

A SURFEIT OF LAMPREYS

By Rick Turner

Inspector of Ancient Monuments, Cadw, Plas Carew, Unit 5/7 Cefn Coed, Parc Nantgarw, Cardiff, CF15 7QQ. Email: Richard.Turner@wales.gsi.gov.uk

This paper looks at the truth behind the phrase a 'surfeit of lampreys' by examining the accounts of King Henry I's death. The Severn Estuary was famous for its seasonal migration and catches of the sea lamprey (Petromyzon marinus), and documentary records suggest that it was the most prized of fish in the Middle Ages. Early cookery books are full of recipes, but it is literary references which suggest the lamprey was considered as an aphrodisiac and that the accusations about Henry I's death may have had an allegorical meaning.

INTRODUCTION

Much of history has been reduced to soundbites. A 'surfeit of lampreys' is one such example. Which king died of this surfeit, what are lampreys and why did they so prove poisonous? For those of us of a certain age, matters are further confused by distant memories of Sellar and Yeatman's classic spoof of British history teaching, *1066 and All That*, first published in 1930. Here we read that Henry I was a tragic king for he met his end by eating a 'surfeit of palfreys' (docile horses).

'This was a Bad Thing since he died of it and never smiled again' (Sellar and Yeatman 1960, 27).

Subsequently they tell us that King John died of a surfeit of peaches, Simon de Montfort of a surfeit of vergers and Richard II of a surfeit of Pumfreys (liquorice cakes).

The truth is as always more complicated. The accusation that Henry I (1068/9-1135) died from a 'surfeit of lampreys' derives from the account of one contemporary chronicler, Henry of Huntingdon (Greenway 1996, 491; Hollister 2001, 473; Green 2006, 6). The king was in his mid-sixties when he died. He had been involved in a dispute with his daughter Matilda and her husband

Geoffrey and had been leading minor military expeditions on the borders of his dukedom of Normandy and Geoffrey's Angevin estates. To relax he retired to his hunting lodge at Lyons-la-Forêt. On returning from a hunt, Henry of Huntingdon reports: '...he ate the flesh of lampreys, which always made him ill, though he always loved them. When a doctor forbade him to eat it, the king did not take the salutary advice. As it is said, "We always strive for what is forbidden and long for what is refused" (Greenway 1996, 491). The king died six days later (Hollister 2004). The earliest reference to a 'surfeit by etynge of a lamprey' comes in Fabyan's Chronicle written before 1513 (Simpson and Weiner 1989, XVII, 290). As this paper will set out to show, lampreys were the most prized fish of the Middle Ages. Not only were they very expensive, particularly during Lent, but also they had an allegorical meaning. By exploring these aspects, the more pointed meaning of Henry of Huntingdon's accusations relating to Henry I's death will be understood.

LAMPREYS

Lampreys belong to an ancient order of boneless fish the *Petromyzontiformes*, a branch of the jawless agnathans. There are 40 recorded species placed in 9 genera and 3 subfamilies. Because they are cartilaginous, their fossils are very rare, but examples have been found in North America dating back 300 million years into the Carboniferous period (Young 1981). They are almost unknown in the archaeological record with only a single reference being traced from the Cistercian Abbey of Dundrennan in Kirkcudbright, Scotland.

These fish have an unusual life cycle, beginning life as burrowing freshwater larvae (*ammocoetes*), which live on micro-organisms. After five to seven years, they undergo a

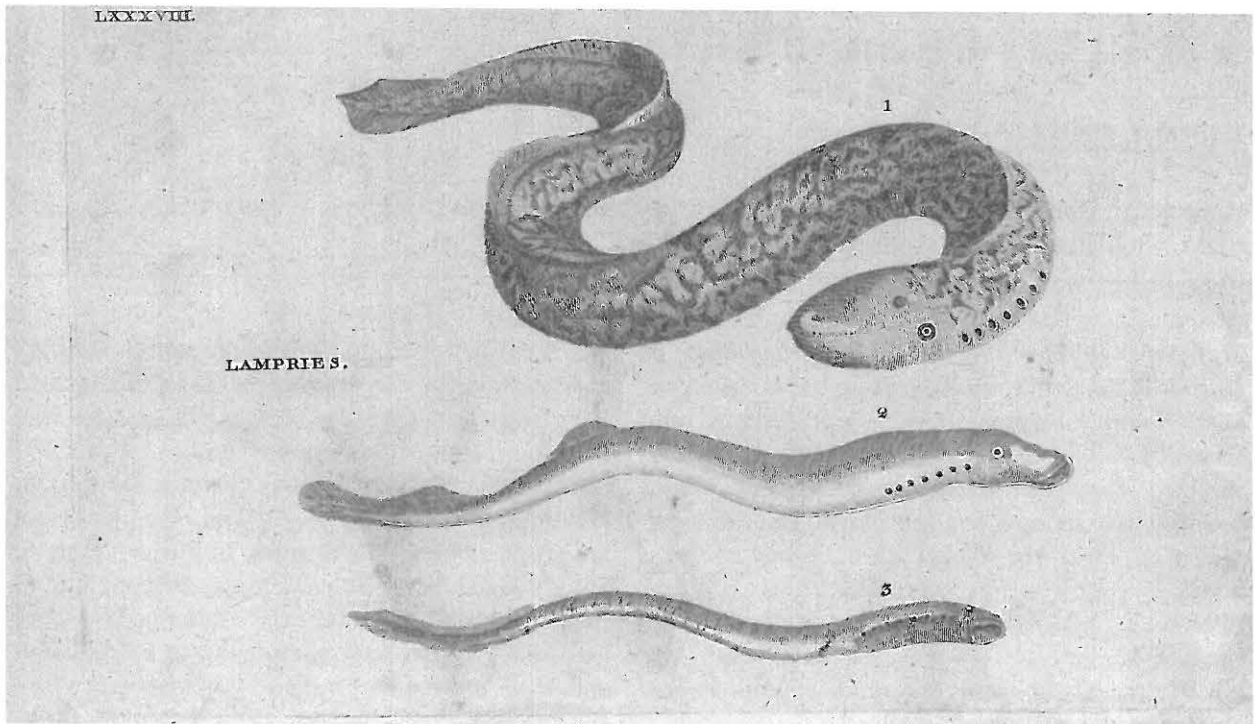


Figure 1. Plate from Thomas Pennant (1774), *British Zoology*, 3rd edition, London. 1 - The Lamprey (Sea Lamprey), 2 - The Lesser Lamprey (River Lamprey), and 3 - The Pride (Lampern or Young Lamprey).

metamorphosis involving a radical re-arrangement of their internal organs, the development of eyes and the formation of a line of gill slits (Figure 1). At this point they can be identified to their species. In British and west European waters, two species occur. The river lamprey or lampern (*Lampetra fluviatilis*), once matured, migrates to live in estuarine and shallow coastal waters, only returning to fresh water to breed. Their favoured prey are members of the herring family. They attach themselves to the fish by their serrated suckered mouth parts and suck out blood and other tissue, often causing the smaller fish to die. The sea lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*) grows larger, moves out to live in marine waters and has been caught at depths of over 4000 m. They range throughout Atlantic waters and there are large populations on the North American seaboard. They have become land locked in the Great Lakes, where they have become a considerable pest to commercial fish stocks. The sea lamprey will predate on fish as large as a basking shark and particularly favours members of the salmon family. They seem to hunt alone. Tagging studies have shown that lampreys are not faithful to the rivers where they are born, so what triggers their

migration to the different spawning rivers remains unclear.

The Severn Estuary and its tributaries were famous for their lamprey fisheries. However, as with all the species of migratory fish, the numbers are now drastically reduced, though river lampreys still breed in the headwaters of the Usk and Severn and sea lampreys in the Wye (Henderson 2003).

LAMPREYS IN THE RIVER SEVERN

In Western Europe, three rivers were famous for their lamprey fisheries, the Thames, the Loire (at Nantes) and the Severn. These three rivers were specifically mentioned in regulations issued by Edward I to the Corporation of London regarding hucksters of fish.

'One lampred of nautes, in their first coming, and of the better sort for a month, for 16d. And after a better lampred for 8d. And after Easter for 6d. Also one better fresh lamprey of Severne or Thames, between the purification of the Blessed

Virgin Mary and the middle of Lent, for 4d. And after the middle of Lent to Easter for 2d.' (Walford 1880, 70).

In the 14th and 15th centuries, prices rose much higher, for Holt wrote in his study of Gloucester's trade:

'A Gloucester lamprey could be worth as much as 10s during Lent – perhaps six or eight weeks wages for a labouring man – and the supply of such fish to the court and to noble households was very profitable to the small group of Gloucester men who bought these from the Severn fishermen or who themselves were able to rent fish-weirs from the crown or monasteries who owned them.' (Holt 1985, 154)

Earlier in the spawning season the price could be even higher. For example, Maurice of Berkeley sent six lampreys to King Edward III in December, which cost £6 7s 2d (Taylor 1974, 16). There is even a poetic reference from the early 15th century saying that the lampreys of the west were worth two hundred pounds a piece (Simpson and Weiner 1989, VIII, 612).

The key to the lamprey fishery in the Severn was that the river and its tributaries hosted large migratory populations of sea lampreys, whose favourite prey were salmon and shad. These were caught in the putts, the distinctive fishing engines used in the estuary (Jenkins 1974, 44-66; Godbold and Turner 1994), or specialised lamprey weels or stocks (Simpson and Weiner 1989, VIII, 613). Thomas Pennant identified the River Severn as the most noted river for lampreys. He reported that the sea lamprey ascended at the end of winter and the beginning of spring, with the best season being March, April and May when they were firm fleshed, but they later got flabby as the weather got hotter. These fish could reach 4 – 5 pounds in weight (Pennant 1776, III, 67-8 and fig. 1).

Lampreys like eels can be kept alive out of water for a period of time. This allowed them to be transported fresh over some distance (a special basket for transporting lampreys survives in the Gloucester Folk Museum). This begins to explain the great interest successive kings, other great

nobles and churchmen took in ensuring their supply of these iconic fish.

From the reign of King John there are regular records of the steward or bailiffs of the royal castle at Gloucester being required to supply lampreys, shad and salmon to the royal courts (Herbert 1988, 25). The Close Rolls of Henry III – which include numerous items from the household accounts – record the procurement of these fish almost on an annual basis. An entry for 1256 can be translated from the Latin as follows:

'About lampreys and shads for the use of the king and queen. It is ordered that the king's bailiffs at Gloucester should provide without delay to the king 40 lampreys and 40 shad and of these should send 10 lampreys and 10 shad to Marlborough for the use of the queen and should send to the king 30 lampreys and 30 shad making sure that they are conveyed so that they do not deteriorate on account of the long carriage and we will have allocated to you custom etc' (Calendar of Close Rolls 1931, 283).

The entry for 1259 gives more idea of the care with which these fisheries were managed and how important they were to the king:

'About the king's lampreys and salmon. Since the king soon expects to cross to French parts to re-establish peace between him and the king of France, it is ordered to the king's bailiffs in Gloucester that they receive from the bailiffs of Matthew Bezillus, constable of the king's castle of Gloucester, all of the lampreys and salmon that they capture for the use of the king in the king's weirs, which are in the custody of the same Matthew, and deliver to them by the king's order. They should carry all of those, just if they happen to be captured, whither those same bailiffs command them on behalf of the king, while the king is absent from his kingdom. And when the king learns the cost that they incur in this, the king will have that allocated to them.' (Calendar of the Close Rolls 1934, 7).

References to the distribution of lampreys



Figure 2. Lamprey pie made for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, 1953 (Copyright Gloucestershire Archives).

from Gloucester to the king are much harder to find in later reigns. In 1285/6, Roger of the Saucery – the saucery was where pastries, sweets and sauces were prepared and dishes dressed for the table - of Edward I's kitchen household at Westminster, was sent to Gloucester for 32 days during Lent to '*ad ponendas lampredas in pane*' (Byerly and Byerly 1977, xxxiv and 28). Literally, this translates as putting lampreys into bread or pastry, but it is more likely to mean the baking of lamprey pies. Lampreys were supplied from Gloucester for Edward II's coronation feast in spring 1308 (Spencer 2002, 71).

At what date this regular supply of lampreys ceased is not known. In 1503, a servant of the prior of Llanthony was given a reward of 5s for bringing two baked lampreys to the Queen (Nicolas 1830, 89). At some point the supply of fish was replaced by the annual presentation of lamprey pies by the city corporation of Gloucester

to the monarch at Christmas (and also the bishop, high steward, town clerk and recorder). Pennant remarks on the difficulty of obtaining the fish so early in migratory season and the city had to pay up to a guinea a piece (Pennant 1776, III, 68). This practice continued until 1836. It was revived between 1893 and 1917, again in 1953 (Stayt and Gibson 1953, and Figure 2), and also in 1977 for Her Majesty's silver jubilee (Herbert 1988, 25 and 192).

'The privilege of pie-making was often the monopoly of a single family, with widow succeeding husband and son succeeding parents. These families were the leading bakers or confectioners in the town, whose reputations warranted this honour.' (Stayt and Gibson 1953, 10).

Authors begin to document the decline of the numbers of lampreys in the Severn during the

19th century. Randall blames the creation of the first weir across the Upper Severn in 1843 (Randall 1862). Lloyd recorded that small numbers of these fish were still being caught in the Berkeley Kypes (fish traps) during the spring (Lloyd 1941). Numbers are now very low.

'In more than 20 years of regular sampling on the intake screen of Hinckley Point nuclear power station only a single sea lamprey has been recorded'. (Henderson 2003, 25).

It is reported that the last time the Gloucester Corporation made lamprey pies they had to import the frozen fish from Canada (Tim Bowly, *pers. comm.* November 2006).

COOKING AND EATING LAMPREYS

Because of the price and special importance of the lamprey, many recipes survive from Medieval and later periods describing how they were cooked and eaten. The lamprey is a very strong-tasting and oily fish. All recipes required the lamprey to be splatted, ie split open and the cartilage running the length of the body removed. The fish is capable of concentrating heavy metals and other poisons within its flesh, so it needs to be treated with care. Four main methods of cooking were employed:

Roasting

The fish were roasted whole. An inventory of 1485 from York of John Custer, tailor, records 'two lampern spits' in the kitchen (Steel and Hampson, 2003, 288). Some idea of how the fish were presented comes from the description of a feast given in 1400, by Aymé, duke of Savoy, for his guest the lord of Burgundy. One of the courses of this extremely elaborate meal consisted of:

'..... an entremet for the first course, pikes cooked in three manners, that is fried in the middle, the third towards the head boiled and toward the tail roasted and so that the said fish are called endored pilgrim pike they should have a good lamprey roasted on top which will be the staff of the aforesaid pilgrims - ' (*Du fait de cuisine*

from www.medievalcookery.com/menus).

This is an indication of how lampreys and indeed other foods had allegorical as well as culinary qualities.

Stewing

Lampreys were cooked *à l'étouffée*, a technique where they were put into tightly-lidded vessels with a little liquid and stewed in an oven. They were served with lamprey or mud sauce. This was made from the blood of the fish mixed with vinegar, wine and some water and beaten fiercely over heat to prevent curdling. The result was almost black in colour (Crossley-Holland 1996, 156 and 159).

Galantine

This method used a cooked lamprey laid out on a layer of white bread with a galantine sauce made of spices, lemon juice and wine ladled over the top. Salted lampreys seem to have been treated in this manner as well (Furnivall 1868, 39-51; Crossley-Holland, 1996, 158). The following recipe, transcribed into modern English, comes from a late 14th century cookery book from Richard II's court and combines aspects of all three methods given above:

'Lampreys in galantine. Take lampreys and slay him with vinegar other with white wine and salt. Scald him in water. Slit a little at the newel and rest a little at the newel. Take out the guts at the end. Keep well the blood. Put the lamprey on a spit; roast him and keep well the grease. Grind raisins of currants; draw him up with vinegar, wine and crusts of bread. Do thereto powder of ginger, of galingale, flour of cinnamon, powder of cloves; and do thereto raisins of currants whole with the blood and grease. Seeth it and salt it; boil it not to standing. Take up the lamprey; do him in a charger and lay the juices onward and serve him forth.' (Heatt and Butler 1985, 127-8).

Pies

Whole stewed lampreys were put in or baked in pies. These were large pies, with raised and

decorative crusts, intended to form centrepieces at great feasts, not provide individual portions. The Berkeley Castle, Gloucestershire accounts have the recipe for such a pie made in the castle in February 1605 and sent by road to Lord Berkeley at his house in Coventry (Berkeley Castle Muniments, GBB 92 f13).

Accounts List for Lamprey Pie. For baking 4 lampreys for to send to Callowdowne uppon my lords letter the tenth day aforesaid (10 Feb 1605).

Item 4 lampreys 18d a pece:	6s
Item a peck and a half of whetton meal:	18d
Synomon half an owncce:	2d
Butter 3 pound:	12d
An owncce of Nutmegges:	4d
Item 3 ownces of pepper:	6d
Shuger one quarter:	5d
Onions one trace (string):	6d
Paper on penny worth:	2d
Clarret wine one quarter:	8d
Gynger one owncce:	1d
For a lof of bred:	1d
Item for Drink in the castell of Kymerley (clerk of kitchen) and his boy:	2d
Item for Drink in the town at night:	3d

On arrival the pie would have been opened in front of the lord and then the galantine sauce prepared and served as above. The ceremony of opening the pie was of significance, for Russell wrote in his 'Boke of Nurture' of c.1460:

'Thus must ye alight a lamprey out of his coffyn cote and so may your soverayne etc. merily be noote' (Furnivall 1868, 44).

Lampreys no longer form part of British cuisine but they remain a delicacy in south-west France, and on the Atlantic coast of Spain and Portugal.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LAMPREYS

There is something special about lampreys that goes beyond their price and the desire of kings and great lords to make them the centrepiece of their feasts. The answer seems to lie in poetic and allegorical references to these fish.

John Gay published a poem in 1745 entitled, 'TO A young Lady, with some LAMPREYS'. This includes the lines:

'Why then send Lampreys? fye for shame!
'Twill set a virgin's blood on flame.
This to fifteen a proper gift!
It might lend sixty five a lift.
I know your maiden Aunt will scold,
And think my present somewhat bold.
I see her lift her hands and eyes.
'What eat it, Niece? eat *Spanish* flies!
Lamprey's a most immodest diet:
You'll neither wake nor sleep in quiet.'
(Dearing 1974, 247-9)

John Webster in Act 1 of his play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, had an interchange between Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, and his twin the Duchess (Brown 1964):

Ferd 'And women like that part, like the lamprey,
Hath ne'er a bone in't.
Duch Fie Sir!
Ferd Nay,
I mean the tongue: variety of courtship –
What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale
Make a woman believe? Farewell lusty widow.

In 1599, Buttes wrote in his *Dyets Dry Dinner*, describing the use of the lamprey in cooking:

'It hath a most excellent fine relish: nourisheth passeing well; increaseth seed; a Lordly dish.'

Going back into the Middle Ages, the Aberdeen Bestiary explains that:

'Lampreys, it is said, are of the female sex only and conceive from intercourse with snakes; as a result fishermen catch it by calling it with a snake's hiss. It is difficult to kill a lamprey with a single blow from a cudgel; you need to beat it repeatedly with a stick. It is a fact that the life-spirit of the lamprey is in its tail, for when it is beaten on the head, it is difficult to kill, but when it

is beaten on the tail it dies at once'.
(www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/translat/75v).

The Aberdeen Bestiary uses the story of the male viper mating with a female lamprey in an allegorical or moral way for a long sermon on conjugal rights
(<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast267.htm>).

The conclusion must be that the lamprey was seen as an aphrodisiac. Its boneless nature, with its life in its tail, must be allegorical to the form and behaviour of the penis. By reserving these fish for kings and nobles, something of their potency is expressed. When Henry of Huntingdon referred to Henry I having died from eating forbidden fish, was he implying they were forbidden because of their sexual charge, rather than forbidden because of their metabolic stimulation. Huntingdon wrote in his earlier versions of the king's obituary, after hinting at his other vices and secrets:

'And debauchery, since he was at all times subject to the power of women, after the manner of King Solomon.' (Greenway 1996, 701).

Another chronicler, Orderic Vitalis judged that although Henry was lascivious he was, nevertheless, 'the greatest of kings' (Hollister 2004). Did Huntingdon consider that the king's untimely death was through eating the aphrodisiacal lamprey caused by his lascivious life? The king was known to have a bevy of mistresses, many of social distinction, by whom he fathered 22 to 24 illegitimate children, more than any other English king. Huntingdon may have got the anecdote about the lamprey from the monks of Bec, who were responsible for burying the king's heart and entrails (Green 2006, 6). Perhaps these religious men felt able to cast aspersions on the king after he had died. Was the reader of the chronicle expected to take this reference as a case of how a man lived was reflected in how he died?

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