The mechanism of movement of the gill-filaments in Teleostei

Our knowledge of the structure of the gills and of the way, in which the gill-elements function in Teleostei, is mostly of older date and has not yet been adapted to the results of the recent physiological investigations of the respiration of these fishes.

It is a well-known fact, that every gill-bar bears a double row of filaments (gill-plates of the first order), the two hemibranchie. The filaments of both hemibranchie of a gill alternate with each other. Every filament is supported by a piece of skeleton, the gill-rod, which is connected with the visceral arch. The filaments are movable through the action of small muscles in the sense of an adduction of the filament-tips of the two hemibranchie, which belong to one gill. The exchange of carbonic acid and of oxygen takes place in the blood-lacuna of the thin lamellae (gill-plates of the second order), which are placed on both sides of the filaments, nearly perpendicular to the surface.

The small muscles, which move the filaments, are described as adductor muscles. They really act as adducting powers for the filament-tips of the two hemibranchie of a gill. Several authors (RIESS, WOSKOBONIKOFF, I. SCHÖTTELTE) ascribe to these adduction movements of the filament-rows of a gill a significance for the renewal of the water during breathing and for the propulsion of the blood through the vessels of the gill-filaments. I. SCHÖTTELTE (1932, p.10)


Even speaks of fanning movements (fächelnde Bewegungen) of the gill-filaments in the Gobiformes, to which the action of these adductor muscles should contribute. According to RIESS the blood of the arteria branchialis should be pushed by the heart-power only as far as the branches of the filaments. By a successive contraction and relaxation of the adductor muscles the afferent vessels for the filaments should be closed and opened alternately, which would cause the current of the blood through the filaments. It is evident, that these authors start from the supposition, that the adductor muscles have a rhythmical action, in which contraction and relaxation follow each other continuously.

When we have a look at the figures of a horizontal section of the branchial region in a Teleost in the different textbooks of zoology and comparative anatomy, it is remarkable that in the first years of control the number of losses of females is far higher than that of males. This observation coincides with the ascertained fact that the reported number of females found dead is nearly double the corresponding number of males.

4. According to the notifications of dead animals found the months most rich losses are May and June. Evidently the females are particularly exposed to peril by the development of the embryo, which takes place at that time, and by the breeding of their young ones.

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5. L. v. DAM, On the utilisation of oxygen and regulation of breathing in some aquatic animals. Diss., Groningen 1898.
found in the eel and the trout a utilization of 80%.; and according to Hazellofff this value amounts to an average of 62% in some other Teleostei. Without knowing Woskoboinikoff's publication, Van Dam concluded in the same way from the value of the utilization of the oxygen, that the wall separating the inspiratory and the expiratory cavity must be a wall without big slits.

In perfect agreement with these conclusions are the results of experiments on Tinca tinca, carried out by Mrs Hofdiijk-Enklaar (Zoological Laboratory of the University of Groningen; not published). By looking under the gill-cover in the phase of expiration it is possible to watch the position of the filament-tips. Mrs Hofdiijk-Enklaar found, that in this phase of the respiration the filament-tips of one hemibranchia and those of the successive one of a following branchial arch lean against each other. As in the inspiratory phase the gill-cover lies close to the body, it is not possible to observe the filaments during this phase of breathing. It was necessary to make a small circular opening in the gill-cover in order to observe the filament-tips during both phases of breathing. A bit of transparent celluloid was inserted in the little circular hole to prevent, that the pressure relations in the expiratory cavity should change. Mrs Hofdiijk-Enklaar could observe, that in quiet respiration the filament-tips of one hemibranchia and those of the successive one of the next gill touch each other during inspiration as well as during expiration.

It was also noticed, that in apparently clean water a normally breathing fish opens the gill-clefts at regular intervals, e.g. 8 times to 50 breathing movements. It makes so-called coughing movements. If small fragments of defilement (small filaments of filtering paper, a large quantity of detritus, etc.) are added to the water, these coughing movements become more frequent. In his investigations concerning the respiration of the Teleoste Kupper observed these abnormal respiratory movements which he rightly interpreted as coughing movements. In his detailed study (1907) he accurately describes the sequence of opening and closing of mouth and gill-cover during the coughing movements.

Mrs Hofdiijk-Enklaar could observe through the celluloid window of the gill-cover, that during the coughing movements the gill-clefts open for a moment as the adduction of the filament-tips of the hemibranchiae belonging to one gill. Inspired particles are coughed out either in a forward or in a backward direction. In both cases a strong current of water is produced, which cleans the gills. The filaments, bridging the gill-clefts, part from each other.

In the same way mechanical stimulation of the mucous membrane of the inspiratory cavity as well as of the expiratory one causes the opening of the gill-clefts.

Afterwards I found, that exactly the same adduction-movements could be called forth in stimulating the filaments of a freshly decapitated fish with an electric current. In such a test-object the position of the filaments is still the same as in the living animal. It was

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2 L. v. Dam, On the utilisation of oxygen and regulation of breathing in some aquatic animals. Diss., Groningen 1938.