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The unicorn is a legendary chimaera that, for centuries, has been present in the mindset of Euro-Mediterranean cultures. Although its morphological description changed, tradition identifies it as an animal like a horse, albeit smaller and with a spiralling horn on its head pointing forward. The unicorn has been known since Antiquity, with references by authors such as Ctesias and Pliny. However, its relevance for medieval Europeans began with the Biblical references to this animal in several Old Testament verses. These verses gave legitimacy to the unicorn, and it was accepted as a tangible animal. During the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the unicorn was often described as a ferocious animal, a symbol of purity, virginity, or grace, and people believed that his horn could purify and heal. The narwhal's tusk (*Monodon monoceros* L.), a cetacean from the Arctic Ocean's icy waters, served as the unicorn horn's iconography standard. Our research aims to facilitate the interpretation of unicorn iconography in the context of Christian art to all those who find representations of unicorns during their pilgrimage or touristic periphrasis.

Key Words: unicorn, symbols in religion, aurochs, Christ, narwhal

The Biblical Unicorn

The unicorn is commonly represented as an animal like a horse but smaller, with a spiralling horn on its head (Gessner, 1560; Jonstonus, 1657) (Figure 1, Figure 2). In the Bible, the unicorn is referred to in nine verses [see Appendix 1] and described as a wild force (Numbers, Deuteronomy), a danger impossible to tame (Isaiah, Job), that is, a metaphor of indomitable strength. The unicorn is presented to us as a real animal, like all other wild or domestic animals that lived in Palestine, Egypt, Sinai, and Mesopotamia when the Old Testament was written (c.1400-400 BC).

The translation of the Old Testament into Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Eastern Mediterranean region after the conquests of Alexander Magnus (356-323 BC), was made around the 3rd century BC, during the reign of Ptolemy II (reigned c.285-246 BC). According to the most widespread legend, the translation was done by

seventy-two scholars (six from each of the twelve tribes of Israel) on the Island of Pharos, near Alexandria – hence the name *Septuagint* Bible. This is the Canonic version, although the translation was probably done over a more significant period and by an undetermined number of translators. During the translation, scholars encountered references to a horned animal called *re'em*, and probably no one knew this animal nor its name in Greek (Godbey, 1939; Gotfredsen, 1999). The interpretation of the verses in which the animal was mentioned required it to be large, not domesticated, and impressive enough to symbolise strength. It was not a bull because, in Isaiah 34.7 and Deuteronomy 33.17, the bull and the unknown animal were used in the same verse.

Using sources unknown to us, the translators opted for *μονόκερος* [*monoceros*], which, translated into Latin, is *a unicorn* – an animal with only one horn (Lavers, 2009). The animal may have been a wild creature that lived in India and was mentioned by Ctesias of Cnidus in his work

Figure 1: Unicorn (1560)



Icones Animalium Quadrupedum Uuiparorum et
Ouiparorum (1560) by Conrad Gessner

Indica. This book is now lost, but it was cited by many classic writers, such as the Greek Claudius Aelianus (175-235), in his book 4.52 of '*De Natura Animalium*' [On the Characteristics of Animals]:

I have heard that there are wild asses in India no smaller than horses which have a white body, a head which is almost crimson, and dark blue eyes. They have a horn on their brow one and a half cubits in length. The lower portion of the horn is white, the upper part is vermillion, and the middle is very dark ... They say that the one who drinks from this horn will never experience terminal illnesses. No longer would he suffer seizures or the so-called holy sickness nor could he be killed with poison ... These creatures are not only faster than other asses, but horses and deer as well. They begin to run lightly, but

Figure 2: Unicorns (1657)



Illustrations (X and XI) from *Historiae Naturalis de Quadrupedibus Libri: Cum Aeneis Figuris* (1657) by
Joannes Jonstonus

gradually they run harder and to pursue one is, to put it poetically, to chase the intangible (Ctesias, 2011).

Some authors say that Hebrew *re'em* could have been the word for rhinoceros, although this animal did not inhabit Palestine when the Old Testament was written. Nowadays, the most accepted hypothesis is that *re'em* was the auroch (*Bos primigenius* Bojanus), the ancestor of the domestic cattle (Griffith, 1827-1835). This animal had an extensive natural range that included Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, and China (Sinding *et al.*, 2016) (Figure 3, Figure 4) and was already extinct in Palestine when the Scriptures were translated in Alexandria. For this reason, the translators were unaware of the animal's identity and granted the unicorn the magnificent attributes of the aurochs. All European cattle breeds descend from the aurochs, and the contemporary cattle are impoverished forms of a genetic heritage that, in the past, displayed an extraordinary richness of genes and splendid vigour. The extinction of the aurochs was caused by human action, and the last specimen – a female – died in the Jaktorów Forest, Poland, in 1627 (Vuure, 2002).

Translations of the Bible into the European vernacular languages kept references to the unicorn until the end of the 19th century; from then on, the 'wild ox' replaced the unicorn.

Figure 3: Auroch

Plate 51 from *The Animal Kingdom: Arranged in Conformity with its Organization* (1827-1835) by Edward Griffith

'His beauty is that of the firstborn of a bull, his horns are those of a unicorn, with them he will push the nations'. Yes, a good bull, like a sacrificial victim for the offences of the whole world, to make all things peaceful. His beauty is holy, for everything firstborn is holy, as I have shown elsewhere (...) And Christ's beauty is truly holy, for it is written in reference to Him as arisen, 'fair in beauty above the sons of men' because He is the firstborn from the dead and has the horns of the unicorn. But we should inquire how Moses, when he spoke of horns, chose those of the unicorn, since the unicorn itself does not appear among the generations of wild animals, so the experts say. And so, we ought rather to judge that the Word is unique, because the substantial Word of God is one Word, and not many (Ambrose, 2003).

The Medieval Unicorn

By the end of the 4th century AD, Saint Jerome (c.342/347-420) translated the Bible from Greek into Latin but did not question the unicorn's existence. His translation – the *Vulgate* – was the Bible used by the Church during the Middle Ages and consolidated the Christian conviction about the existence of unicorns. Also in the 4th century, one of the most influential Latin theologians, Saint Ambrose (340-397), Bishop of Milan, answered the question about the nature of the unicorn, writing that the Unicorn was Jesus Christ, the Son, and the Word of God:

For this theologian, the unicorn was sent by God to fight the devil and defend humans against the evil forces that deviated them from the path of God. Its horn symbolised the union between God, the Creator, and his only begotten Son (Gotfredsen, 1999).

By the late 6th century AD, two other theologians, Gregory the Great (c.540-604, Pope from 590) and Isidore, Bishop of Seville (560-636), wrote about the unicorn. The first wrote commentaries on the Bible and included information taken from the *Physiologus*, and the second wrote a glossary about the biblical knowledge produced until then. Isidore confuses Pliny's references to

Figure 4: Auroch Historical Distribution

Adapted from Sinding, M.-H.S. & Gilbert, M.T.P. (2016)

rhinoceros as being descriptions of the unicorn, namely, the fights between these two animals, which came to be interpreted as combat between elephants and unicorns:

The rhinoceros is named with a Greek word; in Latin it means 'horn on the nose'. This is also the monoceron, that is, the unicorn, because it has a single four-foot horn in the middle of its forehead, so sharp and strong that it tosses in the air or impales whatever it attacks. It often fights with the elephant and throws it to the ground after wounding it in the belly. It has such strength that it can be captured by no hunter's ability, but, as those who have written about the natures of animals claim, if a virgin girl is set before a unicorn, as the beast approaches, she may open her lap and it will lay its head there with all ferocity put aside, and thus lulled and disarmed it may be captured (Isidore of Seville, 2006).

In the Middle Ages, the bestiaries were relevant books for the history of the unicorn, and they were Latin adaptations of a now-lost Greek manuscript – the

Physiologus (Φυσιολόγος), written by an unknown author. Some extraordinary medieval bestiaries survived (*Bodleian Bestiary*, c.1150; *Rochester Bestiary*, c.1230; *Northumberland Bestiary*, c.1250-1260), and we can see how they perpetuated the classic Greco-Roman treatises on fauna, adding allegories and interpretations based on Christian morals to reinforce theological teachings.

In the bestiaries, the unicorn is hostile to humans, an animal that cannot be captured alive, but it becomes docile in the presence of a virgin, in whose lap it will rest its head. When the unicorn finds itself defenceless, the hunter arrives, kills the unicorn, and obtains its prized horn (Figure 5-7). This well-known composition was represented countless times in medieval art. Within this context, the unicorn represents Christ incarnated, laying down his life willingly and preparing Himself for His Passion and Crucifixion.

Although it can be represented in the company of God or with Adam and Eve in Eden, medieval artists represented the unicorn more frequently associated with the Virgin

Figure 5: Hunter Lances Unicorn in Virgin's Lap (C.1150)



Folio 48v from *The Bodleian Bestiary* (c.1150), anonymous

Figure 6: The Unicorn Chase (C.1230)

Folio 10v from *The Rochester Bestiary* (c.1230),
anonymous

Figure 7: Virgin, The Unicorn, and The Chasers (1250-1260)

Folio 11 from *The Northumberland Bestiary* (1250-1260),
anonymous

Mary, as in the *Annunciation* (Figure 8), within the *Hortus Conclusus* (Figure 9) or in the *Mystical Hunt*, as we can see in the Verteuil Tapestries.

Perhaps the most important set of medieval tapestries related to the Christian unicorn are the Verteuil Tapestries, now preserved at *The Cloisters*, the medieval art section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York). These seven tapestries represent a mystical hunt and combine profane and religious elements. The hunt is similar to what we believe were former medieval expeditions intended to capture wild animals. However, religious elements are discreetly placed to remind us of the unicorn's nature. In this context, the hunt invokes the need to fulfil the prophecies of the Old Testament, which led to the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. One of the tapestries represents the death of the unicorn and its transport to the king's palace (Figure 10). The king's

palace is the Kingdom of Heaven, as Christ will ascend into Heaven, bearing the wounds of His Passion – a symbol of His sacrifice and redemption of humans' sins.

Another Verteuil's tapestry depicts a unicorn inside a circular fence (Figure 11) – the circle symbolises Heaven. In this tapestry, the unicorn is attached to a tree – probably *the Tree of Redemption*, which, according to medieval belief, originated from the *Tree of Life*, denied to Adam and Eve when they chose to eat the fruit of the *Tree of Knowledge*. The tree to which the unicorn is attached is a pomegranate (*Punica granatum* L.), which symbolises the Church in Christian iconography. The pomegranate also had a profane meaning – fertility, whose origin goes back to the Greek world and the civilisations that flourished in the Middle East and Persia (Lavers, 2009; Impelluso, 2005). It was also linked to the legend of Persephone and her sojourn in the Kingdom of Hades, where she ate

Figure 8: Annunciation with the Unicorn (C.1480)



Polyptych (detail) (c.1480), anonymous, National Museum in Warsaw

Figure 9: The Annunciation as an Allegorical Unicorn Hunt (c.1500)



Anonymous [nun's work on vellum from Eichstätt, Germany], The Morgan Library and Museum, New York

Figure 10: The Hunters Return to the Castle (1495-1505)



The Unicorn Tapestries, French (cartoon) /South Netherlandish (woven), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

the seeds of a pomegranate. This unwise move decided Persephone's eternal return to the Underworld because those who ate something in this Kingdom could never leave it (Grimal, 1992). A commemorative coin recently minted by the Portuguese Treasury House (2023) depicts a unicorn and a pomegranate within this classic Greco-Roman symbology (Figure 12).

By the end of the 15th century, we find representations of the unicorn made in contexts simultaneously sacred and profane, as in the six Flemish tapestries currently on display at the Cluny Museum (Paris), known as *The Lady and the Unicorn* (Figure 13). They all depict a

woman, a lion, and a unicorn surrounded by *millefleurs* – hundreds of flowering herbaceous plants, such as violets, carnations, or daisies. These tapestries were manufactured in Flanders around 1500 AD; and although there is no consensus on what they represent, most researchers agree that they may represent allegories of the five human senses, which are pathways to temptation (Pastoureau & Delahaye, 2013).

From the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the sacred symbology of the unicorn fell into disuse, but a new era began, now linked to secular art and the revival of the Classic World.

Figure 11: The Unicorn Rests in a Garden (1495-1505)

The Unicorn Tapestries, French (cartoon) / South Netherlandish (woven), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 12 Unicorn Commemorative Sterling Silver [design by Susa Monteiro]

Mythological Heroes and Creatures Series, Portuguese National Mint House [Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda], Lisboa

Figure 13: *À Mon Seul Désir* [To my only desire] (c.1500)

The Lady and the Unicorn Tapestries, French (cartoon) / Flanders (woven), Musée de Cluny, Paris

The Renaissance Unicorn

In the Renaissance, the revival of classical Greco-Roman heritage progressively replaced religion in art. During the 16th century, the symbology of the unicorn became more complex, the association with Christ and the Virgin lost popularity, and the unicorn began to be linked with earthly pleasures and eroticism, such as in the royal favourites (Figure 14). However, it continued to be associated with virtues such as innocence, modesty, chastity (Figure 15-17), and triumph (Figure 18). A painting by Raphael that was thought to represent Saint Catherine of Alexandria, with her attributes, revealed a hidden unicorn after a restoration process undertaken in 1934 (Figure 19).

During the Renaissance, unicorn horns circulated as royal gifts, and some of them are still preserved in museums and private collections. The unicorn horn continued to be a sought-after product due to its alleged therapeutic properties, and so it remained until the 18th century, especially as an antidote against poisons (Miller, 1960).

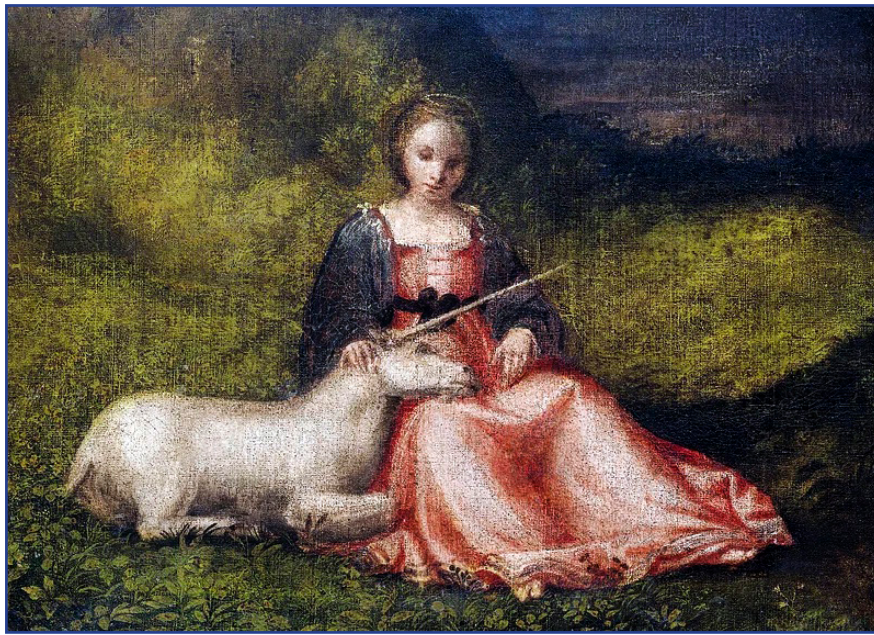
The need to link the unicorn to precious gifts was so strong that the tapestry depicting the arrival of Vasco da Gama to India (Figure 20), made in Tournai (Belgium) in the early 16th century, and currently owned by *Caixa Geral de Depósitos* (Portugal), represents, among other activities, the disembark of a unicorn, probably a gift to the local Indian ruler (Dias, 2007; Levenson, 2007).

Figure 14: A Lady in Her Bath [Diane de Poitiers?] With a Unicorn in the Background (1571)



By François Clouet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Figure 15: Woman with Unicorn (c.1510)



Anonymous, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Figure 16: Saint Justina Venerated by a Patron (c.1530-1534)



By Moretto da Brescia, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Figure 17: Allegorical Figure of Purity with a Unicorn (1688-1689)



By Marcantonio Franceschini, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

**Figure 18: Triumph of Battista Sforza
(1465-1466)**



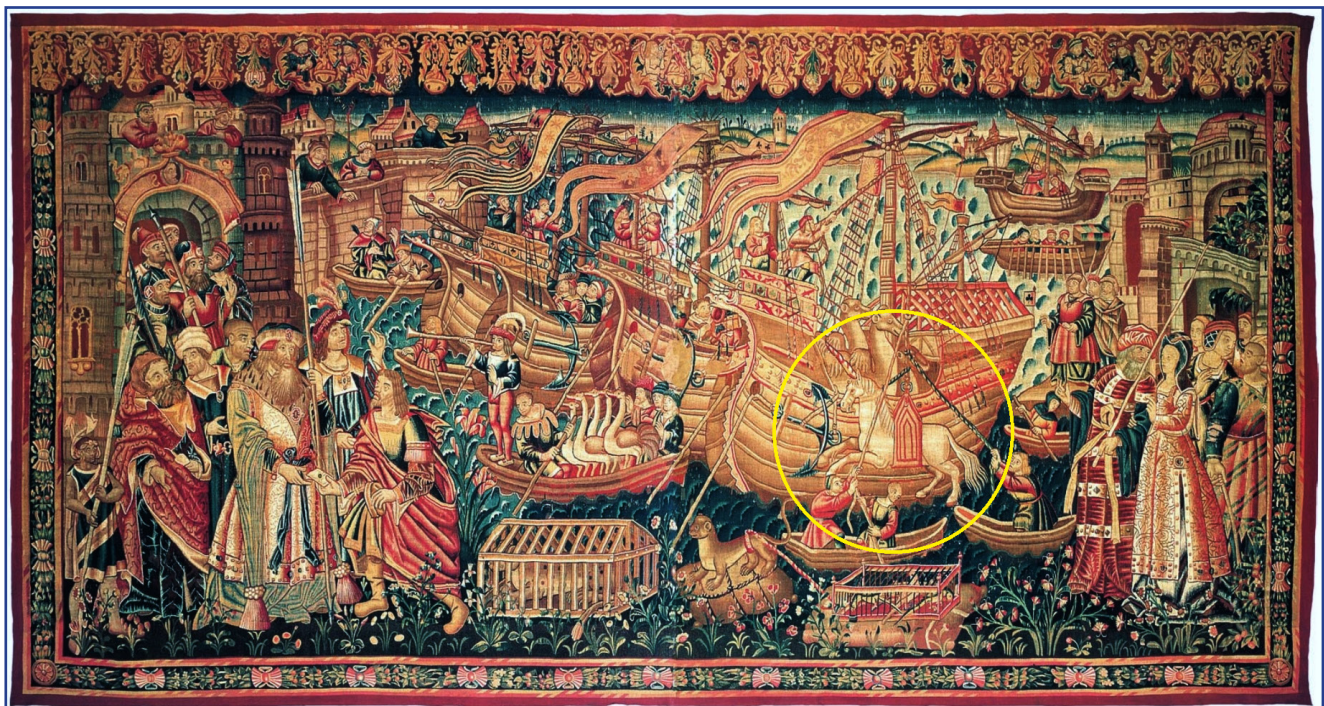
By Piero della Francesca, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

**Figure 19: Young Woman with Unicorn
(c.1505-1506)**

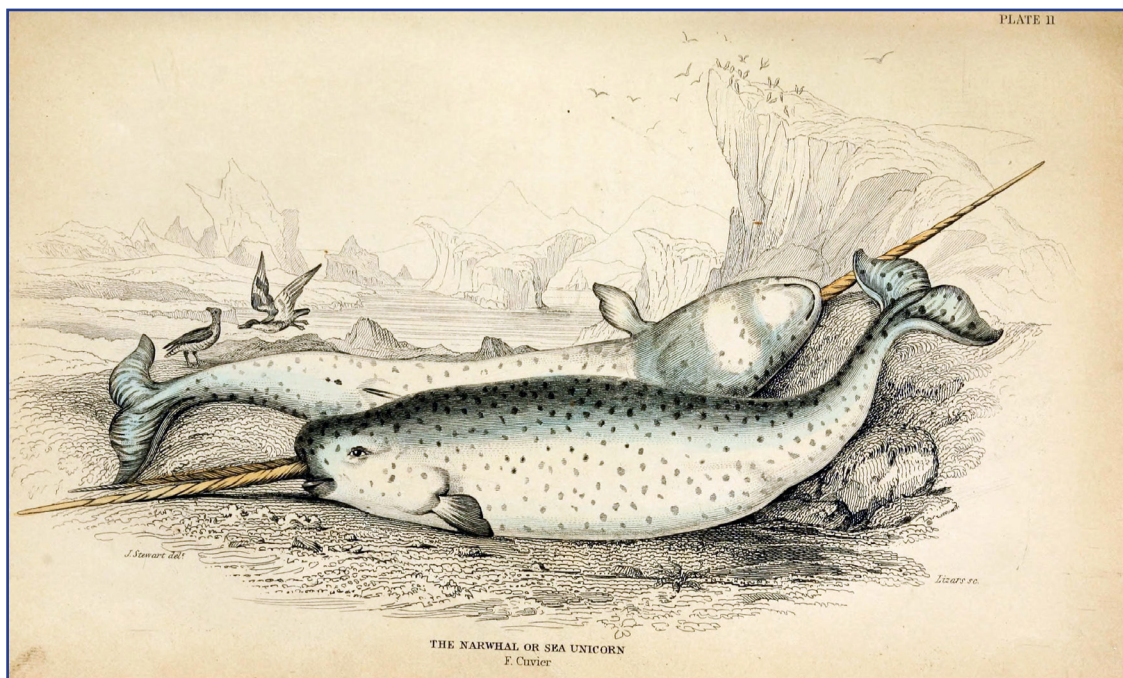


By Raphael, Galleria Borghese, Rome

Figure 20: The Arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut (first quarter of the 16th century)



Tournai (Flanders), Collection of the Caixa Geral de Depósitos, Lisbon

Figure 21: The Narwhal or Sea Unicorn (1843)

Whales, Naturalist's Library (7: Plate XI) by Robert Hamilton and William Jardine

The tusk of the narwhal (*Monodon monoceros* L.), a cetacean that inhabits the Arctic Ocean's icy waters (Figure 21), served as the standard for the unicorn horns' iconography (Hamilton & Jardine, 1843). This tusk is found in males (rarely in females) and can reach a maximum length of three meters. In the past, narwhals may have lived at latitudes close to the northern coasts of the British Isles, and local populations may have traded them as authentic unicorn horns. However, most narwhal tusks were probably obtained from the coasts of Greenland and entered the European trade routes via the Norse cultures.

Usually, each narwhal has only one long projected tusk, but 1 in 500 has two tusks. The tusk is an upper jaw canine tooth, and many are the proposed functions of the tusk. It may be a weapon for fighting, a device to open holes in the Arctic ice or to trap and stun small Arctic cod, an acoustic organ, a secondary sexual character related with a higher status based on the size of the tusk (Best, 1981, Zackary *et al.*, 2020), a sensory organ to understand changes in the environment or for communication (Nweeia *et al.*, 2014). It is not essential for individual survival because females rarely have them and commonly live longer than males.

In the context of the European regalia, the unicorn horn (narwhal tusk) was used in the sceptre of the Holy Roman Emperor (later by the Emperor of Austria), during the coronation and in state ceremonies (Figure 22). It is now kept in the Imperial Treasury at the Hofburg Palace (Vienna). Unicorn horns were also used for the *Coronation Chair of Denmark*, made between 1662 and 1671, and formerly used by the Danish monarchs (Figure 23). This chair, now kept in the Castle of Rosenborg

Figure 22: The Unicorn Horn Scepter (1615)

By Andreas Osenbruck (Prague), Imperial Treasury at the Hofburg Palace, Vienna

Figure 23: The Coronation Chair of Denmark (c.1662-1671)



By Bendix Grodtschilling, Castle of Rosenborg, Copenhagen

(Copenhagen), was inspired by the Throne of Solomon, as described in the Bible's I Kings 10:18: 'Moreover the king made a great throne of ivory, and overlaid it with the best gold'. Unicorns are also common elements of heraldry, such as in the United Kingdom Royal Coat of Arms, where a chained unicorn represents Scotland (Figure 24) (Shepard, 1930).

Conclusions

In the Middle Ages, the unicorn was a symbol of Christ, and this understanding circulated widely, but from the Reformation on, this symbolic association decreased in popularity. As science and reason replaced religious dogmas and the search for a living unicorn proved fruitless, doubt set in. Zoology and the scientific classification of the natural world had no place for the unicorn, which found a new home in secular symbology

and literature. Even in these circumstances, the unicorn remains a powerful symbol. Now, we find unicorns not only in art museums but also in famous novels, such as *The Last Unicorn* (1968) by the American writer Peter S. Beagle, and in the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) by British author Rowling, as well as in popular toys and in successful business start-ups. In the novel, *The Name of the Rose* (1983), the Italian medievalist, philosopher, and novelist Umberto Eco (1932-2016) wrote a remarkable dialogue between a Franciscan friar, William of Baskerville, and a Benedictine novice, Adso of Melk, that, although fictional, may guide us to the understanding of the true nature of the unicorn:

Adso of Melk – *But did the ancient masters happen to receive from God the revelation of the unicorn's true nature?*

William of Baskerville – *Not the revelation: the experience. They were fortunate enough to be born in lands where unicorns live, or in times when unicorns lived in our own lands.*

Adso of Melk – *But then how can we trust ancient wisdom, whose traces you are always seeking, if it is handed down by lying books that have interpreted it with such license?*

William of Baskerville – *Books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry. When we consider a book, we must not ask ourselves what it says but what it means, a precept that the commentators of the holy books had very clearly in mind. The unicorn, as these books speak of him, embodies a moral truth, or allegorical, or anagogical, but one that remains true.'*

Figure 24: Scottish Version of the Royal Arms of the Hanoverians (used in the UK from 1801 to 1816)



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coat_of_arms_of_the_United_Kingdom#/media/File:Lion_and_Unicorn_-_geograph.org.uk_-_902236.jpg

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Appendix 1: Unicorn Verses in King James Bible (Standard) www.kingjamesbibleonline.org	
Numbers 23:22	God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of a unicorn.
Numbers 24:8	God brought him forth out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of a unicorn: he shall eat up the nations his enemies, and shall break their bones, and pierce them through with his arrows.
Deuteronomy 33:17	His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns: with them he shall push the people together to the ends of the earth: and they are the ten thousand of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh.
Job 39:9	Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib?
Job 39:10	Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? or will he harrow the valleys after thee?
Psalms 22:21	Save me from the lion's mouth: for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns.
Psalms 29:6	He maketh them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion like a young unicorn.
Psalms 92:10	But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of a unicorn: I shall be anointed with fresh oil.
Isaiah 34:7	And the unicorns shall come down with them, and the bullocks with the bulls; and their land shall be soaked with blood, and their dust made fat with fatness.