

# ‘Well speaks the Physiologus‘

The Image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the  
ninth-century Byzantine marginal psalters  
and their relation to the Smyrna  
Physiologus

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# **‘Well speaks the Physiologus’: The Image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the ninth-century Byzantine marginal psalters and their relation to the Smyrna *Physiologus*.**

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## Abstract

Since Antiquity, fantastic beasts and their fabulous lore have attracted the attention of audiences all over the world. Among the most popular characters was the untameable unicorn caught by a pure and beautiful maiden, featuring in the *Physiologus*, a Christian moralizing book on the natural world. While no illustrated Byzantine *Physiologus* manuscript prior to the eleventh century exists today providing information about how the set of animals and their respective moral interpretation was visualized in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, in the case of the *Physiologus* chapter on the unicorn, illustrated by the image of the *Virgin and Unicorn*, we possess evidence starting with the ninth-century. Close visual correspondences of the composition in the eleventh-century Smyrna *Physiologus* and the same scene in a set of Byzantine marginal psalters led scholars to conclude that the image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* derived from a visual model common to both types of texts, reflecting the archetype in the original *Physiologus* cycle. However, this view creates some fundamental art historical problems that have not yet been satisfactorily resolved. By introducing into the scholarly discussion an alternative version of the *Virgin and Unicorn*, largely overlooked until today, this paper aims to shed new light on the dynamics of the image-making process in the medieval Byzantine world.

## Introduction

The ancient collection of fabulous stories on real or fantastic animals, plants and stones assembled in the so-called *Physiologus* has lately experienced renewed scholarly interest<sup>1</sup>. Dating back to the early Christian period, the single chapters of the *Physiologus* were probably compiled and written down for the first time around the second or third century CE in Greek, and subsequently translated into many other ancient languages<sup>2</sup>. The combination of Christian moral with fascinating wonders of the natural world seems to have been popular among Christian audiences since late Antiquity<sup>3</sup>. The large number of manuscripts produced over the following centuries attests to the continuing success of the *Physiologus* in the Middle Ages<sup>4</sup>. Compared to the popularity of the book transmitted orally and in writing, it seems strange that

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<sup>1</sup> Macé/Gippert 2021, 15-25. Schneider 2021, 31-47. Schneider 2019, 5-13. Lazaris 2021. Lazaris 2017. Lazaris 2016, 82-84. Bernabò 2019, 17-21.

<sup>2</sup> For the first critical edition of the text see Sbordone 1936. For a recent re-evaluation of the medieval textual recensions as well as the ancient translations, see Macé/Gippert 2021. Schneider 2021, 31-47, esp. 31. Schneider 2019, 5-13, esp. 5. For a list of extant manuscripts containing the *Physiologus*, see Macé 2021 49-107, esp. 53-66. 107. Lazaris 2016, 70-78. Bernabò 1998, 5-13.

<sup>3</sup> Nicklas 2013, 227-250.

<sup>4</sup> Further references and discussion in Macé/Gippert 2021, 16. Schneider 2021, 31. Schneider 2019, 5.

the *Physiologus* was hardly ever illustrated in Byzantium<sup>5</sup>. In fact, only a small number of pictorial cycles in the medieval Eastern and Western visual cultures survive today which testify to the creative engagement of medieval artists with the *Physiologus*<sup>6</sup>. The only illustrated manuscript containing the Greek *Physiologus* and produced in the Byzantine empire is known as the Smyrna *Physiologus* (Izmir, Evangelical School, B 08)<sup>7</sup>. Unfortunately, the manuscript was destroyed by a fire in 1922. Art historical analysis of the manuscript's pictorial cycle depends ever since on three sets of black-and-white photographs taken prior to the destruction of the codex. Together with the pioneering study of the Smyrna manuscript and its pictorial cycle by Josef Strzygowski, published in 1899, the photographic record constituted the basis for all subsequent work on the illustrations of the Byzantine *Physiologus*<sup>8</sup>.

Josef Strzygowski, assuming that the Smyrna codex was the copy of an older lost manuscript, dated the Smyrna codex to the middle or end of the eleventh century<sup>9</sup>. However, his search for a possible archetype made in the early Christian centuries proved inconclusive<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, Strzygowski's assumptions concerning the presumed illustrations as well as the structure of the ancient *Physiologus* cycle remained vague. He therefore consciously refrained from speaking of a lost 'model' or a visual 'archetype' of the *Physiologus* preferring instead the term *Bilderkreis*. The author also remained cautious as to the possible date of the hypothesized ancient *Physiologus* cycle, pushing it back to "(...) einer Zeit, die sich nach dem Anfang zu nicht genau umgrenzen lässt (...)"<sup>11</sup>. Clear evidence of illustrations made for the *Physiologus*, on the other hand, existed in a different literary context. The ninth-century Khludov Psalter was the earliest of a set of four Byzantine psalter manuscripts containing an image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* which was surprisingly similar to the same composition in the Smyrna *Physiologus* [Izmir, Evangelical School, B 08]<sup>12</sup>. Based on this observation, Strzygowski concluded that the artist(s) working on the miniatures for the Khludov Psalter had access to an illustrated *Physiologus* cycle. Implying that the *Physiologus* cycle was created first to be 'upcycled', more or less immediately after, by the artist of the Khludov Psalter, Strzygowski developed an intriguing concept of 'image-exchange'. He hypothesized that the artists involved in the creation of the two cycles probably worked 'side-by-side' in the same monastic circles,

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<sup>5</sup> For a possible explanation concerning this neglect see Lazaris 2017, 84. For the paucity of illustrated manuscripts due to the use of the text in the Byzantine schoolroom, see Peers 2000, 267-292, esp. 271. 292.

<sup>6</sup> For a survey of the short list of illustrated Byzantine *Physiologus* manuscripts see Lazaris 2017, 55-113, esp. 82-4. Lazaris 2021. Bernabò 1998, 13-14. For a discussion of the problems related to the illustrated *Physiologus* see Muratova 1982, 327-340, esp. 327.

<sup>7</sup> The Smyrna *Physiologus* is listed in Pinakes as Diktyon 34075, < <https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr/notices/cote/34075/> > (last accessed 21/04/2023).

<sup>8</sup> Strzygowski 1899. Strzygowski 1901. For a survey of the extant photographic material see Bernabò 1998, vii, xviii, xiii-xv. For the set of photographs made by Buberl, see Demus 1976, 237-38.

<sup>9</sup> Strzygowski 1899, 5. Prior to Strzygowski, Papadopoulos-Kerameus had dated the manuscript to the eleventh century. See Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1877, 32. For palaeographic reasons supporting the initial dating of the codex, see Hutter 1997. Strzygowski's view was rejected by Otto Demus who argued for a Palaiologan date of the Smyrna codex. See Demus 1976, 235-257. A Palaiologan date was recently supported by Bernabò, see Bernabò 2019, 17-21. See the discussion in Lazaris 2021, 29-33.

<sup>10</sup> Strzygowski 1899, 94-95. 97. 99.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 95: "(...) a time of origin that cannot be precisely defined (...)" (Translation my own).

<sup>12</sup> For the online-reproduction of the Smyrna miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in Strzygowski's study, see Internet Archive, Strzygowski 1899, Taf. XII: Sm. S. 74: Der Fang des Einhorns (Smyrna, p. 74: *The Virgin and Unicorn*) [https://archive.org/details/bub\\_gb\\_5Jv1kSRnKsC/page/n155/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_5Jv1kSRnKsC/page/n155/mode/2up) (last accessed: 07/05/2023).

and at the same time<sup>13</sup>. As strong argument in favour of his view, Strzygowski cited the fact that the interaction of the *Virgin and Unicorn* depicted in the Smyrna *Physiologus* matched the story of the unicorn chapter *literally* ('wortgetreu') by reflecting adequately the details of the accompanying text. In the psalters, on the other hand, only the figure of the unicorn was needed to illustrate Ps 91,11<sup>LXX</sup> <sup>14</sup>, while there was no reference to the Virgin in the accompanying psalm verse. Strzygowski thus concluded that the illustration in the Khludov Psalter (as well as in the later eleventh-century psalters) was derivative<sup>15</sup>.

At first glance, Strzygowski's point seems flawless. On closer scrutiny, however, it turns out that his view should be slightly modified. The aim of my paper is to re-examine Strzygowski's analysis of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Smyrna *Physiologus* as well as the marginal psalters in light of a further ninth-century miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* which has been largely overlooked by scholarship until today<sup>16</sup>. The image is found in the Pantokrator Psalter, a close contemporary 'twin' of the Khludov Psalter, yet utterly dissimilar in a variety of ways and, in particular, concerning the scene of the *Virgin and Unicorn*. Through a close analysis of the image in the Pantokrator Psalter as well as a comparison to the miniatures in the Smyrna and Khludov manuscripts, I hope to demonstrate that ninth-century dynamics of image-making were more complex than hitherto assumed. Within the scope of this paper, I limit myself to the discussion of one single illustration of the *Physiologus* cycle, while only addressing other important issues in passing<sup>17</sup>.

### **The Greek *Physiologus* chapter *On the unicorn***

Since Kurt Weitzmann's important studies in Byzantine manuscript illumination, it has become clear that in order to determine how a text passage is connected to its accompanying illustration, it is vital to examine the basic literary text in question<sup>18</sup>. In the case of the *Physiologus*, however, different versions of the basic text evolved over time<sup>19</sup>. Did the textual transformations of the basic text, in turn, affect the accompanying illustration?

Being an art historian, I dare not tread into the field of textual scholarship, especially not in the case of the complex discussions concerning the ancient *Physiologus* recensions<sup>20</sup>. Thus, I can only summarize here Caroline Macé's recent study. According to this author, the scribe of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 96-99.

<sup>14</sup> In this paper, I use the psalm numbering according to the Greek Septuagint (LXX). See the online-Bible in <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/online-bibeln/septuaginta-lxx/lesen-im-bibeltext/> (last accessed 08/05/2023).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 76-77. For an earlier summary of Strzygowski's arguments, see Corrigan 1997, 205.

<sup>16</sup> For earlier remarks on the image in the Pantokrator Psalter, see Einhorn 1976, 85, Walter 1986, 277 and Corrigan 1992, 25. See also my forthcoming article on this miniature *The Virgin, the Unicorn, and Some Potent Drops of Milk* in *The Virgin's Milk in Global Perspective: On the Fluidity of Images and the Politics of Divine Presence*, (eds.) Jutta Sperling, Vibeke Olsen, Matti Meyer. Turnhout, Brepols Publishers.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, the discussion concerning different 'image categories' in the *Physiologus* cycle, first raised by Strzygowski, and subsequently discussed by Corrigan and Peers in their important studies. See Corrigan 1997, 201-212. Peers 2000, 267-292.

<sup>18</sup> Weitzmann (1970/1947), 130.

<sup>19</sup> Macé 2021, 49-106.

<sup>20</sup> Sbordone 1936. For an in-depth discussion of the complex issues, see Macé/Gippert 2021, esp. Macé 2021, 49-107. See also Lazaris 2016. Lazaris 2019. For a survey of the recensions, see Lazaris 2016, 67-78.

the Smyrna Codex followed the first Greek recension of the *Physiologus*, which Sbordone in his critical edition had named *redactio prima*. This group was recently subdivided and renamed by Macé as Phys. Gr I α and Phys. Gr I β in correspondence with two different redactions<sup>21</sup>. In what follows, I start with the text of the unicorn chapter according to Sbordone, followed by an English translation by Grant<sup>22</sup>:

Περὶ μονοκέρωτος. « Ὁ Ψαλμὸς λέγει · καὶ ὑψωθήσεται ὡς μονοκέρωτος τὸ κέρασ μου». ὁ Φυσιολόγος ἔλεξε περὶ τοῦ μονοκέρωτος ὅτι τοιαύτην φύσιν ἔχει μικρὸν ζῶον ἔστιν, ὅμοιον ἐρίφῳ, δριμύτατον δὲ σφόδρα· οὐ δύναται κυνηγὸς ἐγγίσει αὐτὸ, δία τὸ ἰσχύειν αὐτὸ πολὺ, ἔν δὲ κέρασ ἔχει, μέσον τῆσ κεφαλῆσ αὐτοῦ. Πῶσ ὄυν ἀγρεύεται; παρθένον ἀγνήν [ἔστολισμένην] ῥίπτουσιν ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἄλλεται εἰσ τὸν κόλπον αὐτῆσ, καὶ ἡ παρθένοσ θηλάζει τὸ ζῶον, καὶ αἶρει αὐτὸ εἰσ τὸ παλάτιον τῷ βασιλεῖ. (...).

*The Psalm says: 'And my horn will be exalted like that of a unicorn'. The Physiologus said of the unicorn that it has this trait: it is a little animal like a kid, but most alert<sup>23</sup>. A hunter cannot get near it because it is very strong, and it has one horn in the middle of its head. How is it hunted? They place a pure virgin before it [beautifully adorned] and it goes to her bosom and **the virgin suckles the animal**<sup>24</sup> and takes it to the palace, to the king. (...).*

The text cited above clearly specifies the Virgin's action: she is breastfeeding the (small) beast which jumps into her lap. If this, indeed, was the text version transmitted in the Smyrna manuscript, it is incomprehensible why Strzygowski considered the miniature to be a *literal* ('wortgetreue') illustration<sup>25</sup>. In order to find an explanation for the confusion, we have to look a little deeper into the matter. According to Strzygowski's short remarks concerning the unicorn chapter in the Smyrna *Physiologus*, the basic text was written on the verso page of a folio, numbered as p. 73<sup>26</sup>. The author noted that the text was written: "... über das ganze Blatt bis τὸ κέρασ μου ", a fact which seems incompatible with the version recorded by Sbordone as cited above. It is unfortunate, indeed, that no photographic record of the Smyrna text page exists which could help clarify the exact wording of the text in the lost manuscript. From the reference given by Strzygowski in a bracketed note, we may, however, conclude that the text in the Smyrna manuscript followed the version of the unicorn chapter recorded in Friedrich Lauchert's *Geschichte des Physiologus*<sup>27</sup>. A comparison of the text versions given by Lauchert and Sbordone demonstrates that while the first lines of the text describing the unicorn and the beautifully adorned pure maiden are identical in both versions, the following passage, describing how the unicorn is caught by the Virgin, fundamentally differs. Thus, Lauchert recorded: (...) καὶ ἄλλεται εἰσ τὸν κόλπον τῆσ παρθένου τὸ ζῶον · καὶ **κρατεῖ** αὐτὸ, καὶ

<sup>21</sup> Macé 2021, 49-107, esp. 55.73. 79.

<sup>22</sup> Sbordone 1936, 78-80. Grant 1999, 62 (I slightly modified Grant's translation in order to harmonize it with the English translation of Greek 'δριμύτατον δὲ σφόδρα' given in Muradyan/Topchyan 2021, 301).

<sup>23</sup> For the English translation of Greek 'δριμύτατον δὲ σφόδρα', see Muradyan/Topchyan 2021, 301.

<sup>24</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>25</sup> Strzygowski 1899, 76-77.

<sup>26</sup> Strzygowski 1899, 28-29.

<sup>27</sup> Lauchert 1889, 254-55, as noted by Strzygowski 1899, 28. In fact, Friedrich Lauchert seems to have consulted the basic text of the unicorn chapter using mainly manuscript W (Wien, ÖNB theol. Gr. 128) and adding variant readings according to manuscript A (Paris, BNF gr. 2426). For comments on the Greek *Physiologus* manuscripts used by Lauchert, see ib. 1889, vii-viii.

ἀκολουθεῖ αὐτῇ, καὶ αἶρει αὐτὸ εἰς τὸ παλάτιον τῷ βασιλεῖ.<sup>28</sup> Strzygowski, consulting Laucherts study, and seemingly at a loss to find an adequate German term to describe the precise action of the Virgin (who, according to A: **θάλλει** τὸ ζῶον (*warms the animal*) and according to W: **κρατεῖ** αὐτὸ (*she holds it*), somehow vaguely, rephrased the Greek narrative: “Eine reine Jungfrau wird ihm geschmückt ausgesetzt, das Tier springt der Jungfrau auf den Schoß. **Sie bemächtigt sich seiner, es folgt ihr und sie bringt es in den Palast des Königs.**“<sup>29</sup>.

### **The Smyrna miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn*, p. 74 [Izmir, Evangelical School, B 08]<sup>30</sup>**

If we can trust Strzygowski's statement, we have to conclude that the text concerning the unicorn in the Smyrna *Physiologus* did not follow Sbordone's *redactio prima* reporting that the Virgin is suckling the unicorn. Neither, however, does the Smyrna miniature follow the two text variants recorded by Lauchert. In the Smyrna composition, the Virgin is not depicted 'holding' the unicorn or 'warming' it. In fact, she does not even touch the beast. Instead, she looks at it intently, raising her right hand in a gesture of instruction. The Smyrna artist obviously changed her role in the story by depicting the Virgin in a specific visual stance alluding to that of a teacher. As already noted by Strzygowski, the Virgin in the Smyrna miniature is dressed in a white gown and a luxurious headgear decorated with red and golden bands<sup>31</sup>. Recently, Cecily Hilsdale drew attention to the fact, that the same 'fan-like' headdress worn by aristocratic ladies in a number of miniatures in the eleventh-century BAV, Cod. Vat. gr. 752 should be “understood as a gesture towards contemporary Constantinopolitan court culture”<sup>32</sup>. While scholars discussing the Smyrna miniature usually focussed on the characteristic form of the headgear of the Smyrna Virgin, the trumpet sleeves of her dress as well as her jewelled collar reaching up to her chin should also be mentioned. These dress details also indicate that the transformation of the female figure into a contemporary lady wearing court fashion was consciously intended by the designer of the image. Compared to the miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* on fol. 93verso in the Khludov Psalter [Moscow, State Historical Museum, Ms D 129]<sup>33</sup> and the two eleventh-century psalter miniatures in the Theodore Psalter, fol. 124recto [London, Brit. Lib. Ms Add. 19 352]<sup>34</sup> and the Barberini Psalter, fol. 160recto [BAV, Cod. Vat.gr.

<sup>28</sup> Emphasis mine. In his study, Lauchert also noted the text variant according to Pitra's manuscript A: “(...) τῆς παρθένου, καὶ ἡ παρθένος **θάλλει** τὸ ζῶον, καὶ αἶρει εἰς τὸ παλάτιον τῶν βασιλέων. (...)”. See Lauchert 1889, 254.

<sup>29</sup> See Strzygowski 1899, 28: “(...) the animal leaps onto the Virgin's lap. **She takes possession of it; it follows her and she takes it to the king's palace.**” (Emphasis mine).

<sup>30</sup> For the online-reproduction of **the Smyrna miniature** of the *Virgin and Unicorn*, see Internet Archive, Strzygowski 1899, Taf. XII: Sm. S. 74: “Der Fang des Einhorn's” /Smyrna, p. 74: *The Virgin and Unicorn*, [https://archive.org/details/bub\\_gb\\_5Jv1kSRnKsC/page/n155/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_5Jv1kSRnKsC/page/n155/mode/2up) (last accessed: 07/05/2023).

<sup>31</sup> Strzygowski 1899, 29.

<sup>32</sup> Hilsdale 2016, 493-516, esp. 507. Demus, on the other hand, characterized the headgear as a 'skiadion' typical for the Palaeologan era. See Demus 1976, 251.

<sup>33</sup> For an online-reproduction of the miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Khludov Psalter, fol. 93verso, see Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/28433765@N07/4253213537> (last accessed: 07/05/2023) and Wikipedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chludov\\_unicorn.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chludov_unicorn.jpg) (last accessed: 07/05/2023). For a reproduction in print, see Ščepkina 1977, fol. 93verso.

<sup>34</sup> For the online-reproduction of the miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Theodore Psalter, fol. 124verso (British Library), see [https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add\\_ms\\_19352\\_f001r](https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_19352_f001r) (last accessed: 07/05/2023).

372]<sup>35</sup>, the iconographic transformation undertaken by the artist – not only of the figures, but of the whole composition – is considerable<sup>36</sup>.

A close comparison reveals that in the three psalter miniatures other visual elements are also part of the composition. Above the figures of the Virgin and the Unicorn, a *clipeus* image of the Virgin and Christ is added<sup>37</sup>, while a caption referring to St. John Chrysostomos as well as the figure of the saint appears<sup>38</sup>. Strzygowski downplayed the fact that the psalter illustrations contain other visual elements<sup>39</sup>. In the light of the already mentioned ‘fashion update’ of the Virgin it seems possible, however, that these image components were consciously rejected by the Smyrna artist in order to stimulate associations with ‘secular’ or courtly culture instead of alluding to the miniature’s original religious symbolism. The iconographic transformation of the figure of the unicorn in the Smyrna manuscript [Izmir, Evangelical School, B 08]<sup>40</sup> points in the same direction. Instead of highlighting the fabulous features of the animal, consisting in lion paws, the fur of a leopard, the goatee beard, and its enormous blue horn, being depicted in varying forms in the psalter miniatures, the Smyrna artist emphasized the fact that the unicorn resembles a real animal, reshaping it into a big horse with regular horse hooves, a curved horse tail and a shaggy winter fur coat. Compared to the unicorn in the Khludov Psalter [Moscow, State Historical Museum, Ms D 129]<sup>41</sup>, the Smyrna artist also changed the unicorn’s head which, in the psalter miniature, resembles a fierce-looking wolf with its red tongue hanging from its open maw. While the above cited versions of the *Physiologus* text speak of a small animal (‘like a kid’), the Smyrna unicorn is a beast of tall size. Contrary to the scenes in the three above-cited marginal psalters, the Smyrna unicorn does not lift its paw in order to put it into the lap of the Virgin, but, instead, extends its paw past the lady. Thus, the original religious symbolism of the gesture is lost. In the Smyrna manuscript, the unicorn is changed into the lady’s pet, being instructed, and as such, in the process of being tamed. This is indicated visually by the harness or collar around the unicorn’s neck. In fact, the beast seems to listen attentively to the words of the mistress, raising its paw like a gentle horse or a tame, obedient dog, submissively putting its ears back. The Smyrna miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* thus seems blatantly distant from the original Christian meaning of the unicorn chapter alluding to the Virgin’s role in the incarnation of Christ. Instead, it seems that the image was deliberately updated in order to serve the needs of a courtly society, where the old stories compiled in the *Physiologus* played a new cultural role. We may, perhaps, conclude that the

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<sup>35</sup> For the online-reproduction of the miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Barberini Psalter, fol. 160recto, see (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana):[https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Barb.gr.372](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Barb.gr.372) (last accessed: 07/05/2023).

<sup>36</sup> Already observed by Bernabò 1998, 98-99, and Peers 2000, 279-80.

<sup>37</sup> The *clipeus* image of Mary and Christ has been cut out in the Khludov Psalter.

<sup>38</sup> While the figure of St. John Chrysostomos is not depicted on fol. 93verso in the ninth-century Khludov Psalter, the caption referring to him is part of the composition. It thus seems possible, that the Khludov artist bungled.

<sup>39</sup> See Strzygowski 1899, 76-77.

<sup>40</sup> For the online-reproduction of the Smyrna miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* after Strzygowski see Internet Archive, Strzygowski 1899, Taf. XII: Sm. S. 74: “Der Fang des Einhorns” /Smyrna, p. 74: *The Virgin and Unicorn*, [https://archive.org/details/bub\\_gb\\_5Jv1kSRnKsC/page/n155/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_5Jv1kSRnKsC/page/n155/mode/2up) (last accessed: 07/05/2023).

<sup>41</sup> For an online-reproduction of the miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Khludov Psalter, fol. 93verso, see Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/28433765@N07/4253213537> (last accessed: 07/05/2023) and Wikipedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chludov\\_unicorn.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chludov_unicorn.jpg) (last accessed: 07/05/2023). For a reproduction in print, see Ščepkina 1977, fol. 93verso.



patron of the Smyrna *Physiologus* belonged, or had access to, eleventh-century Constantinopolitan court circles of the highest echelons. In light of the observed iconographic transformation of the miniature in the Smyrna manuscript, it seems to me that this eleventh-century composition of the *Virgin and Unicorn* can hardly serve as a witness to the hypothesized ninth-century visual model of the *Physiologus* cycle.

The compositional links of the Smyrna miniature to the illustrations of Ps 91,11<sup>LXX</sup> in the marginal psalters, on the other hand, cannot be denied. Do we consequently have to assume that the Smyrna artist used one of the psalter illustrations as his model? Massimo Bernabò argued that the similarities between the Smyrna miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* and the marginal psalters are only a few, and thus, of 'little weight'. He emphasized the fact that these similarities were limited mainly to the raised paw of the unicorn and the seated position of the Virgin<sup>42</sup>. According to Bernabò, neither the basic text version(s) of the *Physiologus* nor the accompanying psalm verse require these two visual elements, as there are no verbal references to these details in the corresponding texts. Bernabò left it for future research to examine the origins of the visual details<sup>43</sup>.

#### **The image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Khludov Psalter, fol. 93verso [Moscow, State Historical Museum Ms D 129]<sup>44</sup>**

The Khludov miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* is situated on the left margin of fol. 93verso. In the context of the psalter, the image is placed side-by-side with Ps 91, 11<sup>LXX</sup>, for which it serves as illustration. A carefully crafted reference sign above the Greek word 'unicorn', painted in red ink, and formerly linked to a similar reference sign next to the illustration, which must have been cut out together with the *clipeus* image of the *Virgin* and child at the top of the page, created a clear visual link between the miniature and the corresponding psalm verse. Ps 91,11 reads: *καὶ ὑψωθήσεται ὡς μονοκέρωτος τὸ κέρας μου* ("My horn shall be exalted like that of unicorns")<sup>45</sup>. Since Strzygowski first studied the miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Smyrna *Physiologus* and its relation to the illustrations in the marginal psalters, the experts have been unanimous about the fact that early patristic authors, like Eusebius, Theodoret, as well as others, interpreted the single horn of the unicorn mentioned in the Bible, as a type of Christ<sup>46</sup>. It is clear from the caption next to the miniature on fol. 93verso in the Khludov Psalter that this interpretation was also followed by the psalter artists, who referenced the fourth-century patriarch John Chrysostomos as their source: The caption, placed on the left side of the composition reads: Ο ΧΡΥΣΟΣΤΟΜΟΣ ΕΡΜΗΝΕΥΕΙ ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΥ ΜΟΝΟΚΕΡΩΤΟΣ ΕΙΣ ΤΟΝ Υ[ΙΟ]Ν ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ ("Chrysostomos interprets concerning the unicorn as the son of God"). It is not clear, however, why John Chrysostomos is cited in the caption, as the author never seems

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<sup>42</sup> See Bernabò 1998, 98-99.

<sup>43</sup> Bernabò 1998, 99.

<sup>44</sup> For an online-reproduction of the miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Khludov Psalter, fol. 93verso, see Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/28433765@N07/4253213537> (last accessed: 07/05/2023) and Wikipedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chludov\\_unicorn.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chludov_unicorn.jpg) (last accessed: 07/05/2023). For a reproduction in print, see Ščepkina 1977, fol. 93verso.

<sup>45</sup> For comment and short description of the scene, see Corrigan 1992, 76.

<sup>46</sup> Brandenburg 1959, 840-62. Walter 1986, 276 (with bibliography).

to have written a commentary on this psalm<sup>47</sup>. Walter expressed the opinion that in the West, Chrysostomos was sometimes attributed the authorship of the *Physiologus*. He also noted that this remains doubtful as there are no Byzantine sources confirming it<sup>48</sup>. It is, however, probably correct to assume that John Chrysostomos is cited in the caption to the illustration in order to testify to the truth of the unicorn chapter in the *Physiologus*, as the author was regarded a sacrosanct authority of the Church from the distant past. While the caption in the Khludov Psalter (even without the figure of John Chrysostomos, who is missing in this ninth-century composition) seems to function as a remote but authoritative reference to the truth of the story of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the *Physiologus*, it seems strange that the composition in the Khludov Psalter does not openly allude in visual terms to the crucial role of the Virgin in the incarnation as narrated in the *Physiologus*. Instead of depicting the Virgin either *suckling* the unicorn, or else *warming*, or *holding* it<sup>49</sup>, the beautiful maiden in the psalter miniature only raises her right hand in an indecisive gesture which is hard to interpret for the viewer. As in the Smyrna illustration, the beautifully dressed Virgin wearing a small crown on top of her long curly hair, is sitting on a simple, low seat, looking at the fierce looking unicorn. The beast is standing right in front of her, lifting its left paw, and placing it in the Virgin's lap. This meaningful gesture seems to be the only hidden allusion to the maternal role of the Virgin *Theotokos* or Godbearer. The reduced, neutralized action depicted in the Khludov Psalter blurs the original role of the Virgin in the *Physiologus* narrative to a considerable extent. At the same time, the artist does not succeed to develop visually the symbolic meaning of the enigmatic psalm verse referring to the horn of the unicorn which, in turn, also gets lost. While the composition of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Khludov Psalter seems to have its textual roots in a ninth-century *Physiologus* cycle, the visual allusions transmitted in the scene are too undetermined to create a direct and meaningful connection to the *Physiologus* narrative.

**The miniature of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Pantokrator Psalter, fol. 109verso [Mt. Athos, Pantokrator 61]**

The so-called Pantokrator Psalter (Mt. Athos, Pantokrator 61) is an illustrated liturgical psalter, made in Constantinople and dated to the second half of the ninth century<sup>50</sup>. Past scholarship usually characterized the manuscript as a close twin of the Khludov Psalter, emphasizing the obvious similarities between the illustrations and the marginal layout of the two artifacts. However, if one looks up the page containing Ps 91,11<sup>LXX</sup>, which is on fol. 132recto in the Pantokrator Psalter, in order to find the 'twin' illustration to the illustration of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Khludov Psalter, one searches in vain. Instead, we find the image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* on fol. 109verso in the Pantokrator Psalter serving as illustration to Ps 77,69<sup>LXX</sup><sup>51</sup>. From this fact we may conclude that the psalter designers at some point in time obviously changed their mind concerning the place of specific illustrations. This clearly indicates a

<sup>47</sup> See, however, the reference given in Canivet, which, on closer scrutiny, leads to no concrete results. See Canivet 1979, 57-87, esp. 85. (The referenced volume number in Canivet, containing the works of John Chrysostomos should be changed into: PG 5 (John Chrysostomos: Spuria), 763-764.

<sup>48</sup> Walter 1986, 276.

<sup>49</sup> See the discussion above.

<sup>50</sup> Dufrenne 1966, 15-19. Corrigan 1992. 21-37 (with earlier bibliography).

<sup>51</sup> Dufrenne 1966, 30, and Pl. 16.

conscious artistic process of transformation. A close look at the miniature in the Pantokrator Psalter shows that the transformation process in the marginal psalters not only included the place of the miniature, but also its iconography. Compared to the illustration in the Khludov Psalter we see a totally different image in this manuscript (fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Ms Pantokratoros 61, f. 109 verso (detail) by © Iera Moni Pantokratoros  
(Reproduced with kind permission of the Pantokratoros monastery. All rights reserved by the Pantokratoros Monastery, Mount Athos)

The psalm verse (Ps 77,69<sup>LXX</sup>) illustrated by the image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Pantokrator Psalter reads: καὶ ᾠκοδόμησεν ὡς μονοκερώτων τὸ ἅγίασμα αὐτοῦ ('And he built his holy precinct like [that] of unicorns')<sup>52</sup>. Since the fourth century, Patristic authors made several attempts to reveal the meaning of the enigmatic verse, focusing on the two key words 'ἅγίασμα', meaning a 'holy place/precinct' or 'sanctuary' and the term 'μονόκερως' meaning 'unicorn'<sup>53</sup>. Without going deeper into the complex matter of biblical exegesis, it is essential to note that the Pantokrator artist used allegory in visualizing the word 'precinct' identifying the architectural metaphor with the figure of the Virgin. Based on a typological understanding of the psalm, he aimed at visually communicating the idea that the psalm referred to the Virgin Mary as the 'dwelling place' of God. In order to implement the intended identification and root it in the mind of the viewer, a caption is added to the image reading: ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΥ ΥΙΟΥ ΤΟΥ Θ[ΕΟΥ] ΚΑΘΩΣ ΕΘΗΛΑΣΕΝ ΤΗΝ ΠΑΝΑΓΙΑΝ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΝ ('Concerning the Son of God while he was suckled by the all-holy Theotokos' (i.e., God-bearer). A closer look at the composition reveals,

<sup>52</sup> For the English translation of the psalm, see Pietersma/Wright 2007, A New English Translation of the Septuagint 2007<sup>1</sup>/2009, 587 <<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/24-ps-nets.pdf>> (last accessed:08/05/2023).

<sup>53</sup> For the term 'ἅγίασμα', see Lampe 1961, A Patristic Greek Lexicon, 17. For the term 'μονόκερως', see ib., Lampe 1961, 882. <<https://archive.org/details/a-patristic-greek-lexicon-edited-by-g.-w.-h.-lampe.-1961pdf>> (last accessed 2022/10/08). – For the patristic exegesis of this psalm, see Lechner 2000, 148-49. For a survey of the classic, biblical, hermetic, and patristic traditions, see Canivet 1979, 57-87, esp. 66-87. Brandenburg 1959, 840-62.

that the beautiful young maiden with long curly hair, dressed in a costly gold-embroidered silk robe, and wearing precious jewellery, in fact, invites the approaching beast to suckle milk from her breast which is decently covered by her silk gown. Pointing her right hand at her full round breast, the Virgin, seated on what seems to be a rock, intently looks at the intimidating hybrid being. The artist shaped the beast as an otherworldly fabulous animal having a leopard's fur, a lion's tail, and approaching on a lion's sharp claws while displaying a towering, curved blue horn on its forehead. It may come as a surprise to the viewer that the unicorn gently lowers its head and opens its mouth to start suckling at the maiden's breast<sup>54</sup>. Based on the obvious parallels to the story of the unicorn in the Greek *Physiologus* as recorded in Sbordone's *redactio prima* cited above, we can conclude that this must have been the image originally created to serve as a *literal* ('wortgetreue') illustration to the unicorn chapter in the *Physiologus*. It follows, that the Pantokrator artist was in close contact with the artist designing the illustration for the unicorn chapter in the *Physiologus*. It is, perhaps, not implausible to conclude that the Pantokrator artist creating the psalter image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* was, in fact, the same person who was (or had been) originally responsible for the design of an identical image used for the illustration of a ninth-century *Physiologus* cycle<sup>55</sup>.

It remains an open question, why the image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* documented in the Pantokrator Psalter was ignored or better: not handed down over time in the pictorial cycles of the *Physiologus* tradition. As we have seen, the version used by the Khludov artist which was probably made some time after the scene illustrating the Pantokrator Psalter, seems to have been the dominant image type instead. It was therefore preserved and transmitted to the following centuries, albeit with slight variations, suiting the individual purposes of the patrons in the Smyrna *Physiologus* as well as the eleventh-century marginal psalters. We can only hypothesize concerning the possible reasons for the immediate exchange of the original image in favor of a more neutral version of it, taking place in the second half of the ninth century. Judging from the preserved image in the Pantokrator Psalter, it seems possible that this version was rejected and altered at some point of the image-making process, because the composition was, perhaps, somehow embarrassing in the eyes of the official ninth-century Byzantine Church and/or the leading monastic circles of the time. The fact, that the Khludov artist essentially neutralized the Virgin's role in his composition is a strong argument pointing in this direction. The beginning codification processes which can be observed on all levels of Byzantine religious as well as secular culture in the ninth and tenth centuries, were, perhaps, another determining factor heavily influencing or regulating the former visual presentation modes. In the case of the Virgin Mary, it probably was of particular importance to codify the existing pre-iconoclastic visual formulae. Since the ninth century, we can observe that she is regularly presented in her traditional outfit, the *maphorion* which, importantly, was the

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<sup>54</sup> For a full analysis of the composition, highlighting especially the role of the Virgin Mary, see my forthcoming article: *The Virgin, the Unicorn, and Some Potent Drops of Milk in The Virgin's Milk in Global Perspective: On the Fluidity of Images and the Politics of Divine Presence*, (eds.) Jutta Sperling, Vibeke Olsen, Matti Meyer. Turnhout, Brepols Publishers.

<sup>55</sup> Albeit in a somehow modified way, this would support Strzygowski's initial idea of a close workshop-cooperation of artists. In this context, it is also interesting to note, that another set of illustrations, probably also made in connection with the ninth-century illustration process of the ancient *Physiologus* was handed down in other illustrated ninth-century manuscripts, like, i.e., in the *Sacra Parallela* (Paris, BNF Cod. gr. 923). See Bernabò 1998, 97-98.

outstanding and most venerable Marian relic in Constantinople<sup>56</sup>. The changing visual attitudes concerning the Mother of God may be readily observed in the illustration for Ps 77, 66-69<sup>LXX</sup> in the Khludov Psalter, where the half-figure of the Virgin *Hodegetria* dressed in a blue maphorion serves as substitute to the image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* as depicted in the Pantokrator Psalter for the same psalm verse<sup>57</sup>.

## Conclusion

By re-examining Strzygowski's analysis of the *Virgin and Unicorn*-illustrations in the two ninth-century marginal psalters as well as in the Smyrna *Physiologus* my aim was to demonstrate that the image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* seems to have undergone subsequent visual stages, perhaps in part influenced by the different versions of the *Physiologus* tradition available at the time. The intention of the designers of the Pantokrator Psalter was to create a more or less *literal* visual equivalent for the subtle levels of meaning in the *Physiologus* text according to Sbordone's *redactio prima* which also suited the meaning of the psalm verse in the Pantokrator Psalter. The earliest form of illustration for both, the *Physiologus* chapter as well as the psalm verse, documented by the image of the *Virgin and Unicorn* in the Pantokrator Psalter was, however, rejected, probably due to religious considerations or the personal wishes of the patrons ordering the respective illustrations for their manuscripts. Consequently, it seems that for the artists, the process of image-making in the ninth century involved a high degree of flexibility, meaning that they were able to adapt, develop, transform or in other ways, experiment with new visual solutions made to match the changing cultural mentalities of the circle of ninth-century patrons which were in the position to order such heavily illustrated manuscripts incorporating extensive visual cycles.

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<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, Krausmüller 2011, 219-45. For Constantinople as Theotokoupolis, see Mango 2000, 17-26.

<sup>57</sup> See the respective miniature in Ščepkina 1977, fol. 79recto.

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