

ARE THEY REAL?

UNICORNS

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AT A GLANCE

- Unicorns are mythical creatures. They exist in folklore traditions around the world.
- The modern unicorn looks like a white horse. It has a white spiral horn growing from its forehead.
- Ancient unicorns looked like many different animals, such as goats, sheep, and deer.
- The origin of unicorn tales is unknown. They may have come from ancient Asia.
- Unicorns have a reputation as royal, unique, and special. They stand for purity or rarity.
- Many people believe unicorns have magical abilities. These include powers like healing, flying, and making objects move.
- Unicorn horns are considered magical. They were once believed to cure poisoning.



- In the Middle Ages, people sold objects they claimed were unicorn horns. Most of them were actually narwhal tusks.
- One-horned animals do exist in nature. But the popular unicorn from folklore does not.
- Unicorns continue to influence human creativity. They have inspired books, entertainment, toys, and foods.

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THE HISTORY OF UNICORNS

Belief in unicorns is ancient and widespread. Many cultures tell stories about the creatures. But traditional unicorn folklore varies around the world. Different stories come from Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Because of this global history, it is hard to identify one single origin.

The idea of a unicorn is simple at its core. This might explain the confusion about its origin. Animals that grow a pair of horns are common. So it is not surprising that people wondered about single-horned animals.

Several European countries, including Scotland, England, Austria, and Italy, have statues and fountains that feature unicorns.



An animal that grew one horn might have been considered a unicorn. Humans carried stories of unicorns around the world.

WHERE DID UNICORNS COME FROM?

Some of the earliest-known unicorn tales come from China and Persia, which is

UNICORNS OF AFRICA

Several African countries and cultures have unicorn **folktales**. The Ethiopian unicorn lives in the forests and mountains. It looks like a brown horse with a white horn. A gray horselike unicorn comes from South Africa. Sudan's unicorn has a red coat and goatlike hooves.

modern-day Iran. These tales were told before written language was invented. Stories were simply memorized. Myths and legends are like this. Humans eventually wrote them down as folktales.

The Chinese unicorn tale was written around 100 CE. The scholar Wang Chong recorded the story. It told of a unicorn that looked like a female goat. The one-horned goat belonged to the emperor's judge. It helped the judge rule on difficult cases. The unicorn would butt the guilty person with its horn. This ancient unicorn was a symbol of justice and a good **omen**.



Some believe that unicorns can detect whether a person is good or evil.

Another Chinese tale describes a different ancient unicorn. This unicorn looked like a deer with dragon scales. It was also a symbol of justice and an omen of a wise ruler.

GLOSSARY

folklore

traditional customs, beliefs, stories, and sayings

folktales

stories typically passed down by word of mouth

horn buds

the early growths of an animal's developing horns

mythical

based on or described in a myth

nostalgia

a longing for something that is gone or in the past

omen

something that is believed to be a sign of a future event

scholar

a person who has learned a great deal about one or more subjects

symbol

a sign or image that stands for something else

SOURCE NOTES

CHAPTER ONE: WHAT IS A UNICORN?

1. Quoted in Chris Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010, p. 101. <https://archive.org>.

CHAPTER TWO: THE HISTORY OF UNICORNS

2. Quoted in Odell Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979, pp. 26–27. <https://archive.org>.

3. Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*, p. 70.

CHAPTER THREE: LOOKING AT THE EVIDENCE

4. Quoted in Shepard, *The Lore of the Unicorn*, p. 259.

5. Quoted in “Unicorns, West and East,” *American Museum of Natural History*, n.d. www.amnh.org.

6. Quoted in “Unicorns, West and East.”

7. Lavers, *The Natural History of Unicorns*, p. 225.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF UNICORNS

8. Peter Beagle, *The Last Unicorn*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1969, p. 1. <https://archive.org>.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

BOOKS

Peter Finn, *Do Unicorns Exist?* New York: Gareth Stevens Publishing, 2022.

Andy Robbins, *Field Guide to Unicorns of North America: The Official Handbook for Unicorn Enthusiasts of All Ages*. New York: Bloom Books for Young Readers, 2021.

Temisa Seraphini, *The Secret Lives of Unicorns*. London, UK: Flying Eye Books, 2019.

INTERNET SOURCES

Melody Bodette and Jane Lindholm, "Are Unicorns Real?" *Vermont Public Radio*, October 25, 2019. www.vermontpublic.org.

"History of Unicorns for Kids," *Bedtime History*, July 11, 2022. <https://bedtimehistorystories.com>.

Benjamin Radford, "The Lore and Lure of Unicorns," *Live Science*, June 30, 2017. www.livescience.com.

WEBSITES

Fantastic Beasts of the Middle Ages

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/uAWBn9wmjCVVJg>

Google Arts & Culture features the “Fantastic Beasts of the Middle Ages” exhibit from the J. Paul Getty Museum. It is an interactive online exhibit about unicorns and other mythical creatures.

Mythical Creatures: Unicorns

<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/9QXxeLPuj4n9JA>

Google Arts & Culture provides a virtual tour of unicorn artifacts from the “Fantastic Beasts: The Wonder of Nature” exhibit at the United Kingdom’s National History Museum. The interactive slideshow shares cultural history along with historical artwork of unicorns.

The Story of the Unicorn

www.metmuseum.org/primer/met-cloisters/unicorn-tapestries-story

The Metropolitan Museum Cloisters shares information on and images of the Unicorn Tapestries collection. It features some of the most well-known historical unicorn artwork.

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