



PMHx

The pharmaceutical uses of alicorn

The real history of the mythical object's healing powers

How do you catch a unicorn? According to medieval literature, it's simple really. To capture the famously uncatchable creature you need a virgin and a little patience. "For the love (the unicorn) bears fair maidens forgets its ferocity and wildness," wrote Leonardo Da Vinci in one of his notebooks. "Laying aside all fear it will go up to a seated damsel and go to sleep in her lap, and thus the hunter takes it."

The hunter, of course, did no such thing, because unicorns did not—and do not—exist. Still, that didn't stop a booming market from developing around alicorn, or unicorn horn.

The first known reference to the unicorn came from the Greek physician Ctesias around 400 BC. He suggested the horn, which came from a formidable horse-like creature in Asia, had alexipharmic properties. It could protect

people from poison and be used as an antidote. Even the presence of an alicorn was thought to purify water and heal wounds.

In the Middle Ages, bolstered by these stories from antiquity and by biblical imagery, the alicorn became a panacea. It was used to treat everything from aches to leprosy to the plague. This made it very expensive. Some were exchanged for up to 11 times their weight in gold. In a *Pharmaceutical Journal* article from 2004, pharmacist William Jackson writes that in 1609, the value of a single horn was said to be worth "half a city."

Naturally, royalty paid obscene sums for alicorn powders and carvings to protect themselves from would-be assassins. In the court of the King of France, alicorns were used to detect poison in drinks and foods. Meals would apparently start smoking or heating up

in the presence of the alicorn, indicating they were poisoned.

Few besides the hunters and better-educated apothecaries knew the true origin of these horns, and they were often all too happy (and well-paid) to keep it concealed. Sometimes the powders or other products came from elephant ivory or walrus tusks, but most often they came from the unicorn of the sea—the narwhal.

Trade in narwhal tusks was big business in Scandinavia, where whalers around Greenland and Iceland made port. While some across Europe were skeptical about the provenance of these magical artifacts, it took a group of physicians known as the Bartholins to conclusively link narwhals to the alicorn. As Natalie Lawrence writes in a comprehensive essay on the topic for the *Public Domain Review*, these Danish doctors travelled widely, visiting cabinets of curiosities and medieval bestiaries. Then in 1663, the physician and natural philosopher Ole Worm began to systematically compare narwhal skeletons to the twisted ivory horns, proving that the alicorn commonly sold across Europe belonged to a whale that swam in the Arctic seas.

But these findings raised other questions. Did the alicorn in fact have healing properties? Was it worth such outrageous prices? It was Worm's son Thomas Bartholin, another physician, who later took up his father's work studying the horn. Drawing on old Norse texts and experiments of his own, he attempted to clarify the confusion. "In a sense, it was a rebranding exercise," Lawrence writes. "The humble narwhal, its magical properties reaffirmed, now reimagined as the 'Greenland Unicorn.'"

Europeans continued to use these medicines until the early 1800s when new experiments revealed that the alicorn was, from a pharmaceutical standpoint, useless. Still, the myth loomed large. The fables were immortalized in art, and the image and name of the unicorn was used to advertise the most famous pharmacies across the continent. It was an homage to the old medicines as mystic and incredible as the creature itself.

—TRISTAN BRONCA