A Campanian Red-figure Fish-plate in the Kelsey Museum

Red-figure fish-plate
Campania, Italy, late fourth century BCE
Fired clay, 5 × 19.5 cm
Gift from W. Dennison, 1899, from the collection of Canon Giuseppe de Crisco, Kelsey Museum 1084

In the fourth century BCE, potters in Italy and Greece produced a playful style of ceramic dish adorned with a wide array of ordinary and exotic fish. The genre flowered in Sicily and southern Italy, with production centers in Campania, Apulia, and Paestum. To a lesser extent, Athens was also caught up in the “fish-plate” industry; and Athenian examples have been found as far as the shores of the Black Sea. Over 1,000 fish-plates are known in collections around the world, and approximately 500 of these, including the fish-plate in the Kelsey Museum, were made in Campania. Their general conformity in form and concept, coupled with the variation in the choice of fish displayed on each plate, shows both a proclivity for mass production and an unmistakable passion for the denizens of the sea.

Despite the brevity of the fish-plate fad (their production ceased after the fourth century BCE), fish figured prominently in the diet and imagination of Greeks and Romans long before and after the fourth century BCE. Fish consumption probably varied among social groups and in response to shifting attitudes toward fish and the sea. While some scholars imply that fish was not a major part of the diet (Gallant 1985), others argue for the pervasiveness of pickled fish (Curtis 1991). Literary texts would have us believe that fish became more popular over time; the total absence of fish consumption in Homer’s Iliad, where fish figure as predators rather than provisions, can be contrasted with the leading role of fish as symbols of luxury in the works of Roman writers by the time of the late Republic (Dëry 1998).

In the fourth century BCE, when the fish-plate phenomenon was at its peak, most references to fish are found in comedy, and nearly every extant comedy of this period finds a place for them (Davidson 1998), although poetry, such as Archestratos of Gela’s The Life of Luxury, also reveals an obsession with fish (Olson and Sens 2000). Artistic depictions of fish, as on fish-plates, are numerous and can be found across various media (Sparkes 1996).

The fish fixation developed in spite, or perhaps because of, a number of cultural tensions surrounding this ambiguous
food group. On the one hand, the world that fish inhabit is one untamable by the virtuous pursuits of cultivation. The sea is therefore not only an “other” world unfit for human living; it is also an impoverished realm lacking in the riches of the land, and dependence on the meager offerings of its wilds is itself a sign of despondence (Purcell 1996). In Greek and Roman art and literature, the fishermen who make their livings by angling within this watery desert are therefore depicted as paragons of poverty. Compounding the culturally marginal quality of fish is their existence outside of the sacral realm. With some exceptions, fish were not sacrificial animals, and the private and secular manner of their consumption made them ever more open to association with luxury rather than modesty, and modernity rather than tradition (Davidson 1998, 13).

Against this negative picture are numerous indications that fish was valued and a symbol of wealth. Lacking sacral connotations, fish was “the quintessential modern commodity fully fetishized for the private consumer” (Davidson 1998, 20). The Mediterranean Sea is in fact not as abundant in fish as the oceans, making its catch rare and therefore expensive. By the Roman period, affluent Romans farmed their own fish in fishponds (Déry 1998), but in general it was this demand for fish that sustained the fisherman, who sold his catch to satisfy the well-to-do’s insatiable hunger (Purcell 1996). Among both Greeks and Romans, this hunger, however, was discriminating; small fish, such as cheap sprats, were more likely consumed by the lower classes and were regarded with less fervor than larger fish like tuna, sea perch, red and gray mullet, sea bass, and eel (Davidson 1998). It was precisely these contrasts, between the poor fisherman and the gluttonous appetite for fish, between the meager sprat and the big fish displayed on elite dining tables, that made fish excellent material for satire. The symbolic possibilities were numerous.

Studies of fourth-century fish-plates are numerous as well (McPhee and Trendall 1987; Trendall 1988; 1989; McPhee and Trendall 1990). These works focus particularly on identifying the place of production and even specific workshop or painter of the various plates. Although the Kelsey fish-plate has not been subjected to this kind of attribution analysis, elements of its fabric and design suggest Campanian workmanship. Scholars of the fish-plates have taken care to identify the fish depicted on these plates, a task made more or less easy depending on the accuracy or artistic license employed by the painter. These identifications, however, have not yet been incorporated into the wider discussions on the perception and consumption of fish. The central concave depression on these plates may have served to hold the popular, fish-based condiment and seasoning, *garum*, a distinctive and ubiquitous flavor in Greek and Roman cuisine. On many plates such as this one, however, the depression seems too small to have functioned as
any sort of receptacle. The plates may have been used primarily, though not exclusively, for serving fish. Exposing more and more of the fish images while eating would have created the impression that the fish were replenishing themselves on the plate (Wilkins and Hill 1998). The fish displayed here are thought to be two perch and a torpedo fish; both are commonly found on Campanian fish-plates. While perch was certainly edible and prized, the torpedo conjures more the dangers than the delicacies of the sea; the Mediterranean *torpedo marmorata*, known today as the electric ray, produces an electric shock that can be sufficient to knock down a fully grown man. The torpedo fish are not the only inedible creature displayed on these plates—an important reminder that the significance of fish extended beyond their gastronomical value.

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**Works Cited**


------. 1989. *Red Figure Vases of South Italy and Sicily*. London: Thames and Hudson.