

Folklore and Marvels in the *Otia Imperialia*

By Caroline Waugh
Overview

This project explores the role that the marvelous plays in Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia* as both an insight into medieval folklore, and as a tool for guidance and examining more complex political issues and worldviews.

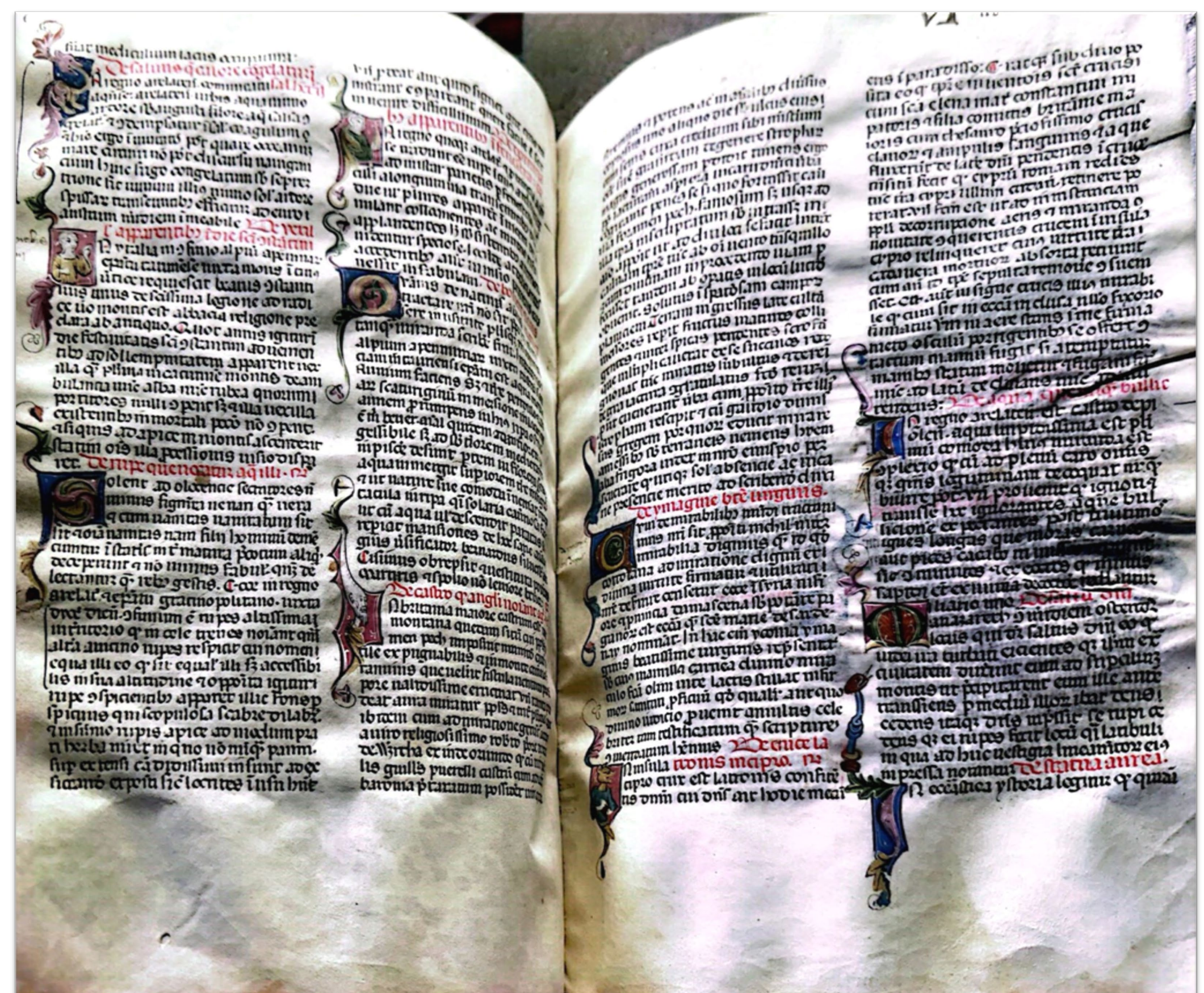
The *Otia Imperialia* is an encyclopedic work written by English Canon lawyer, statesman, and cleric, Gervase of Tilbury, for his patron, Holy Roman Emperor Otto IV, sometime in the years following Otto's excommunication by Pope Innocent III in the early 13th century. The piece is generally thought to be written for the Emperor's entertainment, though it is likely that it served as a form of guidance and education for him as well.



Key Findings

The manuscript is generally divided into three books, with the first covering theology, the second geography and history, and the third the marvels of the world. When writing about wonders, or *mirabilia*, Gervase treats them not as superstition, but rather as true parts of the world that are merely unexplainable. Outside of the book of marvels, these wonders also make appearances in the other two books of the *Otia*, showing how they relate to other real and more credible events and highlighting the dual existence of both miracles and marvels when it comes to the nature of the world.

Gervase likely was utilizing his more fantastical anecdotes in this way to support a dualist stance politically on the papacy and the crown. Folklore and marvels may have been used as devices to capture interest and guide the Emperor's rule by creating an overarching narrative of dual higher powers across all three books of the *Otia Imperialia*.



Conclusions

The *Otia Imperialia* contains a wealth of accounts of medieval folklore beliefs, with traces of many of the tales still being seen in the modern day. Beyond even that, the work provides insight into the values and viewpoints of the time through the underlying theological and intellectual ideas Gervase uses marvels, miracles, and other tales to convey.

References:

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