

Beyond the Ocean: Limits of the World in Oppian's *Halieutica*

The unknowability of the sea's depths and limits courses through the *Halieutica*, a didactic poem addressed to Marcus Aurelius that purportedly details the ways of fishes and how to catch them. Scholars have focused on Oppian's indebtedness to the didactic tradition, engagement with scientific literature, and his complex network of allusions, digressions, and Homeric intertexts (Bartley 2003; Kneebone 2007, 2020). This paper points towards possible engagement with the tradition of Hellenistic Homeric scholarship as a way in which Oppian can comment on limits of the known (and unknown) world.

Oppian asserts, with some tension, that fishermen have sailed the unknowable sea, seen unseen depths, and through skill they have made measurements of the sea: ἀϊδηλον ἐπιπλώουσι θάλασσαν/ τολμηρῆ κραδίῃ, κατὰ δ' ἔδρακον οὐκ ἐπίοπτα/ βένθεα καὶ τέγνησιν ἀλὸς διὰ μέτρα δάσαντο/ δαιμόνιοι. (Op. *Hal.* 1.9-12). Oppian's assertion that the unseen is seen and the measurements have been mapped out profess some attempts at delimiting that which may be limitless. Despite the focus on fishing in the Mediterranean, the expansive Okeanos is only mentioned three times in the *Halieutica* (Op. *Hal.* 1.388; 3.621; 5.58). Okeanos functions as both an ineffable water (ἀθέσφατον ὕδωρ) and, more obliquely, a marked limit of the world, in line with the Aristarchean edition of Homer's *Iliad* (Op. *Hal.* 5.58). Emily Kneebone recognizes the thematic underpinning of the *Halieutica* and how Oppian "highlights both the extraordinary achievements and limitations of human exploration" (Kneebone 2020). The majority of the *Halieutica* steps aside from the points of measurement, but discreet intertexts with Homer, and I argue, Homeric scholarship, holds bearing on how Oppian confines his world and engages with modes of knowledge.

This paper provides insight into Oppian's intertextual nod towards an Aristarchean edition of the *Iliad*, which seems marked in a work about seascapes, in opposition to a reading by Crates of Mallos. Crates of Mallos is one of the few names attached to the Pergamene school of scholarship during the Hellenistic era, and even though his Homeric commentaries are lost to us, but modern critical editions of the *Iliad* at least point to some of his editorial decisions. Of interest for this paper is Oppian's intertextual reference which bypasses Crates' suggestion at *Iliad* 14.246-14.246a: ὠκεανὸς θ' ὅσπερ γένεσις πάντεσσι τέτυκται/ ἀνδράσιν ἠδὲ θεοῖς, πλείστην δ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν ἔησιν. In contrast to Crates' suggestion, Oppian borrows the more standard reading: Ὠκεανοῦ, ὅς περ γένεσις πάντεσσι τέτυκται (*Il.* 14.246). The significance in this reading has been noted by Nagy, who distinguishes Aristarchus' view that Okeanos was a freshwater river encircling a flat earth, while Crates proposed a salt sea which enveloped the world (Nagy 1998). Nagy rightly notes that the distinction is significant, since the reading of the individual line either advances a worldview limited to the *oikoumene* (Aristarchean) or follows Crates, who hypothesized zones beyond the *oikoumene* and posited that the world was spherical (Biliç 2012). Oppian elaborates on his limits of the world when describing the journey of tuna from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean (Mair 1928). Oppian mirrors the Iliadic phrasing, even echoing the root of γένεσις when referring to the tuna odyssey: θύννων δ' αὖ γενεῆ μὲν ἀπ' εὐρυπόροιο τέτυκται/ Ὠκεανοῦ (*Op. Hal.* 3.620-1). Oppian's Okeanos marks here a knowable boundary.

Oppian's *Halieutica* concerns itself with the didactic poetic tradition as much as it recognizes the limits of knowledge. Although only a brief intertextual moment, Oppian's preference for a more finely delimited world in concurrence with Aristarchus' *Iliad* appears as a marked stance against a Cratesian world, and a navigation of the uncertainty of knowledge.

Works Cited

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