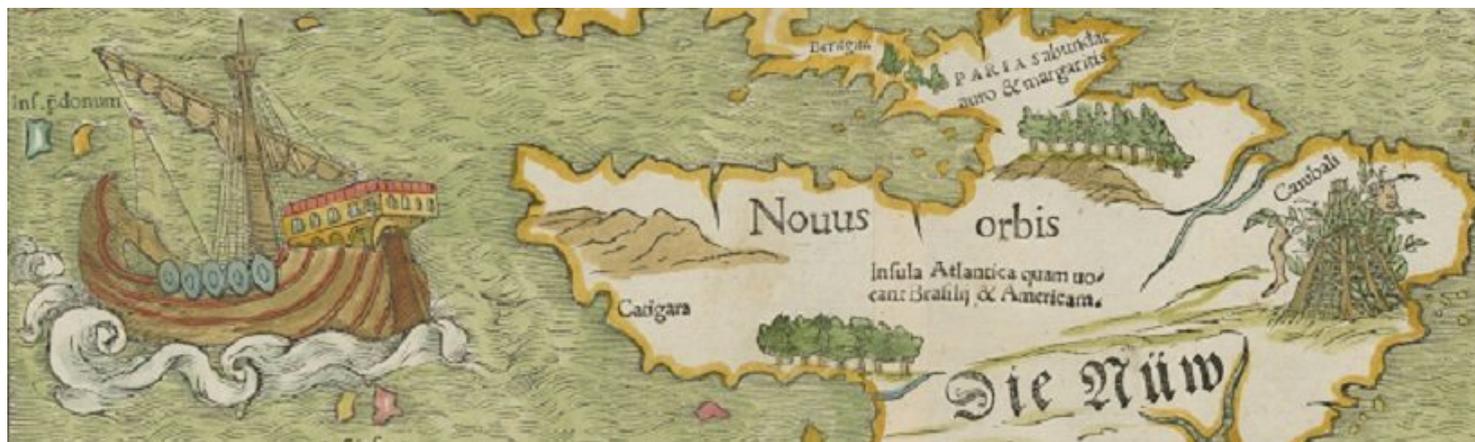


Medieval Travelers

AN EXPLORATION OF ALL ASPECTS OF MEDIEVAL TRAVEL

Menu



Category Archives: Unicorns

The Unicorn

By Amelia Mickelsen

High in the Tibetan Mountains, the chiru, or Tibetan antelope, roams the barren landscape. The chiru, is also called the Tibetan unicorn, and its horns are still used locally as an antibiotic. The blood of the animal is also said to have healing attributes. According to Chris Lavers, *in the Natural History of the Unicorn*, "In profile male chiru appear to have just one horn, which is probably how the myth of their unicornity arose."^[i]

Biologist George Schaller describes physical characteristics of the chiru:

"The male's most conspicuous antelope-like feature is the long, slender, black horns, which rise almost vertically from the head, curved slightly back in the distal half, and then terminate with a smooth rapier-like tips pointing forward. The horns are laterally compressed and have about 15-20 ridges along the front for two thirds of their length."

[ii]

For a beast with such a distinct physical appearance, it's no wonder that pilgrims mistook this creature for a unicorn. Our unicorn from the bestiary, MS Bodley 764, draws many of its characteristics from the myths that formed about animals like the chiru.

Chris Lavers, explains, "chiru horns were no doubt marketed as belonging to a one-horned animal, cementing chiru's reputation for unicornity."^[iii] Because the chiru was advertised as a one-horn animal, travelers and merchants could have believed the chiru was a true unicorn. These horns traveled from the markets in Tibet, and across the Mediterranean. However the Tibetan unicorn was not the only unicorn: horns came from a wide variety of animals, from the Iberian Oryx to the tusk of the narwhal.



— The Tibetan Antelope. From the website, "Chinese Unicorn".

The author of Mandeville's travels, writes "I trow that 100,000 men of arms might not pass those deserts safely, for the great multitude of wild beasts and of great dragons and of great serpents that there be, that slay and devour all that come anent them. In that country be many white elephants without number, and of unicorns and of lions of many manners, and many of such beasts that I have told before, and of many other hideous beasts without number."^[iv] In his writings, which appeared in the 1300s, Mandeville recalls a myriad of fabulous creatures. Perhaps it is this exact sort of exaggeration that makes the unicorn seem more alive in one's imagination, than a true beast who's existence has been proven.

The Tibetan Unicorn is first recorded in the writings of Ctesias, in the 5th century BC. In his work, Indica, Ctesias writes, "There are in India certain wild asses which are so large as horses, and larger...having on the forehead a horn a cubit and a half in length, colored white, red and black; from the horn were made drinking cups which were a preventive of poisoning."^[v] For an animal that never truly existed, the unicorn traveled quickly through the minds of great thinkers: from the Tibetan mountains in India to the great city of Alexandria in Greece. The word unicorn or "monoceros"^[vi] appeared in the Septuagint Old Testament, in place of the Hebrew word Re'em, which refers to a goat-like animal.

Moses blesses the tribe of Joseph, in the Old Testament, with the statement, “His glory is like the firstling of his bullock, and his horns are like the horns of unicorns...”

The mythology further developed in the Greek *Physiologus*, written by an unknown author in the 2nd century. The *Physiologus* is a predecessor to medieval bestiaries, which are a compendium of animal and moral texts. Although Aristotle is often credited as the author of the *Physiologus*, the true writer is unknown.

Our unicorn lives in the pages of MS Bodley 764, a bestiary from the mid-thirteenth century. Ms Bodley 764 presents the unicorn with the text “The Monoceros: A monster like a giant thick-footed horse, with a single long horn and a golden mane, standing here in a forest.”^[vii] The Ms Bodley 764 unicorn is peculiar in two ways, but the most striking characteristic is the blue hue of the unicorn’s coat. Blue is often the color of the cloak of the maiden paired with the unicorn in depictions of the unicorn hunt, a Christian mythology that symbolizes the Virgin and Christ. Unlike the mythology of the unicorn hunt, this unicorn stands alone in a forest



— The Monoceros. From MS Bodley 764 Facsimile edition, 2008.

without the Virgin, and he takes on the color of the Virgin’s cloak with coat of a blue hue. The second strange aspect of the MS Bodley is the paw-like feet, of a usually hooved animal. With a closer look at the shaped muscular aspects of its body, and the almost human like emotion in its eyes, one could conclude that the artist wanted to portray suffering, as if Christ himself was trapped in a great beast.

Although the mythology of the unicorn can be traced back to the Old Testament, it is the *Physiologus* that first describes the unicorn hunt. The story of unicorn

hunt is depicted in the Unicorn Tapestries, designed in a workshop in Paris between 1495-1505.^[viii] Housed at the Metropolitan in New York, the Unicorn Tapestries artfully weave images of the unicorn to symbolize the sacrifice of Christ. Although the tapestries

themselves differ from the typical unicorn hunt, Thomas P Campbell explains in the *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence*, “most medieval representations of the unicorn tamed by the virgin show the hunters killing the unicorn as it lies with its head in the virgin’s lap.”^[ix] The unicorn, when speared in the side by the hunter, is a metaphor for Christ suffering on the cross. Although the Unicorn Tapestries adhere to some aspects of the story, the unicorn is mysteriously pictured alive and captured in the seventh tapestry.

The mythical beast depicted in the tapestries is far more horse-like than the beast of Bodley 764. The discrepancy between the two could simply be due to a difference in information presented to the artist. Alley Godbey, author of *The Unicorn in the Old Testament*, elaborates: “The unicorn of medieval art is the result of an artist trying to portray numerous animals vaguely described in ancient classics. As descriptions vary, each artist is left to his own imagination in his attempted reconstruction.”^[x] Monks, who would have rarely traveled to see the animals they depicted, created Bestiaries within the confines of a monastery.

In the *Mark of the Beast*, Debra Hassig explains, that the impact of bestiaries were not only limited to the rich and educated. Hassig states, “Familiarity with the bestiary stories did not necessarily require direct access to the bestiary manuscripts, as the stories were available from a multitude of sources, some textual, some visual, some word of mouth.”^[xi] Bestiaries were lessons of the church directed to all people. Because bestiaries were commonly read, the unicorns like that of of Bodley 764 spread far across the imaginations of medieval people.

Felix Fabri, an educated traveler in the 1400s, would have known about the unicorn, from stories in the bestiaries. On his journey towards Mt Sinai, Fabri reports seeing a “rhinoceros or a unicorn.”^[xii] From his readings Fabri is able to make certain assumptions about the unicorn, and he goes on to state, “It is a large animal, the color of boxwood, with the body of a horse, the feet of an elephant.... and, as has been said, respects virgins to a remarkable degree.”^[xiii]

Today, unlike the medieval writers, we know that the unicorn does not exist. However, the image of the unicorns has not faded from our minds. Mystery breeds fascination, and people tend to remember the fascinating stories over the mundane ones. The unicorn lives on, through the old stories of our past, and even in more recent tales. JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, is not altogether dissimilar from bestiaries like MS Bodley 764. They both draw from the past, fabricate new myths by manipulating the old, and tell tales of morality that go on to impact a culture for generations.

In JK Rowling's book, *Harry Potter*, Firenze, a centaur, explains the importance of unicorns to Harry Potter, "It is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn. Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself, and you will have but a half-life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips."^[xiv]

^[i] Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*, 12.

^[ii] Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*, 34.

^[iii] Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*, 35.

^[iv] *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, 2nd edition, 181.

[v] Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*, 37.

^[vi] Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*, 51.

^[vii] Christopher de Hamel, *MS Bodley 764 Facsimile edition*, 27.

^[viii] New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Unicorn Tapestry, Unicorn in captivity, 1496-1505*.

^[ix] Thomas P. Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence*, 76.

^[x] Allen Godbey, *The Unicorn in the old testament*, pg 44

^[xi] Debra Hassig, *The Mark of the Beast*, 11.

^[xii] Hilda Prescott's, *Once To Sinai The Further Pilgrimage Of Friar Felix Fabri*, 72.

^[xiii] Hilda Prescott's, *Once To Sinai The Further Pilgrimage Of Friar Felix Fabri*, 72.

^[xiv] JK Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, 242.

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