

## ONCE MORE THE SUCKING-FISH

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IN 1919, while Professor E. W. Gudger's excellent series of articles "On the Use of the Sucking-fish for Catching Fish and Turtles" appeared in *THE AMERICAN NATURALIST*, I was at work on my first volume of "Africa and the Discovery of America," where I had to touch on the remora story in the early voyages to America, in order to show that they were all a myth, based on the literary influence of Odoric of Pordenone on Columbus. As my sources were naturally of a different character from those of Professor Gudger, who was chiefly interested in the zoological side of the question, I was able to supplement his thorough discussion with a number of new data, which the zoologist will not consider to be amiss.

The remora was dimly known to all the Arabic voyagers. We meet with it in the middle of the ninth century, in the very beginning of the "Chain of Chronicles."<sup>1</sup>

In the Indian Ocean there is a fish, twenty cubits in length, in whose belly there is a fish of the same kind, in whose belly there is similarly a third fish. All these fishes are alive and moving. This large fish is called *al-wāl*. In spite of its size it has for its enemy a fish only a cubit in length, called *el-leshek*. When the large fish becomes angry and attacks the other fishes in the sea and maltreats them, the little fish takes charge of him: it attaches itself to the root of his ear and does not let go of him until he is dead. The little fish also attaches itself to boats, and the large fish dares not approach it, because of the fear with which it inspires him.

<sup>1</sup> M. Reinaud, "Relation des Voyages faits par les Arabes et les Persans dans l'Inde et à la Chine dans le IX<sup>e</sup> siècle de l'ère chrétienne," Paris, 1845, Vol. I, p. 2 f.

This account is obviously an exaggeration of some story about the shark, but *wāl* was soon identified with the whale, as appears from the later Arabic sources. A century later Mas'ūdī wrote:

There is a fish in this sea called el-Owāl, which is from four to five hundred 'Omari cubits long; these are the cubits in use in this sea. The usual length of this fish is one hundred perches. Generally the head of the whale is out of the water; and when it powerfully ejects water, it gushes into the air more than one bowshot high. The vessels are afraid of it by day and night, and they beat drums and wooden poles to drive it away. This fish drives with its tail and fins other fish into its open mouth, and they pass down its throat with the stream of water. When the whale sins God sends a fish about one cubit long called *esh-shak* (*al-leshek*, *as-sal*), it adheres to the root of its tail and the whale has no means to make itself free from it. It goes therefore to the bottom of the sea and beats itself to death; its dead body floats on the water and looks like a great mountain. The fish called *esh-shak*, adheres frequently to the whale. The whales notwithstanding their size, do not approach vessels; and they take flight when they see this little fish, for it is their destruction.<sup>2</sup>

Idrīsī merely said that in the Sea of Oman the *wālī*, which is of white color and one hundred cubits in length, is usually accompanied by the small *leshek*, which kills it.<sup>3</sup> Ad-Damīrī definitely identifies the large fish with the *bāl*, the whale.

When it begins to tyrannize the other animals of the sea, God sends a fish about a cubit in length, which attaches itself to its ear, and the *bāl* seeing no means of freeing itself from it, goes down to the bottom of the sea and strikes its head on the ground until it dies, after which it floats on the top of the water like a big mountain, and the men on the East Coast of Africa are generally on the look-out for it. When they find it, they plunge harpoons on it and drag it to the shore where they cut open its belly and take out of it ambergris.<sup>4</sup>

The important point in all these stories, which obviously emanate from the same original account, is that

<sup>2</sup> A. Sprenger, "El Mas'ūdī's Historical Encyclopedia, entitled 'Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems,'" London, 1841, Vol. I, p. 263 f.

<sup>3</sup> P. A. Jaubert, "Géographie d'Edrisi," Paris, 1836, Vol. I, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Ad-Damīrī's "Hayāt al-Hayawān" (a zoological lexicon), translated by A. S. G. Jayakar, London, 1906, Vol. I, p. 237.

the remora is found off the coast of Zanzibar, where it is in the same way connected with the catching of large fish. But we have a circumstantial report of the employment of the sucking-fish in the catching of sea turtles in João dos Santos' "Ethiopia oriental," which was published in 1609:

The fishermen kill turtles at sea [along the coast of Mozambique] in a strange manner. First they catch in certain parts of the sea among the rocks near the coast a kind of fish two spans in length, called by the Moors *sapi*, which is as much the enemy of the turtle as the ferret is of rabbits. The *sapi* has a very dark grey skin inclining to black, and a long thin head ending in a snout similar to that of a pig. Its neck is about half a span long, on the back of which is a shell of the same length and three fingers wide, which is formed of hard and porous furrowed skin with which it clings to the stones as leeches do, and it has the same faculty of sucking blood. For this reason when it meets a turtle it attacks it and wounds it in the neck or legs with this shell, and sucks its blood until it is satiated, leaving the turtle nearly dead, it being unable to resist or get away, as it is large and unwieldy and the *sapi* very nimble.

When the fishermen have caught some of these *sapis* they put them in a basin of salt water and take them in the boat with them. They tie a long line to their tails and then put out to sea in search of turtles, which usually swim on the surface of the water. When they catch sight of a turtle they throw out the fish fastened by the tail, as one lets loose a ferret in a leash after a rabbit, and the fish immediately attacks the turtle with as great force as if it was free and had received no harm from the hook with which it was caught, or as if it was not itself a prisoner. When it reaches the turtle it fastens on it so tightly that it never looses its hold, and as soon as the fishermen feel that it had done so they pull in the line and draw it over the water without its loosening its hold, and the turtle, although very big and heavy, is so dominated and tormented by the fish that it does not fight with it, but lets itself be carried off easily because of the pain it suffers while they are pulling it in, as at that time the fish grips it much tighter. Thus the turtle is brought to the side of the boat, when the fishermen quickly seize it in their hands and lift it in, and the fish they put back into its basin. In this manner they catch a number of turtles.<sup>5</sup>

In the Bantu language of Zanzibar we have "*kassa*, turtle; the *kassa* is caught by means of the *taza* fish,

<sup>5</sup> George McCall Theal, "Records of Southeastern Africa" (London), 1901, Vol. VII, p. 325 ff.

which the fishermen carry alive with them; when they see a *kassa*, they let the *taza* go after it to stick fast to the *kassa*; when the *taza* has seized it, the fisherman throws a harpoon and takes the *kassa* out of the sea, the *taza* letting go instantly when exposed to the air."<sup>6</sup> The same dictionary gives *tasa* "a kind of fish which serves as a bait for turtles,"<sup>7</sup> but the other dictionaries give for it *chazo*, which name is also recorded by Professor Gudger. *Kassa* for "turtle" is of extremely wide distribution and is not primarily a Bantu word, although it is also found as *kasi* in Tete, that is in the region to which dos Santos refers.

The oldest forms on record for this word are Sanskrit *kacchapas*, *kaçyapas*, Avestan *kasyapa*, hence Persian *keshef*, Afganistan *kasph*, Singhalese *keshew*, Hindustani *kacchua*, *kaccha*. It is therefore certain that the turtle fishing was brought to the shores of Zanzibar from somewhere in the Indian Ocean. This is in keeping with the frequently recorded tortoise-shell trade in the Indian Ocean, but "opposite the Ganges there is an island in the ocean, the last part of the inhabited world toward the east, under the rising sun itself; it is called Chryse, and it has the best tortoise shell of all the places on the Erythraean Sea."<sup>8</sup> The Chryse Island has been identified with the Malacca peninsula,<sup>9</sup> hence the origin of the practise of catching turtles with the remora is most likely to be referred to the East Indies, whence it traveled eastward, to the Torres Strait and Melanesia, and westward to the eastern shores of Africa.

The earliest definite reference to the remora fishing is contained in a version of the cormorant fishing, as told by Odoric of Pordenone and for the first time printed in Ramusio in 1574, although it can be shown that it was

<sup>6</sup> L. Krapf, "A Dictionary of the Suahili Language," London, 1882, pp. 130 f.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>8</sup> W. H. Schoff, "The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea," London, 1912, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

already in existence in the fourteenth century. Odoric of Pordenone told how he came

to a certain great river, and I tarried at a certain city (called Belsa) which hath a bridge across that river. And at the head of the bridge was a hostel in which I was entertained. And mine host, wishing to gratify me, said: "If thou wouldst like to see good fishing, come with me." And so he led me upon the bridge, and I looked and saw in some boats of his that there were certain water-fowl tied upon perches. And these he now tied with a cord round the throat that they might not be able to swallow the fish which they caught. Next he proceeded to put three great baskets into a boat, one at each end and the third in the middle, and then he let the water-fowl loose. Straightway they began to dive into the water, catching great numbers of fish, and ever as they caught them putting them of their own accord into the baskets, so that before long all the three baskets were full. And mine host then took the cord off their necks and let them dive again to catch fish for their own food. And when they had thus fed they returned to their perches and were tied up as before. And some of those fish I had for my dinner.<sup>10</sup>

This is followed by another kind of fishing:

The men this time were in a boat, wherein they had a tub of hot water; and they were naked, and had each of them a bag slung over his shoulder. Now they dived under water (for half a quarter of an hour or so) and caught the fish with their hands, stowing them in those bags that they had. And when they came up again they emptied the bags into the boat, whilst they themselves got into the tub of hot water, and others went in their turn and did as the first; and so great numbers of fish were taken.<sup>11</sup>

The second kind of fishing is interesting from the fact that it was much earlier told by Idrīsī as in use at Zanzibar.

These people (at Meduna) fish in the sea without boats. They fish by swimming, with small nets spun from grass and manufactured by them. They tie these strings to their feet by means of knots which they hold in their hands, they draw the strings of the net together the moment they feel that the fish have entered, and this they do with an art in which they excel, and with rules in which they have long experience.

<sup>10</sup> Sir Henry Yule, "Cathay and the Way thither," London, 1913, Vol. II, pp. 188 ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190 f.

To attract the fish they use land reptiles. Although they live in a state of great distress and misery, these people (God loves those who reside at their family hearths) are satisfied with their lots and with what they have. They are under the government of Zanzibar.<sup>12</sup>

Yule<sup>13</sup> cites Fortune and Dabry for the same custom in China, which once more shows the wide distribution of identical maritime customs from Zanzibar to China.

The first kind of fishing has undergone all kinds of changes in the very earliest Odoric manuscripts. Sir John Mandeville, who cribbed so much out of Odoric, tells of a fish-otter, instead of a cormorant, as the animal with which fish are caught.

In that country there be beasts taught of men to go into waters, into rivers and into deep tanks for to take fish; the which beast is but little, and men clepe them *loirs*. And when men cast them into the water, anon they bring up great fishes, as many as men will. And if men will have more, they cast them in again, and they bring up as many as men list to have.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting and important to observe that the Italian version of Sir John Mandeville which came out in 1491,<sup>15</sup> that is, one year before the discovery of America, has the same story, the French term *loir* for "otter" being here rendered by *udria*. The Latin version, of about 1500,<sup>16</sup> simply says:

Tamed water dogs whom we call *luterres*, are here aplenty; every time they are sent into the river, they bring out fish.

The substitution is everywhere from Vincent of Beauvais, who in his "Speculum naturale," XX, 89, tells of the same fish-otters with which fish are caught, but the substitution is unquestionably older than Sir John Mandeville's, who would not have omitted the strange story of the cormorant if he had found it in his copy of Odoric.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 55 f.

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>14</sup> "The Travels of Sir John Mandeville," London, 1900, p. 136.

<sup>15</sup> "Tractato delle piu maravigliose cose e piu notabili," Venice, Nicolaus de Ferrariis, 17 Nov., 1491, cap. CXLVII.

<sup>16</sup> "Johannis de Montevilla Itinerarius in partes Iherosolimitanas," cap. XXXI.

The Latin version of Odoric has the old cormorant story<sup>17</sup> where the bird is called *mergus*, while in the Italian version it is called *smergo*.<sup>18</sup> The usual Italian names for the cormorant which Odoric must have known, are also *mergo*, *maragone*,<sup>19</sup> so that the Latin *mergus* is formed from the Italian *mergo*. Curiously, there are two versions of Odoric in Ramusio. In the first the whole cormorant fishing episode is omitted, while the second has a totally different account. Here we read:

Mine host . . . took us to one side of the bridge where the river was wider, and there we found many boats, and there was one of them employed in fishing by aid of a certain fish called *marigione*. The host had another such, and this he took and kept it by a cord attached to a fine collar. And this indeed is a creature that we have seen in our own seas, where many call it the *sea-calf*. It had the muzzle and the neck like a fox's, and the fore paws like a dog's, but the toes longer, and the hind feet like a duck's, and the tail with the rest of the body like a fish's. Mine host made him go in the water, and he began to catch quantities of fish with his mouth, always depositing them in the boat. And I swear that in less than two hours he had filled more than two big baskets.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear that the description of the *sea-calf* is an exaggeration of that of the fish-otter, which is in Arabic called "fox of the water" or "dog of the water." Hence there is most likely here an Arabic influence which caused the substitution. And the reference to a fish *marigione*, which was kept by a cord attached to a fine collar, is similarly an attempt to bring the cormorant story in keeping with the Arabic and Zanzibar account of the fishing with the remora. We have here a transitional stage from the cormorant story to the *remora* story, as fathered by Columbus and permanently incorporated in all later accounts who drew upon the Columbus story.

<sup>17</sup> T. Domenichelli, "Sopra la vita e i viaggi del beato Odorico Da Portenone," in Prato, 1881, p. 180 (cap. XLVI).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>19</sup> Yule, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

Professor Gudger has shown, beyond any possibility of cavil, that all the accounts of the remora fishing in America recorded after Oviedo go back to this latter source, and I shall now show that Oviedo's account goes back, through Bernaldez, to an Arabic source, which is itself an evolution of the second Italian version of Odoric's cormorant fishing, as preserved to us in Ramusio.

Bernaldez<sup>21</sup> says: "For they call it hunting, and they hunt one fish with others of a particular kind," while in the "Journal of the Second Voyage"<sup>22</sup> we read: "The fishing consists in this that they take certain fishes which they call *revesos*, the largest of whom are not larger than pilchards," from which Peter Martyr made his "*reversus* fishes."<sup>23</sup> In the Spanish the passage in Bernaldez runs as follows:

Vino una canoa a casa de pezes que así le llamaban ellos *caza*, que *cazan con unos pezes otros*.

It will be observed that all the Columbus accounts tell of the invitation extended by the fishermen to Columbus to see the peculiar kind of fishing, and the giving of the catch to Columbus, according to Bernaldez, for a feast. This is identical with the manner in which Odoric tells of the invitation to watch the cormorant fishing. The resemblance is striking. Now, in the second Italian version in Ramusio the fish with which other fish are caught is called *marigione*, "diver," while others call it *sea-calf*. We have here, side by side, cormorant, otter and remora. I have already shown in my book, "Africa and the Discovery of America," that much of the matter in the "Voyages of Columbus" is apocryphal and comes from Odoric of Pordenone's "Itinerario," a name which Bernaldez uses for the book of Columbus, from which he got his information. There can be little doubt that the sec-

<sup>21</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 450.

<sup>22</sup> See my "Africa and the Discovery of America," Philadelphia, 1920, Vol. I, p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> Gudger, *loc. cit.*, p. 297.



ond Italian version was corrected or annotated by Columbus in the margin, where the true story of the remora fishing at Zanzibar was given from an Arabic source, from which Columbus retained two foreign terms. He had found in his source *kassa*, the turtle caught by the remora, and the name was apparently entered into the margin from which Bernaldez got his threefold *caza* "chase." Indeed, it appears that in his "que así le llamaban ellos *caza*," it referred originally to the fishes caught, that is, to the turtles, which from the resemblance to Spanish *caza*, "chase," produced the unfortunate pun. It will be noticed that in the "Journal of the Second Voyage" the corresponding passage runs "they take certain fishes which they call *reversos*," where the second Italian version says "fishing by aid of a certain fish called *marigione*," that is, "diver." Now the Arabic word for "diver" is *gavvāsah*. Anciently the initial guttural was rendered in Spanish by a simple *g*, but in the fifteenth century this Arabic word would sound to a European ear as *reverso* or *reveso*, which it actually assumed in the Columbus story. No such Spanish word is anywhere else recorded for the remora. Again, the marginal gloss, from Bernaldez, "hunting with a fish," must have been "*caza con un pez*," which Peter Martyr took to be the name of the fish, the remora, hence he misread the first as *guaicanum*, and called this the Indian name for the fish, a word which is only recorded as a quotation from Peter Martyr.

From the previous discussion it follows:

1. The remora fishing is very old and originated in the Indian Ocean, but did not get into literature before Columbus.
2. Odoric of Pordenone's cormorant fishing was from the start confused with the fishing by means of an otter and, in Ramusio's second version, was dimly identified with the remora fishing.
3. Ramusio's second version was, before the time of Columbus, influenced by an Arabic source or explained

by an Arab acquainted with the remora fishing at Zanzibar, and this new form supplied Columbus with the Zanzibar word for "turtle," namely, *kassa*, and the Arabic word for "diver," namely, the Spanish *reves* or *reverso*, which was wrongly attached to the "remora."

4. Bernaldez and Peter Martyr created a non-existing remora story for America out of Odoric's much-revised cormorant story, on the basis of some marginal notes in Columbus's "Itinerario," which itself was based on Odoric's "Itinerario," and referred to Zanzibar and not to America.

5. There are in America no corroborative stories of the remora fishing, except as derived from Oviedo's hearsay account, which itself is based on the accounts of Bernaldez and Peter Martyr, which, in their turn, are taken from a revised edition of Odoric's cormorant fishing story.