

# A fish from the sea

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*Antidoron Victori Andreae Daszewski ob piscis maris Erythraei portiunculam  
ante a. XXXI datam*

More than thirty years ago a few of us from the Polish Centre of Archaeology in Cairo, including the present writer, accompanied Wiktor Andrzej Daszewski, then the Centre's scientific secretary in Egypt, to the Red Sea. Visitors were gradually returning to the coast after several years of absence, but there were still very few tourists on those wonderful beaches. The coral reefs on the other hand were vibrant with life. We bathed, observed the rich fauna of the reef and walked along the beach under the brilliant April sun. Andrzej was hunting underwater. His catch included a magnificent colored fish. It was roasted soon on a small improvised fire and the present contributor also had the opportunity to taste its excellence.

The sunset was splendid and the night which followed glimmered magnificently with innumerable stars and luminescent spots shining from a dark sea. It was a memorable excursion, much appreciated, just like marine fish in antiquity. There is much evidence for the appreciation accorded fish in the ancient world and the abundant material with regard to this will not be examined here. Bringing sea fish to the Nile valley is mentioned in papyri from Greco-Roman Egypt. Nonetheless, fishing in the sea was no easy matter and river fish from the Nile were much more common on the local market than those from the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

In his life of Antony, Plutarch mentions Antony and Cleopatra in an angling contest. Antony, greedy to win, had divers hook his fish. He also tells how Cleopatra made a joke on Antony by having salted fish (*tarichos*) from Pontus attached to his hook (Plutarch, *Anthony* 29.6). It would not have been a joke, if this kind of fish were not common in Alexandria, otherwise the spectators would not laugh. We do not know whether Antony and Cleopatra were fishing in the sea or in the Nile. We are allowed to imagine them angling near the same place in the harbor where in our days many Alexandrians sit and fish in the sea.

Fish transport in antiquity was a serious problem. The art of preparing smoked or salted fish was very much developed and the appearance of Pontic salted fish (*tarichos*) on the Alexandrian market is evidence of a far-reaching trade.

Papyri bring further evidence of the transport of preserved fish and sometimes also show that sea fish were considered a rare and delicious kind of food. P. Oxy. III 531 written in January of an unspecified year in the second century AD is a letter from father to son. Cornelius, the father, was apparently a rich member of the Oxyrhynchite elite. His son, Hierax, was a student, most probably in Alexandria. He received regular supplies of money and provisions from home. However, he also sometimes sent little gifts to his family at Oxyrhynchus. In lines 17–18 Cornelius writes (according to the first edition): “You won me over by the dainties and I will send you the price of these too by Anoubas”. However, that translation by the editors of the papyrus is not exact. The *opsaria* sent home by Hierax are not “dainties” but “fish”. In the Roman period the word *opsarion* had already taken the meaning of the later Greek *psari*, i.e., fish. Also the verb *exallasso* of line 18 (*exellaxas hemas*) does not mean “to win over” but “to bring about a change”. That means that the fish sent by Hierax brought a welcome *divertimento* to



Fig. 1. Fishing in the Alexandrian harbor today (Photo I. Zych)

the usual menu. Since the recipient dwells in the Oxyrhynchite, where the Nile fish are easily available, we must take for granted that Hierax sent home not fish from the river but the more exquisite sea fish, certainly from the Mediterranean (since he most probably studied in Alexandria). Obviously, even in winter there was no question of bringing fresh sea fish to places situated far away from the coast. A bucket with sea water would not suffice. Hierax must have sent home *tarichos*, perhaps *tarichos leptos*, i.e., superior quality salted fish. That was not a cheap food, but we are in a wealthy milieu. There was perhaps a touch of paternal overprotecting courtesy in the father's proposal of sending the son the price of the "dainties".

In the third century AD an Oxyrhynchite letter-writer asked his correspondent to buy for him a sea fish (P. Oxy. VII 1067.27–29). Also in P. Oxy. XVII 2148 of AD 27 we have a similar commission, concerning buying "a little fish in mustard". There must have been a variety of preserved fish on sale. In Oxyrhynchus they were probably in part the produce of the Red Sea. The communication between the Red Sea coast and the Oxyrhynchite nome must have been fairly regular in the Roman period.

Some people made fish preserves at home, like the recipient of the P. Oxy. VI 928 (second/third century AD). His brother asks him to send him a pot of salted fish (if he makes the fish for himself). In that case probably river fish is meant.

Greater quantities of salted fish were certainly produced by professionals, the *taricheutae*, who were also the embalmers preparing the mummies. Also fishermen were expected to furnish not only fresh fish, but the salted *tarichos* as well.

The raw material for the fisherman who was expected to produce *tarichos* and *garum* for the imminent visit of Caracalla in 215 (P. Got. 3) came probably from the Nile.

The superiority of fish over meat was commonplace in ancient times. Basic knowledge of fish must have been part of the *savoir* of everyday-life on the Nile. In Egypt, sea fish must have often been compared with the river fish.

It must be added that the local and inconsequent Egyptian veneration of some species of fish was undoubtedly limited to the river fish. Juvenal's words about the "horrifying" (*portenta*) sacred animals of the *demens Aegyptus* ("crazy Egypt"), including *piscem fluminis*, should be taken literally (Juvenal, *Sat.* XV.1–7).

A more general idea of the opposition between the advantages of sailing on the river and on the sea was expressed in a song preserved on P. Oxy. III 425 (second/third century AD). The papyrus preserves unfortunately only the introductory part of the poem, which must have been much longer. The initial *aria* invites to make a *synkrisis* of the sea and of the life-giving Nile. The introduction was probably followed by two choirs: one of the *Nilotae* and the other one of the sea-sailors, both praising the advantages of their respective waters. The Nile sailors are called in the poem *Nilotai glykydromoi*, which is an obvious allusion to the sweet waters of the river. The adjective *glykydromoi* does not mean "(those) who sail in happy course" (translation of the original editors) or those "mit wohigesetztem Kurs die heiteren Wasser besegelnd", (C. Pap. Hengstl 97; as it frequently happens in translations from Greek into modern languages, seven words have been used in this translation as an equivalent to one Greek word!).

The entire item may have been a song from the repertoire of a theatre rather than a piece of *Volkslyrik* as Hengstl thinks (C. Pap. Hengstl 97), although such songs could have also been performed on various occasions by amateur singers.

# ABBREVIATIONS

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AA	<i>Archäologischer Anzeiger</i> , Berlin
AAAS	<i>Annales archéologiques arabes de Syrie</i> , Damas
ABSA	<i>Annual of the British School of Athens</i> , London
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i> , New York
APF	<i>Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete</i> , Leipzig, Stuttgart
ASAE	<i>Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte</i> , Le Caire
BAAL	<i>Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises</i> , Beirut
BABesch	<i>Bulletin antieke Beschaving</i> , Louvain
BCH	<i>Bulletin de correspondance hellénique</i> , Paris
BdÉ	<i>Bibliothèque d'étude</i> , Le Caire
BEFAR	<i>Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome</i> , Rome, Paris
BIFAO	<i>Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale</i> , Le Caire
BSFE	<i>Bulletin de la Société française d'égyptologie</i> , Paris
CCE	<i>Cahiers de la céramique égyptienne</i> , Le Caire
CCEC	<i>Cahiers du Centre d'études chypriotes</i> , Nanterre
CdÉ	<i>Chronique d'Égypte</i> , Bruxelles
CRAI	<i>Comptes rendus de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres</i> , Paris
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> , Vienna
EtTrav	<i>Études et travaux</i> , Varsovie
GM	<i>Göttinger Miscellen</i> , Göttingen
GRBS	<i>Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies</i> , Durham, NC
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i> , Jerusalem
JbAC	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
JEA	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i> , London
JGS	<i>Journal of Glass Studies</i> , New York
JHS	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i> , London
JJP	<i>Journal of Juristic Papyrology</i> , Warsaw
JRA	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i> , Ann Arbor, MI
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i> , London
KHKM	<i>Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej</i> , Warszawa
LIMC	<i>Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae</i> , Zurich
MDAIA	<i>Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung</i> , Berlin
MDAIK	<i>Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo</i> , Wiesbaden
MEFRA	<i>Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité</i> , Paris
MIFAO	<i>Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale</i> , Le Caire
NC	<i>Numismatic Chronicle</i> , London
NumAntCl	<i>Numismatica e antichità classiche</i> , Logano
OLA	<i>Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta</i> , Louvain
PAM	<i>Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean</i> , Warsaw
RACrist	<i>Rivista di archeologia cristiana</i> , Cité du Vatican
RBK	<i>Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst</i> , Stuttgart

*Abbreviations*

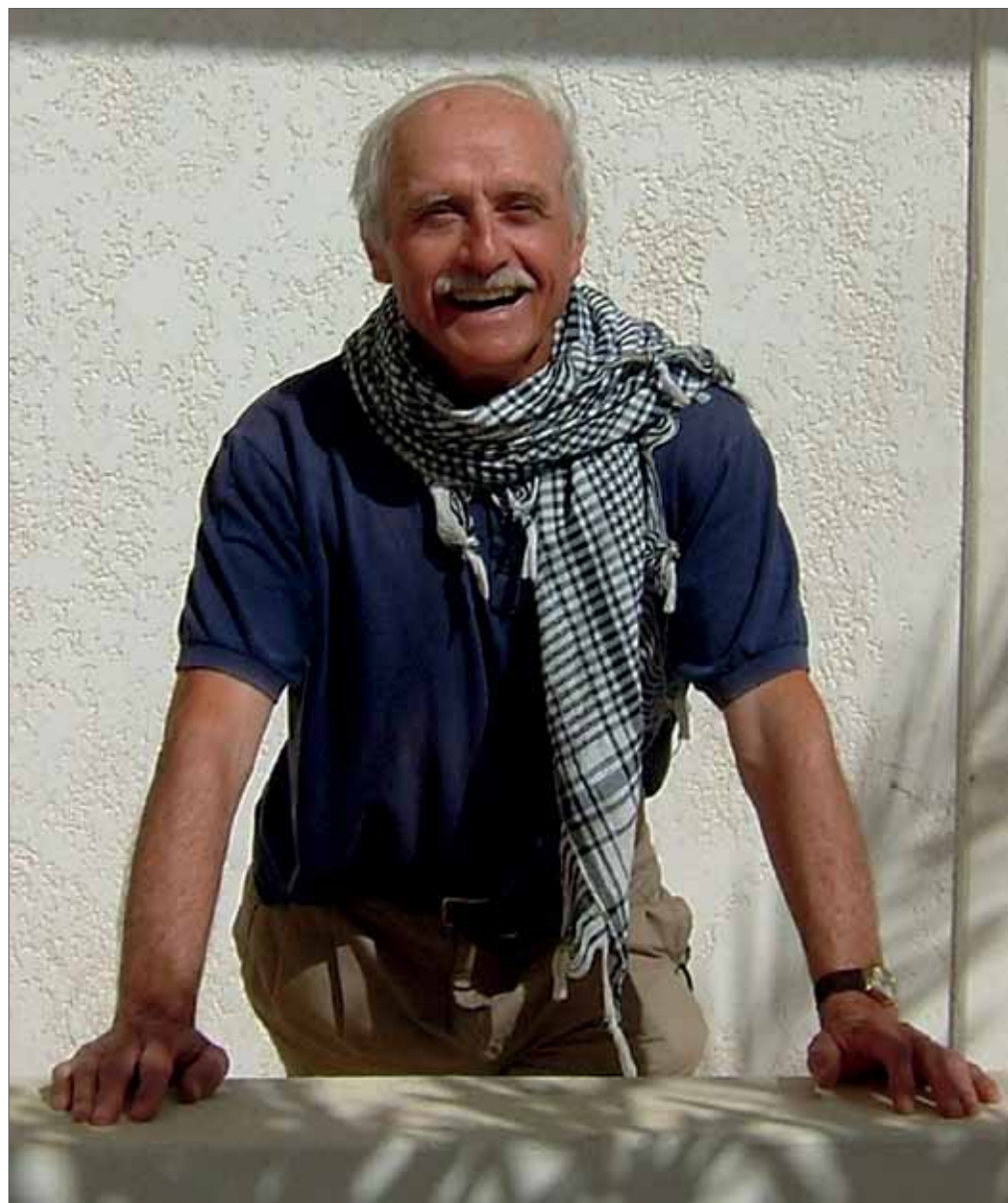
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<i>RDAC</i>	<i>Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus, Nicosia</i>
<i>RdÉ</i>	<i>Revue d'égyptologie, Paris, Louvain</i>
<i>REPPAL</i>	<i>Revue du centre d'études de la civilisation phénicienne-punique et des antiquités libyques</i>
<i>RMNW</i>	<i>Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie, Warszawa</i>
<i>RSO</i>	<i>Rivista degli studi orientali, Roma</i>
<i>RTAM</i>	<i>Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale, Gembloux</i>
<i>RTAM</i>	<i>Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale, Gembloux, Louvain</i>
<i>SAAC</i>	<i>Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization, Kraków</i>
<i>VetChr</i>	<i>Vetera christianorum, Bari</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik, Bonn</i>

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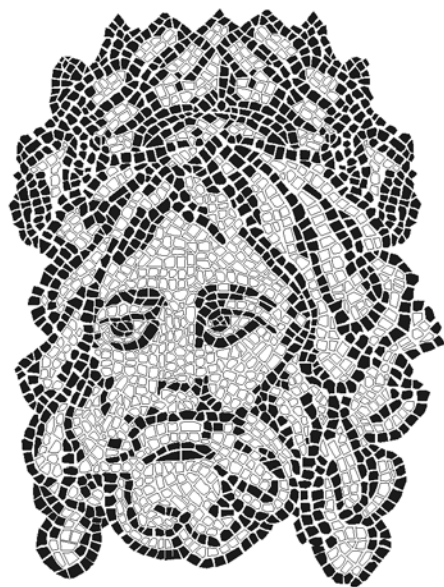
<i>DACL</i>	F. Cabrol, H. Leclercq, <i>Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie</i> , Paris, 1907–1953
<i>LCI</i>	E. Kirschbaum, W. Braunfels (eds), <i>Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie</i> , Rom: Herder, 1968–1976
<i>RealEnc</i>	A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, W. Kroll, K. Mittelhaus, <i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> , Stuttgart–Münich, 1893–1980

CLASSICA ORIENTALIA





# CLASSICA ORIENTALIA



Essays Presented to  
Wiktor Andrzej Daszewski  
on his 75th Birthday

Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology  
University of Warsaw  
Wydawnictwo DiG

# Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw

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