

The tradition of fishery and fishing gear in the island of Cyprus (18th and 19th centuries AD)

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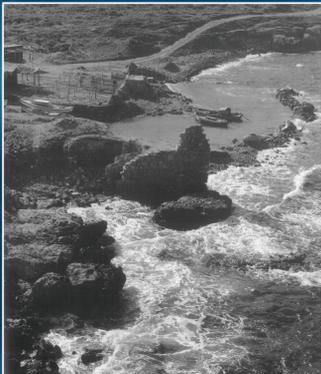
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INTRODUCTION

Cyprus is the third largest island in the eastern Mediterranean. Based on various remains and finds, it is obvious that the sea has been explored and managed for millennia by communities. Consequently, the main aim of this research is to combine archaeological data with the historical testimonies, the oral tradition and the results of an ethnographical study in an attempt to acquire a better general understanding of the formative phases of fisheries in the island during the latest periods of its history (18th and 19th centuries) and the development of the fishing technology and methods.

Fig.1: Fishing Refuge in the northern coast of Cyprus. Photo by Reno Wideson, in 20th century. (source: Wideson, 2010).



METHODOLOGY

For completing this research iconographical evidence was studied, in order to understand the development of fishing equipment and to interpret and describe the traditional fishing practices. Historical sources and testimonies were also considered thus they can provide useful information about the fishing technology, the fishing activities and their role in the daily life of the population of the island. Furthermore, local fishermen were interviewed, in order to collect information about the fishing technology and the difficulties of fishing activities.

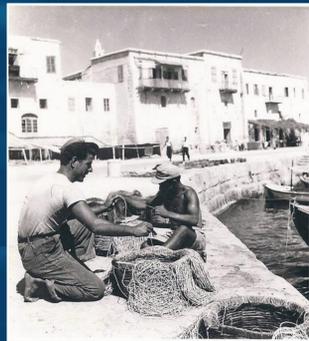


Fig.2: Fishermen at the Kerynia Harbor, in the beginning of 20th century. Photo by Apostolo Ververi. (source: Louka, 2012; online: http://loukis-kyrenia.blogspot.com.cy/2012/11/blog-post_9.html).

FISHING IN THE DAILY LIFE OF THE ISLAND through testimonies, historical and iconographical sources

Although fish is commonly represented in ancient Cypriot art and large numbers of fish bones are commonly found during excavations, some scholars mentioned that the island is not particularly rich in sea-life, and fish was practically unknown to people living far from the coast.

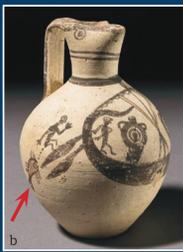
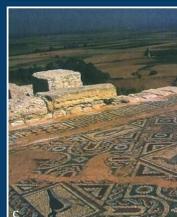


Fig.3: (a) A Geometric vessel decorated with fish and found at Kato Deftera. Kato Deftera is a village, which is located inland of Cyprus; as a result, it is obvious that fish was known to people living far from the coast. (source: Narodni muzej, 1987: 31). (b) An Archaic jug decorated with a merchant ship. There is a detail of a fish. (source: www.britishmuseum.org). (c) A mosaic pavement from the house of Eustolios at Kourion. It is dated at the beginning of 5th century AD. There is a detail of a fish. (source: Soren & James, 1988; Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation, 1987: 36)



They stated that fishing was an occasional activity, which they only developed when there was a general failure of crops and a devastation of domesticated stock. Furthermore, they mention that the small amount of fish in the Cypriot waters illustrated that the profession of fisherman was difficult and not so lucrative.

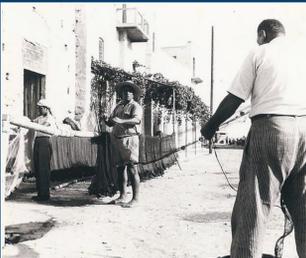


Fig.4: Fishermen at the Kerynia Harbor, in the beginning of 20th century. Photo by Georgio Sfoggara. (source: Louka, 2012; online: http://loukis-kyrenia.blogspot.com.cy/2012/11/blog-post_9.html).

According to folk verses, it seems that the aforementioned opinion is true. Fish was never plentiful as illustrated by the following folk verses:

Τού τζυνηού η κούππα του τζαί του ψαρά το πιάτον σαράντα μέρες όφκερον τζαί μιάρ φοράν γεμάτον. (translation: The hunter's bowl and the fisherman's plate, forty days are empty and only one time full).

Fig.5: Fishermen at the Kerynia Harbor, in the beginning of 20th century. They cleaned and patched their nets. Photo by Apostolo Ververi. (source: Louka, 2012; online: http://loukis-kyrenia.blogspot.com.cy/2012/11/blog-post_9.html).



However, there is surviving evidence from 18th century, when pilgrims and travellers passing through the island left accounts of the people and their eating habits.

Drummond, writing in 1750 and describing a small harbour near Ayia Napa, gives more details on fishing:

“... the poor people employ themselves in fishing, with boats of a very particular texture, consisting of a few sticks bound together, with some very small ones laid in the hollow where the fisherman sits managing his tackle, and steering his machine with a paddle”.

Based on this information, the fishing was probably a profession of people with lower social status.

Furthermore, Dr J. Sibthorp, who visited Cyprus in 1787 and collected notes about the natural history of the island, mentioned that “the shores of Cyprus receive a great number of Mediterranean fishes”. As a result, it seems that the amount of fish in the Cypriot waters was not limited.



Fig.6: Although the high temperature and the salinity of the Mediterranean Sea contribute to the decline of fish species in the water, around 300 fish species have been recorded in the sea around Cyprus, in the recent years. The morphology of the seabed helps to the growth and reproduction of fish species in this area, as a result many of them live there. (online source: <http://www.thepressroom.gr/ellada/ta-23-ton-psarion-poy-katanaloyme-stin-ellada-ta>)

In the Consular Report of 1859, someone can also read that “Le poisson est tres-abondant mais il y a peu de pecheurs” (translation “There are many fish but few fishermen”). Consequently, it seems that the amount of fish was not limited, but few inhabitants of the island preferred to involve with fishing, due to be a difficult profession.

Finally, according to Magda H. Ohnefalsch – Richter, the fishing of sponges was also abounded on the shores of Cyprus. Although all the attempts of the British administration of the island by the end of 19th century urging the Cypriots to engage in sponge fishing, however, it was chiefly carried out by Greeks.

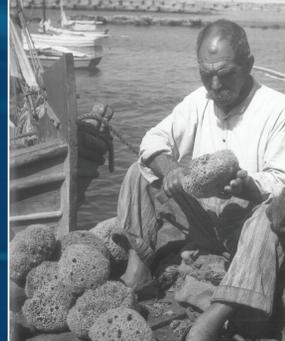


Fig.7: Sponge Fisherman. Photo by Reno Wideson, in 20th century. (source: Wideson, 2010).

FISH SPECIES IN CYPRIOT WATERS

Many species of fish seem to exist in Cypriot waters. According to Dr J. Sibthorp, who visited Cyprus in 1787, there were abundant kinds of Grecian fishes. He specifically mentioned that

“the striking agreement of the modern Greek names of fish with those of ancient Greece is nowhere so evident as in Cyprus. Here we still find the words μόρνυρος, σπάρος, σκάρος, σαργός, σάλπη, μελανουρός, πέγκα, ορφός, and others, precisely the ancient names of Oppian and Aristotle”.

He also referred that there some specific species and fishes were found in Cyprus. According to his list, some of the fish are: *raia torpedo* (μαργοτήρα), *Rbatis* (βατήν), *R. oxyrhynchus* (βατήν), *squalus centrina* (χοιρόψαρο), *S.squatina* (χελάρη), *S. catulus* (σκυλλόψαρο), *S. mustelus* (κατόψαρο), *Acipenser sturio* (μουρούνα), *Lophius piscatorius* (βωθρακόψαρο), *Syngnathus hippocampus* (αππαρόψαρον), *Murena Anguilla* (αχέλιβ) and several species of *Labrus* and *Sparus*.

On the other hand, there is not enough information about the existence of river fish. The main reason of the absence of river fish is probably the fact that there are mainly rivulets in Cyprus. The rivulets generally dry up during summer; as a result, the river fish cannot survive. However, Dr J. Sibthorp stated that “the eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) was their only inhabitant”.

Furthermore, Richard Pococke, who visited Cyprus for two months in 1738, gave some information about the river fish in the chapter XI of his third book, which is about the natural history, natives, custom, trade and government of Cyprus. He described that

“the antients mention three rivers in Cyprus, the Lycus, Tetius and Pedius, through at the best they deserve only the name of rivulets, and I suppose the water seldom fails in these, though it is generally said that there are no rivers in Cyprus: It is certain they have no fresh water fish, except small crabs, which are in most of the rivers in Asia.”

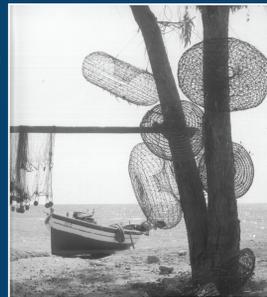
Small shells are also plentiful and are commonly found on ancient sites, while remnants of sea urchins and crabs are commonly found on ancient sites, and presumably continued to be eaten through the ages.

FISHING METHODS

Several methods were used for catching fish, many of them common everywhere in the Mediterranean.

Fig.8 (right): Fishing boat, nets and traps. Photo by Reno Wideson, in 20th century. (source: Wideson, 2010).

Fig.9 (below): Fishing boats. Photo by Reno Wideson, in 20th century. (source: Wideson, 1992: 461)



The most important fishing tackle was boat, which has a mast, a sail, a steering wheel and an anchor. Inside the boat, there were usually buoys used for calculating the depth, weights, nets, harpoons used for consuming the enormous fish, fishing rods, baskets used for preserving the fish and nets, lamps and *κουρκούνα* ή *καρσαλίνα*, a big seashell, which was used as a trumpet in an emergency.

Some specific methods used for catching fish from a boat are:

Fishing nets

Fishing by using nets started in the afternoon or midnight. Fishermen choose the right location and they through slowly the nets with two buoys. They left nets during the night and in the early morning they collected them. Then, they took fish from the nets and they divided them in the baskets, according to their quality.



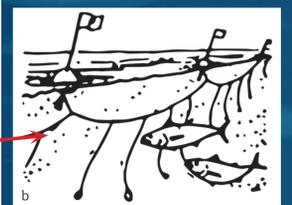
Fig.10: The scene of fishing. A painting of Michael Kkasialos (1885 - 1974). (online source: asia.org.cy, 2009)

Fishing line (παράγαδι ή σιτζίμιν)

Fishing line is a cord used or made for angling. It was a cord, on which tied small and large hooks at equal intervals. Baits were placed on the hooks, in order to attract the fish. The small hooks was used for catching medium size fish, like *λιθρίνι* (*Pagellus erythrinus*), and the large hooks was used for catching bigger fish, like *ορφός* (*Epinephelus marginatus*).



Fig.11: (a) Preparing the fishing lines. Photo by Reno Wideson, in 20th century. (source: Wideson, 2010). (b) A reconstruction of the fishing line. (online source: http://www.kee.gr/perivallontiki/teacher3_4_1.html)



Fishing with skarka (σκαρκά)

An unusual method of special interest is that using the “skarka”. It was a round basket with a hole in the middle, which was used as a fishing trap. There were different sizes and different thickness of weave, in order to catch different kinds of fish. They were traditionally made with thin branches of myrtle, although metal wire predominates in more recent years. About half of the “skarka” is filled with leaves of different plants, such as jasmine, or even a paste of flour and whey. Leaves commonly used are those of the Persian lilac, which have narcotic powers. The “skarka” is then dropped in the sea, mainly next to bushes, and a few hours later, fishermen collected it full of fish.



Fig.12: Fishing trap – Skarka, made of wattle. It was found at Lapithos, Kerynia. (source: Papademetriou, 1999: 75)

Fishing using an iron rod (Σαλατζά)

Another method, employed until recently, was that using an iron rod, 2-2.5m long, fitted with a series of three fishing hooks, which were masked behind a white handkerchief. This method was mainly used to fish octopus, which attracted by the white cloth became unwittingly attached to the hidden hooks.

Finally, there were also methods for fishing in shallow waters or from the coast. Some of them are fishing rods, large fork with three or four prongs, basket/traps placed in narrow passages or wooden tongs fitted with nails, which were the most efficient methods for catching eel.

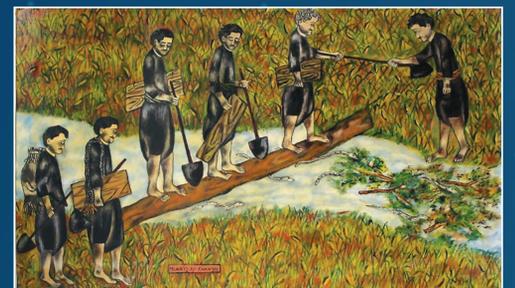


Fig.13: A painting of Michael Kkasialos (1885 - 1974). It presents one of the methods for catching eel. During the rainy season, many sea eels got into the rivers. The Cypriots, who noticed this phenomenon, put a poisonous plant, which they collected on the mountains, at the spring of rivers. The eels forced by the poisoned water swam back to the sea at great speed and while on the run they were caught in hundreds by the Cypriots, who were waiting for them. (online source: <http://www.signalive.com/simerini/politismos/380867/mixalis-kasialos>).

CONCLUSIONS

According to the research, it is obvious that fishing was a part of the daily life of Cypriots during the 18th and 19th century. Fish was known to them and had also an essential place in the Cypriot diet. However, fishing was not a profession that many Cypriots choose to do, because it was a difficult and dangerous.

