

**Proposed Project:** A Study of the Violent Depictions of Dying Unicorns in Medieval Manuscripts

**Background:** The image of a dying unicorn resting its head on the lap of a virgin was prolific in art in Europe during the Middle Ages, particularly from 1100-1500 ce. During the Middle Ages, the unicorn embodied the elusive Christ, while the virgin epitomized the Virgin Mary. According to medieval lore, only a virgin could capture a unicorn, further symbolizing the connection between the Christ and the virgin he chose to be born through. Scholars have done great research in studying the more genteel art of the Virgin and the Unicorn, but very little scholarship has been produced on the more violent depictions of unicorns and their death. There was a common trope in medieval manuscripts of the unicorn resting its head on a maiden's lap while being murdered by a spear through the side, alluding to the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>1</sup>



British Library, Royal MS 12 F. xiii, Folio 10v

**Purpose:** This project will survey images from illuminated manuscripts dating from 1100-1500 ce depicting the death of the unicorn. This research will uncover how medieval society perceived the unicorn as well as the role of women in unicorn lore. This topic also has modern relevance because the image of the unicorn is still used in modern society.

**Timeline:** Starting summer 2017, I will begin a preliminary examination and collection of relevant images. Fall 2017 will be dedicated to a full evaluation of literary and visual material. For the first half of the semester, I will examine medieval manuscripts and do a more thorough analysis on the images gathered over the summer. The second part of the semester will be spent with literature related specifically to the role of the Virgin Mary in Christ's life, as well as the role of maiden women in medieval society. Starting Spring 2018, this information will be amalgamated into a research paper, and the rest of the semester will be dedicated to perfecting this paper. After its completion, I will work further with my mentor to submit my work to an undergraduate research journal.

**Research Methods:** Using primary sources from the British Library Digitised Manuscripts database<sup>2</sup>, as well as the Bodleian Library Electronic Catalogue of Medieval & Renaissance Manuscripts database<sup>3</sup>, I will thoroughly examine images of the maiden and the death of the unicorn for common themes and symbolism. These two databases will supply the several dozen images I will need for my research. Medieval religious texts and translations of bestiaries will also be consulted for references to unicorns and their capture and murder.<sup>4</sup> Primary sources and scholarly sources will be used to examine the following questions: Where does Christ symbolized as unicorn derive from? Why is there a desire to kill unicorns? What is the connection between the Virgin Mary's body as a holy vessel for Christ and the virgin's body as bait for the death of the Christ figure? How is that connected to her role in the medieval church? Is the hunter validated in killing the unicorn?

**Resources:** This research will make use of medieval art and medieval religious texts, as well as modern scholarship. My research will rely heavily on online manuscript databases for images and texts as well as the Edmond Low Library for physical books and images. I will utilize the Interlibrary Service to obtain a greater range of literature and sources. The Edmond Low Library will also allow access to several necessary databases, including the International Medieval Bibliography, Artstor and Oxford Art Online. The Wentz Grant would enable me to visit various museums that feature related artwork, these include the exhibition *Art and Nature in the Middle Ages* at the Dallas Museum of Art (Dec. 4, 2016-March 19, 2017).

<sup>1</sup> David Hunt, "The association of the lady and the unicorn, and the hunting mythology of the Caucasus," *Folklore* 114.1 (2003): 75-90.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Default.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet>

<sup>4</sup> T.H. White, *The book of beasts: being a translation from a Latin bestiary of the twelfth century* (New York: Dover, 1984.)