

THE INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD:  
A CASE STUDY OF EARLY CHRISTIAN FISH SYMBOLISM

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by  
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Ph.D. DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

“The Interpretation of Religious Symbols in the Graeco-Roman World: A Case Study of Early Christian Fish Symbolism”

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This dissertation is a study of fish symbolism in early Christianity, which offers a new approach to the interpretation of religious symbols in the Graeco-Roman/Near Eastern world. I show that it is impossible to comprehend the meaning of a Christian symbol without a thorough understanding of its significance in the wider world from which it was drawn. I demonstrate that symbols such as the fish were composed of intricate referential networks that in effect condensed an entire worldview. Each textual or visual appearance of the fish could evoke several interdependent meanings by referring (for example) to Christ, the eucharist, baptism, and missionizing, while also variously connoting, among other things, wealth, sexuality, sacrality, and death. Finally, I argue that ancient religious symbols not only reflected, but also helped to organize, the religious perceptions and representations of the world as ancient persons viewed it. For these reasons, my dissertation contends that symbols such as the fish were, in effect, important components of the cultural system of ancient religion.

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## CHAPTER 1

### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

#### SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION

The purpose of this dissertation is to offer a new approach to the interpretation of ancient religious symbols in the Graeco-Roman world by describing the various referents and associations of a particular item—— in this case, the fish——in the culture of which it is a part,<sup>1</sup> and by applying this referential complex to the interpretation of specific literary, epigraphic and iconographic examples. In so doing, I argue that it is impossible to understand the meaning of a symbol without a complete understanding of the functions and associations of the content of that symbol in the wider world from which it has been drawn. I demonstrate that ancient religious symbols had a multitude of referents and associations that were incorporated into intricate symbolic complexes—— what some have called “webs of significance.”<sup>2</sup> And finally, I argue that ancient religious symbols not only reflected, but also to some extent organized, the religious perceptions and representations of the world as ancient persons viewed that world. For these reasons, this dissertation contends that symbols such as the fish were, in effect, important components of the cultural system of ancient religion——in particular, early Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

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1. For a discussion of the word “symbol,” see pp. 56ff. below; for my use of the word “image” in regard both to texts and to iconography, see especially pp. 93-99 below.

2. So Max Weber, as discussed by C. Geertz in Interpretation of Cultures, 4 et passim.

3. For the phrase “cultural system” I rely on C. Geertz (especially in his Interpretation of Cultures); see the discussion on pp. 81ff. below.

It is because of the quantity of time and space required for this type of enterprise that I focus exclusively on the interpretation of one symbol, the fish, in one Graeco-Roman religion, early Christianity. As a religious symbol, the fish is appropriate and interesting for several reasons. First, fish are represented on the earliest archaeological monuments of Christianity (c. 150-200 C.E.) and may in fact be the earliest extant Christian images. Second, the richness and diversity of their referential framework are striking. Third, there seem to have been some remarkable consistencies in the early Christian interpretation of fish regardless of chronological, geographical, and functional differences. Fourth, unlike most early Christian biblical images, fish appear with some degree of frequency on early Christian epigraphic monuments. Fifth, as a generic entity fish functioned not only as an iconographic image, but also as a word in the form of an acronym (ἰχθῦς = I.X.Θ.Y.Σ. = Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτὴρ; that is, “fish” = “Jesus Christ Son of God Savior”), thus constituting a religious symbol which is capable of both iconographic and verbal representation. And finally, fish, in certain instances, in both iconographic and verbal forms, seem to have functioned as signals of membership in the early Christian community.<sup>4</sup>

In this project, I describe the use of the fish as a symbol as found throughout the geographical extent of the Graeco-Roman world, meaning primarily the Mediterranean basin area, but extending as far north as northern Europe, as far east as Babylonia, as far west as Spain, and as

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4. As the chi-rho customarily did in the fourth century C.E. and afterwards.

far south as Roman North Africa and Egypt. A plurality of the early Christian material evidence is, however, situated in the city of Rome.

Chronologically, for the early Christian materials, I consider evidence originating in the second half of the second century C.E. and extending for the most part through the first half of the sixth century C.E., although the overwhelming bulk of the evidence is to be located prior to the mid-fourth century C.E.

For the symbolism of fish in non-Christian materials,<sup>5</sup> I take into account literary evidence extending as far back as the time of Homer and the classical period, since these sources were well-known to, clearly important to, and frequently interpreted by, Greeks and Romans who lived at the same time as the early Christians who were using fish symbolism.<sup>6</sup> In addition, I examine iconographic materials, which use fish imagery, from a period approximately contemporaneous with the early Christian fish materials.

In terms of the sources for fish symbolism in early Christianity, I consider both iconographic and textual evidence. For textual evidence, I include the description of fish in both early Christian literature and inscriptions. For iconographic evidence, I include imagery with fish that

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5. Here I refer to Greek and Roman (in the traditional sense), not Jewish, evidence. While I do utilize various materials from ancient Judaism where relevant, they do not receive a comprehensive treatment, since the focus of this dissertation is the Graeco-Roman world.

6. For example, in the *Deipnosophistai*, composed c. 200 C.E., Athenaeus offers numerous contemporary interpretations of fish by referring to Homer, as well as to various Classical and Hellenistic writers. Other writers in the Graeco-Roman period (e.g. Pliny and Macrobius) also cite much earlier authorities in regard to fish, as do most Greek and Latin writers on almost any subject.

is primarily found on wall paintings, sarcophagus reliefs, epigraphic monuments, church mosaics, and (to a somewhat lesser extent) gemstones and jewelry.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, I do not limit myself to one type of medium or setting, such as funerary inscriptions, church mosaics, or domestic wall paintings. Rather, I consider any instances in which fish were described and/or depicted in Graeco-Roman antiquity.

Due to accidents of archaeological preservation, the vast majority of material evidence prior to the fifth century C.E. pertaining to fish in early Christianity is funerary (primarily epitaphs, sarcophagi, and catacomb wall paintings), and the majority of that is found in the city of Rome. I should also mention that, with the exception of the third-century C.E. wall paintings in the Christian worship place of Dura Europus in eastern Syria,<sup>8</sup> and possibly some of the paintings beneath the basilica of SS. Giovanni e Paolo on the Celian hill in Rome,<sup>9</sup> there is scarcely any iconographic evidence from Christian places of worship or from Christian domestic contexts prior to the time of the emperor Constantine.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that some non-funerary early Christian ico-

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7. Here I should point out that I regard the visual depiction of fish in iconography and the verbal description of fish in texts of equal importance and relevance for my interpretations. For further discussion, see pp. 93-99 below.

8. The fundamental publication is still C. Kraeling, The Christian Building.

9 Most fundamental is A. Prandi, Il complesso monumentale della basilica celimontana dei SS. Giovanni e Paolo; for a quick overview, see his SS. Giovanni e Paolo. See also the discussion in R. Krautheimer, Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae 1267-1303.

10. On early Christian house churches, see L. M. White, Building

nography (with fish) on gemstones and on lamps predates Constantine, but the dating of this material (especially gemstones) is notoriously difficult, and some gemstones are probably modern forgeries.<sup>11</sup> Thus, when dealing with this type of iconographic evidence, one needs to concede a greater degree of tentativeness.

In terms of early Christian textual evidence for the use of fish as a religious symbol, there is a wide spectrum of genres available for consideration—such as funerary inscriptions, hymns, oracular literature, theological treatises, religious instructions, homilies and sermons, scriptural commentaries, letters, histories, and heresiological literature. The material under consideration is almost exclusively written in Greek or Latin.

In terms of the functional contexts of iconographic evidence from the non-Christian Graeco-Roman world, I am fortunate to be able to utilize both funerary and domestic materials in relatively equivalent distributions, since much more pagan than early Christian domestic material evidence has been preserved.<sup>12</sup> Yet, unlike early Christian

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God's House, 11-25. An example of iconography with fish in a church context is found most significantly in floor mosaics in the great basilica of Theodore in Aquileia in northern Italy (314-319 C.E.); see pp. 632-33 below. Also important are wall mosaics, such as the last supper mosaic scene from the time of Theodoric (493-526 C.E.) in Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna and the IXΘΥΣ acronym above the gemmed cross in the apse of Sant' Apollinare in Classe also in Ravenna (c. 535-549 C.E.). See F. Deichmann, Ravenna 2.1:125-89 and 2.2:233-89; F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 5:578-89 and 2.2:256; and pp. 584-85 below.

11. For these problems, see the relevant bibliography cited in endnote 2 of Chapter 4.

12. The word "pagan" is problematic on at least two counts. Non-Christians and non-Jews did not use the term to designate themselves.

materials found in church contexts from the fourth to the sixth century C.E., there is scarcely any extant iconographic evidence for fish in pagan sanctuaries.

For the function and interpretation of fish in non-Christian texts, numerous genres provide relevant evidence: satires, drama, poetry, ora-

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For them it apparently meant “rustic” or (perhaps better) the more pejorative “hick.” Early Christians and Jews used it in this pejorative sense to describe those with a different religious framework than themselves. For lists of references, see the heading “Paganus” in TLL 10.1:78-84, as well as “Paganus” in PW 36.1:2295-97 (E. Kornemann).

Unfortunately, there is no better term to use, since pagans did not regularly identify themselves as a unified group. Dedicatory and benefactory inscriptions sometimes identify membership in particular religious groups (Isis, Dea Syria, etc.), but not general affiliation to a larger collective that includes more than one cult. Consequently, it often makes better sense to speak of joint dedication to a particular deity.

Yet, there are features that so-called pagan cults shared, which, to some extent, set them apart from their Christian and Jewish counterparts. This was made clear by those who criticized Christians and Jews in the Graeco-Roman world. In the case of early Christianity, it found well-known expression in various forms of persecution. Thus, despite the anachronistic usage of the term “pagan” from an historian’s point of view, I will continue, for want of a better term, to use it as a way of distinguishing non-Christians and non-Jews from Christians and Jews. I use it with a small “p” to indicate that it is not a technical designation of a group.

Furthermore, the word “pagan”, because of its use by Christians and Jews, generally bears a religious connotation. Yet, in the context of this dissertation, it is sometimes necessary to designate items as pagan that are not specifically, or primarily, religious. For example, in the Graeco-Roman world, it was commonplace to regard large fish as indicative of high status. For non-Christians (i.e. virtually always pagans), this usually encompasses primarily secular matters. For Christians, this reference is transformed into something religious, since a large fish can refer to Christ. But in order to distinguish Christian usage from non-Christian usage, it is most convenient to speak simply of pagans, on the one hand, and Christians, on the other.

One might consider the alternative of referring to Christians, on the one hand, and those in the Graeco-Roman world, on the other. This causes a serious problem, however. For it necessarily suggests that somehow early Christians were not Graeco-Roman. In fact, early Christians were no less (and no more) Graeco-Roman than those whom scholars generally designate as pagans.



tions, histories, biographies, philosophical and moral discourses, religious treatises, dream interpretations, lexica, anthologies, fables, astrological handbooks and charts, cookbooks, funerary inscriptions pertaining to the establishment of institutions for the cult of the dead, etc. Yet perhaps the largest and most significant number of references to fish is found in both prose and poetic treatises on fish (Aristotle who influences all later writers, Nicander of Colophon, Pliny, Plutarch, and Aelian), on fishing (Ovid and Oppian), on pisciculture as a subdivision of agriculture (Columella and Varro), and (in symposium literature) on culinary and dining matters (Athenaeus, Macrobius, and to a lesser extent, Petronius).

In addition to the above-mentioned contexts, I should briefly speak about socio-economic ones. In general, it is very difficult to conclude much about the social or economic status of those who created the archaeological evidence related to fish, or of those who commissioned it, except to say that the use of such items as paintings and sarcophagi, as well as the commissioning of relatively elaborate inscriptions, is indicative of a reasonably well-to-do group.

Yet, in spite of this, one can speak with some degree of certainty about the early Christian representation of socio-economic status. For example, when early Christians depict iconographically, or describe textually, a meal with a large fish which is almost as big as the platter bearing it, they are in part formulating a representation of high status. On the other hand, when they depict a fisherman, or when they describe themselves as fishermen, they are formulating a representation of low

status. Thus, while one is able to learn little from the fish symbol about the actual socio-economic level of early Christians, one can learn something about their representation of themselves in socio-economic terms.

From the scope of the above-discussed material, it should be clear that I am considering a high degree of contextual diversity—of geography, of chronology, of medium (iconographic and verbal, as well as the numerous genres within those categories), of function, and of socio-economic presentation. In part, this stems from the necessity of examining as much evidence related to fish as possible, since (as is the case for most ancient symbols) Graeco-Roman antiquity does not preserve a sufficiently large quantity of relevant materials in any one given category. And what it does preserve, is often found in a fragmentary state.

On the other hand, the consideration of a wide diversity of contexts, specifically for the interpretation of symbols, provides several advantages.

First, the reconstruction of a relatively complete referential complex in one context involves the delimitation of those referents and associations which were emphasized from those which were not. In addition, it helps to establish the varying relationships (which depend on the context) between those references and associations. That is, it contributes to the determination of a network.

Such a network becomes perceptible only through consideration of as many contexts as possible; for one cannot determine what is emphasized in one context until one has determined what is not empha-

sized. And one can not say what constitutes the web of referential relationships in one context until one knows the range of possible references in other contexts. Thus, the interpretation of a symbol is inherently a comparative undertaking.

In close connection with the above consideration, the interpretation of a religious symbol in different contexts allows one directly (rather than implicitly, as above) to compare and contrast different symbolic networks. Such a procedure allows one to categorize the various instances of a symbol and to examine the variations and transformations of the references and associations of a symbol.

Moreover, it is particularly useful, especially in an historical enterprise, to examine different chronological contexts, since one can possibly ascertain something about the development of a symbol (or lack thereof).

Finally, a religious symbol is a component of a cultural system of religion and its meaning existed, to a certain extent, beyond its immediate context (though not removed from it as is asserted by Jungian interpretation). Indeed, that ancient persons could use a religious symbol such as the fish in a variety of contexts suggests that no single context can explain its tremendous significative power. Thus, an examination of as many contexts as possible may offer one of the clues toward explaining that power.

Nevertheless, the comparison of material found in different contexts—especially in more than two of them—can be difficult. For example, it is a delicate procedure to compare funerary materials from

the third century C.E. (found in a variety of locations) with church materials from the fourth century C.E. (also found in a variety of locations). In this particular case, there are at least three contextual categories under consideration—functional, chronological, and geographical. And in each one of them there are variables that are not in fact entirely interchangeable. Still, given the fragmentary state of the evidence, this procedure is the only practicable one. As long as one proceeds with great care, tentative conclusions are possible.

In addition, I argue that a remarkable consistency of meaning—which extends beyond particular contexts—emerges when examining fish symbolism in diverse early Christian contexts. This suggests that, even in difficult cases, surprising connections between different contexts make possible significant conclusions.

On the other hand, by focussing on individual examples and by undertaking to isolate particular symbolic complexes, without an immediate attempt at comparison, one can at the very least ascertain what a religious symbol probably meant in a particular situation and in particular circumstances.

I should also mention a second difficulty. While the dating of most relevant literary materials regarding fish is reasonably secure, the dating of archaeological monuments, including inscriptions, can often be rather difficult. Thus, one must always take into account the possibility of revisions in interpretation. Fortunately, in the area of dating of early Christian archaeological materials, much progress has been made within

the last twenty years, in part due to technical advances made in the area of photogrammetry and in the chemistry of both paint and stone.<sup>13</sup>

## **THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### **The study of ancient symbols**

At this point, I will consider the theoretical underpinnings of my dissertation. In regard to the scientific studies of ancient religious symbols in the Graeco-Roman world (which focus almost exclusively on iconographic materials), two general observations may be made.

First, many scholars have concentrated on the compilation of evidence. As a result, one has at one's disposal a number of encyclopedic works that consolidate huge quantities of information. In particular, many German scholars associated with the so-called Antike und Christentum institute have published extensive studies of various individual items that were used as symbols by Christians, Jews, and pagans in the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>14</sup> Of all these, the most comprehensive is still the five-volume collection on fish symbolism of Franz Dölger, entitled IXΘΥΣ.

Without a unifying interpretive approach (eclectic or otherwise), these types of studies often result in the production of large amounts of data that appear in the form of academic archives with little overall organization. For instance, in the case of Dölger, arguments are often difficult to find and (where found) almost always challenging to follow.

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13. See the discussion in Endnote 1 of Chapter 4.

14. Often found in the Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum and the Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, as well as in separately published books. For more discussion, see pp. 93-94 and 103-06 below.

Likewise, in the case of Josef Engemann, whose lengthy essay updates Dölger on fish symbolism, one discovers a set of lists with brief unrelated arguments scattered in various places.<sup>15</sup> In fact, this generally characterizes the essays on symbols in the Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum, whose editors seem to prefer a purely encyclopedic kind of presentation. This is also true of some who do not use the Antike und Christentum approach, such as Johannes Deckers. Despite his groundbreaking efforts in his comprehensive account of the paintings in the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, in the final analysis, his work results in what amounts to a list—at least until someone provides comprehensive analysis of it.<sup>16</sup>

Anyone attempting to read studies such as these cannot fail to see how easily the interpretive instinct can drown in a deluge of data.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, upon going into some depth on the subject of symbols, it became immediately clear to me that the problem was not one of compilation of materials (for example, Dölger and others were master collectors), but a problem that was fundamentally interpretive.

The second observation evolves in response to this very problem. In an effort to find coherence in the vast array of data, most scholars succumb to the reductionist instinct. In general, they do this in one of three ways: the denial of explicit meaning in favor of “underlying” and “essential” meaning; a code approach that designates a rigid one-to-one correspondence between a referring item and its referent; or the identifi-

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15. "Fisch, Fischer, Fischfang."

16. Die Katakombe "Santi Marcellino e Pietro".

cation of all religious images as decorative.<sup>18</sup>

An exception to this is Erwin Goodenough, who still remains (in my opinion) the most important interpreter of ancient symbols.<sup>19</sup> In addition to the exhaustive character of his multi-volume collection, Jewish Symbols in the Graeco-Roman Period, his work represents the only truly comprehensive attempt by any historian of the ancient world (whether historian of religion, social historian, art historian, or archaeologist) to take a hermeneutical stance (in Goodenough's case, primarily the depth psychology of Freud and Jung) regarding symbols from the Graeco-Roman world.

While it is therefore the work of Goodenough with which any investigation of ancient symbols ought to begin, it is nonetheless astonishing how little work has been done on Jewish symbols since he completed his massive study.<sup>20</sup> And very few interpreters of Christian or pagan symbols make even minimal use of Goodenough's methodology in their own interpretive work. With the foundation set, one would think that a wealth of scholarly literature would have ensued.

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17. See for example the comments of E. Peterson in his review of two of the volumes of the Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum.

18. See pp. 20-48 and 110-17

19. For a biography of Goodenough and the place of ancient symbols within his scholarly program, see R. Eccles, Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough.

20. Perhaps, the most important investigations are still Morton Smith's well-known essays: "The Image of God"; and "Goodenough's Jewish Symbols in Retrospect."

Various suggestions may be made regarding why this did not occur. For example, one might propose that Goodenough's comprehensiveness simply made further study unnecessary. This has, however, certainly never before held back scholarly endeavors, and from the beginning it has been clear that Goodenough's interpretations needed revision.<sup>21</sup> One might propose that there did not seem any available interpretive options other than those advanced by Goodenough, and that they were so distasteful to mainstream scholars that the preferred interpretation was none at all: better to abandon symbols and simply call them decorations.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, as a collection, the work is excellent, and one would have assumed that an alternative model of interpretation (beyond the escape clause of a decoration hypothesis) could have been proposed.

In contrast to these proposals, I would suggest that the lack of follow-through arises from a modern dilemma (closely linked to the methods of historical-critical scholarship) that has especially plagued the interpretation of iconographic and epigraphic materials. This dilemma involves the following kinds of questions: to what extent one can use literary evidence, and which literary evidence to use; whether, when examining early Christian symbols, one can employ theological literature

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21. This was made rather clear at an early date (1955) by M. Smith in the articles mentioned in the previous footnote and by A. D. Nock in his reviews ("Religious Symbols and Symbolism I-III") of several of the volumes of Jewish Symbols.

22. For example, in his review of Goodenough, see the harsh comments of A. D. Nock (1955), who advocates a diminution of interpretation.



to explicate archaeological materials—which might or might not express theological interests; and whether the text should be regarded as primary or the image. The answers to these questions would seem to be determined by predilections and presuppositions that have little to do with historical facts. In the end, can one do any more than offer a subjective interpretation, which describes one’s own symbolic universe more precisely than that of ancient individuals?

The fundamental problem of epistemic subjectivity was posed over two centuries ago by Kant in his critique of Hume.<sup>23</sup> No one experiences the world with an empty mind—a tabula rasa—but all experience is revealed through endemically human categories that to some extent structure one’s experience of the world, before it is ever experienced. In other words, in order to interpret the object world, one depends upon prior mental judgments that enable one to perceive, but at the same time, determine what one perceives and how one perceives it. In addition, not only innate cognitive categories, but past experiences (personal and cultural history), affect one’s perceptions. Ernst Gombrich has both of these in mind,<sup>24</sup> when he writes in regard to visual perception and the visual arts that “the innocent eye is a myth.”<sup>25</sup> Or, in more general terms, one may conclude that the thoroughly “objective” mind must be ignorant, for objects are never merely given, but are part

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23. Critique of Pure Reason.

24. In doing this, he refers to a famous passage in Kant: “Concepts without intuitions [i.e. perceptions] are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.” For discussion of this principle, see The Critique of

and parcel of the structure of human minds.

When persons view the world, they organize it and give it structure—an activity which some refer to as “projection.” For example, when scientists examine a range of data from the point of view of a particular hypothesis, they are explicitly using projection, since they are in fact viewing the data with a particular structure in mind. Success depends upon an adequate fit of the data to the hypothesis. But projection usually functions less explicitly. For example, gestalt psychologists have shown that the human mind possesses schemata that determine the physical shapes of the objects in the world that one sees.<sup>26</sup> Figures are not given, but rather stem from prior cognitive principles.<sup>27</sup>

Therein lies a major problem for the interpretation of ancient symbols. While most historians would presumably prefer to be able to describe accurately the actual referential networks of individual symbols, they find themselves presented with the fact that they must make Judgement, secs. 76-77.

25. Art and Illusion, 298.

26. The German term “gestalt” has been commonly used, because it combines the meanings of “shape” and “form.” For overviews of gestalt psychology (founded by Chr. von Ehrenfels in the late nineteenth century), see the classic works of W. Köhler, Gestalt Psychology; and K. Koffka, The Principles of Gestalt Psychology. D. Katz also provides an excellent overview of the issues in Gestalt Psychology.

27. The problem of visually distinguishing figure from ground is a classic example of this problem; see the discussions in J. M. Kennedy, A Psychology of Picture Perception, as well as in E. Rubin, Visuell wahrgenommene Figuren. Another well-known instance is the so-called Necker cube that changes perspective; J. M. Kennedy, A Psychology of Picture Perception, 136-40.

certain assumptions before they ever look at those symbols. For instance, one may presume that textual evidence relates to iconography, but, in doing so, it is possible to include material that is irrelevant. On the other hand, if one excludes textual evidence, it is possible to exclude material that is relevant. To some extent, whichever position one takes shapes the evidence in a particular fashion.

To this I should add two further items of importance. Projection has two facets. There is the projection of interpreters who examine a symbol, but there is also the projection of those historical persons who actually used the symbol. Thus, interpreters must consider two kinds of projection (a double projection)—their own and that of past viewers.

In addition, the projective process of historians of ancient symbols is inherently different from that of those who used the symbols. It is an explicit rendering of a process that is implicit, which involves the elaboration in discursive form of non-discursive symbols.<sup>28</sup> One kind of projection is used in order to understand another. As an example of this, historians of early Christianity can only describe what they imagine early Christianity to have been without writing as an early Christian would have.<sup>29</sup>

On the one hand, this should demonstrate the extreme complexity of the task at hand and should therefore make interpreters suitably cautious. In fact, it might further explain why some would in exasperation abandon the entire exercise, as they seem to have done in the case of

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28. See pp. 64-72 below.

Jewish symbols since Goodenough.

But projection provides the only means available for interpreting one's own environment and for construing the interpretations of others. In fact, it is not possible in historical writing to take an entirely non-interpretive stance.<sup>30</sup> In the end there are two choices: either retreat from the interpretive process altogether (that is, give up, as some have done) or attempt to make use of the most fundamental interpretive tool human beings possess.

That Goodenough did not respond to the problem of objectivity by emphasizing decoration or by defending the possibility of objective descriptions without cognitive projection, is perhaps one of his most important contributions to the study of ancient symbols and makes him an outstanding scholar in this field. In fact, he was very much aware that it is impossible to understand a symbol without projecting one's own experience and cognitive categories on to it, but he believed that intelligent projection (through the formulation of hypotheses) could lead to a more precise understanding of symbolic significance. He has often been criticized for his intuitive and emotional interpretation and, indeed,

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29. On this kind of distinction, see C. Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures, 14-15.

30. Here I should note that I do not follow the assumptions of many adherents of deconstructionism. Although they recognize the crucial importance of the interpreter ("reader"), they essentially reject the existence of referential reality (the actual world of objects) in favor of a radically anti-historical form of subjectivism. In contrast, I presume the existence of an object world. Projection provides the means of interpreting it. For a critique of deconstructionist theory and of its use in symbol interpretation, see A. Giddens, Central Problems in Social Theory.

it often seems that he reduces the meanings of symbols to his own preferred categories, usually immortality and/or the primal life-urge (libido). Nevertheless, while his categories are far too reductionist, his interpretive procedure has the great advantage of recognizing the necessity and value of projection in the formulation of hypotheses and in the resultant explanations.

### **Depth psychology and Goodenough**

I would like now to describe several interpretations of symbols in depth psychology and their influence on the interpretive approach of Goodenough, since they are fundamental to an understanding of modern interpretations of symbols, and have been considerably influential on the interpretation of ancient symbols in general. Further, they furnish much of what makes Goodenough's interpretations simultaneously insightful and problematic.

Of all theorists, Sigmund Freud has become perhaps most justifiably famous for demonstrating the vast and complex meanings of apparently simple symbols——particularly in his analysis of symbolism in dreams.<sup>31</sup> Previous interpreters had argued that the imagery of dreams reflected physiological phenomena (e.g. indigestion), that they were the nonsen-

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31. For the interpretation of symbols in dreams, the most useful and comprehensive of all his works remains the Interpretation of Dreams (eighth ed.). For a convenient and brief summary, see also On Dreams and Part 2 of the Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis. For revisions in his theory of dreams, see the essay, "Revision of the Theory of Dreams," in New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis. In order to understand Freud's view of symbols and dreams from a biographical point of view, see, P. Gay, Freud: A Life for Our Time.

sical products of overstimulated minds that needed to rid themselves of excess excitation, or that they could be understood as a code that the observer needed to decipher.<sup>32</sup> Instead of proceeding in this way and attempting to explain dreams and their imagery as substitutes for something else (that is, of no value or meaning in and of themselves), Freud viewed dreams in their own right as a rational form of symbolic thought, which could function even more complexly than conscious thought and which had its own purposes.<sup>33</sup>

By analyzing a word or image in dreams, Freud could reconstruct the psychological history of a patient through the establishment of extensive and lengthy chains of overlapping associations or “trains of thought” (Gedankenfüge) that converge at certain crucial points, which he calls “nodal-points” (Knotenpunkten) and sometimes (in regard to words found in dreams) “verbal bridges” (Wortbrücken).<sup>34</sup> Rather than attempting to seek the essential meaning of a dream and thus to describe the dream as a whole, Freud follows the procedure of examining every possible symbolic item so as to describe the dream in detail.<sup>35</sup> For

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32. “Decoding method” = Chiffriermethode. On decoding in particular, see especially Interp., 136ff., 386. For a general summary of all these views, see Chapter 1 of Interp.

33. E.g. “. . . the most complicated achievements of thought (Denkleistungen) are possible without the assistance of consciousness. . . .”: Interp., 632; “. . . when conscious purposive ideas are abandoned, concealed purposive ideas (Zielvorstellungen) assume control of the current of ideas. . . .”: Interp., 570. See also especially Interp., 155-56, 565-68. Like the visions and hallucinations of his psychotic patients, dreams were not composed of irrational visual ramblings, but could in fact be explained in a logical way: Interp., 565-68.

34. For a discussion of the method, see Interp., 312-19. In particular,

Freud, the most insignificant (at least in a superficial sense) elements of a dream can therefore be the most indispensable ones.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, for Freud, the images in dreams are multivalent, and one particular dream can have many meanings.<sup>37</sup>

By following this method, Freud found that dream-images functioned as symbols that were often associated with strong emotions (what Freud called affects), although the emotions themselves might not be attached to the object of actual interest.<sup>38</sup> In addition, he concluded that these symbols did not serve primarily as discursive expressions, but rather as representational expressions (as Freud describes them). That is, since symbolic images in dreams do not have conjunctions (e.g. “if,” “because,” “just as,” “although,” “either——or,” etc.) to connect them to one another, they indicate connections of causality, similarity, contradiction, and contrariety by placing representational elements in certain positions relative to one another.<sup>39</sup> It is this capacity for representation

the “Irma dream” in Chapter 2 (13-153) is an excellent example of the application of this method. For verbal bridges, see e.g. Interp., 410.

35. That is, according to its “segments” (Teilstücke): Interp., 136, 486.

36. Interp., 552; “insignificant” (geringfügigsten).

37. Interp., 299-300.

38. See especially Interp., Chapter 6H.

39. Interp., 344-61.

that makes an item likely to find itself brought into the imagery of the dream content.<sup>40</sup>

The non-discursive character of dreams stems from several factors. Above all, there is the interplay between the “manifest dream-content” (manifeste Trauminhalt) and the “latent dream-content” (latente Trauminhalt) that arises from the division of the human psyche into conscious and unconscious sections respectively.<sup>41</sup> Due to the unacceptability of wishes emerging from unconscious needs and desires (usually of a libidinous nature) of childhood, together with the consequent repression, the mental function of “censorship” (Zensur) prevents those wishes from emerging into consciousness while awake, and allows them to enter into dreams only in a distorted and chaotic fashion.<sup>42</sup>

As a result, Freud finds that there is a tendency in dream symbolism toward “condensation” (Verdichtungsarbeit) of symbols and “displacement” (Verschiebungsarbeit) of emotions.<sup>43</sup> That is, instead of clarifying items in the dream-content, censorship tends to confuse them by packing all sorts of references into individual images (condensation) so that one particular item can be laden with numerous meanings. Or censorship does this by substituting indifferent references in order to replace those that are actually intended (displacement)——with the re-

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40. See Interp., Chapter 6D.

41. See Interp., passim.

42. Usually through the medium of what he calls the “preconscious” (Vorbewusstsein). For discussion of the relations between conscious, unconscious, and preconscious mental processes, see especially In-



sult that strong emotions may be attached to inappropriate items. As a further result of the tendency in dreams toward displacement, dream-work can turn any item and any emotion associated with that item into their opposites so that dreams are often composed of conflicting ideas and emotions, which are almost always extremely powerful and usually remain unresolved.<sup>44</sup>

Dreams, therefore, are composed of symbolic images with extraordinarily complex referential networks.

Since dreams are non-discursive, it is also easy to understand why Freud believes that it is impossible to “decode” (chiffrieren) a dream or adequately to “translate” (übersetzen) it into a discursive mode.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the interpretation of any particular dream is endless, since the symbolic images of dreams are linked to our own unfathomable networks of thought stemming through regression from childhood<sup>46</sup>—— networks which are themselves connected regressively to the “primeval”  
terp., Chap. 7.; and “The Unconscious.”

43. See Interp., Chapter 6, A and B respectively.

44. Interp., passim.

45. On this problem, see the interesting discussion in Introductory Lectures, 172-73; also Interp., 130-32.

46. Interp., 564, where he refers to “network-like entanglement of our world of thought” (netzartige Verstrickung unserer Gedankenwelt). In addition, there is always an interpretable point in a dream that he calls the “navel” (Nabel). It must await further investigation, “since it reaches down into the depths of the unknown”: Interp., 564.

(uralt) needs and desires of the human psyche.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, as Freud seems to describe it, dreams and their images are not intended as forms of communication, but rather they are expressions of deeply felt emotional patterns of thought originating in the unconscious.

In spite of the recognition of his own inability to describe verbally the symbolic imagery of dreams, one cannot read a case history of his without marveling at the extraordinary subtlety and high quality of his complex descriptions of symbols. Whenever he discusses a dream, he carefully avoids oversimplification and remains constantly attentive to the richness of the material. In many ways, therefore, Freud employs an approach that takes into account the kind of complexity that was envisioned as an important component of the purpose of this dissertation.

Yet, at the same time that Freud argues for the intricacy of dream-symbolism, the tremendous welter of detail that this involves also leads him to propose the hypothesis that all dreams (as well as the symbols in them) arise ultimately for one reason—namely “wish-fulfillment” (Wunscherfüllung).<sup>48</sup> According to him, these wishes stem from the above-mentioned needs and desires originating in childhood.<sup>49</sup> Usually they center on the desire to return to the primal womb of the mother

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47. See for example Interp., 587-88 and the connection of this to Nietzsche. More generally for a discussion of wish-fulfillment as a primeval relic of the human psyche, see Group Psychology.

48. See especially Interp., Chap. 3. Of interest is his own dream, where he saw a tablet with the inscription of the date on which the secret of dreams (namely wish-fulfillment) was revealed to him June 12, 1900 (Masson ed., The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess).

and consequently bear the attendant emotions of the libido—to which he would refer under the general rubric of the “life drive” (Lebens trieb),<sup>50</sup> but which as a rule he sees as fundamentally sexual.<sup>51</sup> In the final analysis, symbols in dreams are not only related to wish-fulfillment, but their essential meanings are almost exclusively sexual.

As one can see, Freud moves far away from his emphasis on condensation and displacement (both of which produce conflict), as well as from his discussions of small details that develop into nodal points, verbal bridges, and/or elements of association trains. Instead, he turns to an interpretation of dreams that seeks to explain all meaning in them as the reflection of a single fundamental need.

Thus, in Freud, one sees both an understanding of the complexity of symbols, but, at the same time, the reduction of that complexity to a single causal explanation.

Like Freud, Jung also began by emphasizing the multivalent and ambiguous character of symbols.<sup>52</sup> In fact, he indicated this early on in his career with his extensive experimental research that sought to confirm

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49. Interp., passim. For analysis of specific dreams see Chap. 5B.

50. For full discussion of the life and death instincts, see the following: “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes”; Beyond the Pleasure Principle; and The Ego and the Id, Chap. 4.

51. Freud traces almost every symbol to a sexual origin in Interp., 389ff.

52. For a convenient summary of his views on symbolism, see J. Jacobi, Complex/Archetype/Symbol. See also discussions under “image” and “symbol” in Psychological Types, 442-47, 473-81.

Freud's theory of word association,<sup>53</sup> which Freud had described throughout his Interpretation of Dreams. In his study of word association, Jung discovered in the unconscious the existence of "feeling-tones",<sup>54</sup> around which are grouped large numbers of associations that are connected to the personal feelings and experiences of the particular individuals under examination. He calls these "feeling-toned complexes" (gefühlbetonte Komplexe). When such complexes enter into consciousness, Jung refers to them as "constellated" (konstellierte), since these elements have been gathered together into a relatively fixed form and are then ready for conscious activation.<sup>55</sup>

But as Jung progressed in his research, he came to the conclusion that the unconscious consisted of more than one mode of operation. While his association experiments had focussed on disturbances related to personal feelings and experiences (family, friends, loves, career, economic situation, etc.), he further claimed to have discovered that there was a deeper layer in the unconscious that contains universal contents and modes of human behavior. Thus, he makes a distinction between the "personal unconscious" (persönliche Unbewusste) and the "collective unconscious" (kollektive Unbewusste). He regards the latter

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53. On word association, see especially Experimental Researches. For some historical background, see the discussion in P. Gay, Freud, 197-200.

54. J. Jacobi also refers to them as "nuclear elements": Complex/Archetype/Symbol, 8-9.

55. For a review of this subject, see "A Review of the Complex Theory" in Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche, 92-104. For more detailed discussion, see Experimental Researches, passim.

as the repository of the archaic emotions and contents of all humanity, from its paleolithic origins until the present. According to Jung, Freud discovered the personal unconscious, while Jung himself had discovered the collective unconscious. In the process, he considered the former a more superficial component of the unconscious than the latter and relegated it to a much lower position.<sup>56</sup>

On the one hand, the personal unconscious operates by means of feeling-toned complexes that develop into constellations when activated by consciousness. In contrast, the collective unconscious operates by means of archetypes that develop into symbols when activated by consciousness.<sup>57</sup>

For Jung, archetypes constitute “primordial images” (urtümliche Bilder)—such as father, mother, child, anima/animus, hero, death-rebirth, light-darkness, heaven-earth, earth-water-air, etc.—that originate in the collective psyche of humankind.<sup>58</sup> Although the distinction does not always seem clearly drawn, Jung describes archetypes not as inherited images, but rather as the result of an inherited “pattern of behavior” that produces these images.<sup>59</sup> For this reason, Jung differen-

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56. For the most complete version of this theory, see The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious.

57. Germ. Archetypen and Symbole. See in particular Symbols of Transformation.

58. See Symbols of Transformation and Psychological Types, 442-47.

59. See for example Symbols of Transformation, 158. See also the comments of J. Jacobi on inherited images in Complex/Archetype/Symbol, 43-44, 51-53.

tiates between the archetype before it crystallizes into an image (that is, when it exists as an invisible point in the collective unconscious) and the archetypal representation that later makes itself visible in the collective unconscious.<sup>60</sup>

As he describes them, archetypal images are not directly connected to the appearance of actually existing external objects, but rather stem from unconscious fantasy activity (that is, internal visual activity).<sup>61</sup> In general, these images emerge in dreams during times of stress.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, archetypes bear a “numinous” or emotionally charged character that profoundly affects those perceiving them.<sup>63</sup> Finally, archetypes are not the products of a fundamentally sexual libido (as Freud’s symbols), but rather are products of psychic energy (which is Jung’s definition of libido). Thus, Jung moves archetypes/symbols from theories of childhood regression (like Freud) to theories that describe them as mechanisms for coping with the chaos of the collective unconscious.

For instance, according to Jung (and as I argue in Chapters 2 and 3), a fish in the ancient world was not purely a phallic symbol (as in Freud), but also a symbol of renewal and rebirth.<sup>64</sup> In this fashion, Jung

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60. Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche, 213. Using the terminology of Freud, he refers to these points as “nodal points.”

61. Psychological Types, 442-47.

62. As Jung shows especially in his Symbols of Transformation.

63. E.g. Symbols of Transformation, 157; Archetypes, 28, 39; and Structure, 205-06. In general, “emotionally charged” (*gefühlbetonte*) refers to complexes, while “numinous” (*numinos*) refers to archetypes. But the basic idea is the same. The impact of archetypes on unprepared persons can lead to all sorts of mental disturbances, with which

believes that fish symbolism is used to express hope in continued life, which is periodically threatened by a chaotic unconscious.<sup>65</sup>

As long as archetypes are present only in the collective unconscious, they are not available for conscious perception. When individuals becomes conscious of archetypes, Jung says that they perceive them primarily through the mediation of symbols. A symbol is simply an archetype as it is manifested to the conscious mind—that is, clothed in representational material.<sup>66</sup>

Unlike signs, which Jung sees as “an analogue or an abbreviated designation for a known thing,” symbols function as expressions for unknown things that transcend consciousness.<sup>67</sup> Thus, symbols are not precisely delineable and univalent,<sup>68</sup> but possess such an inexhaustible

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Symbols of Transformation is concerned.

64. E.g. Symbols of Transformation, 198.

65. I cannot confirm or disprove the relation of early Christian fish symbolism to the unconscious.

66. By this he seems to mean both the representation of the archetype itself (such as the anima/animus) and the secondary representations of the original representation (such as the use of water and/or fish as symbols for the anima/animus). For the definition of a symbol, all that really matters is that these archetypes now bear some direct connection to consciousness. For the purpose of interpreting ancient symbols, however, the distinction between archetype and symbol is not of critical importance. See the discussion in Psychological Types, 473-81; also Symbols, 77, 225-26. In fact, Jung himself often seems to use them interchangeably. Thus, when discussing Jung’s approach, I henceforth use synonymously his terms “archetype” and “symbol.”

67. Psychological Types, 474: “. . . als Analogie oder abgekürzte Bezeichnung einer bekannten Sache.”

68. Symbols used in this way are no longer “living,” but “dead”: e.g.

supply of content that he refers to them as “pregnant with meaning” (bedeutungsschwangeres Sinn)—that is, multivalent.<sup>69</sup>

From this description, one can see that Jung regards multivalence as a fundamental component of his version of depth psychology. For example, in his descriptions of complexes, there are found a vast number of associations that congregate around central elements in the personal unconscious. From his descriptions, one also learns that symbols possess a depth of thought and emotion that is even more complex than the symbols of Freud, because Jung’s symbols do not ultimately stem from sexual needs and desires. A further clue to the intricate nature of symbolism for Jung may be found in the tremendous emotional and supernatural power of archetypes (their “numinousness”) that allows them to incorporate in one item the vast number of experiences and thoughts human beings have. This is what Freud calls condensation, only here with even more elements included in it—that is, not only personal, but also collective experiences and thoughts. Finally, according to Jung, the coexistence of opposite elements (male-female, good-evil, etc.) makes the collective unconscious, as well as the archetypes that represent it, a region of conflict that is filled with intricate networks of meaning.<sup>70</sup>

Since the collective unconscious contains within it the sum of all human thoughts, experiences, and emotions, one might expect that Jung

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Psychological Types, 474-75, and generally throughout his writings.

69. E.g. Psychological Types, 473-81; and Symbols of Transforma-



regarded it as the locus of the greatest complexity of the human mind. Furthermore, as Jung describes it, the collective unconscious is a chaotic realm, which should ostensibly contain within it incomprehensibly intricate networks of meanings.

Yet, in the end, Jung draws back from the very complexity he himself has described. While he admits that archetypes have a “manifold meaning” and “almost limitless wealth of reference”,<sup>71</sup> for him they guarantee at the same time in every single individual a “sameness of experience”.<sup>72</sup> In other words, the collective unconscious is essentially a uniform and univalent system.

Problems arise when archetypal images are attached to referents in the personal unconscious—that is, attached to personal, social, historical, and political circumstances. In fact, for Jung complexes are actually archetypal images that are constellated (that is, fixed in a relatively rigid manner) in inappropriate networks of meaning—in other words, “transient” or “mere” (for Jung) circumstances. Jung refers to the tendency to trap archetypal images in these networks as “concretism.”<sup>73</sup> By means of the process of “individuation” in which symbols are used properly, Jung argues that one peels off the sensuous and ephemeral items of the concrete world so that individuals can differ-

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tion, 77-78, 124.

70. See especially Mysterium Coniunctionis.

71. Archetypes, 38: “Vieldeutigkeit” and “fast unabsehbare Beziehungsfülle.”

entiate themselves from the collective unconscious and perceive the archetypes as eternal images separate from themselves. In this way, the archetype becomes a purified “idea.”<sup>74</sup> As a result, full multivalence (that is, including personal, historical, social, political, and economic circumstances) is actually indicative of neurotic behavior.

For Jung, therefore, the world of the concrete and the personal unconscious is a world subject to “elusiveness, superficiality, shadowiness, and indeed of futility.”<sup>75</sup> This should offer a clue as to why Jung objects to full multivalence: like Freud, he is overwhelmed by its apparent confusion, ambiguity, and inclusion of excessive detail.

In the end, Jung’s view leads to the conclusion that the kinds of contextual influences discussed above are really accidental and can be peeled off in favor of the essential meaning of symbols. What really matters for Jung is what is eternal.<sup>76</sup> Symbolism is in fact equivalent to mysticism.<sup>77</sup>

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72. Archetypes, 58: “Gleichheit der Erfahrung.”

73. Psychological Types, 420-21: “Konkretismus.”

74. Psychological Types, 437-41, 445-46: “Idee.”

75. Archetypes, 58: “Fluchtigkeit, Oberflächlichkeit, Schattenhaftigkeit, ja von Futilität.”

76. Appropriately Jung’s autobiography (Memories, Dreams, Reflections) is not in any sense a history of his life (birth, family, upbringing, marriage, children, etc.), but a description of a spiritual journey that is devoid of historical detail.

77. It is the kind of mysticism that uses symbols make sense of opposing elements in the collective unconscious by synthesizing them through the above-mentioned process of individuation.

The importance of context, however, suggests that this cannot be true, at least in the case of ancient symbols in the Graeco-Roman world.

Furthermore, the characterization of symbolism in purely emotional and mystical terms leads Jung to describe symbols as primarily visual in nature. He sees feeling and mystical insight (associative thinking) expressed by means of images, whereas logical construction (discursive thinking) he sees conveyed by words.<sup>78</sup> For Jung, the former stems from the collective unconscious, while the latter is a modern invention of consciousness.

This differs from my own procedure, where I consider both images and words as matter for symbolization.<sup>79</sup> Jung does not take into account the fact that words, such as the acronym IXΘΥΣ or magical incantations, can also function emotively and “numinously.” Likewise, images can function as elements in logical thought.<sup>80</sup>

In his autobiography and in his methodological discussions, E. R. Goodenough makes it quite clear that his approach to the interpretation of symbols owes a significant debt to the interpretive framework established by Freud and Jung.<sup>81</sup> Although he rejects the emphasis of Freud

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78. See Symbols of Transformation, 10ff.

79. See Sections pp. 93-99 below.

80. A point of which N. Goodman (in Languages of Art) is particularly cognizant. See pp. 97-98 below.

81. Goodenough's own understanding of depth psychology can be found in some detail in what one might call his “spiritual” autobiography (similar to that of Jung in Memories, Dreams, Reflections), Toward a Mature Faith, especially in chapters 2 and 3 (pp. 33-69). For his explicit use of them in actual interpretation, see Symbols

on Oedipal complexes and the insistence of Jung on the existence of a collective unconscious,<sup>82</sup> his interpretive terminology and his definition of “symbol” are clearly based on Freud and Jung.

On the one hand, he recognizes the multivalent character of symbolism, arguing for example that the most effective symbols are capable of manifold interpretations.<sup>83</sup> In addition, since symbols originate in the deepest emotional layers of the unconscious and therefore express what we do not consciously know, Goodenough (like Jung) envisions symbols as forever inaccessible to adequate explanation. Precise delineation of the meaning of a symbol is impossible.<sup>84</sup> Finally, in accord with both Freud and Jung, Goodenough argues that the unconscious contains a chaotic maelstrom of conflicting ideas, emotions, and drives that symbols serve to unify. Thus, symbols possess opposing elements (the “fundamental schizophrenia” of the human psyche) in their networks of meaning.<sup>85</sup>

In general, one can see that Goodenough is exceptionally sensitive to the complex and (apparently) ambiguous nature of symbolism.

But at the same time Goodenough takes a position antithetical to this, when he proposes that (although early Christianity, Judaism, and pagan religions represent very different traditions) all their symbols re-

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12:48-62, although it is implicit throughout his methodological discussions, in particular 4:68-77, 12:26-48.

82. Symbols 12:49.

83. E.g. Symbols 4:96.

ferred to immortality. For Goodenough (as for Jung) immortality principally means the search for unification with the eternal mother.<sup>86</sup> This search is an extension of the basic life-urge (here using Freudian terminology) that all human beings possess. In general, for Goodenough (as for Freud) the origins of the life-urge can be traced to infancy and the need of the infant for nourishment and succour. Thus, the search for unification/immortality reflects infantile needs that remain alive in adult psyches. In this way, Goodenough accepts to some extent the wish-fulfillment theory of Freud: the wish for maternal satisfaction.<sup>87</sup>

While Goodenough follows Jung in arguing for a broader definition of the “life-urge” that emphasizes more than sexuality,<sup>88</sup> in many ways he actually follows Freud in that (unlike Jung) he usually ends up emphasizing sexuality. Consequently, he claims that “all archaeological symbols have a basic value of eroticism,”<sup>89</sup> which is principally phallic in

84. Symbols 4:32-33, 12:69-70.

85. Symbols 4:41-42.

86. Especially Symbols 4:51-60 and 12:74-76, but argued everywhere throughout the volumes of Symbols.

87. See Symbols 4:51-60, 12:74-75.

88. According to Goodenough, the three basic symbols of life “are the symbols of hunting or fighting (including sport), the symbols of food, and the symbols of sex.” See especially Symbols 4:49-50.

89. Symbols 4:55 (my emphasis).

nature and whose purpose is to symbolize the desire to unify with the eternal mother.<sup>90</sup>

In general, Goodenough is motivated in his search to find the same meaning for all symbols by a particular polemical concern—namely his intent to show a fundamental contrast between what he regards as orthodox religion and mystery religion. Orthodox religion (which he believed was oriented around father archetypes and which ostensibly emphasized obedience) characterized philosophical pagan religion, rabbinic Judaism, and theological Christianity. In contrast, mystery religion (which he believed was oriented around mother archetypes and which ostensibly emphasized union) characterized pagan mystery religions, diaspora Jews, heretical Christians, and most archaeological evidence. For obvious reasons, the latter expressed sexual symbolism in a relatively open fashion, while the former repressed it so that it was present only in a veiled way. For Goodenough the history of religion is the gradual repression of sexual (in the broad sense) elements.<sup>91</sup>

Because of the heavy dependence of Goodenough on very speculative and generalizing psychological conclusions, many critics have justifiably found this reconstruction of ancient religious symbolism at best implausible. Certainly, the rigid division of religion into that which

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90. Symbols 4:55-58 et passim. He does admit the presence of some female sexual features in ancient religious symbolism, but only in passing.

91. Symbols 4:55-58.

is orthodox and that which is mystery has proven particularly inadequate and misleading.<sup>92</sup>

Yet, there is clearly much that is insightful in his work. I have already mentioned his understanding of interpretive projection, as well as his sensitivity to complexity and apparent ambiguity, neither of which are common among interpreters of ancient symbols. In addition, sexual associations (ignored by most interpreters) were clearly important features of many ancient religious symbols, as I hope to demonstrate in the case of early Christian fish symbolism. Furthermore, the attempt to prove that religious symbols were of tremendous emotional import is successful to a degree, in part (as Goodenough notes) because many of the symbols are often carved as graffiti on inscriptions without apparent aesthetic concern.

Most important the criticisms of Goodenough do not even focus on the most fundamental problem in his interpretive methodology—namely his retreat from the complexity of symbolic meaning, by attempting to reduce it to one item.<sup>93</sup> For him symbolism has a “multi-

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92. For Judaism, see the summary of scholarly discussion in G. Lease, “Jewish Mystery Cults Since Goodenough.” For Christianity, the discussion was really begun by W. Bauer in Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity. For pagan religions, see for example the useful discussions in R. Macmullen, Paganism in the Roman Empire, e.g. 23ff.; and S. R. F. Price, Rituals and Power, who convincingly shows that Roman state-sponsored religion (what one might call “orthodox”) involved great personal religious commitment (usually considered a feature of “mystery” religion).

93. In criticizing Goodenough in his reviews of Symbols, A. D. Nock proposes a version of the decoration hypothesis that essentially achieves an even more one-sided result than Goodenough by defining all symbols in terms of one explanation—namely, decoration. Thus

plicity of forms and sameness of values.”<sup>94</sup> All ancient symbols in fact have an “essential value”. When one religion borrows a symbol from another religion, that value is maintained.<sup>95</sup> In other words, there is a “universal language of symbolism” or a “lingua franca,”<sup>96</sup> which Goodenough encompasses in the idea of immortality through unification. In regard to Christian symbols, he in fact says:

The symbols of Christianity, for example, are indeed many. They are the cross, the crucifix, the Holy Family, the figures of Mary and Christ, the dove, the vine, the cup, the book, the lamb, the tree, the light, the cherub, the throne, the hand, the eagle, the bull, the bleeding heart, the angel, A Ω: one could go on almost indefinitely. Yet all of these will fit into a single formula, namely, the idea that the eternal God lovingly offers to share his nature with man, to lift him into eternal participation in divine life and happiness. Each symbol presents a facet of a single jewel. . . .<sup>97</sup>

In part, Goodenough’s quest for a formulaic explanation of religious symbolism also stems from his position (like Jung) that a true symbol (one that is “living”) is characterized solely by its “emotional impact” and that it functions almost exclusively to elicit powerful

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he effectively denies the importance of historical contexts. Here the reluctance to interpret leads to the elimination of virtually all contextual information; see e.g. 110-17 below.

94. Symbols 4:42. Jung uses “experience” (Erfahrung) in place of “values.”

95. Symbols 4:59-60, 12:70, 12:73-74.

96. 4:37-38, 4:56.

97. Symbols 4:41-42. The reference to participation is clearly influenced by Jung, who frequently uses the French phrase “participation mystique.”



emotions in the human psyche.<sup>98</sup> This explains why he follows Jung in describing symbols as fundamentally pictorial and imprecise in contrast to “explanations,” which he regards as predominantly verbal and precise.<sup>99</sup> Symbolism for him represents the mystical impulses of human beings, and thus a symbol is essentially religious or transcendent.<sup>100</sup>

For this reason, and because he is intent on eliminating complexity, Goodenough excludes from consideration connotations not inherently religious (such as those pertaining to social and economic status, political affiliation, cultural background, etc.). He clearly agrees with Jung that such contextual elements are really accidental and can be peeled off in favor of what for him is the essential meaning of symbols.

All of this presupposes that this universal symbolism, when stripped of its “accidental” or concrete characteristics (what I have called multidimensionality), is really the same for all groups. In the evidence presented in the following chapters, I will show how context does in fact crucially affect the meaning of fish symbolism.

In conclusion interpreters of symbols, such as Freud, Jung and Goodenough, were well-aware of (and often responsible for estab-

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98. Symbols 4:70. In contrast, a “dead” symbol has lost that emotional import (Symbols 4:73).

99. Symbols 12:69-70.

100. In Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire, F. Cumont takes a position generally similar to that of Goodenough.

lishing) the complexity of meaning in certain symbols. Yet that complexity apparently became so confusing, overwhelming, and/or inconvenient that the very concrete features that these authors in many passages describe symbols as possessing, are rejected in other passages in order to make transcendental claims and meta-historical observations. Religious symbols ultimately become referential signals either to psychic disturbances (as in Freud) or to mystic archetypes (as in Jung and Goodenough).

In general (despite the disclaimers of Jung, for example), these interpreters are concerned with symbols as things that have an ontological status even more than with symbolization as a mental function. Symbols are essentially “things” that represent at a distance various elements of the unconscious. In a kind of reverse Platonism, they are understood as copies or reflections of a generally inaccessible region of the mind. Symbol theory therefore becomes a kind of code theory.

### **Code theory in the study of ancient iconography**

In depth psychology, code approaches seem to have emerged unintentionally, with much of the complexity of symbolism still intact. In addition, scholars who take the approach of depth psychology generally recognize the impossibility of adequately delineating the meanings of symbols and of ever exhausting their contents. They never consider a completely objective description of symbols a realistic—or even desirable—possibility.

But other scholars, in particular many who interpret early Christian symbols (for the most part, art historians), assume that it is altogether possible to gain an adequately objective description of what a religious symbol means. In doing this, they eschew psychological interpretation and instead tend to look at religious symbols as signals—that is, as a kind of shorthand code, where a symbol has a simple one-to-one correspondence to a referent. One might phrase such a view in the following manner: when you see A, it indicates that you are always meant to think of B.

In this regard, I should first mention the position of Theodor Klauser who goes to the extent of declaring that the chriophoros (or good shepherd) always refers to philanthropy, while the orant figure (person in prayer) always refers to piety.<sup>101</sup> Or to rephrase it slightly, when you saw a chriophoros, you were always meant to think of philanthropy, while, when you saw an orant, you were always meant to think of piety. In this way, he describes religious iconography as a code for the promulgation of abstract religious ideas.

According to Klauser, the essential meaning was apparently preserved in their transference from a pagan (particularly Roman) context to an early Christian one. Here one has the equivalent of Goodenough's "essential value"—which crosses all religious boundaries—but without the psychological twist of mysticism and (unfortunately) without the recognition of other concomitant meanings.

While Klauser represented the Antike und Christentum strand of the History of Religions School (Religionsgeschichtliche Schule),<sup>102</sup> other interpreters of early Christian symbols directly convert symbols into a code that is based on presumed theological references. In other words, they create a kind of theological decoding.

For example, André Grabar (the foremost proponent of this position) argues the following: when you saw a fish and a meal in an early Christian painting, you were always meant to think of the eucharist. For example, Grabar says:

We know, of course, that the frequent use of any sign in a certain context permits surprising abbreviations. One may cite the famous paintings in the crypt of Lucina which show a fish that serves as a support for a small basket filled with white ring-shaped objects. The Christians who went there knew how to decipher such a painting: communion.<sup>103</sup>

The word “decipher” reveals that he is taking a code approach.

Others use the same method, though offering a somewhat different interpretation by arguing that, when you saw a fish on a grave, you were always meant to think of Christ.<sup>104</sup>

Code thought is essentially reactive and assumes that there is fundamentally an arbitrary relationship between a code item and its referential object. For example, a fish may represent Christ, but so, just as

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101. For discussions of the good shepherd and the orant, see T. Klauser, “Studien” 1:24-44, 2:115-45, 3:112-33.

102. See pp. 93-94 and 104-06 below for more discussion of Antike und Christentum.

103. Christian Iconography, 8. For a photograph of this painting, see infra.

likely, could a tiger, a star, or the letter “W.”

Furthermore, the code item is itself understood as unimportant in relation to its referential object. In the above example, what matters is “Christ.” The signal (“fish”) has no real value in and of itself. In general, this kind of approach makes the independent value of the symbol almost nonexistent, since the symbol merely refers to an idea far more important than the symbol itself.

In his interpretation of Christian symbols, Grabar places this code relationship under the category of “image-sign.” For Grabar, an “image-sign” is an iconographic image that stands as a shorthand code for something other than itself. Unlike narrative imagery, “image-signs” are characterized by brevity and simplicity. According to Grabar, the majority of early Christian “image-signs,” such as Daniel, Lazarus, and Jonah, refer to salvation and the conquest of death. In contrast to the salvific emphasis of the majority of pre-Constantinian images, Grabar argues that a minority of pre-Constantinian “image-signs” stands as a code for Church sacraments (baptism and eucharist). Even if this could be expanded to more than one referent (as he sometimes seems to imply), the coding pattern is always described as a strictly lineal one-to-one correspondence, and the referents therefore do not relate to one another in an overall structure.<sup>105</sup>

According to Grabar, this use of the “image-sign” became predom-

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104. E.g. J. Wilpert, *Prinzipienfragen*, 39-100.

inant after Constantine. Like the “image-signs” pointing toward salvation and rituals, these theological “image-signs” represent the one-to-one correspondence approach mentioned above. The use of this rubric leads to an equally one-dimensional interpretation of the symbol by suggesting that ancient Christian symbols functioned as pictorial language for the teaching of abstract theological ideas.<sup>106</sup>

To be fair to Klauser and Grabar, the use of interpretive codes has always been a prominent feature of the interpretation of early Christian symbols. For example, the majority of late nineteenth century art historians, such as Josef Wilpert and his modern successors, preferred to view Christian symbols from a theological point of view, and have argued that, while most Christian symbols have pagan origins, early Christians rebaptized them to mean something purely Christian—e.g. as resurrection, the eucharist, baptism, etc.<sup>107</sup> In addition, one finds an even more extreme example of code theory in Wladimir Weidlé’s book, The Baptism of Art, where he goes so far as to say that every early Christian iconographic image refers to the idea of salvation through baptism.<sup>108</sup>

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105. Christian Iconography, 8-13.

106. Christian Iconography, 14-30.

107. See e.g. J. Wilpert, Prinzipienfragen. For a modern work, see e.g. P. Testini, Le catacombe, 257-309.

108. Other scholars have followed Weidlé. See e.g. W. Tronzo, who makes the following statement (in The Via Latina Catacomb, 61): “The concept of personal salvation was, as we have already observed, the most important message the signitive art of the catacombs had to communicate.” Note here the use of the words “message” and

The code approach can be used in other ways as well. For example, some scholars have argued that particular iconographic images in funerary contexts essentially functioned to identify the religion of the deceased.<sup>109</sup> Thus, the menorah is sometimes thought to have primarily served as an indication that the deceased was Jewish;<sup>110</sup> or one often hears it said that a cross/chi-rho chiefly revealed that the deceased was Christian.<sup>111</sup> According to this view, any other associations which the image might have had were of secondary importance and were usually not intended by the creators of the images.

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“signitive,” which are hallmarks of the code approach to early Christian art.

109. This view is mentioned most frequently in classroom and conference settings.

110. E.g. H. Leon, Jews of Ancient Rome, 196-98. For general discussion of the menorah in ancient Judaism, one might start with the following: J. Zwartz, De zevenarmige Kandellar in de romeinse Diaspora; E. R. Goodenough, Symbols 4:70-98, 12:79-83; M. Smith, “The Image of God”; and L. Yarden, The Tree of Light.

111. For general discussion of early Christian cross symbolism in iconography, see initially F. Dölger, “Beitrage zur Geschichte des Kreuzzeichens” (who among other things shows the popularity of crosses outside of Christianity); and E. Dinkler, Signum Crucis, 1-76. For the erroneous view that crosses always indicate Christianity, see e.g. E. Testa, Il simbolismo dei Giudei-Cristiani, which argues for the existence of first and second century C.E. Jewish-Christian cross images in Palestine. Contra Testa I should instead note that not every pair of perpendicular scratches on a wall was necessarily regarded as a cross. The positions of Testa and others are somewhat surprisingly also found in the otherwise useful introduction to early Christian art of R. Milburn (Early Christian Art and Architecture, 5-6)—thus showing the popularity of the view that early Christian images fundamentally functioned as code items (which the entirety of Chapter 1 in Milburn seems to suggest).

In general, the assumption that one can obtain an absolutely objective description of the meaning of a symbol demands the kinds of rigorously static and codifiable systems that I have been describing. And such a system, I will show, is belied by the complexity and richness of evidence for fish symbolism as it is found in the Graeco-Roman world.

I would propose that many of the problems with code theory, especially its rigidity and tendency toward oversimplification, stem from the very function of codes themselves; for, by describing religious iconographic images in terms of codes, interpreters assume that they function primarily to communicate certain facts to particular individuals. That is, whether interpreters advocate the history of religions approach of Klauser or the theological approach of Grabar (or any other code approach), codes by definition have a didactic or an informational purpose. At times it is possible they are intended to teach religious ideas, or at other times to tell individuals who they are (e.g. Christian or Jewish), or to comfort them, or to advocate one religious position over another, or to tell passers-by what they believe. But in each case, someone is described as wanting to tell something to someone else.

Not only is this emphasis on communication one feature which distinguishes code theoreticians from those taking a depth psychology approach, but it also suggests that symbols can be easily understood and explained; for communication is useless if it is confusing, unclear,



or difficult to interpret. Rather, it demands clarity, simplicity, and straightforward interpretations.

In addition, the code approach follows the methodology of a dictionary, as if iconographic images can be organized so as to refer to the same things regardless of the context. While useful for the purposes of collection, such a method tends to present materials without sufficient regard to the contexts in which they actually appear and hence with little regard for how the meaning of a symbol might be affected by its function. Thus it produces overly restricted definitions. For instance, a fish may in fact have quite different meanings when surrounded by different symbols, when placed in different locations such as a funerary setting in contrast to a church, when produced in different chronological periods or geographical areas, and when used by different socio-economic groups.

As a rule, this type of static dictionary approach—which promotes the concept of one-to-one correspondence, which restricts the range of meanings for symbols, and which ossifies their structures into rigid patterns—also excludes the possibility that iconographic images (as well as words in texts) can function as powerful symbols that themselves incorporate whole networks of referents. As a result, it has produced a spate of symbol dictionaries that list the meanings of symbols so as to lead readers to believe (mistakenly, in my opinion) that the meanings of a symbol can be conveniently summarized.<sup>112</sup>

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112. E.g. H. Aurenhammer, Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie; L. Réau, Iconographie de l'art chrétien; G. Schiller, Ikonographie der

Most important for the purposes of this project, the work of code theory scholars has had a particularly deleterious effect on the interpretation of early Christian symbols by convincing scholars that this material is easily delimitable and readily explainable.

### **Structural anthropology and code theory**

While Klauser and Grabar and others engaged in the study of early Christian visual materials do not specify the particular theoretical models which inspired them, it is apparent that their assumptions have much in common with certain interpretations of structuralist theory. To some extent this is confirmed by Wladimir Weidlé, who makes explicit his debt to Fernand de Saussure and structuralism itself.<sup>113</sup>

In this regard, it is useful to focus on Edmund Leach's Culture and Communication, since this work conveniently summarizes one version of structural anthropology as it applies to the study of symbols. In particular, Leach and others (like the above-mentioned code theorists) generally conceive of structuralism as a kind of communication theory. For example, he repeatedly refers to the referential process in terms of "messages," which ostensibly signal someone to think or act in a particular way.

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christlichen Kunst; and G. G. Stil, A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art. See also G. Snyder, Ante Pacem, Chaps. 2 and 4. It is possible to cite many more.

113. See Baptism of Art, 10, where he cites de Saussure's Course in General Linguistics.

Leach describes symbols as one feature of communication that he contrasts with signs.<sup>114</sup> Following one particular interpretation of de Saussure,<sup>115</sup> he proposes that with symbols there is an arbitrary relationship between the referring item and its object (referent), while with signs there is an inherent relationship between the referring item and its object. However debatable his reasoning, Leach offers the snake as an example of a “symbol,” because of its (in his view) arbitrary relationship to the concept of evil. In contrast, he characterizes a crown as a “sign” of sovereignty, since the monarch’s regalia regularly included a crown. Or, in the expression “A stands for APPLE,” A is a sign for apple, since “A” is already a part of the word, “apple.”<sup>116</sup>

While the terminology (symbol, sign, signal, index, and icon) differs in usage from one structuralist author to the next,<sup>117</sup> the distinction between referential relationships that are “arbitrary” and ones that are “inherent” is fundamental. In this regard, one should recall that code theorists of early Christian iconography also envision the relationship between image and referent as arbitrary to such a degree that one finally views the image itself as nearly irrelevant in relation to

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114. Culture, 9-16 *et passim*.

115. See J. W. F. Mulder and S. G. J. Hervey, Theory of the Linguistic Signs, as cited by Leach in Culture, 10.

116. Culture, 9-16.

117. See relevant bibliography cited in Leach, Culture, 10.

its referent.<sup>118</sup> As a result, the images analyzed by Grabar, Klauser, et al. essentially correspond to Leach's notion of "symbol" (even though Grabar uses the phrase "image-sign"), since their explanations of early Christian images clearly rely on the arbitrary nature of religious symbols.<sup>119</sup>

Other features of structural anthropology also recall the use of code theory for early Christian iconography. For instance, Leach describes human mental functioning in terms of mathematics, as well as a digital computer.<sup>120</sup> In a similar vein, Claude Lévi-Strauss can explain myth interpretation on the basis of a particular mathematical formula.<sup>121</sup> Both code theorists of early Christian iconography and structural anthropologists consistently favor rigid and clear simplicity at the expense of flexible and multivalent complexity.

In addition, while structural anthropologists generally demonstrate a greater sensitivity to the complexity of symbolism than do code

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118. It should be noted that in linguistic structuralism as expounded by Saussure, arbitrariness means the unpredictable pairing between an expressed term and the item of content that it expresses, although that relationship remains fixed within the structure of signs that constitute the particular language under consideration.

119. For a critique of the arbitrary character of symbols as presented by Leach, see E.-J. Pader, Symbolism, Social Relations, and the Interpretation of Mortuary Ritual, especially pp. 10-15. For more detailed analysis and criticism of arbitrariness as a guiding principle of code theory, see A. Giddens, Central Problems in Social Theory.

120. Culture, e.g. pp. 5 and 57.

121. "The Structural Study of Myth" (in Structural Anthropology) and discussed in Leach, Culture, 25-27.

theorists of early Christian iconography,<sup>122</sup> they nevertheless believe that, regardless of all the layers of meaning, symbols are fundamentally univalent. For instance, Leach can describe symbolic structures as “polysemic” and “ambiguous” and can indicate that signs or symbols only have meaning in “sets” (rather than as isolates), but, in the final analysis, they bear just one message. Thus, there may be more than one referent, but there is solely one referent of comprehensive importance.<sup>123</sup>

Furthermore, in structural anthropology the essential character of human thought, and thus of codes, is binary, since meaning is based on the contrast between one item and another item. That explains why Lévi-Stauss and Leach divide mental functioning into relationships of doublets: signifier-signified; metaphor-metonymy; syntagmatic-paradigmatic; synchrony-diachrony; etc.<sup>124</sup> As I have suggested, this binary division also seems characteristic of the code assumptions used by those who interpret early Christian iconography, where symbolism centers first on an arbitrary indicator, which is of incidental importance in relation to the second item of interest—namely its referent. Where a code approach focusses on these two items—an image-sign and its referent—the observer who would presumably receive this communication remains ignored. And so are any other

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122. Probably because they do not have the source problems characteristic of the study of ancient history in general and religions of the Graeco-Roman world in particular.

123. Culture, 43-49.

associations that the “sign” might have to the viewer, in part because they would spoil the clean symmetrical simplicity that ostensibly characterizes the relationship between a referring item and its referent.

Finally, despite the disclaimers of most structural anthropologists and other code theorists, one side of the binary equation is usually emphasized over the other. For example, I have already shown that, in this way of thinking, the referring item is ancillary and subordinate to its referent. As a result, some structural anthropologists generally emphasize the importance of deep structure and synthesis (what Lévi-Strauss associates with synchrony) over and against contextual (especially historical) conditions and analysis (what Lévi-Strauss associates with diachrony).<sup>125</sup> Likewise, in their studies of early Christian iconography, Wilpert, Weidlé, Klauser and Grabar can say that an image always means one thing regardless of context.

In the interpretations of those using depth psychology (which one might call a modified and “back door” code approach), it is also true that, whether the referent is sexual (Freud and Goodenough) or archetypal (Jung and Goodenough), it proves of much greater interest than the referring item itself. In the end, Freud, Jung and Goodenough strip symbols of contextual orientation and ultimately arrive at single meanings.

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124. See all of Lévi-Strauss, especially Structural Anthropology; and Culture, 49.

125. E.g. Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology (in spite of his protestations).

There is, in my view, a fundamental connection between the emphasis on referents and the tendency to prefer meta-contextual and universal meaning (what Jung calls “ultimate” meaning): e.g. (in structural anthropology) binary patterns; or (in depth psychology) the unconscious, primal drives, and archetypes; or (in the study of early Christian iconography) God, Christ, and salvation.

It is understandable that those who find it difficult to make sense of the tremendous intricacy of detail (historical, social, economic, political, personal, etc.), which is inherent to contextual analysis, would find it inviting to move in the direction of a unifying hermeneutical principle. Nevertheless, this frequently occurs at the expense of historical and cultural sensitivity.

On the other hand, scholarly attention that focusses on what code theorists sometimes designate as the “referans” (in this project, the fish) generally reflect an historical approach, which examines the referring image as an intrinsic part of a cultural matrix. The dichotomy stated by structural anthropologists would seem to be felt by the historians, in that as one moves toward meaning and interpretation (which are ostensibly found in the referents), one moves outside of an historical context. One sees this in the vast lists of materials without actual commentary that are found in the studies of symbols in the Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum. These result, in my opinion, in part from an unwillingness to structure the material by defining the meanings of particular items—that is, by articulating a set of referents and their associations.

It is my contention, however, that preference (especially an exclusive one) for either unifying meaning or contextual particularity leads to disaster in the study of symbols in the Graeco-Roman world. At one end result trivia archives, and, at the other, meaning is divorced from context. Neither approach, nor the result it obtains, explains how a religious symbol could have had a powerful impact on human psyches in the ancient world or how it could serve as a way of making sense of the confusing array of contexts (as well as the data set in them), in which ancient persons found themselves placed.

In this study I attempt to resolve this dilemma.

## **PROPOSED METHODOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS**

### **Introduction**

In view of the above considerations, I make three initial strategic moves. First, before synthesizing the disparate data, I attempt to describe the meanings of fish symbolism as fully as possible. Second, I exclude any synthesis that would eliminate the complexity of meanings already established in my descriptions of the symbol. Third, (with Jung and Goodenough as negative examples) I avoid distancing myself from the concrete and “literal” meanings of symbols, since any overarching meaning may well depend on them. For example, the ubiquitous use of fish as



food in the Graeco-Roman world made it possible for early Christians to represent the eucharist by means of a fish. To apply this approach to another case, the fact that a menorah is a lamp may well form one of the referential foundation blocks for its symbolic meaning as the light of God.

I attempt to avoid imposing a simplistic explanation on an extremely complex description of a religious symbol, and instead seek a solution that both preserves the inherent intricacy of symbolic complexes and yet still offers a description that hangs together in a reasonably coherent way. In order to do this, I search for an interpretive point of view that is as sensitive as possible to historical contexts. Instead of emulating the explanations of code theorists, I endeavor to present an interpretation that is sufficiently malleable and inclusive so as to contain room for new constructions of the same material in light of new evidence or new assessments thereof.

With these concerns in mind, I find the view of symbolism in the philosophical work of Ernst Cassirer and Suzanne Langer, and to some extent (as I see it) carried forward and applied by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, to be most helpful. It serves to allow reformulation of the methodology offered by Goodenough, Freud and Jung, who initially recognize the complexity of symbols, but ultimately ignore it. Along with these I also avail myself of some of the methodological insights of Nelson Goodman, Victor Turner, and Anthony Giddens, who employ a somewhat different methodological framework than do Cassirer and Langer.

### **A functional approach**

For Cassirer, and especially for Langer (who develops the following idea in great detail),<sup>126</sup> human beings share only a portion of the mental framework that (most) animals use.<sup>127</sup> In response to the requirements of a physical environment, both human beings and many other animals developed a mental ability that allowed them to function effectively. Both exist in a physical world that demands (for purposes of survival) particular responses to diverse physical situations, which in effect act as signals<sup>128</sup>—the sort of effector-response system that many animal behaviorists have described.<sup>129</sup> For example, some animals use various

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126. Cassirer's analysis of symbols may be found in various degrees of detail in the following books: Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (3 vols.); Language and Myth; Essay on Man; Symbol, Myth, and Culture (a collection of some of his lectures). Useful analyses and criticisms of his efforts may be consulted in P. Schilpp, The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer (with essays by various scholars) and in the introductory essay to vol. 1 of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms by R. Manheim. In the former work, two essays are of special relevance for purposes here: S. Langer, "On Cassirer's Theory of Language and Myth," 379-400; and H. Kuhn, "Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Culture," 547-75. For the investigations of symbolism by Langer, see the following: Philosophy in a New Key; Feeling and Form; and Mind (3 vols.).

127. See n. 135 below or possible language use by some animals.

128. Both Cassirer (in his English work, Essay on Man) and Langer use the word "sign." In her preface to the third edition of Philosophy in a New Key, however, Langer alters her terminology and opts instead for the term "signal." That is because, as she points out, many semioticians have already used the word "sign" to indicate (among other things) a "symbol," so that "sign" ultimately functions as general category that includes symbols. In addition to subscribing to this, I would suggest that the word "signal" emphasizes the automatic character of the kind of effector-response activity that I am describing and, for that reason, serves most felicitously here.

129. For signals, and their relation to animal and human behavior, see Cassirer, Essay on Man, Chap. 2; Cassirer, Essay on Man, 24-26; S. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, Chaps. 2 and 3; and Langer, Mind, vol. 2 (where she deals with animal behavior in great detail).

signals to indicate to others the possession of a particular territory, while human beings similarly can employ a fence to indicate ownership of property.

Unlike symbols, signals——like the image-signs described by Grabar, like the symbols of sexual libido discovered by Freud, and like the archetypal symbols envisioned by Jung and Goodenough, etc.——operate as indicators that direct one's attention toward something and that serve as stimuli eliciting a particular response. In effect, signals should therefore be regarded as reactions to environmental stimuli.

As a result of this function, signals (as Cassirer and Langer maintain) generally perform most effectively when they make reference in fixed and unique ways, especially when they have a one-to-one correspondence with the object indicated. Signals serve the function of communication, which allows a creature to survive in what would otherwise be an ambiguous, confusing, and (therefore) deadly world.

Furthermore, the referential items giving the signal are sensorily present to the subject responding to them. For example, a stop sign must be seen in order to have its intended effect, or a name must be heard in order to elicit a response.

Finally, signals “announce” their objects, indicating that the sign is something to act upon rather than to think about. For instance, when a pet hears its name, it knows that it is being addressed and acts appropriately.<sup>130</sup>

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130. S. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 61-62.

While human beings use signals as an important part of mental activity,<sup>131</sup> they have at least one other more fundamental means of behavior at their disposal as well.<sup>132</sup>

Building on Kant's insight that objects, and the outside world in general, are never perceived in and of themselves (as code theorists of early Christian iconography regularly imply), but rather are the results of human mental construction, Cassirer argues that thought makes possible the organization and structuring of the human environment. In this way, he opposes the notion that thought is the product of the human attempt to describe or copy the ostensibly real world of objects; instead, he argues, the process of thinking itself determines one's experience of the world.

Here Cassirer more or less follows Kant. But he moves in a somewhat new and different direction by suggesting that logic and science do not totally encompass and define human thought. Rather, observing that language and myth cannot be arranged neatly into the logical and clear order of mathematics (for example), he proposed that thought is characterized by different and innumerable forms of expression, which he calls "symbolic forms" (*symbolische Formen*).<sup>133</sup>

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131. Even most signals (such as names), when used by human beings, have features that suggest something more than signal behavior; see below on p. 64

132. All this does not mean that signal behavior is the only type of behavior that characterizes most animals. For example, Langer points to empathy (often involving senses other than sight) as a fundamental feature of animal behavior. But here again animal empathy generally relies on the physical presence (that is, available to the senses) of items—as opposed to human empathy which relies on symbolic ex-

Disagreeing with those who saw an absolute distinction (implicit in Kant) between scientific and non-scientific forms of expression, Cassirer (who began as a philosopher of science, especially physics, which he saw moving further and further away from “naive” realism) argues that myth, language, the arts, history, mathematics, and science all originate from the same essential mental activity that seeks to structure, and make sense of, the world in which human beings live. For this reason, he suggests that none of these modes reflects an attempt to picture a given reality (to copy an object), but all modes should instead be described in the following manner:

. . . configurations toward being (Prägungen zum Sein). .  
. the ideal process by which reality is constituted for us  
as one and many—a diversity of forms (Mannigfältig-  
keit von Gestaltungen) that are ultimately held together  
by a unity of meaning (Einheit der Bedeutung).<sup>134</sup>

That unity is to be found, not in the idea of a common essence, but in the idea of a common project that seeks to resolve and/or balance the polarities that human attempts at organization and structure must confront: e.g. one and many; being and becoming; whole and part; physical and intelligible; etc.

It was one of Cassirer’s advances to propose that the nature of human thought is essentially symbolic and that symbols are the basic tools

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trapolation. See her Mind 2, especially Chap. 14.

133. In this (including his use of “forms”), he was inspired in large part (though with more sympathy for Kant) by J. G. Herder’s famous study, Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung zur Menschheit, which was one of the first philosophical investigations that did not attempt to categorize all periods and peoples as essentially the same.

that human beings have for every kind of thought.<sup>135</sup> As Langer says, symbols allow us “to manipulate the concepts we have achieved.”

Since symbols constitute a process, rather than merely serving as proxies for things, for Cassirer and Langer the “functional” character of symbols—namely the relationship between referring items and their referents<sup>136</sup>—becomes more important than either the referring items or the referents in isolation from one another. In other words, referring items are no more important than their referents, and vice versa. Rather, by their very nature, symbols are relational, consisting of both the referring item and its referents.

For Cassirer and Langer what matters most is how human subjects shape their environment by relating one item to another through the function of symbolization—that is, by making and using symbols. In this way, they organize and construct a world that makes sense for

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134. Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 1:107.

135. Here it is important to note a modification in the theories of Cassirer and Langer, especially their emphasis on the rather definitive separation between human beings and all animals in their capacity to use symbols. For example, some apes (especially chimpanzees) display characteristics that suggest at least the rudiments of symbolic behavior: tool-making and warring (in the wild), as well as the capacity to express some of their desires and needs through the use of sign-language (only in experimental environments set up by human beings). Since human beings are closely related to apes in the evolutionary family tree (as DNA analysis also seems to confirm), this should not be too surprising and should suggest the hypothesis that the human capacity to use symbols might (at least in part) be a genetic inheritance from their animal relatives. For a general summary of possible language use among apes (as well as dolphins), see D. Premack, Gavagai! Or the Future History of the Animal Language Controversy (I would like to thank Linda Milosky of Syracuse University for alerting me to this work).

them.

In the final analysis, functional thinking replaces substantive thinking as a distinguishing feature of human mental activity.<sup>137</sup> Rather than having ontological status as things, symbols must instead be construed as ever-changing organisms that always mean different things at different times and places, and in different situations. The creativity and the imaginative powers of the human mind, therefore, eclipse in importance the givenness of reality.

In addition, according to Cassirer and Langer, not only are symbols the instruments through which human beings construct ideas (the intelligible world of Kant), but they are the essential mental components that permit literally the construction of the world in which human beings live (physical, social, historical, scientific, mathematical, economic, etc.). Thus, since there is no objective world that exists as a substantive entity (a thing), human beings create their world through acts of symbolization.

That is why Cassirer does not describe symbols as representing what is already known, but as opening new roads to the unknown and to knowledge.<sup>138</sup> As Langer puts it, human beings do not “have” experience, but “conceive” experience.<sup>139</sup> Or to put it another way, “it is not

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136. What Cassirer respectively calls “subjects” and “objects.”

137. What Cassirer respectively calls Functionsbegriff and Substanzbegriff.

138. E. Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 1:110. This feature also corresponds to Jung’s definition of “symbol” (Psychological Types, 601), and it is later affirmed by V. Turner (Forest of Symbols,

the essential act of thought that is symbolization, but an act essential to thought, and prior to it.”<sup>140</sup> As a result, the fundamental epistemological question becomes not the Kantian “What can I know”, but rather “What can I ask?”<sup>141</sup> In a variety of ways, symbolic forms and symbols provide the means to answer that latter question.

Thus, in contrast to the majority of animals, human beings do not confront the physical/sensory world directly, but relate it to intelligible concepts by means of a symbolizing apparatus.<sup>142</sup>

Yet, while for Cassirer a human being is not a purely sensory creature (“animal sensibile”) that operates exclusively on the basis of signals, it is also not a disincarnate mind that operates completely outside of a physical context. Because of this, Cassirer prefers to designate humanity not as “animal rationale” (as suggested by Kant and others who give priority to scientific/mathematical modes of thought), but rather “animal symbolicum”; for humanity does not actually live either in a physical or an intelligible world, but rather in a symbolic world (or matrix) that mediates between the two.<sup>143</sup>

For Cassirer, the attempts of interpreters to determine the multi-

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26) in his critique of those who interpret symbols as signs (that is, as signals).

139. S. Langer, “Theory of Language and Myth,” in Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer (ed. by P. A. Schilpp), 386.

140. Philosophy in a New Key, 41.

141. S. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 83.

142. E.g. Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, 1:87.



plicity and diversity of symbolic expressions form just as much a part of the study of symbols as do the attempts to ascertain the most salient features of symbolic modes (that is, to generalize). The reason for this originates in his commitment (in contrast to structural anthropologists and other code theorists) to both sides of the various bi-polarities mentioned above. In turn, this commitment itself stems from his proposal that symbols are essential to thought, since symbols do not refer to things, but constitute a mediating and overarching matrix that incorporates both ends of the bi-polar spectrum. As a result, Cassirer is one of the rare philosophers who shows a remarkable appreciation of historical particularities and social complexities, while at the same time remaining philosophically committed to developing a theoretical approach that allows for generalizations. In the final analysis, Cassirer transforms Kant's critique of reason into a critique of culture.<sup>144</sup>

Unlike many of the interpreters examined above, he does not drown in a deluge of data that produces either trivia archives, on the one hand, or overly simplistic codes, on the other. His treatment of epistemology as the study of symbolic forms renders him especially attractive to an historian who would interpret symbols.

### **Two modes of symbolism**

In general, Cassirer argues that all forms of symbolic thought serve to fixate images in consciousness—that is, to make them permanent

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143. Essay on Man, 26.

and to order the world.

In particular, for Cassirer, the history of symbolic modes is the development of increasing differentiation and articulation that in turn produces increasing permanence.<sup>145</sup> This can be seen especially in language, which Cassirer views as the critical tool that allows the fixing of images in consciousness, since (as Langer explains) it acts as a vehicle for the conception of an object. When a name is used, for example of a person, it does not merely announce that a person is there (as in a signal), but it evokes a host of ideas about the person, such as his or her personality, demeanor, appearance, etc. In fact, a name in much of human discourse is used in this symbolic manner.<sup>146</sup>

According to both Cassirer and Langer, human beings began to achieve permanence by separating themselves (subjects) from their environment (objects). This produces an awareness of an enduring object

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144. Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 1:80.

145. By this he means the separation of the referring item (symbol) and its object. For example, according to Cassirer, in magical thought (usually associated by him with the more primitive stage of a society), the name of an item and the item itself can be synonymous. Therefore, names themselves often have a power of their own, since they can physically evoke the object. But language inherently tends toward separation of a symbol and an object, since language creates a means for viewing the object that is not purely sensory. See especially his Language and Myth and vol. 2 of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.

146. In contrast, in the case of signals, permanence is attained only with difficulty, usually by means of repetition. For the use of names as symbols, see S. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 61ff. As Langer indicates, it is the realization that words are names (not merely signals to expect things or to identify people and places) that allows the deaf, blind, and mute Helen Keller to understand the concept of language (The Story of My Life, 20-24).

world that includes themselves. In contrast, animals exist in an almost completely subjective state with little differentiation between animal minds and their environment.<sup>147</sup>

Cassirer proposes that this human tendency toward establishing a fixed object world depends on two opposite kinds of thinking. On the one hand, there is “logico-discursive” thought, in which symbols rely on the greatest possible articulation and differentiation in order to make generalizations about particular phenomena:<sup>148</sup>

. . . [It] begins with some individual, single perception, which we expand, and carry beyond its original bounds, by viewing it in more and more relationships. The intellectual process here involved is one of synthetic supplementation, the combination of the single instance with the totality, and its completion in the totality. But by this relationship with the whole, the separate fact does not lose its concrete identity and limitation. It fits into the sum total of phenomena, yet remains set off from them as something independent and singular. The ever-growing relationship which connects an individual perception with others does not cause it to become merged with the others. Each separate “specimen” of a species is “contained” in the species; the species itself is “subsumed” under a higher genus.<sup>149</sup>

In contrast, in non-discursive thought (what Cassirer calls “mythico-religious” thought), perceptions of reality are condensed and telescoped into individual symbols charged with meaning so that particular items can stand for huge concepts that serve to explain the order of the

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147. This has a positive side, however, for animals, which can use their identification with the environment (one might call it empathy) to adapt to it in very effective ways. See S. Langer, Mind 2; or many of the animal behaviorists, such as K. Lorenz in a popular version that is a personal account of his work, King Solomon’s Ring. But this is not the apparently preferred procedure for human beings.

universe and the position of humanity in it:<sup>150</sup>

The mental view is not widened, but compressed; it is, so to speak, distilled into a single point. Only by this process of distillation is the particular essence found and extracted which is to bear the special accent of “significance.” All light is concentrated in one focal point of “meaning,” while everything that lies outside these focal points of verbal or mythic conception remains practically invisible. . . . Here we find in operation a law which might actually be called the law of the leveling and extinction of specific differences. Every part of a whole is the whole itself; every specimen is equivalent to the entire species. The part does not merely represent the whole, or the specimen its class; they are identical to the totality to which they belong; not merely as mediating aids to reflective thought, but as genuine presences which actually contain the power, significance and efficacy of the whole. Here one is reminded forcefully of the principle which might be called the basic principle of verbal as well as mythic “metaphor”—— the principle of pars pro toto.<sup>151</sup>

To summarize, discursive thought organizes the human environment by assembling parts to form a whole, while non-discursive thought does so by condensing a whole into a single part.

While Cassirer emphasizes language as the most fundamental symbolic mode of discourse, Langer views non-linguistic modes of discourse on an equal par with language. Specifically, she creates two

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148. E.g. E. Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic forms 1:184ff.

149. Language and Myth, 89-90.

150. E. Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 2, passim; and Language and Myth, passim. This clearly reflects a position very similar to that of Freud, who also regarded dream images as highly condensed interpretations of the world.

151. Language and Myth, 90-92. I would like to thank Dianne M. Bazell of Syracuse University for alerting me to these two crucial passages from Cassirer.

very broad categories, discursive (which subsumes language) and presentational.<sup>152</sup>

For Cassirer, language is fundamental because it could be found on both ends of the evolutionary spectrum of human thought: it lies at the roots of mythico-religious thought on the one hand, and of logico-discursive thought, on the other. Despite his contention that myth was not pre-logical and that mythico-religious thought itself produced scientific thought, he clearly regards the latter as an historical achievement that in large measure chronologically and intellectually superceded mythic thought.<sup>153</sup> Since mythic thought reflects a non-discursive, condensed form of thought that originates during the earliest stages of differentiation that human beings make between themselves (subjects) and their environment (objects), Cassirer clearly gives discursive thought preference.<sup>154</sup>

Because of her research in the arts (primarily musical and visual), Langer realized that non-linguistic modes of expression could present highly developed ideas that were different from linguistic ones, but just as well suited to organizing the world in which human beings find

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152. See especially Philosophy in a New Key, Chap. 4.

153. Yet, to be fair, one should note that Cassirer also emphasizes that scientific thought stems from mythico-religious thought: Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 2:235-39.

154. This is reflected in the order of the volumes of the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. The subject of vol. 1 is language, since it is the element that unites myth and science; then in vol. 2 he covers myth, which he regards as the beginning of thought; and finally he culminates his project in vol. 3 with scientific thought.

themselves. Presentational thought includes such items as myth/religion, dreams, visual arts, music, and creative writing. Discursive thought includes “language” as one of its main sub-categories, but is not limited to it. One might also cite under this category mathematics, science, logic, and history (among others).

In addition to the distinctions noted above between logico-discursive and mythico-religious thought, there are several other features important for differentiating discursive and presentational thought. For instance, it is only in discursive thought that notational forms of reference (e.g. mathematics, alphabets, and musical scores) are possible. These are systems that are capable of being precisely reproduced and that can be translated from one realm to another.<sup>155</sup> In addition, the nature of discursive thought is sequential: letter to letter as in a word; word to word as in a sentence; paragraph to paragraph as in an essay; etc. In discursive thought, the human mind therefore grasps items successively.

Despite some superficial similarities to signals (clarity, simplicity, translatability, absence of ambiguity), it is important here to note that discursive reference is not equivalent to signal reference; for the movement of reference does not proceed directly from the referring item to its object. As Langer argues, a name (or word, sentence, number, etc.) does not mean its object, but rather means a conception of its object, which in turn makes possible a reference.<sup>156</sup> In part, this explains why some mathematical formulations do not have to

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155. See N. Goodman, Languages of Art, Chaps. 4-6.

correspond to an observable physical reality.<sup>157</sup> There is thus no one-to-one correspondence here.

In contrast, presentational symbols tend to find expression in condensed and telescoped forms, so that single items may represent whole worlds in themselves. Thus, presentational symbols never possess merely one referent; rather, they bear innumerable referents and associations. Many meanings can simultaneously coexist in one symbol. A presentational symbol is multivalent—or, using anthropological terminology, polysemic.<sup>158</sup> Within a single symbol of this kind, an individual can express ideas about personal feeling, daily life, social status, institutions, the beauty of nature, God, and whatever else constitutes the substance of human existence.

From this perspective, Freud was correct in observing that symbols found in dreams can only be understood and interpreted by examining the smallest details, since all of them contribute fundamentally to what comprised life and the worldview encompassed by it. In addition, because they include the totality of life, symbols of this sort are closely linked to states of emotion and feeling that in subtle ways color their various references and associations. As Langer puts it, presentational

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156. Philosophy in a New Key, 61ff.

157. E.g. S. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 18-19.

158. For an excellent description of multiple meanings in an anthropological context, see V. Turner, Forest of Symbols, 50-52.

symbols (in one way or another) create a “semblance” of life and feeling.<sup>159</sup>

Another point regarding presentational symbolism is important to note here. As construed by Cassirer and Langer, the character of symbolism in general—both presentational and discursive—is relational rather than object-oriented. A reference in fact constitutes the various relations between a symbol and its referents and associations. In presentational symbols, extremely complex and intricate networks of meanings can be established. Since symbolic meaning consists of such networks, and not simply isolated items, the referents and associations of presentational symbols do not form collections of disparate and random data; rather, they coalesce into constellations of meanings that themselves form parts of larger wholes. Thus, one might not only view the referents and associations of a single symbol as they relate to each other (which is certainly very important); one must further each symbol in relation to other symbols with which it may be associated. As Gestalt psychologists suggest, parts and wholes—or (to put it in another way) discrete relations and overall patterns—must be viewed in conjunction with one another.

For example, the important relation of an early Christian fish image to the sacrament of baptism forms a discrete element in the larger pattern of early Christian fish symbolism. Thus, even if the eucharist

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159. See Philosophy in a New Key, *passim*, but especially Chaps. 6-8 and p. 98; Feeling and Form, *passim*, but especially Chap. 1; and Mind, *passim*.



(for instance) is not emphasized in a specific instance, it would very likely be influencing the idea of baptism that was the current focus of attention. The totality of these references (and associations) forms the overall pattern of fish symbolism. And, in any context, all of them to a greater or lesser degree influence the meaning of a particular symbol.

It is therefore the different arrangements of referents and associations—not the different objects themselves—that diverse contexts reveal.

Langer provides a fine example of the complexity of presentational symbolism, when she describes a symbol that is particularly potent and culturally significant:

Many symbols—not only words, but other forms—may be said to be “charged” with meanings. They have many symbolic and significant functions, and these functions have been integrated into a complex, so that they are all apt to be sympathetically invoked with any chosen one. The cross is a “charged” symbol: the factual instrument of Christ’s death, hence a symbol of suffering; first laid on his shoulders, an actual burden, as well as an actual product of human handiwork, and on both grounds a symbol of his accepted moral burden; also an ancient symbol of the four zodiac points, with a cosmic connotation; a “natural” symbol of cross-roads (we still use it on our highways as a warning before an intersection), and therefore of decision, crisis, choice; also of being crossed, i.e. of frustration, adversity, fate; and finally, to the artistic eye a cross is the figure of a man. All these and many other meanings lie dormant in that simple, familiar, significant shape. No wonder that it is a magical form! It is charged with meanings, all human and emotional and vaguely cosmic, so that they have become integrated into a connotation of the whole religious drama—sin, suffering, and redemption.<sup>160</sup>

While one may not agree with all of Langer’s theological interpretations here, her description of the cross in a modern context offers

an excellent example for historians who would describe ancient symbols. Although the historian will perhaps need to do this in more depth and with a greater historical sensitivity, Langer shows a way to explain a particular historical problem by affirming complexity and detail rather than sacrificing them on behalf of an overly simplistic model.

Thus, although Langer is not as historically oriented as Cassirer (or as would be preferable) and while she judges (mistakenly, I believe) myth/religion to be a less developed form of presentational symbolism than the arts,<sup>161</sup> I find that her analysis (along with Cassirer's) in fact provides a partial solution to the historian's problem of interpreting ancient religious symbols.

Three further complications. Three further complications must be noted. First, Langer generally regards the worlds which are expressed by the two symbolic modes as relatively self-contained.<sup>162</sup> That is, networks in one symbolic mode tend to comply with the operating principles of that mode. As confirmation of this, I have found in an early Christian context that scientific (discursive) descriptions of fish (such as those of Aristotle and Pliny) were generally recast so as to conform to the demands of religious (presentational) symbolism. That is to say, ancient natural scientists explicitly observed in their investigations that

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160. Philosophy in a New Key, 284-85.

161. E.g. Philosophy in a New Key, 202-03; and Mind 1:80-81.

some fish were especially fertile. Drawing on that notion, early Christians associated the fish with missionary power that could produce multitudes of converts. They made this connection between missionary potency and fertility implicitly, so that fertility formed one component (unstated and assumed) of a highly condensed symbolic network.

Just as presentational and discursive modes of thought are relatively self-contained, so also are the sub-categories of these modes.<sup>163</sup> Thus, in a mythico-religious mode of symbolism, societal associations take on a mythico-religious coloring. For example, I propose in the coming chapters that a large fish indicates high status in a (more or less) secular Graeco-Roman context, but I also suggest that in early Christianity that very social status is subsumed by the mythico-religious reference of the large fish to Christ.

This contrasts with the views of many interpreters of ancient symbols such as Goodenough and Grabar, who (for their own reasons) tend to treat religious symbols as exclusively religious, and of other interpreters such as Klauser, who remove the religious components of religious symbols, so that they become exclusively secular. Some who take the latter approach even regard funerary meal scenes in iconography—as well as fish which are one of the items on the menu—as having virtually no religious significance at all.<sup>164</sup>

Second, presentational symbols are as a rule characterized by com-

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162. E.g. E. Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 1:93-95.

163. For analysis of different artistic sub-categories, see S. Langer,

plexity and untranslatability<sup>165</sup>—characteristics which undermine the usefulness of symbol dictionaries.<sup>166</sup> Relations that make perfect sense when an individual is thinking presentationally, may initially seem strange, ambiguous, and even contradictory, when viewed from a discursive point of view. Yet, to say that religious symbolism is ambiguous (for example) is not in fact accurate, because that ambiguity results from incomplete and superficial analysis that needs further elaboration. In the end, this means that explanations of symbols require extensive and detailed descriptions that can overcome these kinds of difficulties.

Third, the attempt to transpose presentational symbolism into discursive statements is even more complex and difficult than heretofore indicated. It is not so simple, as the signal theorists above seem to imply, to break down the meaning of a religious symbol into a coded statement, with divisions of subject, object, and verb.

Borrowing an insight made by N. Goodman (though not observing his entire argument),<sup>167</sup> I should point out that the referential direction of symbolism is twofold. For example, in the statement, “the fish symbolizes Christ,” there is an act of reference running from the subject

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Feeling and Form.

164. For discussion of these views, see pp. 539-85.

165. On problems of explicating presentational symbolism into a discursive form, see E. Cassirer, Language and Myth, 86, 94; and S. Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, Chap. 7.

166. For criticism of the use of dictionary formats for cataloguing symbols, see Langer, Philosophy in a New Key, 94ff.; and Mind 1:81-83.

(“fish”) to its object (“Christ”). The proposition is that the fish refers to, or denotes, Christ. And the direction of reference runs simply from subject to object.

But there is more to it than that. In statements that Goodman designates as “expressive/exemplificational,” the subject not only represents its object (by referring to it), but it serves as a sample of its object. In the above statement, the fish is actually a sample of—or exemplifies—Christ. The object points to its subject as a sample of itself. Thus, there is in such statements a direction of reference running not only from subject to object, but from object to subject. Not only does the fish (subject) refer to Christ (object), but Christ (object) makes reference to the fish (subject).

There is, therefore, a bi-directional movement of reference that is not present in signals. For example, a flashing red light may be said to refer to danger, but cannot be said to exemplify it. The movement of reference is mono-directional.

The bi-directional character of presentational symbolism (to use this phrase of Langer in the context of Goodman’s terminology) shows another important difference between signals and symbols that bears important implications for the interpretation of fish symbolism. In a symbol which presents a fish in association with Christ, not only does the “fish” refer to “Christ,” but “Christ” can also be said to refer to the “fish.” When early Christians thought of a fish, they would likely have thought of Christ (as the evidence seems to indicate). Conversely, how-

ever, when they thought of Christ, they might also have thought of fish. Naturally therefore, the image of the fish as Christ implies simultaneous thoughts about Christ and fish. As a result, the figure of Christ himself is henceforth conditioned by the image of the fish, and the concept of the fish is colored by ideas of Christ.

Since a symbol establishes a set of complex interrelationships, symbolism involves much more than reflecting or copying objects. In fact, the referents of a particular symbol and the symbol itself interpenetrate one another to a degree that renders inadequate simple coded statements about symbolism—such as those found above in Grabar, Klauser and Leach, as well as more subtly propounded in Freud, Jung and Goodenough.<sup>168</sup> Thus, in order to understand and to describe how ancient persons actually perceived particular symbols, discursive descriptions, though never completely adequate, will have to be sensitive to great complexity and apparent confusion—confusion, that is, from the discursive point of view.

### **Social historical considerations**

While Cassirer, Langer, and Goodman focus on the problem of interpreting symbols from a philosophical point of view, there are also im-

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167. See especially Languages of Art, Chap. 2.

168. In “Medieval and Modern Understandings of Symbolism,” G. Ladner also notes the false separation often posited between symbol and referent in these kinds of interpretations; so also J. Chydenius in The Theory of Medieval Symbolism.

portant methodological issues to consider that pertain to social and cultural history.

As indicated above, many interpreters of symbols reject the fundamental importance of social and cultural contexts, which they regard as secondary in significance to “ultimate” meaning (however they define it). In addition, several of them regard symbols as having a primarily emotional, unconscious, and often reverential (in the sense of “numenal”) impact on human beings that is purported to be more fundamental than social and cultural references. Others seem to regard these latter references as “secular” in contrast to ones that are ostensibly “religious.”

In the first place, I have rejected these assumptions on purely historical grounds. Textual and iconographic sources clearly indicate that the social and cultural references of symbolic networks were of great significance to those who wrote about them and pictured them. For example, the ancient texts show fish symbolism as an important representation of social unity in the early Christian community.

One could minimize the intentionality expressed by the authors of this early Christian material, either by taking a psychoanalytic approach, and emphasizing their fundamental and unconscious motivations, or by following the model of structural anthropologists and removing excess referential details in order to arrive at deep structural binary polarities that allegedly explain the essential sameness of human worldviews.

Interpreters who deny human intentionality in this way generally understand human actions and symbols as reflections or manifestations of fundamental and determinative structures that are in some way hidden from human consciousness. This view, however, does not fit the ancient evidence, since the evidence shows that religious symbols such as the fish did not serve as copies of unknown or concealed objects, but rather functioned as elements in a process that shaped and organized a particular religious outlook.

One who views human beings as active subjects, rather than as passive respondents to unconscious motivations (whether libidinous or archetypal) or mere reactors to static, predetermined coded equations is Anthony Giddens.<sup>169</sup> As Giddens cogently argues, psychoanalytical and structuralist interpreters deny the integrity of the individual as an effective agent.<sup>170</sup> For example, structural anthropologists can elaborate in detail on the complex relationships between the binary poles that (they argue) characterize human thought, but they miss what comes between them—namely an actively functioning subject, who can use these relationships in various ways to create highly original and unique socio-cultural arrangements. At the same time, many psychoanalytic interpreters underestimate the power of individuals to influence their environment in extraordinarily imaginative ways.

The issue of intentionality affects the problem of interpreting symbols in the matter of determining and selecting the “pertinent” data.

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169. Central Problems in Social Theory.



On the one hand, some interpreters of ancient symbols are willing to ascribe unconscious motives for the usages of various symbols. In contrast, others limit themselves to those motivations that are explicitly (i.e. consciously) expressed. In the case of iconography, historical interpreters face difficult problems, since what is, in fact, explicit is often impossible to determine.

But according to Giddens much of human social behavior is axiomatic, in that human beings function with certain shared assumptions that are intentionally construed, but do not always consciously accompany their actions. Giddens refers to this as “straddling consciousness,” since intentionality is only consciously articulated in discourse, but normally functions just below the level of consciousness.<sup>171</sup>

Since this idea suggests that interpreters need not search for “hidden” motivations in some inaccessible (at least from the historical point of view) realm nor restrict themselves to explicit statements of intentions, it should be extremely useful for the purpose of interpreting ancient religious symbols; for it suggests the possibility of a third alternative. Namely, interpreters of symbols can explain meanings that were clearly presupposed, but were not necessarily articulated.

While social historians (including ones who deal with the history of religions) might find this procedure generally acceptable, it has not thus far been utilized by interpreters of ancient religious symbols. Indeed, they generally exhibit little interest in the social context of religious

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170. Central Problems, Chaps. 1-2.

symbolism, which they regard of secondary significance and/or as consisting of irrelevant secular materials.

As I hope to show in this dissertation, however, a wide-ranging examination of both textual and iconographic evidence gives ample reason to accept that social features do, in fact, comprise important components of the networks of meanings of ancient religious symbols. That this observation is also applicable to the contemporary use of religious symbols, is certainly confirmed by numerous anthropologists, especially Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, who reject the notion of some depth psychologists that religious symbols are isolated from social and cultural contexts and are primarily emotional in character.<sup>172</sup>

A converse approach to that in which social context is irrelevant is that in which social context is all-important. Some social historians and social anthropologists (following Durkheim) treat social contexts as foundational—to the extent that religious rituals, institutions, and images become merely analogical copies of preexisting social structures.<sup>173</sup> For example, according to this model, the concept of a monarchical deity would reflect a preexisting monarchical political structure.

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171. Central Problems, 58.

172. E.g. V. Turner, "Symbols in Ndembu Ritual," in The Forest of Symbols (19-47); and C. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in The Interpretation of Cultures (87-125).

173. E. Durkheim, Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.

Or the belief in a rigidly stratified cosmos would reflect a preexisting social structure that is also rigidly stratified.<sup>174</sup>

Consistent with the view of human beings as active subjects, Cassirer critiques social reductionism, arguing instead that social structure is not an objective given to which mythic symbolism refers, but rather mythic symbolism itself contributes to the formation of social structures:

For the form of society is not absolutely and immediately given any more than is the objective form of nature, the regularity of our world of perception. Just as nature comes into being through a theoretical interpretation and elaboration of sensory contents, so the structure of society is a mediated and ideally conditioned reality. It is not the ultimate, ontologically real cause of the spiritual and particularly the religious categories, but rather is decisively determined by them.<sup>175</sup>

In the writings of Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, one can find an understanding of the social and cultural contexts of symbolism.<sup>176</sup>

Geertz is particularly useful because, in an anthropological context, he shows how symbols organize the way individuals and groups—even whole societies—represent the world to themselves—that is how they use symbols to construct a cultural system.<sup>177</sup> Since the world contains a whole host of significant information, it is to be expected that

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174. In fact, this view might be regarded as a version of the code approach.

175. Philosophy of Symbolic Forms 2:192.

176. For Turner, see the various essays in The Forest of Symbols; and for Geertz, see the various essays in the Interpretation of Cultures and Local Knowledge.

177. In particular, see “Thick Description,” in Interpretation of Cultures (3-30).

a symbol, as a kind of distillation of the world, will likewise contain just as much significant information. But the symbol organizes and connects that information in particular ways that allow it not only to be understood, but to make understanding itself possible.

Through an examination of numerous small details and their meanings——what anthropologists call thick description——the observer may hope to reconstruct, by means of interpretation, and in discursive form, what is implicitly and tacitly understood by the various actors in a given culture.<sup>178</sup> In fact, Geertz regards analysis of culture as an endeavor that takes place on the microscopic level.<sup>179</sup>

In doing this, Geertz expressly employs a functionally dynamic concept of symbolism similar to that of Langer's,<sup>180</sup> but focusses his attention on the interpretation of concrete ethnographic data in order to describe contemporary cultural systems. As a result, he provides a particularly useful application of the Cassirer/Langer approach to contexts that have a more important social component than is generally found in the writings of Cassirer and Langer.

In a similar fashion, I examine in this dissertation how early Christians use fish symbolism in constructing one small component of a cultural system. Two considerations should be kept in mind, however.

First, unlike an anthropologist, an ancient historian does not have access to living informants, with whom to verify and re-verify informa-

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178. Ibid.

179. Interpretation of Cultures, 20-23.

tion. This means that an historian must pay especially close attention to contextual variations and must examine a sufficient number of examples so that, instead of gaining depth through conversation and first-hand observation, one can gain depth through the comparison of different symbolic complexes.

Naturally, this entails a detailed exploration of a vast quantity of material—which is certainly appropriate for thick description. In this way, I have the obligation of examining a wealth of information, but at the same time I must attempt to make sense of it without succumbing either to reductionism or to trivia gathering.

Second, as Geertz himself indicates, a system is generally only minimally coherent so that rigidly formal order is not required.<sup>181</sup> Unlike the terms of scientific inquiry (and those of discursive thought in general), social and religious symbols (Langer's presentational symbols) are characterized by complexity and overlapping meanings. Moreover, while in scientific investigation the variables are controllable, in anthropological investigation they are not. The absence of living informants, as well as the necessarily haphazard preservation of ancient evidence, makes the variables even less controllable for the interpretation of ancient symbols.

These factors explain why Geertz rejects the use of the term "hypothesis" for use in anthropological investigation, but instead opts for the more general term "interpretation." As Geertz indicates, in the final

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180. Interpretation of Cultures, 99ff.

analysis, interpretations should simply demonstrate that social actions (or, in the case of this project, religious images) “are comments on more than themselves”——namely that they function as symbols.<sup>182</sup>

What I am doing in this dissertation, therefore, involves a series of interpretations of various symbolic complexes of fish imagery that I hope will put a small corner of ancient religious culture——specifically early Christian culture——into some kind of intelligible framework. In line with Geertz, I am not attempting to establish a clearly and rigidly ordered system of meanings that can somehow mesh in a systematic fashion with the broader cultural system of ancient Christianity. In fact, this would be a misrepresentation of a cultural system. Rather I will be attempting to describe the various constellations of meaning of a particular symbol, with the expectation that this will shed light not only on the symbol itself, but also on the broader culture (or cultural system) and self-conception of ancient Christianity (and even Graeco-Roman religions, and the Graeco-Roman world, in general).

### **Symbolic networks as constellations of meanings**

In every symbolic network there are items that are emphasized to greater and lesser degrees, as well as items that are de-emphasized to greater and lesser degrees. Every emphasis of one element involves suppression of another element. And the multivalent character of religious symbols means that there is a complex and continual interplay

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181. Interpretation of Cultures, 17-20.

of emphasis and suppression that occurs in every symbolic network.<sup>183</sup> For example, in the setting of a baptismal font, early Christians probably emphasized the baptismal associations of fish imagery, while they de-emphasized eucharistic associations and astral phenomena. At the same time, they ascribed in such a context a moderate degree of emphasis to the reference of a fish to Christ.

In general, I tend to refer the various relationships that are established by differing degrees of emphasis and suppression as constellations, while I designate as networks the series of constellations that comprise (in so far as it is possible to determine) the meaning of an entire symbol.

Significantly, items that are suppressed are just as significant as items that are emphasized, since they contribute to making possible the delineation of networks. And their meanings are not purely negative. For example, the association of fish with eucharistic food contributes to making possible the reference of a fish to Christ, even when the eucharistic association is itself suppressed.

Finally, the inevitable coexistence of emphasis and suppression suggests that conflict will sometimes occur in symbolic networks (as Freud suggested). In researching the Ndembu tribe, for example, Turner has

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182. Interpretation of Cultures, 22-23.

183. Further, if Langer is right in suggesting that every word, contains within its network of meaning its entire etymological history (even if some of the meanings are long forgotten), then this interplay grows even more complex. Although admittedly debatable, this is an intriguing suggestion. See Philosophy in a New Key, 282ff.; also Mind 1:190-97.

found persistent conflict that is caused by the interplay between his two poles of symbolism—social/ethical and sensuous/emotional/psychological (corresponding in part to discursive and presentational symbolism). While social conflicts are often glossed in religious rituals, they sometimes emerge in surprising ways.<sup>184</sup> From my analysis of fish symbolism, it is also clear that surprising oppositions are to be found. For instance, fish are associated with both life and death; they also can simultaneously denote both high status and low status, and refer to Christ as well as Christians. These kinds of referential conflicts cannot ultimately be resolved by discursive expositions, but coexist in constant tension with one another.

In conclusion, I should emphasize that constellations of meanings do not refer to purely ambiguous relationships between referents and associations; for an item used as a symbol does not mean everything to everyone in all contexts. Instead, symbols consist of intricate and overlapping relationships that emphasize (or suppress) referents and their associations to one degree or another. In the final analysis, what delineates the meanings of symbols is not the actual referential items themselves, but rather the relationships among those items, as well as the emphases on some items vis-à-vis others.<sup>185</sup>

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184. Forest of Symbols, Chaps. 1 and 2.



### **The problem of certitude**

Interpreters of ancient religious symbols do not have first-hand informants at their disposal, as anthropologists and depth psychologists do. Not only does this personal distance necessitate a dependence on haphazardly preserved evidence, but generally it also entails that the personal histories, experiences, predilections, moods, and habits of particular individuals, as they envision a given symbol, remain relatively inaccessible to the modern interpreter. And from the work of depth psychologists, it is known that factors such as these are critically important for understanding the meanings symbols have held for people.

On the other hand, the investigations of ancient symbols may offer scholars an interpretive distance that is not usually available to depth psychologists, since Graeco-Roman culture no longer exists. In addition, one can make use of detailed textual evidence, which is not generally available to (for example) social anthropologists, who so often investigate non-literate cultures.

Different kinds of evidence, therefore, offer advantages and disadvantages. The ensuing descriptions should be regarded as partial.

In addition (whether the evidence belongs to modern or ancient cultures), the components—and relationships among them—of symbolic networks are ever-changing, so that any alterations (however minor) in the internal mental framework of a person or the external environment produces different structures from moment to moment. This is the opposite of scientific experiment, where variables can be main-

tained with relative stability.

It is therefore my purpose to delineate through description the general referential parameters of fish symbolism that were available to early Christians. Of course, each separate person would have perceived a symbol somewhat differently, but those nuances are generally inaccessible to us. Rather than capturing a particular moment, the descriptions offered here instead simply provide an account of the possible choices at hand in given contexts, as well as the possible relationships among those choices.

### **Further uses of symbols and signals**

In the analysis of religious symbols, it is also important to keep in mind that an image (whether depicted iconographically or described verbally) usually has both a signal and a symbolic function.

For example, the word/acronym ΙΧΘΥΣ, and/or the image of a fish on inscriptions, might be intended to signal that the observer should think of Christ and of the membership of the deceased in the Christian community. Nevertheless, one must ask why in the first place an image acquires the role of signalling such things. I would argue that an image obtains this signal function, precisely because of the symbolic network that the image already possesses and that conditions the interpretation of the image. For instance, images of fish can be associated with the messianic age in Graeco-Roman culture. In part, this association makes possible the early Christian reference of a fish to Christ and of many fish

to his adherents, which in turn enables a fish to become a signal to observers that they should think both of Christ himself and of Christian identity.

Furthermore, while all meaning contains elements that are both signal and symbolic, the modern world and the Graeco-Roman world tend to place greater emphasis on one or the other.

In our post-Enlightenment world (especially in developed industrialized cultures), as Langer notes, many of the overt aspects of meaning are signal and come in the form of asserted common sense facts.<sup>186</sup> While symbolic elements are always present in the form of presuppositions, they are often submerged in favor of a common sense outlook (which Geertz regards as one kind of cultural system) that stubbornly denies symbolic meaning.<sup>187</sup>

In contrast to common sense, Langer observes that other cultural systems place more overt emphasis on the symbolic aspects of meaning than on the signal aspects of meaning. Early Christian fish symbolism confirms this by offering one example of how ancient persons focussed more of their conscious attention on symbolic expressions than on signals (common sense).

### **Summary of the advantages of a functional approach**

I believe that the functional approach outlined here provides the best interpretive alternative for several reasons.

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185. Goodman comes to a similar conclusion, when he distinguishes metaphor from ambiguity: Languages of Art, 68-71.

186. Philosophy in a New Key, 67-79.

187. See C. Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," in Local Knowledge, 74-93. "Common sense" as a system is only different in that it expressly claims immediate access to a given reality. As Geertz explains in detail, what is one person's witchcraft is another person's common sense; common sense is in the eye of the beholder.

First, such an approach does not impose rigid coherence on complex and subtle referential relationships that were clearly characteristic of ancient symbols.

Second, instead of describing meaning in terms of references to things and copies of things, it describes meaning relationally and functionally so that there are no isolated items, but only relationships between items. This helps to explain why ancient religious symbols (including fish symbolism) cannot be molded into dictionary definitions.

Third, it conforms most closely to the evidence, which in fact suggests that ancient symbols were multivalent. For example, the inscription of Avercius describes a fish, which clearly refers to more than one referent—namely Christ and the eucharist. The fish of Avercius also has a large number of associations, namely (among other things) wealth, sexuality, sacrality, death, and the messianic age predicted in astrological speculation.<sup>188</sup>

Fourth, the referents and associations are related to one another, thus indicating that symbols do not produce meaning linearly and in the fashion of a dictionary. For instance, a large fish can refer to Christ only because of prior associations, such as high status. Likewise, the reference of the fish to the eucharist is dependent upon its prior reference to Christ.

Fifth, without positing the existence of a meta-personal unconscious, it makes possible the inclusion of referents and associations, upon which viewers or readers may not have directly focussed their attention. For

example, persons who looked at a fish would have, in certain instances, thought immediately of Christ. Yet, clearly the associations which make that reference possible (e.g. eucharist), even if those persons did not directly focus their attention on them, are of crucial importance for the meaning of fish symbolism.

Sixth, since it views a symbol as a relationship that organizes and arranges the human environment, it permits interpreters to study symbols not simply as isolated items that have an independent history of their own, but also as items that are closely connected to the contexts in which they are found.

Seventh, this interpretive framework is most conducive to historical interpretation, because it presumes that different geographical, chronological, functional, and socio-economic contexts will change the emphases of, and relations among, the referents of various symbols. Thus, different contexts create different dynamic structures.

Eighth, it allows for flexible descriptions that can be altered, when new knowledge is added or new questions are asked.

Ninth, as constructive elements of thought, symbols can serve as entryways into the broader cultural environment of ancient persons—— here early Christians. In other words, one can learn something about the way they shaped their environment to suit their needs, which can be religious, social, economic, political, intellectual, etc.

Tenth, it conforms to ancient views of symbols, which do not rigidly separate referring items from their referents. Even the word σύμβολον,

which could (among other things) refer to two halves of a contractual token and which could indicate contributions to a shared meal, literally means “drawing together.” So the word itself in the ancient world (from the classical to the late antique period) implied overlapping meaning.<sup>189</sup>

Eleventh, by describing thought in terms of a series of modes (instead of a single frame of reference), it lets interpreters examine religious symbolism without excluding features that are usually associated with other modes and without reducing religion to something else. For example, socio-economic features are crucial to understanding early Christian fish symbolism, but they were clearly understood in a religious context. The functional approach used here enables descriptions to include them, but at the same time does not reduce them into the only features that matter—thus avoiding the tendency on the part of some to make religious symbols into what are essentially socio-economic symbols.

Twelfth, it maintains the insights of depth psychologists, who made a major breakthrough by realizing that non-discursive symbolism was characterized by referential condensation. But unlike them it does not reduce that condensation to a single causal explanation, such as wish-fulfillment or archetypes.

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188. For the Avercius inscription, see pp. 311-71 in Chapter 3; and also Text # I.1 in Appendix 1 and all of Appendix 3.

189. For extensive collection of references, see W. Müri, ΣΥΜΒΟΛΟΝ; and M. Schlesinger, Geschichte des Symbols, 5ff.

## THE USES OF TEXTUAL AND ICONOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

In general, most interpreters of ancient symbols have used textual evidence as a virtual appendage to their chief interest, the interpretation of iconography. For example, Goodenough understands symbols as equivalent to iconographic images and uses texts (especially Philo of Alexandria) for the purpose of explaining those images in what he describes as an inadequately verbal manner.<sup>190</sup> In another instance, Liselotte Wehrhahn-Stauch uses early Christian literary texts as a way of interpreting the meanings of fish imagery in iconographic contexts.<sup>191</sup> As one might easily surmise from this, scholars such as Goodenough and Wehrhahn-Stauch find it attractive to use texts as sources for that information, since it is difficult to extract information from iconographic images by themselves.

Other scholars show a clear preference for material evidence over literary sources, concentrating their attention on inscriptions, as well as iconographic images. In the twentieth century, this approach has particularly characterized those affiliated with the Antike und Christentum institute in Germany.

For example, despite the analysis of fish symbolism in the five volumes of *IXΘΥΣ*, Franz Dölger (the founder of the Antike und Christentum institute) focusses his exegesis almost exclusively on early Christian material evidence (iconography and inscriptions). Although he pays

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190. Symbols, passim.

attention to literary texts that shed light on the IXΘΥΣ acronym (apparently because the acronym figures so prominently in material evidence such as jewelry), he only cursorily examines literary texts that discuss fish symbolism in ways unrelated to the use of the acronym. I would guess that he sees these as literary conceits that are extraneous to an analysis of material evidence. In addition, Dölger catalogues early Christian iconographic materials much more extensively than textual materials.<sup>192</sup> As one can see from the essay of Josef Engemann (who is likewise associated with the Antike und Christentum institute), this is no accident, since Engemann also examines material evidence much more closely than literary texts.<sup>193</sup>

Thus, one finds two closely related approaches: 1.) symbols = iconography; and 2.) symbols are found only in material contexts, in the form of either iconographic images or acronyms.

As a result, historians often possess much more detailed information on the use of symbols in material evidence (particularly iconography) than in literary texts. In addition, one is left with the impression that symbolism truly exists in material contexts, and not in literary ones. Not only has this led to a misuse of much of the textual material in the form of a kind of iconographic proof-texting, but (even more important)

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191. "Christliche Fischsymbolik."

192. While he updated and expanded the iconographic catalogue of G. B. De Rossi ("De Christianis Monumentis IXΘΥΝ Exhibentibus") and commented on each item, he did not perform a similar exercise for the textual catalogue of J.-B. Pitra ("IXΘΥΣ sive de Pisce Allegorico et Symbolico").



it has contributed to univalent and code-like interpretations of iconographic evidence. As a result, the complex nature of symbolic significance has been lost.

The first approach (symbol = iconography) makes an assumption that, in my opinion, is invalid—namely that images are the same as visual representations in iconography. Yet, I would argue, while the word “image” frequently refers to external representations (made by painters, sculptors, stonemasons, jewelers, etc.), it can also indicate pictures visualized internally by the human mind. In some instances, these internal images can be schematic pictures, which gestalt psychologists propose are used by human beings in order to organize reality into construable shapes.<sup>194</sup> In other instances, internal images can be internal pictures of external objects, but these images are held in the mind without the physical presence of the object. One might refer to the latter images as examples of what Langer calls symbolic abstraction or projection, since “seeing” by its very nature is a symbolic procedure.<sup>195</sup>

Not only do these internal images constitute a portion of the material from which iconography draws in order to represent external objects, but also a portion of the material which words are able to use in order

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193. "Fisch, Fischer, Fischfang."

194. As early as the late eighteenth century, in his Critique of Pure Reason A 140 (= B 180), Kant suggests the presence of “schemata of objects” (Schemate der Gegenstände) in the human mind. Gestalt psychologists build on this idea with their proposal of schematic shapes.

195. See Mind 1, Chaps. 3-6; also Philosophy in a New Key, 72, 266.

to refer to external objects.<sup>196</sup> In other words, both texts and iconography constitute different kinds of media, in which images are found. The human mind can make use of these images as symbols.<sup>197</sup>

Goodenough and other interpreters using depth psychology (especially Jung) assume that iconography provides readier access to these original images than texts; for they seem to believe that iconography is directly composed of sensory images, whereas texts at best refer to images indirectly.

Nonetheless, although the capacity to generate images probably emerges prior to the capacity to generate words, and although image-making is therefore very likely a more elemental function of the human mind than language,<sup>198</sup> the production both of iconography and of texts involves highly developed cognitive skills of mental organization, especially the capacity for projection. In the end, the production of visual

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196. In his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, L. Wittgenstein proposes a picture theory of language, as in: "A proposition is a picture of reality" (4.01: "Der Satz ist ein Bild der Wirklichkeit"). Of course, this naturally suggests a very close relationship between words and images.

197. I try to avoid the overuse of such phrases as "iconographic image" or "visual image," since they seem redundant and awkward for normal discourse. Generally, when I use "image" or "imagery," I am referring to iconography. But one should always try to keep the above-discussed distinction between iconography and imagery in mind.

198. For a general study of images prior to the formation of language, see E. Spelke, "Perceptual Knowledge of Objects in Infancy." I would like to thank Linda Milosky of Syracuse University for this reference.

representations is no less a form of cognitive projection than the production of language.<sup>199</sup>

Consequently, one cannot (contra Goodenough and Jung) look to iconography as the best device for putting one into contact with the supposedly primal and archetypal emotional forces (what Jung calls “primordial images”) that lie at the foundation of symbolism. As a cognitive tool that relies on projection, iconography depends just as much as do texts upon specific cultural contexts.

In this regard, I should also note the argument of N. Goodman that there is no essential difference between words and images, but only between notational (or “denotative”) and non-notational (or “expressive”) modes of reference.<sup>200</sup> The former makes reference by means of clearly articulated denotative elements that can be translated from one realm to another (e.g. alphabets, musical scores, and mathematical calculations), while the latter makes reference by means of unarticulated expressive elements that cannot be translated from one realm to another (e.g. paintings, sculptures, poems and novels). According to Goodman, images can be used in denotative systems such as Egyptian hieroglyphics, while words can be used in expressive systems such as paintings. Semantic features of words (namely, their meanings) are also expressive, since there is overlapping of reference.

Goodman’s division roughly corresponds to Langer’s distinction be-

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199. As many philosophers of art have shown: e.g. S. Langer, Feeling and Form and Mind 1:179-256; E. Gombrich, Art and Illusion; and N. Goodman, Language and Art (to name a few).

tween discursive and presentational symbolism. In religious symbolism, which is clearly a presentational/expressive mode of discourse, both words and images are therefore used in a presentational/expressive fashion. As a result, one cannot point to images as somehow more connected than words to emotions, archetypes, or religious consciousness in general; for they both form components of various modes of discourse.

At the same time, the preference for examining symbols in archaeological contexts (usually iconographic and epigraphic) may derive from the desire of some interpreters to situate symbolism in the world of realia; for archaeological materials have not been filtered by subsequent normative literary traditions that might skew the selection of evidence.

Yet, literary texts do indeed make use of symbols, and even more important, they preserve features of symbolism that were significant to ancient persons, but simply did not find their way into archaeological materials——primarily because particular genres (whether archaeological or literary) only include certain types of information appropriate to that genre.

I would propose instead that the study of symbols is not in fact the study either of iconographic images (the first approach) or of the use of symbols in material evidence (the second approach). Although symbols can be transmitted only through contextual media (whether iconographic, epigraphic, or literary)——which makes an understanding of contexts therefore crucial to an understanding of symbols——as orga-

nizational tools of cognition, their meaning also extends beyond particular contexts.<sup>201</sup>

As a result, the interpretation of particular symbols in iconography demands a detailed understanding of those symbols in texts, and vice versa.

## **EARLY CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS: PAGAN OR CHRISTIAN? DECORATION OR SIGNIFICATION**

### **Pagan or Christian?**

In general, most early Christian symbols possess both pagan and Christian features and are therefore a part not only of early Christian art, but of ancient art in the wider Graeco-Roman world.<sup>202</sup> For instance, with perhaps the exception of the raising of Lazarus, every early Christian symbol is a pagan symbol,<sup>203</sup> in that Christians use the same formal design elements that pagans do.

Perhaps, the phrase, “Christian archaeology” (Fr. archéologie chrétienne, It. archeologia cristiana, Ger. christliche Archäologie), which is often used as the title for courses in European universities and as a portion of the titles of books, is in part a misnomer; for it presupposes a clear distinction between the material world of early Christians and that

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200. See Languages of Art.

201. In the same way, the meanings of symbols cannot be limited to social, historical, economic, and political contexts.

202. F. Deichmann treats early Christian art as a part of ancient art in Einführung in die christliche Archäologie for the first time in a com-

of their pagan neighbors, as if they were living in two entirely distinct realms. Perhaps, one might more appropriately substitute for “Christian archaeology” the phrase “archaeology of Early Christianity.”<sup>204</sup>

This is no mere game of nomenclature, since so much of the interpretation of early Christian material evidence treats that evidence as if the non-Christian pagan world were non-existent or irrelevant. Thus, Josef Wilpert (1857-1944), the disciple of Giovanni Battista de Rossi (the founder of modern “Christian Archaeology,” 1822-94) and a well-known interpreter of early Christian iconography found in the Roman catacombs, interpreted catacomb materials in terms of Christian dogma and theology. In general, he depended upon the literary evidence of patristic writings, without taking seriously into account the possibility that early Christians might have inherited not only the designs, but also the meanings of pagan visual images.<sup>205</sup>

This prejudice he perhaps acquired from the earliest of the great catacomb explorers (sixteenth to eighteenth century),<sup>206</sup> who saw themselves as responding to Protestant accusations of post-biblical accretions. They sought to restore the links of the Church with its ancient historical roots through affirmation of the sanctity of Christian icono-  

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prehensive way.

203. See e.g. Ibid., 109-235.

204. For a defence of the traditional view, see H. R. Seeliger, “Christliche Archäologie oder spätantike Kunstgeschichte.”

205. Especially in vol. 2 of his Die Malereien Katakomben Roms; but see also Fractio Panis.

graphic images.<sup>207</sup>

I have already discussed how possibly the most influential modern work in English, Christian Iconography (by André Grabar), assumes the priority of Christian dogma and seems to formulate a position that views early Christian visual images as signals that teach abstract theological ideas. Among those who actually perform the excavations of the catacombs, reliance on early Christian theology and dogma has also remained predominant.<sup>208</sup> Although Sister Charles Murray pays closer attention to the actual contexts of imagery, particularly funerary imagery, and actually accepts the influence of pagan meaning, she nevertheless concludes that funerary images are didactic and theological in purpose.<sup>209</sup> Most courses in American universities, which at least touch on the archaeology of early Christianity, begin with the same theological presuppositions.

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206. For the history of catacomb exploration, see P. Testini, Le Catacombe Romane, 15-38.

207. This is also why many of these interpreters, including de Rossi, erroneously dated the catacombs and various cubicula as far back as the first century C.E. See Endnote 1 of Chapter 4 for current literature on dating problems of the catacombs.

208. E.g. P. Testini, Le catacombe. Overall, this “Christian Archaeology” approach has always predominated among those who have done most of the spade work in archaeology and the interpretation of iconography, especially directly “biblical” iconography.

209. See Rebirth and Afterlife. Yet, I should emphasize that Murray’s book is groundbreaking in one way, in that it sees early Christian symbols not as signals with a one-to-one correspondence, but as symbols with a multivalent referential framework——albeit a theological framework. In addition, although I do not agree with all her specific interpretations, her willingness to deal with pagan meaning as a part of Christian meaning is extremely significant.

In opposition to the reliance on early Christian theology and dogma by those who sought to prove the unique character of early Christian iconography, Franz Dölger founded the institute of Antike und Christentum.<sup>210</sup> In direct response to the work of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule in Germany during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, he attempted to examine early Christianity as a religion of the Graeco-Roman world. In doing this, he and his successors (such as Theodor Klauser and Alfred Stuiber) took the position that Christian images must be examined in light of their pagan predecessors, not only in terms of their formal design, but in terms of their actual significance. More recently, some historians of art and archaeologists have arrived at a similar conclusion.<sup>211</sup>

Their general proposal seems logical. Since it is very hard to distinguish pagan and Christian designs from one another, there is every reason to expect that pagan understandings of symbols would have been a part of early Christian understanding as well. Moreover, the interpretation of these materials in literary texts (even theological ones), and in inscriptions, suggests that Christians incorporated pagan meanings into their interpretive framework not only to be rebaptized into “pure Christian form,” as traditional archaeological exegetes (such as Wilpert)

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210. On Antike und Christentum, see the discussion in E. A. Judge, “‘Antike und Christentum’.” For the work and bibliography of Dölger, see T. Klauser, Franz Joseph Dölger 1879-1940.

211. E.g. see H. Brandenburg, “Überlegungen zum Ursprung der frühchristlichen Kunst”; N. Himmelmann, Über Hirten Genr in der antiken Kunst; and E. Jastrzebowska, “Les scènes de banquet.”



might say, but to make a contribution to a symbolic structure, in which what it means to be Christian was partly determined by some pagan presuppositions.

For example, on early Christian monuments, the meanings of the fish, and its symbolic structure as a whole, reflects not only the new Christian interpretation, but the presuppositions of previous pagans, for whom the fish had their own specific meanings. In fact, the meaning of early Christian fish symbolism is dependent upon prior pagan interpretation.

Yet, there is a methodological problem with some of the more reductive conclusions of the Antike und Christentum institute—in particular, their view of the meanings of early Christian symbols as more or less indistinct from pagan meanings. For example, Klauser, who was concerned with relating the good shepherd (chriophorus or sheep-bearer) on early Christian monuments to the pagan good shepherd figure, argued that the good shepherd in Christian contexts does not refer to Jesus, unless it can be specifically proven. Rather, according to him, the good shepherd always refers to the pagan ideal of philanthropy, which is associated in some fashion to the ideal of the good life in a rural, bucolic setting.<sup>212</sup> Nikolaus Himmelmann expands on the work of Klauser to argue that the good shepherd is simply a standard part of a pagan, idyllic rural scene.<sup>213</sup> In the final analysis, the good shepherd for him is not even really Christian.

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212. Especially “Studien der Entstehungsgeschichte der christlichen

Yet, I would suggest that the conclusions of these interpreters rest on at least three problematic assumptions.

First, those affiliated with the Antike und Christentum institute do not recognize that ancient Christianity, while in part a Graeco-Roman religion, inherited much of its symbolic framework from Judaism,<sup>214</sup> whose roots extended well beyond the Graeco-Roman period.<sup>215</sup>

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Kunst,” 21-51 (1958).

213. N. Himmelman, Über Hirten Genre in der antiken Kunst.

214. In this regard, one can distinguish between efforts to show general Jewish influences on the symbolism of early Christian art and the more bold attempts by some to postulate the existence of Jewish biblical iconography as the model for early Christian biblical iconography. The latter cannot be established, since, outside of Dura Europus, there are no Jewish biblical depictions in the pre-Constantinian period. But the following have tried: K. Weitzmann, “Die Illustration der Septuaginta,” “Zur Frage des Einfluss jüdische Bilderquellen auf die Illustration des Alten Testaments,” and “The Question of the Influence of Jewish Pictorial Sources on Old Testament Illustration” (other references may be found in his bibliography in H. L. Kessler, Kurt Weitzmann); H. Stemberger, “Der Patriarchenbilder der Katakomben in der Via Latina”; H. Strauss, “Jüdische Vorbilder frühchristlicher Kunst?”; and U. and K. Schubert, Jüdische Buchkunst.

From our knowledge of ancient Jewish art, primarily in the Roman catacombs (without actual biblical iconography, unless one counts the menorah) and at Dura Europus, it would seem that Jewish art in the diaspora began to flourish at the same time that Christian art actually arose in the Severan period—that is, at the end of the second century C.E. and the beginning of the third century C.E. (See Endnote 1 of Chapter 4 for the earliest beginnings of Christian art). This would suggest that Jewish art did not provide a model for Christian art, but rather that an interest in visual depictions simultaneously arose among Jews and Christians.

Yet, this does not mean that Jewish ideas, religious practices, and self-definition could not have influenced the meanings of Christian visual symbolism. For example, the messianic associations of Leviathan probably affected early Christian interpretation of fish symbolism; see pp. 170-74 below.

215. Of course, Judaism is also in part a Graeco-Roman religion. E.g. see my article, “Jewish Inscriptions.” Nevertheless, its history

Second, they presume that there is no fundamental difference between Christianity and pagan religions.<sup>216</sup> Of course, such a presumption involves issues too complex to treat here. But I would propose that the archaeological evidence itself suggests some notable distinctions. For example, the existence of catacombs, in which large numbers of the Christian (as well as Jewish) community in Rome were buried, may indicate that early Christians (like Jews) conceived of their communities in a different fashion from pagans.<sup>217</sup> At the same time, only very rarely do funerary inscriptions identify membership in a pagan cult,<sup>218</sup> while Christian (and Jewish) funerary inscriptions much more frequently identify membership in their cult group. And they sometimes

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prior to the Graeco-Roman period makes it different from many of the other religious cults, whose histories are in general even more bound up with the Greek and Roman worlds.

216. In regard to the relationship between ancient Christianity and mystery religions, see the recent critique of A. J. M. Wedderburn, Baptism and Resurrection, especially pp. 90-163.

217. In general, pagans had themselves buried themselves in private tomb chambers (if they were rich enough), in open-air cemeteries, in ditches (fossae, in which the poor were placed in mass graves), or in ash urns in columbaria, which were generally administered by funerary clubs (collegia). Columbaria come the closest to catacomb burials, but they were not nearly as large. They also contained a far smaller number of deceased than catacombs, especially considering that catacombs contain sizable spaces for bodies, not tiny urns for ashes. For a possible pagan communal burial chamber, see L. Mopurgo, "Un sepolcro precristiano di Anzio," but this seems to have been one of a kind. On common forms of pagan graves, see M. Eisner, Zur Typologie der Grabbauten im Suburbium Roms.

218. E.g. the hypogeum of Vibia in Rome with the inscription of the priest of Sabazius, by the name of Vincentius: Corpus Cultus Iovis Sabazii 2:31-32; and C. Cecchelli, Monumenti cristiano-eretici di Roma, 167-80.

(most frequently in the fourth century C.E. and afterwards) do this by means of iconographic images, which serve as religious identity markers: e.g. cross, chi-rho (a mixture of word and image), fish and anchor, and Jonah. Thus, iconographic images on inscriptions can themselves demonstrate an important distinction between the self-definition of pagans and of early Christians. This should make one suspicious that pagans and early Christians used the same images in an indistinguishable way.

Third, and perhaps most important, this group of historians of religion tends to assume that a huge gulf exists between the textual evidence and the archaeological evidence for early Christianity. For example, a depiction of the good shepherd in early Christian literature could not have had any significant relationship to the visual depiction of the good shepherd. This is a fallacy, the powerful influence of which makes it necessary to discuss in a separate part.

### **The fallacy of establishing an absolute separation between texts and iconography**

Above I investigated the shortcomings inherent in focussing on iconography at the expense of texts: texts become a virtual appendage to iconography. At the other extreme of interpretation, one finds an emphasis not on the connection between the two, but on the absolute separation between them. This position also has several fundamental flaws.

First, absence of explicit evidence is not evidence of absence. At the very least, one should take an agnostic position in cases such as these. Just because an image does not clearly indicate a connection to a literary text does not prove that there is in fact no such connection. Henry Maguire falls into this trap in his Earth and Ocean (an otherwise excellent book), where he assumes that an image has a “literal” meaning, when there is no explicit indication of a further “symbolic” meaning.

In this regard, inscriptions provide some of the best information for the identification of certain kinds of iconography. Yet, absence of an epigraphic indicator does not show how an iconographic image was actually interpreted in antiquity, but only that its makers did not choose to use indicators that modern scholars can find or understand. For all one knows, with or without an inscription, a particular iconographic composition might have had “symbolic” meaning.

Second, the evidence of inscriptions and the depictions of visual symbols on early Christian epigraphic stones (which fall into a category somewhere between literary texts and archaeological materials) suggest a very different conclusion. For example, the inscription of Avercius, the earliest extant Christian inscription, contains a substantial section on the apparently mystical description of the good shepherd. This would suggest that the image of a good shepherd did not merely evoke a bucolic atmosphere. Rather it also incorporated the rustic connotations of the pagan imagery into a new constellation of meaning found in literary texts, which describes the good shepherd as one who serves as savior,

guide, protector, and guardian of a pleasant and peaceful eternal after-life.<sup>219</sup>

Third, some interpreters who seem to advocate separation depend in fact on literary evidence to draw their conclusions. For example, in equating the good shepherd with philanthropy, Klauser relies on literary evidence, but he selects only pagan literary evidence or early Christian literary interpretations that are predominantly influenced by pagans. Somehow this kind of literature—unlike early Christian literature—does not really end up counting as textual evidence. Obviously this is a flawed strategy.

### **Graeco-Roman code theory**

With the mention of Klauser, it is natural to return to the central issue of whether early Christian iconographic images are simply pagan items in Christian contexts. Most of the interpreters who take this position believe that one need merely examine the pagan context of early Christian images in order to determine what they mean. In general, only within carefully circumscribed boundaries are they willing to speak of certain images as referential. For example, both pagan and Christian meal scenes with fish can be viewed as having referred to pagan cult of the dead meals. Or meal scenes can simply be regarded as references to a standard ancient meal. Or good shepherds are understood as simple references to the Graeco-Roman ideal of philanthropy. Thus, there is a tendency for these scholars to ascribe limited referential status to early

Christian images. But only those references that pertain to non-Christian pagan meaning are included.

Like those who subscribe to the decoration hypothesis, followers of this brand of interpretation are opposed to what they regard as “symbolic” interpretation. By “symbolic” they actually mean Christian iconographic images that refer exclusively to Christian items—that is, theological interpretation.<sup>220</sup>

In general, those taking this “limited reference” position view most early Christian images as references to single items that were well-known and readily understandable in the Graeco-Roman world, but that were not in any way directly connected to Christianity. Although not explicitly stated, it would seem that for them “symbol” refers to items that are religious in orientation. And they appear to be purposefully attempting to disconnect early Christian iconography from any kind of religious context, which for them seems to include everything from ritual practices to cosmic myths to spiritual dogma. They do not even treat cult of the dead meals as sacred feasts, but rather as simply another kind of secular meal with no real important religious overtones.<sup>221</sup>

Significantly, this group falls into the same trap as those discussed above, who were convinced that early Christian symbols should be understood essentially as ciphers for the communication of early Christian beliefs. But instead of opting for a Christian belief code, the ad-

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219. See pp. 336-41 in Chapter 3.

220. See pp. 99-101 above.

herents of this approach choose a Graeco-Roman context code, in which each iconographic image has a one-to-one correspondence with an item found in the Graeco-Roman world.

I have already explained the reasons for rejecting such a one-to-one correspondence approach.

### **Decoration or signification?**

The attempt to place early Christian iconography in an exclusively pagan context also leads to the hypothesis that most iconography (whether pagan or Christian) is essentially decorative.

This is the view taken by many archaeologists, art historians, and social historians of antiquity who have argued that much of the iconography found on ancient objects should be understood as fundamentally decorative rather than produced for the purpose of expressing and/or conveying significant meaning.<sup>222</sup> Generally, such imagery is thought to have come from different types of stock iconography books, from which the commissioner of the monument and the artist could select their favorite visual motifs and styles.<sup>223</sup> Furthermore, some have successfully

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221. E.g. E. Jastrzebowska, "Les scènes de banquet." Lack of these meals is misleading, however: see pp. 130, 139, 159, 577, et

222. The foremost exponent of this position is A. D. Nock in his critical reviews of the work of E. R. Goodenough and F. Cumont in "Religious Symbols and Symbolism" and "Sarcophagi and Symbolism." It is a view among scholars that is most frequently enunciated in oral contexts (classroom, lectures, etc.).

223. For a brief introduction to sarcophagus workshops in the Graeco-Roman world, see G. Koch and H. Sichtermann, Römische Sarkophage, 252-65. See also the following footnote.



argued that the same workshops often produced the iconography on pagan, Christian, and Jewish sarcophagi, mosaics, gold glass, and (possibly) paintings.<sup>224</sup> Since these visual motifs were therefore apparently not the reflection of individual tastes or beliefs, but simply the product of a relatively limited selection, their purpose is regarded as primarily decorative.

According to this view, decoration comes in generally two forms. Either choice of images is regarded as simply a matter of taste or aesthetic considerations.<sup>225</sup> Or the choice is thought to have been based on atmospheric considerations, in that different images set different kinds of moods.<sup>226</sup> For instance, pagan and Christian fish/fishing scenes are sometimes thought to have referred to a bucolic setting.<sup>227</sup>

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224. For religious diversity in ancient workshops, see especially F. Deichmann, Einführung in die christliche Archäologie, 116ff., 139; also J. Engemann, "Bemerkungen zu spätrömischen Gläsern"; and E. Jastrzebowska, "Iconographie des banquets," 61. In both early Christian and Jewish iconography, it would seem that pagan imagery (usually bucolic and maritime) predominated, while explicitly Christian or Jewish images could be inserted in areas left blank, such as a clipeus. A classic example is the menorah on the so-called "Seasons" sarcophagus in the Museo delle Terme in Rome; see H. Leon, Jews of Ancient Rome, fig. 44.

225. This is the view of A. D. Nock in his review of Goodenough.

226. General proponents of this version of the decoration hypothesis are e.g. N. Himmelman, Über Hirten Genre; and H. Brandenburg, "Überlegungen zum Ursprung der frühchristlichen Kunst."

227. See J. Engemann, "Fisch, Fischer, Fischfang"; F. Gerke on relevant sarcophagi in Die christlichen Sarkophage (see references in Appendix 5 here); and F. Dölger in IXΘΥΣ (passim, but particularly in vol. 5). I discuss this problem in further detail in the following chapters.

In general, this reasoning is reinforced by the observation that many items found in early Christian iconography—such as good shepherds and fish/fishing scenes—are depicted in precisely the same fashion as identical items in pagan iconography. They consequently conclude that there was apparently no connection to early Christian literary evidence.

In part, the preference of many scholars for an explanation favoring decoration can also be seen as a negative reaction to those scholars advocating an exclusively Christian alternative. Because of their theological emphasis, those taking the “Christian Archaeology” approach have not only tended to reject the Graeco-Roman aspects of early Christian iconography (whether secular or religious) in order to focus unswervingly on those aspects of symbols that can be directly related to early Christian doctrine, but also they tend to ignore the decorative function of iconography.<sup>228</sup>

Yet both of these opposing groups (decoration and Christian theology) are connected in at least one important way. In either case, they generally refuse to allow for the possibility that certain images can simultaneously possess an aesthetic and a significative value. Both approaches are therefore reductive.

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228. In the area of fish symbolism, particularly strong advocates of this approach are the following: H. Achelis, Das Symbol des Fisches; J. Wilpert, I sarcofagi cristiani (relevant sarcophagi), Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms (relevant paintings), Prinzipienfragen der christlichen Archäologie (Chap. 3), and Fractio Panis (115-19); L. Drewer, “Fisherman and Fish Pond”; and L. Wehrhahn-Stauch, “Christliche Fischsymbolik.”

In this regard, I should note that, contrary to their assumptions, aesthetic components of a symbol are also referential. For instance, when a maritime scene evokes a bucolic mood, it is referring to an environment that possesses all sorts of associations (peace, the idyllic setting of the grave, a pleasant afterlife, etc.).

From my study of the widespread and complex significative value of fish and fishing imagery in textual evidence, it would furthermore seem most probable that this imagery must have had other significative components.

In addition, features of fish iconography itself, as well as accompanying inscriptions, suggest that this iconography was intended to express meaning. For example, several Christian inscriptions——most notably that of Veratius Nikatoras and of Livia Primitiva——place some of the most important early Christian symbols (fish, anchor, Jonah, good shepherd, and sheep) in a sequential series——apparently indicating, in the non-narrative way that many groups of early Christian symbols seem to function, that these were the central symbolic images of early Christians.<sup>229</sup> It is probably not an accident that the good shepherd is included in the central position in these symbol sequences on both the Veratius Nikatoras and the Livia Primitiva inscriptions. So far as I know, this type of sequential placement of iconographic images does not occur on pagan inscriptions. In general, therefore, the evi-

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229. For the sarcophagus of Livia Primitiva, see Appendix 5, Chart 2.3. For the sarcophagus of Veratius Nikatoras, see J. S. Partyka, “L’*épitaphe de Veratius Nikatoras.*”

dence suggests that several early Christian iconographic images were conveyed important meaning for early Christians.

At the same time, one should not assume that, because a particular form of iconography is pagan, that automatically makes it exclusively decorative. Interpreters of pagan iconography have shown that non-Christians in the ancient world also expressed complex multivalent ideas through iconographic symbolism.<sup>230</sup> In fact, their observations accord well with ancient traditions, which offer complex interpretations of works of art through rhetorical exercises and through philosophical analysis (*ekphrasis*), such as in The Tabula of Cebes (first century C.E.).<sup>231</sup>

In addition, the decoration hypothesis makes the modern “common-sense” assumption that symbols really do not have meaning (thus eliminating the possibility of meanings even if they had been there).<sup>232</sup>

Although this could be right in a modern context (which I do not believe), it would certainly seem unlikely among ancient persons who saw

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230. To name but two: B. Andreae, Studien zur römischen Grabkunst; and R. Brilliant, Visual Narratives.

231. On The Tabula of Cebes, see the translation and commentary of J. T. Fitzgerald and L. M. White. For *ekphrasis*, most fundamental is still P. Friedländer, Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentarius (especially pp. 1-132 for an overview); for a useful brief summary, see G. Downey, “Ekphrasis.”

232. Thus, the decoration hypothesis (like all hypotheses) is the kind of interpretive projection discussed on pp. 95-97 above. Whereas a multivalent projection maximizes the number of variables, a decorative projection restricts them.

meaning everywhere in the world around them.<sup>233</sup> In addition, one should not confuse the assembly-line production of the modern industrial world, where images are mass produced, with the intentional and necessarily painstaking production of images in pre-industrial societies. It would thus be anachronistic to impose a modern concept of “mere decoration” on ancient persons.

By the same token, the tendency on the part of some to devalue the decorative and aesthetic importance of early Christian iconography in favor of signification removes the very components that make early Christian visual symbols effective at expressing and conveying meaning; for it is through the use of stock decorative motifs that early Christians chose to embody some of their most important ideas. For example, decorative features, such as scapes of vines/trees or fishing, can set a strongly pastoral tone that makes them much more than simply iconographic fillers. A rustic setting in a funerary context suggests that death and afterlife were viewed in rustic terms. By endowing a funerary setting with a bucolic character, those in the Graeco-Roman world were in fact saying something fundamental about the way they viewed life, death, and afterlife.

Furthermore, I have already argued that symbols are relational in nature. What matters most is not the referential objects, but the relationships among those objects. By setting an emotional tone, decora-

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233. Even for apparently decorative images, such as rosettes, it is probable that the artisans, who created them, intended them to mean something, although it may be very difficult, if not impossible, to determine their meaning precisely.

tive features indeed serve to emphasize some referents and to de-emphasize (or suppress) others. For example, symmetry (a common decorative tool) often places many items to the side and positions a smaller number of items in a more central position. In doing this, symmetry tends to emphasize the central items and to de-emphasize the lateral items. As one illustration, early Christian iconography sometimes emphasizes fish (placed at the center of certain meal scenes) vis-à-vis other items (such as bread and wine, placed at the sides). Thus, decorative elements are themselves inherently significant.

In addition, as already discussed, symbols express aspects of cultural systems. For example, it is fruitless to say repeatedly that the inclusion of a fish in a meal scene simply results from iconographic conventions. In the first place one must explore why fish come to be associated with a meal scene: why they are included in a funerary setting; why they are large; why they are featured so prominently; why persons eat them much more frequently than other types of foods; etc.

In general, one must therefore ask of conventional iconographic motifs what at the outset makes them conventional. Indeed, the very fact that they were used conventionally, suggests that they were important enough to be included everywhere one looked. “Conventional” should not refer to “mere” decoration, but rather to items that were regarded as comprehensible to a wide audience. The whole issue of “formulaic” character ought to be re-examined.

Finally, numerous philosophers of art have shown that it takes great thought to organize sensual elements in decorative schemes.<sup>234</sup> Even within a primarily aesthetic context, where reference to items such as religious rituals or ideas is either absent or unimportant, decoration is a complex and thoughtful exercise. One might cite, for example, complex floral designs, such as rosettes. Thus, there is no such thing as “mere” decoration, since decoration by itself is an exercise in cognition, a form of thought.

Although I do not focus on the aesthetic aspects of fish symbolism as found in early Christian iconography (since they are often only indirectly related to the topic of at hand), it is necessary to note, and sometimes to consider, aesthetic values, when they have an impact upon early Christian iconographic interpretation. In general in my analysis of fish symbolism in early Christian iconography, I will assume that it is both “decorative” and “significative,” whether in a pagan or an early Christian context.

### **Summation**

Generally, in the interpretation of early Christian iconography, there is a methodological dichotomy between two opposing theses: (1) that Christian images are the same as pagan images, whether they are (1a)

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234. E.g. S. Langer, Feeling and Form and Mind 1, chaps. 4-8; N. Goodman, Languages of Art; and R. Arnheim, Visual Thinking, although he unjustifiably denigrates words at the expense of images, as well as content (or detail) at the expense of structure. In this way, Arnheim falls into the same trap as some structural anthropologists.

limited Graeco-Roman reference; or (1b) decoration; and (2) that Christian images bear an exclusively Christian meaning. Those who advocate the pagan alternative favor the decorative or limited referential explanations, since they believe pagan images also to have had a purely decorative or limited referential function. At the other end of the spectrum, those who favor the exclusively Christian alternative advocate an emphasis on signification, since they believe that any image on a Christian object always was intended to convey significant meaning. Evidently, for them, “significant meaning” was always Christian.

It is also important to note that those emphasizing the pagan background of fish imagery assume that the iconography is exclusively pagan in orientation, while those emphasizing the Christian aspects of fish symbolism assume that it is exclusively Christian in orientation. As suggested throughout this section, this type of reductionism permeates the study of early Christian art and should be rejected in favor of a more complex model. Furthermore, from my analysis of both texts and iconography, it is clear that both pagan and Christian components contributed to the formation of the symbolic networks of early Christian fish symbolism.

When one investigates early Christian fish symbolism, it is thus necessary to examine both the pagan and Christian evidence. Overall, I hope to show that early Christians transformed a pagan image (with its own set of referents and associations) into a new symbolic form that incorporated some of the older pagan referents, but at the same time used



those referents to establish a new referential framework and hence to formulate new meanings.

## **STRATEGIES**

In response to the methodological issues discussed in the previous sections, I would suggest seven strategic moves in the analysis of religious symbols.

First, before, one synthesizes, one should attempt to describe the meanings of religious symbols as fully as possible. In the case of fish in early Christianity, this involves primarily three procedures.

Initially, one must describe the meaning-complexes of fish in the Graeco-Roman culture at large (including the Near East), since one must begin where early Christians themselves would have begun. Most early Christians observing, or thinking of, the image of fish would (like other persons living in the Graeco-Roman world) already possess a familiarity with those referents and associations, which were commonly made in that world. And one must always be aware that what might seem strange to modern interpreters (e.g. astrological associations) was for them commonplace.<sup>235</sup> Thus, by offering a description, which gives the complete range and full details of available meanings for a symbol in the Graeco-Roman world, one can put oneself as closely as possible

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235. For example, L. Wehrhahn-Stauch (“Christliche Fischsymbolik,” n. 179) drew my attention to two interesting passages: F. Cumont who refers to the “sonderbaren, ja anstössig Vergleich des Heilandes mit einem Fisch” (“ΙΧΘΥΣ” in PW 9:850), while C. B. Morey describes “the fish with its strange connotation of the Lord’s supper” (Early Christian Art, 60).

into the mental world of an early Christian. I should add that this will contribute to the depth needed for an historical study of a religious symbol.

After establishing the Graeco-Roman meaning-complex of fish, one can then apply that model to specific early Christian examples of fish.

Finally, one can move beyond the individual examples so as to draw some conclusions regarding the meaning of fish as a general religious symbol in the cultural system of early Christianity.

As a result, one will be able to synthesize only after a full and detailed investigation.

Second, there is the need to maintain continual recognition that most early Christian symbols (including the fish) were in large part pagan symbols. When one examines the symbolism of fish, one must avoid isolating them from Graeco-Roman culture, as so many interpreters of early Christian symbols have done because of their theological presuppositions. This makes the above-mentioned analysis of the meaning of fish in Graeco-Roman culture of vital importance.

Third, one should always be aware that secular features are important components of religious symbolism.

Fourth, in the analysis of religious symbols, one should be careful not to accept immediately the transposition of religious symbolism into propositional statements.

Fifth, one should not (like Jung and Goodenough) be uneasy with the concrete and literal meanings of symbols. The “mystical” (or

ultimate) meaning of a religious symbol is often dependent upon the literal meanings. For example, the apparently prosaic association in Graeco-Roman culture of large fish with exceptionally fine meals may well help to explain its function in the inscription of Avercius as a symbol of the eucharist. While the meanings of symbols may extend beyond their immediate contexts, they are not removed from them; for those contexts are what make possible the meanings of religious symbols.

Sixth, one should distinguish between the signal and symbolic aspects of meaning.

Seventh, one should examine both texts and iconography, bearing in mind connections between them.

Eighth, although it is critically important that one's syntheses be clearer and more delineated than they were in the minds of early Christians, one should exclude any synthesis that attempts to eliminate the complexity and overlapping of meanings one has already established in one's descriptions of the symbols.

In conclusion, I believe that it is possible to synthesize without oversimplification, precisely because symbols are not aggregations of disparate and unrelated elements, but rather are integrated structures, in which elements gain their meaning in relation to one another and in relation to the symbolic structure as a whole. Furthermore, since symbols organize and arrange the environment in which human beings find themselves, they are by their very nature synthetic.

## CHAPTER 2

### **The Function and Interpretation of Fish**

#### **in the Graeco-Roman World:**

#### **Early Christian Fish Symbolism in Context**<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

In the Graeco-Roman world, the aquatic realm in general proved of exceptional interest, as numerous and relevant citations in the bucolic poems of Greek and Latin poets indicate.<sup>2</sup> Not only seas, rivers, and lakes held a notable position, but also fish and other creatures that inhabited those waters.<sup>3</sup> As individuals living in the Graeco-Roman

1. Of the vast bibliography on early Christian fish symbolism, I have found the following most directly useful (in chronological order): J. B. Pitra, "IXΘΥΣ sive de pisce allegorico et symbolico" (important collection of literary materials); G. B. de Rossi, "De Christianis Monumentis IXΘΥΝ Exhibentibus" (important collection of archaeological monuments with fish/IXΘΥΣ symbol); H. Achelis, Das Symbol des Fisches; C. R. Morey, "The Origins of the Fish Symbol"; I. Schleftelowitz, "Das Fisch Symbol" (important for the Jewish background of early Christian fish symbolism and for anthropological parallels [i.e. not from the West or the Middle East]); R. Eisler, Orpheus--The Fisher (generally misleading and unreliable); F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ (by far most essential and one of the great collections of any evidence in the history of religions, though often difficult to follow and not synthetic) and a few articles in Antike und Christentum 6; H. Leclercq, "IXΘΥΣ" (good collection of a variety of evidence); E. R. Goodenough, Jewish Symbols, 5:3-61 (concentrates on the Jewish background and relies on evidence mostly from Schleftelowitz); G. Jung, Aion (significant, though not often cited); L. Eizenhöfer, "Die Siegelbildvorschläge" and "Zum Satz des Clemens" (both articles relate certain passages from Clement of Alexandria to early Christian iconography); J. Engemann, "Fisch, Fischer, Fischfang" (relevant for up-to-date evidence since Dölger); L. Wehrhahn-Stauch, "Christliche Fischsymbolik" (important for the collection of Christian materials, especially the appendix at the end, and for examining the history of early Christian fish symbolism through the medieval period); C. Vogel, "Le poisson" (argues for the importance of fish in early Christian funerary banquets); L. Drewer, "Fisher and Fishpond" (focusses primarily on fourth and fifth century C.E. church iconographic materials with fish and relates them to the context of early Christian baptism). Useful for discussion of the New Testament tradition of fishing for human beings is W. H. Wuellner, The Meaning of "Fishers of Men".

2. For reference to much of the primary material in Latin, see especially E. de Saint-Denis, Le rôle de la mer dans la poésie latine. For a

world, early Christians naturally found in fish items of great symbolic power, and fish acquired a special and unique function as a significant early Christian symbol.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, I show the rather extensive referential framework of fish symbolism in the Graeco-Roman world, with special attention to its influence on ancient Christianity. In doing this, I attempt to demonstrate the extent to which early Christian fish symbolism depended on its prior function in the Graeco-Roman world.

In general, I am trying to describe the referents and associations of fish so as to demonstrate not merely the great number of items to which fish referred (although this is certainly important), but so as to convey the sense of fish as symbolic networks. In addition, I have endeavored to establish that the modern scholarly distinctions between what is pagan and what is Christian, as well as what is religious and what is secular, are far too rigidly made, and, at least in the case of fish symbolism, harmful to an understanding of overall symbolic structures.

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discussion of the relation of fish to bucolic themes, see pp. 288-91 below.

3. On the relation between water and fish, see pp. 262-76 below. For a discussion of ancient literature dealing with fish, see endnote 1.

4. For a bibliographic discussion of early Christian art, and symbols in early Christian art, see Endnote 1 of Chapter 4.

## SECULAR CUISINE

### Fish in meals

In paintings from many Christian catacombs in the city of Rome, fish are very frequently depicted as a featured food of meals. These are perhaps most extensively found in the catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus (fourth century C.E.), but are situated in locations of apparently pre-Constantinian date as well, such as the Sacrament Chapel in the catacomb of Callixtus and the hypogeum of the Flavii in the catacomb of Domitilla (both from the third century C.E). In addition, numerous early Christian sarcophagi depict comparable meal scenes with fish. From the similarity of this iconography to pagan meal scenes with fish, it is clear that early Christian iconography depended upon prior pagan models.<sup>5</sup>

These depictions also make it evident that early Christians viewed fish in part as an especially nourishing and desirable food. This supposition is buttressed by a variety of non-Christian literary sources, which explain that fish were regarded as the most elegant and refined of foods in the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>6</sup> By their depiction of fish so prominently in meals, early Christians therefore reflected the culinary preferences of the Graeco-Roman environment in which they lived.

One can begin to verify this by a selection of texts which explain that in the Graeco-Roman world fish were especially prized for display and

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5. For a discussion of meal scenes in early Christian and pagan iconography, see 518-85 in Chapter 4, as well as Appendix 5.

6. F. Dölger mentions some (though not nearly all) of these references in *IXΘΥΣ* 5:329-62. Yet he fails to relate them to early Christian evidence, and he does not really discuss them in an intelligible way.

consumption in luxurious and extravagant meals and banquets. The following list provides some of the notable banquets, at which fish were featured: the banquet, given by the brother of the emperor Vitellius (emperor, 69 C.E.) on behalf of Vitellius, where were served “two thousand of the choicest fish”;<sup>7</sup> the “extravagant banquet, embellished with oysters, fattened birds, and fish” (which apparently never took place) of the emperor Didius Julianus (emperor, 193 C.E.);<sup>8</sup> and the banquets of the emperor Elagabalus (emperor, 218-222 C.E.), who had oxen bring fish to his banquets.<sup>9</sup>

According to the historian Fenestella (late first century B.C.E. to early first century C.E.), as quoted in Pliny, the most magnificent of banquets were considered to consist of three courses, each served with fish.<sup>10</sup> Fish as food at meals were valued to such an extent that clever chefs even strove to form the organs of other animals into shapes of fish.<sup>11</sup>

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7. Suetonius, Vitel. 13.2.: “duo milia lectissimorum piscium.” All translations of ancient texts in this dissertation are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

8. S.H.A., Did. Jul. 3.8: “luxuriosum convivium, ostreis et altilibus et piscibus adornatum.”

9. S.H.A., Heliogab. 24.

10. As quoted in Pliny (HN 35.162): “. . . tripatinum, inquit Fenestella, appellabatur summa cenarum lautitia; una erat murenarum, altera luporum, tertia mixti piscis. . . .” [“. . . Fenestella says the most magnificent of banquets is called ‘Service of Three Dishes’: the first dish is of lampreys; the second dish is of pike; and the third dish is a mixture of fish. . . .”]

11. According to a recipe in Apicius, the chef could use the livers of rabbits, goats, lambs, and chickens in order to make the “form” (formella) of a fish: De re coq. 9.10.10. In the Satyricon (74) of Petronius (69-70 C.E.), one hears of a pig that was shaped into the forms of

Also indicative of the high estimation of fish in the Graeco-Roman world are food markets, since they were well-known as places that were particularly frequented by wealthy lovers of fish.<sup>12</sup> In fact, as early as Aristophanes, wealth and the purchase of fish at the market were associated with one another.<sup>13</sup>

Particularly prized for purchase were large, single and undivided fish.

And there are stories emphasizing that especially large and beautiful fishes rightfully belonged to kings and emperors. For example, in his story on the finding of the seal ring of king Polycrates in the belly of a fish, Herodotus clearly indicates the importance of the fish, by emphasizing not only its “beauty” (καλός), but also its “large” size (μέγας). On this account, the fisherman does not bring it to market, but gives it to King Polycrates because “it seems to me [the fisherman] that it is worthy of you [Polycrates] and of your authority.”<sup>14</sup>

In the Adriatic sea, a fisherman caught in a net “a turbot of such astonishing size” (spatium admirabile rhombi) that (in an almost precise parallel to the Herodotean story) he did not dare to sell it, but (out of fish and birds.

12. For an extensive discussion of “markets” (ἀγοραί) and “fish sellers” (ἰχθυπώλαι), see Athenaeus, Deip. 6.224 C - 228 C. Also of exceptional interest is the description of the fish market on the island of Iassus, where the opening of the fish market is regarded as more important than music (Strabo, Geo. 12.1.21). On the term, “fish-lover” (ὀψοφάγος), see n. 5353.

13. Ran. 1048.

14. Hist. 3.42: “. . . μοι ἐδόκεε σεὺ τε εἶναι ἀξίος καὶ τῆς σῆς ἀρχῆς.” The discovery of valuable items in the bellies of fish is a common motif in the folklore of widely diverse cultures.



fear) gave it as a gift to the emperor Domitian, to whom every “remarkable” (conspicuus) and “rare” (pulcher) thing in the sea belonged.<sup>15</sup> Although there was no platter large enough to hold it (sed derat pisci patinae mensura),<sup>16</sup> an imperial committee determined at all costs to provide a special dish for it, thus preserving the fish whole.

Less flattering to rulers than the stories in Herodotus and Juvenal is a story told by Suetonius, who tells how a fisherman brought a “surmullet” (mullus) to the emperor Tiberius, because it was “huge” (grandis). Fearing that he might be an assassin, he punished the fisherman by having his face scrubbed with the fish.<sup>17</sup>

Other passages confirm the importance of the size of fish in the Graeco-Roman world.

In the fourth century B.C.E., when Demosthenes asked Isocrates if he could receive only one fifth of the instruction lessons, since that was all he could afford, Isocrates replied: “Demosthenes, we do not slice up instruction into pieces, but just as we see excellent fish whole, I will offer my course to you whole, if you are willing to learn.”<sup>18</sup> One should not forget the satirical story of the “huge fish” (μεγάλοι ιχθύες), which were served to the three-headed giant Geryon and which were bigger in size than the island of Crete, as well as the plate which could hold a hundred of these fish.<sup>19</sup>

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15. Juvenal, Sat. 4.37-154.

16. ” . . . sed derat pisci patinae mensura . . . ”

17. Tib. 60.

18. Plutarch, Vit. dec. or., Isoc. 837-E: "Ὁὐ τεμαχίζομεν, ὦ Δημόσθενες, τὴν πραγματείαν· ὡσπερ δὲ τοὺς καλοὺς ἰχθύς ἅλους πωλοῦ-

Closely related to the section from the Juvenal's story on the size of the fish in relation to its platter is the epigram in Martial: "Although a large dish bears the turbot, the turbot is always wider than the dish."<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Horace speaks of "huge turbot and dishes,"<sup>21</sup> while Cicero refers to a meal "with a huge sturgeon."<sup>22</sup> As late as the fourth century C.E., the size and weight of fish were valued to such an extent that some wealthy banqueters brought out "scales" (trutinae) in order to weigh "fish" (pisces), "birds" (volucres), and "doormice" (glires) at "banquets" (convivia).<sup>23</sup>

Large surmullet were particularly preferable. According to Martial, Calliodorus sold a slave for 4,000 sesterces and then proceeded to use that money to buy a four-pound surmullet.<sup>24</sup> In Juvenal, Crispinus paid more than 6000 sesterces for a six-pound surmullet.<sup>25</sup> For an aristocrat,

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μεν, οὐτω κάγω σοι, εἰ βούλοιο μαθητεῦειν, ὀλόκληρον ἀποδώσομαι τὴν τέχνην."

19. According to Ephippus (fourth century B.C.E. dramatist of Middle Comedy) in a fragment from Geryon (Γηρυόνη) in Athenaeus, Deip. 8.346 F - 347 B.

20. Martial, Epig. 13.81: "Quamvis lata gerat patella rhombum,/ rhombus latior est tamen patella."

21. Sat. 2.95-96: "grandes rhombi patinaeque."

22. Fin. 2.8.24: "cum accipensere decimano."

23. Ammianus Marcellinus, Hist. 28.4.13.

24. Martial, Epig. 10.31.

25. Sat. 4.25.

large surmullets covering a platter were particularly appropriate:

“Enormous surmullets cover your yellow gold-inlaid dishes.”<sup>26</sup>

Among these fish, especially esteemed were surmullets and sturgeon, and, to a lesser extent, parrot wrasse and turbot (which were sometimes described as too large to fit on their designated platters).<sup>27</sup> Possibly because of its cultivation in Roman fishponds, the surmullet enjoyed particular vogue among Roman aristocrats from the second half of the first century B.C.E. through the first half of the first century C.E.<sup>28</sup>

Some Greeks and Romans valued sturgeon to such an extent that it was sometimes served with pomp and ceremony, even including a procession with garlanded servants and flautists.<sup>29</sup> When they caught a

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26. Martial, Epig. 43.11: “Inmodici tibi flava tegunt chrysendeta mul-  
li.” As a complement to their praise for large surmullets, Romans  
looked down upon small surmullets, e.g. Martial, Epig. 97: “Grandia  
ne viola parvo chrysendeta mullo;/ ut minimum, libras debet habere  
duas.” [“Do not profane huge gold-inlaid dishes with a small  
surmullet; it should weigh at least two pounds.”] This is further  
confirmed in Martial, when he clearly implies the luxuriousness of a  
“two-pound surmullet” (mullus bilibris): Epig. 3.45.4.

On the other hand, some Romans satirize exaggeratedly large sur-  
mullets. For example, Horace criticizes someone who praises a  
“three-pound surmullet” (mullus trilibris), since it must in any event be  
cut up into single pieces: Sat. 2.33-34. In general, on the size of sur-  
mullets, see Pliny, HN 9.64.

27. For Jerome (Adv. Iov. 2.7), the parrot wrasse (Gk. σκάρπος; Lat.  
scarus) was a “special delight” (delicia), as it was for Ambrose (Hex.  
5.1.2), who also considered it a “luxury” (luxuria). On the magnifi-  
cently huge size of turbot, see nn. 16 and 20. In addition, Persius  
(Sat. 6.23) says that he is not wealthy enough to feed his freedmen on  
turbot (Gk. ῥόμβος; Lat. rhombus), while Horace indicates the early  
imperial love of turbot by pointing out that turbot found in the sea  
were safe in the old days of Rome, as opposed to his time (Sat.  
2.2.48-49).

28. On the surmullet (Gk. τρίγλη; Lat. mullus), see many of the ref-  
erences on p. 134 below, as well as the discussion of it in  
A. C. Andrews, “The Roman Craze for Surmullets” and in T. H. Cor-  
coran, “Roman Fishponds.” In general, the surmullet was one mark of

sturgeon off the coast of Pamphylia, the successful fishermen bedecked themselves and their boats with garlands, and, when they arrived in port, they applauded and played flutes in order to attract those who would bear witness to their lucky catch.<sup>30</sup>

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fine dining: e.g. Martial, Epig. 78.

29. Sammonicus Serenus (d. 212 C.E.) in Macrobius, Sat. 3.16.8: “Haec Sammonicus, qui turpitudinem convivii principis sui laudando notat, prodens venerationem qua piscis habebatur ut a coronatis inferretur cum tibicinis cantu. . . .” [“So said Sammonicus, who in his praise reveals a shameful aspect of the emperor’s banquet by reporting the veneration with which the fish was held so that it was brought in by garlanded servants with the playing of flutes.”

Archestratus (in Athenaeus Deip. 7.294 E - F) describes an almost identical entry of the sturgeon into a banquet on the island of Rhodes: “Ἀρχέστρατος δὲ ὁ τὸν αὐτὸν Σαρδαναπάλλω ζηλώσας βίον περὶ τοῦ ἐν Ῥόδῳ γαλεοῦ λέγων τὸν αὐτὸν εἶναι ἡγεῖται τῷ παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις μετ’ αὐλῶν καὶ στεφάνων εἰς τὰ δεῖπνα περιφερομένῳ ἑστεφανωμένων καὶ τῶν φερόντων αὐτὸν καλοῦμενον τε ἀκκιπήσιον.” [“Archestratus, who affected the life of Sardanapalus, speaking of the Rhodian shark, says that it is the fish called sturgeon (ἀκκιπήσιος) which is carried around at Roman banquets with flutes and garlands.” On the sturgeon at Rhodes, see also the reference to the “Rhodian sturgeon” (helops rhodius): Aulus Gellius, NA 6.16.5. Similarly, according to Plautus, the sturgeon (c. 200 B.C.E.) was served with a “procession” (pompa): Baccaria in Macrobius, Sat. 3.16.2. In a fragment from a lost work of Cicero, a certain Pontius tells Publius Scipio (late third century B.C.E.) that the sturgeon is a fish only meant for the aristocracy (“accipenser iste paucorum hominum est”): On Fate in Macrobius, Sat. 3.16.3-4.

That the sturgeon (Gk. ἀκκιπήσιος, ἀντακαῖος, γαλεὸς ὁ ἐν Ῥόδῳ, and ἄλλοψ; Lat. accipenser, (h)e(l)lops, and attilus) naturally inhabited very deep waters (Columella, Rust. 8.16.9) and was thus very difficult to capture, may help to explain its status as the most consistently highly valued fish in antiquity. As the above references indicate, the high status of sturgeon was at least as old as the late third century B.C.E. in Rome. It evidently suffered a drop in popularity in the first century C.E. (Pliny, HN. 9.60: “. . . nullo nunc in honore est . . .”), probably because of the rise at the time in the use of fishponds (see pp. 131-32 below and endnote 2), in which the sturgeon could not be maintained (Columella, Rust. 8.16.9). But the evidence of Sammonicus Serenus (in Macrobius, Sat. 3.16.6-8) and of Macrobius (Sat. 3.16.1-8) demonstrates its reemergence into popularity in the third and fourth centuries C.E. Fourth century Christian writers confirm this development; see n. 55.

On the identification and description of the sturgeon, see the appropriate sections in D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes;

Although more critical Romans pointed to the better times in the past, when heroes did not eat fish,<sup>31</sup> the cultivation of high-quality culinary fish for private and commercial purposes, or pisciculture, in the form of various types of fishponds, by the second half of the first century B.C.E, became a requisite feature of most Roman villas (along with aviaries and animal preserves).<sup>32</sup> The considerable monetary worth of estates with fish ponds demonstrated the commercial value of pisciculture.<sup>33</sup> With this practice of pisciculture, the Romans evidently followed customs in other parts of the Mediterranean.<sup>34</sup> According to Ma-

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F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 5:339-45; and also D. J. Georgaias, Ichthyological Terms for the Sturgeon.

30. Here sturgeon = *ελλοψ*. Aelian, NA 8.28: “ἐὰν δὲ ἄλω, στεφανοῖς μὲν αὐτοὶ σφᾶς αὐτοῦς ὑπὲρ τῆς εὐεργίας ἀγλαΐζουσι, στεφανοῦσι δὲ καὶ τὰς ἀλιάδας, καταΐρουσι τε κρότω καὶ αὐλοῖς τὸ θήραμα μαρτυρόμενοι.” Plutarch, De soll. an. 981 D - E: “If anyone should happen to catch one (a sturgeon), they wreath themselves and their boats. As they sail past, people greet and honor them with applause and shouts.” [“ἂν οὖν ποτε λάβωσι, στεφανοῦνται μὲν αὐτοὶ, στεφανοῦσι δὲ τὰς ἀλιάδας, κρότω δὲ καὶ πατάγω καταπλέοντας αὐτοῦς ὑποδέχονται καὶ τιμῶσιν.”]

31. E.g. Ovid, Fast., 6.171ff. Other authors cite Homer, who did not allow his heroes to eat fish from the nearby Hellespont: Plato, Rep. 404 B-C; Plutarch, Symp. 4.668 F.

32. See endnote 2 for fuller discussion of fishponds. For animal preserves, see the discussion in Varro, Rust. 3.

33. Because of its fish ponds, the small country estate of Hirrius was sold for the huge price of 4,000,000 sesterces. Cato sold his ward Lucullus’ fishponds for 400,000 sesterces: Columella, Rust. 8.16.5. According to Pliny, the amount was 4,000,000 sesterces: HN 9.170. That pisciculture was extremely lucrative, may also be seen from Pliny’s comment that Sergius Orata developed his oyster ponds not “for the purpose of eating” (*nec gulae causa*), but out of “avarice” (*avaritia*): Pliny, HN 9.168. On the cost of villas in general, see J. H. D’Arms, Romans on the Bay of Naples.

34. In the fifth century B.C.E., the Agrigentines constructed a “swimming-bath” (*κολυμβήθρα*), which became a “fishpond” (*ιχθυο-*

crobius, this practice continued in the late empire.<sup>35</sup> To a large extent private pisciculture was bound up with the pretensions of the Roman aristocracy who built their villas as oases of leisure and privacy,<sup>36</sup> almost exclusively along the sea on the bay of Naples in Campania,<sup>37</sup> and who used the fish from their ponds as main courses in their lavish feasts.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed certain types of fish were the most expensive of foods in the ancient world, and the excessive quantity of money expended for some fish was proverbial. As early as the fourth century B.C.E., according to

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τροφεῖον), seven stades in circumference and twenty cubits deep, fed by neighboring streams for their tyrant Gelon: Diodorus Siculus, Bibl. 11.25.4; Athenaeus, Deip. 12.541 E. According to Plato, the Egyptians practiced pisciculture along the banks of the Nile: Plt. 264 C. Pliny says that the Greeks had “artificial ponds” (piscinae, HN 8.44), since Aristotle mentions a “pond for eel breeding” (ἐγγελο-εὼν), HA 592 A 2).

35. Macrobius, Sat. 3.15.7.

36. In general on villas and their functions, see J. H. D’Arms, Romans on the Bay of Naples.

37. Wealthy Romans frequently built their villas right into the sea on the bay of Naples, and they commonly furnished many of these with private non-commercial fishponds. For examples of the extension of villa structures that were actually built into the sea, see the following: Sallust, Bell. Cat. 20.11; Horace, Carm. 2.18.17-22 and 3.31.33-46; Virgil, Aen. 9.710-18. In a much later period (222-235 C.E) Alexander Severus constructed at Baiae a palace and several pools, which were formed by letting in the sea: S.H.A., Alex. Sev. 26.9-10. In fact some of these villas remained in use through the fifth century C.E.; so J. H. D’Arms, Romans on the Bay of Naples, 103-08. For an illustration of a fishpond on the sea, see Martial, Epig. 10.30.

38. As an illustration of this, one might cite the famous anecdote of Lucius Marcius Philippus, in which he spits out a fresh water pike (Gk. λάβραξ; Lat. lupus), because the refined palate of a discriminating aristocrat such as himself requires salt water fish cultivated in fish ponds: e.g. Varro, Rust. 3.3.9-10; Columella, Rust. 8.16.3.

the Middle Comedy poet, Antiphanes, attempts were made to minimize the price of fish, apparently with little success.<sup>39</sup> One hears in Plutarch that “sea food” (θάλλαττιον ὄψον) was the “most expensive,” or “most valued,” (τίμιωτατος) of all foods.<sup>40</sup> In that same passage, he refers to the complaint of Cato (the Censor, 234-149 B.C.E.) that already in his time a fish sold for more than a cow, and a cask of smoked fish sold for more than an one hundred sheep and an ox.<sup>41</sup> In a similar fashion, Apollonius of Tyana remarks that fish cost more than “race horses” (κοππατίεις),<sup>42</sup> while Juvenal laments that fish cost more than fishermen and even more than “provincial estates” (agri).<sup>43</sup> Two of the most renowned gourmet cooks in the early empire, Apicius and Publius Octavius, competed for a surmullet (sent to the market by the emperor Tiberius) to such an extent that it ended up costing Octavius 5000 sesterces.<sup>44</sup>

After learning that three surmullets had been sold for thirty thousand sesterces, Tiberius determined to regulate market prices.<sup>45</sup> Yet, only a short time afterwards in the time of the emperor Calligula, a surmullet

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39. Athenaeus, Deip. 226 A - C.

40. Plutarch, Symp. 4.668 B; see also comments in 8.8.730 D.

41. Symp. 4.668 B-C; so also Cato’s similar comment, as quoted in Plutarch, Reg. imp. apoph. 198 D.

42. Philostratus, VA 8.7.4.

43. ”potuit . . . piscator quam piscis emi”: Juvenal, Sat. 4.25-26.

44. Seneca, Ep. 95.42.

sold for 6000 sesterces,<sup>46</sup> and, according to Pliny, Asinius Celer paid 8000 sesterces for a surmullet.<sup>47</sup> Much earlier the dictator Cornelius Sulla offered the Lex Cornelia in order to lower the prices of fish, among other foods, but he was similarly unsuccessful.<sup>48</sup> Already mentioned above are the early second century C.E. stories of Calliodorus and Crispinus, who paid excessive sums of money for surmullets.<sup>49</sup> In addition to Juvenal who is extremely disturbed about the high price of surmullets,<sup>50</sup> Martial lists “pike” (lupus) on a par with jewels, silk, and perfume.<sup>51</sup> In general, “fishmongers” (ἰχθυοπώλαι) sold fish at extraordinarily high prices at the “market” (ἀγορά).<sup>52</sup>

In fact, the Greek words for “delicacy” (ὄψον, and also ὀψάριον) became synonymous with fish,<sup>53</sup> while fish and the sea became generally

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45. Suetonius, Tib. 34.

46. Tertullian, De pall. 5.

47. HN 9.67.

48. Macrobius, Satur. 3.17.11.

49. See pp. 128-29.

50. Sat. 11.35-38.

51. Epig. 11.50.9.

52. Athenaeus, Deip. 224 C - 228 C.

53. Lat. obsonium and opsonium, which derived from their Greek counterparts. For summaries of the evidence equating the word for delicacy with the word for fish, see J. de Vreese, Petron 39; and F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 2:380-81. The classic texts are Plutarch, Symp. 4.4.4, and Athenaeus, Deip. 7.276 E, in which they explicitly equate ὄψον with ἰχθῦς, because fish in general were considered the most excellent of all the delicacies for eating. Those persons who proverbially



synonymous with luxury.<sup>54</sup>

While the luxurious habits of fish-lovers were sometimes scorned by critics,<sup>55</sup> others regarded the eating of fish as praiseworthy. On the

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went to the fish market and spent excessive sums of money on fish, they call ὀψοφάγοι (“fish eaters”) or φιλόψοι (“fish lovers”): Athenaeus, Deip. 7.276f; and Plutarch, Symp. 4.667). See also Aelian, VH 28, on the Rhodians, who were the most fish-loving (ὀψοφαγίστατος) of all peoples. See also the NT, John 6.9 and 11; 21.9, 10, and 13. Also found is the phrase, φιλοτάριχος (“salt fish devotee”), used because of the love in the Graeco-Roman world for salt fish; see also n. 106.

54. E.g. see the statements in Pliny, where he equates the sea in general, and most specifically the species “shellfish” (concharae), with “moral corruption” (populatio morum) and “luxury” (luxuria): HN 9.104-05ff. In this regard, he speaks most in depth about “pearls” (margaritae, 9.106-24), which adorned women as various forms of jewelry (9.114), as well as “purples” (purpurae) and “murex” (murices), whose color adorned emperors, senators, triumphal victors, etc. (9.125-41). On purple as a status symbol, see M. Reinhold, History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity. For Seneca, the “oyster” (ostrea) and the “surmullet” (mullus) are equated with “luxury” (luxuria): Ep. 77.16.

Of course luxury was not always healthful. As the character Kronos satirically remarks in Lucian (Sat. 2.28), the eating of fish by the wealthy could cause “gout” (ποδάγρα). According to Martial (Epig. 48.9), eating surmullets, among other foods, produces a “jaundiced complexion” (sulpureus color) and “fleshy feet” (carnifices pedes), i.e. gout. Oppian speaks of the “pain which follows upon gluttony” (ἄσπον αλγος ἀδηφαγήσιν ὀπηδεῖ): Hal. 2.217.

55. According to Seneca, “gluttony” (gula) and “fish ponds” (vivaria) are more or less synonymous: Ep. 90.7. Juvenal laments that “gluttony” (gula) has diminished the numbers and size of the indigenous fish off the Italian coast: Sat. 5.92-97. While praising the man who eats modestly on “roots” (radices) and “herbs” (herbae), Seneca (Prov. 3.6) praises those who refrain “. . . from filling their bellies with fish from a far-off shore . . . and from exciting the sluggishness of their nauseous stomach with shellfish from the lower or upper sea. . . .” (referring to the Tuscan and Adriatic Seas respectively). [“. . . in ventrem suum longinqui litoris pisces . . . congregaret . . . conchylis superi atque inferi maris pigritiam stomachi nausiantis erigeret. . . .”] According to Plutarch, one should not proceed beyond “lentils” (φακὴ), “cardamum” (καρδαμῖς), and “olives” (ἐλαία)—apparently simple foods—to θρῆον (a mixture

island of Rhodes, eating fish was valued to such an extent that the Rhodians regarded those who ate meat as vulgar and gluttonous, while they considered themselves fish eaters who were free from tyrants. Here the implication is clear that the Rhodians saw fish-eating as a refined activity.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, for Cicero, in addition to the “sweet deliciousness of fish” (suavitas piscium),<sup>57</sup> both fish and shellfish——in contrast to

of eggs, milk, lard, flour, honey, and cheese, wrapped in fig-leaves) and fish, the latter two items being associated with “gorging” (πλησιμονή). That is, they were the marks of a luxurious meal: De tuen. san. prae. 125 F. Ambrose criticizes those who eat luxurious foods for causing the deaths of other persons, such as fishermen who drown while obtaining fish and shellfish for their table. Thus, the person who fasts does not eat fish: De Nab. hist. 20. Similarly, for Apollonius of Tyana, the eating of fish was contrary to his ascetic vegetarian practices: Philostratus, VA 8.7.4. On the excessive ceremony offered with the serving of sturgeon, Sammonicus Serenus says explicitly that it is a “shame” (turpitudō): in Macrobius, Sat. 3.16.8. In two passages, Jerome (Ep. 45.5.1) and Ambrose (Hex. 5.1.2) criticize others who eat sturgeon, while they themselves eat “beans” (favae), thus showing that beans are associated with asceticism, and sturgeon with luxury. In another passage, Jerome attacks Jovinian for preferring a sturgeon to Christ: Adv. Jov. 1.40. The examples listed here represent only a sampling.

56. Aelian, VH 1.28: "Ἀλλὰ ἐγωγε ὑμῖν ἐθέλω εἰπεῖν Ῥόδιον δόξαν. ἐν Ῥόδῳ φασι τὸν μὲν εἰς τοὺς ἰχθῦς ὀρώοντα καὶ θαυμάζοντα αὐτοὺς καὶ ὄντα τῶν ἄλλων ὀνοφαγίστατον, ἀλλὰ τουτόν γε ὡς ἐλευθερίον ὑπὸ τῶν δημοτῶν ἐπαινεῖσθαι· τὸν γε μὴν πρὸς τὰ κρέα ἀπονευόντα ὡς φορτικὸν καὶ γάστριν διάβαλλουσι Ῥόδιοι." ["I would like to tell you of the opinion of the Rhodians. They say that those on Rhodes marvel at fish when they see them and that they enjoy fish more than any other foods, but they praise them as free from despots. The Rhodians scorn those who have a predilection for meat as vulgar and gluttonous."]

As in the previous note, here again one sees the connection between eating fish and gluttony. While it is impossible to determine whether or not the association of fish eating with the idea of “freedom” (ἐλευθεριος) was more widespread in the Graeco-Roman world and whether or not that association was somehow transmitted to early Christianity, certainly the idea of fish as a refined food (as opposed to meat, which was a food for vulgar low-class persons) may well have had an influence on early Christianity. For example, the

“spoiled meat” (carnis subrancida)—were respected as the characteristic components of good dining in a Roman house.<sup>58</sup>

This positive attitude toward fish-eating manifests itself in some ascetic strands of ancient Christianity, where fish (as opposed to meats and other delicacies) were often regarded as satisfactory for consumption during certain types of fasts.<sup>59</sup>

From these observations, it is clear that of all foods fish was one of the most highly valued in the Graeco-Roman world, particularly by the wealthy—thus making it an especially attractive symbol for early Christians. When Romans went so far as to establish the vocation of private pisciculture, one sees an indication of the importance of fish to the wealthy. When Avercius speaks in his funerary inscription of the huge fish (Jesus Christ), he clearly associates that fish with the large, heavy, and magnificent fishes that were the favorite dishes of both the well-to-do nouveaux arrivés (novi homines) and of the aristocracy.<sup>60</sup> That this fish was not merely “large” (μέγας), but “huge” (πανμεγέθης) suggests the kind of dazzling and extraordinarily expensive fish that emperors would have served at one of their banquets in order to create

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consumption of fish in the Avercius inscription is clearly related to the eating of fish in a refined, luxurious meal in the Graeco-Roman world.

57. Nat. D. 2.160.

58. Pis. 67.

59. See the extensive collection of materials in F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 5:370-83.

a spectacular visual sight, as well as to impress their guests with the quantity of money at their disposal. This is a fish, which is appropriate for the most wealthy and the most powerful individuals——evidently a fish worthy of symbolizing Christ.

The *ἰχθὺς πανμεγέθους* mentioned in the Avercius inscription is a fish that would therefore not normally belong to common people, but by right to kings and to emperors, or by dint of financial means to the wealthy. That many early Christians ate it, is an indication that the largest possible fish was universally available and accessible. That which had been available to the few was now available to the many.

From the description in the Avercius inscription and in other early Christian texts (Chapter 3), as well as from the depictions of banquets with fish found in numerous early Christian paintings and on sarcophagi (Chapter 4), one can see that the consumption of fish was an activity regarded not in a pejorative light, but rather in a praiseworthy light. As is suggested by instances such as these, early Christians apparently omitted the pagan tradition of criticizing the eating of fish and of equating it with gluttony and luxury. Instead, they seem to have relied on the more positive view of fish eating espoused by the Rhodians and others.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, the presentation of the sturgeon in an almost religious ceremony and the nearly devout veneration of other fishes (such as the

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60. For the Avercius inscription, see pp. 311-71 in Chapter 3; and also Text # I.1 in Appendix 1 and all of Appendix 3.

61. For more on the omission of criticism and the inclusion of praise in early Christian fish symbolism, see the discussion of empathy for fish on pp. 213-42

surmullet) suggests that, even in a secular context, eating fish could have religious overtones. The transformation of the eating of fish in a secular context with religious overtones into the eating of fish in a primarily religious context as in the Avercius inscription—— where it most likely symbolizes the early Christian eucharist——would have been a natural transformation. In this way, the symbolizing of Christ through the serving of a fish (as in the Avercius inscription) would have had both religious and secular overtones.

### Small fish

Yet fish were not only found as delicacies in the diet of the rich—— but different species of fish, especially small fish,<sup>62</sup> as well as fish products such as garum——<sup>63</sup> were the major component of the staple diet of most persons in the Graeco-Roman world as well.<sup>64</sup>

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62. A passage in the biography of John the Almsgiver (20), bishop of Alexandria (d. 619 C.E.) by Leontius of Neapolis (d. c. 650) offers a clue to the importance of small salted fish in the Graeco-Roman world (drawn to my attention by F. Dölger, *IXΘΥΣ* 5:331, n. 14). After the conquest of Jerusalem by the Persians in 614, John in his capacity as bishop sent (among other things) “one-thousand baskets of salted sprats” (χιλία κόλαθα μαινομένης) to the needy and impoverished Christian community of Jerusalem. On the term, μαινομένης, see also nn. 68 and 70 *infra*, as well as the commentary in the edition by H. Gelzer. That he would do this, suggests that small fish, such as sprats, were to be found everywhere in great quantity and thus were a staple of the ancient diet. This is confirmed in the following examples in this paragraph, where one sees that small fish frequently were a component of the everyday meals of most people. In addition, one should note the passage in Lucian, in which the rich character Kronos comments that the poor “neither taste” (αγευστος) “nor eat” (ασιτος) fish. Here “fish” (ιχθυες) evidently refer exclusively to large fish (*Sat.* 2.28), thus indicating that small fish were sometimes not even significant enough to designate as fish.

63. On garum, see pp. 149-56 below.

64. On the other hand, Greek travellers along the Red Sea across from Ethiopia in Carmania were amazed at the people known as the Ichthyophagoi (Ιχθυοφάγοι), or “Fish-Eaters”, whose diet consisted almost solely of fish (mostly small, eaten raw or cooked by the sun on rocks), who fed fish to their cattle (which actually looked like fish), who prepared breads and relishes solely of mashed fish, and who built their homes out of a variety of fish bones. In this case, it would seem that ancient observers were particularly shocked, since in their world fish were a major component of the standard meal, but not the sole component. This is what Diodorus Siculus (*Bibl.* 3.16.3-4) seems to indicate when, in the case of the Fish-Eaters he declares that “Poseidon assumed the task of Demeter” (. . . ως αν τοῦ Ποσειδῶνος τὸ τῆς Δήμητρος ἔργον μετεληφότος). Along with fish, which were in any event still the major staple of the diet of those living in the Graeco-Roman world, Greeks and Romans would have eaten various cereals and grains. Thus, ancient writers viewed the extreme practices

In general for ancient writers, large fish surpassed “small fish” (Lat. pisciculi and clupea; Gk. ιχθύδια,<sup>65</sup> ἀφύη, ἀφρῆτις, and ἐψητός),<sup>66</sup> which were more or less the equivalent of “minnows”——<sup>67</sup>including sprats, anchovies, sardines, smelt, herring, and goby.<sup>68</sup> Because of their small

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of the Ichthyophagoi as barbaric and bestial. For example, Diodorus Siculus (Bibl. 3.15.2) called them “barbarians” (βαρβάροι), who live like “wild beasts” (οἱ θηριοί, 3.16.7); see also in 3.15.2, where Diodorus indicates that they make no distinction between what is “shameful” (αἰσχρὸς) and what is “honorable” (καλὸς). Nevertheless, one should note that some Greek observers were not quite so parochial. Thus, in Philostratus, one hears that the Fish-Eaters are a “gentle people” (γένος ἡμερον): VA 3.55.

On the Fish-Eaters, see the following sources: Diodorus Siculus, Bibl. 3.15-20 (relying at least partially on the second century B.C.E. Hellenistic grammarian and Peripatetic, Agatharchides of Cnidus); Pliny, HN 7.31 (using as his source the third century B.C.E. Hellenistic historian, Cleitarchus of Alexandria); Arrian, Ind. 8.24-31; Strabo, Geo. 2.1-2; and Philostratus, VA 3.55. See also n. 263 on the wearing of fish hides. For further investigation of them, see J. S. Romm, The Edges of the Earth, 52-60.

65. It is also possible to designate small fish by modifying ιχθύες / ιχθύδια with the adjectives, λεπτός (“tiny”) or μικρός (“small”).

66. On the use of these terms to include a variety of small fry, consult the relevant headings in D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes. See also the discussion of small fish (with Latin names) in R. I. Curtis, “Negotiatores Alecarii and the Herring,” 114-15. That ἀφύη and ἐψητός refer to small fish, is clear from the discussions in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.284 F - 286 A and 301 A - C.

67. “Minnow” can, however, also refer to the specific species designated as φοξίνος.

68. “Sprats”: Gk. μαίνιδες (μαίμαι, μαινίδια, μαιομένηα, or μαιομένηαι) and ακταρ (ακταρ); Lat. maenae (menae). “Sardines”: Gk. σάρδα (σαρδίνος, σαρδίνη) and possibly Gk. τριχίς (which could also mean herring); Lat. sarda (sardina). “Anchovies”: Gk. ἐγκρασίχολος (ἐγγραυλίεις) and λυκόστομος. “Smelt”: Gk. ἀθερίνη, ἀθερίνος (probably). “Herring”: Gk. θρίσσα (θρίττα), χαλκίς, and χαλδική; Lat. allec (apparently the name of both the fish and the fish sauce discussed in n. 94 with variant spelling, and also probably deriving from the fish, called in Gk. χαλκίς). “Goby”: Gk. κωβίος and κωβίτις (also κωβήτις); Lat. gobio (gobius and cobio). Τριγλιτίς

size, they were considered inferior food.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, small fish were almost always regarded as the nourishment of the poor and of the common people.

According to one tradition, as an indication of his poverty and his extraordinarily ascetic ways, the Cynic Crates (late fourth and early third centuries B.C.E.) used to roast sprats (τόν μαινιδῶν ἀποτύρις) in the smelting ovens, where the festival of the smiths normally took place.<sup>70</sup> According to Lucian, the eating of “sprats” (μαινιδες) was one of the signals for the meal of a poor person.<sup>71</sup> From Cicero, one clearly hears that the tiny “sprat” (maena) was the least valued of fish in comparison with the “sturgeon” (accipenser), one of the most prized fishes of the ancient world.<sup>72</sup> These sprats are probably to be included in what Epicurus called “the most despised” (contemptissimus) food and drink.<sup>73</sup> In fragments from the comic poet Aristomenes (late fifth century and early fourth century B.C.E.), one hears that the small fish

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ἀφύη probably refers to the whitebait stage of surmulletts (τριγλή): e.g. Athenaeus, Deip. 7.285 A (see also D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes, 268). It is uncertain to what fishes the word βεμβράδες (also μεμβράδες, βαμβραδόνες, μαμβραδόνες) refers, but it is clearly one of the small fry: e.g. Athenaeus, Deip. 7.285 B.

69. There are a few exceptions that one might cite. For example, the sprats of Lipari were highly valued (Clem. Alex., Ped. 2.1 and 3.1). In addition, the ancient writer on cookery Archestratus says that Athenian ἀφύη were the only small fry worth eating (in Athenaeus, Deip. 285 B-C). But these seem to have been extraordinary cases.

70. See n. 108.

71. The Dream or the Rooster 22.

72. Fin. 2.91.



βεμβράς was a cheap fish (one could buy it for one obol) and that it was consequently a “dreadful” (κακοδαίμων) food.<sup>74</sup> Suetonius considered “small fish” (pisciculi minuti) one of the indications of a “very small” (minimus) and “commonplace” (vulgaris, i.e. as in common people) meal, of which the emperor Augustus was surprisingly prone to partake.<sup>75</sup> In Plautus, the slave Davus notes that a wedding could not be taking place, since the father of the daughter was having a meal with “small fish” (pisciculi minuti)—an indication not of a festive meal, but of a commonplace one.<sup>76</sup> Martial refers to “salt fish” (gerres) and sprats as “useless” (inutilis).<sup>77</sup> In dream interpretation, small fish became a symbol of financial failure.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, Cassian ironically remarks that the monks in Egyptian monasteries considered “small salt fish” (pisciculi minuti salliti)—which they also call maenomenia (alluding to μαϊνιδες, “sprats”)—a “special pleasure” (summa voluptas);<sup>79</sup> for these monks were so ascetic that

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73. Cicero, Fin. 2.90.

74. Athenaeus, Deip. 7.287 D. See also Aristophanes, Vesp. 493.

75. Aug. 76.

76. Andria 367-69.

77. Epig. 12.32.15.

78. For example, Artemidorus says that small fish “in no way” signal “financial gain” (οὐδαμῶς κέρδος): Oneir. 14.

79. De inst. coen. 4.22. On maenomenia, see also nn. 62 and 68 infra. For some of the references in the previous paragraph and for this one, see F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 2:321 and 5:329-331. He does not, however, connect them to early Christianity, such as the Tertullian passage

even the food of poor persons was regarded as a delicacy.

It is significant that many small fish, especially those designated with the Greek terms ἀφὴ and ἀφρῆτις, according to ancient belief that originated primarily with Aristotle,<sup>80</sup> arose spontaneously (without reproduction, as in spontaneous generation) from the “foam” (ἀφρός, also meaning semen) produced by the sea or by the rain. It did so in combination with “mud” (ἰλύς) and “sand” (ἄμμος), especially after a rain-storm.<sup>81</sup> Once produced ancient writers said that they were found in great quantities.<sup>82</sup> In addition, they were thought not to eat other fish for food, but rather to gain their sustenance by licking one another.<sup>83</sup>

As indicated above, because of their small size, individually small fish were in general not highly regarded as food. But as a group they were considered able in certain circumstances to become more powerful, for example by not allowing themselves to be broken apart.<sup>84</sup> As discussed in the next section, one should also take note that, while individually small fish were in general a poor person’s food, a quantity briefly discussed below, nor does he attempt to see them as part of a symbolic system.

80. HA 569 A 10 - 570 A 2.

81. In general, the term ἀφὴ was derived from ἀφρός, indicating the foam (i.e. semen) produced by the sea (Athenaeus, Deip. 325 B; and Oppian, Hal. 1.775-76) or by rain (Aristotle, HA 569 B 13-16; and Pliny, HN 31.95). According to Athenaeus, some derived ἀφὴ from α - φὴ (of small size): Deip. 7.324 D. F. Dölger suggests that the connection to foam was probably also partly responsible for the sanctity of ἀφὴ to Attargatis/ Aphrodite, whose name was related to ἀφρός (as she was born from the foam of the sea): IXΘΥΣ 2:171. See Plutarch, De superst. 170 D and p. 180 below.

82. Aristotle, HA 569 B; Oppian, Hal. 1.774-75.

of small fish could be transformed into the highly regarded and (especially for Romans) delicious fish sauces, which many of the wealthy also enjoyed. Apparently, the same fish, which were scorned by the wealthy when eaten as fish, were esteemed by them when condensed and fermented into a fish sauce.

Thus, small fish could simultaneously refer to cheap food and to fine fish sauces—to the weak individual and to the strong group.

Based upon these Graeco-Roman traditions of characterizing small fish, it is very probable that the description by Tertullian of early Christians as “small fish” (pisciculi) draws upon the ancient view that small fishes (i.e. early Christians) were associated with the poor,<sup>85</sup> that they were generated and survived in a miraculous fashion,<sup>86</sup> and (as already mentioned) that they were numerous in quantity, non-predatory,

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83. Oppian, Hal. 1.784-87; Aelian, NA 2.22.

84. Aelian, NA 8.18.

85. For the full passage, see Text # VI.2 in Appendix 1. For further discussion of it see pp. 468-74 in Chapter 3. It is from De baptismo, 1.11-13: “Sed nos pisciculi secundum ἰχθὺν nostrum Iesum Christum in aqua nascimur, nec aliter quam in aqua permanendo salvi sumus.” There are two basic ways to translate this. Either 1) “We are small fishes who are born in water according to ΙΧΘΥΝ, our Jesus Christ. Nor are we saved other than in permanent water.” Or 2) “But we who are little fish in relation to ΙΧΘΥΝ—our Jesus Christ—are born in water. Nor are we saved other than in permanent water.” For various reasons, I have chosen the latter; see pp. 468-74 below.

86. According to Aelian, ἀφὴ found their way “to safe places” (ἐς τὰ σωτήρια) through “miraculous agencies” (ἀτρία θαυμαστή): NA 2.22. Thus, according to traditions in the Graeco-Roman world, small fish only survived by a miracle.

and powerful as a group, though weak and of poor quality individually.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the description in Tertullian would possibly suggest that, from his point of view, early Christians should be characterized by their poverty, by the miracle of their conversion and of their faith, by their large numbers, by their peaceful natures, and by their great strength when they remain united. In addition, it is interesting to note that, when Tertullian speaks of early Christians as small fish, and when both he and Avercius describe Jesus Christ as a much larger fish, they are suggesting a contrast between a powerful leader (Christ) and his weaker followers (early Christians).

Furthermore, the descriptions in many early Christian texts (other than Tertullian) of Christians as fish swimming in a hostile ocean or sea also suggest that writers were probably thinking of small fish. These were in fact the fish that were most vulnerable to the perils of these vast bodies of water.

I should, however, mention that my proposed interpretation refers to the literary picture drawn by Tertullian and others, and it may or may not have corresponded to actual social realities. For example, it does not prove that early Christians were poor, only that they might have represented themselves as poor. All that one can say is that early Chris-

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87. While small fish in general were weak on an individual basis, some ancient writers commented on the surprising exceptions, such as the sucking fish (Gk. ἐχενίς and ναύκρατης; Lat. echenis and remora), which, though only six inches long (thus a pisciculus), could bring a huge boat to a complete halt. For full references, see the description in D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes, 65-67. The sucking fish is discussed most extensively in Pliny, HN 32.2-7.

tians could use small fish in this way to represent symbolically certain conceptions of themselves to themselves and to others.<sup>88</sup>

Thus, one is able to see that the function and symbolism of small fish throughout the Graeco-Roman world very likely had a considerable influence on the function and symbolism of fish in early Christianity.

Two additional observations on small fish are worthy of comment. First, in the Graeco-Roman world, small fish can indicate human souls, as well as human beings. As a result, they were an extremely appropriate designation for early Christians, as the reference to them (pisciculi) in Tertullian indicates. For example, in the “fishermen’s games” (piscatori ludi) on the Tiber in Rome, local fishermen dedicated to Vulcan “small fish” (pisciculi), which were sacrificed to him “on behalf of human souls” (pro animis humanis).<sup>89</sup> Similarly, in a ritual designed to atone for the thunderbolt of Juppiter and customarily attributed to the legendary second king of Rome Numa Pompilius, who was also the institutionalizer of religious customs, a sprat (along with an onion and hair) was offered in sacrifice to Juppiter in place of a human life.<sup>90</sup>

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88. For more on this distinction, see pp. 246-47 and 414-15.

89. Festus, De sig. verb., p. 274, ll. 35ff. (Lindsay ed.). Also normally sized fish can indicate human souls, as discussed in n. 90 below.

90. The earliest reference is found in Ovid, Fast. 3.331-44, but here he simply refers to a fish (piscis), while Arnobius (Adv. nat. 5.1) and Plutarch (Num. 15.5) refer to a sprat (maena and ματις respectively). I owe these references to F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 2:299.

From this instance, one can see that a small fish was identified with human life. Such an identification suggests a possible influence on the designation of early Christians as small fish (particularly in Tertullian) and fish in general (mostly found in fish-catching conversion stories of early Christians).<sup>91</sup> In other words, because they were already identified by pagans with human beings, that made it possible for small fish to symbolize early Christians.

Second, one should note that small fish were themselves emblematic of the ocean as a whole. For example, the statement of Lucian that sprats were specifically associated with Poseidon—that is, the ocean—indicates that, by referring to them, one could also refer to the ocean.<sup>92</sup> From the above-discussed description of small fry, which were born spontaneously from the foam of the salty ocean, one can see that ancient writers viewed small fish particularly as arising, not primarily in relatively small bodies of water such as springs, but rather in the ocean; for it was large, and endowed with the characteristically generative elements of salt and foam.

Thus, when Tertullian refers to early Christians as small fish, he was naturally associating them in part with the ocean and with those characteristics associated with the ocean.

On the other hand, one should mention that the salvific water of Tertullian (aqua permanendo) probably refers not to the ocean, but to the fresh running water (i.e. “living water” = ὄδωρ ζῶν) used in bap-

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91. See particularly pp. 468-74

tisms. Therefore, while early Christian writers spoke of fish as born in the evil waters of the ocean, they were, on the other hand, saved in the fresh baptismal waters that originated in springs and streams.<sup>93</sup>

### **Fish as condiment: fish sauces and fish appetizers**

In this regard, I should mention that the major condiment used in virtually all standard Roman meals——on vegetables, on fish and on meat, as well as for both the rich and the poor——was a type of fish sauce (really serving the function of salt) made from the intestines, organs (especially livers and kidneys), blood, gills, and other viscera of rotted fish. In general, it was called garum (Lat.) or ὁ γάρου (Gk.), but it was also commonly indicated with the Latin designations of allec, muria, and liquamen.<sup>94</sup>

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92. Icaromenippus 27.

93. On early Christian views of water, see Chapter 3, passim.

94. On Roman fish sauces in general, see the following: 1) articles in PW under “Allec” (1:1583), “Garum” (7:841-50), and “Muria” (14:661-62)——the latter being probably still one of the most thorough modern accounts; 2) T. H. Corcoran, “Roman Fish Sauces” (a good general account); 3) P. Grimal and T. H. Monod, “Sur la véritable nature du ‘garum’”, as well as C. Jardin, “Garum et sauces du poisson,” (both useful for the relation of garum to modern fish sauces, especially those used in Indochina and the Middle East); 4) F. Benoit, “Industrie de pêche et de salaison,” R. I. Curtis, “Negotatores Allecarii and the Herring” and (forthcoming) “The Production and Commerce of Salted Fish Products” (all three articles important for the commercial aspects of the fish sauce trade); and 5) A. M. McCann, The Roman Port and Fishery of Cosa, 36-43 (which, especially in nn. 230-32, includes references to important archaeological evidence for fisheries and fish product factories throughout the Mediterranean). For the most extensive general ancient discussion of garum, see Pliny, HN 31.93-97. For the best ancient account of the preparation of garum, see Manilius, Astr. 5.667-81.

Not limited exclusively to Italy, garum seems to have been in use since at least the fifth century B.C.E., and it was evidently popular throughout the entire Mediterranean basin area, as well as northern Europe,<sup>95</sup> until long after the end of antiquity.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, the complexity

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As Ausonius (Ep. 2.25) indicates, garum was originally a Greek term and was never given a Latin equivalent, thus suggesting that fish sauces originated in the eastern parts of the Mediterranean; so also P. Grimal and T. H. Monod, “Sur la véritable nature du ‘garum’,” 37-38. Liquamen, which is used almost exclusively for all fish sauces in Apicius (De re coq.), seems to have been a generic term for fish sauce. Muria apparently was the gritty (that is, with more sediments) byproduct of liquamen. Allec (also Lat. hallec, hallex, or allex—often with only one “l”; and Gk. ἄλιξ—the latter found in Dioscorides, De mat. med. 4.148 and in the Geoponica 20.46.2) seems to have been the gritty byproduct of garum. For the use of fish sauces on items such as vegetables, fish, and meat, see for full references, “Garum,” in PW 7:845-46.

There were innumerable ways of preparing garum (“Garum” in PW 7:842-43). Often fish sauces were combined with other liquids (as can be seen especially in Apicius, De re coq., but also in other sources on cooking, with full references listed in “Garum” in PW 7:844), thus producing a greater variety: with wine (Gk. οἰνόγαρον); Lat. oenogarum, garoenum, and vinum et liquamen); with vinegar (Gk. ὀξύγαρον; Lat. oxigarum and liquamen et acctum); and with olive oil (γαρέλαιον and ἐλαιόγαρον; Lat. eleogarum, ex oleo liquamen, liquamen et oleum, and liquamen oleo mixtum).

95. According to Pliny (HN 31.94), there were fish sauce processing centers in Antipolis in Gallia Narbonensis, in Dalmatia, in Pompeii in Campania, in Thurii in Apulia, in Leptis Maior in Africa Proconsularis, and in Clazomenae in Asia Minor. Strabo also mentions Zuchis in Africa Proconsularis: Geo. 17.3.18. In addition, Pontus was well-known for its processed fish: Strabo, Geo. 3.2.6. Archaeological evidence would reveal considerably more locations. For example, M. Ponsich and M. Tarradell (Garum et industries antiquae de salaison and “The Production and Commerce of Salt and Fish Products”, forthcoming; fragmentary references in his “In Defense of Garum”, 236-40; and Aceite y oliva salazones de pescado) show that fish processing factories existed all along the Atlantic and the Mediterranean coasts of Spain and North Africa, as well as in Gaul, Italy, Sicily, North Africa, Sardinia, the Black Sea region, and Egypt. Curtis has found numerous inscriptions referring to fish sauce merchants (e.g. Gk. γαρόπωλης; Lat. negotiator allecarius, negotians muriarius, liquemenarius, salsamentarii, and salsarii). From epigraphic evidence, it is



and extent of the garum trade indicates the great demand of the population in the Graeco-Roman world for fish sauces.<sup>97</sup> In a society whose

clear that allec merchants (negotiatores allecarii) plied their trade as far north as Brittany, The Netherlands, and Britain, probably conveyed from coastal seaports with fisheries; see R. I. Curtis, "Negotiatores Allecarii and the Herring," 148-51, 156). Italy and Spain seem to have been the major centers, displacing Pontus in producing the highest grade of garum. In addition to Pompeii, fish sauce processing factories existed in a variety of places in Italy, according to inscriptions on amphora and literary evidence: e.g. at Cosa in Etruria (A. M. McCann, The Roman Port and Fishery of Cosa, 40ff.) at Antium in Latium (CIL 15.4712), Beneventum in Samnium (Pliny, HN 32.19), Puteoli in Campania (CIL 15.4687, 4688; Pliny, HN 35.45), Velia in Lucania (Strabo, Geo. 6.1.1), and Cumae in Campania (Strabo, Geo. 5.4.4). Fish product factories existed in Hispania Baetica at Gades (modern Cadiz; Euthydemus in Athenaeus, Deip. 3.116 C) and at Maliaria and Baelo (Strabo, Geo. 3.1.8). Also in Hispania Baetica, Carteia and Turdetania, as well as the rest of the seaboard outside the Straights of Gibraltar (ancient Pillars of Hercules), produced excellent fish sauces: Pliny, HN 9.92; Strabo, Geo. 3.2.6. New Carthage (Carthago Spartaria) in Hispania Baetica was renowned for its most expensive fish sauce, garum sociorum: Pliny, HN 31.94. It was even renamed "Mackerel Island" (σκομβραρία), because on its shores fishermen caught mackerel (Gk. σκόμβρος; Lat. scomber), which was used in the finest grades of garum (Strabo, Geo. 3.4.6; Athenaeus, Deip. 3.121 B).

96. For fifth and fourth century B.C.E. Athenian enjoyment of fish sauces, see Athenaeus, Deip. 2.67 C. Ausonius shows that garum sociorum was enjoyed in the fourth century C.E.: Ep. 25. In "Negotiatores Alecarii," R. I. Curtis adduces considerable evidence to demonstrate the popularity of garum in the Middle Ages. In the seventh century C.E., Isidore of Seville speaks frequently of garum in his Origines.

97. Archaeological evidence shows that Spain exported fish sauces to army camps throughout northern Europe. It is known that Tarentum in Apulia exported fish products as early as the second century B.C.E.: Euthydemus in Athenaeus, Deip. 3.116 C. A. M. McCann (The Roman Port and Fishery of Cosa, 40) shows that Rome imported some of its garum from Antium, Pompeii, and Puteoli and that Pompeii exported its garum to Delos and to Athens in the first century C.E. As early as the second century B.C.E., Gades in Hispania Baetica exported preserved and salted fish to merchants in Bruttium and Campania in Italy: Euthydemus in Athenaeus, Deip. 3.116 C. On the international character of this trade, T. H. Corcoran alerts one to

diet was not heavy in proteins and certain nutriment, fish sauce provided essential nutriment (such as nitrogen and iron) and proteins in the form of amino acids.<sup>98</sup>

While many Latin writers show that some types of garum were especially praised by the wealthy, it is clear, particularly from archaeological evidence, that all strata of the population considered garum their condiment of choice.<sup>99</sup> Although several ancient writers complained of

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two important examples: “Roman Fish Sauces,” 209. A corporation of merchants from Malaca in Spain existed in Rome, where they dealt with fish products from Spain, and one of their officials was an Athenian, Publius Clodius: CIL 6.9677. Likewise companies from Syria and Asia had their fish processing headquarters in Malaca (CIL 15.4690, 4692-93, 4695-4702, 4705, 4729, 4804).

98. On the importance of fish sauce as a dietary supplement for Graeco-Roman culture and for other similar modern cultures, see the references in n. 94 above.

99. The range of costs extended from the very cheap kinds of allec and liquamen (known as liquamen secundum [see references in T. H. Corcoran, “Roman Fish Sauces,” n. 5]) to the most expensive garum, known as garum sociorum (made from mackerel [Gk. σκόμβρος, Lat. skomber] in the processing factories of Spain, especially New Carthage). For references and discussion of the latter, see R. Étienne, “Garum Sociorum.” Some garum was as expensive as perfume: Pliny, HN 31.94. In addition, Pliny (HN 31.94) complains that two congii (= six and one-half litres; 8 congii= one amphora) of garum sociorum cost 1000 sesterces. Both Seneca (Ep. 95.25) and Manilius (Astro. 5.671) designate garum as “expensive” (pretiosus), while according to Martial, mackerel garum (i.e. garum sociorum) is a gift sent to a rich man (Epig. 13.103). The high estimation of garum extended from the time of Cato the Elder in the late third century B.C.E. (Pliny, HN 19.57) to the seventh century C.E. (Isidore of Seville, Orig. 20.3.19). Like pisciculture, garum was viewed by some as a luxury (e.g. by Cato in the Pliny passage) and at some Christian monasteries in the fourth century C.E. it was on this account forbidden to monks (Rule of St. Pachomius 45 = PG 40:949 = PL 23:72 C from Jerome; see L. Th. Lefort, ed., “Le règle de S. Pachôme”; or A. Boon and L. Th. Lefort, eds., Pachomiana Latina). As a result, some forms of garum came to be made from pears, kitchen herbs, and even grasshoppers; see the references in “Garum” in PW 7:849.

its smell and putrefaction,<sup>100</sup> these same writers could also praise it,<sup>101</sup> and the frequent examples of its high price confirm its popularity.<sup>102</sup>

While garum could in some cases have consisted of high grade fishes such as tuna,<sup>103</sup> mackerel, and surmullet, it is also very interesting to note (as mentioned above) that small fish such as sprats, atherine, and small fry (to use the generic term), which generally were associated with

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On the other hand, R. I. Curtis (in “In Defense of Garum”) adduces considerable evidence to show that garum was used by all socio-economic groups in the Mediterranean world and that garum was normally very affordable. For example, the Edict of Diocletian shows that the best garum was less expensive than second quality honey and first quality olive oil (as cited in idem, “In Defence of Garum,” 235-36, with further price comparisons). In Rome and in Pompeii, excavations have uncovered more of the expensive garum containers than the containers with cheaper fish sauces such as allec; and, throughout Pompeii, they have uncovered garum containers in the houses of both the wealthy and the poor (R. I. Curtis, “In Defence of Garum,” 236-37).

100. In several passages, Martial (Epigrams) remarks on the unpleasant smell of fish sauce: a certain young woman Thais smelled worse than garum (6.93); the breath of a certain man Papyrus was more foul than garum (7.94); and a certain Flaccus is a man “of iron” (ferreus), because he makes love with a woman, who has had six helpings of garum (11.27.1-2). Horace says that it stinks: Sat. 2.4.65. The ancient master chef Apicius suggested that there were various ways of improving the smell of garum: De re coq. 1.7. Because it was prepared by letting it ferment, often under the sun, other writers complain of its putrefactive character (Gk. σαπρός, σηπεδών; Lat. putrescens, sanies): Plato, the fifth century Athenian comic writer, in Athenaeus, Deip. 2.67 C; Pliny, HN 31.93; Seneca, Ep. 95.25; and Artemidorus, Oneir. 1.66.

101. Immediately after his comment on the putrefactive character of garum, Pliny goes on to say that garum can be diluted to the color of honeyed wine and drunk: HN 31.95. Artemidorus (Oneir. 1.66) speaks of drinking garum in a dream, and Isidore of Seville (Orig. 20.3) describes garum as a drink. Martial (Epig. 3.82) explains that garum is “reknowned” (nobile), and he devotes a short epigram of praise (13.102) to that most special of fish sauces, garum sociorum.

the dietary regime of the poor, were also very frequently the major component of ancient fish sauces.<sup>104</sup>

Probably because the Graeco-Roman world so valued it as a condiment and because food in general in antiquity was viewed as having curative properties, garum was also preeminent as a therapeutic

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102. See pp. 133-35 above.

103. Tuna = Gk. θύννος, θυννίς, θύννη, θύνα; Lat. thynnus, thunnus.

104. This seems to confirm what Pliny indicates about the very nature of garum, when he says that garum consists of the parts of fish that would otherwise “be thrown away” (abiecenda): HN 31.94. See also Pliny, HN 31.95; Geoponica 20.25; 20.46.1.3. In these passages, “Small fish” = Gk. ἰχθύδια, ὀψαρίδια, λεπτεροὶ ἰχθύες; Lat. pisciculi. Sprat = Gk. μαινος, μαινή; Lat. mena, maena. Atherine = Gk. ἀθερίνη, ἀθερίνος; Lat. atherina. “Small fry” = Gk. ἀφύη; Lat. apua.

The word allec itself seems to have been associated with a small fish. Columella refers to a fish of small size, called hallecula, which inhabited both seas and rivers (Rust. 6.8.2; 8.15.6; 8.17.12; 8.17.14). Isidore of Seville (Orig. 12.6.39-40) says that the allec was a small fish (pisciculus). According to the above mentioned reference in the Geoponica, the ἄλιξ is a small fish suitable for making garum. According to R. I. Curtis (“Negotiores Allecarii and the Herring,” 153ff.), allec probably (like apua above) referred in a generic sense to small fry, including anchovies, sardines, shad, and herring. Archaeological evidence—as cited in R. Sanquer and P. Galliou (“Garum, sel et salaisons en Armorique gallo-romaine,” 207), in R. Sanquer (“Informations archéologiques: Douarnenez”), and in R. I. Curtis (“The Garum Shop of Pompeii,” 11)—shows that both pilchards and sprats were used for making garum in Armorica on the Gallic coast and that anchovies were used for making garum in Pompeii.

In the seventh century C.E., Isidore of Seville (Orig. 20.3.19) comments that the number of fish included in garum is “infinite” (ex infinito). For further ancient references to fish used in fish sauces, see “Garum” in PW 7:842. P. Grimal and Th. Monod (“Sur la véritable nature du garum,” 30ff.) show that the fishes used in ancient fish sauces are similar to the ones used in fish sauces in contemporary Indochina.

aid, which was frequently ingested as a medication and which was sometimes applied as an unguent to wounds.<sup>105</sup>

Like garum, which served as a salty inducement to appetite, salt fish also served as a standard appetizer in ancient meals.<sup>106</sup> For the feast of a rich person, especially befitting and appropriate (among other things) was “salt fish” (τάριχος) from Spain.<sup>107</sup>

From this brief overview, one can understand what an important position fish sauces (especially garum) and salt fish held throughout the geographical extent and socio/economic entirety of the Graeco-Roman world. Like salt throughout the contemporary Western world, they served the function of condiments at virtually every meal. In fact, the smell and taste of fish were ubiquitous on non-meat items—legumes, carbohydrates, ruffage, and even in non-culinary medicinal concoctions.

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105. When ingested it was supposed to mitigate the effects of humours, to promote digestion and to heal indigestion, to stimulate the appetite, and to prevent both constipation and diarrhea. Because of its astringent properties, Pliny (HN 31.96-97) and others describe it as particularly effective when applied as an unguent in healing wounds and skin ailments. For collection of the relevant references, see “Garum” in PW 7:846-47; T. H. Corcoran, “Roman Fish Sauces,” 207; and especially R. I. Curtis, Garum and Salsamenta.

106. Commenting most extensively on this is naturally Athenaeus (Deip. 2.116 A - 121 D; 2.125 A; so also, Strabo, in scattered references in the Geo., as indicated in n. 95), who refers to salted fish as τάριχος and (when it is used solely as an appetizer) as ὠραῖον. Included under this category is a wide variety of species, especially sturgeon (Gk. ἄντακαῖος, ἀκκιπήσιος, ἔλλοψ; Lat. accipenser, ellops), tuna, and mackerel. The Athenians loved salt fish to such an extent that they enrolled the sons of a salt fish dealer as citizens (though apparently with some criticism): Athenaeus, Deip. 2.120 F. For salt fish devotees there was also a special term, φιλοτάριχος:

### **General Conclusions**

From this one should not be hasty to conclude that early Christian fish symbolism was based intentionally and directly on the use of fish sauces and salt fish. In fact, early Christian fish symbolism clearly referred to fish themselves rather than to fish sauces.

But that fish sauces and salt fish were such a normal and ubiquitous component of day-to-day life in Graeco-Roman antiquity does suggest an environment that would make fish symbolism attractive and acceptable to early Christian. For one living in the United States or western Europe in the late twentieth century, it may be difficult to imagine what the effect might have been, when virtually every piece of food, which was to be consumed, tasted and smelled of fish. Yet that was exactly the situation in antiquity. In the final analysis, fish symbolism is much more likely to arise in this kind of context than in a context where fish is of only secondary or minor importance.

Even more significant the use of fish as a condiment formed only a part of its role in secular cuisine. Not only did fish serve this accessory purpose, but they also functioned as main courses in the meals of virtually everyone in the Graeco-Roman world. Thus, fish were even more ubiquitous in the Graeco-Roman world than already indicated.

Consequently, it should be even less surprising that fish became such an important early Christian symbol, since fish symbolism emerged out of a culinary context, in which one's olfactory, gustatory, and visual

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Athenaeus, Deip. 2.125 A.

senses were suffused with the presence of fish.

In the normal meal, one would have seen, smelled, and eaten fish—— regularly sized fish; large, heavy and magnificent fish (on special occasions); small salt fish; and fish sauces. In eating, therefore, one could scarcely have escaped fish.

In addition, in the air of a typical ancient city street, one would have smelled the odor of fish wafting from the fish markets, which were so popular in the ancient world, from the smoke of fish (especially small fish) grilled on open fires outside buildings,<sup>108</sup> from the factories in which rotting fish were laid out in the sun for the preparation and creation of fish sauces, and from the fish that were set out on altars as offerings to chthonic deities (such as Hecate).<sup>109</sup> Travelling on the road from city to city, one would have inhaled the smell of fish coming from the sacks of salt fish that travellers on roads carried with them on their shoulders as their nutritional sustenance. Everywhere one went, one would have been likely to encounter fish in one form or another.

In addition, one would have seen fish depicted everywhere in paintings, relief work, sarcophagi, mosaics, and other media, found both in homes and cemeteries. Especially common would have been scenes of

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107. Lucian, The Ship or the Wishes 23.

108. For example, in the fifth century B.C.E., Epicharmus spoke of “plump small fry roasted on a fire” (ἀφύας ἀπεπυρίζομες στρογγύλας): in his Sirens (Σειρήνες) as cited in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.277 F. According to another tradition, the Cynic Crates (late fourth and early third centuries B.C.E.) used to roast sprats (τῶν μαινίδων ἀποτύρις) in the smelting ovens, where the Festival of the Smiths (τὰ Χαλκεῖα) took place: Stobaeus, Ecl. 4.33.31.

banquets and scenes of sea life.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, at expensive banquets, the featuring of huge fishes as a spectacular sight constituted one of the major purposes and effects of the culinary preparation of the fish.

Indeed, I would propose that it is only because it was ubiquitous that the use of fish as a symbol could have arisen in early Christianity. Thus, one must pay attention not only to those features of fish in the Graeco-Roman world that were directly influential on early Christian fish symbolism, but also to the general context that made it possible for early Christian fish symbolism to emerge and flourish.

### **Secular Features of Early Christian Fish Symbolism**

In general, therefore, I would suggest that early Christian fish symbolism, as I will confirm in greater detail in the following chapters, reflected to a considerable degree the importance of fish in the secular cuisine of the ancient Mediterranean world. In fact, it would seem that early Christian interpreters often transformed the secular aspects of fish symbolism and gave them religious connotations. In addition, it should now be clear that assumptions of a clear separation between what was religious and what was secular are false. Here, I would cite as one example the festivities associated with the serving of sturgeon at feasts, where secular and religious connotations were already inextricably intertwined.

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109. On laying fish for Hecate, see p. 163 and n. 123 below.



### **Some Meals in Ancient Judaism**

One should also not neglect the possibility of the influence of ancient Judaism; for it seems that, in many cases, Jews in the Graeco-Roman world considered it de rigueur to serve fish in religious meals.<sup>111</sup>

For example, in rabbinic texts, there are statements to the effect that Jews could (and sometimes should) eat especially large and fine fish to honor the Sabbath.<sup>112</sup> Considering the importance of single large fish on elegant tables in the Graeco-Roman world (as discussed above), it is probable that ancient Jews took up this practice in response to Greek and Roman customs.

In one passage, in the mid-first century C.E., Persius complains about the eating practices of the Roman Jews on Sabbaths, when one finds on their dinner table a red dish with the tail of a tuna floating in it.<sup>113</sup> It is possible that this description refers to some kind of fish broth or sauce, such as muria, which was considered even better than the standard garum.<sup>114</sup> In any event, it shows that fish or fish sauce could

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110. See pp. 288-91 and pp. 518-85 below.

111. Evidence for the importance of fish on Jewish holidays may be following: I. Schleftelowitz, "Das Fisch Symbol," 18-21; F. Dölger, E. Goodenough, Symbols 5:41-47.

112. BT Shabbat 118b; Yalk. Isaiah 58: These emphasize the exhortation to eat fish on Sabbaths. See also Neh. 13.16, when the Tyrians brought fish (as well as other merchandise) to the Jews in Jerusalem. There is in addition a story describing how a certain tailor paid a large sum for a beautiful fish and then brought it to a Sabbath meal: MR Gen. 11.4; Pesik. Rabb. 23.6; BT Shabbat 119a. A fish is mentioned in connection with the Sabbath also in the following two sources: Mish. Betsah 2.1; BT Betsah 17b.

113. Persius, Sat. 5.180-84. On the Persius passage, see M. Stern,

be used on special Jewish holidays.<sup>115</sup>

In such cases, it would seem that the use of fish stemmed not necessarily and exclusively from the religious symbolism of fish in ancient Judaism, but partly because fish represented fine dining—suggesting, as in Graeco-Roman tradition, that secular and religious features were already combined.

Thus, when the Avercius inscription speaks of a religious meal with a huge fish, it may be drawing on a Jewish meal tradition, which (like Graeco-Roman meals with fish) was already partly religious and partly secular.

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Greek and Latin Authors 1:435-37 (with full bibliography); and F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 2:94-95, 543.

114. See Manilius, Astr. 5.668-72; Martial, Epig. 13.103; Auson. Ep. 13.21. On cooking of tuna in general, see D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes, 88-89.

115. It is difficult to say whether or not the eating of a fish was customary for the supposed ancient Jewish festival, entitled in Latin, cena pura. See Endnote 3 for fuller discussion.

## **FISH IN SACRAL CONTEXTS**

### **Introduction**

Yet, the early Christian meals found in texts and depicted in iconography refer not only to a secular meal, but also to some type of sacred meal. While the influence of secular features of Graeco-Roman fish interpretation are extremely significant for an understanding of early Christian fish symbolism, nevertheless early Christian meals with fish have, at least in part, a fundamental and powerful religious component.

In addition, as will become clear in the next chapters, early Christian fish symbolism outside of the context of meal scenes also included religious elements that were crucial to its expression. This is demonstrated by the references of fish to Christ, to a new age, to rebirth through baptism, to immortality, to death to the world, as well as to conversion and the consequent multiplication of Christian followers.

Thus, an investigation of the functions of fish in sacred contexts in the Graeco-Roman world should prove useful.

### **Fish and death**

In the ancient world, fish were frequently associated with death. This is especially true of dolphins, which were considered fish,<sup>116</sup> and which often were said to have carried dead bodies on their backs, such as those of Achilles and Melicertes/Palaemon.<sup>117</sup> According to one

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116. See n. 154

117. A “team of dolphins” (*delphines biugi*) bears the dead Achilles on his mother Thetis’ lap to his burial: Statius, *Achil.* 1.217ff. Also

story, after the dead bodies of Hesiod and his servant Troilus were thrown into the sea, dolphins bore them to Rhium near Molycreia (in Locris Ozolis in central mainland Greece) so that their corpses would receive proper burial.<sup>118</sup> At the end of some stories about them and their relationships with young boys, they often die out of heartbreak over boys whom they loved. Other stories describe them as sometimes attending the funeral of those who saved their lives.<sup>119</sup> In general, in the view of Plutarch, “they have an affectionate and humane interest in

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dolphins carried Melicertes/Palaemon to his place of burial: Pausanias, Descrip. Gr. 1.44.7-8; Lucian, Dial. Mar. 5 (8); Statius, Theb. 1.121-22; and Claudian, Epithal. 156.

118. Plutarch, Sept. sap. conv. 162 B - 162 F (originally referred to in Thucydides, Pelop. War 3.96).

119. For the tragic deaths of lovesick dolphins, see n. 345 below. On the attendance at funerals, see the story of Coeranus, to whose funeral a host of dolphins comes; see p. 229 below.

the dead.”<sup>120</sup> And according to Aelian, they often brought the dead bodies of their fellow dolphins to shore in the hope that persons would bury them.<sup>121</sup> As their beachings on shores would appear to indicate, dolphins were even thought to have had a foreknowledge of their own imminent deaths.<sup>122</sup>

From literary and archaeological evidence, one knows that fish in general were associated with the dead and with chthonic deities. For example, according to Antiphanes, “sprats” (μαινίδες) and “surmullet” (τριγλίδες), apparently because of their “scantiness” (Βραχύτης), were the “food of Hecate” (Ἐκάτης βρώματα), goddess of the underworld.<sup>123</sup>

In his philosophical interpretation of cultic practices, the emperor Julian cites the association of fish with the underworld as one of the reasons that the worshippers of the Mother of the Gods (or Cybele) did not eat it “during the time of purification” (ἐν ἀγνείας καιρῷ). Unlike certain vegetables and fruits which grow upward toward the sky (and thus may be eaten by the worshippers of Cybele), fish, like roots and seeds which grow under the ground, live “at the lowest depths” (κατὰ τοῦ βυθοῦ) nearest the underworld. As a result, they were not appropriate as food.<sup>124</sup>

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120. Plutarch, Sept. sap. conv. 162 F: “ἐχουσιν οικείως καὶ φιλανθρώπως πρὸς τοὺς ἀποθανόντας.”

121. NA 12.6, where he says that they are “mindful of their dead” (νεκρῶν μνημόνες). In part, human beings bury them out of respect for their musicality; see n. 348.

122. They were believed to be aware of their “end of life” (τέρμα βίου): Oppian, Hal. 2.628-41.

123. Antiphanes (fourth century B.C.E. dramatist of Middle Comedy) in a fragment from The Hick (Ὁ Ἀγροικός) or Boutalion (βουταλίῳν) in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.313 B; 8.358 F. Evidently, surmullet was not

In addition, literary and epigraphic texts indicate that relatives and friends of deceased persons brought fish as offerings to the dead. According to a tradition preserved in Athenaeus, certain fish travelled on the Olynthiac river north of the Chalcidic peninsula in northern Greece at a particular time of year so that they would intentionally make themselves available as roasted offerings (*ἀποπύρις*) to the dead Olynthus.<sup>125</sup> At Phaselis in Lycia, the inhabitants brought salt fish as offerings to the dead hero Cylabras.<sup>126</sup> In a testamentary inscription from the Greek island of Cos, a certain deceased Diomedes established a procedure as part of the cult of the dead to bring a yearly “offering of dead fish” (*ἀποπύρις*) in his honor.<sup>127</sup> In another testamentary inscription from the Cycladic island of Thera, an individual named Epictetus established that “three roasted fish” (*πάρρακα...ὀψάρια τ[ρι]α*) be brought as an offering in the cult of the dead.<sup>128</sup> In Italy, it is known from the most complete extant example of a Roman funerary collegium as valued in the fourth century B.C.E. as they were in the early imperial period.

124. Julian, Orat. 5 (Hymn to the Mother of the Gods) 177 A - C. On this passage, see also n. 372. For a discussion (with references) of the appropriate sacrificial items for chthonic and non-chthonic deities, see F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 2:1-24. On the dangers of the depths of the ocean for Christians, see pp. 447-50 below.

125. Deip. 8.334 E. For more on the topic of *ἀποπύρις*, see F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 2:377ff.

126. Athenaeus, Deip. 7.297 E - F.

127. SIG 3<sup>3</sup>.1106; also found in B. Laum, Stiftungen 45 (2:52-56).

128. IG 12<sup>3</sup>.330, also found in B. Laum, Stiftungen 43 (2:43-52).

(the worshippers of Diana and Antinous) that the diners ate “sardines” (sardas).<sup>129</sup>

As further confirming evidence, I would also note that fish were associated with death in an astrological sense as one of the indicators of the death of an age.<sup>130</sup>

In addition, numerous pagan paintings and sarcophagi with scenes of diners sitting or lying on a couch in front of a table with a fish on it most likely show that visitors to the grave often consumed fish in meals for, and with, the dead. In part, these meals, and the fish in them, clearly refer to the Graeco-Roman cult of the dead. In this regard, it is important to know that (as literary and epigraphic sources demonstrate) cemeteries and tombs in Graeco-roman antiquity were places particularly characterized at appropriate times by the visits of relatives and friends of the dead—not merely to observe and to contemplate—but rather to participate near the graves in various ceremonies that culminated in ritual meals. Through these meals, the participants not only remembered the dead, but actually communicated in table fellowship with them.<sup>131</sup>

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129. Cultores Dianae et Antinoi: CIL 14.2112 (2.14) and discussed in detail by J.-P. Waltzing, Étude historique 1:268ff. For more on this inscription, see nn. 153 and 221 below in Chapter 4.

130. See pp. 248-61 below.

131. See pp. 518-85 below for analysis of this iconography and for more discussion of the cult of the dead. There I also discuss the viewpoints of other interpreters who do not believe that this iconography refers to cult of the dead meals.

Of course, the above-mentioned meal iconography could have referred not only to one specific genre of meals, but could also have indicated in a general way several different types of meals. This would include among other things a meal in paradise that some in the Graeco-Roman world believed would take place for the elect.<sup>132</sup> For example, in the well-known painting in Rome of the heavenly ascent of Vibia in the so-called hypogeum of Vibia (probably a syncretistic monument, including worshippers of Christ, Mithras, and Sebazius), accompanying inscriptions in this pictorial composition definitively indicate that elect diners in paradise ate fish as part of a heavenly banquet.<sup>133</sup>

Thus one can surmise that fish, partly because of their frequent occurrence in these meals, were naturally associated with death and after-life (which is after all a part of death), as well as with the communication between the living and the dead.

It is also of significance to note that, as early as the fifth century B.C.E. (and discussed by Athenaeus at the turn of the second century C.E.), both Sophocles and Herodotus offer “Egyptian mummy” (νεκρὸς Αἰγυπτίος) as one of the definitions of τάρπιχος (“salt fish”).<sup>134</sup> In this regard, it is interesting to observe that there are numerous examples of mummified fish from ancient Egypt in the Graeco-Roman period.<sup>135</sup>

In general, it is likely that persons in the Graeco-Roman world, when

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132. On meals in paradise, see in particular pp. 539, 554-56, 577-78 below, as well as in general pp. 518-85.

133. On this painting see especially pp. 554-55 below, as well as Jast. 25-26 in Chart 1.B in Appendix 5.

134. Sophocles, in a fragment from Phineus quoted in Athenaeus, Deip. 3.119 C; Herodotus, Hist. 9.120.



they heard, said, or thought of the word “fish” (ἰχθῦς, piscis), would have often spontaneously associated it with death.

This association of fish with death among pagans had a particular influence on early Christians as well. For example, from the numerous depictions of meals with fish in paintings and sarcophagi (dated from the third through the early fourth centuries C.E.), it is probable that early Christians viewed fish as an important component of meals that honored the dead. The importance of such meals for early Christians is confirmed in literary and epigraphic sources.<sup>136</sup>

Since fish were evidently an important component of meals honoring the dead, one must also consider the strong possibility that images of fish not only referred to early Christian funerary meals when they were placed in fully developed meal scenes in Christian paintings and sarcophagi, but that even the images of single isolated fish on Christian funerary inscriptions referred in part to funerary meals.<sup>137</sup> Such a reference may have been of secondary emphasis. Yet, considering the close association in Graeco-Roman antiquity between fish and funerary meals and considering the importance of funerary meals to many pagans early Christians, the reference of a single isolated fish to funerary meals was probably one part of its multidimensional framework of meaning.

Yet, as was the case for meals in pagan contexts where a meal scene could refer to more than one meal, early Christian meal scenes with fish

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135. For a sample collection of this material, see F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 2:143-45; 3:10-11 (for plates).

136. For this material, see pp. Chapter 3 and 4, passim.

also did not necessarily refer solely to funerary meals per se or to generic meals in paradise, but could have referred to several specifically early Christian meals, which were all linked in the context of death——namely the eucharist, the agape, and the New Testament meal of loaves and fish.<sup>138</sup> Here, I should not fail to mention that, in certain early Christian texts, Jesus was sometimes regarded as a fish roasted on the cross——thus linking the eating of the fish with both Jesus and his death.<sup>139</sup>

In addition to these references, it is also possible (though not certain) that eating of fish was associated by early Christians indirectly with a messianic banquet, in which the saved Israelites would feast on the flesh of Leviathan——who in some Rabbinic traditions significantly is called a “fish,” (אִשׁ).<sup>140</sup>

Early Christian fish imagery, therefore, echoed with the reverberations of several sacred meals, all linked in the context of death——funerary meals and eucharists, the heavenly banquet to come in the afterlife, the miraculous meal of fish and loaves in the New Testament, as well as possibly the ancient Jewish messianic meal of Leviathan.

In general, the chthonic associations of fish made it an appropriate food for all meals——pagan or Christian——associated with death.

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137. See pp. 586-613 below.

138. It is very possible that the imagery was intentionally ambiguous so as to avoid the problem of too great a restriction on meaning and to be able to allude convincingly to a wide variety of referents, including both secular meals and religious meals. On this see pp. 518-85 below.

139. See pp. 484-87 below for full discussion.

Since it was the death of Christ and his resurrection that were the central features of much of early Christianity, especially Pauline Christianity, I would also suggest that the Graeco-Roman association of fish with death made it an exceptionally appropriate animal to symbolize Christ, as, for instance, in the inscription of Avercius.<sup>141</sup> Early Christian inscriptions (especially from Rome) also use fish to refer to Christ in the context of death (both the general funerary context and the death of Christ).<sup>142</sup>

Finally, one should mention that, in early Christian literature, baptism was often compared to death. In addition, early Christian literary references (especially Tertullian) confirm that the Christians who were baptized could be referred to as fish.<sup>143</sup> The use of the image of a fish on a funerary stone would have seemed appropriate not only because fish were closely associated with death in the Graeco-Roman world, but also because early Christians were persons for whom death meant something rather singular in the Graeco-Roman world. Indeed, instead of meaning the end of life, the image of a fish on an early Christian gravestone may well have referred to the conquest of death through baptism, which was itself a kind of death, and, thus it may have meant the beginning of a new saved life.

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140. On the messianic banquet of Leviathan, see pp. 170-74 below.

141. Although F. Dölger devotes the bulk of vol. 2 of IXΘΥΣ to the funerary associations of fish in the Graeco-Roman world, it is interesting to note that he never explicitly advocates the connection between fish as a chthonic animal and fish as a symbol of Christ.

142. See pp. 586-613 below.

### **Sacred fish in ancient Judaism: the Leviathan banquet**

In ancient Judaism there was a tradition of a messianic banquet, in which the main course would have been the flesh of the great sea beast Leviathan.<sup>144</sup> In general, Leviathan was thought to have lived at the very bottom of the ocean, where its water sources originated.<sup>145</sup> As a creature of the watery depths, he was regarded as inimical to humanity, as well as to God. But when God would destroy him at the inception of the messianic age, his flesh would serve as meat upon which the victorious followers of God could then feast. In line with this, some rabbinic commentators made sure to emphasize the status of Leviathan as a kosher food, since he had both scales and fins.<sup>146</sup>

Dölger argues against the influence of the Leviathan banquet on early Christian fish symbolism, because he regards Leviathan not as a

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143. See below Chapter 3, passim, as well as 467-81.

144. In general, on the Leviathan banquet with numerous references, see I. Schleftelowitz, "Das Fisch Symbol," 6-16, et passim; and E. R. Goodenough, Jewish Symbols 5:35-41. And for a collection of many post-biblical Leviathan passages, see L. Ginzberg, Legends, 1:27-30; 1:40-42; 5:41-49. The biblical basis of the Leviathan tradition is to be found in passages, such as Ps. 74.14, 104.26; Isa. 27.1; and especially Job 41. Some important non-rabbinic passages on Leviathan are: Jubilees 2.11, Apocalypse of Abraham 10.10, 2 Baruch 29.4 (which is the earliest reference to feasting on Leviathan, as well as on the great land beast Behemoth).

145. E.g. 1 Enoch 60.7-8.

146. This is true, despite the protestation of Ginzberg (Legends 5:43), who erroneously sees no relation between the following references and the messianic banquet: Sifra 11.10; BT Hullin 67b; and WR 22.10.

fish, but as an evil monster.<sup>147</sup> This position understands early Christians to have clearly regarded ΙΧΘΥΣ as a fish (“The Fish”) and to have considered fish in early Christian monuments and literature sympathetic creatures. Yet, in the Hebrew Bible, Leviathan is described as a “serpent” (שָׂרָף, לָחָץ, the latter perhaps meaning without fins and scales).<sup>148</sup> And in the Greek Septuagint Leviathan is variously translated as a “sea monster” (μέγα κήτος),<sup>149</sup> a “dragon” (δράκων),<sup>150</sup> and a “dragon/snake” (δράκων οψις)—not the most positive of terms.<sup>151</sup>

Yet, clearly various rabbinic traditions considered Leviathan a fish, as is shown by the very fact that some regarded it as an edible (i.e. kosher) food. Moreover, modern classifications of animals do not necessarily correspond to ancient ones, since ancient writers often include mammalian species, when discussing fish. For instance, large sea creatures (κήτοι) can also describe types of fish, such as tuna.<sup>152</sup> At the same time, Firmicus Maternus can denominate the constellation Cetus (Lat. Cetus or Belua [“whale”], Gk. κήτος) with a Greek word for a type of fish called ὀρφός (transliterated into Lat. by him as

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147. ΙΧΘΥΣ 2:490-91.

148. Isa. 27.1.

149. Job 3.8.

150. Ps. 104.26.

151. Isa. 27.1.

152. Athenaeus, Deip. 303 B - C.

orphus)——a name probably used for the sea perch.<sup>153</sup> Likewise, sea mammals such as dolphins can be called fish.<sup>154</sup>

On the face of it, the evil character of Leviathan would, however, seem to constitute a greater problem for its influence on ΙΧΘΥΣ (“The Fish”). Yet, a passage of Rufinus of Aquileia (in spite of its confusing language) suggests that Leviathan could refer to a fish and that he could refer to the flesh of Christ consumed in a Christian banquet held during the messianic era.<sup>155</sup> Thus, it is possible (at least for Rufinus in the fourth century C.E.) for a fish to refer simultaneously to the savior Christ and to the evil Leviathan.

That Leviathan could have been connected to early Christian fish symbolism, Schleftlowitz convincingly argues by pointing out one striking connection between Leviathan and “The Fish” (ΙΧΘΥΣ) in the Avercius inscription. Namely, the description of the fish as “huge” (πανμεγέθης), a term which may also have astrological connotations,<sup>156</sup> and as “pure” (καθαρός), corresponds precisely to some of the terminology used to describe Leviathan in rabbinic texts. For example, one source describes Leviathan as huge, taking up one-seventh of the entire

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153. Math. 8.17. So also D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes, 187-88. See additionally the other Latin fish glossaries listed in Endnote 1 for more discussion of this fish.

154. E.g. Oppian, Hal. 1.643; 5.44; Aelian, NA 15.17.

155. Text # II.C.9 in Appendix 1.

156. On fish symbolism and astrology, see pp. 248-61 below.

ocean.<sup>157</sup> In addition, Leviathan is called a “pure fish” (דג טהור).<sup>158</sup> In other words, just as Leviathan is huge and pure, so also ΙΧΘΥΣ (“The Fish”) is huge and pure. While one may question (as Louis Ginzberg does) whether טהור refers literally to “clean” food, its use is strikingly close to that of καθαρὸς in the Avercius inscription.

Yet, because of the above mentioned personality problem of Leviathan and because there is no direct linking evidence, one should be careful to avoid the one-to-one correspondence equivalence of ΙΧΘΥΣ (“The Fish”) with Leviathan.

Rather, it is more appropriate to consider the Leviathan tradition as the background soil out of which a very different tradition grew. That is, because early Christians may have known of early Jewish interpretive traditions of Leviathan, they were able to transform that tradition from one focussed on Leviathan into one focused on the fish as Christ. The existence of one type of fish banquet most likely made possible its transformation into a very different kind of fish banquet. This would help to explain the messianic connotations of “The Fish” (ΙΧΘΥΣ) and the vocabulary similarities between the description of the fish in the Avercius inscription and in certain rabbinic texts.

While it is unlikely (contra Schleftelowitz and Goodenough) that the banquet with fish in (for example) the Avercius inscription primarily refers to the eating of Leviathan, it is still nevertheless, in my opinion, probable (contra Dölger, who seems uncomfortable with Jewish influ-

ence in general) that the early Jewish tradition of a fish or sea creature being eaten in a messianic banquet served as one of the models for the symbolic ingestion of ΙΧΘΥΣ (“The Fish”) by Avercius and his Christian compatriots (as in the eucharist).<sup>159</sup>

Thus, the Leviathan banquet constituted one small facet of the multi-dimensional frame of reference of fish symbolism.

### **Sacred fish in pagan religions**

Sacred fish are found very frequently in Graeco-Roman tradition. Consequently, they no doubt contributed to the acceptance within the early Christian community of the association of fish with sacrality and especially the association of fish with the most sacred figure of Christianity—Jesus Christ.

For example, from reliefs found primarily in Thrace (now found in northern Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania), it would seem that, in the cult of the Thracian Rider, very possibly sacred fishes were served in cultic meals.<sup>160</sup> In this iconography, it would seem that a fish on a large platter was associated with certain religious events that were also depicted. In cases such as these, like the fish which were consumed in funeral

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157. 4 Ezra 6.52.

158. Sifra 11.10; BT Hullin 67b.

159. On the lack of attention to ancient Judaism by Dölger and Antike und Christentum, p. 104 and nn. 214-215

160. For this material, see F. Dölger, ΙΧΘΥΣ 2:420p2f47, 4:113p2f17 (plates). For the Thracian Rider cult in general (including this material), see the extensive collection in Corpus Cultus Equitis Thracii.



meals, fish functioned as sacred food to be consumed in ritual meals of a religious cult. It is not possible to determine, whether Thracian Rider fishes have chthonic associations, but it is probable that the purpose of such meals was not limited exclusively to death.<sup>161</sup>

As numerous passages in Greek and Latin writings indicate, however, more commonly in Graeco-Roman antiquity, for a variety of reasons, pagans considered many fish so sacred that members of various religious groups, as well as individuals in diverse geographical locations, felt compelled to abstain from them as food. Ironically, while fish were evidently an important component of funerary cuisine, many ancient writers in other contexts comment that certain kinds of fish were not permitted to be eaten. As I will now show, there were several reasons for this.

First, many in the Graeco-Roman world regarded a variety of different fishes as sacred—and, thus, not to be caught, killed, or eaten—particularly because they were sacred to various deities.

For example, the priests of Poseidon at Leptis (probably in Egypt) refused to eat “any sea creature” (*ἔναλος τὸ παράπαν*), while the priestess of Hera at Argos in Argolis abstained from fish to pay them “honor” (*τιμῆ*)—evidently because they were sacred to Poseidon and Hera respectively.<sup>162</sup> The pilot-fish was sacred to Poseidon, as well as the Samothracian gods. As a result, when the fisherman Epopeus and his son made a meal of it, a sea monster killed and swallowed Epopeus in

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161. In general, the tendency to view mystery cults exclusively in terms of the attempt to overcome death through belief in afterlife is

front of the eyes of his son—clearly implying that one should not eat consecrated fish.<sup>163</sup> Likewise, if a dolphin ate a pilot-fish, it soon afterwards became helpless and died.<sup>164</sup> If a human being ate it, it was considered a “transgression of the law” (παρὰνομέω),<sup>165</sup> as was the case when human beings ate dolphins.<sup>166</sup> Also sacred to Poseidon were the crabs in the Red Sea: “They were consecrated to the god, so that as offerings to him crabs were free from harm and not liable to attack.”<sup>167</sup> In the “Lake of Poseidon” (λίμνη καλουμένη Ποσειδῶνος) in Aegiae in Laconia, people were afraid to catch and eat the fish in it, since they thought that, on account of the location of the Temple of Poseidon beside it, the fisherman would turn into the fish called “angler” or “fish-ing-frog.”<sup>168</sup>

In the fountain of Arethusa, which was sacred to Artemis, on the island of Ortygia off the coast of Sicily at Syracuse, lived a variety of

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overstated.

162. Plutarch, De soll. an. 983 F.

163. Gk. πομπίλος, ἡγητήρ; Lat. naucrates ductor. Aelian NA 15.23; Athenaeus, Deip. 7.282 E - 284 B. See for more discussion of the pilot-fish nn. 332 and 339 below, as well as p. 184.

164. See previous footnote for references.

165. Athenaeus, Deip. 7.283 C.

166. See n. 343.

167. "καὶ ἀφιέρονται τῷ θεῷ, οἷον ἀναθήματα εἶναι ἐκείνου ἀσινῆ τε καὶ ἀνεπιβούλευτα οἱ καρκίνοι"; as quoted from Aelian (NA 17.1) who was himself paraphrasing a certain Alexander from his Voyage Around the Red Sea (Ὁ Περίπλοος τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς Θαλάττης). Crab = Gk. καρκίνος; Lat. cancer.

large fish, consecrated to the goddess; if anyone ate them, they were punished.<sup>169</sup> Others said that the surmullet was sacred to Artemis and carried in her procession at Delphi, because it killed sea-hares, which were extremely poisonous to human beings.<sup>170</sup> According to this tradition, both the goddess Artemis and the killing of the sea-hare by the surmullet benefitted humankind.<sup>171</sup> In Eleusis the surmullet was also sacred, and evidently not eaten.<sup>172</sup>

According to Plutarch, “all sea creatures” (τὰ κατὰ θάλατταν) were “sacred” (ιερός) and “kindred” (ἀδελφός) to Aphrodite, who did not approve of their “killing” (φονεῖω).<sup>173</sup> Likewise, the gilthead was sacred to Aphrodite,<sup>174</sup> as was the peacock fish (doubtless because of

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168. Pausanias, Descr. Gr. 3.21.5. Angler = Gk. ἀλιεύς; Lat. rana, piscatrix.

169. Diodorus Siculus (Bibl. 5.3.5-6), who reports on the sacred origins of the fountain and of the island, on the “many large fish” (μεγάλοι καὶ πολλοὶ ἰχθύες) which inhabit it, and on those who are punished for eating those fish; the latter also in Bibl. 34.7.9. In addition, see Plutarch, De soll. an. 976 A.

170. Sea-Hare = Gk. λαγὼς ὁ θαλάττιος; Lat. lepus marinus.

171. Hegesander of Delphi (second century B.C.E.), probably in his Memoirs (Υπομνήματα), recorded in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.325 C: “for the benefit of humankind” (ἐπ’ ὠφελεία τῶν ἀνθρώπων). See also Plutarch, De soll. an. 983 F. On the poison of the sea-hare, see especially Pliny, HN 9.155; and D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes, 142-44.

172. Aelian, NA 9.51. It was sacred, either because it gave birth three times (τρὶς) a year or because it killed sea-hares.

173. Plutarch, De soll. an. 983 E - F.

174. Gk. χρύσοφρυς (also χρυσοπός, χρύσαφος, χρυσοφός); Lat. aurata, chrysophrys. On its consecration to Aphrodite, see the fragment from the play, “The Fish” (Ἰχθύεις), by the fifth century

its beauty) in the river Hyphasis in India.<sup>175</sup> Because the murex (or purple shellfish) was thought on its own to be able to stop a ship and because it did just that at the behest of Periander (Corinthian tyrant, 625-585 B.C.E.), so that some youths on the ship could “be castrated” (castrarentur), it was worshipped for that service at the shrine of Venus at Cnidus.<sup>176</sup> The “shellfish” (concha), mentioned in a number of sources as the sailboat, was sacred to Venus, since it used to carry her on the ocean; this fish was probably the argonaut, because the argonaut was well-known in antiquity for using its feelers as sails and oars so that it resembled a sailboat.<sup>177</sup>

At Pharae in Egypt, a “spring” (πηγή) sacred to Hermes contained fish, which, because they were considered sacred to Hermes, one could

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B.C.E. Athenian comic poet Archippus (recorded in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.328 A - B). On its generally sacred character, see the following sources: Plutarch, De soll. an. 981 D; Athenaeus, Deip. 7.284 C. Jerome refers to it, when he speaks of the fisher of human beings (piscator hominum, i.e. Jesus), who draws up the gilthead, i.e. a Christian (in this case, Lucinus): Text # II.A.5 in Appendix 1.

175. Philostratus, VA 3.1. Peacock fish = ἰχθύς ταῶς.

176. Pliny, NH 9.80. Purple-shellfish = Gk. πορφύρα; Lat. murex. For an extensive discussion of this fish and its use as a dye, see especially Pliny, HN 9.125-41; D.W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes, 208-18; and (in general on purple) M. Reinhold, History of Purple. See pp. 292-301 below for the relation of this fish to sexuality.

177. Argonaut = Gk. ναυτίλος, ναύπλιος, ποντίλος; Lat. nautilus and nauplius. On this fish and on the identification of it as the shell (concha), in which Aphrodite rode, see especially D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes, 172-75, with references. On the shell of Venus, see Tibullus 3.3.34; Statius, Sily. 1.2.117; and Fabius Plancius Fulgentius (fifth century C.E. mythographer), Myth. 2.4.

not catch or eat.<sup>178</sup> Since certain streams (called Hreitoi=οἱ Πειροί) at Eleusis were sacred to Kore and Demeter, only the priests could eat the fish in it,<sup>179</sup> as was perhaps also the case for priests of the Syrian Goddess.<sup>180</sup> Among other reasons,<sup>181</sup> the surmullet was sacred to Hecate, because Hecate was also a “sea goddess” (θαλαττιος).<sup>182</sup> On the island of Seriphos in the Cyclades, the inhabitants not only returned sea-cicadas to the sea when caught, but they even buried them and “mourned” (θρηνέω) for them when they died, since they considered them the “darlings” (αθουρμα) of Perseus, son of Zeus.<sup>183</sup>

Some fish were sacred to various deities because of their names. Thus, since the box fish grunted, it was associated with Hermes (god of eloquence and rhetoric).<sup>184</sup> Since the name for the kitharos fish (κιθαρος) was the same word as “lyre,” it was associated by Greek-speaking individuals with Apollo (god of music, who is characterized frequently in iconography as playing the lyre).<sup>185</sup> The surmullet (τριγλη) was sacred to Hecate because its name was phonetically similar to the epithet

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178. Pausanias, Descr. Gr. 7.22.4.

179. Pausanias, Descr. Gr. 1.38.1.

180. See p. 193 and n. 244.

181. See pp. 179-80 immediately below.

182. Melanthius (350-270 B.C.E.), in a fragment from On the Eleusinian Mysteries (Περὶ τῶν ἐν Ἐλευσίῃ Μυστηρίων), recorded in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.325 C.

183. Aelian, NA 12.26. Sea-cicada = τέπτιξ ὁ ἐνάλιος.

184. Athenaeus, Deip. 7.287 A, 325 B. The box fish (βῶξ) is so

of Hecate, “of the triple crossroads” (τριγλανθινη).<sup>186</sup> And since the word for “small fry” (ἀφύη) originated from the word for the “foam/ semen” (ἀφρός), out of which Aphrodite was born, it was especially beloved to Aphrodite.<sup>187</sup>

That some fish were generally sacred and were consecrated to certain divinities, is also indicated by the sacrifices of fish to a variety of deities. Around Lake Copais in Boeotia, the people sacrificed wreathed eels.<sup>188</sup> At Halae in Locris Opuntia, they sacrificed the first tuna (called the thynnaion) to Poseidon.<sup>189</sup> At Phaselis in Lycia, they sacrificed smoked fish, because it was the payment of the Rhodians, when they colonized Phaselis.<sup>190</sup>

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named from its grunt.

185. Athenaeus, Deip. 7.287 A.

186. Apollodorus of Athens, in a fragment from On the Gods (Περὶ Θεῶν), recorded in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.325 C.

187. Athenaeus, Deip. 7.325 B.

188. Agatharchides (grammarian and Peripatetic from Cnidos from the second century B.C.E.), in a fragment from European Histories (Τὰ κατὰ τὴν Ἑυρώπην) in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.297 D. When asked why they did it, they responded that they were simply following “ancestral customs” (τὰ προγονικὰ νόμιμα) and that they did not have to “justify” (ἀπολογίζομαι) this practice to anyone.

189. θυνναῖον, in Antigonus of Carystus (fl. c. 240 B.C.E.), in a fragment from his On Diction (Περὶ Λέξεως), in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.297 D.

190. Smoked fish = τάρηχοι. This story is found in the following sources from Athenaeus, Deip. 7.297 E - 298: Heropythus, in a fragment from Annals of the Colophonians (Ἔρηροι Κωλοφωνίων); Philostephanus of Cyrene (geographer of the third century B.C.E.), in a fragment from Cities of Asia (ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ Πόλεις).

The close relationship between fish and specific divinities was, at least from the Hellenistic period on, very much embedded in the symbolic framework of Greeks and Romans. For example, in Graeco-Roman religious traditions, gods could metamorphose into fish, such as Venus,<sup>191</sup> Atargatis/Derceto/Venus,<sup>192</sup> Ares,<sup>193</sup> and Poseidon.<sup>194</sup> Thus, the relationship between certain fish and a particular divine entity was an extremely close one, since it was based on the fact that a fish could be a god and a god could be a fish. In addition, as the following cases suggest, fish were beings that were respected to such an extent that they could bear divine names: adonis fish (that is, Adonis, whose cult probably originated in Cyprus);<sup>195</sup> glaucos fish (that is, Glaucus);<sup>196</sup> and zeus faber (i.e. Zeus/Jupiter = the fish called John Dory in English).<sup>197</sup>

Thus, for Greeks and Romans, the voyage from a fish to a deity was an extremely short one.

Second, not only their association with a specific deity, but also their location in certain sacred geographical positions——especially in the Nile river in Egypt——also made certain fish sacred. In general, the

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191. Ovid, Met. 5.331.

192. See p. 194.

193. Nicander of Colophon in Antoninus Liberalis, Collection of Metamorphoses (Μεταμορφώσεων συναγωγή) 28 (drawn to my attention by F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 2:122, n. 3).

194. E.g. Ovid, Met. 6.120.

195. Gk. ἄδωνις and Lat. adonis. This fish climbs out onto land in order to sleep; for references, see n. 472.

Egyptians regarded many different types of fish inhabiting the Nile as sacred, a fact which was attested as early as Herodotus.<sup>198</sup> Some of these fish are the following: the oxyrynchos fish (named after the city), which was completely prohibited as food, since it was sacred to Osiris, from whom it was born and with whom the Egyptians identified the Nile;<sup>199</sup> the latos fish (named after the city of Latopolis);<sup>200</sup> the lepidotos fish;<sup>201</sup> the phagros and the maiotes, because these fishes heralded the rise of the Nile in the spring;<sup>202</sup> and eels, which many Egyptians evidently regarded as divine.<sup>203</sup>

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196. Athenaeus, Deip. 7.295 B - 297 C. Glaucos fish = γλαύκος.

197. Gk. χαλκεύς, ζαίος (= Zeus, Ζεὺς).

198. Hist. 2.77, where he says that they ate fish, “except for those which the people (Egyptians) of that country considered sacred” (χωρὶς ἢ ὁκόσοι σφι ἱεροὶ ἀποδεδέχονται).

199. Ὀξύρρυγχος (of uncertain identification): Aelian, NA 10.46. See also Strabo, Geo. 17.40; and Clement, Protrep. 2.39.5.

200. Λάτος (of uncertain identification): Strabo, Geo. 17.40 and 17.47.

201. Λεπιδοτός (of uncertain identification): Herodotus, Hist. 2.72; Strabo, Geo. 17.40.

202. Phagros = φάγρος and maiotes=μαιώτης. At Syene they worshipped the phagros, and at Elephantine they worshipped the maiotes. See Aelian, NA 10.19; and Clement, Protrep. 2.39.5.

203. Eel=Gk. εγγελύς; Lat. anguilla: Herodotus, Hist. 2.72, who mentions it as sacred. In two satirical remarks recorded by Athenaeus (Deip. 7.299 E), individuals mocked the divine status of eels in Egypt. According to Antiphanes (dramatist of Middle Comedy in the fourth century B.C.E.), in a fragment from Lycon (Λύκων), the Egyptians recongized eels as “equal to the gods” (ἰσόθεος); and according to Anaxandrides (also a dramatist of Middle Comedy in the fourth century B.C.E.), in a fragment from Towns (Πόλις), the Egyptians considered the eel a “great divinity” (μέγιστος δαίμων).



In addition to fish in the Nile, a variety of other fish (which were also regarded as tame) were considered sacred, because they inhabited sacred springs and other water containers in religious sanctuaries:<sup>204</sup> at Stephanopolis in Epirus in cisterns (δεξαμεναι) beside the temple of Fortune; in the spring of Arethusa at Chalcis in Euboea; in the “spring” (πηγή, fons) in the “sanctuary of Apollo” (νεὸς Ἀπόλλωνος) at Myra in Lycia; in a spring at the temple of Zeus in Labranda in Caria;<sup>205</sup> and in the sacred (to Hera, because she bathed there after her marriage to Zeus) “spring of Chabura” (πηγή, fons Chabura) in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers.<sup>206</sup>

Third, as suggested above in the case of the surmullet (which was sacred because it killed sea-hares), in addition to their connections with various deities, fish were also sacred for a variety of other reasons (sometimes not stated).<sup>207</sup> For example, perhaps because it is white, the white fish was considered sacred.<sup>208</sup> Other sea creatures mentioned as

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204. For these references, see Pliny, NH 32.16-17; and Aelian NA 12.30. See also pp. 218-21 below for further discussion. These waters were generally considered to have purificatory functions; on the topic of purification, see for a start W. Burkert, Greek Religion, 75ff.

205. “in the spring of Jupiter at Labranda” (in Labrayndi Iovis fonte), Pliny, HN 32.16; “in the sanctuary of Zeus at Labranda in a spring of transparent running water” (ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ δὲ τοῦ Λαβρανδέως Διὸς ἐν κρήνῃ διειδοῦς νάματος), Aelian, NA 12.30.

206. It was celebrated for its “transparent” (διειδής) quality.

207. See also below on p. 190 below on the anthias fish as a guarantor of peace in the areas of the sea in which it was present.

208. Λεῦκος (of uncertain identification): fragment from the Berenice (Βερενίκη) of Theocritus of Syracuse (third century B.C.E.),

sacred were the following ones: the hyce fish,<sup>209</sup> turtles, which, according to Pliny, were worshipped by the Troglydites or cave dwellers (Trogodytae) of Ethiopia;<sup>210</sup> and argonauts, as well as octupi, at Troezen in Argolis.<sup>211</sup> According to Oppian, the species of grey mullet was regarded as a “holy race” (ἀγνὰ γένεθλα), because they ate none of their own species or of any other fish.<sup>212</sup> One should add that some considered the pilot-fish sacred, not only because it was connected to Poseidon and to the Samothracian gods, but because it guided ships from open sea into harbour.<sup>213</sup>

Of all sea creatures, perhaps those considered most sacred were dolphins, which ancient writers in antiquity classified among fish.<sup>214</sup> While dolphins were especially sacred to Poseidon,<sup>215</sup> who could himself

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recorded in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.284 A.

209. According to Callimachus (third century B.C.E.), in a fragment from his Epigrams, “his god is the sacred hyce” (θεὸς δὲ οἱ ἱερὸς ὕκης): Athenaeus, Deip. 7.327 A.

210. Pliny, HN 9.38.

211. According to Clearchus (fourth century B.C.E. dramatist of Middle Comedy) in a fragment from On Proverbs (Περὶ Παροιμιῶν) in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.317 B. Octopus = Gk. πολύπους (with minor variants) and Lat. polypus. In this passage, it would seem that κωπηλάτης πολύπους (=literally the rowing octopus) refers to the above-mentioned argonaut.

212. Oppian, Hal. 2.642-48. See also pp. 223-24 below.

213. See n. 339 below.

214. See n. 154 above.

215. As Oppian says, Poseidon “loves” (ἀγαπάζω) them (Hal. 5.385), and they are his “attendants” (προπόλοι; Hal. 5.422). Poseidon “rules over dolphins” (δελφίνων μεδέων), who were his attendants:

metamorphose into a dolphin,<sup>216</sup> and were to a lesser extent associated with Dionysus,<sup>217</sup> ancient writers considered dolphins generally sacred, godlike, and beloved of all the gods.<sup>218</sup> They obtained this status pri-

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Aristophanes, Knights 560. In order to reward dolphins for finding Amphitrite, whom Poseidon loved, “in the halls of Ocean” (ἐν Ὠκεανοῦ δόμοισι; Oppian, Hal. 1.388) “on the islands of Atlas” (κατὰ τὰς νήσους τοῦ Ἀτλαντος), “he assigned them the greatest glory” (μεγίστην δόξαν αὐτῶ ἀπονέμοντες), by placing them as a constellation in the sky: Eratosthenes, Catasterismorum Reliquiae 31; Schol. Arati 5.316 p. 79,23; Schol. Germanici BP p. 92,2; Schol. Germanici G. p. 161.22; and Hyginus, Poet. Astr. 2.17. As a result, they were “sacred” (ἱερός) to him. According to another story (Ovid, Fast. 2.79-118), the dolphin became a constellation, because he rescued Arion (see n. 349). In the pseudepigraphical poem of Arion, the connection between Poseidon and his dolphins is also clear: in Aelian, NA 12.45. In his interpretation of the affection of dolphins for a young boy Hermaias in the city of Iassus in Caria, Alexander the Great made Hermaias a priest of Poseidon as a sign of the favor of Poseidon for him: Pliny, HN 9.27.

216. Ovid, Met. 6.120.

217. As a punishment for attempting to capture him, Dionysus turned a group of Tyrrhenian pirates into dolphins: Homeric Hymn 7.52; Propertius 3.17.25-26; Seneca, Agamemnon 451; Apollodorus, Bibl. 3.5.3. In some cases, he did not specifically turn them into dolphins, but into fishes: Oppian, Hal. 1.649-52; Nonnus of Panopolis, Dionys. 45.105-68.

218. According to the religious teacher Epimenides of Crete (c. 500 B.C.E.), the comic poet Teleclides (fifth century B.C.E.) and others, dolphins (along with the pompilus) were specifically regarded as sacred (ἱερός): Athenaeus, Deip. 7.282 E. That dolphins were “loving of humankind” (φιλόανθρωπος), made them for Plutarch “beloved of the gods” (θεοφιλής): De soll. an. 984 C. According to Oppian, because dolphins were originally human beings (see the story of their metamorphosis in n. 216), “nothing diviner than the dolphin has ever been created” (δελφίνων δ’ οὐπω τι θεώτερον ἄλλο τέτυκται): Hal. 1.648-52. “Peace” (σπονδαί) between humanity and dolphins represented peace between humanity and gods: Oppian, Hal. 5.563. According to Aelian, the killing of dolphins by human beings angers the Muses, the daughters of Zeus—thus, of course, indicating that dolphins were sacred to the Muses. In one tradition, Apollo himself was called Apollo Delphinus, to whom the Greeks erected temples: Plutarch, De soll. an. 984 A.

In addition, as an indication that they were beloved of the gods, the

marily on account of their friendship with human beings, their kindness, their rescues of human beings, and their human qualities.<sup>219</sup> The tabu against catching them, killing them, and eating them was extremely powerful and generally effective.<sup>220</sup>

In addition, a number of fish were also sacred and/or of religious——particularly augural——significance, because in the Graeco-Roman world they served crucially important religious functions.

Thus, at Sura in Lycia, there were those who practiced divination on the basis of the various movements of fish.<sup>221</sup> A similar practice of fish divination took place in the above mentioned Spring in the sanctuary of Apollo in Myra in Lycia, where there lived “schools of sea perch” (ὄρφῶ οἱ ἰχθύες ἀθρώοι). In the spring, they scattered the “meat of calfs” (κρέα μόσχεια), which had been sacrificed to Apollo. If the fish

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immortal nymph Thetis rode a dolphin to her marriage with the mortal Peleus (Valerius Flaccus, Argon. 1.130; Tibullus 1.5.45) and carried her son Achilles’ dead body in her arms, while “a team of dolphins” (delphines biuugii) bore it to its burial: Statius, Achil. 1.217ff. See also n. 343.

219. On these characteristics of dolphins, see further pp. 226-32.

220. See n. 343 below.

221. Aelian, NA 8.5. Sura is a city in which “there are some who devote themselves to divination by means of fish; and they know what it means if the fish approach or withdraw when they are called, what it indicates when they do not respond, and what it signifies when many come. You will hear the prophetic interpretations of the wise persons, when fish leap up and rise up to the surface from the depths, when they accept food, and when on the contrary they rejects food.” [“. . . μαντεύονται τινες ἐπ’ ἰχθύσι καθημένοι, καὶ κ̅σασιν ὅ τι καὶ νοεῖ ἢ τε ἀφιξίς αὐτῶν κληθέντων καὶ ἡ ἀναχώρησις, καὶ ὅταν μὴ ὑπακούσῃσι τί δηλοῦσι, καὶ ὅταν ε̅λθῶσι πολλοὶ τί σημαίνουσιν. ἀκούσει δὲ τὰ μαντικά τῶν σοφῶν ταῦτα καὶ πηδῆσαντος ἰχθύος καὶ ἀναπλευσαντος ἐκ βυθοῦ καὶ τροφήν προσεμένου καὶ αὐτὸ πάλιν μὴ λαβόντος.”]

made a “meal” (δαίς) of it, they took it as a good sign; if they did not, they took it as a bad sign.<sup>222</sup> At Delos, when the Athenians were sacrificing, they found fish in their “bowl” (φιάλη) of “lustral water” (χέρνυψ), thus indicating to the Delian “diviners” (μόνταις) that the Athenians would have dominion over the sea.<sup>223</sup>

By means of portents and augury, Romans also believed in the predictive possibilities of fish. Thus, during the Sicilian War (38-36 B.C.E.), when Augustus was walking along the shore, a fish from the sea leaped out in front of him, indicating to the “priests” (vates) that those who were in control over the sea (i.e. Augustus) would win over those who held sway over the land (i.e. Pompei).<sup>224</sup>

On the other hand, some persons abstained from certain sacred fish, not because of their positive and pleasant religious associations, but rather because they were unclean. Such was the case among the initiates at Eleusis, who abstained from the dog-fish, because it was said to give birth from its mouth.<sup>225</sup> In a similar vein, according to Plutarch, the Egyptians abstained from eating the above-mentioned sacred oxyrynchos, latos, and lepidotos fishes, because they were associated with

222. Aelian, NA 12.1; Pliny, HN 32.17.

223. According to a fragment from the History of Delos (Δηλιάς) of Semos (c. 200 B.C.E.) in Athenaeus, Deip. 8.331 F.

224. Pliny, HN 9.55.

225. According to them, the shark (γαλεός) was impure (οὐ καθαρός): Aelian, NA 9.65.

the sacriligious action of eating Osiris' genitalia—the only member of his body which Isis did not find.<sup>226</sup>

In cases such as the latter ones, it would seem that “sacred” (Gk. ἱερός; Lat. sacer) meant “set aside,” in such a way that these fish were to be avoided as food. Thus, “sacred” could have a negative sense, as well as a positive one. In other words, sacred fish could be of model character, such as dolphins, or, from a more negative point of view, they could be unclean and polluted with sin.

Although, catching sacred fishes was prohibited in many places, ironically, contrary to everything already said in this section, catching certain sacred fish was sometimes looked upon with great favor.

For instance, as far back as Ennius (239-169 B.C.E.), at the same time that Romans considered the parrot wrasse one of the finest fish for food, it was also regarded as “almost the brain of supreme Juppiter.”<sup>227</sup> In addition, as shown above, fish consumption itself was sometimes regarded as an event to be celebrated in a semi-religious fashion, such as catching sturgeon off the coast of Pamphylia.<sup>228</sup>

The word “sacred” (ἱερός) could also refer to the kinds of magnificently large and heavy fishes, which Homer says that fishermen caught in his time. In fact, Homer designates one such fish as a “sacred fish”

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226. De Is. et Os. 358 B. On the relationship of this passage to the fish and sexuality, see p. 294 and n. 574 below

227. In a fragment from his Hedyphagetica (in Apuleius, Apol. 39): “cerebrum Iovis paene supremi.” Parrot wrasse = Gk. σκάρος; Lat. scarus.

(ἱερὸς ἰχθύς).<sup>229</sup> According to Aelian and others,<sup>230</sup> many centuries after Homer the holy fish of Homer was a sturgeon—the same fish whose capture was celebrated in a semi-religious fashion.

In this way, the quality of sacrality intersected with the quality of culinary excellence. Something which was exceptionally delicious also was to some extent worthy of veneration.

Thus, two opposing conceptions of sacrality existed side by side in the Graeco-Roman world. According to one view, the sacrality (for whatever reason) of a particular fish prevented its consumption as food. According to another view, the very culinary excellence of some fish made those same fish sacred.

While the sacred fish in Homer suggested to many ancient writers that this fish was sacred on account of its excellent taste, others regarded the fish in Homer as sacred, because it was powerful and strong.<sup>231</sup> Still others regarded ἱερὸς in Homer as “dedicated” (ἄφειτος) and “consecrated” (ἱερωμένος, ἄνετος), such as the above mentioned fish, which were consecrated to specific deities.<sup>232</sup>

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228. See pp. 130-31 above.

229. Il. 16.407.

230. Aelian, NA 8.28; Plutarch, De soll. an. 981 D; and probably in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.284 E.

231. So Athenaeus, Deip. 7.284 C - D, where he quotes from Homer, Od. 8.385: “ἱερὸν μένος Ἀλκινόοιο” (“the sacred might of Alkinoös”). Also Plutarch (De soll. an. 981 D) uses the Gk. word μέγας, which would here seem to have the sense of “strong,” since the word can also designate as sacred the last bone of the spinal column (ἱερὸν ὄστον, “sacred bone”), as well as “epilepsy” (ἐπιληψία). This contrasts with the English translation of H. Cherniss and W. C. Helmbold, who translate μέγας as “important” in the Loeb edition of

On the other hand, some individuals regarded the anthias fish as the sacred fish of Homer, since it was said to mark the areas of the sea where hostile fish and sea monsters (such as Cetaceans) were absent.<sup>233</sup> It was a fish at truce with all other water creatures.<sup>234</sup> And for fish and sponge divers, it was a guarantor of inviolability as well.<sup>235</sup>

Here sacrality was connected with peace.

Thus, I would conclude by pointing out that, at least for pagans, certain fish were sacred for a variety of reasons: associations with specific divinities, associations with sacred locations, high quality of character, rescue and protection of human beings, augural functions, culinary excellence, and powerful strength; but also uncleanness and bad character (which contradict some of the above reasons).

Below I will show that most of these played a role in the early Christian interpretation of their sacred fish.<sup>236</sup> For this reason, a picture of the influence of sacred fish on early Christianity is bound to be an

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Plutarch.

232. Plutarch, De soll. an. 981 D; Athenaeus, Deip. 7.284 C - D.

233. "Holy": Gk. ἱερός; Lat. sacer. The anthias (Gk. ἀνθίας; Lat. anthias) is a fish very difficult to identify. On this problem, see Athenaeus, Deip. 7.282 C - E; and D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes 14-16. For this fish, see especially the following ancient references: Aristotle, HA 620 B 33; Pliny, HN 9.153; Aelian, NA-8.28; Athenaeus Deip. 4.157 A (quoting a fragment from Secretly Wedded (Παρεκδιδομένη) by the fourth century B.C.E. dramatist of Middle Comedy, Antiphanes) and 7.282 C (where Athenaeus quotes the passage in Aristotle); Plutarch, De soll. an. 981 E; Oppian, Hal. 5.628.

234. "Truce" = σπονδαί, in Aelian, NA 8.28.



exceedingly complex one.

### **Sacred fish at the margins of the Graeco-Roman world: Atargatis and Oannes**

In addition to the sacred fish mentioned above, perhaps most identified with the worship of fish and the abstention from fish as food (as well as with the worship of, and abstention from, “doves,” περιστερές) were the inhabitants of Syria, especially those persons identified as worshippers of goddess Atargatis/Derceto. She was specifically associated with Aphrodite,<sup>237</sup> and her cult was centered in Hierapolis-Bambyce (“the holy city” = ἡ ἱ(ε)ρὴ πόλις=Ἱεραπόλις, modern Membidj) in northern Syria.<sup>238</sup> According to at least one tradition, persons

235. Ἐγγυτῆς ἀσυλίας, in Plutarch, De soll. an. 981 E.

236. See Chapters 3 and 4 below.

237. According to Ctesias (paraphrased in Athenagoras, Plea for the Christians 30.1) and Diodorus Siculus (Bibl. 2.4-20), the Syrians worshipped Semiramis, the daughter of Atargatis/Derceto/Aphrodite. In her infancy, doves took care of the exposed child, and at her death she metamorphosed into a dove. As a result, the Syrians worshipped doves and did not eat them. In fact, both the worship of fish and doves were distinctive features of Syrian religion, as reported by writers in the Graeco-Roman period. In his philosophical interpretation of this practice, the first century C.E. philosopher and rhetorician Lucius Annaeus Cornutus (Summary of the Traditions Concerning Greek Religion, p. 6, ll. 11-14 = Lang ed.) suggests that, by abstaining from doves and fishes, the Syrians were indicating that “the principle of being was air [i.e. doves] and water [i.e. fish]”: “σημαίνοντες ὅτι τὰ μάλιστα δηλοῦντα τὴν τῆς οὐσίας αἰρεσιν αἴρ καὶ ὕδωρ.” It is not possible to determine whether this belief was an actual part of the cult.

238. On the city of Hierapolis as “the holy city,” see Lucian, Syr. D. 10ff.; and Pliny, HN 5.81. The identification of Atargatis as Isis in Hyginus is perhaps an error or idiosyncratic: (Poet. Astr. 2.41. In

worshipped Atargatis not in human female form (as at Hierapolis), but in a half-fish/half-human form; here she was female from the waste up, and a fish tail from the thighs down.<sup>239</sup>

In general, many in this region considered various fish found in the waters of Syria as consecrated to the goddess, and thus divine. As early as King Cyrus in the fifth century B.C.E., the Chalus river in Syria was “filled with large tame fish” (πλήρη δ’ ἰχθύων μεγάλων καὶ πραέων), which the Syrians regarded as “gods” (θεοί), and which (along with doves) they refused “to harm” (ἀδικεῖν).<sup>240</sup> In Hierapolis itself, there was a lake with “many” (πολλοί) sacred fish, which were “large” (μεγάλοι), swam in companies (ἄλκι), had names and were called when summoned, wore jewelery and sacred objects, and were at such complete peace that they did not devour one other.<sup>241</sup> As a punishment for eating fish, especially sprats (ματιδέες) and small fry (αφρη) according to Plutarch,<sup>242</sup> the Syrian Goddess produced in those persons a sickness, which caused a swelling of the feet and stomach.<sup>243</sup> In the general, on Atargatis and the worship of the fish, and also useful for reference to photographic plates, see F. Dölger, *IXΘΥΣ* 2:160-211.

239. See Lucian, *Syr. D.* 14.

240. Xenophon, *An.* 1.4.9.

241. Pliny, *HN* 32.17; Lucian, *Syr. D.* 45; Aelian, *NA* 12.2; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl.* 2.4.2-3. For the full Greek text of Pliny, Lucian, and Aelian, see n. 303 below.

242. Plutarch, *De superst.* 170 D.

243. Porphyry, *Abst.* 4.19. On the Syrian sickness, as well as the extent to which fish-eating sinners went in their repentance, see the discussions and references in F. Dölger, *IXΘΥΣ* 2:162-65.

sanctuary of the Syrian goddess at Smyrna, the priests alone could eat fish, and only after the fish had died of natural causes.<sup>244</sup>

Often in a satirical and scornful manner, authors dating from the fourth century B.C.E. to the third century C.E. commented that Syrians worshipped a fish (as well as doves).<sup>245</sup> In this regard, they say that the Syrians set up statues of fish in the same fashion as the Roman set up statues of their ancestral gods (the Penates) in their homes.<sup>246</sup> Appar-

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244. That is, if one believes the polemical assertion of Mnaseas of Patrae (Greek geographer, third century B.C.E.) in a fragment from On Asia (Περὶ Ἀσίας), preserved in Athenaeus, Deip. 8.346 D-F. On this passage, see also p. 196 below. Yet, it may in fact be confirmed by an inscription from Smyrna on the Euphrates River; namely, Dittenberger, SIG 2<sup>2</sup>.584: “[Ἰ]χθὺς ἱεροὺς μὴ ἀδικεῖν μηδὲ σκεδός τῶν τῆς Θεοῦ λυμαίνεσθαι, μηδὲ [ἐ]κφέρειν ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ ἐπ[ι]κλοπή ὁ τούτων τι ποιῶν κακὸς κακὴ ἐξωλεία ἀπόλοιτο, ἰχθυόβρωτος γενόμενος. ἕως δὲ τις τῶν ἰχθύων ἀποθάνῃ, καρπούσθω αὐθημερὸν ἐπὶ τοῦ βωμοῦ· τοῖς δὲ συμφυλάσσουσιν καὶ ἐπαύξουσιν τὰ τῆς θεοῦ τίμια καὶ τὸ ἰχθυοτρόφιον αὐτῆς βίου καὶ ἐργασίας καλῆς γένοιτο παρὰ τῆς θεοῦ ὄνησις.” [“It is forbidden to injure the holy fish, to ruin those things belonging to the goddess, and to bear them off from the sanctuary in theivry. The wicked person who does such things will be destroyed in wicked annihilation; for that person is a fish eater. If one of the fish should die, let it be partaken of on the altar as if it were untame. For those who protect and multiply the honors of the goddess and her fishpond, there will be advantage from the goddess in life and in prosperous business.”] This text includes only those fish which have died of natural causes.

245. Timocles (dramatist of Middle Comedy in the late fourth century B.C.E.) in a fragment from Delos (Δήλος) in Athenaeus (Deip. 8.342 A) comments satyrically that the orator Hyperides was such an epicure that he made sea-gulls (λάροι) out of the Syrians (since the diet of sea-gulls normally consisted of fish); Cicero, Nat. D. 3.15.39, “pisces Syri venerantur” (“Syrians worship a fish”)——he calls those who believe such things, “ignorant,” imperiti; Clement of Alexandria (Protrep. 2.39.9); Artemidorus, (Oneir. 1.8.14); Acta Apollonii 21 (Apollonius regards the practices of the Syrians as “sinning against heaven”, εἰς οὐρανὸν ἀμαρτάνουσιν); Lucian, Syr. D. 14; and Athenaeus, Deip. 8.346 C - F). It is interesting to note that the doctor and philosopher Sextus Empiricus (Pyrr. 3.223) compares the Syrian abstention from doves to the abstention of Jews, as well as Egyptian priests, from the meat of pigs (“χοίρειον”), since they would rather die

ently, they also brought Atargatis silver and gold fish offerings.<sup>247</sup>

In all the stories about Atargatis, since they use the words Aphrodite and Venus so frequently in place of and alongside of Atargatis, it is clear that Greeks and Romans considered her synonymous with Aphrodite/Venus. In the fifth century B.C.E., Herodotus referred to her temple in Ascalon as the “temple of the heavenly Aphrodite.”<sup>248</sup>

Ancient writers attempted to explain the origin of the Syrian worship of, and abstention from, fish by means of apparently different mythological traditions. According to Ctesias as preserved in several different sources, Derceto (the daughter of Aphrodite/Venus) fell into the lake at Bambyce, whereupon “The Fish” (Ὁ Ἰχθύς) “saved” (σώζω; salvo) her. For this good deed, both “The Fish” and its grandchildren (ἄγγονοι) were placed in the sky as constellations (The Southern Fish and Pisces).<sup>249</sup> According to a variation of the myth preserved in Ovid,

than eat pork.

246. Hyginus, Poet. astr. 2.41: “. . . eorum simulacra inaurata pro diis penatibus colunt. De hoc Ctesias scribit.” [“. . . they (the Syrians) worshipped gilded statues [of fish] as their ancestral gods (Penates). Ctesias has written on this.”]

247. According to Mnaseas of Patrae (Greek geographer from the third century B.C.E.) in a fragment from On Asia (Περὶ Ἀσίας) in Athenaeus, Deip. 8.346 D - E.

In describing the worship of the fish, the Scholium Arati (5.386 p. 85,27s) and the Scholium Germanici (BP p. 98,16) use the words “honor” (τιμῆ) and “cherish” (colo); in this way, they indicate the extremely high regard in which Syrians held fishes.

248. Herodotus, Hist. 1.105: “τῆς οὐρανόθεν Ἀφροδίτης τὸ ἱερόν.”

249. Ctesias as preserved in Eratosthenes, Catasterismorum 38; Schol. Arati 5.386 p. 85, 27s; Schol. Germanici BP p. 98, 16; and

not one fish (as in the constellation of the Southern Fish), but two fish (as in the constellation Pisces) rescued Venus from threatening foes (possibly the horrible monster, Typhon).<sup>250</sup>

Another version of the story indicates that Venus and Cupid fell into the Euphrates, where the above-mentioned Typhon threatened them. In order to escape, they metamorphosed into fish.<sup>251</sup> Thus, the Syrians worshipped, and abstained from, the fish in order not to “seem to fight against the assistance of the gods.”<sup>252</sup> According to Avienus, the fish of Pisces were called “the fish of Bambyce, ‘your children, Derceto’” (proles tibi Dercia, Pisces . . . Bambycii), suggesting this story of metamorphosis.<sup>253</sup> Other writers suppose that Jupiter rewarded Venus for her religiosity (religiosa) and “great concern for human beings” (in-hominibus officiosa diligenter) by placing in the heavens the images of those animals, with which she was associated.<sup>254</sup>

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Schol. Germanici G p. 176, 17. On these constellations, see pp. 248-61 below.

250. Ovid, Fast. 2.458-74.

251. According to Diognetus Erythraeus in Hyginus, Poet. astr. 2.41; and Manilius, Astr. 4.577-84; 4.800-01 (also 2.33). In the latter passage, he explains the metamorphosis into fish as a result of the aid of the fish (ope sumpta), thus suggesting that fish were made into a constellation as a reward for offering Venus their corporeal form.

252. Hyginus, Poet. astr. 2.30: “deorum praesidia inpugnare videantur.”

253. Avienus, Aratea 539-44.

254. Paraphrased from Nigidius Figulus (first century B.C.E.) in Sphaera Graecanica in Schol. Germanici p. 81,20ff.; Hyginus, Fabula 197; Lucius Ampelius (c. second to third centuries C.E.), Liber Memorialis 2.12; and Dositheus (fourth century C.E., in the Swoboda

While some writers took a neutral or sympathetic stance, the strange euhemerist stories of the legendary origins of Syrian fish abstention in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* clearly stemmed in part from the lack of appreciation and the lack of respect that many in the Graeco-Roman world had for this custom.<sup>255</sup> Actually these stories seem to conform primarily to the Graeco-Roman topos of criticizing excessive fish eating,<sup>256</sup> and thus probably did not reflect actual cultic beliefs.<sup>257</sup>

Although the myth of Derceto mentioned by Diodorus Siculus is not so directly critical, it also seems rather distinct from the above-mentioned stories. In this story, Venus was jealous of the beauty of Derceto and punished her by causing her to fall in love with a Syrian youth. After bearing a child, Derceto killed the youth, exposed the child, and in shame tried to commit suicide by throwing herself into the lake at Bambyce, but instead was transformed into a fish.<sup>258</sup>

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ed. of Nigidius Figulus, p. 127).

255. *Deip.* 8.346 C - F, with reference to the following writers: Antipater of Tarsus (second century B.C.E. Stoic philosopher) in a fragment from *On Religion* (*Περὶ Δεισιδαιμονία*), where he says that “Queen Gatis of Syria” (Γάτις ἡ τῶν Συρῶν βασίλισσα), because she was a “fish lover” (ὀψοφάγος), forbade the eating of fish; Mnaseas of Patrae (Greek geographer, third century B.C.E.) in a fragment from *On Asia* (*Περὶ Ἀσίας*), where he claims that Atargatis was a “cruel queen” (χαλεπή βασίλισσα), who forbade the eating of fish and made her subjects bring fish to her for her luxurious meals; and Xanthus of Lydia (contemporary of Herodotus in the fifth century B.C.E.) in the above mentioned work of Mnaseas said that, because of her cruelty, Mopsus the Lydian drowned Atargatis and her son Ἴχθὺς in the lake of Ascalon, and that they were consumed by fish—thus leading to the Syrian worship of fish.

256. For example, see n. 55 above.

257. These stories may well, however, have reflected actual cultic practices, since they discuss abstention from fish, as well as the gold

Greeks and Romans apparently criticized Syrian worship of Atargatis for several different reasons. In general, they seem to have objected to Syrian abstention from a whole class of food—that is, not just one type of fish, but all fish. Also Greek and Roman writers seem to have believed that Syrians worshipped fish and pictured Atargatis as a fish, which probably reminded them of the kind of animal worship, popular in Egyptian religion, that many of them considered barbaric.<sup>259</sup> Furthermore, those depictions of Atargatis as a half-human/half-fish goddess would probably have struck writers in the Graeco-Roman world as the bizarre (and barbaric) description of a mongrel deity. Finally, these very features that offended Greeks and Romans made Syrian religion and the worship of Atargatis seem like just another of the bizarre (from the Graeco-Roman point of view) religions of the Near East.<sup>260</sup>

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and silver fish offerings mentioned in Mnaseas of Patrae; see n. 247 above.

258. Diodorus Siculus, Bibl. 2.4.2-3.

259. For criticism of the Egyptian worship of animals, see e.g. Agatharchides of Cnidos (late second century B.C.E.) in Photius, Bibl. 443 a - 444 b.

260. The Near Eastern associations are made even more conspicuous by two further items. First, the name Atargatis was equivalent to the name of the goddesses of fertility and sexuality throughout Syro-Phoenicia and Babylonia, 'Attart/'Astarte/Ishtar. On this goddess, see H. Gese, M. Höfner and K. Rudolph, Die Religionen Altsyriens, 161-65, 213-14, 219-20, 228-29, et passim. In addition, Semiramis, the daughter of Atargatis, was according to Diodorus Siculus an Assyrian queen who built Babylon and whose dominion, while centered in Mesopotamia in the Tigris-Euphrates crescent, extended from Egypt and Ethiopia to Persia and Bactria: Diodorus Siculus, Bibl. 2.3.4-20. It is possible that she in fact corresponds to the Babylonian Queen Sammuramat, wife of Shamshi-Adad V and regent (810-805

Yet, while animal deities, and deities formed of strange bestial combinations (as well abstention from all fish), may have frequently offended Graeco-Roman sensibilities, the many large fish consecrated to Atargatis in the lake of Bambyce would at the same time have seemed perfectly normal and acceptable to them, as can be seen from the numerous examples of sacred fish mentioned in the section above. Thus, one finds no criticisms among Greek and Roman writers of the existence of sacred fish in sacred springs, ponds, and rivers in Syria.

As similarly strange to Greeks and Romans as the worship of Atargatis was the semi-divine legendary figure of the fish-man Oannes, whose teachings, according to Babylonian traditions preserved by the third century B.C.E. Babylonian historian Berossus, were responsible for the religion, culture, and civilization of the world some 432,000 years prior to the flood.<sup>261</sup> Specifically, the entire body of Oannes was

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B.C.E.) of Adad-Nirari III (810-783 B.C.E.). So argue Hildgard Lewy, "Nitokris-Naqia," 264, n. 5; Wilhelm Eilers, *Semiramis: Entstehung und Nachhall einer altorientalischer Sage*, 33-38; and S. M. Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berossus*, 22, n. 65. For an opposing viewpoint, see W. Schramm, "War Semiramis assyrische Regentin?" In any case, she was undoubtedly famous in certain Graeco-Roman circles as an important Near Eastern figure.

261. In his *Babyloniaca* (Βαβυλωνιακά, dated c. 281 B.C.E.), which was transmitted fragmentarily in a variety of excerpts from an epitome of the first century B.C.E. historian Alexander Polyhistor. The excerpts are recorded by the following authors: the Jewish historian Josephus in the first century C.E. in his *Jewish Antiquities*; the second century C.E. historian Abydenus (preserved in the Armenian version of the *Chronica* of Eusebius, as well as in Greek in the *Preparatio Evangelica* of Eusebius and the *Chronica* of Georgios Syncellos); and by the fourth century C.E. Christian historian Eusebius in the first book of his *Chronica*. The texts preserved in Eusebius are for the most part in Armenian (the only language in which the *Chronica* is



that of a fish, except for his head and his feet. Also according to Berossus, while teaching human beings, he spent his days on land and his nights in the ocean. Thus, not only his physical form was half-human/half-fish, but his nature was half-earth/half-water (similar to that of amphibious animals).<sup>262</sup>

In a euhemerist interpretation, the first century C.E. Stoic tutor of Nero, named Chaeremon, criticized Oannes as a despot, who was in fact merely “wearing (as clothing) the skin of a fish” (ἰχθύος ἡμφιεσμένοσ δοράν),<sup>263</sup> as well as one who gained his royal power through his knowledge of eclipses and the stars in general.<sup>264</sup>

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entirely preserved), while in the ninth century Georgius Syncellus (who, in his own Chronica, excerpted parts of the Chronica of Eusebius) preserved some excerpts in Greek. For a translation and a discussion of the text, see S. M. Burstein, The Babyloniaca of Berossus. See also the collection of Greek texts in FGH 3 C, 364-410.

262. According to Berossus, some of the Babylonian kings of the pre-deluge era were also part fish and part human being.

263. In fact, Arrian (Ind. 24.9) reports that, in the fourth century B.C.E., the commander of Alexander the Great, Nearchus, saw in Gedrosia, on the Red Sea across from Ethiopia near the land of the Fish-Eaters, people who wore “the skins of large fishes” (ἰχθύων τῶν μεγάλων [τε] τὰ παχέα). According to Philostratus, in Carmania in Stobera, northwest of Gedrosia, the Fish-Eaters themselves wore the “hides” (διφθέρες) of “large fishes” (μεγίστοι ἰχθύες): VA 3.55. Thus, the interpretation of Chaeremon very likely stemmed from the observations by Greek travellers of barbarian customs: from the point of view of many Greeks, just as barbarians wore fish skins, so the barbarian Oannes must have done the same. In a similar euhemerist trajectory, other ancient writers apparently interpreted Oannes as one of the so-called Fish-Eaters, who, as indicated in n. 64, ate only fish: so Hippolytus, Ref. om. haer. 5.2. On Oannes and on fish clothing in general, see F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 2:186-88, 2:232-40.

264. In a fragment from his Aegyptiaca (Αἰγυπτιακά) preserved in Michael Psellos (eleventh century C.E.), in Πόσα Γένη = FHG 3c1: 618 F 7; 667 F 193 (pp. 132-33 and 271-72).

Nevertheless, the actual teaching of Oannes of a primeval time when all was “darkness” (σκότος) and “water” (ὕδωρ) and when strange creatures of bizarre combinations appeared in the ocean,<sup>265</sup> corresponds to the Graeco-Roman understanding of the sea as the generator of life and as a strange and alien place, where miraculous events occurred and strange creatures lived.<sup>266</sup>

As in the case of Atargatis, although the physical form of Oannes apparently seemed bizarre to some Greeks and Romans, certain parts of the teachings of Oannes (on eclipses, astrology, the sea) would, on the other hand, most probably have seemed perfectly reasonable and acceptable to them.

Thus, when one draws conclusions about the influence of the Syrian fish-woman goddess Atargatis and of the Babylonian fish-man Oannes on the symbolism of fish in the Graeco-Roman world, one must make careful distinctions between those features which the Greeks and Romans considered barbaric and those features which, at least to some extent, fit in with their preconceived notions of how a sacred fish should function.

For example, had they been irredeemably appalled by the physical strangeness of Atargatis, as they were by some foreign divinities, Greeks and Romans would simply have criticized her and designated her by her foreign name. Yet, on the contrary, as indicated above,

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265. According to Oannes, there were winged human beings, two-headed human beings, hermaphroditic human beings, equine human beings (i.e. hippo-centaurs), bulls with human heads, four-bodied dogs, animals that were half-horse and half-fish, etc.

Greeks and Romans explicitly wished to connect semitic Atargatis directly with Graeco-Roman Aphrodite/Venus——probably because they were impressed by, as well as found easily understandable and easily assimilatable, the sacred fish of Syria. It is also possible that, in his history of Babylonia, Berossus chose to incorporate Oannes and his teachings, precisely because (although the mixed physical character of Oannes may have been offensive) his teachings, including those about the ocean and the earth, would have made sense to Greeks and Romans.

Nonetheless, one should always remember that the unacceptable characteristics of Atargatis and Oannes served to set their influence within certain specifically limited parameters and made their impact only partial in the Graeco-Roman world.

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266. See pp. 262-76 and 292-301 below.

### **Relationships between sacred fish and early Christian fish symbolism<sup>267</sup>**

Based upon the evidence for sacred fish, I would argue that, in the Mediterranean basin area in the Graeco-Roman period, the sacrality of the Christian fish would have seemed perfectly natural to any Greek or Roman. For early Christians, it would certainly have made sense that one of their most powerful and primary symbols was an item that was comprehensible in the larger context of the world in which they dwelled. Indeed, virtually everyone would have lived near individuals or groups, who viewed various fish as sacred and also as possibly having a prophetic/divining function.

While most non-Christians would not have understood the “fish” acronym ΙΧΘΥΣ and would not have comprehended the Christian connotations of fish on early Christian monuments, in general the recurring verbal references to the “fish” acronym and the relatively frequent appearance of grafitto-like carved representations of fish on early Christian inscriptions would have clearly suggested to them the sacred fish so frequently found throughout the Mediterranean basin area.

At the same time, the early Christian community would have not only understood the specifically Christian meaning of the ΙΧΘΥΣ acronym, but would have immediately comprehended the reference to “The Fish” as a sacred fish. Furthermore, since the use of fish symbolism suggested a prediction of the coming new age,<sup>268</sup> I would also propose that early Christian fish symbolism possessed a prophetic

component and thus evoked the prophetic fish found in pagan contexts.

In this context, one should certainly add that both the New Testament, and early Christian literature as a whole, portrayed Christ in general as having (among other things) potent predicative powers—especially in regard to his prediction of the coming of the messiah and of a glorious messianic age. The use of a fish—which was itself associated with prediction in the pagan world—would definitely have been appropriate in conveying an idea of the overall importance of prophecy in early Christianity.

This contrasts with the the position of Dölger, who often vacillates, by arguing that a particular instance of fish symbolism must either be exclusively pagan (as in the case of early Christian iconography, where images of fish must refer to cult of the dead and/or to pagan sacred fish) or exclusively Christian (as when referring to the acronym IXΘΥΣ). Pagan and Christian associations have little to do with one another.

From the descriptions given here, however, one can see that early Christians made fish symbolism inclusive, accepting pagan connotations and transforming them so that they would have new meanings. In doing this, fish symbolism on early Christian monuments and in early Christian literature maintained the older pagan references to sacred fish. At the same time, it incorporated the sacrality of fish into a new constellation of meaning, which included new Christian references, such as the association of a fish with Christ.

When early Christians looked at the image of a sacred fish on a

Christian monument, they would naturally have understood its associations with a particular deity, but at the same time that deity would now have been Christ. In addition, an image of a fish would have evoked an image of a word/acronym——namely IXΘΥΣ——that would once again have referred both to a sacred fish and to Christ as savior. Clearly, pagan and Christian meanings were closely intertwined.

Though there are a few exceptions,<sup>269</sup> early Christians customarily viewed the sacred quality of their fish (IXΘΥΣ) in very generic terms—— that is, as referring not to a specific species of fish, but as referring to fish in general. For example, both funerary inscriptions and literary references almost always use the generic word “fish” (ἰχθὺς) rather than employing a word for a specific fish (such as “surmullet,” “pike,” “bass,” etc.). In doing this, early Christians indicated the generic quality of their fish.

In addition, early Christians carved representations of fish on funerary stones, which seem intentionally to have referred not to one particular species of fish, but rather to the generic idea of fish. Evidently, like many of those pagans who viewed all sea creatures as sacred to Venus/Aphrodite and to Poseidon, early Christians seem to have viewed their fish as referring to almost all species of fish in virtually all bodies of water. Since the IXΘΥΣ acronym clearly referred to “Jesus

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267. Here I am not including a culinary context.

268. See pp. 248-61 below.

269. E.g. the “gilthead” (aurata) in Jerome: Text # II.A.5 in Appendix 1.

Christ” (Ἰησοῦς Χριστός), its simultaneous meaning of “fish” suggests that most fish (regardless of specific species) referred to him in some way.

In the Avercius inscription, the reference to a specifically “pure fish” would have indicated to almost all readers (including pagan ones), on account of the use of the word “pure” (καθαρός), that this was a sacred fish. Of course, the idea that fish were to be associated with Christ would have been available only to early Christians or to those familiar with the symbolism of early Christianity.

Even more important, the reference to a spring in the Avercius inscription pointedly alludes to the above-mentioned springs in religious sanctuaries, which would have contained sacred fish. It is also important to note that many of the sacred fish in these religious sanctuaries were also tame. That the fish in the Avercius inscription was also very probably tame is indicated by the description of the virgin who “grasps with her hand” (ἔδραξατο) the fish. As I show below, the allowance of fondling by human hands was, in addition to being sexual, a clear reference to the tame quality of certain fish.<sup>270</sup>

Thus, the fish in the Avercius inscription was not only a sacred fish, but one which was particularly associated with tame fish in the springs of pagan religious sanctuaries.

That the early Christian fish was associated with salvation one can see easily from the reference to the “savior” (σωτήρ) in the ΙΧΘΥΣ acronym. In part, I would argue that this association with salvation could have made sense both to early Christians and to non-Christians,

precisely because other fish in antiquity had salvific functions.<sup>271</sup> For example, dolphins were viewed as consecrated to the gods, in part because they saved the lives of human beings. Likewise, in the mythological traditions of Atargatis, fish were sacred in part because they saved the life of the goddess. I have also shown above that the pilot fish was sacred, because it guided sailors to port. Consequently, the salvation of human beings in pagan stories would have made understandable to pagans the early Christian symbolism of a salvific fish.

In addition, since “sacred” was sometimes interpreted to mean “powerful,” as in the case of the sacred fish in Homer, it is probable that the early Christian sacred fish also contained within its symbolic network the connotation of power. For example, the description of the pure fish by Avercius as “huge” (πανμεγέθης), in addition to indicating large size, may also have indicated its phenomenal power, as in the phenomenal power of Christ.

Furthermore, Greeks and Romans could sometimes sacrifice small fish as a part of religious rituals. In one ritual, they were sacrificed on behalf of human souls.<sup>272</sup> While the fish of the Avercius inscription is clearly a “huge” (πανμεγέθης) fish, nevertheless the idea that a fish could be sacrificed on behalf of human beings may have contributed to

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270. See pp. 216-21.

271. I discuss below on pp. 248-61 the salvific associations of fish in astrology, and I am therefore not mentioning them here.

272. For this material, see pp. 147-48 above.



the representation of Jesus Christ as a fish.<sup>273</sup> Of course, this would be most obvious in the already mentioned very late antique references to Christ as a fish roasted on the cross. Yet, as I will discuss, considering that in one version of the IXΘΥΣ acrostic, the sigma refers to σταυρός (“cross”) and considering the importance of the sacrifice of Christ in early Christian literature outside of fish symbolism, it is very possible that the sacrificed fish of pagan traditions would have constituted one facet of the early Christian symbolism of the fish as Christ, who was also sacrificed on behalf of human beings.

It should become evident in the following chapters that fish in early Christian fish symbolism were sacred, in part because the word for fish was an acronym that referred to Jesus Christ as savior and as son of God. That Christians saw the word for fish as a name connected to a deity, was not, however, an independent invention of their own, but followed pagan practices. In this regard, in the discussion of pagan sacred fishes, I offered several examples where the specific names of fish (the surmullet = Hecate; the box fish = Hermes, “small fry” = Aphrodite, the kitharos fish = Apollo; and zeus faber = Jupiter) were often related in a substantial way to a particular deity.

Such a conception corresponds to the kind of word magic which anthropologists discuss in their depictions of so-called primitive religion.

Because of its phonetic similarity to a particular deity or because it is

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273. One should also remember that Ovid does not designate the fish as a “sprat” (maena), but rather simply as a “fish” (piscis): Fast. 3.342. It may well be that the fish used in this ritual was not always exclusively small.

metonymically associated with a specific deity, a word designating a particular fish gains a special power of its own, and the fish itself acquires that power and finds itself divinized. In a way similar to these pagan examples, the word  $\iota\chi\theta\upsilon\varsigma$ , because of its initials and because of what those initials spelled out for early Christians, gained a magical significance of its own. From its depiction on early Christian funerary inscriptions and on doorposts, the appearance of  $IX\Theta Y\Sigma$  would have had this sacred/magical quality and would have therefore been extremely effective in serving an apotropaic function.

In contrast to the early Christian cases, however, there are no precise parallels for the use of the word  $IX\Theta Y\Sigma$ , or any words designating fish, on pagan archaeological monuments. Thus, while it would seem that early Christians borrowed from pagans the idea of associating fish with particular deities, unlike early Christians, pagans did not want to put fish words on funerary monuments. Rather, the association of fish with particular deities occurred only in pagan literary evidence. Indeed, it is rather obvious that the presence of  $IX\Theta Y\Sigma$  on early Christian monuments indicates that this word held a peculiar importance for Christians as an acronym, which it (or any other words designating fish) did not hold for pagans.

I would also suggest that it was possible to identify Christ with a fish, in part because various gods could themselves through metamorphosis take on the appearance of a fish. As a result, when early Christians associated fish with Christ, a pagan would not necessarily have

found this completely strange, since a fish could also at times have been a god.

On the other hand, most Greeks and Romans did not view their deities primarily in terms of animal forms—especially fantastic forms. That explains why in part they criticized Egyptian animal worship. Furthermore, as demonstrated above in my discussion of Atargatis and Oannes, Greek and Roman writers frequently criticized the worship of animal and semi-animal deities—indicating that from their point of view groups involved in such activities were on the margins (geographical, social, and cultural) of the Graeco-Roman world.

Yet the early Christian use of fish symbolism conforms more or less to religious interpretations of animals throughout the mainstream of the Graeco-Roman world. In fact, the early Christian fish was not so strange as Atargatis or Oannes, since it was not a semi-human/semi-animal being and since (most important) early Christians did not really view physical fish themselves as divine—but rather (as in Greek religion) as symbolic representations of anthropomorphic beings, namely Christ or Christians. In addition, one would not have found cult statues of fish in central positions in Christian churches; nor would one have found in churches centralized paintings or mosaics with images of Christ in the form of a fish.

On this account, it would most likely have been reasonably acceptable, comprehensible, and normal for a Greek or Roman to envision a group using an animal like a fish as a primary symbol for an anthropomorphic deity.

Traditions of sacred fish in sacred fishponds and the context of death. To what exact extent the cult of the goddess Atargatis directly influenced early Christian fish symbolism is not completely clear.<sup>274</sup> But I would tentatively suggest that the worship of, and abstention from, both fish and doves corresponded to the importance of both those animals in early Christianity, as evidenced by their appearance on a significant number of early Christian gravestones.<sup>275</sup>

In general, unlike the fish in bodies of water in religious sanctuaries, the sacred fish described in the inscription of Avercius was intended to be consumed. In fact, Avercius states quite clearly that he and his compatriots ate (ἔσθαι) a fish—clearly implying that eating this fish represented the consumption of the eucharist.<sup>276</sup>

In part, the description of the fish in the Avercius inscription as καθαρὸς indicates that it was sacred. Normally, sacrality made items prohibited for consumption, since they were consecrated to the divine realm or to a particular deity.

The Avercius inscription turns this tradition on its head by having Avercius and his compatriots eat a sacred fish. When Avercius calls the

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274. Whether or not the references to Atargatis as a cruel queen in traditions recorded by Athenaeus were related to the reference to the queen (βασίλισσα) in the Avercius inscription, I cannot at this time determine.

275. For fish on gravestones, see pp. 586-613 below, as well as Chart 2 in Appendix 5. For doves in early Christian iconography, see F. Sühling, Die Taube als religiöses Symbol im christlichen Altertum; and for doves on gravestones specifically, see P. Bruun, “Symboles, signes et monogrammes,” 86-92.

“great fish” (ἰχθὺς πανμεγέθης) a “pure fish” (ἰχθὺς καθαρός), he is in part therefore implicitly indicating that this fish is permissible to eat.

This is confirmed in the ensuing lines of the inscription.

Moreover, from what one knows of early Christian eating practices overall,<sup>277</sup> although there are some examples of abstention from fish as a luxurious food,<sup>278</sup> there are no general early Christian prohibitions against the eating of fish.<sup>279</sup> Specifically, in the eating of the sacred fish in the Avercius inscription and in other texts, it would seem that early Christians were not drawing on the well-known tradition in the Graeco-Roman world of abstaining from sacred fishes found in sacred fishponds.

Instead, I would in part suggest a connection with the above-mentioned semi-religious consumption of sturgeon in various locations. It is also plausible that the consumption of fish in the Avercius inscription was drawing on the possible tradition of eating fish in certain ritual meals, such as those of the Thracian Rider cult. But this is more uncertain than the semi-religious meals featuring the sturgeon.

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276. See pp. 311-71 below, especially pp. 322-24.

277. See pp. 558-72 below.

278. See Section X.I in Appendix 1 (quoting Jerome and Ambrose).

279. The very same Jerome, who protests the eating of sturgeon by Jovinian (Text # X.I.1 in Appendix 1), also says in another passage that fish are good to eat (Text # X.F.2 in Appendix 1). As indicated above, the association of fish with luxury depends on the size and quality of particular species of fish, not on a general condemnation of all fish.

In any case, in their understanding of early Christian fish symbolism, it is significant that early Christians such as Avercius eliminated the Graeco-Roman tradition of abstaining from sacred fish found in sacred fishponds and instead included the Graeco-Roman tradition which favored the semi-religious, or (possibly) ritual, consumption of fish.

Yet there is more to it than that. In contrast to those fish in the Graeco-Roman world that were consecrated to deities and not allowed to be eaten, certain fish in religious contexts were intended to be consumed. In some cases, they are sacred fish, but they are fish that are sacred in the context of death and meals associated with death. These are the fish that were regarded as a part of the menu for meals in the cult of the dead. And they are depicted in both pagan and early Christian meal scenes in iconography, as well as alluded to by Avercius in his inscription where cult of the dead meals are expanded into eucharistic and other Christian meals.<sup>280</sup>

As a result, I would suggest that early Christians (as can be seen most illustratively in the Avercius inscription) combined three different traditions: 1) sacred fish in sacred fishponds from which one was supposed to abstain; 2) sacred fish like the sturgeon found in the open sea, whose consumption could be conducted in semi-religious contexts; and 3) fish intended for consumption in the context of death. Among pagans these three traditions were kept relatively separate (especially 1 and 3), but among Christians they were united. In doing so, early Christians like Avercius eliminated the abstention from fish that was a

part of the first tradition, but kept the tradition of sacred fish in sacred fishponds.

One can only speculate as to why early Christian fish symbolism developed in this way. But clearly Avercius (for example) was rejecting the notion (so common among pagans) that certain animals should not be eaten, because they were sacred. In fact, Avercius transforms the sacred fish in sacred fishponds into fish that (while still sacred and still associated with a sacred fishpond) are associated with death and therefore able to be consumed.

I would hope that the discussion in this section would give one an idea of the extreme complexity of some religious symbolism.

## **EMPATHIC RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN HUMAN BEINGS AND FISH**

### **Examples from the Graeco-Roman World**

In addition to their value as food and in addition to their sacral character, many in Graeco-Roman antiquity regarded fish as animals worthy of great respect. As quoted in the Graeco-Roman period by Plutarch, Anaximander (c. 610-540 B.C.E.) went so far as to say that human beings

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280. See pp. 311-72 below, as well as the summary on pp. 355-70.

were first nourished inside a fish——consequently making a fish the mother and father of human beings.<sup>281</sup> According to Plutarch in the same passage, others (the priests of Poseidon in Leptis, as well as Syrians), who abstained from fish, thought that both human beings and fish descended “from the same moist element” (ἐκ τῆς ὑγρᾶς οὐσίας). So for some abstention from fish was decidedly to be justified for this reason. Thus, in the Graeco-Roman world, not only gods and fish were closely connected, but so were human beings and fish, whose relationship was much closer than some modern scholars might initially suppose.

As an example of the respect in which fish were held, especially in Italy, wealthy owners of fishponds, rather than treating fish as food to be eaten, had fish as pets——giving them names, adorning them with jewelry, caring for them in sickness, and mourning their deaths. Most famous among these owners of pet fish were the outstanding orators of the first century B.C.E., Lucius Licinius Crassus (born 140 B.C.E.) and Quintus Hortensius Hortalus (114-50 B.C.E., contemporary of Cicero) to whose love of luxury frequent allusion is made.<sup>282</sup>

The fish of Crassus were said to respond to their own names, and upon their deaths he wept.<sup>283</sup> Hortensius had a villa with numerous fishponds in Bauli (near Baiae on the Bay of Naples), but, because of his passionate love for his own fish, he used to send out to Puteoli for

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281. Symp. 8.880 E-F.

282. For more references to this luxury, including his allegedly excessive expenditures, see the article on him in PW 8:2470-81.



other fish (whom he did not personally know) to be eaten at the dinner table.<sup>284</sup> After falling in love with one of his lampreys, he actually wept when it died.<sup>285</sup> This is reminiscent of the above-mentioned inhabitants of the island of Seriphos in the Cyclades, who buried dead sea-cicadas, and mourned for them when they died.<sup>286</sup> At the same villa of Hortensius in Bauli in Campania, Antonia (the wife of Marcus Livius Drusus) adorned her favorite lamprey with earrings.<sup>287</sup> Feeding his fish himself, Hortensius went to extraordinary lengths to make sure that they did not go hungry, going so far as to employ numerous fishermen to give them “little fish” for their dining pleasure.<sup>288</sup>

In addition, Lucius Licinius Lucullus actually went to the extent of building a tunnel between his ponds and the sea in order to maintain a constantly fresh supply of sea water for his beloved surmullets.<sup>289</sup> Following the example of this novelty, Hortensius himself cut through a mountain near Naples in order to keep a fresh supply of sea water for his fish.<sup>290</sup>

Indeed, Hortensius was said to take better care of his sick surmullets

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283. Plutarch, De cap. ex. inim. util. 89A, Prae. ger. reipub. 811A, and De soll. an. 976a; Macrobius, Sat. 3.15.4; Porphyry, Abst. 3.5.

284. Varro, Rust. 3.17.5.

285. Lamprey: Gk. μυραίναι; Lat. murenae; Pliny, HN 9.172.

286. See p. 179.

287. Pliny, HN 9.172.

288. Pisciculi minuti, Varro, Rust. 3.17.6-7.

than his sick slaves.<sup>291</sup> According to Pliny, Gaius Hirrus was unwilling to exchange his lampreys for money, and he only loaned them for the triumphal banquets of Caesar so that he would not have to exchange them for money and for financial profit.<sup>292</sup> Domitia, the aunt of Nero, was also particularly fond of her fishponds.<sup>293</sup>

There are also many stories that describe the amazing characteristics of tame fish. To what extent these are factual, is impossible to determine. But they do suggest the popular belief among well-to-do Romans that fish were in many ways similar to human beings.

In one wealthy Roman villa by the seashore of Formiae in Latium, fishponds contained lampreys which were said to swim up to their “master” (magistrum), as well as grey mullets and surmulletts, which, at

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289. Varro, Rust. 3.17.9.

290. Varro, Rust. 3.17.8-9; Pliny, HN 9.170.

291. Varro, Rust. 3.17.8. Known also for his sympathy for other animals as well (which Cicero considered a sign of his luxurious habits), Hortensius was said to have been the first to offer a “meal” (cena, considered a luxury for animals) to his domestic chickens: Varro, Rust. 3.6.6. Following the lead of Fulvius Lippinus, who was the first to set up “animal preserves” (vivaria), Lucius Licinius Lucullus (active politically from c. 88-59 B.C.E. and consul in 74 B.C.E., whose villas were in Misenum and Neapolis on the bay of Naples) and Hortensius adopted this practice: Pliny, HN 8.211. At one dinner party in the game preserve of Hortensius, a man dressed up as Orpheus and, when he played music, an extensive variety of animals came out to listen to him: Varro, Rust. 3.13.3, where game preserve is called Lat. therotrophium = Gk. θηριотροφειον. Apparently Hortensius loved not only animals, but also plants. Once he asked Cicero if could exchange speaking places with him in order to irrigate a plane tree with wine: Macrobius, Sat. 3.13.3. For other references to this practice of using wine instead of water, see e.g. Pliny, HN 12.48.

292. HN 9.171.

the call of their names by the nomenculator (the servant who informed his master of the names of those whom he met) were said to swim out in response.<sup>294</sup> In one imperial villa, Pliny claimed that fish came up “one by one” (singuli) in response to the call of their names.<sup>295</sup> In the emperor Domitian’s fishpond at Baiae, Martial describes how fish came at their master’s voice, when they were summoned by name.<sup>296</sup>

Martial puts the special qualities of tame fish into poetic form, when he says that at Formiae the fishing line did not even seek its prey, but the fish drew themselves up onto the line.<sup>297</sup> Clearly this is an

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293. Tacitus, Ann. 13.21.6.

294. Martial, Epig. 10.30.21-24. Grey mullet=κέφαλος, κεστρεύς.

295. HN 10.193.

296. Epig. 4.30.4-7.

297. Epig. 10.30.16-18. For a summary of some of the evidence of fish as pets, see also J. M. C. Toynbee, Animals in Roman Life and Art, 209-11. In the 60’s B.C.E., Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.) criticized these practices as signs of the luxurious decadence of those who ignored “affairs of state” (re publica) in order to tend to their fishponds. For example, he makes fun of those piscinarii (“fishpond lovers”, among whom he clearly intended Hortensius) and whose mullets were tame enough to come to one’s “hand” (manus) when called: Att. 2.1.7. Other passages, in which Cicero often accuses these luxury loving piscinarii of being envious of him, include: Att. 1.18.6; 1.19.6; 1.20.3; 2.9.1; Par. Sto. 38. Macrobius (Sat. 3.15.6) identifies some of these piscinarii as contemporaries of Cicero, such as the following: Lucius Marcius Philippus (active politically between 61-43 B.C.E.; see also Varro, Rust. 3.3.9; and Columella, Rust. 8.16.3), the Luculli (Lucius Licinius Lucullus and his son Marcus Licinius Lucullus), and Quintus Hortensius.

On the issue of too much “leisure” (otium) and too little leisure in Cicero, see J. H. D’Arms, Romans on the Bay of Naples, 70-71. On criticism of the exaggerated luxuriousness represented by these fishponds, see also Horace (Carm. 2.15.3) who complains that fishponds were spreading everywhere, and Seneca (Ep. 90.7-8), who associates fishponds with “luxury” (luxuria) and “gluttony” (gula). Even

exaggeration, but indicative nonetheless of how tame these fish were.

In addition, throughout Graeco-Roman antiquity, in some natural bodies of water (rivers and lakes) and in some sacred fishponds, tame fish were said to beckon to various calls of human beings, and they also apparently wore jewelry. Normally fearful fishes in the river Helorus in Sicily took bread from human hands and wore earrings and necklaces.<sup>298</sup> Such was also the case with the following fish: fish in cisterns near the temple of Fortune in Stephanopolis in Epirus; fish in the sanctuary of (or in the harbour of) the Old Men in Chios; “eels” (anguillae) in the spring of Jupiter in his famous sanctuary at Labranda in Caria; and fish in the spring of Chabura in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers.<sup>299</sup> At the spring of Arethusa in Chalchis in Euboea, surmulletts were “tame” (χειροήθεις), eels wore “silver and gold earrings” (ένώτια άργυρά και χρυσά), and they were all fed on the entrails

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Columella, while he describes the techniques of pisciculture in detail, he criticizes at the same time those very practices as exemplifying the decline of Roman morality: Rust. 8.16.6. For more discussion of fishponds and pisciculture, see also Endnote 3.

298. According to Nymphiodorus of Syracuse (fl. c. 335 B.C.E.) in a fragment from Voyages (Περιπόλις), cited in Athenaeus, Deip. 331 E - F. The fish involved are sea-bass or pike (Gk. λάβρακες; Lat. lupi) and eels (Gk. έγγελεις; Lat. anguillae).

299. Pliny (HN 32.16-17) and Aelian (NA 12.30) confirm that these fish and fish in other locations wore “earrings” (Gk. έλλόβια; Lat. in- aures) and “necklaces” (Gk. όρμισκοι, only mentioned in Aelian). On these examples see p. 183 above.

(σπλάγγνα) of sacrificial animals and on green cheese.<sup>300</sup> Pliny and Plutarch refer to these eels as sacred.<sup>301</sup>

According to Pliny, fish in the spring of Apollo at Myra in Lycia responded to the sounds of a “pipe” (*fistula*) which was played three times in order to give oracular responses.<sup>302</sup> In the lake of Atargatis/Venus at Bambyce/Hierapolis in Syria, sources maintain that many large sacred fish of different kinds had names, obeyed the voice of temple ministrants, received food from human hands, were adorned with jewelry and with sacred objects, and were at peace with one another.<sup>303</sup> At Stabiae in Campania near the rock of Hercules, *melanuri*

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300. Athenaeus, *Deip.* 8.331 E - F.

301. The following sources report on the sacred eels (*ιερά εγγελεύς*) in Arethusa, which were tame (see also p. 183 above): Aelian, *NA* 8.4; Plutarch, *De soll. an.* 976 A.

302. *HN* 32.17.

303. Pliny, *NH* 32.17: “Hieropoli Syriae in lacu Veneris aedituorum vocibus parent vocati veniunt exornati auro, adulantes scalpuntur orahiantia manibus inserendis praebent.” [“In the lake of Venus in Hierapolis in Syria they (the fish) obeyed the voices of the temple ministrants, came when called, and were adorned with gold (jewelry). They fawned to be scratched and offered their mouths wide open for incoming hands (with food.)”]

Lucian, *Syr. D.* 45: “ἔστι δὲ καὶ λίμνη αὐτόθι, οὐ πολλὸν ἐκάς τοῦ ἱεροῦ, ἐν τῇ ἰχθύες ἱεροὶ τρέφονται πολλοὶ καὶ πολυεῖδεις. γίνονται δὲ αὐτέων ἄνιοι κάρτα μεγάλοι· οὗτοι δὲ καὶ ὀνόματα ἔχουσι καὶ ἔρχονται καλεόμενοι. ἐπ’ ἐμεῦ δὲ τις ἦν ἐν αὐτέοισι χρυσοφορέων, ἐν τῇ πτέρυγι δὲ ποίημα χρύσειον αὐτέῳ ἀνακέετο. καὶ μιν ἐγὼ πολλάκις ἔθεησάμην, καὶ εἶχε τὸ ποίημα.” [“Not far from the sanctuary, there is a lake, in which many different kinds of sacred fish are raised. Some of them grow to a rather large size. They even have names and come when summoned. When I was there, some were wearing gold jewelry, and on their fins, there rests a gold object. As often as I saw the fish, I saw the object.”]

Aelian, *NA* 12.2: “Κατὰ τὴν πάλαι Βαμβύκην (καλεῖται δὲ νῦν Ἰεράπολις, Σελεύκου ὀνομάσαντος τοῦτο αὐτὴν) ἰχθύες εἰσὶν ἱεροί, καὶ κατ’ ἑλίας νήχονται καὶ ἔχουσιν ἡγεμόνας, καὶ τῶν ἐμβαλλομένων

were fed with bread.<sup>304</sup> Sacred fish in Lydia that were not allowed to be eaten used to come up “in schools” (gregatim) at the sound of a “flute” (tibicina).<sup>305</sup> In a spring at the Temple of Apollo at Myra in Lycia, the sea perch were said to respond to “the voice of the priest” (ιερέως φωνή).<sup>306</sup>

Furthermore, certain fish were reknowned as “tame” (πράος) and as “accustomed to the (human) hand” (χειροήθεις). Of such a kind were the following fish: the “sacred eel”, which responded to voices, in the spring of Arethusa in Sicily;<sup>307</sup> the silourus;<sup>308</sup> and the fish in Stephanopolis in Epirus.<sup>309</sup> The Chalus river in Syria was “filled with large tame fish” (πλήρη δ' ἰχθύων μεγάλων καὶ πραέων).<sup>310</sup> Likewise, in a lagoon

αὐτοῖς τροφῶν προεσθίουσιν οὗτοι γε. φυλάττουσι δὲ καὶ τὴν πρὸς ἀλλήλους φιλίαν μάλιστα ἰχθύων, καὶ ἔστιν αἰεὶ ἑνσπονδα αὐτοῖς, ἥτοι τῆς θεοῦ τὴν ὁμόνοιαν καταπνεούσης, ἣ διότι τῶν ἐμβαλλομένων τροφῶν ἐμπιπλάμενοι οὕτως τῆς ἀλλήλων βορᾶς ἀγευστοὶ τε καὶ ἀμαθεῖς διαμένουσιν.” [“In the ancient city of Bambyce (now called Hierapolis, after it was named thus by Seleucus) there are sacred fish. They swim in companies, have leaders, and eat food thrown to them. More than other fish, they have friendships with one another and are at peace with another, either because the goddess inspires them with harmony, or because they are satisfied with the food thrown in. Thus they have not tasted, and are ignorant of, the flesh of one another.” See also Diodorus Siculus, Bibl. 2.4.2-3.

304. Pliny, HN 32.17.

305. Varro, De Re Rust. 3.17.4.

306. Aelian, NA 12.1.

307. “Sacred eel” (ιερά εγγεῖλος): Aelian, NA 8.4.

308. Silourous = σίλουρος, which, according to Aelian, was a fresh water fish found all over the Mediterranean: NA 12.29.

309. Aelian, NA 12.30. Although they were not fish, some crocodiles were also regarded as sacred in Egypt: Aelian, NA 8.4.

in the Ionian Sea near Epidamnus in Illyria, “flocks of tame mackerel were fed” (σκόμβρων ἠθάδων καὶ ἡμερων ἀγέλαι τρέφονται), and, as a reward for their “treaty of peace” (ἔνσπονδα) with human beings, they aided fisherman in catching other foreign mackerel.<sup>311</sup>

Some individuals even took on ichthyological cognomina.<sup>312</sup> In one case, one of the “fishpond owners” (piscinarii) was compared to shepherds, who, instead of tending flocks of sheep, tended flocks of fish.<sup>313</sup> These examples confirm that human beings could conceive of themselves in a close relationship with fish.

While ancient writers could describe human beings as shepherds of fish, other writers described certain fish themselves as shepherds. For example, Oppian describes the male sargue, who gathers his female wives as a “shepherd” (μηλονόμος) who “pastures his fleecy flocks” (εἰροπόκοι ἀγέλες).<sup>314</sup>

In general, ancient authors could refer to fish in terms of flocks and

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“Crocodile” = Gk. ἱεροὶ κροκοδίλοι; Lat. crocodili

310. Xenophon, Anab. 1.4.9. On this passage, see also p. 192 above.

311. Mackerel: Gk. σκόμβρος; Lat. scomber. Aelian, NA 14.1.

312. E.g. Sergius Orata (gilthead or goldfish) and Lucius Licinius Muraena (active from the 80’s to the 60’s B.C.E.; Lat. murena = lamprey): Varro, Rust. 3.3.10; Columella, Rust. 8.16.5; Macrobius, Sat. 3.15.1. See also the references to Antoninus Terrentius Varro Murena: CIL 14.2109 = ILS 897; and CIL 6.1324, first century B.C.E.

313. In somewhat sarcastic language Varro (Rust. 3.17.9) compares how Lucius Lucullus (see n. 33 above and Endnote 2) led his fish into cooler places, just as Apulian “shepherds” (pecuarii) led their “flock” (pecus) through paths in the Sabine hills.

herds.<sup>315</sup> In the Istrian Sea, south of the Danube, clams (χήμαι θάλατται) were purported to swim like a “herd” (ἀγέλη).<sup>316</sup> Athenaeus and Plutarch describe the ἀμία(ς) (probably an unspecifiable type of tuna) as swimming in herds,<sup>317</sup> while Aelian describes tuna (θύννοι) in the same fashion.<sup>318</sup> According to traditions preserved in Athenaeus, the amia(s) was so called, because it is “not solitary” (οὐ μίαν= ἀ/μίαν), but travels in “herds” (ἀγελῆδόν) and “goes with its own kind” (ἄμα τένα).<sup>319</sup> Similarly, Phaidimos said that the amias was so called because of its “herding together” (συναγελασμός).<sup>320</sup> In the Halieutica, Oppian tells how dolphins “drive into confusion the infinite flocks of the sea” (κλονέουσιν ἀθέσφατα πώεα λίμνης).<sup>321</sup> In addition, Varro describes how the sacred fish in Lydia used to come up to the edge of pools “in flocks” (gregatim, as of sheep).<sup>322</sup> Columella refers to schools of fish as “scaly flocks” (squamosi greges) or as a “watery flock” (aquatile

314. Hal. 4.393-98. Sargue=Gk. σάργος; Lat. sargus.

315. In this regard, it might be of interest to note the above-mentioned sargue had a great affection for another animal also characterized by its herding tendency, namely goats—an attraction which proved of great use for fishermen in catching sargues: Aelian, NA 1.23; Oppian, Cyneget. 2.433 and Hal. 4.308-73.

316. Aelian, NA 15.12.

317. See nn. 319-320 below.

318. NA 15.3.

319. *Deip.* 278 A and 324 D.

320. In Plutarch, De soll. an. 980 A.

321. Hal. 2.547.



pecus).<sup>323</sup> Similarly, Oppian uses the phrase “footless flocks” (νεπόδες ἀγέλαι) to describe schools of fish.<sup>324</sup>

Examples such as these show that Greeks and Romans viewed fish as very similar to domesticated animals and thus capable of a certain amount of interaction with human beings.

In those texts describing the character of animals, Greek and Latin authors praise fish in particular for their human-like traits of sociability, communality, and their concern for the protection and salvation of their fellows. For example, in Plutarch, Phaidimos (the defender of the intelligence of fish) says most clearly that many fish are “communal” (κοινωνικός) and show “mutual affection toward one another” (φιλάλληλος), especially the anthias fish and the parrot wrasse.<sup>325</sup> In addition, they are described as always coming to the aid of their hooked compatriots.<sup>326</sup> Another example of this was the grey mullet, which, according to Aelian, ate only dead fish and had “peaceful relations” (ἠσπρονδος) with other fish.<sup>327</sup> In addition, as discussed above, Oppian tells his readers that the grey mullet (κεστρεύς) was a “holy race” (ἀγνὰ γένεθλα), because “its mouth touched no fleshly food nor gulped down

322. Rust. 3.17.4.

323. Rust. 8.17.2.

324. E.g. Hal. 3.441-42.

325. De soll. an. 977 C. Anthias = ἀνθίας. On the anthias fish, see also p. 190 above and p. 237 below.

326. Pliny, HN 9.180; Aelian, NA 1.4; Oppian, Hal. 4.40-126.

327. NA 1.3.

blood.”<sup>328</sup> One should also mention the anthias fish, around which there is always peace,<sup>329</sup> and the sacred fishes in Hieropolis, which were always “at peace” (ἔνσπονδος) with one another.<sup>330</sup> Furthermore, the same Phaidimos as mentioned above says that sea creatures—even crocodiles—have a “community life” (κοινωνία).<sup>331</sup> The pilot fish exemplified the aid of one sea creature on behalf of another by always accompanying the great sea beasts (Gk. κήτοι; Lat. ceti, which can also mean large sea creatures in general), especially whales, and by directing their course, without which they can not navigate.<sup>332</sup> In addition, unlike bees and ants, fish have “regard” (στοχασμός) and “concern” (φροντίς) for one another as individuals.<sup>333</sup> Even “sharks” (γαλεοί) were said to follow one another into captivity out of “love” (φιλότης) and “mutual aid” (ἀλλήλων ἐπαρωγή).<sup>334</sup>

In addition, some fish, such as the shad and the common crab, were said to take such great delight in the sophisticated human-made sounds of instrumental music, song, and rattles that fishermen could use them

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328. Hal. 2.642-48: “οὐδὲ ποτε ψάβουσιν ὑπὸ στόμα σαρκὸς ἐδωδής, οὐδὲ φόνου λάπτουσιν.”

329. Especially Aelian, NA 8.28.

330. Aelian, NA 12.2.

331. Plutarch, De soll. an. 980 D - E.

332. Pliny, HN 9.186, 11.165; Plutarch, De soll. an. 980 F - 981 B; Aelian, NA 2.13; Oppian, Hal. 5.62-108. Pilot fish = Gk. πομπίλος ἡγεμών, ἡγητήρ; Lat. pompilus (but in Pliny, Lat. musculus = (strangely) the sea mouse). Whale = φάλλαίνα; Lat. ballena.

333. Plutarch, De soll. an. 981 B.

to catch these sea creatures.<sup>335</sup> As a further indication that fish had a kinship with human beings, one might cite the above-mentioned examples, in which fish save the lives of human beings.<sup>336</sup> Finally, despite the association by some in antiquity of fish with stupidity,<sup>337</sup> others argued that fish were endowed to some extent with the particular human characteristics of reason and intelligence.<sup>338</sup>

From illustrations such as these, and those in the above paragraphs as well, it should be clear that numerous individuals in the Graeco-Roman world viewed fish as similar to human beings in many ways.

One should also mention that it was possible for certain persons to believe that various fish could actually at one time have been human

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334. In Oppian, Hal. 4.242-83. See also Aelian, NA 1.55.

335. On the shad and music, see the following: Plutarch, De soll. an. 961 E; Aelian, NA 6.32 (in Lake Mareotis in Egypt); Porphyry, Abst. 3.22.4. Shad = Gk. θρίσσα, θρίττα; Lat. thritta. On the common crab which followed the sounds of flutes (αὐλός), syringes (σὺριγγίς), Egyptian flutes (φῶτιγγίς) out of the water to captivity, see Aelian, NA 6.32; Plutarch, De soll. an. 961 E; and Porphyry, Abst. 3.22.4. Common crab=Gk. πάγουρος; Lat. cancer.

336. See immediately below, pp. 195 and 206 above, and 248-61 below.

337. For this evidence, see n. 373 below.

338. See especially the defence of sea creatures by the protagonist Phaedimos in Plutarch, De soll. an. 975 C — 985 C, arguing for the “reason” (λόγος) and “understanding” (σὺννεσις) of fish. In addition, see the comments of Pliny (HN 9.143-47) on the faculties of “perception” (sensus) and “intelligence” (intellectus) of the torpedo (Gk. νάρκη; Lat. torpedo), the sea frog (Lat. rana in mari), the monk- or angel-fish (Gk. ῥίνη; Lat. squatina), the turbot (Gk. ῥόμβος; Lat. rhombus), the scolopendra (a type of sea centipede), the sea ram (Gk. κριός; Lat. aries), and even those creatures somewhere (according to Pliny) between animals and plants, namely jellyfish (Lat. urtica) and sponges (Gk. σπόγγος; Lat. spongea).

beings. According to Apollonius of Rhodes, the pilot-fish was formerly a human being, who was turned into fish, because he tried to help a girl (whom Apollo loved) escape from the god.<sup>339</sup> As mentioned above, some believed that fishermen could turn into the fish called “angler,” if they tried to practice their craft in the Lake of Poseidon in Aegiae.<sup>340</sup>

Thus, the distance between human beings and fish was not always a long one.

Most respected of all sea creatures were dolphins, who were included among fish in the ancient world,<sup>341</sup> and around them a special literature of praise arose.<sup>342</sup> Not allowed to be eaten or taken up in a fish catch,<sup>343</sup> numerous stories circulated in antiquity demonstrating that

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339. In fragments from the The Founding of Naucratis (Ναυκράτεως κτίσις) in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.2283 D - F; and in Aelian, NA 8.23. See p. 184 above, as well as nn. 163 and 332.

340. See pp. 176-77 above.

341. Gk. δελφίς, δελφίν; Lat. delphin, delphinus. Of course, according to the modern classification of animals, dolphins are mammals, but, despite their awareness of the different breathing of dolphins, many ancient writers in the Graeco-Roman world designated them as fish; see n. 154 above.

342. See the many references below for examples of this literature. For secondary bibliography, see D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes 52-56; and E. B. Stebbins, The Dolphin in the Art and Literature of Greece and Rome.

343. To kill a dolphin is “to sin” (ἀλπιίνω) against the gods (Oppian, Hal. 5.561-64) and is “immoral” (ἀπότροπος; Oppian, Hal. 5.416). According to Plutarch, “there is an unwritten law of amnesty” (νόμος ἀδείας ἀγραφος ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς) on behalf of dolphins: Sept. sap. conv. 163 A. Nevertheless, there are two examples where dolphins were hunted: at Pharnacia in Chaldaea for their blubber and because they accompany tuna (Strabo, Geo. 12.3.19, a striking parallel to the modern hunting of tuna through the scouting and killing of dolphins); and in Thrace, where they were killed in an especially cruel manner

dolphins were protectors, saviors, and close friends of human beings.<sup>344</sup>

In cities throughout the Mediterranean, many of these stories focussed on the love of a dolphin for a particular boy,<sup>345</sup> who played with the

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(Oppian, Hal. 5.519-88). In addition, Aelian laments that a human being is an “all-devouring creature” (τὸ ζῷον πᾶμβορον), who sometimes kills dolphins to pickle them: NA 12.12. But these are clearly exceptions that prove the rule.

344. As the following expressions indicate, the friendliness of dolphins to human beings made a particular impression on ancient writers: “friendly to human beings” (homini amicus; Pliny, HN 9.24); “loving humankind” (φιλόανθρωπος; Athenaeus, Deip. 606 D; Plutarch, De soll. an. 984 C); “loving without thought of profit” (φιλεῖν ἀνευ χρείας; Plutarch, De soll. an. 984 D); (human beings and dolphins are) “friends” (ἑταῖροι; Oppian, Hal. 5.560); and (they have) “a heart at one with human beings” (ἀνθρώποισιν ὁμόφρονα θυμόν; Oppian, Hal. 5.520). Their relationship to the youth of Iassus is described in terms of “goodwill” (εὐνοια), “friendship” (φιλία), and “love” (ἔρως): Plutarch, De soll. an. 984 D. Indeed, the dolphin is “the only animal, which loves human beings, simply because they are human beings” (μόνος γὰρ ἀνθρώπων ἀσπάζεται, καθ’ ὅ ἀνθρώπος ἐστὶ): Plutarch, De soll. an. 984 C. In general, “community of mind and feeling” (ὁμοφροσύνη) exists between humanity and dolphins (Oppian, Hal. 5.563). Among the explanations for not killing dolphins (Oppian, Hal. 5.422-23), one hears that “the thoughts of these attendants of the sea-booming god (Poseidon) are similar to those of human beings” (ἴσα γὰρ ἀνθρώποισι νοήματα καὶ προπόλοισι Ζητῆος ἀλγιδούποιο). If one were to kill a dolphin, it would be akin to killing members of one’s own family: Oppian, Hal. 5.423-24, 553-55.

345. Baiae in Campania (Pliny, HN 9.25, according to traditions handed down in Maecenas, Fabianus Papius, Flavius Alfius, all in the first century C.E.); Puteoli in Campania (Aelian, NA 6.15; Aulus Gellius, NA 6.8.2); Dicaearchia in Campania (Aulus Gellius, NA 6.8.4-7); Taranto in Calabria (Aristotle, HA 631 A 18; Pliny, HN 9.28; Antigonus Carystus, Hist. mirab. 55 [60]); Hippo Diarrhytus in North Africa (Pliny, HN 9.26; Pliny, Ep. 9.33; and possibly Oppian, Hal. 5.453-57); Alexandria in Egypt (Aelian, NA 6.15; in the reign of Ptolemy II, 308-246 B.C.E.); Naupactus in Locris Ozolis in Greece (Pliny, HN 9.27; Aulus Gellius, NA 6.8.2; in both, as recorded by Theophrastus in the fourth century B.C.E.); Amphilochia in Greece (Pliny, HN 9.28); Poroselene off the coast of Asia Minor (Pausanias, Descr. Gr. 3.25.7; Aelian, NA 2.6); and Iassus in Caria (Aristotle, HA 631 A; Pliny, HN 9.27; Plutarch, De soll. an. 984 E - F, where he tells his readers that the city minted a coin with the figure of a boy riding a dolphin; Aelian, NA 6.15; Duris [340-260 B.C.E.] in

dolphin and rode on its back.<sup>346</sup> As a result of the death of the boy, the dolphin would often die of heartbreak.<sup>347</sup>

In other stories, dolphins saved the lives of individuals, who would have otherwise drowned in the ocean.

In this regard, most famous is the tale of the minstrel, Arion of Lesbos (inventor, composer, and institutionalizer of the dithyramb and the dithyrambic chorus). Upon hearing the greatest singer in the world,<sup>348</sup> a dolphin saved Arion from death, after sailors (in order to take his money) had thrown him overboard.<sup>349</sup> Although the Arion tradition was the most widespread and well-known one in the Graeco-Roman world, stories depicting the saving of the lives of Coeranus of Paros (who himself had saved the lives of some dolphins caught by fishermen) and of Telemachus (son of Odysseus), as well as of others, were also significant.<sup>350</sup> In addition, dolphins guided settlers in their

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Athenaeus, Deip. 13.606 D - E; and Antigonus Carystus, Hist. Mirab. 55 [60]). On the relationship between dolphins, sexuality, and love of boys see pp. 296-97.

346. In general, Plutarch mentions that “they took great pleasure in children swimming and competed with them in diving” (χαίρει δὲ καὶ νήξεσι παίδων καὶ κολύμβοις ἀμιλλᾶται): Sept. sap. conv. 163 A.

347. On the relationship between dolphins and death, see pp. 162-63.

348. See n. 356 on the musicality of dolphins.

349. According to Dio Chrysostom, the rescue of Arion took place in the time of Solon (early sixth century B.C.E.): Or. 37.1-4. On Arion and the dolphin, see especially the following citations: Herodotus, Hist. 1.24; Ovid, Fast. 2.79-118; Propertius 2.24.37; Dio Chrysostom, Or. 19.1-2, 37.1-4; Pliny, HN 9.28; Pausanias, Descr. Gr. 3.25.7; Aulus Gellius, NA 16.19; Plutarch, Sept. sap. conv. 160 F - 162 B; Aelian, NA 2.6, 6.15, 12.45; Oppian, Hal. 5.448-52; Philostratus, Imag. 1.19.24; Martianus Capella, De nupt. 9.908. I should note that

complicated voyage from Crete to Delphi (which they founded). They also aided sailors who were lost in the Aegean.<sup>351</sup>

Known also for their similarity to human beings in terms of biological features,<sup>352</sup> dolphins were regarded as remarkable for their human characteristics of intelligence,<sup>353</sup> amiability,<sup>354</sup> love of their children and

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several of the citations listed in D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes (54) are erroneously recorded.

350. After a shipwreck, the dolphins saved Coeranus, who had saved them: Plutarch, De soll. an. 984 F - 985 A; Athenaeus, Deip. 13.606 E; Aelian, NA 8.3. From the passage in Plutarch, it seems that the story of Coeranus was known to Archilochus in the seventh or sixth centuries B.C.E. According to the fifth century B.C.E. lyric poet Stesichorus, dolphins rescued Telemachus as a small boy off the coast of Zacynthos in Greece: in Plutarch, De soll. an. 985 B. In addition, Plutarch mentions the rescue by dolphins of a certain “young girl” (κόρη) and of two lovers (the daughter of Smintheus, who was to be sacrificed to Amphitrite, and Enalus): Sept. sap. conv. 163 A - C. For this story, see additionally Plutarch, De soll. an. 984. Stories also circulated about the rescue by dolphins of Taras or Phalanthus: Pausanias, Descr. Gr. 10.13.1; Antigonus Carystus, Hist. Mirab. 55 (60).

351. Plutarch, De soll. an. 984 A - B; cf. Homeric Hymn to Apollo 3.393ff.

352. According to Pliny, dolphins, like human beings, are monogamous, “roaming about in couples” (vagantur fere coniugia) and bearing their children in the tenth month, only one month longer than human beings: HN 9.21; cf. Aristotle HA 566 B and 631 A 18. Unlike most sea creatures, they have the ability to spend time on land: Pliny, HN 9.22. “Their voice is similar to the groan of a human being” (pro voce gemitus humano similis): Pliny, HN 9.23. As Aelian says “the female dolphin has breasts like a woman” (Ὁ δελφίς ὁ θήλυς μαζοὺς ἔχει κατὰ τὰς γυναῖκας) and it has a clear sense of family life: NA 10.8. In the words of Oppian, “dolphins have sexual intercourse similarly to human beings and they possess human like genitalia” (δελφίνες δ’ ἀνδρῶσιν ὁμῶς γάμον ἐντύνονται μῆδεα τ’ ἀνδρομέοισι πανεῖκελα καρτύνονται): Hal. 1.580-81.

353. According to Duris (c. 340-260 B.C.E.), the dolphin is an “extremely intelligent animal” (συνετώτατον ζῷον): in Athenaeus, Deip. 13.606 D. Aelian says that dolphins demonstrate their “intel-

friends,<sup>355</sup> and musicality.<sup>356</sup> In addition, like the fish mentioned above,

ligence” (συνέσις), by biting through fish nets and by appealing to the sympathy of the fishermen: NA 11.12; also 15.6. See especially the instances, where dolphins shrewdly help fishermen catch fish and then themselves receive a reward, consisting of some of the captured fish which they can then consume: at Naumasiensis (Nîmes) in Gallia Narbonensis (Pliny, HN 9.29-32); at Iassus in Caria (Pliny, HN 9.33); and on the Greek island of Euboea (Oppian, Hal. 5.425-47; Aelian, NA 2.8). Cf. the story of the tame mackerel, who aid fishermen in their catch on pp. 220-21 above.

354. Oppian (Hal. 5.519) says that dolphins excelled in “gentleness” (ἐνηεῖη). They were known for gamboling (as in the pseudonymous poem of Arion in Aelian, NA 12.45), especially in front of ships. Of course, their playfulness is indicated in the above-discussed stories of them and young boys.

355. Pliny tells his readers that “they even carry their young around, while weak from infancy” (“ . . . etiam gestant fetus infantia infirmos”): HN 9.21. In the words of Oppian, “they love their offspring and are very much at peace with one another” (τὸ καὶ φιλότητι γενέθλης κέχρηται, μέγα δ’ εἰσὶ συνάρθμοιοι ἀλλήλοισιν): Hal. 5.424-25. See also Oppian, who notes that the “the dolphin excels in its love for its children” (δελφίς μὲν ἀριστεύει φιλότητι παιδῶν): Cynegit. 3.113. According to Aelian, “the female dolphin is by far of living creatures the most devoted to its children” (δελφίς δὲ ἄρα θήλυς φιλοτεκνότητος ἐς τὰ ἄσχατα ζῶν ἔστι), so that she will go to any extreme to protect her offspring: NA 1.18. As one who “loves its relations” (φιλοικεῖος), the dolphin comes to the aid of its endangered compatriots (Aelian, On Animals 5.6, 11.12) and, in one instance, dolphins even asked for “clemency” (miseratio) in order to free a fellow dolphin caught by the king of Caria (Pliny, HN 9.33; cf. also Aristotle, HA 631 A 18). Dolphins are animals who “love their children” (φιλότεκνος), who are “affectionate” (φιλόστοργος), and who “fear for their young” (ΚΑΘ ὑπὲρ τῶν βρεφῶν ὀρρωδεῖ): Aelian, NA 10.8.

356. In the ancient world, they were widely known as lovers of music: “moved by the lovely sound of flutes” (αὐλῶν ἐκίνησ’ ἔρατὸν μέλος; Pindar in Plutarch, De soll. an. 984 C); “friend of the musical art” (“amicum animal . . . musicae arti”; Pliny, HN 9.24); “flute-loving” (φίλαυλος; Euripides, El. 435; Aristophanes, Ran. 1317); and Aelian, NA 12.45); “song-loving” (φίλωδός; Aelian, NA 12.45); “music-loving” (φιλόμουσος; Plutarch, De soll. an. 984 B and Aelian NA 2.6, 12.6 [φιλομουσία], 12.45); According to the pseudonymous poem of the dolphin rider Arion in Aelian, dolphins are described with numerous phrases that illustrate their love of music and of dance: NA 12.45. When the sailors were readying themselves to kill him, it



dolphins answered to the call of a name.<sup>357</sup>

Thus, Greeks and Romans considered dolphins a type of fish that had many of the positive features of human beings (and less of some of the negative ones). Their kinship was so close to human beings that, according to Graeco-Roman traditions, they frequently fell in love with them and saved their lives.

### **An example from ancient Judaism**

The association of fish with human beings is not only found in pagan traditions, but it is also found in Jewish ones as well. While there are no examples known to me praising tame fish or the human qualities of fish, ancient Jews were able to use fish in order to refer to human beings.

The classic biblical text that equates human beings with fish is that from Habakuk 1.14: “You make human beings as fish of the sea.”<sup>358</sup>

While later rabbinic commentators interpret this passage in a variety of ways, they generally accept the equivalence of Jews/Israelites with fish. Most important for the interpretation of fish symbolism are several passages from c. fourth century C.E., in which the Torah is compared to water that nourishes fish so that Jews/Israelites are portrayed as the

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was the harp playing of Arion that attracted the dolphins to him: Herodotus, Hist. 1.24; Dio Chrysostom, Or. 37.1-4; Pliny, HN 9.28; Plutarch, Sept. sap. conv. 161 C - D; and Aulus Gellius, NA 16.19. Plutarch says that “they are enchanted by flutes and songs” (. . . κηληθέντας ἀυλοῖς ἢ τισι μέλεσι) and “that they delight and follow after music” (. . . ἔτι μουσική τὰ ζῶα ταῦτα χαίρει καὶ διώκει): De soll. an. 162 F.

357. In this case, according to Pliny, they all responded to the name, “Simon” or “Pug-faced” (Σιμόν, Simo): HN 9.23.

faithful fish swimming in the waters of the law.<sup>359</sup>

Considering the importance of the book of Habakkuk for Jews (e.g. the Qumran community) in the Graeco-Roman period and considering that the reading of fish as a reference to Jews was rather well-known to rabbinic exegetical circles, it is plausible to suppose that Hab. 1.14 and its interpretations to some limited extent influenced early Christian fish symbolism as well. In fact, one might cite as a possible example of Jewish influence the portrayal in early Christian texts of certain kinds of water——especially baptismal water——as spiritually healthful for fish/human beings.<sup>360</sup>

### **The influence of fish-human empathy on early Christian fish symbolism**

From the preceding discussion, it would seem that the empathic relationship, which many ancient persons believed existed between human beings and fish, must have contributed to the matrix out of which early Christian fish symbolism developed. For to a large extent early Christian fish symbolism presumes that not only can one compare fish and

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358. See Text # XIV.1 in Appendix 2.

359. BT Abodah Zarah 3b; BT Berakoth 61b; MR Gen. 97.3; Abot de R. Nathan 40. For collection of this material, see I. Schlefelowitz, "Das Fischsymbol in Judentum und Christentum," 2-6; and E. R. Goodenough, Symbols 5:32-35.

360. See pp. 460-463, 467-81, and Chapter 3 (passim) below. It is very probable that many of these fourth century traditions are in fact much older than that. In addition, the biblical verse is self-explanatory and does not even need interpretation in order to enable some sort of identification of fish with human beings.

human beings as in a simile (as is perhaps the case in the interpretations of Hab. 1.14), but that one fish and many fish could metaphorically embody Jesus Christ and the members of the early Christian community respectively.

That in the Graeco-Roman world persons could have fish as pets with names and adornments, that fish could be domesticated and made to wear human bodily accoutrements (such as jewelry), that individuals could take on ichthyological cognomina, that they could mourn when certain fishes died, that human beings were said to have formerly been nourished inside fish, that human beings and fishes were said to have descended from the same element, and that fish could be regarded as having been at one time human beings, meant that Greeks and Romans recognized in fish human traits.

For example, when one put jewelry on a fish, one would have thought of the creature in womanly terms. Or when one mourned for the death of a fish, one would have thought of it as a friend.

I would suggest that these empathic connections between human beings and fish made it possible for a fish to symbolize a human being, such as Jesus. That is, because fish and human beings were so closely related, the development of a fish symbol representing Jesus Christ as in part a human being would have evolved naturally and would have certainly been comprehensible to anyone brought up in the Graeco-Roman world.

I would like here to suggest several specific instances that exemplify the possible influence of Graeco-Roman human-fish empathy on early

Christian fish symbolism. For example, the association of fish with human beings is particularly appropriate in the inscription of Avercius, where grasping the “huge fish” with the hand (ἐδραξάτο) suggests the kinds of tame fishes (found in various bodies of water in the ancient world) which allowed fondling by human hands.<sup>361</sup> In other words, the fish of the Avercius inscription was a fish that could relate to human beings and that was sufficiently human-like to accept the hands of friendly individuals.

Just as certain individuals took on the names of specific fishes, because they loved them so much, and just as deities could even be called Ὁ Ἰχθύς, I would propose that the word ΙΧΘΥΣ as it is found on a number of funerary inscriptions (especially from Rome) functioned as a designation for the Christianity of the monument.<sup>362</sup> That is, it served to identify Christians. For pagans it would not have referred to an acronym, but it would simply have seemed like an odd word that early Christians used on their epigraphic monuments to identify themselves, while for Christians it would also have referred to Jesus Christ. But for both it would have functioned as a designation: when one saw ΙΧΘΥΣ, one would have thought of Christianity.

If I am right in calling ΙΧΘΥΣ a designation for early Christians, its usage in this capacity is reminiscent of the pagan practice of taking on a fish cognomen to express one’s love for fish, even though strictly speaking it is not in fact a cognomen. Thus, early Christians did not,

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361. For more on handling fish, see p. 299 below. On tame fish, see e.g. pp. 183, 192-93, and 216-21 above.

like a few pagans, insert the name of a fish into their actual names, but they used it instead as a group designation (for example in the inscription of Pectorius, with its reference to the “Divine Race of the Celestial Fish”).<sup>363</sup> Furthermore, instead of expressing their love for actual species of fish, early Christians probably used ΙΧΘΥΣ to express their love for their fish, Christ.

In addition, in speaking of the rescue of human beings by dolphins, ancient writers indicate a salvific aspect of dolphin symbolism—a feature that would have been most conducive to the fish symbolism of Christ who, as early Christian literary references indicate, saved Christians from the worldly sea.<sup>364</sup> The guidance of confused sailors to their destinations by dolphins and pilot-fish, as well as the protection of divers afforded by the anthias fish, would have further confirmed the salvific aspect of fish symbolism. Moreover, the reference to the “savior” (σωτήρ) within the ΙΧΘΥΣ acronym itself would very possibly have directed one’s attention to the salvific feats of certain fish, such as dolphins and even anthias fish, as well as to the salvific function of Christ.

One other aspect of human empathic identification with fish and its possible influence on early Christianity is worth noting—that is, the the above-mentioned examples of Romans who mourned for their

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362. For more on this, see pp. 493-504 below.

363. For the inscription of Pectorius, see Text # I.2 in Appendix 1.

364. See Chapter 3 below. Plutarch uses the Greek word σωτήρια (here “rescue”) to describe the rescue by dolphins of a maiden from the sea; on this story, see n. 350 above. Of course, this word also has strong religious overtones, especially in early Christianity.

recently deceased pet fish. The very fact that Romans could mourn for their favorite fish (even if this was sometimes viewed by critics with a certain degree of satirical humor), should itself make the representation of Christ as a fish seem less absurd. Certainly for non-Christians encountering early Christianity, it would have made sense. Just as Greeks and Romans could mourn for a fish, a Christian could also mourn for the killing of their fish, namely Christ.

Likewise, as discussed above, ancient writers commented on the human-like features of dolphins—features which could even be considered superior to human beings—both in terms of their physical characteristics and in terms of their virtuous character.<sup>365</sup> At the same time, the traits of sociability, communality, intelligence, amiability, and concern for their fellows, which were so frequently associated with sea creatures (including dolphins) would have made the fish extremely appropriate for symbolizing early Christians as a group. Like these fish, early Christians cared for each other, lived in closely knit communities, and conceived of themselves as kind, gentle, and peaceful.

Some Romans even went to the extent of representing little fish as human souls in certain religious rituals—thus making the connection of fish to humanity even more explicit.<sup>366</sup> This tradition is possibly connected to the portrayal by Tertullian of early Christians as little fish (pisciculi).

Finally, by referring to groups of fish as flocks and herds, ancient observers of the ichthyological world used language that was analogous

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365. One must remember that dolphins were regarded by many in the Graeco-Roman world as fish.

to the description of groups of sheep, as well as of goats, cattle, and other domesticated animals. As already mentioned, there is even a reference to the practitioners of pisciculture as shepherds.

In using this kind of language, these writers established an effective metaphor, which would have allowed early Christians to describe themselves as fish: just as they saw themselves as sheep guided by a shepherd, early Christians could also see themselves as fish, guided (as in Tertullian) by the big fish. Indeed, I have already indicated that ancient writers could describe certain fish themselves as shepherds. In the Avercius inscription, it is very likely not an accident that the person referred to as the big fish (Jesus, as I will argue) is also described as a shepherd. Just as a shepherd would pasture his flock of sheep, the big fish Christ would have shepherded his flock of Christians.

In support of my conjecture that empathic relationships between fish and human beings influenced the identification of fish with Christ and with Christians, I would also cite the texts from Section V in Appendix 1. In that section, one sees that many early Christians regarded fish as more intelligent and well-behaved than human beings. In addition, they were thought to be aligned with the divine law of God to a much greater extent than human beings. Texts such as these show that, like pagans, Christians viewed fish as in many ways worth of imitation. Thus, the identification by Christians of fish with human beings and with Christ may well have had its background in the general empathic relationship between human beings and fish that characterized the world of pagans, as well as of Christians.

To these pagan traditions, I should add the Jewish material men-

tioned above. There one also finds the capacity of some ancient Jews to identify fish with human beings. Furthermore, positive portrayals of fish by Greeks and Romans would have fit in nicely with Habakuk 1.14, as well as with the Jewish traditions based on it. From an early Jewish point of view, many of these portrayals would very likely have seemed comprehensible and normal. From an early Christian point of view, the Graeco-Roman traditions would have consequently seemed in line with a very important Old Testament tradition. Thus, for early Christians, the fish-human empathy that was so widespread in the Graeco-Roman world around would perhaps have found confirmation in sources from their own Jewish roots as well.

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366. See p. 147 and nn. 89-90 above.



## CRITICAL EVALUATIONS OF FISH IN THE GRAECO- ROMAN WORLD

These positive views of fish notwithstanding, it must not be ignored that several authors, including early Christian commentators on the creation,<sup>367</sup> criticized and/or feared fish on the following grounds: their sexual immorality;<sup>368</sup> their devouring of—and animosity toward—one another;<sup>369</sup> their sometimes dangerous, poisonous and death-

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367. See for example the interpretations of the creation, each entitled Hexameron, by Basil of Caesarea and Ambrose. I do not deal with these negative interpretations here. Many of them are dependent on the Graeco-Roman materials cited in this section.

368. Considered particularly lustful was the parrot wrasse (Gk. σκάρος; Lat. scarus) and also the grey mullet (Gk. κέφαλος, κεστρεύς; Lat. mugil), the males of which, according to Aelian, could be entrapped by clever fishermen with the enticement of female bait: NA 1.2, 1.12, 1.14-15. So also the octopus (Gk. πολύπους; Lat. polypus), which Aelian regarded as “extremely licentious” (ἀκολαστότατος): NA 6.28. Aelian considered “most lecherous” (λαγνίστατος) of all, however, the sea perch (χάννη): NA 4.5. An exception was the aetna fish (αἰτναίος), which was always said to remain faithful to its spouse: Aelian, NA 1.13.

369. For example, Oppian remarks that “all fish are extremely welcome food and gluttonous destruction for one another” (μάλα πάντες θασιν ἀλλήλοις φορβή τε φίλη καὶ λιχνος θλεθρος) and that of all animals “the belly holds greatest power among the footless ones (i.e. fish)” (γαστήρ . . . τὸ δὲ πλεον ἐν νεπόδεσσι κάρτος χει): Hal. 3.195-96, 202-04.

In addition, the enmity existing between certain fish can be seen in the stock ancient descriptions of battles between particular fish which devoured one another: the prawn (Gk. καρίς; Lat. squilla, scilla) which defeated the bass (Gk. λάβραξ; Lat. lupus; Aelian, NA 1.30); the lamprey (Gk. μύραινα; Lat. murena) which defeated the octopus (Gk. πολύπους; Lat. polypus; Aelian, NA 1.32; Oppian, Hal. 2.253-320); the octopus which defeated the crawfish (Gk. κάραβος; Lat. carabus; Aelian, NA 1.32, 9.25, 10.38; Pliny, HN 9.185; Oppian, Hal. 2.385-418); and the crawfish which defeated the lamprey (Aelian, NA 1.32; Oppian, Hal. 2.321-88). Also at enmity were the dolphin (Gk. δελφίς; Lat. delphin, delphinus) and the whale (Gk. φάλαγγαίνα; Lat. baelena; Aelian, NA 5.40); the dolphin and the amia(s) fish (ἀμία and ἀμίας; Oppian, Hal. 2.553ff.); the bass and the grey mullet (Gk. κεστρεύς; Lat. mugil), the former biting off the tail of the latter (Aristotle, HA 610 B 16; Pliny, HN 9.185; Aelian, NA 5.40); and the lam-

bringing characteristics;<sup>370</sup> their lack of a sense of justice;<sup>371</sup> their insusceptibility to domestication;<sup>372</sup> their stupidity;<sup>373</sup> as well as other assor-

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prey and the conger eel (Gk. γόγγρος; Lat. conger; Pliny, HN 9.185; Aelian, NA 5.40).

370. For example, octupi (Gk. πολύποι; Lat. polypi) are called the most “vicious” (atrocious) sea creatures for killing human beings in water: Pliny, HN 9.91. The ray (Gk. βούς; Lat. box) was said particularly to love human flesh, and it was described as entrapping divers by hovering over them: Aelian, NA 1.19. From time to time, sea rams (Gk. κριοί; Lat. aries) supposedly sunk ships: Pliny, HN 9.145. Considered especially poisonous, and therefore dangerous, for human beings were the sea hare (Gk. λαγώς ὁ θαλάττιος; Lat. lepus marinus; Nicander, Alex. 465; Pliny, HN 9.155; Aelian, NA 2.45; Apuleius, Apol. 40); the sting ray (Gk. τρυγών; Lat. pastinaca, trygon, turtur; Aelian, NA 2.50); and the scorpion fish (Gk. σκόρπανα, σκορπιος, σκορπις; Lat. scorpius; Oppian, Hal. 2.461; Ovid, Hal. 117). Regarded as particularly dangerous were the great sea beasts or cetaceans (Gk. κήτοι; Lat. ceti), such as the sea lion (Gk. λέων; Lat. leon), the hammer head shark (Gk. ζύγαινα), the shark (Gk. κῶων; Lat. canis, canicula), the sea leopard (Gk. πάρδαλις), the physalos (Gk. φύσαλος), the pristis (Gk. πριστις, πρήστις; Lat. serra), the maltha (Gk. μάλθα or μάλθη), and the sea hyena (Gk. θαινα). In a spring in Armenia, “black fish” (Gk. ἰχθὺς μέλανες; Lat. nigri pisces) were said to bring instant death: Ctesias, Ind. Frag. 20; Pliny, HN 31.25. Seneca stated that the fish, which were found in the waters of certain underground areas (in subterraneis) in Idymus in Caria, caused death for those who ate them: Qnat. 3.19.2.

371. This is also a feature of the sea in general: Oppian, Hal. 2.664-65. “Justice” = δίκη.

372. The emperor Julian offers this as one of the reasons that worshippers of the Mother of the Gods (or Cybele) do not eat fish during the rite of purification (Or. 5 177 A - C): “For we do not have flocks of fish as we do of sheep and cattle” (μητε ἡμῖν εἰσιν ἀγέλαι καθάπερ προβάτων καὶ βοῶν οὕτω καὶ τῶν ἰχθύων). Of course, this does not reflect the tradition of pisciculture in the Graeco-Roman world, which I have investigated in Endnote 3. It may instead indicate a decline in the frequency of pisciculture by the mid-fourth century C.E. On this passage, see also p. 163 above.

373. According to the defender of the superiority of land animals over sea animals in Plutarch, the Greeks mocked “ignorant” (ἀμαθής) and “stupid” (ἀγνοητός) persons by calling them fish: De soll. an. 965 E — 975 C, 975 B. This is clearly a very old Greek tradition: see Aristophanes (in a fragment cited in Athenaeus, Deip. 2.119 C), who indicates that individuals mocked stupid persons with the derogatory appellation, “salt fish” (τάριχος); and especially Plato (Ti. 92 B) who

ted activities and traits.<sup>374</sup> Indeed, virtually all of those authors who denigrated the character of fish were precisely those who, in other contexts, praised it (e.g. Aelian and Oppian). Evidently praise and criticism could coexist in the mind of the same author.

Of course, in the early Christian use of fish as a symbol of Christ and of individual early Christians, these negative features of fish—as well as the criticism of fish eating as a symptom of gluttony and luxurious living<sup>375</sup> were ignored or not deemed relevant for inclusion. Some early Christians did in fact from time to time criticize the character of fish and fish eating, but naturally they did not wish to insult either themselves or the figure of Christ. On the contrary, when using this kind of fish symbolism, early Christians focussed their attention on the positive characteristics and associations of fish, as they were interpreted in the Graeco-Roman world.

It may, however, be significant that early Christians chose an item for a symbol that persons in the Graeco-Roman world did not view in completely positive terms. This distinguished it, for example, from the

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explains that fish (as well as other sea creatures) stem “from the most stupid and ignorant persons” (ἐκ τῶν μάλιστα ἀνοητοτάτων καὶ ἀμαθεστάτων) and that they live in the ocean because of their “ignorance” (ἀμαθία).

374. Characteristic of the use of fish by humans for evil purposes is the ancient story of the freedman’s son who attained equestrian rank and became a friend of the emperor Augustus. His name was Publius Vedius Pollio, a man who was said to punish cruelly his disobedient slaves by feeding them to his flesh-eating lampreys, which dwelled in one of his fishponds on his villa at Posillipo on the bay of Naples. On this and on the punishment of Vedius by Augustus, see Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 54.23.1-5; Seneca, *Clem.* 1.18.2 and *De ira* 3.40.2-5. This story may also illustrate the excesses of freedmen in the late Roman republic and early empire. On Pollio and his villa with its fishpond, see J. H. D’Arms, *Romans on the Bay of Naples*, 111-12, 125, 229-30.

dove.

### **THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS OF FISHING AND OTHER FISH TRADES**

I have already demonstrated that large fish were associated with meals of the wealthy, while small fish were associated with meals of the less well-to-do. It is clear, therefore, that the type and size of fish was an important social and economic indicator. Yet, not only were fish themselves identified with certain social and economic strata, but so were the occupations of catching and selling fish. And an understanding of this is useful and relevant for the interpretation of fish symbolism, both in the Graeco-Roman world and in early Christianity, since fishing was itself an important part of that symbolism. This was especially the case in early Christianity, where texts describe Christ as a fisherman who caught early Christians by means of his missionary nets and hooks.<sup>376</sup>

In this regard, it is important to know that trades dealing with fish were always associated only with the very lowest classes. For example, in Athens, people were shocked when the sons of a salt fish dealer were given citizenship.<sup>377</sup> Juvenal mocks an imperial official who used to be

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375. See especially n. 55 above.

376. See pp. 406-67 below.

377. See Athenaeus, Deip. 2.120 F, as well as discussion of it in n. 55 above.

a fish-seller at the market.<sup>378</sup> The term “salt-fish seller” was itself an disparaging term,<sup>379</sup> and, when wealthy persons were insulted as “salt-fish sellers”, it meant that they were cheapskates.<sup>380</sup>

In general, literary portrayals in the ancient world depict fishermen at the bottom of the social and economic ladder.<sup>381</sup> In certain texts, references to the poverty of fishermen are numerous.<sup>382</sup> Sappho speaks of the “painful life” (κακοζωΐα) of fishermen,<sup>383</sup> while Addaeus of Mytilene says that fisherman had two abodes of “poverty” (πενίη)—his home and his boat.<sup>384</sup> One poem describes fishermen as having very little on which to live.<sup>385</sup> According to another poem, a certain fisherman Heliodorus caught only sea-weed in his net; in response, he dedicated his unsuccessful net to the Syrian Goddess, apparently because fish (which he could not catch) were sacred to her, and no one could con-

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378. Sat. 4.28-33.

379. ταριχοπόλη: Plutarch, Symp. 631 D, where he refers to it as an “insulting” (λοιδορέω) term.

380. Thus, Alexandrians nicknamed the emperor Vespasian cybiosactes (Lat., transliterated from Gk. κυβισσάκτης), meaning a dealer in salt fish, which was the cognomen of one of their own kings, because he was “shamefully stingy” (turpissima sordes): Suetonius, Vesp. 19.

381. But this is not necessarily a factual description of the social and economic status of fishermen. See my comments at the end of this section.

382. On this topic, see W. Radcliffe, Fishing from the Earliest Times, 116ff; and T. Corcoran, “Roman Fishermen,” 100, 102.

383. Anth. Pal. 7.505.

384. Anth. Pal. 7.305.

385. Anth. Pal. 6.25.

sume them.<sup>386</sup> In The Rope, Plautus describes the indigent and harsh life of fishermen: they are “paupers” (pauperes); their clothing is poor; they can only afford the most basic necessities; and they often would “go to bed without eating” (dormimus incenati), when their efforts were unsuccessful.<sup>387</sup> In the view of Plautus, they are a “starving brood” (famelica hominum natio),<sup>388</sup> even though they sleep little and their days are long.<sup>389</sup> Virgil refers to the “poor home” (pauper domus) of the fisherman Menoetis,<sup>390</sup> while Ovid describes an extremely poor fisherman.<sup>391</sup> When depicting the underworld and when showing how mighty kings and satraps are reduced to “begging” (πτωχεῖω), Lucian illustrates their poverty by having them “selling salt fish” (ταριχοπωλέω).<sup>392</sup>

Although ancient writers could view recreational fishing in a positive light,<sup>393</sup> the ancient world regarded the actual occupation of fishing as

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386. Anth. Pal. 7.305.

387. Rudens 289-311, 906-13, 940-42.

388. Rudens 311.

389. Rudens 898.

390. Aen. 12.518-20.

391. Met. 3.586ff.

392. Menippus 17.

393. For instance at villas (Pliny, Ep. 9.7.4; Martial, Epig. 3.58.27, 10.30.16-18) and by emperors (Suetonius, Aug. 83; Oppian, Hal. 1.63-72).

degrading, dishonorable, and deceitful.<sup>394</sup> For instance, in his negative evaluation of fishing vis-à-vis hunting, the defender of hunting in Plutarch mocks the occupation of fishing, calling it “shameful” (αἴσχος), “unenviable” (αζήλος), and “slavish” (ἀνελευθερός, i.e. for slaves). In contrast to hunting, he argues that there is no “courage” (ἀλκή) or “skill” (μελέτημα σοφίας) in catching a fish. According to him, no one has given a god the appellation of fish-slayer, e.g. “mullet-slayer” (τριγλοβόλος).<sup>395</sup>

As Seneca indicates, fishing was often viewed as a deceitful and dishonest activity.<sup>396</sup> In the Aesopic Corpus, the inhabitants of a district criticize a fisherman, who uses trickery to catch fish.<sup>397</sup> In one epigram, Martial compares fishermen to a flattering fortune-hunter who tricks a wealthy man into giving him a share of his inheritance,<sup>398</sup> and, in another epigram, he refers to the “deceitful hook” (fallax hamus) and “crafty bait” (callida esca) of the flatterer.<sup>399</sup> In fact, Hermes/Mercury, the god of trickery, was the god of fishermen.<sup>400</sup>

According to Virgil and Ovid, there was no fishing in the golden

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394. For other discussion of this evidence, see F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 5:308-09; T. H. Corcoran, “Roman Fishermen,” 190-91; and J. Engemann, “Fisch, Fischer, Fischfang,” 1040-41.

395. Plutarch, De soll. an. 965 D - 966 B.

396. Seneca, Ep. 8.3.

397. Aesopic Corpus 26.

398. Epig. 4.56

399. Epig. 6.53.

age,<sup>401</sup> nor was there fishing (according to Ovid) in the idyllic early days of Rome.<sup>402</sup> In addition, fishermen were considered ignorant and uneducated individuals.<sup>403</sup> For example, it was with great surprise that Phaenias of Eresus commented on the rise to power of Philoxenus from fisherman to tyrant.<sup>404</sup>

Thus, when early Christians called Christ a fisherman who sought through conversion to catch Christians and when they referred to themselves as fishermen catching converts, they were consciously associating the conversion process, as well as the fish symbol (which, among other things, symbolized that conversion) with the literary depiction of lower economic groups and with those whose occupations were not regarded as socially respectable—that is, the socially marginal.

One should, however, be careful to distinguish the literary depiction of the living conditions of fishermen from their actual living conditions. In fact, the epigraphic evidence shows that fishermen formed guilds worthy of state recognition and public celebration. And the high price

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400. Oppian, Hal. 3.26; Anth. Pal. 6.23, 6.27-29.

401. Virgil, G. 1.141-42; Ovid, Met. 15.101.

402. Ovid, Met. 15.476; Fast. 6.173-74.

403. See the references in Jerome and Sulpicius Severus on p. 415 below.

404. Cited from “Tyrants Killed in Revenge” (Τυρράνων ἀνείρεσις ἐκ τιμωρίας) in Athenaeus (Deip. 2.90 E - F). Phaeneas was a pupil of Aristotle and his floruit was around 320 B.C.E.



of some fish described in literary sources suggests that many fishermen in reality must have been quite prosperous.<sup>405</sup>

Thus, as emphasized in Chapter 1, one must distinguish between reference to actual socio-economic reality and the symbolic depiction of social and economic norms and ideals. All that one can say is that Greeks and Romans envisioned fishermen as symbolizing a humble social and economic status, while at the same time early Christians used images of fishermen symbolically to represent poverty and social marginalization.<sup>406</sup>

### **FISHING FOR CONVERTS**

The New Testament and early Christian literature refer to Jesus and to his missionizing apostles as fishers of human beings. Likewise, early Christians are often referred to as fish caught in the net, or on the hook, of Christ.<sup>407</sup>

This metaphor for missionizing is well-known in the Graeco-Roman world, since Greek and Latin literature uses fishing as a metaphor for rhetoric, whose practitioners must catch the attention of their listeners with the attractive bait of words.<sup>408</sup> For example, in Petronius'

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405. As T. Corcoran points out in "Roman Fishermen," 98-100.

406. See also pp. 414-15 below.

407. See Chapter 3, passim, for all of this.

408. In general on the relationship of rhetoric to fish, see J. de Vreese, Petron 39, 13-17.

Satyricon, Agamemnon goes on to compare the orator to the “fisherman” (piscator), who must use the right “bait” (esca) to catch the “little fish” (pisciculi).<sup>409</sup> Thus, it is not unexpected that in his astrological summation Trimalchio associates the zodiacal sign of Pisces with “rhetors” (rhetores).<sup>410</sup> In fact, in astrological literature, the sign of Pisces is associated with oratory, loquaciousness, and skill in speaking.<sup>411</sup>

As a result, the use of early Christian fishing symbolism in the context of preaching and conversion has at least a partial basis in this tradition of associating rhetoric with fishing.

## THE ASTROLOGICAL SYMBOLISM OF FISH

It is very probable that fish symbolism also had an astrological component.<sup>412</sup> In the second and third centuries C.E., one finds defini-

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409. Sat. 3.

410. Petronius, Satyr. 39.

411. E.g. Manilius, Astr. 4.573ff. (though here the association is negative); Firmicus Maternus (speaking more positively), Math. 8.30.3, 8.30.7; and many other examples listed in J. de Vreese, Petron 39, 13-17.

412. On ancient astrology in the Graeco-Roman world, most generally informative is still H. Bouché-Leclercq, L'astrologie grècque. Useful also, though less comprehensive, is F. Cumont, Astrology and Religion. For a short synopsis, of great help is the introduction by G. Goold to the Loeb edition of Manilius' Astronomica. For a bibliographical starting point, very strong is W. Hübner, Die Eigenschaften der Tierkreiszeichen, which should also become the standard book for the determination of the characteristics of the various zodiacal signs (for some corrections, consult D. Pingree's review of this book in Gnomon). On astrological literature, see W. and H. G. Gundel, Astrologoumena; and W. Hübner, Die Eigenschaften der Tierkreiszeichen, 335-419. Important also is the

tively Christian inscriptions, which have images of two fish swimming toward or near one another.<sup>413</sup> The double fish as described in ancient literature and as depicted in ancient zodiacs (in a similar fashion to the two fish on early Christian inscriptions) is the sign of Pisces.<sup>414</sup>

spread of Greek and Roman astrology to Persia and India, since they have their own astrological literature which preserves Greek and Roman astrological traditions. In this regard, see the following: D. Pingree, "Historical Horoscopes," "Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran," and his commentary in The Yavanajataka of Sphujihvaia. On the origins of astronomical names (stars and constellations) which are important (in the context of this project) for an understanding of relevant constellations such as Pisces, Aquarius, and the Southern Fish, see the following: L. Ideler, Untersuchungen über den Ursprung und die Bedeutung der Sternnamen; W. Gundel, De Stellarum Appelatione; E. H. Webb, The Names of the Stars; R. H. Hinckley, Star Names; A. Le Boeuffle, Le vocabulaire latin de l'astronomie and Les noms latins d'astres et de constellations. The latter two are the most up-to-date and comprehensive.

I. Schleftelowitz, "Das Fisch Symbol" (41-53), positively considers the astrological influence in ancient Jewish fish symbolism. F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ (1:33-39) rejects the influence of astrology on early Christian fish symbolism, while J. Engemann ("Fisch, Fischer, Fischfang," 1042-43) more or less glosses it.

413. See especially pp. 586-613 below.

414. On Pisces in general, see H. Bouché-Leclercq, L'astrologie grècque, 147-48, et passim; and J. de Vreese, Petron 39, Chapter 11. On the biform nature of this sign, see especially the relevant sections in the "Systematik" of W. Hübner, Die Eigenschaften der Tierkreiszeichen, 45-334, as well as 611-34 et passim. A classic description of its visual appearance and biform character may be found in Manilius (early first century C.E.), Astr. 1.273 and 2.162-66; the descriptions of Manilius are fundamental for an understanding of many zodiacal signs. On some of the above-mentioned inscriptions (such as the Licinia Amias inscription in Chart 2.I.23 in Appendix 5), the garland might act as the constellation known as the "Knot" (Gk. Δεσμός-Δεσμοί (Δεσμά), Λίνος-Λίνοι, Ἀππεδόναι; Lat. Vincla-Vincula, Cingula, Linus, Alligamentum) with the center of the knot called Gk. Σύνδεσμος ὑπουράνιος or Lat. caelestis Nodus (both translated as "Heavenly Node" which in modern astronomical terms is the star "α," or Alrisha). The "Knot" constellation has always been regarded as tying the two fish of the constellation together.

In addition, there are literary references to Christ as an enormous fish, which are similar to the ancient technical (astronomical and astrological) designations of the constellation of the Southern Fish.<sup>415</sup> In

415. The Southern Fish is often designated with the following phrases: Gk. Ὁ νοτιος Ἰχθυς (“The Southern Fish) or simply Ὁ Ἰχθυς (“The Fish”); Piscis notius and Piscis austrinus (both meaning “The Southern Fish), or simply Piscis (“The Fish”). Just as frequently ancient persons entitled it in terms of its size, as in the following instances: Gk. Ἰχθυς μέγας or Ὁ μέγας ἰχθυς (both translated as “The Big Fish”); Latin Piscis magnus (“The Big Fish”), Piscis ingens (“The Huge Fish”), or Piscis enormis (“The Enormous Fish”). For many of these references, see A. Le Boeuffle, Les noms latins d’astres, 150-51); and L. Ideler, Sternnamen, 284-86. To these, I would add for Gk. Ἰχθυς μέγας: Eratosthenes, Catasterismorum Reliquiae, 38; Schol. Arat. 5.386 p. 85,27s; for Lat. Piscis Maior: Schol. Germanici BP p. 98, 6; and for Piscis magnus: Schol. Germanici G. p. 176,17; and for Lat. Piscis Notius: Hyginus, Astr. 2.41.

In the Avercius inscription, the phrase is Ἰχθυς πανμεγέθης (“enormous fish”). In the passage from Tertullian (Text # VI.2 in Appendix 1) Lat. noster ichthys (accus. nostrum ichthyn, “our fish”) is contrasted with nos pisciculi, “we little fish.” In doing this, Tertullian suggests that ichthys is bigger than the pisciculi. In addition, the reference in the inscription of Pectorius of Autun (Text # I.2 in Appendix 1) to the ἰχθυς οὐράνιος (“heavenly fish”) also suggests the Southern Fish. In this regard, one should not forget that one could in antiquity refer to the Southern Fish with simply the term, “The Fish” (Gk. Ὁ Ἰχθυς, Lat. Piscis); this word is the same as the early Christian acronym IXΘΥΣ = ἰχθυς.

The Southern Fish was not a sign of the zodiac, but was an important constellation in antiquity; e.g. see Manilius, Astr. 1.438; 5.394-408. It was located in the watery section of the heavens, which contained other constellations including Cetus (the sea monster), Aquarius (the water bearer), and the river Eridanus (associated in antiquity with either the Po or Nile rivers); see A. Le Boeuffle, Les noms latins d’astres, 139-40. In antiquity, the river Eridanus was said to flow out of the pot held by the water bearer Aquarius, and at its end swam the Southern Fish. These connections are very important for the reference to Pisces and Aquarius in Zeno of Verona (Text # VI.4 in Appendix 1). For excellent charts of the ancient heavens, including the Southern Fish, see those in G. P. Goold’s Loeb edition of the Astronomica of Manilius and in A. Le Boeuffle, Les noms latins d’astres. The river Eridanus was also associated with Phaethon, who fell into it, after he was burned by the sun while driving its chariot: e.g. Avienus, Phaenom. Arati, 780-806; Eratosthenes, Catasterismorum Eratosthenis 37; Schol. Arat. V.352, p. 83,18; Schol. Germ., BP. p. 98,1; Schol. Germ. G. p. 173,18; Hyginus, Astr. 31; Euripides,

some traditions, the Southern Fish is viewed as the grandparent of the two smaller fish in the constellation Pisces.<sup>416</sup> In addition, the Southern Fish was considered a salvific figure who saved the life of Atargatis/Derceto,<sup>417</sup> as well as the life of Isis.<sup>418</sup>

Other literary evidence shows that the sign of Pisces was associated with the activities of salvific figures or salvation in general:<sup>419</sup> the birth of Moses;<sup>420</sup> the saving by Perseus of Andromeda from the sea

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Hipp. 735ff.; and Ovid, Met 1.750-79, 2.319-28, 2.367-80.

416. The two Piscean fish are designated as “grandchildren” (Gk. ἐγγόνοι, Lat. eggoni) of the Southern Fish Ὁ μέγας Ἰχθύς (or “The Big Fish) in the following sources: Eratosthenes, Catasterismorum Reliquiae 21; Scholium Arati 5.239, p. 72,1; Scholium Germanici BP p. 81,13; Hyginus, Astr. 2.30. Tertullian’s description of the Lat. pisciculi (“little fish”, such as minnows, sardines, smelt, shad, goby) who are baptized by “The (big) Fish” (Gk. Ἰχθύς) may suggest this astrological relationship between Pisces and the Southern Fish.

417. As she was drowning in a lake in Syria: Eratosthenes, Catasterismorum Reliquiae 38; Schol. Arati 5.386 p. 85,27; Schol. Germanici BP p. 98,16. Other myths state that Derceto (= Atargatis) was transformed into a fish: e.g. Diodorus Siculus, Bibl. 4.2-6, 2.20.1-2; Ovid, Met. 4.44-48; Manilius, Astr., 2.33.

418. Hyginus, Astr. 2.41.

419. In Indian and Islamic astrology—which preserve many Graeco-Roman astrological traditions (see n. 413 in this chapter)—the constellation of Pisces is associated with philosophers, holy persons, and the gods in general. This may well be an additional confirmation of the association in the Graeco-Roman world between salvation and Pisces and the Southern Fish. E.g. see Yavanajataka (c. 245-300 C.E.) 1.25: “Its places are auspicious ones, (where there are) gods and Brahmanas, pilgrimages, rivers, oceans, and clouds. See also al-Biruni, The Book of Instruction (1029 C.E.), sec. 366: “Abodes of angels, holy men, Magian priests, mourning places, cane-breaks, lake shores, salt marshes, granaries.”

420. See Midrash Esther 7.11.

monster,<sup>421</sup> which was associated with Pisces because of its close proximity;<sup>422</sup> and salvation after death.<sup>423</sup>

Thus, it should not be surprising that, according to Zeno of Verona (d. c. 380 C.E.), Christ as Aquarius the baptizer saved the two fish, who are Jew and Gentile, by means of baptism, and then unites them in one sign, namely Pisces.<sup>424</sup> Furthermore, the constellation of Pisces would

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421. E.g. Manilius, Astr. 5.540-618.

422. See n. 415 above.

423. See the Brihat Jataka of Varaha Mahira (c. 500-600 C.E., from India) 25.15, in which salvation after death is promised, if the person's birth sign has its exalted or rising sign in Pisces and if Juppiter (the planet of Pisces) occupies it. See references in n. 412 above for relevance of Indian astrological materials.

424. Text # VI.4 in Appendix 1. In general in ancient astrology, Aquarius and Pisces were associated with one another; see the "Systematik" in W. Hübner, Die Eigenschaften der Tierkreiszeichen, *passim*, but especially pp. 73f. While here Aquarius is associated with Christ, in more traditional astrological sources, Aquarius is associated with Ganymede: Eratosthenes, Catasterismorum Reliquiae 26; Schol. Arati 5.282, p. 76,39; Schol. Germanici BP. p. 85,4; Schol. Germanici G. p. 153,3; and Hyginus, Astr. 2.29). In addition to Ganymede, Hyginus associates Aquarius with Deucalion and Cecrops: Astr. 2.29.

Like Pisces (see pages below), Aquarius is also associated with death; see the citations in W. Hübner, Die Eigenschaften der Tierkreiszeichen (201, 205, 285, 486-87), in which several ancient horoscopes describe Aquarius and Pisces with the adjective νεκρώδης ("corpse-like"). In addition, the festival of the Parentalia, celebrating and commemorating the death of one's ancestors, began in the sun sign of Aquarius (February 13-21), as Macrobius observed in his commentary on the Dream of Scipio: Somnis Scipionis 1.12.4. Macrobius also comments that Aquarius is "hostile to human life" (humanae vitae contrarium).

In Zeno the river Eridanus pouring out of the water cup of Aquarius seems to be associated with baptism. One may also find the association of Aquarius with baptism in Pesik. Rab. 20.2 and 53.2, where baptism is connected with the forgiveness of sins.

The description of the two fish as Jew and Christian may correspond to the idea that Pisces is composed of two opposing elements; so Manilius, Astr. 2.164-65. On the other hand, the two fish may be considered an indication of community (as in CCAG 5.1 p.

have been attractive to Christians, since in antiquity it was considered a good constellation,<sup>425</sup> was associated with the sacred color white,<sup>426</sup> and was characterized by qualities conducive to sociability and amiability,<sup>427</sup> as well as most significantly to fellowship and communality.<sup>428</sup>

In addition, the sign of Pisces, probably because it was the last of the twelve signs of the zodiac,<sup>429</sup> was associated by pagans and Jews (especially in the pseudonymous Jewish Treatise of Shem) with death and the eschatological end of time or of a particular age.

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187, 25). On the Christian horoscope in Zeno, see W. Hübner, “Das Horoskop der Christen”; and Zodiacus Christianus, 63-64.

425. For Pisces as a “good” (Gk. ἀγαθός, Lat. bonus) sign, see W. Hübner, Das Horoskop der Christen, 228-38.

426. Sacred garments in the Graeco-Roman world were often white, including those worn by Christians at baptism. For collection of relevant sources, see A. Hermann, “Farbe” (for the color white among early Christians, see pp. 428ff.) and V. Pavan, “Colore.” For the association of Pisces with white, see the references in W. Hübner, Die Eigenschaften der Tierkreiszeichen, 275-80. According to Theocritus (300-260 B.C.E), in his poem, βερβικη, the white fish (λευκός) is the most sacred of all fish: cited in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.284 A.

427. Manilius, Astr. 4.290. See also W. Hübner, Zodiacus Christianus, 185, 220.

428. In two different astrological texts (CCAG 1, p. 166.135.1; 5.1 p. 187.25), on account of its double character (along with Gemini, Virgo, and Sagittarius), it is described in terms of its σὺμφωνά κοινῶνία (“harmonious fellowship”). This should not be surprising, since fish were sometimes associated with communality; see pp. 223-24 above. Κοινῶνία itself is a word used frequently by Paul to describe Christian fellowship with each other, as well as with God and Christ, and is often attached to early Christians; see F. Hauck, “Κοινός.”

429. It is probably because of this that in melothesis, the ascription of zodiacal signs to various parts of the body, Pisces was associated with the feet, the lowest (i.e. last) part of the body. See W. Hübner, Zodiacus Christianus, 18-21.

Ancient horoscopes often describe Pisces with the Gk. adjective, νεκρόδης (“corpse-like”).<sup>430</sup> In the early first century C.E., Manilius connects Pisces, through the influence of the sea monster cetus, to the capture and death of fish.<sup>431</sup> At the same time, Pisces was viewed by the astronomer Ptolemy in the early second century C.E. as a sign that was particularly productive for necromancers.<sup>432</sup>

It is perhaps also significant that the most important Roman public holiday regarding the commemoration and celebration of the death of one’s ancestors, the Feralia, took place on the first day of the sign of Pisces on February 21. Immediately prior to this, the private holiday of the Parentalia was celebrated in both Aquarius and Pisces from February 13-21.<sup>433</sup> That the Romans were aware of the connection between holidays and astrological phenomena, is evidenced by Macrobius, who, in his commentary on the dream of Scipio, connects the Parentalia to Aquarius.<sup>434</sup>

Most notable of early Jewish sources mentioning Pisces as the sign of the eschatological end of days is the so-called Treatise of Shem (in Syriac) which describes the year of Pisces as a year of death and de-

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430. See W. Hübner, Die Eigenschaften der Tierkreiszeichen, 201, 205, 285, 486-87.

431. “They are killed by the sword” (ferro necanture) and “torn limb from limb” (scinditur in artus). See Manilius, Astr. 4.485-87 and especially 5.667-92.

432. Ptolemy, Tetra. 182 (4.4): Νεκρομάντεις (along with Sagittarius).

433. See n. 424 above.



struction, followed at year's end by peace, prosperity, love, and harmony.<sup>435</sup> Twice in the Pesikta Rabbati, one finds references to Pisces as the constellation of the last days and of a new world to come.<sup>436</sup> In Midrash Esther, Haman plans to destroy the Jews under the sign of Pisces.<sup>437</sup> In a passage from the early Christian "Narrative of Events Taking Place in Persia" (c. 430 C.E.), the author (Phillip of Side) refers to the child/ Jesus/Christ/fish as "the beginning of salvation" and "the end of destruction"—thus associating Christ in the form of a fish with the contrasting ideas of the beginning of one thing and the end of another.<sup>438</sup>

On the one hand, as the last of the twelve zodiacal signs, Pisces represents the end of a time. Yet, as the first constellation of Spring, Pisces also represents renewal.<sup>439</sup> It is, therefore, easy to see the logic of associating Pisces both with death and salvation. In any event, for the very earliest Christians, a fish would have been an appropriate symbol for the end of the world and the coming of the new age (or parousia).

434. Somnis Scipionis 1.12.4.

435. On the Treatise of Shem, see A. Mingana, "The Book of Shem Son of Noah" (with text and translation); James H. Charlesworth, "Rylands Syriac MS 44" (with corrections of Mingana) and especially his translation of the treatise in the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, 481-90, with an excellent introduction (in which he dates the treatise to the late first century B.C.E.).

436. Pesik. Rab. 20.2, 53.2.

437. Midrash Esther 3.7; also Yalkut Esther 3.7. One should add that, in 2 Baruch 27ff., after the twelfth age (very probably corresponding to the twelfth sign of the zodiac, namely Pisces), when disorder and destruction reign, the Messiah will come. In the Mandaean Ginza (pp. 408ff.) and in the Madaean Book of the Zodiac (e.g. p. 119), the constellation of Pisces is also associated with the end of days. On connections between Pisces and the last days, see additionally H. L. Strack, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, 1046, 1049; and E. Stauffer, Jesus and His Story, 32-35, 216-17.

438. See Text # 1.3 (in Appendix 1), l. 13.19: ἀρχὴ μὲν σωτηρίας, τέλος δὲ ἀπωλείας.

It may also be significant that probably the most important astrological event of the Augustan period was the conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn—the latter planet having been associated with the pre-Olympian golden age——<sup>440</sup> which took place three times in the sign of Pisces in 7 B.C.E. Such an event occurs only once every seven hundred and ninety-four and one-half years, and it is this, to which the birth narrative of Jesus in Matthew 2 may possibly have referred.<sup>441</sup>

In Graeco-Roman antiquity, conjunctions of various kinds were a very important signal of the coming of a new age. For instance, one should recall that in Stoic thought the conjunction of all seven planets in one sign heralded the destruction of the universe by fire (ἐκπύρωσις) or deluge (κατακλυσμός), to be followed by the renewal of a new universe (ἀποκαταστασία).<sup>442</sup> This belief probably stemmed from the very ancient astrological predictions of the Babylonians (and well-known in

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439. So also Schleftelowitz, “Das Fisch Symbol,” 47.

440. The planet Saturn was naturally linked to the leader of the Titans, the god Kronos/Saturn. The association of the golden age with Kronos/Saturn was very old: Hesiod, Op. 109-13. In Virgil’s fourth Eclogue, the birth of a messiah-like child is associated with the return of the golden age under the rule of Saturn. There are other passages as well. On the association of Saturn with the golden age, see G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, Hamlet’s Mill, 146, 244-45, 269. One should add the interesting anecdote mentioned in Athenaeus, Deip. 6.268 A - B, in which is cited a passage from the Amphyctions (Ἀμφικτιόνες) of the fifth century B.C.E. Athenian comic poet Teleclides, who, in describing the golden age of peace, mentions how in that age fish came to houses, baked themselves, and then served themselves on the table. Since Pisces was associated with the end of one age and the beginning of another (see below), the connection between a golden age and fish miracles makes sense.

441. On these conjunctions and their relation to early Christianity, see Endnote 4 for detailed discussion.

the Graeco-Roman world), who believed that conjunctions of all the planets in a particular zodiacal sign heralded fiery or watery destruction.<sup>443</sup>

Since this particular conjunction was associated with Pisces, one can imagine how natural it would have been for early Christian fish symbolism to incorporate this specific astrological component,<sup>444</sup> whether or not the so-called “star of Bethlehem” actually coincided with it.

Finally, just before and after the beginning of the common era, the vernal equinox was precessing from the sign of Aries into the sign of Pisces,<sup>445</sup> an observation of which some early Christians were very

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442. For further references, see A. Bouché-Leclercq, L’astrologie grècque, 33, n. 1.

443. Berossus, Babyloniaca (dated c. 281 B.C.E., Book 1.3): seven planets conjoined in the sign of Cancer presage fire, and seven planets conjoined in the sign of Capricorn presage flood.

444. See Endnote 4.

445. Precession refers to the shifting of the celestial equator and ecliptic, due to the movement of the earth, which does not spin evenly, but which wobbles in a gyroscopic tilt. Thus, the constellations do not remain in the same heavenly geographical positions vis-à-vis particular points on the earth, but change a small amount, approximately one degree every 72 years. Eventually (once every approximately 2160 years), they change to the extent that one constellation replaces (in retrograde motion from east to west) the position of another at a particular time of year. Because the astrological year is calculated from the vernal equinox (traditionally in Ares, because that was the vernal equinoctial sign in the sky, when the Babylonians began to organize their astronomical and astrological speculations), the change in stellar position was particularly significant. Some non-astrological calendars—including both the Babylonian calendar and the pre-Julian Roman calendar—also calculated the year beginning with the vernal equinox. (On ancient calendars in general, see E. J. Bickerman, Chronology of the Ancient World.) Thus, precession usually refers to the change of constellation in the vernal equinox. For an accessible description of the phenomenon of precession, see G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, Hamlet’s Mill, 58-59, 142-46); and D. Ulansey, The

likely aware.<sup>446</sup> Considering the ubiquity of astrology in Roman antiquity,<sup>447</sup> as well as the importance of the precession of the equinoxes

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Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries, 49-51.

According to written sources (Ptolemy, Alm. 7.1-3), Hipparchus (c. 190-126 B.C.E.) was the first known individual (though this does not rule out previous knowledge) to become aware of these changes in stellar positions (c. 128 B.C.E.), but thought that it was the movement of the sphere of fixed stars rather than the movement of the earth. After him, precession was well-known throughout the ancient world, and its observation was, in fact, used by some as a criticism of astrology. For example, a person born under Ares, after the precession, would be born in Pisces. On the problems caused by precession for ancient astrologers, see H. Bouché-Leclercq, L'astrologie grécque, 129, n. 1; 180; 579, n.1.

In the course of written human history the vernal equinox has occurred under three different signs: Taurus (c. 4000-2000 B.C.E.), Ares (c. 2000-1 B.C.E.), and Pisces (c. 1-2000 C.E.). According to varying calculations, the vernal equinox will soon occur in the constellation of Aquarius (extending from c. 2000-4000 C.E.). These dates are very approximate.

446. E.g. Origen (in Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel 4.11) criticizes the efficacy of astrology because of the phenomenon of precession.

447. For a survey of the widespread interest in astrology among Romans, very useful is F. Cramer, Astrology in Roman Law and Politics. The banquet of Trimalchio in the Satyricon furnishes an excellent example in chaps. 35 and 39, in which food is served in a circular tray representing the zodiac with each sign bearing an appropriate food (e.g. Pisces has two surmulletts). See also chap. 30 with the picture of the moon and the planets, as well as other instances throughout the Satyricon. On astrology in Petronius, see Section VII of this chapter and J. de Vreese, Petron 39. For a critique of the influence of astrology ascribed to Petronius himself and of the influence of formal astrology (as opposed to lay astrology), see S. Eriksson, Wochentagsgötter, Mond und Tierkreis.

For a similar platter shaped like the vault of heaven with the constellations including the Southern Fish, see Athenaeus, Deip. 2.60 A-B. It is known that formal astrologers had tremendous influence in imperial circles throughout imperial Roman history. Perhaps the most famous of court astrologers, was Thrasyllus, one of the emperor Tiberius' most intimate and trusted advisors. See F. Cramer, Astrology in Roman Law and Politics on Thrasyllus.

(e.g. as recently suggested for the cult of Mithras),<sup>448</sup> very early Christian awareness of the significance of precession is even more likely.<sup>449</sup> The awareness of the change of the positions of zodiacal constellations in relation to the vernal equinox could well have signified the end of an age.<sup>450</sup>

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448. D. Ulansey has argued that an awareness of the change of the vernal equinox from Taurus to Ares contributed to the formation of Mithraism, based on astronomical/astrological speculations: “Mithraic Studies” and The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries. E.g., according to him, the slaying of the bull represents the end of the age of Taurus—that is the entry of the vernal equinox from Taurus into Ares. This subject remains very controversial.

449. The references to the Magi and to the appearance of the stars in Matthew 2 confirm very early Christian interest in cosmic phenomena, and in astrology in particular. The very earliest Christians could also have inherited respect for astrology from Judaism. The reference to the Magi was a problem for some later early Christian exegetes, who saw astrology as a threat to free will and tried to combat its influence in Christian circles (see the discussion with references in A. Bouché-Leclerq, L’astrologie grècque, 609-27). Nevertheless, many early Christians continued to follow cosmic phenomena and to respect their astrological implications, such as Eusebius of Emesa, who was deposed from his bishopric for practicing astrology in the mid-fourth century C.E (see M. Simonetti, “Eusebio di Emesa”): Sozomen 3.6 and Socrates 2.9. Some even went to the extent of praying to stars (according to Eusebius of Alexandria; on him see S. J. Voicu, “Eusebio di Alessandria”). For this material, see the collection of sources in A. Bouché-Leclerq, L’astrologie grècque, 615-616. Constant Christian protests against astrology (e.g. those found in Augustine throughout his writings) suggest that this attraction was not confined to so-called heretics, such as Gnostics and Priscillianists (who were well-known for Melothesis—the ascriptions of zodiacal signs to various parts of the body), but was a part of the everyday life of many apparently orthodox Christians. For discussion with references to the relations between Christianity and astrology, see A. Bouché-Leclerq, L’astrologie grècque, 609-27; and W. Gundel and H. Gundel, Astrologoumena, 332-39. For a broader chronological survey, see W. Hübner, Zodiacus Christianus.

450. That it precesses from Aquarius into Pisces, symbol of death, salvation, and the end of times, could have further emphasized the decisiveness of this end. For the interpretation of precession as representing the end of an age, see G. de Santillana and

In the above discussion, I have proposed that the double fish of Pisces could signify both the destruction of one age and the creation of a new blessed age. This certainly corresponds to early Christian notions of the new messianic age. In Chapter 3 and 4, I will suggest how these astrological associations of fish were important in formulating early Christian fish symbolism in texts and iconography.

The story of Sarpedon. That fish could signify both destruction and salvation, is also indicated in a rather different kind of story. The Stoic philosopher Poseidonius (c. 135-50 B.C.E.) tells how Sarpedon, the general of Demetrius II Nikator (c. 161-125 B.C.E.), defeated Tryphon of Apameia, who had seized Syria. This was accomplished not by Demetrius, but rather by an ocean wave, which overwhelmed Tryphon as he was marching to battle. When the followers of Sarpedon found them, they saw a mass of fish among the dead bodies. Thereupon the victorious army carried off many of the fish in order to sacrifice them to Poseidon in thanks for their victory.<sup>451</sup>

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H. von Dechend, Hamlet's Mill, pp. 58-59, 142-46; D. Ulansey, "Mithraic Studies" and The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries, 49-51, 76-81, 82-84. One does not, however, have to accept the assumptions in de Santillana and von Dechend that precession was known to the Babylonians and to others well before Hipparchus; on this, see D. Ulansey, The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries (p. 134, n. 41) on the so-called pan-Babylonian controversy.

451. Cited in Athenaeus, Deip. 8.333 C - D = FHG 3.254. Except for the inclusion of fish, this story is curiously reminiscent of the fate of the army of the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses, who was overwhelmed by the Red Sea while chasing Moses (Ex. 14).

In this case, in addition to referring to Poseidon, the presence of a great quantity of fish clearly symbolized the defeat of one Greek army by another victorious one. Thus, here is a further example of fish symbolizing both victory and defeat—salvation and destruction.

In this regard, it may be important to recall the observation in Chapter 1 that symbols can combine opposing elements in the same network of meaning. In this instance, fish symbolism combines and unites the normally opposing elements of destruction/death and renewal/life.

## **FISH: ALIEN CREATURES LIVING IN AN ALIEN REALM**

### **The alien and miraculous realm of water**

Throughout the ancient world, fish were not only viewed as an interesting animal species whose habits and anatomy were worthy of more than passing interest, but as denizens of another realm whose watery environment was inaccessible to human beings; for we live on land, and we depend on air. This inaccessibility made water a region that seemed foreign and different, and it produced the same understanding of the fish who dwelled in it. Surrounded as they were by the presence of the Mediterranean, as well as dependent on its contents (especially fish) for a good portion of their physical subsistence, and, at the same time, having found those waters and its inhabitants visually inaccessible and obscure,<sup>452</sup> it is understandable that they saw in water and its piscatory inhabitants a realm which was simultaneously alien and filled with mira-

culous occurrences and creatures.<sup>453</sup>

Naturally, therefore, water became a medium of great interest for those in the Graeco-Roman world, and it contributed a crucial referential component to fish symbolism. Thus, it is both pertinent and necessary to examine not only the fish themselves, but water and the influence of it on the symbolic interpretation of fish.

Individuals in the Graeco-Roman world, especially in the Mediterranean basin area, were fascinated with water—including seas, rivers, streams, ponds, lakes, springs and wells.<sup>454</sup> Their parent and source was the great river Ocean,<sup>455</sup> which was the most marvellous of all waters and out of which sprang all waters (sometimes called okeanides = Ὠκεανίδες)—from large seas (such as the Mediterranean) to the smallest springs.<sup>456</sup>

Of particular interest is a passage of Proclus in his commentary on Plato's Timaeus, in which the ocean is described as the chorus of all

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452. See pp. 267-68 below.

453. For a discussion of the sea as an alien realm, see also pp. 265-67 below. On the symbolism of the sea in general, see E. de Saint-Denis, Le rôle de la mer dans la poésie latine.

454. On this topic, see especially E de Saint-Denis, Le rôle de la mer dans la poésie latine. One can glean further information from the fishing and fish treatises listed in Endnote 1.

455. Gk. ποταμὸς Ὠκεανός; Lat. Oceanus.

456. For the continuing ancient tradition of the ocean as generator of all waters, see the references extending from Homer and Hesiod to the end of late antiquity collected in the article "Okeanos (mythisch)" in PW 17:2352-54 (H. Herter). On the Okeanides, see the article "Okeaniden" (H. Herter) in PW 17:2303-08.



movement (*ἀπάσης . . . κινήσεως χορηγόν*), suggesting a connection with the ocean as source of life.<sup>457</sup> Exemplary descriptions of the relationship of the ocean to other waters may be found in the fifth century C.E.(?) work of Nonnus of Panopolis,<sup>458</sup> as well as much earlier in the genealogy of Hesiod, which describes the progeny of Ocean and Tethys.<sup>459</sup>

It is important to note that the ocean was not only the “primeval ancestor” (*ἀρχέγονος*) of large bodies of water, but also of small wells and springs, as is suggested by phrases such as “father of springs” (*κρη-  
νῶν πατήρ*) and “parent of the nymphs” (*genitor nympharum*).<sup>460</sup> This indicates that all water was interconnected, as in fact a passage of Basil of Caesarea demonstrates, in which he describes the unity of all the waters of the earth—from small springs and ponds to great oceans and seas.<sup>461</sup>

The supernatural symbolism of the sea may perhaps best be exemplified in the beginning of chapter 32 of Pliny’s Natural History, where he offers a description of the miraculous wonders of the sea, especially its “power” (*potentia*), “force” (*vis*), and “efficacy” (*effectus*). In Chapter 9 of the Natural History, one finds that the sea is characterized by the “extraordinary creatures” (*monstrifica*) found in its depths. In addition,

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457. See Orphicorum Fragmenta 116 (ed. Kern) = Proclus, Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus 40 E. See also n. 489 below.

458. Dionys. 6.253-55.

459. Hesiod, Theog. 337ff.

460. Respectively: Sophocles, TGF<sup>2</sup> 248; and Catullus 88.6.

at the ends of the earth on the “Islands of the Blessed” (Μακάρων Νήσοι) beside “deep-eddying Ocean” (Ωκεανὸς βαθυδίνης) lived “heroes” (ἥρωες) or “demi-gods” (ἡμιθεοί)—once again connecting the ocean with miraculous beings and miraculous places.<sup>462</sup> Elysium, the plain where heroes retire, was said to be located on the “edges of the earth” (πεῖρατα γαίης) at the furthest shore of the ocean.<sup>463</sup> That the ocean itself was also associated with a miraculous aura one can see from the description of its fishermen as supernatural human beings, who were known as “daimons” (δαμόνιοι).<sup>464</sup> In addition, according to Oppian, the fisherman was likely to see “awful terrors” (δυσδερκέα δειμάτα), namely the huge “sea beasts” (κῆτεα) which partly gave the ocean its awesome character.<sup>465</sup>

Thus, the supernatural character of the ocean evoked a realm of wonder. At some times that wonder was cast in a positive light, and at other times it could be terrifying and dangerous.

In addition to the miraculous features of the sea, ancient writers frequently describe the sea as an alien realm. For example, Plutarch says that it was because fish did not partake of air that Egyptians did not eat

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461. Text # IV.2 in Appendix 1.

462. Hesiod, Op. 156-69.

463. Homer, Od. 4.563-65. On the topic of the edges of the earth and the strange peoples and occurrences associated with those regions, see generally J. S. Romm, The Edges of the Earth.

464. Oppian, Hal. 1.9-12. This is an interesting contrast to the depiction of virtually all fishermen as poor and socially disreputable (pp. 242-47 above). It shows again the extreme complexity of some symbolic material.

any creatures of the sea.<sup>466</sup> Likewise, sea animals were seen as “entirely alien and remote from us” (ἄκφυλον ὄλωσ καὶ ἀποικον ἡμῶν), and the realm of the sea was regarded as “another world” (ἄλλος κόσμος).<sup>467</sup> Columella complains that “pisciculture” (cura piscium) is “completely alien” (alienissimus) to the business of farmers, since “dry land” (terrenus) and “liquid” (fluidus) are contrary to one another.<sup>468</sup> In a similar fashion, Plautus contrasts air and land—which are environments that are obviously inappropriate for fishing—with water and sea—which are environments that are obviously inappropriate for hunting.<sup>469</sup> According to one ancient proverbial tradition, if fish did not partake of air, they died;<sup>470</sup> on the other hand, the sea meant death for human beings.<sup>471</sup> Since many ancient naturalists were startled by their own

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465. Hal. 1.47-49.

466. Symp. 4.669, 8.729 B - C.

467. Plutarch, Symp. 4.669 D.

468. Rust. 8.16.1.

469. Asin. 99-100.

470. This was a commonly observed fact in antiquity: e.g. Basilides (in Hippolytus, Ref. om. haer. 7.22.13, 7.27.2) who says that air is “fatal” (ὀλεθρὸς) and “ruinous” (φθορὰ) for fish; Artemidorus (Oneir. 1.18) who comments that “every fish dies outside of its natural environment” (ἕξω γὰρ τοῦ περιέχοντος γενόμενος πᾶς ἰχθύς ἀποθνήσκει; Antony of Egypt (Text # XIX.1 in Appendix 1) who explains that just as fish die out of water, so monks die out of their cells; and (in ancient Judaism) BT Abodah Zarah 3b, which compares fish dying out of water to human beings who abandon the Torah.

471. According to Heraclitus, while (salt) water is “potable” (πότιμος) and “salvific” (σωτηριος) for fish, it is “non-potable” (ἀποτοτος) and “fatal” (ὀλεθρὸς) for human beings (in Hippolytus, Ref. om. haer. 9.10.5).

observations of those fish that anomalously embarked on land journeys,<sup>472</sup> their very surprise confirms the ancient belief that fish and land were alien to one another.

Overall, it is certainly probable that both the alien and miraculous aspects of water complemented one another and fitted together neatly: since water was alien, it was miraculous and, since water was miraculous, it was alien.

From the examples above, one can see that water was a phantasmagoric realm. Several factors contributed to this atmosphere. For example, ancient writers often comment on the boundlessness of the ocean and its lack of accessibility to human understanding,<sup>473</sup> as is suggested by referring to the ocean as the “depths” (Gk. βυθός, βάθη;

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472. Athenaeus, Deip. 8.332 A - E; Pliny, HN 9.70-71; Oppian, Hal. 1.155ff.; Aelian, NA 9.36: on the Arcadian Adonis fish (which is identical to the sleeping-fish; ἐξώκοιτος) that supposedly sleeps on land; on sea mice (marini mures); on octupi that are said sometimes to hunt prey on land (Gk. πολύποι; Lat. polypi; so also HN 9.85-86; Oppian, Hal. 1.310-311, 4.268-307); on lampreys that are described as coming on to land in order to copulate with snakes (Gk. μυραίναι; Lat. murenae; so also HN 9.76) ; and on a “certain species of fish in the rivers of India” (in Indiae fluminibus certum genus piscium) that is said to bear its offspring on land. In Greek sources, authors refer to the latter fish as “Indian minnows” (Ἰχθυῖδια οἱ Ἰνδικοῖ): Aristotle, Mirab. 835 B 5; Theophrastus, Frag. 171.2.

473. Oppian describes it as “boundless” (ἄπειροσιος) and “of immeasurable depth” (ἀμετροβαθής), not easily amenable to the “understanding” (νόος) and “strength” (ἄλκη) of human beings: Hal. 1.85-87. Nonnus of Panopolis (fifth century C.E.?) designates the ocean as “boundless” (ἄτέρμων) and “larger than the earth” (μείζων γαίης): Dionys. 42.470. For more on the boundless quality of ocean waters, see J. S. Romm, The Edges of the Earth, 11-20.

Lat. profundum/profunda).<sup>474</sup> Oppian describes how fishermen who sailed over the “unknown ocean” (ἀίδηλα θάλασσα) could only “glimpse at unseen depths” (εδρακον οὐκ ἐπιόπτα βένθεα).<sup>475</sup> According to Plutarch, the sea allows one to see only “a little” (μικρά) and “covers up” (κατακαλύπτει) its activities.<sup>476</sup> Oppian, who says that “many things are hidden in it” (πολλὰ δ’ . . . κέκρυπται),<sup>477</sup> uses the following adjectives to describe the hidden character of the sea: ἀίδηλος (“unknown”), οὐκ ἐπιόπτος (“invisible”), and αἰδυτος (“secret”).<sup>478</sup> As a result, a fisherman cannot determine the locations of fish when seeking to capture them.<sup>479</sup>

What is infinite and what is not understood is often associated with miraculous and divine qualities. For example, when Oppian connects the awesome and mysterious beasts of the sea with the “secret” (αἰδυτος, as in the innermost sanctuary, or adyton, of a Greek temple) parts of the sea, he clearly links that which is hidden with that which is miraculous.<sup>480</sup>

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474. For further discussion of this terminology, see pp. 447-50 below.

475. Hal. 1.9-12.

476. Plutarch, De soll. an. 975 E.

477. Hal. 1.85.

478. Hal. 1.1-92.

479. Hal. 1.52-53.

480. Hal. 1.47-49. That water is associated with the hidden and the miraculous may recall some of Jung’s observations that the sea can be a metaphor for the unconscious.

Moreover, one should add that Greeks and Romans viewed the ocean as the source of all life, that is the medium out of which organic life and inorganic existence originated—an observation which certainly added to its supernatural character.<sup>481</sup>

For instance, Homer calls Ocean “the parent of all things” (γενέσις πάντεσσι).<sup>482</sup> The very earliest Greek philosophical speculation in the person of the Milesian Thales (early seventh century B.C.E.) postulated that water was the “first cause” (ἀρχηγός) of all things.<sup>483</sup> In reporting the descent of the stars into the ocean, Valerius Flaccus (late first century C.E.) describes the great ocean as “the generative life source” (magni . . . oceani genitale caput).<sup>484</sup> In a prayer to Ocean (Oceanus), Virgil refers to Ocean as “father of things” (pater rerum).<sup>485</sup> In the fourth century C.E., the emperor Julian (citing the above-mentioned passage in Homer) calls Ocean the father of all things both for “mortals” (θνητοί) and for the “blessed gods” (θεοὶ μάκαρες)—“for there is not one single thing in the whole of existence that was not the progeny of the substance of Ocean.”<sup>486</sup> Adding an interesting twist to this concept,

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481. See pp. 268ff. below.

482. Il. 14.246.

483. According to Aristotle, Metaph. 983 B 27.

484. Argonautica 4.90-91. See also pp. 272-73 for the relationship of the stars to the ocean.

485. Georgic 4.382.

486. Or. 4.147 D - A: “ἐν γὰρ τῶν παντῶν οὐδέν ἐστίν, ὃ μὴ τῆς Ὀκεανοῦ πέφυκεν οὐσίας ἐκγονοῦ.”

Claudian (late fourth to fifth centuries C.E.) states that the Ocean was “the progenitor of the Romans” (generis procreator).<sup>487</sup>

In addition, both the salt of the oceans and the gods of the oceans, such as Poseidon, were associated with the production of life.<sup>488</sup>

According to a common descriptive phrase in the ancient world, the gods, as a form of life, also originated out of the oceanic womb,<sup>489</sup> which was especially associated with the Titans and most specifically Oceanus.<sup>490</sup>

In fact, it was under, and at the very edges of, rivers and the ocean that the earth met the underworld, thus making bodies of water the places where life and afterlife crossed into one another——another factor which certainly contributed to the phantasmagorical quality of the ocean.<sup>491</sup> For example, as noted above, Ὠκεανός (“Ocean”) was the

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487. Fescennine Verses 2.3-24.

488. See pp. 297-98 below.

489. θεῶν γένεσις (“source of the gods”): see the citations extending chronologically from Homer to the emperor Julian, as listed in “Okeanos” (H. Herter), PW 17:2315-16. Especially noteworthy is a passage in Plato’s Timaeus (40 E), in which Plato, apparently quoting older sages (possibly the Orphics: Orphicorum Fragmenta 16), says that that Ocean was the primeval ancestors of all the later gods, including most of the Titans (see the following footnotes).

490. For an indication of the reverence of Ocean, see Ovid’s reference to “reverence” (reverentia) for the gods in Met. 2.510; so also Hesiod, Theog. 116-138; Diodorus Siculus, Bibl. 4.69.1, 4.72.1.

491. According to Homer, Hermes lead the dead suitors of Penelope to the realm of the dead “down past the streams of Ocean” (παρ δ’ ἔσαν Ὠκεανοῦ τε ῥοάς), which is also located “beyond the gates of the sun” (παρ’ Ἡελίοιο πύλας) and “the land of dreams” (παρ’ . . . δῆμον ὄνειρων): Od. 24.11. Likewise, Elysium is located at the furthest shores of the ocean: see p. 264 above.

parent and source from which all water sprang, among which was the “terrible river Styx” (δεινὴ Στύξ). At the bottom of the ocean were the terrible gods, «Υπνος (“Sleep”) and Θάνατος (“Death”), in front of whom were the dwellings of Hades and Persephone.<sup>492</sup> Furthermore when Latin authors used the word “depths” (pro-fundum/profunda/profundus), they were in fact associating the ocean with the underworld.<sup>493</sup>

The proximity of the ocean to the realm of death certainly contributed to its phantasmagorical qualities, and also helps to explain why the Graeco-Roman world associated death with fish, which were given as offerings to chthonic deities and to the dead.

In addition, water (particularly the ocean) formed the sheath, which covered the earth.<sup>494</sup> For instance, one can see this in Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles,<sup>495</sup> in which the outermost rim consists of the ocean surrounding the earth, as well as in Hesiod’s description of the shield of Heracles.<sup>496</sup> In another passage in Homer, the adjective αψοροος (“backward-flowing”) indicates a similar pic-

492. Hesiod, Theog. 736-806; also Orphicorum Fragmenta 116 (ed. Kern) = Proclus, Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus 40 E.

493. E.g. Virgil, G. 1.243; Valerius Flaccus 7.41; Statius, Theb. 1.615; Claudius, Rape of Persephone 1.2.

494. On the encirclement of the earth by water, see “Okeanos” (H. Herter) in PW, especially 17:2312-16 and 17:2329-31.

495. Il. 10.606-07.

496. Scut. 314-17.



ture.<sup>497</sup> Likewise, one can observe a comparable description of the ocean, when Aeschylus describes it as a “sleepless current encircling the entire earth.”<sup>498</sup> In the late first century C.E., Silius Italicus describes Tethys (consort of Ocean) as “encircling this globe while it pours forth with its current.”<sup>499</sup>

As a result, the ocean not only formed the boundary between earth and underworld, but also the boundary between earth and the heavens above it.<sup>500</sup> In this regard, apparently quoting older sources,<sup>501</sup> Plato directly designates the ocean as a combination of earth and heaven, when he refers to Ocean and Tethys as the children of “Earth” (Γαῖα) and “Heaven” (οὐρανός).<sup>502</sup> Perhaps most explicitly, in the fifth century C.E.(?), Nonnus of Panopolis refers to Ocean as “girdled with the circle of the firmament” (μιτροῦμενος ἀντυγι κόσμου).<sup>503</sup>

As the boundary between the earth and heaven, many in the ancient world viewed the sun and the stars as rising out of, and descending into, the sea—its sleeping chamber. As opposed to a scientific or semi-scientific concept, the idea of the sun resting in—and rising out of—

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497. Od. 20.65.

498. PV 138-39: “ . . . τοῦ περὶ πασάν θ’ εἰλισσομένου χθόν’ ἀκοιμήτω ρεῦματι παίδες. . . .”

499. Pun. 14.347: “hunc affusa globum Tethys circumliget undis.”

500. For further discussion, see J. S. Romm, The Edges of the Earth, 9ff.

501. Possibly the Orphics; e.g. Orphicorum Fragmenta 16.

502. Tim. 40 E.

the ocean was throughout most of antiquity probably a widespread folk belief. Though this view is sketched most frequently by Homer,<sup>504</sup> Valerius Maximus, at the end of the first century C.E., describes the “descent of the stars” (subeuntibus astris) into the ocean.<sup>505</sup>

Thus, in antiquity the waters of the earthly orb constituted a meeting point of various realms—underworld-earth-heaven—a threshold at which extraordinary events took place and in which extraordinary creatures lived. Bodies of water functioned as liminal places where human beings could gain a hazy glimpse, occasionally described in terms of a dream,<sup>506</sup> of those divine realms which they only partially understood.

To a certain extent, because of its status as a liminal and otherworldly realm, water came to serve as a socially unifying symbol for ancient religions. For example, in many ancient religions, water constituted a crucial component of religious rituals and myths, whether it was the worship of the Nile or the Tiber in Egyptian and Roman religion,<sup>507</sup> the resting place of the sun in mythic cosmology,<sup>508</sup> the miracles

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503. Dionys. 38.108.

504. E.g. Il. 3.1-2: “Ἡἠλιος δ’ ἀνόρουσε λιπὼν περικαλλέα λιμνην οὐρανὸν ἐς πολὺχαλκον.” [“After the sun left the beautiful sea, it arose into the bronze heavens.”]

505. Argonautica 4.90-91.

506. Oppian says that the occupation of fishing is “unstable as a dream” (σταθερὸς . . . ἢ ὄτ’ ὄνειρος), partly because it is filled with hidden terrors (Hal. 1.35ff.). In fact, Artemidorus characterizes the sea by its “disorder” (ἀταξία), which (as is seen in Oppian) was also the characteristic of dreams: Oneir. 3.16.

507. For worship of the Nile in late antiquity, see A. Hermann, “Der Nil und die Christen.” Concerning the cult of the Tiber river in Roman

that occur in and near water in both ancient Judaism and Christianity,<sup>509</sup> the performance of baptism as a crucial initiation rite in Christianity and in some other Graeco-Roman religions,<sup>510</sup> or the undertaking of ritual baths as a form of spiritual purification in Judaism.<sup>511</sup> While water could, both in some traditions of pagan literature and of early Christian literature,<sup>512</sup> symbolize the world in its sinful state, at the same time, in other traditions of pagan and early Christian literature,<sup>513</sup> it was a liminal realm filled with supernatural phenomena.

I would surmise that the liminal position of water in the world——  
which also made its fish inhabitants liminal creatures——contributed to  

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religion, see J. Le Gall, Recherches sur le culte du Tibre.

508. See p. p. 272 above.

509. One might cite the following examples: the miracle of the water brought out of the rock at Meribah by Moses, Noah and the ark, and the story of Jonah (all depicted frequently in early Christian iconography; e.g. see the index in P. Testini, Repertorio); the miracle at the red sea; Christ walking on the water; etc.

510. The bibliography on baptism in early Christianity and the Graeco-Roman world is massive. For a discussion of baptism in the New Testament and Graeco-Roman world, see A. J. M Wedderburn, Baptism and Resurrection. For a preliminary start on the general bibliography, see the following brief dictionary discussions with bibliography: E. Dassmann, A. Hamman, and R. J. de Simone, “Battesimo”; and E. Ferguson, “Baptism” and Baptistery.”

511. See previous footnote for some relevant citations. One must also materials in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

512. See p. 460 below and Chapter 3, passim.

513. See Sections IV and VI in Appendix 1, as well as Chapter 3, passim.

the astrological reference of the Piscean fish; for Pisces figured as a symbol of liminality. In fact, it served to symbolize the transition that took place with the death of one age and the birth of the next.

I would furthermore suggest that early Christians could easily associate fish with Christ, since they were creatures that lived in water and therefore dwelled in a liminal realm outside of normal reality—a reality which was associated with supernatural phenomena. Of course, Christ as son of God was regarded as a supernatural being, who performed supernatural activities. When Christ was called “fish” (whether in the inscription of Avercius or as an acronym in inscriptions or in other texts), early Christians were naturally, among other things, associating him with the liminal and supernatural realm in which fish lived.

While a fish could symbolize Christ, it could, as indicated, additionally symbolize early Christians. The association of fish with a supernatural realm also probably influenced this aspect of early Christian fish symbolism. Indeed, it was through the symbolism of fish that early Christians could represent their own liminal situation—one in which they were positioned at the threshold between this world (sae- culum) and another world of eternal life.

Since fish were so closely associated with supernatural phenomena, through the use of fish symbolism, early Christians could communicate the miraculous and liminal character of special sacrosanct rituals, such as the eucharist and baptism. In the case of the eucharist, by eating the big fish, as in the inscription of Avercius, one was in a sense ingesting

something that was a part of a supernatural realm. Thus, by eating it, one would have found oneself closer to salvation.

From literary sources, it is also known that fish were associated with baptized early Christians.<sup>514</sup> According to Tertullian, it would seem that a big fish baptized the many little fish. Here there was a clear connection between baptism as immersion in water and fish as water creatures, which dwelled in a liminal and supernatural realm. When one was baptized in salvific water, one entered the same medium as fish and, thus, entered a watery realm which put one closer to salvation than before.

In fact, the supernatural character of water should help to explain the ritual of baptism itself, because the evidence adduced above would suggest that it was primarily water that made this ritual special and that gave it its supernatural efficacy. By referring to the baptism of fish, early Christian writers made the metaphor of baptism complete: it was not just the ritual placement of human beings in water, but also human beings in the metaphorical form of fish entered a liminal and supernatural realm that brought them closer to God and to salvation.

Moreover, that all waters of the earth were thought to be physically related to one another through their birth from the ocean and that fish were thought to be present in nearly all known waters, rendered fish an especially appropriate symbol for early Christians. For this metaphor would have probably suggested that all early Christians were living in the same unitary realm of metaphorical water, and were, on this account, all physically and spiritually connected to one another. Thus, for

a group, whose claims were based on the universality of God's efficacy and which identified itself as a universal and inclusive association transcending exclusive social, economic and ethnic divisions, the symbolic description of fish in a universal watery medium would have found a receptive audience.

Some Observations on the Symbolism of Seas and Oceans in Ancient Judaism. In general, Jews in biblical antiquity viewed seas and oceans as places of great supernatural power. On the one hand, they functioned as regions of great danger and evil. In Near Eastern myths (especially in Canaanite religion), battles between sympathetic heavenly deities and fearsome aquatic ones were frequent. In biblical texts, one can see traces of battles between Yahweh and aquatic deities in the descriptions of the huge frightening sea beast Leviathan. In Judaism, one can trace part of the background for the association of the sea with terror to Genesis 1.1, which portrays water as a place of chaos and disorder.<sup>515</sup> The fear of dangerous sea creatures continued among Jews in the Graeco-Roman period, such as Daniel 7.2ff., which describes the terrifying sea beasts that represented the enemies of Israel, especially the Seleucid monarch Antiochus Epiphanes.<sup>516</sup>

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514. See pp. 467-81 below and Chapter 3, passim.

515. In general, on battles between heaven and sea in the ancient Near East and its influence on biblical Judaism, see H. Gunkel, Schöpfung und Chaos; and J. Day, God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea.

516. The passage is later in part reinterpreted by early Christians in Rev. 13.1-18. Also the following biblical sources refer to the great

Yet, while these vast bodies of water could cause fear for Jews, they also exemplify the might of God and the beauty of his creation.<sup>517</sup>

Likewise, Leviathan can even be described in Job 41 as a magnificent and beautiful creature, albeit extremely dangerous.

In Judaism during the Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman periods, one finds a greater number of positive evaluations of the seas and oceans, as well as their inhabitants. Above I showed that Leviathan was transformed by some from a dangerous living creature into one that would be killed and whose flesh would then serve as the main course in messianic banquets for faithful Jews. Therefore, Leviathan was no longer dangerous, but dead and conquered.<sup>518</sup>

Furthermore, I already observed that seas and oceans could be viewed as equivalent to Torah,<sup>519</sup> while fish could be viewed as equivalent to human beings. In this regard, I would suggest that, as a supernatural element, water was especially appropriate to symbolize Torah, since Torah was of course itself regarded by ancient Jews as supernatural.

Thus, in the period upon which this dissertation focusses, Jews viewed water analogously to pagans—as supernatural places where strange things took place and strange creatures lived, both good and sea beast Rahab: Is. 51.9-10, Ps. 89.10, and Job 26.12.

517. E.g. Ps. 104.24-26.

518. See pp. 170-74 above.

519. One might add other passages (which refer only to water, and not to fish) collected by I. Schlefelowitz in “Das Fisch-Symbol im Judentum und Christentum,” 3, n. 3.

bad. I would suggest that perhaps Jews were influenced in this regard by the Graeco-Roman environment in which they lived. In any event, early Christians would naturally have comprehended Jewish and pagan views of water as mutually complementary.

### **Silent fish**

In addition to the above-mentioned factors, another factor contributed to giving fish an association with the strange and the supernatural. Unlike land animals, fish were considered silent creatures and thus represented a state of existence altogether different from that of creatures of the land (including human beings),<sup>520</sup> whose social intercourse was characterized by noise. For example, ancient writers often referred to fish as “voiceless” (ἀναυδής and ἀφωνος).<sup>521</sup> That fish were

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520. It is only in exceptionally strange times that the realm of the sea and the realm of the land intersect. For example, in Graeco-Roman tradition, in the time of the great flood, sea animals (especially dolphins) and land animals (especially boars) found themselves in the same place—an indication of the possible reversal of the natural order in extreme situations: Ovid, *Met.* 1.302. Cf. Claudian, *Adv. Eutrop.* 1.352; Horace, *Ars P.* 30.

521. E.g. Aeschylus, *Persae* 577; Sophocles, *Aj.* 1297 and a fragment quoted in Athenaeus, *Deip.* 7.277 A - B; Artemidorus, *Oneir.* 14 (explaining that fish are not a good symbol, when orators see them in dreams); and Athenaeus, *Deip.* 7.308 B. In this latter passage, Athenaeus derives ἄλλοψ (probably a type of sturgeon; see the discussion in D. W. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Fishes*, 62-63, and D. G. Georgaias, *Ichthyological Terms for the Sturgeon*) from ἄλλεσθαι (“to bar”) and ὄψ (“voice”). In this regard, Empedocles (c. 493-433 B.C.E., in a poem to his friend Pausanias) said that Pausanias should “hide himself within a silent mind,” where the word for silent is ἄλλοψ, also the word for a fish (probably a type of sturgeon, as indicated above). For other examples of the use of ἄλλοψ (and variants) as a word for “mute” which formulaically describes fish, see the following texts: Hesychius, *Lex.* 75; Lycophoron 1375; Sophocles, *Aj.* 1297; *Titanomach.*, Fr. 4 (ed. T. W. Allen, *Homeri Opera*,



identified with silence one may also see from the occasional surprised mentions by ancient naturalists of fish that do make sounds.<sup>522</sup> In addition, as a further indication of the association of a fish with silence, a fish occupied a central position in Roman rites dedicated to the goddess of silence, Tacita (“Silence”).<sup>523</sup>

In Pythagorean tradition, the silence of fishes would seem to have had a religious connotation, to the extent that, while they did not eat

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Oxford, OCT).

In addition, according to Pherecrates (comic dramatist of the fifth century B.C.E.) in a fragment from Ant Men (Μυρμηκανθρώποις) in Athenaeus (Deip. 7.287 A), “they say that a fish has absolutely no voice” (ἀλλὰ φωνὴν οὐκ ἔχειν ἰχθὺν γέ φασι τὸ παράπαν). It is also suggestive that, in a fragment from the third century B.C.E. traveler, geographer, and antiquarian, Mnaseas of Patrae, (cited in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.301 D), “Fish” (simply ἰχθὺς, whatever specifically that is) is sibling to his sister “Silence” (ἡσυχία) and together they produce “Calm” (of the sea, γαλήνη), “Lamprey” (μύραϊνα), and “Spindle-fish” (ἡλακατῆνες).

522. E.g. fish in the Aornus river in the strange (for the Greeks) lands of Bactria and India (Philostephanus of Cyrene, third century B.C.E. friend of Callimachus, in a fragment from On Strange Rivers (Περὶ τῶν παραδόξων ποταμῶν), cited in Athenaeus, Deip. 8.331 D - E); fish in the river Ladon near Cleitor in Arcadia (in fragments from the above mentioned Mnaseas of Patrae, cited in Athenaeus, Deip. 8.331 D - E; from the Peripatetic Clearchus, c. 340-250 B.C.E. in his Water Animals (Περὶ τῶν ἐνὺδρων), cited in Athenaeus, Deip. 8.332 F; in HN 9.70, Pliny calls them the Adonis Fish); the parrot wrasse (Gk. σκάρος; Lat. scarus) and the river pig (ποτάμιος χοῖρος), which make sounds (the former in Oppian, Hal. 1.134; both in Athenaeus, Deip. 331 D, as quoted from Aristotle); and fish listed by Aelian (NA 10.11, following Aristotle (HA 535 B 4-20). These latter fish are the grunting gunard (λύρα, χρόμις, κάπρος (see also Pliny, HN 11.25); the whistling John Dory (Gk. χαλκεύς; Lat. zeus faber); the piping cuckoo (κόκκυξ); and (like the gunard) the maigre (Gk. σκίαϊνα; Lat. sciaena, sciadeus, scias). To these Aristotle adds (HA 535 B 16) the following creatures: the whirring (made as it passes along the water) scallop (Gk. κτείς, κτήν; Lat. pecten); the flying-fish (χελιδών); and the dolphin (Gk. δελφίς, δελφίν; Lat. delphin, delphinus), which “makes a moaning sound” (τριγμὸν μύζει). From the point of view of Aristotle, these sounds are “noise” (ψοφός), and not “articulate voice” (φωνή).

meat and/or the meat of sacrificed animals, they always especially refused to eat fish.<sup>524</sup> Probably indicating a popular belief in the Graeco-Roman world, one of the explanations (attributed by Plutarch to the Lacedaemonian Tyndares) explains that Pythagoreans abstained from fish because they regarded the “silence” (σιωπή) of fish as “divine” (θεῖα).<sup>525</sup> This seems to have been related, according to Tyndareus, to the Pythagorean practice of concealing their doctrines.<sup>526</sup>

By making their words obscure and by making their doctrines available only to the initiated, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, as well as a variety of Stoics, Middle Platonists (including Philo), Neoplatonists, and others, confirm this view of silence and obscurity as essential to the mysteries of true philosophy.<sup>527</sup> For example, one might quote from the extremely influential passage in the Timaeus (28 C) of Plato:

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523. Ovid, Fast. 5.571ff.

524. For the Pythagorean association of the muteness of fish in a religious sense, see the discussions in Plutarch (Symp. 8.728 C - 730 F) and in Athenaeus, Deip. 7.308 C - D), in which the Pythagoreans (according to Plutarch and Athenaeus), occasionally ate animals and/or the meat of sacrificed animals), but always refused to eat fish; so also Athenaeus, Deip. 4.161 B. The same was true for the pupils of Alexicrates according to Athenaeus. As discussed below, a variety of explanations are offered for this practice. For further discussion, see Plutarch, who says that the true reason would probably always remain a mystery, ἀπόθετος καὶ ἀπόρητος, literally “secret and unspeakable”: Symp. 728 F.

525. Plutarch, Symp. 728 E - F.

526. Plutarch, Symp. 728 E.

527. One may find a complete collection of these references in the book by O. Casel, De Philosophorum Graecorum Silentio Mystico.

To discover the maker and father of the universe is a major task, but once discovering him, it is impossible to tell everyone.<sup>528</sup>

Interesting also are the passages from the second epistle (312 D - E) of Plato (probably pseudonymous):

You say that you are not fully satisfied with the response of that one concerning the first principle of nature. I must state it to you in riddles so that in case the tablet falls into folds (and) suffers a misfortune on land or on sea, the reader will not understand.<sup>529</sup>

In the Avercius inscription, the reference to all those who know or understand (ὁ νοῶν . . . πᾶς, v. 19) is strikingly similar to the passage in Plato, where reference is made to those who “do not know” (μη̄ γινῶ).

In the period contemporary with Jesus, Strabo comments that “mystic silence (or veiling) concerning sacred things sanctifies the divine by imitating its nature, which nevertheless escapes our understanding.”<sup>530</sup>

In the gnostic Secret Book According to John (1.1-2), the narrator explains that the mysteries are hidden in silence. Passages such as these may be cited innumerable. In addition, in the performance of the auspices by Roman augurs, silence was a sign that the procedure had

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528. "τὸν μὲν οὖν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς εὐρεῖν τε ἔργον καὶ εὐρόντα εἰς πάντα ἀδύνατον λέγειν." On the influence of this passage in the writings of Apuleius, see R. Mortley, "Apuleius and Platonic Theology."

529. "φῆς γὰρ δὴ κατὰ τὸν ἐκείνου λόγον οὐχ ἰκανῶς ἀποδεδεῖχθαι σοὶ περὶ τῆς τοῦ πρώτου φύσεως. Φραστέον δὴ σοὶ δε' αἰνιγμῶν, κ' ἂν τι ἢ δέλτος ἢ πόντου ἢ γῆς ἐν πτυχαῖς πάθῃ, ἀναγνοῦς μὴ γινῶ."

530. Strabo, Geo. 10.467 C: "ἢ τε κρύψις ἢ μυστικὴ τῶν ἱερῶν σεμνοποιεῖ τὸ θεῖον, μιμουμένη τὴν φύσιν αὐτοῦ φεύγουσαν ἡμῶν τὴν ἀσθησιν."

gone perfectly—— thus indicating the association of silence with religious activity.<sup>531</sup>

In the ancient world, both in the Classical and Christian traditions, “silence” (Gk. ἠσυχία, σιωπή, ἀποφητία, κρύψις, and derivatives; Lat. silentium) was associated with the divine realm in general, as well as with the primordial period prior to creation. According to Plotinus, the “contemplation” (θεωρία) of the divine could take place only in silence.<sup>532</sup> In orthodox Christian and gnostic Christian writings, frequent reference is made to the silence (sometimes hypostasized) of the divine realm and to the silence in which God dwells.<sup>533</sup>

The association of silence with divinity was a natural one, since Middle and Neo-Platonic and early Christian texts often describe the first cause and/or God as a being for whom words were inadequate. For example, they frequently use adjectives, such as “indescribable” and “unnameable” as designations for that being.<sup>534</sup> Without words, silence

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531. Cicero, Div. 2.34.71.

532. E.g. Ennead 8 (On Nature and Contemplation): 3.8.4.4, 16, 27; 3.8.5.25; 3.8.6.12-13, 15, 26, 31, 39.

533. E.g. Secret Book According to John 4:13 and 7:3f; Thunder—Perfect Intellect 14:9; First Thought in Three Forms 46, et passim; The Egyptian Gospel (Codex IV) 54:21 and 56-57, passim; Three Tablets of Seth 127:15f (Layton trans. and comm.); and Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. 1.1.1, 1.2.1, 1.11.1. On silence in Augustine (with relevant references), see J. A. Mazzeo, “Truth vs. Eloquence and Things vs. Signs”; M. Colish, “St. Augustine’s Rhetoric of Silence Revisited”; and P. F. Gehl, “Competens Silentium.”

534. For example, Apuleius, De dog. Plat. (possibly pseudonymous) 1.5 says that God was “unnameable” (innomabilis) and “inexpressable” (nemini effabilis). For some examples in philosophical literature, see O. Casel, De Philosophorum Graecorum Silentio Mystico in the index under “ἄρρητος,” “ineffabilis,” “innominabilis,” etc. The number of

becomes the best alternative.

Thus, by using fish as their distinctive symbol, early Christians could suggest their connection to an alien and strange realm, a silent realm in which miracles took place and, into which——through the sacraments of the Eucharist and baptism——a Christian could cross over and enter.

After one has entered such a realm, it was not possible or permissible to speak of it directly and clearly to the uninitiated. Thus, drawing on a tradition extending as far back as Pythagoras and continuing through the Neoplatonists, Avercius indicates in his epitaph that only those who “know” would be able to understand his words.

It is significant that, in the earliest extant Christian inscription, the assumption of the obscurity of Christian language coincides with the symbolism of silent fish. Given the evasiveness and obscurity of the Avercius inscription, which seems partly directly at concealing cultic details, it makes sense to include the fish; for fish were also associated with silence or obscurity of speech (at best). While Pythagoras may have been the first to interpret the silence of fish in this way, early Christians used fish symbolism most extensively for that purpose, as can be seen by its relatively frequent use in iconography.

Furthermore, I would suggest that, every time the fish appears in an inscription, its intention in part was to indicate a message to the initiated. Indeed, with the frequency of references to silent fish in the

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instances is innumerable in Christian literature as well, especially writings of Neoplatonically influenced mystics. For a combination of ineffability and silence see First Thought in Three Forms 46, et passim (Layton trans. and comm.); and Irenaeus Adv. Haer. 1.11.1 (on the Valentinian myth).

ancient world, it would have been virtually impossible to use fish imagery without visualizing and imagining to some extent its silent and consequently mysterious quality. That the fish also was in other contexts an acronym for Christ confirmed further that it had special meaning only for those who knew what the initials of the acronym meant.

Thus, the use of fish symbolism indicates that many early Christians saw themselves as an initiatory group, whose teachings would not be immediately accessible to everyone.

### **Sleepless fish**

As another indication of the strange character of the ocean and its inhabitants, Oppian remarks that, with the exception of the parrot wrasse, fish never slept.<sup>535</sup> Instead, “their eyes and minds were constantly awake.” So also Seleucus of Tarsus observed that the parrot wrasse was the only fish (μόνος τῶν ἰχθύων) that did not sleep (κατεύδω).<sup>536</sup>

Despite the protestations (correct from a modern biological point of view) of Aristotle that fish did indeed generally sleep,<sup>537</sup> apparently many others including Oppian and Seleucus followed folk wisdom

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535. Oppian, *Hal.* 2.658-59: “ἀλλ’ ἄρα τοῖσι καὶ ὄμματα καὶ νόος αἰὲν ἐγρήσει πανάυπνος.” To refer to fish, he uses the word *ἄλλοπες*, but here it does not specifically mean “sturgeons”, but “silent ones”——which is another way of saying “fish.” See n. 521 above.

536. In a fragment from *Fishing* (Τὸν Ἀλιευτικόν) in Athenaeus,

rather than Aristotelian science. That people thought this could be attributed, according to Aristotle, to the fact that fish did not have “eyelids” (βλέφαρον) and consequently did not shut their eyes even when asleep.<sup>538</sup> But even Aristotle admitted that fish “slept very little” (βραχύπνοος).<sup>539</sup>

The notion of sleepless fish, whose eyes were always alert, possibly had a direct connection to early Christian fish symbolism. For example, in the inscription of Avercius, the good shepherd “has huge eyes which look everywhere” (ὀφθαλμοὺς ὅς ἔχει μεγάλους πάντη καθορώντας, v. 5). Moreover, the good shepherd almost certainly represents the same person—namely Jesus Christ—as the “huge fish” (ἰχθὺς παν-μεγέθης, vv. 13-14). Thus, there seems to be a connection between the huge eyes of the shepherd and the huge fish. In any case, the emphasis on eyes in v. 5 is appropriate in light of the mention of a fish eight verses below.

In addition, in using fish symbolism, early Christians very likely were associating it with the tradition of God who does not sleep, as in Psalm 121.3-4: “The one [God] who watches over you does not slumber; the one who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep”.<sup>540</sup> In this

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Deip. 320 A.

537. HA 536 B 2 - 537 B 12.

538. HA 537 A 3-4.

539. HA 537 A 1p2f2.

540. " . . . אֶל-גְּנוּם שִׁמְרֶהּ: הַגֵּה לֹא-גְנוּם וְלֹא יִישָׁן שׁוֹמֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל"; and Greek Septuagint (Ps. 120.3-4), " . . . μηδὲ νυστάξει ὁ ψυχλάσσων σε. ἰδοὺ

regard, the phrase “the eyes of God” (Heb. *עֵינֵי יְיָ*; Gk. *ὀφθαλμοὶ κυρίου*; Lat. *oculi Domini*) constituted a very important part of biblical tradition, which depicted the visage of God, indicating that God was always observing and watching over God’s people.<sup>541</sup>

In early Christian terms, it might have run something like this: as fish never sleep, so also “The Fish” (ὁ ἰχθύς or ἰχθύς πανμεγέθης)—Christ—does not sleep.

It is also of note that fishermen, like fish, whom they seek as their prey, must “not like satiety of sleep” (μηδ’ ὕπνου φιλέοι κόρον) and must have “wide open eyes” (ὀμμασιν πεπταμένοισιν).<sup>542</sup> Thus, pagan Graeco-Roman tradition would have confirmed some of the above-mentioned notions, which were handed down in the Jewish biblical tradition.

Furthermore, in the ancient world, especially for Jews and Christians, the word “sleep” euphemistically meant death—though death may well have been a temporary state prior to resurrection.<sup>543</sup> Thus, by

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οὐ νυστάξει οὐδὲ ὑπνώσει ὁ φυλάσσων τὸν Ἰσραὴλ”; and the Latin Vulgate, “. . . neque dormitet qui custodit te. Ecce non dormitabit neque dormit qui custodit Israel.”

541. Of particular importance is the reference in *Zech.* 4.10: “These are the seven eyes of the Lord which range over the entire world [*“עֵינֵי יְיָ הַמְּשֹׁמֵטִים בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ”*]; Greek Septuagint, “ἑπτὰ ὀφθαλμοὶ κυρίου εἰσὶν οἱ ἐπιβλέποντες ἐπὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν”; and Latin Vulgate, “septem isti oculi sunt Domini, qui discurrunt in universam terram.”

542. Oppian, *Hal.* 3.45-46.

543. “To sleep” (καθεύδω, κοιμάομαι) was frequently used in the New Testament to describe early Christians who had died. Particularly popular in Jewish inscriptions was the formulaic phrase, “in peace be your sleep” (ἐν εἰρήνῃ ἢ κοιμήσις σου), indicating that the period



using images of fish on funerary inscriptions with their associations of sleeplessness, early Christians may well have indicated that they would ultimately be awake, i.e. alive forever.

### **FISH AS PART OF A BUCOLIC THEME**<sup>544</sup>

As a result of the importance of water in the Greek and Roman worlds, it should be no surprise that, in ancient art,<sup>545</sup> the composers of visual imagery let maritime scenes such as the following figure promi-

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buried beside the tombstone was dead. See especially L. Kant, "Jewish Inscriptions in Greek and Latin"; and M. Ogle, "The Sleep of Death."

544. This section is only a very brief summary. For further discussion in this dissertation, see e.g. pp. 416-17 below and Chapter 4, passim; also Chart 1 in Appendix 5.

545. For a brief bibliography related to symbols in Graeco-Roman art, see Endnote 2.

nently:<sup>546</sup> fishing,<sup>547</sup> harbour activity,<sup>548</sup> boats,<sup>549</sup> and peaceful bucolic relaxation on shorelines or riverbanks.<sup>550</sup>

Of special importance for purposes here, many ancient mosaics (now found in museums) often feature a virtual zoological display of the numerous and various fish and sea mammal species. In many marine genre mosaics from North Africa, as well as in still-life paintings from

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546. On maritime scenes in Roman mosaics, see especially the general discussion in K. M. Dunbabin, The Mosaics of Roman North Africa, 125-130, 150-154, *et passim*; C. Belz, "Marine Genre Pavements in North Africa" (Ph.D. diss.); and also the bibliography in L. Drewer, "Fisherman and Fish Pond," 1. For maritime scenes in still-life paintings from Pompei and Herculaneum, see J.-M. Croisille, Les natures mortes campaniennes (21-45, pls. A-C; with corresponding descriptions in the catalogue). On the depiction of maritime scenes on sarcophagi, see A. Rumpf, Die Meerwesen auf den antiken Sarcophagreliefs. This is just a brief summary. For their interpretation on both pagan and Christian materials, see for a start the following: B. Andrae, Studien zur römischen Grabkunst; H. Brandenburg, "Meerwesensarkophage und Clipeusmotiv" and "Die Darstellung des maritimen Lebens"; H. Sichtermann, "Deutung und Interpretation der Meerwesensarkophage"; and J. Engemann, Untersuchungen zur Sepulkralsymbolik, 60-69.

547. On fishing in the ancient world in general, still fundamental is W. Radcliffe, Fishing From the Earliest Times. For ancient texts on fishing in the Graeco-Roman world, most complete in one place is Oppian, Halieutica (= Ἀλιευτικόν). For fishermen in art (specifically sculpture in the round), see H. P. Laubscher, Fischer und Landleute, as well as Chart 4 in Appendix 5 in this dissertation.

548. Clearly, sea ports were a central part of business life in the ancient Mediterranean and were the virtual life-lines for urban centers (Ostia for Rome, Piraeus for Athens, the sea port at Alexandria, etc.). On harbours in the Roman world, basic are K. Lehmann Hartleben, Die antiken Hafenzentren; G. Schmiedt, Il livello antico del mar tirreno; and A. M. McCann, *et al.*, The Roman Port and Fishery of Cosa.

549. For an introduction to shipping and boating in antiquity, a basic introduction is L. Casson, The Ancient Mariners. For images of ships in early Christian art, see G. Stuhlfarth, "Der Schiff als Symbol der altchristlichen Kunst"; and H. Leclercq, "Navire."

Pompei and Herculaneum on the Bay of Naples (for example) one finds various kinds of marine scenes with deities and fantastic creatures, as well as displays of great varieties of fish.<sup>551</sup> At the same time, from Pompei one finds mosaics entirely devoted to functioning as a kind of compendium of marine life.<sup>552</sup>

In addition to the functions and meanings of fish in the above instances, Graeco-Roman artisans included fish in scenes of nature and in fishing scenes as parts of an overall suggestion of an idyllic, bucolic environment.<sup>553</sup> In general in Graeco-Roman antiquity, graves of those who had enough money were actually set in bucolic locations, especially gardens.<sup>554</sup> And the pictures of meals in iconography very often show rustic scenery.<sup>555</sup>

Hence fish and fishermen (like shepherds) had idyllic connotations, which a Roman would have immediately understood. These rustic settings had a purpose, however. They connoted well-being and the locus amoenus (“pleasant place”), which could also be a description of the environment of the deceased in the area of the grave, in heavenly

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550. See pp. 632-39, as well Chart 1 in Appendix 1.

551. See for example the relevant material in n. 546 above. This is just a tiny sampling; they exist everywhere throughout the Mediterranean in museums and archaeological sites.

552. E.g. Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples: MN 9997 and 120177 (pl. 44 in J.-M. Croisille, Les natures mortes campaniennes). There are other examples as well.

553. See the numerous examples from the materials collected in n. 546, and see also Chart 1 in Appendix 5.

afterlife, or a combination of both. In addition, it offered a pleasant environment for those who visited their familial graves and suggested to those visitors the same idyllic possibilities of which they might hope to partake when they died at some future date.

When early Christians used fish or fishermen as symbols on epigraphic funerary monuments, they were probably linking them to this pagan bucolic tradition, as they also clearly did with good shepherd symbolism.<sup>556</sup> Thus, when early Christians carved fish or fishermen on inscriptions, they were indicating that the deceased, as well as those who visited them at their graves, were dwelling in a pleasant place where no one was lacking in physical nourishment, and everyone was happy. That is after all what the locus amoenus was meant to evoke.<sup>557</sup> It was probably not in most instances a specific allusion to a particular place, such as heaven or the Islands of the Blessed, but rather a general evocation of a comforting world in which to live.

In this case, if I am right, early Christians were simply accepting this pagan bucolic tradition as a whole and incorporating it into the general

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554. See p. 543 below.

555. See pp. 515-85 below.

556. See pp. 336-41 and 586-613 below.

557. This phrase was frequently used by Latin writers to describe beautiful landscapes (mountains, forests, lakes, rivers, springs, coastlines, etc.), which were rustic locations and not filled with people: E.g. Varro in Isidore of Seville, Etym. 14: “amoena loca Varro dicta ait eo quod solum amorem praestant et ad se amanda adliciant.” [“Varro said that loca amoena are places which maintain solitary love and which attract loving things to themselves.”] See also Servius, Comm. Aen. 5.734: “amoena sunt loca solius voluptatis plena” [“loca amoena are full of solitary pleasure.”]

framework of their fish symbolism. Contrary to some who have argued that this is the only thing that certain iconographic scenes mean,<sup>558</sup> however, I am proposing that it is indeed an important component, but not an exclusive one.

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558. See pp. 99-118 above, especially pp. 110-17.

**FISH AS SEXUAL AND FERTILE CREATURES LIVING IN A  
SEXUAL AND FERTILE REALM<sup>559</sup>**

As demonstrated above, Greeks and Romans considered the medium, in which fish lived——water——as the source of all life.<sup>560</sup> Because of this and also probably because ancient observers viewed the quantity of fishes in the sea as innumerable,<sup>561</sup> fish were associated with fertility, quantity of offspring, sexuality, phalluses, and promiscuity.

For example, Manilius comments that Venus implanted in the fish of Pisces “her passionate fires” (sui ignes),<sup>562</sup> so that those born under Pisces are particularly “fertile” (fecundus), just as fish “fill the waters with their offspring” (partu complentes aequora Pisces).<sup>563</sup> Since Pisces was a sign of twins (thus, two fish), he designates as never “alone” (solus), but always associated with plurality.<sup>564</sup> That is partly why Ptolemy regards Pisces (along with Scorpio and Cancer) as one of the

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559. I wish to thank Lawrence Richardson of Duke University for emphasizing the relationship of fish to sexuality, while I did research for this dissertation at the American Academy in Rome.

560. See pp. 268ff. above.

561. For example, in the Halieutica (2.547), Oppian tells how dolphins “drive into confusion the vast flocks of the sea” (κλονέουσιν ἀθέσφατα πώεα λίμνης). Here ἀθέσφατος primarily bears the sense of quantity, but it also refers to divine oracles, so that prolificness and sacrality are joined in this word.

562. Manilius, Astr. 4.582.

563. Manilius, Astr. 2.236-38 and 4.290-91.

564. Manilius, Astr. 4.583-84.

“prolific” (πολύσπερμος) signs.<sup>565</sup> In addition, ancient astrological charts associate Pisces with “libidinous” (άσελγής) qualities.<sup>566</sup>

For an ancient naturalist, such as Aristotle, fish were exceptionally prolific—a fact which was thought to explain why they lay external eggs.<sup>567</sup> Yet, even prior to Aristotle, in the sixth century B.C.E., Empedocles referred to fish as “fertile” (πολύσπερής).<sup>568</sup> Much later Plutarch wrote that “of living animals, whether on the land or winged, none are as “prolific” (γόνιμος) as sea creatures.”<sup>569</sup>

Medicinally and magically, fish not only had healing powers, but (as I show for salt) they also had aphrodisiac powers. For example, the pan fish (or great Nile perch) contained inside itself the magic stone—άστερίτης λίθος—which was reknowned for its value as a “love charm” (φίλτρα), and was said to have been used by Helen. In addition, it was known as “monstrously huge” (κητώδης)—probably as an allusion to a phallus.<sup>570</sup> Certain fish—in particular the large cow-

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565. Ptolemy, Tetr. 190 (4.6).

566. See W. Hübner, Die Eigenschaften der Tierkreiszeichen in der

567. Aristotle, Gen. an. 751 A 28-29: “. . . πολύγονον έστι τὸ τῶν ἰχθύων γένος” [“. . . the fish tribe is extremely prolific.”]

568. According to Plutarch, Symp. 685 F.

569. Symp. 685 F: “αὐτῶν δὲ τῶν ζῴων οὐδέν αν χειρσαῖον η πτηγὸν εἶπεῖν εἰς οὐτῶ γόνιμον ὡς πάντα τὰ θαλάττια.”

570. Pan (πάν) fish = great Nile perch = modern Lates niloticus. On this fish see the following: Suidas under “πάν, πανός” (referring to a tradition handed down by Aesop the “reader” [ἀναγνώστης] of Mithridates); and Ptolemaeus Hephaestion in a paraphrase of a fragment from his Histories (ἱστορία) in Photius, Bibl. 153 b. On the asteritês lithos = άστερίτης λίθος in a magical context, see the alchemical

rie—were specifically associated throughout the Mediterranean (including Italy and Egypt) with phalluses and with fertility (probably through sympathetic magic).<sup>571</sup> Fish phalluses (along with evil eyes) were often used as apotropaic symbols.<sup>572</sup> By calling someone a “skinned sardine” (deglupta mena), a character in the Poenulus of Plautus can insult a would-be lover as having a small, ineffectual organ.<sup>573</sup>

As a further indication that fish were associated with phalluses, Plutarch informs his readers that the Egyptians abstained from certain fish, because they were associated with a sacriligious action—namely the eating of the genitalia of Osiris.<sup>574</sup> Similarly, the murex (or purple-shellfish) was evidently associated with an act of castration and, on that account, was worshipped in the shrine of Venus at Cnidos.<sup>575</sup>

In general, castration in the ancient world was closely associated with Aphrodite, especially in her Syrian form as the fish goddess Atar-

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treatise ascribed to Democritus (but actually to Ps. Democritus, in the edition of alchemical writings by M. Berthelot, Collection des anciens alchimistes grècques, 50), who uses the asteritès lithos for the alchemical creation of gold. In order for the power of this stone to make itself sufficiently felt, it must feel the heat of the sun.

571. On the use of cowries as a phallic fertility symbol, see D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes, 289-91. Cowrie = χοιρίνη.

572. See J. Engemann, “Fisch, Fischer, Fischfang,” 994.

573. Poen. 1310-14.

574. Plutarch, De Is. et Os. 358 B: “. . . τὸ αἰδοῦν . . . γεύσασθαι . . .” = “eating the genitalia.” See p. 188 on the relation of this passage to fish abstention.



gatis/Derceto. For example, the priests (galli) of the Syrian Goddess were castrated.<sup>576</sup> In these cases, it is not an accident that fish were associated with genitalia, but an indication that fish and genitalia were closely associated with one another.

Moreover, the phallic god Priapus was one of the gods venerated by fishermen—another indication of the association of phalluses and fish.<sup>577</sup>

In general, all sea creatures were sacred to Venus, goddess of love and sex.<sup>578</sup> Furthermore, in the various stories of Atargatis/Derketo/Venus, one can see the close identification and connection between Venus and fish. Either they rescue her, or she transforms herself into them. That Jupiter rewards her by placing the fish in heaven as a constellation shows that fish were essentially the emblem of Venus. It is also of interest to note that small fish were sometimes specifically associated with her, apparently because (as shown above) they were regarded as especially prolific.<sup>579</sup> In addition, fishing scenes occasionally involving Venus as a fisherwoman,<sup>580</sup> and more frequently

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575. \*\*\* Pliny, HN 9.80; see p. 178 above for further discussion.

576. On the galli see Apuleius, Met. 8 and 9.

577. E.g. Archias in the Greek Anth. 10.7, 8. In general on Priapus, Priapo. For the depiction of Priapus in Pompeian wall paintings, see the apos” in K. Schefold, Die Wände Pompejis, 372. On poems associated W. H. Parker, Priapea (with bibliography).

578. Plutarch, De Sollertia Animalium 983 E - F.

579. On Venus and fish, see e.g. pp. 178, 181, 194ff., 292 above.

580. See J. Engemann, “Fisch, Fischer, Fischfang,” 994-95; and

her winged and naked male children (otherwise known as erotes), probably have an erotic component that suggests those who are caught by love.<sup>581</sup>

Thus, the association of fish with Venus further confirms that fish were generally associated with sex and fertility.

From the descriptions in dolphin stories of the love between dolphins and boys, it is clear that there is a strong element of sexuality in them. In all of the stories, their relationship to the boys is described in terms of love (amor and cognates, as well as ἔρως and cognates). According to Aulus Gellius, they are “sexual” (venerius) and “amorous” (amasius) with them, and “they had a passion for boys of handsome figure” (. . . pueros forma liberali . . . arserunt).<sup>582</sup> As Aelian says, the dolphin was the “lover” (ἔραστής) of the boy, who was its “beloved” (παιδικός).<sup>583</sup> In addition, he describes its nature is “amorous” (ἔρωτικός),<sup>584</sup> while Antigonus Carystus says that it “behaved erotically toward boys” (πρὸς παῖδας ἐρωτικῶς εἶχειν).<sup>585</sup> As early as the fourth century B.C.E., Aristotle mentions the dolphin’s “demonstrations of

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K. Schefold, Pompejanische Malerei, 190-91.

581. On erotes in early Christian paintings, see pp. 632-39 below.

582. NA 6.8.

583. NA 6.15.

584. NA 2.6.

585. Hist. Mirab. 55 [60].

love and desire” (ἔρωτες καὶ ἐπιθυμιαί).<sup>586</sup> As Oppian said, “you would say that (the dolphin) in its love desired to kiss and embrace the youth.”<sup>587</sup> He also describes how a dolphin “burned with love” (ἔρράσσατο θερμὸν ἔρωτα) for a shepherd boy.<sup>588</sup>

From these examples, it should be clear that, like fish in general, in the Graeco-Roman world, dolphins had special associations with sexual love.

In addition, the enjoyment of fish at meals and banquets was sometimes equated with the enjoyment of sex. As early as the fourth century B.C.E., the founder of the so-called Cyrenaic school of philosophy, Aristippus, believed that fish (along with wine) were clearly important components of satisfying meals. And he equated the enjoyment of them with the enjoyment of a “prostitute” (πόρνα).<sup>589</sup> In a similar fashion and also in the fourth century B.C.E., the Athenian traitor Philocrates equated fish with a good meal and sex, and he was said to have betrayed Athens to the Macedonian king Philip for money, with which he could buy “prostitutes” (πόρναι) and “fish” (ἰχθῦς).<sup>590</sup> In the first century C.E., Philo equates gluttony and debauchery with the eating of fish, among other things.<sup>591</sup>

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586. HA 631 A 18.

587. Oppian, Hal. 5.487-89: “φαίης κέ μιν ἰμείροντα κόσσαί καὶ μεναίνειν ἠΐθεον.”

588. Oppian, Hal. 5.454. For these stories, see n. \*\*\*.

589. Plutarch, Amat. 750 D - E.

590. Demosthenes, Or. 19.229 (De Falsa Legatione); Plutarch, De

In a fashion similar to fishes, “salt” (αλς) was also considered, apparently because of its “heat” (θερμότης), a stimulus to procreation and fertility.<sup>592</sup> As a result, it was appropriate for ancient writers to describe Aphrodite with the epithet, “born of the brine” (άλιγενής) in order to allude in part to the generative properties of salt.<sup>593</sup> Evidently because of their connection with the salty sea, gods of the sea in general—and specifically Poseidon—were considered “prolific” (πολυτέκνος) and “fertile” (πολυγόνος).<sup>594</sup>

Since salt was closely associated with fish, because both were products of the oceans and seas and because fish sauces served as a salt condiment, the sexual and procreative function of salt was clearly significant for the symbolism of fish in the Graeco-Roman world. In addition, I have already observed that water in general was associated with the generation and production of life.<sup>595</sup> Thus, it is evident that various items associated with the sea—water, salt, and fish—all had sexual and procreative connotations.

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fort. 97 D and De garr. 510 B.

591. De spec. leg. 4.91, 4.113.

592. Plutarch, Symp. 685 A: “ὡς ἐπὶ συνουσίαν ἀγοντας” = promoting sexual intercourse” (i.e. an aphrodisiac). Without coition, rats could supposedly reproduce themselves in “infinite numbers” (πλήθος ἀπλετον) by simply licking salt, while dog breeders used salt as a copulatory stimulus. Likewise, idiomatic language could describe “female beauty” (κάλλος γυναικός) as “salty” (άλμυρός) and “riquant” (δριμύς). The latter two passages are found in Plutarch, Symp. 685 D - F.

593. Plutarch, Symp. 685 E.

Because the associations of fish with sexuality and fertility were ubiquitous in ancient fish symbolism in the Graeco-Roman world, it is probable that such associations had a major influence on early Christian fish symbolism. Since early Christians described themselves as fish and since they described the missionary process of conversion as one of a fisherman catching fish, the ancient idea of fish as prolific would likely have had a natural impact in early Christian circles. As I argue in Chapter 3, just as fish multiply innumerable, so early Christians expected that they too would multiply innumerable. When Tertullian describes early Christians as “small fish” (*pisciculi*), the reference to the prolific and fertile character of fish was even more overt, since ancient writers particularly associated small fish with those qualities.

Thus, in using the fish as a symbol, it would have been difficult to avoid referential associations with its multiplicatory powers and its ability to generate itself innumerable.

In addition, by describing the fish as “huge” (*πανμεγέθης*), the Avercius inscription suggests the kinds of large fish that the ancient world clearly associated with phalluses. As a possible further confirmation of the sexual connotation of the fish in the Avercius inscription, the grasping of the fish by the pure virgin suggests the ancient custom

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594. Plutarch, *Symp.* 685 E.

595. See pp. 268ff. above.

of depicting the erection and sexual titillation of a phallus by means of an animal in the hand or lap of a woman.<sup>596</sup>

Certainly in part, early Christians would have connected such references with the generally generative properties of fish, which I have already discussed above. On the other hand, in the Avercius inscription, the more directly erotic overtones of the imagery—namely the encounter of a virgin with a possibly phallic fish—would have been difficult to overlook. On this ground, I would tentatively surmise that, through the symbolism of the fish, some early Christians expressed their view of their relationship to Christ partly in sexual terms. While the appearance of the fish on most early Christian funerary stones does not immediately and necessarily suggest a sexual interpretation, it is probable—considering the ubiquitous association of fish with sexuality in Graeco-Roman antiquity—that a sexual connotation (however conscious or unconscious) adhered, at some level, to the fish every time it appeared.

Furthermore, I have observed that in Graeco-Roman tradition, eating fish at meals was connected with sexual activities. In the Avercius inscription and in other early Christian texts, the description of the consumption of a fish (sometimes huge), combined with the description of the sexual connotation of a virgin grasping a large fish, may well link these fish to this tradition. Likewise, when early Christian paintings depict a large fish at a meal, part of their connotation was very

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596. E.g. the “sparrow” (*passer*) in the lap of Lesbia, the lover of Catullus: 2.1ff., 3.3ff.; and Martial, *Epig.* 11.6.16.

likely sexual, even if that connotation was not always consciously articulated.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, it is also important to remember that generation, procreation of life, and sexuality were all associated with activities of the gods. As Plutarch suggests, “generation of life” (τὸ γόνιμον) is itself a “divine activity” (θεῖος), since “the beginning of all things is always a god.”<sup>597</sup> Indeed, I have already demonstrated that water was especially associated with the generation of divine life. One should add that some considered salt, because of its generative and aphrodisiac powers, a “divine” (θεῖος) and “god-beloved” (θεοφιλής) substance.<sup>598</sup>

From this point of view, it should not be surprising that early Christians selected a symbol that had such powerful sexual and generative associations, since these associations had strong links to divinities. For many early Christians, the sexual and prolific fish would likely have had a natural connection to the divine realm and especially to their divine being—Christ. In this regard, fish symbolism would have been especially effective, since, by calling Christ a fish (as in the Avercius inscription or as in the use of the ΙΧΘΥΣ acronym), many early Christians might well have associated him with his role as missionary, as one who multiplies converts—that is, as the generator of Christians. Just as pagans viewed the ocean as the generator of the gods, so early Christians viewed Christ as the generator of themselves.

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597. Symp. 685 D: "ἀρχὴ θεὸς πάντων."

598. See Plato, Tim. 60 E; and Plutarch, Symp. 684 E - 685 A.

## ENDNOTES

1. On the classification, identification, and description of various species of fish in antiquity, consult especially the following literature for fish as described in Greek: A. W. Mair, Introduction and glossary in Oppian; D. W. Thompson, A Glossary of Greek Fishes (most complete and thorough of all); J. Richmond, Chapters on Greek Fish Lore. For the Latin description of fish, see especially the following: J. Cotte, Poissons et animaux aquatiques; E. de Saint-Denis, Le vocabulaire des animaux marins and his commentaries on books 9 and 32 of Pliny's Historia Naturalis, as well as his commentary on Ovid's Halieutica; J. Richmond's commentary on the Halieutica of Ovid; and F. Capponi's commentary on the Halieutica of Ovid. Of use for etymological issues in the study of sturgeon in antiquity is D. J. Georgaias, Ichthyological Terms for the Sturgeon. For fish depicted on plates, the starting point is I. McPhee, Greek Red-figured Fish-Plates.

The extant ancient texts dealing most extensively with fish in the Graeco-Roman world are: Nicander of Colophon (c. 200 B.C.E.), Θηριακά, Αλεξιφάρμακα = Theriaca, Alexipharmaka (On Animals, On Antidotes); Ovid (probably), Halieutica (Fishing, fragmentary, probably written in exile in Tomis on the Black Sea from 8-17 C.E.); Plutarch, Πότερος τῶν ζῴων φρονιμώτερα τὰ χερσαῖα ἢ τὰ ἐνυδρᾶ = De sollertia animalium or Whether Land or Sea Animals are Cleverer, written probably between 70-79 C.E.); Pliny, Historia naturalis (Natural History, completed by 77 C.E.), Books 9 and 32; Oppian, Ἀλιευτικά = Halieutica (Fishing, probably c. 180 C.E.); Claudius Aelianus (170-235 C.E.), Ζῴων Ἰδιότητος (On the Nature of Animals) on fish, as well as many other animals; and Athenaeus of Naucratis (c. 200 C.E.), Δειπνοσοφισταί = Deipnosophistai (Dinner Conversations of the Sophists), especially books 6-8, but also books 1-4, with scattered references elsewhere. Of course, of central importance are the Greek works of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.), whose influence on the study of animals in the Graeco-Roman world was profound, in particular Ἄι περὶ τὰ ζῷα ἱστορίαι (History of Animals), but also Περὶ ζῴων μορίων (The Parts of Animals), Περὶ ζῴων γενέσεως (The Generation of Animals), and Περὶ ζῴων κινήσεως (The Movement of Animals). In these works, see relevant sections on fish. For discussion of other less major Greek texts and no longer extant Greek texts, as well as the above mentioned texts, see the introduction of A. W. Mair to his Loeb translation of Oppian; T. H. Corcoran, "Fish Treatises in the Early Roman Empire"; and J. Richmond, Chapters on Greek Fish Lore.

2. An extensive and useful discussion of archaeological remains and collection of texts on Roman fishponds may be found in G. Schmiedt, Il Livello antico del Mar Tirreno, 215-221 ("Appendice," by G. D. Conta), 223-236. For relations between the archaeological and literary evidence on the commercial cultivation of fish in ponds, especially useful is A. M. McCann, The Roman Port and Fishery of Cosa, 36-43, with full bibliography; see n. 212 for full bibliography on archaeological remains. See also "Piscina" in PW 20:2.1783-90 (K. Schneider); T. H. Corcoran, "Roman Fishponds"; and J. H. D'Arms, Romans on the Bay of Naples (though this focusses on private pisciculture). Texts of central importance are: Varro, Rust. 3.3.2, 3.3.4-5, 3.3.9, 3.17.2-9;



Valerius Maximus 8.1.1; Columella, Rust. 8.1.3, 8.16-17; Pliny, HN 9.168-72; and Macrobius, Sat. 3.15.1-10, 3.16.10-13.

According to Columella, the cultivation in Italy of fish in “fishponds” (piscinae or vivaria) extended to a period well before his own: Rust. 8.16.1-2. And, according to others (Aulus Gellius, NA 2.20.6.; Plautus, Trucul. 35ff.; Poen. 293—piscinae mentioned in all of them), fishponds were well-known in the area of Rome in the late third century and early second century B.C.E., though their more abstemious forbears kept salt water fish in fresh water fishponds and cultivated much less luxurious fish (according to Columella, Rust. 8.16.1-2). Examples of the less luxurious fish are the grey mullet (Gk. κέφαλος, κεστρέυς; Lat. mugil) and parrot wrasse (Gk. σκάρος; Lat. scarus), which are contrasted with more refined fishes, such as the lamprey (Gk. μύραινα; Lat. murena), sea-bass or pike (Gk. λάβραξ; Lat. lupus), and gilt-head (Gk. χρῖσοσφορυς, with slight variants; Lat. aurata).

Later on luxurious habits replaced older methods, and luxurious fish replaced common fish: Columella, Rust. 8.16.5ff. Licinius Murena invented sea water fishponds for fish other than grey mullet and sea-bass (prior to the Marsic war in 91-89 B.C.E.; Pliny, HN 9.170), and he was subsequently followed by Lucius Marcus Philippus (Pliny, HN 9.170; Varro, Rust. 3.3.9; Columella, Rust. 8.16.3), Lucius Sergius Orata (early nineties B.C.E., oyster ponds on the Lucrine Lake; Pliny, HN 9.168; Varro, Rust. 3.3.10; Columella, Rust. 8.16.5; Valerius Maximus 9.1.1; Macrobius, Sat. 3.15.3), Quintus Hortensius Hortalus (114-50 B.C.E., at his villa in Bauli near Baiae; Pliny, HN 9.170; Varro, Rust. 3.3.10, 3.17.5-9; Macrobius, Sat. 3.15.6), Lucius Licinius Lucullus (active politically c. 88-59 B.C.E. and consul of 74 B.C.E., whose villas were in Misenum and Neapolis on the bay of Naples, at which he probably spent most of his time after 67 B.C.E.), his son Marcus Licinius Lucullus (Pliny, HN 9.170; Varro, Rust. 3.3.10, 3.17.8; Columella, Rust. 8.16.5; and Macrobius, Sat. 3.15.6), and Gaius Lucilius Hirrius (a kinsman of Pompey; Pliny, HN 9.171; Varro, Rust. 3.17.3; Macrobius, Sat. 3.15.10), all in the late second B.C.E. and first half of the first century B.C.E. (see n. 440 for further details). Thus, sea water was stipulated for sea fish, the pike was scorned, and sea fish were preferred over fresh water fish (particularly Varro, Rust. 3.17). Particularly prized in all the texts mentioned at the beginning of this footnote was cool and fresh water.

For detailed discussions on some of these owners of villas with fishponds, see J. H. D’Arms, Romans on the Bay of Naples: Gaius Sergius Orata = pp. 19-23; Lucius Licinius Lucullus and Marcus Licinius Lucullus = pp. 40-41, 184-87; Quintus Hortensius Hortalus = pp. 68-69, 180-81; Gaius Lucilius Hirrus=p. 188; and Lucius Marcus Philippus = pp. 189-91.

3. The evidence for the cena pura, as well as its possible associations with fish, may be found in general in E. Schürer, “Die siebentätige Woche,” 7-8; F. Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 2:536-544 (referring to older collections as well); and in E. Goodenough, Jewish Symbols 5:41-47.

Part of the debate focuses on what exactly “pura” means. W. Bacher (“Cena Pura”) argues that pura could refer to Heb. פָּרָה, which could indicate an elaborate meal, though contrasted (according to Bacher) with the elaborate repasts of Roman meals. E. Schürer (in “Die siebentätige Woche,” 8, n. 1) argues that the Friday evening meal prior to the Sabbath was a simple frugal meal, and not an elaborate meal. Nor, he argues, can pura mean kosher since every Jewish meal is kosher.

The references to the Gk. παρασκευή in John 19.31, 42 and its frequent translation in old Latin biblical versions into Lat. cena pura (see Dölger, IXΘΥΣ 2:537) indeed suggests that some kind of special meal took place on “Friday” (παρασκευή). Beyond this very little is known about the cena pura in Graeco-Roman antiquity, and there is certainly not enough evidence (contra Goodenough) to justify the presence or absence of fish.

Contra Dölger (IXΘΥΣ 2:544) no evidence exists proving that the early Christian description of fish as a symbol of the eucharist was intended to oppose the eating of fish in the Jewish cena pura. It is very possible that the content and organization of the meal was not rigidly set, since cena pura seems in pagan sources to be able to refer to a variety of culinary practices (e.g. a meal without vegetables in the Hermetic Corpus, Asclepius 41). It is also possible that the phrase simply designates a festal meal, as it does in pagan citations such as Festus, De verb. sig., p. 260, ll. 15-18 (Lindsay ed.), as well as in Christian citations, such as Zeno of Verona (Text # VI.4 in Appendix 1), in which case a fish could (though not obligatorily) serve as an appropriate food to honor the Sabbath.

4. For dated references to these conjunctions, see W. Stahlman, Solar and Planetary Longitudes, 306. It is known that ancient astronomers in the Graeco-Roman world were aware of this phenomenon; see the cuneiform tablet of the Assyrian ephemerides from Sippar (Babylonia) of 7 B.C.E. (published by P. Schnabel, “Der jüngste datierbare Keilschrifttext”) and the Greek ephemerides on a papyrus in Berlin (dated to 42 C.E.), listing the movements of the planets from 17 B.C.E. to 10 C.E. (published by W. Spiegelberg, Demotische Papyrus, 29-32). See the references to these materials and discussion of their significance for the birth of Jesus in E. Stauffer, Jesus and His Story, 32-34, 216-17. Later Iranian (Sasanian, 222-651 C.E.) and Islamic astrologers defined the ages of the world in terms of the occurrence of these triplex Saturn-Jupiter conjunctions, which they termed “Great” (as opposed to the smaller conjunctions, taking place once during the year, every twenty years): see D. Pingree, “Historical Horoscopes” and “Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran” (245-46); and E. S. Kennedy, A Survey of Islamic Astronomical Tables and “The Sasanian Astronomical Handbook.”

Medieval commentators continued the tradition of interpreting world-ages through Saturn-Jupiter conjunctions. So proceeds the Ren-

naissance Jewish Philosopher, Isaac Abravanel (1437-1509), who (in 1497) works out such a system in his commentary on Daniel (Ma'ayneh hayyeshuah = The Wells of Salvation), but evidently omits its occurrence in 7 B.C.E., perhaps because of its associations with Christ (see R. Rosenberg, "The 'Star of the Messiah' Reconsidered"). The founder of modern astronomy, Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), makes the triplex Saturn-Jupiter conjunction the foundation of his world-age system, in which the phenomenon of 7 B.C.E. figures prominently; see J. Kepler "De Stella Nova" and "De Vero Anno."

In fact, Kepler is the first modern scholar to equate it with the appearance of the so-called star of Bethlehem, mentioned in the infancy narrative of Jesus in Matthew 2. Many commentators on this biblical passage have found convincing and attractive the hypothetical connection between the Saturn-Jupiter conjunction and the star in Matt. 2; see particularly the commentary in R. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, 172-73, as well as the slow-motion replays, which occur in modern planetariums (especially at Christmas time). Others are more doubtful, such as F. Zinniker, Probleme der sogennanten Kindheitsgeschichte, 115-17; and E. Nellessen, Das Kind, 117-119. The Gk. term for "star" (ἀστὴρ) in Matt. 2 has been a particular problem, since it does not technically refer to conjunctions (normally σύνδεσμος): so F. Boll, "Der Stern der Weisen"; R. Rodman, "A Linguistic Note on the Christian Star"; and J. H. Charlesworth, "Treatise of Shem," 479, n. 35. Whether the passage in Matthew would have preserved such a technical restriction is doubtful, however.

Others have suggested alternative planetary conjunctions in the last decade B.C.E. See R. Sinott, "Thoughts on the Star of Bethlehem," who suggests June 17, 2 B.C.E., when Venus conjoined with Jupiter. For an evaluation of Sinott's hypothesis and other suggestions of planetary conjunctions, see C.E. Federer, "Rambling Through December Skies." This is a very serious suggestion (I viewed an impressive demonstration of it at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago in December, 1992), rendered plausible by the fact that this conjunction took place in the sign of Leo (symbol of the Jewish people), whose major star Regulus is associated with kingship (the role of the messiah). On the other hand, although the date of Herod's death is not completely certain, still 4 B.C.E. seems most probable (see for a start E. Schürer, History of the Jewish People, 327-28) and this would render the 2 B.C.E. less likely, since the birth of Jesus was supposed to have taken place during the reign of Herod.

It would seem significant that the supposed observers of this phenomenon were Iranian "Magi" (Gk. Μάγοι). Since it seems that Iranians in particular developed the world-age system, based on Saturn-Jupiter conjunctions, (so D. Pingree, "Astronomy and Astrology in India and Iran," 245-46), it is plausible that that tradition goes further back than the Sassanian period.

In regard to the proposed planets in such a conjunction—Jupiter and Saturn—it is suggestive that the Olympic games in Greece,

according to Pausanias (Descr. Gr. 5.7.6ff.) were founded in memory of the wrestling of Kronos (i.e. Saturn) and Zeus (i.e. Jupiter), though the astronomical patterns at that time do not conform to the founding date in Pausanias; this connection is proposed by G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, Hamlet's Mill, 268. Connections between Jupiter and Saturn may well have been of interest to Jews, who, according to Valerius Maximus (1.3.2) were apparently expelled from Rome in 139 B.C.E. because of their worship of Jupiter Sebazius (Sabaoth? Saturn?). Interestingly this passage associates the Jews with Chaldean astrologers, who are also expelled. See the discussion of the Valerius Maximus passage in M. Stern, Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism 1:357-360, with full bibliography, except for the article of E. N. Lane, "Sebazius and the Jews in Valerius Maximus." (The argument of the latter for the annulment of the reference to the Jews in Valerius Maximus as a result of scribal error seems to me problematical and without sufficient corroborative evidence).

It is additionally of interest that, since Saturn and Jupiter were the two planets in this conjunction, one also knows that El in Phoenician religion was equated with Saturn (see C. C. Clemen, Die phönikische Religion, especially pp. 58ff). Furthermore, Jupiter as king of the gods may well have designated the messiah, king of the Jews. Thus, the equivalences: God = Saturn and Messiah = Jupiter. In addition, as shown, the ruling planet of Pisces, in which the Saturn-Jupiter conjunction takes place, is Jupiter (e.g. Ptolemy, Tetr. 1.17).

It is possible that several traditions are conflated in Matt. 2 (conforming well to my own model of multidimensional reference), one (1) drawing on the Graeco-Roman tradition of associating important individuals with their star (as in Pliny, HN 2.6.28) or of associating the birth of individuals with marvellous cosmic phenomena (such as the appearance of a star at the birth of Alexander, in Suetonius [Aug. 94] or the appearance of light at the birth of Moses; see L. Ginzberg, Legends 5:397, n. 42; as I. Schleftelowitz and R. Brown discuss in "Das Fisch Symbol," 43, and in The Birth of the Messiah, 170-71); a second (2) referring to the biblical prophecy of Balaam in Num. 24.17, in which the birth of the messiah is associated with the rising of a star, (see R. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, 190-96); and a third (3) drawing on eastern cosmic age speculation.

As Charlesworth suggests ("Treatise of Shem," 479, n. 35), it is also possible that the star could refer to the planet Saturn (since Gk. ἀστέρες—from Gk. ἀστήρ—can refer to planets), and Saturn in general both as planet and god was identified in antiquity with the Jews (e.g. Tibullus 1.3.15; Frontinus, St. 2.1.17; Tacitus, Hist. 5.2.1, 5.4.4; Dio Cassius, Hist. 37.16.2ff, 39.22.5; Brevis Expositio on Virgil's Georgics 1.336; and see comments on these texts by M. Stern in Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism). In addition, Gk. ἀστρα—from Gk. ἀστρον—can refer to constellations (so A. Bouché-Leclercq, L'astrologie grèque, 88-9, n. 3).

All of this would seem to make the precise delineation of ἀστήρ in Matt. 2 rather complicated.

The intersection of the end of one age and the beginning of another age might well be associated in astrological circles (i.e. Magi) with the expectation of the birth of a messianic figure. In fact, as indicated in n. 440, in his fourth Eclogue, Virgil associates the birth of a messiah-like child with the return of the golden age under (significantly) the reign of Saturn.

Of course, the association of the triplex conjunction may not have been an actual occurrence at the birth of Jesus, but could (as R. Brown suggests in The Birth of the Messiah, 171) have been an association made in the memory of the later Christian community.

Whether or not one accepts the association of it with the birth of Christ, the triplex Saturn-Jupiter conjunction in Pisces in 7 B.C.E. was probably (as the Sippar Cuneiform tablet suggests) an extremely important event in the Graeco-Roman world. Its placement in Pisces would have associated it with all the various references discussed in my text and notes on the interpretation of Pisces. If it were associated with world-ages, its placement in Pisces would suggest among other things the death of one age. I should add that I. Schleftelowitz ("Das Fisch Symbol," 43-44) adduces evidence from the eighth to the seventeenth centuries to connect the birth of the Messiah with the sign of Pisces.

By way of additional information, I should also observe that in late February and early March (sun sign of Pisces) of 6 B.C.E., the planet Mars passed into the area of Jupiter and Saturn, forming a close triangular relationship, which is exceedingly rare (every eight hundred and five years), on different days conjoining with either Jupiter or Saturn. See the discussion in J. H. Charlesworth, "Treatise of Shem," 479, n. 18; and C. A. Federer, "Rambling Through December Skies."