ANIMALS as DEFENDANTS - RATS

0. ANIMALS as DEFENDANTS - RATS - Story Preface

1. PEOPLE and ANIMALS in MEDIEVAL EUROPE

2. ANIMALS as DEFENDANTS - PIGS

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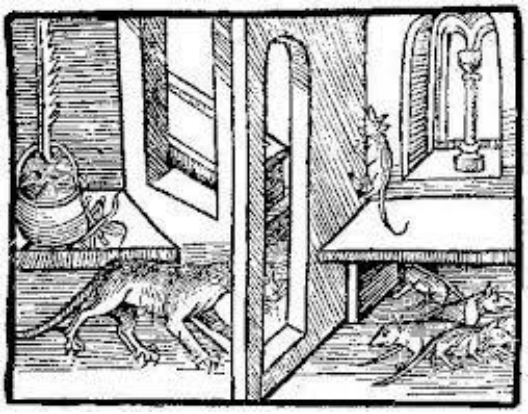

This medieval image, depicting a kitchen cat chasing rats in the kitchen, is by an unknown artist. During the Middle Ages, rats were capable of devouring fields of barley. Put on trial, circa 1510, those barley-eating rat defendants were represented by Bartholomew Chassenee, a very capable French lawyer.

Large groups of rats sometimes destroy fields of crops. Such was the story, in 1510, when rats were devouring fields of barley in Autun, France.

Fed-up with the rodents' invasion of their fields, the people of Autun demanded that the local bishop solve the problem.

Living in a time when animals were charged with crimes - and defended, in such instances, by lawyers - the bishop ordered a trial of the offending rats. Bartholomew Chassenee was assigned to the case.

There were several problems in mustering-up the rodents for their trial:

- Which rodents were damaging the fields?
- How could anyone be sure where those rodents lived?
- Who controlled them?
- Farmers owned pigs (or cows or donkeys), which sometimes misbehaved, but who owned the rats?
- If no one owned the rats - and, therefore, no human being controlled them - how would the rats know they had been summoned into court to stand trial?

The court tried to resolve these issues, raised by the rats' able lawyer. The judge ordered local priests to announce, from their pulpits, that *all* the rats in their respective parishes had to appear for trial on a specific day. But .... no rats showed-up at the appointed time. Did that mean the rats were in contempt of court?

Chasseness, counsel for the rats, had to defend his clients' absense. There was a law, he pointed-out, which applied to humans. It stated that no one could be ordered into court if making the journey to the courthouse put one's life in danger. Shouldn't that law also apply to rats?

It was, after all, the perfect explanation for their absence. In order to get to court, all the rats had to pass through an area filled with ... cats. Why should they be ordered to do such a thing? It would clearly put their lives in jeopardy.

This was another serious issue, requiring more careful thought by the prosecuting attorney.

To give the prosecutor additional time to counter the argument, the judge agreed to adjourn the trial. A date to resume the case, however, was never set. Perhaps the prosecutor couldn't think of a way to defeat Chasseness' argument.

This time ... the rats were legally safe from execution and were free to continue their barley-chomping ways.

Many other animals, charged with a crime, were not as fortunate. In his book *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*, E.P Evans fills twenty-five pages with summaries of such cases.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/ANIMALS-as-DEFENDANTS-RATS-Animals-as-Defendants

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/ANIMALS-as-DEFENDANTS-RATS-Animals-as-Defendants

Media Stream

Rats Eating Crops - A Medieval Crime

Photo of Rice Field Rats, by GR Singleton, online at the IRRI (International Rice Research Institute) web site.
View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Rats-Eating-Crops-A-Medieval-Crime

Fields of Barley

Photo of barley field, by crabchick, online via Flickr.

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Plague of Rats

Image of children with rats, in Chin state Burma - taken on January 14, 2009 - by Benny Manser. Online, via Flickr. Copyright, Benny Manser, all rights reserved. Image provided here as fair use for educational purposes.
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Autun, France - Prosecution of Rats

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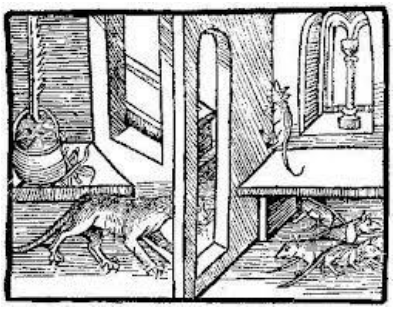

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Bartholomew Chassenee - Lawyer for Rats

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