

At first glance *SEG* 11.692 appears unpromising. It consists of a single word, Ποηοιδᾶνος (“Poseidon’s”), inscribed retrograde in late archaic lettering on a small bronze figurine discovered near the Amyclaeum just outside the village of Vaphio in Laconia (von Massow 1927: 63, no. 5). The few scholars that mention it follow von Massow in describing the figurine simply as “a bronze fish” (*SEG* 11.692; Jeffery 1990: 200, no. 34; Cartledge 2002: 83). In fact, as a re-examination of the figurine, now in the collection of the Sparta Museum, and a comparison with other iconographic evidence clearly shows, it is not just any fish but a tuna. The implications are potentially significant.

Although previous scholars have attempted to restrict geographically the tuna sacrifices attested by Antigonus of Carystus (e.g. Wilamovitz 1881: 174; Shapiro 1989: 41; Bresson 2007: 186), most of these interpretations rely on unlikely emendations (e.g. Αιολέας or Ἀλαιέας for ἀλιέας) and the MS evidence for Athenaeus suggests, together with the iconographic and other evidence, that Antigonus is referring to a custom widely shared among tuna fishermen (Ath. 7.297e and 303e). In all likelihood our figurine was similarly dedicated by a Laconian tuna fisherman, a suggestion that is even more intriguing in light of the dialect form employed. Ποηοιδᾶν is obviously not Doric but more closely related to the Arcadian Ποσοιδᾶν and some scholars would identify it with the pre-Doric inhabitants of Laconia (Cartledge 2002: 83). Interestingly, most of our evidence for Ποηοιδᾶν is owed to dedications made by emancipated helots in the Poseidon sanctuary at Cape Taenarum. Given what our sources suggest about the close relationship between refugees and other marginal social classes and fishing, it would not be surprising to discover a relationship in Laconia between fishing and freed helots and other marginal social classes living in coastal perioecic communities.

Although archaeological evidence indicates that tuna were being hauled from Laconian waters already in the Mesolithic, and comparative evidence suggests tuna fisheries existed in certain locales even into the 20th century, ancient evidence from Laconia remains scarce. But I will conclude by suggesting additional indications are preserved in a little-discussed Hellenistic inscription discovered in the sanctuary of Apollo Hyperteleatas near the Laconian village of Phoiniki (*IG* V.1 931=*SEG* 13.259). This decree, perhaps issued by Epidaurus Limera, honors two brothers for their efforts in resolving a territorial dispute with the neighboring community of Zarax. The key passage reads (ll.4-8): “[concerning the disputed] land from...σκηλοπιᾶς τᾶς ἐπὶ τῶ...and the waters and the adjacent land and likewise the harbor...” Scholars have all followed Wilhelm in interpreting σκηλοπιᾶς τᾶς ἐπὶ τῶ as a mountaintop watchtower (see e.g. Ager 1994: 223). But σκηλοπιᾶ and closely related terms refer specifically to coastal tuna lookouts in literary sources and even in inscriptions from Parium, Cyzicus, and Cos. Here the term likely refers specifically to a tuna lookout on the coast between Zarax and Epidaurus Limera.

Given the nature of the evidence, our understanding of the economic and social life of Laconia’s coastal perioecic communities will remain incomplete, but when taken together with additional relevant evidence the two inscriptions discussed here suggest a considerably richer portrait.

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