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## ANTAKAIOS: APHRODITE'S STURGEON?

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This article discusses the fish known among ancient Greeks of the Black Sea and more generally as the *antakaios*. It is the sturgeon, and perhaps specifically a variety called the “starry sturgeon” (*Acipenser stellatus*). The fish appears in texts and archaeological remains. Near the end of the fourth century BC the Bosporean kingdom issued large bronze coins which clearly show this species of sturgeon. It is easily identified by its long, thin snout, and it is among the various species of fish which Greeks also called *oxyrhynchos* or “sharp snout.” The fish was important to the economy and daily life of the northern Black Sea, as we hear already in Herodotus (4. 53). However, on these Bosporean coins we find the fish among the iconography of myth and religion, that raises the question as to whether the fish also had a significant place in the beliefs and cults of the region. We know that fish-cult was connected to the cult of Aphrodite Ourania at Ascalon. Here it is suggested that the starry sturgeon may have been linked to the goddess also in the Bosporean kingdom, especially in view of its appearance (the star-like plates along its body) and its particular liking for foam (*aphros*), which was noticed in antiquity. Finally, we many wonder whether the Bosporeans who famously visited the Nile in Egypt took an interest in the *oxyrhynchos* fish that received cult there, the so-called “elephant fish.”

*Keywords: Bosporean kingdom, religion, Aphrodite Ourania, Ascalon, Apatouron, fish, sturgeon, derceto, oxyrhynchos, Egypt, Nile*

Greeks who came to the Black Sea could only be impressed, if not amazed, by experience of its environment. For them this was a new and different world in so many ways. The physical environment was on a huge scale for Greeks of the Mediterranean, who were also struck by the possibly vast numbers of its human inhabitants – not lest the peoples they called “Scythians” to the north (Thuc. II. 97. 6; cf. Hdt. IV. 81). Like the extensive steppelands, great forests, and lofty mountains of the region, its many great rivers were extraordinary to them, as Herodotus indicates clearly enough (Hdt. IV. 82). These huge waterways were often navigable into the continental interior, and in any case offered routes along their banks. Herodotus found it convenient to structure much of his account of Scythia around these rivers, not least because they offered

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lines across a steppe that seemed trackless to outsiders. In that sense, the physical geography of the region was dominated by the Danube, Dniester, Dnieper, Don, Rioni, Chorokhi, Yesilirmak, Kizilirmak, and more besides. Accordingly, these rivers were key to habitation and exchange, and to the development of Greek communities around the shores of this “most marvellous of seas”. As Herodotus put it (IV. 82). By contrast, the rivers of the Mediterranean had few waterways to match Pontic rivers. Dazzled by the Dnieper and its riches, Herodotus thought of the Nile, the only river he knew that could claim to outdo it (IV. 53). In what follows here, we shall be concerned with one feature of these great rivers of the Black Sea, albeit perhaps one of their most famous and important inhabitants - the *antakaios*, usually translated “sturgeon”. The word is not often used in the ancient Greek texts that have survived for us. By examining these texts and related material culture, we can – I suggest - open a new path into the religion of the north coast of the Black Sea, especially in the Bosporean kingdom. We shall see too that Herodotus’ thoughts of the Nile may arise from ideas more specific than his general sense of world geography and the relationship of north and south<sup>1</sup>.

The earliest appearance of the *antakaios* in extant Greek literature forms part of Herodotus’ glowing account of the extraordinary river Borysthenes – the Dnieper and the extensive estuary it forms with the Hypanis (modern Bug). At the outset of his account of Scythia, Herodotus (IV. 5) had told of the Scythians’ own account of their origins, in which the Borysthenes was a forefather of the Scythian people. The notion of descent from a river made sense among Greeks (whatever precisely was said among Scythians), while Greeks also recognised the divinity of rivers. At Olbia, both the Borysthenes and the Hypanis were deities, and we may be sure enough that the other waterways of the region were treated as divine by the Greeks who settled beside them, whether or not we have specific information about that<sup>2</sup>. Herodotus gives his assessment of the Borysthenes in unusual detail – even the Danube does not receive such an extended treatment. For he considers the Danube less important, as he says when he makes the Borysthenes second only to the Nile among the rivers of the world in what it has to offer, including outstanding fish. Of these fish, he specifies only the *antakaios*, which he links with the vast natural salt-pans which he describes at the mouth of the river. His focus is intriguing, since there were other fish from the river that were caught and/or salted. He writes: “And there are great water-monsters without spines, which they call *antakaioi*, used for salting” (Hdt. IV. 53. 4).

Size was evidently an issue. The *antakaios* was huge, like so much else that was vast around the region – a *kētos*, a word usually denoting monsters of the sea, whether more or less dangerous. However, there were other large creatures, which do not rate a mention<sup>3</sup>. The zander (alias pike-perch) was another great species of the river, while mention might also have been made of the dolphin, routinely treated as a fish by the ancient Greeks, if mistakenly, and eaten. The dolphin is beyond the scope of the present discussion, but we may note in passing that its association with Apollo has long been recognised, while his links to Dionysus were at least as important<sup>4</sup>. This was a “fish” of the region with a firmly religious aspect, while the dolphin-coinage of

<sup>1</sup> On which, e.g. Romm 1993, with essays in Braund et al. 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Further, Dubois 1996; cf. Arrian, *Periplus*, 10 for ritual.

<sup>3</sup> Further, Stolba 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Lyons 2014.



Fig. 1. Egyptian elephant fish, bronze figurine

Olbia illustrates the special role for fish in the complex relationship between coins and the supernatural<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, the false classification of the dolphin as a fish in antiquity also illustrates the shortcomings of ancient ichthyology, and biology in general. While specialists might strive to improve matters through personal observation and attempts at taxonomy, it remains uncertain whether much of their work reached the ordinary man and woman. Among fishermen, fish-merchants and their customers there was a blizzard of terminology, much of it local. Meanwhile, there was obvious advantage in selling a cheaper item of fish as if it were in fact something more valuable: traders in fish were considered especially untrustworthy among Greeks, who held all traders under significant suspicion<sup>6</sup>.

As for the *antakaios*, Herodotus presents the name as local to those around the Borysthenes. I take him to include the Greeks of Olbia and the region around the city, not least because so much of what he says has clearly come from that source. Some scholars have taken him to mean that the name is Scythian, though our author does not say that, while John Hind even made the bold conjecture that the Antikeites (as Strabo calls the Kuban: XI. 2. 4 and 9) was a corrupt form of what had been Antikaites, or “Sturgeon-river”, presumably on the pattern of Rhombites<sup>7</sup>. If so, the corruption was no fault of Strabo, who wrote of the *antakaios*, as we shall see. However, it seems best to avoid conjectures, especially as Antikeites makes complete sense in Greek, as Hind acknowledges. Similarly, *antakaios* looks like a plausible enough Greek word, which would explain its use at Athens only a generation or two after Herodotus completed his *Histories*. In fact, it appears on the stage there, with no apparent need to explain it much or at all. The Athenian audience knew the name in the fourth century, and the more prosperous surely ate the salted fish itself, shipped from the Black Sea – perhaps in *stamnoi* like the fish shipped from Taras, on which Euthydemus wrote (Athenaeus, 3. 116c). We rely heavily on fragments of various

<sup>5</sup> Seaford 2013; cf. Schaps 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Davidson 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Hind 2008, 3, with n.8; cf. Jakson et al. 2007.

comic plays which were performed for Athenians from the fourth and third centuries (see Appendix). In themselves these fragments offer little detail about the fish, but they confirm familiarity with the word, while Herodotus' brief description confirms that we have here sturgeon. Precisely why the fish was called *antakaïos* is beyond our knowledge. After all, we often have difficulty in explaining why fish and other creatures are given their names. If a Greek etymology is needed, we might consider the obscure Greek word *antakas*, which (as Hesychius' lexicon tells us) was a rare word for "today". If there were such a connection, then *antakaïos* would seem to be an adjective formed from the word, so that the name would be "today's". On balance, however, etymology seems best avoided, here and usually elsewhere. The important point is that the *antakaïos* was known far from its Black Sea haunts.

We see extensive debate over fish terminology most clearly in the *Deipnosophists* ("Dinner-philosophers") of Athenaeus, a long work (some 15 books) of around AD 200 (see Appendix). Here, in an atmosphere of learned comedy, we see a developed form of scholarly and comic concern with the terminology of food-science. In its third and seventh books, in particular, the naming of fish constitutes a key topic of attention, and the discussion there reveals a body of earlier Greek work on the terminology and science of fish. While many names were in use for many fish, there was also variety in the naming of fish across Greek culture. A familiar name for fish species among ancient Greeks was *oxyrhynchos*, literally "sharp-snout". In modern Greek usage, *oxyrhynchos* usually denotes the sturgeon in all its many sub-species. Scholars have often thought that the same word also meant "sturgeon" in ancient Greek. However, the matter is more complicated than that. Athenaeus happens to mention in passing that the fourth century comic playwright used the word to mean a kind of mullet (Appendix (iv)), while in Sicily Epicharmus used the word to denote a needlefish in the fifth century (Athenaeus 7. 304c). Meanwhile, in Egypt Greeks used the word to denote the elephant fish (fig. 1), which was held sacred at the important city of Oxyrhynchus on a branch of the Nile (Strab. XVII. 2. 4; cf. Plut. *De Iside* 7). We shall return there later, but should note here that Greeks did not use the well-established Egyptian word for this fish, *medied*. That is some further reason to doubt that *antakaïos* was adopted by Greeks from the Scythian language. However, despite these clear examples, the widespread belief that ancient Greeks sometimes used *oxyrhynchos* to denote sturgeon and sturgeon-like species remains entirely plausible, even though we have seen that they did not always do so, and that they used it for other species too. For we know that sturgeon lived in the Mediterranean in classical times, though they have been eliminated there in modern times through over-fishing. Very likely, Herodotus' attention to *antakaïos* as a local name of the north Black Sea owes something to the name for the fish that he will have known during his travels in the Aegean and Adriatic regions, where *oxyrhynchos* was the familiar term. At the same time, his description of the great fish rules out another great fish of the river, namely the zander, or pike-perch. The nose of that fish could seem sharp enough, and it also grew to great size, but it had a spiny dorsal fin, by contrast with the sturgeon, which our author correctly describes as without spines.

There is also a certain amount of archaeology. It has been well observed that bone-studies suggest that the sturgeon – and especially the species known as the "starry sturgeon" (*Acipenser stellata*) – were particularly favoured for salting in the Bosphoran kingdom. It was in the later fourth century that the Bosphoran kingdom issued large bronze



Fig. 2–3. Bronze coins of Pantikapaion

coins (tetradrachms) which allow us to identify the fish they display<sup>8</sup>. Where the entire head of the fish is visible, we see that it can only be the starry sturgeon (*A. stellata*). For these coins show the long snout that is the most obvious distinctive feature of this kind of sturgeon. The snout distinguishes the starry sturgeon from the other sturgeon once commonly found around the Black Sea and also attested in bone studies - the so-called Russian sturgeon (*A. gueldenstaedtii*). The latter is also named the “Danube sturgeon” and “Diamond sturgeon”. Its last name arises from the pale platelets that run along the lateral line of the fish's sides. It is on account of similar platelets that the starry sturgeon has its name – the diamonds of one species are seen as stars on the other, with the shape of the snout being the clearest distinction. Most likely that distinction mattered little (if at all) to ancient fishermen and their customers, or the wider human population, but we should retain the possibility that the coins were understood to show specifically the starry sturgeon.

We must ask why these sturgeons were shown on Bosphoran coins. The apparently simple question resists a simple answer. We know almost nothing about the processes by which coins were designed in antiquity, and nothing at all about practice in the Bosphoran kingdom. Presumably the Bosphoran rulers took some interest in the matter, and approved designs in some sense. After all, coins were a means by which the rulers could communicate with their people and with the world at large, especially with those who received new coin from the Bosphoran mint – the military, state employees and agents, and foreigners in receipt of payments and gifts. Designs must be appropriate to that purpose, and present a suitable image of the issuing authority – ultimately the Bosphoran rulers themselves. Much more might be said. However, if we look at the other images on these bronze coins, we see the iconography of myth and religion.

<sup>8</sup> See Stolba 2005, also earlier silver denomination, much smaller.

On the obverse we have the head of a satyr-like figure, who in my view is most likely Pan himself. No doubt those who looked at the image in antiquity made their own decision about his identity. Pan gives the first syllable of *Pantikapaion*, which looks very much like “Garden for Pan” in Greek. On the reverse, there is some variety. The name of *Pantikapaion* (or again, Pan himself) is evoked by lettering. Also, on the reverse we have the foreparts of a griffin or a lion’s head. In both cases, the sturgeon is located beneath the beast. However, there is no interaction between the creature and the fish (Figs. 2–3). Of course, the lion has such a wide range of possible significance that we can only observe its popularity on the coinage of Milesian colonies, as here. Clearly, too, the lion suggests nothing about the fauna or production of the Bosporus, either, as has sometimes been claimed for the sturgeon beneath it. Similarly, the griffin seems to suggest myth. We should note its particular frequency on coins of Teos and its Thracian foundation, Abdera. Since we know that Dionysus was important to both, and to Teos’ colony at Phanagoria, and the Bosporan kingdom at large, and also that the griffin was especially associated with Dionysus and Apollo<sup>9</sup>, we may prefer to see the griffin here as in some sense Dionysiac. Whether the obverse is a satyr or Pan, both are at home in the circle of Dionysus. Apollo of course must be retained in any case<sup>10</sup>. Since the various other images on these bronze coins seem to connect with myth and religion, there is every reason to ask whether the sturgeon also has such a connection. There have been attempts to weave them into a single narrative, but the lack of interaction makes that rather unlikely.

Among the principal cults of the Bosporan kingdom, Aphrodite Ourania stands out, with her substantial cult-centre at Apatouron, about which so much has been written<sup>11</sup>. The goddess oversees fertility and orderly reproduction among humans and across the natural world. In that role she had a special significance for the rulers of the kingdom, who sought to reproduce with a view to passing on their thrones to their offspring. I have argued elsewhere that the bird named the purple gallinule (the *porphyrio*) was probably to be found at Apatouron, in view of its imagined commitment to virtue and marriage. We occasionally see the swan as another natural feature of her entourage in nature, as she rides it through the heavens, the *ouranos*<sup>12</sup>. However, she is also a goddess of the sea, who had come from the foam, the *aphros*. Her very name Aphrodite Ourania brings nature together by uniting sea and sky, by whose union she had herself been created. Although no single text mentions any connection between her and the sturgeon, there is enough to make such a connection more than mere speculation.

Herodotus makes a strong connection between the northern Black Sea and the cult of Aphrodite Ourania at Ascalon. He reports the notion that the looting of her temple at Ascalon was the cause of the Scythian Enareis, who suffered from the “female disease” that made women of these men and their descendants, as the story goes. This as their divine punishment, as the Scythians themselves are said to have acknowledged (Hdt. I. 105; cf. IV. 67). We know that the great cult at Ascalon accorded great importance to doves, who duly appeared on the city’s coinage – another good example of the interaction of cult and coin iconography. Also, at Ascalon, where Syrian deities clustered

<sup>9</sup> Delplace 1980.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Lyons 2014 on the two gods.

<sup>11</sup> See Braund 2018, with extensive bibliography especially the works of V.D. Kuznetsov and his Phanagoria team.

<sup>12</sup> See also Ustinova 1998; 1999.

with Ourania, fish were of prime importance, with myth about Derceto – a divinity with a woman's head and the body of a fish, whose sanctuary at Ascalon stood near a fish-filled lake (e.g. Diod. 2. 4<sup>13</sup>). The cult of Aphrodite at Ascalon was embroiled in the cult of fish as well as doves and more. When we consider the possibility of fish in Bosporan cult, Aphrodite Ourania seems the most probable presiding deity. It would have been easy enough on the Taman peninsula to keep a lake where fish were treated as sacred, as was evidently done at Ascalon and elsewhere in the worship of this cluster of deities<sup>14</sup>.

Clearly, fish were caught, eaten and salted on the north Black Sea coast, but a special location may be imagined where fish were not caught. Strabo (VII. 3. 18) happens to mention a special device that was used to extract fish from beneath the ice of the Cimmerian Bosporus, called a *gangame*. Ancient lexicography is clear (especially Hesychius s.v.) that this is a net of some kind, though modern writers sometimes prefer to suppose a hooked device, especially in view of the need to break ice. The practice is obscure and curious, so that we may even suspect that Strabo refers to a practice which combined ice-hole fishing with special treatment for the *antakaios*. For he specifies this sturgeon as the fish for which the *gangame* was used.

But why would Bosporans give special honour to sturgeons, most likely in the cult of Aphrodite Ourania? Three different factors seem to be involved. First, and by far the most unclear, is non-Greek concern with fish in the region before and during Greek settlement there, about which detail is evasive. Second, there is the physical appearance of these sturgeons. They were strikingly big, as Herodotus' term "water-monsters" indicates. While that might be enough to inspire thoughts of the supernatural, we should pay attention also to the patterns on their bodies. The perception of their paler platelets as "starry" or "diamonds" might well seem to link them to the great sea-goddess of the heavens, Aphrodite Ourania (Fig. 4). Thirdly, we are told by a Greek writer of the second century AD – Aelian (*NA*. 16. 24) - that the sturgeons in the Danube seem to revel in the foam the *aphros*, the medium in which Aphrodite had been born and brought to land. There seems to be good biological observation here. These sturgeons have a need for oxygen, so that the more aerated water of the foam is perfect for them. The starry sturgeon in particular has a tendency to leap high out of the water, which has been interpreted as a further indication of its liking for oxygen. We may note too that the same quest for oxygen would bring sturgeon thronging around holes made in the ice, for that is probably what Strabo describes as their being dug from the Bosporan ice.

Given the coins and our scatter of texts, there is some basis for thinking the sturgeon was the special fish of Aphrodite Ourania for the inhabitants of the Bosporan kingdom, and possibly others around the Black Sea, where the goddess was important, and where her cult seems to be a product particularly of Greek colonial encounters with nature. If that is broadly correct, we may proceed to apply the hypothesis to an old puzzle in Bosporan history, which takes us again to the Nile. There has been much speculation about a visit of a delegation from the Bosporus to Egypt and the Nile under Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the third century BC<sup>15</sup>. We glimpse them on the Nile, travelling with a party from Argos, where Io-Isis held special interest. Elsewhere I have argued that the cult of Isis-Io was important to the Bosporan mission, set in the broad context of

<sup>13</sup> Ustinova 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Hörig 1984; Frahm 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Further, Braund 2018, ch. 4.



Fig. 4. The starry sturgeon

Egyptian religion in Bosporan traditions. We may now wonder whether the Bosporan mission had any special interest in the “sharp-snouts” of the Nile, the sacred fish which gave its name to the city of Oxyrhynchus, or “Sharp-snout”<sup>16</sup>. For Plutarch tells us that these were sacred specifically in the cult of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, whom he - as other Greeks - considered to be the equivalent of Aphrodite, together with Isis-Io. If indeed the key Bosporan cult of Aphrodite Ourania made much of the Black Sea *oxyrhynchos* (alias the *antakaios*), then the Bosporans might well have taken an interest in the sacred *oxyrhynchos* of the Nile. If so, they may have been disappointed to see elephant fish and not their own starry or diamond sturgeons.

#### APPENDIX: ANTAKAIOS\_FRAGMENTS

Athenian audiences enjoyed comedy centred around food, its preparation, and its consumption<sup>17</sup>. Most of these plays have survived only as fragments, and many of those have been preserved because they provide examples of unusual words or expressions. Around AD 200 a Greek from Roman Egypt (Naukratis) produced an extraordinary, huge work for his Roman patron, which presented the discussions of a group of dining “philosophers” from around the Greek world. Their discussions often concern the best use of Greek language and vocabulary, while ranging far and wide across earlier Greek cultural and its many writings and concerns. Athenaeus’ enormous creation manages to forge humour and serious comment, within which our fragments on the *antakaios* are quoted<sup>18</sup>. The key parts of the work for this paper are provided here, as they appear in a standard English translation of Athenaeus’ so-called *Deipnosophists* by C.B. Gulick<sup>19</sup>: more recent translations are available.

##### (i) Athenaeus 3. 116a-b

..., the scholar Varus spoke up: “Look you, the poet Antiphanes, also, mentions these pickled fish in Deucalion:17 “Salt sturgeon, if one likes it, or a Cadiz tunny; and revels in the odour of a roe tunny from Byzantium”. And in The Parasite:18 “In the middle a salt sturgeon, luscious, white throughout, and hot...”.

...Plutarch answered: “How does that ‘half-salted’ fish differ from the ‘half-pickle’ which your noble Archestratus mentioned above ?20”. Yet Sopater of Paphos names

<sup>16</sup> Parsons 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Wilkins 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Further, Braund, Wilkins 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Gulick 1927.



21 the half-salted in The Slavey of Mystacus, thus: "He received a sturgeon, which the mighty Danube nurtures, the half-salt joy of Scythians."

(ii) Athenaeus 3. 118d–119a

After this lengthy discussion it was decided at last to dine, and when the hors d'oeuvre of salt fish had been passed round Leonides said: "Euthydemus of Athens, my friends, remarks in his work on Salt Meats that Hesiod has this to say about salted or pickled food: 'First in choice is the sturgeon with double-edged mouth, the fish which the rough-clad fisherfolk call the "jaw." The Bosporos, rich in salt fish, delights in it, and the people there cut the belly pieces into squares and make it into a pickle. Not p45 inglorious in the eye of mortals, I ween, is the tribe of sharp-nosed sturgeon which jagged lumps of salt adorn either whole or sliced...'"

(iii) Athenaeus 7. 315d–e

stance from the Pillars of Heracles is wanting in fat because they have swum over a wider space. Now in Cadiz the shoulder-bones are preserved separately, just as in the case of sturgeons the jaws and the roofs of the mouth and the so called 'heart-of oak' are cut from them and preserved.

(iv) Athenaeus 8. 354a

The barbed mullet occurs in the ocean, in lakes, and in streams. This fish, Diphilus says, is also called sharp-snout.

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#### ANTAKAIOS: ОСЕТР АФРОДИТЫ?

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В статье обсуждается рыба, известная древним грекам Черного моря и в более широком смысле как *antakaïos*. Это осетр и, возможно, именно его разновидность под названием «звездчатый осетр» (*Acipenser stellatus*). Рыба фигурирует в текстах и археологических находках. Ближе к концу IV в. до н.э. Боспорское царство выпустило крупные бронзовые монеты, на которых отчетливо изображен этот вид осетровых. Его легко узнать по длинной тонкой морде, и он входит в число различных видов рыб, которых греки также называли *oxyrhynchos* или «острая морда». Рыба была важна для экономики и повседневной жизни северного Причерноморья, о чем говорит уже Геродот (4. 53). Однако на этих боспорских монетах изображение рыбы связано с иконографией мифа и религией, что ставит вопрос о том, занимала ли рыба также значимое место в верованиях и культах региона. Известно, что культ рыбы был связан с культом Афродиты Урании в Ашкелоне. Наконец, многие задаются вопросом, интересовались ли боспоряне, точно побывавшие на Ниле в Египте, почитавшейся там рыбой-*oxyrhynchos*, так называемой «рыбой-слоном».

*Ключевые слова:* Боспорское царство, религия, Афродита Урания, Аскалон, Апатур, рыба, осетр, *derceto*, *oxyrhynchos*, Египет, Нил