

THE PELAMYDES OF BYZANTIUM AND THE GOLDEN HORN

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Byzantium, or Istanbul, as it is known today, was founded as a colony of Megara, on the Thracian shore of the Bosphorus in the seventh century BC.¹ It is, however, generally accepted that colonists from other cities had a part to play in its foundation.² The initial centre and Acropolis of the city was the area where Topkapı Palace and Hagia Sophia are today to be found. The city expanded with time so that in the Hellenistic and Roman periods it had spread over and even beyond the areas now known as Eminönü, Sultanahmet, Cağaloğlu and Çemberlitaş.³

Why Calchedon (today Kadıköy), which lies immediately across from Byzantium on the Asian shore, should have been found-

For the Turkish version of the present article see *Tarih ve Toplum* 135 (Mart 1995), pp. 43-46.

1 Various ancient writers (Skymnos, 716 ff.; Dionysios Byzantinos, *Anapoulos Bosporou*, 7; Strabo, VII. 6.2) say that the founders of Byzantium were from Megara in central Greece. For the connections between Byzantium and Megara see K. Hanell, *Megarische Studien*, Lund 1934, pp. 116-136. Also see A. Erzen, «İstanbul Şehrinin Kuruluşu ve İsimleri», *Bellekten* XVII (1954), pp. 131-158.

2 Incomers from the Peloponnese and Central Greece had a share in the founding of Byzantium, along with Calchedonians and possibly colonists from Miletus. Tacitus (*Annales*, XII. LXIII) says that it was found by the Athenians.

3 For the topography and buildings of the city see W. Müller-Wiener, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbul*, Verlag Ernst Wasmuth, Tübingen 1977; S. Eyice, «Tarih İçinde İstanbul ve Şehrin Gelişmesi», *Atatürk Konferansları*, 1975, XIII. Dizi, Türk Tarih Kurumu, p. 89 ff.; D. Kuban, «Bizantion», *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul 1994), vol. 2, pp. 258-259.

ded before Byzantium, is a question which has intrigued people down through the ages. Various ancient authors⁴ claimed that it would have been more sensible for the first colonists of the area to have settled on the site of Byzantium, it being better placed, and even went on to accuse them of being blind for not doing so. So why did the first colonists prefer the Kadıköy site? I will briefly mention the most widely accepted reasons⁵ that have been put forward, before moving on to the real subject matter of this essay, i.e. Byzantium's pelamydes.

The site of Byzantium gained importance through Black Sea trade. At the time of the founding of Calchedon, Black Sea trade was of no importance. For colonists looking for new lands the need was to settle on land which was suitable for cultivation.⁶ It is also indubitably true that the site of Byzantium, being on the Thracian side, was not immune to possible attack by Thracian tribes.⁷ It has furthermore been claimed that having entered through the Dardanelles (Hellespont), the colonists would have found the Asian shore of the Sea of Marmara (Propontis) to have provided a more attractive route for sailing boats to reach the Bosphorus, and hence would have seen the site of Calchedon as being more useful to them.⁸

4 Herodot IV. 144; Strabo, VII. 6.2; Tacitus, *Annales*, XII. LXIII.

5 For this view see K. J. Beloch, *Griechische Geschichte* I. 1, Berlin-Leipzig 1924, p. 257; C. Roebuck, *Ionian Trade and Colonization*, New York 1959, p. 114; B. Isaac, *The Greek Settlements in Thrace Until the Macedonian Conquest*, Leiden 1986, pp. 219-222.

6 It is also claimed that the nearby copper mines were an important factor. See Pliny, *N. H.* XXXVII. 72 and R. P. Legon, *Megara: The Political History of a Greek City-State to 336 B. C.*, London 1981, p. 79.

7 Polyb., IV. 45.7; Herodot V. 23. Also see A. J. Graham, «The Colonial Expansion of Greece», *CAH* III.3 (1982), p. 120.

8 I. Malkin-N. Samueli, «Niçin Khalkedon (Kadıköy) Bizans'tan Önce Kuruldu?». (*Mediterranean Cities. Historical Perspectives*, ed. I. Malkin-R. L. Hohlfelder, London 1988'den çev. N. Narlı), *Toplumsal Tarih* 10 (Ekim 1994), pp. 14-20. (Note that since Byzantine/Byzance and Byzantium have different meanings it would have been better if in the translation of the text by Narlı, the word Byzantium/Byzantion had been used rather than Byzantine (Bizans in Turkish), to avoid confusion.

Migrating of Fish

In ancient times, as today, fishing was an important source of income. Byzantium, being on the Bosphorus would have overlooked the route taken by shoals of fish migrating between the Black Sea and the Aegean.⁹ The main fish found in the Bosphorus were the pelamys and the tunny.¹⁰ Pelamys and tunny resemble each other closely in size and anatomical features. Some varieties of tunny (tunafish) can grow to as much as 3-4 metres. Although pelamys is smaller than tunny some specimens reach about a half metre. Nowadays their numbers are much reduced but in ancient times both pelamys and tunny were found in vast quantities in the Bosphorus. The Golden Horn in particular seethed with pelamydes.

Both species are migratory; they winter in the Mediterranean or Sea of Marmara (Propontis) and summer in the Black Sea (Pontos Euxinos).¹¹ As winter approaches the pelamys and tunny, who had gone up (*anavashya*) to their summer feeding grounds in the Black Sea, return (*katavashya*) back down the Bosphorus to the Sea of Marmara, some of them even continuing as far as the Aegean and Mediterranean. In the Autumn when the cold north winds begin to blow and stir up the waters of the Black Sea the first shoals, the pelamydes aim for the Bosphorus.¹² They are

9 On the subject of the fish found in the Dardanelles, the Bosphorus and the Black Sea see also M. Danoff, «Pontos Euxinos», *RE Supp.* IX (Stuttgart 1962), col. 959 ff.; E. Slastenenko, *Karadeniz Havzası Balıkları* (Turkish translation by H. Altan), Et ve Balık Kurumu Umum Müdürlüğü Yayınları, İstanbul 1955-1956; F. Akşiray, *Türkiye Deniz Balıkları Tayin Anahtarı*, İ. Ü. Rektörlüğü Yayınları, no. 3490, İstanbul 1987; L. Robert, «Les Poissons du Bosphore», *BCH* 102 (1978), pp. 531-535.

10 Although it is mainly pelamydes that are referred to in this article, there is no doubt that vast quantities of other fish are to be found in both the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn.

11 For the species and the migration of fish around Turkey see K. Devedjian, *Pêche et Pêcheries en Turquie*, Constantinople 1926.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 3 : «...A l'automne donc, quand les vents glacé du Nord commencent à souffler et à brouiller les eaux du Pont, ce sont d'abord les Pélamides qui se mettent en route et entrent dans le Bosphore.»

followed by the large pelamydes. Towards the end of November the final shoals, the mackerel, migrate to the Bosphorus. They winter there and at the beginning of spring return to the Black Sea.¹³ They are followed by the large pelamydes. Without doubt the largest of the migrating fish is the tunny. Pliny¹⁴ has this to say about the tunnies of the Bosphorus :

«...In spring time they enter the Black Sea from the Mediterranean in shoals, and they do not spawn anywhere else. The name of cordyla is given to the fry, which accompany the fish when they return to the sea in autumn after spawning; in the spring they begin to be called mudfish or pelamydes, and when they have exceeded the period of one year they are called tunny. These fish are cut up into parts, and the neck and belly are counted a delicacy, and also the throat provided it is fresh, and even then it causes severe flatulence; all the rest of the tunny, with the flesh entire, is preserved in salt : these pieces are called melandrya, as resembling splinters of oak-wood. The cheapest of them are the parts next the tail, because they lack fat, and the parts most favoured are those next the throat; whereas in other fish the parts round the tail are most in use. At the pelamys stage they are divided into choice slices and cut up small into a sort of little cube»

Pliny¹⁵ thus says that only after reaching a certain size are the pelamydes referred to as tunny. In other words he sees the tunny

13 *Ibid.*, p. 3

14 *N. H.* IX. 47-48.

15 *Ibid.*, XXXII. 149 «...orcynus-hic est pelamydum generis maximus...»; *ibid.*, 48 : «...cum annum excessere tempus, thynni.»

and the pelamys as being one and the same fish.¹⁶ There is also an interesting passage in Athenaeus.¹⁷

«...Heracleon of Ephesus says that tunny is the name given to the *orcynus* (large mackerel) by the Attic writers. But Sostratus, in the second book of his work *On Animals*, says that the young is called *thynnus*; when it becomes larger, *thynnus*; when still larger, *orcynus*, and when it grows to excessive size, *cetus* (whale).»

Pliny¹⁸ also says that since the tunny sees better with their right eye (which may or may not be true !) it was believed that they entered the Black Sea by following the right bank and left via the left bank. Aristotle¹⁹ says the same thing, too and adds that «it likes warm places, and for that reason keeps close to the sand.» It is also important to emphasize that the earliest writer to mention the abundance of fish in the straits is Homer.²⁰

The Importance of the Currents in the Bosphorus

In ancient times a lot of coastal cities were engaged in fishing. But there were only a few cities like Byzantium that were founded on a strait. And for these cities, during the migration season an important part of their income was derived from fish. A number of ancient writers mention the abundance of fish in

16 Although according to modern classification the two fish are generally shown as being from the same family, they are occasionally given as being from different families.

17 *Deipnosophistae*, VII. 303b. Athenaeus (*ibid.* VII. 297c) quoting from Antigonus of Carystus, also informs us that «the people of Halae (a town on the shore of Attica), when they celebrate a festival to Poseidon in the tunny season, offer to the god in the event of a good catch the first tunny caught; and this offering is called a *thynnaion*.»

18 *N. H.* IX. 50 : «...*thynii dextera ripa intrant, exeunt laeva; id accidere existimatur quia dextro oculo plus cernant, utroque natura hebeti.*»

19 Athen., *Deipnosophistae*, VII. 301e.

20 *Il.* IX. 360.

the Bosphorus.²¹ For Byzantium one of the main if not the most important source of income was the pelamys and tunny. These fish in fact were so important that they came to symbolize the city. Even the currents in the Bosphorus favoured Byzantium. Thanks to the current the shoals of fish were swept towards Byzantium whether they liked it or not. So much so that Strabon²² has this to say :

«...There they are caught by the current, and since at the same time the region is so formed by the nature as to turn the current of the sea there to Byzantium and the Horn at Byzantium, they naturally are driven together thither and thus afford the Byzantines and the Roman people considerable revenue. But the Chalcedonians, though situated near by, on the opposite shore, have no share in this abundance, because the pelamydes do not approach their harbours.»

The Golden Horn

This was the name given in ancient times to the inlet lying between the plateaus of Istanbul and Beyoğlu, and it is the name by which this inlet is still known in many languages («Goldenes Horn» in German, «Corn d'Or» in French and «Altın Boynuz» in Turkish). The modern Turkish name, «Haliç» comes from the Arabic. In Ottoman times this stretch of water was known as the Halic-i Konstantiniyye or the Halic-i Dersaadet.²³

The place where the pelamydes were mostly to be found and caught was the Golden Horn (*Chrysoceras*).²⁴ We know from many

21 For these sources see H. Merle, *Die Geschichte der Städte Byzantion und Kalchedon*, Kiel 1916, p. 67.

22 VII. 6.2.

23 For the Golden Horn, particularly in the Byzantine and Ottoman periods see S. Eyice, «Tarihçe Haliç», *İTÜ Haliç Sempozyumu 10-11 Aralık 1975*, I, pp. 263-307; Eyice, «Haliç», *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 3 (Istanbul 1994), pp. 501-508.

24 Also see E. Oberhummer, «Chrysoceras», *RE* III (1899), col. 2513.

ancient sources²⁵ that it was named as «the horn» (*ceras*). Strabon²⁶ says that «it resembles a stag's horn, for it is split into numerous gulfs-branches, as it were». According to the myth²⁷ Zeus, the chief god, fell in love with a girl named Io, and to save her from the anger of his wife Hera, he changed Io into the form of a cow. This cow, whilst escaping from a pestering fly, crossed the Bosphorus (from which mythical event the Bosphorus, meaning «cow strait» gained its name) and came to the Golden Horn. To the daughter which she gave birth to on a nearby hillside, she gave the name «Ceroessa». In time this name became distorted to «Ceras».

Pliny²⁸ who knew the inlet as the Golden Horn²⁹ also goes on to satisfy our curiosity as to why it was so named :

«...In the channel of the Thracian Bosphorus joining the Sea of Marmara with the Black Sea in the actual narrows of the channel separating Europe and Asia, there is a rock of marvellous whiteness that shines through the water from the bottom to the surface, near Chalcedon on the Asiatic side. The sudden sight of this always frightens them, and they make for the opposite promontory³⁰ of Istanbul in a headlong shoal; this is the reason why that promontory has the name of the Golden Horn.»

In the work which he wrote in the second half of the nineteenth century P. A. Dethier describes the Golden Horn as follows : «Whether from its horn like shape or from the plentifulness of fish enriching and at one time sheltered by its shores, but which are now reduced to fleeing from the steamboats, this natural harbour is called the Golden Horn.»

25 Strabo VII. 320; Polyb. IV. 43.7; Amm. Marc. XXII. 8.7.

26 Strabo VII. 320.

27 See W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der Griechischen und Römischen Mythologie*, II/I, Leipzig 1890-1894, cols. 267 and 1175-76.

28 *N. H.* IX. 50-51 : «...*ex ea causa appellatum Aurei Cornus*»

29 *N. H.* IV. 46 : *Chryseon Ceras*.

30 Here the Golden Horn refers to the Istanbul peninsula which is the historical peninsula («tarihi yarımada» in Turkish) of the modern Eminönü district. But what is meant must be either the mouth of the Golden Horn or the Golden Horn itself.

So Pliny explains the name Golden Horn as resulting from the supply of fish (i.e. pelamydes) found therein. Likewise Strabon³¹ says that the current forced the pelamydes to enter the Golden Horn in shoals and that in a narrow section it was even possible to catch them by hand :

«...The pelamydes rush into these gulfs and are easily caught, because of their numbers, the force of the current that derives them together, and the narrowness of the gulfs, in fact, because of the narrowness of the area, they are even caught by hand.»

Thus it is to be understood that the Golden Horn was full of pelamydes; the horn of plenty filled with fruit (*cornucopiae*) of antiquity became the horn of plenty filled with pelamydes, for Byzantium!

Pelamydes on Coins

In ancient times some cities represented their main natural source of wealth on their coins. Since the main natural source of income for Byzantium was the pelamys/tunny fish, that is what they put on their coins. In particular in the period from the first to the third centuries AD when Byzantium was under Roman rule then the reverse of its bronze coins displayed the pelamys/tunny fish. Coins bearing fish are to be seen in the reigns of the following emperors and empresses : Caligula, Trajan, Plotina, Sabina, Faustina I, Lucilla, Crispina, Julia Domna, Caracalla, Plautilla, Geta, Diadumenianus, Julia Maesa, Julia Mamaea, Volusianus, Gallienus and Salonina. As mentioned above, since the two fish resemble each other it is not possible to say whether the ones on the coins are pelamys or tunny. But that is not important. What matters is that these fish constituted the main natural wealth of Byzantium to the point where the Horn became known as «Golden».

31 VII. 6.2.

On some of the coins the pelamydes/tunnies are horizontal, on others, vertical. On some a dolphin lies between two fish. Early silver coins of Byzantium from the period dating to the beginning of the fourth century BC. have a cow standing on a dolphin depicted on their obverse. The cow represents Byzantium's cattle industry, the dolphin, its fishing industry. The city of Byzantium also obtained fish from lake Derkos/Delkos (today Terkos) and lake Daskylitis (today Manyas). According to a document of somewhat later date about 100.000 kg. fish were taken annually from lake Derkos. This was rather a large quantity compared to the 10-15.000 kg. of fish which was at one time taken annually from the lakes of Küçük Çekmece and Büyük Çekmece.³²

The Torch, Fishtrap or Buoy?

On provincial bronze coins of Byzantium (1st-3rd centuries AD) was yet another design which probably indicates the importance of the city's fishing industry. The design is of a biconical shaped object which has been variously identified. E. Schönert-Geiss³³ who prepared a corpus of the coins of Byzantium says that the object is a torch connected with the cult of the goddess Artemis *Phosphoros* or Artemis *Lampadephoros* who was sacred to Byzantium. Factually this point of view holds water. However the biconical object portrayed on the coins neither looks like a torch nor resembles the torches³⁴ held in the hands of for example Artemis and Demeter on other coins of Byzantium. Perhaps the object could be a cult statue (xoanon) representing the goddess, rather than being her torch.

In some publications the object is described as a fishtrap³⁵ (or as a cage for keeping live fish in, in the sea). If it really is a fishtrap then the fish probably entered through a gap along the

32 L. Robert, «Dedicaces et Reliefs Votifs : 9. Reliefs Votifs de Derkoz», *Hellenica* X (1955), p. 42.

33 *Die Münzprägung von Byzantion, Teil II : Kaiserzeit*, Adolf M. Hakker-Amsterdam 1972, p. 36.

34 *Ibid.*, nos. 1454-1455, 1497, 1528, 1638 etc.

35 *BMCThrace*, nos. 65, 80-82.

line between the two conical sections, where they joined. And the tassel-like strip on the upper point could have been bait for the trap.

Another suggestion we would like to make is that the object could be one of the buoys or floats attached at intervals to large fishing nets. Once the net was full of fish it would be dragged down in the water and the buoy would become partially submerged. This would of course be a sign to the fisherman that the net was full. The horizontal line across the center of the object as shown on the coins which is presumably a rim, could be a mark to show how low the buoy is lying in the water, or it could be some sort of levelling device to ensure that the buoy stays upright on the surface of the water. However since the biconical object appears to be made of wicker or latticework (assuming this is not just a decorative effect) then this buoy theory remains open to some doubt, and the identity of the biconical object remains open to further discussion.