

Unicorns

Unicorns are mythical creatures and there are tales of these magnificent animals from China, India, Greece and Scotland. The Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations also believed in unicorns. For thousands of years, the unicorn has been a symbol of innocence, love and purity. Some societies also believe that they have magical powers and are very difficult to catch.



What a unicorn looks like

The majority of stories and pictures describe unicorns as white horses with a single horn on their forehead. The first written account of a unicorn was by the Greek historian Ctesias. He described them as having blue eyes, a white body with a purple head and a single horn on their forehead. This horn, he described, was white at the base with a black centre and a red tip. Some people believe that Ctesias was describing an Indian rhinoceros, an animal that wasn't native to Europe and Europeans hadn't seen before.

The first drawn image of a unicorn was discovered in France in the Lascaux Caves with carvings dating back to 15,000BCE. The Lascaux unicorn was drawn slightly differently from Ctesias' description, as it had two horns very close to each other and therefore was eventually discounted as a unicorn. Other cave drawings of unicorns have been found in South Africa and South America.

Magic

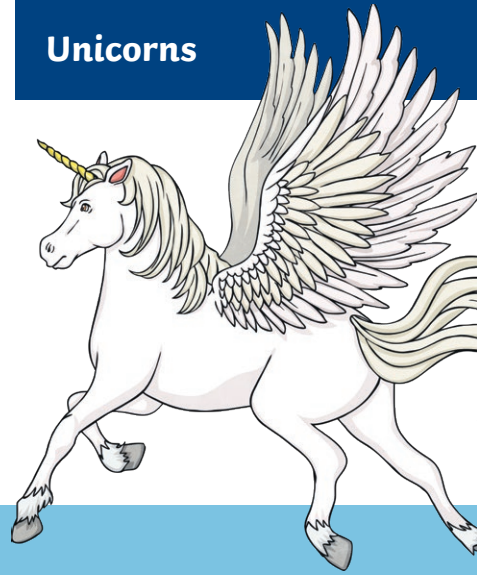
The ancient Greeks believed that unicorns were magical. If someone was to drink from the head of a unicorn it would protect them from poison, stomachaches and other health problems, but the drinker had to catch it first! A very difficult feat!

Did you know...?

National unicorn day is 9th April

Symbolism

As such strong, beautiful creatures they have been commonly used by nobility and royalty for thousands of years. In 3000BC the image of a unicorn was used as a seal on clay tablets of important documents. The ancient Chinese people believed that seeing a unicorn was an omen of good luck and fortune. During the 1400s King James III introduced two gold coins known as the unicorn and the half unicorn.



Sightings

Throughout history many people have believed that they have seen a unicorn. Famous explorers, royalty and authors are among those who claim to have seen the beautiful beings.

Marco Polo, an explorer, believed that he saw a unicorn and described his encounter, “they are very ugly brutes to look at, they are not at all such as we describe unicorns.” It turned out he hadn’t seen a unicorn, in fact he’d come across a rhinoceros!

Usage of the horn

- In the 6th Century Greek merchant, Cosmas Indicopleustes, said that the magical power of the unicorn was in its horn. Cups made from rhinoceros horn were then highly prized in the middle ages because they were believed to have come from unicorns.
- The tusk of a narwhal horn looks similar to what unicorn horns are believed to look like. As a result of this narwhal horns were sold as unicorn horns throughout history and this threatened their existence.
- In the 1500s a Spanish merchant sold a narwhal horn to the Pope in the hope it would cure him of an illness, it didn’t and he died soon after receiving it. Another Pope bought a narwhal horn from a German merchant in the 1500s which in today’s money cost more than £18,000!
- The Danish royal family commissioned a throne to be made out of narwhal horns, can you imagine sitting on that?
- In England Queen Elizabeth I asked for a **sceptre** to be created out of unicorn horns, narwhal horn was used and it cost over £6million in today’s money!
- In the mid 1700s powdered unicorn horns were sold in pharmacies to cure ailments, these were eventually proved as fakes and the practise was stopped.

Scottish Unicorn

The unicorn has been linked to Scotland for centuries. As it was considered a symbol of purity, strength and power it was chosen as a suitable national animal for the country. In the 12th Century, William I used it for the first time on Scotland’s coat of arms, where it was displayed with a unicorn either side of the shield. When Scotland and England unified under James VI in 1603, the British coat of

arms was updated to show a unicorn and a lion. The unicorn is shown chained because a free unicorn is a very dangerous animal and is famously difficult to tame. Perhaps this says something about the Scots.

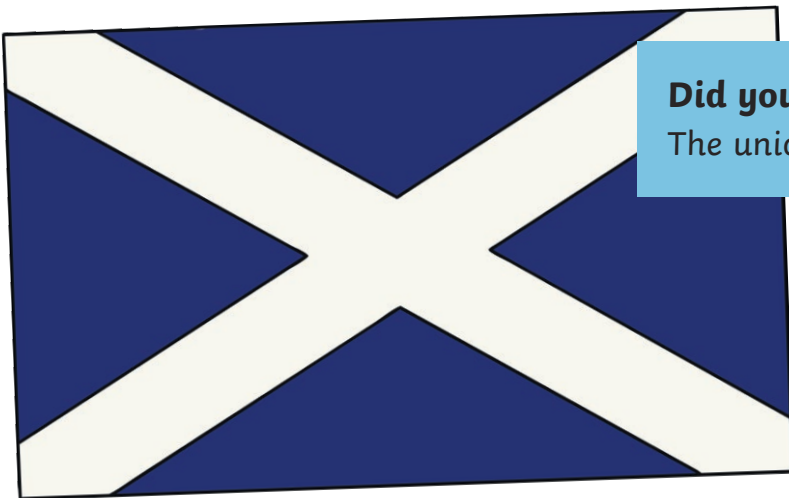
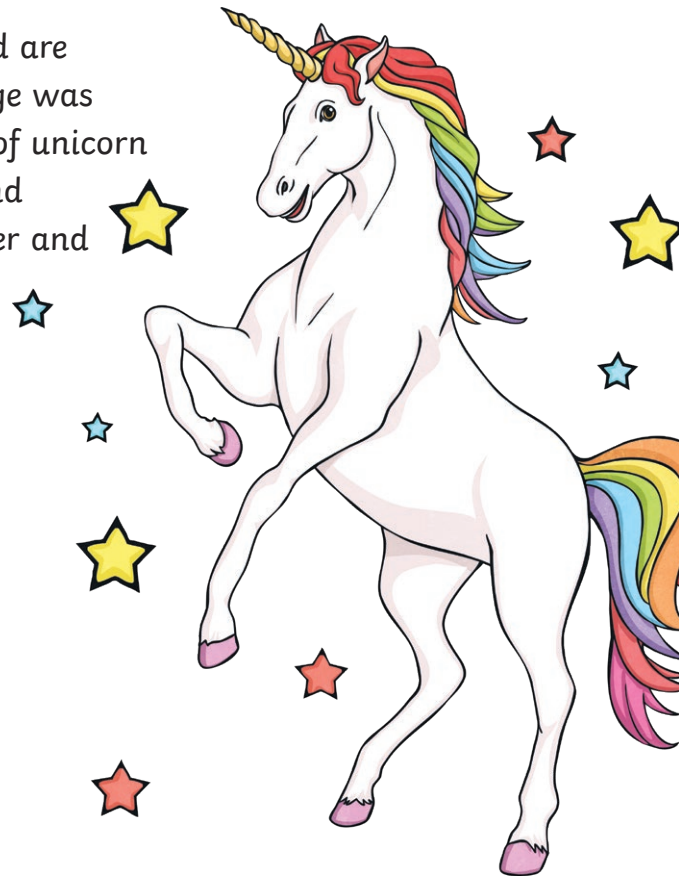


Modern Unicorns

Unicorn designs can be found on all kinds of items and are particularly popular with children. When Prince George was christened he was **allegedly** given a hair brush made of unicorn mane! They can be found on items of clothing, toys and stationery. As a symbol of beauty, magic, purity, power and strength it is no wonder they are so popular. Do you have anything with a unicorn design on it?

Fun Facts

- In the Old Testament of the Bible the word Re'em was mistranslated to mean unicorn. Re'em is a hebrew word for wild ox.
- A winged horse type creature with a horn on its forehead is known as an alicorn.
- It is believed that unicorns are afraid of labradors but are calmed by pheasants.



Did you know...?

The unicorn is the national animal of Scotland

Glossary

feat - an achievement that requires great courage, skill, or strength.

legendary - described in or based on legends

sceptre - an ornamented staff carried by rulers on ceremonial occasions

Questions

1. Where do tales of unicorns come from?

- All over the world
- China only
- Asia only
- Scotland only

2. Who wrote the first account of a unicorn?

- Marco Polo
- No one knows
- Greek historian Ctesias
- Charles Darwin

3. Find and copy the word that means “unworthy of consideration”.

4. Which animal’s horn was used as a unicorn horn?

5. How much, in today’s money, did Queen Elizabeth pay for her sceptre?

6. Why do you think Prince George was given a hairbrush made of unicorn hair?

7. Thinking about the people of Scotland, why do you think the unicorn was chosen as the national animal?

8. What do you think has made the unicorn so popular today especially with children?

9. What do you think Marco Polo might have told his friends about his meeting with a unicorn? Write a short paragraph about what he saw.

10. Some people think that the unicorn horn had magical powers, why do you think that? What powers would you give a unicorn?
