

Seafarer's superstitions: fact or fiction?

There is much folklore associated with the sea and sailors, much of it repeated across a range of cultures.

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It has been said that men of the sea are among the most superstitious on earth. The origins of many superstitions are lost in time, but no doubt many arose due to man's natural tendency to look to the supernatural for causes of strange phenomena, and also the traveller's love of exaggerating mysterious occurrences.

Many sailor superstitions from the eighteenth century and before remain to this day. And why should they risk the consequences by doubting them...?



- Don't turn anything upside down – it will capsize the ship
- Don't mention certain things or words such as 'drown'
- Don't mention the name of a ship which has been lost
- Nail a horseshoe to the mast
- Decorating with flowers adds luck
- Putting a gold coin under the mast for good luck
- Any sailor laying eyes on the Flying Dutchman will die in a shipwreck
- Never set sail on a Friday
- Swearing on board a ship scares away the fish
- Spitting is protection against bad luck. Fishermen spit upon their nets for good fishing

Weather

- The following are just some of the multitude of beliefs and proverbs which relate to the weather, obviously of great importance to the sailor at sea. Many have actually been proved to be based on sound meteorological principles.
- Red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky in the morning, sailor's warning
- Whistle to get wind (careful not to whistle up a storm)
- Clear moon, frost soon
- Mackerel sky, not 24 hours dry
- A ring around the sun or moon, means that rain will come real soon
- "When the rain's before the wind, strike your tops'ls, reef your main; when the wind's before the rain, shake 'em out and go again."



People

- Naked women calm the sea – hence bare-breasted female figureheads
- Don't carry a corpse on board
- Don't carry women on board
- Wear an earring for better eyesight, and also protection from drowning and foundering. The gold ring was also for the priest to pay for his funeral. It is also a symbol of betrothal between the sailor and the sea, and the trophy for the sailor who managed to cross Cape Horn
- It's bad luck to damage a figurehead
- Jonah – thrown overboard to rid the ship of bad luck, swallowed by a whale
- When a sailor died at sea it was his messmates who helped the sailmaker sew his body in canvas, along with two cannonballs, before it was consigned to the deep. The final stitch, according to tradition, was passed through the sailor's nose. The grisly duty had 2 purposes – to make absolutely sure the sailor was dead, and to keep the shroud in place.
- Mythical creatures called sirens sing haunting songs to lure sailors to their death
- To have a death on a ship is a very bad omen, as the deceased may consider the boat as his coffin and sink.
- A tattoo gives protection, and is also a sign of power.

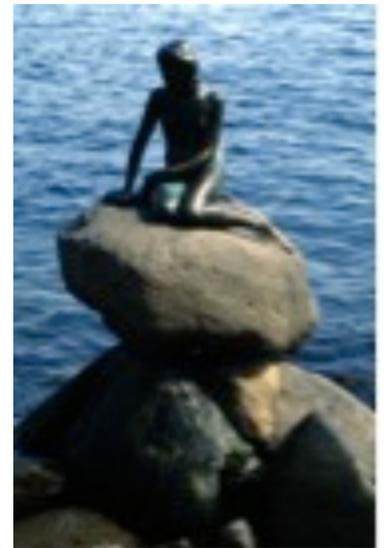
Animals

- A seagull at sea carries a sailor's soul, and the screech of the bird is the mournful cry of the dead man. Do not touch the gull to avoid injury to the deceased.
- Killing certain things, eg an albatross, brings bad luck (the Rime of the Ancient Mariner)
- A shark following a ship is an omen of death
- Ravens close to the seafront portends stormy weather
- Cries of cormorants herald a deterioration of the weather, and may also mean fishing will be poor



Mythical creatures

There is much folklore associated with the sea and sailors, much of it repeated across a range of cultures. Some 'mythical creatures' include mermaids, Triton, King Neptune, sirens, Scylla and Charybdis



Mysterious events

Find out more about some of the ocean's mysteries, including Mary Celeste, The Flying Dutchman, The Bermuda Triangle, the Sargasso Sea, the Mahogany Ship, The schooner Patanela, Saint Elmo's fire.



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