The sea is one of the most mysterious environments on earth. Even today it is by no means fully understood, so it is little wonder that our ancestors imagined creatures as strange and wonderful as the oceans themselves. One such creature is the mermaid, a legendary being with the tail of a fish and the top-half of a human. Often considered magical, with the ability to give people powers, or to tell the future, mermaids frequently fall in love with men, either luring them with beautiful song and music to death by drowning, or by transforming into human women and eating them when their prey is at ease. The classic portrayal of the mermaid, seated on rock by the sea, golden hair and fishtail dipping into the water, a comb and mirror in hand, seems to first be depicted during the Middle Ages - however, long before then mermaids enchanted people.

Mermaids in Mythology

The mermaid and merman legends began with the worship of gods, as did many other myths. The earliest representations and descriptions of these now well-known creatures can be traced back as far as the 8th Century BC.

Babylonia

The sea-god called Oannes, or Ea, was reputed to have risen from the Erythrean Sea and taught people the arts and sciences. He is depicted as a merman, with a fish-like tail and the upper body of a man.

Syria

The Semetic mermaid moon-goddess Atargatis was depicted as a mermaid as the tides ebbed and flowed with the moon. This was incorporated into the god-like personifications that are found in Syrian art and literature. Atargatis is one of the first-recorded mermaids and the legend says that her child Semiramis was a normal human and because of this Atargatis was ashamed, and killed her lover. Abandoning the infant, she became wholly a fish.

Greek and Roman

Greek and Roman art and literature contain some of the first literary descriptions of the mermaid. The Greek Poseidon and the Roman Neptune were often depicted as half-man and half-fish but the most popular motif of the ancient world that depicts mermen was the triton - Triton was the son of the powerful sea-god. Specimens of tritons in classical times were said to be found at Tanagara and Rome, though according to Pausanias, it is presumed by scholars today that they were fakes, just like those

mermaid remains that could be found in the later-19th Century freak shows.

The Celts and the British Isles

The British Isles have their share of merfolk mythology. Originally British mermaids lacked tails, but with sailors from the Mediterranean trading more regularly, the idea of the half-human, half-fish creature became more popular. The Cornish knew mermaids as merrymaids; the Irish knew them as merrows or muirruhgach. Some sources write that they lived on dry land below the sea and had enchanted caps that allowed them to pass through the water without drowning. While the women were very beautiful, the men had red noses and were piggy-eyed with green hair and teeth and a penchant for brandy. Other sources write that the merrow were believed to forebode a coming storm and WB Yeats wrote in his *Irish Folkstories and Fairytales*:

> It was rather annoying to Jack that, though living in a place where the merrows were as plenty as lobsters, he never could get a right view of one.

In the Shetlands, the mermaid is known as the sea-trow, which is able to take off its animal skin and swim through the water like a fish and then walk on land like humans. In Orkney, the selkies (or seal folk) were kin to mermaids, and all over Britain was the legend of a horrible water-creature, most commonly called Jenny Greenteeth.

Scandinavia

The neck, along with the havmand (merman) and the havfrue (mermaid), were able to live in both saltwater and freshwater. The Norwegian mermaids known as havfine were believed to have very unpredictable tempers. Some were known to be kind, others to be incredibly cruel and it was considered extremely unlucky to see one.

Germanic

The meerfrau (sea maiden), also known as the nixe, inhabited freshwater lakes and rivers. The nixe would sometimes appear in human form at markets, where she could be identified by the fact that the corner of her apron was wet. If she paid a good price for goods, it would be an expensive year, but if she paid a low price then the prices for that year would remain cheap. The Rhine has inspired stories of Rhinemaidens, sometimes referred to as the Lorelei, and there are also stories surrounding a creature called Melusine - a double-tailed mermaid.

Russia and the Slavic countries

The rusalka (a water-nymph who drowned swimmers) and the vodyany (the male water-spirit who followed sailors and fishermen) are among the most common mermaid types known in Russia and the Slavic Countries.

Africa

Legends of a fish-wife and river-witches are among some of the mermaid tales known on the African continent.

India and Asia

Among the many gods of India, the apsaras (celestial flute-playing water-nymphs) were worshipped by fishermen. In Asia there were not only mermaids, but also sea-dragons and the dragon-wives. The Japanese mermaid known as ningyo was depicted as a fish with only a human head.

Oceania

Polynesian mythology includes a creator named Vatea who was depicted as half-human and half-porpoise.

Not all ancient water-gods or spiritual personifications took on the form of a mermaid or a merman. Water-nymphs could be mistaken for mermaids; they were beautiful in their appearance and were also musically talented, which mermaids are well known for, be it through singing or playing of a musical instrument. Sirens, too, are forever being mistaken for mermaids. The siren and the mermaid are two separate entities however - one has the upper body of a young woman and the lower body of a bird, the

other the upper body of a young woman and the lower body of a fish.

During the Middle Ages, mermaid mythology turned from that of near-godlike status, to more of a folklore; rather like unicorns, dragons or werewolves. No longer a god, mermaids were regarded as natural, if freakish, creatures and were often added to medieval bestiaries[1], alongside zoological information about 'real' animals. Mermaids were believed to exist even by the most educated men and continued to be witnessed the world over:

- **The Chronicles of Raphael Holinshed, 1587**
  In the reign of either King John or King Henry II, some fishers of Oreford in Suffolk, caught a man-shaped fish, who would not or could not speak, ate fish raw or cooked and finally escaped after two months, going back to the sea.

- **The log book of Captain Henry Hudson, 15 June, 1608**
  Two of the ship company, Thomas Hill and Robert Raynor, said that they had seen a mermaid:
  > *From the Navill upward, her backe and breasts were like a woman's... her skin was very white; and long haire hanging down behinde, of colour blacke; in her going downe they saw her tayle, which was like the tayle of a Porposse, and speckled like a Macrell.*

- **The Aberdeen Chronicle, 20 April, 1814**
  Two fishermen at Portgordon (about a mile west of Buckie) were returning from fishing in Sprey Bay:
  > *About three or four o'clock yesterday afternoon, when about a quarter of a mile from the shore, the sea being perfectly calm, they observed, at a small distance from their boat, with its back turned towards them, and half its body above the water, a creature of a tawny colour, appearing like a man sitting, with his body half bent. Surprised at this they approached towards him, till they came within a few yards, when the noise made by the boat occasioned the creature to turn about, which gave the men a better opportunity of observing him. His countenance was swarthy, his hair short and curled, of a colour between a green and a grey: he had small eyes, a flat nose, his mouth was large, and his arms of an extraordinary length. Above the waist, he was shaped like a man, but as the water was clear my informants could perceive that from the waist downwards, his body tapered considerably or, as they expressed it, like a large fish without scales but could not see the extremity.*

  This was not the end of their encounter for the creature dived and surfaced some distance away and was not alone. With him was what appeared to be a female of his species for she had breasts, as well as hair that reached past her shoulders. The two men then rowed as fast as they could to land where they related their story to the local schoolmaster.

- **Isle of Benbecula, Outer Hebrides, 1830**
  Women cutting seaweed reported they had met a creature of female form playing happily off the shore. A few days later her dead body was found two miles from where she had first been seen. Reports at the time recall:
  > *The upper part of the creature was about the size of a well-fed child of three or four years of age, with an abnormally developed breast. The hair was long, dark and glossy, while*

the skin was white, soft and tender. The lower part of the body was like a salmon, but without scales.

- **Kaiwa Point, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, 12 April, 1998**
  Dive-boat captain Jeff Leicher recalls:
    We were on our way out to the point when a school of dolphins started following the boat, playing in our wake. Suddenly one of the men on the port side starts yelling and pointing. I couldn't believe what I saw. There, not ten feet from the bow, was what looked like a nude woman. She had long flowing hair and one of the most beautiful faces I've ever seen. But there's no way a human being could be swimming so fast. She was keeping right up with the dolphins. Then she leapt into the air and my heart almost gave out on me. The entire lower half of her was covered with scales and tapered back into a huge tail. She jumped once more, then disappeared under the surface. About an hour later we arrived at the point and we were diving. Suddenly I felt something brush against my right leg. She shot by me like a streak of lightning, then turned and came back past me, swimming the other way.
  Ten other participants in the dive also saw the mermaid as she swam with the dolphins at Kaiwa Point.

Mermaid Anatomy - A scientific outlook

Contrary to popular belief, mermaids are not human or fish at all. They are mammals with the appearance of a human being above the pelvis and the appearance of dolphins or whales below. All mammals are warm-blooded and have hair, and all female mammals have mammary glands (breast and nipples for feeding young). Fish have a completely different anatomy. Mermaids do appear to have scales, but it is possible that this is in fact a pattern or camouflage that resemble scales. Some species of mermaid also have twin-tails and there are even some that are completely humanoid in appearance, apart from scale-like skin and dolphin-like biology (sonar, respiratory, circulatory and skeletal systems). The mermaid is also known to have both a caucasian or negro complexion and some sighted have a greenish appearance.

Biological functions

Mermaids have organs in their chest that can operate as a lung or a gill, depending on whether they are in or out of the water. The organ expands and contracts exactly like a lung, yet has the ability to extract oxygen from the water. This allows the mermaid to 'breathe' water in the same way that they breathe air - by filling and evacuating the chest cavity. This organ is also needed to operate the larynx. The human larynx cannot operate under the water as it cannot be made to vibrate from water pressure, yet the mermaids larynx operates equally well using water or air. The mermaid circulatory system is also designed to withstand differing water pressures like that of the dolphin and whale, while the skeleton is light and pliable like those of a bird or dolphin. The lenses of mermaid eyes are also different and are able to correctly focus for use both above and under water. A mermaid is also able to hear on a different level to humans and has the ability to use sonar for communication and hunting purposes underwater.

Reproduction

In mermaids, reproduction is much like that of dolphins. The reproductive organs of both the male and female are akin to the dolphin and whale, and mermaid babies are born live (as opposed to hatched from eggs).

Diet

The mermaid mostly eats fish, but has been known to subsist on other meats, fruits and vegetables. There are some species of mermaid that are vegetarians only.

Habitat

The mermaid is able to exist equally on land and in the sea, although it can become dehydrated if on land for extended periods of time. Most mermaids live in schools or pods, but some are known to travel as hermits. The mermaids live in caves under the water and in undersea cities. The merpeople cities is more common on other planets, but it will be more merpeople cities on Earth in the future. Some merpeople also live on alien starships and in big alien space stations.

The Mermaid in Literature

Stories of mermaids have been told for centuries in the form of folklores, legends or fairy tales. There are countless children's stories through every world culture, and writings in every genre - from fantasy to horror to adult erotica - that incorporate the mermaid. Images of this creature have plagued artists and writers in their efforts to bring to life its mystery and beauty to their audiences. Some examples include:

- *Comedy of Errors* by William Shakespeare.

    O, train me not, sweet mermaid, with thy note,
    To drown me in thy sister's flood of tears:
    Sing, siren, for thyself and I will dote.

- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare.

    Once I sat upon a promontory,
    And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
    Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
    That the rude sea grew civil at her song
    And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
    To hear the sea-maid's music.

- *Faerie Queen* by Edmund Spense.
  Five mermaids try to tempt Guyon, the Knight of Temperance.

- *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen.
  A young mermaid gains a human soul through her faithfulness.[2]

- *Peter Pan* by JM Barrie.
  A young girl is whisked away by an elflike pixie to a land called Neverland, inhabited by mermaids, pirates and all sorts of wondrous creatures.

- *The Water Babies* by Charles Kingsley.
  A young chimney-sweep falls into the world of the water people and learns to live with them.

- *Namor; The Sub Mariner* by Marvel Comics
  Comic-book character who was a powerful man from under the sea.

- *Aquaman* by DC Comics
  Comic-book character, the King of Atlantis who fights to protect both the Ocean and the Earth from evil.

The Mermaid in Film and Television

The mermaid would come to be represented in celluloid as well; here is a selection of the most well-known:

- *Mr Peabody and the Mermaid*
  Romantic comedy about a man who catches a mermaid while fishing. Starring Ann Blyth and William Powell.

- *Easy to Love*
  Romantic comedy about two men who compete for the love of a mermaid. Starring Esther Williams.

- *Stingray*
  Television puppet show about the crew of a futuristic submarine. A princess from under the sea called Marina also starred.

- *Miranda*
  Romantic comedy about a doctor who rescues a mermaid. Starring Glynis Jones.

- *Mad About Men*
  Comedy in the *Prince and the Pauper* ilk, where a mermaid and a society girl swap places. Sequel to *Miranda* (see above). Starring Glynis Johns.

- *Peter Pan*
  Disney animated adventure based loosely on JM Barrie's *Peter Pan*.

- *Return to Neverland*
  Disney animated adventure sequel to *Peter Pan*.

- *Splash*
  Romantic comedy about a New York man who falls in love with a mermaid. Starring Daryl Hannah and Tom Hanks.

- *Splash, Too*
  Television movie, sequel to Splash. Starring Amy Yasbeck.

- *Local Hero*
  Comedy about a Texas oil company trying to buy a small Scottish village. A character, Marina, is a web-toed marine biologist who seems to live in the sea. Starring Burt Lancaster, Peter Riegert, Denis Lawson, Peter Capaldi and Jenny Seagrove as Marina.

- *The Little Mermaid*
  Disney animated musical about a mermaid called Ariel and her friends Flounder and Sebastian the crab. Loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen's story.

- *Hook*
  Family action adventure featuring characters from JM Barrie's *Peter Pan*. Starring Robin Williams, Julia Roberts and Dustin Hoffman.

- *The X-Files*
  Fantasy action/adventure television series. An episode entitled *Humbug* featured merpeople and references to the Feejee Mermaid. Starring David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson.

- *She-Creature*
  Horror-fantasy about the 'true' story behind the disappearance of the ship *Marie-Celeste*. Starring Rufus Sewell, Carla Gugino and Rya Kihlstadt as the mermaid.

- *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
  Fantasy action/adventure television series. An episode entitled 'Go Fish' featured merpeople. Starring Sarah-Michelle Gellar.

- *Peter Pan*
  Family action adventure based on JM Barrie's *Peter Pan*. Starring Jeremy Sumpter.

The Mermaid Legacy

In the early 21st Century the mermaid has become a symbol of fun and fantasy, rather than an accepted part of cultural tradition. She is seen as a figure of eroticism mixed with the fear of the unknown, or the animal side nature. She has also, however, become a marketing tool for toys, cartoons, soft pornography, women's swimwear, men's deodorant and mobile telephone providers. No matter how the mermaid is used, or what role she plays, she will always retain a mysterious and magical air appealing to both children and adults alike.

[1]A bestiary is a book containing drawings and information on different animals or beasts.[2]Andersen's birth city of Copenhagen, Denmark keeps the spirit of both the writer and his mermaid alive with a life-size, bronze statue of the Little Mermaid sitting on a rock in the harbour, looking out to sea.