**Foreword**

At the beginning of *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault recounts how his thought was shaken—“shattered” even, he says—when he read an essay by Jorge Luis Borges in which the famous Argentine author tells of a certain Chinese encyclopaedia that he discovered somewhere, perhaps in a translation by Franz Kuhn. This encyclopaedia offers the following taxonomy of animals: “animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suck[l]ing pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (k) having just broken the water pitcher, (m) that from a long way off look like flies.”[[1]](#footnote-1) What Foucault hopes to convey here, via Borges, is that we should not take for granted the “order of things” to which we are used. Rather, this order is subject to historical change, as successions of *epistemai*, or “historical a prioris,” have the human mind structure its experience in accordance with a large variety of different frameworks. (*The Order of Things* tells the story of how these frameworks developed from the Renaissance right up to the birth of the human sciences in the twentieth century.)

Foucault goes on to speak of the “exotic charm of another system of thought,” which at the same time points to the “limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The reader will perhaps experience a similar kind of reaction when he or she opens the pages of Ranulph Higden’s *Distinctiones*, a fourteenth-century encyclopaedia of the meanings of biblical terms. In the letter A, Higden begins with *abicere*, “to cast off,” whence he moves to *abscondit*, “he conceals,” *abstinencia*, “abstinence,” *accedere*, “to approach,” until, thirty-two entries later, he reaches *aurum*, “gold.” These lists were meant to help preachers with the construction of sermons. But how did this work? What logic governed the inclusion of particular biblical terms, in particular grammatical forms? (Why does *abicere* appear in the infinitive while *abscondit* is in the third person singular?) Ranulph Higden’s *Distinctiones* are far less exotic than Borges’s imaginary Chinese encyclopaedia, to be sure, but they do challenge our ways of ordering and doing things. Certainly, biblical scholarship and homiletics proceed very differently in our own time!

The *Distinctiones* are a massive work, comprising over 400 entries, many of them lengthy. Dr. Eugene Crook has edited the text from MS. Worcester Cathedral, F 128, fols.1–125, prepared an English translation, and identified the authorities cited. We are presenting the result of Dr. Crook’s labours as the first digital edition in our series, for a couple of reasons. First, the edition and translation are still a work in progress which will profit from the comments of fellow scholars.[[3]](#footnote-3) Secondly, it is not certain that a printed edition of this kind of text would be commercially viable. How many scholars, or even libraries, would acquire a copy? However, given the fact that we have now all entered the digital age (some think it is the age of surveillance capitalism[[4]](#footnote-4)), an online edition may in fact no longer require much justification.

Much gratitude is due to Dr. Eugence Crook for bringing this work to completion during a time when one would excuse even the most dedicated scholar for worrying about other things than a fourteenth-century collection of biblical *distinctiones*.

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1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Feedback may be directed to Dr. Crook at gcrook@fsu.edu. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I am of course referring to the book by Shoshanna Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)