

CHAPTER II

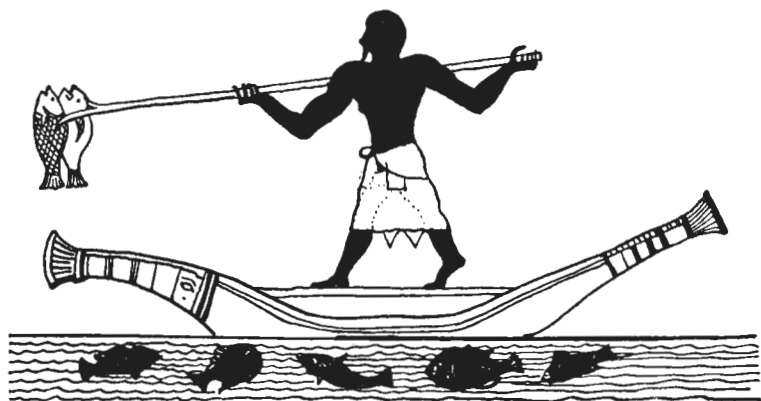
Fishermen of Ancient Egypt, Palestine, Greece, and Rome

WE have a considerable knowledge of the fisheries of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome owing to contemporary paintings and sculptures which have been preserved to this day. The classical writers also refer very frequently to fishing and fish food.

EGYPT. The paintings in the Egyptian tombs often depict fishing scenes. Without these it would be almost impossible for us to reconstruct the life of an Egyptian fisherman three thousand years ago. The chief methods of fishing in use in ancient Egypt were harpooning, hand-lines, nets, and traps, according to the species of fish to be captured. Fish seems to have been the normal article of food for those who lived on the banks of the Nile or in its neighbourhood. Moreover, there were certain sacred animals which had to be fed on fish. Hence the enormous development of Egyptian fisheries as early as 2000 B.C. The harpoons in use at that time were either barbed or trident-shaped, the former not unlike those employed to-day in whale-fishing. Originally they were made of bone, later of metal. Until about the Twelfth Dynasty the fish-hooks in Egypt were made of copper, but as time went on bronze became more common. These early Egyptian fish-hooks are very similar in shape to those actually in use to-day in most parts of the world. It is curious that no double fish-hooks seem to have been discovered

Fishermen of Ancient Egypt

in Egypt, although they have been frequently found in other Mediterranean countries. Line-fishing was generally done from the shore, but in some of the old paintings there are representations of boats engaged in fishing. In some cases lines are shown with many hooks attached, in other paintings there is only one hook. Fish or meat was used as bait, but never fish of



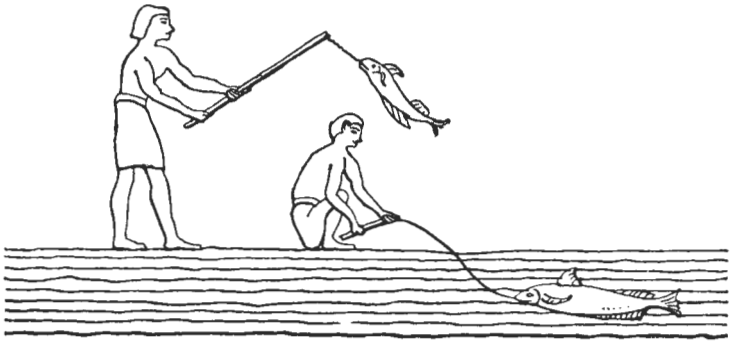
AN EGYPTIAN FISHERMAN

the same species as were being caught. This would have been regarded as a kind of sacrilege. Even to-day, I am told, Egyptian fishermen will never use an artificial bait or fly. Nets were of various types, mostly of the seine pattern. Many have been discovered in tombs, and their mesh varies considerably. Fish-traps were made of wickerwork, not unlike those still used in China.

Except for certain species which were held to be sacred, all fish were regarded as edible by the ancient Egyptians. Some fish were eaten raw, others were cooked. On the second day of the first month the Egyptians were bound to eat nothing but fish, and this had to be fried at home. The priests also cooked fish on this day, but do not seem to have been under the

Fishermen and Fishing Ways

same obligation to eat it. Aristotle mentions quite a number of small fish that were venerated in ancient Egypt. Some modern writers have suggested that, as these were obviously the best species for edible purposes, perhaps the priests may have wished to keep them for their own use. Of all the aquatic creatures of the Nile none was treated with such reverence as the crocodile,



EGYPTIAN FISHING SCENE

for it was supposed to predict the annual rise and fall of the waters in some mysterious manner.

PALESTINE. Turning our attention to Palestine, we find curiously little material available when studying the fisheries of ancient Judæa. Fish and fishing are not often mentioned in the Old Testament, and fishermen do not appear to have taken the same important place in the life of the Jews as they did among other nations who lived on the shores of the Mediterranean. Joppa (the present-day Jaffa) was the only seaport in possession of the Israelites, the northern coast belonging to the Phœnicians, the southern part to the Philistines. The river Jordan is too rapid and too muddy for angling purposes. The Dead Sea is entirely destitute of all marine life. Hence the only places in Palestine

Fishermen of Palestine

where fishing was carried on to any extent was the Sea of Galilee and the artificial pools of Heshbon. The prophet Isaiah refers to fishermen and drag-nets (chapter xix, verse 8), but he is speaking of the Egyptians, not of the Israelites. There is the bare mention of the creation of fish in the first chapter of Genesis; there is in Leviticus the Mosaic division of fish into clean and unclean species; in Deuteronomy the worship of fish is prohibited, and in many places in the New Testament there are references to fish as an article of food, but no single *species* is mentioned from one end of the Bible to the other, with the exception of the whale. (And here it should be pointed out that the fish which swallowed Jonah was not a whale, but a "sea monster," probably a shark, which is sometimes found in the Mediterranean.)

The chief fish found on the Lake of Gennésaret are species of bream, carp, and perch. The 'sheat fish,' or *siluroïd*, often taken on this inland sea are the "bad fish cast away" by the fishermen in the parable of the net cast into the sea (Matthew xiv, 47-48).

FISHING ON THE SEA OF GALILEE. The Sea of Galilee is no more than a comparatively small inland lake, but one has to spend only a few days beside its shores and to watch its fishermen at work to realize that they have all the essential qualities of the born seaman. They are far from being mere fresh-water boatmen. The storms on the lake are so sudden and so violent when they occur that strong, well-built boats are essential, the sort of craft, in fact, that one finds on a salt-water loch in the Scottish Highlands, and of about the same size.

The boats are obviously designed for seine-net fishing, and as this was the method of fishing in the time of

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Christ it is probable that the boats used by the Apostles Peter, Andrew, and James were not so very different in their essentials from those one sees on Galilee to-day. When one has lived even for a short time by the Sea of Galilee all those passages in the New Testament which refer to the fishermen Apostles take on a new meaning. They are no longer records of events that took place nineteen hundred years ago, but vivid and accurate reports of scenes of ordinary life such as one might read of in the newspapers of to-day. One actually sees these twentieth-century Galilean fishermen behaving and doing exactly as one reads concerning the Apostles in the pages of the Gospels. I had spent a few days at Tiberias some years ago, and had been able to reconstruct in imagination every incident in the New Testament which refers to fishing and fishermen. I had seen the men "washing their nets," I had seen them returning after a night's fishing, "having taken nothing," at other times "with their nets full." I had watched the men "mending their nets," I had (to my great delight) discovered a party of fishermen eating a meal by the shore, and there was "a fire there and fish laid thereon and bread."

But I had not witnessed a storm. Day after day the sun poured down mercilessly, the sea and the sky a deep blue. The heat, dust, and Oriental smells of Tiberias became more and more trying. Then, quite suddenly, on my last morning, "there came a storm of wind on the lake," and "the waves beat upon the ships" that were anchored off the little jetty which you will notice in my drawing. Practically all the fishermen were at home. They had been out all night and were resting. But in a few moments after the first gust of wind they were running down to the shore, alarmed



ON THE SEA OF GALILEE

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for the safety of their boats. By this time the whole surface of the lake was covered with white-crested waves; the wind had risen to almost the force of a gale, and the sky had turned from pale blue to the colour of ink.

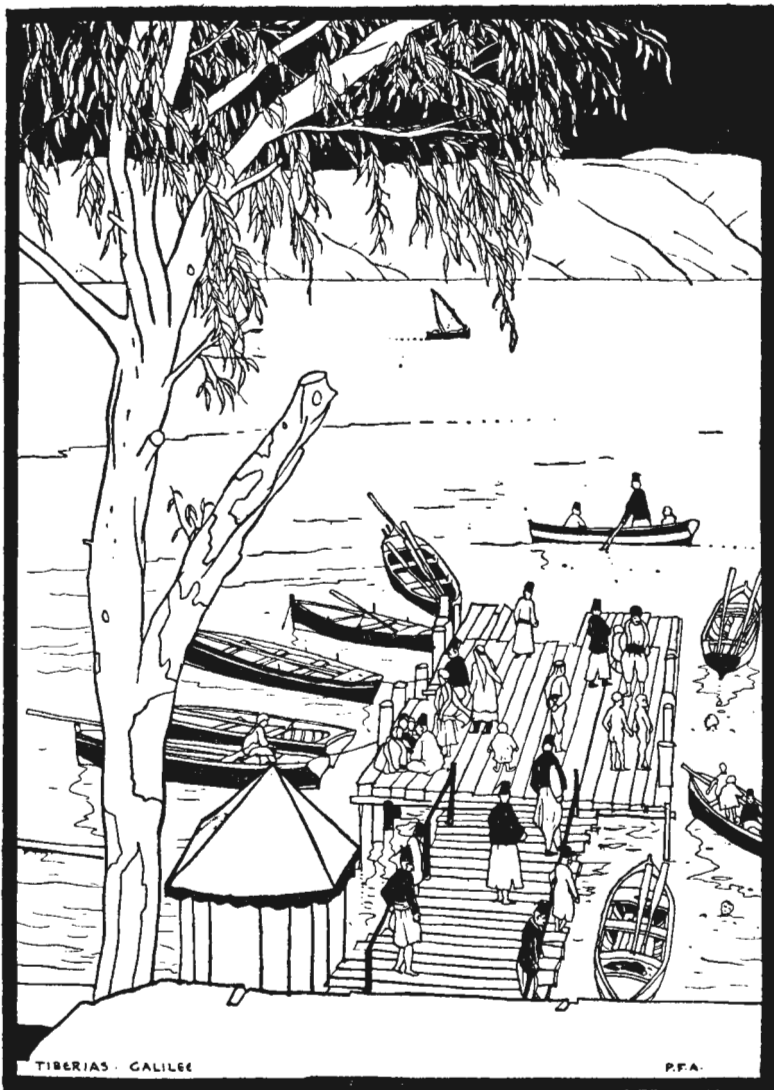
The fishermen, one and all, flinging off their clothes, except their shirts, cast themselves into the sea, swam out to their boats, and hauled up the anchors. Within a few moments they were standing to their oars, rowing hard, with the water coming over the bows, "for the wind was contrary," in the direction of a small artificial harbour that lies about a quarter of a mile to the north of Tiberias.

It was a thrilling sight to watch them. Seldom have I seen such fine seamanship (I use the word deliberately), for there was nothing to suggest that this angry mass of grey-green water was merely a thirteen-mile-long lake. By the time that the last of the boats had reached the place of shelter "the wind ceased," and in less than half an hour the storm was over.

Such incidents must have been everyday occurrences in the lives of the Apostles who followed the calling of fishermen.

I have included a sketch done at Tiberias. The little jetty is the favourite resort of the townsfolk. All day long in the summer months small boys are bathing from it—a simple matter, for the clothing of a Galilean boy consists merely of a shirt.

I have also included a sketch of one of the twentieth-century Galilean fishermen standing up to his oars as he rows across the lake. He is wearing a loose cotton shirt and a pair of wide baggy black trousers, fastened at the ankle. His headdress is a kind of large handkerchief, kept on by a heavy double coil of cord made of goat's hair.



TIBERIAS · GALILEE

P.F.A.

THE JETTY, TIBERIAS

Fishermen and Fishing Ways

When one is staying in Tiberias fish seems to be the regular dish at every meal. And never have I tasted better fresh-water fish.

Turning our attention to the Mediterranean shores of Palestine, we find that a certain amount of fishing is



A GALILEAN FISHERMAN OF TO-DAY

carried on at the present time, and no doubt the methods employed are those which were used over two thousand years ago. A casting-net, obviously of a similar kind to that mentioned in the New Testament, is chiefly used. It is a circular net of very fine twine with a small mesh. Made fast to the centre is a long cord, and round the edge it is weighted with lumps of lead. When wandering along the beach I sometimes came across a fisherman with his clothes tucked up round his waist wading out into the broken water near the shore. He carries one of these nets over his left arm, all the while watching intently the shoals of fish as they swim about. Waiting until a shoal is in a favourable position, suddenly he flings out the net to cover the fish. Sometimes the cast is in vain and the fish swim away; at other times a good haul rewards his labours.

FISHERIES OF ANCIENT GREECE. It would require a volume in itself to deal satisfactorily with the sea-

Fishermen of Ancient Greece

fisheries of ancient Greece and Rome, for fish has always been one of the chief articles of food of these nations. The earliest representation of a fishing scene in Greece dates from the year 1500 B.C., and is found on a vase dug up on the island of Melos.

Just as in Egypt, so also in Greece the fishermen were looked upon as being one of the lowest classes of society. Curiously enough the primitive Greeks seem to have regarded fish as the food of the poor and not fit for the rich. At one time certain species were held to be sacred by the Greeks, but this taboo gradually disappeared as time went on.¹ Homer makes several references to the methods of fishing in ancient Greece, nets, lines, and harpoons all being mentioned. But he gives the names of only two distinct species—*i.e.*, the dolphin and eel. The Greeks had a great veneration for the former. They regarded the dolphin as the friend and companion of mankind. It will be recalled that a dolphin rescued Ulysses and Telemachus. The ancient Greeks used to capture red tunny fish with fixed nets in much the same way as is done off the coast of Spain to-day. For smaller species of fish—*e.g.*, mackerel—they used a type of seine-net. Just as you may still see in many parts of Europe, for instance, in Norway and Cornwall, so used the Greeks to post watchmen on the cliffs to look out for shoals of fish at sea, the presence of which they would signal to the boats far below them on the water.

FISHERIES OF ANCIENT ROME. The Romans held fish in even greater esteem as an article of food than did the Greeks, and there are endless references to fisheries

¹ The custom of sacrificing fish to the gods in order to ensure good luck was everywhere practised—especially the first fish to be caught on a line or in a net.

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throughout the pages of the Latin authors. Hand-lines, spears, nets, and traps were the chief methods of capture. The hand-lines were sometimes used with a short rod, often not more than two or three feet in length. Also a piece of horsehair was attached to the fish-hook. Many fish-hooks have been found both at Herculaneum and at Pompeii. Most of them are bronze or iron, comparatively few being made of bone. As they were intended almost exclusively for the capture of salt-water fish, these Roman hooks are solidly made and constructed in such a way that the line can be made fast to them. Various kinds of bait seem to have been used, flies, spiders, worms, fish, raw or cooked, meat, etc., being favourites. The Romans supposed that fish were more attracted by cooked than by raw meat. Sometimes fragrant herbs such as thyme, rosemary, and mint were mixed with the bait. Lines were weighted with small pebbles or lead. The ordinary kind of spear used in fishing by the Roman fishermen was a three-pointed harpoon fixed on to a pole of about nine feet in length. Two sorts of nets were used off the coast of Italy and Gaul: one like a small drag-net, the other, much larger, was similar to the modern seine-net; it required several men for hauling. Hand-nets not unlike a shrimp net were also employed by the Roman fishermen. As for the fishing-boats themselves, they seem to have been small craft very low in the water, carrying two men, one of whom rowed while the other fished. Of all the salt-water fish eaten by the Romans none was so appreciated as a certain species of mullet, the *mullus barbatus*, for which fabulous sums were paid when they were of large size. One often sees paintings of this fish on the walls of the Roman houses. Oysters were another favourite edible fish among the Romans, and

Fishermen of Ancient Rome

oyster-beds were to be found all over the Roman Empire, where this fish was bred in order to satisfy the popular demand. A great deal could be written concerning the commercial fisheries of ancient Rome and the astonishing way in which fish was cooked and served up at banquets, but this is not a cookery-book, so I will pass on to mention some of their curious methods of catching fish.

According to Aristotle, kites were used to catch certain kinds of fish. Another classical author relates that the Sicilian shepherds had discovered that when they took their goats down to the sea to bathe almost immediately fish used to swim up to the shore, attracted, no doubt, by the smell of the goats. Noticing this, a fisherman had the inspiration to skin a dead goat and put the body in the water, with the result that he was always sure of taking much fish. On the Danube it was the custom to place a yoke of oxen on the bank of the river when about to capture the *silurus glanis*, a large fish that often measures more than nine feet in length. Attached to the middle of the yoke or collar of the oxen was a line, to the end of which was fastened a hook baited with the raw lungs of a wild bull. The fish would seize this as it floated about in the water, swallow the hook, and be drawn up on shore by the two oxen which were harnessed to the line. The ray, or skate, was supposed to be particularly sensitive to the sound of music. Aristotle tells us that it was the custom in certain places for a violinist to place himself in a fishing-boat and to attract skate with his music, while another man held a net over the side. The fish, hypnotized by the music, would allow themselves to be captured without offering any resistance!

Crabs were also supposed to love music, and could

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be induced to come up on to the beach if lured by the sound of a flute. Here is a curious method employed in certain parts of Greece to capture eels. The fisherman would place in the river part of the intestines of a dead sheep, first closing up one end. The eel would seize hold of this end and commence to devour the bait. The fisherman would then blow into the intestine at the other end, and the whole skin would swell, including the portion in the mouth of the eel. Not being able to separate its teeth from the bait, the fish would thus be easily caught !