

# LIFE AND TIMES OF AMBROISE PARE

[1510-1590]

*With a New Translation of his Apology and an  
Account of his Journeys in Divers Places*

BY

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WITH TWENTY-TWO TEXT ILLUSTRATIONS, TWENTY-SEVEN FULL PAGE PLATES  
AND TWO FOLDED MAPS OF PARIS OF THE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES



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first consulting him as to what the stars revealed on the project. The book on fevers concluded with an apologetic paragraph in which Paré protests that it was not ambition to show off his learning that prompted its composition, because, he says, all that is good in the book was "compiled by me from good physicians, from whom, after God I hold what little learning I have in medicine and surgery."

In 1580, Monsieur Christophe Juvenal des Ursins sustained a fall from his horse and was badly injured. Paré was seventy years old but when sent for promptly mounted his horse and rode out in the country to the place where the injured man was lying. When the patient had recovered, he asked Paré why he had not given him mummy for his wound. This request prompted Paré to write his discourse on mummy and unicorn's horn,<sup>20</sup> in which, although upwards of seventy years old, he displays a vigor and esprit fully equal to that of his very best work. These two remedies were held in the highest esteem. Mummy was a resinous substance which purported to be made from Egyptian mummies. Unicorn's horn was supposed to be derived from the animal. As a matter of fact it was generally made from elephant's or rhinoceros' tusks. It was sold for a most enormous price and its use was chiefly in consequence confined to the noble or wealthy. When

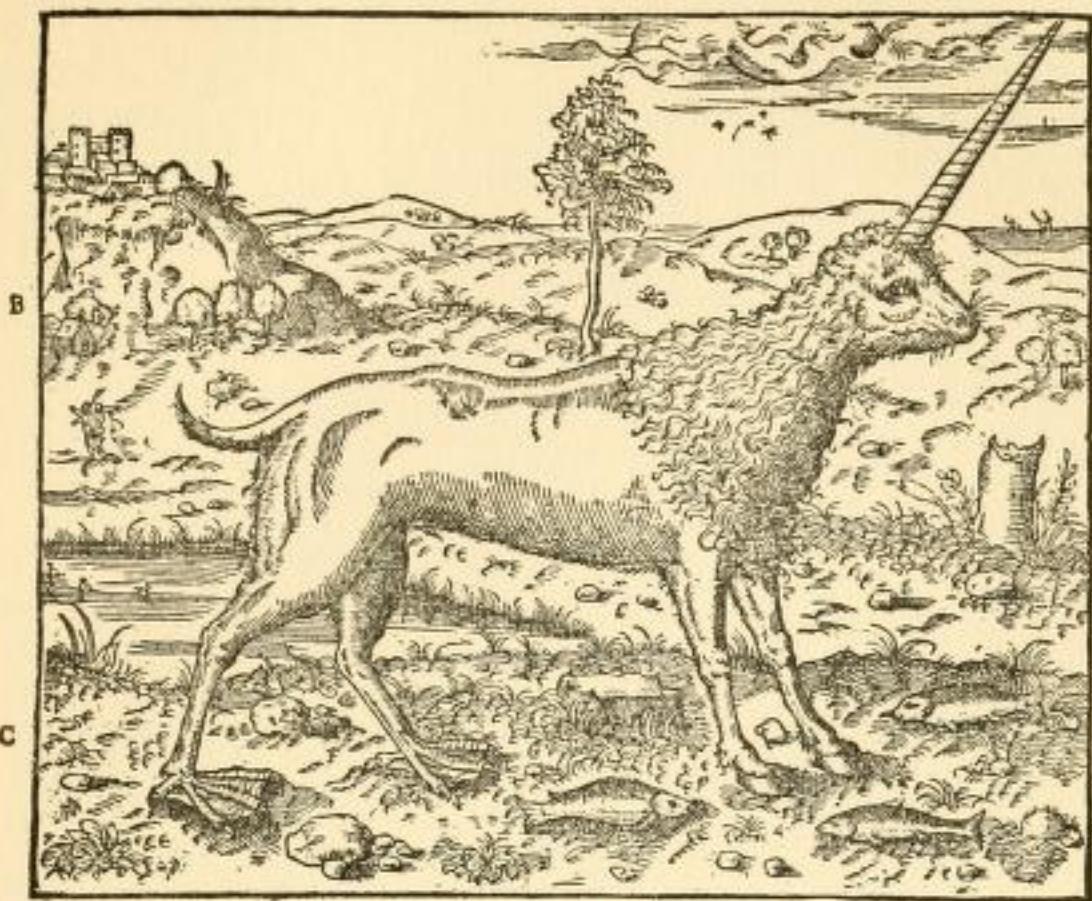
<sup>20</sup>*Discourse de la Mumie et de la Licorne*, Paris, 1582.

Henri II was married to Catherine de Medici, the bride's uncle, Pope Clement VII, presented François I, the bridegroom's father, with a piece of the horn of a unicorn, beautifully mounted by a Milanese goldsmith. This horn was said to possess the power of destroying the effects of poison mixed with food. In 1557 when Elizabeth, daughter of Henri II, had smallpox, the Constable, Anne de Montmorenci, sent to Madame d'Humeires, who had charge of her, "a piece of the horn of a unicorn," with the directions that it was to be dissolved "but not in warm water," and administered.

Mummy was greatly sophisticated, being made from all sorts of resinous substances. Paré says that, according to some, mummies were sometimes made "in our France" from the bodies stolen from gallows; but he adds, "Nevertheless I believe that they are as good as those brought from Egypt; because they are none of them of any value. Thereupon we will send them back to Egypt, as we will the unicorn to inaccessible deserts." Paré says that it is inconceivable that decomposed bodies are of any use as remedies, even if the true mummy were obtainable. As to unicorn's horn, he reports that there is no proof that such an animal exists, that the horn on the market may be any kind of ivory, and that whatever it is, there is absolutely no medicinal value in a substance so perfectly inert. He

quotes ancient authority, Hippocrates and Galen, to show that these men made no use of it, and that the modern physicians of whom he inquired were also sceptical. He asked Chapelain, first physician to Charles IX, to use his authority to abolish the custom which prevailed at the court of dipping a piece of unicorn's horn in the king's cup before he drank as a precaution against possible poison in his drink. Chapelain replied that although he did not believe that unicorn's horn possessed any virtue, he dared not stop the practice as the belief was rooted in the minds of both princes and people, adding that if it did no good it certainly did no harm except to the purse of those who purchased it.

This discourse on mummy and unicorn's horn produced an answer from an anonymous author, but bearing the statement that it had been "seen and approved by M. Grangier, Dean of the School of Medicine." The author advises Paré to confine himself to surgery as when he goes beyond his confines the little children mock at him, and he reproaches him with inserting pictures of monsters in his surgery which would only serve to amuse children. He adds that the mere fact that they conserved at St. Denis a unicorn's horn for which the King had refused one hundred thousand crowns sufficed to convince him of its usefulness, and that Paré wronged the King by his skepticism.



THE CAMPHUR, A VARIETY OF THE UNICORN, SAID TO HAVE  
BEEN FOUND IN ETHIOPIA.

*(Paré, Edition 1585.)*

Paré condescended to answer his anonymous critic in a little pamphlet,<sup>21</sup> in which, while not adding anything new to his arguments, he concludes with what Malgaigne calls this charming supplication, "Only I pray him, if he desires to oppose any argument to my reply, that he will quit his animosities and treat more kindly *le bon viellard*."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> "Replique d'Ambroise Paré, premier chirurgien du roy, a la response faicte contre son discours de la licorne," 1584.

<sup>22</sup> Sir Thomas Browne in his "Pseudodoxia Epidemica or Vulgar Errors," Book III, chap. xxiii, writes at length of unicorn's horn. Although he states his belief in the existence of such an animal, he then proceeds to mention that the substances in general sold for it are derived from an innumerable variety of sources and not solely even from horns. He ascribes to Thomas Bartholinus of Copenhagen and Olaus Wormius the credit of pointing out that many of the specimens were the teeth of the narwhale, and continues, "that some antidotal quality it may have, we have no reason to deny; for since elk's hoofs and horns are magnified for epilepsies, since not only the bone in the hart, but the horn of the deer is alexipharmical (antidotal to poisons), an ingredient into the confection of hyacinth, and the electuary of Maximilian, we cannot without prejudice except against the efficacy of this."

Sir Thomas concludes: "Since, therefore, there be many unicorns; since that whereto we appropriate a horn is so variously described, that it seemeth never to have been seen by two persons, or not to have been one animal; since though they agreed in the description of the animal, yet is not the horn we extol the same with that of ancients; since what horns so ever they may that pass among us, they are not the horn of one, but several animals; since many in common use and high esteem are no horn at all; since if they were true horns, yet might their virtues be questioned; since though we allowed some virtues, yet were not others to be received; with what security a man may rely on this remedy, the mistress of fools hath already instructed some, and to wisdom (which is never too wise to learn), it is not too late to consider." Sir Thomas mentions the horn of St. Denis, saying "that famous horn which is preserved at St. Denis near Paris, hath wreathy spires, and cochlear turnings about it, which agreeth with the description of the unicorn's horn in Elian."

The "Encyclopedie Britannica," XIIth Edition (Art. *Unicorn*), states that the earliest description of the unicorn is given by Ctesias, who says that there were in India white wild asses celebrated for their fleetness of foot, and having on the forehead a horn a cubit and a half in length, colored white, red and black, and from this horn were made drinking cups which were antidotal to any poison put in them. A belief in its antidotal properties lingered in England until the reign of Charles II, when a cup made of rhinoceros horn was given to the Royal Society to investigate its properties. This investigation resulted in completely proving its uselessness.