

## *The Unicorn*

The first version of the Unicorn is nearly identical with the latest. Four hundred years B.C., the Greek historian and physician Ctesias told that among the kingdoms of India there were very swift wild asses with white coats, purple heads, blue eyes, and in the middle of their foreheads a pointed horn whose base was white, whose tip was red, and whose middle was black. Pliny, more precise, wrote (VIII, 31):

the fiercest animal is the unicorn, which in the rest of the body resembles a horse, but in the head a stag, in the feet an elephant, and in the tail a boar, and has a deep bellow, and a single black horn three feet long projecting from the middle of the forehead. They say that it is impossible to capture this animal alive.

Around 1892, the Orientalist Schrader conjectured that the Unicorn might have been suggested to the Greeks by certain Persian bas-reliefs depicting bulls in profile with a single horn.

In Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, composed at the beginning of the seventh century, we read that one thrust of the Unicorn's horn may kill an elephant; this perhaps is echoed in the similar victory, in Sindbad's second voyage, of the Karkadan, or rhinoceros, which can 'carry off a great elephant on its horn'. (We also find here that the rhinoceros's horn 'cleft in twain, is the likeness of a man'; al-Qaswini says it is the likeness of a man on horseback, and others have spoken of birds and fishes.) Another of the Unicorn's enemies was the lion, and a stanza in the tangled allegory *The Faerie Queene* records the manner of their duel in this way:

Like as a Lyon, whose imperiall powre  
A prowde rebellious Unicom defyes,  
T' avoide the rash assault and wrathful stowre  
Of his fiers foe, him to a tree applyes,  
And when him ronning in full course he spyes,  
He slips aside; the whiles that furious beast  
His precious horne, sought of his enemyes,  
Strikes in the stocke, ne thence can be releast,  
But to the mighty victor yields a bounteous feast.

These lines (Book II, Canto V, Stanza X) date from the sixteenth century; at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the union of the Kingdom of England with the Kingdom of Scotland brought together on the heraldic arms of Great Britain the English Leopard, or Lion, and the Scottish Unicorn.

In the Middle Ages, bestiaries taught that the Unicorn could be captured by a maiden; in the Greek *Physiologus* we read: 'How it is captured. A virgin is placed before it and it springs into the virgin's lap and she warms it with love and carries it off to the palace of kings.' One of Pisanello's medals and many famous tapestries illustrate this victory whose allegorical applications are obvious. Leonardo da Vinci attributes the Unicorn's capture to its lust, which makes it forget its fierceness, lie in a girl's lap, and so be taken by hunters. The Holy Ghost, Jesus Christ, mercury, and evil have all been represented by the Unicorn. In his *Psychologie und Alchemie* (1944), Jung gives a history and an analysis of these symbols.

A small white horse with the forelegs of an antelope, a goat's beard, and a long twisted horn projecting straight out from its forehead is the picture usually given of this imaginary animal.

## *The Unicorn of China*

The Chinese Unicorn, the *k'i-lin*, is one of the four animals of good omen; the others are the dragon, the phoenix, and the tortoise. The Unicorn is foremost of all the 360 creatures that live on land. It has the body of a deer, the tail of an ox, and the hooves of a horse. Its short horn, which grows out of its forehead, is made of flesh; its coat, on its back, is of five mixed colours, while its belly is brown or yellow. It is so gentle that when it walks it is careful not to tread on the tiniest living creature and will not even eat live grass but only what is dead. Its appearance foretells the birth of an upright ruler. To wound the Chinese Unicorn or to come across its dead body is unlucky. The span of this animal's natural life is a thousand years.

When Confucius' mother bore him in her womb, the spirits of the five planets brought her an animal 'having the shape of a cow, scales of a dragon, and a horn on its forehead'. This is the way Soothill reports the annunciation; a variant of this given by Wilhelm tells that the animal appeared on its own and spat out a jade tablet on which these words were read:

Son of mountain crystal [or of the essence of water], when the dynasty crumbles, thou shalt rule as a throneless king.

Seventy years later, some hunters killed a *k'i-lin* which still had a bit of ribbon around its horn that Confucius' mother had tied there. Confucius went to look at the Unicorn and wept because he felt what the death of this innocent and mysterious animal foretold, and because in that ribbon lay his past.

In the thirteenth century, a scouting expedition of the

Emperor Genghis Khan, who had undertaken the invasion of India, met a creature in the desert 'like a deer, with a head like that of a horse, one horn on its forehead, and green hair on its body', which addressed them, saying, 'It is time for your master to return to his own land.' One of Genghis' Chinese ministers, upon consultation, explained to him that the animal was a *chio-tuan*, a variety of the *k'i-lin*. 'For four years the great army has been warring in western regions,' he said. 'Heaven, which has a horror of bloodshed, gives warning through the *Chio-tuan*. Spare the Empire for Heaven's sake; moderation will give boundless pleasure.' The Emperor desisted in his war plans.

Twenty-two centuries before the Christian era, one of the judges of the Emperor Shun was in possession of a 'one-horned goat' which refused to attack the wrongly accused but would butt the guilty.

Margoulies' *Anthologie raisonné de la littérature chinoise* (1948) includes this mysterious, soft-spoken allegory, the work of a ninth-century writer of prose:

It is universally held that the unicorn is a supernatural being and of auspicious omen; so say the odes, the annals, the biographies of worthies, and other texts whose authority is unimpeachable. Even village women and children know that the unicorn is a lucky sign. But this animal does not figure among the barnyard animals, it is not always easy to come across, it does not lend itself to zoological classification. Nor is it like the horse or bull, the wolf or deer. In such circumstances we may be face to face with a unicorn and not know for sure that we are. We know that a certain animal with a mane is a horse and that a certain animal with horns is a bull. We do not know what the unicorn looks like.