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Monk Seals in Antiquity
The Mediterranean Monk Seal (*Monachus monachus*)
in Ancient History and Literature
by

William M. Johnson & David M. Lavigne

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The role of the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) in the history and culture of ancient Greece and Rome is poorly documented in contemporary literature and generally misunderstood by many modern scholars. A comprehensive search was therefore initiated to locate all surviving references to the species in the classical literature of the mediterranean region.

The search yielded over 200 references authored by some 60 writers from the Greek, Roman, and Byzantine periods. Examination of these texts, together with information derived from numerous secondary sources, provides new insights into the monk seal's distribution and abundance in antiquity. It also reveals ancient human attitudes toward the monk seal that resulted in its exploitation for fur, oil, and meat, its use in medicine and entertainment, and its role in mythology and superstition. The accumulated evidence now suggests that many of the large monk seal herds that existed in early antiquity were either dramatically reduced or extirpated by intensive exploitation during the Roman era. Throughout much of its historical range, human persecution and progressive habitat deterioration also appear largely responsible for changing a naturally gregarious beach dweller into a less social and reclusive habitant of caves.

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