



Media Spotlight

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR MEDIA

SPECIAL REPORT



THE UNICORN

FABLED BEAST OF MYTH & MAGIC

by Albert James Dager

Of all the mythical beasts of religion, folklore, art, and literature, the unicorn holds the greatest sway over man's imagination. The origins of its legends lost in time, this fabulous beast has held a part in virtually every culture, sought out by kings and popes of old for its magical qualities.

The unicorn most prominent in the West today is depicted as a graceful horse with a long, tapering horn protruding from its brow. But this is only one of many imaginative portrayals.

Variouly described as an ox, ram, goat, bull, antelope, wild ass, horse, rhinoceros, even as a serpent and as a fish, the unicorn has eluded any specific delineation. And in spite of the claims of men to have seen the unicorn, evidence of such an animal has never materialized.

THE BIBLICAL UNICORN

In view of the Bible's references to the "unicorn" (Numbers 23:22, 24:8; Job 39:9-10; Psalms 29:6, 92:10), would it not be reasonable to assume that it did at one time exist, perhaps having gone the way of the dinosaur into extinction? Perhaps it even exists still, indigenous to some faraway land, its habitat some inaccessible region, hidden from the sight of man.

Wishful thinking aside, the unicorn remains nothing more than a figment of man's imagination. The origins of the biblical unicorn can be traced to the third century B.C., when seventy-two Jewish scholars in Alexandria produced the Septuagint (a translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek). Finding several references to an animal called the "*re'em*,"

they were puzzled as to its meaning. No one was sure what the *re'em* was, although they deduced that it was large, fierce, and horned. They "resolved their confusion by deciding to use the term *monoceros*, later Latinized into *unicornus*. These references in the Bible in large part account for the entrance of the unicorn into European consciousness. Its presence in the Old Testament and, a few centuries later, in the Talmud, extended the unicorn's pedigree as far back as Adam and Eve. And because the animal was mentioned in the Bible its existence could certainly not be doubted; the Word of God attested to it."¹

The controversy over the true identity of the *re'em* lasted for centuries and was mired in complexities. It was eventually identified as the giant aurochs, a species of wild buffalo that lived in Mesopotamia and became extinct around 500 B.C.

Working from the Septuagint, early translators of the Bible into English retained the word "unicorn," rather than seek a more accurate rendering from the Hebrew. The translators of the King James Version employed the earlier English versions as guides and also retained the word "unicorn." Thus they gave so great a sanction to this pagan myth that the idea of the unicorn as a reality persisted among Europeans until as recently as the eighteenth century.

Was this an oversight, or were there other influences?

THE LUNAR UNICORN

The unicorn, being a representation of the moon, played a significant part in the prevalent sun-worship of the early British. In British mythology, the sun was represented as a lion, the moon as a unicorn. This myth is an integral part of British heraldry:

"The emblems of heraldry perpetuate the symbolism expressive of the solar worship of primitive times. We see the Royal

Arms of England, supported by the solar lion and the lunar unicorn.

"The two creatures," says [Robert Brown, Jr., in *The Unicorn*] are naturally antagonistic. In the ancient myth, the Unicorn, when rushing at the Lion, sticks his horn fast in a mythic Tree, behind which his opponent has taken refuge, and the Lion coming round devours him whilst thus defenceless. This is the explanation of the myth. The Lion-Sun flies from the rising Unicorn-Moon, and hides behind the Tree or Grove of the Under-world, the Moon pursues, and sinking in his turn, is caught in this mysterious Tree, and sunslain."² (See illustration, page 2)

Although the myth of the lion and the unicorn can be traced to Babylon, the unicorn's role in British heraldry may have been one reason the KJV translators gave sanction to this mythical beast. Out of other myths came its identification with Christ.

THE VIRGIN AND THE UNICORN

During the Middle Ages, bestiaries—moral tales centered on real or imagined animals—were very popular. Details varied according to regions and religious proclivities, but the most famous legend of the unicorn describes the method of its capture by a virgin. A concise description of this legend is presented in Volume 11 of the encyclopedic *Man, Myth & Magic*:

"According to this tale, the unicorn, a small kid-like beast armed with a sharp pointed horn, is too fleet and fierce to be taken by hunters. Only a virgin seated alone under a tree in a forest can capture it; because it is irresistibly attracted by the odours of virtue, the unicorn approaches the virgin, lays its head in her lap and permits itself to be caressed into sleep. She breaks its horn, the dogs leap, the huntsman pounces, and the unicorn is taken to the palace of the king.

"Details vary, vividly, from text to text; in some the unicorn indulges in familiarities remarkably unsuited to virginal virtue, and in others the virgin is a boy in disguise. Although this legend of unknown provenance, is transparently erotic, it was tortured into ill-fitting Christian significance. The treacherous virgin was identified with the Mother of God, and the unicorn with Christ and also, despite its dubious familiarities, with purity. The single horn was said to symbolize the unity of Father and Son, and also the 'horn' of the cross, the upright beam projecting above the transverse. The huntsman became the Holy Spirit acting through the

angel Gabriel, and the king's palace was heaven. The dogs represented truth, justice, mercy and peace, despite the fact that their function was to tear the unicorn to pieces; they were said to couple at the beast's death, signifying that, though seemingly irreconcilable, truth, justice, mercy and peace were now one."³

THE ALCHEMIST'S UNICORN

Tradition has it that the unicorn was sought for the therapeutic qualities of its horn. In the fifth century B.C., a Greek physician named Ctesias returned from Persia with stories of a wild ass described as having a white body, a red head, blue eyes, and a single horn in the middle of its forehead. When mixed in a potion, declared Ctesias, parings from the horn would act as an antidote to poisons.

Due to the influence of Aristotle, who considered Ctesias untrustworthy, this claim found no acceptance in Europe until the eighth century Muslim invasion. Arab philosophers then revitalized the tale among Europeans.

Counterfeits of unicorn horn powder, made of anything from ground bone to limestone, fetched handsome prices. Emperors, popes, kings, and princes paid fortunes for whole "unicorn horns" which were nothing more than narwhol tusks.

"There were other customers who sought a horn for other reasons than the fear of poison. It was conviction of the unicorn's sanctity that prompted monasteries and cathedrals throughout Europe to pour forth treasure to procure his horn—and yet more treasure to mount it in silver and set it about with gold and precious stones."⁴

THE ANDROGYNOUS UNICORN

It seems paradoxical that the unicorn, traditionally male, is symbolic of the moon which, in pagan lore, is almost universally associated with the female principle in nature. Yet this poses no problem with those versed in the eastern mystical concept of the yin and the yang, which views everything in nature as intrinsically linked. Taoist philosophy teaches that all opposites mutually create each other, and turn into each other. (See our Media Spotlight Special Report, "Acupuncture: Magic Or Medical Science?," for a detailed explanation.) Thus male and female are mutually cohesive, neither being different from the other except in outward appearance which, in eastern philosophy, is illusory.

In all cultures throughout history the most significant role of the unicorn has

been as a symbol, whether of power and sexual prowess, or gentleness and purity. It's a strange mixture of opposites—particularly male and female opposites. In China the unicorn is known as *k'i lin* (*k'i*, "male," *lin*, "female").

"Many modern interpreters regard this last role as the crucial one and relate it to symbolism of the soul as the spark of divine light in the darkness of matter and evil, the body, and to the concept of the hermaphrodite as the perfect union of opposites. . . .

"This explains the unicorn's place in the symbolism of alchemy. The 'great work' of alchemy was an attempt to liberate the divine spirit of light from its prison of darkness by transforming base metal into gold through means of the Philosopher's Stone, and by transforming the alchemist himself into the psychic equivalent of gold, a being who was spiritually purified, who had



The Royal Arms of England depicting the Solar Lion and the Lunar Unicorn in conflict.

liberated the god within himself. Mercury, the 'male-female', the androgyne, was an essential element in the work and the personification of Mercury as the precursor of triumph, proclaiming victory over darkness was the unicorn."⁵

Carl Jung in his book, *Psychology and Alchemy*, concluded that this relationship is symbolized by many variants embracing single-horned animals, both real and mythical. Jung explains that the horn has a dual symbolism: "from one point of view it is penetrating in shape, and therefore active and masculine in significance; and from the other, it is shaped like a receptacle, which is feminine in meaning."⁶

THE NEW AGE UNICORN

In view of its androgynous symbolism as well as its personification of the male-female god principle, it is not surprising that the unicorn is also a New Age symbol. At the heart of the New Age lies a

philosophy which encompasses the women's liberation and gay rights movements. We also see a return to the worship of nature with the concurrent casting off of biblical morality and rejection of Jesus Christ. Nature worship entails witchcraft techniques which are part and parcel of New Age philosophy: occult healing, holism, psychotherapy, inner healing, *et al.*

The androgynous unicorn has been merely a foreshadowing of the uni-sex mentality exhibited in modern art and music, as well as in the general acceptance of the homosexual and lesbian lifestyles.

The unicorn is also considered by New Agers as the symbol of innocence and gentleness personified in the conquering child Horus. This Egyptian solar god is said to conquer through gentility.

According to New Age teaching, the world will soon enter the second Golden Age, about the year 2000. The Golden Age (New Age) is also known as the Age of Aquarius and the Eon of Horus, an era of peace and brotherly love.

Thus we see that the unicorn is the symbol of a future conqueror who will bring peace to the earth. Who is this but the anti-Christ for whom the world waits?

Many Christians find the unicorn appealing. Unaware of the spirit behind it they display it in their homes and cars.

How many Christians will yield to the unicorn's beauty when it rears its head to pierce the last vestiges of God's order on the earth?

NOTES

1. Nancy Hathaway, *The Unicorn* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), p. 13.
2. William Tyler Olcott, A.M., *Sun Lore of All Ages; A Collection of Myths and Legends Concerning the Sun and Its Worship* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1914), p. 302-303.
3. *Man, Myth and Magic*, Ed. by Richard Cavendish (New York: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 1983), Vol. 11, s.v. "Unicorn" by June Gimble.
4. Elizabeth Pool, *The Unicorn Was There* (Barre, MA: Barre Publishers, 1977), p. 38-39.
5. *Man, Myth and Magic*.
6. J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, translated from the Spanish by Jack Sage (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962), p. 144.



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