

Fish.

It may seem rather perverse and perhaps somewhat abortive to devote an entire chapter to the analysis of potential evidence for abstention from fish in Graeco-Roman antiquity. One could say that many of the justifications that were advanced for the ideology and practice of vegetarianism in antiquity could have been equally applied to both terrestrial and aquatic creatures.¹ Arguments concerning whether animals were in possession of souls, whether they were sentient or had the capacity to experience emotions or sensations of pain could be, and indeed frequently were, felt to be applicable to maritime creatures as well as those of the land. It may seem a debatable point as to whether marine forms of life (whether it be fish or shellfish) may be deemed sufficiently dissimilar from other animals to merit a separate and distinct category.² Another predicament with which the scholar is presented is the frankly remarkable enthusiasm for fish that frequently appears in many of our extant sources, in particular those pertaining to some classical Greek societies (Athens in particular). It is the writings that refer to Athenian society of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. that provide the primary source of evidence for excessive consumption, and this is mainly because of the fragments that are preserved in the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus. It is problematic to extrapolate from Athens to other Greek communities that were of a very different character, economically, ethnically and politically. It is quite plausible that the nature of Athenian diet (and the writings about it) was very distinct from other areas of population and thus it becomes almost impossible to infer information about these other communities from what we know about Athens. Many of the texts should be treated with caution, in as much as they are often fragmentary, cited in isolation, or derive from the genres of poetry or comedy. However, even if we allow for a certain amount of artistic hyperbole and distortion, or a pattern of survival of texts and archaeological evidence that may present an uncharacteristic or unrepresentative portrait of ancient dietary culture, it would still appear that fish were an abundant commodity that repeatedly played a significant role in many Graeco-Roman societies, not just in a

¹ For the argument against this, see pages 74-75.

² As note 1 above.

gastronomic sense, but also looming larger in the general cultural consciousness. This is particularly evident (perhaps quite naturally) in coastal communities. Fish and other forms of marine life were a recurrent motif that appeared not just in literary texts, but also on mosaics, frescoes and on coinage (on the latter, images of crabs and dolphins are particularly prevalent).³ Fish appeared upon the stage, in cookbooks and as the subject of philosophical dialogues. It would seem that any attempt to postulate individual or collective aversions to fish would be doomed to failure in the face of this overwhelming piscatorial domination of the ancient psyche.

Yet, further investigation reveals that there is evidence that in some instances fish was certainly treated as a prohibited food, either through sentiments of abhorrence or reverence. Whilst it would be inaccurate to assert that this phenomenon was a widespread one, it may have played a critical role in Graeco-Roman cultural self-definition. Certainly, these investigations seem to indicate that this supposed ‘mania’ for seafood was far from unproblematic. Often, contemplation of the ancient seascape and its denizens provoked a diverse selection of attitudes that tended to veer towards fear, distrust and sometimes a fierce hostility to all matters maritime. Once one left the shore, *terra firma* became *terra incognita*.

Some historians have sought to implement a strict division of Graeco-Roman attitudes to the sea. They attempt to categorise Greeks as a sea-faring people, characterising the Romans as agrarian hydrophobes. Meijer identifies the Romans as a race of people with a profound distrust of the sea, asserting that

there are hardly any traces in Roman literature of a real attachment to the sea.⁴

This position seems rather too crude, not only ignoring the many Mediterranean peoples who did not categorise themselves as either Greek or Roman, but is perhaps too ready to buy into the unsophisticated and rudimentary stereotypes about themselves that certain segments of Greek and Roman society were all too fond of disseminating and perpetuating. The placing of Greeks and Romans at polar ends of marine attitudes is not particularly helpful.⁵ If one were to provide an example of a people marked as hostile to

³ See Jenkins (1972); Sutherland (1974). Also Wilkins and Hill (2006), 156.

⁴ Meijer (1986), 147.

the sea, it may be helpful to look to the ancient authors. Plutarch asserted that the Egyptians maintained a great distrust of the sea, regarding it as impure and an environment that was alien to man. It was reputed that Egyptians would not even greet those whom were sailors (κυβερνήτας) because they earned a living from the sea (ὅτι τὸν βίον ἀπὸ θαλάττης ἔχουσιν).⁶

This representation of the sea as being an antipathetic realm is a common theme in the ancient texts. The *Halieutica* of Oppian portrayed the sea as a mysterious and inhospitable place, forbidding and home to various κήτεα.⁷ Even allowing for Oppian's hyperbolic language, which endeavoured to transform the humble craft of the fisherman into epic, a heroic canvas on which man performed daring exploits and displayed his mastery over the waves, the ancient seascape is plainly an environment in which man will never feel entirely at ease. It is a vast and almost unknowable province.⁸ Plutarch, in his discussion of the nature of sea creatures, advances, through the characters of Polycrates and Symmachus, a eulogy to fish (particularly its pre-eminence in diet).⁹ The third speaker, Lamprias, is in agreement and advances an argument that proves that sea creatures are eminently suited to be eaten by man:

τὸ δὲ τῶν ἐναλίων γένος ἔκφυλον ὅλως καὶ ἄποικον ἡμῶν, ὥσπερ

⁵ For an integrated Mediterranean seascape, see Horden and Purcell (2000). They acknowledge the dangers of crude simplification: 'That there was a homogenous Mediterranean culture under the Romans is an assumption which...ancient historians have only comparatively recently begun to challenge-faced as they nearly always have been with a material culture which hardly seems to have varied from one end of the Mediterranean to the other'; 28.

⁶ Plut *Quaest. conv.* VIII.8.729.

⁷ Opp. *Halieut.* I.40-55. In the notes to the Loeb translation of this work, A. W. Mair has the following to say on the word κήτος: 'denotes Whales, Dolphins, Seals, Sharks, Tunnies, and the large creatures of the sea generally'; 203, note d). His translation of it as 'Sea monsters', in line with LSJ, seems to accurately convey the sense of dread of the strange beings that inhabit the depths of the oceans. See Olson and Sens (2000), note on Archestratus frag. 35, page 40: 'The term κήτος may be used of any huge sea creature...and in biological writing is generally applied to whales (Arist. *HA* 566b2)'.
⁸ Opp. *Halieut.* I.85.

⁹ Plut *Quaest. conv.* IV.4.

ἐν ἄλλῳ τινὶ κόσμῳ γεγονότων καὶ ζώντων .¹⁰

In this conceptualisation of fish, their alien nature is not the element that makes man revile them as food, but makes them particularly appropriate: the environmental displacement ensures that they share little kinship with those on the land. It is interesting that in another essay, concerning the Pythagorean abstention from fish, this alien nature is used to advance a contrary position, whereby fish have no interaction with the human world and thus man has no call to use them for food. In general, Plutarch is rather equivocal about the sea, and sees both good and bad in it:

τῆς θαλάττης τὸ ὕδωρ ἄποτόν ἐστι καὶ πονηρόν, ἀλλ' ἰχθύς τρέφει
καὶ πόμπιμόν ἐστι πάντα καὶ πορεύσιμον ὄχημα τοῖς κομιζομένοις·¹¹

Wilkins notes:

They [fish] were viewed in various ways in the ancient world, but were broadly categorised either as rapacious creatures grouped with animals that were hunted and wild birds—that is, creatures that are inimical to man- or were seen in human terms.¹²

He rightly goes on to draw attention to the way in which both the Greeks and the Romans attempted to assimilate the creatures of the sea into a more familiar (and thus more controllable sphere) by the use of nomenclature.¹³ Fish were named after, and frequently assigned the characteristics of, land animals, perhaps in order to try to absorb them into the body of human knowledge. Wilkins also makes the point that fish were often regarded as actually antithetical to mankind, and thus his potential nemesis. This is

¹⁰ Plut *Quaest. conv.* IV.4.669D: 'The race of the sea is wholly distant from us, as if born and living in some other universe'.

¹¹ Plut. *De cap.* 86E: 'The water of the sea is undrinkable and useless, but it nourishes the fish and is the way of conveying and the transport of travellers everywhere'.

¹² Wilkins (1993), 191.

¹³ Wilkins (1993), 191.

not always the case. Sometimes fish are presented as being indifferent to man, or actively amiable (if one may use such a word in this instance) towards him.¹⁴ The ancient texts present us with both sides of the argument, although they tended towards an antagonist view of fish. On the positive side, there is reference to the pilot fish (πομπίλος) that assisted man in locating the safety of the seashore.¹⁵ The dolphin is also praised : *περὶ γὰρ σφε Ποσειδάων ἀγαπάζει*.¹⁶ The elder Pliny devotes four chapters of his book on fish in the *Natural History* to this creature. In one chapter he explores the reported sympathetic relationships between man and dolphin.¹⁷ In the following chapter, he explains how dolphins assisted men in catching fish at a lake called Latera at Nemausus in Gallia Narbonensis.¹⁸

However, both Oppian and Pliny made much of the predatory nature of many sea creatures and the inherent peril they represented to all seafarers. Martial imagery was used to characterise this adversarial relationship. Pliny characterised the encounter of the fleet of Alexander the Great with a shoal of tuna in terms of a military battle.¹⁹ As we have already seen, with Oppian's use of the loaded term κήτεα, sea creatures were, on more than one occasion, portrayed as monstrous and ferocious. It has even been claimed that it was the octopus that provided the inspiration for the myth of the Gorgon.²⁰ Fish were not merely the enemy of mankind; given the opportunity, it was believed that they would consume his flesh. A fragment of Arcestratus preserved in Athenaeus refers to the carnivorous nature of the shark, but goes on to state that this is not just a characteristic of this one creature, but was in fact a feature common to all

¹⁴ It should certainly not be discounted that posited antagonistic sentiments of fish towards humans in texts may have been exaggerated for dramatic licence, transforming fishing from a rather mundane and repetitive occupation into a potential life and death struggle. One has only to see what the film *Jaws* did for the reputation of the great white shark.

¹⁵ Opp. *Haliout*. I.186-210.

¹⁶ Opp. *Haliout*. I.385: 'For Poseidon loves them'.

¹⁷ Plin. *HN* IX.8.

¹⁸ Plin. *HN* IX.9.

¹⁹ Plin. *HN* IX.2.3.

²⁰ Elworthy (1903), 215. Elworthy rather overstates his case, clearly believing the octopus to be the most fearsome and dangerous creature that lurked in ancient waters.

fish.²¹ A fragment of Alexis' *Women from Greece*, also preserved in Athenaeus, stressed the perpetual state of war that existed between man and fish, and the hunger the latter possessed for the flesh of the former.²² There are references in the Homeric texts to the fact that fish were prone to eat human flesh. In the *Iliad*, there is a reference to a slaughtered boar that is flung into the sea, where it will be eaten by the fish, βόσιν ἰχθύσιν.²³ Another notes how a fish will lick the blood of a human corpse and will consume the flesh.²⁴ With regards to fish, the Homeric texts present a number of problems, which have been recognised both by ancient and modern authors.²⁵ Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are noteworthy for the lack of fish mentioned as part of the diet of the Homeric heroes. There is some discrepancy between the two texts-the references to fish are slightly more numerous in the latter work-, and this has inevitably been used to reinforce arguments that the two poems are, in fact, the work of two different authors.

The Homeric poems offer up a vision of diet that seems (at least in retrospect) rather curious. It is a regimen that appears to have centred on meat, roasted rather than boiled, and wine, and made little or no mention of either fish or vegetables as forming a part of archaic diet. Scouring the Homeric texts for documentary evidence of eating practices in Bronze Age Aegean cultures would certainly be imprudent, but we may attempt to formulate several hypotheses to explain this omission. It is not impossible that the lack of fish in Homer reflected a state of reality; the texts portray existing cultural mores in place either during the period in which the events of the Trojan War were putatively set, or at the time that Homer was supposed to have lived (or perhaps both). This conjecture seems improbable for a number of viable reasons, not least the appalling physiological implications of such a heavily carnivorous diet. This pattern of protein-heavy eating would have had catastrophic effects on the body of a warrior.²⁶

²¹ Frag. 35 Olson and Sens; Ath. *Deip.* 301f-2b. See Olson and Sens (2000), 40; Wilkins and Hill (1994), 72-73.

²² Kassel and Austin fr. 2.60 in Ath. *Deip.* 226 f-g; Arnott (1996), 208-210.

²³ Hom. *Il.* XIX.268.

²⁴ Hom. *Il.* XXI.122-127.

²⁵ Pl. *Resp.* III.404c; Ath. *Deip.* I 9d. Also Heath (2000), 342-352; Davidson (1996), 57-64; Davidson (1997b), 12-13; 16-17. Garnsey (1999), 73-77; Wilkins and Hill (2006), 253-260.

²⁶ This may be a contentious point as, in spite of modern nutritional theories about the use of carbohydrates in athletic training, there was a tradition in Greek antiquity linking the consumption of meat

The suggestion of the texts is that the activity of fishing was not unknown during this period. There is a reference in the *Odyssey* to fishing with hooks.²⁷ Yet, it is clear from this reference that fishing was something to which one resorted only as a final measure, when hunger was particularly oppressive and the threat of starvation seemed imminent. Odysseus' crew chose to risk divine wrath by stealing the oxen of Helios rather than attempting to catch fish (which would have been abundant and relatively easy to procure). This surely points to rather more than a mere distaste for piscine flesh (or conversely a particular love for beef). Fish were either anathema to these people, or were so to the author(s) who was channelling his distaste through his literary protagonists. The problem is defining what was the motivating force behind this aversion: disinterest, shame, reverence or something else?

The debate about the possible impetus behind the Homeric diet was the subject of a number of articles published in academic journals in the first half of the twentieth century. John Scott, writing in 1917, believed that the solution to the question lay in geography:

Homer looked upon fish as food with great disfavour because as a native of Asia Minor he had been trained to regard fish as an unhealthful [sic] or distasteful food to be eaten only as a last resort and also because he had no feeling for that conception of the European Greek which regarded fish as pre-eminently the ὄψον, the greatest luxury.²⁸

Scott's comment about the popularity of fish being a peculiarly European Greek

with physical strength. Diogenes Laertius asserts that a certain Pythagoras (who may, or may not, have been the philosopher) was the first to alter the diet of athletes from one of figs and cheese to one of meat; *Pythag.* VIII, 12. Dalby (2003), 38. Excessive eating of beef is linked with the physical power of Hercules and Milo of Croton. See Davis (1971), 122-142 for the diet of the Roman soldier.

²⁷ Hom. *Od.* XII.330-333.

²⁸ Scott (1917), 330.

phenomenon (as opposed to the Greek speaking communities of Asia Minor) is unhelpful, as it assumes a culinary esteem for fish that was contemporaneous with the events of the Trojan War (or the time of the poems' composition). This estimation to which he refers must have been a later development. It is an occurrence that was distant chronologically, not spatially, as Scott appears to imply. This theory, claiming Smyrna as the native city of Homer, suggested the 'inferiority of Phrygian fish' as the reason for their absence from Homeric diet.²⁹ Local customs have been overlaid on a much larger scale onto the topography of the ancient Aegean, ensuring that the posited parochial modes of behaviour and attitudes of the Homeric author are interpreted as an archetype or template for all the other protagonists in the epic. This theory found little support amongst other scholars.³⁰

Fraser preferred to see, in the absence of fish, the remnants of a taboo that had become transformed into a cultural practice:

the effects of the early taboo, surviving in such forms as half-believed superstitions and half-conscious impulses, are deep-rooted and of long persistence.³¹

In the same issue of the *Classical Journal*, Scott went on the defensive, re-emphasising the importance of the geographical dimension. His evidence was, for the most part, spurious. He maintained that, in the modern period, only the most penurious regard the rivers and lakes around Smyrna as an acceptable source of food. He asserts that

this seems [to me] to give an easy explanation, since Homer must have been born and bred in poverty and he knew the feelings of his own class.³²

This theory is weak; it assumes that one may see analogies between the modern period

²⁹ Fraser (1923), 240.

³⁰ Scott himself later came to recognise the deficiencies in this approach in a later article in the *Classical Journal* in 1936 (Vol. 32. no. 3).

³¹ Fraser (1923), 241.

³² Scott (1923), 243.

and the archaic world with regards to attitudes to fish, as well as postulating that environmental conditions were similar. Even more dubious was the position adopted by H.J. Rose.³³ He saw the Homeric heroic class of being of Nordic origin, and that it is this factor that explained their aversion to fish, because ‘Nordics as a rule are no great eaters of fish’.³⁴

Let us return to the notion of a taboo upon the ingestion of fish, and the issue of the possible origins of its derivation. The Egyptian and Syrian taboo, linked with the status of fish either as an impure entity or conversely the object of piety and reverence, may have exerted a powerful influence over other cultures in the Mediterranean. In the discussion of ancient vegetarian ideology already undertaken by this thesis, it has been remarked that eastern cultural practices may have exercised some influence over some Greek-speaking communities.³⁵ Much has been made of theories that the Pythagorean school’s rules concerning dietary abstention may have been influenced by Egyptian religious doctrines. I have already stated my reluctance to see any cultural transmission of such dogma as being through the medium of one man, preferring to see wider cultural dissemination as taking place through trade or other forms of integration between populations, such as worker migration, transient populations, political embassies.³⁶ Yet, the Homeric texts fail to provide any mention of fish within a religious context. When reference to them is made, it is almost as an irrelevance. Perhaps the aversion to fish sprang from sentiments of dread or disgust. Plutarch saw such repulsion as perhaps springing from loathing of the sea itself.³⁷ He appears to link this with the attitudes of the Egyptians. In his text on the rites of Isis, he refers to the Homeric attitude to fish as it being something unnecessary and superfluous.³⁸ In the very next sentence, he states:

ὅλως δὲ καὶ θάλατταν ἐκ πύους ἡγούνται καὶ παρωρισμένην
οὐδὲ μέρος οὐδὲ στοιχεῖον ἀλλ’ ἄλλοῖον περίπτωμα διεφθορὸς

³³ Rose (1923).

³⁴ Rose (1923), 49.

³⁵ See page 112-113; 118.

³⁶ See page 118.

³⁷ Plut. *Quaest. conv.* VIII.8.729.

³⁸ Plut. *De Is. et Od.*, 353D.

καὶ νοσῶδες.³⁹

The juxtaposition of these two assertions appears to link the attitudes of Homer's heroes with the Egyptians, although it is not clear that Plutarch believed that Homer derived these attitudes from the Egyptians. Rather, the implication is that a revulsion for the sea and for the creatures it contains was a commonly held truth, of which both parties were cognisant. Plutarch represents the Egyptians as holding that the waters of the sea were constituted of disgusting matter that was an element that did not belong to this world. This attribution of a putrid quality to seawater is curious, but may be linked with the fact that fish do not just live in the water, but also excrete in it. Thus they live in a quasi-faecal world, amidst a miasma of their own effluent. The sea is thus a thing of filth, as are those that live in it.⁴⁰ The aversion may have come from the notion that fish themselves were impure or polluting, not merely as a result of the environment in which they exist. The impurity may have derived from its disassociation from the sacrificial process, thus rendering it an ineligible food. However, this may be an unproductive route to take with regard to the Homeric poems.⁴¹ Many other foods, particularly fruit and vegetables, are similarly neglected in these texts, with no hint that they have an impure status.⁴²

Frederick Combellack suggests that any Homeric taboo on fish may have derived from the nature of what fish eat.⁴³ He proposed that fish were not appropriate for consumption by man because they were prone to consume human flesh. The stigmatisation of fish for this feature of their diet is problematic. Fish appear to be of an

³⁹ Plut. *De Is. et Od.*, 353E: 'In short, they [the Egyptians] believed the sea to come from pus and to lie outside the boundaries; it is neither a part nor an element but is a diseased and corrupted remnant of something else'.

⁴⁰ A revulsion towards an animal that is supposed to exist in, or to eat, its own waste matter may be partly behind the prohibition placed by some cultures upon the flesh of pigs.

⁴¹ Wilkins notes that the Homeric poets were not averse to the sea, citing the inventory of regal properties in *Od.* 19.109-114; Wilkins and Hill (2006), 256. Also *Ath. Deip.* 9d for Homeric references to fish as a source of wealth and symbol of abundance.

⁴² However, maybe the existence of fish, vegetables and fruit is implied by the use of the vague term, εἶδατα πόλλα; Hom. *Od.* XVII.95. See Wilkins and Hill (2006), 257.

⁴³ Combellack (1953).

omnivorous disposition; they do not feed *exclusively* on human flesh. Surely any animal (sometimes even human beings) will consume what is available and/or what is palatable. Choice of food may as often be a consequence of social conditioning, learned behaviour and ideological considerations as it is a result of obedience to the dictates of nature. Human beings at the limits of endurance through starvation may find themselves willing to overcome a taboo against cannibalism (prevalent in almost all human societies) in order to survive.

The Pythagoreans made an explicit connection between eating the flesh of living beings and cannibalism. Through the process of *metempsychosis*, they believed that any living being could potentially house the soul of a human. However, the Pythagorean biographical texts were confused over the status of fish within diet. They were perceived as occupying a position that was analogous to, but separate and distinct from meat, since not all fish were regarded as forbidden.⁴⁴ Avoidance of meat was a necessary precaution against inadvertent cannibalism. Another factor that may have counted against fish with regard to their taste for humans is that it is conceivable that they were regarded as subverting a natural hierarchy, whereby man was at the head of the food chain, with animals and fish occupying an inferior and subordinate position.⁴⁵

Fish were not the only scavengers in Homer, as Combella notes:

Again, there are in Homer three animals mentioned in connection with the devouring of dead bodies: birds, dogs, and fish. Just as birds and dogs are the scavengers on land, so fish are the scavengers of the sea. Of these three animals, fish and birds are eaten only to avoid starvation and dogs are not eaten at all.⁴⁶

It is feasible that it was not merely the carnivorous nature of their appetites that rendered the flesh of these animals as taboo. After all, birds do not feed exclusively (or mostly at all) on the flesh of humans, and dogs, when they are domesticated, are taught (or

⁴⁴ Iambl. *VP* 109 specifies the *melanouros* and *erythrinus*. Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII. 19 also lists the former, but does not mention the *erythrinus*, but instead the red mullet.

⁴⁵ See page 88, note 44.

⁴⁶ Combella (1953), 260.

constrained) not to eat it. Fowl may have the aura of the illicit because, like the fish, it exists at a distance from the realm of man. In the case of dogs, it may be a question of their close relationship to man. A dog could be a domesticated animal, but not in the same sense as sheep or oxen. The relative ease with which they may be trained made them an extremely valuable tool in shepherding and hunting, and for protection.⁴⁷ It would certainly be unwise to claim for ancient peoples an anthropomorphic or overly sentimental view of dogs. It is known that puppies were sacrificed to the goddess Hecate.⁴⁸ Galen noted that at least some ancient communities were happy to consume the flesh of dogs.⁴⁹ He does not specify whether these eaters of canine carcass are Graeco-Roman peoples, but he does say that they were numerous. Parker highlights the sometimes degraded status of the dog, maintaining that

it was denied entry to the Athenian acropolis, to Delos and other sacred islands, and, no doubt, to many other sacred places besides. In other respects, too, the dog's status was degraded. It was a symbol of shameless behaviour, and occupied the most ignominious place in the sacrificial system, being exploited in purifications and as an offering to the marginal Eileithyia, the dishonoured Ares and the tainted Hecate.⁵⁰

This analysis appears to confirm the notion of the dog as scavenger, but nevertheless one may make a convincing case for some feeling of sympathy between dog and man. Lonsdale notes the ambiguity of the relationship, acknowledging that the dog could be friend or foe. For the former, he points to the fact that Greeks kept dogs as pets.⁵¹ There are in existence records of approximately four hundred dog names from antiquity.⁵²

A sympathetic and symbiotic rapport between man and beast was offered as reason for the hallowed status of the dolphin; its intelligence and apparently congenial nature raised it above the mass of other aquatic creatures. Wilkins notes the sacred

⁴⁷ Hes. *Op.* 603-605.

⁴⁸ Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* LII; LXVIII (also for the sacrifice of dogs during the festival of the Lupercalia).

⁴⁹ Gal. *De al. fac.* K665.

⁵⁰ Parker (1983), 357-358.

⁵¹ Lonsdale (1979), 150.

⁵² Lonsdale (1979), 149.

standing of the dolphin within Graeco-Roman culture, but also observes that in some other civilisations, it was rather less hallowed.⁵³ The Mossynoeci used dolphin fat in their cuisine, as well as pickling and storing slices of dolphin flesh.⁵⁴ Clearly, the dolphin's status was not absolute, but was dependent on relative cultural norms. This is not to say that the dolphin was the only form of marine life capable of arousing feelings of tenderness in man. Porphyry relates the implausible tale of Crassus and his pet lamprey. This fish would answer when its name was called, and its death elicited from its master considerably more grief than that expended on the death of his three children.⁵⁵

Another plausible hypothesis is that the exclusion of fish from the texts is the result of a deliberate choice on behalf of the author(s).⁵⁶ Thus, Homeric diet is an artificial ideological construct. Fish are simply an unsuitable food for those of warrior status. Plato made reference to this dietary idiosyncrasy in the *Republic*.⁵⁷ For Plato, the diet of the Homeric heroes was a reflection of their status within their society. They were akin to demigods, and their diet was a reflection of this: like the immortals, they consumed animal flesh (although, obviously, they did not consume the same parts of the carcass that sacrificial ritual assigned to the gods). The gods rejected the flesh of fish, and so did the Homeric warriors. Garnsey posits that the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as they were interpreted in the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus, was not merely endeavouring to map onto his literary landscape an idealistic dietary structure (one in which heroic men ate like the gods). This structure was also seeking to fulfil a didactic function:

⁵³ Wilkins and Hill (2006), 155.

⁵⁴ Xen. *An.* V.4.28; Wilkins and Hill (2006), 155.

⁵⁵ Porph. *Abst.* 3.5. See Clark (2000), 166 note 403, which notes that Plutarch mentions this in *De soll. an.* 976f but omits the three children. See Ward (1974), 185-186 for argument that the Crassus mentioned is not the *triumvir*, but the orator Lucius Crassus.

⁵⁶ There is one another possibility, albeit a hugely implausible one: that all references to fish were excised from the material during some later period. However, it would be difficult to discern a motive for such an action.

⁵⁷ Pl. *Resp.* III.404bc. See also Heath (2000), 342-352.

It is a feature of Athenaeus' account of heroic society that Homer is presented as a social critic of his age, promoting an idealised image of the heroes at dinner with the aim of influencing the behaviour of his contemporaries.⁵⁸

Also, within the context of later societies (in particular, that of classical Athens), fish came to be regarded (if we may trust the extant literature) as a mark of wealth and luxurious living, enjoyed by the gluttonous the effeminate and the corrupt. If Plato were attempting to map contemporary cultural attitudes chronologically backwards, then fish would logically have been an entirely inappropriate foodstuff for an Achilles or an Odysseus. Plutarch made a similar point, characterising Homeric diet by its lack of complication.⁵⁹ In this strain of thought, fish was equated not with urbanity and sophistication, but with dissolute effeminacy. Equally, the Homeric warriors were not primitive and brutish, but instead represented the pure and uncorrupted heroic archetype.

Plato's remarks implied that there existed within this constructed diet a moral component. He went on to assert that Homer also made no mention of sweet foods (ἡδυσμμάτων), another type of food upon which Plato frowned. The predominant thrust of the Platonic argument seemed to be a utilitarian one. A diet of roasted meat was one that was easy for soldiers on campaign to prepare, requiring little in the way of cooking utensils. This line of reasoning seems unconvincing, as surely fish would have required as little or even less preparation than roasted meat, as well as not requiring the rigours of the sacrificial ritual. The Platonic argument holds up this diet as an ideal from which subsequent cultures have declined. Thus, fish were either supposed to have no place in civilised society, or only a marginal one. The apparent popularity of fish in Plato's own time seems to point to the fact that in the intervening centuries there had been a dramatic shift in perspective (at least in some quarters).

It may appear that an excessive amount of time has been spent on the Homeric texts, in spite of the fact that it is most unlikely that they provide evidence of actual practice. However, these texts are of vital importance, not merely because they provided an important ideological framework in so many aspects of later Greek thought. They provide an important instance of a definite ideological stance towards fish, and the way

⁵⁸ Garnsey (1999), 76.

a culture could adopt divergent attitudes between concept and reality. Fish becomes an entity that embodies more than just a foodstuff; it represents abstract moral concepts. It becomes a metaphor. It is this that later thinkers will seize upon, when both Greek and Roman cultures succumb to the charms of seafood.⁶⁰

So far, this study has concentrated largely upon Greek attitudes to fish. Now, we must turn to the Romans. It will be necessary to discern whether their attitudes in this area were in any way related to those of their Mediterranean neighbours; whether they were a development of Greek attitudes, a reaction to them or whether one may discern an individual and distinctly Latin attitude to marine matters. Superficially, the beliefs and anxieties appear to have been, in many ways, similar, with an analogous pattern of ideological development, proceeding from an initial distrust or distaste for fish as something unfamiliar and alien to indigenous culture, to an enthusiastic embracing of all things piscine. This latter-day conversion to seafood was, as with the Greeks, concomitant with a certain nervousness about the ideological implications of such a diet, particularly from those who linked eating fish with both autocracy and wanton behaviour, and a betrayal of cultural roots. The texts of the imperial period offer an amalgam of the poetic, the satirical and the scientific. Oppian transported the profession of the fisherman into the realms of the epic; the elder Pliny and Galen proposed an alternative view, largely shorn of religious or folkloric embellishment. As asserted previously, it would be ill advised to accept unreservedly the self-imagery produced by ancient writers, and one cannot simply classify the Romans as an agrarian people who initially feared and mistrusted the sea and its inhabitants. Nevertheless, scholars have discerned in the works of some Latin poets an air of unease with the sea, and stress the themes of seasickness or the terror of maritime storms.⁶¹ It is easy to forget that the Mediterranean was (and still is) a geologically unstable region, scene of some considerable seismic activity and volcanic eruptions. A degree of hydrophobia may have been an entirely understandable reaction to the effect such phenomena would have had upon the ancient seascape.⁶² The destructive power of wind and wave, capable of

⁵⁹ Plut. *Quaest. conv.* IV.4.668F.

⁶⁰ In the *Deipnosophistae*, a form of cultural schizophrenia is apparent with the adoption of an Homeric viewpoint whilst sumptuous fish are being consumed.

⁶¹ See Rolfe (1904), 192-200; Hodnett (1919), 67-82; Huxley (1952), 100-104.

⁶² For the potential dangers presented by tidal activity in antiquity, see Smid (1970), 100-104.

smashing or swallowing coastal cities and wrecking the most formidable fleets may have been a powerful incentive for people to remain upon the land. At the very least, the unpredictability of maritime weather (no doubt the result of some unknown deity's capriciousness) would have governed the timing and the limits of any sea venture. The maritime topography was, to some extent, a continual reminder of man's relative impotence in the face of forces of the natural world, a watery command for humility.

As Plato identified the eating of fish with profligacy and weakness, an aberration from the austere diet of a previous epoch, so frequently Latin writers saw fish as representing simultaneously development and degeneration. A transformation of diet formed part of the process whereby a society became more sophisticated and complex, but, at the same, this was not always assumed to be a good thing. Social and cultural mutation could mean a shift away from idealised origins. Ovid referred to a period in the past where diet was simpler, and, pointedly, fish were not eaten.⁶³ There is a passage in Gellius' *Attic Nights* that concerns itself with different types of foreign food.⁶⁴ Referencing a satire of Varro's, entitled *Περὶ Ἐδεσμάτων*, we are presented with a litany of foods that may prove a lure for those of a gluttonous disposition. Two features stand out from this list. Most of them are from Greek territories, and a good proportion of them are fish or shellfish.⁶⁵ Here, we are presented with an explicit link with luxury, foreignness and seafood. The elder Pliny, too, warned against the potentially detrimental consequences of eating seafood upon one's grasp of morality.⁶⁶ In short, fish was perceived as being both a symptom of, and an agent for increasing and promoting, luxurious behaviour.

If fish were a prized commodity, the status of fishermen appears to have been rather less exalted. There was a definite schism between the activity of purchasing and consuming the fish, and the actual physical act of catching it.⁶⁷ Purcell refers to the ancient seascape as a bleak realm in which man does not belong, and stresses the

⁶³ Ov. *Fast.* VI.169-182.

⁶⁴ Gell. *NA* XV.xvi.

⁶⁵ Gell. *NA* VI.xvi.5.

⁶⁶ Plin. *HN* IX.liii.34. See also Wilkins (2000), Ch. 6 'Luxurious Eating in Comedy', 257-311.

⁶⁷ If we are to believe Athenian comedy, the mediator between these worlds, that of the artisan and the consumer-the fish seller- was also a troublesome and untrustworthy figure.

marginal status of sea-fishing:

Dependence on the desolate world of the sea is a potent sign of need, and in both Greek and Roman thought the fisherman is a classic type of poverty.⁶⁸

Even those who greatly cherished fish as a precious product felt the need to distance themselves from the demeaning activity of actually catching it. Plutarch thought it more correct to purchase fish than to catch them.⁶⁹ The character of Aristotimus compares fishing unfavourably with hunting, and regards sea creatures as requiring little bravery or dexterity to catch.

Why might people have objected to the consumption of fish or shellfish? It is possible that individuals may have disliked the taste of piscine flesh, regarded it as an insubstantial foodstuff, or even been repelled by its physical appearance.⁷⁰ Even in modern western societies, fish is often thought of as being somehow less filling than a meal in which the primary constituent is meat. The impetus for abstention may have been an economic one. In both Greek and Roman societies, certain fish were able to command enormous sums of money, and the texts speak of the larger species of fish as being highly coveted items. As Davidson notes:

The eating of any but the most desultory species of fresh fish can, it would appear, be considered an elitist activity at Athens in the classical period.⁷¹

The taint of ‘elitism’ may have been particularly disliked or mistrusted in a community wary of autocratic forms of government. Some groups were reported to have esteemed

⁶⁸ Purcell (1995), 135.

⁶⁹ Plut. *De soll. an.* 965e-966b.

⁷⁰ Even now, in spite of our island status, many inhabitants of the UK are wary of seafood, often citing the way that sea creatures look or feel in their alienation. Many people will refuse to eat fish if it is served with the head still intact. Some of this revulsion may be because if fish are served in this way, it is a reminder to the consumer that this was once a living creature. However, all the ancient evidence suggests that such aversion was not a factor in Graeco-Roman culture.

⁷¹ Davidson (1995), 135.

fish over meat, even when the latter was available. Aelian reported that the inhabitants of Rhodes were of just such an opinion.⁷² With the development of fish farms during the late Roman republic and early imperial period, fish and seafood became not merely an esteemed foodstuff, prized for taste, but valued possessions in themselves that were frequently not even eaten. They were just symbols of affluence, privilege and refinement. Varro tells us about the enormous sums of money that could be spent (perhaps one may even say squandered) on pisciculture. Gaius Lucius Hirrus was said to have earned twelve thousand sesterces from the buildings around his fishponds, and this income was all spent upon food for the fish in these ponds.⁷³ To balance this picture, fish could also occupy a position at the very opposite end of the social and economic spectrum. Small fish could be caught by individuals, either from the shore or from small boats in coastal waters. These could largely bypass the market economy, either being consumed by the fishermen themselves, or sold/bartered within family or localised circles. These fish were not the enormous fish that were deemed worthy only of a powerful ruler; a Polycrates or a Domitian.⁷⁴ It is likely that these small fish and shellfish were relatively easy to obtain for those who desired them and who lived in close proximity to the sea. The procurement of these ‘small fry’ did not necessarily depend upon having sufficient wealth to own or equip a boat, nor the vagaries of the weather.

It is perhaps worth noting here that, in the main, our discussion has tended towards the phenomenon of sea fishing, and those fish that lived in the sea. This is not because people did not eat river fish. It is just that sea fish seem to have been much more valued than freshwater varieties. Galen speaks disapprovingly of such fish, and he seemed to be of the opinion that, unless the river was fast flowing, there was a danger that freshwater environments, such as swamps and marches, could become stagnant, having a damaging effect upon the flesh of those fish that lived there.⁷⁵ There was also the danger from sewage that drained into rivers such as the Tiber.⁷⁶ Fish caught in

⁷² Ael. *VH.* I.28.

⁷³ Varro *Rust.* II.xvii.2-9.

⁷⁴ Hdt. III.42; Juv. IV. Wilkins (1993); Purcell (1995).

⁷⁵ Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.709-738 K.

⁷⁶ Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.722-723 K.

highly polluted waters may have been sold at substantially lower prices. Galen makes reference to a type of eel that lived in the Tiber, which was sold very cheaply in Rome because the sewage made it taste unpleasant.⁷⁷ The penurious would have had to balance the low price of such fish against the disagreeable taste and the very real hazard of falling ill after eating it. Varro also speaks disparagingly of freshwater fish, believing them to be fit only for the poor.⁷⁸ Some of the arguments that were advanced for and against the eating of fish would have been applicable to both freshwater and sea varieties. However, it is in the crucible of sea fishing that the most significant matters of cultural identity were forged. It should be noted that sea fish were not only available to the rich or to those who lived in coastal areas. The salting process and the production of fish sauce (*garum* or *liquamen*) ensured that fish were a commodity that could be relished by a great many people who lived far from the sea or a river.⁷⁹ The process of preservation also ensured that access to fish products was not determined by seasonal dictates.

Abstention from fish may have been rooted in ideological reasons. It has already been noted that those who advocated vegetarianism seem to have regarded aquatic and terrestrial creatures with a degree of equanimity. This thesis has already dealt extensively with the arguments that were advanced for the preservation of animal life, and it will come as no surprise to discover that the main proponents of a meat-free diet—the Pythagoreans, Plutarch, Porphyry—also advocated abstention from fish.⁸⁰ There is one significant difference between meat and fish in an ancient context. Meat bore certain loaded ideological connotations as a consequence of its use as part of ritual sacrifice. As has already been emphasised, the sacrifice of an animal (at least, following Vernant's model) helped to locate man within the universal order, midway between animal and god. This thesis has already drawn attention to the problems that may have arisen in response to the abnegation of meat, in terms of the duties and responsibilities

⁷⁷ Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.722 K.

⁷⁸ Varro *Rust.* II.xvii.2-9.

⁷⁹ Curtis (2001), 402-417.

⁸⁰ Iamb. *VP* 98 asserts that not all fish were taboo for the Pythagoreans. Laertius also denies a blanket piscine proscription. According to him, only the red mullet and *melanouros* were taboo; Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII. 19. See page 152, note 44.

to the state of the ancient citizen. Overt and militant vegetarianism could have served to alienate those who espoused it from their peers.⁸¹ Fish presented less of a problem in this respect, as it was a creature that generally lay outside the realm of sacrifice.⁸² One may perhaps say that this rendered it, in some ways, an inherently ‘selfish’ foodstuff, in that it was not shared with any of the gods: it was designated for the palates of mortals alone. When selecting a fish to eat, man was guided by gastronomic and aesthetic considerations, not religious ones. Diogenes Laertius, in his account of the life of Pythagoras, explained this as being the rationale behind the Pythagorean prohibition on the eating of certain ‘sacred’ fish. He asserted that the Pythagoreans believed that it was most inappropriate for mortals and immortals to partake of the same food:

τῶν ἰχθύων μὴ ἄπτεσθαι, ὅσοι ἱεροὶ· μὴ γὰρ δεῖν τὰ αὐτὰ τετάχθαι
θεοῖς καὶ ἀνθρώποις, ὥσπερ οὐδ’ ἐλευθέροις καὶ δούλοις.⁸³

To the strict Pythagoreans, land animals were deemed prohibited as, owing to the ritual of sacrifice, gods and men took shares in the carcass. Sacred fish, it seems, also fell into the category of belonging to the gods, although not subject to sacrificial slaughter. Laertius mentioned in this regard, such fish as the red mullet and the *melanouros*, although he does not give a reason for their sanctified status.⁸⁴ Iamblichus also makes a reference to the blacktail, and also to the erythrinus fish, and maintained that the Pythagoreans regarded them as belonging to the infernal deities.⁸⁵ Whether one saw in

⁸¹ Perhaps more of a problem within the context of the Greek polis and less so for Roman millionaires, although see 194-195 for Seneca.

⁸² Fish were not generally sacrificed, although there were exceptions; Ath. *Deip.* 297c for the sacrifice of conger eels by the Boeotians, and tuna in Attica.

⁸³ Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII.34: ‘Not to touch those fish that are holy. For it is not fitting for gods and men to be allotted the same things, just as it is not for free men and slaves’. The separation of foods into what is pure and holy, and what is not, will be of significance in the examination of the Jewish food laws; pages 171-198.

⁸⁴ Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII.19. However, later, he refers to abstention from meat and fish (specifically mullets) in the context of purification (VIII.33). However, it is not entirely clear whether the exhortation was meant to apply to all species of fish. See page 160, note 80.

⁸⁵ Iamb. *VP* 24.109.

these accounts evidence that the Pythagoreans believed in abstention from all fish (as they possessed souls) or only certain fish (that were seen as being sacred to certain gods), clearly the later biographers felt that fish played a substantial role in the Pythagorean legend, as is illustrated by the tale of Pythagoras' counting and subsequent releasing of a net full of fish at Croton.⁸⁶

If the fish was felt to fulfil no religious purpose, perhaps it was felt that excessive consumption would infect the eater with a 'godlessness' or secularity; fish flesh becomes an agency that could exert an unhealthy influence on those who chose to eat it. It is perhaps inaccurate to use this term 'godless'. Fish often left an impression upon the theological canvas, habitually being sacred to deities of the sea or river. In this respect, they were no different to any other animal. Fish were entities that could be feared or revered. As we have seen, fish could be called 'holy' or 'sacred' if they seemed to be sympathetic or helpful to man, or connected in some way with a specific deity.⁸⁷ In general, it seems not to have been a characteristic of Graeco-Roman peoples to abstain from fish for religious reasons, although fish were cited as one of the categories of food that were forbidden to the initiates of the Eleusinian mysteries, along with domestic fowl, beans, apples and pomegranates.⁸⁸ Parker notes that similar rules were connected with the Haloa, another festival devoted to Demeter. Parker believes these were temporary, rather than absolute, prohibitions, linked with preparations for a specific initiatory ritual.⁸⁹ Fish abstention was generally regarded as something that alien cultures did, in particular the Egyptians and the Syrians. Egyptian priests had precepts that prohibited them from eating fish, although this did not extend to the whole population.⁹⁰ Fish abstention amongst the population was frequently selective: the people of Oxyrynchus did not consume those fish that were caught with a hook, believing it to be impure, whilst those who lived at Syene did not eat sea bream,

⁸⁶ Iamb. *VP* 8.36.

⁸⁷ For example, Paus. XLI.4-8. Pausanias describes a sanctuary to Eurymone in Phigalia, Arcadia. It was believed that she was a daughter of Ocean. Although Pausanias did not see the image of Eurymone himself, he was informed that the wooden image therein represented a figure that was half-human and half-fish.

⁸⁸ Porph. *Abst.* 4.16. See Clark (2000), page 189, note 642.

⁸⁹ Parker (1983), 358. See also page 119, note 23.

⁹⁰ Hooke (1961), 535; Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 353C-D.

believing it to be a herald of the rising of the Nile. Herodotus maintained that only two sorts of fish were held in sanctity by the Egyptians—the lepidotus and the eel. These were regarded as sacred to the Nile.⁹¹

There are numerous references to the worship of the Syrian goddess known variously as Derceto, Astarte and Atargatis.⁹² Diodorus Siculus relates that Derceto was turned into a fish through the wrath of Aphrodite, and this is why Syrians do not eat fish, instead revering them.⁹³ In Athenaeus, it is asserted that, according to the Stoic Antipater of Tarsus, the edict prohibiting fish consumption derives from a desire to prevent anyone 'except Gatis' (Gatis being the queen of Syria) eating fish.⁹⁴ A similar explanation is offered by Mnaseas, in *On Asia*.⁹⁵ He relates that they were the preferred tribute of a cruel ruler, Queen Atargatis (note the difference in name). Lucian's *De Dea Syria* deals extensively with the rites of this cult of Atargatis. He refers to a half-human, half fish effigy, representing Derceto, in Phoenicia.⁹⁶ However, he says that the image at the temple at Hierapolis is all woman. There is mention of the fish taboo, and he refers to a lake near the temple where fish were raised.⁹⁷ Severe punishments were threatened to those who did not properly revere and care for the sacred fish:

τὴν δὲ Συρίαν θεὸν οἱ δεισιδαίμονες νομίζουσιν, ἄν μαινίδας τις
ἢ ἀφύας φάγη, τὰ ἀντικνήμια διεσθίεν, ἔλκεσι τὸ σῶμα πιμπράναι,
συντήκειν τὸ ἦπαρ.⁹⁸

The punishment is aimed not just at those who consume the larger and more prestigious species of fish, but at all who would eat marine life. This rather florid description of the

⁹¹ Hdt. II.72.

⁹² See Burkert (1983), 204-207; Gilhus (2006), 93.

⁹³ Diod. Sic. II.4.2-4.

⁹⁴ ἄτερ Γάτιδος ; Ath. *Deip.* 346d.

⁹⁵ F.H.G. iii.155; Ath. *Deip.* 346d-e.

⁹⁶ Lucian *Syr. D.* 14. Compare this with the description of the image of Eurymone; page 162, note 87.

⁹⁷ Lucian *Syr. D.* 45. There is also a reference in Xenophon to sacred fish, revered by the Syrians in the Chalus river; Xen. *An.* 1.4.9.

⁹⁸ Plut. *De superst.* 170D: 'The superstitious believe of the Syrian goddess that if someone were to eat small fish or sardines, she will eat through his shins, she will burn his body with ulcers and melt his liver'.

potential fate of fish abusers is reinforced by an inscription from Smyrna which threatens the destruction of those who insult the fish or attempt to steal them:

ὁ τούτων τι ποιῶν χαχὸς χαχῆ ἐξωλεία ἀπόλοιτο,
ἰχθυόβρωτος γενόμενος.⁹⁹

A taboo on fish was also associated with rites connected with the worship of Cybele.¹⁰⁰

It seems evident that fish veneration, whilst not entirely absent from Graeco-Roman culture, was a rather more conspicuous feature of the ideological systems of some neighbouring alien races. A more significant influence within Greek and Roman thought may have been the way fish was placed within the diet. If one looks at the way classical Greek thought broke down its idealised dietary regimen into a tripartite division of ὄψον, σῆτος, and οἶνος, the first element was deemed to occupy a subordinate role.¹⁰¹ Both Plato and Xenophon used the form of the Socratic dialogue to examine the formulation of this dietary division.¹⁰² It is not that ὄψον is inherently bad. Indeed, it is a necessary part of the diet. However, it must not be allowed to take a predominant position, lest the components of the diet become unbalanced. This notion of dietary equilibrium is important.

These many strands of fishy ideologies are confusing and ambiguous. They point to an apparent *volte-face* in Greek and Roman cultures. Fish are transformed from something that was despised and marginal in the Homeric texts, to a commodity that was coveted and revered, yet was feared for its power to corrupt. It may not be

⁹⁹ Syll.³ 997.

¹⁰⁰ Scott (1922), 226.

¹⁰¹ This is rather a crude division that essentially divides diet into a cereal staple, perhaps bread (σῆτος), meat or fish (ὄψον) and wine (οἶνος). LSJ notes that ὄψον was generally thought of as signifying meat, but at Athens was mostly understood as meaning fish. It also has the meaning of ‘anything eaten with bread’, or ‘seasoning’, or ‘sauce’. It may be helpful to us to view the ὄψον/σῆτος division in terms of a protein/carbohydrate split. See Davidson (1995), 205-207. Davidson appreciates the difficulty of determining a precise definition of ὄψον, and locating it within this dietary system: ‘It is a necessary element of the diet and yet somehow superfluous to it’. I am not sure that Davidson is correct in defining it as a superfluous element; even Plato in *Resp.* allowed fruit and vegetables into the diet.

¹⁰² Xen. *Mem.* 3.14; Pl. *Resp.* 2.372a-373c.

unreasonable to suggest that this shift in attitude may have accompanied growing cultural, political and economic confidence, a self-assurance marked by maritime expansion. The frequent references to compulsive fish eating in Athenian comedies came during a period of Athenian militancy at sea, when its imperial ambitions ensured a steady flow of tribute into the city from its territorial possessions.¹⁰³ Similarly, the Roman mania for fish farms developed as the state's tendrils spread over the Mediterranean. There was a growing sense of control, even mastery, over the waves. Travel became safer as the threat of pirates was removed.¹⁰⁴ Both Athens and Rome experienced the vast influx of wealth that accompanied both political dominion and increased trading opportunities. Fish fall under human dominion as the sea is brought under control. Fish become almost synonymous with material wealth and political potency. As Davidson notes, this connection between fish and monetary wealth was apparent to ancient authors:

The silver that comes to Athens from its allies is described in one image of Aristophanes as a shoal of tuna spied swimming from far out at sea.

In comedies, jokes are made comparing fish-scales with the small change that Athenians carried in their mouths.¹⁰⁵

The contents of a Roman fish farm were not necessarily there to be eaten, but to be admired.¹⁰⁶ They were a valuable piece of property that was a signifier of the owner's wealth and social status, just as the purchase of a large fish in the Athenian agora showed the affluence of the consumer.¹⁰⁷

Fish and the sea may have also represented a different kind of prosperity. In his *Table Talk*, Plutarch, through the mouth of his interlocutor, Symmachus, expresses the opinion that fish is preferable to meat, because the latter is bland and lacks a salty

¹⁰³ Was the incidence of fish gluttony in the fourth century, when tribute to Athens had dried up, a display of some form of nostalgia?

¹⁰⁴ App. *Rom. Hist.* XII.xiv.94-96 for Pompey's crushing of piracy in the Mediterranean in 67 B.C.

¹⁰⁵ The Aristophanic reference is to *Knights* 303-312; Davidson (1997b), 18.

¹⁰⁶ Fish may not be eaten if by doing so the owner is eating into his own wealth.

¹⁰⁷ Although a rich man eating cheap fish may be taken for an arrogant miser.

flavouring.¹⁰⁸ The Homeric heroes are able to live without fish, but cannot tolerate unsalted meat. It is plausible that salt may be the true wealth of the sea, rendering the bland and the inoffensive palatable, being an addition not just to food but also to drink. Salt also had important health implications. In the sweltering heat of some Mediterranean countries, essential bodily salts were lost through the excretion of sweat. This salt needed to be replaced in some form. Fish become a way of achieving this addition of salt. Plutarch noted the food prohibitions placed upon the priesthood of Isis in Egypt, including periods when the use of salt with food was not allowed.¹⁰⁹ He asserts that salt augmented the desire for food and drink. This association between salt and increased appetite may assist us in comprehending the way sea fish were associated by some writers with gluttony. The salinity of piscine flesh had the capacity to warp human appetite, inducing a propensity for gorging oneself without restraint. Unfortunately, this theory would fail to account for the fish that inhabited lakes or rivers, although it may help to explain both the superior regard in which sea fish were held (with regards to taste) and their association with self-indulgence and appetite.

This equating of fish and affluence carries intriguing ideological implications, as Davidson notes.¹¹⁰ The consumption of fish was a signifier of urban sophistication, and was an inherently secular and *human* activity. It was a selfish foodstuff, not offering any part of itself to the gods, nor was it divided amongst the diners. It was consumed not for its ritual significance but for the sake of gastronomic gratification, and as part of a balanced diet. In a sense, it is hardly surprising that it should have been the signal for social anxiety. The transition from utilitarian to hedonistic was a sign of societies in the process of mutation. Increased wealth meant greater freedom from the shackles of self-sustenance and more time that could be devoted to pleasure. Anxieties that connect increased affluence across the social spectrum with the disintegration of morality are themes that are the concern of social commentators even in modern western societies. Inevitably, though, the social spectrum is essentially a limited one, being confined almost exclusively to the wealthy elite of society. It is the affluent who suffer paroxysms of cultural angst.

¹⁰⁸ Plut. *Quaest. conv.* IV 668F.

¹⁰⁹ Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 352F.

¹¹⁰ Davidson (1997b), 20.

Scholars are far from unanimous about the importance of fish in the ancient Mediterranean diet. Sallares and Gallant warn about the perils of using literary texts in order to form plausible hypotheses about historical processes.¹¹¹ Given that so much of our information about a ‘mania’ for fish within Greek culture comes from Athenian comedies, there is a risk that not only may we fall prey to treating the hyperbole of the stage as documentary evidence (Gallant uses, as an analogy, the extrapolation of a general enthusiasm by the British for Spam based upon the comedy of Monty Python¹¹²), but we may attempt to view Athens as equivalent with other Greek communities. This is also a concern when we look at other large cosmopolitan cities, such as Rome, Alexandria or Ephesus. One cannot postulate homogeneous dietary features across vast swathes of territories based on anomalous large-scale urban centres. These maelstroms of disparate cultures and religions cannot be convincingly compared to small village communities located in provincial backwaters. For example, the sea would have played a more meaningful role in the lives of communities that existed on barren islands (where there was little, if any, arable land) than for those people who lived far away from the coast. Gallant in particular feels that the importance of fish in classical Greek diet has been greatly exaggerated. He believes that ancient fishing techniques were practised on a small scale and were very labour intensive. They were reliant on the vagaries of fish migration (not always accurately predictable). Far from being a central tenet of Greek diet, he sees fish as possessing a marginal status:

The most important function of fishing would have been to provide a source of food which could off-set periodic fluctuations of crop yields.¹¹³

It is a perplexing state of affairs. Gallant’s thesis is a plausible one, particularly his assertion that the movement of fish (particularly the pelagic species, such as mackerel and tuna) was too unpredictable to render it a reliable dietary or economic staple. Yet, the extant literature from both Greek and Roman sources affords fish a huge ideological weight. If we tentatively accept Gallant’s theory, then we are compelled to interpret

¹¹¹ See page 32, note 39.

¹¹² Gallant (1985), 12.

¹¹³ Gallant (1985), 42.

literary representations of fishing and fish (whether large or small) as something more than tracts about food and diet. Fish become ideological constructs of identity; they are status markers. They become a metaphor that revolves around notions of aspiration or derogation. Once, caviar and champagne were regarded as useful signifiers for wealth and prestige in the western world. These words would instantly conjure up in the popular imagination certain images of wealth and sophistication. In the last thirty or forty years, in the UK certainly, there has been a gradual erosion of a system that ensured privilege went hand in hand with membership of the elite echelons of society. This has to some extent been replaced by, if not a meritocracy, then certainly one in which it is money, rather than class, that is significant. Those old ‘buzzwords’, such as caviar, champagne, long-haul flights and five star hotels no longer have the same cachet as they once had. Lottery winners and premiership footballers may now, thanks to the democratisation of luxury, fraternise with princes. However, it may be profitable if we think of fish in Graeco-Roman antiquity in a similar way to these items. They were useful linguistic and conceptual tools, which enabled a writer to use the word ‘fish’ as a compact, ultra-dense mass of imagery and innuendo, instantly understood within the confines of that culture as representing something more subtle and complex. Fish had taken on a role that went far beyond its actual physical entity. It acted upon the ancient psyche as a potent metaphor. The extent to which it actually featured in ancient diet may, in this context, be, if not irrelevant, not as important as one may have first thought.

All the evidence so far has suggested the existence of a widespread anxiety in Graeco-Roman about the sea and the forms of life that it contained. Yet, if we accept the above analysis, this was not the prime focus of their fear. Rather, it was an apprehension about the way wealth and foreign cultural influences were transforming indigenous societies. This apprehension oozes from the ancient texts and reflects the concerns of the well-heeled. Wealth becomes spread throughout the social order, invariably facilitating a greater degree of social mobility. The old noble families falter, and ‘scum’ rises to the top. Eating fish could be a revolutionary act.¹¹⁴ Actual habitual abstention from fish within these cultures was rare. The Pythagoreans and others who espoused a vegetarian diet were in a definite minority. Fish exerted alternating forces of repulsion and attraction, but in general people seem not to have desisted from fish consumption

(even with all those dubious moral connotations). The concern with fish seems to have been very much an ideological one. It appears that abstention from fish was viewed as something foreigners did. Unusual attitudes to fish could be a method of culturally defining other races. Herodotus notes that there were three Babylonian tribes that ate nothing but fish.¹¹⁵ Of course, such a diet seems highly unlikely, and may just have been an example of the Herodotean ‘mirror’, by which the ‘normality’ of Greek customs were defined as the inverse of other alien practices.¹¹⁶ If these Babylonians are defined as eating only fish, surely it is to contrast them with Greeks who have a ‘proper’ balanced diet, or who eat rather more meat than fish (and more cereal than meat). A repudiation of fish may have been as abnormal in the same way as a diet that was comprised exclusively of fish.

Let us proceed to this formulation. In spite of the varied anxieties and tensions that surrounded the procurement and consumption of fish in Graeco-Roman culture, instances of actual abstention were reasonably infrequent, being predominantly confined to peripheral vegetarian sects, such as the Pythagoreans. It is supposed that even they did not place a complete embargo upon fish consumption, limiting their prohibition to certain species of fish regarded as ‘sacred’ or ‘holy’. In this sense, fish may be regarded in a similar way to some other foodstuffs (including vegetables and fruits) that may have been felt to be linked with some deity, through myth or ritual. The consequence may have been a complete taboo on the food, for priesthood or laity, either permanently or for a finite period. An absolute proscription was regarded as the hallmark of other races, something that was ‘unnatural’. The Egyptians and the Syrians would not eat fish, and some of the Babylonian tribes had adopted an exclusively piscatorial diet. Both these could be deemed as diets that were unbalanced. This may have been one of the fears that lay behind the criticism of *opsophagia*: it could have been construed as the start of an inexorable slide towards the behaviour of the ‘other’. It undermined cultural identity. This is difficult to reconcile with the deficiency of fish in the Homeric diet. Lack of fish in Homer is equated with purity and heroic virtue, not with primitivism. Ultimately, it is difficult to say why a dearth of fish in Homer was lauded, but fish abstention in other

¹¹⁴ Davidson (1993) for fish as a destabilising influence in classical Athenian society.

¹¹⁵ Hdt. I.200. Also, II.92 for Egyptian marsh dwellers who also subsisted only on fish, in this instance dried.

¹¹⁶ Hartog (1988). See Davidson (1997b), 309-315.

cultures was viewed with mistrust. It may be a case of blatant hypocrisy (a practice may be good if Greeks do it, but not others), or perhaps it was regarded as an acceptable custom in archaic times, but not later on. Perhaps it was simply nostalgia for simpler times, a rose-tinted view of the past inspired by the tumult and turbulence of social and economic change. It is surely this that concerns writers such as Athenaeus and Plutarch; the search for identity in a constructed purer past amidst the uncertainty and turbulence of (their) modernity. The upsurge in fish-eating and the veneration of fish as a supremely desirable foodstuff occurred during periods of history when territorial expansion in the Greek and Roman world brought both a substantial influx of wealth and immigrants, accentuating and accelerating the process of hybridisation.

It is possible that this study has made a little too much of the significance of fish eating (or fish abstention) in the context of cultural identity. However, one cannot fail to notice the repeated connection made in antiquity between the consumption of fish and social status. Small fish are consumed by those who were at the lower end of the social spectrum; the larger species were reserved for the moneyed and the politically dominant. Embedded within this analysis is the ideological dichotomy that both positions may be simultaneously good and bad. Poverty is to be despised but may in some way be eulogised as being closer to an untainted and uncorrupted archetype. Luxury may signify progress, but with it brings the potential to erode the qualities that made that success achievable. If fish were in any way marginal to ancient diet, its ideological significance was such that it burned itself onto the ancient Mediterranean consciousness.