

Food or foe?

Preparation, consumption, and sacralisation of fish in Graeco-Roman and Byzantine Egypt

23/4/2024 : 14:30-18:30

24/4/2024 : 9:30-18:00

Université de Namur

Local L31

Rue de Bruxelles 61

5000 Namur

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Conference venue

Université de Namur
Local L31 (3rd floor)
Rue de Bruxelles 61
5000 Namur

Hotel

Les Tanneurs de Namur
Rue des Tanneries 13
5000 Namur

Speakers' dinner (23/4, 19h)

L'Huile sur le Feu
Rue de Marchovelette 19
5000 Namur

Lunch (24/4, 12h)

Brasserie François
Place Saint-Aubain 3
5000 Namur

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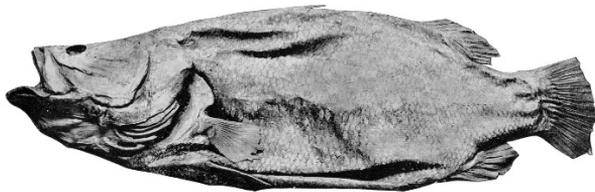
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Workshop

**Food or foe?
Preparation, consumption, and
sacralisation of fish
in Graeco-Roman and Byzantine
Egypt**



23–24/04/2024

University of Namur



Egyptological research in the project AGROS

The interdisciplinary project AGROS (Agriculture, diet and nutrition in Greco-Roman Egypt. Reassessing ancient sustenance, food processing and [mal]nutrition) focuses on diets in Egypt during the Graeco-Roman period by establishing nutritional parameters based on the collection of archaeological remains of plants and animals preserved at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology (USA). The results of research obtained using archaeobotanical, archaeozoological, nutritional biochemical and microbiological methods are supplemented by information drawn from papyrological evidence and hieroglyphic sources.

The project brings together researchers from the Vrije Universiteit Brussels, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, the University of Liège, the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, the University of Michigan and the University of Namur. The latter is home to the Egyptological part of the project, conducted as a postdoctoral research by Arnaud Delhove and Alexa Rickert under the direction of René Preys. One of the questions to be addressed is to what extent the food offering to the gods in the temple is related to the diet of the priests, since scholarship traditionally assumes the distribution of the offerings to the clergy after the ritual. The investigation on what kinds of food were present in the temple and how they were prepared raises also the question why certain dishes, including fish, are largely absent from the offering scenes and descriptions. Discussions on the avoidance of fish in the temple gave rise to the idea of organising this workshop.

Programme of the workshop

23/04/2024

14.15–14.45 Arrival of the participants, coffee

14.45–15.00 Welcome, introduction to the workshop

Part one: Fish in profane contexts

Session one, chair: Gert Baetens

15.00–15.30 Daan Smets, Lisa Vanoppré (KU Leuven): *Salty Business – Consuming and processing fish in Ptolemaic Egypt*

15.30–16.00 Sandra Gubler (University of Basel), Johanna Sigl (Commission for Archaeology of non-European Cultures KAAK): *Ancient Aswan’s fisheries*

16.00–16.30 Coffee break

Session two, chair: Daan Smets

16.30–17.00 Nicolas Morand (National Museum of Natural history, AASPE – MNHN): *Fish consumption in Alexandria and its hinterland during the Graeco-Roman and Byzantine periods: first archaeozoological insights and perspectives*

17.00–17.30 Mauro Rizzetto (Ca’ Foscari University of Venice): *Fish exploitation at Ptolemaic and Roman Al-Qārah al-Ḥamrā, Egypt*

PROGRAMME

- 17.30–18.00 Korshi Dosoo (University of Würzburg): *Fish in Graeco-Egyptian and Christian Magic*
- 18.00–18.30 Katelijn Vandorpe (KU Leuven): Response and discussion part one
- 19.00 Speakers' dinner (L'Huile sur le Feu, Rue de Marchevelette 19)

24/04/2024

Part two: Fish in religious contexts

Session one, chair: Alexa Rickert

- 09.30–09.40 Welcome address by Carine Michiels (University of Namur, vice-rector in charge of research and libraries)
- 09.40–10.10 Arnaud Delhove (University of Namur/ULB): *Thou shalt not eat fish, for it is an abomination! On the bw.t on fish consumption in Graeco-Roman Egypt*
- 10.10–10.40 Wim Van Neer (Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences): *A Late Period votive deposit of fish at Oxyrhynchus (Al Bahnasa, Egypt)*
- 10.40–11.10 Daniel von Recklinghausen (University of Tübingen): *Why was Esna called “The City of the Nile perches” (Lato(n)polis) in Greek?*
- 11.10–11.40 Françoise Labrique (University of Cologne/ULB): *Kom Ombo : graphies et théologie*

PROGRAMME

- 12.00–13.30 Lunch (Brasserie François,
Place Saint-Aubain 3)
- 14.00–15.30 Informal part of the event: guided tour of Namur
- Session two, chair: Arnaud Delhove
- 16.00–16.30 Alexa Rickert (University of Namur): *The catcher in the dark: fish in the economic processions of the Graeco-Roman temples of Egypt*
- 16.30–17.00 Christian Cannuyer (Lille Catholic University/ S.R.B.É.O.): *The fish as a symbol of Christ: its possible Egyptian origin and its treatment in Coptic iconography*
- 17.00–18.00 René Preys (University of Namur): Response and discussion part two, general discussion, closing of the event

Abstracts

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**Salty Business –
Consuming and processing fish in Ptolemaic Egypt**

Daan Smets, Lisa Vanoppré
(KU Leuven)

Documentary papyri from the Graeco-Roman period shed a unique light on daily life in Egypt, including activities related to the fishing industry. Based on a thorough analysis of these documents, together with information provided by classical literature, Lisa Vanoppré and Daan Smets will present some results of their ongoing research on fish consumption and fish processing in Ptolemaic Egypt. Lisa Vanoppré will discuss three topics relevant for Ptolemaic fish consumption: the geographical variation in state intervention regarding access to fish, the ambiguity of popular attitudes towards fish consumption, and the social differences according to the fish consumed. Daan Smets will discuss how fish was processed during the Ptolemaic period. He will focus on the pickling or salting of different types of fish, the substances used, and the pickling process itself. In this context, the shelf life of pickled fish will briefly be touched upon as well. In addition, the consumption of pickled fish will be dealt with, including different types of pickled fish eaten, the context of this consumption, and the social groups to which the consumers belonged. Finally, dishes containing pickled fish, such as Cicero's famous *tyrotarichum*, will be considered.

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Ancient Aswan's fisheries

Sandra Gubler (University of Basel)

Johanna Sigl (Commission for Archaeology
of non-European Cultures KAAK)

Fish was one of the staple foods in ancient Egypt from the onset of the Pharaonic kingdom to the Graeco-Roman times. Archaeological finds, depictions and texts as well as the zooarchaeological record allow insight into techniques of fishing and fish preparation. However, it can be assumed that fisheries worked differently in different locations along the Nile. Seasonal accessibility of the Nile, long-term climate and environmental change as well as population density had impact on the possibilities for fishing and the availability of species.

At the example of the twin towns of the First Cataract, the settlement on Elephantine Island and ancient Syene, the core of modern Aswan, we will compare fishing methods and consumption preferences of the late Middle Kingdom and the Graeco-Roman times. How did the people catch their fish? How did they prepare it for food or to make it durable? What impact did the accessibility to the Nile or the question as to who did the actual fishing have? Can we see effects of a changing environment or population? Our focus will be on the zooarchaeological record, but sources like texts, depictions and archaeological finds connected to fishing and fish preparation as well as experimental work will be taken into account as well.

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Fish consumption in Alexandria and its hinterland during the Graeco-Roman and Byzantine periods: first archaeozoological insights and perspectives

Nicolas Morand

(National Museum of Natural history AASPE – MNHN)

The capital of the Lagid Kingdom was situated on a coastal ridge between the sea and a vast lagoon by the end of the 4th century and experienced rapid development in the first decades of the 3rd century BC. This location allowed the city to become a major commercial hub, which had significant consequences on the landscape of the western margin of the Nile Delta. The Mariout Lagoon was impacted by the human activities such as the construction of a canal diverting water from the Nile to Alexandria, partially blocking its access to the sea. Numerous canals were also created, gradually transforming it into a brackish lake. Its waters, described as full of fish, were exploited in antiquity to supply the capital and the villages dotting its nearby chora. This communication presents the first results and prospects of a program initiated in 2021 regarding meat and fish consumption in domestic sphere, from the Late Period to the Arab conquest. We will focus on archaeozoological discoveries made at four settlements in the Mareotis region and the city of Alexandria. We will heed both the fish spectra for each site and the first glimpses of trends to examine the role of fish in diet and culinary practices with a diachronic multiscale approach.

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Fish exploitation at Ptolemaic and Roman Al-Qārah al-Ḥamrā, Egypt

Mauro Rizzetto
(Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

The Ptolemaic and early Roman site of Al-Qārah al-Ḥamrā is located on the north shore of Lake Qārūn in the Fayyūm depression, Egypt, and was likely connected to the larger towns of Karanis and Soknopaiou Nesos. It developed as a lakeshore settlement involved in fishing and trading, both of which were under state supervision during the Ptolemaic period. The excavation project focuses on establishing the settlement's economic relationships within the wider area and its dietary and environmental parameters. The faunal assemblage was dominated by fish, with an almost exclusive presence of catfish and perciforms. Catfish was especially present in Trench 1, where it is mainly represented by cranial elements from small-sized individuals. The zooarchaeological evidence, combined with historical references to fish products, suggests that catfish was being cured on a regular basis, possibly to be shipped elsewhere or for long-term storage at the site.

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Fish in Graeco-Egyptian and Christian Magic

Korshi Dosoo
(University of Würzburg)

The corpora of Greek, Demotic, and Coptic magical papyri provide us with hundreds of sources which offer a sense of the intimate and imaginative lives of individuals from the first millennium CE, documenting the attempts of normal men and women to navigate the crises of their daily lives, and giving us a sense of their conceptions of the human, animal and divine spheres. We find fish implicated in all of these – as divine symbols, they may feature in *historiolae* or mythological reminiscences embedded in spoken or written formulae; as physical animals, their bodies may be used in specific rituals, mummified to produce “ready-made gods”, or individual body parts might be used in sacrifices; in the human sphere, the catching and consumption of fish seems to have formed a key part of certain diets and professions, and so we find some magical texts which aim to help or harm fishermen. Other practices demonstrate crossings between these spheres, as the qualities of certain fishes (the electric power of the catfish or ray; the stench of rotting fish) is applied to the targets of rituals in erotic or curse spells. This presentation will provide an overview of mentions of fish in these texts, and suggest changes over the *longue durée* by reference to older Egyptian and later Hebrew and Arabic material from Egypt.

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Thou shalt not eat fish, for it is an abomination!
**On the *bw.t* on fish consumption in Graeco-Roman
Egypt**

Arnaud Delhove
(University of Namur/ULB)

As in many religious traditions, ancient Egyptians placed great emphasis on ritual purity and cleanliness while dealing with the gods, and developed rules on what their priests should, could and couldn't do serving in their sacred homes, the temples, such as to be completely shaved and remain continent. But there were also regulations on food. Certain foodstuffs were considered an abomination (*bw.t*) to the god. While these 'taboos' were generally limited to certain places, times, and persons (contrary to, for instance, the prohibition on pork in Judaism and Islam), one seems to have been rather strict and generalised: they shall not eat fish, although it was a staple food for many Egyptians.

After an overview of the concept of *bw.t* in Egyptian theology, particularly regarding food prohibitions in the Graeco-Roman temples of Egypt, this paper will investigate and focus on the question of fish taboo, through Egyptian and Greek sources to precise its possible origins, characteristics, and limits, while also looking at what was left unsaid in our documentation.

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**A Late Period votive deposit of fish at
Oxyrhynchus
(Al Bahnasa, Egypt)**

Wim Van Neer

(Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences)

The site of Oxyrhynchus in Middle Egypt has been famous since the first millennium BC for the mormyrid fish that were worshipped there and after which the town was named. The role played by these fish has already been amply documented through textual evidence, bronze statuettes and paintings. Although excavations have been ongoing on the site since the end of the 19th century, it was only in 2012 that a deposit was found with thousands of complete fish that were piled up next and on top of each other, with in between layers of matting and wrapping. We will describe the ritual deposit as a whole, with emphasis on its extent, its stratigraphy and its relationship to the surrounding structures, which, together with a very specific artefact, allow the layers to be dated to the Late Period. We pay attention to the way in which the fish bundles were prepared, involving the use of both textiles and halfa grass, and to how the deposit was organised. We discuss the species spectrum in relation to both the Egyptian fish cult and evidence from written sources.

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**Why was Esna called
“The City of the Nile perches” (Lato(n)polis)
in Greek?**

Daniel von Recklinghausen
(University of Tübingen)

According to a well-known passage in Strabo’s “Geographika” (XVII, 47 [817]) the Egyptian town of Esna was called “Lato(n)polis” in Greek, “where Athena and the Lates are venerated”. While Athena is clearly the “Interpretatio Graeca” of the Egyptian goddess Neith, the Lates can be identified as the “Nile perch” (*lates niloticus*). At first glance, this emphasis is rather at odds with the local hieroglyphic temple inscriptions which date in their majority, like Strabo, to the Roman period. In these texts, the two fundamental deities of Esna are of demiurgical character, namely the ram-headed god Khnum and the anthropomorphic goddess Neith. While these two deities are ubiquitously shown and mentioned in the temple decoration, the Nile perch is referred to in but one single passage: The inscriptions tell us a great deal about how creation was set into motion from a local perspective. One of the most famous texts is the “Cosmogony of Neith” where the goddess is said to create the world by pure uttering of her thoughts while transforming into several creatures – including a Nile perch.

The question arises, then, why the city was called Lato(n)polis in Greek and solely equated with Neith and one of her manifestations, which was, seemingly, of minor importance within

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the temple decoration. Looking at the archaeological and numismatical data, on the other hand, it becomes clear that the Nile perch was of tremendous religious importance. A necropolis, e.g., situated in the west of the town containing i.a. vast amounts of mummified Nile perches may have functioned as a place of worship of Athena/Neith.

The aim of the paper is to present the relevant material and to discuss why the Nile perch was seemingly almost absent in the temple decoration but formed the nucleus of religious activity elsewhere.

Kom Ombo : graphies et théologie

Françoise Labrique
(University of Cologne/ULB)

The decoration of the walls of the temple in Edfu shows the king killing the enemy, who appears symbolically under various animal shapes. These animals were wild and chosen according to their biotope. But fishes were only treated in festival calendars.

The temple of Kom Ombo is very damaged. The enemies who are killed in the remaining decoration are only human. Fishes are mentioned, alone or with birds, in festival calendars and mythological stories, as symbols of children of Re, who rebelled originally against their father. Haroeris and Sobek, as champions of Re, react against the rebels, but differently. These points will be studied and at the same time we will discuss the distortion between the discourse of the decorator and the ritual reality.

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**The catcher in the dark:
fish in the economic processions of the Graeco-
Roman temples of Egypt**

Alexa Rickert
(University of Namur)

An integral part of the decorative programme of Egyptian temples built in the Graeco-Roman period are the processions decorating the lower part of the wall, the so-called *soubassement*. These rows of offering bearers are led by the king and presented to the main deity or triad of divinities of the temple. The inscriptions that accompany the personnel of these processions contain encyclopaedic knowledge about the various areas of life in ancient Egypt – such as geography, geology, hydrology, but also about the temple’s supplies.

With regard to nutrition in the temple, the economic processions are particularly revealing, in which most of the participants are assigned to certain types of food or drink, for example bread, meat, milk or beer. Thus, a group of offering bearers within these processions is in charge of catching birds and fish, such as “the one who is in front of his catching rope” or “the fisher and fowler who comes out at night”. The presentation is dedicated to these divine offering bearers, focusing on the signification of fish in the representations and texts associated with them. The aim is above all to work out the extent to which the consumption and sacrifice of fish are addressed, but also answering the question of whether the sources reveal information about the role of fish in the theology of the respective temple.

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**The fish as a symbol of Christ:
its possible Egyptian origin and its treatment in
Coptic iconography**

Christian Cannuyer
(Lille Catholic University/S.R.B.É.O.)

It is generally accepted that the adoption of the fish as a symbol of Christ by the first Christians stems from the acrostic IXΘΥΣ = Ièsous Christous Theou Uios Sôter, “Jesus Christ son of God Saviour”. However the symbol of the fish as Christ is attested before the acrostic, which is perhaps only a happy late interpretation (3rd century?), testifying to an elaborate Christology. This raises the question of its real origin. The symbolism of the fish in ancient Egypt, and in particular its Osirian resonances linked to the idea of resurrection, suggest a possible filiation, a hypothesis reinforced by the use of the symbol in Coptic iconography.

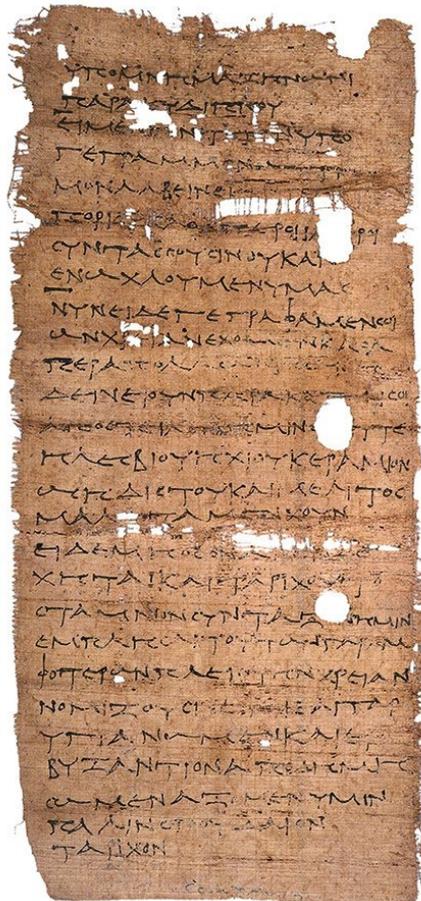


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