



Christic Symbolism of the Lion & the Unicorn

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*Ihesus-Crist, nostre Sauveur
C'est l'Unicorne spiritual.*

William of Normandy

During the Middle Ages the *Ars Regia*, pertaining to the Lesser Mysteries, comprising such symbolic sciences as alchemy and heraldry preserved a deposit of emblematic images which transmit the esoteric teachings of the schools of Christian hermetism. Here we shall briefly consider the symbolism of the Lion and the Unicorn which are to be found in numerous contexts in medieval art and more specifically as emblems of Christic perfections.

An especially famous representation of these two symbolic beasts is to be seen in the famous late 15th century tapestry called *La Dame à la Licorne*, a beautiful artistic expression of hermetic *chevalerie* and the initiatic domain of *amour courtois* (*À Mon Seul Désir*): the Damozel at the centre is flanked in each of the six tapestries by the unicorn to her left and the lion to her right. The central tree, like the 'Tree of Life' at the centre of the Terrestrial Paradise, echoes the 'axial' symbolism of the unicorn's horn.

The Monoceros /Unicorn is a well-known emblem of Christ expounded upon in medieval bestiaries and the motif of the 'Hunt of the Unicorn' depicts the mystery of the Immaculate Conception. The archangel Gabriel blows his hunting-horn while his four hounds ('Mercy', 'Justice', 'Truth' and 'Peace') pursue the unicorn into a walled garden (*hortus conclusus*) where it lays its horned head in the lap of the Virgin Mary, as only a virgin had the power to tame the unicorn. The single horn of the unicorn representing the unity of God and Christ. Louis Charbonneau-Lassay remarks in 'The Bestiary of Christ' that the unicorn is to '*compared to that other lord of suffering, which is the poor humble, human heart...the old legend of the unicorn, the virgin, and the hunter was a theme eminently suited to represent the Incarnation and the redemptive sacrifice of the Son of God.*'

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The mystic properties ascribed to the unicorn's spiral horn, to counter-act the deadly effects of poison made it a prized item in the medieval pharmacopeia but here we see yet another esoteric motif; the unicorn was famed for 'water-conning', for purifying the waters of springs by dipping its horn into pools, fountains and wells and John of Hesse during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1389 related having beheld a unicorn 'conning' and purifying waters near Mount Sinai. This signifies the power of purificatory and salvific regeneration. As far back as ancient Persia we find mention in a Mazdean scripture of the unicorn: "*We worship the Good Mind and the spirits of the Saints and that sacred beast the Unicorn which stands in Vouru-Kasha, and we sacrifice to that sea of Vouru-Kasha where he stands.*" (cited in ch.8, 'The Lore of the Unicorn' by Odell Shepard, 1930) Here the unicorn regenerates and purifies the waters polluted by the demonic powers of Ahriman and is thus a symbol of the Universal Saviour, the Saoshyant.

Just as the unicorn is the pre-eminent symbol of Christ in medieval heraldry just so we find the same beast in the emblematic language of alchemy and hermetism, most notably in the 3rd plate of the 'Book of Lambspring, where the unicorn represents *Spiritus* in the hermetic ternary of Spirit, Soul and Body.

The 'Lion of Judah' is the most famous Christic symbol, emanating from the imagery of the Lion-Messiah in Jewish tradition. In his article 'Christ, Priest and King' first published in 1927 in the Catholic review *Le Christ-Roi* at Paray-le-Monial (c.f. 'Recueil' René Guénon, p.146-151, 2013) the lion symbolism of Christ is discussed by René Guénon: '*He is called the Lion of Judah: the lion, solar and royal emblem of this tribe, most especially of the family of David*'. Louis Charbonneau-Lassay in the 'Bestiary of Christ' remarks upon how medieval Christian symbolists saw 'in the perpetually open-eyed lion the image of the attentive Christ who sees everything, and who guards souls from evil when they truly wish.' This refers to the legend that the lion whether awake or asleep had open eyes and the lore that the lion could animate its apparently lifeless cubs on the 3rd day after their birth by the miraculous power of its breath also relates to the symbolism of the Resurrection. As Louis Charbonneau-Lassay says the medieval symbolic tradition '*made the lion, in Christian art, an emblem of Christ as the risen God-Man*' and reminds us of the prophetic words of Joel: 'The Lord also shall roar out of Zion.'

Guénon asks why the lion relating to the regal function embodied in the Davidic house of kingship embodies the lineage of Jesus Christ, rather than the priestly line of Levi and the family of Aaron, and refers to St Paul's teachings in the Epistle to the Hebrews ch 7. 11-17 referring to the change of the priesthood and of the law and the rising of another priest '*after the similitude of Melchizedec.*' Resuming the formerly separate functions of *Sacerdotium* and *Regnum* in their principial unity, as Melchizedec was both 'rex et sacerdos', in the union of the Divine and Human natures in Christ, in whom as Guénon says '*is realised the figure of the Principle in whom the two powers are united, like the sacrifice which is offered with the bread and the wine is the same figure of the Eucharist.*' (c.f R. Guénon; Recueil)

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Some traditional lore describe a combat, rivalry or enmity between the lion and the unicorn such as an old English nursery rhyme which begins: '*The lion and the unicorn were fighting for the crown...*'. If we interpret the unicorn as symbolizing *Sacerdotium* and *spiritus* and the Lion as *Regnum* and *anima* this could be an archaic echo of the 'kshatriya revolt' in which the regal or warrior function of temporal power seeks to usurp the priestly function of spiritual authority, a harbinger of the destruction and loss of the hierarchic pattern of the Divine Order of the Primordial Tradition and thus of the degeneration and decadence of humankind over the cycles of the ages. The Lion and the Unicorn harmoniously conjoined in their hermetic, heraldic and chivalric context as esoteric images of Christic perfections, as we behold in the tapestry of *La Dame à la Licorne*, would represent the mystical and initiatic regeneration realised through the figure of Jesus Christ who is at one and the same time Eternal High Priest and King of Kings.

