



BEAVER

BEAVER, *Castor fiber* L., semiaquatic mammalian rodent, in Persian commonly called *sag-e ābī* (lit. “aquatic dog”), no longer extant in Iran (Eʿtemād, I, and Harrington et al. do not mention it). As late as 1874 J. H. Schlimmer (p. 115) noted that “small numbers [of beavers] are found along the bank of the Šaṭṭ-al-ʿArab in the province of Šūštar and Dezfūl.”

The beaver in early Iranian sources. There appear to be references to beavers in Avestan and Pahlavi literatures. In the *Ābān yašt* (Yt. 5.129; Lommel, pp. 43–44; Pūr-e Dāvūd, I, pp. 297–98 and n.) the garment of Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā is described thus: “[She] wears a dress of *baβra* fur [made] of the [pelts of] 300 *baβras* [each of] which bears four pups, for the *baβri* is the prettiest in that [her fur] is the thickest. The *baβri* is an aquatic animal; his pelt, if obtained at the right time, is very glossy [like] silver and gold.” Avestan *baβra/baβri*– has traditionally been interpreted as “beaver,” the word itself being considered akin to Sanskrit *babhru*– “reddish brown, ichneumon,” Latin *fiber* “beaver,” Old High German *bibar* (modern Ger. *Biber*), and Pahlavi *babrag* (see below; see also *Air Wb.*, col. 925; Horn, *Etymologie*, p. 42; Hübschmann, *Persische Studien*, p. 25; Horn and Hübschmann, pp. 236–37). A little more information is found in the *Bundahišn* (TD₂, p. 96; tr. Anklesaria, 13.18, pp. 120–21): The beaver, “*babrag-e ābīg* [lit. “aquatic *babrag*”], which is [also] called *sag-e ābīg*,” is said to be one of “ten species of dog,” among which the fox, the sheep dog, the weasel, and the otter (*udrag*; see below) are also included. In *Mēnōg ī xrad* (35.10, ed. Anklesaria, p. 104; tr. A. Tafazzolī, Tehran, 1354 Š./1975–76, p. 51), killing a *babrag* is considered one of the thirty cardinal sins (along with the



murder of a holy man, idolatry, heresy, and sodomy). These references are witness to the value placed on the beaver as a fur-bearing animal in pre-Islamic Iran.

The beaver in Islamic Iran. The existence of several Persian or dialectal Iranian names (all obsolete now) for the beaver and especially for its “testicles” (see on castoreum below) in Persian sources of the Islamic period indicates a continued interest in the beaver, no longer for its pelt (considered “unclean” in the Islamic law like the skin of any other dog), but for the medicinal properties of its *gond/jond* “testicle” (i.e., castoreum), which were made known to the physicians-pharmacologists of the Islamic period through the Arabic translation of Dioscorides’ treatise on materia medica by Ḥonayn b. Eshāq and Stephanos (Eṣṭefān b. Basīl) under the caliph al-Motawakkel (232-47/847-61). The earliest mention of the beaver in Islamic Iranian lands is probably that by the 4th/10th-century historian and philologist Ḥamza Eṣṭahānī (quoted by Bīrūnī, *Ṣaydana*, ed. Said, p. 142): “*Vīdastār* [i.e., the beaver] is an animal found only in the valley of the Aras [River] in Azarbaijan and in the valley of Atil, the Khazar capital.” For the animal we also find the following names, all mentioned, or quoted from earlier authors, by Bīrūnī, op. cit., pp. 141-42; *saglāb(i)/saglābī/saglāv(i)* (corruptions of *sag-e ābī*, *qondoṣ/qondos* (according to Shirr, p. 129, an arabicized form of *gond-e sag*, lit. “dog testicle”; cf. the turkicized *qondūz*, still used in Turkish for this animal); *hazad(ū)*, and *ḳazadū* (the last one probably a variant or alteration of *hazadū* in the Persian adaptation of Bīrūnī’s *Ṣaydana* by Kāsānī, I, pp. 218-20). By far the commonest name for the beaver in Persian and (with arabicized variants) in Arabic sources is *bīdastār* or *bādastār*, which, according to Mo’īn (*Farhang-e fārsī*, s.v.), is composed of *bī* “without”/*bā* “with” + *dast* “hand” + *ar* “saw,” probably referring to the fact that the beaver, without a hand-saw or as if with a hand-saw, is able to “saw,” i.e., to gnaw down, some trees with its strong sharp front teeth (but cf. Bīrūnī’s explanation, p. 141: *bī* “without” + *dast* [= *tāmm*] “entire, complete,” “that is, incomplete as to its two testicles”).

More numerous are the names for the beaver’s “testicle(s).” This animal being unknown in Arabic-speaking lands (see Ma’lūf, pp. 31-32), the authors of the Islamic period took for granted Dioscorides’ inaccurate description of the *kástor* (Gk., beaver), and his misinterpretation that castoreum or castor (variously arabicized as *qaṣṭorīūn*, *qaṣṭūrīūn*, *qaṣṭūr*, etc.) is the testicle [sing.: sic] of the beaver (see below; in Ar.: *ḳoṣyat al-ḳalb al-baḥrīy* “testicle of the marine dog,” *ḳoṣā ḳalb al-mā* “testicle of the water dog,” etc.). The Persian



gond-e bīdastar/bādastar, *hazad-gond*, *qondoḏ-qūrī*, etc., and the Turkish *qūndūz kāya-sī* (all recorded as such by Bīrūnī, loc. cit.) reflect the same original description by Dioscorides (as quoted by Ebn al-Bayṭār, pt. 1, pp. 171–72): “The *qāṣṭor* is an animal adapted to living both in water and out of it but mostly living in water, where he feeds on fish and crabs. His testicle is the *jond-bādastar*. This animal is fit to live both on land and in the sea, [but] he is usually in streams with snakes and crocodiles. . . . False is the report that this animal, when chased and wanted, extracts his testicle and throws it [to the hunters], for it is impossible for him to reach it, because it is stuck like a pig’s testicle. [To do this,] he should rend the skin covering the testicle and take this out with the *ḥejāb* (envelope) containing a honey-like moist matter, which is [then] dried, and taken internally” (it should be noted that the misinformation that the beaver “is usually in streams with snakes and crocodiles” does not occur in the translation of Dioscorides by Ḥonayn and Stephanos and later revised by Abū ‘Abd-Allāh Nātelī in 380/990-91; see the relevant fol. of the Leiden ms. of this revised translation as reproduced by Sadek, p. 184). Unrelated names for castoreum are: *āš-e baččagān/baččahā* (cf. its Turk. tr. *oḡlān-āšī*) of dubious literal meaning (“the children’s *āš*”? cf. the unconvincing etymology proposed by Pūr-e Dāvūd, quoted by Mo‘īn in *Borhān-e qāṭe’* I, p. 44, n. 6: *āš* “many” + *baččagān* “children,” lit. “[having/bearing] many pups”), mentioned by Bīrūnī, loc. cit.; *fāješa* (*sic*; given by Bīrūnī, and recorded in *Borhān-e qāṭe’* s.v., as Persian, but cf. the Arabic *al-fāḥeša* mentioned by Ebn Maymūn, no. 79, along with *koṣyat al-baḥr*, lit. “sea testicle,” and *koṣā al-sammūr*, lit. “testicle of the sable,” etc., as synonyms for *jondabādostor* [*sic*]); and *qazmīān* (recorded by Bīrūnī and in *Borhān-e qāṭe’*, s.v.; origin uncertain; for a probable connection with *qaz* “weasel”? see the *sam(m)ūr* below). Another Persian name for castoreum, *sag(-e) āb*, lit. “water dog,” also in Bīrūnī, recalls the confused use of one and the same word for this animal and its “testicle,” as is the case for the Engl. *castor* meaning both (cf. also Ebn al-Bayṭār, pt. 4, p. 21, who uses *qaṣṭūra* as a synonym for *jondabādastar*).

Actually, castoreum is a musk-like strong-smelling resinous matter secreted by a pair of bulky glandular pouches united by a common excretory duct and located side by side under the abdominal skin in the urogenital region of both male and female beavers (it probably serves to delimit the beaver’s territory and/or to attract the opposite sex). The fact that she-beavers also possess these musk glands (though less developed than in males) must have passed unnoticed by classical authors and their Islamic imitators—hence the confusion of these pouches with he-beavers’ testicles (to be noted incidentally that



the word *musk*, designating a substance similar to castoreum and secreted by an abdominal pouch in the male musk deer, goes back—through the Persian *mošk*—ultimately to the Skt. *muṣkā* meaning “testicle, scrotum”). These glands were mistaken for testicles because, in addition to their outward resemblance to the latter, they were often sold in pairs (Meyerhof, in Ebn Maymūn, p. 42). Apparently because of the scarcity of genuine castoreum, it was often adulterated (according to Dioscorides, with some gum ammoniac and another resin mixed with blood and a little castoreum, all placed in single bladders and let to dry up); therefore, it was recommended to eventual users to “select always those twin [“testicles”] which have a common [excretory] outlet . . . and the inside of which is divided into numerous natural fossae (*hojob*) containing [a matter] like blood, malodorous, hot, pungent, and easily detachable [from the inner walls of the pouches]” (Dioscorides, loc. cit., condensed by Bīrūnī, loc. cit., Ebn Sīnā, II, Pers. tr., p. 106, etc.; cf. Anṭākī, I, p. 95, who states that “the best *jondabīdastār* is the red, sweet-smelling [*sic*], friable one, not older than three years”).

Probably because of the nonexistence of the beaver in the greater part of the Islamic world, confusion has also developed about the very animal yielding castoreum. The confusion seems to have been first with a certain fur-bearer of the family Mustelidae: *sammūr* in some Arabic texts, and *ḳaz(z)* in some Iranian sources. For instance, Ebn Beklāreš (2nd half of the 5th/11th century), quoted by Renaud and Colin (p. 48, no. 103), while giving the synonym *ḳoṣyat al-baḥr* for *jondobādastār* [*sic*], states that “it comes from the animal called *sammūr*; and Ebn Maymūn (6th/12th century), loc. cit., believing that “*jondabādostor* is the testicle of the *sammūr*,” explains that the latter “is a sea animal, the “water dog,” which comes out [of water] and feeds/roams freely on land.” Bīrūnī (d. 440/1048) reports (*al-Jamāher*, p. 102) some people’s belief that “the hunters of *ḳazz* castrate it and [that] its testicle is [called] *jondbīdastār*.” Esmā’īl Jorjānī (6th/12th century) states (p. 603) that “*jond-e bīdastār* is the testicle of the animal called *ḳaz* in Persian and *qondos* by Turks.” Kāsānī (1st half of the 8th/14th century), loc. cit., quotes “some people” as saying that “the *jond-e bīdastār* is the testicle of the animal from the hair of which *ḳaz* clothes are woven [*sic*]” (cf. also *ḳazmīān* “castoreum” above). As an animal unanimously acknowledged as bearing a valuable fur, the *sammūr* (Pers. *samūr*, Pahl. *samōr*) has been generally identified by modern authors as *Mustela/Martes zibellina*, the sable (see, e.g., Schlimmer, p. 393, Ma’lūf, p. 213, and Ghaleb, s.v., who, however, has “common *sammūr*” = *ḳazz* = *Mustela martes* and reserves *M. zibellina* for the “*sammūr* of Siberia”), and the *ḳaz(z)*



variously as *Martes martes*, pine marten, *Mustela martes*, “common marten,” or *M. foina*, weasel (see the same sources, and *Dā’erat al-ma’āref-e fārsī* I, Tehran, 1345 Š./1966-67, s.v.; for the great confusion in the identification of the *sam(m)ūr*, *kaz(z)* and the like in Arabic and Persian sources, see Ma’lūf, pp. 158-60 and 213).

A further confusion is that of the beaver with another mustelid, the otter, *Lutra lutra* L. (*udrag* in Pahl., cf. Hindi *ūd* “otter,” from Skt. *udrā*, referring to an aquatic animal, the otter according to some). The following fact may have added to the confusion due to the nonexistence of the beaver in these areas: Most members of the family Mustelidae (including martens, weasels, badgers, and otters, all of which are found in Iran; see Harrington et al., p. 10), particularly martens and polecats, “have well-developed [anal] scent-glands” from which they emit a fetid secretion to defend themselves and/or to mark their territory; both terrestrial species (martens) and semiaquatic (fluvial) ones (otters) exist; generally they bear much valued furs; they are carnivorous (unlike the beaver, which feeds mainly on the bark and tender twigs of some trees). The otter is called *qożā’a*, *kalb al-mā’* (lit. “water dog”) or *qondos/qondor* in Arabic (see Ma’lūf, p. 31, who states that “the otter is abundant in Iran and Iraq, well known in Syria and possibly in Jazīrat al-‘Arab”); in contemporary Persian it is called *samūr-e ābī*, sometimes *sag-e ābī*, or more accurately by its specific Gīlakī name *šang* (in Maz. (ū-)šeng). Melgunof, writing in 1863 (Pers. tr., p. 72), reports the pelts of the fox, weasel, jackal, and otter (*šeng*) among the goods bought by Russian traders from the Turkmans and others in Astarābād.

Interestingly, the imaginary picture of a beaver in the illustrated Leiden ms. of the above-mentioned Arabic translation of Dioscorides (dated 475/1083; the earliest dated ms.: University of Leiden, Or. 289, Warn., see Sadek, loc. cit., fig. 37), far from representing a true beaver, looks rather like a fox (cf. the Ar. name *ta’lab al-mā’*, lit. “water fox,” also used for the beaver). This untrue representation indicates that the confusion about the identity of the beaver was already great in the 5th/11th century. The zoologist-philologist Damīrī (742-808/1341-1405), I, p. 306, by adding some features of the seal (probably the species *Phoca caspica* Gmel.) to some features of the beaver, the *sammūr*, and the otter has raised the confusion to its highest point: “The *jondabādestar* is an animal [sic] looking like a dog, not like the *kalb al-mā’*. He is [also] called *qondo* as well as *sammūr*. He is found only in the country of the Qefjāq [i.e., Qepčāq] and in the neighboring regions. . . . He lives mostly in water, where he feeds on fish and crabs. He looks like a red fox. He has no forepaws, but he has



hindlegs and a long tail. His head is like a human head, with a round face. He crawls on his chest as if walking on all fours. He has four testicles: two outer/apparent ones and two inner/hidden ones. . . . When he sees that the hunters are after him to obtain the castoreum, which exists in his two apparent testicles, he flees, and if they persist in pursuing him, he cuts [his outer testicles] off with his mouth and throws them to the hunters. . . . After having cut off the apparent two, he brings into view the two invisible ones in their stead. Inside his testicle there is something like blood or honey, foul-smelling. . . . His pelt has dense hair, and is suitable to be worn by cold-tempered (*mabrūd*) and aged people” (the medicinal virtues subsequently mentioned by Damīrī are those traditionally attributed to the castor).

Probably the first attempt to clarify this confusion was by M. M. Tonokābonī (fl. 1077-1105/1667-94) who had first-hand knowledge about the otter, which is abundant in his native Tonokābon in Māzandarān, and about the seal (*Phoca caspica* Gmel.) living in the Caspian and on its shores, but no knowledge of the beaver. In his *Toḥfa* (pp. 731-33, s.v. *kalb*, and 253-54, s.v. *jond*), first he distinguishes three kinds of *kalb* “dog”: domestic (*ahlī*), wild (*barrī*), and aquatic (*ābī*). He then distinguishes two kinds of the aquatic: marine (*baḥrī*) and fluvial (*nahrī*). According to him, the fluvial “dog” is called *ḳaz-mān* (“for it resembles the *ḳaz*”) in Persian (cf. the above-mentioned *ḳazmīān*) and *kalb māī* (lit. “aquatic dog”) in Arabic. “The *jond* is obtained from this [fluvial] one.” “The marine “dog” is as large as the domestic one and [even] larger, has very short limbs, and no tail. It is abundant [in the “Lake of Darband,” explains Tonokābonī’s commentator ‘Aqīlī Ḳorāsānī, p. 361, probably meaning the part of the Caspian Sea facing the Caucasus], where [the local people] use its hide as a container for naphtha.” (This description applies to the seal.) “The fluvial “dog” is as large as a cat or larger, resembles the *dalaq* [arabicized from *dala*, weasel], has long limbs and a tail like a cat’s. It is mostly found in large streams. [It also lives out of water, explains ‘Aqīlī, op. cit., p. 160] . . . Its hair is blackish red. . . . It is called *šang/šeng* in Tonokābon and Deylam. The *jond* obtained from it looks like a testicle. . . . In Īravān I have seen its fresh *jond*, which had just been cut off by a hunter: it had no odor or color whatever; only after I had boiled it in lye and had cured it with smoke from straw fire did a kind of transformation occur in it, and it gained odor and color.” (This description applies to the otter and to its “testicle.”)

The therapeutic virtues mentioned for castoreum by the Islamic-period authors are essentially those indicated by Dioscorides and Galen (cf. the



quotations from these two by Ebn al-Bayṭār, pt. 1, loc. cit.)—a fact which further confirms that most of those authors did not have any direct, exact knowledge about the beaver and its *jond*. The principal therapeutic indications of castoreum derive from the Galenic assumption that it is highly *mosakken* (heating, calorific), *mojaffef* (desiccant) and, at the same time, very *latīf* (gentle, soothing). Consequently, it is useful in “all cold and moist ailments of the lungs and the brain” (Galen), including nervous disorders such as spasm, tremor, hiccups caused by “cold humors,” lethargy, cramp, etc. (Galen and Dioscorides). Other “cold and moist” diseases reported by later authors as curable with castoreum are: *eḳtenāq al-raḥem* (strangulatio uterina), cephalgia (Ṭabarī, *Ferdaws al-ḥekma*, p. 438), poisoning by “cold” poisons especially by opium, phlegmatic and gaseous colic, epilepsy, *omm al-ṣebyān* (hydrocephalus of newborn children), “cold” gout, palsy, anesthesia (Sofyān Andalosī, quoted by Ebn al-Bayṭār, loc. cit.), and “moist” tetanos (Ebn Sīnā, II, Pers. tr., p. 106). Other uses: (castoreum ointment) against vermin stings (Dioscorides), bites of wild beasts (Ṭabarī, loc. cit.); (taken internally with wild pennyroyal) as an emmenagogue (Dioscorides and Galen), and to expel the embryo and placenta (Dioscorides); (taken with vinegar or “honey water”) against persistent flatulence, etc. (Dioscorides and Galen); (in a collyrium) for “clearing” the eyesight (Ṭabarī, loc. cit.); (in eardrops with nard oil) against otitis (Ebn Sīnā, loc. cit.); as a sternutative (Dioscorides), and so on. Curative virtues were also indicated for some other parts of the beaver. According to a certain Baṣrī (ʿIsā b. Māsa?), quoted by Ebn al-Bayṭār (loc. cit.), eating its flesh, which is also *mosakken* and *moyabbes* (desiccant), is good for paralytics and people affected with *roṭūbāt* (moist humors); and as reported by Ṭabarī (loc. cit.), “some people believe that a piece of its pelt, if placed under a gouty person, cures him.”

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