

On the origins of the Spanish word ‘tiburón’, and the English word ‘shark’*

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Synopsis

Large sharks were known to the Greeks and Romans, and references to large sharks of the Mediterranean are found in the writings of classical writers. However, large sharks are conspicuously absent from the medieval bestiaries that described the then known fauna. The explanation for this interesting omission is simple: Medieval man did not encounter large sharks because he fished mainly in rivers and close to shore and did not venture far into the ocean to catch fish, and the few large European sharks did not venture into rivers or shallow waters. The Spanish and the English first encountered large sharks in the American tropics. Both groups borrowed Amerindian words to designate them. The Spanish borrowed the word *tiburón* from the Carib Indians, and, later, the English borrowed *tiburón* from the Spanish and used it for about 100 years. In the late sixteenth century, the English borrowed the word *xoc* from the Mayans and it became the English word *shark*.

Large sharks are conspicuously absent from the medieval bestiaries that described the then known fauna as well as some imaginary animals. The explanation for this interesting omission is simple: Medieval man did not encounter large sharks because he depended on freshwater fish and he did not venture far into the ocean to catch fish (Hoffman 1995), and large sharks did not venture into European rivers where people did most of the fishing. People could catch sufficient fish in rivers and at the seaside and had no need for the arduous task of rowing far offshore. A schoolroom dialogue used by Aelfric, a Wessex schoolmaster, who in the years 987–1002 taught his pupils about the different economic activities around them, is enlightening about medieval fishing practices:

Master: ‘Which fish do you catch?’

Fisherman: ‘Eels and pike, minnows and burbot, trout and lampreys’.

Master: ‘Why don’t you fish the sea?’

Fisherman: ‘Sometimes I do, but rarely, because it is a lot of rowing for me to the sea’.

(Lacey & Danzigere 1999, p. 59).

Large sharks were known to the Greeks and Romans, and references to large sharks of the Mediterranean are found in the writings of classical writers from Aristotle to Aelian. However, knowledge of large sharks seems to have been lost with the Dark Ages. Thus, at the time of the great voyages of discovery to the New World, large sharks were basically unknown to Renaissance Europeans (Gesner 1670). The Spaniards were first to encounter large sharks in the New World (Oviedo 1526), followed closely by the English. Both the Spanish and the English had names for small sharks. However, both groups lacked names for large sharks, and both borrowed Amerindian words to designate them. Here I trace the origin of the Spanish word *tiburón* and the English word *shark*. The origins of both words are remarkably similar and they are both tied together.

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Today, in the Spanish speaking countries, there are two words for ‘shark’: *cazón* for a small shark and *tiburón* for a large shark. Small species of sharks and the young of large species are both referred to as *cazones* (plural of *cazón*). A large shark is always a *tiburón* (plural *tiburones*). This arbitrary size distinction is puzzling and confusing even to Spanish speakers. To understand how this confusing terminology came about, we need to look into the origin of the word *tiburón*.

When the early Spanish explorers first encountered the large, aggressive, and voracious sharks of the American tropics in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, they quickly differentiated these large sharks from the smaller sharks or *cazones* that they were familiar with. Lacking a name for large sharks, the Spaniards borrowed the Indian name *tiburón*. According to the lexicographer Fernando Ortiz (1974), *tiburón* is a Carib word, and he states that most authorities seem to accept the uncertain opinion that *ti* means ground and *burón* means fish.

Tiburón appears to have been in wide use by the Spanish by the middle 1520s. The first use of word *tiburón* in Spanish, that I have been able to find, is in *Sumario de la Natural Historia de las Indias*, published in Toledo in February 1526. This work, written by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, is the first description of the wildlife and plants of the New World. In this work Oviedo (1526, p. 256) mentions that there is a great diversity and number of fishes in the New World, but that he will discuss only three at length: *tortuga*, *tiburón* and *manatí*. He writes: ‘El segundo pescado de los tres que de suso se dijo, se llama tiburón; este es grande pescado, y muy suelto en el agua, y muy carnívoro’ (The second fish of the three mentioned above, is called a *tiburón*, this is a great fish, very quick in the water, and very much a carnivore). The fact that he explains what the animal *is called*, implies that he does not expect the reader to be familiar with the fish or the name. The friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, who came to the New World in 1502, provides more definitive evidence of the Indian origin of *tiburón* in his *Apologetica Historia Sumaria*. In this work, begun in 1527, Las Casas writes (Sanz 1909, p. 27): ‘Hay en la mar y entran tambien en los rios unos peces de hechura de cazones ó al menos todo el cuerpo, la cabeza bota y la boca en el derecho de la barriga, con muchos dientes, que los indios llamaron tiburones. . .’ (There are in the sea [off Hispaniola] some fishes that also enter the rivers, built like cazones or at least their whole body, the head blunt, and the mouth in the centerline of the belly, with many teeth,

that the Indians called *tiburones*). As late as 1585 writers felt obliged to explain that these large fishes were called *tiburones*. Juan González de Mendoza (1585, p. 314), an Augustine friar, wrote about the sharks that followed ships off Hispaniola: ‘pero sobre todo hay mucha infinidad de unos peces muy grandes que llaman tiburones, de los cuales andan grandes manadas; son aficionadísimos a carne humana y siguen un navío quinientas leguas. . .’ (above all there is an infinite number of some very large fishes that they call *tiburones*, of which there are great schools, they are very fond of human flesh and they follow a ship for five hundred leagues. . .).

A Gallicized version of *tiburón* appears as *tiburins* in the 1525 version of the manuscript of Antonio Pigafeta’s (1525, p. 14) account of the voyage of Magellan: ‘Aupres ne se trouve fons/ et va moult de poissons nômez tiburins’ (Nearby they found no bottom [anchorage]/ and there were many of the fish named *tiburins*). Pigafeta was an Italian adventurer who accompanied the Spanish expedition that first circumnavigated the world. He wrote the account of the voyage in French, and used *tiburins* instead of the modern word *requin* (shark). The word *requin* appears around 1529. It is believed to derive from *requien* or *requiem*, but its origin is controversial (Rey 1992). One old and colorful explanation is that ‘requiem’, from the Latin *requies* or rest, is the first word in the Introit in the Mass for the Dead: ‘*Requiem aeterna dona eis, Domine*’ . . . etc, and that sharks are called requiems because: ‘Quand il a saisi un homme. . . il ne reste plus qu’à faire chanter le Requiem pour le repos de l’âme de cet homme là’ (When it seizes a man. . . there is nothing left to do but to sing the Requiem for the repose of the man’s soul) (Rey 1992, p. 1178). This explanation has been called ‘too good to be true’ by Budker (1971, p. 3). In any case, ‘requiem’ was borrowed from the French into the English language and became the name for the white shark (Simpson & Weiner 1998). Later, in the English language, the term requiem or requiem shark was expanded to include the galeid or carcharhiform sharks (Jordan & Evermann 1896).

The English followed the Spanish explorers into the New World. The English were familiar with the smaller sharks found around the British Isles, which they termed *dogfish*, *huss*, *nuss*, or *nurse* (Castro 2000). Like the Spaniards, the English were not familiar with the large sharks of the American tropics. So, when they encountered the large sharks of the New World by the middle of the sixteenth century, the English borrowed the name *tiburón* for large sharks, just like the

preceding Spaniards had done some 50 years earlier. Examples of the use of *tiburón* by the English during the sixteenth century and the early part of the seventeenth century are common: ‘The seconde of these fysshes whereof I have spoken is the *Tiburon*. This is a very great fysshe and very quicke and swifte in the water, and a cruell devourer’ (Eden 1555, p. 201, translating Oviedo’s description); ‘... many sharkes or *Tiburons*, who came about the ships’ (Hakluyt 1589, Vol. 7, p. 18); ‘The shark, or tiberune, is a fish like unto those which wee call dogge-fishes, but that he is farre greater’ (Hawkins 1622, p. 47).

The word sharke or shark appears suddenly in the English language in 1569. The first known use of the word appears in a broadside issued by the press of Thomas Colwell on 25 January 1569 (Jones 1985). The broadside was occasioned by the capture, on 16 June 1569, of a large and unfamiliar fish by English fishermen working in the Straits of Dover. The following day, Friday, they brought it up the Thames to the Billingsgate Market in London, where it attracted immediate attention. On Saturday, the fish was cut up and gutted, and its meat was sold for food. Its skin was stuffed and mounted at one of the Fleet Street taverns, the Red Lion. Within a week the broadside announcing the capture and display of the fish circulated widely through the city. The description and accompanying illustration (Figure 1) are accurate enough to identify the seventeen-foot creature as a thresher shark. The broadside announces: ‘Ther is not proper name for it, that I knowe, but that ser-tayne men of Captain Haukineses, doth call it a Sharke’ (Jones 1985, pp. 221–222). According to the Oxford

English Dictionary, ‘the word seems to have been introduced by the sailors of Captain (afterwards Sir John) Hawkins’ expedition who brought home a specimen which was exhibited in London in 1569. The source from which they obtained the word has not been ascertained’ (Simpson & Weiner 1998, Vol. 15, p. 181).

The new word ‘shark’ replaced *tiburón* in the English language during the middle seventeenth century. By the end of the seventeenth century shark was well established in the English language: ‘We caught several great Sharks’... (Dampier 1697). The first etymology of ‘shark’ appears in Samuel Johnson’s 1756 dictionary of the English language. In this work shark is defined as ‘a voracious sea-fish’ (Johnson 1843, p. 657) and its origin is given as the Gothic *skurk* or *skurka*, without any examples. Since then numerous English dictionaries have cited a similar origin for the word or stated that the origins of the word are obscure. Others have speculated on its origin without adducing any evidence. In a popular work, McCormick et al. (1963) quoted previous authors writing that the word may derive from several sources, and all the possible roots point towards attributes of the shark: *Shurke* the German word for villain, and the Anglo-Saxon word *sceran* which means ‘to shear or cut’, but they adduced no convincing etymological evidence, examples, or arguments. This work has been often quoted unquestionably in the elasmobranch literature and has become one of the numerous legends in a field full of legends.

Given that the word ‘shark’ is first attributed to men of the Hawkins’ expedition, it seems natural to look into this expedition to elucidate the origin of the word. The expedition in question, was Sir John Hawkins’

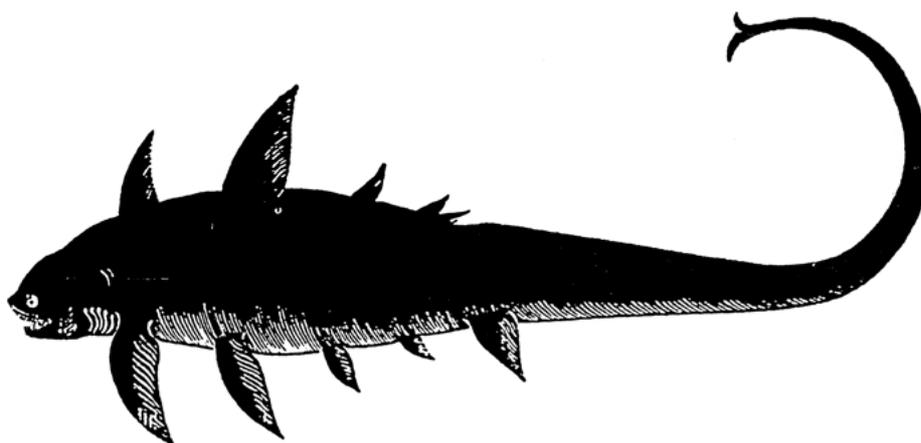


Figure 1. Depiction of a thresher shark from the 1569 broadside, with the correct number of fins and two claspers, after Jones (1985).

third slaving trip to Africa and the New World. Sir John Hawkins was a slaver (a respectable occupation in sixteenth century England) who carried slaves from Guinea to Brazil and the West Indies. During early trips to Santa Cruz in the Canaries, Hawkins heard stories of how in the Spanish settlements in the West Indies the native Indians were being exterminated, and that Africans were in great demand to work the mines and plantations. In 1562, he sailed a modest fleet of three ships and 100 men from Plymouth to Sierra Leone, where he captured and gathered some 300 Africans. He then successfully proceeded to Hispaniola, where he sold his human cargo. This trip was so successful that a larger and more powerful syndicate (that included the Queen) financed a second trip. In 1564, he sailed again from Plymouth with over 250 men in four ships, bound for the Guinea coast. Again, he had a successful trip. A third voyage in 1567–1568 ended in disaster. In October 1567, Hawkins led a fleet of six ships and 408 men out of Plymouth Sound. Most of these were destined never to see their homes again, as death awaited them in many unexpected forms. After the obligatory stop in Africa to pick up some 470 unlucky souls, he proceeded to the West Indies. After disposing of his ‘black ivory’ in the Caribbean, he was forced by lack of water to take refuge at San Juan de Ulua, in the port of Veracruz. After he had gained permission to enter the port, the silver fleet arrived at the port unexpectedly, bringing the new governor of New Spain. The arriving Spaniards made terms with Hawkins, but later the Spaniards attacked the English ships by surprise. All the English ships were captured except for two. Hawkins managed to escape in one. The two escaping ships soon separated, and Hawkins found himself with 200 men and a damaged ship off the coast of Mexico. Hawkins sailed along the Mexican coast for two weeks. Everything edible in the ship had been devoured, including the ship’s pets: dogs, cats, monkeys, parrots, etc. The voyage home would take four to six weeks, and they did not have enough provisions or water for the entire crew. Hawkins called a meeting of the crew. After a vote, half the crew elected to remain ashore, and the other half elected to brave hurricanes and starvation and head for home in the leaky ship. Somehow, after starvation, deaths, and gales that blew him off course, Hawkins managed to bring the ship to Vigo Bay, Spain. Here there were plenty of victuals, and the starving crew devoured such quantities of fresh meat that 45 of them died while the ship was at anchor in Spain. Eventually, Hawkins reached England

in January of 1569. Of the one hundred men who left the coast of Mexico in September of 1568, there were only 15 left (Gosse 1930).

If the men from Hawkins’ expedition were the first ones to use the word in England, where did they acquire the word and what is its origin? Given that the expedition had been in Caribbean Mexico, it is natural to start the search in Mexico. The Mexicans were well acquainted with sharks. In the *Codex Fejérvary-Mayer*, of Aztec origin (Seler 1902), there is a clear depiction of a stylized shark (Figure 2, from Seler plate IX, No. 42). It shows an elongated fish-like creature with a mouthful of large triangular teeth, fins, and a heterocercal tail, and with a human foot sticking out of its mouth. This animal is called *acipactli* in the text, and the name is erroneously translated as a ‘swordfish’. This is an obvious translation error, as the creature is certainly shark-like and lacks the identifying rostrum and lunate tail of a swordfish, and a swordfish lacks the large triangular teeth of the depicted animal. In any case, the name *acipactli* cannot be related to the word ‘shark’. Thus, the next alternative is to look for the word in the Mayan languages that were spoken along the Caribbean coast of Mexico. In Yucatec Mayan we find the word *xoc* (pronounced ‘choke’). According to the Maya scholar J. Eric Thompson (1944), the word *xoc* has two meanings; in one sense it means ‘to count’ and in another it means ‘shark’. Thompson (1944) cites four references, directly or indirectly, where *xoc* is translated as ‘shark’. According to Thompson in a Vienna dictionary the word ‘xoc’ (the duplication of vowels is said to be seldom significant in Yucatec) is given as ‘shark’, ‘the teeth of which the Indians remove to shoot arrows with’. In the Pio Perez dictionary ‘hkan xoc’ is listed as a species of shark. Thompson points to two other references where *xoc* is translated as shark or pointed out that the word also means ‘to count’. He also notes that the Pio Perez dictionary lists *hkan xoc* as a species of shark. Thompson cites other references that indicate that *xoc* means shark or pilot whale, concluding that



Figure 2. Depiction of a shark from the *Codex Fejérvary-Mayer*, labeled as *acipactli*, and erroneously translated as a ‘swordfish’, from Seler (1909), plate IX, No. 42.

the term *xoc* refers to ‘an ill-defined group of large fish or whales’.

A more recent work by Jones (1985) explores the Mayan origin of ‘shark’ and cites another three examples. Jones mentions that in the Alcalá dictionary *ah kan xoc* is defined as *tiburón*, that there is a similar definition in *Arte del idioma Maya*, and that a neglected entry in the Vienna dictionary defines ‘arrows that have *tiburón* teeth for arrowheads’ as *xoc yee halas* (*xoc* arrowheads), all supporting the interpretation of *xoc* as ‘shark’. This elegant work was published in an ethnological publication (*The Palenque Round Table Series*, Volume 7, *Fifth Palenque Round Table*, 1983). Unfortunately, biologists seldom read it. The question still remains of how the English sailors acquired the word *xoc*. Jones (1985) speculates that Hawkins’ men may have acquired from a Spanish pilot they had captured and who had guided Hawkins’ vessels for four days into San Juan de Ulua. The question may never be answered precisely.

In any case, the terms *tiburón* and shark both originated with the Amerindians of the Caribbean. Both the Spanish and the English borrowed the terms and the terms were well established in both languages by the middle of the seventeenth century. In Spanish, *cazón* would be retained as a confusing term for all small sharks, with *tiburón* reserved for the larger specimens. The distinction remains tenuous and confusing. In English, shark would partially replace nurse and dogfish and, in time, would acquire many other meanings.

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