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 Deipnosophistae of Athenæus for any mention of the Torpedo or νάρκην 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 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 Latre.,?" In the systematic list of species, under Malapterurus electricus (p. 230), "Torpedo Athenæus," is also named.

*This list is exclusive of species which Athenæus had just before mentioned in the same chapter; that is, the Latos, different Coracini, and the Mura. Incidentally, it may be added that Athenæus says that the Latos "is like the fish called the Glimis, which is found in the Danube"! The Coracini doubtless included the celebrated Boldi (Talapia nilotica).
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 thefe Rivers and Lakes is alfo found the Torpedo, which if any man hold in his hand, if it stirre not, it doth produce no effect: but if it mone it filleth never fo little, it fo tormenteth the body of him which holds it, that his Arteries, Joints, Sinewes, & all his Members feele exceeding paine with a certaine numbeffe; and as foone as it is let go out of the hand, all that paine and numbeffe is alfo gone. The Superfititious Abaffines beleeeue that it is good to expell Deuils out of humane bodies, as if it did torment Spirits no leffe than men. They fay, if one of these alme bee laid amongft dead Fishes, if it there fhirre it felfe, it makes thofe which it toucheth to fhirre 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 River of Sofala is f stere of Fift fat and sauorie, as Mulletts, Needles, Dolphins, &c. One strange fift in qualitie is common in thofe Rivers, which the Portugals call Tremedor, and the Cafres, Thinta, of fuch nature that no man can take it in his hand while it is alive, for it filleth the hand and fnrne with paine, as if every joint would go afunder; but being dead is as another fift, and much esteemed for good meate. The Naturals fay, that the skin of this fift is fed to forceries. It is medicinable againft the Cholick, rosted and ground to powder and drunk in Wine. The biggeft of them is two fpannes and halfe long, the skin blackish, rough and thick.

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