

THE HORN OF THE UNICORN

by

Professor Humphrey Humphreys, O.B.E., M.C., M.B., F.D.S.R.C.S.
Vice Dean, Faculty of Dental Surgery, Royal College of Surgeons of England

THE HORN OF the unicorn as it appeared in mediæval art and legend is of particular interest to doctors and dentists: to the former because its substance formerly figured as a drug in the British Pharmacopoeia, to the latter because it was in fact a tooth, the tusk of the narwhal. Though everyone now agrees that the unicorn never existed, this unanimity is quite recent. All through the 19th century there were periodic reports of its presence in darkest Africa or on the Asiatic steppes, and hopes that it would turn out to be a reality died hard. But if there never was such a creature why did the men of the middle ages believe in it so firmly and depict it so often? As Christians it was incumbent on them to do so, for it was mentioned in the Old Testament and, therefore, must be real. Its presence there was due to the authors of the Septuagint, the Hellenised Jews who, at Alexandria, in the centuries between the city's foundation and the Christian era, translated their sacred books from Hebrew into Greek and on seven occasions used the word *μονόκερως* (Greek for unicorn). The Hebrew original was *re'em* or oxen, but the context shows that a wild ox was intended, for the reference is always to an animal strong and untamable, as for example in Job xxxix, 10. "Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? Wilt thou trust him, because his strength is great?" Why did the translators—the legendary 70—employ the word *μονόκερως*? There were at least two sources from which they may have derived their belief in a wild bull with but a single horn, and there may have been others in the shape of folklore now forgotten. In the first place the Greek naturalists, Aristotle and others, had put on record the reputed reality of the unicorn, though none claimed to have seen one. The earliest reference is by Ctesias, a Greek physician at the Persian court at the end of the 5th century B.C., who wrote that such animals existed in India, and it appears highly probable that he had heard of the Indian rhinoceros which—unlike the African variety and the extinct species figured in palæolithic art—has only a single horn. The strength, solitary habits and ferocity which are said to be the most striking qualities of the unicorn support this conjecture, though Ctesias' description reminds us in some respects of the onager or wild ass. The theory is further favoured by the fact that S. Jerome, when writing his Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, used *rhinoceros* as equivalent to *μονόκερως*: he had probably seen one in the Rome arena. But there was a second source from which the Septuagint scholars may have derived their belief. Assyrian and Persian art employed a convention which regulated the representation of animals in profile on flat surfaces. In such profiles an animal like an ox commonly appeared with one horn thereby solving for the artist the problem of perspective,

and it is possible that alien peoples, like the Jews in captivity, without proper understanding of an unfamiliar convention, may have been led in this way to believe in unicorns. The great single-horned bulls upon which they gazed at Nineveh or Babylon probably represented the gigantic aurochs or wild ox (Fig. 1). That was the opinion of Layard, who excavated them a century ago. This animal, extinct since the 16th century but once widespread over Europe and the Near East, stood nearly seven feet high, and Cæsar's description (on *de bello gallico*) of its strength and ferocity accords well with the biblical attribution of these qualities to the unicorn.

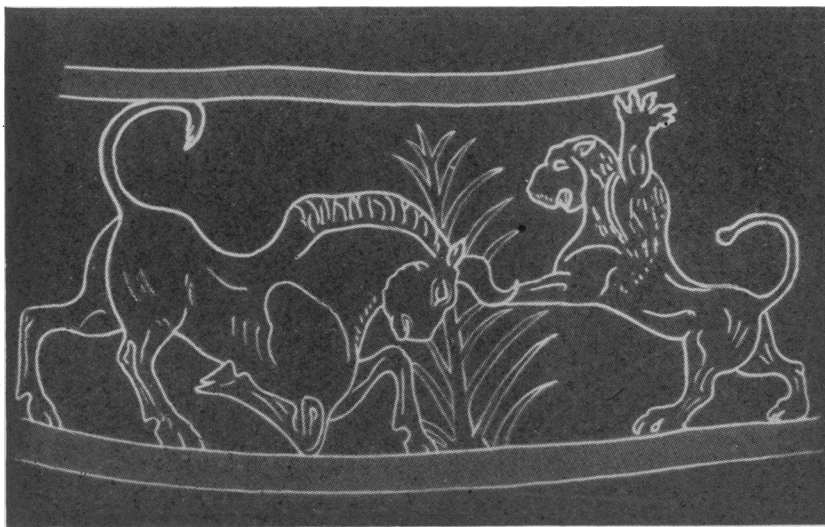


Fig. 1. Sculptured ornament on robe on Assur-Nasir-Pal II, King of Assyria 850 B.C. From A. H. Layard's "Monuments of Nineveh," I, plate 48, Fig. 2.

There is no convincing evidence that the Assyrian sculptors themselves believed in it. Indeed in the art of the ancient east there is none of that surprising unanimity on the shape of the unicorn's horn which we find in Christian illustrations. A bull, an antelope or a goat seem at different times to have supplied the model and this perhaps shows that the artists were not thinking in terms of a specific single-horned animal. But there is one feature of their art which is a source of perennial speculation. For 3,000 years from the Royal Tomb at Ur to the palace at Persepolis erected by Artaxerxes in 350 B.C. the art motif of a lion attacking an ungulate represented with a single horn—the lion and the unicorn fighting—recurs so constantly that many scholars have sought for the symbolic meaning which, as our knowledge of ancient art compels us to believe, underlay it. The most plausible hypothesis is that it personified

the victory of a sun-worshipping patriarchal people over an older moon-worshipping matriarchal society, a struggle reflected in the myths of many nations. The early history of Egypt and Chaldea, Greek myth and modern anthropology, all indicate that the patriarchal social pattern displaced one in which descent, property and power passed in the female line. The coincidental duration of the lunar and feminine cycles suggested that the one governed the other so that the moon became pre-eminently the planet presiding over women. Now an association of the unicorn with the moon is attested by both ancient and mediæval art, and from very early times the lion has served as a solar emblem. Another theory is that the allusion was astronomical, representing the triumph of summer (for the summer solstice then lay in Leo) over spring represented by Taurus, the zodiacal sign of the sun at the vernal equinox (Bunt *Antiquity*: December, 1930). Some faint echo of this ancient feud lingered on even after the dawn of the Christian era. The theme recurs occasionally in Byzantine art and its derivatives, and appears in mediæval bestiaries so that Spenser alludes to it in the *Faerie Queene*:—

Like as the lyon, whose imperial powre
A proud rebellious unicorn defyes,
T'avoide the rash assault and wrathful stowre
Of his fiers foe, him to a tree applies.
And when him running in full course he spyes
He slips aside; the whiles that furious beast
His precious horne, sought of his enemyes,
Strikes in the stroke, ne thence can be released,
But to the Victor yields a bounteous feast.

This is an exact description at an interval of 2,400 years and nearly 3,000 miles of the scene depicted in Fig. 1. The tenacity of life of this legend need not surprise us when we recall that a belief in the power of the moon to influence the flow of the body's humours was held by serious physicians as late as the 19th century.

Let us now come to Europe in the Christian era. The art of the Middle Ages reveals the unicorn as one of its favourite subjects, and the reason for this—even more surprising than the fact—is that the animal had now become one of the symbolic representations of Jesus Christ. We can trace this belief back to the third century A.D., when there was compiled at Alexandria a collection of animal stories known as *Physiologus* or “The naturalist.” They were fables, usually adorned with a moral and some reference to a passage in scripture, and in the course of time they attained such immense popularity that they were translated into practically every written language of Europe and the Near East from Iceland to Ethiopia. Some were perhaps old folk stories; others were probably invented at the time, for the human fancy has ever delighted in such tales and been prolific in their creation, from *Æsop's fables* and the Buddhist *Jataka* to “*Alice in Wonderland*” and “*The Wind in the Willows*.” In *Physiologus* appeared the tale by virtue of which the unicorn, already made authentic by the *Septuagint*, really came into his

own. He is depicted therein as a small animal the size of a goat—very different from the personification of power figured in the Old Testament—but like him, wild and untamable, proud and solitary. However, there is one method by which he may be taken. If a virgin is set in his path he will run towards her, lay his head in her lap and sink into a repose wherein he can be slain by the hunter. This picture is a parable in which the Virgin is Mary and the unicorn Jesus ; his rest in her lap might represent the Incarnation, and his death at the hand of the hunter the Passion, though sometimes the hunter is represented as the Holy Ghost. It had an immense vogue for a thousand years, in the course of which the unicorn acquired other mystical attributes. In Gothic sculpture and stained glass, in painting and tapestry, in illuminated manuscripts and in heraldry, he is a favourite figure from the 12th century onwards. (Fig. 2.) Nor was the obvious erotic potential of the tale neglected in the literature of chivalry. There is some variety in his pictured appearance, perhaps encouraged by the conflicting accounts of Aristotle, Aelian and Pliny ; sometimes his hoof is cloven, sometimes solid ; here he resembles a goat, there a horse. But on one feature there is a singular unanimity amongst the mediæval artists of every kind, and that is the shape of the horn—the straight and slender spike with its spiral markings which we see projecting from the forehead of the unicorn in our royal arms.

Now the reason for this unanimity is not far to seek. The artists drew not from their imagination but from models, a number of which were all exactly alike in shape if not in size, and which we know from many records to have been amongst the most treasured possessions of popes and princes, of doges and of dukes. These were the actual unicorns' horns which were perhaps the most precious merchandise of the Middle Ages, worth ten times their weight in gold. The Doge of Venice had two, believed to have been looted from Constantinople when it was captured in A.D. 1204 on the Fourth Crusade ; they are still to be seen. Benvenuto Cellini records how he just missed a commission from the Pope to mount one for presentation to Francis I of France. There was one at Windsor which was disposed of with the Crown Jewels under Cromwell's Commonwealth. In 1404 William of Wyckham died and left one to his New College, Oxford, which is still preserved. Others are recorded and no one ever doubted their authenticity till the 16th century.

And yet they were not horns at all but teeth, the tusks of that curious cetacean, the narwhal, a native of the Arctic ocean from which it seldom if ever strays (Fig. 3). It is one of the smaller members of the whale family, 12 to 18 feet long, and the male possesses a single tusk projecting forward, slender and straight, with spirals traced on its surface exactly as the mediæval artists represented it. Like the tusk of the elephant it grows continuously, and is commonly about one-third the length of the animal. Now very rarely a dead narwhal may drift down with the summer currents and be cast up on the beaches of the British Isles or Scandinavia, and its single tusk may then be found by man. It was such



Fig. 2. Marginal illustration from Italian MSS. of 14th Century A.D. in the British Museum (Royal MS. 12.F.XIII folio 10v.)

chance finds, their origin obscured by successive exchanges, that were marketed by mediæval merchants—possibly in all good faith—as the authentic horn of the fabulous unicorn, and they were all the more valuable for being so scarce. Their scarcity can be judged by the fact that since their real origin became known in the 16th century, only three instances have been recorded of narwhals stranded on the coasts of Great Britain—in 1648, 1800 and 1808. There are also one or two records of tusks being picked up. The growth of the whaling industry however in the 19th century made them familiar objects.

But there was another quality besides their rarity and their mystical associations which caused them to be so highly prized, and that was their reputed medicinal potency. A cup made from unicorn's horn had the power of neutralizing any poison put into it and small fragments ground into powder and swallowed were not only sovereign against poison but against any other ill that flesh is heir to. Belief in the first of these powers is ancient and is, indeed, mentioned by Ctesias in the 5th century B.C. as a property of unicorn's horn. But it is not confined to that animal, and it was long a popular belief, still cherished among

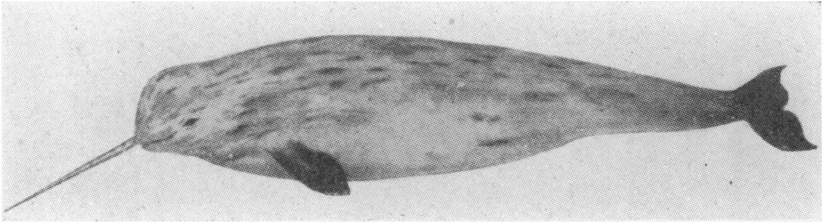


Fig. 3. Male narwhal.

primitive peoples, that a cup of horn has the power to purify its contents. Faith in its pharmaceutical qualities taken internally is more peculiar. It is not mentioned by Galen or Hippocrates, and as it appears to have first gained currency in the 13th century it may have been borrowed from Arabic medicine, then the chief source of new ideas. Arabs in their turn drew much from India, where faith in the protective power of horn is still widespread. Its roots reach right back to the primitive and universal belief that any form of matter which appears to be incorruptible, such as ivory, horn or gold, holds the secret of life and has the magical property of passing it on if suitably invoked or applied. Untutored minds do not draw the sharp distinction that we do between animate and inanimate matter.

It was in the 14th, 15th and early 16th centuries—the great age of political poisoning—that the reputed properties of unicorn's horn won their widest credence; and as they were very scarce their price reached astronomical proportions. Their scarcity precluded the clinical tests which might have disproved their prophylactic powers, but from the beginning of the 17th century there was a slump and their value rapidly declined. This followed on the knowledge newly won of their real origin. As soon as it was realised that America was not the India its earliest discoverers had believed it to be, there began that search by British sailors for a North-West Passage which continued intermittently till the middle of the 19th century. Humphrey Gilbert, Frobisher and others coasting along Greenland and the shores of Baffin Bay for the first time in history saw the narwhal and described it. For Frobisher and his fellows it was a fish and they named it the sea-unicorn, but despite the name the glory had departed. By no stretch of imagination could this strange monster be fitted into the familiar fable and its horn was no longer exalted but debased, at any rate in terms of the currency. Nor were the physicians slow to perceive the significance of the change. Marini, a Venetian doctor, published a book in 1566 denouncing the therapeutic properties of the unicorn's horn, as being devoid of all foundation in fact. He was followed a few years later by the more famous Ambroise Paré, "The Father of French Surgery." In England, however, the substance remained on the list of drugs which registered pharmacists

were required to carry till 1741. In that year a new edition of the *Pharmacopœia* was published containing it, and this evoked a protest from the College of Physicians at the inclusion of a drug long recognised in scientific circles as without effect and employed only by charlatans and quacks. It was omitted in subsequent editions. Hogarth was engaged in 1741 on his series of pictures, "*Marriage à la mode*" (now in the National Gallery). He probably heard of this incident and it is perhaps for this reason that in the third picture of the series, which shows a consulting room, he painted a unicorn's horn conspicuously displayed to label the consultant as a quack.

It is to be remarked that though the spread of knowledge in western Europe extinguished faith in the pharmaceutical efficacy of unicorn's horn, it remained active farther east, in Russia and in Asia. In China it was the single horned rhinoceros, native not only to India, but to all S.E. Asia, and not the narwhal, which supplied the stock of unicorn's horn. It is still in use there for medicinal purposes, more often as an aphrodisiac than an averter of disease, and the demand for it has led to a noticeable diminution in the numbers of this species. Nowadays the scarcity is to some extent met by a brisk import trade in the horns of the African rhinoceros, which providentially has two of them. While, as always happens when superstition holds sway, there is a fertile field open for the supply of fraudulent substitutes.

Any discourse on the unicorn is expected to account for its presence as the supporter of our royal arms, which has made it universally familiar. The explanation is simple. Owing to its mystical associations the animal was a favourite with the heralds, and two unicorns figured as the supporters of the royal arms of the last three Stuart monarchs of Scotland, James V, Mary Queen of Scots and James VI. When the last named became James I of England his heralds produced new arms for the joint kingdom. Leaving the lion which for many generations had been the English dexter supporter they installed the Scottish unicorn sinister in place of the Welsh dragon, which the Tudor monarchs had maintained there. This friendly confrontation of the lion and the unicorn is due to a dynastic incident, and does not derive from the feud figured in the art of Assyria and already described. But it is not impossible that the College of Heralds, aware of their planetary associations, should have felt it to be particularly appropriate that symbols of the sun and moon should support the new arms of a greater and more glorious kingdom.