

HPHI7016

Past Peoples, Present Societies:

Research Methods and Skills

Assignment 4

Image Commentary

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Assignment 4 – Image Commentary

The image to be analysed is that of the Virgin and the Unicorn from the Rochester Bestiary, which is a parchment codex with the dimensions 300mm by 215mm. The text which precedes each image is in columns of 195mm by 100mm. The Bestiary was produced between 1225 and 1235 and contains 55 images in various colours, including gold, which follow each text description. As well as the image of the unicorn, the Bestiary contains many images of exotic animals such as camels, lions and tigers and some which would have been more familiar to Medieval readers like cats, hedgehogs and moles.¹

The Bestiary is held in the archives of the British Library but was originally owned by the cathedral Priory of St Andrew at Rochester. The history of its ownership can be traced by inscriptions on the frontispiece. In the fourteenth century it appears to have been stolen from the Priory by John Malling, who was excommunicated for his crimes in 1387. Malling's brother is recorded as returning the Bestiary to the Priory. It passed into the ownership of William Brybbons and Thomas Aston in the fifteenth century and subsequently came into the possession of Henry VIII, being recorded in the inventory of the Upper Library at Westminster in 1542. It is in the catalogue of the library at St James's Palace in 1698 and was presented to the British Museum by George II in 1757.²

While the term 'bestiary' is sometimes applied to any Medieval text containing images of animals, Clark argues that, in order to be useful in the analysis of codices from this period, the term should only be used to refer to those texts which follow in the tradition of the Greek *Physiologus*. These true bestiaries contain 'nature writings, folk tales, myths, and superstitions to which was added lore from and references to the bible'.³ In this sense, bestiaries allow the animal kingdom and the creation myth to be understood by linking the 'literal, allegorical, moral, and spiritual senses of the animal'.⁴ However, the animals were also expected to be represented realistically,

¹ British Library, Archives and Manuscripts Catalogue, 'Royal MS 12 F XIII', [n.d.] <[Royal MS 12 F XIII - British Library Archives and Manuscripts Catalogue](#)> [accessed 2 January 2026].

² Ibid.

³ Willene B. Clark, *A Medieval Book of Beasts: The Second-Family Bestiary. Commentary, Art, Text and Translation* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), p. 8.

⁴ Diane, Heathe, 'Rochester Bestiary, circa 1230', Kent Archaeological Society, July 2023 <[Rochester Bestiary, circa 1230 — Kent Archaeological Society](#)> [accessed 2 January 2026].

although the fact that many of them had not been seen by the artists and were being reconstructed from descriptions resulted in some imaginative depictions. Some bestiaries were unillustrated whereas others, including the Rochester example, were produced for wealthy patrons by professional artists using the most expensive materials available.⁵

The Rochester Bestiary belongs to the second-family Latin bestiary tradition, as classified by James in the 1920s. James distinguishes the second family as typically being of English origin, richly illustrated and containing a more expanded text than the earlier first family.⁶

The unicorn image in the Rochester Bestiary illustrates the myth of the fierce animal which cannot be captured by force but becomes tame if it encounters a virgin, at which point it can be killed by a hunter. The image, which can be seen at Annex 1, is a miniature with a gilded background, depicting the virgin seated on the right-hand side in a green pasture next to a tree which is painted in the same shade of green. A brown plant is visible in the foreground. The virgin has long blond hair and, in contrast with many such images, she is naked with her modesty preserved by the positioning of the unicorn's head which rests in her lap. The unicorn is a pale pink colour. It has a mane which covers most of its back and chest and one long, straight horn with spiral markings and which extends through the image border. The unicorn's ribs are indicated by curved lines on its side, and it has male genitalia. The unicorn is in a submissive position, with its legs tucked beneath it. The hunter appears on the left of the image, dressed as a knight in silver chain mail with the edges of a brown under-tunic visible beneath the mail. He holds a red shield which has a simple depiction of a flower in the centre. The hunter has pierced the side of the unicorn with a lance, shown in white. Red blood can be seen on the side of the unicorn, but its expression is tranquil. The miniature is surrounded with a blue border which with a white dotted line and two further borders of green and gold pigment.

The pigments used in illuminated manuscripts were normally mixed by the illustrator or an assistant and were obtained from a variety of sources, including coloured earth, stones, plant and vegetable matter, insects, and metallic ores. These were

⁵ Heathe, 'Rochester Bestiary'.

⁶ M. R. James, *The Bestiary: A Study of the Texts and Pictures* (Oxford, 1928), pp. 34–56.

ground up and mixed with a binding agent to make a paint. A larger range of pigments became available throughout the thirteenth century and could increasingly be bought from apothecaries or specialist suppliers.⁷

The positioning of the figures in the unicorn image is significant. The juxtaposition of the virgin and the hunter at either edge, separated by the tree, may be intended to separate the peaceful scene of the virgin taming the beast from the subsequent violent events. Additionally, the opposing diagonals formed from right to left by the virgin's arm following the form of the unicorn's body and from left to right by the hunter's lance draw the eye to the centre of the image where the act of killing is taking place. This symmetry is characteristic of early thirteenth century illuminations.⁸

The image should be seen in the context of the text which precedes it which explains the allegorical meaning of the unicorn and the symbolism used in the image.⁹ This text describes the appearance and fierce nature of the unicorn and likens it to a small goat, symbolising Christ's humble incarnation in human form. It also explains that the single unicorn horn embodies the unity of Christ and his father as one God. The extreme length of the horn, which causes it to pierce the border, draws additional attention to this feature. The unicorn placing its head in the virgin's lap represents Christ in the womb of his mother, Mary. Interestingly, the unicorn is described in the text as if it were a real animal which is reinforced by the claim that unicorns are so fierce they often pierce the stomachs of elephants with their horn. The use of gold in Medieval illustrated manuscripts often indicated that the theological and moral basis for the image. Gilding was usually the first process in creating a miniature illustration and was carried out by a specialist because of the cost and difficulty of working with gold leaf.¹⁰

The text in the Rochester Bestiary does not fully explain the imagery used in the unicorn miniature which perhaps indicates that the scribe expected the users of the codex in the thirteenth century to already be familiar with the myth. Users of the

⁷ Michelle P. Brown, *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts* (London, 1994), p. 84.

⁸ Jonathan J. G. Alexander, *Medieval Illuminators and Their Methods of Work* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 52–60.

⁹ Kent Archaeological Society, 'Unicorn, Rochester Bestiary, c.1230', [n.d.] <[Unicorn, Rochester Bestiary, c.1230 — Kent Archaeological Society](#)> [accessed 2 January 2026].

¹⁰ Brown, *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts*, p. 46.

Bestiary would have known that the killing of the unicorn represents the crucifixion, and the unicorn's meek acceptance of its fate once tamed by the virgin is symbolic of Christ's similar attitude to the events leading to his death.¹¹

The same story is also illustrated in the Ashmole Bestiary, held at in the collection of the Bodleian Library, which is also a parchment codex dating from the early thirteenth century. This bestiary is slightly smaller than the Rochester example, having the dimensions 275mm by 180.5 mm.¹² The image of the unicorn hunt in the Ashmole codex has some similarities but also significant differences from the Rochester one. The image is included at Annex 2 for ease of comparison.

It can be seen from a comparison of the two images that the position of the figures is reversed. In the Ashmole image, with the virgin on the left side. She is wearing an elaborate reddish-brown robe and has long brown hair. The unicorn is depicted as something more resembling an amalgamation of real animals than as a mythical beast. It has a long, almost kangaroo-like, tail and its body and colouring are like a deer or antelope. It has a single long horn, which is slightly curved, and there are no visible spiral markings. In contrast to the Rochester unicorn, it is in a less calm and relaxed pose, and its head is raised towards the virgin's face as if it is entreating her to protect it. There are two hunters dressed in simple tunics of brown and red occupying the centre and right-hand side of the image. One hunter is carrying a wooden spear which has pierced the side of the unicorn, and he is wearing a blue or grey cap. The hunter who occupies the centre ground is carrying an axe, which is raised but has not made contact with the unicorn. This hunter has a blue face. Three trees are visible, the most prominent of which is blue and separates the virgin from the hunters. The image has a gilded background and a reddish border with an elaborate repeating pattern and in general the colours are more vibrant than in the Rochester image. However, it demonstrates the same use of diagonals to create a sense of dynamism and drama.

While the two images have many similarities and some stylistic differences, perhaps the greatest difference is in the tone. The figures of the unicorn and the virgin in the

¹¹ Medieval Bestiary, 'Unicorn', 23 November 2025 <[Medieval Bestiary : Beasts : Unicorn](#)> [accessed 3 January 2026].

¹² Medieval Manuscripts in Oxford Libraries, MS Ashmole 1511, [n.d.]. <[MS. Ashmole 1511 - Medieval Manuscripts](#)> [accessed 3 January 2026].

Rochester image have tranquil, neutral expressions and while undoubtedly portraying a scene of violence the tone is of calm acceptance of the events. The Ashmole image has a more menacing and overtly violent tone, perhaps exemplified by the inclusion of the second hunter wielding an axe, and the human figures are more intently focussed on the fate of the unicorn. The less mythical appearance of the Ashmole beast also contributes to this more realistic portrayal of a violent hunting scene.

It could be that these differences can be explained by the purposes for which the codices were created. Whilst it can be assumed that the Rochester Bestiary was created for use in the Priory, the provenance of the Ashmole version is less clear. It is thought to have been produced in England, but scholars disagree about both its region of origin and its original patron and whether it was intended for use by a religious community or had some other function. Inscriptions in the codex show it to have been owned in 1550 by William Wright who was vicar of Chipping Wycombe. It was presented to Peter Manwood by William Man by on 3 August 1609 and known to have been in the library of John Tradescant 1638, passing then to his son who was also called John. It finally passes from Elias Ashmole to the Ashmolean Museum and was transferred to the Bodleian in 1860.¹³

In conclusion, the unicorn miniature in the Rochester Bestiary is an important example of the use of allegory in early thirteenth century manuscripts and illustrates the themes and purpose of medieval bestiaries. An analysis of this image clearly demonstrates its use in the context of a bestiary, that is to reinforce the moral and religious teaching of the medieval church. It uses artistic techniques common in the period, specifically the use of gold to indicate a theological theme and diagonals to create a sense of tension and drama. Contrasting it with the Ashmolean depiction of the same scene serves to highlight the features which reinforce the Rochester image's effectiveness in its specific setting. These include the use of a more muted palette and the lack of realism in depicting the unicorn as well as its meekness which symbolises the belief that Christ knowingly submitted to his fate during the crucifixion

¹³ Medieval Manuscripts, MS Ashmole 1511.

which was a key tenet of medieval Christianity.

Annex 1: Image of the Unicorn from the Rochester Bestiary¹⁴



¹⁴ The image can be seen at [Unicorn, Rochester Bestiary, c.1230 — Kent Archaeological Society](#) [accessed 3 January 2026].

Annex 2: The Unicorn Hunt from the Ashmole Bestiary¹⁵



¹⁵ The image can be seen at [Bodleian Library MS. Ashmole 1511](#) [accessed 3 January 2026].

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