

Brill's New Pauly entry for "Sirens": René (Basle) Nünlist and Balbina (Göttingen) Bäbler

(Σειρῆνες/*Seirēnes*; Latin *Sirenes*, *Sirenae*).

I. Mythology Mythical female creatures who sing seductively

Sirens are mythical beings (in Greek myth female) in ancient sailors' tales (the earliest evidence - admittedly without context - extends back to the Mycenaean period [1]). Their seductive song makes sailors forget their home (cf. [Lotophagi](#)) and perish. Instructed by [Circe](#), [Odysseus](#) outwits the Sirens: he stops the ears of his companions with wax and has himself tied to the mast with instructions that under no circumstances he is to be freed. The Sirens' alluring call - they promise a song about Troy, Odysseus' greatest feat, and omniscience - dies away, not unheard but without effect (Hom. Od. 12,39-54; 12,158-200). In the legend of the [Argonauts](#) the Sirens are not outwitted, but literally 'outsung' by [Orpheus](#) (Apoll. Rhod. 4,891-919; 4,1264-1290). The relationship between the two variants of the legend is disputed (most recently [2], with bibliography). The Sirens' committing suicide because of the defeat is not found in literature before the Hellenistic period (Lycophr. 714). Early sources comment either not at all or only vaguely on their appearance (chimeras of birds and humans first in pictorial representations (see II), later Apoll. Rhod. 4,898 f.), origin (Soph. fr. 861 TrGF mentions [Phorcys](#) [1] as their father) and number (two: Hom. Od. 12,52; three: Hes. Cat. 27; eight: Pl. Resp. 617b). The Sirens' bewitching song forces comparison to singers (Hom. Od. 12,183-196) and the [Muses](#) (Alcm. fr. 30 PMGF). From there it is but a step to the Sirens as a symbol of seduction (Pl. Symp. 216a; Alexander [21] Aetolus fr. 7 CollAlex), often with negative connotation. In Roman literature there are no substantial representations apart from Ov. Ars am. 3,311-314; Mart. 3,64.

Nünlist, René (Basle)

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A. HEUBECK et al., A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, Books 9-16, 1989, 118-120 (with bibliography).

II. Iconography

Sirens are depicted as a chimera of birds and humans, in the earliest - from the second quarter of the 7th century onwards - sometimes male, even bearded (esp. in Corinthian objets d'art [4; 5. 1103; 6; 7]). The Sirens were among the elusive daemonic forces that appear in the early period, with no concrete myth connected to them, individually or antithetically on numerous vases [7]. After the middle of the 6th century the bird body disappeared, and female breasts and arms appear, holding instruments, fans, and pomegranates. Fertility is suggested by means of a [polos](#) [3], tendrils, plants or Dionysian scenes [5. 1103]. On numerous vases and funerary monuments, however, Sirens are presented as daemons of death [2. 36 f.; 3;

4. 243-248; 5. 1099 no. 73]. Depictions of [Odysseus](#)' adventures with the Sirens start appearing on vases some hundred years after the composition of the epic [1. 288-302] and are also popular on Roman sarcophagi ([Sarcophagus](#)) [8. 172-176, 253].

The menacing daemonic element disappeared at the end of the 5th cent. BC, when music-making or threnodic Sirens, now beautiful women with avian traits, became typical figures in cemeteries of the classical period, both as statues and in funerary reliefs [4. 151-186; 11. 134-140; 12. 91-99]. These helpers and performers of lamentation for the dead were also widespread in the Hellenistic period; they were often represented in pairs, both clothed and naked; they were adopted into Roman wall painting and provincial Roman sculpture.

In Christian late Antiquity, in the Middle Ages and in the modern period, Sirens symbolise the temptations of the world (often as a counterpart to an angel blowing a trombone) [10].

Bäbler, Balbina (Göttingen)

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