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Dolphin with rider, a Greek original in white marble of the Hellenistic period (ca. 160 B.C.). The inset area at bottom of the plinth shows that the statue was once inserted into a base. The upper part of the plinth has been carved to simulate water. Preserved height, 10 inches; preserved width, 16½ inches; photograph courtesy of the Museum Art, School of Design, Providence, R. I.

Dolphins and Dolphin-Riders

By BRUNILDE SISMONDO RIDGWAY

It all started quite innocently. I had to write a catalog entry for an exquisite fragment of sculpture at the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, and at first glance I took it for a traditional nymph or Aphrodite riding a dolphin. The sculpture was obviously a Greek original of Hellenistic date. The dolphin, a rather elongated animal with large head and pronounced "forehead," sank its "beak" into the waves and once had raised his missing tail upward. On him sat a youthful figure with flowing drapery which left free the upper torso once also added separately. For all its feminine voluptuous appeal, the view from the top showed that the figure was male.
Two views of the dolphin and rider. The tenon hole and the smooth surface around it prove that the dolphin's tail had been carved separately, and then attached. Photographs courtesy of the Museum of Art, School of Design, Providence, R. I.

View of the top of the dolphin and male rider. The tenon hole shows that the upper torso had been added separately. The sex of the rider is also evident. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Art, School of Design, Providence, R. I.
A black-figured Ionic cup of around 540 B.C. with its interior decorated by two concentric circles of dolphins whirling around a central warrior. Most of the animals are complete dolphins, but some still display human legs.

I thought it would be simple to discover who the male personage was, but I did not know how many people in antiquity had ridden or had been associated with dolphins! Indeed, I emerged from the first half of my research with the impression that this surprising animal with the built-in grin was the favorite mount of the past. The ancients knew that the dolphin was a mammal and had noticed his love for mankind. They claimed that the dolphin had once been a man himself and the (story of the) metamorphosis is narrated in the Homeric Hymn to Dionysos: one day, the god of wine sat alone on the shore of a lonely sea; he was dressed in long shining robes; his dark curls were flowing in the wind. Sailors of a Tyrrenian pirate ship saw the handsome youth, decided to capture him and sell him on the slave market. Dionysos did not resist capture and sat silent at the stern of the ship, but strange things began to happen en route. Red wine spread over the decks; mast sprouted leaves; and when the frightened pirates looked at their prisoner, he had turned into a lion. The sailors leaped into the sea and jumped, they were transformed into dolphins.

The most famous illustration of this myth, a slightly different version, occurs on the frieze of the Lysikrates Monument in Athens, erected in 334 B.C. to commemorate a theatrical victory: perhaps the winning play narrated the same myth. Representations of the story, however, occur much earlier, as is shown by a sixth century Ionic black-figure cup in a private collection.
Another probable allusion to the legend was painted by Exekias on the inside of one of his finest cups, now in the museum in Munich, dated to about 530 B.C. The god Dionysos sails alone on a boat with a large white sail and a mast which has grown tendrils, vine leaves and large bunches of grapes, while a series of dolphins cavort in the free field around the ship. The dolphins may be the transformed pirates or they may simply represent the sea, for the Greeks seldom depicted landscape in natural terms, but instead alluded to it by illustrating the creatures typical of a certain habitat. Hence a river god stood for a river, a nymph for a spring and a fish for the sea. A similar ambiguity of representation exists also in the case of a hydria decorated by the Berlin Painter and now in the Vatican Museum: Apollo is shown sitting on a large winged tripod sailing above the sea. Presumably he is on his annual trip to the Hyperboreans. The seascape this time is suggested by a series of wavelets filled with fish, while clear of the water two dolphins leap on either side of the tripod. They could be a further characterization of the sea or they could be an allusion to an epithet of the god, “Delphinios.” Apollo is often linked with the dolphin: the Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo tells how, in the guise of a dolphin, he led a Cretan ship to the harbor of Kirrha to found Delphi. A different version has Apollo’s son Eikadios shipwrecked and brought by a dolphin to shore near Mount Parnassos where he founded a temple in honor of his father. Though both legends may have been simply based on a punning etymology (delphis = Delpho), the dolphins on the Berlin Painter’s hydria may allude to both the myth and the sea. In many painted scenes, however, there is no doubt and a leaping dolphin often represents the demarcation between land and sea.

Though the dolphin is not a fish and the Greeks knew it, no other marine animal could be a more appropriate symbol for the element. Sung by Homer and Pindar, the dolphin was considered the swiftest of all living beings, king of the fish and lord of the sea. He was well known as a helper of fishermen and as a weather prophet. He was believed to foretell his own death and to come ashore to seek burial. Useful alive, he was also very useful in death. His fat was a remedy for dropsy, his ashes for some skin diseases, his liver for fevers. His teeth were used in dentistry. Yet it was considered unlawful to kill a dolphin and the barbaric Thracians who made this a practice are mentioned with indignation because there was “nothing more god-like than a dolphin.”

It is small wonder that, with this reputation and with the appeal of his natural shape, the dolphin should be found represented in various decorative forms such as designs for embroidered garments, gems, earrings, necklace clasps and other jewelry and for handles of vessels. There are dolphin-shaped terracotta vases and finials. A famous dolphin existed at Olympia. We know from ancient sources that the starting signal at the hippodrome was given by a bronze eagle rising and a bronze dolphin sinking. The second century traveler Pausanias tells us about the statue of Demeter Melaina (Dark) at Phigaleia in

A detail of skyphos (wine cup) painted by Makron (ca. 490 B.C.). Demeter is pictured with her robes embroidered with dolphins. London, British Museum E140.
Arcadia, a district which seems to have added strange
touches to traditional Greek religion. This Dark De-
meter had a horse's head and sat holding a dove in
one hand and a dolphin in the other.

On a fragmentary record-relief from Athens, dating
to 321-320 B.C., the snout of a large dolphin faces a
female figure in archaic costume, presumably Athena.
Unfortunately it is impossible to explain this unprec-
edented representation and we can surmise only that
as Athena usually stands for Athens, so the dolphin
might stand for another city which is making some
agreement with Athens. But which city? To judge
from numismatic iconography, the dolphin may stand
for many cities. The dolphin appears alone on coins
of Thera, Lindos and especially Zankle-Messana,
where the curved outline of his body recalls the sickle-
shaped harbor. On other coinage, it is found in con-
junction with various animals like the eagle (at Si-
nope) or with water and a conch shell (at Tyre).
The most accurate and beautiful numismatic dolphins
of antiquity appear on the coins of Syracuse where
they surround the head of Arethusa. Once again they
are an appropriate symbol for a city with such promi-
nent harbors. But they may also allude to the legend of
the nymph Arethusa and her sea journey.

Perhaps the dolphin figures most prominently on
the coinage of Tarentum, however always with a rider
who can be identified from the inscription as Taras,
the mythical founder of the city or as Phalantos, the
historical founder who was thought to have been res-
cued by a dolphin from a shipwreck. The rider usually
appears naked with a variety of symbols in his hands,
at times being crowned by a flying Victory. Since he
often holds a trident and this depiction occurs on the
coins of other South Italian towns, some scholars have
doubted that either Taras or Phalantos were quasi-his-
torical heroes, but want to interpret them as local gods
akin to Poseidon, if not Poseidon himself. This theory
stems chiefly from a deep disbelieve in the stories of
rescues by dolphins, but, as we shall see later on, mod-
ern research now tends to support the ancient accounts.

The best known tale of a rescue by a dolphin is
that of the poet Arion. According to the historian
Herodotus, the lyric poet was returning from a con-
cert tour in Magna Graecia where he had encountered
great favor and comparable monetary reward. The
sailors, to gain possession of his money, decided to
murder him by forcing him to jump into the sea.
Arion asked to be allowed first to sing. He sang his
last performance and threw himself into the sea. But
a school of dolphins who had followed the ship at-
tracted by the beauty of Arion's singing, surrounded
him and the strongest carried him on his back to Cape
Tainaros from where Arion made his way to the cour-
of Periander at Corinth. When the murderous sailor
came to the Corinthian tyrant with tales of the poet's
death, Periander was able to confound them by pro-
ducing Arion safe and sound. Because of the connec-
tion with the fully historical Periander, this even-
should have taken place in the second half of the sev-
enth century B.C., but again modern scholars have not
believed it and have tried to interpret the story in
terms of symbolism and religious allusions.

The dolphin's love of music is attested by another
example. When Poseidon, to reward the dolphin who
had found for him his bride Amphitrite, turned the
animal into a constellation of nine stars, the new astra-
group became known as a musicum signum (a music
sign). Since the dolphin had found Amphitrite, this
goddess is often represented riding the mammal. Nat-
urally Poseidon too, the god of the sea, is constantly
associated with the dolphin. Literary sources tell us
that the Greek sculptor Lysippos in the fourth cen-
tury B.C. made a statue of Poseidon with his foot upon
a dolphin and that Skopas (a sculptor of the same pe-
riod) made a whole marine thyasos representing Po-
seidon, Thetis and Nereids riding dolphins, which are
especially famous in Roman times and stood in the
Flaminian Circus in Rome. Its imagery carried into
many Roman sarcophagi because of the funerary sym-
bolism attached to the Nereids as conveyors of war-
riors' souls to the nether world.

Single statues of Nereids on dolphins also exist
such as the one in Venice, where the dolphin's eye
has been enriched with a dentated halo to indicate
lashes, a motif which seems to date to Augustan time
(27 B.C.-A.D. 14). The most common representa-
tion of Nereids on dolphins is, however, part of a spec-
ific story: the carrying of Achilles' weapons. The story
told in the Iliad: after Patroklos had been killed and
Peirce's armor he had borrowed from a friend Achilles, Achilles' mother, Thetis, asked the
god of smiths, Hephaistos, to make her son new
armor. The Nereids helped carry the arms to the ha-
bor when they were completed. The subject appears in
so-called Mician reliefs (i.e. from the island of Melos
of the first half of the fifth century and in Tarentum's
appliques of the fourth century and later. Both of
these types are products of industrial art for the de-
coration of funerary chests. But the motif appears
well on many vases, of which at least some had
funerary connotation.

The dolphin has other connections with weapons
and warriors. It was often drawn as a shield de-
emprise with apotropaic functions. Warriors
and dolphins may have formed the chorus of a play using...
Marble statue of a Nereid on a dolphin of the fourth century B.C. and now in the National Museum in Venice. The ornamental eyebrow of the dolphin may suggest that it is a Roman copy of the first century of our era.

corded in ancient sources but perhaps alluded to in ancient vase painting: an early fifth century wine-cooler in the Schimmel collection in New York is repeatedly inscribed with the word "epidelphinos" which should be translated "the dolphin-rider." It has been suggested that this refers to the title of a play, possibly a comedy, in which the chorus was made up of warriors on dolphins and this surmise is supported by other depictions of this kind where the riders appear together with a flute player who traditionally provided the accompaniment for choral dances. Another vase with possible theatrical connections is an Etruscan amphora, decorated with a frieze of bearded men to whose back a headless dolphin body has been attached. One interpretation sees in these figures an Etruscan phantasy equivalent to the Greek Triton. Some scholars, however, believe that the scene represents the chorus of a satyr play. And indeed the dolphin is connected with satyrs, though perhaps for entirely different reasons. Besides the obvious association of both dolphins and satyrs with Dionysos, the ancients found a physical resemblance between them in the peculiar shape of their faces. The traditional name for a dolphin in antiquity was "simós" (the simo of Latin) which means snub-nose or pug-faced. Pliny in his Natural History tells an interesting story: at the time of the Emperor Augustus, a boy lived in Puteoli who had a dolphin friend. Every day when the boy had to go to school across the bay, he would call his
friend, "Simo, Simo!" and the animal would come and carry the boy across the bay to school and back again at night. One day the boy became ill and died. The dolphin, after waiting in vain for the familiar call, finally died himself, undoubtedly of sorrow.

Statues of satyrs riding dolphins are rare. Only slightly more numerous are representations of another rider whose physical characteristics have obviously no connection with pug-faces or satyrs—Aphrodite. The goddess of love was supposedly born from the sea and it is therefore natural that she should be shown riding sidesaddle on the animal who represents the sea, though no specific myth is involved. By far the most frequent rider, the dolphin-rider par excellence, Aphrodite's son, Eros. He appears in a variety of media and forms: as a chubby marble child astride the mount, for a Roman fountain ornament or slightly older as a youthful rider in the inside of an Attic red-figured cup many centuries earlier. He is so popular that the Etruscans pick up the motif and with usual misunderstanding transform the dolphin into a highly decorated fish all but dwarfed by the enormous winged female riding it. Some Hellenistic and Roma
mosaics depict huge dolphins ridden by diminutive Erotes. These mosaics often decorated the interior of fountains and the rippling of the water over the tesserae set the patterns in apparent motion and created the illusion that dolphins and riders were truly swimming. The more common Roman adaptation of a dolphin as a fountain decoration was in the function of a spout with the water pouring out of the animal's mouth. While the Greeks strictly distinguished between fresh and salt waters and would never have associated dolphins with anything but the sea, the Romans did not make such a differentiation and indeed the geographer Strabo (63 B.C.-A.D. 21) as well as other sources mentions dolphins in Indian rivers—a notion which in modern times was at first discredited, but has now found confirmation.

As a fountain ornament many combinations are possible, and we have the dolphin carrying Eros or Eros carrying the dolphin and even such complicated compositions as the one in Naples where it is difficult to tell who is carrying whom. But these are aberrations of a jaded taste. The traditional sculptural composition as it originated probably in the third century B.C. is much simpler and far more pleasing. Usually the dolphin stands upside down on his nose as if plunging into the waves, while Eros sits astride behind the dorsal fin against the background of a raised tail. This representation carries over into Christian iconography because the winged child is taken to be symbolic of the soul and the dolphin is its conveyer to the afterlife, thus preserving the funerary connotation already present in pagan art. Indeed the motif carries on into the Renaissance and in the fifteenth century, Agostino di Duccio can place as many as three putti on the back of a saw-toothed dolphin as part of the interior decoration of the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini. The speculations on this symbolism are best left to the art historians, but undoubtedly also in antiquity more than one Eros could ride a dolphin. The Medici Venus, for instance, is flanked by a dolphin with two Erotes. Unfortunately it is not possible to tell whether this rendering is due to the whim of the copyist or was part of the original composition, since the replica in New York, though assuring us of the legitimate presence of the dolphin support, gives no clues as to the number of his riders.

We do not know who was the first artist to conceive of the dolphin as a suitable motif for statuary support, but it certainly was a brilliant idea and must have originated some time around the middle of the second century B.C. A marble statue, as contrasted with a bronze, needs a certain strengthening at key points to prevent breakage. Roman copyists were always hard put, when converting a metal original into a cheaper marble version, to find a suitable but unobtrusive way of supporting the ankles of their figures. The same problem faced artists who conceived their works directly in stone and only seldom was a solution found which managed to fuse the support into

Red-figured lekythos painted by the Bowdoin painter, ca. 470 B.C., depicting an Eros riding a dolphin. In a private collection.
DOLPHINS continued

(Left) Fountain ornament from Capua in the Naples Museum with Eros and a dolphin. Probably a creation of the late first century B.C. to the first century of our era. (Right) Bronze Eros carrying a dolphin; fountain decoration from Pompeii in the Naples Museum.

...the composition. The traditional strut was a tree trunk, often irreconcilable with the subject. A dolphin upright, possibly with a rider, had the same stabilizing influence of a tree trunk but was more compatible with many representations. The Poseidon of Melos, for example, an original work of the late second century B.C. was given a dolphin support and certainly this became standard practice in the case of Aphrodite, both deities having reasonable connections with the gods of sea and love. The Medici Venus is only a Roman replica, but Aphrodite Landolina in Syracuse is an original of the late second century B.C. and other original examples...
of Aphrodite and the dolphin are known. Perhaps the cleverest use of a dolphin as a statue support is to be found in connection with a Roman emperor: the Augustus from Prima Porta is flanked by an Eros riding a dolphin. The head of the child is a Julio-Claudian portrait, while the obvious connection of the dolphin with Aphrodite stresses the descent of the Julian family from the goddess through Aeneas.

In a way, this idea became so popular as a propaganda motif, that the Eros on a dolphin can almost be considered a badge of Augustan times. The motif is ubiquitous: on lamps, table supports and other similar objects. In later times, dolphins with or without riders continued to be associated with supports in general, to the point that we find them incongruously even among the leaves of Corinthian capitals or as arm rests for chairs! Though such excesses seem illogical, the general principle is correct and based on accurate observation. These animals will support a sick or newly-born dolphin above water level, since periodic immission of air is essential for the life of this aquatic mammal. A natural instinct has therefore developed which spurs dolphins to bounce and support any object. Recent experiments have demonstrated that a dolphin will push even a rubber mattress, but also, and especially, a dead body. Many legends of antiquity thus seem more plausible. Ancient sources tell us that the dolphin brought ashore the body of the murdered poet Hesiod. The same story is told of the Christian saint, Lucian of Antioch. A purely mythological account tells how the dead Melikertes was brought by two dolphins to Isthmia where he was worshipped as Palaimon; while another, more historical narrative, refers to a boy Hermias (or Dionysios) of Iasos in Caria who used to go swimming with a dolphin until one day he died at sea, either drowned by waves or inadvertently pierced by the animal's fin, and was brought back by the desperate dolphin who beached himself and also died. Iasos put Hermias and his dolphin on its coinage. The story was exploited even in more recent times: some European museums and several English villas in fact possess replicas of a marble group made in the 1760's by the sculptors Cavaceppi and Nollekens who passed them off as copies of an original work by Lorenzetto after a drawing by Raphael. This information has only recently been published. Previously, many of these replicas were thought to reproduce not a Renaissance work but a Greek or Roman composition depicting the legend of Hermias and the dolphin. Yet the rolling eye of the animal turning in despair and guilt to look at his burden and the gaping wound, betray a romantic approach completely alien to classical sculpture.

DOLPHINS CAN BE RIDDEN by human beings. This has been proved not only by animals in captivity, but also by such surprising cases as the wild dolphin of Opotomi in New Zealand, who sought human company and allowed children to ride him. This is a case of recent years fully documented and photographed. Experiments carried out by scientists in conjunction with the United States' Navy and other sponsoring agents, have shown that many of the ancient beliefs were justified. They have revealed even greater powers of this most intelligent mammal whose sonar equipment allows him almost fantastic feats of orientation and communication with his fellow animals. We are beginning to understand more and more the complex intelligence of the dolphin who can even be taught to speak, some scientists affirm. In this note of confidence in the ancient sources, it might not be amiss to close with one more legend, totally improbable this time, illustrating the almost human mind of the dolphin.

Aesop recounts that during a shipwreck, dolphins were as usual active among the waves trying to rescue survivors. One dolphin found not a man, but a monkey, and deceived by its quasi-human aspect decided to save it. En route to land, the dolphin asked the monkey if it was familiar with Athens and the monkey, afraid to betray its ignorance of things human, asserted, "Then you must know the Peiraesus," said the dolphin, alluding to the famed harbor of Athens. "O, yes," said the monkey, "he is one of my best friends." The dolphin, indignant for having been deceived, plunged into the deep and drowned the imposter.

For those who at this point are still interested in finding out who the Providence dolphin-rider is, I shall admit that no sure identification has been found. He is probably a hermaphrodite, a conclusion reached mostly because of his appearance, but partly justified by connections with Aphrodite and funerary symbolism.

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