

Information about fish from tales and myths

DIRK HEINRICH

Institut für Haustierkunde, Neue Universität
Olshausenstr. 40, D-24118 Kiel, Deutschland

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ABSTRACT: Legends may comprise some essence of truth and thus can provide information about fish in a historical context, if they deal with that vertebrate group. This is shown by some examples from Schleswig-Holstein. The use of such legends in connection with archaeozoological studies is discussed. The first case concerns the disappearance of a species, herring (*Clupea harengus*) from the waters of Helgoland and cod (*Gadus morhua*) from the outlet of the Schlei. Appearances and disappearances of herring as a periodic phenomenon are well known from the Norwegian and Swedish fisheries, and the literature also hints at disappearances of cod. In connection with cod there is mention of a splinter, which can be interpreted as a special fishing tackle. The second example deals with special fishery rules which can possibly be deduced from a tale about bream (*Abramis brama*) fishing in the Schlei. And the last case deals with historical fauna. The legend in question records the presence of wels (*Silurus glanis*) in a locality near the Elbe estuary which helps to reconstruct the former distribution area of the European catfish.

KEYWORDS: *CLUPEA HARENGUS*, *GADUS MORHUA*, *ABRAMIS BRAMA*, *SILURUS GLANIS*, SPECIES DISAPPEARANCE, FISHING IMPLEMENTS, FISHERY RULES, FAUNAL HISTORY

RESUMEN: Por su posibilidad de incorporar elementos veraces, las leyendas pueden proporcionar información acerca de peces (caso de tratar sobre ellos) en contextos históricos. Este trabajo presenta algunos casos procedentes de la región de Schleswig-Holstein. El primer ejemplo se refiere a la desaparición del arenque (*Clupea harengus*) en las aguas de Helgolandia y del bacalao (*Gadus morhua*) en la desembocadura del Schlei. Las apariciones y desapariciones periódicas de arenque son hechos bien documentados en las pesquerías suecas y noruegas y la bibliografía también esboza posibles desapariciones del bacalao. En relación con este último hecho se menciona una esquirla que puede interpretarse como un tipo especial de aparejo de pesca. El segundo ejemplo trata de la normativa de pesquerías que podemos inferir en una historia de pesca de brama (*Abramis brama*) en el Schelei. El último caso trata de faunas históricas. La leyenda en cuestión menciona la presencia de siluros (*Silurus glanis*) en una localidad cerca del estuario del Elba que ayuda a reconstruir la distribución pretérita de esta especie. Se valora, por último, la utilidad de tales leyendas en conexión con los estudios arqueozoológicos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *CLUPEA HARENGUS*, *GADUS MORHUA*, *ABRAMIS BRAMA*, *SILURUS GLANIS*, DESAPARICIÓN DE ESPECIES, APAREJOS DE PESCA, NORMATIVAS DE PESQUERÍAS, HISTORIA FAUNÍSTICA

INTRODUCTION

In the following I discuss information about fish that is provided by folk tales and myths. All people have such traditional legends, some of them probably dealing with our vertebrate group of interest. About 150 years ago the philologist of the German language, Karl Müllenhoff, collected tales and myths told by the indigenous population of

Schleswig-Holstein (Figure 1) as well as some that had already been written down (Müllenhoff, 1921). In my opinion these legends, which have been told for generations, often contain an essence of truth. However, legends which concern fish are rare in Müllenhoff's collection. I have found only four convincing ones. They give evidence on several different points of interest relating to fish, that is ecological changes, fishing equipment, fishery rules, and the former distribution of a species.

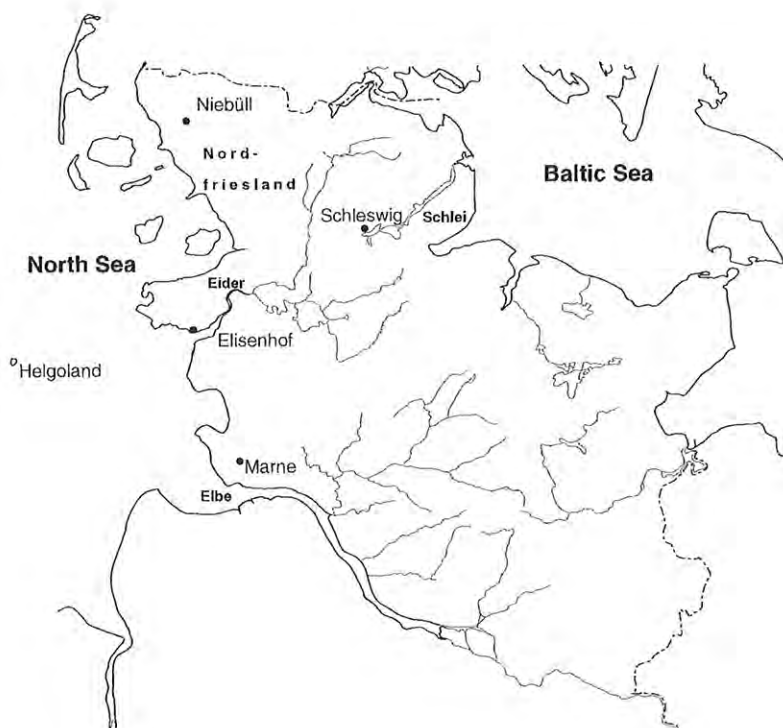


FIGURE 1

Schleswig-Holstein. The topographic situation of the localities and waters mentioned

THE LEGENDS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

The first legend deals with the vanishing of the herring, *Clupea harengus*, from the waters around the island Helgoland in the German Bight.

The herrings of Helgoland

When Christianity was introduced to the isle of Helgoland, one of the old idols became renamed. That was because this particular idol always used to guarantee good fortune to the fishery. One year the herrings did not appear as usual. Therefore people took the idol and carried it round the island three times. While doing so a few hooligans started maltreating the idol. Not one herring has come back to Helgoland ever since.

Other people tell the story this way: there always used to be one particular crucifix that was carried around the island before fishermen put to sea. This ceremony made the herring surface in large numbers. Therefore it was easy for the fishermen to catch sufficient fish. One day one of the fishermen got cocky. He caught a herring,

whipped it and threw it back into the water. Thereupon all the herrings left the area and in addition almost all the people on the island caught the plague. Only 14 survived (Müllenhoff, 1921, 142, No. 202).

This tale, which had already been reported in a similar version by Gesner in 1558 (1981, reprint of the edition from 1670), points to the well known phenomenon of the appearances and disappearances of herring. Those are not only sporadic or seasonal events, like spawning and feeding migrations, but especially long-term periodic ones. Scandinavian scientists first discovered and studied this periodicity of the Norwegian, the Bohuslanian and the Scanian herring fisheries, and Ljungman (cited in Cushing, 1982, 80ff.) reconstructed, based on historic sources about the catches, for the Bohuslan fishery a periodicity of 110 years, which included good as well as poor fisheries, going back to A.D. 915. These authors also observed a certain degree of alternation between the fishery of autumn spawning herring off the

Bohuslän coast and that of the Atlanto-scandian spring herring off the coast of Norway. It is now thought that the greatest changes on a secular scale are due to changes of some orders of magnitude in recruitment or year-class strength. These changes, however, are influenced by climatic factors. Thus the Scanian fishery, which is said to be of fundamental importance for the development of the Hanseatic League, ended at the end of the 16th century, just before the so-called Little Ice Age started (Cushing, 1982).

Increase or decrease of herring populations are also known from other areas. For Helgoland it is said that herring was caught there until A.D. 1425. It then disappeared, to return 105 years later when the herring fishery prospered again for a time (Riedel, 1957). Thus the tale cited by Müllenhoff probably has an element of truth. The disappearance of herring, but not its reappearance, is the topic of the story, impressively explained by Cushing (1982, 95): «The collapse of a herring fishery remains in men's memories longer than its advent, because the disaster has destroyed their livelihood».

A second legend about the disappearance of a species concerns cod, *Gadus morhua*, in the western Baltic (Heinrich, 1986). It may also point in certain probability to a special fishing tackle, a so-called gorge, a pointed wooden or bony bar placed in a bait which will turn transverse in the throat of the predator eating it.

The cod frightened away

In the old days so many cods were usually caught near the outlet of the Schlei, a brackish inlet of the western Baltic, that finally even domestic servants and day-labourers spurned it. One day, a girl committed a big outrage. She took a huge cod and forced a splinter right through its eyes. She then threw it back into the Baltic Sea. While doing so, she wished it a pleasant journey and asked it not to come back again. Ever since the fine gift of God has disappeared, and cod is nowadays so rarely to be seen that it can only be found on the menu of the wealthy (Müllenhoff, 1921, 143, No. 203).

It might be that this «splinter» refers to a gorge. Gorges are known from various sites, such as Elisenhof, an early historical rural settlement situated at the estuary of the river Eider. Of course such implements may also have been useful for catching

other large-sized predators among fishes, as well as waterfowl (Sirelius, 1934). Considering cod fishing originally was done with a line rather than nets (von Brandt, 1975), it is possible that people at the coast of the western Baltic used such gorges for this purpose.

Cod is a resident species in the western part of the Baltic. As a demersal fish it resists better environmental factors than does the pelagic herring. Nevertheless, it did disappear now and then. This is reported by Duncker (1960), who also mentioned Müllenhoff's legend. According to Krøyer (1843-45), too, there once was a decline in the cod stock of the Abenraa Fjord, the utmost western bight of the Baltic, as well as one of the stock of the Odense Fjord in the southernmost part of the Kattegat.

Certain rules of a fishery probably are the topic of a legend which deals with the bream, *Abramis brama*, in the Schlei.

«Black Greet»

Two poor fishermen who lived on the Schleswiger Holm had been working all night without any success. Sadly they hauled in their empty nets for the last time. Sadly they turned their boats towards home. All of the sudden «Black Greet» appeared to them. –«Black Greet» is the local name of the Danish Queen Margarete who died 1283 A.D. and who as a feudal lady had a lot of influence in the dukedom of Schleswig. – To local fishermen she is a common and well-known appearance. She always turned up in royal splendour and was covered with pearls and diamonds, and she always was dressed in black. She spoke to the fishermen: «Put out your nets once more. You will make a good haul. But you must throw back the best fish you catch into the sea.» They promised to do so and did as they were told. The haul was that big that it would hardly fit into their boat. One of the fishes, however, was bristling all over. There were golden coins instead of scales, fins made from emerald and pearls on top of its nose. «That is the best one» one of the fishermen said and wanted to throw it back into the sea. The other one took away the fish from him and hid it underneath the big pile of fish they had caught, so that Greet would not see it. Then he pulled towards home quickly, for he was scared. His mate only reluctantly obeyed him. While they kept rowing the rest of the fish also turned golden since they had caught it from the «goldfish». But the gold was heavy and so the boat got heavier and slowly sunk into the depth and took the nasty one with

it. The other fisherman just escaped from drowning and told his friends at home the story (Müllenhoff, 1921, 165-166, No. 246).

The best fish of the catch obviously recalls a male bream in the spawning season, when it develops special tubercles on its body and the older individuals glitter with golden colour (Ladiges & Vogt, 1979).

This species of low commercial value today was in earlier times economically very important for the fishermen of the Holm, the fishing community of Schleswig. They used to fish the bream collectively with a certain team-seine. That happened during the winter, when the bream was crowded into shoals (Neubaur & Jaeckel, 1935-37; Nellen, 1968). This special fishery started on the 10th of December and lasted until the arrival of the spawning herring in the Schlei in March or April (H. Ross, head of the fishing community of the Holm, Schleswig, pers. com.). It was exclusively a collective fishery, which was limited to the winter season especially in order to protect the bream during its own spawning season from May to July. The message of the legend can be interpreted as a warning against the twofold sacrilege of catching spawning bream and doing this outside the community.

Finally I mention a legend that points to the former presence of a species at a locality where it is absent today. There is no doubt from the description that the wels or European catfish, *Silurus glanis*, is the subject.

The coffinfish

At Marnerdike there are swamps and areas covered with water which developed after the bursting of the dike. People say a fish called coffinfish lives there. It is as big as a calf and it carries a coffin on its back. To see one is a portent to fishermen and everyone else that they will soon drown. That is the reason why parents warn their children not to play out there at late hours so the children do not run the risk of seeing a coffinfish (Müllenhoff, 1921, 261, No. 389).

Marne is a small town situated a little north of the Elbe estuary and somewhat beyond the western boundary of the distribution area known for the wels in the lower Elbe region recently, that is, in the beginning of this century (Duncker, 1960). It is further noteworthy that subfossil remains of this species were found at the aforementioned settlement Elisenhof, which was located at the Eider es-

tuary, 40 to 50 km northward from Marne and thus further from the distribution area of the species (Heinrich, 1994a). Hence this tale of the coffinfish joins the subfossil finds from Elisenhof with the recent range and helps confirm a former, more extensive distribution (Heinrich, 1994b). Obviously in earlier times the wels inhabited the whole river Elbe and probably could invade even the river Eider when this river was still a tributary of the Elbe, before the transgression of the North Sea in this area (Figge, 1980).

DISCUSSION

Although animal remains must always be the material basis of archaeozoological work, other sources like those presented above may be taken into consideration, for they can provide interesting supplementary information of various kinds. Ecological aspects were shown for herring and cod. While increases and declines of herring populations and the related fisheries may be explained by recruitment influenced by climatic factors, no reason for similar alterations in cod populations is evident. The legend that deals with wels is an example of using this source for investigations into faunal history, for it can give information which is like one piece in the puzzle. Special fishing implements as well as fishery rules may also be reported, as in two further legends.

From Müllenhoff's collection only four legends could be studied. Other similar sources might provide more tales about fish, as well as other animal groups of archaeozoological interest.

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