

Beasts and Myths of the Middle Ages



Ashley Millette
Aashish Srinivas

Table of Contents

Medieval Mythology.....	Page 2
Medieval Tapestry.....	Page 3
Pliny the Elder.....	Page 4
Medieval Heraldry.....	Page 5
The Dragon.....	Page 6
The Chinese Dragon.....	Page 7
The Basilisk.....	Page 8
The Phoenix.....	Page 9
The Centaur.....	Page 10
The Griffin.....	Page 11
The Mandrake.....	Page 12
The Stag.....	Page 13
The Unicorn.....	Page 14
Robin Hood.....	Page 15
The Canterbury Tales.....	Page 16
King Arthur.....	Page 17
Merlin.....	Page 18
Glossary.....	Pages 19-20
About the Authors.....	Page 21
Picture Credits.....	Page 22

Medieval Mythology

During the Middle Ages, myths and legends were extremely popular. Topics ranged anywhere from unicorns to the **Holy Grail** with



animal myths being of immense popularity. While some of these myths portrayed strictly imaginary beasts, such as the centaur, others embellished actual animals, such as the stag. These myths were not only used as entertainment, but

also had various spiritual and religious implications. The unicorn, for example, signified the unification of God and Christ. Although many of the myths have lost popularity since the Middle Ages, some are still popular. Many mythical beasts of the medieval age appear in the *Harry Potter* books and movies. Several others also appear in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.



Medieval Tapestry

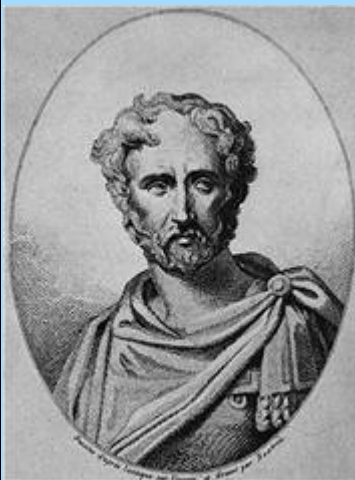
A **tapestry** is any piece of art woven on a loom. The medieval period was very famous for its tapestries, and many of the tapestries woven during this era included pictures of beasts like dragons and unicorns. Tapestries were useful because they could be easily rolled up and transported from place to place.



One of the most important tapestries of the medieval period was the *Hunt of the Unicorn*. This tapestry pictures a group of hunters that are trying to kill a unicorn. The tapestry also features other animals such as a stag, a lion, and a wolf. Five other tapestries, including “The Unicorn is Found”, “The Unicorn Defends Itself”, and “the Unicorn in Captivity,” tell the entire story of the hunt.

Pliny the Elder

Pliny the Elder was a Roman writer who lived from 24 to 79 A.D. He lived almost a **millennium**, or a thousand years, before the Middle Ages, but he was still very important to its mythology. His book, *Naturalis Historia*, was one of the most important early books because it explained the ancient understanding of the world.



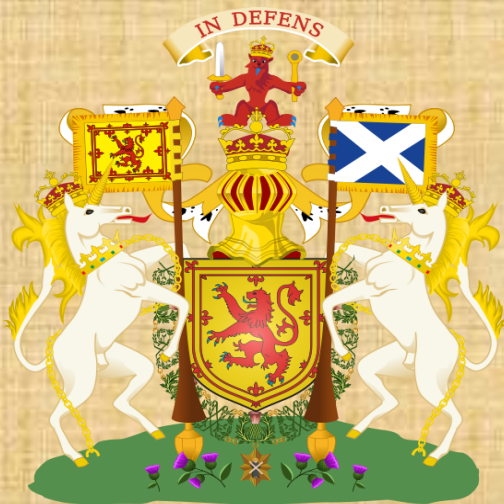
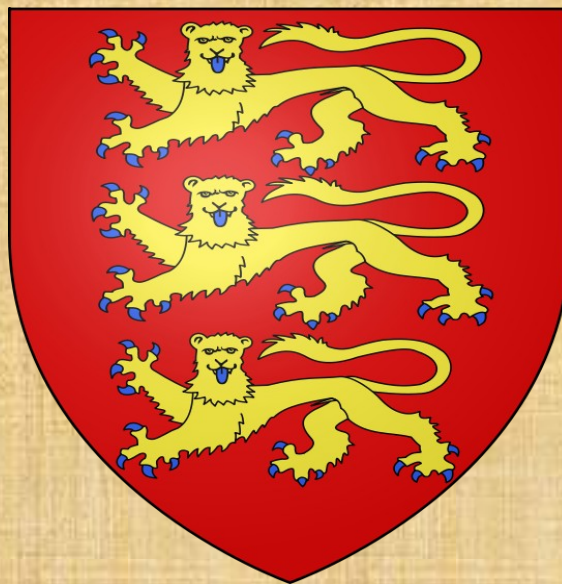
Much of the mythology of the Middle Ages came directly from the mythology of Rome and Greece. Almost every creature which is found in medieval mythology, including dragons, unicorns, and man-drakes, can be found in Pliny's book.

Did you know?

Pliny the Elder was killed in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 A.D. He was near the city of Pompeii when Mount Vesuvius, a volcano, erupted violently. His death was written about by his nephew, Pliny the Younger.

Medieval Heraldry

Heraldry is the art of making seals or symbols. In medieval times, heraldry was very important because it was used to identify people. Kings and knights would each have their own coat of arms and hold them up during battles so that everybody could identify who they were. Many of the symbols used in heraldry were animals, each of which symbolized different traits.



Each kingdom has its own coat of arms as well. The coat of arms of England has three lions. This coat of arms was created by **Richard the Lionheart**. The three golden lions on a black background represent bravery and strength. Most other coats of arms featured either animals or, less commonly, plants.

Other Coats of Arms

- Bavaria— Panther and lions
- Scotland— Unicorns and lions
- France— Fleur-de-lis (a flower)
- Spain— Lion and a pomegranate
- The Netherlands— Lions and a pair of wings

The Dragon

The dragon is the most well-known of all medieval creatures. It was the fiercest of all serpents and the one which struck the most fear into the hearts of men. The dragon had small wings which allow it to fly. It was often shown spitting fire from its mouth, but some cultures believed that it spit ice or poison instead of fire. The dragon also had very sharp teeth and tongue shaped like an arrow. Even though it could easily kill a man with its mouth, the power of the dragon was said to lie in its long and scaly tail.



A creature similar to the dragon is known as the **wyvern**. This creature had only two legs and was used in many coats of arms in England. The dragon and the wyvern were both symbols of power and courage.



A Scientific Look

The origin of the dragon is not known. Some believe that early “dragon bones” were actually dinosaur bones.

The Chinese Dragon

The dragon is a very significant icon in Chinese culture. It was once common among the Chinese to refer to themselves as “**the Descendants of the Dragon**”. The Chinese dragon is thought of as a symbol of good luck and prosperity. It differs from the European dragon because it is never feared or dreaded.

In China, dragons have many powers, including ruling over the seas, creating wind and rain, and protecting fortunes. They are said to have the head of the camel, the scales of a fish, the ears of a bull, the neck of a snake, and the claws of an eagle. Because they have the best traits of all the other animals, they are thought of as the most powerful creatures in China.



Did You Know?

The dragon is a symbol of the Chinese New Year, which usually occurs in January or February. Chinese New Year parades around the world feature people dressed as dragons representing good luck for the year to come.. Every 12th year after the year 2000 is a year of the dragon.

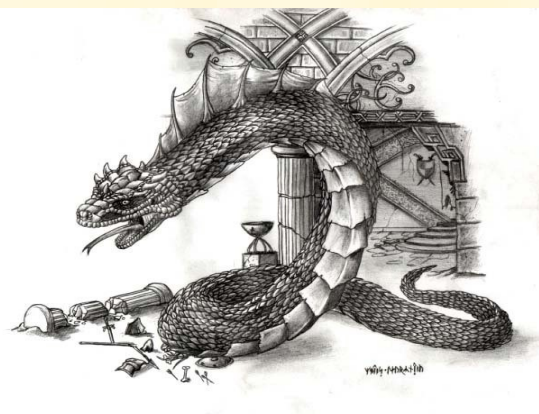
The Basilisk

The basilisk, one of the fiercest beasts of the Middle Ages, was known as king of all the serpents. Its name, which came from the Greek word *basiliscus*, means “little king”. Although it is considered a serpent, its body resembles that of a rooster but with the tail of a snake. According to legend, the basilisk’s odor could kill other snakes, fire coming from the basilisk’s mouth could kill birds, and if a man looks at it, he would die instantly. Its hiss can also kill other animals. The venom from its bite was said to make the victim fear water. It hatched from a chicken egg and lived in dry places like deserts. The only enemy of the basilisk was the weasel, which could kill it with its stench.



An Interesting Fact

Although much more serpent like in the movie, this is indeed the seem mythical beast from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets!*



The Phoenix



Although there are many myths and legends about the phoenix, two in particular are famous throughout the world. The first gives an account of a mystical species of bird that lived in India.

Once the phoenix reached the age of 500 years, it would cover itself in frankincense, fly to an altar, and be consumed in flames. When the flames would burn out, a worm would come out of the ashes and turn into a phoenix three days later.

The other legend gives an account of a purple and red bird born in Arabia. Unlike the other legend, this one claims that it was only possible for there to be one phoenix on the earth at a time. When the phoenix grew old, it would climb onto a pile of wood and spices and become ignited by the sun. When it was done burning, a new phoenix would appear from the ashes.

The Centaur

The centaur was a mythical creature with the lower body of a horse and the upper body of a man. The centaur supposedly re-



ceived its name from **Thessaly** horseman who in warfare appeared to be of the same body as their horses. In modern literature, centaurs are perceived as bow and arrow toting creatures with a love for **astrology** and future-seeing.

Fast Fact!

The centaur can be seen in many childrens' movies including several of the *Harry Potter* movies and the *Narnia* series.



The Griffin



The griffin was an ancient half bird, half mammal creature with a lion body and eagle wings. Its place of birth is undetermined but most legends say it was born in either the **Hyperborean mountains** or **Ethiopia**. Many people feared the griffin because in most myths the griffin was portrayed as a vicious animal who would take people back to its nest to feed its young. The griffin was

strong enough to carry an ox and could easily dig gold out of the ground. Its only enemy was the horse. The griffin was also associated with medicine and it was believed that just one griffin feather could cure blindness.



Did you know...

The griffin is an emblem of the Christian view of remarriage because they mate for life.

Fast Fact!

The griffin signifies divine power.

The Mandrake

The mandrake, a common plant used in magic and religious rituals, was thought to have roots that resembled a human body. It is said that when a mandrake is pulled from the earth, it shrieks so loudly that everyone around it will either die or go insane. To avoid hearing the mandrake's scream, people trying to obtain the plant would tie a dog to it and lure the dog forward, pulling the plant out of the ground with it.



Did you know?

The mandrake appears in various movies, plays, and books including *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, Machiavelli's play *Mandragola*, and The Bible.

Fast Fact!

The mandrake was the most popular **anesthetic** of the Middle Ages.

The Stag

The stag, also known as the deer, had many medicinal values. According to legend, if a person ate venison that person would never get a fever because stags were immune to fevers. If drinks were made from the tears

and bones of a stag, they were said to cure heartache. Its enemy was the snake, and the stag would kill the snake by drawing it out of its hole and trampling it. Ironically, as in myths about snakes, stags can also be charmed by music. To catch stags, hunters would play the reed



pipe, which would put the stag into a trance, making it easy for them to be caught. Stags could live for an extremely long time and would renew themselves by eating snakes and drinking enough water to dilute the poison. The stag is also a symbol of Christ.

The Unicorn

The unicorn, one of the most famous mythical creatures of all time, plays a very different role in medieval mythology than most other myths. The unicorn resembled a small goat or horse with a grooved horn sticking out of its forehead. Supposedly, the unicorn was a fierce beast that could only be caught by a young girl. The unicorn would fall asleep in the girl's lap and could then be captured. Most people believed that the horn of a unicorn was extremely valuable and that it could be used to detect poisonous substances.



CAUTION: This is NOT a real picture!

Did you know...

That the unicorn has several metaphorical meanings? In some medieval myths the unicorn symbolizes Christ. Its wildness signifies the inability of hell to hold him, while the horn symbolizes his unity with God.

Robin Hood

Robin Hood, one of the most famous outlaws of all times, was also one of the most famous myths of medieval times. Hood, whose exact origin is unknown, supposedly lived in the **Sherwood Forest** with his “band of merry men”. Robin and his men were known throughout the land as outlaws who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor. Robin Hood’s arch enemy was the Sheriff of Nottingham, who vowed to imprison Robin forever. Although there is not much evidence, some sources say that the



story of Robin Hood was based on real people and events.

Did you know...

The story of Robin Hood was turned into the Disney hit, *Robin Hood* in 1973.



The Canterbury Tales

The **Canterbury Tales** are a group of stories written by **Geoffrey Chaucer** in the 1300s. They were written in a very old form of English known as **Middle English**.



Each of Chaucer's tales is told by a person about his or her life. There is a knight's tale, a miller's tale, a cook's tale, and a wife's tale, among others. The stories were very important to the mythology of the Middle Ages because they were so widely read and discussed. They represent the beliefs of people during the Middle Ages.

A look at Middle English

It is very clear that the English of Chaucer is very different from modern English. Here are some lines from the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales*:

*When Zephyrus eke with his swoote breath
Inspired hath in every holt and heath
The tender croppes and the younge sun
Hath in the Ram his halfe course y-run*

King Arthur

King Arthur is a legendary English king. Much of the mythology of the Middle Ages focuses on the adventures of King Arthur and his **Knights of the Round Table**. King Arthur and his knights often fight dragons and other beasts while defending their kingdom.



One of the most important stories about King Arthur is the story of **Excalibur**, Arthur's sword. Arthur is said to have pulled the sword with his immense strength from a stone in which it was stuck. In another version of the story, the Lady of the Lake gives him the sword. All of the Arthurian legends are told in many different ways. This is because they were told **orally**, meaning through word of mouth, before they were written down. Because of this, each person had a different idea of the stories and so there were many forms of them.

Was King Arthur real?

It is plausible that King Arthur was a real historical figure in the 700s A.D. If he is not a real figure, his stories may also have been loosely based on a real man. Some say that he was the king that defeated the Saxons, who were trying to take over England.

Merlin

Merlin was the most important wizard in the Arthurian Legends. He is said to have used magic to make the birth of Arthur. He is a very wise and gentle man. It is believed that his father was not a man, but rather an **Incubus**, which is a demon-like spirit which roams the world.



The legend of King Arthur says that Merlin was Arthur's adviser. It goes on to say that the Lady of the Lake threw Merlin in jail, ending his role in legend.

A Demon?

The French Poet Robert de Boron wrote a poem about Merlin, describing him as demon-like. He is more commonly depicted as a wise and kind old man.

Glossary

Anesthetic - A drug that induces sleep; often used in surgery

Astrology - The study of space and the heavenly bodies

Canterbury Tales - A group of stories written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the 1300s in Middle English.

Chaucer, Geoffrey - The writer of the *Canterbury Tales*. One of the greatest writers of the Middle Ages

Descendents of the Dragon - Name which ancient Chinese cultures used to refer to themselves.

Emblem - An object or a representation that functions as a symbol

Ethiopia - A country in eastern Africa

Excalibur - The legendary sword of King Arthur

Heraldry - The art of making coats of arms and royal seals.

Holy Grail - A dish, plate, or cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper.

Hyperborean Mountains - An imaginary continent which was located where Antarctica is now.

Incubus - A spirit which can father wizards.

King Arthur - A legendary king of England.

Knights of the Round Table - Knights such as Lancelot, Galahad, and Bedivere who helped King Arthur

Merlin - The wizard and advisor of King Arthur

Millennium - A period of 1000 years, 100 decades, or 10 centuries

Orally - Spoken rather than written

Pliny the Elder - Roman writer who died in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D. A lot of his stories were still around in the Middle Ages.

Richard the Lionheart - King of England from 1189 to 1199. He was one of the leaders of the Crusades.

Sherwood Forest - A royal forest in Nottinghamshire, England

Tapestry - Any piece of art woven on a loom. An example is the Bayeux Tapestry

Thessaly - A region of Italy on the east coast

Wyvern - A dragon-like creature without front legs

About The Authors

Ashley Millette was born on a sunny day in July. She grew up with her brother and sister in the town of Douglas, Massachusetts, where she lived until age 14. She then moved to Auburn. Shortly after, she began school at the Massachusetts Academy of Mathematics and Science at WPI where she is currently a junior. Although she enjoys all academics, she especially enjoys science and humanities. After completing high school, she hopes to attend college and major in environmental engineering. When not at school (or doing homework), Ashley partakes in many activities such as softball and horseback riding.

Aashish Srinivas is currently a student in the Massachusetts Academy of Math and Science at WPI. He was born in Bangalore, India but moved to the United States when he was five years old. He went to school in both Framingham and Northborough, MA before he decided to come to Mass Academy in Worcester. He enjoys running and swimming. In the future, he wishes to train for running a triathlon. He is very interested in biology and wants to major in that subject in college.

Picture Credits

http://www.graphpaper.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/holy_grail_660.jpg
<http://tattoo.about.com/library/graphics/mikewingdrag.jpg>
<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast265.htm>
<http://media.photobucket.com/image/basilisk/AngelofthePhoenix/basilisk1.jpg>
<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast149.htm>
<http://www.eaudrey.com/myth/images/Centaur.gif>
http://astalythe.files.wordpress.com/2007/09/kwhiteford_centaur.jpg
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Venice_-_Statue_of_a_griffin.jpg
http://schools.cbe.ab.ca/b826/images/griffin_up.png
<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast1098.htm>
http://dic.academic.ru/pictures/enwiki/77/Mandragore_officinale_fruits.jpg
http://www.iconart.org.uk/works/med_4.jpg
<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast140.htm>
<http://bestiary.ca/chimaera/wp-content/images/mandrake-root.png>
[Orior/1186282287_resunicorn.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/18/1186282287_resunicorn.jpg)
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a9/Robin_Hood_Memorial.jpg
<http://www.tkn.tu-berlin.de/research/trace/plakate/RobinHood.jpg>
<http://www.draconian.com/dragons/Images/Chinese%20Dragons/Chinese-Dragon-Green-17-large.jpg>
<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/34/Nibelungendrache.jpg>
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:H%C3%A9raldique_meuble_Dragon_\(wyvern\).svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:H%C3%A9raldique_meuble_Dragon_(wyvern).svg)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:England_COA.svg
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bayeux_Tapestry_WillelmDux.jpg
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Hunt_of_the_Unicorn_Tapestry_1.jpg
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canterbury_tales
<http://www.ibiblio.org/expo/vatican.exhibit/exhibit/g-nature/images/nature04.jpg>
<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/01/Bedivere.jpg>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bedivere.jpg>