"The great Dragon rifeth vp with a straight ftalke": A Possible Model for the Unicorn's Tree

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The Unicorn Tapestries in The Cloisters are remarkable for their realistic and stylized depiction of plants. E. J. Alexander and C. H. Woodward discussed the woven flora in a two-part paper originally published in *Journal of the New York Botanical Garden* in 1941; this was revised and reprinted as a booklet, *The Flora of the Unicorn Tapestries*.[1] Alexander and Woodward's work informed Margaret B. Freeman's account of the plants in the chapter of her book *The Unicorn Tapestries* entitled "The Groves of Trees, the Flower Fields, and the Gardens."[2] Yet much in these splendid tapestries remains enigmatic, especially those plants that can be identified with certainty but are essentially out of place among vegetation dominated by oak and holly that is typical of temperate northern Europe: the orange, the pomegranate, the date palm, and the strawberry tree, to name just four.[3]

The last of the series of seven tapestries that portray the allegory of the Hunt of the Unicorn shows a unicorn within an enclosure and chained to a tree (Figure 1). Alexander and Woodward commented: "It is a strange looking tree which catches the eye in the seventh tapestry, with flat rosettes of pointed leaves at the ends of the branches and a big red-orange fruit set in the center of each. It resembles no tree on earth, but the fruit is a perfect pomegranate, offering an excellent example of how a designer tried to cope with a subject with which he was only half familiar."[4] In his recent book *The Natural History of Unicorns*, Chris Lavers makes no attempt to identify the tree, noting that "no one has managed to identify which species of tree this is. Probably no one ever will."[5] How could one ignore such a challenge?

Since I read Lavers's book, the tree to which the unicorn is chained in the seventh tapestry has niggled at me, not least because it seemed quite familiar. There is no reason not to suppose that it was based on a real plant, or more than one. The unicorn in the tapestry clearly had a goat in its "parentage"; note the beard and the cloven hooves, even though the eye does not have a goat's rectangular pupil. It goes without saying that the unicorn is a figment of imagination, a partial chimera (without the bits of lion and serpent) with an unwieldy spike stuck on its head (for which a narwal's tusk sufficed).[6]

Could not the tree also be a chimera? Part of it has been identified, and I need not discuss the merits of the case because there is nothing to add: the fruits it bears are perfect pomegranates, as Alexander and Woodward stated. Yet they are imperfect and unreal, too, for they sit on the leaves in impossible ways.[7] I suggest that the rest of the "tree" (now in quotation marks) is modeled not on a real woody tree but on a deciduous herb.

Two characteristics of the "tree" stand out: the irregular mottling or banding on the "trunk" and "branches" and the unusual asymmetrical branching pattern.[8] Both are distinctive and both can only be found in one European plant that I know of: the aroid, which today is given the scientific name *Dracunculus vulgaris* (Figures 2, 3). The dragon arum, to employ one of its English names, is a common springtime sight in the hinterland of the eastern Mediterranean. I am especially familiar with it in Crete, but it is also not a difficult plant to cultivate, and it thrives in our garden in eastern England (see Figures 3, 6).

Although pomegranates are certainly not its fruits, the mottled stem and asymmetrical branching of *Dracunculus vulgaris* are certainly mimicked in the unicorn tapestry. Its deeply divided, digitate leaves are similar to the foliage in the tapestry, though not identical (Figures 4, 5). What is missing from the "tree" in the tapestry is the remarkable inflorescence of the aroid, which comprises a spathe that is usually very dark blackish red inside and a similarly colored, blatantly phallic spadix (Figure 6). When the inflorescence is in its prime it exudes a powerful, thoroughly disgusting (to human tastes) aroma, the smell of putrid flesh.

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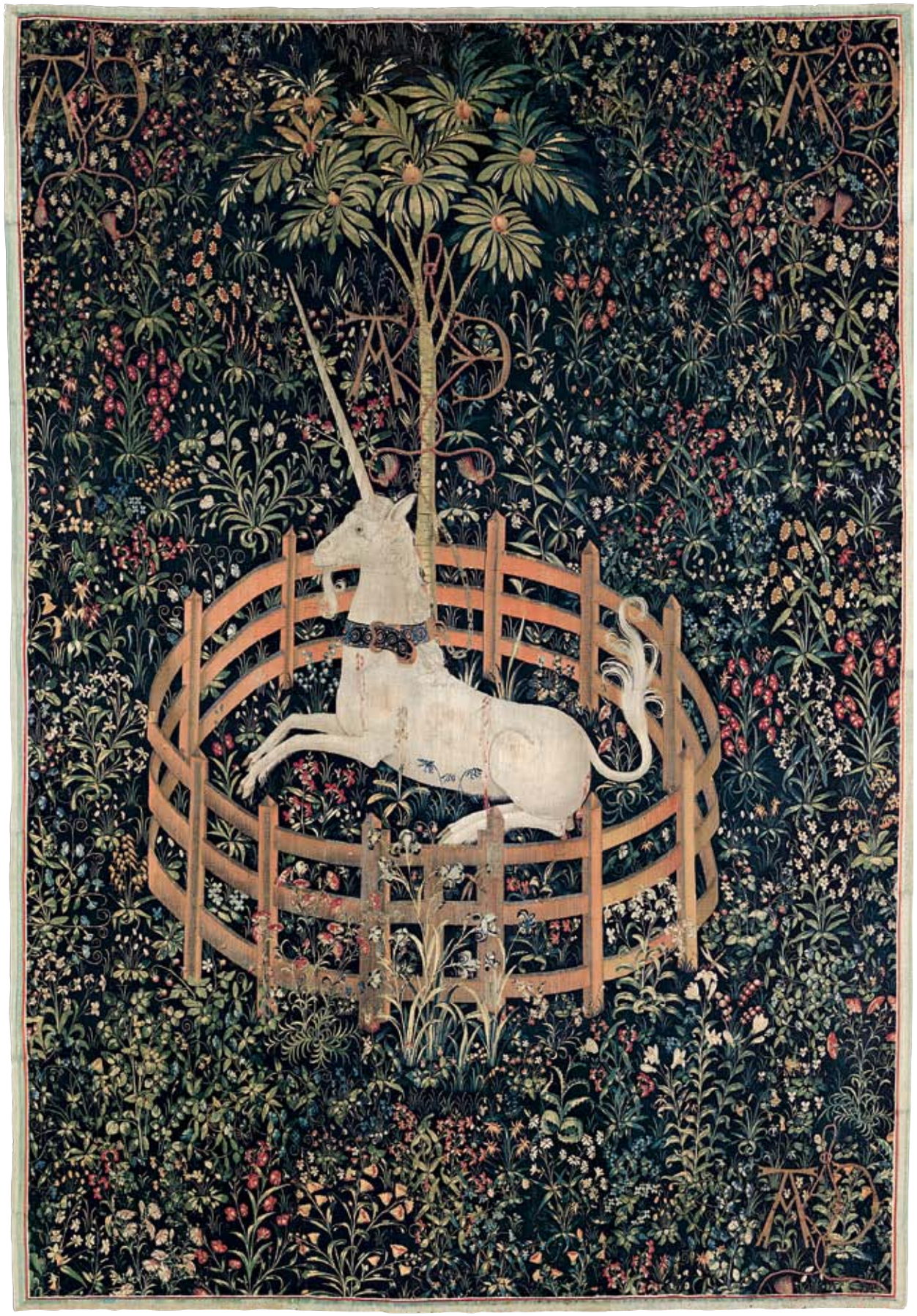

1. *The Unicorn in Captivity,* ca. 1495–1505. South Netherlandish. Wool warp, wool, silk, silver, and gilt wefts; 12 ft. 1 in. x 8 ft. 3 in. (3.68 x 2.52 m). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr., 1937 (37.80.5)

2. A plant of *Dracunculus vulgaris* (dragon arum) in the early spring in the gorge near Gouverneto, Hania, Crete. This plant, about 18 in. (46 cm) tall, has yet to flower. Photograph: E. Charles Nelson

3. The stem of *Dracunculus vulgaris* (dragon arum) cultivated in Outwell, England. Photograph: E. Charles Nelson

Alexander and Woodward commented that the Unicorn Tapestries "stand alone for their magnificence, their perfection. To those of us who have closely studied the plants depicted in them, that perfection reaches its height in the flowers, shrubs, and trees. . . . . In the accurate representation of plant life, the weavers' skill in these tapestries represents the highest art form of the period."[9] But not everything was accurate. If the subject itself, a unicorn, is a concoction, why not also the "tree"?

If this identification is correct, and the designer did use *Dracunculus vulgaris* as the model for the unicorn's tree, there will arise in some nonscientific circles an overwhelming desire to interpret the plant and its depiction in terms of medieval symbolism. Freeman described many instances of the symbolic associations of the plants portrayed in the Unicorn Tapestries. She cautioned, however, that it would be unwise to assume that all those many meanings "were in the minds of the seigneur who commissioned the tapestries, the designer who drew the patterns, and the weavers who wove them so expertly and so lovingly. But it would be equally unwise to assume, as some have done, that except for a very few symbolic plants, the trees and flowers were to be enjoyed by the medieval viewer for their decorative values only."[10]

John Williamson mentioned the dragon arum accidentally, because he confused several scientific names. About *Arum dracunculus* (*Arum dracunculus* L. is a synonym of *Dracunculus vulgaris* Schott), he wrote: "As we shall see, because of the antiviperous properties of this plant, its image was symbolically used in one of the panels of the Unicorn Tapestries."[11] Williamson should have referred, however, to *Arum maculatum*, commonly called cuckoo-pint or lords-and-ladies, which belongs to a quite separate, although related, genus.[12] The cuckoo-pint is woven between the middle and upper runners of the fence enclosing the unicorn, directly under the beast's rump (Figure 7).[13] It has a small spadix enclosed within the spathe, both of which are pale cream in color, suggesting that the model for it may have been *Arum italicum*, Italian cuckoo-pint (or Italian lords-and-ladies), and not *Arum maculatum*,[14] but it is certainly not the dragon arum, *Dracunculus vulgaris*.

Could the "tree" represent the dragon arum, perhaps drawn from memory rather than from a living specimen? Although medieval craftsmen would not have known this,

4. A leaf of *Dracunculus vulgaris* (dragon arum), photographed in 2008 in Imbros Gorge on the southwest coast of Crete. Photograph: E. Charles Nelson

5. Detail of Figure 1, showing a leaf of the "tree" with a central pomegranate

6. *Dracunculus vulgaris* (dragon arum) in full bloom in Outwell, England, June 2010. The pointed, phallic spadix is about 12 in. (30 cm) long. Photograph: E. Charles Nelson

Dracunculus vulgaris was the model for motifs painted on sarcophagi by the ancient inhabitants of Crete, the people archaeologists have named Minoans. Hellmut Baumann, noting that fact, added that because of the mottled stems "the ancients associated [dragon arum] with snakes in a mystical chthonic concept."[15] The plant thus has long had associations not only with snakes but also, aided by its "penetrating stench," with death. Add an impossible and incongruous sprinkling of pomegranate fruits, symbols of fecundity and life to the ancient Greeks and mentioned in the Bible and in the Qur'an,[16] and this becomes the "tree" of death with a promise of fertility and life.

Does this seem familiar? I return to Lavers's commentary: "The artist depicted not *a* tree, but *the* tree, most obviously in the present context, symbolizing Christ's cross, the tree of redemption. Less obviously it symbolizes the tree of life, which was denied to Adam and Eve because they partook of the fruit of that other tree in the Garden of Eden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."[17] The description fits: pomegranates ("good") on a dragon arum ("evil"). As John Gerard wrote, "The great Dragon rifeth vp with a straight ftalke."[18]

7. Detail of the fence directly under the unicorn's rump in Figure 1, showing a plant that might be modeled on the cuckoo-pint (*Arum maculatum*) or, more likely, the Italian cuckoo-pint (*Arum italicum*)

NOTES

1. Alexander and Woodward 1969.
2. Freeman 1976, chap. 5, pp. 109–53.
3. I am not aware of any attempt to explain the origins of a small number of essentially subtropical plants among the flora of the Unicorn Tapestries. Grigson (1978) commented that Alexander and Woodward had "hoped the collocation of species might be some clue to the where, the by whom, and the for whom of the tapestries; and in this—though wrongly, I think—they were disappointed. . . . Yet most of the species, which include such a peculiar plant as *Cucubalus baccifera* [panel 6; berry catchfly], occur in the country of sand, clay and chalk north of the Loire." Later in the same article he remarked on the "frequent include of bluebells. Here is a plant of Atlantic distribution, which on that account hardly figures in medieval cognizance, which is uncommon in the dry chateaux lands, and which in the tapestry context would speak more of Normandy and Brittany." Oddities of more southern, Mediterranean origin include, as well as the strawberry tree and the pomegranate, the date palm and *Biserrula pelecinus* (*Astragalus pelecinus*), the fruits of which were identified by Crockett (1984), suggesting that the "by whom" was also familiar with the plants that inhabit the periphery of the Mediterranean Sea. Of course, they could have been cultivated in northern European gardens, but keeping such subjects as seedling palms alive would have been difficult at the time the tapestries were created (see, for example, Harvey 1981, p. 67).
4. Alexander and Woodward 1969, p. 4.
5. Lavers 2009, p. 90.
6. See Freeman 1976, p. 29, fig. 8. For further discussion of the relationship between unicorns and narwals, see Lavers 2009.
7. Crockett (1984, p. 22) stated: "Its fruit is both superbly designed and accurately depicted, but the remainder of the tree is fictitious."
8. I acknowledge that some of the other trees portrayed in the Unicorn Tapestries, especially in the first of the panels, also have banded markings on the trunks.
9. Alexander and Woodward 1969, p. 18.
10. Freeman 1976, p. 153.
11. Williamson 1986, pp. 47–48.
12. Grigson 1955, pp. 429–31. In fact, Williamson (1986, pp. 212–13, 238–39) also gave the "correct" names for this plant: in the diagram providing a key to the plants in the seventh tapestry (p. 238), it is numbered 14.
13. See Williamson 1986, pp. 212–13, fig. 78. Williamson's text is clearly derived from Grigson 1955, pp. 429–30.
14. Boyce 1993. Although *Arum maculatum* can have a cream spadix, it is more usually purple. There can be no absolute certainty, however, about the identity of the model for the tapestry, and the ranges of the two species more or less coincide throughout Europe.
15. Baumann 1993, pp. 181, 184, fig. 361.
16. Ibid., p. 50; Musselman 2007, pp. 231–34.
17. Lavers 2009, p. 90.
18. Gerard 1633.

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