

Fishing in Hispanic Society: Exploitation and consumption in Late antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

Patricia Ana Argüelles Álvarez

University of Salamanca  

Laura Casal Fernández

Museo Arqueológico Provincial de Ourense  

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Abstract: Through this study, we approach the treatment of Hispanic fishing in early medieval society. In particular, we will make a historiographical review based on the main historical and legislative sources to understand the role and social configuration of the exploitation of fishery resources. Likewise, we turn to the archaeological record to better understand the productive process of both fishing and conservation. Finally, we highlight the role of fish in the diet of Hispanic society.

Keywords: Fishing; food; rural economy; Late antiquity; Early Middle Ages; Visigoths; Hispania.

[es] La pesca en la sociedad hispana: Explotación y consumo entre la Tardoantigüedad y la Alta Edad Media

Resumen: Mediante el presente estudio nos aproximamos al tratamiento de la pesca hispana en la sociedad altomedieval. En particular, haremos un repaso historiográfico a través de las principales fuentes históricas y legislativas para comprender el papel y la configuración social respecto a la explotación de los recursos pesqueros. Igualmente, acudimos al registro arqueológico para comprender mejor el proceso productivo tanto de pesca como de conservación. Por último, ponemos en relación el papel del pescado en la dieta de la sociedad hispana.

Palabras clave: Pesca; alimentación; Tardoantigüedad; Alta Edad Media; Visigodos; Hispania.

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1. Introduction¹

Fishing has been a basic activity in the economy of the Iberian Peninsula throughout its history. Undoubtedly, this circumstance has been favoured by its particular geographical location, in a peninsular territory, surrounded by seas, as well as by the

existence of a dense hydrographic network, characterised by its fish richness.

The medieval diet was predominantly based on cereal consumption and, to a lesser extent, wine and meat. Indeed, fish was also relatively present, depending on the period of the year and the geographical area, regardless of access to rivers, lakes and the sea. It seems that fishing *per se* did not constitute the main productive activity, within the Medieval Hispanic economy. However, with this study, we show through a reading of historical-archaeological sources, that this activity, always in the background in relation to hunting, had its relevance in certain local economies. As we have pointed out hunting seems

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to have enjoyed a higher consideration, of greater value, than fishing. This idea seems to date back to Classical times, as reflected in the Greco-Latin sources themselves:

“How miserable is the life of poor people, especially when they have nothing to earn a living and have not learned any art. They must necessarily be satisfied with what they possess at home. From the way we dress, you can imagine how scanty our riches are. These hooks and rods are our way of life and our only source of income. Every day we come from the city to the sea to seek our sustenance; this is our gymnastic exercise and our arena. We try to catch urchins, limpets, oysters, barnacles, shells, sea nettle, mussels and striated ‘plagusias’ (...).”²

Meanwhile, as referring to the virtues of bravery and cunning, as well as the intellectual ones, the Stoics, as an isolated case, praised the fisherman over the hunter:

“Semi-divine men sail over the mysterious sea with daring hearts (...) and with their arts they have drawn the map of the sea (...). The [hunters] are not so deterred by winter, nor are they so affected by the heat of summer, because hunters have many shelters (...) many rivers of silver (...) thirst relief and perennial bath dispensers (...) the long-suffering fishermen are always in contact with the cold and wildly angry water that even produces fright (...). In fragile boats they wander, slaves of the storms, with their minds always attentive (...). They have no shelter from the raging winds, no defense against the rains, and no protection from the summer heat. There are no hounds to guide the fishermen on the marine path (...) young men drive a boat (...) and at the stern the most skilled pilot guides the ship (...).”³

² Rudens 290-300: “Omnibus modis qui pauperes sunt homines miseri vivunt, praesertim quibus nec quaestus est, nec didicere artem ullam: necessitate quidquid est domi id sat est habendum. nos iam de ornatu propemodum ut locupletes simus scitis: hisce hami atque haecharundines sunt nobis quaestu et cultu. ex urbe ad mare huc prodimus pabulatum: pro exercitu gymnastico et palaestrico hoc habemus; echinos, lopadas, ostreas, balanos cap tamus, conchas, marinam urticam, musculos, plagusias striatas”, in Plauto, *Comedias*, III. El Cartaginés - Pséudolo - La Maroma - Estico - Tres monedas - Truculento - Vidularia - Fragmentos. Trans. M. González-Haba. Madrid: Gredos, 2002.

³ Hal. I, 9-63: “ἄτηδηλον ἐπιπλώουσι θάλασσαν τολμηρή κραδίη, κατὰ δ' ἔδρακον οὐκ ἐπίσπιτα βένθεα καὶ τέχνησιν ἀλλὸς διὰ μέτρα δάσαντο δαιμόνιοι (...) οὐδ' ἄρα τοῖς οὐ χείμα τόσον δέος, οὐ μὲν ὀπτώρι φλέγμα φέρει· πολλαὶ γάρ ἐπακτήρων ἀλεωραὶ λόχμαι τε σκιεραὶ καὶ δειράδες ἄντρα τε πέτρης αὐτόροφου· πολλοὶ δὲ τιτανόμενοι κατ' ὀρεσφιν ἀργύρεοι ποταμοί, δίψης ἄκος ἡδὲ λοετρῶν ἀνενοι ταρίαι (...) τλησπιόνοις δ' ἀλιεῦσιν ἀτέκμαρτοι μὲν ἄεθλοι, ἐλπῖς δ' οὐ σταθερή σαίνει φρένας ἥγετ' ὄνειρος οὐ γάρ ἀκίνητου γαῖης ὑπερ ἀθλεύουσιν, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ κρυερῷ τε καὶ ἀσχετα μαργαρινοῖς ὕδατι συμφορέονται, ὁ καὶ γαίηθεν ἰδέσθαι δεῖμα φέρει καὶ μαῦνον ἐν ὅμμασι πειρήσασθαι δούραστι δ' ἐν βαιοῖσιν ἀελλάων θεράποντες πλαζόμενοι, καὶ θυμὸν ἐν οἴδημασιν αἰέν ἔχοντες, αἰεὶ μὲν νεφέλην ἰοιεδά παππαίνουσιν, αἰεὶ δὲ τρομέουσι μελαινόμενον πόρον ἄλμης οὐδέ τι φοιταλέων ἀνέμων σκέπτας, οὐδέ τιν' ὅμβρων ἀλκήν, οὐ πυρὸς ἀλκαρ ὀπτωρινοῖ φέρονται (...) οὐ μὲν τις σκυλάκων ἀλίην ὄδον ἡγεμονεύει ἰχθυβόλοις· ἵχνη γάρ ἀειδελα νηχομένοισιν οὐδ' οἵ γ' εισορόσωσιν ὅπτη σχεδὸν ἴζεται ἄγρης (...) νῆσα μὲν εὐγόμφωτον, ἔūζυγον, ἔξοχα κούφην, αἰζηοι κώπησιν

In Medieval Europe there was a combined consumption of both wild and farmed fish, of marine and freshwater origin.⁴ It is possible that the social prominence of hunting versus fishing, is the reason why there is a thematic *hiatus* in this topic of research on late antique and early medieval fishing,⁵ in the face of the relative abundance and profusion of studies on the hunting issue in this period.⁶

2. Fishing in the historical sources

2.1. Early Medieval time historical sources

The oldest documented allusion which mentions references of fishing, for the late antique and early medieval Hispanic period, is Alfonso X's First Chronicle of Spain, which includes a passage: “De Alarigo rey de los godos et de lo que contesçio en el primero anno del su regnado”⁷, the year in which Alaric II climbed to the throne, after Euric's death. This passage tells for the fourth year of mandate, that is, the year 462, the surprising particularity of some fish with “written” scales, caught in the Miño River:

“Del secundo anno fastal quarto de regnado del rey Alarigo non fallamos ninguna cosa que de contar sea que a la estoria de Espanna pertenezca, si non tanto que en el segundo pescaron los omnes de tierra de Gallizia en el rio que dizen Minno unos pesçes que tenien en las escamas escriptas la era desse anno. En el quarto murio el papa Anastasio et pusieron en su lugar a Simaco el primero, que fue el XLIX Apostoligo”.⁸

To understand the relationship between fishing and its consumption in the early Middle Ages (Fig. 1), it is essential to examine Isidore of Seville's work and his *Etymologies*, dating to the seventh century. Here is the allusion to certain food preparations that include fish among their main ingredients.⁹ The author also describes some of the best known and most

ἐπειγομένης ἐλόωσι, νῶτον ἀλλὸς θείνοντες· ὁ δ' ἐν πρύμνησιν ἄριστος θείνητρος ἀλιστὸν ἄγει καὶ ἀμεμφέα νῆσα χῶρον ἐς εύρυαλόν τε καὶ εὔδια πορφύροντα (...)", in Opiano, *De la caza. De la pesca*. Trans. C. Calvo Delcán. Madrid: Gredos, 1990.

⁴ Montanari, Massimo. *La fame e l'abbondanza. Storia dell'alimentazione in Europa*. Firenze: Economica Laterza, 1993.

⁵ Argüelles Álvarez, Patricia and Laura Casal Fernández. “Explotaciones primarias en el territorio visigodo: una mirada histórica de la pesca”. *Urbs regia*, 9, (2025): 145-155.

⁶ See, for example, Díaz, Pablo de la Cruz. “Cerdos y otras bestias. Pastos comunales/pastos públicos en la Lex Visigothorum”. *Melánges de la Casa Velázquez*, 51-2, (2021): 15-33; Gómez-Pantoja, Joaquín, ed. *Los rebaños de Gerón: Pastores y trashumancia en Iberia antigua y medieval*. Madrid: Colección de la Casa Velázquez, 2001.

⁷ Primera Crónica General de España. *Estoria de España de Alfonso X*. Ed. R. Menéndez Pidal and D. Catalán. Vol. I, Madrid: Gredos, 1977, 244-245.

⁸ “From the second to the fourth year of the reign of King Alarigo we do not find anything worth relating to the history of Spain, but except that in the second year the men of the land of Galicia fished in the river called Minno, some fish that had a text written in their scales indicating the year's era. In the fourth year, Pope Anastasius died, and Simachus I, who was the XLIX Apostle, was put in his place”.

⁹ “(...) Picadillo (minutual) owes its name to the fact that it is made with fish, meatballs and vegetables very finely chopped (minutatim) (...). Martisium is made by mashing the fish in a mortar, hence its name. Isocis is a kind of fish with which, at first, the isicum was made (...”, (Etim. XX, 2) in Isidoro de Se-

widely demanded fish sauces in the Roman world, such as *garum*, *liquamen* or *muria*, which would be kept along the Visigothic reign.¹⁰ Regarding the production and consumption of salt, Book XVI mentions the existence of several types of salt mines, describing their operation. Isidore of Seville alludes to the existence of different kinds of salt.¹¹ On the other hand, an authentic catalogue of the fish known so far is included, naming and describing their features.¹² References to certain marine species are of interest here, since the author named the methods used to capture them in his explanation.¹³ Thus, fishing with hooks appears in the description of the octopus and a fish called *hamio* by Isidore of Seville, and possibly an identifiable one, with the genus *Gasterosteus*.¹⁴ For the capture of the *scarida*, the author calls for the use of fishing nets, and in the case of the mullet, he alludes to the use of pots, as well as other kinds of traps, of an undefined typology to catch the cuttlefish. Isidore of Seville probably refers to the use of some kind of harpooned fishing instrument when he names the spear used in the capture of the torpedo, probably identifiable with a family of rays of the order *Torpediniformes*.

The work of Isidore of Seville also offers a description of some of the fishing nets, known and used at the time,¹⁵ among which he mentions, in general

villa, *Etimologías*, II. Ed. y trans. J. Oroz Reta and M.A. Marcos Casquero (Madrid: Ed. Católica, 1995).

¹⁰ (...) Garum is a fish-based liquid sauce. In the past it was made with a fish that the Greeks called garos; although today an infinite variety of fish is used in its preparation, it nevertheless retains the name of the fish with which it began to be made. Liquamen is given this name because the minnows dissolved in this sauce liquefied, giving rise to such a condiment. This sauce is known as salsugo (salting) or muria (brine). However, in its proper sense, muria is the name given to water in which salt has been dissolved, and which has a taste similar to seawater (...)", Isidoro de Sevilla, *Etimologías*, XX, 3.

¹¹ Isidoro de Sevilla, *Etimologías*, XVI, 2.

¹² Isidoro de Sevilla, *Etimologías*, XII, 6.

¹³ (...) The mullet is called this because it is very agile (multum agilis): when it realises that there are fishermen's traps being set, it immediately retreats and escapes from the net, so lightly as the fish were flying (...) The *scarida* (...) People said that it is an animal endowed with ingenuity and that, when it has fallen into a net, it does not try to get out from it by breaking it with its forehead, or by putting its head between the meshes, but, swimming backwards, giving continuous flicks of the tail, escapes through the opening of the net (...) The *hamio* lives among the stones (...) It is called *hamio* because it is only caught with hooks (hamus) (...) The octopus (polypus) (...) This is a clever animal: when it wants to seize the bait of a hook, it catches it with its arms, not with its mouth, and does not let go until it has devoured it completely. The torpedo fish (...) is an animal that, if touched with a spear or a stick (...) feels its arms get numb (...) We give the cuttlefish (cuttlefish) its name because it is easily caught with a cane pot (sepes) (...) Isidoro de Sevilla, *Etimologías*, XII, 6.

¹⁴ García, Rosalía. "A propósito de los ictiónimos en 'De piscibus' *Etimologías* 12.6 de Isidoro de Sevilla". *Habis* 32 (2001): 553-575.

¹⁵ "The nets are called like this because they retain the fish (retinere); or by the ropes (restis) with which they are stretched. Although less frequently, the network is called synplagium, derived from *plaga*, because, in its strict sense, *plagae* are the ropes that, located at the top and bottom, serve to lay the nets. The sheath is a type of fishing net, so called, because it is thrown to the bottom. For the same reason it is called *iaculum*, derived from *iactare* (to throw) (...) *Tragum* is a variant of fishing net that is called *trabere*, to drag. It is also known as *verriculum*, because *verrere* (to sweep) is to drag (...)", Isidoro de Sevilla, *Etimologías*, XIX, 5.

terms, trawl gear or others used particularly to capture species that lived on the seabed. Saint Isidore's explanation of the term "net" is very interesting, since he recognised the essential importance of the existence of two ropes, an upper one (with corks or floats) and a lower one (with weights), whose balance of forces allows the net to be kept immersed in the water at a certain height by fisherman.



Fig. 1. Visigoth script with fish motif decoration. *Lectionnaire pour les différentes fêtes de l'année à partir de Noël, à l'usage de l'abbaye de Silos. Écriture visigothique du XI siècle.* II (fol. 35v). Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des Manuscrits. NAL 2176 (2) <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8457364k/f14.item.r=ecriture%20Visigothique%20lectionnaire> [01/11/2024]

Thus, in Middle Ages, as in the earlier Classical world, in addition to the net and the hook (with or without a rod), harpoons and pots were also used for fishing, and on the Atlantic coast marsh fisheries appeared.¹⁶ However, the methods and techniques of halieutical activities varied over time, and were also conditioned by the geography itself, the climate and the type of species to be captured.

In Medieval times, fishing in continental waters experienced its peak, in parallel with the development of Christianity and religious orders. During this period, the link between the monastic lordship and the organization of river fishing was confirmed.¹⁷ In order to obtain a maximum productivity, mass capture methods were practiced, with nets and pots proliferating, to the detriment of fishing with line and hook (Fig. 2). We must keep in mind that current

¹⁶ Contamine, Philippe, Stéphane Lebecq, Jean-Luc Sarrazin and Marc Bompaire. *La economía medieval*. Madrid: Akal, 2000, 152.

¹⁷ Ferreira Priegue, Elisa. *Galicia en el comercio marítimo continental*. A Coruña: Universidad Santiago de Compostela, 1998.

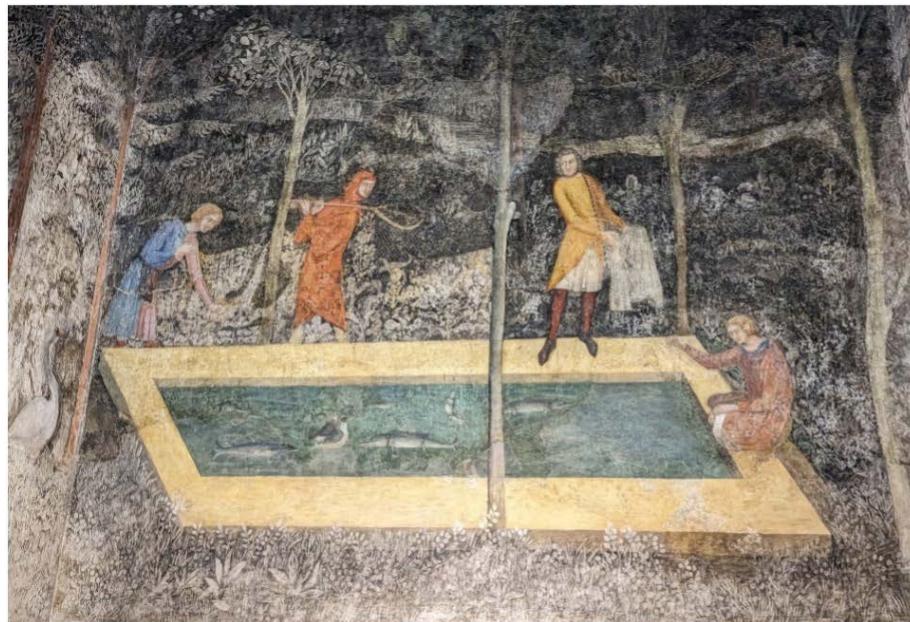


Fig. 2. Scene with fishing gears in a pond. Palace of the Popes in Avignon, The Stag Room (fourteenth century). Photo: L. Casal Fernández

fishing conditions are very different from those ones of the Medieval world, both in the marine environment and in the river and lake one.

As stated above, in Middle Ages marsh fisheries proliferated. The coast was subject to jurisdiction and was capable of ownership, encompassing the waters up to a certain distance from the shoreline. The shore areas were delimited by different fishing methods, such as the so-called fishing corrals (Fig. 3). Some of these marsh fisheries date back to the early medieval period, such as the wooden structure unearthed at the Blackwater estuary (UK) dating from between the seventh and tenth centuries.¹⁸ Although it is not known who was responsible for the exploitation of this trapping system, the monastery of Bradwell-on-Sea nearby, founded in the middle of the seventh century. The large quantities of fish that could be caught by this method suggest the production of surpluses for commercial purposes, beyond the supply of a single community. The fish would have been processed by one of the known preservation methods (salting, drying, smoking and pickling), for subsequent distribution and sale.

2.2. Early Medieval legislative sources

In the first centuries of the early Middle Ages, it is very interesting to analyse the legislation linked to fishing rights in the Hispanic context. Thus, we observe that although hunting plays an important role, when it comes to regulating its practice, the same does not occur with fishing.¹⁹ In fact, there is no specific law in this regard. The Breviary of Alaric or *Lex Romana Visigothorum*, dated from the beginning of the sixth century, makes a significant reference of the importance of correctly exploiting both hunting and fishing

resources: "The fishing and hunting are considered an instrument as important as the fundo. It is required to obtain the maximum yield from the farm".²⁰

We find several allusions in the *Lex Visigothorum*, dating from the seventh century, which provide insight into the processes and regulations of fishing. We note that fishing was considered a free activity, and anyone could fish. Normally, this was done with a net. However, private individuals who owned land adjacent to the river had to follow certain regulations. Owners of bordering lands had the right to build a dam from their bank to the middle of the river's course. However, if the same owner possessed land on both banks, the public rights was abolished. When there were two owners, one on each bank, each built their own dam.²¹ The law stipulated that they had to be at different heights, so that the water could flow between them, and the boats could travel with their nets.²²

The idea that fishing was considered a public asset and is a common right for all citizens is reiterated in the Digest of Justinian, dated a century before the *Lex Visigothorum*, both in relation to sea and to river fishing:

"(...) therefore, no one can be prohibited from approaching the coast for the purpose of fishing".²³

¹⁸ LRV, Sententia 25, in *Lex Romana Visigothorum*. Ed. G. F. Haenel., B. G. Lipsiae: Sumptibus et typis B. G. Teubneri, 1849, 390.

²¹ The *Lex Visigothorum* also includes the problem and punishment of destroying other people's mills and dams, as well as the fine to be paid, LV. VIII, 4, 30, in *Liber Iudiciorum*. Intr. R. Ramis Barceló, Translation and notes de P. Ramis Serra and R. Ramis Barceló, Madrid: Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2015.

²² LV. VIII, 4, 29; About primary exploitations in the Visigothic period see Martín, José Luis. *La Península en la Edad Media*. Barcelona: Teida, 1984, 83-85.

²³ Dig. 1, 8.4, in *Digesto de Justiniano*. Ed. A. D'Ors, F. Hernández-Tejero, P. Fuenteseca, M. García-Garrido y J. Burillo. Madrid: Ed. Aranzadi- CSIC, 1968.

¹⁸ Essex County Council Field Archaeology Unit, Blackwater Estuary Fish Traps. Essex. York: Archaeology Data Service, 2013.

¹⁹ Poveda Arias, Pablo. "Incidencia y regulación de las dinámicas cinegéticas en la sociedad visigoda". *Studia histórica, Historia Medieval* 39-1, (2021): 173-196.

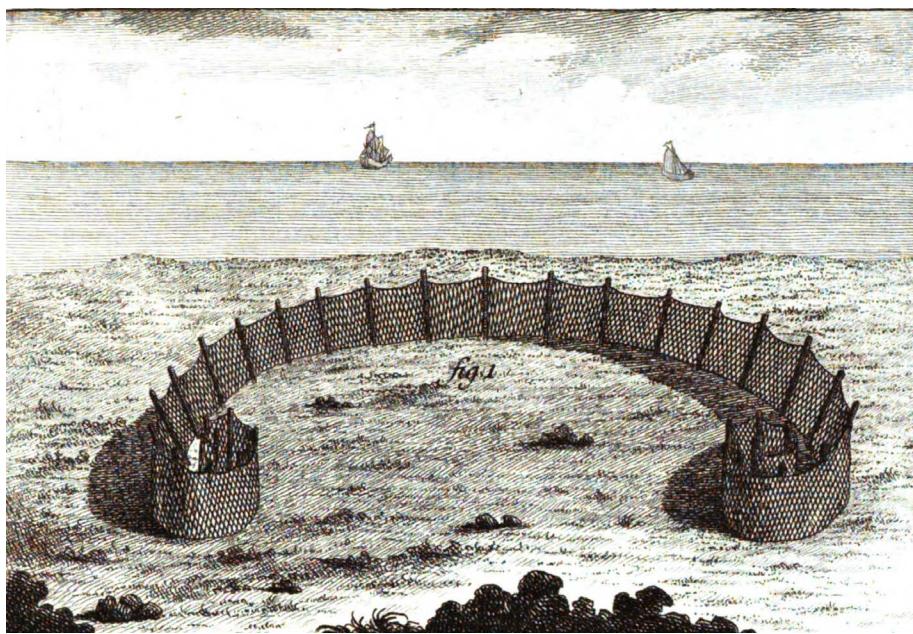


Fig. 3. Corral to retain the fish at low tide (Sánchez Reguart, Antonio. *Diccionario histórico de los artes de la pesca nacional*. Madrid: Don Joaquín Ibarra, 1791, vol. II, Lám. LVII, fig.1)

“(...) the fish (...) which, as soon as they are caught, (...) undoubtedly become the property of the one who has seized them”.²⁴

“(...) and the offspring that are born of these animals when they are in our power”.²⁵

“We have (...) the fishes in ponds we gather; but not the ones that are in a lake”.²⁶

“The use of the banks of the rivers is public, by the right of nations, as well as that of the river itself. Thus, anyone is free to (...) put the nets to dry (...) and unload the boat there (...)”.²⁷

In the ninth century, the Albeldense Chronicle collected news and references from the end of the Spanish Visigothic monarchy. In this sense, it refers to several famous facts of the Hispania, at the Gothic period (in the section *Item causas celebres ex Spania*), noting *Mancario* for its oysters and for *Tattiber* for its lamprey. In the edition of the work of J. Gil, J. K. Moralejo and J. I. Ruiz de la Peña,²⁸ it is believed that the place name *Tattiber* could possibly be associated with the banks of the Miño, perhaps with one of the parishes of Tui, called Tebra, since it is here where lamprey fishing is especially famous. On the other hand, the area of Moncario (*Mancario*) is more difficult to identify. According to ancient travelers, it could be associated with Ponte-Sampayo, famous for its oysters. When Ordoño II handed over the Church of Mondoñedo to the town of Bares, he referred to: “(...) Montarion usque ad illud Portum de Dolphino atque Sauris, sive ostreareas, vel devesas seu piscarias, per aqua de Villare Berilli”.²⁹ However,

the allusion to the “*Ostrea de Mancario*”, collected in the Albeldense Chronicle, is invoked by J. Cornide in defense of the antiquity, excellence and abundance of the oysters of the Arousa estuary, and specifically of the seaport of Rianxo because, according to the author: “Mancario is corruption of Bancario, and this is the Latin name of a Place next to Rianjo, called Abanqueiro, whose oysters are, even nowadays, one of the most esteemed in Galicia”.³⁰

Likewise, along the Galician coast, fish production was notable. The Galicians owned cargo ships, and they fished, salted, pickled, and shipped large quantities of sardines, oysters, and ceciales from Pontevedra, a practice with roots in “ancient times”.³¹

In contrast, in Asturias, it is noted that both fishing and hunting were important. As regards river fishing, the abundance of salmonids was relevant, and in the coastal case, the richness in fish and shellfish. It was understood that such abundance of fish was the basis of the popular diet of coastal populations.³² It also seems that the Asturian-Cantabrian and Basque sector was famous, long before the Medieval period, for whaling.³³

Next, we will see what historical-archaeological evidence exists, to provide a daily perspective on the relationship between humans and fishing, both in terms of production and consumption, in the early Medieval centuries of Spain.

²⁴ Dig. 41, 1.14, in *Digesto de Justiniano*.

²⁵ Dig. 41, 1.2, in *Digesto de Justiniano*.

²⁶ Dig. 41, 2.3 14, in *Digesto de Justiniano*.

²⁷ Dig. 1, 8.5, in *Digesto de Justiniano*.

²⁸ C. Alb. VII, in *Crónica Albeldense, Crónicas Asturianas*. Ed. J. Gil Fernández, J. Moralejo, J. I. Ruiz de la Peña. Oviedo: Edición Universidad de Oviedo, 1985, 92.

²⁹ Flórez, Enrique. *España sagrada*. Madrid: Oficina A. Marín, 1764, vol. XIII, 317.

³⁰ Cornide Saavedra, José. *Memoria sobre la pesca de la sardina en las costas de Galicia*. Madrid: Joachin Ibarra, 1774, 48.

³¹ Cornide Saavedra, José. *Memoria sobre la pesca de la sardina en las costas de Galicia*. Madrid: Joachin Ibarra, 1774, 48; Ferreira Priegue, Elisa. “*Pesca y economía regional en Galicia*”, in V. V. A. A., *La Pesca en la Edad Media*, Madrid: Monografía de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Medievales, 2009, 11-34.

³² Casariego, Jesús Evaristo. *Historias asturianas de hace más de mil años: edición bilingüe de las crónicas ovetenses del s. IX y otros documentos*. Oviedo: Instituto de Estudios Asturianos, 1983, 140.

³³ Casariego, Jesús Evaristo. “*La costa astur galaica a mediados del siglo XII*”. *Boletín del Instituto de Estudios Asturianos* 56 (1965): 197-213.

3. Some archaeological brushstrokes on Hispanic fishing

Despite being an activity that has received relatively little attention from researchers compared with other aspects of the economy studied by scholars of Late Antiquity, fishing offers a series of literary, epigraphic and archaeological sources, which are of varying extent and well known in Roman Hispania.³⁴ This information serves as a starting point to understand the evolution of fishing and its tradition in subsequent centuries. The question raised here is how fishing activity evolved and, by extension, the associated industries particularly the flourishing imperial production and trade of fish products, throughout the arrival and consolidation of the Visigoth presence in the Iberian Peninsula, as inferred from archaeological data. In this sense, an essential aspect to take into account when addressing the fishing issue in Visigothic Hispania is the deep divergence between the coastal and inland areas.

The archaeological record points to a remarkable vitality along the Hispanic coasts in Late Antiquity. The Mediterranean and Atlantic areas remained interconnected through navigation and maritime trade relations during this period, which sustained the dynamism of the peninsular port areas. In the inland areas, on the other hand, urban life and commercial activity, which had gained strength under Roman rule, entered a gradual decline, with circuits and markets of a distinctly local or regional nature thriving. Until the victory of Suintila over the Byzantines in the seventh century, the Levantine coast and the south of the peninsula would continue to engage in active exchanges with the Empire, which at that time controlled the maritime economy. Here the Visigoth presence must have been minimal, with a Hispano-Roman population base that continued to evolve throughout the final moments of the Classical world.³⁵ This situation contrasts with that of the inland lands, which were withdrawn under the rule of the Visigoth monarchy. In terms of social organization, the Visigoth population represented a minority, adopting Roman lifestyle and practices.

As for the material evidence relating to fishing activity in the early medieval Hispanic world, very little has been studied or published to date, making this a promising field of research. The discovery of fishhooks in the archaeological record is generally a complex task. This is mainly due to their fragility and the difficulties of their preservation, as they are

usually made of a thin metal rod, most often bronzed or iron. A partially preserved bronze fishhook was found within an inhumation grave in the necropolis outside the Paleochristian Basilica of Vega del Mar (Marbella, Málaga) during archaeological excavations in 1930.³⁶ It was made from a small metal rod of circular-section with a barbed tip at one end, indicating its use of fishing (Fig. 4). Although the lack of the distal end or head of the hook (where it would have been attached to the fishing line), preventing determination of the method use for fastening, nothing in its configuration distinguishes it from analogues of the preceding Roman period.³⁷ A second hook, made of a copper alloy and of unknown morphological characteristics, was found in another tomb at the Vega del Mar site. Alongside the remains of fish spines and macromammal bones (likely funerary offerings), other marine archaeofaunal remains of malacological origin were also found in the funerary context. In sum, these constitute some of the few known examples of this type of fishing implement within the Visigothic sphere, an activity that remains virtually unknown to Hispanic medieval archaeologists.



Fig. 4. Fragment of a bronze hook from the Visigoth necropolis of Vega del Mar (Marbella, Málaga) -Tomb 37th. Length of 2 cm. (Photo: P. E. Suárez). Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Inventory:61004.<https://ceres.mcu.es/pages/Viewer?accion=4&AMuseo=MAN&Museo=MAN&Ninv=61004> [01/12/2024]

The fishhooks and faunal remains exhumed could be related to the trade and fishing practiced by a population living in a maritime environment with a strong fish processing tradition, dating back to the Phoenician-Punic world. Another notable discovery of a fishhook in a sepulchral context from the Visigothic period (dated between the second half of the seventh century AD and the middle of the eighth century AD), was made in the cave of Riocueva (Entrambasaguas, Cantabria), during archaeological work conducted between 2010 and 2014.³⁸

³⁴ Junta de Andalucía, ed. *Historia de la pesca en el ámbito del Estrecho. I International conference (1-5 de junio de 2004, Puerto de Santa María, Cádiz)*. Cádiz: Junta de Andalucía, Instituto de Investigación y Formación Agraria y Pesquera, 2006; Arévalo González, Alicia, Lázaro G. Lagóstena Barrios and Darío Bernal Casasola (coords.), CETARIAE 2005. *Salsas y salazones de pescado en Occidente durante la Antigüedad: Proceedings of the International Congress* (Cádiz, 7-9 noviembre de 2005). Oxford: BAR International Series, 2007; Bernal Casasola, Darío, ed. *Pescar con Arte. Fenicios y romanos en el origen de los aparejos andaluces: Catálogo de la Exposición Baelo Claudia*, diciembre 2011- julio 2012. Cádiz: Universidad de Cádiz, 2011.

³⁵ Bernal Casasola, Darío. "Ciudades del Fretum Gaditanum tardoantiguo. Pesquerías y comercio transmediterráneo en época bizantina y visigoda", in Olmo, Lauro (ed.), *Recópolis y la ciudad en la época visigoda*, Alcalá de Henares: Zona Arqueológica 9, 2008, 362-383.

³⁶ Pérez de Barradas, José. *Excavaciones en la necrópolis visigoda de Vega del Mar (San Pedro de Alcántara, Málaga)*. Madrid: Junta Superior del Tesoro Artístico, 1934, 9, 11, 26, 34, Lám. XVI-4.

³⁷ Vargas Girón, José Manuel, ed. *El instrumental de pesca en el Fretum Gaditanum: Catalogación, análisis tipo-cronológico y comparativa regional*, Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020, 26-61.

³⁸ Gutiérrez Cuenca, Enrique, José Ángel Hierro Gárate and Helena Paredes Courtot. "Ollas para los muertos. Cerámica de los siglos VII-VIII de la cueva de Riocueva (Cantabria)",

The funerary record can therefore provide valuable insights into the daily life of the deceased and the economic activities of the coastal communities to which they belonged. This is also evident in the Late Roman necropolis of *Baelo Claudia*, particularly in the grave goods of the so-called Tomb T-1, dated between the sixth and seventh centuries AD, where an exceptional malacological find of a *buccinum* of remarkable dimensions was unearthed in 2005 near the head of the burial (Fig. 5). The traditionally known use of the shell of this type of mollusk was traditionally used to produce sound signals related to the activities of fisheries. Comparable examples are known from the city of Pompeii, dating back to the first century AD. This finding makes it possible to suggest that the deceased may have been a high ranking individual involved in “almadraba” fishing.³⁹



Fig. 5. *Buccinum* used to make acoustic signals from the Late Roman necropolis of *Baelo Claudia* - Tomb T-1 (centuries 6th-7th AD) (Tarifa, Cádiz) (Bernal Casasola, Darío, Alicia Arévalo González, Muñoz, Ángel Muñoz Vicente and Ismael García Gómez. Catálogo n.º 22, in Bernal, Darío (ed.), *Pescar con Arte. Fenicios y romanos en el origen de los aparejos andaluces: Catálogo de la Exposición Baelo Claudia, diciembre 2011-julio 2012*. Cádiz: Universidad de Cádiz, 2011, 400-401)

Visigoth rule would have meant a gradual decline in the thriving salting industry of the Roman and Late Roman periods, established in Strait area, giving way to a period of insecurity, heightened along the coast by the Muslim invasions.⁴⁰ The cessation of activity and the abandonment of salting facilities following the arrival of the Germanic peoples had already occurred in other, more northern Hispanic production centers, such as the Rías Baixas in Galicia.⁴¹ However, some authors, such as A. P. Magalhães, provided examples

in Martín Viso, Iñaki, Patricia Fuentes Melgar, José Carlos Sastre Blanco and Raúl Catalán Ramos (coords), *Cerámicas Altomedievales de Hispania y su entorno (siglos V-VIII d.C.)*, Madrid: Glyphos, 2018, 68-83.

³⁹ Arévalo González, Alicia, Darío Bernal Casasola, Ángel Muñoz Vicente, Ismael García Gómez and M.ª Milagros Macías López. “El mundo funerario tardorromano in *Baelo Claudia*. Novedades de las intervenciones arqueológicas del 2005 en la muralla oriental”. *Anales de Arqueología Cordobesa* 17-II (2006): 61-84, fig. 8.

⁴⁰ Soto Melgar, M.ª Mercedes. *El arte de pescar palabras. Terminología marinera gaditana*. Cádiz: Servicio de publicaciones de la Universidad de Cádiz, 2017.

⁴¹ Díaz García, Fructuoso. *El mundo antiguo en el Museo Massó y la romanización de Bueu*. Santiago de Compostela: Xunta de Galicia, 2015, 48-69; Ferreira Priegue, Elisa. “Pesca y economía regional en Galicia”, in V. V. A. A., *La Pesca en la*

ilustrating both the decline and continuity of salted fish production on the Lusitanian coast between the third and the seventh centuries AD.⁴² The industry as a whole prospered until the fifth century AD, except for the Tróia fish-salting complex (Grândola, Setúbal), which remained active during the sixth and seventh centuries. A. P. Magalhães links the survival of this production to the demand controlled by the churches, whose economic influence increased throughout these two centuries. The crucial implication of the author's analysis of Lusitanian archaeological evidence is the central role played by the churches as administrators of ecclesiastical properties, sponsors of local communities, and the driving force behind a network of communication and exchange independent of, but not alien to, the structures of the Late Roman period.

The economic factor in the expansion of the position achieved by the churches (at all levels of society throughout the sixth and seventh centuries) is a process largely overlooked by economic historians. The simultaneity of economic circumstances, dissimilar from each other in different regions, characterized the administrative reality of the Visigothic kingdom. This scenario of localism and economic fragmentation contrasts with the large-scale production and commercialisation of goods throughout the imperial territory during the preceding Roman period, which regarded as the framework for the first instance of globalization in history⁴³. In fact, the economy operated primarily at the local level in the early Middle Ages, displaying different patterns that responded to the interests and contingent needs of each community. This, however, did not preclude the existence of regional and interregional connections. Differences in socioeconomic organization often ran parallelly to the great environmental variations that still exist across the Spanish geography. Continuity in social and economic organisation in the typically Roman manner, seems to have been predominant in olive and cereal producing regions of the Meseta and the south of the peninsula. Elsewhere in Spain, other areas were also economically significant, characterised by an abundance of natural resources and primary industries. These geographical divergences did not favour economic integration at the peninsular level.

Late Roman coastal and riverside populations would have known and been experienced in the capture and processing of certain fish species for preservation. It is possible that these practices continued into the early Middle Ages on an artisan scale, well below the volumes characteristic of the large-scale production in the preceding period, and intended for domestic consumption and/or for small-scale trade. Early Medieval fishing must therefore have been the heir of the Roman fishing-salting tradition, particularly in regions where this industry had been established and developed.

Edad Media, Madrid: Monografía de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Medievales, 2009, 11-34.

⁴² Tedesco, Paolo, Merle Eisenberg and Jamie Wood. “Approaching the Early Medieval Iberian economy from the Ground up”. *Al- Masaq* 35-3 (2023): 247-270.

⁴³ Regarding the trade of goods and legislative regulation for this Visigoth period, see Argüelles, Patricia. *Vías de comunicación en la legislación visigoda*. *Studia Historica. Historia Medieval* 38 (1), (2020): 143-166.

As explained, the sea was a common asset for all, so anyone had the right to fish. Initially, these communities, or at least most of their members, had to combine agricultural works with the extraction of resources from the sea, in a dual role as farmers and fishermen or sailors. Inshore fishing probably predominated in the early medieval period, using similar methods and techniques to those employed in continental waters, until a large stage when sailors began to fish in waters farther from the coast. Deep-sea fishing began in the thirteenth century and reached its peak in the fifteenth century.⁴⁴ However, coastal or inshore fishing was not abandoned, meeting the demand for fresh marine fish trade in urban markets along the coast, often on or near the seashore. To be consumed in inland areas, the catches had to be undergo various processing methods to ensure preservation, such as salting, pickling or drying (with or without smoking), in which the use of salt was practically essential (Fig. 6).

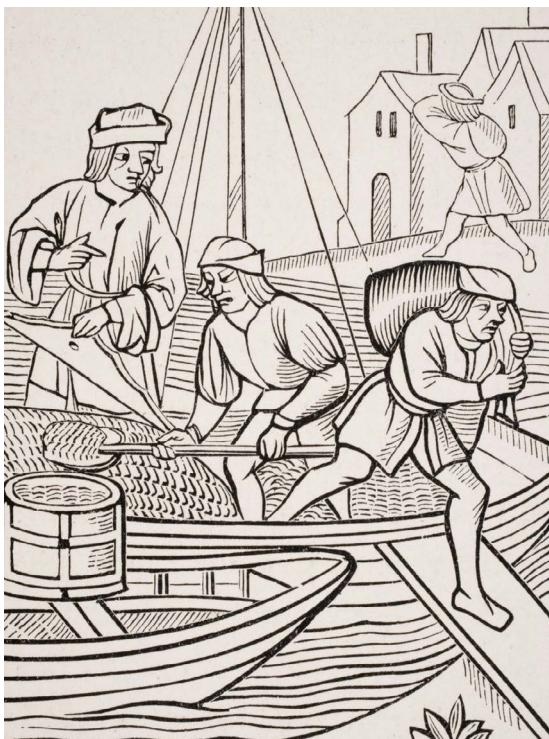


Fig. 6. Salt measurement and discharge at the seaport. *Des Faits et Ordonnances de la prévosté des marchands et eschevinaige de la ville de Paris* (Edition of an ordinance of Charles VI of February 14, 1415). Unknown editor, 1501, p.80 [https://bibliotheque-numerique.inha.fr/viewer/58545/?offset=1#page=80&viewer.picture&o=bookmark&n=0&q=\[01/11/2024\]](https://bibliotheque-numerique.inha.fr/viewer/58545/?offset=1#page=80&viewer.picture&o=bookmark&n=0&q=[01/11/2024])

Another category of material evidence associated with fishing is archaeo-ichthyological remains, whose analysis is essential for determining which species were caught, in what portions, and with what fishing methods, since the fishing gear and tackle varied depending on the targeted fish species.

Unfortunately, the study of ichthyofauna remains is often accompanied by shortcomings arising from the absence of adequate excavation methodologies, which have led to biased sampling and, therefore,

limited usefulness for historical-archaeological interpretation. The general absence of ichthyological remains in the material records is due to the need for a meticulous excavation methodology, which includes sifting with small meshes (between 2 and 5 mm) and sediment flotation, which often exceeds the objectives of an archaeological intervention plan. Thus, this methodological limitation must be taken into account when assessing the scarce or non-existent presence of fish remains both in coastal sites (and, nevertheless, with a strong fishing-canning vocation) and in inland sites (where archaeological records could mistakenly suggest a secondary or marginal nature of fishing activity).

On the other hand, it has been suggested that the late appearance of medieval fishing in Iberia, which corresponds mainly to the Late Middle Ages, could be due to the risk involved in practising the activity in dangerous waters, due to piracy and the fluctuating border between the Christian and Muslim kingdoms, during the Reconquista.⁴⁵ It was from the Almohad invasion that we could date the few known faunal samples. According to the faunal records, it was in the Late Middle Ages that the trade in marine fish, always processed using one of the known preservation methods, appears to have become consolidated in the Christian kingdoms. And we know this thanks, basically, to the evidence provided by coastal sites and also inland sites, but relatively close to the coast, and always intervened with a meticulous excavation methodology. The ichthyological record from inland sites far from the coast, and therefore associated with river and/or lake fishing, is, however, very scarce, representing only 10% of the medieval Spanish ichthyofaunistic collection.⁴⁶

Thus, the fauna collections from Late Middle Ages contexts of the Galician coast support the data provided by historical documentation, regarding the existence of a fishing industry, specialized in the capture of certain species destined for processing by drying and salting. Hake (*Merluccius merluccius*) was very important at the end of the Middle Ages, as a product of trade and consumption, forming part of the medieval Galician fish triad, together with the sardine (*Sardina pilchardus*) and the conger (*Conger conger*). All these types would become the axis on which the activity of the so-called "mareantes" was developed, which appear perfectly captured from the first half of the fourteenth century.⁴⁷ Hake also gained great importance in the fishing trade of Christian Europe throughout the Middle Ages and the Modern Age.

⁴⁵ Morales Muñiz, Dolores C., Eufrasio Roselló Izquierdo and Arturo Morales Muñiz. "Pesquerías medievales hispanas: las evidencias arqueofaunísticas", in V. V. A. A., *La Pesca en la Edad Media*, Madrid: Monografía de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Medievales, 2009, 145-165.

⁴⁶ Sánchez Quiñones, Julián. *La Pesca en el Reino de Toledo. La cuenca media y alta del Tajo en los siglos XII al XVI*. Oxford: British Archaeological reports (International Series), 1489, 2006; Guerrero Navarrete, Yolanda. "Consumo y comercialización de pescado en las ciudades castellanas de la Baja Edad Media", in V. V. A. A. *La Pesca en la Edad Media*. Madrid: Monografía de la Sociedad española de Estudios medievales, 2009, 235-262.

⁴⁷ Ferreira Prieque, Elisa. *Galicia en el comercio marítimo continental*. A Coruña: Universidad Santiago de Compostela, 1998.

⁴⁴ V. V. A. A., *La pesca en la Edad Media*. Madrid: Monografías de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Medievales, 1, 2009.

However, studies of archaeo-ichthyological records also show the capture of demersal and carnivorous species that inhabit coastal waters and are mainly fished with line and hook gear. These species had little commercial value, at least over long distances, so their capture may have responded to other types of demands and consumption of fishing resources, far removed from any industrial or commercial purpose. Nevertheless, it should not be ruled out that their capture was accidental, linked to the use of certain fishing gear intended for species of greater commercial value. In any case, accidental capture did not necessarily imply discarding them, and they could have been consumed locally or used to satisfy short-distance commercial demand.

Of particular interest is the faunal record of Punta Atalaia (O Cervo, Lugo), located on the shores of the Cantabrian Sea, due to its importance in the survival customs throughout the Middle Ages, practices already evidenced since Antiquity. The ichthyological collection of Saltés (Punta Umbría, Huelva) follows a similar line of interpretation,⁴⁸ being located in the Tinto and Odiel estuaries, within the area of the Circle of the Strait.

Along with the abundance of hake ichthyological remains, the Punta Atalaia site records the presence of species very similar to those found Roman period faunal assemblages, although in a smaller proportion.⁴⁹ This fishing seems to have been carried out in the maritime environment close to the site, with *Labrus bergylta* being the best represented species. In the area of Punta Atalaia during medieval times, species were still being caught that indicate a certain continuity since the turn of the era, and that had been practiced by the so-called "fishermen" since the Middle Ages. They were not organized like the "mareantes" and carried out their activity near the coast, on board small boats, using traditional fishing gear such as the trammel net, hook, or the longline.⁵⁰ This was a low-yield activity, mainly intended for self-consumption, although it was also directed towards the trade of fresh fish in the nearby markets. The ichthyological remains of Punta Atalaia are similar to those found in Galician sites dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

At the Praia de Area site (Viveiro, Lugo), also located on the Cantabrian coast, the presence in the medieval record of species absent in ancient contexts, such as the gurnard (*Trigla lyra*), which lives on sandy and muddy bottoms at depths greater than 40 m, could suggest the introduction during the Middle Ages, of new bottom fishing gear for the exploitation of commercially

⁴⁸ Morales Muñiz, Dolores C., Eufrasia Roselló Izquierdo and Arturo Morales Muñiz. "Pesquerías medievales hispanas: las evidencias arqueofaunísticas", in V. V. A. A., *La Pesca en la Edad Media*, Madrid: Monografía de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Medievales, 2009, 145-165.

⁴⁹ González Gómez de Agüero, Eduardo. *La ictiofauna de los yacimientos arqueológicos del Noroeste de la Península Ibérica*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. León: Universidad de León, 2013, 99-161.

⁵⁰ Ferreira Priegue, Elisa. *Galicia en el comercio marítimo continental*. A Coruña: Universidad Santiago de Compostela, 1998; "Pesca y economía regional en Galicia", in V. V. A. A., *La Pesca en la Edad Media*, Madrid: Monografía de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Medievales, 2009, 11-34.

valuable such as hake.⁵¹ It could therefore represent a casual catch made while fishing for other marketable species. Other species, such as seabream (*Pagellus acarne* and *Pagellus bogaraveo*) and European sea bass (*Dicentrarchus labrax*), would have been fished near the coast, mainly in summer, with line and hook gear.⁵² In other words, demersal species continued to be caught with single or multipline line and hook equipment, probably in an opportunistic fishery intended for self and local consumption and/or for short-distance trade supplying a fresh fish market.

At Taramancos (Noia, A Coruña), there is also evidence of specialization in hake and sardine fishing. The commercial importance of these two species, together with the skeletal representation detected, suggests the existence of fish preservation production. It is known that, at this time, industrial cannery facilities proliferated on the outskirts of the town of Noia,⁵³ where true industrial complexes were created, and where salting activity was forbidden within the town.⁵⁴ The Taramancos site could therefore correspond to the remains of one of these factories or cannery establishments located nearby. The Noia sardine was highly appreciated in foreign markets for its quality, being caught in spring-summer for salting and in autumn-winter for smoking.⁵⁵ Likewise, the archaeo-malacological analyses also revealed shellfish activity, focused on two species: the oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) and the common cockle (*Cerastoderma edule*).

The Iberian High Middle Ages appear to represent a *hiatus* in the ichthyo-archaeological record. However, there are exceptions, such as the site of San Xiao do Trebo (Cariño, A Coruña), on the shores of the Cantabrian Sea, where the excavation of a High Medieval shell midden (found during the restoration works of the Hermitage) allowed documentation of remains belonging to *Labrus bergylta* and to the families of *Sparidae* and *Scombridae*⁵⁶ which *a priori* suggest a coastal fishing, carried out from land or on board small boats, in waters not necessarily far away from the coast, using single or multipline line and hook tackle.

⁵¹ González Gómez de Agüero, Eduardo. *La ictiofauna de los yacimientos arqueológicos del Noroeste de la Península Ibérica*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. León: Universidad de León, 2013, 162-178.

⁵² Cornide Saavedra, José. *Ensayo de una historia de los peces y otras producciones marinas de la costa de Galicia, arreglado al sistema del caballero Carlos Linneo, con un tratado de las diversas pescas, y de las redes y aparejos con que se practican*. Madrid: Oficina de Benito Cano, 1788.

⁵³ Ferreira Priegue, Elisa. *Galicia en el comercio marítimo continental*. A Coruña: Universidad Santiago de Compostela, 1998, 150.

⁵⁴ Fabeiro Gómez, Manuel. *Páginas Históricas de Noia*. Noia: Ediciones Sementeira, 1990, 140.

⁵⁵ Cornide Saavedra, José. *Memorias sobre la pesca de la sardina en las costas de Galicia*. Madrid: Joachin Ibarra, 1774; *Ensayo de una historia de los peces y otras producciones marinas de la costa de Galicia, arreglado al sistema del caballero Carlos Linneo, con un tratado de las diversas pescas, y de las redes y aparejos con que se practican*. Madrid: Oficina de Benito Cano, 1788; Ferreira Priegue, Elisa. *Galicia en el comercio marítimo continental*. A Coruña: Universidad Santiago de Compostela, 1998, 134, 146.

⁵⁶ Rodríguez López, Carlos. "Análise do conchero de San Xiao de Trebo", in Ramil González, Eduardo and Picos Brage, Felipe (eds.), *A rehabilitación de la Capela de San Xiao de Trebo (Cariño, A Coruña)*, A Coruña: Deputación da Coruña, 65-77.



Fig. 7. Loading of processed fish in wooden barrels for distribution by land in horse-drawn carts - Copper engraving print (1716) - Institute of Material Culture of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, Austria - CC BY-NC-ND. <https://www.europeana.eu/item/15501/016857> [01/11/2024]

4. Early Medieval food: a Roman culinary tradition

Peasants constituted the vast majority of the Iberian population during the early Middle Ages. Early Medieval Iberia appears to have been the result of local communities acting autonomously rather than following a predetermined pattern. The variety of productions and the multiple economic trajectories of the peninsula were accompanied by great differences in both in social and economic organisation: Roman-style land ownership was dominant in the large olive and cereal producing regions of the south of the Meseta and present-day Andalusia, but not in the areas where the exploitation of natural resources predominated. Geographical disparities meant that the internal economic integration of the Iberian Peninsula did not become uniform. The population of the Visigothic kingdom in Hispania, in the mid and late sixth century, was composed largely of Hispano-Romans, together with a preponderant military minority of newcomers. The expansion and consolidation of the Visigothic kingdom in Iberia, from 570 to the first decade of seventh century, contributed to mitigate this process of fragmentation and, at the same time, increased the extent of lands under royal control.⁵⁷

As it is well known, the consumption of fish was very important in Rome,⁵⁸ and this must have been

so during the Visigothic reign. Its gastronomy was greatly influenced by the Roman tradition, which combined local products with other exotic ones of eastern origin, such as spices. We have already mentioned Isidore of Seville.⁵⁹ His work *Etymologies*, in Book XX, entitled "On Provisions and Domestic and Rustic Utensils", addresses issues related to food and drink, as well as tableware. Book II names food topics and mentions Apicius and his work *De re coquinaria*.⁶⁰

According to Isidore of Seville, in the morning the so-called *prandium* was eaten, the first meal of the day, at which consisted mainly of cereals, *moretum* (cheese spread) or dried fruits. At noon, it was time for the *admordium*, a long and elaborate meal with various starters and some meat, fish or seafood dishes, which poorer people reduced to a single main dish of vegetables and meat. The meal was completed with desserts.⁶¹ At night, the *coena* was the last meal of the day, beginning with digestible, liquid, and light dishes.

The early medieval diet was dominated by cereals and vegetables, along with the meat and wine. Fish was consumed throughout the year, either because of the proximity of the sea or river and lake shores, or because of the different methods of preserving fish resources, such as salting (Fig. 7). It was, however,

⁵⁷ Tedesco, Paolo, Merle Eisenberg and Jamie Wood. "Approaching the Early Medieval Iberian economy from the Ground up". *Al- Masaq* 35-3 (2023): 247-270.

⁵⁸ Ponsich, Michel. *Aceite de oliva y salazones de pescado: factores geo-económicos de Bética y Tingitana*. Madrid: Ed.

Complutense, 1988.

⁵⁹ Isidoro de Sevilla, *Etimologías*.

⁶⁰ Apicio. *De re coquinaria*. Ed. B. *Pastos Artigues*. Madrid: Co-
loquio, 1987.

⁶¹ Clement, Joan, Jorge Morín de Pablos, Isabel M.ª Sánchez, Cristina Silvestre and Albert Rivera. *Recetas Visigodas*. Sa-
badell: Como, 2019.

particularly typical during Advent and Lent, given the rules of the Christian Church and the periods of abstinence from meat (Lenten abstinence),⁶² fish was “the other food”, an alternative to meat, which was forbidden for religious reasons. Nevertheless, fishing was the basis of the medieval fishermen’s diet. The rest of the population rarely consumed fish as a daily food and main staple. In the most households, fish was seasonal and served as a complement to the cereal-based diet.⁶³ On the other hand, the Roman *triclinium* would be replaced by an elevated space where medieval banquets could be held. In the case of the Spanish, the first documented example of such a space is that of Los Hitos, at Arisgotas (Orgaz).⁶⁴

We know that Goths already incorporated wheat or barley into their daily diet for bread, along with milk, hunted and fished products, as well as fruits.⁶⁵ The processing of fish and molluscs through various preservation methods ensured the inclusion of fishery products in the diet without requiring immediate consumption. Factors such as the seasonality of certain catches, the production cycles linked to agriculture that demanded exclusive dedication during specific periods (double condition of sailor and farmer in coastal populations), or the impossibility of going out to fish due to the harsh sea conditions, could make the consumption of these products difficult or even impossible. Added to these difficulties were the fragility of ships and the threat of piracy. These adverse circumstances were counteracted by resorting to preservation methods such as drying, salting, or pickling, which ensure the continuity of supply throughout the year. Preservation techniques required the addition of salt, as well as other substances of both of plant and animal origin.

Regarding method of preparation, it seems that the fish was served in multiple ways: roasted, fried, boiled, in pies or broths, both fresh and processed, by salting or other preservation methods. Medieval physicians recommended preparing fish in such a way that it would not be difficult to digest, advising that it be cooked in vinegar. Fish was considered to cause thirst and a feeling of stomach heaviness, and the healthiest were those found in rocky areas and in clear, medium-sized streams.⁶⁶

5. Concluding remarks

The issue of fishing has scarcely been addressed by medievalist historians. This apparent lack of interest in medieval fishing is even more evident in the study of archaeological evidence. This contrasts with the growing research attention that has been paid to the

archaeology of concerning the Classical world during the last two decades.

Documentary and archaeological data related to the early medieval period are particularly scarce, which makes it extremely difficult to study fishing during this period, specially compared with the information available on the last centuries of the Middle Ages, when there was an evident increase in specialized fishing and the processing of certain species for commercial purposes. In this sense, it must be taken into account that the archaeological record associated with fishing is usually considerably poorer and more complex to interpret than the archaeological data related to other types of activities, for which there is also a greater research background and a larger body of documentary evidence. On the hand, the study of fishing equipment requires clearly dated contexts of origin, since they are tools that have hardly evolved over time and successive historical stages. The study of this type of artefact, which is the key to advancing our understanding of fishing practices, does not usually arouse the interest of historical and archaeological research compared to other, more traditionally studied objects. At the same time, the organic nature of the other large group of material remains associated with fishing, constituted by the ichthyological data, favours their degradation and, ultimately, their disappearance from archaeological record. Only the application of appropriate excavation methodologies for discovering ichthyological remains, consisting mainly of fish bones and scales, and involving exhaustive screening with sufficiently small mesh sizes can ensure the recovery of such faunal remains.

It can therefore be stated that the faunal archaeological record offers, in reality, a diminished reflection of the wealth and exploitation of fish resources in early medieval Hispania. The biological significance of the archaeo-ichthyological findings is not questioned, rather, it is their historical interpretation that remains problematic, largely as a result of insufficient field methodology. In addition to the methodological limitations set out above, there is little interest, and therefore little effort, in research devoted to the fishing practices in the early Middle Ages. In fact, there are very few documentary references on fishing and fish consumption in early medieval Hispania.⁶⁷ It is very likely that fish was not a marginal resource at all, but rather the opposite. The scarce archaeological trace of fishing activity in the early medieval period highlights the need to address this topic in future archaeological intervention projects. The early medieval period still offers a wide range of records awaiting of study within the field of the Archaeology of fishing in the Iberian Peninsula. The systematic review of the materiality from early medieval settlements, with a clear aim to compiling and studying possible ichthyofaunal remains and fishing instruments, is essential for obtaining results that will advance our knowledge of fish capture and consumption throughout this period.

We know that fishing has been an everyday activity throughout history. We can conclude that, in the Visigoth world there was a predominant interest in

⁶² Aparisi, Frederic. “Fishing in Medieval Valencia”. *Imago Temporis. Medium Aevum* XV (2021): 213-241.

⁶³ Hoffmann, Richard. “Medieval fishing”. In *Working with water in Medieval Europe. Technology and Resource-Use*, edited by P. Squatriti, vol. 3. Leiden: BRILL, 2000, 340. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047400110_012

⁶⁴ Morín de Pablos, Jorge, Isabel Sánchez Ramos and José R. González de La Cal. “Los Hitos (Arisgotas, Toledo). Nuevos datos para el conocimiento de un asentamiento rural de prestigio de época visigoda en la península ibérica”. *Pyrenae* 53 (1) (2022): 217-239.

⁶⁵ Corradi, Fernando. *Monarquía visigoda según el fuero juzgo*. Madrid: El Clamor público, 1865, 184.

⁶⁶ Weiss-Adamson, Melita. *Food in Medieval times*. Westport-Connecticut-London: Greenwood Press, 2004.

⁶⁷ V.V. A.A. *La pesca en la Edad Media*. Madrid: Monografías de la Sociedad Española de Estudios Medievales, 1, 2009.

maintaining a solid commercial network, which was regulated with respect to travelers, their animals and goods. Early Medieval Spanish legislation sought to favour, as far as possible, livestock interests over agricultural ones, and, the regulation of fishing activity was practically non-existent. In this sense, river fishing seems to have played a secondary role, subordinated to agriculture and livestock, unlike sea or ocean fishing. On the other hand, literary sources (among which the work of Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, stands out) attest to the continuity, throughout the first centuries of the Middle Ages of a wealth of knowledge accumulated during the preceding Classical period on fishing and related activities, as well as on the consumption of fish and shellfish products, which, however, is not yet sufficiently documented, either textually or archaeologically.

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