

Fish as a Source of Food in Antiquity

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1. *Introduction*

This chapter reviews literary evidence for the consumption of fish in antiquity and has two aims. The first is to complement the archaeological evidence presented in other chapters in this volume; the second is to comment on the nature of the literary sources, to show that they provide not merely “evidence” on the topic of salted fish but in addition a valuable cultural commentary on this type of food. This commentary reveals the variety of types available and the enormous range of interest in what might at first sight seem a simple foodstuff.

Sources on the ancient diet are diverse and potentially misleading. They tend to be influenced by strong literary and philosophical traditions which value morality over health and nutrition, and the care of the soul over care of the body. Two extreme illustrations may be found in Ovid’s *Fasti* and Plato’s *Republic*. At *Fasti* 6.169-86, the goddess Carna is said to be a goddess of traditional values whose festive foods are emmer wheat and pork. The foods the goddess is said to reject are imported fish and foreign birds such as the guinea fowl (which is said to have come to Rome from North Africa) and francolin (which is said to be imported from the Aegean). Rome, this text asserts, was not traditionally a fish-eating society, or at least did not construct herself as such.

Similarly, when describing the ideal diet for the rulers in the *Republic* (372), Plato’s Sokrates sets out vegetarian foods that are based on agriculture as those which are most desirable. This privileging of cereals and meat over fish and imported foods is widespread and pervades many literary sources, including much of Greek comedy, which is one of the major literary genres to focus on the consumption of fish (see Wilkins 2000, ch. 6).

This ancient perspective has been reinforced by two modern works, Galant 1985 and Davidson 1997. The first, which is discussed elsewhere in this volume, uses a statistical approach to claim that fish stocks made only a small contribution to the ancient diet, while the latter focuses on fish as a luxury product. Taken together, these claims suggest that the majority of people in the ancient Mediterranean area ate little or no fish. I argued in Wilkins 2000 and 2001 that Davidson’s picture is partial (he is interested only in the

wealthy) and that Gallant's case is misconceived since he sets the calorific value of fish in the diet against that of staple cereals rather than considering fish beside meat, vegetables and other complements to a cereal diet. I argued that fish was accessible to all members of the ancient polis, depending on cost and supply, both of which varied greatly. I also argued, incidentally, in Wilkins 2000, that Davidson was mistaken in assuming that the institution of the symposium was exclusive to the elites of the Greek cities. Davidson's argument on the role of desire in ancient Greek literature is an excellent case which maps on to the ancient diet (with particular reference to fish and wine) in a fascinating way; but it does not accurately reflect the ancient diet as currently understood.

I mentioned Ovid and Plato above because they are deeply embedded in Roman and Athenian culture. A number of the texts I am about to use do not derive specifically from either Athens or Rome and so reflect broader concerns in the ancient world. In the first place, my focus is on medicine, on the author of the Hippocratic text *Regimen II*, Diocles of Carystus, Mnesitheus of Athens, Diphilus of Siphnos, Hicesius of Smyrna and Galen of Pergamon. Secondly, I consider the sympotic author Athenaios of Naukratis. These authors cover a period from the fourth century BC (the author of *Regimen II*, Diocles and Mnesitheus) to the second/third centuries AD (Galen and Athenaios). These are familiar authors to the historian of ancient fishing. They are used extensively for example in Curtis 1991. What I undertake is to explore the importance of fish in these medical and sympotic authors in general, and not to use them merely as sources for vital pieces of evidence in a reconstruction of the ancient fish industry. My main headings will be: (a) geographical concerns; (b) fish in relation to other foods; (c) concerns of terminology and taxonomy; and (d) attempts to give an overview of the diet, from the imperial period in which Galen and Athenaios were writing, back over a millennium of Greek culture.

2. *Texts on fish*

2.1 *Medical texts: a brief survey*

The Hippocratic *Regimen II* (which probably dates to about 400 BC) has a substantial section on fish (48) dividing them according to dryness (*xerotatoi*) and lightness (*kouphoi*, largely the fish that inhabit rocky waters) and heaviness (*barus*, largely fish that inhabit rivers and marshes). Salted fish (*tarichos*) is "drying and attenuating" (Jones, *xerainousi kai ischnainousin*), fat ones are gently laxative, while the driest come from the sea, the moistest from lakes. The driest *tarichos* comes from the driest fish. This classification derives from the scientific categories of *Regimen I*, in which it is argued that the cosmos, the world and human and animal life are based on the principles of fire and water.

Later in the fourth century, Diokles of Carystus seems to have discussed fish in at least two treatises, *Hygieina* and *Hygieina to Pleistarchus*. He too is interested in dryness (Diokles, fragments 225-27, van der Eijk) and in soft or tough flesh in fish. For *tarichos*, he is interested in fat and non-fat fish that have gone into the pickle. There is little to distinguish Diocles from his predecessor in respect of fish, other than to say that more fish were probably included in the discussion. There is thus a possibility that the Hippocratic list was expanded.

This feature is more marked in Mnesitheus (fourth century BC) and Diphilus (third century BC), while Hicesius of Smyrna addresses the *chule* or juice that the food brings with it or causes to be produced in the body, and the qualities of a food that might affect the stomach. These may be new features, but it is hard to say given the fragmentary nature of the evidence. All three expand what the Hippocratic author had said.

Galen, writing in the second century AD has more to add. He has a major geographical concern, on which more shortly; he expands on the environmental concerns of the Hippocratic author; and he also rejects the scientific basis of *Regimen 1*, even denying that treatise Hippocratic authorship.

Of the medical authorities mentioned above, most of the fragments of works on fish by Mnesitheus, Diphilus and Hicesius survive only in quotations in the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaios, a slightly younger contemporary of Galen.¹

2.2 Athenaios: a brief summary of the *Deipnosophistai*

The *Deipnosophistae* is a sympotic text in the tradition of Plato's *Symposium*. Unlike that work and nearly all later symposia, food is at the centre of the *Deipnosophistai* and the familiar idea that wine provokes thought and philosophy – unlike food which impedes thought and discussion – is turned on its head. The fifteen books follow the order of the meal, and the symposiasts debate with each other over the correct way to approach their material. They recline in Rome, the centre of the world, and bring the fruits of research in libraries to the dinner table of Larensis, a minor Roman magistrate. They are clients of the great patron, and have an ambiguous relationship with Rome. But the text does not seem to adopt the hostile approach to fish which is frequently found in Roman authors, for example in the ninth book of Pliny's *Natural History* (9.53). Rather, at the beginning of the fish section we are told how

Thereupon, slaves entered bearing an enormous quantity of fish from sea and lake, on silver platters, so that we marvelled at the luxury as well as at the wealth displayed. For our host had brought everything but the Nereids. And one of the parasites and flatterers remarked that Poseidon must have sent the fish to Nittunius; not however through the agency of the merchants in

Rome who sell a tiny fish for a huge price; rather he must have brought them himself, some from Antium, others from Taracina and the Pontian islands opposite, still others from Pyrgi which is a city of Etruria. For the fishmongers of Rome do not fall short, even by a little distance, of those who were once satirised in Athens (Athenaios, 6.224b, trans. Gulick).

A little later, at the beginning of the next book, Athenaios moves from sympotic conversation to an alphabetical list of fish, which raises questions of (a) composition and (b) the ordering of his material. This makes for difficult reading, but if we set form aside the data provided is invaluable.

I want to turn to two representative passages: one is medical from Galen, the other is “sympotic” from Athenaios. I shall then draw out what I think are four important features from them.

2.2.1 *On grey mullet*

The grey mullet belongs to the family of scaly fish that grows not only in the sea but also in pools and rivers. This is why the various grey mullet differ greatly from one another, so that the class of sea mullet appears to be another one from that in the pools, rivers or swamps, or in the drains that clean out the city latrines. ... They are better or worse according to their food. For while some have plenty of weed and valuable roots and so are superior, others eat muddy weed and unwholesome roots. And some of them that dwell in rivers running through a large town, eating human dung and certain other such bad foods, are worst of all ... It is also clear from what has been said that, for this reason too, one sea is better than another so far as it is either completely clear or receives many large rivers like the Pontus. For in such a sea the fish are as superior to those living in pools as they are inferior to those in the open sea. ... Now this mullet like any other sea fish does not possess many small spines. But the mullet that enters the sea from rivers and marshes is full of such spines, much the same as other fish from the same source. ... Some of our own people call the fish produced in rivers “white mullet”, believing that they are a different species from grey mullet. ... This fish is also one of those that is pickled, and the variety from pools becomes much improved when prepared in this way. For it gets rid of everything in the taste that is slimy and foul-smelling. The recently salted fish is superior to the one that has been pickled for a longer time. But a little later there will be a general discussion about pickled fish, as also about fish that can be kept

in snow until the next day (Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 3.24 = 6.708-13 Kühn, trans. Powell)

Now Athenaios:

As we ate our salt fish many of us had a desire to drink. And Daphnus, raising his hands, said: Heracleides of Tarentum, my friends, says in his work entitled *Symposium* that a “moderate quantity of food should be eaten before drinking, and chiefly the dishes that form the ordinary courses at the beginning of the feast. For when foods are served after an interval of drinking, they counteract what settles on the stomach from the effects of wine and becomes the cause of gnawing pangs. Some even think them unwholesome – I mean the different kinds of green vegetables and salt-fish – possessing as they do a pungent quality. ... Diphilus of Siphnos says that salt-fish, whether from sea or lake or river, has little nourishment or juice; it is dry, easily digested, and provocative of appetite. The best of the lean varieties are cubes, *horaia*, and the like; of the fat, the tunny steaks and young tunny. When aged, they are superior, being more pungent, particularly the Byzantian sorts. The tunny steak, he says, is taken from the medium-sized young tunny, the smaller size resembling the cube tunny, from which class comes also the *horaion*. The Sardinian tunny is as large as the tuna. The mackerel is not heavy, but readily leaves the stomach. Spanish mackerel is rather purgative and pungent and has poorer flavour, but is filling. Better are the Arynclanian and the Spanish sort called Saxitanian, which are lighter and sweeter. Now Strabo, in the third book of his *Geography*, says that Sexitania, from which this fish gets its name, is near the Isles of Heracles, opposite New Carthage, and that there is another town called Scombroaria [Mackerel town] from the mackerel caught there. ... The river crow-fish from the Nile, which some call crescent, but which among the Alexandrians is known by the special name of “half-salt” is rather fatty, quite well-flavoured, meaty, filling, easily digested and assimilated, and in every way superior to the mullet. ... (Athenaios 3.120b-121c, trans. Gulick).

The main features that emerge in Galen’s account of the grey mullet, an important fish in the salting industry, are: the difficulty in distinguishing one species from another; the crucial role played by habitat; and his assimilation of much detail from varied sources. Athenaios, by contrast, quotes from sources and does not synthesise them into a smooth account. He refers to more places (but Galen refers to Spain elsewhere (3.30), on salted tuna), covering

Spain and Egypt as well as the Black Sea. He also draws heavily on medical authors – Heracleides and Diphilus – and reflects the integration of comment on medicine and comment on eating and symposia. He too is interested in varieties and the differences either between fish or between different ages and cuts of fish. We can pick out generic features from these passages, which are brief extracts from much more extensive comments on fish and salt fish. Galen has fifteen chapters on fish, a number of which include salted fish, and one on salted food in general (3.23-37 and 41); Athenaios discusses salt fish explicitly at 3.116a-121e, and in passing in many other passages.

3. *Concerns of Galen and Athenaios*

3.1 *Geographical concerns*

Galen's review of food in general in *de alimentorum facultatibus* (On the Properties of Foodstuffs) is comprehensive. He lists cereals in more detail than does Athenaios, plants in similar detail, meat and fish in less detail. Both authors range over many geographical areas, from Spain to Syria and the Black Sea to North Africa, but they concentrate on Asia Minor and Alexandria; in Athenaios' case there is much on Athens and the cities of mainland Greece; in Galen the Greek mainland is completely ignored, in favour of the greater Roman Empire. Here are some details on the Pontic region, which is the main focus of this volume. In his survey of all foods, Galen refers to specific places 73 times. Of this number, he refers to places related to the Pontic region 18 times (to Pontus 3 times, to Bithynia 3, to Dorulaion, Juliopolis, Claudiopolis, Crateia, Nicaea, Prusa, Cappadocia and Pamphylia once, to Thrace twice, to Phrygia twice. Additional references to Asia are normally to Mysia (3) and Galen's home town of Pergamon (2). This focus on place is invaluable. Galen has modified the Hippocratic focus on the environment (most notably in *Airs, Waters and Places*), though those concerns are still evident in the discussion above on the grey mullet in relation to rivers, deltas and different seas. To this environmental interest, Galen adds specific places that he has visited, or so at least he implies. Autopsy is one of his main modes of research. He thus gives excellent regional variation of diet, particularly for cereals but also for fish.

Athenaios can match Galen and outstrip him. Place is a vital consideration for Athenaios, and he provides the most specific data on the ancient diet that is available. He refers to so many hundreds of cities that I do not give figures. His data is normally also indexed by time, from the date of the author quoted. I'll return to Athenaios on geography.

3.2 *Fish in relation to other foods*

There are large differences. Galen has three books, one devoted to cereals, one to other plants and one to animal and fish products. Fish is a smaller compo-

ment, comprising 15 out of 147 chapters. It is clear in Galen's mind that cereals far outweigh fish in importance. Athenaios reverses this emphasis. He, by contrast, has 15 books, the three central of which (6-8) are largely devoted to fish, while, in addition, shellfish and salted fish are treated in book three. Just a small part of the evidence of salted fish in book three is quoted above. What are the implications of this coverage? One answer is that Athenaios, unlike Galen, who in his travels often notes what peasants and other poor people eat, is concerned with the life of luxury and all the variety and distinction that money can buy. The perspective of luxury explored by Davidson 1997 is certainly relevant here.

3.3 Terminology and Taxonomy

But so is another perspective. Fish provide as great a challenge to the taxonomer as any division of ancient food. Athenaios attempts to cover a large number of them, while Galen does the same for plants, and to some extent for fish, as we saw above. I discuss this further in Powell (2003) ix-xxi. Here are some representative passages:

Athenaios on the *hepatos* or *lebias*; Athenaios goes to a doctor and two philosophers to try to pin down the names of this fish (or fishes):

Diocles says that this is one of the rock fishes. Speusippus says that the *hepatos* is like the *phagros*. According to Aristotle it is solitary, carnivorous and has jagged teeth. (Athenaios, 7.301c).

Galen on *seris*:

there is another kind of wild herb which is less cutting than those mentioned; this kind appears to belong between the two, having neither a definitely cutting nor a thickening effect. The general name for these is *seris*; but the individual species are given different names by rustics, such as lettuce, chicory, the Syrian *gingidia* and countless similar ones in every region. The Athenians use the term *seris* indiscriminately for all of them; for the ancients did not allot any names to the individual species. (Galen, *Thinning Diet* 3).

Galen here identifies a developing problem for the taxonomer, which was not noticed by "the ancients" but now requires attention.

Galen on firm-fleshed fish finds errors in his sources, as does Athenaios on occasion:

Phylotimos also wrote about these in the second book of *On Food* as follows: weevers, pipers, sharks, scorpion fish, horse mackerel

and red mullet [a long list follows]. This is Phylotimos' statement. But let us examine each individual item mentioned, from the beginning. Now weevvers and pipers, to those who have eaten them, clearly have firm flesh. But there is no one species of shark. For the fish that is highly prized among the Romans, which they call *galaxias* belongs to the family of sharks [*galeoi*]. This fish does not seem to occur in Greek waters, which is why Phylotimos also appears to be unaware of it. ... It is clear that the *galaxias*, which is in high repute among the Romans, is one of the tender-fleshed; but the other sharks are firm-fleshed (Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 3.30).

Galen is making various claims, to be more thorough, more accurate, more up to date and more accurate in his taxonomies.

However, the clear message for us is that there was considerable uncertainty in the ancient world considering families of fish. While we can accept modern identifications of fish that are based on archaeological evidence, ancient evidence is more ambiguous partly because it does not rest on our "scientific" classifications and partly because so many varieties of fish were eaten, both fresh and salted.

3.4 Overview of the diet

Galen and Athenaios attempt to cover the whole Roman Empire, from Spain to Syria and beyond. They also cover a millennium of Greek culture, from Homer, whom both mention, to their own day.

Problems of taxonomy are lexical as well as botanical and zoological. This is why these two sources produce the detail they do on salted fish and grey mullet. They are indeed valuable texts.

These texts can be made to work for us in various respects and will produce various results.

Let us take first the example of *garum*. Athenaios does not mention *garum* very often. He has an entry on *garos* in his list of seasonings at 2.67b-c:

FISH SAUCE (GAROS). Cratinus has this: "Your pannier will be chock full of fish-sauce". Pherecrates: "He has fouled his beard with fish sauce". Sophocles in *Triptolemus*: "the sauce made of pickled fish". Plato: "They will souse me and suffocate me in rotten fish sauce." That the noun is masculine is proved by the masculine article which Aeschylus uses when he says: "the sauce made of fish" (Athenaios 2.67b-c, trans. Gulick (adapted)).

These attestations are fascinating. They draw on the authors of Greek comedy (Cratinus, Pherecrates and Plato) and tragedy (or more likely satyr play), namely Sophocles and Aeschylus. There was evidently clear knowledge of *garum* in fifth century Athenian drama. Was it widely used, as in the Roman period? It would appear not, for the term rarely appears in Athenaios and he had every reason to mention it and none to omit it. Furthermore, the early culinary text Archestratos' *Life of Luxury* does not mention it, but uses related flavourings based on salt water and vinegar, with reference also to *tarichos*. If *garum* was known but not widespread in the fifth and fourth centuries, why did Athenaios not tie it in to his own time, as he does sturgeon and many other items? Galen, in contrast, frequently refers to *garum* as a flavouring in his own time, as Curtis 1991 has observed.

The next promising area that might be explored is the role of salted fish in the "cutting" or remedying of thick humours. Phlegm is particularly in need of treatment in this respect in Galen's humoral medicine. It is clear from Galen's treatise *On the Thinning Diet* and from chapter 3.41 of *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* that salt and vinegar are probably as important in providing this effect as the fish itself. Athenaios' characters have a similar interest in vinegar, oil and salt at 9.384f, in a passage on acidity of taste and language which ties in with the passage before us in book 3 (cf. p. 25).

A third example is offered by the *Life of Luxury* of Archestratos. This is a mock epic poem of the fourth century BC that puts all the fish back into epic poetry that Homer had famously omitted from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The very title *the Life of Luxury* is problematic for an author such as Athenaios, since it would appear to encourage immorality, as he often points out, but Archestratos also provides much that Athenaios values. This includes alternative names for fish; different species in different locations around the Mediterranean; different forms of preparation for the table. Archestratos thus addresses, some six centuries earlier, the geographical and taxonomic interests of Athenaios and Galen. Indeed, Athenaios sometimes ties comments made by Archestratos to the Roman period, as Galen did above on the *galaxias*. The following fragment of the poem gives a good example of Archestratos' use of detail, with reference to geography, type of fish and mode of salting:

and a slice of Sicilian tuna < >
 cut when it was about to be pickled in jars (*bikoi*).
 But I say to hell with *saperde*, a Pontic dish,
 And those who praise it. For few people
 Know which food is wretched and which is excellent.
 But get a mackerel on the third day, before it goes into salt
 water
 Within a transport jar as a piece of recently cured, half-salted
 fish.

And if you come to the holy city of famous Byzantium,
 I urge you again to eat a steak of peak-season tuna; for it is very
 good and soft.
 (Archestratos, fr. 39 Olson and Sens)

Conclusions

Athenaios shows us that there was an extraordinary range of interest in salt-fish and other fish in ancient texts. When thinking about the relationship between fish and food in ancient thought, Athenaios demonstrates that fish is a topic not just for zoological research (which Aristotle, for example, pursued in *On the History of Animals*), but for the symposium and even for the theatre.

Medical and culinary study of salt-fish and other fish in antiquity were not separated in ancient thought. Doctors were happy to write about the symposium and sympotic writers often refer to medical works.

Galen and Athenaios have very different objectives, but they share interests in the identification and taxonomy of fish.

For all his value, Athenaios is not interested in the majority of the population. It is in fact quite difficult to find detail on the poorer sections of society – but it is there, as I showed in Wilkins 2000 and Wilkins 2001. Galen was interested in poorer citizens, but only in respect of the plants and cereals that they consumed. Fish for him, as for many other texts, were the expensive single fish (“singletons”) that were affordable only for the rich.

Galen and Athenaios offer a double perspective. They review their own period, with an extensive overview of the second and third centuries AD. But they also provide on an encyclopaedic scale reference back to specific datable authors. Each can bring benefits to Black Sea studies.

We should remember, finally, the fine fish-plates of Athenian and South Italian manufacture, many of which were sent to Olbia and subsequently excavated there. Many of them were painted by the same or similar vase-painters as the familiar drinking cups and mixing bowls of the symposium. Some thousand of these plates are known, with artistic representations of fish upon them that link them with the deipnon-symposium in a way similar to the link between wine and pottery and song. This is a further expression of the integration of fish into Greek culture.

Notes

- 1 See Athenaios *Deipnosophistai* 3.116e and 118b-c for Hicesius, 120e for Diphilus, 121d for Mnesitheus. Also 8.355a-358c. For Mnesitheus, see also Bertier 1972, 30, 178-9, 190-1, 194-205.