

DEAR MARGARITA,

I found where the 'tarkhoi' (in my head) came from.

Some years ago there has been found a Greek ship wreck in the Black Sea near to the coast at Varna. In this wreck were some amphora's filled with food, some of them with chunks of fish - most certainly salted. There were several studies, and reports on the find of this ship in The New York Times and several scientific magazines. Scientists exploring the site published what they found, and were speculating what fish it was, and why it was on board in this salted state.

Fish being salted has for a long time been considered to have started in later days. In the Netherlands we consider Willem Beukelszoon van Biervliet (± 1380) to be a specialist in this field, finding that when all intestines except the pancreas are taken out of a salted fish the enzymes in the pancreas are the decisive factor in the ripening of the fish (more specific the herring) and the famous Dutch herring, thus "gekaakt" on the way home from open seas, changes from an animal into a special treat.

It appears that the Aegean sea has not much to offer, besides its beauty. When it comes down to fish there is hardly any. Theory now was that for fish the ancient Greeks went to the Black Sea and in the process started to trade with the world around them.

Later I found reports on ostrakon (Greek: pieces of pottery that may contain scratched-in words) found in workshops of Egyptian workers of the pyramids. These were 'shopping lists' asking for very special and expensive food products, wines, olives and indeed tarkhoi (as the word is in older English translations of Greek drama; I would like to keep that as such in the poem as it refers then to these translations and makes the 'I' in the poem more of a visiting outsider).

When in Bulgaria your sister, my dear colleague Darina showed my wife and me around in the churches of Nessebar I stumbled on the not particularly respectful, but to me nevertheless touching (I studied ship-travelling of that era), scratches of early medieval North European ships in the murals at some dark end.

When now you asked me more certainty about the word 'tarkhoi' I was so lucky to find some remarks on this fish from an expert on Ukraine. He published this in order to have the sea archeologists working on the wreck near Varna no longer in complete darkness:

"Tarikhos is not cod. It's dried & salted fish, all right, but it comes from the giant cat-fish, called "Som" in Ukrainian. It's a fresh-water fish, which was prevalent in Ukrainian rivers from Danube to Kuban'.

The fish reached amazing size - normally 10 to 12 feet in length, probably the largest freshwater fish anywhere. Alas, "Som" was heavily fished for 3,000 years at least and is almost extinct by now.

But still, I remember a "Som" caught in a tributary to Dnister, in my grandpa's village. I was about 5 years old at the time, but I was tremendously impressed by it. It was (they said) three meters long, much bigger than I was at the time (and even now, I guess!)."

Since you found the 'som' to be sheat-fish this pleases me even more, as in the village that I spent most of my childhood in, and where I later lived a few years with my wife, the sheat-fish was in the nearby lake and still lives there, much like a rarity. It had always been considered to be extinct and it was known only in myths. As I was a keen swimmer in those days I was often warned for this 'terrible animal' but from the very first time I saw it I liked it as something of a friendly grandad.

Thank you for all your work. I do know a bit about it as I have every so often tried to translate my English poems (some half of me is a Scotchman) into the Dutch I am supposedly more familiar with (born in Friesland, and a teenager in the Holland bit of The Netherlands). One finds much of the ideas one has in a language simply wanting in another. Where words so often were chosen for their multiple bearing of meaning you must have had a hell of a job.

WITH LOVE AND RESPECT,
JOSEPH