

# The Ecphorizer

## The Symbolism of Horns

Lisa Barrigan Basker

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### *Horny ideas through the ages*

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As far back as man can be traced, he has had an emotional esteem for horned animals. Cave paintings indicate the intensity of ancient hunters' feeling toward deer, bison, aurochs, rams and oxen. Later, written records affirm these visual ones. The nomad and farmer cherished his goats,

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cattle and oxen. These feelings were not wholly based on the fact that the animals [quoteright]provided him with meat, milk, cheese, wool, and hides, and pulled his plow or threshed his grain.

He believed that their strength was concentrated in their horns. Further, these were herbivorous animals, offering no competition for game that man hunted. In fact, they were easily-obtained prey for him. They shared the human instinct for gregarious herding together, and except when threatened by preying animals or during rutting season, they were gentle creatures.

The Hebrew word "*keren*" means both horn and power. Fighting for their lives or at mating, rams, deer, elk and oxen butted, tossed, gored and killed with their horns. Ancient gods and super beings had horns. Kings adorned headdresses with horns as a symbol of strength, supremacy, sovereignty and regal dignity. Horns meant glory as well as aggressive ferocity.

After conquering Egypt, Alexander the Great was declared divine in the temple of the ram-god Anon. From that point he was pictured on coins wearing ram's

horns. Greco-Roman gods were depicted wearing horns, as Zeus, for example, who also often took the form of a bull. Bacchus has the appellation "the horned one," and Pan, as well as his satyr companions, wore goat's horns.

The strength, power and supremacy were but a part of the symbolism of horns. The other was virility - procreative vigor. Even the use of the oxen to pull the plow had its sexual connotation. The plow drew its furrow in the soil, and was pulled by reins attached to the oxen's horns. The horns were the force behind the plow's coitus with the earth. Horns were an erotic stimulant. It is common knowledge that they still are considered so, as powdered rhinoceros, elk and other animal horn is sold today in Asian countries as powerful aphrodisiacs.

In Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice says "There will the Devil meet me, like an old cuckold, with horns on his head." Stag horns in particular were an old symbol of cuckolds. Christianity, too, sought to discourage the pagan worship of horns and depicted the Devil himself as wicked with bestiality, and thus horned.

In addition to physical strength and generative power, horns symbolized mental and spiritual strength as well. Witch doctors and medicine men wear horns. Moses, receiving the Tablets of the Law on Mt. Sinai, was pictured by Michaelangelo with horns on his head. This, however, is probably due to an error in translation of the Latin word, "cornuta" (with horns), which should have been understood as "bright" or with a halo or aura of light. Warriors from the earliest times put horns on their helmets. The Mesopotamians, the Etruscans, the Vikings - even those hefty Valkyrien maidens of Wagner's wore them. Scandinavian coats of arms bore horns and horned figures, and family names were often equivalent of Ox, Deer, Doe, Buck or Horn.

Dead, discarded horns retained their vitality, and were used as vessels and receptacles. Even the horn shape was sacred, and goblets were made of silver, gold, crystal or clay to resemble horns.

The Lord said to Joshua, "...and seven priests shall bear before the ark seven trumpets of rams' horns ...and the priests shall blow with the trumpets." And when they blew, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down!

The words "horn" and "corn" are synonymous -- cornucopia, unicorn. Moses was commanded by God, "And thou shalt make the *horns* of it upon the four *corners* thereof," when he ordained the structure of the Jewish altar. And the fleeing Israelites tried to take no risks on their luck, in spite of the miracles of the burning bushes, parting seas, and manna from heaven - they fashioned a graven image, a golden calf! (Maybe it was a big calf with horns already.)


Of all the corneous phenomena, the unicorn remains the most mysterious. Whether or not the creature ever existed will never be explained, in all probability. Quite possibly it is just a super-macho pipe dream of men who fantasized about the ultimate in phallic symbols. Or perhaps a dream of women. At any rate, unicorns have consistently figured in the legends of China, Arabia and India. Confucius, Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan reputedly came in contact with real unicorns, and a Greek physician at the court of Darius II in Persia wrote a book about India in the 3rd Century B.C. describing the unicorns found there. They resembled large asses, he said, and were snow white, with red heads and dark blue eyes. A horn eighteen inches or more long rose from the middle of their foreheads. The unicorn is so swift no other animal can overtake it, and it is powerful as well, he wrote.

Legends seem consistent about the personality and powers of the unicorn. It could only be captured when it laid its head in the lap of a virgin, and it was only

pure virgins for whom it had a penchant. Also, it could dip its horn into water -- a well, stream, river or lake - and instantly purify it. Holding its horn over the body of a terminally ill or wounded person would make them well. Yet it was the nature of men to kill off this remarkable animal to obtain the magical horn!

Charms to avert evil have long been shaped like horns. These, or making a sign of the horn with the fingers and "butting" with them, wards off the "evil eye."

Sacrificial breads and cakes were crescent shaped, in deference to the moon gods, which of course wore horns. French croissants still are.

So, if you get an urge for a hot croissant or start feeling a primeval horniness, you have centuries of heritage to justify you. You are not alone.  not found or type unknown

*Lisa Barrigan Basker, a professional writer, has been published in numerous national magazines. She recently took over the editresship of Sacramento Mensa's newsletter, Sacramensan.*

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## Contributor Profile

**Lisa Barrigan Basker**