

# Unicorns

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Note: thanks to sound editing, the time-stamps no longer correspond exactly to the audio.

Alexa (00:01.690)

[reading] “There are wild elephants in the country and numerous unicorns, which are very nearly as big. They have hair like that of a buffalo, feet like those of an elephant, and a horn in the middle of the forehead, which is black and very thick. They do no mischief, however, with the horn, but with the tongue alone. For this is covered all over with long and strong prickles. And when savage with anyone, they will crush him under their feet.

The head resembles that of a wild boar, And they carry it ever bent toward the ground. They delight much to abide in mire and mud. Tis a passing ugly beast to look upon, And is not in the least like that which our stories tell of, As being caught in the lap of a virgin. In fact, tis altogether a different form from what we fancied.”

Alexa (00:58.390)

Hi, I'm Alexa Sand.

Ian (01:00.740)

And I'm Ian MacInnes.

Alexa (01:04.654)

And this is real fantastic beasts.

Ian (01:07.359)

because we believe that learning about animals in history and literature and art helps us understand our place among our fellow creatures today. And today we are coming up on April 9th, which is believe it or not, International Unicorn Day. I don't know why we have such a thing as international Unicorn Day. Do you know the history of it, Alexa?

Alexa (01:27.670)

There had to be one. Ian, I don't even ask that question anymore. There's an International Day for everything, you know, chocolate chip cookies, dog collars.

Ian (01:42.999)

It makes me wonder whether there's... Yeah, yeah. I wonder whether there's an international day for other fantastic creatures that we should be anticipating. We'll have to look into that, but...

Alexa (01:54.530)

Very good question. Yeah.

Ian (01:56.879)

For sure we have International Unicorn Day, so we're going to do it. You're going to know so much about unicorns by the end of our episode that you will be able to properly celebrate International Unicorn Day.

Alexa (02:05.554)

Yeah. Right. And really, you know, unicorns are the OG, real fantastic beast, aren't they?

Ian (02:19.759)

Yes, if not dragons, then unicorns. I don't know. It's a toss up. One or the other.

Alexa (02:25.432)

But there's more reality to a unicorn, I'm afraid, than to dragons.

Ian (02:33.559)

What do you mean more reality to unicorns?

Alexa (02:37.870)

Well, I just told you, I just read you a historical source. I mean, an eyewitness account of unicorns, right?

Ian (02:41.499)

Ah, okay. Yeah, yeah. So tell me about that source. It seems like maybe it's describing a real animal as a unicorn.

Alexa (02:54.830)

It absolutely is describing a unicorn, an animal with one horn. That's what a unicorn is. And this account comes from Marco Polo, sometimes accused of being the world's greatest liar, but there were partisan politics behind that. Marco Polo wrote this. He was describing in his sort of memoirs, which he dictated, his visit to Sumatra in 1291. He was on his way home to Venice, his home, from China, and he was kind of disappointed, as you can tell, to encounter his first real unicorns in the wild.

Ian (03:43.679)

Not as elegant as perhaps he wanted them to be.

Alexa (03:49.170)

Yeah, I mean, they lick people to death and they delight much to abide in mire and mud. They're also really big. They're almost as large as elephants, you know? So.

Ian (03:54.400)

In mire and mud. So I didn't know that Marco Polo got to Sumatra.

Alexa (04:04.670)

Many people are not aware of that. And some people think he's a liar.

Ian (04:07.160)

I thought he, and some people think he's like, I thought he traveled the Silk Road. That doesn't go through Sumatra.

Alexa (04:11.710)

So, you know, when he was on his deathbed, there's a story, probably apocryphal, but a story that when he was on his deathbed, he was asked to repudiate all the unbelievable stories that he had told in his recollections of his travels. The book is called *Il Millione, or The Description of the World*. And he refused. He said, no, I'm not going to repudiate all the things in my book because I haven't even reported half the wonders that I've seen. And you know the general consensus is he actually did go to these places and see a lot of the things that he described seeing. Now you know he describes them through the lens of a late 13th century Italian traveler and so we have to understand that framework.

But yeah, he was there in Sumatra and he saw unicorns.

Ian (05:19.539)

I think the word for unicorn, the Greek word for unicorn is monoceros, which gives us a lead into the rhinoceros, right?

Alexa (05:20.353)

I mean...

Alexa (05:29.711)

Wait, are you saying that Marco Polo's unicorn was a rhinoceros?

Ian (05:36.639)

Well, it was a monoceros. Yes, I would suggest that.

Alexa

Well, if you are saying that, you would be most likely correct because in Sumatra they have a very small, in fact the smallest living species of rhinoceros. Now the Sumatran rhinoceros actually has two horns, but one of them is so small and flat that you wouldn't necessarily notice it or even call it a horn. And these Sumatran rhinoceros have long red hair, which suggests that they're probably the closest surviving living relatives of the extinct woolly rhinoceros of the Ice Age, which is kind of cool. At present there are fewer than 80 of them left alive, and that means that they are a critically endangered species. This is down to habitat loss, the fragmentation of their forest habitat. And so the remaining animals survive in these non-viable populations. They basically can't find mates, so they don't breed.

Ian (06:59.120)

So you're saying that the unicorn is endangered, like so many animals.

Alexa (07:04.390)

Oh, critically endangered, yeah. And I mean, I think in a way, I mean a rhinoceros is a unicorn. It's a rare and somewhat magical beast and we're at risk of losing the last living unicorns, by the Marco Polo standard of evidence. So, you know.

Ian (07:28.679)

So unicorns became rhinoceros and now rhinoceros becomes unicorn.

Alexa (07:33.890)

Yeah, I mean, I guess we can kind of dig into the semantics of it, but Marco Polo thought he saw a unicorn when he saw a rhinoceros, because he had this category, right? Like, unicorns are animals with one horn. And then he had this kind of animal he had never seen before, and he kind of reconciled the two. I think it's a, like, I would call it a heuristic, a mental shortcut to understanding something. He's just attempting to sort of naturalize the thing that he's seeing. Now, no, Sumatran would have looked at rhinoceros and said, oh, it's a unicorn, because they didn't have like that whole category that Marco Polo alludes to, the white horse with a horn in the middle of its forehead that puts its head down in the lap of a virgin and allows itself to be slaughtered. I mean, that's a whole European folk tradition that would have been completely alien in Sumatra. They have a name for this animal, it's a padak in Malay. But in a way there's a kind of a wonderful meeting of these real animals and these fantastic beasts in this moment. I mean unicorns for the Middle Ages had a whole lot of baggage.

Ian (09:05.899)

Oh, so it is interesting because later writers will say things like, "well, there are lots of unicorns ... like the rhinoceros. You know, like there's one of them, right? Like it's just, you know, it's just it's a unicorn, like very different than other unicorns, but perfectly legit unicorn.

Alexa (09:21.650)

Oh, yeah. when I was a kid and kind of unicorn crazy in the 1970s, which was one of the great eras of the unicorn, I'll have you know. I had this book about unicorns and it was illustrated and it had drawings and you know art, but it also had photographs of actual animals that had one horn. You know, including like goats that have these horns that grow together into a spiral: unicorns. But of course, when we talk about the unicorn, when we think about that white horse with the horn in the middle of its forehead, that is a different beast.

Ian (10:14.779)

And that's why, I mean, you were also, I believe you have said horse crazy too, yes? So, I mean, I'm gonna suggest psychologically that in your mind, the unicorn was a horse with a horn.

Alexa (10:20.735)

Absolutely, it was. And you know, exactly. And they get that from antiquity. So, you know, back in, in, I think we've talked about this writer named Ctesias in the fifth century BCE, he, you know, was a doctor and a traveler. I think he worked for a Persian king, Artaxerxes. He wrote about a lot of different animals, including the manicomore, but he mentions a creature like an ass with a single horn growing from the middle of its forehead. So that's like a unicorn, right? I mean, donkey, horse, they're not exactly the same animal, but close enough. And so I think, you

know, these sources come before the Middle Ages, certainly. But it's really with the Physiologus and the whole bestiary tradition that the legend of the unicorn achieves this really wide dispersal. And there's a really...

Ian (11:46.520)

What's the date on the Physiologus? When was that?

Alexa (12:40.510)

So the Physiologus, it's a didactic Christian text. It was written in Greek, sometime around in the second century CE. So really, really early on, we have this description in the Physiologus. It tells us that the unicorn is small and shrewd because like Christ, he is humble and also smarter than the devil. Like even the most clever demon cannot outwit him. So then we also have this story that comes about that Marco Polo refers to, you know, having to do with the virgin who goes out in the woods and she sits down and she has to be a virgin. And the unicorn comes and puts his head down in her lap, right? And then the hunters can come along and kill the unicorn. And in some versions, in the physiologus version of the story, for example, he leaps right up into her lap.

Ian (14:06.679)

It's a small unicorn.

Alexa (14:32.930)

It's not just that he puts his head in her lap, he actually suckles from her breast. So I think you can see where this is going. She's a virgin, the unicorn is this white animal that represents Christ, he comes to her, puts his head in her lap, maybe even takes milk from her breast. She is the Virgin Mary and the unicorn...

Ian (14:40.059)

Oh my gosh.

Alexa (15:02.090)

And then while this is going on, while all of this action is going on, the hunters sneak up and kill the unicorn.

Ian (15:02.641)

Okay, okay.

Ian (15:12.259)

Alright, so how does that fit into the story?

Alexa (15:15.030)

So Christ becomes human, Christ is, you know, born of a virgin, and then is slaughtered mercilessly, basically. So it's a sort of figure for the incarnation and passion of Christ.

Ian (15:33.743)

Ha! Okay.

Alexa (15:34.250)

So, and that metaphor is very, very powerful. And we see it represented in art over and over again, especially in the later middle ages. So in the Cloisters Museum in New York City, there's a wonderful set of tapestries representing the unicorn in captivity. There's another set of tapestries that doesn't actually refer to the slaughter but that sort of recruits the unicorn for an exploration of the different senses. And that's the Lady and the Unicorn Tapestries at the Cluny Museum in Paris. But the unicorn is very closely tied to this kind of Christological imagery. Now, because of the unicorn's association with Christ, the horn of the unicorn becomes a kind of prophylactic, I guess you could say. If you take the horn of a unicorn, according to these various medieval sources, if you dip it in a drink, say a glass of water or a glass of wine, it will turn black if it detects poison. Or you can dip it in a drink to treat epilepsy, for example. So the sort of magical or healing properties of the unicorn's horn are associated with its Christological imagery. So you know Christ can turn water into wine and drive out the way evil functions that Christ has, especially in the sort of combination of Christian traditions with pre-existing folk beliefs about poison, about purification. And so they all get kind of mixed together in the unicorn and specifically in the horn of the unicorn.

Ian (17:59.699)

So does the physiological material always carry the Christological significance with it in the Middle Ages? That is to say, do they ever stop referring to the Christological stuff and just talk about the, you know, the antidotal sort of prophylactic function of the horn?

Alexa (19:09.230)

Yeah, I mean, there are times when the focus is on the sort of properties of the horn. And that becomes more true as we move towards the 14th, 15th century. I think always in the background, though, of that is this Christological understanding. The other thing is that, you know, the unicorn becomes a very, very significant heraldic animal in the later Middle Ages, so it becomes a kind of trait of certain families or certain lineages and specifically has some kind of royal implications, so you know the lion and the unicorn, that kind of thing. And that too probably has something to do with its Christological element.

Ian (20:06.320)

At least, at least originally.

Alexa (20:09.210)

I don't think we can ever really entirely extract the sort of Christian symbolism of the unicorn from the animal. Now, the horn, just the horn, when it's all on its own, maybe that's different, I don't know.

Ian (20:18.039)

Alright.

Ian (20:27.379)

So visually speaking, in the representations in these tapestries, the unicorn looks a lot like we would think a unicorn would look like, i.e. a horse with a horn. Is that right? Like a white horse with a horn.

Alexa (20:43.010)

Well, yes, certainly if we're looking at later medieval images, you know, images from the 14th, the 15th century, those are the unicorns that we know today. And those are, those unicorns really, you know, are the sort of pattern book for these later unicorns. But if you see a manuscript or 13th century manuscript, those unicorns, they're kind of funny looking, honestly. I mean, they don't look like the unicorns that we expect. I guess I would say like the earliest unicorns who are really familiar to me come from maybe some later 13th century representations. I mean, they're cute, but they're small as I mentioned, and they are, they tend to be not necessarily white always. Sometimes they're gray. They can almost look a little bit like a dog with cloven hooves, you know, like gray and kind of not always the long spiraling horn.

Ian (22:13.939)

Cloven hoofs is something, you know, horses do not have cloven hoofs. And I just pulled up a, like a, you know, fairly recent image of the royal arms, you know, with the lion and the unicorn, which is, you know, now the arms of, I guess, Great Britain, right? And the unicorn is Scotland. But that unicorn, even in this modern representation, has cloven hoofs and the tail looks a lot more like a lion's tail and not like a horse's tail. The mane is pretty horsey. So it's like, you know, it's still, it's not quite, it's not really a horse with a horn.

Alexa (22:53.870)

Right, and if you look at the sort of classical tradition, like let's just say Pliny, you know, so in the first century CE, he tells us in his natural history that the unicorn has the body of a horse, the head of a stag, the feet of an elephant, there's that elephant foot thing again, and the tail of a boar, and that its horn is black, not white, you know.

Ian (23:20.619)

Yeah, see that sounds like a rhinoceros to me.

Alexa (23:24.550)

Yeah, but, you know, Isidore of Seville, in his etymologies, this is the seventh century, and he's, you know, deeply influenced by these classical sources, tells us that it has a single four-foot horn in the middle of its forehead, and it often fights with elephants. And that it's extremely strong, but no details of the feet. So in a sense, a medieval illuminator, you know, dealing with some of these texts, doesn't have, isn't necessarily obligated, I guess, to follow a certain pattern. I find that the unicorns become more and more horse-like as you move into the 14th century. I'm looking here at an image from a manuscript that's in Munich. It's a Psalter that was made in France in the 13th century for a princess of France. It's called the Psalter of Isabella of France. And this is sort of a gray dappled unicorn. It's got its head resting, very horsey head resting on a virgin's lap and it's being stabbed through the hindquarters with a very large spear by a young man. So that's a kind of horsey unicorn and that's almost as early as I know of an example of a

very horsey looking unicorn. Before that they they're kind of small, that's one thing, you know, and they tend to be a little bit more ambiguous.

There's a Physiologus manuscript that's in Italy but it's a copy of a much earlier Greek Physiologus manuscript. It's from the 14th century, but the illustrations really look like, you know, eighth or ninth century illustrations that have been copied. And that one has almost like a little goat.

Ian (25:56.240)

Yeah, the cloven feet. Well, the cloven feet could be deer too. And I'm thinking that it makes sense that it would become more horsey, but also that it would have some of these deer-like attributes, the size, the delicate little cloven feet. Because for medieval illustrators, they're dominated, they're within a system called chivalry, because of the horse domination, the horse riding elite, right? So the horse is associated with nobility. So if you want a noble looking animal, the horse is a way to go. And then the traditional sort of noble animal of the chase, the hunt, would be the stag. So I could just see them, you know, like it's these cultural pressures that are pulling them away from rhinocerosy, gigantic, frightening, elephant, that they would perceive as sort of not noble but more monstrous and towards the the nobility of other animals that they are presumably depicting in tapestries as well.

Ian (28:28.283)

Yeah. Although when it comes to things like the allegorical, the Christological associations, I think the Council of Trent, which is this reforming council held by the Catholic Church in the mid 16th century, they kind of downplayed the unicorn as part of religious art. So the unicorn, like those options become less available for artists, I think, that seems to be happening and you got to figure that there's before it can't have just come up at the Council of Trent this there must have been a little bit of discontent about using these unicorns to do what they were doing yeah

Alexa (29:21.270)

Yeah, and I mean, I think, you know, despite its sort of profoundly Christian identity, there's also something profoundly pagan about a unicorn, right? Like it's this magical beast, and it's got this horn that has all of these curative properties, and as I was saying, traditions and the allegorical reading of the virgin and the unicorn. Although with the exception of those two tapestry cycles, almost all the images of unicorns from the Middle Ages depict the virgin and the unicorn, the capture of the unicorn.

Ian (30:13.259)

Yeah. I think maybe, I mean, one of the things the council of Trent was trying to do is to push back on the Reformation. And you can be sure that the fantastical nature of the unicorn and its emblematic representation is a target for the early Protestants as a kind of idolatry and something to be attacked. They thought, well It's better PR for us if we stop using unicorns in our representations.

Alexa (30:48.912)

Exactly. Exactly, exactly.



Ian (30:53.079)

But that certainly did not hinder the popularity of unicorns, period. It just kept them from being used as the enunciation or as representations of Christ and Mary.

Alexa (31:11.270)

Yeah, and I should say there's one other way in which the unicorn does show up with some regularity, although much less often, which is as a figure for death, because there's this little parable that that 13th century preachers like to use that, this man is being chased. He's being chased by a unicorn and a dragon. And he kind of like gets away from them. Yeah, he gets away from them by climbing a tree. And this tree happens to have a lot of fruit in it. And he gets distracted. He starts eating the fruit instead of thinking about how escape these two creatures. And while he's eating the fruit, rats come and gnaw at the base of the tree, and in fact weaken the trunk so much that it falls over. And then the man falls over as well, and is consumed by the dragon. And in the story, the moral of the story basically is the tree is worldly life, the dragon is hell, and the unicorn is just sort of the figure, the premonition of death itself. This is quite cheerful.

Ian (32:44.839)

That's kind of wacky. Yeah. I'm not sure I would have read it..

Alexa (32:47.650)

Yeah, and there are a couple of depictions of that. There's a depiction of that in a book that I actually wrote my doctoral thesis on. It's a full page illumination that depicts this little parable.

Ian (33:03.559)

Well, that's quite different than the Christ image.

Alexa (33:09.970)

Although, you know, again, you know, the way in which the unicorn represents Christ is in terms of Christ's passion, right, and death, his human death, so there might be some connection there. But, you know... really what the question we haven't resolved is this whole thing about whether it's a goat or a deer or a hybrid creature of some sort. It's got this horn growing in the middle of this its forehead and and Isidore all all the way back in the seventh century Isidore of Seville is telling us it's four feet long. That's a pretty big horn that that defies any kind of natural logic that foot long horn like that. And also, even in that book that I had as a kid, the, you know, real animals with the horns, they were never that big, you know? And certainly a rhinoceros horn is not that big. It's kind of stubby, right?

Ian (34:13.401)

Right.

Alexa (34:20.490)

So where do these horns, where does this idea of the horn come from?

Ian (34:23.699)

Where does the horn come from? Well, the horn becomes the central obsession of the Renaissance, the unicorn horn, I will say. Although, you know, it is like some of the emblematic, you know, heraldic stuff continues. I mean, all the heraldry continues for sure. And then if you subtract the Christological associations of the unicorn, it gets deployed by humanists as being an emblem of chaste love and marriage. A positive thing, you could see how it could slip from one to the other. But sort of artistically, it can be deployed like that. But meanwhile, the question about the unicorn itself, and particularly the unicorn's horn, continues. And it was a unique problem for natural philosophy. Because this is a case where there wasn't, there's no European animal, let's just say. They were not saying that there were European unicorns, which is different than dragons. They did say, you know, oh yes, we also have, you know, the dragons are here too, right? They pretty much said, look, you know, there's unicorns that are out there, right? They exist, right? They're like a rhinoceros, right? And there's, you know, like there's nothing in the high middle ages that is really an example. But on the other hand, there's unicorn horns, there's physical objects being called the horn of the unicorn everywhere across Europe. They're mainly owned by royalty. They're very expensive, they're very rare, and because they're assumed...

Alexa (36:34.090)

I mean, of course they're rare because they come from a non-existent animal, right?

Ian (36:40.179)

Well, there's rare and there's rare. They're common enough that in any country, a natural philosopher could find a unicorn horn and request to look at it and sit down with it just as you and I go into the archives and call something up. And it's a rare book, but we still get to see it. So you could see these objects, but they're expensive partly because royalty, you know, the aristocrats want them because they're still assumed to be this universal antidote to all poison. Either they cure poison or they alert you to the presence of poison. There's all sorts of, you know, these stories that are associated with it. And if there's one thing that Renaissance monarchs who have now centralized all this power are becoming obsessed with it's dying from poison, and so they offer a lot of money to get these unicorn horns. And we're talking a lot of money, so a unicorn horn was supposed to be worth 11 times its weight in gold, if you had one.

Alexa (37:55.791)

And are they very heavy?

Ian (37:58.639)

Well, they can be quite heavy. So the natural philosophers are saying, okay, so these horns are everywhere. They're unicorn horns. We don't see these unicorns. Where do these things come from? And they're also very interested in medicine. So potentially more interested in the medical solutions within the natural world. So it becomes to be that the unicorn is sort of all about the horn.

Ian (38:29.919)

And my favorite, Edward Topsall, the encyclopedist, early, whose early 17th century work lists everything, the history of all four-footed beasts, comes to the unicorn and he has an entry for the

unicorn. But he says, he starts by saying, "We are now come to the history of a beast whereof diverse people in every age of the world have made great question."

So that question of like, does it even exist at all is one that he says has been around for a long time, right? Like everybody wonders about the unicorn. A little bit like the dragon, you know, you're going to talk about the unicorn. You first have to talk about like, does it even exist? And then, but then he says that it's about the horn, right? The virtues of the horn have been the occasion of this question, right? If there hadn't been, if the horn hadn't had any properties, we should as easily believe there was a unicorn in the world as we do believe there's an elephant, although not bred in Europe. So he said if it wasn't for the horn, we just treat it as an animal that's maybe somewhere out there that we're unfamiliar with that probably exists. And Topsoll, like other natural philosophers, doubles down on the real existence of the unicorn, although not the one that we all imagine. He says there are unicorns that are out there, like the rhinoceros.

Alexa (40:13.750)

Right, so he's making distinctions between various types of monoceroi. Like, there are classes of monoceroi. There's rhinoceroses, there's Indian asses, maybe there are these goats.

Ian (40:27.819)

Yes. Yep. Yep. Yeah. So like there's plenty of unicorns out there. We only really care about the unicorn because we wonder about the unicorn horn and is there a unicorn horn? Does it cure all these things? And like others, Topsell has experienced a unicorn horn in England. So he says, here's the one of the English court, right? He gives a long description of it. He says it's really big, so tall that the tallest man can scarcely touch the top. At least 7 feet tall, and it weighs 13 pounds.

Alexa (41:02.270)

So that's a lot more than Isidore's four feet. So apparently unicorn horns have gotten longer.

Ian (41:09.339)

Yeah, exactly. And Topsil says like, huh, if you're going to imagine the animal that carried this thing, it had to be no smaller than a large ox, right, in order to carry this gigantic horn. And it's not just the horn in England that's big. I mean, there's a lot of them. One of them is supposed to be, I think the one given to Charlemagne was supposed to be nine feet long, right, which is a pretty big unicorn. It doesn't seem like it's going to leap into the lap of a virgin. If it does, there's not going to be much of her left by the time it does finish its leaping.

Alexa (41:44.171)

Yeah.

Ian (41:48.699)

So there's a little bit of a question, like what animal has this thing, you know, and they're looking around for animals that would have this horn. Then you get a guy named Bartolin, right, who's a stannous physician. He's an early natural philosopher. And he says, I'm going to figure this out. I'm going to go around Europe and I'm going to look at all the horns that we have. So he does

this, and he looks at all the horns, he does notice that they're not all the same, that presumably there's a bunch, like they're not the same object, but there are a lot that are the same. And Bartolin concludes that whatever they are, they are not horns and they do not come from a hoofed animal.

Alexa (42:40.410)

And on what basis does he make that conclusion? Comparison to the horns of... ..

Ian (42:53.699)

Well, he knows what horns look like. Exactly, he's got horns from all over. Yeah, yeah. And you know, like for one thing, they're way harder than any horns for sure. But then he dies in 1629 and he kind of leaves it there. You know, he says like, oh, I'm sure there's a unicorn which I don't know what it is yet, but it's not a hoofed animal. I don't know what it is, but I'm sure it cures all these things. It's super fantastic.

Alexa (42:54.630)

Like, does he look at other animals? Yeah, I guess he horns and antlers and yeah.

Alexa (43:08.192)

Mmm.

Ian (43:23.719)

It's a total antidote for everything, only not from a hoofed animal. And then he dies. And then comes along his brother-in-law, whose name I love this guy's name. His name is Ole Worm.

Alexa (43:28.950)

Mm-hmm.

Ian (43:38.760)

O-L-E. Yeah.

Alexa (43:42.051)

I think you made that up.

Ian (43:47.761)

Hey, he's a super famous physician and natural philosopher. Ole Worm for sure. There's a great picture of him, a painting where it's him and his three wives that he had over time, all of his children and his grandchildren, or as I like to call them, the little worms. And then on the side is Christ, and then next to Christ are his four faculty mentors from his student days as the four apostles.

Alexa (44:24.330)

I can't even.

Ian (44:26.159)

Yeah, it's a great picture. Yeah. And he's kind of a fun looking guy. He's kind of a, he's got chubby cheeks and he looks like he would be great fun to talk to. He was a super collector, but he takes up the, you know, he takes up the challenge, like find the unicorn. And, you know, he starts from the idea that, okay, they're not the horns of a hoofed animal. And he happened to have in his collection, the head, the skull of a marine animal called a narwhal, which is a marine mammal that has a long tooth that sticks out of its head. So if you know what a narwhal looks like, you can find pictures of it. He had essentially a narwhal horn, and he said, it's attached to the skull. I know it's not, I know this is not a hoofed animal, I know this is a whale, it came to me as like, you know, a marine mammal. And it looks an awful lot like these horns. So he went around and he compared everything to his narwhal horn, and he said, the horns that I'm finding are narwhal horns. Just that's it. I'm sorry, the unicorn is in narwhal. End of story.

Alexa (45:30.192)  
Interesting.

Alexa (45:35.831)  
Huh. Okay. And I mean, he was a famous collector, right? Like he had this curiosity cabinet, cabinet, or whatever you want to call it, as collection of curiosities. Yeah. And, and the horn was in there with the skull attached to it. Fantastic. He had a lot of like marine

Ian  
Yeah, yeah. He was really fascinated, I think, with the natural world. Among other things, he had a pet great auk. The great auk is now extinct. If you read the story of the extinction of the great auk, it will make your blood boil. But this is early days yet, and he had this auk, and he did a picture of it, put it in his book, and it's the only illustration we have from life for this extinct animal.

Alexa (46:18.160)  
Yeah.

Ian (46:35.439)  
All right, so the question remained for him. So now I know that they come from the narwhal. The question is still, does the narwhal horn cure all poisons? Is it the universal antidote to everything? And so he decided he would explore this. And this is where you're going to become less happy with Ole Worm. Because he did essentially animal experimentation. He took kittens, and he fed them arsenic.

Alexa (46:57.055)  
Oh No..

Ian (47:06.001)  
And then when they became ill, he fed them ground-up narwhal horn to see whether it fixed them.

Alexa (47:13.272)  
And let me guess.

Ian (47:13.299)  
Yes?

Alexa (47:16.793)  
It didn't work.

Ian (47:18.200)  
No, it did work!

Alexa (47:20.312)  
WHAT?!

Ian (47:21.519)  
I did. Yes, he concludes that it works. So there's, you know, the only conclusion that I guess, you know, we might come to is the idea that he didn't really poison them very much, you know, or that he didn't use arsenic. Like, whatever it is, he didn't do a very good job of poisoning these kittens, which is why they got recovered when they ate, you know, the narwhal. But for whatever reason,

Alexa (47:22.750)  
Get out!

Ian (47:51.779)  
So he discovered that the source of all these horns; his answer is the answer that we still have today. These are narwhal horns all over Europe. We just don't think they cure kittens from arsenic poisoning.

Alexa (48:01.490)  
Right. Yeah. So they actually are like a tooth. Yeah. Yeah. And the narwhal is actually not even a whale. It's a porpoise. But, you know. It's a sea monster.

Ian (48:14.899)  
Well, cetacean, right? Go back to our strange fish episode. It's a sea monster, yeah. All right. But, okay, so then you come to Thomas Browne, whom we have mentioned before, who wrote this book called *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, sort of the epidemic of false knowledge. And he doesn't have an entry on the unicorn. He has an entry on unicorn's horn, right? So like, he's gonna address this.

Alexa (48:42.078)  
Ah!

Ian (48:44.839)

And this is 1646, so it's not much later. But he mentions Ole Worm's work, right? So he incorporates that work. He's clearly been reading the most recent things. And he points out a whole bunch of things. One is that, first, he does say, by the way, we affirm there are many kinds of unicorns,

Alexa (48:55.294)

Right.

Ian (49:14.879)

Like a kind of deer which they thought had one horn, although it does not. But he also mentions beetles, right? You know, like, of course there's unicorns. Look at these beetles, right? So for him, you know, it just means, yes, anything with one horn is a unicorn. But he says, that's not really the point. The point is like, is there this animal that has this magical horn or not? And he says, the first problem is that the unicorn itself in the ancient world is not uniformly described, right? Some people say it's big. Some people say it's small, some people say it's mean, some people say it's docile, some people say it has the feet of elephants, some people say it's... So he says whatever they're describing, it's not the same thing, right? So you don't even know what you got. And then the horns that are described in these sources don't match the horns that are currently called unicorn horns. So they describe horns in some of these ancient sources, but the descriptions of the color and everything don't match the horns that are lying around that you could find. And then he also says the horns that you will discover that people will produce as unicorn horn, you know, come and check out my unicorn horn, are actually from different animals. So some of them, you know, they're like some of them are, you know, he says some of them are like walrus teeth, right? Some of them are stones that people have said, you know, they're shaped like a horn.

Alexa (50:37.650)

Mm-hmm.

Ian (50:44.879)

So the unicorn horn that people are using to fix poison is not even the same thing. And then most of the things that are called unicorn's horn, he says, aren't even horn. That is to say they're harder, they're, you know, they don't match the description of any horn from any known

Ian (51:14.839)

And then mentions the narwhal and says, you know, it's a tooth, right? It's not a horn at all.

Alexa (51:20.772)

So he basically just bombs the whole idea of the magical unicorn. He's a real killjoy.

Ian (51:25.699)

Yes, he's a real killjoy. And then he says, OK, but what about, like, let's say, you know, like, we pick one of these and say, like, this is the horn. This is the horn that's magical and does things, whatever one we pick. But he says, look, none of the ancients ascribed all the antidotal powers to

it that we think are there. And when they were describing horns that are the antidote, they were clearly describing horns that aren't the horns that we have, right? They were describing a horn that maybe came from, I don't know, some distant animal that had a single horn, but like we don't have it. And then he also says the claims that are made about the power of this horn are just completely extravagant and they're like they're multiplying out of control. So they just can't be real, right? And he also says there's no way they can cure so many different poisons because they all have different mechanisms. They do their work by different means, so there's no way that you could imagine why this single thing would cure all of them. Although he says, maybe it'll cure something. I mean, we have a heart's horn, which is distilled deer horn that they use for treating various things. I don't know whether it's useful or not. It's basically ammonia. But he says, maybe it's helpful. but it can't cure all poisons.

Alexa (52:59.510)

Right, right. I believe heart's horn, because of the ammonia cum, you know, content was just basically used to shock people out of a faint, you know, you carried it around in a little...yeah. Yeah.

Ian (53:01.139)

Yep.

Ian (53:09.639)

Smelling salts, yeah. Yeah, not a magical antidote to all poisons known to humanity. So Brown just uses his logical discussion of the evidence to conclude that unicorn horn cannot cure anything. This is 1646, but people were selling unicorn horn into the 18th century. So the popular belief continues for sure.

Alexa (53:45.890)

interesting. I mean, one thing we haven't talked about here is that, you know, well, the unicorn at the center of this discussion that we're having is clearly a European unicorn, there are other cultural traditions around sort of a magical single horned creature. And so, you know, there, there's possibly another unicorn episode to come on, you know.

Ian (56:13.099)

I did come across one, I guess medieval story, at least. It's repeated in a Renaissance source, which is how I found it. But this is attributed to a Byzantine writer around 1100. And this is about the connection with the young virgin. And this writer says that Indian and Ethiopian hunters, knowing that the unicorn is attracted to virgins, hunt it by taking a beautiful young man, cross-dressing him as a virgin, covering him in perfume, and setting him out there. I don't know why they need to do that, but, you know, the unicorn is attracted by the scent of the perfume, comes up, lays its head at the laugh of the young man, who then, you know, reveals himself as a hunter.

Alexa (57:05.650)

Interesting. You kind of wonder if, yeah, you just don't want to put the real virgins at risk. Yeah.



Ian (57:07.040)

And then what they do is they come up and they cut the horn off and let the unicorn go free.

Alexa (57:19.834)

Nice.

Ian (57:24.519)

Yeah, that was the first separation of the horn from the unicorn, should we say, in the Byzantine source.

Alexa (57:30.090)

Oh dear. Only the Byzantines would think of that.

Alexa (57:41.850)

And, you know, we've mentioned this before, that medieval real fantastic beasts and early modern real fantastic beasts have a enduring presence in fantasy literature.

Ian (58:49.719)

Yeah, still very positive, right? Rainbows and unicorns are all supposed to be unusual good things. Uh, we have yet to, I, I kind of want to see a fantasy book where, you know, there's the enormous angry, dangerous unicorn of death.

Alexa (59:06.850)

that yeah that licks you to death.

Ian (59:10.381)

with its seven foot horn.

Alexa (59:19.031)

very fierce.

Ian (59:20.879)

Yeah, contradict all the associations with unicorns.

Alexa (59:25.430)

Yeah, and no, no, no, uh, rainbows. Game of unicorns coming soon.

Ian (59:34.639)

coming soon. "Deeply scarred unicorn hunters."

Alexa (59:42.670)

It's like The Witcher meets Game of Thrones, only instead of the dragons there are unicorns. Yes!

Ian (59:46.004)

Yeah, that's right.

Ian (59:50.379)

Yes, that's what the Witcher needs is a unicorn episode.

Alexa (59:55.130)

an evil unicorn episode. Anyway.

Ian (59:58.381)

Yeah.

Ian (01:00:02.819)

Alright, well, thank you for joining us on Unicorn Day!

Alexa (01:00:04.530)

Well, happy happy international. Yeah, happy International Unicorn Day, everyone.