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# Iconography of the Unicorn from India to the Italian Middle Ages

by FRANCESCA TAGLIATESTA

## *Iconographic Evolution*

The present study reports on a historical-cultural analysis and field reconnaissance aimed at examining an iconography depicted in mosaic paving and figurative friezes.

The iconographic cycle of the unicorn in the various Italian mediaeval artistic contexts summarizes a comprehensive network of historical links that, from India to the Mediterranean, attests the vitality of an imaginary figure spread by iconographic tradition.

The Byzantine unicorn in Italian churches is the result of strong cross-cultural pollination and represents the penultimate phase of an iconography first developed in the Indus Valley and that completed its cycle in the most sophisticated Renaissance portrayals.

From the protohistoric sites of Harappa, Mohenjodaro and Lothal come seals bearing impressed unicorn figures. The much debated question of whether these were bicorn or unicorn animals now seems to have been resolved. Numerous researchers now agree that bicorn animals, represented in profile, clearly display the two horns <sup>(1)</sup>. The unicorn figures must therefore be interpreted for what they actually are. The animal depicted is generally a male, the body of which resembles that of an African antelope, the oryx, and sometimes that of an ox. The long pointed ears are those of an antelope; the horn often displays stripes and more occasionally is smooth. The eye, the protrusion of which is underlined by a pronounced eyelid, in some cases resembles that of an ox, and in others a camel.

The unicorn depicted seal no. 11 has a body resembling that of an antelope, and the tail and eye that of an ox. A curious heart-shaped stain is visible on the shoulder,

<sup>(1)</sup> J. Marshall, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilisation*, London 1931, vol. I, p. 68; A. Parpola & J.P. Joshi, *Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions*, 1. *Collections in India*, Helsinki 1987; J.H. Mackay, *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-Daro, Being an Official Account of Archaeological Excavations at Mohenjo-daro Carried Out by the Government of India between the Years 1927 and 1931*, New Delhi 1937.

which has been identified as a 'saddle' <sup>(2)</sup>. In front of the unicorn's head there is an object of worship, a censer or, as has sometimes been claimed, a *pīpal* tree.

Seal no. 387 [= Parpola 1987: 72: M 296] displays two unicorn heads generated by a *pīpal* tree. In seal no. 383 [= *ibid.*: 101: M-417], six animal heads rotate around a circle-like motif: included among them is a unicorn. Marshall considers this as a scene representing the solar disk. Seal no. 641 [= Mackay 1937: pl. XCVIII; Parpola 1987: 73: M-297] bears the impression of a six-pointed star, one of whose points is a unicorn's head. The animal appears to be closely related to sun worship, a hypothesis supported by the fact that the unicorn has been depicted on a number of occasions as being paraded in a procession, as though it were a divinity <sup>(3)</sup>. A triad of zoomorphic divinities comprising a bison, a unicorn and an ibex is depicted on seal no. 24.

Dating to the 3rd and 4th century B.C. are several silver coins bearing two unicorns and a sacred tree incised on the reverse side <sup>(4)</sup>. The animal is quite clumsily executed, especially if it is considered that it is 'the descendant of the unicorn of the Indus Valley' <sup>(5)</sup>. The small tree situated between the unicorns could be a *pīpal*.

On the north and south pillars of the western portal of the Sañchi *stūpa* no. 1, along the stalk of the lotus flower, various animals are depicted, arranged in five successive registers, separated by flowers and leaves. They consist of lions, griffins and unicorns accompanied by riders that, in some cases, are depicted astride the animals <sup>(6)</sup>. Sharma noted a strong similarity between this scene and that depicted on seal no. 387 from Mohenjodaro and ventures the opinion that

[...] the unicorn represented in this scene being a composite animal is entirely different from that which is depicted on the Indus Seals and may be a lineal descendant of the latter. <sup>(7)</sup>

The earliest unicorn figure discovered in Iran dates to the proto-Iranian culture of Amlash (9th-8th century B.C.). This consists of a small bronze statue representing a goat with a frontal horn. The unicorn measures four centimeters in height and six and a half centimeters in length and was part of some grave goods <sup>(8)</sup>.

<sup>(2)</sup> Sri O.P. Sharma, 'The unicorn in Indian Art and Legend', *Journal of the Bihar*, 43, 1957, pp. 359-66.

<sup>(3)</sup> Although no reference may be made owing to the chronological distance, it is nevertheless curious to note how also inside the *rota* laid on the mosaic paving of Otranto Cathedral a star appears beside the unicorn, in this case with five points.

<sup>(4)</sup> J. Allan, *Catalogue of the Coins of Ancient India*, British Museum, London 1967, p. 62, pl. VIII.15.

<sup>(5)</sup> Sharma, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

<sup>(6)</sup> J. Marshall & A. Foucher, *The Monuments of Sañchī*, MASI, London 1940, Vol. 3, pp. 143-44, pl. 66.

<sup>(7)</sup> Sharma, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

<sup>(8)</sup> R. Ghirshman, *Arte persiana. Protoiranici, Medi e Achemenidi*, Milano 1982, p. 36, fig. 43.

The theme of the seduced unicorn, which will influence numerous Hinduist, Buddhist and Jainist accounts <sup>(9)</sup> as well as the *Physiologus* and the Cyranides, is closely linked to magical-religious values. The ascetic ‘gazelle horn’ – *ṛṣyaśṛṅga* – or unicorn – *ekaśṛṅga* – is devoted to the accumulation of *tapas* – ascetic heat. The seductress – a young girl – has the function of turning *tapas* into *kāma* – sexual heat. The *tapas* actually corresponds to drought, while *kāma* represents fertility. The function of restoring cosmic order performed by the seductress becomes essential: that is why she is invited into the forest to seek out the ascete <sup>(10)</sup>.

In India, to cite but a few examples, the theme of the seduced unicorn appears at Chaubārā in a pillar relief dating to the 1st century B.C.-1st century A.D. and conserved in the Mathurā museum, at Govindnagar on a pillar dating to the 1st century B.C.-1st century A.D., at Bhūteśwar, in a relief on a pillar dating to the 1st century B.C.-1st century A.D. and at Nagarjunakonda <sup>(11)</sup>.

In the *Pañcatantra* (I 1, 44) the ascetic appears as *ṛṣyaśṛṅga* ‘he who has the gazelle horn’ inherited from the mother, a gazelle <sup>(12)</sup>.

In the 4th century B.C., the legend of the unicorn begins to spread through the West. It was actually Ctesias of Cnidos who provided the first description in his *Indika* <sup>(13)</sup>. The animal described by Ctesias comes from India and resembles an ass or a horse: white body, red head and blue eyes. On the front, the horn, about one and a half feet long, is tricoloured: the base is white, the tip cream and the central part black. The magic potential of the horn, as pointed out by Ctesias, lies at the origin of its capture.

Largely recounted by travellers and Persian functionaries <sup>(14)</sup>, Ctesias’ description of the unicorn makes explicit symbolic and magic references. Ctesias is

<sup>(9)</sup> M. Restelli, *Il ciclo dell’unicorno*, Venezia 1992, pp. 78-104.

<sup>(10)</sup> The *ṛṣyaśṛṅga* legend is without doubt a development of the tragic story of Enkīdu in which the theme of seduction is a dominant motif. On this topic see: A. Panaino, ‘Between Mesopotamia and India: Some Remarks about the Unicorn Cycle in Iran’, in R.M. Whiting, ed., *Mythology and Mythologies*, Helsinki 2001, pp. 149-79.

<sup>(11)</sup> Restelli, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45, figs. 15, 17-18. The iconography of *ṛṣyaśṛṅga* at Mathurā (1st-2nd century) is earlier than *Pañcatantra* in the version that we know.

<sup>(12)</sup> In the 1st *tantra* (44) of the *Pañcatantra* Damanaka addresses the king Pingalaka thus: ‘Perhaps among the saints is not Viṣṇu worshipped in the form of a wild boar, the great *ṛṣi* in the form of a gazelle and Ṣaṅmukha, or six-headed god, in the form of a goat?’. *Pañcatantra*, ed. by G. Bechis, Milano 1983, p. 30; *Pañcatantra*, ed. by É. Lancereau, Introduction de Louis Renou, Paris 2006<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>(13)</sup> In about the 5th and 6th century B.C., Ctesias of Cnidos, royal physician at the court of the King of Persia Artaxerxes, wrote a History of India in a single volume which has practically been entirely lost. Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople, who was born around 827, with his collection of works and biographies of Greek writers, of whom all memory is believed to have been lost, entitled *Bibliotheca*, is a good point of reference for obtaining some idea about Ctesias’ writings. Fozio, *Biblioteca*, tradotta dal Cavaliere Giuseppe Compagnoni, Milano 1836, pp. 197-98.

<sup>(14)</sup> Ctesias had actually never been to India: his work as physician at the court of the King of Persia Artaxerxes II (between 405 and 359 B.C.) brought him into contact with various Persian functionaries who had visited India. This helped expand his knowledge of the Indian land.

the most authoritative source for the artists that depicted the unicorn in the Byzantine churches. They are images of isolated unicorns that appear to have no link with the legend of the seduced unicorn and must be viewed in relation to the impressive apotropaic value of the horn.

Ctesias made no mystery of the fact that he had never been to India and his white ass, with its single horn, was certainly suggested to him by some Persian functionaries who, like him, attended the Achaemenid court of King Artaxerxes II Mnemon. Persia thus became a border land across which iconographic details filtered from India to Europe and, in this specific case, from India to Greece. In the stories by Persian authors mention is often made of the medical and purifying properties of rhinoceros horn, which became the object of quality trade <sup>(15)</sup>. In order to explain some apparent contradictions in Ctesias' description of the unicorn, Shepard puts forward several hypotheses <sup>(16)</sup>. It actually seems that he combines two animals – the rhinoceros and the ass – into a single description. The colours may have come from the brightly coloured images of rhinoceroses displayed on the Indian fabrics sold in Persia <sup>(17)</sup>. The colours of the horn are perhaps the echo of the three colours with which, according to the Greeks, the Indians for magic reasons used to paint the cups obtained from rhinoceros horns <sup>(18)</sup>.

Later, practically all the classical authors will boast of having seen the bizarre horse-like animal in India <sup>(19)</sup>.

<sup>(15)</sup> Travellers' reports often describe the properties of the beneficial horn by means of which Indian kings obtain cups capable of protecting them from disease and poison. Nearly all the Arabic authors agree on the fact that human and animal figures may be obtained by sectioning the horn. In any case, the Persians and the Arabs were the largest exporters of rhinoceros horns.

<sup>(16)</sup> O. Shepard, *La leggenda dell'unicorno*, Firenze 1984.

<sup>(17)</sup> In manufacturing their cloth, the Arab craftsmen of Fatimid Egypt and the Seljuqs drew inspiration from the motifs appearing on Sassanid fabrics. These are the same that the Greek merchants dispatched to the emporiums in Sicily and southern Italy. A. Venditti, *Architettura bizantina nell'Italia meridionale (Campania, Calabria, Lucania)*, Napoli 1967, p. 930.

<sup>(18)</sup> Already Philostratus, in his *Life of Apollonius*, claimed that the Indian kings hunted the unicorn in order to obtain a chalice, or cup, from its horn.

In the *Thousand and One Nights* Sinbad the Sailor describes the rhinoceros, *karkadann*, as a large animal with a horn in the middle of its head some ten cubits long, in which the shape of a man may be discerned. This information was taken from the reports of Persian authors and repeated elliptically, as the human figure may be obtained only by sectioning the horn of the rhinoceros (*Le mille e una notte*, ed. by F. Gabrieli, Torino 1997, Vol. 3, p. 20). G. Ferrand, *Relations de voyages et textes géographiques arabes, persans et turks relatifs à l'extrême-orient du VIII<sup>e</sup> au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris 1913; J. Sauvaget, *Aḥbār As-Šīn wa l-Hind, Relation de la Chine et de l'Inde rédigée en 851*, Paris 1948; P. Charles-Dominique, *Voyageurs arabes, Ibn Faḍlān, Ibn Jubayr, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa et un auteur anonyme*, Paris 1995.

<sup>(19)</sup> Aristotle mentions two species of animal with a single horn: the oryx and the wild ass. Pliny, as well as confirming the presence of the unicorn in a few palaces in Persepolis, described three species of unicorn: oryx, Indian ass and Indian ox.

In about the 4th century A.D. at Alexandria, under the Judaic-Christian influence, a number of stories based on symbolic animals will be collected. This collection will be called *Physiologus*, from the scripture citation used as an introduction to each story. The legend of the unicorn described in the *Physiologus* and in the Cyranides forms the basis of the iconographic depictions that appeared in Europe between the 14th and 15th centuries. The story told in these works is the one best known in the West referring to an animal resembling a kid with a single horn which can be captured only by means of a stratagem involving a bare-breasted virgin maid. In Christian tradition the unicorn will be identified with Christ <sup>(20)</sup>. The virgin located in an isolated spot is used as a bait to capture the animal, which is considered uncatchable and which will fall upon her bosom. It will later be transported to the royal palace <sup>(21)</sup>. In this case, the animal is more like a goat than a horse, thus negating the Aristotelian theory according to which animal with a solid hoof have one horn while those with a cleft hoof have two <sup>(22)</sup>.

From the figurative standpoint, the literary contradiction will be resolved by depicting a composite animal that is more like a horse than a goat. From Pliny it will get its heat, the equine neck and mane, while from the *Physiologus* the goatlike beard and the cleft hoof. In ancient images, the unicorn has cleft hoofs on the forelegs and solid ones on the back legs – or vice versa – a goatlike beard on a horse's head or a goat's body on a horse's head.

The earliest mosaic iconographies of the unicorn come from two pavements discovered at Hūarte in Apamea <sup>(23)</sup> in Syria, between 1976 and 1977. In the mosaic discovered in the central porch of the ancient baptistery and dating to the late 4th-early 5th century, a unicorn is depicted, the body of which, made of reddish-pink tesserae outlined in black, resembles that of a horse <sup>(24)</sup>, with a short tail resembling that of a goat and a cleft hoof. The backward-curving spiral horn is pink in colour and can be dated to the 6th century by an inscription situated at the southern entrance. The unicorn depicted there has a dark, backward curving horn, a short tail

<sup>(20)</sup> The horn actually symbolizes the unity of Christ with the Holy Father. *Il Physiologus*, ed. by F. Zambon, Milano 1975, pp. 60-61.

<sup>(21)</sup> The favourite prey is the property of the king just as, in India, the rhinoceros horn or wild ass belonged to the sovereign.

<sup>(22)</sup> Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, éd. trad. P. Louis, Collection des Universités de France, II 1, 499 b 20, Paris 1964.

<sup>(23)</sup> The village of Hūarte is situated in the North of Syria, in the tall hills of the Gebel Zawiye. 'Blotti dans son hémicycle de croupes chauves, il a un peu l'impression d'atteindre un bout du monde. Certes les religieux qui fondèrent ces sanctuaires au IV<sup>e</sup> et siècle devaient être d'authentiques ermites, voués au silence et au dénuement des déserts pour mieux contempler Dieu' (P. & M.T. Canivet, Hūarte, *Sanctuaire Chrétien d'Apamène (IV<sup>e</sup>-VI<sup>e</sup> S.)*, Paris 1987, p. 27).

<sup>(24)</sup> According to Canivet the two unicorns have bodies similar to those of the *Antilope cervicapra* of India.





Fig. 1 - Unicorn. Church of San Saba, Rome.

like a goat and cleft hoofs. According to Cavinet it corresponds to the description of the oryx given by Aristotle, which is quite distinct from the unicorn ass<sup>(25)</sup>.

The unicorn decorating the central register of the mosaic paving of the Büyük Sarai in Constantinople conceivably dates to the mid 4th century, although this dating is still subject to discussion among researchers. It consists of an animal, with a short smooth horn made of black, red and grey tesserae. The muzzle is so pointed that Cavinet considered it to be that of a wolf.

From Cyrenaica comes a fragment of mosaic floor dating to the late 5th century depicting a unicorn with a beard and clearly visible sexual organ<sup>(26)</sup>. It has a cleft hoof and a body similar to that of a horse, while the tail is short like a goat's.

From the Church of Tell el Awash, a locality situated 5 km from Apamea, comes a mosaic paving depicting a unicorn whose muzzle can no longer be determined owing to the very poor state of conservation of the floor. The thin horn is nevertheless clearly visible, as are the cleft hoofs<sup>(27)</sup>.

<sup>(25)</sup> *De Part. Anim.*, III 2, 663.

<sup>(26)</sup> Better known as the London unicorn as it was sold by a London antiquarian. The place of origin of this mosaic fragment was probably Cyrenaica although Cavinet has expressed some doubt in this connection. According to her iconographic examination would reveal a technique similar to that used in the iconographies of Huarde and so she believes it is of Syrian origin.

J.W. Einhorn, *Spiritualis Unicornis*, Munich 1976, nos. 19 and 168.

<sup>(27)</sup> The dating of the mosaic is not known exactly, although the shape of the animal's body is very similar to that of the unicorn present in the new baptistery of Huarde.

*Relief Contained in the Church of San Saba in Rome*

From the Church of San Saba in Rome comes a stone relief dating to the 8th century on which a unicorn has been sculpted. The animal is placed inside a lozenge motif frame. The animal's curious muzzle resembles that of a bird while the body is that of a horse. The tail closely resembles that of a goat and it has a very long neck.

The unicorn is depicted in the act of eating a leaf. Situated in front this panel is the one representing a deer, an animal with which the unicorn is often associated<sup>(28)</sup>. The animal's strange beak, from which a protuberance projects, nevertheless raises some doubts as to the correct identification of the animal as it might simply consist of a two-horned animal (Fig. 1).



Fig. 2 - Virgin and unicorn. Basilica of San Savino, Piacenza.

*Unicorn in the Basilica of San Savino at Piacenza*

In the crypt of the Basilica of San Savino a tessellated floor is present that is dated by Cecchi Gattolin to 1107<sup>(29)</sup>. Twelve *rotae* are present in it – still visible despite the very poor state of conservation of the mosaic, inside which twelve zodiac signs are depicted. In the band located to the South, between horsemen and duellers, a virgin and a unicorn again suggest a theme that is influenced by the *Physiologus*. The scene depicted seems to suggest that the animal was goat, while in fact it is still a composite animal even though it is more sheeplike than horselike. The muzzle is that of a goat, as are the ears, although it has no beard. The body, the coat of which is made of alternating white and black tesserae measuring 40 m in height from the left hoof to the back, is similar to that of a foal. The tail is that of a horse and the hoofs are cleft. The thin curved horn is composed of white tesserae and measures 8 cm in length. The virgin, which never appears beside the unicorn in Byzantine mosaics, is practically unidentifiable except for a few details, such as the hand offering the bare breast to the unicorn (Fig. 2).

<sup>(28)</sup> J.-P. Joussa, *La licorne. Histoire d'un couple*, Paris 1994, p. 30.

<sup>(29)</sup> R. Salvini, *La Basilica di San Savino e le origini del romanico a Piacenza*, Modena 1978, pp. 128-39.

### *Unicorn in the Monastery of Santa Maria del Patir*

Only a few kilometers from Rossano Calabro, in the Sila Greca, stands the Monastery di Santa Maria del Patir<sup>(30)</sup>, commonly known as the *Patire*<sup>(31)</sup> in honour of father Bartholomew, its founder. In the mid 12th century, the abbot Blasio had the mosaic floor constructed, which has only been partially preserved<sup>(32)</sup>. At the main entrance, situated to the North, the mosaic consists of four *rotae* inside which the following are depicted: a centaur in the act of blowing a horn, a unicorn, a griffin, a feline (Figs. 3-6). Beside the entrance, to the North-East: a deer, a centaur, an acephalic feline, a quadruped of which only the paws remain (Figs. 7-8).

The unicorn located at the centre of the medallion at the North entrance measures about 1.79 m. from head to foot and 1.24 m from the back to the feet. The horn, placed on the forehead, has a length of 26 cm and a thickness of 6 cm; it is greenish in colour. The animal's head with a beard, is goatlike<sup>(33)</sup>. The tesserae providing the colour of the eye are black while those making up the animal's body and the paws are red, outlined in black. Lastly, the unicorn has a cleft hoof (Fig. 4). An analysis of the figurative context clearly shows that the unicorn depicted at the *Patire* is the result of contamination due to the encounter between the two traditions – the classical and that of the *Physiologus*.

### *Unicorn in Otranto Cathedral*

The floor mosaic in Otranto Cathedral<sup>(34)</sup> was made, as may be inferred from an inscription, between 1163 and 1166 by friar Pantaleone<sup>(35)</sup>. The 8th *rota*, from the top to the bottom, on the left of the altar, depicts the unicorn and the friar (Fig. 9).

<sup>(30)</sup> The monastery was founded in 1095 by San Bartolomeo da Simeri with the collaboration of the Norman admiral Christodulus. Conserved in the Museum of the Archbishopric of Rossano Calabro is the *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis*. I.F. Walther & N. Wolf, *Codices illustres: Les plus beaux manuscrits enluminés du monde: 400 à 1600*, Köln 2001.

<sup>(31)</sup> From the Greek *patèr*.

<sup>(32)</sup> The inscription placed on the floor bears the name of the executor, the abbot Blasio. On the various hypotheses regarding the origin of the workmen that of Orsi is noteworthy. He believes indeed that the artisans who made the paving mosaic of the Patirion were of Sicilian origin. To back up his hypothesis he points to the complete absence of mosaic paving traces in Calabria during the Byzantine era and the presence of mosaicists following the Norman conquest. Venditti, *op. cit.*, pp. 930-36.

<sup>(33)</sup> The mane placed on a goat's head is particularly evident.

<sup>(34)</sup> The material from which the polychrome tesserae were made is very hard local limestone. A. Antonaci, *Otranto*, Galatina 1992, p. 316.

<sup>(35)</sup> The names of the person commissioning it and the artist who made the mosaic are indicated at the cathedral entrance: 'Ex Ionath(e) donis / per dexteram Pantaleonis / hoc opus insigne / est superans impendia digne'. After the third column, starting from the main entrance, there is another



Fig. 3 - Centaur into *rota*. Monastery of Santa Maria del Patir, Rossano Calabro, Cosenza.



Fig. 4 - Unicorn into *rota*. Monastery of Santa Maria del Patir, Rossano Calabro, Cosenza.



Fig. 5 - Griffin fo into *rota*. Monastery of Santa Maria del Patir, Rossano Calabro, Cosenza.



Fig. 6 - Feline (lion?) into *rota*. Monastery of Santa Maria del Patir, Rossano Calabro, Cosenza.



Fig. 7 - Deer into *rota*. Monastery of Santa Maria del Patir, Rossano Calabro, Cosenza.



Fig. 8 - Centaur into *rota*. Monastery of Santa Maria del Patir, Rossano Calabro, Cosenza.



Fig. 9 - Unicorn and friar into *rota*. Otranto Cathedral, Lecce.

Leaving aside an overall reading of the entire mosaic cycle <sup>(36)</sup> which, in Frugoni's interpretation, is the expansion of a discourse formulated through episodes drawn from the biblical and profane repertoire on the basis of an order

inscription in which the author and the person commissioning the work are mentioned again: 'Humilis servus Ch(rist)i Ionathas hydruntin(us) archiep(iscopu)s iussit hoc op(us) fieri p(er) manus Pantaleonis p(res)b(yte)ri'. The third inscription gives the data and name of the reigning king: 'Anno ab incarnatio(n)e D(omi)ni n(ostri) Iesu Christi MCLXV i(n)dictio(n)e XIII regnante D(omi)ni n(ost)ro W(illelmo) rege magnifico et t(r)iu(m)fatore humils se(rvus) Christi Ionat(has)'. The fourth inscription, located in the vicinity of the main altar, indicates a date, earlier than the other two, and the names of the king and the bishop: '(Anno) ab (incar)nacio(n)e D(omi)ni nos(t)ri Iesu Ch(rist)i MCLXIII i(n)dic(tione) XI regn(ante) felicit(er)D(omi)no n(ost)ro W(illelmo) rege magnifico et t(r)iu(m)fatore humilis se(rvus) Christi Ionat(has)'. This layout shows that the mosaic was constructed progressively from top to bottom, from the altar to the main entrance.

<sup>(36)</sup> The tree of life, associated with the two rodents and to the man climbing a branch is a clear reference to the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat.

coordinated by the great guiding tree, the *rota* with the unicorn represents the tradition <sup>(37)</sup>.

The *rota* surrounding the unicorn contains twenty-six circles, arranged over the entire circumference and a twenty-eighth circle enveloped by a five-pointed star. The unicorn, as in Indian tradition, with its single horn, could represent royalty <sup>(38)</sup> and the friar kneeling before it could be Pantaleone himself <sup>(39)</sup>. The animal measures 1.17 m from head to foot, and 0.67 m from the back to the hoofs. The horn placed on the forehead is red in colour and measures 29 cm in length. It is 8 cm thick at the point of attachment and 3 cm at the extremity. The head is that of a horse and the body that of a goat and the hoofs are cleft. The eyes are black, the body and feet are beige or greenish.

The representation is composite in nature: a unicorn that is half goat and half horse. As suggested by the most authoritative classical tradition, the horn is cream coloured; however, the symbolic animal more closely resembles a goat than a wild ass.

In support of the area of historical-artistic provenance of the *Presbyter* Pantaleone in the Byzantine environment there is the monastery of San Nicola di Casole, located a few kilometers from Otranto, even though Bertaux *a priori* rules out a non French origin for the mosaic figures <sup>(40)</sup>.

It is doubtful, according to Frugoni, that Pantaleone was aware of the total assimilation of this symbolism. It seems more likely that it was probably an 'iconographic relic' or the memory of a fixed scheme already in use, the echo of *Physiologus*' circulation in the mediaeval environment <sup>(41)</sup>.

### *Unicorns in the Parma Baptistery*

The decorative frieze running around the Baptistery, interrupted by the portals, is carved with figures of real and imaginary animals <sup>(42)</sup>. To the right of the northern

<sup>(37)</sup> In general, the contemporary mosaic pavements are decorated with simple geometric motifs and both real and imaginary animals are included inside *rotae*. The use of *rotae* to frame animal figures may be related back to a first example on the floor of the Church of Sant'Ilario in Venice (9th century). C. Frugoni Settis, 'Per una lettura del mosaico pavimentale della cattedrale di Otranto', *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano e Archivio Muratoriano*, 80, 1968, pp. 213-59.

<sup>(38)</sup> Conversely, Frugoni Settis interprets the unicorn as a symbol of chastity. Frugoni Settis, *op. cit.*, pp. 242-43.

<sup>(39)</sup> On this subject, see: J.W. Einhorn, *Spiritualis unicornis. Das Einhorn als Bedeutungsträger in Literatur und Kunst des Mittelalters*, München 1976 and C.A. Willemsen, *L'enigma di Otranto. Il mosaico pavimentale del presbitero Pantaleone nella Cattedrale*, Galatina 1980.

<sup>(40)</sup> É. Bertaux, *L'art dans l'Italie méridionale*, Paris 1904, vol. I.

<sup>(41)</sup> Again in Puglia, in Brindisi, in the Church of San Giovanni del Sepolcro and in Bari, in the Church of San Nicola, elephants support vases from which flowers emerge: they have the function of caryatids.

<sup>(42)</sup> Dating to the 12th century. G. De Francovich, *Benedetto Antelami, architetto e scultore e l'arte*



Fig. 10 - Unicorns into *rotae*. Decorative frieze of the Parma Baptistery.

portal two unicorns are situated inside two *rotae*, framed by an inset (Fig. 10). The two *rotae* are separated by a third *rota* in which a human figure has been sculpted holding a branch in the right hand, while two snakes at the feet are turned towards the unicorns. The unicorn to the right of the human figure has a horse-like head, bulging eye and a horse's paws, both right forepaw and left rear paw, while the state of preservation of the animal does not allow absolute accuracy. The horn is broad at the point of insertion and narrow at the extremity. The left hand unicorn has the body and tail of a goat and the horn is shorter than that of the corresponding one.

#### *Unicorn in the Basilica of St John the Evangelist in Ravenna*

The Basilica was erected as an ex-voto to St John the Evangelist who, according to the tradition, watched over the imperial family during the sea voyage to Ravenna<sup>(43)</sup>. It was founded by Galla Placidia. Over the years the church underwent considerable alterations and nothing remains of the original apsidal mosaic, dating to a period between the 6th and 7th century.

In the 10th-11th century the Basilica became the seat of a Benedictine monastery. In the early 13th century the floor level was raised by 0.50 m. The mosaic floor of the middle nave, discovered in 1763, actually dates to 1213<sup>(44)</sup>, as is proved

*del suo tempo*, Milano-Firenze 1952; C. Frugoni, *I mesi antelamici del Battistero di Parma*, Parma 1992; Ead., *Benedetto Antelami e il Battistero di Parma*, Torino 1995; J. Le Goff, *Immagini per un medioevo*, Roma-Bari 2000.

<sup>(43)</sup> St John the Evangelist in Constantinople is considered the patron saint of sailors.

<sup>(44)</sup> Following the restoration action carried out after World War II, the floor mosaics were moved to the walls of the inner façade and of the southern nave. The mosaic found after the removal of the 13th century one depicts the Labyrinth and representations of the months.

by an inscription mentioning the person who commissioned it, abbot Guglielmo <sup>(45)</sup>. The tesserae used to make the mosaic are of different sizes and quality: they are made of marble, limestone, vitreous paste, listel fragments, and *opus sectile* polychrome marble and porphyry <sup>(46)</sup>.

The animals depicted inside the frame inserts include also the unicorn. As Campanati points out, the real animals are executed with greater accuracy, which is indicative of an already assimilated iconographic tradition. The unicorn



Fig. 11 - Unicorn inside frame. Basilica of St John the Evangelist, Ravenna.

is depicted inside an insert framed by ondulated racemes and lines of stylized plant volutes, arranged in a heart pattern. It measures 54 cm from head to paws; 33 cm from the belly to the left anterior hoof; 33 cm from the extremity of the body to the rear paws. The horn, represented by white tesserae surrounded by black tesserae, is 13 cm long and 3 cm thick. The body type conforms to that of a goat while the head is a horse's. The anterior hoofs are both cleft (Fig. 11).

In order to identify the original location of these mosaics in the absence of any excavation reports, Professor Campanati relied on a plan view of the Church made during the postwar interventions and conserved in the Drawing Archives of the Ravenna Superintendency <sup>(47)</sup>. It seems to indicate that the panels containing the individual animals were probably arranged in a continuous fashion with the inserts belonging to the first floor section – in line with the second intercolumn on the right – divided into four registers in the vicinity of the entrance to the middle nave <sup>(48)</sup>.

<sup>(45)</sup> The inscription implies that the mosaic floor was commissioned in 1213. R. Farioli Campanati, *I mosaici pavimentali della Chiesa di San Giovanni Evangelista in Ravenna*, Ravenna 1995, n. 8.

<sup>(46)</sup> Material salvaged from previous decorative phases of the church. In particular, the *opus sectile* was obtained by combining multicoloured pieces of marble while the *opus tessellatum* was obtained using tiny pieces of marble or glass.

<sup>(47)</sup> The plan view is similar to the survey made by R. Strumia (AD., no 10703). Farioli Campanati, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>(48)</sup> In these panels there are actually traces of decorations and animal figures. For this reason it was possible to postulate that the series could continue with that of the animal subject group.





Fig. 12 - Unicorn and other fantastic animals. Aosta Cathedral.

### *Unicorn in Aosta Cathedral*

The presbytery of Aosta Cathedral contains two mosaic cycles built using polychrome tesserae. The first of these dates to the first half of the 13th century and is made up of a lozenge inside which a fish, a bird and two animals are depicted while along its external sides there are four animals, including the unicorn (Fig. 12). Beside the rhombus shaped motif there are depictions of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the elephant and the chimera. The second mosaic cycle dates to the second half of the 12th century and consists of a central *rota* in which Christ, the Lord of Time, is depicted, holding the sun in his right hand and the moon in his left, while all around rotate twelve *rotae* with representations of the twelve months of the year (Fig. 13).

The unicorn with a southeast alignment has a body made of red and white tesserae surrounded by black ones and measures 37 cm from the head to the hoof, 30 cm from the back of the paws and 46 cm in length. The horn is made of blue and grey tesserae and measures 39 cm. The eye is black in colour. The head and body are a horse's, the anterior hoofs are compact, while the rear ones are absent as is the tail (Fig. 14).



Fig. 13 - Christ, the Lord of Time, and the twelve months of the year. Aosta Cathedral.



Fig. 14 - Unicorn, detail of Fig. 12. Aosta Cathedral.

Table 1

Provenance	Category Name	Dating	Horn Colour
1) Harappa		Seal no. 11	2300 - 1750
2) Iran	Bronze statuette	Proto-Iranian culture of Amlash 9th-8th c. B.C.	
3) Chaubără	Relief on pilaster	1st c. B.C. - 1st c. A.D.	
4) Govindnagar	Relief on pilaster	1st c. B.C. - 1st c. A.D.	
5) Bhûteçwar	Relief on pilaster	1st c. B.C. - 1st c. A.D.	
6) Hûarte in Apamea (Syria)	Mosaic (Ancient baptistery)	Late 4th c. or early 5th c.	Pink and beige
7) Hûarte in Apamea (Syria)	Mosaic (New baptistery)	6th c.	Dark
8) Büyük Sarai (Constantinople)	Mosaic	Mid 4th c.	Black / Red / Grey
9) Cyrenaica	Mosaic fragment	Late 5th c.	
10) Tell el Awash (Syria)	Mosaic		
11) Rome	Relief	8th c.	
12) Piacenza	Mosaic	1107	White with black outline
13) Rossano Calabro (CS)	Mosaic	Mid 12th c.	Greenish with black outline
14) Otranto (LE)	Mosaic	Between 1163 and 1166	Red with black outline
15) Parma	Frieze	12th c.	White marble
16) Ravenna	Mosaic	1213	White with blue and black outline
17) Aosta	Mosaic	1st half of 13th c.	Blue and grey
Colour of Unicorn	Horn Length	Unicorn Height	Unicorn Length
2)	4 cm	6.5 cm	
6) pink-red, black outline			
7) dark			
12) black and white	8 cm	40 cm high	
13) greenish head, red body with black outline	26 cm	1.79 m from head to hoof, 1,24 m from back to hoof	
14) beige with black outline; collar composed of red and blue tesserae	29 cm	1.17 m from head to hoof; 0.67 m from back to hoof	
16) blue, light blue, green, white and brown	13 cm	54 cm from head to hoof; 33 cm from back to hoof	
17) Red and white, black outline	39 cm	37 cm from head to hoof; 30 cm from back to hoof	46 cm

*continue*

continued Table 1

Head	Body	Tail	Eye
1)	Antelope	Ox	Ox
2)	Goat		
6)	Horse	Goat	
7)		Goat	
8)	Antelope		
9)	Horse	Goat	
11) Bird	Equine	Goat	
12) Goat	Equine	Equine	Black pupil, white eyeball, black outline, black eyebrows
13) Goat (with mane)	Equine	Equine	Greenish pupil, white eyeball and black outline
14) Equine (with mane)	Goat	Goat	Black pupil, white eyeball, black outline, black eyebrows
16) Equine	Goat	Goat	Black pupil, white and beige eyeball and blue outline
17) Equine	Equine		Black pupil, white eyeball, black outline
Hoof	Beard	State of Preservation	Position
6) Cleft			
7) Cleft			
9) Cleft	X	Very poor	
12) Cleft		Good	Inside frame
13) Cleft	X	Good	Inside <i>rota</i>
14) Cleft		Good	Inside <i>rota</i>
15) Solid		Fair	Inside <i>rota</i>
16) Cleft		Good	Inside frame
17) Solid		Good	Inside frame

