Mythical Horses: Crash Course World Mythology #37

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology and today we're moving on from the scary monsters of teh last episode to nice mythical horses.

Well... some of them are nice. Some of them are terrible. It's shocking, I know.

===== Intro (0:14-0:22) =====

Horses are domestic animals that have been inextricable from human life in many cultures for a long time. So it makes sense that there are a ton of mythical horses. If you're Apollo, your mythical horses can even fly and I will take that over a Tesla any day.

But the beginning of our mythical horses history doesn't end at the Greeks and Romans, oh no no. Accrdoing to Plutarch, the Egyptian god, Osiris once asked his son, Horus, "Which animal would be most useful in battle?"

Horus chooses the horse-us. When Osiris asks why he doesn't go for something more fierce like the lion, Horus answers that a lion is good for saving a man in danger, but a horse is best for cutting off the flight of the enemy and annihilating him.

This answer convinces Osiris that Horus is ready to become a warrior.

Svaðilfari is a famous mythical horse from Norse mythology. That's right, this horse is a Norse, of course of course. He is a true power-horse, which I guess means he's got lots of horsepower?

And he helps a mysterious builder complete a wall around Asgard. Almost.

You see, the wall is being built because, if the builder completes it, he gets to marry Freyja, the goddess of love and sex and beauty and war and death.

The Aesir don't want some rando marrying Freyja though, so they give this dude an impossible task. He has a single season to complete his labor. When it looks like the builder is going to complete his task with the help of Svaðilfari, Loki transforms himself into a beautiful mare and distracts Svaðilfari.

Without his magic horse friend, the builder fails, and Freyja escapes. Also, they kill the builder and horse-Loki gives birth to an 8-legged baby. They name this horse Sleipnir and Odin takes it as his personal steed.

There are myths about real historical horses as well like Bucephalus, the 4th Century BSE steed of Alexander the Great. Initially, Bucephalus was untameable, but even as a 13 year-old, Alexander figured it out. He figured out that Bucephalus lost it when he saw his shadow, so he turned the horse toward the sun and his shadow was behind him. Clever.

Another famous equine is Al-BurÄ•q, Muhammad's horse. According to a tale from the hadith, Al-BurÄ•q carried Muhammad on his journey from Mecca to Jerussalem and back in a single evening, including a stop in the heaven.

In Persian imagery, Al-BurÄ•q is often pictured with wings and a human face. And speaking of horses with human features, let's take our own mythical journey back to the Greco-Roman tradition and talk about centaurs.

Centaurs have the body of a horse and the head and torso of a person. Most myths describe centaurs as more animal than human, often they personify human lust. And their minimal hybridity puts them in the same monstrous category as werewolves or fauns.

(Or Thoth. Who's also monstrously handsome. I mean come on, look at this guy.)

One of the most famous centaur stories revolves around a lot of monstrous lust. It's the wedding of King Pirithous of the Lapiths to Hippodameia, extra foreshadowing, Hippodameia means "tamer of horses".

Pirithous and Hippodameia invite a number of centaurs to come celebrate. And when they show up, they hit the open bar pretty hard. The centaurs get wasted and one of them, Eurytion, tries to rape Hippodameia.

A brawl ensues, which grows to a full-scale battle that becomes known as the Centauromachy. The whole story is immortalized in the Metopes of the Parthenon. And also in a relief by Michealangelo, his final work.

While we're confident in saying drunk centaurs come from sober centaurs, this leaves unanswered the question, "Where do sober centaurs come from?"

In one myth, Apollo's son Centauros mates with a horse. Another myth claims that centaurs are the offspring of Cronus and and Phylira. Cronus and Phylira had been... ahem, horsing around for a while when Rhea, Cronus's titan wife, burst in on them.

Cronus gets so spooked that he transforms into a horse and gallops out of bed. Alls well that ends well, except nine months later, Phylira gives birth to Chiron, who is, you guessed it, a centaur.

Chiron is less aggressive than other centaurs and becomes famous for his wisdom. He goes on to teach Achilles and Asclepius, the healer. And in one set of very important mythological stories, is also the director of activities at Camp Half-Blood.

Centuars have a rather ambivalent reputation, but there's one Greek horse who is is a real fly companion, our favorite winged steed: Pegasus. Pegasus is born when the hero Perseus decapitates the gorgon Medusa.

He has a whole plan; mirrored shield, very sharp sword, and it is off with her head! As Persues stuffs Medusa's head into a magic sac, blood pours from the monster's neck and creates a magnificent, winged, white horse.

In some versions of the story, Pegasus lets Perseus jump right on and the two escape the rest of the gorgons. In other versions, Pegasus behaves like a wild horse and flies away, Perseus has to chase after him with his winged sandals.

Eventually Athena catches and tames Pegasus and then lends him back to Perseus. The two go and rescue the Princess Andromeda, who's been stripped naked, chained to a rock, and molested by a sea monster all because her mother boasted about how beautiful she is.

Don't boast when there are gods around, they just always take it super personal!

After the rescue, Perseus gives Pegasus back to Athena and the horse becomes a friend of the Muses. But, to be fair, having Pegasus on your side doesn't necessarily guarantee success. Thought Bubble, take us to the dark side of the horse.

===== Thought Bubble (6:16) =====

The warrior,Bellerophon decides that he wants to tame Pegasus. He spends the night at Athena's temple, receives a golden bridle, and some instruction, and everything goes according to plan. Pegasus tamed!

Huh, that was easy, thanks Thought Bubble!

Nah, I'm just kidding, 'cause things get real for real when Bellerophon, who has been falsely accused of adultery, is sent on a quest to kill the chimera. With Pegasus's help, Bellerophon stabs the chimera in the mouth. The fire breath melts his sword and the monster chokes on teh molten metal.

After the chimera, Pegasus and Bellerophon manage a couple other heroic, bloody victories. Iobates, the king who sent him on his quest, realizes that this guy is probably innocent and awards Bellerophon his daughter, Philonoe's hand in marriage.

Then stuff starts to get real for real for real. Instead of enjoying domestic bliss, Bellerophon decides that he deserves to be on Olympus alongside other heroes like Heracles.

And now that he's tamed Pegasus, he's just gonna hop on and fly up to Olympus to take what he feels is his rightful place and I'm sure that out of all the ambitious dudes in all of mythology, Bellerophon will be the one that this works out for, right? Wrong!

Zeus overhears Bellerophon's bragging about his plan (what'd I just say about boasting?). The god sends a gadfly to bite Pegasus on the butt. The horse rears up and throws Bellerophon. The arrogant hero falls to his death while Pegasus flies on to Olympus alone.

There, Zeus makes him his pack-horse where he carries Zeus's thunderbolts around. The horse be with Zeus always.

Thanks, Thought Bubble!

===== End Thought Bubble (8:00) =====

And finally, we can't do an episode on mythical horses without talking about unicorns. The Greeks and Romans thought unicorns were real. Animals with a horse's body, a stag's head, elephant's feet, a boar's tail, and a 3 1/2 foot horn.

Elephant feet? Really? Man, what a mess!

In medieval Europe, unicorns became an important symbol in art and allegory. By this point, unicorns had lost many of their original features and were represented mostly as majestic horses with a single horn protruding from their foreheads.

Now, it's easy to see the phallic symbolism of such a horn, but unicorns were also symbols of chastity. It was believed that they couldn't be captured through force, but would willingly lay their heads in teh lap of a young virgin.

So when unicorns appear alongside virgins in medieval art, like the famous Unicorn Tapestries, the virgin is meant to symbolize Mary. This is how the unicorn became a symbol of Jesus as well, with images of unicorn-killing acting as an allegory for the Crucifiction.

There are unicorns in East Asian mythology too. Qilin, the Chinese unicorn has the body of an antelope, an ox's tail, and a 12-foot long horn. It's appearance portents momentous changes like the birth or death of a king.

According to one myth, qilin appeared on teh banks of a river to give legendary Emperor Fuxi magical signs that would inspire Chinese writing.

Horses and their mythical relatives have a complicated relationship to humans. They can represent our worst impulses as centaurs do or a boon companion like the monster-fighting Pegasus. The wide range of their symbolism makes sense, given the wide range of a horse's place in teh history of human life.

Horses have been important human companions for a long long time. They've been transportation, pack animals, laborers, and even friends. Horses helped so many cultures experience and understand their landscape. So it makes sense that we'd want to tell stories about them.

Sort of, actually, how we do with cars today. If you think about it. And I think I'm fine with calling the Fast and Furious franchise an epic.

Next time, we're going to continue our survey of mythical monsters with that rowdy lot that you should never make a deal with: dragons.

Thanks for watching, we'll see you then!

===== Credits (10:30) =====

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Our animation team is Thought Cafe.

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Thanks for watching and for putting up with all of our horse puns. We're just horsing around. Neigh! But seriously, we hope you got a kick out of this episode.