Bygone Fish

Rediscovering the Red-Sea Parrotfish as a Delicacy of Byzantine Negev Cuisine

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Polychrome mosaic emblema (panel) showing fish and sea creatures, Pompeii, House of the Geometric Mosaics. Naples National Archaeological Museum [Public domain].

*In the ancient world, the presence of exotic fish in locations distant from the sea would have signified their importance as luxury foods for social elites. Of special interest in this respect is the Red Sea parrotfish (*scarus *Sp.), which, while consumed regularly around the Red Sea basin, would have been considered an exotic fish when found at great distances from its point of origin. Recent archaeological excavations in the Negev Desert of the southern Levant have yielded surprising and unprecedented quantities of parrotfish remains, found in the landfills of Byzantine sites located some 200 km from the Red Sea (Tepper et al. 2018; Bar-Oz et al. 2019). These sites (Elusa, Soubeita, Oboda, and Nessana), which date from the fourth through seventh centuries CE, are located along the main system of ancient trade routes that connected the Arabian Peninsula and the Red Sea with the Mediterranean region and Europe (fig. 1). The remains recovered from these sites testify to the historical importance of this fish in Byzantine society and economy, as well as to the development of sophisticated trade networks, which facilitated the supply of Red Sea fish to distant inland locations.*

Here we present the social and economic background for the increased culinary demand for parrotfish during the Roman and Byzantine periods and the technical means developed for answering this demand. Of special interest to us are the methods of conservation and transportation that allowed for the long-distance distribution of parrotfish on such a large scale, facilitating its popularity on the tables of well-to-do residents of the region in this period.

We have assembled a multidisciplinary group of historians, archaeologists, and culinary experts to trace the route of the parrotfish from its places of procurement, through its preservation by methods of drying and salting, to its transportation to distant markets and distribution among local elites. Our results allow us to place the entire process within the social context of the late antique meal and to introduce an experimental culinary approach through which we recreate the tastes of parrotfish dishes, incorporating at the same time other products of the Byzantine world.

A Keystone Species

Parrotfish are medium-sized, marine herbivore fish and are among the most common fish in coral reefs in tropical seas, including the Red Sea. They are easily noticeable with their bright, parrot-like colors (predominantly red and green) and their sharp beaks with which they scrape dead coral to feed on algae (fig. 2). They include a diverse group of fish and comprise more than fifty known different species that are of unparalleled importance to the ecological balance of coral reefs (Hoey and Bonaldo 2018, and papers therein). Of the hundreds of species living in the coral reef it is the only fish that regularly performs the task of scraping and cleaning the reef's surface. By doing so, it contributes to

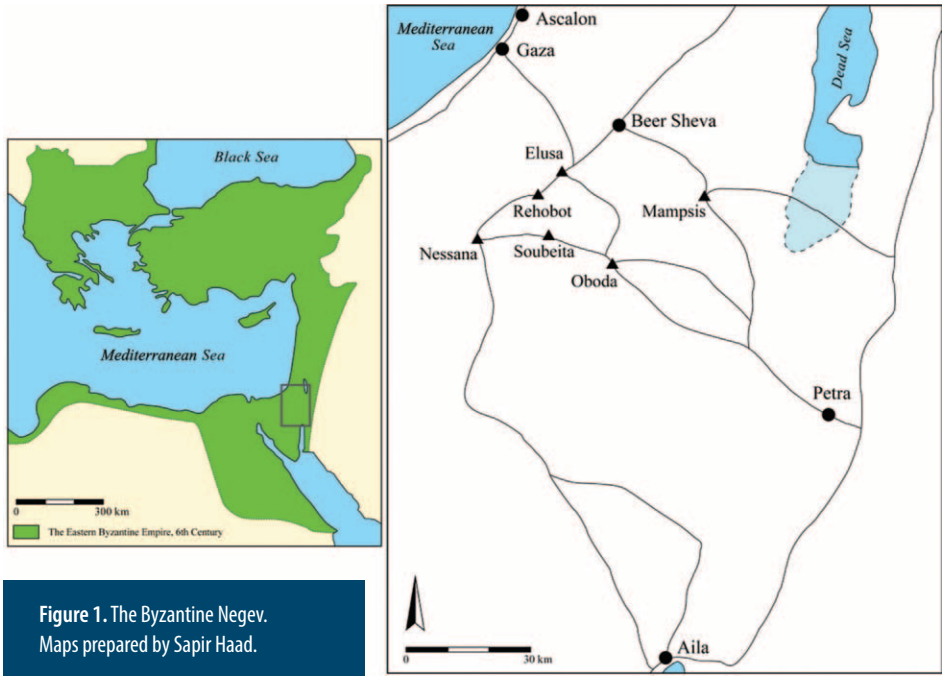

Figure 1. The Byzantine Negev. Maps prepared by Sapir Haad.

the corals' health and helps to preserve the delicate balance of the reef's ecosystem (Bellwood et al. 2004).

As a dominant component of the reef, parrotfish are considered a keystone species and play a critical part in the survival of the entire coral reef ecosystem. Nowadays, however, populations of parrotfish are endangered worldwide across their distribution range. A recent study conducted for The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species found that numerous populations of parrotfish face risk of regional extinction. Among the main reasons is excessive fishing, which often employs nonselective fish traps and nets. In addition, parrotfish are targets of nocturnal spearfishing throughout their distribution range (Comeros-Raynal et al. 2012).

Parrotfish in the Byzantine Negev

Throughout most of modern archaeological research, parrotfish bones have been very rare and are usually found sporadically in sites that are largely restricted to the region of the Arabian peninsula and Egypt, close to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf (Beech 2003; Studer 2008). It is only in Byzantine times that we begin to see them in increasing numbers at sites in the desert of Israel and Jordan (Lernau 1995; Van Neer et al. 2004; Studer 2008: fig. 3; Kroll 2012). During this period they are also found hundreds of kilometers from where they were caught, and they are mostly observed in high numbers in sites along ancient trade routes from Arabia to the northern parts of the Byzantine Empire and the Mediterranean Sea. This includes the numerous parrotfish bones that were recovered in the Byzantine sites of the Negev (fig. 3).

The archaeological record of the Byzantine period in the Negev shows that human occupation flourished in the early Byzantine period (fourth–fifth centuries CE), until a dramatic decline that occurred in the mid-sixth century CE (Avni 2014; Tepper et al. 2018). Within the larger frame of our project we explore the attributes of the phenomenal success of Byzantine society in the semi-arid area of the Negev, and the nature of its decline. As part of the project, several trash mounds were excavated within three of the main settlements of the Negev, namely, Elusa, Soubeita, and Nessana.

The ancient trash yielded an exceptional abundance of food refuse, ranging from bones of sheep and goats to seeds of edible plants and wood used as fuel. These bones are the best empirical evidence to reconstruct the food preferences and culinary practices of the Negev Desert people in Byzantine times. The organic material also included numerous bones of parrotfish (Bar-Oz et al. 2019).

The unexpected discovery of parrotfish is one of the peculiar aspects of these excavations (Blevis 2019). All fish remains were identified to biological taxa based on morphological and metric criteria, using the fish-reference collection of Irit Zohar, which is stored in the Laboratory of Archaeozoology at the University of Haifa. Specifically, a significant number of remains of Red Sea parrotfish were identified, based on the presence of their beak-like tooth plate and pharyngeal bones, which are distinct from those of their Mediterranean cousins (Blevis and Zohar, table S7 in Bar-Oz et al. 2019).

The Byzantine Negev

The Negev desert was located in a remote corner of the empire, distant from the imperial centers of power to the north. But modern scholarship has mostly neglected a simple fact in its numerous studies of late antique Negev society, namely, its northern reaches lay in proximity to the Mediterranean coast, allowing, at least in theory, for a manageable connection of the entire micro-region to Mediterranean networks of commerce and knowledge (Wickham 2005).

Located between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and bordering the Sinai Peninsula and the Jordan Valley, the Negev Desert was home to seminomadic peoples since at least the second millennium BCE. Patterns of a more complex society, employing sedentary settlement forms and reliant upon imported goods, appeared in the Nabatean period, towards the second century BCE, and continued to develop during the time of the Nabataean kingdom and its incorporation into the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries CE (Rubin 1996). Under the Byzantine Empire, the entire area flourished and reached an unprecedented economic peak. It subsequently declined rapidly, possibly even before the Muslim conquest (Bar-Oz et al. 2019).

The strong connective capacity of this area—bridging the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and by implication East and

Figure 2. Parrotfish in the wild. Red Sea (top) and Mediterranean (bottom); (top: CC BY 2.0; bottom: CC BY 2.5. Via Wikimedia Commons).

West—has generated a dominant modern view of the ancient Negev as a "junction" or "crossroad" of civilizations, or, even more simplistically, as a transition area (Bradshaw Aitken and Fossey 2013). Its aridity has created yet another commanding modern perspective—particularly for its long period of significant prosperity—focusing on elements of local innovation and self-consistency, and generally highlighting the area's insularity. Even during its significant period of prosperity, its economic success has been analyzed in isolation from the elaborate commercial networks in the region and has often been explained through the impact of empire, denying local societal initiative and agency (Gambash 2017).

But human civilizations rarely exist in isolation, nor do they ever function as mere conduits of goods and culture (Knapp 2015). The scarcity of evidence may obstruct from view the full intricacy of contacts probably already existing between earlier, still-seminomadic Negev societies and at least some of the regional networks that surrounded it. But the written and material record that represents the microregion since the time sedentary settlements appeared and developed in the area should allow for a far more detailed evaluation of the connectivity of the Negev throughout late antiquity, with initial analysis pointing towards a more dominant Mediterranean orientation than so far noticed (Horden and Purcell 2000). For instance, Negev wine was exported through Gaza and Ascalon to Italy and Spain, while Greek and Anatolian marble was imported to Soubeita and Elusa, probably through the same harbors (Mayerson 1985; Fischer 1998).

Since the early nineteenth century, the ancient settlements of the Negev have drawn the attention of researchers of the Near East, who noticed the region's fast development during the Byzantine period, and its no less abrupt decline in the sixth century. The prosperity of the six main centers—Elusa, Rehobot, Nessana, Soubeita (fig. 4), Oboda, and Mampsis—and of the numerous rural agricultural settlements in the area, still appears impressive to scholars today, for its sudden appearance and longevity as well as for the challenging arid conditions in which it emerged (Avni, Porat, and Avni 2013; Tepper et al. 2018).

The markers of this prosperity are numerous and include intensified urbanization; development in architectural styles; innovative agricultural methods based on run-off water; abundant cultivation of grapes, olives, wheat, and barley; the emergence of local production centers; and a generally sophisticated material culture (Kennedy 1985). The symptoms of the rapid descent of the Negev are also familiar and include a demographic decrease, accompanied by the desertion of whole urban neighborhoods and smaller settlements, and a general economic slowdown (Magness 2003).

Fish in the Classical World

In his speech "On the Embassy," Demosthenes denounces Philocrates as follows (19.229): "He earned money by giving away his country, and went around spending it on prostitutes and fish." In his ninth book, Pliny the Elder describes no fewer than 144 species of fish. We are of course not to assume that each of these would have been so desirable and expensive as to exhaust the royal bribe money received by Philocrates. But it is accurate enough to describe fish as common in the antique Mediterranean meal, introducing a wide selection of possible species and dishes, many of which could easily have sold for high prices in the market. In the quotation above, Demosthenes indeed used the proper Greek word for fish (*ikhthus*)—but in contemporary Athens, where his speech was delivered, one of the synonymous words for fish was "dainty" (*opson*)—fish being the declared delicacy of the Athenians (Trentmann 2012).

As with food in general, our sources for fish in the classical Mediterranean are numerous and elaborate, insofar as concerns their acquisition, processing, and consumption. Beyond the regular corpora of evidence available for dining culture, we have written sources especially dedicated to fish, including, among others, Aristotle's natural observations, Pliny the Elder's geographic and cultural insights, and Apicius's culinary perspectives. Archaeology can add significant information regarding the fishing process, as well as aspects of preservation,

transportation, and kitchen processing (Marzano 2013). The picture is supplemented by archaeozoology, which offers valuable information regarding the types of fish preferred in various areas, and their possible place of origin (Van Neer et al. 2004).

The taste of the Byzantine Negev society for the Red Sea parrotfish raises essential questions regarding the entire process that led to the consumption of fish in the eastern Mediterranean, particularly in sites distant from the sea. Issues of choice and preference, preservation and transportation techniques, processing and cooking methods, and the resulting price, all come into play here, as well as cross-regional influences, which go beyond the immediate networks of Mediterranean connectivity.

The parrotfish in its Mediterranean representation (*sparisoma Cretense*) was familiar in antiquity and attracted the attention of naturalists as well as cuisiniers since at least the classical period, when it was described by Aristotle (*Hist. An.* 8.2). While the Mediterranean parrotfish was initially described as originating in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean, it gradually became familiar and popular all around the Mediterranean. After it was artificially introduced to Italian shores in the first century CE, it is said to have climbed to the very top of the fish pyramid of haute cuisine (Pliny *HN* 9.29):

Figure 3. Parrotfish bone recovered at Elusa. Photograph courtesy of Guy Bar-Oz.

FIgure 4. Soubeita. Photograph courtesy of Guy Bar-Oz.

Figure 5. Woven basket with fish. Detail from the Lod mosaic, Palestine, third–fourth centuries CE. Photograph by Carole Raddato [CC BY-SA 2.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)].

> Nowadays the first place belongs to the parrotfish, which is the only fish that is said to ruminate, and to feed on grass rather than on other fish. It is abundant mostly in the Carpathian Sea, and never migrates willingly beyond Lectum, a promontory of Troas. The commander of the fleet under the Emperor Claudius, Optatus Elipertius, brought this fish from that area, and dispersed it between Ostia and the shore of Campania. For about five years, the greatest care was taken that those caught would be returned to the sea. After this, they have been found in abundance along the coast of Italy, where they had not been captured formerly. Human appetite thus obtained for itself its desired delicacy with these fish, and gave to the sea a new inhabitant.

The list of written sources for the Mediterranean parrotfish, which includes recipes and instructions for various means of preparation, is long and ranges at least from the classical to the Late Roman periods, suggesting that the fish would have likely maintained its popularity and culinary supremacy well into the Byzantine period. The corpus includes Archestratus, Seleucus of Tarsus, Nicander of Thyateira, Ovid, Pliny the Elder, Marcellus Sidetes, Martial, Oppian, and Aelian. However, an archaeological site in the Mediterranean basin with material remains that would corroborate this reported popularity of the parrotfish is yet to be discovered. Interestingly, the late antique Negev towns do exactly that (fig. 5), though not without some fascinating twists in the narrative.

With the discovery of significant quantities of Red Sea parrotfish remains in the middens of Negev settlements, we are in effect witnessing a society that is connected both to the Red Sea and to the Mediterranean, adopting the Mediterranean taste for the parrotfish, yet recreating it—and, indeed, possibly even improving on it—by replacing the Mediterranean variety with its counterpart from the Red Sea. In order to understand this choice better, we turn to examining the nutritional value of the parrotfish, and then address the practical implications of preferring the Red Sea species to the Mediterranean one, particularly those concerning the long and arid routes across which the fish had to be transported; and the necessary preservation process it had to undergo upon its capture.

Nutrition

The nutritional value of the parrotfish explains why it was such a desired delicacy in the Byzantine world. The meat of the parrotfish is white and of high quality, and it flakes effortlessly. It has a mild fish flavor with a distinct, delicate aquatic taste. This taste is further intensified during the curing process. As such it is very similar to the popular Atlantic cod fish (*gadus Morhua*), which is among the most popular fish consumed in the United Kingdom and the east coast of the United States and Canada (commonly served as "fish and chips").

Another criterion that makes the parrotfish very similar to the Atlantic cod fish is the low fat content of its meat. In both taxa, the fat content is approximately 3 percent. In addition, they have a low ratio of saturated fat and are a rich source of omega-3s. Their meat is also a good source for vitamins (B12 and B6) and minerals (potassium and phosphorus), as well as for protein (Torry Research Station 1989).

Ancient societies may not have had our knowledge of such details, but the general nutritional value of the fish, as well as its attractive colors, would not have been lost on them. Furthermore, the low fat content of the fish would have been most relevant for the Byzantine trade economy: Fish caught in the Red Sea could be dried easily, as is still done today by local Bedouin fishers in the Sinai (fig. 6). This processing would have allowed for the preservation of the meat for long periods and its transportion as exotic taxa across long distances, reaching new markets in distant parts of the empire.

In many respects the Byzantine dried parrotfish is similar to the modern Portuguese dried salted cod fish, or Bacalhau. The Bacalhau is a ubiquitous ingredient of the Portuguese cuisine, and the Portuguese have dozens of ways to cook it. In spite of the staggering diversity of fish found in Portugal that can be consumed fresh, the Portuguese clearly prefer the dried Bacalhau, importing it all the way from the North Sea.

Also in modern-day Okinawa, Japan, the parrotfish is a highly desirable food, sold as delicacy on the market (fig. 7). Here the prestige of the fish is also related to its vivid colors, and it is usually consumed fresh.

All of these factors—the vibrant color, its nutritional value, and the ability to export it across long distances—contribute to explaining the parrotfish's high popularity among such groups as the Byzantine elites.

Preservation

The catabolic reactions that begin to develop immediately upon the capture and killing of fresh fish would have necessitated either prompt consumption in locations close to the fishing site, or the preservation of the fish for later consumption and possible transportation.

Various hints suggest that fish had been preserved in the Mediterranean basin at least since the early Neolithic period. Starting in the Bronze Age, we witness such pictorial representations as the relief from the tomb of the two brothers in Egypt, depicting cleaned and opened fish hanging to dry (Brewer and Friedman 1989). The presence of salt on Minoan Crete suggests that salting was known as one of the means of preserving food already in the eighteenth century BCE, and evidence for fish paste appears on sixteenth-century BCE Thera (Kopaka and Chaniotakis 2003). Indirectly, fish preservation must be assumed for Mycenaean-period sites located at some distance from the sea, for example in Anatolia (Van Neer et al. 2004). Cranial parts of Nile perch with butchery marks on them were discovered at Iron Age Dor, as well as at Tell Abu-Huam, both located in the southern Levant, indicating that fish were imported across long distances, sometimes with their heads still on (Gilboa 2015). Various Mediterranean fish were also found in numerous inland Iron Age sites in the area, including thousands of fish bones discovered in Jerusalem (Reich, Shukron, and Lernau 2007).

Figure 6. Dried parrotfish in the Bedouin fisherman village of Ras-Abu-Galum, Sinai. Photograph courtesy of Tzur Shezaf.

It is generally held by experts that knowledge of fish salting technologies had reached the western parts of the Mediterranean with Phoenician and Greek colonization (Curtis 2001; Botte 2016). Interestingly, most archaeological evidence for industrial-scale salteries comes from the western Mediterranean and northern Africa (Trakadas 2015). The bias

Figure 7. Parrotfish served in New York (left) and Japan (right). Photographs courtesy of Guy Bar-Oz.

Figure 8. Camel carrying Gaza jars; mosaic from a Byzantine church near Kissufim, sixth century CE. Photograph courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

may be explained by the misinterpretation of eastern Mediterranean salteries, which were possibly smaller than their western counterparts, as a new study suggests (Mylona 2018). To be sure, written sources paint a picture of an elaborate salting industry all around the Mediterranean, up through the late antique period:

> There is another salting method which can be employed even in hot places, during every time of the year. After pigs are prohibited from water for a day, on the next day they are slaughtered and their hair is removed, either with boiling water or with a small flame made from thin pieces of wood, for the hair is removed in either way. The flesh is cut up into one-pound pieces. Then parched salt is spread in large vessels, moderately broken as we have said above. The small pieces of meat are placed compactly, and salt is added alternately. But when the necks of the vessels are reached, the remaining part is filled with salt and covered with pressing weights. This flesh is always edible, just as salted fish is preserved in its brine. (Columella 12.55.4)

Longer periods of preservation, involving less liquid, resulted in harder curing and a more durable product, also suitable for transport across long distances.

There is no need to assume that the Red Sea region would have had to await the advent of the Roman Empire for acquiring knowledge of industrial-scale fish preservation by drying and salting. The region had been thoroughly connected to Mediterranean networks for millennia, whether through the Egyptian or the Negev–Levantine civilizations. We are currently not aware of facilities identified by experts as salteries on the northern coasts of the Red Sea. Since salting installations in the Mediterranean were usually, and sensibly, placed close to salt and fish sources, we may assume that the preservation process was carried out close to the shore also in the Red Sea area, whether next to fishing focal points, or by main marketplaces, prevalent in such emporia as Berenice, Aila, and Myos Hormos, where lively fishing and salting activity has been recorded (Hamilton-Dyer 2011; Thomas 2011).

For the period of interest to us, it is also interesting to follow the intriguing routine of the residents—soldiers and miners—of Mons Claudianus. This Granodiorite quarry was located in Egypt's eastern desert, some 200 km from the Nile and 50 km from the Red Sea. During its floruit of activity, between the first and third centuries CE, it generated significant demand for imported goods, well attested in the site's archaeological and written record. Evidence includes dozens of food plants and animal sources, and a wide variety of fish, the Red Sea parrotfish among them (Van der Veen 1998).

Transportation

Fresh fish would have been prevalent above all at sites not far removed from the Mediterranean shoreline. The better the road going inland and the transportation arrangements, the farther away from the sea fresh fish could have been shipped, but ultimately the distance would have remained limited. The enterprise described above, of Claudius's fleet commander Optatus Elipertius exporting the Mediterranean parrotfish from the east to the shores of Italy, reveals also the ability of the ancients to transport live fish across long distances. The multiple challenges involved would have been answered particularly by the employment of ships whose lower compartments would have been adapted into fish tanks. Beyond such written reports, archaeological evidence from shipwrecks suggests the employment of such a technology, as does the likely presence of fish tanks in fishmongers' shops (Marzano 2013).

The demand for fish also remained high among wide populations based further inland, which had no means of receiving them fresh, or could not afford the high costs of sophisticated shipments. The majority of the fish export market would have had to revolve around the transportation of preserved fish (Lantos 2019). The indirect evidence here overlaps with that of fish preservation: Fish bones found in inland sites far removed from the sea must indicate the preservation of fish at or near the

Byzantine Negev Parrotfish Soup

Ingredients

Whole salted Parrotfish	1.5kg (head removed)
Chickpeas	50gr
Carrots	5
Celery	4 roots
Celery leaves	handful
Parsley	4 roots
Lemons	2
Olive oil	half a glass
Fresh chopped dill	spoonful
Butter	

Preparation

Steep the chickpeas in water 12 hours before preparation.
Peel the vegetables

While cooking the soup

Squeeze the lemons and keep their peel. Steep the lemon peels in boiling water for 3–4 minutes and repeat. Chop the lemon peels to create a paste. Add olive oil and lemon juice to the paste to create an emulsion.

Cooking the soup

Use a large pot and add vegetables (3/4 pot).
Add water (5 cm below vegetables level).
Spread the parrotfish over the vegetables.
Cover the pot with a lid and heat to boiling temperature.
After boiling keep pot over low temperature—mild bubbling—for 10 minutes. Before the fish disintegrates, transfer it whole from pot to plate, and remove the bones.
Add chopped celery leaves to the soup. Keep cooking the soup until the chickpeas are soft, and taste for saltiness.
Filter the soup water to a separate vessel.

Serving

Place the vegetables and fish in bowls, and add the soup on top.
Add lemon emulsion to bowls according to taste.
Add fresh chopped dill and butter and serve.

site of their obtainment, as well as their transportation to the place of consumption. Direct evidence is even more elaborate and colorful, especially for the period in question.

Dried and salted fish, in whole or in part, could be transported in a variety of receptacles, from sacks and barrels to the more customary amphorae, either broadly or specifically defined for this particular purpose. Material evidence consists of fish remains found in excavated amphorae, as well as of written sources such as the labels (*tituli picti*) found on amphorae, indicating their contents, and lists of prices, goods, and taxes describing market transactions involving various receptacles containing fish (Marzano 2013).

A telling example, directly relevant to the Byzantine Negev, comes from the Nessana papyri, which refer directly to fish transported to the desert (Kraemer 1958). Around the year 600 CE, the local fish trade is attested for a type of gray fish called *glaukos* in P. Ness. III 95; and the presence of garum and pickled fish is made clear in P. Ness. 85 and 87, dated to the late seventh century. At least in some of the cases the fish are described as being carried in *gazitia*—the familiar Gaza jars—which, while they give away the distinct orientation towards the Mediterranean, should also be considered as desirable containers for the trade between the Red Sea and the Negev (fig. 8).

Transportation by ship would have been the most efficient and cost effective way to send large shipments of preserved fish between coastal locations. But we are more interested here in the available land options, which, as for all other imports, would have been slower and more expensive, yet nevertheless widespread and accessible. Carts would have been the customary solution for suitable roads, and barges sailing up rivers would have been used as well.

For the lines of transportation available in the desert land of the Negev, however, it is much more reasonable to assume that the solution would have been supplied by the camel caravans moving between Red Sea and Mediterranean harbors, particularly Gaza and Ascalon (Habas 2009). Contemporary local mosaics depict camels carrying amphorae that could be used for all sorts of goods, from wine and olive oil to fish and garum (*Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae* 3.2545; fig. 8). Once reaching one of the coastal emporia, the entire commercial network of the Mediterranean would have been accessible for further exportation (Gambash forthcoming).

Taste

The parrotfish was marked as a delicacy already in classical antiquity. Archestratus—the "Deadalus of delicious dishes"—recommended in the fourth century BCE (Athenaios, *Deipnosophistai* 7.320a):

> Having washed it well, roast the parrotfish of Chalcedon by the sea. You will find it good also in Byzantium, and for size, its back is like a round shield. Serve it whole, as follows: once it is all closely covered with cheese and olive-oil, take it and hang it in a hot oven, to have it roasted. Sprinkle it with salt and cumin seeds, and with gleaming olive-oil, pouring with your hand the divine stream.

Petronius (*Sat*. 93) in the first century CE included the parrotfish in the long list of dainties served in Trimalchio's feast, and Galen (*Al. Fac.* 3.27), a century later, corroborated Pliny in stating that "the parrot wrasse has been thought to be the finest among [rock fish] in tastiness." Also relevant to our discussion, the Roman recipe collection attributed to Apicius included a variety of dishes based on salted fish, which could be prepared with the parrotfish. One of the recipes allows for "any kind of cured fish" (*pisces qualeslibet curatos*), instructing to have it "carefully treated, soaked, and cleaned" before frying it in oil (Ap. *Re coq*.

4.2.23). Another recipe (Ap. *Re coq.* 4.2.24) directs one to place onions—preferably Ascalonian—into a pot, and lay on top of them any kind of whole cured fish (*pisces super compones*). The fish is presumably meant to be steamed in the cooking process.

These and similar recipes have inspired our chef, Uri Jeremias, to experiment with the preservation of parrotfish meat through salting and drying, aiming to reach the product that would have left the shores of the Red Sea on its way to the Negev dining halls. He then produced a main dish of *Byzantine Negev Parrotfish Soup* (see the recipe above) based on dried and salted Red Sea parrotfish, and on ingredients and cooking methods from the Byzantine world.

We may imagine one of Soubeita's leading families gathering for dinner on a hot summer evening sometime in the fifth century CE. The wine they will be drinking, likely made in the family's own vineyard, is the same wine that is exported through the harbors of Ascalon and Gaza to Italy, Gaul, and Spain. They share with other Mediterranean societies also in their dietary fundamentals—from grain and olive to meat and dairy. And they are savvy consumers of Mediterranean luxuries, making their choices also in correspondence with contemporary fashions.

The parrotfish dish they will have for dinner—similar to the one prescribed above—tells the story of their unique position as established Negev residents, at once locally innovative and regionally connected. Like Trimalchio, they are consuming the luxurious parrotfish, yet their fish comes from the Red Sea, not from the Mediterranean; it reaches their table by means of camel transportation, and not on board a maritime or riverine vessel; and it arrives preserved, not fresh. The fact that their dish is prepared with the Red Sea parrotfish and not with the Mediterranean one is therefore another choice they are making—they are just as connected to the Mediterranean markets, as is demonstrated by other dishes on their table, or the marble on their walls.

This also means that, similar to the wide distribution of Gaza wine across the Mediterranean in the Byzantine period, preserved parrotfish from the Red Sea could potentially make its way to regional markets beyond the Negev and the Levant. If we do not yet find the evidence for such circulation, it is either because we are not looking for it, or because the Red Sea parrotfish was simply not in demand in the Mediterranean. To be sure, in the late antique Negev, demand for it was high, and, so long as the local social and economic systems continued to function regularly, this demand could be met conveniently, if not cheaply.

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