

Do We Need a Bigger Boat? A Possible Depiction of a *Carcharodon carcharias* on the
Pithekoussai Shipwreck Krater

Discussion of sharks in the Mediterranean is not common within academic communities related to the Classics. This is particularly due to the scarcity of shark remains and imagery from the archaeological record and its limitation to a few references within ancient literature. Adrienne Mayor highlights these difficulties in her work on ancient paleontology. Often a fossil or shark tooth that turns up during an excavation is misidentified or even misplaced. If such evidence is recovered, it is usually not the focus of the report or can become lost among copious amounts of data (Mayor 2002: 168). Some fieldwork, however, has been successful in uncovering evidence of shark related material; examples include: pottery patterned with shark teeth at Malta (Mayor 2002: 172) and fossilized shark teeth at Nichoria in the Peloponnese (Mayor 2002: 186). This demonstrates that some ancient cultures of the Mediterranean had experience with sharks, but it does not explain why sharks are often neglected in sea iconography of cultures so adept at sea faring.

This paper will explore possibilities as to why sharks are usually not included in the art of the Greek and Romans incorporating evidence that has been found for sharks. One example of art that could possibly depict a shark comes from a Late Geometric krater discovered at the site of Pithekoussai (see Figure 1). Pithekoussai was a colony established by the Eretrians and Chalcidians on the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples (Boardman 1999: 165). Scholars have often mentioned this particular shipwreck scene (see Figure 2) in general terms as a way to describe the dangers of sea travel and as a possible narrative scene (Boardman 1999: 166). Others believe similar Geometric shipwreck art might detail mythological scenes with Odysseus (see Hurwit 2011). I believe that the Pithekoussai shipwreck scene is not a stylized image or a

mythological scene, but one that is meant to inform its audience about an actual event. I suggest that the largest fish, attacking one of the survivors, is not only a shark, but is possibly an early representation of a *Carcharodon carcharias* (commonly referred to as the Great White shark).

Recent research (see De Maddalena and Heim 2012) records all possible sightings and attacks of the white shark within the Mediterranean Sea, specifically citing those in the Ligurian and Tyrrhenian Seas. This places the white shark in close proximity to the settlement of Pithekoussai. It is also interesting that the image of the fish on the Pithekoussai krater demonstrates anatomical similarities to the great white shark as discussed by Alessandro De Maddalena and Walter Heim (2012: 6-9). For example, the teeth of the depicted fish appear to be serrated and the crescent shapes on the fish seem to demonstrate the extension and contortion of a great white's gills as it bites down on its prey. These are just a few reasons to suggest the fish's classification as a *Carcharodon carcharias*.

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Figure 1: Pithekoussai Shipwreck Krater

<<http://www.pithecusae.it/colonia1.htm>>. Accessed September 22, 2014.

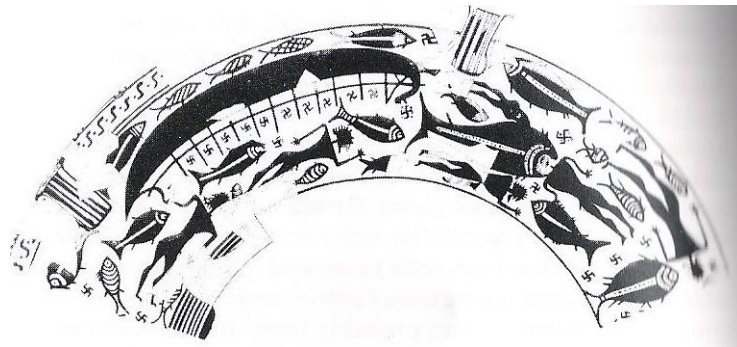


Figure 2: Illustration of Pithekoussai Shipwreck Scene

After Boardman 1999, 166, fig. 203.