

# Mulled Thoughts: Mullus and Mugilis in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* and the *De Re Coquinaria* of "Apicius"<sup>1</sup>

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"The inordinate love for the same tragle,<sup>2</sup> in the city and the times of the Caesars, would surpass belief, if much contemporary evidence did not lay an historical bar in the way of any rational scepticism on the subject. Mullomania, though undescribed as a disease by Roman physicians, was a mental malady well known and deplored by Roman moralists, which invading the grownup children of the higher ranks, seems to have been as rife and catching among them as modern measles or smallpox. All Rome's great men and mighty men, and councilors of state; all her citizens of trust and taste and ton<sup>3</sup> prince, premier, and philosopher, poet, painter, and pimp, parasite, parvenu, and purveyor, were, with the velduo velnemo<sup>4</sup> exception, confirmed mullomaniacs." Rev. C. David Badham, *Prose Halieutica: Or, Ancient and Modern Fish Tattle*<sup>5</sup>

The Romans seem to have been absolutely enamoured with the Mullet during the late republic and high empire. While the *Prose Halieutica* is unrestrained in how it chooses to portray the species, other sources still reflect this tendency. James Grout regards this widespread competition both in the exploitation and serving of the fish as behaviour similar to the "tulipomania" of 17th century Holland, where a similar level of irrational (at least to modern

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1. Apicius. *A Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. Christopher Grancock and Sally Grainger. (Great Britain: Prospect Books, 2006), 125.; Sally Grainger, "The Myth of Apicius," *Gastronomica* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 7177, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/gfc.2007.7.2.71>. Grainger argues that the text of the *De Re Coquinaria* indicates that authorship by any historical Apicius is unlikely. Rather, it was named a later point in recognition of the gourmet nature of the work. Hence "Apicius" when referring to the author(s) of the work.

2. French a fish of the Triglidae family. Presumably the meaning was broader in the time of when the *Prose Halieutica*, and included the Mullet and allies within its scope. Italics are emphasized as the text had them.

3. In the French sense, of manner or tone.

4. In reference to Persius', *Saturae*. 3 literally "Either two or no one."

5. C. David Badham, *Prose Halieutica: Or Ancient and Modern Fish Tattle* (London, Great Britain: John Parker and Son, 1854), 133, [https://books.google.ca/books?id=1vFIAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.ca/books?id=1vFIAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false). Accessed on May 27th, 2015. This text, while not especially useful, is rather entertaining for the perspective it puts to the Roman period, and the period of its authorship.

senses) desire and overvaluation of an organism occurred.<sup>6</sup> Alfred C. Andrews provides a short overview of the majority of the Latin and Greek sources which mention this fish, where he specifically notes a few unique properties of this craze.<sup>7</sup> He identifies from the available literature that the primary factors at play with this craze were size, and where the fish was sourced. But notably missing from the sources consulted in these studies is the one source held to be a cookbook of the Roman experience, the *De Re Coquinaria* of “Apicius,” which contains a number of recipes using the species.

Given this, comparison would make sense, even though little can be learned from the text of Apicius. Looking at a single species of fish yields information about the Roman world in general at which points does Apicius accord with the technical treatises of the Roman noble writers? Where does it differ? Much has been done comparing and contrasting other literary depictions to the technical works and realities of the Roman life within the agricultural sphere and the marine sphere.<sup>8</sup> To realize this I will compare Apicius to BK IX of Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia*, where he makes mention of the Mullet. This comparison makes sense for a few reasons drawing on a broad diversity of both cultural and technical references which Pliny makes both Pliny and Apicius can be thought of as being roughly representative of a general Roman perspective on the natural world, being of roughly similar time periods of production, and being of roughly comparable presence which the Mullet has within each text. By looking at the role the Mullet plays in both texts, it becomes clear that the image of the Roman Mullett presented in Pliny (and scholarship following it) as overripe with excess, does not accord with the Mullet preserved in the text of Apicius.

### TAXONOMY: MULLUS, MULLĪ, M; vs. MŪGILIS (MŪGILIS?), MŪGILIS, M

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6. Jim Grout, “The Red Mullet in Rome,” *Encyclopaedia Romana*, accessed May 25th, 2015, [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia\\_romana/wine/mullus.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/wine/mullus.html).

7. Alfred C. Andrews, “The Roman Craze for Surmullet,” *The Classical Weekly* 42, no. 12 (March 21 1949): 186188, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4342555>.

8. See N. Purcell, “Wine and Wealth in Ancient Italy,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 75, (1985): 119, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/300648>; K.D. White, *Roman Farming*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), 1441.

Before this comparison can be made, some taxonomy must be cleared up. In the modern period, "Mullet" can be used to refer to a variety of species a quick search into the *Fishbase* search engine reveals 50 different species with this name. From this list, the Mullet as it appears within Roman sources is a pair of variants.<sup>9</sup> The first variant, the "Red Mullet," either *Mullus surmuletus* or *Mullus Barbatus*, is identified by its red scales, barbs, and bottom dwelling.<sup>10</sup> The second variant, the "Grey Mullet," *Mugil Cephalus*, is identified by its lack of barbs and greater range.<sup>11</sup> For the most part, these traits agree with the nomenclature which the Oxford Latin Dictionary assigns to "Mullus" and "Mugilis" respectively.<sup>12</sup>

However, even if we have consistent Latin terminology, the tradition itself is not guaranteed to reflect this. The ancient technical writers, while writing in intense levels of detail, were not always the most consistent. As T.F. Carney attests with the case of John the Lydian naming of species was inconsistent throughout antiquity.<sup>13</sup> As such, the use of these terms ought to be carefully considered. Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* does seem to provide enough information for a positive identification of species as they appear, but the text of *De Re Coquinaria* does not. The *De Re Coquinaria* does indicate two distinct species being cooked with, but does not provide enough further detail to judge which variants are being used where.<sup>14</sup> While it is possible, as Grocock and Grainger do in their commentary, to assume that the differences are the ones heard elsewhere, at the same time the text itself is written in a vulgar Latin where the use of *Mullus* and *Mugilis* is used in a manner unlike other settings.<sup>15</sup> As such, the mentions of both terms will be brought up.<sup>16</sup>

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9. Andrews, "The Roman Craze for Surmullet," 186.

10. *FishBase*, accessed on May 27th, 2015, <http://www.fishbase.org/home.htm> s.v. "Mullus surmuletus," accessed <http://www.fishbase.org/summary/1327>; s.v. "Mullus barbatus barbatus.Seabase <http://www.fishbase.org/summary/790>.

11. id. s.v. "Mugil Cephalus," <http://www.fishbase.org/Summary/785>.

12. *Oxford Latin Dictionary* s.v. "Mugil", "Mullus."

13. T.F. Carney, "The 'Helops,' A Case Study of the Transmission of a Piece of Scientific Knowledge by the Scholarship of Antiquity," *Phoenix* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 1967), 202220, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1086746>.

14. Apicius, *De Re Coquinaria* 9.10.67, 9.10.9.

15. Api., *Coq.* 9.10.9.

16. This uncertainty of term is a constant presence within the scope of working within Roman sciences. Pliny himself notes this in Pliny *Naturalis Historia*. 25.89. A more recent example of this confusion only being recently understood can be found within the naming and identification of the "Cucumis," "Cucurbita," and

**PLINY'S *NATURALIS HISTORIA*: MULLEUS AND THE *EQUITES LITERATI* PERSPECTIVE**

The *Naturalis Historia* has had an interesting reception in the classical tradition. With an immense size and scope it is unmatched. As Pliny puts it, his focus is on *sterilis materia, rerum natura, hoc est vita*: the sterile origin, the nature of things, it is this, Life. The text proceeds to do so in just thirty-seven books (ten volumes in the modern Loeb collection).<sup>17</sup> Unsurprisingly, the text itself is criticized for such a mission, the tradition being rather critical of this breadth, as it finds Pliny to lack the careful detail and brevity of other sources.<sup>18</sup> But overall, the text itself is quite useful for showing that the sources and opinions of the mid-1st Century CE of well learned *equites* (knights), a class which would rise to prominence with the empire, and which would write diffusely on subject matter as Latin had not had prior.<sup>19</sup> As such, Pliny works as a comparator, for he mentions information from all different spheres, from cultural to historical to natural.

Book IX of the *Naturalis Historia* is devoted to the studies of the wildlife of the sea. Starting with the fantastical and then going on to the merely very large, he begins his description of fishkind at section 43. From here he describes other species of fish and the habits of fish in general, before finally reaching the specific section on the Mullet in section 64. See Appendix A for these references to the Mullet, but a short summary will be given here. It begins with Pliny relating a shared opinion with other common classical sources as to the Mullet's place as a foremost fish and a plentiful one. In the same section, he also mentions the fact that they have been grown to especially large sizes. His further description includes mentions of the variable species, the variable tastes, and its spawning period, being thrice a year. The cultural notions of the gastronomical scene then follow, including a description of how the Mullet changes colour when killed at the meal, and then goes to specific mentions of the dish in the mealscape. Citing the historical

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related terms in Janick Jules et al., "The Cucurbits of Mediterranean Antiquity: Identification of Taxa from Ancient Images and Descriptions," *Annals of Botany* 100, (2007): 14411457, doi:10.1093/aob/mcm242.

17. Plin. *N.H.*, pref. 13.

18. Mary Beagon, *Roman Nature: The Thought of Pliny the Elder*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 24.; Aude Doody, *Pliny's Encyclopedia*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1523.

19. Beagon, *Roman Nature*, 1415.

Marcus Apicius directly, Pliny designates a garum (fish sauce) of its own liver from which it is to be served in.<sup>20</sup> Pliny concludes with a shorter section describing the increasing valuation which the Mullet seems to be undergoing.<sup>21</sup>

### THE *DE RE COQUINARIA* OF “APICIUS”<sup>22</sup>

This text is unique within the Latin classical canon as it is the only cookbook which seems to have survived. While there are recipes preserved within the Latin farming and medicinal treatises, household meals are preserved in some fairly limited contexts.<sup>23</sup> From references in other texts, there is reason to assume that texts like the *De Re Coquinaria* were extant in a sphere of culinary Greek and Latin literature about the sensations, theory, and serving of food.<sup>24</sup> Despite this, the *De Re Coquinaria* as far as texts go is substantially removed from other Latin writings not only is it written in a vulgar Latin, but also arranged strangely. Grainger and Grocock summarize this well in their introduction:

“By its very nature, the text is couched in simple terms, and its Latinity rarely reaches great sophistication. *Apicius* as a whole is made up of 459 separate texts, many of which are no more than lists of ingredients. Even where instructions are included, the need for grammatical subordination is limited if those instructions are laid out in a logical sequence (which is not always the case). As we have seen, the texts themselves seem to be gathered from a range of sources and may have been composed over a lengthy period. Some were probably composed originally in Greek, subsequently translated into Latin. It is remarkable and fortunate, given its evidence that such a variety of styles could coexist that neither the food compiler of *Apicius* nor the subsequent transcribers saw fit to emend or correct the varieties of expression, to produce a homogenized version. The nature of the text a series of practical instructions may mean that it incorporates idioms from the spoken rather than the written language and, as Roger Wright noted in a recent collection of studies, it might well be the case ‘that spoken Imperial Latin was . . . more like the Romance languages than we usually give it credit for.’<sup>25</sup>

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20. Plin. *N.H.* 65-66

21. See Appendix A

22. See note 1.

23. e.g. Cato *De Agri Cultura* 7488, 104121 with recipes for food, medicines, and preserving goods, or Petronius’ *Satyricon* for literary depictions of meals.

24. Apicius. *A Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. Christopher Gracock and Sally Grainger, 3972.

25. .id 9596.

This work, as Grainger attests, represents the work and effort committed not by the *literati* and *equites* of the Roman aristocracy, but rather the kitchen workers, either slaves or freedmen.<sup>26</sup>

Such figures would have had fundamentally different relations with the Mullet that is described in the work of Pliny, although overlap can certainly be expected to occur. Those recipes with mentions of either *Mullus* or *Mugilis* are tabled below, but a short explanation of them is in order. These instances occur at the beginning of BK IV, concerning compound dishes, where the Mullet is mentioned in some *patina*.<sup>27</sup> Then, the Mullet next appears in BK IX under Sauces, Book X, under Seafood, and lastly in a few appearances in the Apici excerpta a vindario viro inlustri: the extracts of Apicius by Vinidarius.<sup>28</sup> These specific mentions are outlined in Appendix B.

On reviewing the recipes in which the Mullet appears, the majority of the recipes are specifically concerned with developing a sauce in which the Mullet is to be served. It is also striking that the sheer presence of the Mullet in these text, for by comparison to other components within the Apician corpus, the Mullet is used in ten out of 459 recipes. Other components that share such a presence within Apicius, is the Mussel (*escia*) which is also used in ten recipes, and the Piglet (*porcellum*) in twenty-three recipes. The majority of these recipes are of the “Simple” designation which Grocock and Grainger identify.<sup>29</sup>

### CONCLUSIONS: SCALING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN PLINY AND “APICIUS”

While both Pliny and Apicius do agree on a few points, they differ in some notable ways. This difference is most readily apparent in the atmosphere of excess in which the Mullet is given.

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26. Sally Grainger, “The Myth of Apicius.”

27. A patina is a mixture of meat or fish or vegetables and eggs and sauce, cooked and allowed to set over a fire. Basically, imagine a baked omelette. See Apicius, in *A Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. Christopher Grancock and Sally Grainger, 357358.

28. These last three recipes on the list are found not on the main collection itself, but on the “Apici excerpta a vindario viro inlustri” See id., 3235 for an explanation, but it is thought to be of a late 4th or 5th century origin. It would still be reflective to some degree of the 1st century culinary experience, but it should not be recognized as the same.

29. .id 96. And see Appendix B.

In Apicius, the Mullet is not depicted as a rich fish. Most of the recipes which make use of either of the species do so simply, and not specifically noting it to be of any great value. Furthermore, as can be seen within the second appendix of Grocock and Grainger, not a single Mullet recipe is linked with the legendary gourmet, with or our understanding of how the *Mullus* was served from other sources.<sup>30</sup> While it is still possible that the fish lived up to the hype of its valuation, the *Mullus* that the Apicius author discusses seems to be removed from this world. The Apician fish seems to have been a relatively common eaten fish not unlike flamingo's tongue or peacock, which are mentioned at numerous points throughout the work. This Mullet is not subject to any speculative investment that would increase its value. By comparing the world of Pliny to this specific culinary culture to which Apicius belongs, the significance of these differing notions of Mullet appear vast in scope; it seems to be *hole* in nature. It would seem that the fish of Pliny and the fish of Apicius are different the authors' perspectives on the organism attest two different worlds either temporally, geographically, culturally, or some combination thereof by which the organism is understood.

Further statements regarding the Mullet as it appears within Apicius and Pliny are honestly difficult to make. Inherently, the *De Re Coquinaria* is a difficult text to use. It has an unknown provenance, there is no solid idea of how representative it is of Roman mealtime experiences, diets, or perspectives. We've no sense of its accuracy in comparison to other ancient works. While this might be resolved by attempting a much more expansive project, like a recipe by recipe analysis of ingredients, cooking processes, etc., in order to establish its relation to the normative Roman culinary culture otherwise attested to us. However, at the present no one has accomplished this. All we have is the text itself and the supposition that it provides an authentic record of some normative views.<sup>31</sup> While the lack of any definitive statements related to these different conceptions is frustrating, this process of going through the text and closely making comparisons is useful. In examining the different aspects of how they both choose to render the same entity, a more complete understanding can be made that is worth pursuing. By doing so, the exploration of how

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30. .id 36972

31. See pg. 56; Apicius. *A Critical Edition*, ed. and trans. Christopher Grancock and Sally Grainger, 125.

a species was understood and the role it played in the Roman life can expand, and perhaps more importantly, the role which the Apicius text plays in consulting, discussing, and informing readings of other species can expand as well.

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Table A: Mentions of Mullus and Mugilus within Pliny NH. 9		
Section	Term	Facts / Description
9.29	"Mugilum"	Dolphins help humans drive the Mullet into shore based nets.
9.59	"Mugilum"	The fish hides its head and thinks itself entirely hidden, can be used to bait others of its species into following it.
9.64	"Mullis"	Fish is first most, plentiful. Size is moderate, but grows in the NW Oceans. Many different kinds of Mullet are extant.
9.65	"Mulleorum"	Types. Barbs on the fish. Bottom dwelling. Etymology of name.*
9.66	"Mullum"	Three spawnings a year. Changes colour when killed live as gastronomic spectacle. Apicius cooks it in sauce made of its own species.
9.67	"Mullum"	Overvaluation, Mullet economic bubble.
9.185	"Mugil"	They get in fights with wolfish. At times are peaceful.

\* This point serves in a good establishment of the Mullus as a Red Mullet. See pp 23.

Table B: Mentions of Mullus and Mugilis within the <i>De Re Coquinaria</i>			
Section	Term	Latin Recipe Name	English Recipe Name*
4.2.22	"mullorum"	"patina mullorum loco salsi"	"Patina of mullet making use of salt fish"
4.2.31	"mugillem"	"patina de piscibus denticem auratam et mugillem"	"Patina of dentex, gilthead bream, and gray mullet"
9.10.6	"mugile"	"ius in mugile salso"	"Sauce for salted mullet"
9.10.7	"mugile"	"alter ius in mugile salso"	"Another sauce for salted mullet"
9.10.9	"mulo"	"ius in malo tarico"	"Sauce for preserved gray mullet."**
10.1.11	"mullos"	"ius in mullos assos"	"Sauce for grilled mullet"
10.1.12	"mullos"	"alter ius in mullos assos"	"Another sauce for grilled mullet"
Vin. Ex. 14	"mullos"	"mullos anetatos sic facies"	"You make mullet in dill sauce like this"
Vin. Ex. 15	"mullos"	"alter mullos"	"Another recipe for mullet"
Vin. Ex. 16	"mullos"	"murenas aut anguilas uel mullos sic facies"	"You make moray eels, eels, and mullet like this"

\* Earlier Latin translations of Pliny are the author's own, however the Apicius translations are from Grainiger and Grocock. While the author trusts in their own Latin ability, the nature of the specific culinary terminology in *De Re Coquinaria* makes it such that it is preferable to rely on the translation of Grainiger and Grocock.

\*\* See note 16.