Introduction: On Fishing

> [There is] a collision in his book; a confusion in the mind of the reader between fish and men . . . And while the fisherman sleeps, we who are presumably reading – but what kind of reading is this when we see through the words Corby's trees and trout at the bottom of the page? – wonder, what does the fisherman dream? Of all the rivers rushing past – the Eden, the Test, and the Kennet, each river different from the other, each full of shadowy fish, and each fish different from the other; the trout subtle, the salmon ingenious; each with its nerves, with its brain, its mentality that we can dimly penetrate, movements we can mystically anticipate, for just as, suddenly, Greek and Latin sort themselves in a flash, so we understand the minds of fish?
>
> Virginia Woolf, 'Fishing'

The minds of fish, the dreams and disposition of the angler, and the captivating paradoxes of the fisherman's art: Virginia Woolf's essay on fishing addresses the relationship between literature and the natural world, and the status of fishing as a moral, technical, and psychological exercise. In her essay Woolf reviews J. W. Hills' classic fly-fishing guide, *A Summer on the Test* (1924), dwelling on the power of the text to transport the reader into the environment it evokes.[1] Transpose these concerns to the open sea, and her words could delineate the world of Oppian's *Halieutica*, a second-century CE Greek didactic epic in which fish and men, as well as poetry, politics, and pragmatism, collide before the reader's eyes. In five hexameter books on fish and fishing, the *Halieutica* too sets out to 'penetrate' a shadowy aquatic domain, portraying the hopes, struggles, and character traits of both humans and the fish they pursue. Each of the poem's myriad sea-creatures – or rather, each species, for, as often in

[1] Woolf 1947: 176–224. Woolf remained ambivalent about both fishing and John ('Jack') Waller Hills, who had married her stepsister Stella Duckworth shortly before the latter's premature death in 1897.

hunting literature, the individual animal is also synecdochic, representing its kind at large – has its own habits and desires, its own peculiar mentality. Not for nothing did John Henry Newman label Oppian a 'biographer of brutes'.[2] With this Newman succinctly pinpoints both the spirit of the poet's enquiry and the savage subject-matter of the poem, which illuminates the 'lives and loves and enmities of fish' (*Hal.* 1.6), as well as the methods for their capture.[3] For Oppian, fish are crafty and baffling carnivores prone to devouring one another without mercy, but creatures also capable of affection, joy, and co-operation.

In the ancient world fishing was rarely represented as a dignified and reflective leisure-time pursuit, 'the contemplative man's recreation' evoked in the subtitle to Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* (1653), still one of the most frequently reprinted books in English. Oppian stresses from the outset that the fisherman's life is demanding, dangerous, and uncertain: nothing like the pleasant afternoon pastime that occupies a gentleman as he lolls idly by a shady rill, like Walton's protagonists Venator and Piscator, or the fisherman dozing by Hills' Hampshire chalk-streams. Oppian specifically differentiates his fisher from the leisurely terrestrial hunter, whose easy, bountiful life is contrasted with the terror and difficulty of life at sea (1.12–55).[4] If for Walton there can be no 'more calm, quiet, innocent recreation than angling', an activity framed as a modern-day pastoral idyll,[5] then for Oppian sea-fishing is fraught with a raw elemental danger. The poet is patently fascinated by the spectre of the sea as an unstable environment, an infinite space full of menacing terrors; this is a world closer to the roiling oceans of Melville's *Moby-Dick* than to Walton's quiet, gliding streams. Tossed on the waves in a paltry skiff,

[2] Newman 1873: 12, marking his distaste for didactic poetry by denying Oppian (perhaps alongside ps.-Oppian) the status of 'poet', an overtly Aristotelian critical stance highlighted by his use of Empedocles as the model of 'an historian of nature' rather than a poet (on which see further Chapter 1, pp. 31–2). As Newman puts it, '[f]idelity is the primary merit of biography and history; the essence of poetry is fiction'.

[3] Unless otherwise specified, unattributed references in this book are to Oppian's *Halieutica*, largely following the text of Fajen 1999, and all translations are my own.

[4] Like Walton's Auceptor (introduced in later editions), Oppian's fowler (1.29–34) is brought in as a third point of contrast, but is dealt with swiftly, leaving the primary contrast that between hunter and fisherman.

[5] Walton 1983 [1653–1676]: 112: 'this kind of fishing, and laying night-hooks, . . . work for the owners when they do nothing but sleep, or eat, or rejoice, as you know we have done this last hour, and sat as quietly and as free from cares under this sycamore, as Virgil's Tityrus and his Meliboeus did under their broad beech-tree. No life, my honest Scholar, no life so happy and so pleasant as the life of a well-governed Angler; for when the lawyer is swallowed up with business, and the statesman is preventing or contriving plots, then we sit on cowslip-banks, hear the birds sing, and possess ourselves in as much quietness as these silent silver streams, which we now see glide so quietly by us.'

'slaves to the storm-winds', and 'ever trembling at the darkening paths of the sea', 'the long-suffering fishermen's labours are devoid of certainty, and unsteady hope beguiles their minds like a dream'.[6] While Woolf's sleeping fisherman dreams happily of his catch, for Oppian even the fisherman's dreams collude cruelly with the wave-tossed deep. Part of this contrast is to be located in the dangers of sea-fishing as opposed to the comparative safety of freshwater streams and rivers, but part points also to the prevalent pre-modern conception of fishing as a demanding but banausic profession that occupies a very different conceptual space to its later popularity as a meditative recreational activity.

A further facet of that distinction is the fisherman's relationship to politics. Piscatorial literature tends to represent the sphere of fish and fishing as either a refuge from, or conversely a replication of, human social and political life. Walton's anglers contrast their peaceful life with that of the busy lawyer or machinating politician; Woolf too opens her review by situating the domains of fishing and politics at opposite ends of a moral and mental spectrum, while ascribing the tension or 'collision' between fish and men in Hills' manual to the fact that its author was not only a devoted fisherman but also a long-time Member of Parliament.[7] Oppian's sea is an overtly political world. In the *Halieutica* both the fisherman's actions and the 'dog-eat-dog' tendencies of sea-creatures mark the sea as the site of an endless struggle for power, a battleground in which one species triumphs over another. Fish eat, chase, or elude one another in a manner disconcertingly familiar to the human observer, for all its raw savagery. The carnivorous predations of these creatures reveal the power relations that structure any complex ecosystem, whether terrestrial or aquatic. Fish thus operate as analogues for the human sphere despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that neither can thrive in the other's natural element; they function as both a mirror and a distorted, cautionary model of the behaviour of humankind.[8]

[6] 1.41–4: δούρασι δ' ἐν βαιοῖσιν ἀελλάων θεράποντες | πλαζόμενοι, καὶ θυμὸν ἐν οἴδμασιν αἰὲν ἔχοντες, | αἰεὶ μὲν νεφέλην ἰοειδέα παπταίνουσιν, | αἰεὶ δὲ τρομέουσι μελαινόμενον πόρον ἅλμης; 1.35–6: τλησιπόνοις δ' ἁλιεῦσιν ἀτέκμαρτοι μὲν ἄεθλοι, | ἐλπὶς δ' οὐ σταθερὴ σαίνει φρένας ἠΰτ' ὄνειρος.

[7] Woolf 1947: 176: 'While there is a Chinese proverb which says that the fisherman is pure at heart "as a white sea-shell", there is a Japanese poem, four lines long, which says something so true but at the same time so crude about the hearts of politicians that it had better be left in its original obscurity. It may be this contradiction . . . which has produced a collision in the book, a confusion in the mind of the reader between fish and men.'

[8] As Shakespeare's fishermen observe in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, '"Master, I marvel how the fishes live in the sea." "Why, as men do a-land: the great ones eat up the little ones"' (Act II Scene i).

In Greco-Roman culture, moreover, fishing often served as a metaphor for power relations at large, and it is telling that the *Halieutica* should be addressed to the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. Fishing is a game of strategy, patience, craft, and deception, and for Oppian it operates as a prompt to reflect on intellectual and ethical qualities such as rationality, dissimulation, and manipulation, as well as violence, greed, and desire. Fishing is an act of domination, an imposition of one being's will on another, and a reminder of the superior mental or physical capacities of the victor; it also marks out the limits of mankind's control over the natural world. This is a sphere in which a single error can mean death, at times for the fisherman as well as the fish, and it maps with almost startling ease onto the domains of politics and military conflict.

The sea has long retained a powerful force as both symbol and reality. As the epigraphs to this book suggest, the rich history of marine symbolism renders literary transition between the two planes almost effortless, at times insuppressible. For John Donne, preaching in 1619, 'the world is a sea', and the sea an endless source of metaphorical significance. Expounding on Matthew 4:18–19, where Jesus' first disciples are said to convert rapidly from fishermen to 'fishers of men', Donne finds symbolic potential in the sea's ebbs and floods, in the cleansing potential of its waters, its tempests and calms, and its role not as a place of permanent residence but as a means of transition to new realms. For Donne, the devil deceives those he pursues with hooks and bait, wounding his fish in the catching, whereas the gospel is conceived as a net buoyed up with corks, promising the possibility of an abundant spiritual catch. If men are represented as fish, then fishing becomes an act with the potential for either good or evil, depending on the mode in which it is carried out. The sea is here heavily overdetermined: a space of multiple potential meanings and messages. The *Halieutica*, as we shall see, makes much of the metaphorical currency of tempests, nets, and bodies of water in ancient thought, and of the multiple valence of fishing, including its potential for misuse.

Ernest Hemingway, from whom my second epigraph is drawn, affected to object vehemently to such schematic or overtly symbolic interpretations of the sea and its inhabitants. In response to critics' identification of what they variously conceived as the allegory, symbolism, metaphor, or religious imagery at the heart of *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), Hemingway instead emphasised the primacy of realism in his work. In a letter to the art critic Bernard Berenson in September 1952, he claimed that 'there isn't any symbolism' in the novel, even as he acknowledged the presence of deeper layers of meaning, a stance that bespeaks a desire to frustrate critical

attempts to 'decode' his works.[9] Hemingway purports to write only about the realities of fishermen, fish, and their predators, but alludes nevertheless to his work's mediation between real and metaphorical planes. A text can be both 'about' fishing and at the same time about more than just fishing; it can become a source of wider truths about the world.[10] So too with the *Halieutica*: this is not an allegory, but a poem in which fish, fishermen, and sea may be read on multiple levels, and which slips easily between the concrete and the abstract, the literal and the literary, the world of fish and that of humankind.

Oppian's *Halieutica*

The *Halieutica* was composed by a Cilician during the joint rule of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus (177–180 CE);[11] little of biographical value is known about the author beyond the information contained in the poem itself.[12] The work is addressed to the emperor and his son, and falls into two parts, the first of which treats fish themselves (books 1–2) and the second the methods for their capture (books 3–5). The first book opens with an invocation to Marcus Aurelius, a syncrisis of hunting, fowling, and fishing, a representation of the emperor fishing, and a meditation on the immensity of the sea. A catalogue of sea-creatures divided by habitat

[9] In an interview for *Time* magazine, Hemingway also claimed, '"No good book has ever been written that has in it symbols arrived at beforehand and stuck in. That kind of symbol sticks out like raisins in raisin bread . . . I tried to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them good and true enough they would mean many things. The hardest thing is to make something really true and sometimes truer than true"' (*Time*, 13 December 1954: 72).

[10] Berenson himself responded to precisely this impulse when he characterised *The Old Man and the Sea* as 'an idyll of the sea as sea, as un-Byronic and un-Melvillian as Homer himself, and communicated in prose as calm and compelling as Homer's verse. No real artist symbolizes or allegorizes – and Hemingway is a real artist – but every real work of art exhales symbols and allegories' (Baker 1981: 785).

[11] The *Halieutica* refers only to an Antoninus and his son, but internal and external evidence points to Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. See Mair 1928: xiii–xxiii; Keydell 1939: 698–90; Fajen 1999: viii. Neither the *Suda* nor the Byzantine *Vitae* distinguish between the authors of the *Halieutica* and the *Cynegetica*, and both poems were attributed to Oppian in antiquity, along with an *Ixeutica*. The *Cynegetica*, a four-book didactic poem on hunting, was composed in the early third century, and alludes to the *Halieutica* throughout; the separate authorship of the two was first established by Schneider in 1776 and has since been accepted near-universally. See Ausfeld 1876; James 1970: 1–4; Fajen 1999: ix; Hamblenne 1968; Whitby 2007; contrast White 2001.

[12] Athen. 1.13c includes Oppian in a list of authors of verse *Halieutica* and prose treatises on fishing, and notes that the poet wrote 'a little before our time' (see Chapter 1, pp. 33–4). The narrative of Oppian's life in the Byzantine *Vitae* is interesting in its own right, but is chronologically implausible for the author of the *Halieutica* and geographically at odds with the claims made by the author of the *Cynegetica*. See e.g. Colonna 1964; Mazal 1967; Hamblenne 1968; Fajen 1999: ix.

prompts the poet's reflection on the interconnected nature of the elements and the universe; the remainder of the book treats the mating habits of sea-creatures, including the fierce love exhibited by animals for their offspring. Book 2 opens by emphasising the power and munificence of the gods, and focuses on the hostility, guile, and defensive strategies of different species of fish; substantial space is devoted to the mutual enmity between octopus, crayfish, and moray eel, and to the fluctuating fortunes of dolphins. The justice and restraint of the vegetarian grey mullet occasions an extended discussion of the absence of justice from the sea at large, followed by the claim that Justice has only recently entered the mortal sphere as a result of the peaceable reign of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus.

Book 3 turns from fish to fishing, opening with an aetiological account of Zeus' defeat of Typhon, whose blood is said to have stained the Cilician banks. The book focuses largely on the gluttony of fish, and on the bait used by fishermen to manipulate this impetuous greed. Book 4 revolves primarily around lust, offering up a 'hymn' to Eros and outlining the methods by which fishermen take advantage of the desires of fish, including their fervent attraction to members of their own species, as well as a range of more outré erotic partnerships; the end of the book treats other methods of capturing fish, some notably violent. The final book of the *Halieutica* treats large sea-creatures (κήτεα), and is dominated by the dramatic capture of a vast whale or sea-monster. The second half of the book includes a series of anecdotes about the remarkable companionship between humans and dolphins, as well as the sacrilegious dolphin-hunts perpetrated by Thracian and Byzantine fishermen; the final vignette of the poem represents the death of a sponge-diver at sea.

Supervening on top of the poem's two-part division between fish and fishing, therefore, is a second organisational principle: the three middle books are devoted respectively to hostility, greed, and lust, a structure that represents the act of fishing as a punishment for moral failings, and that invites the reader to map the lives of fish onto those of men. The poem's organising categories are heterogeneous, however, and at times material is included that does not fully fit the ostensible theme of the section. Each book is composed primarily of demarcated, self-standing episodes – as with much didactic poetry, there is no unitary or extended narrative plot – while several of these episodes are developed at considerable length or spin into the poet's wider reflections on pertinent subjects. Subsidiary thematic clusters and motifs recur throughout, as do suggestive patterns, parallels, and juxtapositions between images or episodes; the reader is invited to seek out meaning in these patterns and to draw their own conclusions from the

poet's selection and juxtaposition of vignettes. The emperor Marcus Aurelius, sometimes together with his son Commodus, is invoked in the proems to each book and at key transitional junctures, but a wider generic addressee is implicit throughout the remainder of the work, and a range of 'voices' may be heard in the poem.

While Oppian's factual material is drawn from earlier prose sources rather than direct first-hand observation, the zoological and piscatorial subject-matter of the *Halieutica* is related with an extraordinary anthropomorphic immediacy. The catalogue format that dominates the opening stretches of the poem soon cedes to a more expansive narrative mode in which a wide array of metaphors and extended similes – perhaps the most striking feature of the *Halieutica* – constructs a pervasive parallelism between fish and human beings. In more than 120 similes, metaphors, and analogies of varied length and poetic pedigree, the poet compares fish to a remarkable array of phenomena. These include banqueters, hurricanes, convalescing patients, children at school, animals hunted by predators, warriors in combat, cities under siege, athletes and their eager fans, wayward youths, singers drunk and sober, lawless robbers, and even an anxious grandmother. The poet uses analogy to probe the close relationship between fish, humans, and other animals, showing that sea-creatures are frequently dominated by what seems only a more exaggerated version of the same basic impulses that structure our own lives.

Both the elegance of Oppian's Greek and the imaginative richness of his representation of the marine world have impressed readers from antiquity onwards. Ps.-Oppian's homage in the form of the *Cynegetica*, a four-book didactic poem on hunting composed partly as a terrestrial response to the *Halieutica*, indicates the regard in which the poet was held even by the early third century, while the poem's influence on imperial Greek poets such as Quintus of Smyrna, Triphiodorus, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Nonnus is evident both linguistically and thematically. The *Halieutica* remained hugely popular well into Byzantine times (and elicited praise from Eusebius, Jerome, and Eustathius, among others), as the large number of manuscripts, scholia, *Vitae*, epigrams, references, and a prose paraphrase attest.[13] Yet the poem's later reception is notable primarily for

[13] Over seventy (predominantly Byzantine) manuscripts of the *Halieutica* survive, as well as papyrus fragments. Anonymous epigrams devoted to Oppian indicate that the *Halieutica* was used as a school text, as do the three families of Byzantine scholia on the poem. Byzantine *Vitae* are transmitted in several manuscripts of the *Halieutica*, and a paraphrase of the *Halieutica*, of which only the second half survives, is attributed to Eutecnius and preserved in a sixth-century manuscript. See Fajen 1969; Mair: 1928: xiii–xviii. Jerome's citation of Oppian to support the

the contrast between the exceptionally high regard in which the work was held by a few, often very eminent, critics, and its otherwise widespread neglect.[14] No less distinguished a critic than Julius Caesar Scaliger deemed Oppian the greatest of all Greek authors, a man who wrote divinely, and the only Greek poet worthy of comparison to Virgil.[15] In 1646 Sir Thomas Browne observed that Oppian 'may be read with great delight and profit', and considered him 'one of the best Epick Poets', even as he lamented that 'his Elegant Lines' were not more widely known.[16] Widespread popularity continued to elude the *Halieutica*, however, and in the preface to Diaper and Jones' 1722 translation, John Jones proclaimed his 'Design of calling Oppian from Oblivion', remarking that 'I know not how it happens, but there is scarce any of the Ancients that deserves more, or meets with less Regard.'[17] During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the *Halieutica* was frequently met not merely with disregard but with outright hostility. In a critical environment widely unsympathetic to post-classical Greek literature, and above all to didactic poetry, the poem was disparaged for its alleged tedium and for the poet's lack of genuine personal involvement with his derivative factual material.[18] This disdain is in part symptomatic of a predominantly Romantic preoccupation with the supposed

'miracle of the 153 fish' caught in John 21:11 – claiming in his commentary on Ezekiel 47:9–10 that the *Halieutica* observes that there are 153 different species of fish in total – also raises the intriguing possibility that the subject-matter of the poem might have appealed symbolically to Christian readers. On Jerome and the *Halieutica* see Grant 1949; on the symbolism of fish in early Christianity see e.g. Gilhus 2006: 103–4, 168; Jensen 2000: 46–59.

[14] Lilly 1919: 137 calls the *Halieutica* 'a poem that has met with extravagant praise as well as with the coldest neglect'. Cf. Fajen 1999: vii.

[15] Scaliger 1561: 5.9: *atque Oppianus quidem inter Graecos adeo sublimis est, adeo numerosus, ut eorum unus ad Vergilianam diligentiam aspirasse videatur.* Scaliger was particularly fond of the similes of the *Halieutica*, to which he devotes the best part of this chapter of the *Poetics*. The poem was translated into Latin in 1478 by Lorenzo Lippi; the *editio princeps* was published in 1515 in Florence by Junta, and in the sixteenth century four separate editions of the *Halieutica* were produced, along with another of the *Cynegetica* only. This proliferation was not without its own problems: in the 1550s Adrien Turnèbe and Jean Bodin levelled against one another accusations of plagiarism over their respective editions of the *Cynegetica.*

[16] Browne 1646: 1.8.9.7

[17] Diaper and Jones 1722: *Dedication*, 13. William Diaper, whose love of the *Halieutica* inspired his *Sea-Eclogues* of 1712 (the marine pastoral poetry lampooned by Pope in his *Dunciad*), translated only two books of the *Halieutica* before his death in 1717; the work was completed by Jones. Scholarship on the *Halieutica* has often been marred by misfortune: Franz Lehrs died while finishing his edition of *Poetae bucolici et didactici* in 1846, and neither Rezső Vári nor Kazimierz Kumaniecki finished their planned editions of the *Halieutica*; Kumaniecki's work was wholly lost during the destruction of Warsaw in 1944. Even Alexander Mair died shortly after the publication of his Loeb edition of the poem in 1928.

[18] Lesky 1957–8: 738 declared that, whilst the *Halieutica* possesses a certain technical elegance, 'doch kann diese Versifizierung tradierten Materials trotz manchen Einlagen unser Interesse nicht wacherhalten'; Wilamowitz 1911: 255 called the poem 'erschreckend langweilig', criticising its

spontaneity of the creative process and with a poet's presumed degree of emotional engagement with their material, as well as a broader concern with the primacy of narrative plot at the expense of less familiar poetic modes.

Scholarship on the *Halieutica* remains sparse even by the standards of imperial Greek poetry, and has tended towards the narrowly linguistic or stylistic in scope. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, studies of Oppian were dominated by analysis of the poet's vocabulary, biography, and sources, as well as the poem's relationship to the zoological material transmitted by Aelian.[19] Select linguistic and text-critical aspects of the poem continue to be explored,[20] but more 'literary' approaches to the *Halieutica* are still in their infancy. Even as late as 1977 Bernd Effe could remark upon '[d]ie weitgehende Vernachlässigung der *Halieutika*' and reasonably state that the pages devoted to Oppian in his typological study of didactic poetry were the first to examine the poem at anything but the most superficial interpretative level.[21] There are signs that Oppian's fortunes are finally beginning to revive,[22] and over the last fifty years slightly more critical attention has been paid to the poem; the monographs of James 1970, Rebuffat 2001, and Bartley 2003 all offer helpful analysis of isolated aspects of the poem's linguistic and stylistic techniques.[23]

derivative content and genesis in 'abgestandene Buchweisheit'; Gow 1968: 60 remarked that 'one might think [the *Halieutica*] hardly worth the *aureus* for every line with which Marcus Aurelius is reported in the *Life* of the author to have rewarded it'; Latacz 1975: 443 lent his support to what he described as the *communis opinio* that 'Oppians Halieutika weder poetisch noch sachlich besonders bedeutsam sind.'

[19] See Martin 1863; Lohmeyer 1866; Ausfeld 1876; Munno 1917, 1921, 1922; James 1970. On Oppian and Aelian see Jacobs 1832; Schöner 1873; Rudolph 1884; Wellmann 1891, 1895; Baumann 1912; Keydell 1937; Richmond 1973; Benedetti 2005.

[20] See West 1963; Gow 1968; Giangrande 1970. Tomás Silva Sánchez's unpublished 1999 doctoral thesis offers text-critical and metrical analysis of the *Halieutica* and *Cynegetica*. Fritz Fajen's reassessment of the manuscript tradition of the *Halieutica* (1969, 1979, 1995) has culminated in his 1999 Teubner edition of the *Halieutica*, the first critical edition of the text since Schneider's kleinere Ausgabe of 1813. Fajen regards the degree of contamination in the manuscripts as too great to allow the production of a satisfactory stemma; contrast Robin 1981; Leverenz 1991.

[21] Effe 1977: 138 n. 6.

[22] The *Halieutica* has been characterised by Hopkinson 1994: 185 as 'the most accomplished and attractive didactic poem to survive from the Imperial period'; by Bowersock 1985: 653 as 'a work of remarkable subtlety and poetic power'; and by Agosti 2008: 593 as 'perhaps the best poem from the first two centuries of the Imperial Age'.

[23] James 1970 examines neologisms in the *Halieutica*, focusing on compound linguistic forms. A chapter of Toohey 1996 (recapitulated, at times verbatim, in Toohey 2004) addresses the didactic aims of the poem, but treats Oppian and ps.-Oppian as one poet, despite his acknowledgement that they are two, and frequently looks to the *Cynegetica* to set the tone for the *Halieutica*, resulting in an often puzzling reading of the poem. In his important articles, Iglesias Zoido examines the poet's praise of the emperors, the possible influence of Virgil's *Georgics*, the structure of the *Halieutica*, and the poem's content. Rebuffat 2001 isolates formal 'compositional

A commentary is still a major desideratum, however, and until now no full-scale unified interpretation of the poem has been advanced. This book aims to re-evaluate Oppian, not simply in the sense of restoring the poet's reputation, but by positioning the *Halieutica* critically in its wider cultural contexts. Close attention to the poem, I argue, sheds light on the evolving traditions of (didactic) epic poetry, on the literary, social, and political dynamics of the imperial Greek world, and on ancient ideas about non-human animals.

Interpretative Contexts

The Greeks and Romans were surrounded by fish. This is true not simply in the basic practical sense of their geographical orientation – and that of the Roman empire more broadly – around the Mediterranean Basin, but also, and indeed consequently, as a matter of cumulative cultural exposure: ancient literary and material culture is crammed with representations of sea-creatures. Greek gastronomic texts manifest a pervasive obsession with fish, even a brief glance at Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* reveals, and the Romans adopted and expanded upon this fascination; Ennius' gastronomic hexameter *Hedyphagetica*, for instance, advertises its overt debt to Archestratus' *Hedypatheia,* while updating its geographical and piscine reference-points. The popularity of specific species on the dinner table was subject to the vagaries of fashion, but evidence suggests that the imperial period marked a further upswing in overall fish consumption.[24] Fish must have contributed to the diet of wide swathes of the population, but the cultivation, presentation, and consumption of highly prized species was also closely indexed to social status and luxury in both Greek and Roman contexts, a notion bolstered not only by the speed at which fresh fish spoils, but by the role of fish as a primarily non-sacrificial food distanced from the religious and communal associations with which the meat of other animals was often invested.[25] In part for these reasons, fish

techniques' in the *Halieutica*, analysing the poem's structure, sources, and rhetorical tropes (including catalogue technique, amplification, syncrisis, and gnomai), often relating these constructively to contemporary rhetorical practice; Bartley 2003 offers selective linguistic commentary on features of similes and digressions in the *Halieutica* and *Cynegetica.* A number of ongoing PhD projects on the *Halieutica* and its reception promise to open up new frontiers of research in coming years.

[24] Marzano 2013: 276.

[25] See e.g. Davidson 1997; Marzano 2013, esp. 269–300; Wilkins 2000, esp. 303, on sacrifice. Tuna were sacrificed to Poseidon, however; on evidence for ancient fish sacrifice see Burkert 1985: 55; Durand 1989: 127–8. Deposition of bloodless offerings in sanctuaries must have been more