



The Lore and Mystery of Unicorns

by Kathleen Karlsen

The unicorn is one of a very few mythological creatures that are considered to be beneficial in almost all traditions. The unicorn is universally beautiful, mysterious and difficult to capture or tame. Although modern unicorns are depicted simply as horses with a single horn, traditional unicorns also possessed a billy goat's beard, a lion's tail and cloven hooves.

Unicorns have a place in Greek mythology, Chinese traditions, in the art of the Indus Valley and India. Greek writers including Pliny the Elder and Aristotle mention the unicorn in their writings. Some historians believe they may have been confused by earlier historical references to the rhinoceros, oryx (antelope) or wild asses. However, translators of the Hebrew Bible have also used "unicorn" for the word "re'em" and give at least eight mentions of the unicorn in the Old Testament, including "And the unicorns shall come down with them, and the bullocks with their bulls; and their land shall be soaked with blood, and their dust made fat with fatness" (Isaiah 34:7) and "God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of the unicorn" (Numbers 23:22).

The unicorn became a religious symbol in the art of the Middle Ages. The original tale was that a beautiful maiden representing the Virgin Mary managed to trap a unicorn, whereupon the unicorn became tame and lay its head in her lap. As the legend grew through reinterpretation, the unicorn was viewed as the Christ or Incarnation and the death of a unicorn as the Passion of Christ. This allowed a pagan symbol to become highly esteemed within the church. In fact, a grouping or herd of unicorns is called a "blessing" of unicorns.

Unicorns are also prominent in heraldic symbolism, usually with a spiral horn, sometimes of red and black. In heraldry, unicorns are often shown with a collar and a broken chain, indicating that they have freed themselves from bondage and cannot be taken again.

The magical powers of unicorns are also legendary. Unicorn horns are said to be harder than diamonds and to be able to neutralize poisons. Unicorn tears can heal both physical wounds and sorrows of the heart. A person with the ability to see a unicorn may have a wish granted as a reward. Unicorns are often reputed to have the ability to fly. Some unicorns are believed to be able to speak to all kinds of other creatures.

In modern literature, the lure and mystery of unicorns remains. In the recent *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, powerful wands are made with a core of unicorn hair. The blood of a unicorn is also reputed to keep a person alive even if he is very close to death. The ongoing body of literature associated with unicorns and the powers attributed to them will undoubtedly continue to add to their value as symbols of freedom, healing and beauty.