

The Representation of the Fox through the Ages

K.J.W. Oosthoek & M. Roepers, 'Beeldvorming van de vos door de eeuwen heen', in: Thoen, Erik et al (eds.), *Jaarboek voor Ecologische Geschiedenis 1999*, Vol. 2 (Academia Press, Gent, 2001), pp. 61-78.

By the start of the 21st century the ancient images of the fox as a cunning and even evil animal are still around but the negative religious interpretation of the fox has almost disappeared and is replaced by a milder image. This is especially influenced by the development of the fox as a literary character in stories and fables since the emergence of the Reynard stories in the later Middle Ages. The development of the modern perception of the fox took place in an urban environment. This started in the cities of Flandres during the early modern period where the urban upper class recognised in the fox the 'underdog' who resists with success their own enemies: the clergy and nobility. During the Enlightenment La Fontaine helped to improve the image of the fox with his fables, which he wrote for a predominant urban audience. During the 19th and the 20th centuries the image of the fox continued to improve in an increasingly urbanising society through fairy tales, children's stories and TV series in which animals figured. This meant that among the urban population the image of the fox became increasingly positive, or at least neutral. It is therefore striking that the image of the fox among many farmers and countryside-based hunters and landowners remained negative until our own times. It seems that the conflict between animal rights campaigners and hunters is a clash between urban and countryside cultures. It is likely that this problem is caused by the fact that urban dwellers have no daily contact with nature while farmers and landowners living in the countryside are daily confronted with nature and the animals living next to them. The fox has thus become a focus of the clash between urban versus country life and modernity versus tradition.

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