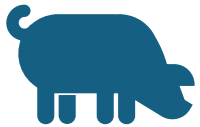




RATS, PIGS, AND STATUES ON TRAIL:

THE CREATION OF CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN THE PROSECUTION OF ANIMALS AND INANIMATE OBJECTS

Article by Paul Schiff Berman

Presentation by Marie Krems

Why were animals and inanimate objects prosecuted in court?

Opening Case: The Rats of Autun

The trial of the rats of Autun appears absurd, but introduces the article's core question

- 1522: Rats were taken to a church court for eating barley
- Defense arguments:
  - the rats had not been properly summoned
  - not all rats could know about the court order
  - travelling to court was dangerous because of cats
- The case introduces Berman's central question:

  Why did communities prosecute animals and objects?

Core Argument

Trials involving animals and objects helped communities to impose a symbolic order on disturbing events

Trails were not just superstition or historical curiosities

These trials made otherwise disturbing events socially comprehensible

Guilt, responsibility and justice were negotiated in public

Legal proceedings served as cultural and ritual practices

Historical Background

These trials had roots in ancient Greece and medieval Europe

- In antiquity and the Middle Ages, communities resorted to legal proceedings when death, injury, or destruction threatened the social order.
- Objects or animals could become the legal focus when no human actor could clearly be blamed
- The aim was not necessarily to prove moral guilt in the modern sense
- Instead, the trial identified a visible source of danger, disorder or pollution
- By turning harm into a legal case, the community could publicly address fear, uncertainty and accidental events

→ These cases reveal a form of symbolic responsibility: law created order even where intention and human guilt were missing.

What Was Put on Trial?

Trials targeted objects, individual animals, and entire groups of pests

Inanimate objects

- stones, statues, ships, tools, weapons
- **Focus**: fatal accidents or harmful events
- symbolized danger when no human offender was available

Individual animals

- Pigs, dogs, donkeys, bulls
- **Focus**: injury or killing of humans
- treated through procedures similar to criminal trials

Animal groups / pests

- Rats, insects, snails, weevils
- **Focus**: destroying crops and threatening community survival
- often framed as religious or communal crises

Inanimate Objects on Trial

legal responsibility could also be symbolically attached to objects

Inanimate Objects on Trial

- In ancient legal traditions, objects involved in death could be brought into legal proceedings
- Stones, weapons or tools were not seen as intentional offenders
- Their legal treatment was symbolic rather than psychological or moral
- The object represented the dangerous event and gave the community a concrete focus
- The procedure helped transform accidental death into a publicly manageable case
- This shows that legal responsibility could function even without intention

Why Object Trials Matter

Object trials reveal the symbolic power of law especially clearly

Why Object Trials Matter

- Objects cannot think, intend, confess or understand punishment
- Therefore, these trials cannot be explained as ordinary criminal punishment
- The object became a visible focus for fear, danger and disorder
- By putting the object on trial, the community could name the harmful event and respond to it publicly
- The case became meaningful not because the object was guilty, but because the legal process created order

Examples of Inanimate Objects on Trial

1. A spear

- A spear involved in the death of a boy became the legal focus of the case
- The central issue was not intention, but the need to process the fatal event
- The legal procedure made the accident socially visible and manageable

2. Stones

- Stones connected to fatal accidents could be treated as objects of responsibility
- Their removal or destruction helped to symbolically banish the danger from the community

→ These cases show that law could create responsibility even when no human offender was clearly available

Animal Groups and Pests

Trials against pests addressed threats to food, harvest, and survival

Animal Groups and Pests

- Rats, insects, snails and weevils could destroy crops and threaten food supply
- These cases were not isolated accidents, but dangers to the whole community
- Because no individual animal could realistically be punished, the proceedings targeted the group as a collective threat
- Courts could order pests to leave fields, vineyards or villages
- The trials expressed the community’s need for protection, explanation and control
- Natural destruction became understandable through legal and religious categories

Case Example: The Weevils of Saint Julien

The Saint Julien case shows how trials staged competing interpretations

Community's perspective

- Weevil destroyed vineyards
- The affected community wanted to protect the harvest and the well-being of the community

Arguments for defense

- The animals were also creatures of God
- They had a need for food and habitat

Meaning of the trial

- The court served as a forum for debating nature, religion, and social Order
- The trial did not only ask what happened, but what the event meant for the community

Individual Animals on Trial

Domestic animals could be treated like criminal defendants

Individual Animals on Trial

- In Middle Ages Europe, humans and domestic animals often lived very close together
- Pigs were among the animals most frequently accused
- They sometimes injured or killed small children
- In such cases, the animal could be arrested, imprisoned, tried, convicted and executed
- The procedure mirrored human criminal justice
- The trial transformed shocking violence into a recognizable legal process

Why These Cases Were Socially Serious

Animal trials responded to real fear, not only strange beliefs

- Animal attacks could cause grief, anger and public anxiety
- Crop destruction threatened food supply, income and survival
- Fatal accidents created uncertainty when no clear human offender could be blamed
- Medieval communities needed visible ways to restore order after disruptive events
- Legal procedures offered a familiar structure:
    - accusation
    - defense
    - judgment
    - punishment or banishment

Civil Courts vs. Church Courts

Different courts framed harm in different ways

Civil courts

- usually handled individual animals
- focused on injury, death and punishment
- treated the case more like a criminal offense

Church Courts

- often handled groups of pests
- focused on crop destruction, divine order and religious interpretation
- could use prayers, warnings, banishment or excommunication

Interpretation:

The type of court shaped whether the event was understood as crime, disorder, sin or divine disturbance.

How the Trials Worked

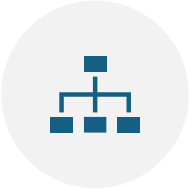
The proceedings transferred human legal forms onto non-human actors

Animals could be officially called to court

Defense lawyers and advocates appeared in court

Jurisdiction, evidence, guilt, and punishment were addressed

Judgments could include punishment, banishment, or excommunication



The legal framework gave the chaotic events a recognizable structure

This structure made disorder appear manageable

Religion and Excommunication

Church-related trials framed animal harm as both a legal and religious problem

- Many measures against pests took place within the church context
- The communities responded with prayers, warnings, ritual acts, and, in some cases, excommunication
- Damage caused by animals could be interpreted as a sign of a disruption in God’s creation
- Religious rituals offered the community a way to seek protection, forgiveness, and restoration
- Law and religion overlap in the effort to regain control over destructive forces of nature

Historical Criticism of Animal Trials

Animal trials were not simply accepted; they were already debated by legal and religious thinkers

Critics questioned whether animals could truly be guilty without moral understanding

Some argued that punishment only made sense for rational beings

Others defended the trials as necessary responses to harm, disorder, or divine judgment

The debate shows that animal trials were not based on one simple belief system

They reflected competing ideas about guilt, nature, divine order and legal responsibility

Theory: Trials as Narratives

Courts create socially accepted interpretations of events

- Trials do not merely collect facts; they organize facts into a meaningful story
- They define who is harmed, what caused the harm and who or what is responsible
- In animal and object trials, this narrative function becomes especially visible
- The court turns chaos into a structured sequence: event, accusation, defense, judgment and consequence
- This shared narrative helps the community process fear, grief and uncertainty
- Law therefore stabilizes social order by producing meaning, not only by applying rules

From Animal Trials to Modern Legal Proceedings

Berman uses historical extreme cases to rethink the function of trials more broadly

- Modern trials also do more than determine guilt or punishment
- They create public stories about responsibility, victims, harm, and justice
- Courts help society understand serious events and crises
- This narrative function is still relevant in modern legal systems
- Berman therefore challenges a purely rational view of law
- His argument shows that law is also symbolic, cultural, and social

Conclusion

The trials were less absurd than functional: they transformed chaos into order

Not just curiosities, but formally structured processes

Core function: Coming to terms with guilt, fear, and social disruption

Courts do not just deliver judgments; they also shape cultural narratives

Guiding principle: The law explains what an event means for a community

Thank you for your attention.

What do you think about the idea of putting

animals or objects on trial?

Discussion

1. What do you think about the idea of putting animals or objects on trial?
2. Do you find these trials completely absurd, or can you understand why people used them?
3. How do you feel about Berman's argument that these trials helped communities deal with fear and disorder?
4. What do you think about the criticism that animals cannot be guilty because they do not understand right and wrong?
5. Can it ever make sense to assign responsibility to animals or objects, even symbolically?