



SHORT COMMUNICATION

Eaten and forgotten: a record of conjoined twin harbour porpoises *Phocoena phocoena* from 1891 (Mammalia, Cetacea)

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Reports of conjoined twins in wild mammals are extremely rare. Recently, Kompanje *et al.* (2017) described the first known case of conjoined twin harbour porpoises (*Phocoena phocoena*), a *parapagus dicephalus*, bycaught in the Southern North Sea (the Netherlands) in May 2017. This was published as the second known case of twinning and the first case of conjoined twins in *P. phocoena*, the fourth known case of *parapagus dicephalus* in any cetacean species and the tenth known case of conjoined twinning in a cetacean species.

Shortly after Kompanje *et al.* (2017) shared this unique find, another almost identical case of *parapagus dicephalus* conjoined twins in harbour porpoises came to our attention. It was published more than 120 years ago in the Liepāja German language daily newspaper, the *Libauer Zeitung*. To the best of our knowledge, this case remained unnoticed among zoologists till now.

In this non-scientific daily from July 27, 1891 a short notice (Fig. 1) was published on the find of conjoined twin harbour porpoises along the coast near Bernati, south of Liepāja, Latvia. A farmer boy found the freshly dead conjoined twins, washed ashore.

Libauer Zeitung

Here we cite from the newspaper (Anonymous 1891) [original German sentences between square brackets]. The length of the cadaver was 2¾ Fuß (approximately 820 mm), indicating

newborn fetuses. Both pectoral fins, the dorsal fin and tail flukes were normally developed [*Schwanz – und Rückenflosse sowohl als auch die beiden Seitenflossen scheinen mir durchaus normal zu sein*]. There were two well-formed heads with four eyes and two beaks [*Die beiden ganz gleichen und wohlgeformten Köpfe sind mit je einem kräftigen Maul, vier gutentwickelten Augen und je einer Oeffnung zum Ausstoßen der Luft versehen*]. The owner of the conjoined twins, a fisherman [*Fischerbäuerlein*] thought he could make some money by exhibiting the monster in a Liepāja show booth [*in einer Libauer Schaubude Kapital aus seinem Funde zu schlagen*], after which the porpoises would be served as a good feast meal [*nachher soll sein "Meerschwein" ihm noch einem schönen Festbraten liefern*]. Despite his pious wish to good business and blessed appetite, the anonymous author of the short notice unsuccessfully tried to save the carcass for a scholar [*Mein Proposition den Delphin zu herrn Oberlehrer Rapiersky zu transportiren schien dem guten Mann wenig zu behagen, umsomehr mein frommer Wunsch zum guten Geschäft und gesegneten Appetit!*].

Lost for science

Just like in the recently described 2017 case, these Latvian conjoined twins were lost for science. The Latvian twins ended in the pot and were eaten. It is interesting to note that at the time porpoises were regularly caught and eaten as 'marine pork', hence the German word 'Meerschwein' and the English

'porpoise', which is derived from the French 'porc poisson', in its turn literally meaning 'pork fish'. Nowadays, porpoises are legally protected by wildlife laws and not being eaten anymore, so in the North Sea case the fishermen threw the specimen back into the sea.

The Latvian conjoined twins should be considered as the third known case of twinning and the second known case of conjoined twins in *P. phocoena*, the fifth known case of *parapagus dicephalus* in any cetacean species and the eleventh and oldest known case of conjoined twinning in any cetacean species.

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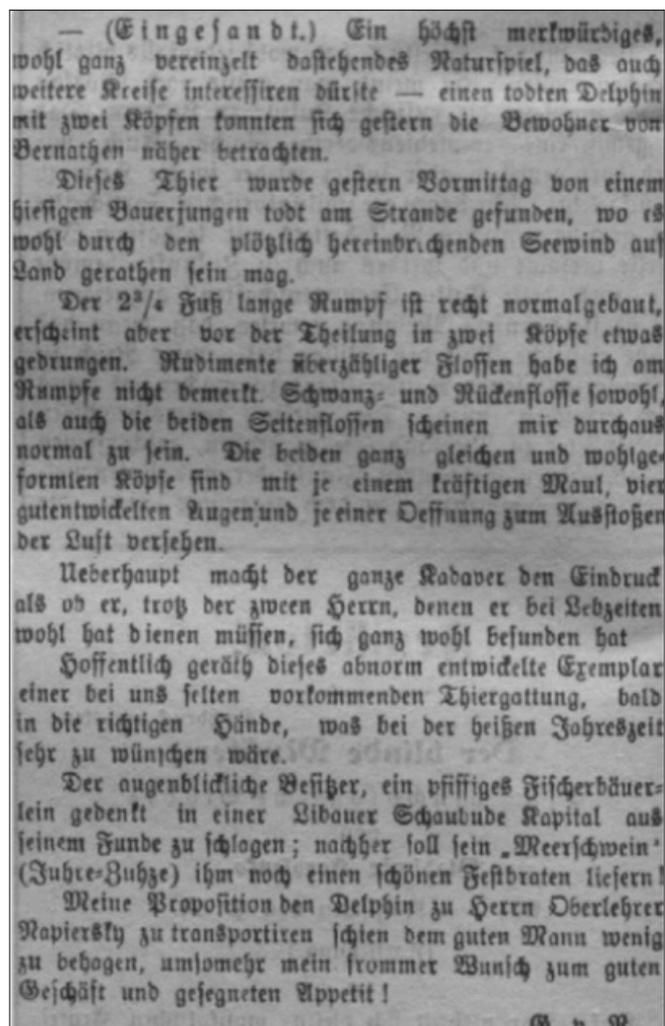


Figure 1 The original newspaper notice in *Libauer Zeitung*, July 27, 1891.

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