

**Fabulous Creatures,  
Mythical Monsters, and  
Animal Power Symbols: A  
Handbook**

*Cassandra Eason*

**Greenwood Press**

# Fabulous Creatures, Mythical Monsters, and Animal Power Symbols

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*A Handbook*

CASSANDRA EASON



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# Introduction

From early times humans have been fascinated by the animal and bird kingdoms. From the fabulous real-life creatures described by voyagers from Ancient Egyptian and Greek times onward, a strong mythology of mystical and mythical creatures has developed. These creatures may once have roamed the earth, only to become extinct. Among indigenous societies, animals and birds have been and still are accorded great respect. Creatures that are hunted for food are considered gifts from a generic and universal Mistress of the Animals, Birds, or Fish, or a Lord of the Animals. By studying Paleolithic cave painting and artifacts from these sites, one can speculate that traditional hunting rituals were accorded almost magical significance. These hunting practices have remained relatively unchanged for many centuries among such people as the Innu of North America and the Sámi reindeer people of Lapland.

For example, in the British Museum in London there is a small wounded bison image on stone that is 12,500 years old, engraved during the Upper Paleolithic age. It comes from a cave in the Tarn et Garonne region of France. The diagonal lines on the animal's side are believed to represent spears thrown at the creature, and the wavy lines on the animal's lung area represent blood, made with red ochre. Such charms may have been carried for luck; perhaps the user believed it would bring about, by some kind of mental or telepathic power, the successful conclusion of the hunt by drawing the animals to the hunters and at the same time guiding the hunters to the herds.

Life for the Innu or Montagnais–Naskapi people of Quebec and Labrador, even today, depends on the caribou migration. Before the hunt, according to tradition, the leaders dreamed of caribou migrations and saw the route the

herds would take. The women once decorated caribou skin coats, showing the design of Caribou Mountain where the Caribou Master of the Spirits was said to live, and the route that the dreams indicated the animals would take. Hand-sewn and hand-painted, the colorful caribou skin coats of the Innu are now rare, though one is on display in the British Museum in London. There are estimated to be about 150 Innu caribou skin coats surviving in museums in the world, dating from 1700 to the early 1900s. Hopefully, with the revival of indigenous arts, the coats may become more commonplace again. The Mokushan feast at which these coats were once worn is a ritual that honors the caribou through the ritual consumption by elders of caribou fat and bone marrow. The women prepare the carcass of the first caribou caught, splintering the long bones to create broth. The broth is drunk carefully so as not to spill a drop.

On the northwest coast of America, local tribal fishermen pray and hold ceremonies each year to ensure the return of salmon and candlefish to the rivers. Fish represent wealth in that society, and salmon are the color of copper, the highest-value metal in that society.

The first salmon of the year is eaten at a ceremonial feast, and thanks are given to the Salmon people. Salmon bones are then returned to the water so they might regenerate into fish (a practice that is ecologically sound because it adds minerals to the water).

This natural rhythm, common among indigenous people, is just one of many ritual actions to ensure that humans live in harmony with animals, birds, and fish, and it is a kind of magical offering in the belief that sufficient food supplies will be given to the people in return. This respect, based on dependency on the animal kingdom for food, may explain the creation of idealized or especially intelligent and spiritually wise members of different animal and bird species as helpers of the nature gods and goddesses in many lands, called Animal or Bird Clan leaders in the Native North American tradition. These imagined, wise, and often larger-than-life creatures were described in myth as bringers of gifts, such as fire, to humanity, and they were regarded as messengers of the deities. Some high-ranking families in cultures throughout the world, from the Innu to the ancient clans of Scotland, claim symbolic, or in some cases, actual ancestry from the wise animals.

## **THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MAGICAL CREATURES**

Magical creatures represent, in a pure and undiluted form, strengths and qualities that humans desire in their own lives: the courage of the lion, the selfless devotion of the dog, the single-minded focus of the hawk, and the

protective fierceness of Mother Wolf toward her young and her clan. In modern urban society, where daily contact and observation of animals is not so frequent, the spiritual focus of these creatures can have symbolic and psychological significance and can draw people closer to nature and activate their own innate natural instincts. This could occur by reading old legends of these creatures or by studying the actual creatures described in the myths, such as the wolf, in conservation areas.

The Ancient Egyptians linked these higher animal qualities with specific deities. The sacred animals and birds embodied the most positive characteristics of their ruling gods and goddesses. Each Egyptian town and region, called a Nome, had its own local sacred animal, centered on the place where the related deity was most venerated. It is hard to imagine the huge scale of this veneration, but archaeologists have excavated vast acres of cat cemeteries at Bubastis, Bast's cult center on the Nile delta, where it is estimated that many hundreds of thousands of mummified cats were buried over centuries. Although sacred animals have always been central in Ancient Egypt, animal temple cults developed into their most popular and widespread form during the Late and Ptolemaic periods, between 664 and 30 BCE.

The goddess Bast in her cat form, or Bastet in her cat-headed form, was the goddess of music, dance, children, women, and fertility, and is still adopted by some young business women as a power symbol because of her fierce protectiveness to her kittens.

## **FABULOUS CREATURES AS POWER SYMBOLS**

Totally mythical beasts can also act as psychological power icons. For example, the phoenix, common to several cultures, is said to burn itself on a pyre of fragrant incense every 500 or 1,000 years, whereupon a new bird rises from the ashes as a symbol of renewal and transformation. Medieval heraldry adopted a number of mythical creatures such as the unicorn and the griffon as family crests, engraved on armor and shields to express values that typified a family or clan. Native North American clans engraved their family clan animals, whether idealized beavers or mythical thunderbirds, on their totem poles.

## **SHAPE-SHIFTING INTO ANIMALS**

Changing into an animal or bird form was common among myths of pre-Christian deities in a number of cultures, a strategy adopted, according to the stories, when the ancients wished to travel swiftly or undetected by humans.

For example, according to Norse myth, the fertility and love goddess Freya, often took the form of a falcon by putting on a falcon skin that gave her the power to fly. Bronze Freya falcon necklaces are still sold in Sweden, where there is a revival of interest in the pre-Christian religions, especially among younger people. I asked a businesswoman I met recently in Central Sweden about this. She was wearing a Freya charm, and she said that it reminded her of the courage of Freya in her fierce battle aspects.

Shape-shifting was also associated with exceptionally powerful humans, for example the Viking berserkers or bear men. The term comes from the Old Norse word *berserkr*; a wild warrior or champion. Such warriors wore bearskins, and the origin of the word was probably *bera* (bear) and *serkr* (shirt or coat), or it might have meant *bare of shirt*, that is fighting without armor. According to eye witness accounts (albeit recorded later) the Berserker warriors, who were dedicated to the father god Odin, went into ecstatic trance in battle and howled like animals, foamed at the mouth, and seemed totally fearless and unaware of pain. The enemy saw them as wild animals; they were sometimes described as wearing wolfskins or bearskins. The warriors thought of themselves as bears, and because of the power of the mind, in this psychological sense, they appeared, in the heat of battle, like wild animals to the enemy, who no doubt had heard stories about them turning into bears. Because of all of this they struck terror into all who opposed them.<sup>1</sup>

## THE SHAPE-SHIFTING SAINT

Shape-shifting accounts may also be found in Celtic myth, among the stories of their deities, including the intriguing account of the Celtic Christian, Saint Patrick. There is little hard evidence about the precise dates of Patrick's conversion of Ireland, but it seems to have been during the second half of the fifth century. Celtic Christian chroniclers seem fairly liberal about events and dates. It is told that Saint Patrick and his men were travelling to the king's court, when he discovered that the Druids (Celtic priests) had prepared an ambush for him. As they walked, the saint and his followers chanted the sacred *Lorica*, or *Deer's Cry*, that later became known as the *St. Patrick's Breastplate Prayer*, claimed, again with some uncertainty, to have been created by the saint. According to the myth the Druids did not see the saint and his followers pass, but saw only a gentle doe followed by twenty fawns.

One explanation is that there were deer present and that Patrick, who was supposedly gifted in the powers of illusion, like some modern-day magicians,

somehow lowered his and his followers' profiles psychologically, or distracted the enemy. It may have been that he and his followers went unseen, perhaps behind bushes, while the Druids were watching the procession of deer, an animal sacred to them. Many stories of the amazing deeds of Christian saints were probably created to win over pagan worshippers by convincing them that the new deity was more powerful than the old ones. I can describe this ability apparently displayed by St Patrick only as being similar to when there is a confrontation, and some people are not picked on by the troublemakers, while others stand out as victims, maybe because they are transmitting unseen waves of fear. We do not really understand how, or indeed whether, people can send out certain energies to prevent attack, or whether there is some kind of illusion. In Irish the Deer Cry is called Fáed Fíada. There exist a variety of versions, written in both Irish and Latin.

Most of these versions have an openly strong Christian and anti-pagan theme and seek God's protection against such dangers as "black laws of paganism, against deceit of idolatry, against spells of women and smiths and druids."<sup>22</sup>

Though Saint Patrick was crusading for Christianity in a pagan land, the version of the Deer Cry I use is generally more nature based, and it is included in all the other versions. I learned this shortened version when I was working with some Irish women who lived in a dangerous part of Ireland and so were interested in the whole idea of psychological profile lowering. (There are a number of versions of the Deer Cry in books and online.)

Today I put on  
 The power of Heaven,  
 The brightness of the sun,  
 The radiance of the moon,  
 The splendour of fire,  
 The fierceness of the lightning.

Today I put on  
 The whiteness of snow,  
 The swiftness of the wind,  
 The depth of the sea,  
 The stability of the earth,  
 And the hardness of rock.

Christ with me, Christ before me,  
 Christ behind me, Christ in me,  
 Christ under me, Christ over me,  
 Christ in every eye, which may look on me,  
 Christ in every ear, which may hear me.

The Saint Patrick account is also quite unusual because shape-shifting into deer is more usually associated with myths about Celtic goddesses. I have written about this more in Chapter 1 on Animal Worship and Chapter 7 on Clan Animals, and it is a theme that recurs frequently throughout the book.

## **THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SHAPE-SHIFTING**

Of course no one is suggesting that even a saint can change into an animal. But because the belief still exists among some indigenous people, it may have some enduring psychological significance. Supposing people were able not just to imagine they had the courage of a lion, but to take into their own energy field the sensation of feeling as though they were lions, while at the same time retaining the necessary restraints of humanity. I know of no scientific experiments into the effects of such visualization, either to dismiss it as pure imagination on the part of the person projecting leonine energies, or to suggest that shape-shifting might be a valuable psychological technique in confidence or assertiveness training.

## **SHAMANIC SHAPE-SHIFTING**

Shamans, the priest/healer/magicians of both sexes in tribal societies in areas as far apart as India; Australia; Japan and China; Siberia and Mongolia; and in Africa; among the Bedouins in the Middle East; and in North, Central, and South America, frequently put on bird or animal headdresses, animal skins, or feather cloaks as part of their rituals. According to numerous eye witness accounts, they enter into trance to travel in their minds as birds or animals, visiting the spirit worlds to seek healing for individuals and blessings or help for the people from the Mistress of the Herds or the Sea Creatures. This would seem a very old tradition.

Painted in black on the cave walls of Les Trois Frères in the French Pyrenees is a shamanic figure that may portray a specific man dressed in animal skins and mask, dating from about 14,000 BCE. He stands high above the animals that throng the walls. Only his feet are human; he possesses the large round eyes of an owl or lion, the antlers and ears of a stag, the front paws of a lion or bear, the genitals of a feline, and the tail of a horse or wolf. Similar costumes can be seen in African seasonal rites and rites of passage ceremonies today.

Aztec priests would also assume such animal guises with headdresses and skins or feather cloaks to signify the power of the deities, many of who had

animal or bird characteristics. At an Aztec exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2005, I saw a headdress of a priest of the god Ehcatl with his birdlike beak, who generated wind, the precursor of rain. Once the priest assumed the role and the bird headdress, he ritually *became* Ehcatl, and it was believed that his bird spirit flew through the skies generating in ritual what the people believed were the necessary energies to herald the rainy season that was so necessary for the crops to grow. As with other shamanic practices, the inert body would lie below as if dead, or dance so fast it was easy for onlookers, in the excitement of the ritual and perhaps moving fast themselves to a drum beat, to imagine that the priest was flying.

A number of New Age practitioners and traditional spiritual teachers of shamanism and indigenous religions instruct others to achieve this mind flight using a variety of techniques including drums, rattles, dance, and chanting.

## WEIRD CREATURES

In recent years there has been a great revival in interest in werewolves and other strange creatures not currently recognizable as existing species. Some are hypothesized in the more popular forms of the media to be of paranormal or even extraterrestrial origin, and sightings of some of the strangest are often accompanied by increased anecdotal reports of UFOs in the area.

Cryptozoology, the science of hidden or unknown animals, from the Greek words *kryptos*, *zoon*, and *logos*, which mean *hidden*, *animals*, and *discourse*, aims not to research the paranormal, but to discover and explain previously unknown and unclassified creatures. Of course this is not a new study. For example the unicorn was first described in 398 BCE by the Ancient Greek naturalist Cresias. He travelled throughout Persia and the Far East and told of a creature he encountered that seems remarkably similar to the fabled unicorn, with a white horse body, a dark red head and dark blue eyes, and a three-colored, pointed horn about one-and-a-half feet long. It may be that unicorns died out because their powdered horns, as Cresias reported, when powdered, were considered to have healing properties and so were highly prized. Of course we have of no way of proving that unicorns existed outside the realms of myth. However in parts of the Far East the tiger is threatened with extinction because its paws and other body parts are prized for medicinal purposes and as an aphrodisiac. European Medieval bestiaries are filled with accounts and illustrations of strange creatures such as the unicorn, seen during journeys by Greek and Roman philosophers and chroniclers. These bestiaries formed fascinating early cryptozoology books.

In popular culture the term *cryptozoology* has been widened to include creatures that are not explicable in terms of the nature of the planet earth. Of course it may be that some we consider paranormal may be animal mutations or the survival of creatures from much earlier times. With new methods of detection, some of these weird creatures may one day be found in an as-yet-unexplored remote rainforest, or a much-less-exotic but similar creature may emerge to provide the basis for myths to grow up over time like Chinese whispers.

## WHY THE REVIVED INTEREST IN WEIRD CREATURES?

The interest in strange creatures, especially in what appear to be (in current terms of reference) other worldly encounters, may be partly due to conventional religious declines in a number of westernized societies, in which people are desperately looking for some proof that there is life beyond the material world, and that we are not alone in the universe. This of course does not make the sightings objectively true or paranormal.

What is more, with advanced, computer-created graphics, special effects in films such as *Jurassic Park* and the recent *King Kong* and programs like the *X Files*, it becomes easy to blur the lines on an unconscious level between what is actual and what is fantasy. Therefore a lake monster or a Yeti in the remote parts of Tibet suddenly seems more possible; the boundaries of possibility have extended within the mind because of this media simulation.

The frightening nature of many of these creatures may also reflect a primitive instinctive terror of being harmed by forces beyond our control, and this is not a recent phenomenon. In the Christian religion these terrifying forces are focused on the devil himself, often pictured as horned and cloven-footed, and still believed by some to be an actual, physical being. The werewolf, for example, reflects a fear of being eaten alive, of bloodletting, hints of which can be detected lurking beneath the surface of unedited versions of so-called fairy stories, as in, for example, the German Brothers Grimm Red Riding Hood written around 1812.

## WEREWOLVES

The werewolf, or wolfman or -woman, appears throughout the literature of Northern Europe, with Germany being a particularly rich source of werewolf legends. The first werewolf accounts are found in the Babylonian Epic

of Gilgamesh, written about 1800 BCE. Throughout the Middle Ages there were numerous accounts and legends, especially in Western Europe. Through the ages people have believed in werewolves and the legends of people turning into wolves on the night of the full moon have grown up around certain areas. There may have been an original attack or a series of attacks by a huge ferocious wolf that stood on its hind legs. These may have occurred more frequently around the full moon, when people were more likely to be out at night walking in the countryside because the increased natural light made travel easier when the moon was bright.<sup>3</sup>

Any other attacks in the same place might thereafter be interpreted in the same way, and unscrupulous, strong, hairy men might have dressed in wolfskins to avoid detection and hide behind the superstitious fears of werewolves to attack females out at night alone. The most recent reported werewolf sighting, or at least one considered locally to be a werewolf sighting, was in 1998 at Hahn Air Force Base, Germany, just outside the village of Wittlich, the last town where, it is said, a werewolf was killed in the late 1880s. There is a shrine just outside town where a candle always burns. Legend has it that if the candle ever goes out, the werewolf will return. One night during 1998 the candle went out, and security policemen investigating alarms at the base saw a huge wolflike creature seven or eight feet tall, who jumped a twelve-foot security fence after taking three immense leaps. I have written more about werewolves in Chapter 6.

## MOTHPMAN

Perhaps the strangest creature, the subject of a popular film in 2002, *The Mothman Prophecies*, is called *Mothman*. He has been sighted in a number of places in Virginia and West Virginia, most commonly near an abandoned ammunitions dump dating from World War II, close to Point Pleasant, West Virginia. The strange creature was called Mothman after a fictional Batman enemy, Killer Moth. The majority of sightings were between 12 November 1966 and December 1967, though there have been occasional reported sightings as recently as 2005.

Mothman has been consistently described as a grey figure with large hypnotic red eyes that glowed in the dark, which were set right into his shoulders or chest. He had wings folded against his back, and it was reported that he chased cars at speed approaching 100 mph.

A number of hypotheses have been presented to explain eyewitness accounts of Mothman, ranging from misidentification and media hype to a huge bird or some kind of paranormal creature. There are numerous abandoned and

collapsed tunnels that could in theory harbor such a creature were it to exist. Mothman's appearances also coincided with anecdotally reported UFO sightings in the Point Pleasant area during the same period, and sightings of the mythical Native North American thunderbird, to which Mothman was reported to have similarities. Cases like this are curious, even allowing for media hype and hoax reports, and the intense distress felt for months afterward by those involved seem out of all proportion to the experience.<sup>4</sup>

## THE FOUR CELESTIAL ANIMALS OF *FENG SHUI*

The four celestial animals of *Feng Shui*—a bird, a tortoise, a dragon, and a tiger—were once called the four celestial palaces and were associated with major constellation groupings in Chinese astrology. They demonstrate how archetypal or idealized animals have become central to a major belief system of energy balancing that has spread from China to the West in recent years. *Feng Shui* is a popular, worldwide energy-directing method adopted on business premises and in homes alike, apparently to ensure that the *Qi*, or universal life force, is directed through the home or office in the most beneficial way. It may be useful to study these four creatures, regardless of whether *Feng Shui* is an objectively valid system, because the animals have moved far beyond their original role of lucky or protective creatures to become part of the way a considerable number of people measure and try to manipulate energies within their homes.<sup>5</sup>

## WHAT IS *FENG SHUI*?

*Feng Shui*, which means *wind and water power*, may have been practiced in some form for up to 6,000 years. A Neolithic grave from that time, excavated in the Henan province of China, showed on either side of the buried body two of the four *Feng Shui* celestial animals etched on clam shell, the dragon on the east side and the tiger on the west. The first actual discovered writings about *Feng Shui* do not appear until the fourth century CE, however, in a sacred Chinese text called the *Book of Burial*, written by Guo Pu (276–324 CE) during the Jin Dynasty. It is suggested here that the universal *Qi* life force is carried on the wind (*Feng*), representing change and transformation in nature. *Qi* is held or contained within water (*Shui*), which provides a more stable form of the life force. The *Book of Burial* described how, by finding a place where the four animals were in harmony according to the characteristics of the landscape, the best site might be identified for imperial tombs, the original purpose of *Feng Shui*.

The Form or Shape method, the more intuitive of the formal *Feng Shui* Schools or traditions, involves visually assessing and identifying, rather than measuring, the form and nature of the landscape, the site, and the specific location of the building, according to traditional principles set down by the early *Feng Shui* geomancers. The founder was the Imperial *Feng Shui* master Yang Yun Sung in Kwangsi province, China, about 840 to 888 CE. The method was inspired by the dramatic nature of the landscape in that area.

## THE RED PHOENIX OR BIRD

The red phoenix is associated with the south point of the compass. It was in the ideal Chinese location, positioned in front of the main entrance door to a home or business. Chinese front doors traditionally face south, the direction of the sun, even in apartment blocks. More populist westernized *Feng Shui* practices site the red phoenix in front of the main door regardless of the compass orientation of the door, and they locate the other three creatures accordingly. The phoenix is said ideally to need an open space at the front of the site or house, on a small hill gently sloping down, but not too steeply, or the phoenix will fall off. A small pool here, or a winding stream, is considered good, so that the water transmits the *Qi* gently.

The phoenix, whose name means gracefulness, represents the sun and the summer, the season of warmth and time of harvest. It symbolizes fame and good fortune. In Chinese mythology the body of the phoenix is said to signify the five human qualities. Its head represents virtue; the wings represent duty; the back portrays ritually correct behavior; the breast stands for humanity; the stomach represents reliability.

The red phoenix of the South is often depicted as the mate of the celestial dragon of the East. It is linked to the Chinese element of fire, which is portrayed as dynamic and energetic. Its prosperity- and success-bringing energy, *Yang Qi*, comes from the south.

## BLACK TORTOISE

The black tortoise is sometimes called the *Dark Warrior*. He stands in the North (or the back of the house in modern westernized practice). The tortoise needs enclosed protective sheltering land such as low hills at the back. It is the creature of the moon and the winter, and a symbol of long life, the family, strength, and endurance. Its element is water and it is mysterious, intuitive, and compliant.

Its slow gentle power *T'sang Qi* comes from the north, flowing slowly and gently, bringing harmony and tranquility.

## THE GREEN DRAGON

There are nine Chinese dragons that control the various universal elements. The green dragon is the Earth dragon.

The dragon stands on the east (or in modern westernized adaptation, to the left) side of the house as the practitioner faces the front door. Traditionally the land of the dragon should be higher than that of the tiger in the West. The balance between the dragon and tiger is considered an important one in *Feng Shui* practice. Too powerful a tiger is said to be reflected in disruptive energies and maybe in power struggles in the family.

The dragon represents the East, the springtime, the direction of sunrise. It is associated with thunder and the Chinese element of wood, which signifies health, ambitions, and growth. Its energy is called *Sheng Qi*, the power that is believed to stimulate new beginnings, fertility, and an increase in everything positive in the home or workplace.

## THE WHITE TIGER

To the Chinese, a white tiger symbol is considered inauspicious, especially in matters of gambling or speculation. However, in *Feng Shui*, the White Tiger is an icon of strength, disruption, or more positively necessary change, and protection against evil intentions from strangers. It traditionally stands to the west of a building (or in modern westernized adaptation to the right side) as a practitioner faces the front door.

The white tiger symbolizes autumn, the Chinese element of Metal, which represents determination, unyielding powers, and unpredictability. The *Sha* or Tiger *Qi* is very fierce *Qi*, and it is believed to rush in straight lines through a home, overwhelming other energies if unchecked.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

Unusually perhaps, for a resource book, a large proportion of the material comes from the oral tradition. The legends and myths about a number of the creatures in the following chapters have been collected orally in my

travels and research during more than twenty years, from people of different cultures, from their family, or from local traditions. I have collated these along with material from written and Internet sources into a private database of millions of words. Because of this there are variations in legends and chants, such as the Saint Patrick Deer Cry, and the anecdotal oral versions are part of a living and evolving tradition, which is what mythology should represent.

So that you can follow up the references and use them for more in-depth study if you wish, I have suggested in the reading list at the end of each chapter a great number of books that deal with each subject separately.

## **DEVELOPING THE MATERIAL**

Rather than giving you specific page references to read out of context, I have focused more on high-quality books to be read in more detail. These will expand your knowledge on those topics that fascinate you and act as reference sources for project or reference work. If you do want a quick follow-up of any details I have given, the Internet is also an excellent source of material. It may include research in the field, or direct you to people who have visited the areas associated with the legends, or who have gone back to ancient sources in old languages, as well as presenting more academic papers. You can also find traditional sites of indigenous wisdom that may tell myths and legends in different versions so you can decide which one seems best to you to typify the creature concerned. In this way you will understand what it was that prompted our ancestors to write about the animals and to describe what they had seen in dreams, or through rich imagination that embellished or changed the stories over time.

Perhaps an elderly relative mentioned an even older relative who once saw a strange creature in a remote country. As new species are discovered in remote rainforests, and as other species die out, our descendants may marvel at the mythical white Siberian tiger or polar bear unless we seriously begin to tackle global warming and take responsibility for worldwide conservation.

Begin your own journal of mystical and mythical creatures. Keep your journal on your computer, or use a handwritten one, and collect material online of old drawings that can be downloaded for noncommercial purposes. Look on Web sites for unusual accounts and legends build your own database for creative work and for handing on your favorite stories to your descendants.

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## CHAPTER 1

# Animal Worship

---



There is a long and close relationship between animals and deities in pre-Christian societies. This relationship still exists in hunting societies where practices are largely unchanged over the centuries. They reflect the dependency of hunting and fishing societies on the coming of the herds and shoals. They also reflect the link between a Mother goddess figure as the creatrix and animals who could be entreated for food. Excavated artifacts, art, and sites are the main source of information, but their meaning is open to interpretation. Other information from preliterate time comes from folk stories handed down in the oral tradition for many centuries. For example, few Native North American myths were recorded before the nineteenth century. However, there is a growing body of writings from indigenous teachers, especially in the Native North American world.<sup>1</sup>

The world's earliest cave paintings were discovered in Fumane Cave, near Verona in northern Italy. They are between 32,000 and 36,500 years old and were originally painted in red ochre. Though faded and covered in calcite, they show a four-legged beast and a man with an animal head. These paintings may have had some significance in the ritual of worshipping early earth deities.

### THE MISTRESS OF THE ANIMALS

The Mistress of the Animals or Herds or the Lady of the Beasts is a generic term used in different cultures and ages for an Earth goddess. She was believed to be responsible for the care of and release of animals to the hunters. (The early Bird goddesses are covered in Chapter 4 and the Sea Mothers in Chapter 8.)

Like the Caribou Master or Spirit of the Montagnais-Naskapi people of Quebec and Labrador, the Mistress of the Herds and her male counterpart, the Horned Hunter, in different cultures, transmitted rules through messages. These messages were believed to have been given by the gods or spirits to wise huntsmen and shamans. These safeguards ensured that the forest or land would not be overhunted, and that respect for the animals would be maintained. Though these laws were practical, such as restrictions on killing breeding females, they had more weight because they were considered divine edicts.

Even in more complex civilizations like the Ancient Greeks, Artemis, the goddess of Hunt, punished hunters who killed pregnant or nursing animals with death by her silver arrows.

### WHY A MISTRESS OF THE HERDS?

Early people, who witnessed human and animal life cycles and the seasonal variations in plants and trees, assumed that a Mother or Earth goddess gave birth to all forms of life, and so human and animal remains were returned to the earth after death. Even today, among some existing hunting peoples, the Earth Mother is offered the most precious body parts of the first animal killed in the hunt. In Sweden, as a relic of this folk custom, even sophisticated moose hunters from the cities leave the entrails of the slain animal on a rock in the forest as an offering to the Earth Mother, though none I have interviewed have any idea why.

The historian Anne Baring describes in her book, *Myth of the Goddess*, how at a burial site at Mal'ta, near Lake Baikal, Siberia, twenty mammoth ivory figures of goddesses, carbon dated between 16,000 and 13,000 BCE, have been excavated.<sup>2</sup> One is dressed in lion skin. Found within a child's grave, the small goddess figures were surrounded by six ivory birds, either geese or swans with wings in flight, an ivory fish, and the skeletons of fourteen ritually buried animals. The tiny lion-skin goddess may have been an early representation of the association between the goddesses and animals. Her feet were tapered so she could have been originally carried while hunting and set in the ground as a good luck charm.

In Siberia, indigenous hunters still pay respect to Bugudy Musun, Siberian Mother Goddess of the Animals, an old but very physically powerful goddess who sometimes assumed the form of a huge elk or a reindeer and controlled all food supplies. Even today, she is offered the finest part of the first animal killed. Another Siberian Mistress of the Herds, Zonget, ruled all birds, animals, and the people who hunt them. According to folk custom, birds and