



Unicorns and Flying Dragons in Noah's Ark: The Bible Story according to Medieval and Modern European Works of Art

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Abstract: The current study analyzes several medieval and modern works of art that portray mythological creatures who entered Noah's ark (Genesis 6:5-9) – flying dragon-like and imaginary creatures as well as unicorns. The artists assumedly chose to portray these animals for several reasons: a) in the ancient world the existence of creatures with unusual and exceptional qualities was a commonly held belief; b) mythological animals aroused the imagination of the ancients and sparked their curiosity.

Keywords: Noah's Ark. Art. Midrash.

Resumo: Este estudo analisa algumas obras de arte medievais e modernas que criam criaturas mitológicas que entraram na Arca de Noé (Gn 6:5-9), criaturas voadoras semelhantes a dragões e imaginárias, assim como unicórnios. Os artistas supostamente optaram por retratar esses animais por várias razões: a) no mundo antigo, a existência de criaturas com qualidades incomuns e excepcionais era uma crença comumente aceita; b) animais mitológicos despertaram, reiteradamente, a imaginação e a curiosidade dos antigos.

Palavras-chave: Arca de Noé. Arte. Midrash.

The story of the flood in the book of Genesis (6:5-9:17) describes the eradication of all creatures as a consequence of their wayward behavior. God instructs Noah to build an ark that will serve as a refuge for his family and for a group of animals, and after the flood these survivors start a fresh page in the history of humanity and of the natural world. The text notes that three major types of animals entered the ark – fowls, beasts, and insects (Genesis 7:2). These included seven pairs each (male and female) of the pure animals and only one pair each of the impure animals. The biblical narrator does not list the species that entered the ark, aside from the raven and the dove that are mentioned in the context of their role in the story (Genesis 8: 7-12).

The text's underlying premise is that the flood affected the entire world of old, or at least that known to the ancients, and that all existing animals were

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represented within the ark. Over the generations various sources, both Jewish and non-Jewish, referred to the various species of animals sheltered by the ark, as part of their interpretation and study of the story and its theological meanings. Post-biblical Jewish compilations state, for example, that lions, bears, ostrich, elephants, gazelles, and other animals entered the ark.¹ The sages of the midrash literature mention these animals with regard to questions that arose in the study halls, for instance how did Noah feed the animals and respond to their needs, what routine was followed within the ark, and how did Noah manage to cope with the extensive work involved in feeding the animals.

From ancient to modern times, the story of the flood has received many varied interpretations. Most of these were written in the form of commentaries on the text, while others are reflected in visual art. Artists who painted scenes from the story expressed their perceptions and understanding of its distinct parts. The story of the flood attracted the attention of well-known artists such as Michelangelo and Rembrandt, and these included in their works new and interesting insights.

1 The purpose of the article

This article analyzes several medieval and modern works of art that portray mythological creatures who entered Noah's ark – flying dragon-like and imaginary creatures as well as unicorns. The main question discussed in the article is: Why did the artists to include these creatures in their description of Noah's ark?

In their works, some artists described various details related to the structure of the ark, its manufacture, and how it was populated. A particularly prominent dimension often portrayed is the entrance to and departure of animals from the ark, as well as their stay within it during the flood. By focusing on this chain of events, the artists could make use of their zoological knowledge. They documented animals that were familiar to them from their close environment or animals about which they had learned – from rumors, contemporary literature, or other works of art.

The story of the flood and the ark appear in European art in different types of artwork, such as oil paintings, wall paintings in churches, wall hangings in royal palaces, and illustrations in books.

2 Flying creatures in Noah's ark

Example of imaginary creatures Noah's ark is found in the royal tapestries

¹ See for example, THEODOR and ALBECK, 1903, Parashat Noah, 31:21, p. 87; BUBER, 1894, Parashat Noah 7:16, p. 18.



(known as 'Jagiellonian tapestries' or 'Wawel arrasses') in Kraków Castle (Wawel Castle), Poland, that most of them were amassed by Sigismund II Augustus (1520–1572), King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania (Figures 1 and 2). The collection of the tapestries includes biblical scenes created according to design by the Flemish painter Michiel Coxie (Mechelen 1499–1592) who also had designed tapestries for the Brussels looms and for Phillip II's Royal Palace of Madrid.²

The biblical scenes from the book of Genesis in Wawel Castle are the Story of the First Parents, the Story of Noah and the flood (in eight parts), and the Story of Tower of Babel. Two tapestries are showing animals entering the Ark and coming out of it, such as lions, camels, and various species of fowls. However, to contemporary person several animals are not familiar and look imaginary (see the left side of the picture in front of the ark).³



Figure 1 – The Entry of Noah, his family and the Animals into the Ark⁴

² CAMPBELL, 2002, p. 394-403.

³ On the dragons in the 'Jagiellonian tapestries' see also ROBINSON, 2017, p. 14-15.

⁴ Source:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arras_Animals_Entering_the_Ark.jpg>.



Figure 2 – The entry into the Ark – imaginary creatures (close-up)

Another example of dragon-like or imaginary creatures in 16th century artwork referring to Noah's ark is an oil painting by the Flemish artist Simon de Myle from 1570 (Figure 3). The painting depicts the ark perched on Mount Ararat, where it came to rest after the flood (Genesis 8:4), and the animals leaving the ark. The artist portrays many animals – both wild and farm animals. In the center of the painting is a column of animals descending the ramp in perfect order, such as a pig, horses, ostrich, cows, and sheep. Animals are also scattered around the ark, for example elephants, a camel, a lion (devouring a horse), as well as monkeys, which were imported to European countries from Africa and served as pets and for entertainment purposes.⁵

In the area of the ship's bow a white unicorn is evident, a recurring element in various works, as will be discussed below. Notably, paintings of the animals attest not only to the artists' outlooks and beliefs but rather also to their familiarity with the animals painted. For example, in this painting the giraffes have a smooth-brown type of fur that is not true to life. Giraffes were known to

⁵ On apes in Medieval Europe see JANSON, 1952; SAX, 2001; BUQUET, 2013.



medieval Europeans; due to their appearance and body shape they were considered a most unique animal and were therefore often portrayed in art.⁶



Figure 3 – Simon de Myle, 1570, Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat⁷

Different parts of the painting show representations of various fowls, some of them exotic. A pair of ostrich is shown walking down the ramp, their height emphasized by the artist, and on the left, on the railing encircling the ark's bow, there is a peacock with a beautiful long tail. It may be assumed that, similar to the giraffe, the painter chose the peacock and the ostrich since in Europe they were considered impressive fowls with an exceptional body shape.⁸ On the right, in the upper part of the painting, a large group of fowls of various species alight skywards, and on the left are two flying dinosaur-like creatures with relatively long tails (Figure 4).

⁶ On descriptions of the giraffe (*camelopardus*) in Medieval Times manuscripts see for example ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, 2006, Book 12, 2:19; LAUFER, 1928; KELLY, 2000, p. 23-25; RINGMAR, 2006, p. 375-397.

⁷ Source:

<https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%91%D7%A5:Noah%27s_Ark_on_Mount_Ararat_by_Simon_de_Myle.jpg>

⁸ See GREEN, 2006, p. 27–66; SHEMESH, 2018.



Figure 4 – Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat, Simon de Myle, 1570 – dragon-like creature (close-up)

Dragon- and monster-like creatures were common in medieval works of art and illustrated books.⁹ The 16th century, when the current work was designed, had a fairly extensive literature, both zoological and general, describing an array of marine and land-based animals. Some of these animals seem fanciful to modern people, but judging by contemporary knowledge and worldviews they were considered realistic.

Examples of imaginary animals who the ancients thought existed are evident in many books, such as Conrad Gesner, *Historia Animalium* (1551); Guillaume Rondelet, *Libri de Piscibus Merinis* (1554); Ambroise Paré, *Des Monstres of Ambroise Paré* (1573-1585) (=Janis L. Pallister (ed), *Ambroise Paré On Monsters and Marvels: translated with an introduction and notes*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

3 The unicorn in Noah's ark

The belief that there is indeed an actual animal with one horn on its forehead, whether a goat, an ass, or a horse, is fairly ancient and was shared by various cultures, for instance in the region of India, Persia, as well as in Greece and Rome.¹⁰ As shall be seen below, this belief existed in medieval times and was even fairly common, and therefore various sources recognize the unicorn as an animal that survived the flood by finding refuge in Noah's ark.

The research literature has different versions and explanations concerning its origins as well as what inspired the design of this mythical-fabulous creature – perhaps a rhinoceros with a horn above its nose or an oryx who, when viewed

⁹ See BARBER, 1999; ALLAN, 2008; DELL, 2010.

¹⁰ HAMILTON, 2010.



from the side, appeared to have one horn, or following encounters with male oryx who had lost one of their horns in territorial battles.¹¹

The unicorn was mentioned in classical sources, such as in the works of Ctesias (5th century BC),¹² Strabo (64/63 BC – c. AD 24),¹³ and Aelian (c. 175 – c. 235 AD)¹⁴, and its image appeared in Jewish literature as well. In contrast to non-Jewish sources that describe the unicorn as a goat or horse, a Talmudic Midrashic tradition tells of a one-horned bull sacrificed by Adam, and of the *tahash*, an unidentified one-horned animal whose skin was used to produce the covering of the tabernacle.¹⁵ Several Talmudic and Midrashic sources tell of an animal called a *keresh* that had one horn, and they too appear to be referring to a unicorn. We find no ancient Jewish source that explicitly ties the unicorn to Noah's ark. There is a Talmudic tradition that appears in the midrash as well and speaks of the problems entailed by the entrance of the *re'em* to the ark,¹⁶ but this appears relevant for the aurochs (*Bos Primigenius*) rather than the *oryx*, which some see as the origin of the unicorn's image.

The unicorn appeared in quite a large amount of written material, book illustrations, and Christian art in medieval Europe. The presence of the unicorn in Noah's ark as portrayed in Christian sources was undoubtedly significantly affected by the fact that it was perceived as a biblical animal, as in several biblical translations common in Europe, both ancient and later, it was identified with the *re'em* that is mentioned in many verses. The identification of the unicorn with the Biblical *re'em* is found, for example, in the *Septuagint* (μονόκερωσ= monokeros= one horn=unicorn), and The King James Version (KJV).¹⁷

¹¹ DOR, 1997, p. 37-38, 1997 ; FISHER, 1972, p. 280; DAYAN, 2017, v. 1, p. 220-231.

¹² CTESIAs, On India (Indica), 45.

¹³ STRABO, Geography XV, 1, 56.

¹⁴ AELIAN, *De natura animalium* III,41; IV, 52; XVI, 20.

¹⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Sabbath, 28b.

¹⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Zevahim 113b; THEODOR and ALBECK, 1903, Parashat Noah, 32.

¹⁷ The *Septuagint Bible*, 1954; *The Authorized King James Version* (KJV), 1611. See for example the translations to Numbers 23:22; Deuteronomy 33:17; Isaiah 34:7; Job 39:9–12; Psalms 92:10.



Figure 5: Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César ("Ancient history until Caesar"), text that was written for Roger IV, the châtelain of Lille. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Français 20125, fol. 8v¹⁸

In Figure 5, dated to the 13th century, Noah's ark is portrayed as a ship, flanked on its two ends by figureheads that resemble predators. This embellishment has of course no basis in the biblical text but it may attest to the maritime world with which the artist was familiar. The ship is divided into two main parts. The bottom part served as housing for the animals, and the upper level as a section for human beings, intended for Noah and his family. Interestingly, while the animals are in a sealed windowless area, the space serving the humans has many windows, possibly only for artistic reasons.

According to the text, the ark had three levels and the artist appears to have housed the fowls in the green roof that forms the third level. On the left of the painting are animals entering the ark – horses, camels, deer, and a lion. Above these mammals a light-colored unicorn can be clearly identified (although not white as in most paintings). The unicorn is characterized by a thickened horn on its forehead. The artist seemed to have been intent on accentuating the unicorn.

¹⁸ Source: <<http://jessehurlbut.net/wp/mssart/?p=6818>>.



Figure 6 – British Library, catalogue of illuminated manuscripts, Royal 2 B VII f. 6v¹⁹

An illustrated page in a book located in the British Library (Figure 6) shows a scene in which Noah and his family are depicted standing in front of the ark, which can be accessed via a ladder rather than a ramp as seen in other paintings. The artist appears to have chosen to focus on the family members, however various albeit not many animals, such as a lion and deer as well as several species of fowl, are also shown. The illustrator drew a unicorn (goat?) at the bottom of the illustration, clearly identified by the single relatively long horn protruding from its forehead.

¹⁹ Source:

<<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=52306>>.



Figure 7 – Bernardino Luini, Noah's ark. Fresco, San Maurizio church, Milan, Italy²⁰

Another example of the unicorn in Noah's ark as depicted in European art, is in the fresco in Milan's Maurizio church (Figure 7). The painting which is attributed to the Italian painter Bernardino Luini (c. 1480–1532) depicts God revealing Himself to Noah during the scene of the animals entering the ark. The artist portrays an array of exotic animals, such as lions, giraffes, monkeys, and elephants, as well as domestic animals such as dogs, horses, and cows. In the center of the ramp leading to the ark is a pair of white unicorns resembling stately horses, and their location in the center of the ramp, contrasting with the black elephants, is apparently intended to attract the observer's attention to this unique animal.

Summary and conclusions

Images of flying dragons, and particularly unicorns, appear in various medieval and modern artworks depicting the story of the flood and Noah's ark. The artists assumedly chose to portray these animals for several reasons.

²⁰ Source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:San_Maurizio_Luini_noah%27s_ark.JPG



In the ancient world the existence of creatures with unusual and exceptional qualities – human creatures, hybrid creatures, flying creatures, and animals – was a commonly held belief.²¹ The ancients believed that these were completely realistic creatures and therefore assumed that they too entered the ark, as did other animals. The artists chose to portray unique and exceptional animals, as well as realistic animals that did not exist in Europe, such as elephants, lions, and giraffes originating from Africa (there is also an Asiatic lion). Mythological animals aroused the imagination of the ancients and sparked their curiosity. It may be assumed that this type of creature generated more appreciation of the artwork and attracted people's attention and consideration. Nevertheless, in many works of art the imaginary animals receive a more marginal place than the realistic ones.

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²¹ SOUTH, 1988; ROSE, 2001.



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