

1 THE UNICORN'S HORN

Northern Europe, AD 1427–1618

Size: 2 m, 7 cm long



Before the mid-16th century, everyone knew that horns such as this belonged to unicorns. The existence of unicorns is already stamped on Indus Valley seals of the mid-3rd millennium bc, and continued to be recorded throughout Antiquity, the Middle Ages and beyond, in images, literature and poetry. And then, quite suddenly, belief in their existence faded. A sign of this occurred at the Council of Trent (1545–63), which deemed the representation of the unicorn as a symbol of the Incarnation inappropriate, on the basis that nobody believed in their existence any longer. This is a bit rich considering the myths that the Catholic Church continues to peddle – Virgin Birth, Resurrection, Son of God, etc. – and this reverse-Dawkins-like attitude has certainly returned to bite them in the backside in recent times.

It is axiomatic that you cannot perceive something in which you do not believe. As the unicorn in Alice in Wonderland said to Alice: ‘I’ll try and believe in you if you believe in me.’ And it is typical of the arrogance of modern scholarship to decide to deny the existence of a creature that has been familiar to many for thousands of years, thereby wilfully impoverishing our imagination. There is thus a case to be made that the imagination is more important, and more enduring, than science, and it is our duty to make sure that this is so.

In 1577 Sir Martin Frobisher presented Queen Elizabeth I with the horn of a ‘Sea-Unicorn’, at the time much rarer than the land unicorn, that he brought back from his search for the North-West Passage. According to Herman Melville, this horn hung in Windsor Castle for a long time. The idea that such horns were born of fish had already been promulgated in an illustration by Olaus Magnus in 1555, and further promoted by the Danish zoologist Ole Worm in 1638. Since then the improbable idea that such horns are the teeth of whales has prevailed, and unicorns have gradually disappeared. But Ole Worm also declared that Tradescant was an idiot, so his views can be taken with a few grains of salt.

And this is despite all the historical evidence. Images abound from ancient China and Iran, although the only feature common to the Kylin and the beast represented at Persepolis is the single horn. An Egyptian papyrus from the 2nd millennium bc in the British Museum shows a unicorn playing chess with a lion. The Greeks categorized the unicorn under natural history, not as myth, as the writings of Aristotle, Strabo, Pliny the Elder and others show. The first written description we know dates from c. 400 bc, and the first illustration to appear in Europe is in the margin of a manuscript by Cosmas the India-Farer, the original of which was written c. ad 1000. Thereafter we come across a legion of believers, including Marco Polo, Piero della Francesca, Petrarch and Shakespeare. The Danish Kings sat on the ‘Unicorn Throne’, and bishop’s croziers of unicorn horn can be seen in church treasuries across Europe. Its medicinal properties, still valued in the 18th century, were probably responsible for the shaved tip of this horn. Leonardo da Vinci wrote the following: ‘The unicorn, through its intemperance and not knowing how to control itself, for the love it bears to fair maidens forgets its ferocity and wildness; and laying aside all fear it will go up to a seated damsel and go to sleep in her lap, and thus the hunters take it.’ And he knew a thing or two.

Unicorns were abundant in Muslim lands. They were called karkadan, and fine prancing images can be found on enamelled glass, inlaid bronzes, stone reliefs, ivory caskets, in miniature paintings and even on carpets, throughout the Middle Ages, and even later, since Muslims were not impressed by the Council of Trent. Not only that, they also figure in the encyclopaedic writings of Ibn Bakhtishu and al-Qazvini, who describe in detail their peculiarities and habits. Several varieties bounded across the land of Iran, bull-bodied in the East, and equine in the West of the type familiar to Europeans. To my knowledge their horns were not gathered there, and had no ecclesiastical or medicinal associations. Rams' horns adorn many shrines in Central Asia, but never the horn of a unicorn. Probably, like all the great classical carpets of Iran, they were traded with greedy and well-informed Westerners. And today, their graceful traces are as invisible there as they are in Europe.

The most splendid example is in the Imperial Treasury in Vienna, for which a quite staggering price was paid. It stands 2m 43cm high, and is mounted on a bejewelled base. The Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I (1558–1564) declared that the two most important items among the fabulous riches of the Imperial Treasury were this horn and the Holy Grail. I agree with him about the horn, but have my doubts about the Grail, which is a typical Byzantine agate bowl of the 4th century ad. Furthermore, were one to accept all the Holy Grails scattered around – Joseph of Arimathea's, variously located in the UK, (including at Aberystwyth and Rosslyn Chapel), San Lorenzo Treasury, Genoa, etc. – one would have to assume that the Last Supper was a wild party. Lorenzo the Magnificent had a horn of similar size to this one, and his great-grandson, Alessandro Duke of Florence, wore a piece of it on a gold chain as protection against poison. It must have worked, since he was assassinated with a dagger.

Never underestimate the unicorn. He features prominently, after all, on the Royal Coat of Arms of the United Kingdom, and has been there since 1603, rather bucking the trend initiated at the Council of Trent. Given the enticing but improbable task of choosing one work of art above all others to live with, the five 'Lady and the Unicorn' tapestries in the Musée de Cluny in Paris must be a contender. So beautiful, mysterious and enchanting

Many people who sit in parks have noticed the uncanny resemblance that dogs have to their owners. I have an old friend, a poet and writer, who so embodies the unicorn that I can have no doubt about their existence. He, like the unicorn, also has a tendency to want to lie down with his head in a lady's lap. His explanation for their current invisibility is: 'Every time someone fails to believe in unicorns, a unicorn fades away.' If only our attitude could change, there would be as many unicorns in Richmond Park as there are now deer, and a UNICORNUCOPIA would become available to us all.

A radiocarbon dating measurement report from RCD Lockinge is available