

BOOK REVIEW

Harvesting the Sea: The Exploitation of Marine Resources in the Roman Mediterranean. By ANNALISA MARZANO. Oxford Studies on the Roman Economy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xvi+ 384, with 46 ill. Hardcover, \$150.00. ISBN 978-0-19-967562-3.

The author of this interesting and valuable work makes her goals very clear. This is not a book about recreational fishing or small scale harvesting of the bounty of the sea. It is specifically about the organized, large scale exploitation of the marine species available to late Roman civilization throughout the Mediterranean littoral. Thus, “octopus” does not appear in the index, for while assuredly eaten and hunted, it was not done so on a commercial level.

Such a subject could easily have been resulted in a tedious recitation of facts, and it is to Marzano’s credit that although often technical, the book generally reads engagingly. A brief listing of the chapter contents will indicate the scope of the ancient Romans’ use of the sea. Chapters 1 and 2 address fishing in the sea, rivers and lagoons; 3 and 4 study the salting of these fish and the creation of salt by which to do so; 5 and 6 deal with molluscs—the purple dye *murex*, shellfish for eating (especially oysters), and sidebars on pearls, coral, and “sea silk” (*bissus*); 7 studies fish farms; 8 studies fishing and the law; 8 deals with the effect demand had on prices and distribution. Appendix I offers the entire text with translation of a long inscription and Appendix II is a list of marine fish ponds in the Mediterranean. The bibliography is long and filled with citations from sources and in languages (e.g. Spanish) many scholars would not normally know about.

Most classicists are very aware of the central role the sea played in the life of the ancients, but having such a wealth of material collected in one place allows readers to expand this knowledge immensely. We learn of “tuna-spotters” and how they fit into the hunting of tuna. The smelly specifics of creating fish sauces are carefully set out and alternate forms of oyster farming are investigated. The economic impact of each type of exploitation is always addressed.

Marzano is to be praised for going beyond the “usual suspects” of Pliny the Elder, Oppian, Athenaeus, and the like. Inscriptions (always translated), coins, archaeological finds, and comparative ethnographic practices are commonly adduced to help offer theories as to the realities of ancient operations. Examples stretch from prehistoric Greek times, through the Middle Ages (where many written sources are cited) and on to modern practices in places as widespread as Wales, Japan, and Brazil. Such widely divergent material does raise one cautionary note. On a given page the reader may see evidence that spans thousands of years and that stems from widely divergent cultural heritages. This is not to say that such an approach is invalid. Quite to the contrary, it is exceptionally informative and useful. The reader, however, needs to be as judicious in making broad assertions based on such evidence as is Marzano herself.

The illustrations are of good quality, if sometimes attenuated in size. A magnifying glass will be useful. Typos are few and far between. This reader found himself wishing for a more thorough index and for clarification in certain areas: obscure place names are not always located within a country and there is no map; not all species names are clearly identified (“Mugilidae, sparidae, soleidae, moronidae, and anguillidae all enter lagoons ...,” 53) whereas popular names of fish could use scientific names to help the uninitiated (what, for example, is a “riverside” or “clupeid?”); sometimes a modern practice (e.g. the St. Andrew’s Cross (166) is inadequately explained). A quick internet search is often required to make sure one is following along. But such minor problems are far outweighed by the inherent interest of the book’s contents and the breadth of its scholarship. In sum, an excellent study. One hopes a paperback edition will make this information more readily affordable for students and interested parties.

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