

The Colorful World of Fly Fishing in Aelian's *De Natura Animalium*

Many fly fishermen would agree with me when I say that how one casts is more important than what one uses when casting. Regardless of what tackle you wield, how new your rod and reel are, or what bait is fastened to the hook, you will not be able to catch a fish if you find yourself in a tree or if the fish witnesses your line slapping the surface of the water. Still, a fisherman's choice in tackle is rather important once he or she has mastered the art of casting and stalking fish. One important aspect of the choice in line, leader, and bait is color. Color plays a major role in both the enjoyment and the success of fly fishing. Not only does the color of the line complement the visually stunning casting of the fly fisherman, but the line and bait's color can also affect how the fish behaves. This concern is nothing new.

Claudius Aelianus, commonly known as Aelian, who lived in Rome from around 170 to 230 CE, is more famous among fly fishermen and fly fishing historians than he is among classicists. Although he himself was no angler, Aelian has gifted us the first explicit descriptions of an artificial fly used to hunt river trout in the fifteenth book of his astonishing *De Natura Animalium* ("On the Characteristics of Animals"). These passages are the most famous and beloved among modern fly fishermen, and rightfully so: Aelian gives us a description of what is understood to be a trout, the name of the river in which the scene unfolds, the nature and description of the ἵππουρος fly, blatant evidence of the conscientious creation of an artificial ἵππουρος fly, a description of that artificial fly, and last but not least a wonderful hunting story. These passages also have a fascination with color. Aelian's peculiar description of fishing tackle and his special interest in color (topics which have been overlooked by historians and classicists alike) suggest that Aelian might have obtained this information first-hand from a passing fisherman. Yet, such specificity also suggests not only that this section is connected to his later

fly fishing episodes, but that Aelian might have also obtained this information from literary sources before him (specifically Plutarch and Aristotle). I will thus argue for the rich, literary and cultural complexity of these episodes.

On a practical level, this discussion of the cultural context surrounding fishing and of ancient tackle colors will be fruitful for modern fly fishermen who are looking for more information about the best tackle colors to use, a new perspective on the debate, or some historical insight regarding their beloved hobby. The anglers of antiquity were very conscientious of how their equipment affected both the fish and, in turn, their ability to catch them. In a similar vein of thought to modern fishermen, interestingly enough, color is not the only thing that guarantees effective subtlety, but it is a worthwhile supplement to the rest of the tackle to achieve this goal of complete stealth.

Moreover, I will argue that Aelian uses the culturally contentious color purple within his two fly fishing stories to push his own moralistically Greek agenda. There was a ravenous gluttony for owning purple among the vulgarity during the second and third centuries CE, a gluttony spawned from a long tradition of purple's positive royal connections. Purple was the color of the Roman *fascēs*, the color of the boyhood toga, a mark of distinction among the Senate, and a color of the Roman high priests. Yet this color (when understood "synaesthetically") came with a lot of negative baggage in the Roman world as a physical and moralistic symbol of extravagance, lust, and gluttony (Bradley, 2013). The specific purple colors of the bait that Aelian describes not only serve a practical purpose as a list of materials chosen to catch fish or entertain the reader, but they also serve a didactic, moralizing purpose as colorful warnings designed to critique the gluttonous Romans, or the fishy Epicureans, of Aelian's own time.

Bibliography

Bradley, Mark. "Colour as Synaesthetic Experience in Antiquity." In *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses*, edited by Shane Butler and Alex Purves. Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2013. 127-40.