

Tortoise

Latin name	<i>Testudo spp.</i>	Polarity	Yin
Family	<i>Testudinidae</i>	Element	Water
Folk name	<i>galapago</i> (Spanish)	Planet	Moon, Venus, Mercury
Etymology	Middle English <i>tortuce</i> , from Old French <i>tortue</i> , from medieval Latin <i>tortuca</i>	Deities	Venus/Aphrodite, Mercury/Hermes, Pan, Hsi-wang-mu, Kumpira, Benten, Ea-Oannes, Kasyapa

Varieties

The tortoise and the turtle were not distinguished before the sixteenth century, so many mythologies regard them as interchangeable. The Greek Tortoise (*Testudo graeca*) is found in the region of the Mediterranean. There are several species of Giant Tortoise (*Testudo gigantea*), which come from the Galapagos Islands. The Margined Tortoise (*Testudo marginata*) is found in south-eastern Europe and Asia Minor. The Spurred Tortoise (*Testudo sulcata*) is found in Africa. The Four-toed Tortoise (*Testudo horsfieldii*) is found from the western Caspian region, through central Asia, as far as western Pakistan. The Red-footed Tortoise (*Testudo carbonaria*) is a South American species, and has a black carapace with yellow markings. The Forest Hinged Tortoise (*Kinyxis erosa*) is found in tropical West Africa; it has a divided carapace. The Radiated Tortoise (*Testudo radiata*) is found in Madagascar. The scariest-looking Tortoise is a South American carnivorous species called Matamata (*Chelys fimbriata*).

Folklore

According to Greek legend, the tortoise could hatch its eggs just by looking at them.

The Chinese made stone tortoises with large slabs on their backs; this was a form of sympathetic magic to prevent earthquakes and bring the celestial and terrestrial realms closer together.

Mythology

The tortoise represents the waters, the Moon, the Earth Mother, creation, time, immortality, fertility, and regeneration. It is regarded as the sustainer of everything and the support of the earth.

In Hindu mythology, the tortoise Chukwa supports the elephant Maha-pudma, which upholds the world. (The elephant is a masculine power, the tortoise feminine; together they represent the potential for life.) In another legend, the tortoise Akupera supports the world on its back. Kasyapa, the North Star, was the first living creature, and the progenitor of all life (he was a tortoise). He was the husband of Vinata, the sister of the queen of the serpents (one of

the Nagas). He was an avatar of Vishnu, the Preserver and the Power of the Waters. His lower shell is the earth, and his upper shell is the heavens. Kasyapa and Vinata were the parents of Garuda, the divine bird-man and steed of Vishnu. Kasyapa was one of the seven great Rishis or sages. In another myth cycle he was married to Diti, the goddess of infinity, and she gave birth to the Daityas (the Vedic equivalent of the Titans) and the Maruts (the companions of Rudra, the storm god). Kasyapa's titles are the Old Tortoise Man and the Lord Progenitor of All Creatures. The second avatar of Vishnu was also a tortoise; he was called Kurma, and he dived to the bottom of the ocean to recover the treasures of the Vedic tribes which were lost in the great flood.

In China, the tortoise is regarded as one of the Four Spiritually Endowed (or Auspicious) Creatures (the others being the dragon, the phoenix, and the unicorn). It represents the North, Yin, and the element of Water. It is known as the Black Warrior, and denotes strength, endurance, and primordial chaos. It was believed to live for a long time and hence it was a symbol of longevity. In Chinese cosmology, the tortoise supports the world, and the four corners of the earth are its four feet. In Taoism, it represents the great triad of the heavens, the earth, and the waters: the dome of its back is the sky, its body is the earth, and its lower shell is the waters. The imperial army carried tortoise and dragon banners to represent indestructibility, because neither can destroy the other: the dragon cannot crush the tortoise and the tortoise cannot reach the dragon. The goddess Hsi-wang-mu (see **Toad**) is also known as the Golden Mother of the Tortoise. The shell of the tortoise can be used in divination.

In Japan, the Cosmic Mountain and the dwelling of the Sennin (the Taoist Immortals) are supported by a tortoise. It is also an attribute of Kumpira, the god of sailors, and of Benten, the goddess of the sea. Benten was mainly worshipped on the outlying islands of Japan; there was a shrine to her at Enoshim, where she was said to have enchanted and married a dragon which was devouring the children of the area. She was one of the seven deities of good luck, the Shichi Fukujin. The tortoise is also an attribute of Fukurokuju, the god of wisdom and longevity, and of Jorojin, the god of longevity and good luck.

In Graeco-Roman myth, the tortoise was regarded as the feminine power of the waters, and was associated with Venus and Aphrodite, who was born from the sea. It was also an emblem of Hermes and Mercury. According to Pausanias it was sacred to Pan in Arcadia, and it was forbidden to kill it. (There are wild tortoises in Greece.)

In indigenous American mythology, the tortoise and the turtle are interchangeable. The continent of America was known as Turtle Island. In Lakota (Sioux) myth, the world is a huge turtle floating on the waters. In Huron cosmology, the tortoise supports the world. There are various turtle clans and the people of the Pueblos hold turtle dances in spring and autumn. The tortoise and the turtle are associated with the earth and the waters, and the feminine power. In some legends, the cosmic tree grows out of the tortoise's back. Among the Maidu of California, the god Talvolte was the head of a tortoise clan and one of the survivors of the deluge.

In Mexico, the tortoise was the Great Mother in her terrible aspect.

In West African mythology, the tortoise gave ju-ju to humanity, and it is incorporated into fertility rituals. The tortoise is sometimes a trickster figure, but it is always outwitted. Like Brer Rabbit and Anansi, tortoise stories were taken to the Caribbean from Africa.

In ancient Egypt, the sign of Libra was associated with two tortoises, as the measure of the flood waters of the Nile.

In Sumer, the tortoise was sacred to Ea-Oannes as Lord of the Great Deep.

Symbolism

The tortoise is generally regarded as a manifestation of feminine power, and is associated with the element of Water.

The tortoise typifies plodding persistence. In the fable of the hare and the tortoise, the tortoise wins because it plods along till it gets to the end of the course, whereas the hare doesn't bother to start till later because it is so sure that it will win, and it loses.

The name tortoise (*testudo* in Latin) was given to the battle formation where soldiers placed their rectangular shields over their heads to attack a fort.

In Alchemy, the tortoise symbolised the *massa confusa*.

In Christianity the tortoise was a symbol of the chaste wife living retired in the house. In early Christian art it, however, it was a symbol of evil, as opposed to the cockerel of vigilance.