Mythological Creatures

Centaur

**Description:** The centaur is a mythological creature. Its head, arms, and chest are those of a human and the rest of its body, including four legs, hindquarters, and a tail is like that of a horse.

**Origin:** According to Greek tradition, there are two families of centaurs. The more numerous and unruly centaurs are those born of the union of Ixion, King of the Lapithae and a cloud which Zeus disguised as his own wife, Hera. Chiron who was like the above centaurs in appearance fathered a different race of centaur, sober, learned and studious. His father was Cronus, the Titan and his mother was Philyra, an Oceanid (or ocean nymph). He was a famous physician and teacher and was renowned for his skill in hunting, medicine, music, and the art of prophecy. Taught by Apollo and Diana, Chiron went on to tutor the greatest Greek warriors, Aesculapius, Jason, Hercules, and Achilles.

Cerberus

**Description:** According to Horace, Cerberus possessed one hundred heads. Hesiod wrote that he had fifty, while most sources agree to only three. The center head was in the shape of a lion, while the other two were in the shape of a dog and a wolf, respectively. He also had a dragon's tail and a thick mane of writhing snakes.

**Origin:** It is generally thought that Cerberus was born to Echidne, a half-woman, half-serpent, and Typhon, the most fierce of all creatures.

Cyclopes

**Description:** The Cyclopes were almost like human beings but of a gigantic size and with only one eye in the middle of their heads. Essentially there were three of them: Brontes (thunder), Steropes (Lightning), and Arges (Thunderbolt).

**Origin:** They were born to Gaea and Uranus.

Chimera

**Description:** From the Greek meaning "she-goat" the Chimera is a fire-breathing creature that has the body of a goat, the head of a lion and the tail of a serpent. Some sources have represented the Chimera with three heads (the lion's head as the main part, then the goat's head sprouted from its back, and the serpent's or dragon’s head on its tail), but the popular myth tells of the single, fire-breathing head. The very unlikely aspect of the chimera has gradually turned its name into a synonym of a vain dream.

**Origin:** The chimera of Greek myths is the offspring of Echinda and Typhon. It has many other monstrous brothers and sisters.
**Griffin / Gryphon**

**Description:** The griffin or gryphon is a mythical quadruped with the foreparts of an eagle and the rear, tail, and hindquarters of a lion.

Its eagle-like head had pointed, upstanding ears. Feathers grew upon its head, neck and chest and the rest of the griffin’s body was covered in lion’s fur, subtly colored in shades of tawny brown.

Aelian said the wings of griffins were white and their necks were variegated in color with blue feathers. The griffin claws were especially valuable as they were reputed to change color in the presence of poison, which is why they made useful drinking vessels. At times, it is portrayed with a long snake-like tail. In some traditions, only the female has wings. Its nests are made of gold and its eggs resemble agates. It is supposed to be of gigantic proportions, the morphology being left to our own deduction after we have been informed that one claw is the size of a cow's horn.

**Origin:** The Griffin was known in Egypt before 3300 BC and is possibly more ancient still.

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**Harpy**

**Description:** The Harpies were fierce, filthy, winged monsters who had characteristics of a bird and a woman, similar to that of the early Sirens. Their hideous faces of women with sharp claws mounted on the bodies of vultures inspired both horror and disgust. They could fly as fast as a bolt of lightning.

**Origin:** The three daughters of Thaumas and Electre called Aello, Ocypete, and Celaeno were originally goddesses with beautiful hair and wings until they were reduced to such fearsome monsters. They were also referred to as "robbers," "snatchers," and "those who seize," meaning that they would steal anything that did not belong to them. They snatched food from their victims or left a loathsome stench rendering it inedible. They were also referred to as the "hounds of Zeus."

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**Fury / Erinyes**

**Description:** The Furies were considered hideous in appearance. They take the appearance of clawed women dressed in black and red with hair bristling of serpents. They carry whips and torches and are seen pursuing their victims.

**Origin:** The Furies, or Erinyes in Greek, have an origin that is not completely known; they were born, it is said, from drops of blood that fell from Uranus after he was slain by his son Cronus. It is also thought that they were the daughters of Mother Earth and Darkness, or of Cronus and Eurynome, or Cronus and Night. Though originally there was an indefinite number of Furies, eventually the Greeks decided that there were three: Tisiphone (the avenger), Megara (the jealous), and Alecto (the unresting).

**Role:** At first, the task of the Furies was to guard the entrance to Tartarus, to make certain that those who entered had atoned for their sins. Those who had not were rejected and had to wander as ghosts. They became better known for their responsibility as punishers of those who offended the Olympians.

Their main function was then to torment those who have committed a sin. Though originally probably reserved for murderers, and those who broke their oaths, the Furies eventually would come to punish any sin. They
would harass and injure their prey but not kill them. They pursue wrongdoers relentlessly, until death, often driving them to suicide. They would extend their torments into the underworld, cruelly lashing the offenders. The sight of them could drive one to madness.

**Hydra**

**Description:** A huge serpent with nine heads (although in some accounts she may have six, seven, eight or fifty heads). It lived at Lerna, in a pool formed by the Amymone spring. It is sometimes said that the Hydra had the body of a dog.

**Origin:** The Hydra was the daughter of Echidna and Typhon and the half-sister of the Nemean Lion.

**Kraken**

**Description:** Probably no legendary creature was as horrifying as the Kraken, a giant sea monster. According to stories this huge, many armed, creature looked like an island when motionless and could reach as high as the top of a sailing ship's main mast with its arms deployed. When the Kraken attacked a ship, it wrapped its arms around the hull and capsized it. The crew would either drown or be eaten by the monster.

**Origin:** The Kraken of legend is probably what we know today as the giant squid or cephalopod. Though they are considerably less then a mile and a half across, they are large enough to wrestle with a whale.

**Gorgon / Medusa**

**Description:** The gorgon was an immortal, but the most famous gorgon, Medusa, was mortal. Born beautiful, Medusa was seduced by Poseidon, disguised as a horse, in one of Athena's temples. Athena became incensed and turned Medusa into a fearsome winged creature. Originally, Medusa was depicted as a horse with wings, then a woman with equine hindquarters and wings on her hair. At a later date, portraits of her reveals that her teeth were transformed into the tusks of a wild boar, her black tongue protruded and became too large for her mouth, her hands became brazen claws and her wings were changed into serpents. Her gaze alone turned men to stone. Later depictions show a hideous creature with snakes for hair.

**Origin:** Three sisters and daughters of ancient, pre-titan gods, Phorcys and Ceto.

**Minotaur**

**Description:** In Greek mythology, the Minotaur is a monstrous double, sometimes with the head of a bull and the body of a man or, conversely, with the body of a bull and the head of a man.
Origins: This creature was born of Pasiphae, Minos' wife, the king of Crete and a white bull sent by Poseidon who was angry with Minos. Minos was so disgusted and embarrassed by his wife and the Minotaur that he ordered Daedalus to hide them. Daedalus built a maze called the Labyrinth where they were to live and never escape.

One of Minotaur's half brothers ordered that seven youths and seven maidens from Athens be let into the maze every ninth year to feed the Minotaur. The Minotaur survived by capturing and eating these youngsters because they could not find their way out of the maze.

Pegasus

Origin

Pegasus sprang from the blood of the Gorgon Medusa when the hero Perseus beheaded her.

Role

Pegasus is the one that brings the thunder to Zeus.

Phoenix

Description: There are many, many descriptions of this legendary bird. Al-Jili considers the phoenix a prime example of unseen things (such as God), which can only be understood through their names and attributes.

Some describe the phoenix as an eagle-sized bird; half eagle and half pheasant. Others say it is heron-like or a conglomeration of the most beautiful parts of all the birds in the world. Its name comes from the Greek word for "purple" because the phoenix is associated with fire and the sun. It has been described as golden or multicolored. Some say it never eats. Others say it eats only dew. Most believe there is only one of its kind and it lives alone in Arabia or Ethiopia. All agree it is a bird of great beauty.

Powers: The Phoenix enjoys immortality, which had to be renewed with fire every 300 to 500 years. When the end of its life cycle drew near, the phoenix would gather aromatic herbs, woods, and spices from around the world with which to build its own funeral pyre or nest. Sitting in the nest, and having turned to face the rays of the sun, beating its wings, it deliberately fans the flames for itself and is consumed in the fire. Once the old body was consumed, the phoenix would be reborn from a worm, its marrow, or an egg found among the ashes and would embark on another 500 years of life. According to some legends, the renewed phoenix carried its old bones to the City of the Sun in Egypt where they were disposed of with special funeral rites.

Symbol: Wherever it is found, the phoenix is associated with resurrection, immortality, triumph over adversity, and that which rises out of the ashes. The Phoenix is symbolic of rebirth, hope, purity, chastity, marriage, faith, constancy, summer, eternity, immortality, and light.
Satyr

**Description:** The Satyrs were creatures that looked like men, but had the hooves and feet as well as the tails of goats. They could be best described as goat-men. Their preferred pastimes were to chase after the wood nymphs and to play nasty tricks on men.

**Origins:** One of the most famous Satyrs was Pan, a son of Hermes by Penelope or of Zeus and Hybris. Also called Hylaeos, or forest god, Pan was represented as a bearded man with a large hooked nose, and with the ear, horns and legs of a goat. His body was covered with hair and he held a seven-reed shepherd's pipe. His name is the basis for the word "panic". He was the god of green fields and the guardian of the shepherds associated with the worship of Dionysus, and as a mountain deity with that of Cybele. He is at home in any wild place but, his favorite is Arcady, where he was born. He is always in pursuit of one of the nymphs but, always rejected because he is ugly. He was fond of sportive dances, singing with woodland nymphs and playing on pipes, the sprinx or Pan pipes, invented by him according to this story. Satyrs are always represented at the Dionysus banquets, the god of wine.

Sirens

**Description:** The Sirens or Mermaids were odd-looking creatures that had features of a bird from the waist down and a body of a woman from the waist up. The Sirens were thought to be three in number, but that is not certain. The most common names were Teles, Raidne, Molpe, Thelxiope, Aglaophonus, Parthenope, Ligeia, and Leukosia.

It is said that the Sirens induced by Hera competed with the Muses in a singing contest and lost. The Muses plucked the Sirens’ feathers and wore them as a trophy. With their feathers plucked the Sirens were no longer able to fly and turned half of their body into a fish tail. Half-woman and half-dolphin or fish depicted today are more common than the early sixteenth century part woman, dolphin and lion. The fish tail was thought to be shed when needed to make the mermaid more attractive to men. There is a theory that mermaids were actually misidentified sea-cows, mammals or porpoises.

**Place:** Sirens lived then on an island, called Anthemoessa, in the sea between Sicily and Italy. Huge boulders surrounded their island where ships would be destroyed if they ventured too closely.

**Role:** The Sirens sang songs to sea travelers to lure them to their deaths. Their songs were enchanting and would make sailors forget their sense of direction. The sailors would steer straight toward the island and crash into the rocks that surrounded it. The island grew white with bleaching bones, from which the Sirens would make musical instruments. According to Appolodorus, the talented Sirens boasted not only a vocal trio, but a small instrumental ensemble, two accompanying the third on lyre and flute.

**Powers:** Also known as 'Sea Sirens', their personality and appearance is most commonly known to be that of a seductive temptress. Their beauty has been said to reflect the wondrous treasures and power of the sea itself. The sound of the mermaid singing was once thought to be a reason for sailors meeting disaster, as the haunting lilting voice was said to be heard coming from the waves forecasting bad weather. Mixed omens surround the stories of their sudden appearance being feared but also known to have saved the lives of sailors who had fallen overboard. Women saw them as enemies, as they were often thought to seek out men as partners, getting married, turning their partners into 'mermen'.
Scylla

**Description:** A monster with six arms, six heads with four eyes each and at the lower part of her body, six hideous dogs with mouths containing three rows of razor sharp teeth. With necks fully expanded, Scylla is 15 feet tall; the necks are 5 feet long each. Hidden in a cave at the bottom of a cliff, Scylla usually let her heads rearing up out of the chasm, dolphins or any human or animal that would venture in the surroundings.

**Origin:** Scylla was formerly a beautiful maiden daughter of Phorcys and Crateis or Lamia and Triton. Glaucus who was madly in love with Scylla went to Circe, the enchantress and asked for a potion that would burn Scylla's heart. Circe fell in love with him but Glaucus still wanted Scylla. Circe was so mad she made a poison to damage Scylla beauty and put the poison in Scylla's bathing spot. When Scylla took a bath, she turned into a monster. In other versions of the legends, Poseidon fell in love with Scylla and a jealous Amphitrite asked Circe to punish her.

Sphinx

**Description:** There are three types of sphinx.

- The androsphinx, the typical lion with a human face/head
- The criosphinx, a ram-headed lion.
- The hierocosphonx has the body of a lion and the head of a hawk.

In early Greek mythology, the bestial nature warped the mind and spirit of this being and it was portrayed as an unhappy monster, a symbol of the 'terrible mother'; the monster of death bringing extreme bad luck and the perversion of the intellect, womanhood, and power. The Greek sphinx had the bust and head of a lady, the wings of an eagle, the body and legs of a lioness, and the tail of a snake or dragon. Sometimes it was portrayed with the body of a bull and the legs of a lion. The Roman sphinx was a simple solar symbol.

**Origins:** The Sphinx is a legendary creature made up of both human and animal parts. This figure originated in Egypt and then spread, with many modifications, throughout the ancient world. Its name comes from the Greek "sphingo" which means "to strangle."

Unicorn

**Description:** The unicorn is a mythical creature. Strong, wild, and fierce, it was impossible to tame by man. Plinie, the Roman naturalist records it as "a very ferocious beast, similar in the rest of its body to a horse, with the head of a deer, the feet of an elephant, the tail of a boar, a deep, bellowing voice, and a single black horn, two cubits in length, standing out in the middle of its forehead." (Cubit is normally defined as the length from elbow to the index fingertip.)

**Origin:** The unicorn is an archetypal monster, present both in eastern and western mythology. Powers: Throughout the stories of the unicorn, its horn, the unicorn, is said to have great medicinal powers. It protects against deadly diseases, and if mixed into a potion, you would be protected.

**Symbol:** Its white coloring made it a natural symbol for purity and chastity. The mythological unicorn was a symbol of chivalry with qualities befitting this status, proud and untamable.