
A Sea of Glass. Aquatic Imagery in Greco-Roman Art

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Résumé

A Sea of Glass. Aquatic Imagery in Greco-Roman Art

Greco-Roman art is full of images of aquatic fauna, whether in the scenery of mythological stories, seascape or shoreline panoramas with and without fishermen, or in depictions of individual species on fish plates, floor mosaics, or wall paintings. These often provide stunning details about the shape and coloring of individual fish whether shown alive or ready to be served. They also give a general sense of the sea and its shores as a habitat for animals and way of life for humans.

This paper, however, tries to go beyond iconography and understand how the material the depictions were made of betrays general physical, and more specific zoological and ecological knowledge of their subject matter. Building on the analogy between the sea and glass (Horace, *Odes* 4.2; *Revelation of John* 4.6; 15.2) – that is the confluence of water/liquid, sand/silica, and fire – I explore this context as one of interaction, production, symbiosis, and conflict between different agents, human and animal, terrestrial and aquatic. Visual imagery will be paired with technical knowledge as transmitted in Aristotle, Oppian, or Pliny's NH et al. Focus is on depictions of fish made in or with glass, such as in mosaics, on plates, in the form of inlays or flasks. The transparency of glass, its capacity to change color effects (especially apparent in filled as opposed to empty flasks) or to create optical illusion (the magnifying effect of glass and water) give the depicted species a particular liveliness as they emphasize the metamorphic aspects of their movement. At the same time, it propels them out of the dark sea, which is usually not considered transparent, as if onto a serving platter. Concurrently, water, sand, and fire also played a role in the hunting and lixiviation of fish

Mots-Clés: sea, glass, fish, environment, hunting, mosaics

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