

## Canadian Content? The Beaver in Antiquity

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Most of us think of the beaver as the quintessentially Canadian animal. However, our beaver (*Castor canadensis*) is not alone. The Old World has its own beaver (*Castor fiber*) which still inhabits parts of France and Germany. In classical times, beavers were also found around the Pontus or Black Sea, for which reason they were also known as “Pontic dogs”.

Actually, the words *castor* and *fiber* are synonyms in Latin. Both mean ‘beaver’. For *fiber*, late Latin texts sometimes use a variant form *biber* or *beber*, which is clearly related to our word ‘beaver’. The origin of these terms was already a matter of debate in antiquity. Varro ineptly derives *fiber* from *februm* “something far away”, on the grounds that beavers are often seen at a distance along the river bank. Servius, commentator on Vergil, believed that the *castor* is so called because it castrates itself (more on this below!) On the other hand, the fable-teller Phaedrus claims (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) that the *castor* is named after the god Castor, one of the brothers of Helen of Troy.

A description of the beaver in Pliny’s *Natural History* sounds partly familiar. He says the beaver has a strong bite, cutting down trees on the river banks as if with steel. It has a body similar to an otter, and soft fur. But Pliny goes on to say that the beaver has a tail like a fish’s, and that if it bites into a man’s body it will not relax its grip until the fractured bones are heard grinding together! Aelian, a Greek writer on animals, adds that the beaver lies hidden in rivers by day, but prowls the land for food at night. The agricultural writer Columella advises wiping your knife on beaver skin while pruning vines, as this will help prevent vermin from eating your grapes.

The male beaver was noted for its production of “castoreum” or beaver oil, a pungent liquid extracted from its testicles. Castoreum was very potent: the smell of it would make you sneeze. If rubbed on the head, it brought sleep. If dissolved in water and swallowed, it relieved brain fever. Its fumes would revive a person from fainting or even from a coma. It also cured vertigo (fear of heights), cramps, muscle spasms, tummy ache, and paralysis. Dissolved in honey, it was a treatment for epilepsy; dissolved in wine, a cure for scorpion bites. It was also a cure for toothache, earache and weak vision, as well as being an antidote for many types of poison. Castor oil, which in my grandparents’ day was a common cure for a variety of ailments, is named after castoreum because of its similar qualities, though it is actually extracted from the seeds of a plant.

Because of its extensive medical properties, castoreum was very costly, and therefore beavers were hunted for their testicles. But according to ancient lore, beavers had a strategy for escaping the hunter. A large number of classical sources tell us that when pursued, the beaver will use its sharp teeth to bite off its private parts, leaving them in the path of its pursuer who will stop to pick them up, allowing the beaver to get away. If a beaver who has previously sacrificed its parts is pursued a second time, it will stand on its hind legs to show that it is missing the desired parts and is thus not worth the hunter’s

efforts, for its meat was not particularly prized. Ancient authors, fascinated by this bizarre story of self-castration, came up with various ways of rationalizing it. Cicero refers to the beaver “ransoming itself with that part of the body for which it is most sought after”. The fourth-century orator Symmachus likewise explains that the beaver “makes a bargain for its life”. Juvenal says the beaver “turns itself into a eunuch in order to escape”. Phaedrus draws a human moral from the fable: if only humans would imitate the beaver by giving up what they own, they might live safely in future!