

The curious survival strategy of the Roman beaver is well-known to anyone who has read Apuleius: there and elsewhere (Juvenal's twelfth satire, Phaedrus' *Fabulae*, and the *Nux*), the creature is said to sacrifice its genitals by way of distracting hunters or predators. From a zoological perspective this belief is patently ridiculous, but it was nevertheless pervasive and quite long-lived. We first find a doctor attempting to refute it in book thirteen of Pliny's *Natural History*; but since Thomas Browne, and then the Encyclopedistes, still felt compelled to refute it more than a millennium later, we can only assume that this belief remained what Browne would have called a pseudodoxion epidemicon for some time after the fall of the Roman Empire. How can we account for the durability of a belief like this, which anyone can disprove simply by looking at the underside of a beaver?

The aim of this paper is to show a connection between this widely-attested belief and the circulation, as a luxury good, of so-called "beaver testicles" – actually scent-glands – which were used at Rome in the preparation of medicines, perfumes, and aphrodisiacs. This is by way of making a contribution to the study of Roman luxury more broadly, which has lately – with, for instance, Dalby's *Empire of Pleasures* – taken a turn towards investigating the cultural mythologies surrounding the production and exchange of luxury goods in the Roman world. Roman beliefs about the beaver, as I hope to prove, are an exemplary instance of "scientific" knowledge the roots of which can be directly traced to production and circulation of a luxury good: in this instance, however, only a thin line separates ancient "science" from myth.