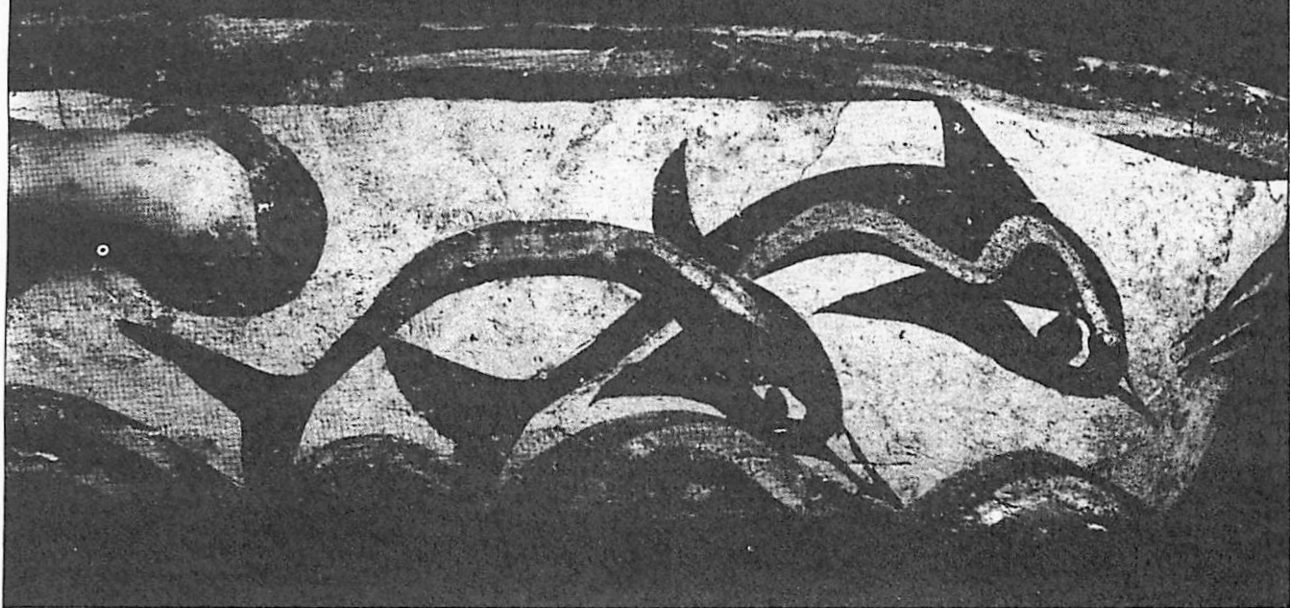


“Delphinia!”



Dolphins, the playful charmers of the ocean, have long held a special place in the hearts of Greeks. Myths and legends tell of their friendship with men and gods alike

by Adrienne Mayor

No sight in the Aegean is more thrilling than a school of dolphins frolicking in the waves – they’ve been described as “beautiful abstractions of speed, energy, power and ecstasy.” Greek sailors say dolphins bring good luck – and some claim that all dolphins answer to the name of Vasilis (that’s Billy or Basil in English). But if calling dolphins by name doesn’t work, you might try playing a tune on a flute or lute. The dolphin’s passion for music was recognized over 2000 years ago by the ancient Greeks. The classical playwrights Euripides and Aristophanes referred to the allure of flute melodies, while other writers mentioned dolphins’ appreciation for shepherd’s pipes. Discerning dolphins also enjoyed part-singing, lyre music, and the strains of the water organ.

Dolphins were admired in antiquity for their sociable and compassionate nature. Aristotle had observed dolphins coming to the aid of their injured young and described a group of them flocking to a harbor to beg fishermen to release a companion. Dolphins were known for their habit of rescuing drowning humans too. Many writers extolled the

amiable and intelligent cetacean’s remarkable affinity for humankind – the dolphin was known as “the only creature who loves man for his own sake,” expecting nothing in return.

One Greek myth attributed dolphins’ ‘human’ qualities to the fact that they were once human themselves. According to the story, purple-robed Dionysos

was captured by pirates on his way to Naxos. Believing they were kidnapping a member of a royal family, the pirates chained the god to the mast and rowed toward Turkey, dreaming of great ransom. Unobserved, Dionysos broke his chains and took out his flute. As he played a magical song, thick grape vines entwined the ship’s mast, the oars became writhing serpents, and the god himself changed into a panther. The terrified pirates threw themselves overboard and were instantly transformed into dolphins. To this day dolphins are drawn to humans, boats, and music.

One distinguished musician, Arion of Lesbos, bet his life on dolphins’ love of music. In 625 BC, Arion (inventor of



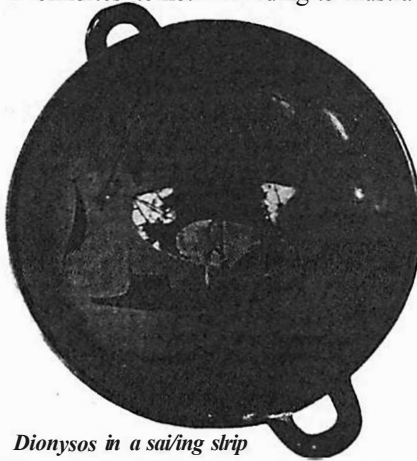
Dolphins gambol around a fishing boat in a mural at Tarquinii, Italy.

the dithyramb and choir-master of Corinth) was returning to Corinth after a successful concert tour of Italy. Half-way to Greece, the ship's crew conspired to relieve Arion of his tour profits. They were about to throw him overboard when Arion requested that he be permitted "one last song" on his lyre. According to the historian Herodotus, the pirates acquiesced because they were "delighted at the prospect of hearing a song from the world's most famous singer." Arion put on his professional singing costume and the pirates assembled for the musician's farewell concert. As the music drifted over the water, dolphins drew near the boat; as the song ended, Arion leaped overboard and was carried to the Peloponnese by one of the dolphins. Upon his safe landing at Cape Matapan at the tip of the Peloponnese, the musician wrung out his singing robes and dedicated a bronze statue of a man riding on the back of a dolphin. (Just such a figurine has been discovered at the ancient site of Taenarum.) Arion's home town of Methymna issued coins depicting Arion dressed in a long chiton and seated on a dolphin, holding a lyre.

According to ancient tradition, Tarentum, the town Arion had set sail from, was founded by Ioras, a Greek who had been saved from shipwreck by a dolphin sent by his father Poseidon. Tarentum, whose founding was predicted by a Delphic oracle in the eighth century BC, issued several coins depicting Taras riding a dolphin.

Scores of Greek legends feature dolphin lifeguards. Centuries after Taras and Arion were rescued at sea, Alexander the Great happened to be on a beach when a boy named Dionysius was brought ashore by a dolphin. Alex-

ander took the boy to his court, where he became a priest of Poseidon. Another legend relates that when Hio, driven mad by the jealous goddess Hera, leaped off the Moulourian Rocks into the sea (near the 48th kilometer marker on the old road between Eleusis and Megara) with her infant son Melikertes in her arms, a dolphin carried the two safely to the Isthmus of Corinth, where the Isthmian Games were established in Melikertes' honor. Isthmian coins show Ino and her son on the cliff with an alert dolphin waiting below, and Melikertes on the dolphin's back. At Isthmia today one can see the ruins of the circular temple built over Melikertes' tomb. According to illustra-



Dionysos in a sailing ship

tions on bronze coins, its domed roof was decorated with dolphins and there was a statue of the boy on the dolphin's back inside.

In Arion's home town of Methymna, a youth named Enalus snatched up the daughter of Smintheus as she was about to be sacrificed to Amphitrite and leaped over a cliff into the sea with her. The two were saved by dolphins. In a ninth-century romance, described as a "rather tasteless love story in eleven

volumes," a mysterious winged boy on a dolphin rescues the maiden Hymire from a shipwreck. Vigilant dolphins nudged Odysseus' little son Telemachus back to shore at Zakynthos when he strayed into deep water; in gratitude Odysseus decorated his shield and signet ring with the image of a dolphin. An inscription cut into rock on Thera-Santorini has been interpreted as a commemoration of a man's rescue by a dolphin.

It seems that in antiquity dolphins zealously patrolled the sea for human swimmers in trouble; indeed the notion that should one fall into the sea a dolphin might come along had become proverbial by Plato's time. A humorous twist on the theme appears in one of Aesop's fables: a cruising dolphin scooped up a shipwrecked monkey near Sounion thinking it was a small Hellene. As they entered the Saronic Gulf and approached the harbor, the dolphin enquired whether his passenger was Athenian. The monkey indicated he was. But when the dolphin asked, "Do you know Piraeus well?" the monkey replied. "Oh yes, we're good friends." whereupon the dolphin realized his mistake and flipped the monkey into the water to swim the rest of the way.

Dolphins were said to remember kindnesses. The favorite example was the story of Coeranus, a native of Paros. Coeranus once paid a group of fishermen at Byzantium to release some dolphins caught in a net. Years later Coeranus was washed overboard in a storm between Naxos and Paros and would have perished had not grateful dolphins carried him to a cave on the island of Sicinos. When Coeranus died as an old man, it was said that scores of dolphins assembled offshore to pay tribute at his funeral.



Pig-like dolphin in a Roman mosaic



"The Monkey and the Dolphin"

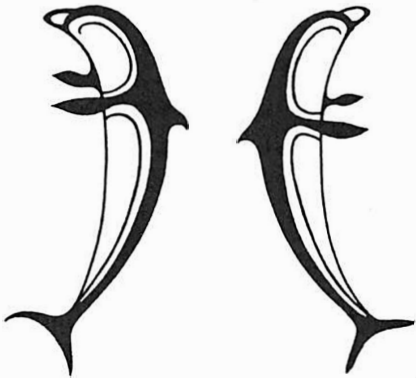
An anecdote of the second century AD tells of an old couple who rescued a young dolphin injured by fishermen. It became the companion of their grandchild and when the dolphin grew up it helped the old couple by catching fish. The fish-catching abilities of dolphins were exploited by Mediterranean fishermen after they noticed that small fish fled before pursuing dolphins. Several writers have described how dolphins would come when called to herd schools of mullet into nets. Euboean fishermen rewarded their finny helpers with a share of the catch and a bonus of bread soaked in wine.

Sometimes dolphins brought drowned bodies to shore for burial - the eighth-century-BC poet Hesiod was a well known example. According to tradition, after Hesiod was murdered in the Nemean Grove in Locria and thrown into the sea near Euboea, dolphins transported his body to shore. When St Lucian was lost at sea in the fourth century AD, his friends were amazed to see his body carried gently to land on the slippery back of a dolphin, -as if resting upon a bed. • A song about this marvel was current centuries later: "Upon its back the dolphin carried him / and breathed its last upon the shore."

It became a poetic cliché that a dolphin inevitably died of exhaustion upon depositing a drowning victim on the beach or of a broken heart upon the death of a human companion. By Roman times nearly every story of human-dolphin friendship ended with an obligatory double-death scene. Some accounts added the detail that duffog the dolphin's death throes on the sand the creature turned every hue of the rainbow. (Byron compared the dolphin's death to sunset: "Parting day / dies like the dolphin, whom each pang

inbues / With a new color as it gasps away. / The last still loveliest, till - 'tis gone, and all is gray.")

The best-known tragic tale is that of the dolphin Simo ('snub-nose') and Hyacinthus. Simo was hand-fed, came when called, and gave Hyacinthus aride to and from school each day. When Hyacinthus fell ill and died, Simo waited forlornly at the accustomed places, then passed away from grief and was buried at the boy's grave. In a similar legend, Hermias of Iasus used to plunge into the sea each day after training at the gymnasium. Waiting faithfully was a tame dolphin who gave the boy rides far out to sea and back. One day Hermias drowned. The dolphin rushed



Dolphin's on a floor pillow

him back to shore, then expired from sorrow. Their friendship was memorialized in a statue of the two, and coins from Iasus show Hermias swimming with one arm over the dolphin's back.

Some cities became renowned for their trained dolphins. Pausanias, the travel writer of the second century AD, saw the famous tame dolphin of Poroselene, an island near Lesbos, which gave children rides and per-



Athella with a dolphin on her shield

formed tricks. The town charged admission to the show and stamped the creature's likeness on its coins. Another performing dolphin was described about 100 years earlier by Pliny. One day a dolphin made friends with an adventurous child swimming far out to sea; the next day the whole town turned out to see if the dolphin would reappear. This time the creature was coaxed to shore where everyone patted its head and children took turns riding its back. Once an official poured perfume on the town's aquatic mascot during a ceremony - a gesture the dolphin did not appreciate, for it seemed to faint from the "strange sensation and smell" and disappeared for several days. This tale had an unhappy ending: after enduring several years of unruly tourist hordes, the village fathers decided to quietly do away with the famous attraction.

Today's dolphins are just as playful, friendly, and music-loving as their ancestors. There are modern accounts of musicians performing well-received concerts for dolphins, children be-



Bacchus (Diollysos) and the Tyrrhellenian pirates

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frinding them, and exhausted swimmers being pushed to safety by them. The adventure of a Greek sailor who fell overboard between Crete and Thera-Santorini in the 1950s is typical. He was not a strong swimmer and just when he thought he was done for, he felt something large and smooth under his tired legs. A dolphin swam right between his knees and carried the sailor at a gentle pace until he could wade ashore. Even this modern example ends with the demise of the dolphin, whose blow-hole was inadvertently blocked by the exhausted sailor. In the early 1960s, two American archaeologists bathing in the Corinthian Gulf off Porto Germano were playfully nudged by a dolphin, an experience reported by other swimmers over the years.

Writer Patrick Fermor recalls a memorable sunset in the Cyclades not long ago. He and some friends were on a yacht between Folegandros and Siki- nos (where Coeranus had been rescued by dolphins) listening to a recording of Handel's "Water Music". As the melody wafted over the still sea, they saw a dolphin leap not far away, then another and another, until the boat was surrounded by dolphins gracefully "gamboling and pirouetting" to the music. A friend of Fermor's, poet- psychiatrist Andreas Embirikos, re- membered the day he was listening to a symphony on a portable radio in a small rowboat in the bay of Batsi, on the is- land of Andros. Soon six or seven dol- phins began to leap and dive, becoming quite boisterous as the music reached a crescendo. Fearing that the little dinghy would capsize in the waves made by the dancing dolphins, he switched off the radio and quickly rowed to shore. Safe on the beach, Embirikos turned the radio back on and enjoyed the rest of the concert while the dolphins con- tinued to cavort nearby.

Ferryboat passengers lucky enough to hear the delighted cry "Delphinia!" are in for an exhilarating sight, as dolphins surge and leap in the wake or off the prow or race alongside. One writer has described the breathtaking experience of watching dolphins playing at dusk near Mount Athos in phosphorescent waves. "Flames seemed to whirl from them"; as they leaped they shook off "a million fiery diamonds and when they plunged it was a fall of comets." Streaming away together, each trailed a wake of glowing bubbles until they be- came a "far-away constellation on the sea's floor." At a moment like this, one might well agree with the Greek poet Oppian that "Diviner than the dolphin is nothing yet created."