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21 OCTOBER 2013

## Unicorn versus Rhinoceros

The planned Ark Encounter theme park (Williamstown KY) will allegedly show [unicorns boarding the Ark](#). The Bible does indeed refer to unicorns, and while for some this is the end of the matter for others it's only the beginning.

[Father Benito Feijoo OSB \(1676-1764\)](#) reader (in Latin, of course) of Bacon, was a major figure of the Spanish Enlightenment. (Only the Spanish would have taken a Benedictine as their Voltaire.) His *Teatro crítico* (1726–1739) was a collection of essays on various questions, many of them on nature.



Portrait of Feijoo y Montenegro by Juan Bernabé Palomino (image from [Wikimedia Commons](#))

He often cast himself in the role of debunker of myths and vulgar errors: Ovid was not inspired by the Bible, he said (see Trousson), and there was no such thing as a unicorn.

He was a controversial writer in an age of controversialists, and the *Teatro crítico* gave rise to a whole corpus of counterblasts and counter-counterblasts (bibliographed by Cameron).

In 1728 Feijoo (*Teatro crítico*, II, discourse II) decided that the unicorn was a myth, and that what the Bible calls the unicorn was *Rupicapra orientalis*, the Oryx. The unicorn horns found in royal collections were the tooth of the narwhal: Feijoo cites 'Francisco Willugbeyo' (Francis Willughby), *Historia piscium* (London, 1686) [BL shelfmark 41.i.1.]

Salvador José Mañer (1676-1751) weighed in in six years later with his *Crisol crítico, theologico, historico, politico, physico, y mathematico, e que se quilatan las materias, y puntos que se le han impugnado al Teatro crítico, y pretendido defender en la Demonstracion crítica el M. R. P.*

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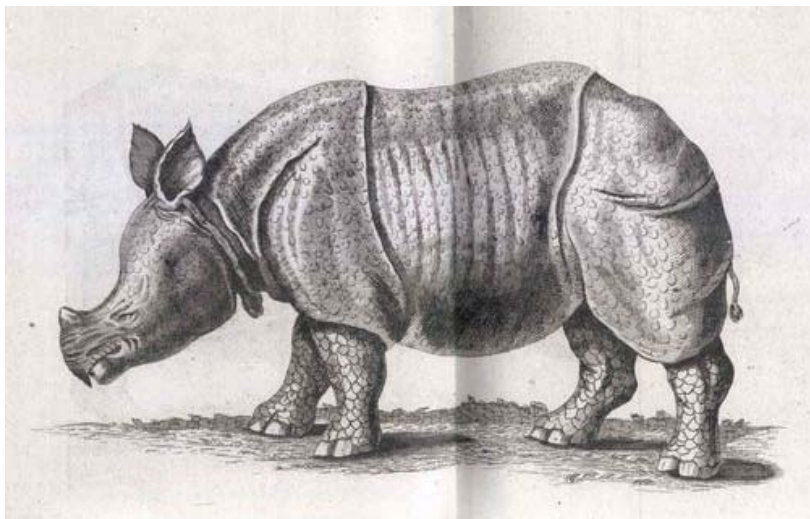
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Lector Fr. Martin Sarmiento, *benedictino*. (Madrid, 1734) [RB.23.a.34204]

This work is “a crucible in which the principal objections to the Teatro crítico are assayed”. On pp. 235-49 he reports that Fr Martín Sarmiento Feijoo’s staunchest defender, identified the biblical unicorn with the rhinoceros.

In 1743 Feijoo received a letter from an anonymous correspondent, who said that his aide de chambre had seen a unicorn at Brussels. Feijoo had the last word (*Cartas eruditas y curiosas* (1745), III, letter III): he is adamant that the unicorn and the rhinoceros were quite different, and that this was a rhino.

In a final note, Feijoo says “I will not hide from the reader that I fear that the Brussels rhinoceros is the fiction of some idle person”. Here for once the great man was wrong: this was [Clara](#), the celebrated rhinoceros, who made a European tour from 1741 to 1758, passing through Brussels in 1743, and was celebrated in [painting by Longhi](#) (in the National Gallery, London) and in [Meissen porcelain](#).



A contemporary rhinoceros, from James Parsons, *Die natürliche Historie des Nashorns ...* (Nuremberg, 1747). [B.342.(2)]

Barry Taylor, Curator Hispanic Studies

References:

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Posted by Susan Reed at 10:00 AM

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