

## Medieval beaver myths

 Most beaver mentions in texts of the period are in allegorical works intended to point out a moral (we still often use animals that way in, e.g. animated films)



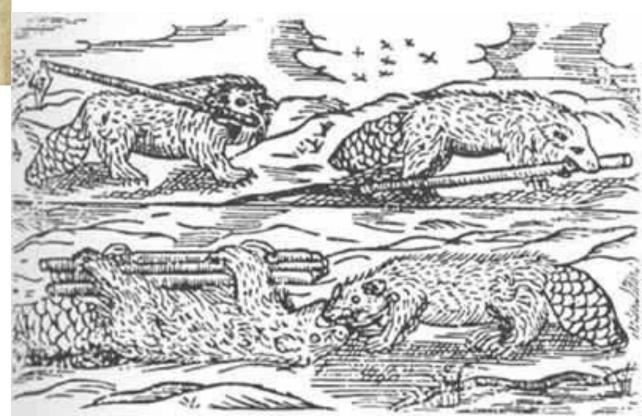
Still from 'Open Season'

- They usually appear in anthologies with various other animals, all of which are used in this allegorical sense
- Which suggests they should not be taken too literally; the central concern of the author was how humans should live, and the stories were illustrations to that end.



Beaver as guide to life. 1) Eliminate desires to save yourself

Beaver as guide to life. 2) Industry and cooperation.



## 'They thought they were fish' – a 'Myth of Medievalism'

- A very common story is that people in the 'Middle Ages' classified beavers as being fish.
- This isn't true for example, the monk Geraldus Cambrensis, writing in the 1200s, described beavers as 'this fish-like animal' – ie, not a fish, but resembling a fish in some respects.
- The story comes from misunderstanding Jewish dietary law as interpreted by the medieval Church: "These ye shall eat of all that are in the waters: all that have fins and scales shall ye eat" (Deuteronomy 14:9); repeated as "These shall ye eat of all that are in the waters: whatsoever hath fins and scales in the waters, in the seas, and in the rivers, them shall ye eat." (Leviticus 11:9; King James translation).
- The original Hebrew word translated as 'fin' is 'סנפיר', 'sə-nap-pîr', which can mean 'fin' but also 'finlike', 'flipper' (Almaany English-Hebrew dictionary). The webbed feet of beavers are 'finlike'; or even 'flippers'; and they have scales on the tail.
- They were therefore classified with (not as) fish, as one of the foods you could eat on fast days.
- Much as we often have molluscs and crustaceans on the 'fish' menu in restaurants.



Crab Pasta

in Pink Sauce

Tom Yum

Crab Pasta

Lemon Butter

Salmon

....presumably meaning that *our* descendants will laugh at us for thinking crabs, prawns, and squid were fish!



