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## The Image of κῆτος in Oppian of Cilicia's *Halieutica*

**Abstract:** The Greek word τὸ κῆτος has many meanings, all of them connected with miscellaneous water creatures. The didactic poem written by Oppian of Cilicia describes the inhabitants of the sea, κῆτεα included. In *Halieutica* the noun τὸ κῆτος is used to design various animals. The article presents the usage and different meanings of this word in Oppian's poem.

**Key words:** κῆτος, Oppian, *Halieutica*

*Halieutica* (*Fishing*) by Oppian of Corycus (or Anazarbus) in Cilicia, the author flourished in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, is a didactic poem in five books concerning the fishing, dedicated to the Emperor Antoninus and his son (the most probably to Marcus Aurelius and his heir Commodus). Oppian's biographer, Constantinus Manasses (12<sup>th</sup> century AD), writes about the origin of this poem (*Vita Oppiani*, Colonna). When the Emperor Severus was paying a visit in Cilicia, the only person who didn't show him any respect was philosopher Agesilaus, Oppian's father. Neglected Severus banished him to an island called Melite (Malta?). In his exile Agesilaus was accompanied by his son. On the island Oppian found an object of interest — the fish. He started to write a poem and finished it shortly before Severus' death. Thanks to this event, Oppian was able to visit Rome and try to gain a pardon for his father. After presenting *Halieutica* in the Roman court, Oppian was rewarded by the Emperor, who enjoyed it mostly because of its theme, language and hexameter. Finally, he could come back to his native country with his father. Unfortunately, the author died shortly after that, when he returned to Cilicia, and after his death he was commemorated by a splendid monument. An inscription on it praises his great talent and work. The poem contains not only

a piece of advice how to catch the fish, but is also an ichthyological compendium — and besides, describes also the other marine creatures. One of these creatures is κῆτος, which appears in *Halieutica* several times.

The noun τὸ κῆτος has a number of meanings which always refers to the aquatic animals and designs many types of real or mythological sea-monsters. Amongst the second group the most famous is undoubtedly the one which was supposed to devour princess Andromeda and was killed by the hero Perseus; also κῆτος of Troy, defeated by Hercules. However, in mythical poems κῆτος can mean common sea-animals (seals, dolphins, sharks, etc.) as well. Finally, it is the name of the constellation, which symbolizes the sea-monster from the mentioned above myth of Andromeda (this constellation, known in Latin as *Cetus*, nowadays is showed rather as a whale<sup>1</sup>). In scientific works the word κῆτος is used when the author wants to describe the fauna of e.g. a river, region or country (eventually in mythical narrations that are put to entertain the reader). Usually, it is not specified which creature is meant by this word, it refers rather to general groups. Sometimes some sea-gods can be called κήτεα: for example Glaucus (Strab. IX 2 Meineke) or Triton (Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* IV 1613—1616 Fraenkel).

At the very beginning, the author generally presents the main theme: “The tribes of the sea and the far scattered ranks of all manner of fishes, the swimming brood of Amphitrite, will I declare, O Antoninus, sovereign majesty of earth”<sup>2</sup>. Oppian declares that he will describe all kind of fish and things connected to them — their habits, dwellings, mating and breeding, life, even feelings — and finally, the ways of catching them. After that introduction Oppian’s narration concentrates on the description of labours, which a fishermen’s work is plenty of — in contrast to hunters seeking their prey in the mountains or woods where hunting itself is a pleasure. On the land people can also take the hounds to find the animals’ trails and help to kill them. The only one the fisherman can truly depend on is himself. Moving across the sea in tiny boat requires both skills and great courage — for humans’ lives can be endangered in any moment; it can perish not only because of the imminent storms, violent winds and waves. Beneath the surface of the water lurks the real horror — marine beasts, κήτεα. People who meet it, shiver with fear:

πρὸς δ’ ἔτι καὶ βλοσυρῆς δυσδερκέα δείματα λίμνης  
κῆτεα πεφρίκασι, τὰ τε σφίσιν ἀντιώσιν  
εὗτ’ ἂν ὑποβρυχίης ἄδυτον περόωσι θαλάσσης<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See also J.H. Rogers: “Origins of the ancient constellations: II. The Mediterranean traditions”. *Journal of the British Astronomical Association* 1998, Vol. 108, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Opp. *Halieut.* I 1—3, p. 201. In: *Oppian, Colluthus, Tryphiodorus*, with an English translation by A.W. Mair. Loeb 1928.

<sup>3</sup> Opp. *Halieut.* I 47—49 Mair.

The author calls them (κήτεια) δείματα (objects of fear, terror), adding the adjective δυσδερκέα — ugly; the word δείμα is used as a synonym for κήτος by several ancient writers, e.g. by Aratus of Soli (*Phaen.* 629 Martin).

Further in the first book, Oppian refers to κήτεια and their various species — each of them perilous and belligerent. Besides, he mentions or describes more precisely their features and habits. He writes as follows: “The Sea-monsters (κήτεια) mighty of limb and huge, the wonders of the sea, heavy with strength invincible, a terror for the eyes to behold and ever armed with deadly rage — many of these there be that roam the spacious seas, where are the unmapped prospects of Poseidon, but few of them come nigh the shore, those only whose weight the beaches can bear and whom the salt water does not fail”<sup>4</sup>. From amongst them Oppian successively enumerates such kinds (I 367—373): λέων (a kind of crab; a sea-monster<sup>5</sup>), ζύγαινα (a hammer-headed shark), πορδάλιες (a ravenous sea-fish), φύσαλοι (the poisonous toads/fish; kinds of whales), μέλαν θύνων ζαμενές γένος (“the impetuous black race of the Tunny”<sup>6</sup>), πρήστις (a saw-fish), λάμνη (a fierce shark), μάλθη (a great fish), κρίοι (the sea-monsters; kinds of mussels), ύαίνη (a sea-fish) and κύνες (the dog-fish or sharks). The last group contains 3 smaller which dwell different places, but are all fierce and strong:

[...] ἐν δὲ κύνεσι  
 τριχθαδὴ γενεή· τὸ μὲν ἄγριον ἐν πελάγεσσι  
 κήτεσι λευγαλέοις ἐναριθμίον· ἄλλα δε φύλα  
 διπλόα καρτίστοισι μετ’ ἰχθύσι δινεύονται  
 πηλοῖς ἐν βαθέεσι [...]

Sometimes, κήτεια can come out their natural watery environment — they flow out to the shore and rest on the beaches: “There are also those among the stern Sea-monsters (ἐνὶ κήτεσιν) which leave the salt water and come forth upon the life-giving soil of the dry land”<sup>8</sup>. The author provides us such names of species: ἐγγέλυνες (eels), χελώνη (a turtle), καστορίδες (sea-calves, seals), φάλαινα (a whale) and φῶκαι (seals). The most surprising here is the noun φάλαινα, a whale, which is not supposed to leave the sea. Diodorus Siculus, in the narration about the siege of Tyre in 332 BC, also describes amazingly huge κήτος, that

<sup>4</sup> Opp., I 360—366 Mair, p. 241: Κήτεια δ’ ὀβριμόγυια, πελώρια, θαύματα πόντου, ἄλκῃ ἀμαιμακέτω βεβριθότα, δείμα μὲν ὄσσοις εἰσιδέειν, αἰεὶ δ’ ὀλοῆ κεκορυθμένα λύσση, ἅμα μὲν εὐρυπόροισιν ἐνιστρέφεται πελάγεσσι, ἔνθα Ποσειδάωνος ἀτέκμαρτοι περιωταί, ἅπαντα δὲ ῥηγμῖνων σχεδὸν ἔρχεται, ὅσσα φέρουσιν, ἠιόνες βαρύνοντα καὶ οὐκ ἀπολείπεται ἄλμης.

<sup>5</sup> Compare to *LSJ*.

<sup>6</sup> Opp. I 369 Mair, p. 243.

<sup>7</sup> Opp. I 373—377 Mair, p. 243: “Of the Dog-fish there are three races; one fierce race in the deep seas is numbered among the terrible Sea-monsters; two other races among the mightiest fishes dwell in the deep mud”.

<sup>8</sup> Opp. I 394—395 Mair, p. 245.

was thrown by the great wave into a dam (surprisingly, despite its magnitude, the creature did not cause any damage), then laid and rested there for a while, and finally returned to the sea (XVII 41, 5—6 Vogel). Except providing the information, Oppian mentions a certain superstition related to the voice of καστορίδες — it's believed to bring misfortune and even death to whoever happens to listen to it. The similar thing is also contained in *Natura Animalium* of Claudius Aelianus, who writes about the ill-omened walrus' voice (IX 50 Hercher).

In the next passus the author describes a paradise for the fish, which is the Black Sea. Each spring, the fish come here to breed, since the water is the clearest and best for them; also surrounding area — the sandy beaches and beautiful shores — seems to be safe and profitable. The underwater caverns are shady, but there are no hostile creatures — like octopuses (πουλύπουδες), lobsters (άστακοί), crabs (πάγουροι) and κήτεα. No bigger animals dwell there, except for dolphins, but they are no menace for other beings. These mammals also belong to the group of κήτεα — they were classified as ones by Homer firstly (*Od.* XII 93—97 Dindorf):

ἐν δέ οἱ οὔτε τι κῆτος ἀνάρσιον οὔτε τι πῆμα  
ἐντρέφεται νεπόδεσιν ὀλέθριος οὐδὲ μὲν ὄσσοι  
δυσμενέες γεγάασιν ἐπ' ἰχθύσι βαιοτέροισιν  
ὄλκοι πουλυπόδων οὐδ' ἄστακοὶ οὐδὲ πάγουροι  
παῦροι μὲν δελφῖνες, ἀκιδνότεροι δὲ καὶ αὐτοὶ  
κητείης γενεῆς καὶ ἀκήδες ἐννεμέθονται<sup>9</sup>.

Next notices about monsters come from 5<sup>th</sup> book. Oppian compares there aquatic and terrestrial creatures which are known as dangerous and strong. He admits that more powerful are marine beasts: “And the huge Sea-monsters (κήτεα) that are bred in the habitations of Poseidon are, I declare, no whit meaner than the ravening children of the land, but both in strength and size the dauntless terrors of the sea excel”<sup>10</sup>. Terrestrial tortoises, dogs, leopards, hyenas and rams can not compete against aquatic ones. The boar does not have the strength that can be compared to the force of mighty λάμνη and the hammer-head's courage and valour surpasses even the lion's. Even the bears will be frightened to fight the terrible seal (!). Yet the biggest and most dangerous are “real” κήτεα, which live deep in the bottom of the oceans. There are so many of them and they are very huge (πλείστα τε καὶ περίμετρα<sup>11</sup>). Rarely do they come into sight because of gi-

<sup>9</sup> Opp. I 606—611 Mair, pp. 263, 265: “But no fierce Sea-monster inhabits there nor any deadly bane of the finny race nor any of those which prey upon the smaller fishes — no coiling Poulpe nor Lobster nor Crab; Dolphins, indeed, dwell there but few, and feebler even these than the Sea-monster breed and harmless”.

<sup>10</sup> Opp. V 21—24 Mair, p. 461.

<sup>11</sup> Opp. V 47 Mair.

gantic form and big weight, so they stay put at the bottom of the sea, they are also very gluttonous: “And not often do they come up out of the brine, but by reason of their heaviness they keep the bottom of the sea below. And they rave for food with unceasing frenzy, being always anhungered and never abating the gluttony of their terrible maw: for what food shall be sufficient to fill the void of their belly or enough to satisfy and give a respite to their insatiable jaws?”<sup>12</sup>. Their gluttony is so big, that they kill and devour each other:

[...] οἱ δὲ καὶ αὐτοὶ  
ἀλλήλους ὀλέκουσι, χερεῖονα φέρτερος ἀλκῆ  
πέφνων, ἀλλήλοισι δὲ βορῆ καὶ δαίτες ἔασι<sup>13</sup>.

Some of them may also leave the depths of the Ocean and stay near the surface. They frequently swim across the Iberian Sea and approach to the areas where the ships sail — there can be seen by the people from those ships’ crews. These big κήτεα resemble — because of their magnitude — ships with 20 oars (νήεσσιν ἔικοσόροισιν ὁμοῖα<sup>14</sup>). Strabo confirms the information about κήτεα in the Iberian Sea as well (III 2, 7 Meineke). Similar story is described by Diodorus Siculus, who mentions about group of huge sea-monsters seen from the ships of Nearchus’ fleet during the Alexander the Great’s expedition (XVII 106, 6—7 Vogel).

Oppian writes also about the other, rather unexpected side of κήτος — which as also described in all details by Claudius Aelianus in *Natura Animalium* (II 13 Hercher) — about its, so to speak, friendship with another animal. He gives a description of some kind of small fish, which serves as a guide for the big one, which because of own largeness and stoutness can not move and does not see far:

κήτει δ’ ἐκπάγλως κεχαρισμένος ἐστὶν ἑταῖρος  
πομπός τε φρουρός τε· φέρει δὲ μιν ἢ κ’ ἐθέλησι  
ρηιδίως.<sup>15</sup>

An invincible κήτος can make friends with this tiny fish, which guides it and shows the oceanic paths, food or warns it about dangers like the shallow water, dangerous reefs or fishermen’s traps. The guide can do this thanks to the motions of its tail, which shows the right direction. Although that small fish can easily lead κήτος to doom, it does not want to make any harm. The author compares that relationship to the situation from human world: among the people the wise will always rescue

<sup>12</sup> Opp. V 47—53 Mair, p. 463.

<sup>13</sup> Opp. V 53—55 Mair, p. 463: “Moreover, they themselves also destroy one another, the mightier in valour slaying the weaker, and one for the other is food and feast”.

<sup>14</sup> Opp. V 59 Mair.

<sup>15</sup> Opp. V 71—73 Mair.

the stronger, but not opposite. Unfortunately for it, when the guide fish happens to be missing or dies, the sea-monster is not able to find its way or shun the danger. It wonders around aimlessly, not knowing what to do. This is the chance for people to kill it: “Thereupon with eager thoughts the fishers hasten to the labour of the hunt, praying to the blessed gods of whale-killing (μακάρεσσι κητοφόνοις) that they may capture the dread monster of Amphitrite”<sup>16</sup>. Oppian uses here the word τέρας (a wonder; a sea-monster) as a substitute for κήτος.

After description of the species and habits of κήτεα, the author starts to relate how the hunting for them looks like. Many fishermen participate in that perilous action, and they must have a sophisticated, warlike equipment, which have to be prepared with great accuracy: special weapons such as iron blades, sharpen tridents and axes, big as for killing oxen. They also need better boats than for usual fishing. As they start the hunt, the fishermen must stay alert all the time and observe the sea’s surface attentively. When the beast, sleeping on the waves, is seen, people need to keep quiet while moving towards it and row with caution, in order to not to wake the monster; if not, the great κήτος will hearken to the sound of splashing and dive deep into the ocean:

μή τι μάθοι μάγα κήτος αλευόμενόν τε νέοιτο  
βυσσὸν ὑποβρυχίην, ἄλιον δέ κε μόχθον ἄροιντο.<sup>17</sup>

As it was said, the fishermen must exert themselves tirelessly, because it is very difficult to kill the monster through its magnitude and weight:

Κήτεα μὲν τοίοισιν ἐδηώσαντο πόνοισιν  
ὄσσα δέμας προβέβηκεν ὑερφυές, ἄχθεα πόντου.<sup>18</sup>

To be killed, κήτος must be firstly immobilized (with help of big harpoons and thick ropes that cannot be torn easily by the beast). After catching and killing the sea-monster, it is needed to be hauled up to the shore. However, sometimes κήτος crawls on the beach itself and because of its large size and — most of all — weight is not able to go back to the sea: “But when he comes nigh the land, then destruction real and final rouses him, and he struggles and lashes the sea with his terrible fins, like a bird upon the well-built altar tossing in the dark struggle of death. Unhappy beast! verily many an effort he makes to reach the waves but the strength of his valour is undone and his limbs obey him not and panting terribly he is dragged to land”<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Opp. V 111—113 Mair, p. 469.

<sup>17</sup> Opp. V 158—159 Mair.

<sup>18</sup> Opp. V 350—351 Mair, p. 487: “Such are the labours by which they slay those Sea-monsters which exceed in monstrous bulk of body, burdens of the sea”.

<sup>19</sup> Opp. V 304—311 Mair, p. 483.

Finally, Oppian writes again about one of fishermen's superstitions. They do believe that some of marine threats can be avoided: the storm, danger of meeting the sea-monster (κήτειον πῆμα) or whatever else. Fishermen pray and beseech sea gods to help and protect them from any peril connected with sailing and sometimes this help really comes. Besides, there exists some kind of fish, also known as 'Beauty-fish', κάλλιχθυσ (fishermen call it 'the holy fish', ἱερὸς ἰχθύς). It is the sign of sea tracks' safety. If the sea track is safe, it means that it is free from an invincible κήτος:

οὐ γάρ πω κείνησι νομαῖς ἔνι κήτος ἄαπτον,  
οὐ δάκος, οὐδέ τι πῆμα θαλάσσιον ἄλλο φαάνθη,  
ἀλλ' αἰεὶ καθαροῖσιν ἀπημάντοισι τε πόροισι  
τερπονται· τῷ καὶ μιν ἐφήμισαν ἱερὸν ἰχθύν<sup>20</sup>.

What's that holy fish — we do not know, but it seems to be some kind of animal which is opposed to κήτος — the symbol of the terror and danger of the sea. The adjective ἱερὸς appears as an epithet of a fish also in *Iliad*. Homer describes a fight between Patroclus and Thestor, son of Enops; Patroclus pierces his opponent with a spear and drags him out of the chariot like a fisherman sitting on the seashore rocks drags the holy fish (ἱερὸς ἰχθύς) from the sea to the land (XVI 407 Allen).

In the 1<sup>st</sup> book Oppian calls κήτεια horrors of the sea. They are mostly big aquatic creatures, fierce and strong. To emphasize the features (rather negative) of the sea-monsters Oppian uses adjectives, which lay stress on their magnitude (ὄβριμόγυιον, πελώριον, μέγα, περίμετρον). He also describes κήτος as hostile and invincible (ἀνάρσιον, ἄαπτον) and uses some synonyms that show its threatening and wondrous nature: δυσδερκές (awful, abominable) δαίμα, τέρας, θαῦμα πόντου. The enormous weight of κήτεια is mentioned several times in *Halieutica*; the author even calls them the burdens of the sea (ἄχθεια πόντου).

Some of them can also stay on the dry land; not all of them are aggressive towards the other beings (e.g. the dolphins). People can kill it as well, but a hunting itself is very risky. Yet, the biggest and most terrifying sea-monsters live in the deepest parts of the ocean, in the dominions of Poseidon — whose true servants they are, according to Homer (*Il.* XIII 27—28 Allen).

So far we examined the text of the poem, Oppian uses the word κήτος to determine the water animals like sharks or whales; it's rather a general name for them. The same thing is seen in Homer's poems — the poet enumerates several kinds of κήτεια: for example seals, which are described as fat, ζατερεφεῖς (*Od.* IV 443, 450—451 Dindorf). *Halieutica* is a scientific work where the author writes about

<sup>20</sup> Opp. V 629—632 Mair, p. 511: "for where these range there never yet hath any dread Sea-monster appeared nor noxious beast nor hurtful thing of the sea but always they delight in clean and harmless paths: wherefore also men have named it the Holy Fish".



real creatures and their features — it has obviously didactic purposes. He describes the superstitions connected to κήτεια partly because it makes the narration more attractive, and for the reason that mythical or fabulous tales are often kind of justification if there are no reasonable evidences.