

Economic Impact of Unicorns on Medieval Europe

It's pretty much impossible to find an origin for the Unicorn because ultimately the invention of the Unicorn is a case of mistaken identity.

Strabo and Pliny the Younger mention it and so do some versions of the bible, but ultimately these references are probably talking about an oryx or rhino. So let's skip that part and go straight to the middle ages when they start to look like the unicorn in your head right now. How do they end up looking like that? Well, a lot of early depictions of two-horned animals were drawn or carved in profile. Stylistically, like Picasso or Clipart.

When Christian Crusaders left Europe and headed to the fertile crescent to invade and capture Jerusalem around 1100AD, they saw these images, misinterpreted the stylistics and thought they represented a one-horned animal. If that sounds like a simplification, then...just imagine the same story but with Europeans trying to read Greek translations of the Hebrew Old Testament instead of looking at carvings and you pretty much have it.

So imagine a bunch of religious fanatic soldiers, a long way from home, staring at pictures of goats in the desert and the mystery somehow solves itself.

For one thing, this explains how the UNICORN came to symbolise Jesus. Perhaps not much should be read into this because almost everything was taken as a symbol of Christ in medieval Europe. However, the Unicorn Myth managed to cover a web of allegory that variously included Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Gabriel, the immaculate conception, the Jesus-Bloodline theory made famous by the Davinci Code, the crucifixion and salvation, courtly love, chivalry and gender relations. Pretty much the whole story depending on who you were talking to.

Let me start by explaining the standard things we, as medieval Christian crusaders, "know" about Unicorns.

Firstly, they are wild and ferocious beasts and generally can't be tamed - except by a virgin.

Secondly its horn is an antidote to poisons. This is the main reason why Unicorn Horn, or Alicorn eventually becomes so prized and sought after. By the end of the crusades, the Unicorn was almost exclusively a noble-myth rather than a commoner's myth, this state of affairs developed at least in part because poisoning was almost exclusively feared by the

wealthy. For one thing, to be poisoned, you had to be important enough that your killer felt the need to remain anonymous. Being poisoned was a status symbol, and protecting yourself against poison was the ULTIMATE status symbol.

Relatedly, the Unicorn is most commonly seen in medieval art dipping its horn into a spring. This purifies the water by sponging up the poison from the water, which bad serpents have left there. According to Laurens Catelan in the 17th Century, this action causes the Unicorn great pain, but the only way to sate the pain is to bathe the horn again in water - basically an itch that would go away if the Unicorn could leave it alone, but it can't. I haven't got to the bottom of this one, but its worth remembering.

To explain the connections between Christ and the Unicorn a bit further, once the Unicorn is tamed by a virgin, its brought into a kind of hedged-in garden and then a bunch of men jump out with spears and stab it to death. It was called the Hunt for the Unicorn and it was compared to Christ being Incarnated and then Crucified. Along the way, both the Unicorn and Jesus are seen purifying serpent's poison, the Unicorn as I've just mentioned and Jesus saving us all from Adam's original Sin. Jesus and the Virgin, Adam and Eve. Snakes. Unicorns.

What is absolutely fascinating is that the Church decided it was a good idea to appropriate these "carved goats seen by soldiers in deserts" in the first place. Why not just leave it well alone?

Intellectual life at this time aspired to a kind-of total allegorical worldview where everything was a reference to the bible. This paranoiac method ran into difficulties when it butted up against things that were essentially confused, like the Unicorn's mistaken identity. There was no Unicorn in the Garden of Eden, the Unicorn was an invention based on translation error. By ascribing everything to the bible, Unicornists were unaware of their ability to invent by accident.

The official line was that the "Unicorn tamed by a Virgin" simply referred to the fact Jesus allowed himself to enter into the world only through the womb of a virgin birth. However, the Catholic Church never really explained why it was fitting to tell this story by first turning Jesus into a unicorn. Somethings must just be taken on faith.

Its curious though to remember that previous divine conceptions usually involved Zeus raping young women in the form of various animals. Do

we see an echo of that here? Animals and virgins? Is this an example of early christian appropriation? I think it is.

We can give a kind of meta-allegory here. Just as the unicorn's horn absorbed poison from water, so the unicorn story came to absorb many aspects of pagan myth that the Christian Patriarchy couldn't stamp out but also couldn't endorse. It's a way of mopping up any culture that isn't already Christian. You can't eradicate Zeus entirely but you can provide a bridge between Zeus and Christ.

Different factions of Christians have slightly different approaches however. The 13th c. chronicler, Pier vauz de Chernay claims that the Cathars of Provence (12th-14th C) were massacred and repressed for suggesting that Mary Magdalen and Jesus were lovers. Cathars gave Mary much greater credit for spreading the word of God than other Catholics and had a record of allowing women to deliver the sacrament and preach. Unicorns were by far the most common watermark used by publishers in the Cathar Langudoc and they almost certainly took on this emblem because of an undercurrent of belief that the Virgin and the Unicorn represented more than just birth.

And so through various means, the Unicorn is firmly ingrained in the cultural imagination well before 1382, when Wycliffe translates the Latin bible into middle-english and casually inserts the word "Unicorn" into the text a dozen times, For example, Numbers 23:21-23 "The Lord God ledde hym out of Egipt, whos strengthe is lijk an vnicorn;"

The European medieval community was actually pretty used to the Unicorn. When the Myth was gaining in complexity in the 1200's, Europe experienced a period of economic prosperity and this must have helped the spread of this rather spectacular Christ analogy. In the medieval mind, the unicorn was a biblical fact, so it must have existed once, and the search to find living unicorns was constant.

This was spurred on by the existence of a number of Unicorn Relics held by Churches and noble houses. Holy Relics are after all the "living proof" of the Church doctrine. Generally the stories about these relics were pretty good. Usually a local knight will head off to the holy land and be way-laid by a vision of an angel that will tell them where a Saint's bones were hidden, then the knight will dig up the bones, take them back home and build a church around them. However, the story of the Unicorn had Unicorns.

I don't know how many unicorn horns were in existence in Europe in the 13th-16th Centuries, but I have found the following references:

- the horn of St. Denis, near Paris
- two horns of St. Mark's in Venice, said to have been taken at the fall of Constantinople in 1204
- Maréchal de Brissac's alicorn, held at thirty thousand ducats, also in St Marks
- Milan Cathedral
- the church at Raskeld, which had several
- St. Paul's in London and
- Westminster Abbey each had one or more before the Dissolution,
- Pope Julius III, who bought a horn for ninety thousand écus for the Vatican museum
- The Sultan of Turkey allegedly sent twelve alicorns as a gift to Philip II of Spain, although this story was doubted by Caspar Bartholinus, who could not believe that even the Sultan was rich enough to own twelve horns at a time
- wIn about the year 1560 a group of German merchants offered an alicorn for sale in Rome and other Italian cities for ninety thousand scudi, or about £18,000 to the Pope.
- Queen Elizabeth I had one, valued by Hentzner in 1598 at one hundred thousand pounds.
- Charles V paid off his entire national debt with two, sometime before 1558
- Grand Duke Francesco Medici had some
- as did the Duke of Mantua
- Ruberto Ricci of Florence
- and the King of Poland

Andrea Bacci says that in his time--the second half of the sixteenth century--there was not a prince in Italy, to say nothing of those outside of it, who had not at least a piece of the horn in his possession and a pretty standard estimation of the cost of Unicorn Horn was 10x its weight in gold. They were occasionally circulated as a form of grand currency, like gold reserves, so its possible some in the list above are in fact the same horn twice at different times, but at the proposed prices, its a sizeable chunk of the personal wealth of the European elite.

They were kept to protect against poison but as with today's treasures, they were almost certainly used as debt-colateral to borrow money for various wars.

There's one piece of horn that I haven't yet mentioned and that is the fragment worn to protect against witchcraft by none other than Tomas de Torquemada, the First Grand Inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition, born in 1420. Such was the spiritual and material investment of the Church in Unicorns that belief in Unicorns was a requirement enforced by the Inquisition. They were in the Bible and so you could be burned at the stake for refusing to acknowledge their existence. Torquemada died in 1498 and it wasn't long after this that the Unicorn Myth started to unravel.

This occurred over the course of the 16th Century when sales of Horn reached their peak.

In 1577, the explorer Martin Frobisher found a unicorn horn still attached to a corpse in the arctic circle, which he gave to Queen Elizabeth on his return to England, which pretty much gave him the prestige to launch a number of future missions with the hope of finding more horn.

However, in 1588, a horn picked up on the coast of Wales was sold for an unspecified sum, and it was gradually becoming apparent to the intelligencia that there was a reasonably abundant source of horn in the North Sea - the Narwhal - that bore a striking resemblance to a Unicorn. The best that could be said was that there may be some real Unicorn around, but much of it was probably Narwhal.

Unicorns have a role in science here as people develop empiracle tests to work out which animal a given noble's horn has come from. but that's another story. As far as the Narwhal fakes go, its pretty much evident that the horn trade was controlled by Denmark, which in fact reached its political apogee around this time as well.

Considering the glacial diffuse of knowledge around Europe at this time, it isn't surprising that the value of Unicorn Horn took a while to collapse - and not least because people like Frobisher were reluctant to tell the Queen that they'd pulled the horn from a whale. But the origin of the collapse can perhaps be traced to the Council of Trent, which was a series of meetings set up by the Catholic Church between 1545 and 1563 to discuss how best to respond to the fracturing of the Christian community into a number of dissenting groups, due in part to Martin Luther's 95 Thesis in 1517.

In many ways, the Council of Trent was a re-assertion of Catholic Doctrine, for example the medieval quasi-aristotolean belief in trans-

substantiation. However, some forms of modernisation did take place, and the Unicorn was a casualty.

One of the most enigmatic characters at the Council of Trent was Olaf Magnussun, a Swedish Bishop that had been living as an exile in Venice since Sweden had stopped being catholic in 1526.

He had written a number of works about Scandinavia for the Venetian Public, including "History of the Northern Peoples" which was printed in Rome in 1555 and included an account of the Narwhal. It is almost certain that he in fact believed in Unicorns, using the Narwhal as evidence by invoking the widely held belief that every animal on land had an aquatic doppelganger.

However, , the last session of the Council of Trent passed a loose decree against superstitious or unseemly images, also ensuring that bishops would have the authority to suppress anything that was confusing, unusual, or tending to excite lascivious thoughts. It might be possible to see this as pre-emptive legislation, with plenty of wriggle-room, but Unicorns in particular were becoming a source of embarrassment for the Church. Olaf Magnusson wasn't the only person to write about Narwhals during the Council of Trent and it wasn't good to compare Jesus to an animal who's existence was often doubted.

In 1558, Conrad Gesner wrote his Historiae animalium, an encyclopedia which includes both a Unicorn and a Narwhal. However, whilst he plays the Narwhal pretty much straight, His description of the Hunt for the Unicorn is a little bit off. Rather than a traditional female virgin, he explains that it is common for a boy to be dressed as a woman and for the boy to Lure the Unicorn to its death. He was a protestant and the Catholic Church tried unsuccessfully to ban the book.

Besides, even before the council, the Unicorn was often lampooned. If you remember the Church mocking the poor old Irish god Dagda earlier on, then the Christian Unicorn gets the same treatment in 1532 from Francois Rabelais. His account of the hunt in Gargantua and Pantagruel has the unicorn with a floppy, flacid horn, at least until the virgin arrives in the scene.

Following the Council of Trent, The Church jettisons much of its horn, the famous Parisian Horn of St Dennis passing into the hands of the French King, for example.

And without Church backing, the price of Unicorn Horn does seem to decline from then on. About 100 years after the Council of Trent, there's so much of it about that the King of Denmark has a throne constructed of his spare stock, which can still be seen today. The Unicorn was taken up by emerging Humanists as a symbol of the Mind, because it couldn't be chained, but with the spectre of the Narwhal looming suspiciously in people's minds, the Horn of the Unicorn never regained its allure.

Of course, with the benefit brought to us by 400 years of science, we now know that there never was any Unicorn Horn. It was, in fact, Unicorn Ivory.