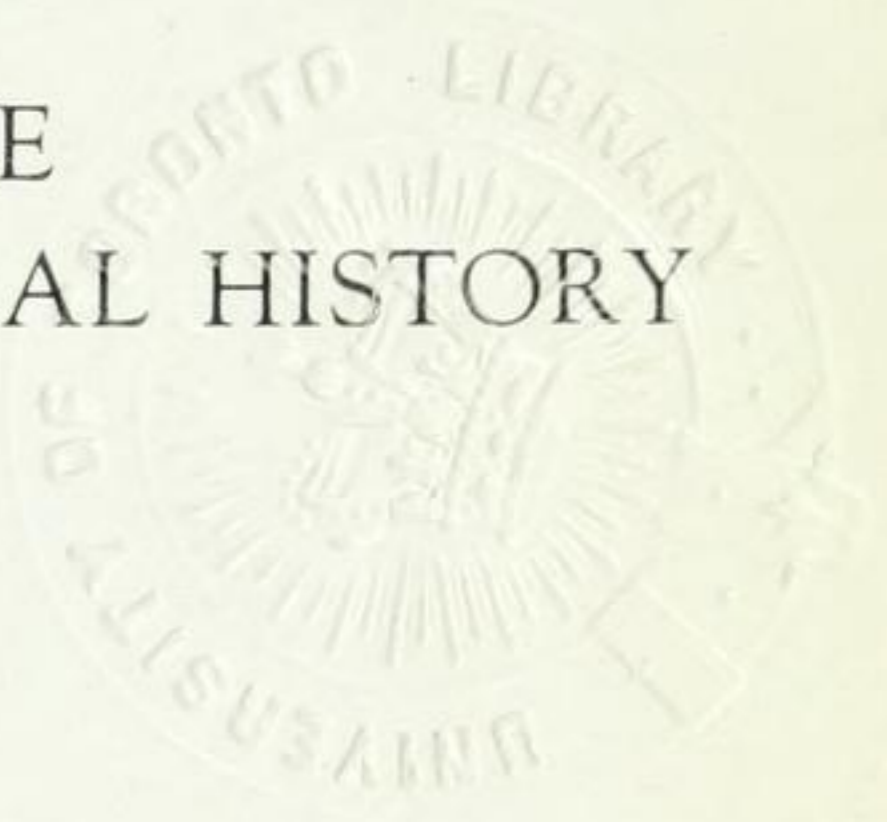


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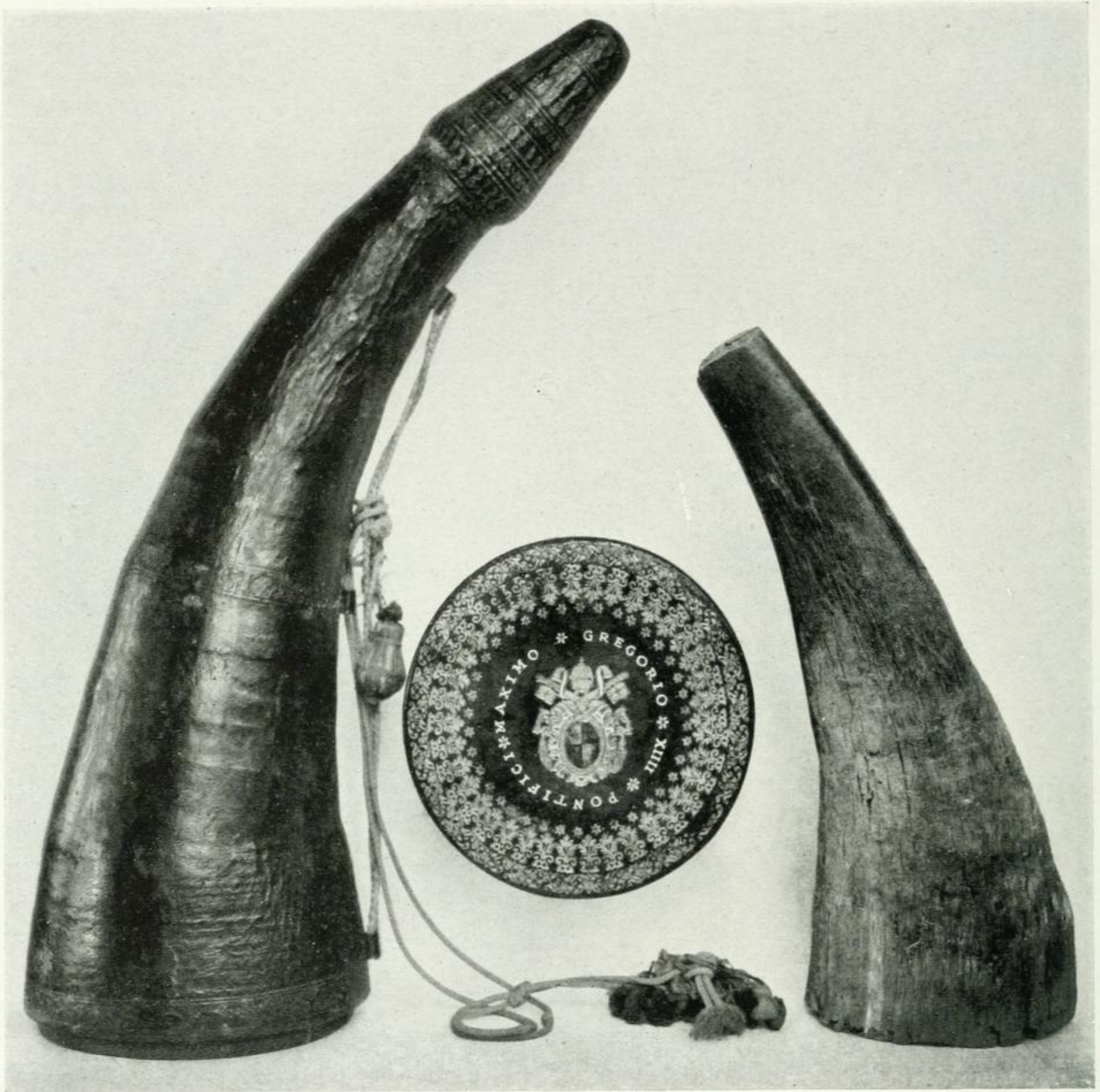
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HORN OF INDIAN RHINOCEROS KNOWN AS ALICORNE OR UNICORN

Presented to Pope Gregory XIV, in 1590, because of its reputed medicinal qualities, by the Prior and Brothers of the Monastery of St. Mary of Guadalupe, Spain. This inscription runs around the rim of the cover while the top of the cover bears the arms and superscription of Pope Gregory XIV.

The missing tip, reduced to powder, was administered to the Pope in his last illness. The statement that it was used as an amulet is entirely erroneous. The horn was purchased by Dr. L. Pollak, of Rome, at the Ferroni sale of 1909, from whom it was obtained by Mr. John Marshall, who, at the suggestion of Dr. Bashford Dean, presented it to the American Museum in 1920

The Unicorn and His Horn

By FREDERIC A. LUCAS

“THE unicorn,” writes Pliny, “has the head of a stag, the feet of an elephant, the tail of the boar, while the rest of the body is like that of the horse; it makes a deep lowing noise, and has a single black horn, which projects from the middle of its forehead, two cubits in length. This animal, it is said, cannot be taken alive.”

One might suppose from the detailed description that it was written by some one who had actually seen the animal; in reality it has no firmer foundation in fact than the tusks of the narwhal, all the rest being supplied by the imagination of the writer.

The old zoölogists were indeed gifted with vivid imaginations, although, as animal psychologists, they were far behind some of the writers of today, for none of them ever credited a woodcock with surgical skill, much less a sponge with sufficient intelligence to adapt the time of laying its eggs to the currents and temperature. So, given the horn of the narwhal, the rest could be added. After all, this is not so surprising, for even today there is a widespread belief that a palæontologist can restore an animal from a single bone, a belief, it is needless to say, more flattering than accurate.

There are times when the early zoölogists seem a little hazy, and he who is following the trail of the unicorn through the pages of the literature of the past will find a tendency to confuse the unicorn with the rhinoceros, although the best systematists distinguished these under the term of *monoceros* or *monocerate*.

Thus Guillim, who wrote on heraldry in 1610, says: “The Unicorn hath his Name of his one Horn on his Forehead. There is another Beast of

a huge Strength and Greatness, which hath but one Horn, but that is growing on his Snout, whence he is called *Rhinoceros*, and both are named *Monoceros*, or One-horned. It hath been much questioned among Naturalists, which it is that is properly called the Unicorn: And some hath made Doubt whether there be any such Beast as this, or no. But the great esteem of his Horn (in many places to be seen) may take away that needless scruple. . . . Touching the invincible Nature of this Beast, Job saith, ‘Wilt thou trust him because his Strength is great, and cast thy Labour unto him? Wilt thou believe him, that he will bring home thy seed, and gather it into thy Barn?’ And his Vertue is no less famous than his Strength, in that his Horn is supposed to be the most powerful Antidote against Poison: Insomuch as the general Conceit is, that the wild Beasts of the Wilderness use not to drink of the Pools, for fear of the venemous Serpents there breeding, before the Unicorn hath stirred it with his Horn. Howsoever it be, this Charge may very well be a Representation both of Strength or Courage, and also of virtuous Dispositions and Ability to do Good; for to have Strength of Body, without the Gifts and good Qualities of the Mind, is but the Property of an Ox, but where both concur, that may truly be called Manliness. And that these two should consort together, the Ancients did signify, when they made this one Word, *Virtus*, to imply both the Strength of Body, and Vertue of the Mind. . . .

“It seemeth, by a Question moved by *Farnesius*, That the Unicorn is never taken alive; and the Reason being demanded, it is answered ‘That

the greatness of his Mind is such, that he chuseth rather to die than to be taken alive: Wherein (saith he) the Unicorn and the valiant-minded Soldier are alike, which both contemn Death, and rather than they will be compelled to undergo any base Servitude or Bondage, they will lose their lives.' ”

Whatever uncertainty there might be as to the animal, there was none as to the medicinal value of the horn, be it that of unicorn, alicorn, monoceros, or rhinoceros.

The standard works on zoölogy and medicine from the time of Pliny onward all testify to the potency of the horn of the unicorn, and to these well-known authorities, Mr. John Marshall has added some interesting extracts from a work compiled by Andrea Bacci, of Florence, in 1573, entitled *L'Alicorne, della sua natura et della sue virtu.*

Thus Bacci, quoting Signor Mundella, “the highest authority of all,” states that he places a high value on the monoceros horn as an antidote against poison and the bites of mad dogs and other poisonous animals, while various authorities consider it efficacious against pestilential fevers, bubonic plague, and even mushroom poisoning. And yet Mundella—as he ingenuously admits a little later—had never even seen a horn!

If we marvel at the credulity of the learned men of the Middle Ages, at their taking so many things on faith, we have only to recall a few of the fads of the present generation. It is not so many years ago since the blue glass craze swept over the land; yesterday we were seeking earthly immortality by drinking sour milk; today it is the light-hearted yeast cake that is to lengthen our days; tomorrow it will be “something just as good.”

And if it seems strange that no one considered it remarkable that a patient sufficiently wealthy to procure a

dose of unicorn powder should die, the explanation was simple: either the precious horn was given too late, when the patient was *in extremis*, as was the case with Pope Gregory XIV, or the dose was too small. Truly a difficult answer turneth away argument.

That it was not used more commonly was on account of its rarity and price. For unicorn horn was not a poor man's medicine; it was reserved for princes and potentates, the capitalist class of those days; the quotations on unicorns vary from \$12,000 upward, extra fine being valued at \$150,000 or, considering the purchasing power of money then, about half a million dollars of our present currency.

From Bacci we gather that it was given for mushroom poisoning as well as for other ailments. The customary dose was about ten grains administered either in wine or water, and it was well to give at the same time an emetic—an item that possibly accounts for its success in curing mushroom poisoning.

There seems to have been a belief that the medicinal value of a drug or other substance employed in medicine, bore some relation to its scarcity and costliness. Thus we are told that Gregory XIV was kept alive for some days by the administration of gold and jewels, although at the last the horn of the unicorn failed to preserve his life.

This very horn, now of historic interest, and all the more valuable because it lacks the tip administered to Pope Gregory when *in extremis*, has just been presented to the American Museum by Mr. John Marshall. As we learn from the inscription around the cover of the case in which it was preserved, it was presented to Pope Gregory XIV in 1590, by the Prior and Brothers of the Monastery of St. Mary of Guadalupe. It is just possible that it was given because it was known that the Pope was already in

poor health and there could be no better gift than a restorative. Be this as it may, the incumbency of Pope Gregory XIV was brief, lasting but a year, and the precious horn that was administered at the last proved un-availing.

Now and then some bold spirit seems to have been skeptical as to the value of some of the drugs in vogue, and Mr. Marshall quotes Muratori who, writing of the very case we have considered, says, "From the historian's statement he [Pope Gregory] was kept alive for a few days by virtue of the gold and jewels they gave him, he paying as a fee the sum of \$15,000. We must conclude that the good Pope either had about him some quack doctors or very slick thieves." But heresy such as this is rare indeed and there is possibly a bit of professional jealousy here of the man who received a fee of 15,000 scudi.

As Lincoln said, there is a great deal of human nature in most people, and no matter how far back we go in the past, we find the same tendencies as nowadays. So it is not surprising to learn that there were counterfeits of so precious a drug as unicorn's horn, although these might be recognized by giving "Red Arsenic or Orpiment to two pigeons, and then to let them

drink of two samples; if genuine, no harm would result—if adulterated, or false, the pigeons would die."

The unicorn is mentioned several times in the Old Testament, or rather the term *reem* has been translated to mean *unicorn*, but although all that is said in the Book of Job and elsewhere would apply to the rhinoceros, it is now considered that the word applied to the wild ox.

"Will the Unicorn serve thee, or will he tarry by thy Crib? Canst thou bind the Unicorn with his Band to labour in the Furrow or will he plough the Valleys after thee?"¹

The zoölogist is at a loss to understand where the Israelites could have made the acquaintance of either the rhinoceros or the wild ox.

How the unicorn came to symbolize the Holy Spirit and how it found its way into heraldry, simply changing its Italian name *alicorne* to *licorne*, books at hand do not tell, but it became popular with Scotch heralds. A pair was taken, as we know, for supporters on the arms of the King of Scotland and, upon the accession of James VI to the throne of England as James I, one of them was transferred to the English royal coat of arms, where today it still stands on guard with the lion.

¹ Job, Chap. XXXIX.



The arms of the King of Scotland. From Grant's *Manual of Heraldry*