Until now, the identity of the Mediterranean crustacean described by Risso (1816) as *Hippa caerulea* has never been adequately ascertained. The only conclusion appears to be that it is not a hippid crab (Decapoda, Anomura, Hippoidea, Hippidae), as no revision of hippid crabs has included this species (Miers, 1878; De Man, 1896), and no species of *Hippa* has ever been subsequently recorded from the Mediterranean. The only published suggestion as to its true identity was made by Holthuis (1977), who placed it in synonymy with *Albunea carabus* (Linnaeus, 1758) (Hippoidea, Albuneidae). In doing so, Holthuis (1977: 62) admitted that Risso’s species “has several aspects which do not agree with [A. carabus]”. In fact, an examination of the descriptions of Risso (1816, 1827) shows that *H. caerulea* substantially differs from *A. carabus* in color, morphology, size, habitat and behavior and, as such, cannot be considered conspecific with that taxon. However, many of the characters of *H. caerulea* agree with those of female isopods of the genus *Gnathia* Leach, 1813. A comparison of the components of Risso’s (1816) description of *H. caerulea* to gnathiid isopods is given below in support of this hypothesis.

Risso (1816: 50-51) described *Hippa caerulea* as follows (also in translation from the French):

“Il n’est point d’espèces de paguriens sur lesquelles un certain luxe de couleur ne se fasse plus ou moins remarquer. Cette hippe diffère de celles qui sont connues, par la forme allongée de son corps, par sa couleur jaunâtre sur son pourtour, et d’un beau bleu d’outre-mer au milieu. Son têt est ovale, oblong, échancre sur le devant. Les yeux sont placés sur des pédicules courts. Les antennes extérieures sont grosses, les intérieures courtes. La bouche est entourée de petits palpes soyeux. L’abdomen est glabre. La première paire de pattes a ses articles un peu plus larges que ceux des autres paires, lesquelles sont dépouyées de crochets. Les écailles natatoires qui sont au bout de la queue sont terminées par une pointe recourbée en-dessous. La femelle m’est inconnue.”
A mesure que les naturalistes français soumettent à l’observation les êtres qui vivent autour d’eux, on voit s’accroître le nombre des espèces des divers genres que la nature sembloit avoir rélégués dans les contrées les plus reculées de l’Europe. La hippe que j’ai trouvée dans nos mers ne vit point en parasite sur les huîtres de nos rochers, mais elle se cache seulement dans les trous extérieurs de ces bivalves. Ayant mis plusieurs fois des hippoc à la surface de l’eau, j’observai qu’elles descendaient promptement au fond, et qu’aussitôt qu’elles touchaient la coquille, elles la parcouraient en tout sens avec une vitesse extraordinaire. Quand je les iritissais avec une paille, loin de s’échapper, elles voient au contraire audevant, l’entouraient de leurs bras, et la pressaient fortement. Actifs, voraces et courageux, ces petits crustacés conservent toutes ces qualités, même quand il y a long-temps qu’ils ont été retirés de leur élément.”

[There are no pagurid [sic] species on which a certain abundance of color is not more or less noticeable. This hippoc differs from those that are known by the elongated form of its body, by its yellowish color on its periphery, and a beautiful ultra-marine blue in the middle. Its shell is oval, oblong, crescent-shaped on the front. The eyes are placed on short peduncles. The external antennae are large, the interior short. The mouth is surrounded by small setose palp. The abdomen is smooth. The first pair of legs has its articles a bit broader than those of the other pairs, which are deprived of hooks. The swimming scales [uropods] that are at the end of the tail are ended by a ventrally recurved point. The female is unknown to me.

As fast as French naturalists have observed creatures that live around them, one sees the number of species increase of the various genera that nature appears to have relegated to the most distant regions of Europe. The hippoc that I have found in our seas does not live at all parasitic on the oysters of our boulders, but only hides in external holes of these bivalves. Having put several times these hippoc to the surface of the water, I observed that they descend promptly to the bottom, and that as soon as they touched the shells, they ran around it in all directions with an extraordinary speed. When I irritated them with a straw, far from escaping, to the contrary they came ahead, surrounding it with their arms, and squeezed strongly. Active, voracious and courageous, these small crustaceans have all these qualities, even when they have been pulled out of their element for a long time.]

The color of these animals is the first characteristic noted by Risso (1816) and, indeed, it is one of the four characters he gives (“in medio caerulea”) to diagnose the species. This color pattern is certainly not that of a hippoc crab, as species in that family are invariably either uniform in color, or possess a banded, mottled appearance (Boyko, unpubl.), but are never blue. Holthuis (1977) suggested that this color “fit rather well for Albunea carabus”, but in point of fact, that species is a dark purplish-brown color which is evenly distributed across the carapace (Rubíó & Holthuis, 1976). However, note the similarity between the color given by Risso (1816) for H. caerulea and the following description by Bate (1858: 171) of a pre-ovigerous female gnathiid isopod:

“I... perceived, after a few days, that the blue mass, which first appeared to fill and distend the large segment of the pereion, gradually diminished, apparently deteriorating. It recedes first from the margin. In so doing it displays a series of layers, placed one before the other, lying across the animal.”