

# THE USE OF THE NAME TORPEDO FOR THE ELECTRIC CATFISH.

By THEODORE GILL,  
*Honorary Associate in Zoology.*

In the Proceedings of the U. S. National Museum for 1895 (p. 161) the name *Torpedo* was revived for the electric catfish, generally known as *Malapterurus electricus*. This view has been adopted by several authors (Jordan, Evermann, etc.) and doubtless will be generally by those who adhere strictly to rules of priority. It has already been indicated that the application of the name to the electric rays by the ancients was secondary and not primary, and that the term was as applicable to the electric catfish as to the electric rays. I was not aware, however, that it had been so applied by any other than Forskål. Recently my attention was accidentally drawn to the fact that in 1843 Heckel had indicated that the catfish was mentioned under the name *Torpedo* by Athenæus and Purchas.

I have searched in vain in the *Deipnosophistæ* of Athenæus for any mention of the *Torpedo* or *ράρκη* which could be referred to the electrical catfish. All the notices found (VII, c. 95; VII, c. 120; VII, c. 140) relate to a sea fish, avowedly or in all probability. In an imperfect list of "the chief fish found in the Nile" (VII, c. 92), only sixteen<sup>a</sup> species are named, but it is remarked that "there are also a great number of others." Unfortunately Heckel has given no reference to the chapter of Athenæus which led him to suppose that reference to the catfish was meant; his only citation (in the *Abbildungen und Beschreibungen der Fische Syriens*) under "Athenæus" is in a chronological summary of authors treating of Egyptian fishes, where, in a list of sixteen species (p. 218), the following reference is made: "*Torpedo*. *Malapterurus electricus* Lacep.??" In the systematic list of species, under *Malapterurus electricus* (p. 230), "*Torpedo Athenæus?*" is also named.

<sup>a</sup>This list is exclusive of species which Athenæus had just before mentioned in the same chapter; that is, the *Latos*, different *Coracini*, and the *Mæotæ*. Incidentally, it may be added that Athenæus says that the *Latos* "is like the fish called the *Glanis*, which is found in the Danube"! The *Coracini* doubtless included the celebrated Bolti (*Tilapia nilotica*).

See Val Arch M N B 2 43-62 44



In Purchas His Pilgrimes, published in 1625, two notices of the electric catfish or Raad of the Nile appear. ✕

In the seventh booke Abyssinia, called then Abassia, is described, and a notice of Abassine animals is given (p. 1183).

In these Riwers and Lakes is also found the Torpedo, which if any man hold in his hand, if it stirre not, it doth produce no effect: but if it moue it felfe neuer so little, it so tormenteth the body of him which holds it, that his Arteries, Joints, Sinewes, & all his Members feelee exceeding paine with a certaine numbnesse; and as soone as it is let go out of the hand, all that paine and numbnesse is also gone. The Superstitious *Abaffines* beleeeue that it is good to expell Deuils out of humane bodies, as if it did torment Spirits no lesse than men. They say, if one of these aliue bee laid amongst dead Fishes, if it there stirre it felfe, it makes those which it toucheth to stirre as if they were alive. There is great store of this kind in *Nilus*, in the furthest parts of *Goyama*, where there is a Meere or Fenne without bottome, welling and admirably boyling forth waters continually, whence *Nilus* springeth.

In the twelfth booke, in which the present country of Mozambique is described (p. 1545), the Torpedo is named in the margin, and the following notice of it appears:

In the Riuer of *Sofala* is store of Fish fat and saurie, as Mulletts, Needles, Dolphins, &c. One strange fish in qualitie is common in those Riwers, which the *Portugals* call *Tremedor*, and the *Cafres*, *Thinta*, of such nature that no man can take it in his hand while it is alive, for it filleth the hand and arme with paine, as if every ioint would go afunder; but being dead is as another fish, and much esteemed for good meate. The Naturals say, that the skin of this fish is vsed to forceries. It is medicinal against the Cholick, roasted and ground to powder and drunke in Wine. The biggest of them is two spannes and halfe long, the skin blackish, rough and thick.

It is quite likely that Forskål may have read these accounts, and thence been influenced in appropriating the name *Torpedo* as the generic designation of the fish in question.

✕ See for another by R. Jobson, *Like Brea*  
 vide Vol. Arch Mus N.R., 2, 49, 50.  
*Gambia*



Gill, Theodore. 1903. "The use of the name torpedo for the electric catfish."  
*Proceedings of the United States National Museum* 26(1329), 697–698.  
<https://doi.org/10.5479/si.00963801.26-1329.697>.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/32571>

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5479/si.00963801.26-1329.697>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/9446>

**Holding Institution**

Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

**Sponsored by**

Smithsonian

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: NOT\_IN\_COPYRIGHT

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.