

STUDI DI EGITTOLOGIA  
E DI PAPIROLOGIA

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MARIO CAPASSO

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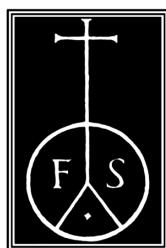
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# STUDI DI EGITTOLOGIA E DI PAPIROLOGIA

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# SALTY DELICACIES

ANGELIKI SYRKOU

**ABSTRACT:** Greeks and Egyptians exploited the inexhaustible richness of fish and sea food of the Mediterranean Sea. They created a variety of enjoyable dishes consisting of dried, smoked or pickled fish. Having thoroughly studied every kind of fish, they cooked it in a way that highlighted its best properties. So they managed not only to meet their nutritional requirements, but also to enjoy refined and gourmet dishes.

**KEYWORDS:** fish, garum, tarichos.

## PROLEGOMENA

ANCIENT sources inform us about the places where fish could be found and the proper time for catching the various kinds; they also record hundreds of names of fish and seafood. The number of these names alone shows us that the ancient Greeks were not only familiar with the sea, but had a probably unparalleled sophisticated knowledge of marine life in relation to seafood. The Mediterranean Sea offered the ancient world a nutritious and delicious variety of food, while encompassing both fish and other sea food. The bountiful products of the Mediterranean were not only enjoyed by those living on its immediate shores, but further inland as well; with the consumption of fish varying in accordance with the wealth and location of the household.

Archaeological, literary and epigraphical evidence record the number of the fish species known, and allow us to trace the route from the fishermen on the coast to the consumers via the fish market or with the aid of the fishmongers.<sup>1</sup> Those who had a distinct predilection for fish were called *opsophagoi*; an *opsopha-*

*gos* is a fish lover, who became mad about fish and philosophers considered them decadent.<sup>2</sup>

Fish in ancient Greece was an aquatic creature, a food item, a commodity, an idea and it meant different things to different groups of people throughout the various stages in the progress from the sea to the table.<sup>3</sup> It was sometimes offered as a love-gift in Attic vase-painting and was used as a symbol of tyrannical power. An amusing example occurs in Juvenal's Fourth satire, which concerns an enormous fish for the emperor Domitian. There are other literary references to fish and tyranny, especially about Sicilian tyrants. Fish also was considered something dangerous and threatening in itself, a force which drives men from within to desperate actions.<sup>4</sup>

In this brief introduction to the subject it is neither possible to present a definitive description of the gastronomic habits of the ancient Greeks, nor to catalogue all the species of fish consumed and the variety of ways they were caught.<sup>5</sup>

In Homeric epics people were skilled in the art of fish and fishing, as Sarpedon's words reveal when he compares the call to hunting with the netting of all kinds of fish (Ath. 25 b-c). But for Homer, fish was not a food fit for heroes, and paled in comparison with the beef they esteemed (Ath. 13 f). The most distinguished men and the nobility were awarded honors at their dinner parties; so Tydeides was honored with meat<sup>6</sup> and Ajax as a token of honor was offered a special portion of meat.<sup>7</sup> It is evident that Homer's heroes did not appreciate the nutritional value of fish, and ate

\* I am grateful to my colleague Nikos Charalabopoulos for his comments on this paper.

<sup>1</sup> D. MYLONA, *Fish*, in J. WILKINS-R. NADEAU (eds.), *A companion to food in the ancient world*, UK 2015, p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> J. DAVIDSON, *Courtesans and Fishcakes. The consuming passions of Classical Times*, New York 1998, pp. 3-4, 20.

<sup>3</sup> MYLONA, *Fish* cit., p. 158.

<sup>4</sup> J. DAVIDSON, *Fish, sex and revolution in Athens*, «CQ» 43 (1993), pp. 9, 61-62.

<sup>5</sup> The extensive and very detailed study of D. THOMPSON, *Glossary of Greek fishes*, Oxford 1947, reveals the variety of fish that the Aegean and the Mediterranean generously offered for the enjoyment of the ancient Greeks.

<sup>6</sup> Hom., *Iliad* VIII 161-2 Τυδείδῃ περὶ μὲν σε τίον Δαναοὶ ταχύπωλοι ἔδρη τε κρέασίν τε ἰδὲ πλείους δεπάεσσι.

<sup>7</sup> Hom., *Iliad* VII 321-322 νότοισιν δ' Αἴαντα διηνεκέεσσι γέραιρεν ἥρωες Ἀτρεΐδης εὐρὺ κρείων Ἀγαμέμνων.

them only as a last resort, when nothing else was available.<sup>1</sup> From the 8<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. to the 4<sup>th</sup> A.D. meat became more and more common over time and was consumed by larger and larger groups of population. It is likely that other animal products, like eggs underwent a similar evolution. Meat was nonetheless basically a luxury good and remained associated with festivities and good cheer to the end.<sup>2</sup> By the late Classical and Roman period this situation had changed; fish became more popular and gained an important position in the eating habits of the ancient Greeks.

#### FISH IN CLASSICAL ERA

In the Classical era, fish and sea food played an important role in the culinary habits of the general population.<sup>3</sup> In Greece fish was very important in the diet of inhabitants and a luxury affordable to large sections of most Greek cities. Fish in the context of an urban market, especially in Athens, was characterized as an expensive luxury; the ability to buy fish implied higher status, education and a cosmopolitan lifestyle. In the literary discourse fish appears as a luxury food.<sup>4</sup> There are various passages showing that fresh fish was expensive in Athens, for example in a fragment by Alexis<sup>5</sup> the fishmongers are presented as exacting “royal tributes” for their produce and in *Neaniskoi* of Antiphanes, a character says that he has to look away, when he buys fish, because if he see how small the fish is and how they charge for it, he could be frozen solid.<sup>6</sup>

In the celebrations hosted by the richer citizens, fish and seafood were brought to the table before the main course, a custom that has

survived across Europe until the present day. On the contrary, in coastal areas, where fish were plentiful, and transport not problematic for fishermen and residents alike, fresh fish would have been the staple food in their daily diet.<sup>7</sup> The emergence of gastronomy in Greek cities followed a path parallel to the development of the market for fresh fish. In Athens fine cuisine revolved around seafood, which became associated with the growth of wealth and income among those people who could afford the most prized varieties.<sup>8</sup> Most of the information available to us on fresh fish in a market context refers to Athens. Athenian market was stocked with fish caught in the surrounding seas, mostly the Saronic Gulf. Whitebait from Phaleron and Megara and a variety of other species were sold at the fish stalls in the agora.<sup>9</sup>

The lists of fishes, which were very common in theatrical Comedy,<sup>10</sup> show that Greeks consumed a great variety of fish, from the smallest that were fried in a mass together, to the biggest which assumed the role of a main dish when served whole or cut into fillets. Large fish were more expensive than the smaller ones of the same species; in comedies, the desire for large fish and the appreciation of its qualities signified cultivation and familiarity with the cosmopolitan lifestyle of the cities.<sup>11</sup> In formal dinners, fish and meat dishes were sometimes mixed together (Ath. 96 b). Most Athenians did not think of fish as a luxury, but large fish were the prerogative of the rich and these wealthy elite had the choice of a wide variety of kinds of fish.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile the poorest social classes had to

<sup>1</sup> Hom., *Odyssey* IV 368-9 αἰεὶ γὰρ περὶ νῆσον ἀλώμενοι ἰχθυόασκον / γναμπτοῖς ἀγκίστροισιν, ἔτειρε δὲ γαστέρα λιμός and *Odyssey* XII 329-332 ἀλλ’ ὅτε δὴ νηὸς ἐξέφθιτο ἥια πάντα, / καὶ δὴ ἄγρην ἐφέπεσκον ἀλητεύοντες ἀνάγκη, / ἰχθυὺς ὄρνιθας τε, φίλας ὅ τι χεῖρας ἵκοιτο, / γναμπτοῖς ἀγκίστροισιν, ἔτειρε δὲ γαστέρα λιμός.

<sup>2</sup> C. CHANDEZON, *Animals, Meat and Alimentarity by products: patterns of production and Consumption*, in J. WILKINS-R. NADEAU (eds.), *A companion to food* cit., pp. 144-145.

<sup>3</sup> F. GOTTET, *Η θάλασσα στο πιάτο των αρχαίων*, «Αρχαιολογία και τέχνες» II (2012), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> MYLONA, *Fish* cit., p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> Alexis, *Pyl.* fr. 1, 1-4 Νῆ τῇν Ἀθηναῖν, ἀλλ’ ἐγὼ τεθαύμαχα.

<sup>6</sup> Antiph., fr. 166, 3-7 ἐμβλέπων γὰρ αὐτόθι / τοῖς ἰχθυοπώλαις, λίθινος εὐθύς γίνομαι, ὥστ’ ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἔστ’

ἀποστραφέντι μοι / λαλεῖν πρὸς αὐτούς· ἂν ἴδω γὰρ ἡλίκον / ἰχθὺν ὅσου τιμῶσι, πῆγνυμαι σαφῶς.

<sup>7</sup> A. DALBY, *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece*, London 1996, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> DALBY, *Siren Feasts* cit., p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> MYLONA, *Fish* cit., p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> I. KONSTANTAKOS, *A Commentary on the fragments of eight plays of Antiphanes*, Ph.D Thesis, Cambridge 2000, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> D. MYLONA, *Fish-Eating in Greece from the fifth Century B.C. to the Seventh Century A.D. A story of impoverished fishermen or luxurious fish banquets?*, BAR International Series, 1754, Oxford 2008, pp. 105, 109.

<sup>12</sup> T. BEKKER-NIELSEN, *Introduction*, in T. BEKKER-NIELSEN (ed.), *Ancient fishing and fish processing in the Black Sea Region*, Aarhus 2005, p.14.

make do with whitebait, anchovy, round sardine, smelt, and sardines, which were fried together in hot oil and formed a fine Athenian specialty, ἀφύη. So fish dishes cooked in this way were called *afyai*.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to their use in *cuisine*, fish were occasionally thought of as contributing to medicinal purposes. Hippocrates, although he considers eel very useful for humans, proposes abstinence from the *surmullet*, the blacktail, the mullet, and the eel for people suffering from the so called sacred disease (epilepsy).<sup>2</sup>

According to Archestratus,<sup>3</sup> many Greek cities had thriving markets where fish, more than meat, was more affordable for most consumers. Greeks, much as they appreciated fried fish (Ath. 108 b), still used their imagination to invent different recipes for enjoying fish: they ate fish in a coriander crust, tuna steak and seafood rissoles with cumin sauce.<sup>4</sup>

Here follows a summary of the main fish species which formed the staple food of the ancient Greeks:

Fish species	Properties
ἀφύη (anchovy)	The term ἀφύη is generic for the small fry of various kinds of fish. The anchovy is heavy and indigestible, and the white kind is called the <i>cobitis</i> (Ath. 356 e). The best anchovy came from the seas around Athens, with Aristotle <sup>5</sup> arguing that the tastiest was that from Salamis, Marathon and the area around Themistoclean (Ath. 285 c), but Athenians themselves failed to appreciate it as it deserved; they claimed that this is beggars' fish (Ath. 285 e).
γαλεός (dogfish or shark)	This was also famous in classical Greece. This fish contains neither fat nor lard. (Ath. 294 d-e).
γόγγρος (conger eel)	Conger is coarser than the common eel; its flesh is less firm and less nutritious and it is very deficient in palatable juice; but still, it is good for the stomach (Ath. 288 c). They used to say that γόγγρος would not be despised by the gods (Ath. 302 e).
ἔγχελυς (eel)	A special delicacy for Athenians were <i>eels</i> , the best of which arrived in Athens fresh from the Copaic lake of Boeotia, <sup>6</sup> and fetched a high price on the Athenian market (Ath. 27 e), while the eel from the river Strumon were salted and exported to southern Greece during the Hellenistic era. Ancient Greeks cooked eels in a berry sauce. <sup>7</sup> The Egyptians, as is widely believed, offered the eel worship. <sup>8</sup> Lake eel is tastier and more nourishing than marine eel (Ath. 355 d).
θυννίς or θύννος (pelamys, thunnis, female tunny)	The <i>pelamys</i> is called the <i>thunnis</i> , or female tunny-fish; but that when it becomes larger, it is called <i>thunnus</i> ; and when it gets to a larger size still, it is called the <i>orcynus</i> ; and that when it has grown to a size which is quite enormous, then it is called <i>cetus</i> (Ath. 302 a-b). <i>Thunnis</i> is rich and nourishing (Ath. 356 e).

<sup>1</sup> Athen. 285a, 300f.

<sup>2</sup> Hippocr., *De morbo sacro* 1, 25-33.

<sup>3</sup> Archestratus was a Greek poet who lived around 350 B.C. in Sicily. From his poem, called *Hedypatheia*, 340 hexameters are preserved by Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*. The poem imitates Hesiod's *Works and Days* and occasionally borrows phraseology from Hesiod.

<sup>4</sup> A. DALBY-S. GRAINGER, *The Classical Cookbook*, London 1996, pp. 67, 130.

<sup>5</sup> Aristot., *Opera omnia*. v. *Historia animalium*, Lipsiae 1831, pp. 211-212.

<sup>6</sup> Aristoph., *Acharnians* 880 ἰκτῦδας ἐνύδρως ἐγγέλεις Κωπαίδας. Athen. 27 e.

<sup>7</sup> DALBY-GRAINGER, *The Classical Cookbook* cit., pp. 62-64.

<sup>8</sup> DAVIDSON, *Courtesans and Fishcakes* cit., p. 8.

Fish species	Properties
κεστρεύς ( <i>cestreus</i> or grey mullet)	<i>Cestreus</i> is the generic term for the various species of the grey mullet; gray mullets feed mainly on seaweed, diatoms and bottom detritus, which they obtain by browsing along the bottom and sucking in the mud; so, their gut contains more sand and mud than any other material. This was noticed by the ancients who thought that grey mullets had a poor diet and they were constantly hungry, so they gave gray mullet the designation νῆστις or ἄσιτος. <sup>1</sup> The <i>cestreus</i> is found not only in the sea, but in rivers and in lakes. And this fish is also called the <i>oxyrhynchus</i> ; but the one which is taken in the Nile is called the <i>coracinus</i> . And the black kind is smaller than the white; boiled it is not so good as when it is roasted; it is good for the stomach and good for the bowels (Ath. 356). According to Hippocrates <i>cestreus</i> should not be eaten by those suffering from the disease called Sacred. <sup>2</sup>
κέφαλος (gray mullet)	It belongs to the category of the general name <i>leucisci</i> (λευκίσκοι); there are many sorts; some are called <i>cephali</i> , (κέφαλοι), some <i>cestres</i> (κεστρεῖς), some <i>chellones</i> (χελλῶνες) and some <i>myxini</i> (μυξῖνοι) (Ath. 307 e-f). They used to say that fine cut from these fish would not be despised by the gods (Ath. 302 e).
κίθαρος	It was a flat fish, which seems not to have been esteemed as food. <sup>3</sup>
κολίας (mackerel or the Spanish mackerel)	It is mentioned frequently by Aristotle. Spawns once a year like most other fish. <sup>4</sup> It was imported to Athens salted or smoked from Byzantium.
κωβίος <i>gobie</i>	<i>Gobie</i> is easy on the stomach but provides little nourishment (Ath. 309 e).
λάβραξ (sea bass or <i>labrax lupus</i> )	Large sea bass, very clever and invented, served filleted and roasted; it was very much appreciated since it was tasty and juicy (Ath. 310 e, 311 a).
μαινίς Sprat	This is a small fish of the <i>maena</i> species. <sup>5</sup> As the red mullet fish it was sacred to Hecate (Ath. 325 b); sprat is hard for the stomach (Ath. 313).
μελάνουρος (bream or <i>melenurus</i> , blacktail)	<i>Melanurus</i> was a large-eyed fish, named after the conspicuous black spot on its tail, but offering little value as food. <sup>6</sup> Archestratus proposed cooking it in a clay pot, greased with oil and cheese, and sprinkled with salt and cumin. <sup>7</sup> Hippocrates considers <i>melanurus</i> very useful for humans but he believes that it should not be eaten by those suffering from the so called sacred disease (epilepsy). <sup>8</sup>
μύραινα or σμύραινα ( <i>murry</i> , <i>mu-raena</i> , sea-eel, lamprey)	The lamprey can exist for a long time out of the water, because it has very small gills. It is nourishing as other eels (Ath. 312 c); the lamprey from the seas around Italy is an amazing food (Ath. 313). The lamprey that comes from the shore between Italy and Sicily is the best food.

<sup>1</sup> KONSTANTAKOS, *A Commentary on the fragments* cit., p. 189.

<sup>2</sup> Hippocr., *De morbo sacro* 1, 31-32 καὶ ἐδεσμάτων πολλῶν καὶ ἀνεπιτηδείων ἀνθρώποισι νοσήουσιν ἐσθίειν, θαλασσίων μὲν τρίγλης, μελανούρου, κεστρέως, ἐγχέλυος.

<sup>3</sup> THOMPSON, *A Glossary of Greek fishes* cit., p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> THOMPSON, *A Glossary of Greek fishes* cit., p. 120.

<sup>5</sup> THOMPSON, *A Glossary of Greek fishes* cit., pp. 153-155.

<sup>6</sup> KONSTANTAKOS, *A Commentary on the fragments* cit., p. 193.

<sup>7</sup> DALBY-GRAINGER, *The Classical Cookbook* cit., pp. 61-62.

<sup>8</sup> Hippocr., *De morbo sacro* 1, 31-32

Fish species	Properties
μῦρος <i>muros</i>	<i>Muros</i> is different than lamprey; its flesh is tender and tasty. (Ath. 312 e-f).
ξιφίας (swordfish)	A large fish of the open sea which grows to a great size. It is one of the great fish included under the name κήτη. <sup>1</sup> It is eaten sliced and it is delicious (Ath. 314 f).
ὀρφός or ὀρφός (grouper or sea-perch)	These often featured in formal dinners. <sup>2</sup> Large groupers were apparently served filleted. The <i>orphus</i> , is very full of a pleasant juice, glutinous, indigestible, very nutritious, diuretic. But the parts near his head are glutinous and digestible; the more fleshy parts are indigestible and heavy, while the part towards the tail is the tenderest part (Ath. 315 a-c).
πέρκη (perch)	A fish common to both fresh and saltwater. <sup>3</sup> <i>Perch</i> swims in circles among the rocks, bears on its body vertical stripes and lines. There is a proverb saying that perch follows a <i>melanouros</i> (Ath. 319 b-c). It can be eaten whole or sliced. Sea perch had to be cut in two to be fried.
πηλαμύς (bonito fish or <i>pelamys</i> )	A relative of the tuna fish also very popular frequently found in fish directories. <sup>4</sup> Arcestratus gives us an interesting recipe for <i>pelamys</i> : it should be baked with some fresh oregano wrapped in fig leaves in the ashes. <sup>5</sup> The <i>pelamys</i> is very nutritious and heavy, it is also diuretic and very indigestible; but when cured like the <i>callubium</i> , it is quite as good for the stomach and it has a tendency to make the blood thin; the large kind is called the <i>synodontis</i> (Ath. 357). <i>Pelamys</i> is also excellent eating when is pickled. <sup>6</sup>
σάλπη (salpe or salpa or saupe)	The <i>salpe</i> is hard-fleshed, and unpleasant to the taste, but the best are those which are caught at Alexandria, and those which are taken in the autumn. For it is white, full of moisture, and free from any unpleasant smell (Ath. 356).
σαργός (sargus rondeletii)	The <i>sargus</i> is an excellent and delicious fish but it is a very cunning fish as respects catching it, and brings forth its young twice in the year. They are best at the beginning of the winter (Ath. 321 b).
σαρδίνη or σάρδα or σαρδίνος (sardine)	<i>Sardines</i> were a favorite among small fish and especially those from Phalerum, and had the added advantage of being cheap. <sup>7</sup>
σκάρος (parrot wrasse or <i>scarus</i> )	<i>Scarus</i> was a famous fish in antiquity. Aristotle says that this fish has serrated teeth, is a solitary fish and carnivorous; the <i>scarus</i> has tender flesh and is flaky, sweet, easily digested. (Ath. 355 e). It is the only fish which never sleeps, so it is not easily caught, even by night (Ath. 319 e-f).

<sup>1</sup> THOMPSON, *A Glossary of Greek fishes* cit., pp. 178-180.<sup>2</sup> Aristoph., *Wasps* 493.<sup>3</sup> THOMPSON, *A Glossary of Greek fishes* cit., p. 195.<sup>4</sup> DALBY, *Siren Feasts* cit., pp. 70-71.<sup>5</sup> DALBY-GRAINGER, *The Classical Cookbook* cit., pp. 59-60.<sup>6</sup> THOMPSON, *A Glossary of Greek fishes* cit., p. 199.<sup>7</sup> Aristoph., *Frogs* 984-5 τίς τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀπεδήδοκεν / τῆς μαινίδος and *Birds* 76-77 τοτὲ μὲν ἐρᾷ φαγεῖν ἀφύας Φαληρικὰς: / τρέχω 'π' ἀφύας λαβὼν ἐγὼ τὸ τρύβλιον.

Fish species	Properties
σκόμβρος (tunny or mackerel)	The tunny is the most ancient fish species for which there is evidence of extensive exploitation from the prehistoric times. In historical times it was fished in huge quantities and eaten fresh, dried or salted and considered a fine food. Strabo ( <i>Geography</i> VII 6, 2) describes the routes of the tuna fisheries which started from the Black Sea and extended to Sicily. Tunny imported from the Narrow Sea was considered the best. <sup>1</sup> The <i>scombrus</i> , or tunny, is mentioned by this name by Aristophanes, in his <i>Gerytades</i> . The species of tunny called <i>scombrus</i> is smaller in size, but more nutritious, than the species called <i>colias</i> ; and also more juicy, though not more easily digested (Ath. 321). <i>Scombroi</i> and <i>saperdai</i> were caught in large quantities in the Black Sea and nearby areas and then pickled and exported. <sup>2</sup>
σπάρος (sparus or sea-bream)	The <i>sparus</i> is harsh-tasted, tender, with pleasant smell, good for the stomach, diuretic, and digestible; but when it is fried, it is indigestible (Ath. 355 e).
σκορπίος or σκορπίς or σκόρπαινα (sea scorpion)	The sea-scorpion, which is found in the deep sea, and is of a tawny color, is more nutritious than the one found in marshes, or than the large one which is taken near the shore (Ath. 355 e).
σφύραινα or σφῦρα ( <i>sphuraena</i> or spet)	The <i>sphuraena</i> , or hammer-fish; is more nutritious than the conger, but very unpleasant and unpalatable to the taste (Ath. 323 a).
τρίγλη (trigle, red mullet, the bearded mullet or surmullet)	The red mullet fish was, as <i>μαινίς</i> , sacred to Hecate (Ath. 325 b); it was served whole because of its small size, and as a fine fish, required careful cooking (Ath. 311 a). Red mullet was esteemed above all other small fish that were served in large quantities. The mullet brings forth three times in the year; and the fishermen have adopted this opinion from the spawn being seen three times a-year in certain localities (Ath. 324 d, 325 f). The mullet is good for the stomach, very astringent, of very firm flesh, not very digestible, apt to bind the bowels, especially when it is broiled; but when it is fried in a frying-pan, then it is heavy and indigestible; and, as a general rule, the whole tribe of mullets has the property of causing secretions of blood (Ath. 355 e). Hippocrates considers red mullet very useful for humans but it should not be eaten by those suffering from the disease called Sacred. <sup>3</sup>
φάγκρος (sea bream)	The <i>phagrus</i> is found both in the river and in the sea; but that which is found in the sea is the best (Ath. 355 e). Sea-bream is very tasty and sweet rather nourishing (Ath. 327 d).
χελιδών (flying fish or sea swallow)	The sea-swallow, also cuttlefish or <i>chelidonias</i> , is something like the <i>pelamys</i> but harder (Ath. 357). The cuttlefish was regarded as a wily animal, because of the ink it discharges to conceal itself and its tricks in catching small fish. <sup>4</sup>

They also use to enjoy a variety of fish with serrated teeth, for example: grim torpendo (νάρκη), perch (πέρκη), trichias (τριχίας),

lizard (σαῦρος), phycis (φυκίς), sea cuckoo (κόκκυξ), red mullet (τρίγλη) (Ath. 322 e-f).

<sup>1</sup> DALBY, *Siren Feasts* cit., pp. 40, 105.

<sup>2</sup> KONSTANTAKOS, *A Commentary on the fragments* cit., p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Hippocr., *De morbo sacro* 1, 31-2.

<sup>4</sup> KONSTANTAKOS, *A Commentary on the fragments* cit., p. 72.

## SHELLFISH AND MOLLUSKS

Apart from fish, the Ancient Greeks relished shellfish and mollusks. According to Aristotle (Ath. 88 b) shellfish/oysters are generated in the mud or the sand; they are of all the following kinds: ὄστρεα, φησίν, πίνη, ὄστρεον, μῦς, κτεῖς, σωλήν, κόγχη, λεπάς, τῆθος, βάλανος. πορφυρικά δὲ κῆρυξ, πορφύρα, ἡδυπορφύρα, ἐχῖνος, στράβηλος. Here follows a summary of the main shellfish and mollusks which Greeks loved to consume:

good food and enjoyed everything cooked in unusual ways. They liked meatballs from mollusks, shrimp, lobsters, squid, cuttlefish, squids, crayfish mixed with cumin. They also accompanied oysters and other shellfish with cumin sauce.<sup>4</sup>

Some areas were famous for the quantity or the quality and taste of the fish with the island of Ikaria being called, ἰχθυόεσσα, on account of the number of fish to be found there (Ath. 30 d). While near Carthage there was

ἄστακός (lobster)	Lobster was highly prized with the best lobsters coming from the island of Lipara (Ath. 104 e-105).
κάραβος (crayfish or langouste)	They were also sought after by some who found their flavor much to their taste and valued them as a diuretic, while for others they were somewhat indigestible, but more digestible than fish, they enjoyed them grilled (Ath. 105 b-e).
καρίς (shrimp)	Like crayfish, shrimp had a special place on the Greek table (Ath. 105 b-e).
μῦς (mussel)	The mussel has a hinged shell.
πορφύρα (sweet purple-fish)	The sweet purple-fish belongs to the migratory fish and is born about springtime. There are many different kinds of purple-fish; those which live in the gulfs are of large size and mainly black in color, but those which are found near the shore and around the coasts are small and of a red color. (Ath. 88 b-d).
πίν(ν)η	The <i>pinna</i> has a smooth mouth; it is a fan mussel, which appears in papyri. <sup>1</sup>
πωλύπους or πουλύπους ( <i>octopus</i> )	A very tasty mollusk which often accompanied a meal. <i>Octopus</i> , as all mollusks, contributes to pleasure, including sex (Ath. 316 d).
ὄστρεον (oyster)	Oysters were rare and considered a special delicacy; Apicius sent some to the Emperor Trajan who was in Parthia, a distance of 10 days away from the sea. <sup>2</sup>
σηπία (cuttlefish)	Cuttlefish had a special place in Athenians' cuisine. <sup>3</sup> It is tender, tasty and easily digested, even when stewed (Ath. 356 d).
τεuthίς (squid)	Greeks loved squids and they preferred them fried as they were able to rouse the dogs of the god Hephaestus or to deeply please a lover (Ath. 326 c).

People often accompanied their meals with fried fish eggs, γόνος, which was a special tidbit (Ath. 108 b-d). Greeks were lovers of

a town called *Scombroaria* after the mackerel caught there, from which the best fish pickle, γάρος, was prepared (Ath. 121 b).

<sup>1</sup> POxy x 1273.

<sup>2</sup> Athen. 7 d Τραιανῷ δὲ τῷ αὐτοκράτορι ἐν Παρθίᾳ ὄντι καὶ τῆς θαλάσσης ἀπέχοντι ἡμερῶν παμπόλλων ὁδὸν Ἀπίκιος ὄστρεα νεαρά διεπέμψατο ὑπὸ σοφίας αὐτοῦ τεθησαυρισμένα: καὶ οὐχ ὡς Νικομήδει τῷ Βιθυνῶν βασιλεῖ ἐπιθυμήσαντι ἀφύης μακράν δὲ καὶ οὗτος ᾗν

τῆς θαλάσσης' μάγειρός τις μιμησάμενος τὸ ἰχθυῖδιον παρέθηκεν [ὡς ἀφύας].

<sup>3</sup> Aristoph., *Acharnians* 1156-1158 ὃν ἔτ' ἐπίδοιμι τευθίδος / δεόμενον, ἥ δ' ὠπτημένη / σίζουσα πάραλος ἐπὶ τραπέζῃ κειμένη; Athen. 323 c-d.

<sup>4</sup> DALBY-GRAINGER, *The Classical Cookbook* cit., p. 130.

## SMOKED FISH

The ancient Greeks, because of the difficulty of preserving fresh food, ate a large variety of smoked and salted fish, which made fine food.<sup>1</sup> They relished the thin fillets from the tail of the fish as much as the thick ones from the body of the fish; the best salted fish was considered to be tuna (Ath. 116 a-d). They considered that fish pickled in salt, whether salt water or freshwater, to be neither nourishing, nor succulent; eschewed them as inflammatory and acting strongly on the bowels as well as provoking lust (Ath. 120 e-f).

The fish mostly pickled were: bonito fish (πηλαμύδα), mackerel (σκόμβρος), *coliae* (κολία), lakerda (λικιβάττω), sea born turtle (σκυτίνη), grey mullet (κέφαλος), *cestreus* (κεστρεύς), *lebi* (λεβία), *sciaena umbra*, (μύλλος), sardine, (σαρδίνη), tunny (θυννίς), mackerel (κολιός) (Ath. 118 b-e, 121b).

The roe of every fish, whether ree with the stomach; worst of all the roe of the larger, more oily fish, not disagreeable to the taste when seasoned with salt and roasted. All pickled fish had to be repeatedly soaked until the water became sweet and odorless. Boiling dried sea-fish makes the flesh sweeter, and it is sweeter when eaten hot than cold (Ath. 120 d-e).

## GARUM SAUCE AND TARICHOS

Literary texts and inscriptions indicate that the consumption of *garum*, despite its strong smell, was more widespread, in geographical and social terms, than that of fresh or salted fish. The production of *garum*, the most famous fish sauce, which was transported possibly in barrels, and salted fish (τάριχος or *salsamentum*) originally took place within the *oikos* (family), but then expanded over the whole Mediterranean world and in par-

ticular to Crimea, where a big industry grew up.<sup>2</sup> No ancient author described in detail what this fish sauce, *garum*, looked like, but descriptions of the production process imply that *garum* was a thick salty liquid containing scales, bones and nuggets of fish.<sup>3</sup> Pliny states that the fish parts were combined with salt to make *garum*, but the ratio of the fish to salt when making *garum* is described as being 8:1.<sup>4</sup> There was white and black *garum*, top quality and second quality, famous *garum* from Pompei and Klazomenai, and Leptis Magna, from Carthage and Babylona. Almost no other liquid apart perfume came to be more valuable.<sup>5</sup>

*Garum* was known in Athens during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, but it does not seem to have been as widely used as in Roman period.<sup>6</sup> Galen, who frequently refers to *garum* as a flavoring in his own time, says that *garum* could heal ulcers and cure dysentery and as a young medical student, in order to enrich the monotony of legumes that he consumed daily, he ate *garum* to which he added oil or vinegar or wine.<sup>7</sup>

Although the *garum* was popular with the Greeks and Romans, there were others who disliked it. The bishop of Cremona, Liutprand,<sup>8</sup> ambassador and emissary from Germany to Constantinople 949-950 and 968, describes *garum* as an unpleasant liquid prepared from fish. Liutprand also tells us that while at that time the *garum* had disappeared from the western Mediterranean, in Byzantium it was still widely used.

*Tarichos* (τάριχος) was a fish processed by drying, smoking or pickling. Τάριχος was sold by special sellers, ταριχοπῶλαι, in different shops from fresh fish; ταριχοπῶλαι were businessmen engaged in large-scale trade.<sup>9</sup> The variety of preserved fish products was very much appreciated and it was consumed

<sup>1</sup> Aristoph., *Wasps* 491 νῦν δὲ πολλῶ τοῦ τὰριχου ἐστὶν ἀξιοτέρα.

<sup>2</sup> BEKKER-NIELSEN, *Introduction* cit., pp. 14, 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> R. CURTIS, *Sources of Production and Trade of Greek and Roman Processed Fish*, in T. BEKKER-NIELSEN (ed.), *Ancient fishing and fish* cit., p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Plin., *Naturalis Historia* 31, 93 ff. and *Geoponica* 20 46, 3.

<sup>5</sup> P. J. PARSONS, *City of the sharp-nosed fish, Greek Lives in Roman Egypt*, London 2007, p.112.

<sup>6</sup> R. CURTIS, *Sources of Production and Trade* cit., pp.28-29.

<sup>7</sup> Galen, *De simplicium medicamen.*, vol. 12, p. 377 Γάρος δυνάμεως ἐστὶ θερμῆς ἱκανῶς καὶ ξηρᾶς, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο πρὸς τὰ σηπεδονώδη τῶν ἐλκῶν ἐχρήσαντό τινες αὐτῶ τῶν ἱατρῶν, ἐνῆσσί τε τοῖς δυσεντερικοῖς τε καὶ ἰσχυαδικοῖς.

<sup>8</sup> DALBY, *Siren Feasts* cit., pp. 198-199.

<sup>9</sup> KONSTANTAKOS, *A Commentary on the fragments* cit., pp. 89-90.

as appetizers while the fresh fish was consumed either as main food or appetizer.<sup>1</sup>

#### FISH IN EGYPT

The Nile remained a lifeline for Egypt. It provided natural and regular irrigation, the quickest and cheapest form of transport, a renewable source of food.<sup>2</sup> There were fish everywhere, not only in the river but in the canals, ponds and marshes which divided up the cultivated land. Fish and fishing rights were valuable, whether the rights of a private owner with a lake on his land or the rights of the city or the state to exploit public waterways. Fishing could be done on foot, or from a boat, with spear or hook and line, with hand nets or cast nets or seine nets, by the use of traps or weirs or barrages.

Egypt is dominated by the river Nile, which supplied the inhabitants of the country with large quantities and a wide variety of fish, some of them were sacred and therefore untouchable.<sup>3</sup> For Egyptians it was easier to consume fish than eat a whole pig at one sitting.<sup>4</sup> Herodotus says that Egyptians ate fish both raw and sun-dried, and preserved in brine.<sup>5</sup> Fresh fish could not be preserved for a long in a hot climate. So the specific climatic conditions and the wide variety of fish in Egypt forced the residents of the Pharaonic era to salt fish intended for later use or export. Thus the art of the curer was developed and *taricheia* created, with factories for fish curing. This activity was another source of revenue for the State and the curers, organized into guilds, subjected to special taxation. The fish curers, along with fishermen and fishmongers had a strong presence in the social life of Egypt, chronicled in terms of their participation in various activities within the framework of civic duties.

One of the big fish markets was Oxyrhynchos, which maintained a good population of specialist tradesmen; in the town's market there were sellers of fish and fish-sauce. The fish sellers stocked all kind of fish, and the *garum* sellers of Oxyrhynchos said nothing about the quality and the origin of their stock; they sell generally *garum*.<sup>6</sup>

Salting also played an important role in storing fish; salting fish and the salty fish sauce *garum* and wine *garum* are well attested in papyri, which show that all these products were an important part of the population's diet. The ancient Egyptians processed fish but it is unclear to what extent the technology went beyond merely drying or smoking fish.<sup>7</sup> The quantity of fish products produced domestically was not sufficient to meet the needs of residents, so Egyptians imported them in large quantities from the Pontic regions, and from Sicily they bought salted, dried and pickled fish, the staple food of Greeks.<sup>8</sup> Egyptians use to have a very varied diet, given also the many different sorts of fish that were available in the Nile, which, apart the ones considered sacred, were all edible.<sup>9</sup> Especially for the marsh inhabitants, fish formed their staple food and fishing was a major economic resource, while farmers still fished in the flooded fields or in the mud left by the Nile as it receded after the annual flooding.<sup>10</sup> Fish were gutted, cut up, and eaten boiled, roasted, pickled in brine or dried, while the fish eggs were set aside for further treatment. Fish was also flavored with salt, pepper, cumin, coriander, sesame, dill and fennel. Pictures show ancient Egyptians hunting for fish and birds in the reeds that grew along the banks of the Nile.

<sup>1</sup> MYLONA, *Fish-Eating in Greece* cit., p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> The important role of fishing in the Egyptian economy, from the Pharaohs to the Byzantine era, the fishing methods and Ichthyological variety, as illuminated by the papyri is presented in the two-volume work of H. CHOULIARA-RAIOU, *Η αλιεία στην Αίγυπτο υπό το φως των Ελληνικών παπύρων*, Ioannina 2003.

<sup>3</sup> PARSONS, *City of the sharp-nosed fish* cit., pp. 97-98.

<sup>4</sup> R. BAGNALL, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton 1996, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Herodot. II 77.

<sup>6</sup> PARSONS, *City of the sharp-nosed fish* cit., pp. 102, 112.

<sup>7</sup> BAGNALL, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* cit., p. 29 and n. 93; CURTIS, *Sources of Production and Trade* cit., p. 44 n. 2.

<sup>8</sup> M. ROSTOVITZ, *The Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*, Oxford 1941, p. 1254.

<sup>9</sup> Herodot. II 72, 77.

<sup>10</sup> Plin., *Naturalis Historia* 9, 179.

## FISHING INDUSTRY

Besides its role in the Egyptian staple diet, fishing was also an important economic activity, which generated significant profits for the Treasury. The exploitation of fisheries always remained a state monopoly, in the Pharaonic era belonging to the Pharaoh and in the Ptolemaic era to the King. Most cities were built close to the Nile, and many fishermen were city dwellers, while the cities themselves controlled some of the most profitable fishing grounds.<sup>1</sup>

The papyri give us rich information about fishing rights, regulation by the state and the taxes levied. Fishermen were well organized into guilds which were useful to the local authorities for controlling prices and regulating trade practices for the benefit of the customers. The state often ceded fishing franchises to individuals and churches to pay the corresponding tax to the state. The state monopoly of fishing disappeared gradually during Roman and Byzantine times, but this did not mean state control and regulation was diminished, merely that it lost the more authoritarian aspects of its character.<sup>2</sup>

Fishermen had to pay different taxes in Ptolemaic era it seems that the amount of tax reached 25% of revenues derived from the sale of fish. In Roman times, as with other areas of economic activity, so with the fishery, part of fishing activity passed into the hands of private individuals; the State leased the fishing rights to monopolies or contractors who undertook the management of state fishing grounds, renting out, in their turn, their professional rights of fishing in public lakes, rivers or canals. The fishermen, who used to fish from boats were subjected to special taxation.<sup>3</sup>

The State, anxious to secure the supply of fish in the market places of big cities, forced

fishermen to sign binding contracts, sometimes accompanied by an oath, regarding the quantity of fish they should supply. On the other hand, the fishmongers, as private traders, were forced to undertake civic functions, to pay public contributions, which were not related to their profession or even to undergo *angariai* in order to have either a fishing boat or rent a fishing ground. Fishermen and fishmongers in Egypt and Rome during the Republic were organized in professional guilds.<sup>4</sup> The relation between the fishermen and fishmongers in Athens and other Greek cities is not quite clear; in Greece the numerous references in the written sources to fishmongers, as opposed to the almost complete silence about fishermen, could support the idea that a similar separation was followed.<sup>5</sup>

## FISH IN ROMAN ERA

Fish remained a favored food during the Roman and Byzantine period. In the Hellenistic era fish was a luxury and expensive. The Romans frequently enjoyed fish of good quality, as becomes obvious from Senecas' quotation referring to the moral decline in his time.<sup>6</sup> In the Roman world fish could be processed for preservation in two main ways: the fresh catch could be cut up and salted, forming the *salsamentum*, or the leftovers and fry, or immature fish, could be macerated with salt and fermented, forming the various liquid fish sauces, *garum*, *liquamenta*, *muria*, *allec* and *lymphatum*.<sup>7</sup> Consumption of salted fish in amphorae and the *garum* were expanded during this period, and, as a result, the fishing industry flourished.<sup>8</sup> In the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. the western Mediterranean provinces had productive economies with markets throughout the Empire and their salted fish products were exported to Greece and Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> BAGNALL, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* cit., p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> A. H. M. JONES, *The Later Roman Empire* 284-602, II, Oxford 1964, p. 859 and CHOULIARA-RAÏOU, *H αλιεία στην Αίγυπτο* cit., pp. 526-528.

<sup>3</sup> CHOULIARA-RAÏOU, *H αλιεία στην Αίγυπτο* cit., pp. 164-166, 180, 194, 318.

<sup>4</sup> CHOULIARA-RAÏOU, *H αλιεία στην Αίγυπτο* cit., pp. 301, 321, 361.

<sup>5</sup> MYLONA, *Fish* cit., p. 158.

<sup>6</sup> Sen., *Naturales Quaestiones* III 18.

<sup>7</sup> A. TRAKADA, *The Archaeological Evidence for Fish Processing in the Mediterranean*, in T. BEKKER-NIELSEN (ed.), *Ancient fishing and fish* cit., p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> GOTTET, *H θάλασσα* cit., p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> TRAKADA, *The Archaeological Evidence* cit., p. 74.

## CONCLUSION

Greeks and Egyptians, according to their financial and social position, exploited the inexhaustible richness of fish and sea food of the Mediterranean Sea. In their effort to preserve fish for a longer time, but also to give people living far away from the sea the chance to enjoy the sea's fruit, they created a variety of enjoyable dishes consisting of dried, smoked or pickled fish. Having thoroughly studied every kind of fish, they cooked it in a way that highlighted its best

properties, often combining it with spices, honey or nuts. So they managed not only to meet their nutritional requirements, but also to enjoy a series of unique, refined and special dishes, to indulge in a new and very special pleasure; they created balanced, but sensually exquisite specialties whose imaginativeness and creative juxtapositions may escape us, as we are unable to recreate them adequately.

*University of Patras*  
a.sirkou@gmail.com

COMPOSTO IN CARATTERE SERRA DANTE DALLA  
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