

MERMAIDS

Theme: Mermaids.

Keywords: Mermaid, Bird-Mermaid, Fish-Mermaid, forked-tailed Mermaid

Summary: The mermaid is a creature of fantastic/magical nature whose myth originated in Antiquity. The etymology of the Spanish word *sirena* (translated into English as *mermaid*) has been put in relation with the Punic word *sir* -song- and with the Semitic *seiren* -female that fascinates with her chants-. Its main feature was its seductive chant of love that triggered a fatal attraction to those that heard it¹. It was born as a symbol of the dangers that lied beyond the sea. During the Middle Ages it was associated with lust, temptation and the dangers of sexuality² because mermaids were considered as volatile as love, a portrait of falsehood, deceit and inconstancy.

Attributes and types of representation: The Mermaid is a hybrid with women's head and body of a bird in the case of the bird-mermaid, but it can also be found as a creature with the upper body of a woman and from the waist down with the body and caudal tail of a fish. Fishlike mermaids are characterized by a long mane and a naked torso. Sometimes both concepts of bird-mermaid and fish-mermaid merge and wings can be found in the fish-mermaid's torso.

In Romanesque art a group of fish-mermaids can be found represented with forked-tails hold between their hands³.

They can be represented carrying musical instruments that allude to their deadly song. Sometimes they can also be carrying a fish or a big sea-shell hinting their aquatic environment. In some cases they are represented nurturing their offspring⁴. During the Gothic period the most common attributes of the mermaid will be a mirror and a comb, generating the iconography of the coquettish mermaid⁵ since both objects are symbols of feminine seduction.

Mermaids are ambiguous temptresses because they cannot satisfy the passions that they provoke, thus their erotic function can be related to death. They were considered soul birds because they had the capacity to attract other souls to their doom generating agony before death. In the Hellenistic world they were identified as gods from the other world that sang to the dead in the Isles of the Blessed, also known as Fortunate Isles.

The bird-mermaid was the most frequent type from Antiquity until the Middle Ages. Its appearance followed two models; the most common type presents the head of a woman and body of a bird, with a variation where the mermaid has an elongated head, a second type depicts the body of a woman up to her waist and the inferior part of a bird. The

¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Song XII.

² Clebert (1971), p.379 and Mentre (1993), p.32 linked them to this meaning, while Burger and Crémillieux (1997) think that in the 11th century she is a messenger of the teachings of the Church, because the attraction of their song is like the one exerted the Divine Word and it would be a later development that they would become the symbol of temptation and lust, pp. 56-58. This possibility of redemption has also been pointed out by Leclercq-Marx (1997), p. 226.

³ This typology can be easily adapted to the architectural framework and it could have its origins in the tritons of double tail that appear in the ornamental repertoires from the last centuries of Antiquity. Occasionally, they can hold a lock of hair in each hand or a fish.

⁴ Rodríguez López, M.I. (1999), p. 108, mentions that some authors spread the idea that their milk could help the abandoned heroes left in the water to grow.

⁵ The fish and the mirror were symbols of prostitution. The mirror was latter the attribute of the impure woman due to its magical character, which shows a duality between illusion and reality, see Rodríguez López (1998), p. 50.

later type is less common but there are examples since the Antiquity. In literary sources, even when they are ambiguous in the descriptions, mermaids are identified with these forms. The mermaids were even allocated to a specific island or rock from where they sang their seductive chant. The fish-mermaid, with the lower part of a fish tail, was created after the mythological female tritons from the *marine thiasus*. Its appearance is more charming than the bird-mermaid, and thus they are associated with lust while the bird-mermaid is associated with demonic symbols⁶.

Primary Sources: Literary sources from the Greek world show mermaids as marine creatures with an unclear genealogy. In some accounts they are daughters of the muse Melpomene and the river-god Achelous. Some sources attribute their origin to Sterope and others explain that they were born from Achelous' blood when he was hurt by Heracles. Their paternity is also associated with the marine god Phorcis⁷. His metamorphosis into hybrid beings was a punishment from Demeter for failing to avoid Persephone's kidnapping by Hades, which gave the myth a funerary character. Besides singing they could play several musical instruments like the flute -vanity-, the lire -lust- and viola -deceit-⁸. In some sources three mermaids are mentioned; two seduced Ulysses with their song while perched on the rocks whereas a third one threw itself into the sea, a very significant tale from an iconographic point of view⁹.

The first written reference of these beings can be found in chant 12 of the Odyssey, the episode in which Ulysses, instructed by Circe, blocked the ears of his sailors with wax and made his crew tie him to the mast of his ship to hear the mermaid's chants without succumbing to it: *Come hither, renowned Ulysses, hither, you pride and glory of all Achaea! Pause with your ship; listen to our song. Never has nay man passed this way in his dark vessel and left unheard the honey-sweet music from our lips; first he has taken his delight, then gone on his way a wiser man. We know of all the sorrows in the wide land of Troy that Argives and Trojans bore because the gods would needs have it so; we know all things that come to pass on the fruitful earth.'*

But why have you, Sirens, skilled in song, daughters of Acheloüs, the feathers and claws of birds, while still bearing human faces? Is it because you were numbered among the companions, when Proserpine gathered the flowers of Spring ? When you had searched in vain for her on land, you wanted, then, to cross the waves on beating wings, so that the waters would also know of your trouble. The gods were willing, and suddenly you saw your limbs covered with golden plumage. But, so that your song, born, sweetly, in our ears, and your rich vocal gift, might not be lost with your tongues, each virgin face and human voice remained, Ovid, The Metamorphoses, Book V, III¹⁰.

In literary sources from the Middle Ages the mermaid theme is dealt with from a moralizing point of view¹¹:

- *El moralista enseña que las sirenas son crueles; que viven en el mar, que los acentos de sus voces son melodiosos, y que los viajeros quedan prendados de ellas hasta el punto de precipitarse en el mar, donde se pierden. El cuerpo de estas*

⁶ For a list of typological classifications see Rodríguez López M.I. (1999), pp. 104-107.

⁷ Pérez Suescun, F. y Rodríguez López, M.V. (1997), pp.55-56 make a summary of its possible genealogy quoting several literary sources.

⁸ The musical attribute of the mermaids can be read in Rodríguez López, M.I., (2007).

⁹ Rodríguez López, M.I. (1998), p. 45. Rodríguez López, M.I. (1999), p.99, quotes the names by which they are known: see also Rodríguez López, M.I., (2007), p. 5.

¹⁰ Many authors of Antiquity deal with this myth: Rodríguez López, M.I., (2007), p. 1.

¹¹ Pérez Suescun, F. and Rodríguez López, M.V. (1997), make an exhaustive enumeration of many medieval written sources, pp. 57-60. See also Rodríguez López, M.I. (1999) y (2002).

encantadoras es el de una mujer, hasta los senos; el resto recuerda al pájaro, al asno o al toro. "Physiologus", 5th century.

- *Así, los seres humanos ignorantes e incautos se ven engañados por las hermosas voces, cuando los encantan las faltas de delicadeza, los rasgos de ostentación, o los placeres, o cuando se vuelven licenciosos... Pierden todo su vigor mental, como si estuviesen sumidos en un profundo sueño, y, de pronto, el ataque arrebatador del enemigo cae sobre ellos. "The Cambridge Bestiary", 134-135.*
- *Las sirenas son doncellas marinas, que seducen a los navegantes con su espléndida figura y con la dulzura de su canto. Desde la cabeza hasta el ombligo tienen cuerpo femenino y son idénticas al género humano, pero tienen las colas escamosas de los peces, con las que siempre se mueven por las profundidades. "Liber monstruorum diversis generibus", 4th century, 42-43.*
- *La sirena vive en el mar, canta contra la tormenta y llora si hace buen tiempo, pues tal es su naturaleza; tiene forma de mujer hasta la cintura, pies de halcón y cola de pez. Cuando quiere divertirse, canta en voz alta y clara; si la oye el marinero que navega por la mar, olvida su nave y se duerme al instante. Recordadlo: ésta es la significación. Las sirenas son las riquezas del mundo; la mar representa este mundo; la nave las gentes que hay en él; el alma es el marinero, y la nave, el cuerpo que debe navegar. Sabed que muchas veces las riquezas del mundo hacen pecar al alma ya al cuerpo, es decir, a la nave y al marinero; hacen que el alma se duerma en el pecado y además perezca. Las riquezas del mundo hacen grandes prodigios: hablan y vuelan, agarran de los pies y ahogan...La sirena es de tal naturaleza que canta cuando hay tempestad... cuando confunde al hombre rico... La sirena, con buen tiempo, llora y se lamenta sin cesar: cuando el hombre da riquezas y las desprecia por Dios, ese es un buen momento, y la riqueza llora. Philippe de Thaün (or Thaon), "Bestiaire", 1121-1152, 1361-1414.*
- *Hay tres clases de sirenas: dos de ellas son mitad mujer y mitad pez, y la otra, mitad mujer y mitad ave. Pierre de Beauvais, "Bestiaire", 1206, 172-173.*
- *Lo cierto es que las sirenas fueron tres meretrices que engañaban a todos los que se cruzaban en su camino y los arruinaban. Y dice la historia que tenían alas y garras en representación de Amor, que vuela y hiere; y que vivían en el agua, porque la lujuria está hecha de humedad. Brunetto Latini, "Livre du Tresor", 1220, 131-132.*
- *Hay otros peces que tienen trenzas y cuerpo de doncella hasta el ombligo, y por debajo del ombligo de pez, y alas de pájaro. Su canto es hermoso y dulce, que es un prodigio el oírlo; y los llaman sirenas. Unos dicen que son peces; otros, que son aves que vuelan por el mar. Goussouin, "Image du monde", 1250, 126-127.*
- *De ahí que debemos entender, por las sirenas, los placeres mundanos y las diferentes vanidades, que cantan tan dulcemente, que por su suavidad se duermen muchos hombres sensuales. Pero los navegantes cautos y prudentes, que no quieren oír las voces de las sirenas, se tapan los oídos con cera, es decir, con palabras santísimas y honestas, con buenas acciones y con virtud. "Libellus de natura animalium", 14th-15th centuries, 313 and following.*
- *La sirena es una criatura prodigiosa... La que tiene forma de pez y de mujer tiene un aspecto tan dulce, que todo hombre que la oiga cantar se acuesta de buen grado para escucharla...Podemos comparar a estas sirenas con las mujeres que tienen buena palabrería, que engañan a los hombres haciendo que se enamoren de ellas. "Bestiario Catalán", manuscript A, 15th century, 79-80.*

This moralizing character continues in Alciato in his Book of Emblems: "*This woman who has a tail of a black fish is seductive; for lust brings with it many monsters*", Emblem 116 (<http://www.mun.ca/alciato/e116.html>).

Other sources, non-written sources: The Homeric sirens fixed to the rocks eventually transformed into flying birds due to the oral transmission of the poems and possibly due to foreign influences such as the representations of the Egyptian *Ba*, whose hieroglyph was a bird with a human head that flew from the tomb to unite with the *Ka* in a future life. Since they were associated with the sea, they were eventually transformed into fishlike beings to acclimatize to its aquatic environment. This enabled artists to associate mermaids with other hybrid beings from the aquatic realm, like female tritons. The transformation was a slow process, during the Middle Ages, in the Merovingian and Carolingian periods, the interpretation of the texts and the moral sense acquired by these images produced a change in the typology¹².

Geographical and chronological framework: The artistic creation of the mermaids has its origin in the Hellenistic world where it is frequent to find the scene of the Odyssey in which the mermaids are singing to Ulysses in the decorations of vases. These beings can also be found in funerary contexts. The myth was carried into the Roman world and expanded around the Mediterranean basin. In the transitional period from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, Coptic art developed its own expression of the myth with a fishlike morphology. A strong Etruscan influence can be found in these images, like in the case of the woman demon Albasdria (or Alabasandria), represented with half feminine body, wings and scaled lower parts in the monastery of Bawit. The scene where the mermaid is represented depicts Saint Sisinnius fighting against temptations¹³. Other representations of possible mermaids in Coptic art are two fishlike beings in a relief from Herakleopolis Magna-Ahnas, dated around the 6th century from whose necks hang an *ankh* (Icon Museum, Recklinghausen). The image has been considered by K.Wessel as the first representation of the fish-mermaid¹⁴. In Western Christian art we can find the first representations of mermaids in the frames of Merovingian and Carolingian books due to the revival of classical knowledge amongst the learned. In this cultural background we can find a representation of a bird-mermaid whose extremity coils up in a fishlike tail. The image can be found in a folio next to the Virgin in the frontispiece of Gellone's Sacraments Book (National Library, Paris).

During the 11th and 12th centuries bird-mermaids and fish-mermaids will co-exist in Western artistic representations and they will become main characters in art works. Fish-mermaids can be represented with a caudal or forked tail, with the latter being the most represented. They do not have the seductive qualities attributed by traditional sources and the most common feature is that they hold their extremities with both hands. Only in some cases, like the mermaid represented in the ceiling of St. Martin's church in Zillis (Switzerland) that plays the flute, mermaids are accompanied by musical instruments with which they sang their charming chant.

It will be in this moment that fish-mermaids will eclipse the bird-mermaids because of the association between their marine quality and sea creatures. However, in Spanish

¹² Isabel Rodríguez López in her Ph.D. Dissertation mentions this transformation (2002). See also, Touchefeu-Meynier (1962).

¹³ See figure in the iconography file of the Knight Saints.

¹⁴ Rodríguez López, M.I. (1998), p. 46, considers that they are she-tritons with funerary character.

Romanesque art the most common type of representation is the bird-mermaid, perhaps due to the influence of anthropomorphic birds in Islamic folklore¹⁵.

In Romanesque art, besides the two types of mermaids previously described, there are also horse-mermaids and bull-mermaids that have wings to differentiate them from other hybrid beings like centaurs¹⁶. In some cases mermaids appear with male figures like tritons. Their significance is still unknown, though their presence might be in relation to music since tritons have been considered since Antiquity as interpreters and musicians¹⁷. Also from this period, like the Bawit painting already mentioned, mermaids may appear with centaurs, both symbols of lust and temptation. Some authors consider that this association is because they appear together in bestiaries and in its illustrations they are usually represented in confrontation, which could have served as the model for monumental art¹⁸. Other scholars have pointed out a Roman origin, where it was frequent to associate characters from the marine *thiasus* and those from Bacchus' *thiasus*¹⁹.

In the last centuries of the Middle Ages, the model of the fish-mermaid with a caudal tail will become the most common representation. The naturalism of its representation better responds to the ideals of beauty and seduction described in literary sources. They are frequently represented with a mirror in their hand while they comb their long hair to stress the ideas of vanity and lust. During the Gothic period the image of the mermaids will not only be used in religious contexts (especially in capitals and *bourg-en-bresse* in choir stalls) but it will also be used in sumptuary objects for secular use.

In the cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean there can also be found images of these marine geniuses from Byzantium²⁰ to Islamic art, where they are intertwined with demons from the sea, carriers of misfortune and mishaps²¹.

This type of iconography continued into the Renaissance, using the mermaid's body as a pretext to show nakedness. And even nowadays, the myth continues.

Artistic media and techniques: Mermaids in its diverse typologies have been represented during the Middle Ages in all sorts of mediums and techniques. Due to their moralizing character they can be frequently found in miniatures from codices, sculptures decorating capitals, corbels and other architectonic elements, as well as in choir stalls, painting, stained glass, ivory, ceramic and all types of sumptuary art.

Precedents, Transformation and Projection: The artistic creation of the mermaid myth originated in the cultures of Egypt and the Near East. We have already pointed out how the *Ba* was represented as a bird with a female head, which can be considered as one of the clearest precedent of the iconic formation of these beings whose typology is already defined in 7th century B.C. Hellenistic world²². It has been suggested that its hen-like appearance can be connected to a geographic reference, since the myth can be

¹⁵ Leclercq-Marx (1997), p. 215.

¹⁶ See examples of these representations in: Pérez Suescun, F. and Rodríguez López, M.V. (1997).

¹⁷ As mentioned by Rodríguez López, M.I. (2007), p. 11.

¹⁸ See, for example, Martínez de los Lagos Fernández, E. (1993) and Malexecheverría, I. (1982).

¹⁹ Rodríguez López, M.I. (1998), pp. 48-49.

²⁰ See, for example, a bird-mermaid in a Russian manuscript of the 10th century: http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archivo:Sirin_lubok1.jpg (last access 15/04/2010)

²¹ Rodríguez López, M.I. (1999), pp. 136-138.

²² See Rodríguez López, M.I. (2007), pp. 6-7.

traced to the surroundings of the *Li Galli* islands, where the legend grew possibly due to the high number of shipwrecks that occurred in the area²³.

The transformation of the iconography from bird-mermaid to fish-mermaid can be traced to the Roman world. The iconography was most likely based on female tritons and the mythological Scylla, a monstrous creature that harassed sailors in the strait of Messina with the body of a woman and a lower body formed by six dogs and a caudal tail. But the formation of the formal prototype originated in the marine daemons, half human, half fishlike, from the cultures of the Near East and in the Syrian goddess Atargatis, with head of a female and body of a fish.

Even though the fish-mermaid supplanted the bird-mermaid from the 11th and 12th centuries onwards, during a long period of time both formal prototypes coexisted, and with the change of the iconography there was a significant increase of its sexuality. But even in later periods we can find mermaids that still have bird legs.

Typology and related themes: The mermaid myth was born out of the dangers that threatened ships in the areas close to the islands in front of the Sorrento coast. The high number of shipwrecks and deaths of sailors were soon associated with all sorts of dangers that stalked men and lead them to evil ways.

From an iconographic point of view, the bird-mermaids can be confused with harpies, hybrid beings that also had the head of a female and the body of a bird, though these last ones were repugnant unlike the bird-mermaid, which is associated with seduction. Mermaids are also associated with the devil and temptation, thus the symbolism behind them is not very different. In Romanesque sometimes is difficult to determine the difference, since both are represented almost in the same way, without beauty and seduction as a distinctive factor. This confusion has lead scholars to identify, for example, the bird-like creatures with a female head of the cloister of the Abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos both as bird-mermaids and as harpies. Some have long hair; others cover it with a headdress, an element that has lead scholars to believe that they are mermaids.

Fish-mermaids can easily be confused with female tritons that accompany Poseidon's *thiasus*. This raises doubts as to the significance of the images in some representations, like the already mentioned relieve of Ahnas, Egypt.

Other connections can be made with hybrid creatures, especially with the onocentaur, as it can be seen in the image of Sloane's manuscript.

Images:²⁴

- Fish-Mermaids or female tritons, 6th century, relieve on stone, originally from Ahnas, Icons Museum, Recklinghause (Germany).
- Fish-Bird-Mermaid, end of 8th century (ca. 790), miniature on scroll, Sacraments Book of Gellone (Meaux, France), Lat. 12048, f^o 1v, frontispiece page, National Library, Paris (France).
- Bird-mermaid or harpies, last quarter of the 9th century, relieve on stone, Abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos, Burgos (Spain)

²³ Rodríguez López, M.I. (2007), pp. 1-2.

²⁴ Besides the images that are shown here, there is a very varied and complete repertoire of this iconography in <http://www.flickr.com/groups/1102568@N24/pool/> (last access on 15/04/2010).

- Fish-Mermaid, 1125-1150, relief on stone, archivolt of the central portal, western façade, Abbey church of Ste. Marie Magdaleine, Vezélay (France).
- Fish-Mermaid, first half of the 12th century, relief on stone, archivolt of the church of Santa María de Uncastillo (Spain).
- Fish-Mermaid, half of the 12th century, relieve on stone, capital of the church of San Claudio de Olivares, Zamora (Spain).
- Forked-tailed fish-mermaid, 12th century, relief on stone, originally from the church of San Esteban Banyoles, Regional Archaeological Museum, Banyoles (Spain).
- Fish-Mermaids (male and female), ca. 1175, relief on stone, church of San Andrés, Soto de la Bureba (Spain).
- Bird-mermaid, second half of the 12th century, relief on stone, capital, church of San Pedro de la Rua, Estella (Spain).
- Bird-mermaid, 13th century, relief on stone, tomb in the church of Santa María de Magdalena (Spain).
- Fish-Mermaid and onocentaur, 1250-1300, miniature on scroll, bestiary of Philippe of Thaon, Sloane manuscript 278, f^o 47r, British Library, London (UK)
- Forked-tailed fish-mermaid, 14th century, tempera on wood, palace of the Duchess of Villahermosa, Huesca (Spain).
- Coquette mermaid, ca. 1500, relief on stone, capital of the high choir of the basilica of Asunción de Nuestra Señora, Colmenar Viejo (Spain).

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