



"DE UNICORNU VEL RINOCEROTE" *Early 13th. Century*



THE UNICORN, gentle in the presence of a maiden
Early 13th. Century

ANIMAL LORE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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The history of the unicorn¹ presents some interesting features. Greek writers spoke of certain animals bearing a single horn, the Indian ass and the oryx (an African antelope), while Pliny mentions in addition an Indian ox. The unicorn was mentioned as a distinct animal first in the Septuagint translation of the Pentateuch, which is thought to have appeared in the third century B.C. The word is there used twice as a rendering of the word *re'm* or *reem*, which the English Revised Version translates "wild ox." In one of these passages (Deut. xxxiii. 17) the context shows that the animal was two-horned. This use in the Septuagint of the word *μονοκέρας* (=Lat. *unicornis*) as a substantive indicates that before 200 B.C. an animal had begun to be called the unicorn, and Pliny's use of *Monocerotem* as a noun in a solitary passage (VIII, 76), while elsewhere he uses the adjective *unicornis*, probably recognises this. The legend of the unicorn was probably developed by commentators on the Septuagint, and the animal was included among the emblems of the *Physiologus*. When the unicorn was thus recognised as a separate beast, the stories of the one-horned Indian ass were transferred to it. Hence came the belief in its fierceness, and also in the virtues of its horn as an antidote or a preventive against poison. From the notion, recorded by Ælian (XVI, 20), that this fierce animal was wonderfully gentle to the female in the mating season, there was evolved the idea that it became gentle in the presence of a maiden and was lulled to sleep with its head on her bosom. This

¹ Odell Shepard's *Lore of the Unicorn*, recently published, gives compendious information about the legends connected with this fabulous animal. The account here given was written before I saw that book, and after reading it carefully I see no reason to make any alteration.

fancy seems to emerge first in the *Physiologus*,¹ which states: "They send to it a pure virgin all robed. And the Unicorn springs into the lap of the maiden and she subdues him and he follows her." This is repeated by Eustathius.²

But meanwhile the rhinoceros had become known in Europe. Though certainly known to the ancients, this animal is not mentioned under that name before Strabo, who wrote just before and after the beginning of the Christian era. It was not seen in Europe before 61 B.C., when Pompey the Great celebrated his triumph by exhibiting many Eastern animals. The first Latin writer to mention the rhinoceros was Pliny (VIII, 71), who mentions its combats with elephants. Ælian (XVII, 44) gives a detailed description of this kind of combat. The rhinoceros soon began to be regarded as the original of the unicorn, and the legends concerning the latter were transferred to it. Jerome, commenting on the "unicorn" in the Book of Job (xxxix.) says that, as the word is translated "rhinoceros" and "monoceros" by different writers, "we notice that the rhinoceros is the same as the monoceros, and is in Latin understood to be the unicorn." Thus, while the *Physiologus* speaks of the unicorn as caught only by a virgin, Isidore (seventh century) states this of the rhinoceros, and Neckam follows him, as also does Giraldus Cambrensis (c. 1187). Alanus, however, (c. 1200) keeps to the unicorn. Yet that this was generally believed of the rhinoceros in the thirteenth century is shown (1) by Bartholomew Glanvil, who identifies the two animals, and (2) by Marco Polo (1298), who in describing the rhinoceros says: "They

¹ Trans. Carllil (1927).

² Migne, *Patrol. Græc.*, XVIII, col. 744.

are not of that description of animals which suffer themselves to be taken by maidens, as our people suppose, but are quite of a contrary nature." Soon afterwards another European traveller, the Dominican Friar Jordanus (1321), differentiates the rhinoceros from the "real unicorns, only to be captured by maidens."¹ As the rhinoceros became ruled out by known facts, the legendary unicorn was again reinstated. That there was scepticism about its existence is shown by the exclamation of Sebastian in *The Tempest* (III, iii, 22), when he sees the "strange shapes" evoked by Prospero's magic: "Now I will believe that there are unicorns." Topsell, in his *History of Four-footed Beasts* (1607), protests against such scepticism. Even as late as 1801 we find a discussion in the *Monthly Review*, "On the probability of the existence of a unicorn."

The unicorn's horn in heraldry is shown growing out of the forehead, and is straight and spirally twisted. Now the earliest Greek descriptions make no mention of the spiral twist, the first such reference apparently being in Ælian (IV, 52), who, in describing the monoceros of India, says that it has a horn "growing out from between the eyebrows, not smooth, but having some natural twists or convolutions." It is probable that this "wreathed horn" was suggested by a narwhal's tusk, either brought from the sub-arctic region or described by travellers. This animal, which is of the dolphin family, is not usually seen south of latitude 62° north, but has been seen very rarely on British coasts since the sixteenth century. Tusks (which were thought to be horns) have occasionally been thrown on the shores of

¹ Beazley, *Dawn of Mod. Geog.*, III, 226, 230.

Northern Europe. However, there is no evidence to show that the narwhal's tusk was known even by hearsay in Southern Europe or Southern Asia before the Christian era. The only known voyage to Northern seas before that period was that of the Greek Pytheas of Massilia (Marseilles) in 325 B.C., and it is not certain that he went further north than the coasts of Britain. The probabilities are that during the two centuries following Cæsar's invasion of Britain, Roman soldiers or traders brought to Southern Europe either specimens or descriptions of the narwhal's tusk, which was identified with the horn of the unicorn. In the sixteenth century Sir Humphrey Gilbert, in his *Discourse on the North-West Passage to Cathay* (1576), mentions that an alleged unicorn's horn had been found on the coast of Tartary (i.e. N. Russia); this he doubts, giving as one reason that, "as Albertus saith, there is a fish which hath but one horn in his forehead like to a unicorn." (He refers to Albertus Magnus, who wrote c. A.D. 1260.) He regards the unicorn as distinct both from the one-horned Indian ass and from the sea-unicorn (or narwhal). But in the next year Martin Frobisher, in his second voyage in quest of the North-West Passage, found on the shore of a bay north-west of Labrador, "a dead fish floating, which had in its nose a horn, straight and torquet [twisted], of length two yards lacking two inches, being broken in the top, where we might perceive it hollow, into which some sailors putting spiders they presently died. . . . By the virtue whereof we suppose it to be the sea-unicorn." Thus the efficacy of the unicorn's horn against poison was credited also to the narwhal's tusk.

The idea of an animal's horn used as a drinking-cup giving immunity from poison is as old as Ctesias, who attributes this virtue to the horn of the Indian ass. Ælian makes larger claims for it, saying that to drink out of the horn makes one immune from epilepsy and the effects of poison, and also cures poisoning by acting as an emetic. His contemporary Philostratus, recording this belief, says he would believe it if he found a king of the Indians to be immortal. In the sixteenth century (and probably long before) pieces of the so-called unicorn's horn were powdered and used medicinally, either against poison or as a cure for melancholy. The dramatist Webster, in his *White Devil* (II, i), refers to the use of spiders to test the anti-venomous power of the horn:

"As men, to test the precious unicorn's horn,
Make of the powder a preservative circle,
And in it put a spider, so these arms
Shall charm his poison."

As a cure for melancholy it is mentioned by Ben Jonson (*Every Man out of his Humour*, v, iv): "I am sorry for your heaviness . . . why, had you no unicorn's horn . . . about you?" Burton also (*Anat. Mel.*, II, 4, i, 1) mentions it among cures for "black choler."

The fierceness of the unicorn is alluded to by Shakespeare (*Timon of Athens*, IV, iii, 339): "Wert thou the unicorn, pride and wrath would confound thee and make thine own self the conquest of thy fury." His contemporary Chapman, in the play *Bussy d'Ambois*, boldly writes:

"As I once did see
In my young travels through Armenia,
An angry unicorn in his full career
Charge with too swift a foot a jeweller
That watch'd him for the treasure of his brow;
And ere he could get shelter of a tree
Nail him with his rich antler to the earth."

It was said that experienced hunters, when charged by a unicorn, would slip behind a tree, in which the fierce animal then embedded his horn. This is the meaning of a passage in Shakespeare's *Julius Cæsar* (II, i, 204):

"I can o'er sway him, for he loves to hear
That unicorns may be betrayed with trees."

Spenser describes this as a ruse employed by the lion when attacked by a unicorn (*Faerie Queene*, II, v, 10):

"Like as a lyon, whose imperiall poure
A proud rebellious unicorn defydes,
To avoide the rich assault and wrathful stoure
Of his fiers foe, him to a tree applyes,
And when him ronning in full course he spydes,
He slips aside; the whiles that furious beast
His precious horne, sought of his enemyes,
Strikes in the stocke, ne thence can be releast,
But to the mighty victor yields a bounteous feast."

The epithets "precious" and "rich" applied to the unicorn's horn are explained by the fact that it was sold by apothecaries at a price more than ten times as great as that of a similar weight of gold.¹ A passage in the *Kingis Quhair* of King James I of Scotland² alludes both

¹ Chambers's Dict., quoted by Dyce.

² Skeat, *Specimens*, p. 42.

to the virtues of the horn and to the supposed capture by a virgin:

"The luvar [lover] unicorn
That voidis venym with his evour [ivory] horne."

Another fabulous animal is mentioned once or twice in our literature, e.g. by Skelton in his poem *Phyllyp Sparowe* (294), in an imprecation on the cat that killed the sparrow:

"The mantycors of the montaynes
Might fede them on thy braynes."

Professor Williams, in his edition of Skelton, quotes allusions in Caxton's *Mirroure of the Worlde* and in Sylvester's *Du Bartas*. The ultimate authority for this animal was Ctesias, whose description is given by Aristotle (*H.A.*, II, 501a): "He assures us that the Indian wild beast called the *martichoras* has a triple row of teeth in both upper and lower jaw; that it is as big as a lion and equally hairy, and that its feet resemble those of a lion; that it resembles man in its face and ears; that its eyes are blue and its colour vermilion; that its tail is like that of the land-scorpion; that it has a sting in the tail, and has the faculty of shooting off arrow-wise the spines that are attached to the tail; that the sound of its voice is something between the sound of a pan-pipe and that of a trumpet; that it can run as swiftly as a deer, and that it is savage and a man-eater" (trans. by D'Arcy Thompson). Pliny repeats the substance of this, calling the beast *mantichora* (VIII, 75), and quotes King Juba II as saying that it imitates human speech

(VIII, 107). Ælian (IV, 21) as usual elaborates this description, giving the name (as in Aristotle) *martichoras*: he says the word is Indian, and means "man-eater." This is approximately correct, the derivation being from Old Persian *martijaqâra*, lit. "man-slayer" (*N.E.D.*). Ælian says that Ctesias claimed to have seen one of these animals in Persia, whither it had been brought as a present to the king, but he throws doubt on the reliability of the witness. The animal was no doubt the Bengal tiger, described by panic-stricken witnesses after headlong flight.

In Chester's *Love's Martyr* (ed. Grosart, p. 112), there is a description of the onocentaur:

"The Onocentaur is a monstrous beast
Supposed halfe a man and halfe an asse
That never shuts his eyes in quiet rest
Till he his foes deare life hath round encompass;
Such were the Centaurs in their tyranny
That liv'd by human flesh and villanie."

It is mentioned also by Skelton (*Phyllyp Sparowe*, 1295):

"By Hercules that hell did harow
And with a venomous arow
Slew of the Epidauras
One of the Centaures
Or Onocentaures
Or Hippocentaures."

This fabulous animal began its literary existence only in the Septuagint. The Greek version of Isaiah (xiii. 22, xxxiv. 14) gives "onocentaurs" for the Hebrew word which is rendered in the Authorised Version "wild