

# *Fishing and the development of human societies: a view from the classical world*

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## **Fishing and the Development of Human Societies: a View from the Classical World**

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Fishing is not a topic that normally features prominently when discussing the early stages of human evolution, nor does one readily think of fish as part of the diet of hominids. Yet, evidence dating to *c.* 140,000 years ago discovered in caves in South Africa indicates that early humans were eating fish and shellfish. Fishing in shallow waters does not necessarily require tools and, just like some animals are able to capture fish, it has been posited that early hominids engaged in fishing.<sup>1</sup> The earliest evidence for *purpose-made* fishing tools, however, dates to ‘only’ between 16,000 and 23,000 years ago. Excavations in the Jerimalai Cave on East Timor, an island to the north-west of Australia, uncovered the earliest known fishhooks. These hooks, about 2.5 cm long, were manufactured from seashells and are thought to have been used to fish for shallow-water fish, such as grouper and snapper.<sup>2</sup> This same cave has yielded evidence for *systematic* pelagic fishing dating to much earlier, to *c.* 42,000 years ago.

It was not just medium-sized fishes that were targeted by humans during prehistory, but also large migratory pelagic fish. In the Mediterranean, fishing for large fishes such as tuna, alongside hunting of large terrestrial mammals, is suggested by the cave art of the Late Glacial period, such as the paintings of the ‘Grotta di Cala dei Genovesi’ on the island of Levanzo, off the western coast of Sicily, which have been dated to the Upper Palaeolithic.<sup>3</sup> Consumption of both dolphins and tunas is attested by fishbones found in the layers dating to between the Mesolithic and Neolithic investigated at the Uzzo Cave in the north-western part of Sicily and the Franchthi Cave on the northern side of Koiladha Bay in southwestern Argolid in Greece. At this last site, around 9,000 years ago a shift can be observed in the composition of marine catches: tuna bones, including those belonging to large specimens weighting more than 50 kg, become prevalent over other species. This datum suggests organized fishing efforts targeting schools of migratory pelagic fish and the manufacture of suitable fishing implements; in other words, it suggests the existence of fishing technique targeting specific types of fisheries. These examples of pre-historic attestations of marine

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., see Stewart 1994.

<sup>2</sup> O’Connor, Ono, and Clark 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Di Maida et al. 2018.

fishing for periods pre-dating the development of agriculture and urban societies is a reminder that fishing featured in the life of humans from the very early stages.<sup>4</sup> Although on the whole fish and molluscs—both marine and freshwater—did not have a primary role in the diet of ancient peoples, in specific locations characterized by bountiful fisheries fishing and the product thereof did make an important contribution to the local diet and the economy. Looking at the Greek and Roman worlds, we can see that in some cases the exploitation of specific fishing grounds dictated the location and growth of settlements. For some communities, fishing could be the main economic activity and access to fisheries could even be the object of bitter legal disputes.

### *Fishing in the Greek and Roman Worlds*

Ancient Greece and Rome were pre-modern agrarian societies, and so land, which produced food and raw materials, occupied a central role in their development. Nevertheless, fishing activity was ubiquitous in the classical Mediterranean and was practised on different levels: from the small fisherman striving to support his family, to the subsistence farmer occasionally supplementing his diet by fishing, and the fishermen organized in business partnerships who worked in collaboration with the fish-salting establishments or the fishmongers. In the context of the Mediterranean regions, the sea, the rivers, and the many coastal lagoons that characterized the ancient landscape were all important fisheries. Both in the case of the societal organization of Greek city-states and of the Roman state, political organization and social standing were ultimately based on landed wealth.

This situation meant that fishermen and fish occupied an ambiguous place in society. Fishing was a very humble occupation in antiquity, as it was in modern times. The fishermen—as in the case of other people who had to work for a living—had a relatively low social status, and fishing was thus seen as a vile occupation, which, unlike hunting, did not require courage or physical prowess, just cunning. The philosopher Plato thought that, whereas hunting improved the soul, fishing induced laziness because one just needed to wait for the fish to be trapped in nets and wicker traps,<sup>5</sup> a view picked up by later Greek authors who presented fishing as an activity unworthy of free men.<sup>6</sup>

It is true that in the case of large-scale fishing of large migratory fish, fishing could assume almost heroic tones, as was the case in traditional tuna fishing in the Sicilian *tonnare*

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<sup>4</sup> See also Morales Muñiz 2010 for an overview of fishing in prehistoric times.

<sup>5</sup> Pl., *Leg.* 7.823d.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Plutarch, *De sollertia animalium* 9.965f–966a.

of the modern era, but the depictions of fishermen contained in literary texts of the classical period contain many stereotypes: the fishermen are poor, they live in simple huts on the beach, they are untrustworthy individuals, fraudulent even. In classical texts, often the action of fishing by professional fishermen is labelled as *furtum* or *rapina*, that is, robbery.<sup>7</sup>

Fishing for *leisure* was certainly practised among the upper classes in the Roman imperial period and several upper-class individuals who spent relaxation time fishing are mentioned in the texts, such as Pliny the Younger (who claimed he would fish from the bedroom window of his villa on Lake Comum) and the emperor Antoninus Pius.<sup>8</sup> But these anecdotes do not change the fact that fishing was seen by the elite as an inferior activity to hunting, and that those who fished for a living remained quite marginal figures. It is interesting that for the Roman empire, when *collegia* or professional associations were so widespread, we have only a handful of attestations that point to the existence of professional associations of fishermen.<sup>9</sup>

Seafood, on the contrary, appears in a wider range of literary texts. The focus varies, depending of the genre: comedies allude to food as part of their depiction of daily life and creation of comical situations; satirical poems use food to criticize social hierarchies; poetic ‘catalogues’ of the best seafood according to geographic location are as much a display of the author’s knowledge as they are a guide for gourmands. These attestations are indicative of culinary tastes and of their changes over time, even though only of the tastes of the wealthy rather than of the ordinary people. If fishing was considered a humble occupation, certain types of fresh fish were clearly a prestigious food for the rich.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of how professional fishermen were seen by the upper classes, fishing and fish had an important role in those societies: seafood was an important part of the diet, particularly for settlements in coastal locations,<sup>11</sup> and certain types of fresh fish were social enhancers.

### *Fisheries and the Local Economy*

We know that for some ancient towns the exploitation of marine resources occupied a primary role in supporting the settlement. Velia, for example, a small coastal town in

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<sup>7</sup> De Nicolò 2016, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Pliny, *Ep.* 9.7.4. Fronto, *De Feriis Als.* 3.5.5 (Teubner edn: 230); Oppian, who dedicated his poem *Halieutica* to Marcus Aurelius, at lines 56–72 depicts the emperor as fishing from a well-equipped boat.

<sup>9</sup> Marzano 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Purcell 1995; Marzano 2013, 269–295.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., in the case of Herculaneum, as shown by the study on the deposits from the *Cardo V* sewer: Rowan 2014.

southern Italy, was, according to the first-century AD geographer Strabo, completely reliant on fishing and ancillary activities such as fish salting because of the poverty of the soil.<sup>12</sup> Settlements where abundant fishing was possible, particularly in the case of the seasonal migration of pelagic fish, explicitly celebrated their source of wealth, as for instance in the case of Gadir/Gades, modern Cadiz, renowned since Punic times for fishing and fish salting activities. Coins issued by this city from the third century BC onwards depicted on the reverse two tunas, a clear reference to the importance of fishing and fish processing for the prosperity of the town.<sup>13</sup>

Ensuring access to, and control of, fishing locations was something that both Greek and Roman towns actively fought for. In the second century BC, the towns of Troizen and Arsinoe/Methana in the Peloponnese had made specific agreements to regulate the shared access they had to a specific coastal territory where tuna fishing occurred.<sup>14</sup> An inscription tells us that fishermen from Troizen who wanted to fish for tuna had to pay a fee to their town, probably in order to rent a tuna lookout owned by the polity itself. These revenues were, in turn, shared between Troizen and the neighbouring community.<sup>15</sup>

It appears that large-scale fishing became more widespread in the Roman period, with systematic targeting of fishing in open waters and the introduction of fishing nets with smaller mesh size. Large-scale fishing can be inferred first and foremost by the abundant evidence for Roman fish-salting workshops and factories. Their number and geographic distribution, and the fact that these were permanent, purpose-built structures, indicate a flourishing fishing sector operating for the commercial market. The natural resources offered by the sea and coastal lagoons were valued and regularly exploited; securing the rights to these resources could put different parties at odds with each other. Take the example of the prolonged dispute which occurred during the first and early second centuries AD between the town of Histria, located at the mouth of the Danube, and the Roman tax farmers.<sup>16</sup> Histria relied on the rich fisheries of the Danube delta, and had obtained from the Roman authority special exploitation rights which included the right to transport fish from the fisheries to the town without paying custom dues. Roman tax farmers, however, had disregarded these privileges and had been asking for payments.<sup>17</sup> The inscriptions, which reproduce letters of

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<sup>12</sup> Strabo 6.1.1.

<sup>13</sup> Alfaro Asins 1988.

<sup>14</sup> *IG* 4.752.

<sup>15</sup> Marzano 2013, 78.

<sup>16</sup> The dispute is attested by an epigraphic dossier: *I. Histriae* 67–68.

<sup>17</sup> Marzano 2020.

various Roman governors prompted by embassies sent by the town, show that Histria took great care to contact each successive legate sent to rule the province in order to explain the exploitation rights they had received and to obtain written confirmation from each legate about these rights. These exchanges with the Roman administration went on for more than fifty years, but the town did not desist, because, as stated in one of the texts, ‘the revenue from salted fish is just about the city’s only revenue’,<sup>18</sup> a statement confirmed by archaeological evidence.<sup>19</sup>

*Fishing and maritime connectivity: colonization, trade, and transfer of knowledge*

In Book 4 of his *Histories*, the fifth-century BC historian Herodotus recounts the mythical story of a certain Korobios, a murex fisherman from Itanos, on the island of Crete. Thanks to his expert knowledge of marine sea routes, Korobios was able to lead the colonists coming from Thera to a suitable location for the new colony they were establishing: the island of Platea, off the coast of Cyrenaica in North Africa.<sup>20</sup> Not only does this anecdote suggest that fishermen could venture quite far from where they lived in looking for good fisheries—it implies that Korobios used to venture all the way to North Africa in his search for murex shell fisheries—but it also assigns to fishermen an important role in the ‘discovery’ of novel geographic locations suitable for the establishment of settlements. Many years ago Bintliff postulated that in the Aegean the location of prehistoric settlements, trade routes, and seafaring were to be related to the seasonal exploitation of migratory fish and the opportunities for cultural interactions created by the systematic movements of migrant fishermen.<sup>21</sup> He called this communication network ‘transmerance’, playing on the affinity with transhumance, thus equating the sea and schools of fish to the seasonal movements of shepherds and herds between winter and summer pastures. Bintliff also stressed the role fishermen had in regard to trade and the establishment of new settlements. Indeed, the geographic mobility of fishermen is a phenomenon not limited to the modern era; we have some suggestive indications of this being the case also in antiquity. Ephraim Lytle has drawn attention to the fact that sea fishermen in ancient Greece seem to have had limited constraints as to where they fished.<sup>22</sup> In a fragment of the comedy *The Fishermen* by Menander, quoted

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<sup>18</sup> See Marzano 2020, Appendix, no. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Excavations there have recovered in abundance in all archaeological layers, fishing weights, hooks, fish bones, and mollusc shells: Ardeleanu 2016: 314.

<sup>20</sup> Hdt. 4.151.

<sup>21</sup> Bintliff 1977.

<sup>22</sup> Lytle 2012.

in Atheneus, we find mention of the long absence of fishermen from their homes and one of Alciphron's fictional letters refers to a group of Rhodian fishermen working in Attic waters.<sup>23</sup> Another ancient text refers to fishermen from the Iberian Peninsula who travelled beyond the Strait of Gibraltar for days in order to reach good tuna fishing grounds.<sup>24</sup>

In the case of trade and sea transport, it is conceivable that fishermen who regularly ventured far from home, like the semi-mythical Korobios mentioned above, also contributed to the establishment of maritime trade routes and to the small-scale transport of goods within regional trade networks. For later historical periods for which documentary and/or ethnographic evidence exists, we see that, when fishing was slow, fishermen often engaged in transport activity. In 1380, the bishop of Artaud in France, who had financed a group of fishermen, in addition to receiving a good share of the catches, also took from them 75% of the profits they made by transporting goods and people.<sup>25</sup> In the eighteenth-century upper Adriatic, fishermen normally worked at transport in the off season months, and in Liguria, where the rough terrain made land transport particularly difficult, fishermen used their boats to transport vegetables and other goods between coastal towns even when the distance to be covered was small. It is therefore likely that also in the ancient Mediterranean fishermen played such roles and that in some cases it was fishing activity and the search of bountiful fisheries that opened new routes to commerce. Research into Roman regional maritime networks has suggested that they were more than a simple subsidiary level of the networks that connected the larger urban coastal hubs and that they were an important constituent of overall maritime connectivity.<sup>26</sup> This 'regionalism of small-scale but routine connectivity'<sup>27</sup> featured small ships with minimal crews calling at beaches and anchorages that served as occasional ports and markets. It is not difficult to imagine that also fishermen and their boats could be part of such micro-networks, especially in areas such as the Aegean or parts of the Adriatic, rich in islands.

Movement of people means also the transfer of ideas, knowledge, and skills. For classical antiquity, it has been suggested that the mobility of fishermen in pursuing their trade also meant that specific fishing techniques and specialist knowledge moved with them. There are many later historical attestations of the creation of new settlements in other countries where fisheries were not fully exploited and where the fishermen's experience and techniques

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<sup>23</sup> Ath., 4.132e = fr. Kock 3.13; Alciph. 1.2.

<sup>24</sup> Ps.-Arist., *Mir.* 136a.

<sup>25</sup> Bresc 1985, 112.

<sup>26</sup> Leidwanger 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Leidwanger 2014, paragraph 6 of online version (<http://journals.openedition.org/nda/2343>).

could be put to good use.<sup>28</sup> For instance, Italian fishermen gave the impetus to fishing in different areas of the Mediterranean in the nineteenth century. At Sète in Provence, while the fishermen of the lagoon were locals, those who fished in the sea were Italians from Genoa, Naples, and Calabria, and Italian fishermen founded several coastal settlements in Corsica.<sup>29</sup> The contribution of individuals moving from areas with a long-standing tradition in specific fishing techniques to new places can, however, be found earlier than the nineteenth century. There was Genoese input behind the establishment, in 1476, of the tuna fisheries and salting at Sidi-Daud in Tunisia, at a time when Sicily had a de facto monopoly on tuna fishing and salting because the detailed knowledge about technique and equipment was restricted to a small group and guarded as a secret.<sup>30</sup> The *a vista* fishing technique, employed largely to fish for tuna, appeared in seventeenth-century Provence as an import from Spain.<sup>31</sup>

For the ancient world, clear evidence of geographic mobility of fishmen and the transfer of knowledge is more difficult to come by but we have several clues. The very fact that in ancient Greek, the same names of sea fish are attested around Greece, often displaying non-Hellenic origins, while for freshwater species there is a much higher use of regional names, often difficult to identify, suggests fishermen's high mobility and the diffusion of technical skills. Even when fishermen themselves did not travel to a given region, the knowledge of certain techniques used by them could travel and spread with other people's movements, and this might have happened in antiquity more often than we think. For example, according to Strabo, the Macedonians who reached India with Alexander the Great, were the ones who taught people in India how to collect sea sponges and use them.<sup>32</sup>

### Conclusions

This is only a brief overview of the role of fishing and fish in the daily life of ancient Greece and Rome. Although in the past scholars had largely dismissed the importance of fishing in classical antiquity and the role it had in the ancient economy, it is now recognized that in the ancient classical world fishing was practised on a large scale, with methods and techniques which were as efficient as the traditional fishing methods still in use until the early twentieth century.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Horden and Purcell 2000, 192–4.

<sup>29</sup> Parain 1936, 67.

<sup>30</sup> Bresc 1985, 111; the *rais* was the depository of much knowledge about tuna fishing, which was passed on only to his son.

<sup>31</sup> Marzano 2013, 87.

<sup>32</sup> Strabo 15.1.67.2.

<sup>33</sup> Marzano 2013.



Fishing appears in the early stages of evolution of hominids, during the transition from hunter-gatherer groups to settled societies, in the world of Greek city-states of the like of Athens and, later, in the Roman empire. It went from being just one of the ways in which early humans acquired food to becoming an organized activity central to the economies and livelihood of many coastal settlements. Athens and Rome, and like them other ancient cities, had specialized fish markets where the rich could buy sought after and expensive fish and the less wealthy small fry and anchovies. It even appears that in many Greek cities the arrival of the catch at the fish market was announced by the ringing of a bell to alert keen buyers.<sup>34</sup> However, the fishermen who provided markets with the products so desired by urban dwellers occupied a very humble place in society. Yet, despite this, there are many indications suggesting that fishing and the people who practised this profession contributed to the development of classical society not simply by procuring food, but by establishing new maritime routes, which later became part of trade networks, and sometimes may have even led to the discovery of new locations where to establish colonies. The geographic mobility of fishermen in pursuit of migratory schools of fish and in search for good fishing grounds also instigated the dissemination of specific technical knowledge from one region to the other, with impact on local diet, the exploitation of natural resources, and the capacity of settlements to grow. Fishing was so much more than simply catching fish.

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<sup>34</sup> Plut., *Mor.* 668; Strabo 14.2.21.

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