

## Unicorn Reading Comprehension

Name \_\_\_\_\_

When you imagine a unicorn, what do you see? Do you see a graceful, white, horse-like creature with a long horn protruding from its forehead? If so, you may be surprised about how it came to be the symbol we imagine. For most of history, the unicorn was seen quite differently. In fact, it remains somewhat of a mystery how history's interpretation of the unicorn evolved into today's version.

### Where the Legend Began

The Legend of the Unicorn began with Pliny the Younger's epic encyclopedia known as *Natural History*, in which he described a creature called a Monoceros. Pliny was a philosopher in ancient Rome who also happened to pen the only known eyewitness account of the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D. Pliny described the unicorn as "the fiercest of animals, and it is said that it is impossible to capture alive. It has the body of a horse, the head of a stag, the feet of an elephant, the tail of a boar, and a single black horn three feet long in the middle of its forehead. Its cry is a deep bellow."

### Unicorns Around the World

Descriptions and depictions of unicorns would next appear in the Bible and other early folklore. The Chinese version of the unicorn was known as a kirin. A kirin sighting was thought to come before the birth of a baby, or, in some cases, the death of a sage or ruler. In Medieval Europe, unicorn horns were said to detect poisons in drinks and food. Unscrupulous merchants made small fortunes selling narwhal tusks or oryx horns as unicorn tusks to royals and aristocrats. Many of those who were wealthy enough to purchase such horns ground them up into powder and ingested them preemptively to gain supposed immunity to toxins. The powder was known as alicorn and had no actual medicinal qualities.

### The Real Unicorn - Maybe

While the inspiration for the mythical unicorn may have simply been an antelope or deer with a lost antler, many believe the Indian rhinoceros to be the true inspiration for the unicorn. Much of Pliny the Younger's description could be attributed to the rhino, which indeed had a single, long horn, a tail similar to a boar's, and had feet similar to an elephant. As generations of Romans traveled to India and China, descriptions of the rhinoceros may have been embellished or changed over time. Furthermore, Marco Polo's description of a unicorn he observed in Asia in the 1200s undoubtedly fit the description of a Javan rhinoceros.

**1. Why does the author ask questions in the first paragraph?**

- A. Because the author is curious about how the reader would answer
- B. Because the author doesn't know the answer
- C. Because the author wants to prepare the reader for a new explanation
- D. Because the author wants to indicate the main idea

**2. According to Pliny the Younger...**

- A. the Monoceros was similar to a modern-day unicorn.
- B. the Monoceros was several modern-day animals put together.
- C. had no characteristics of a modern-day unicorn.
- D. had multiple horns.

**3. Which is not true about Pliny the Younger?**

- A. He lived during the same time as Marco Polo
- B. He saw Mt. Vesuvius erupt
- C. He was an ancient Roman philosopher
- D. He wrote an encyclopedia

**4. What does the word "Unscrupulous" mean in the following sentence?**

Unscrupulous merchants made small fortunes selling narwhal tusks or oryx horns as unicorn tusks to royals and aristocrats.

- A. Unsuccessful
- B. Unclean
- C. Disorganized
- D. Dishonest

**5. To which of the following questions would "to become immune to poisons" be the answer?**

- A. Why did wealthy aristocrats believe in unicorns?
- B. What were the medicinal properties of narwhal tusks?
- C. Why did unscrupulous merchants sell tusks?
- D. Why did wealthy aristocrats grind tusks into alicorn?

**6. Why do some people believe the Indian rhinoceros was the inspiration for the unicorn?**

- A. Because many people from the Roman Empire had visited Asia
- B. Because Roman descriptions of the Indian rhinoceros may have evolved over time
- C. Because Marco Polo traveled to China in the 1200s
- D. Because the inspiration for the unicorn was unlikely an antelope or deer that had lost an antler

**7. What is suggested in the third paragraph?**

- A. Most people weren't wealthy enough to acquire alicorn
- B. The kirin was the Chinese version of the unicorn
- C. Alicorn may have actually had medicinal qualities
- D. Narwhals were the real unicorns