



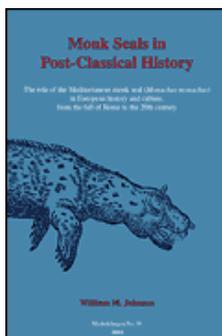
MONK SEALS IN POST-CLASSICAL HISTORY

The role of the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*)
in European history and culture, from the fall of Rome to the 20th century

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ABSTRACT



The role of the Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* in the history, culture and economy of the Mediterranean region has long remained obscure and subject to error and contradiction. In order to extend historical knowledge of the species beyond the time-frame covered in our companion publication, *Monk Seals in Antiquity*, a review of the available literature was undertaken covering the period from the fall of Rome to the 20th century. This research indicates that the monk seal in the Mediterranean continued to be exploited for its fur, oil, meat and perceived medicinal properties well into the Dark Ages and the Renaissance, albeit on a much-reduced scale than the exploitation witnessed during the Roman era. The species also continued to be a target of Mediterranean fishers, angered over reduced catches and damaged nets. Elsewhere, large, newly-discovered colonies in the eastern Atlantic off the coast of Africa became a lucrative if short-lived industry for French, Portuguese and Spanish explorers. In the Mediterranean, sustained persecution of surviving groups, coupled with increasing human disturbance and deterioration of habitat, appears to have acted selectively

against colony formation, leading to an inexorable decline and fragmentation of the population. Although described as 'rare' by science in 1779, the species continued to be a target for collectors from zoos and museums until the early 20th century, when extinctions along broad stretches of coastline first became apparent.

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