



**The  
CRAYFISH TALE  
By TRAPPER ARNE**

**HOW OLD ARE CRAYFISH?**

Crayfish have been around for a long time. A very long time. Even millions of years, according to those who study fossils. Yes, there are fossilized crayfish found here and there on our globe that date back some 280 million years to the Permian and the Triassic eras. Some scientists even believe that the lobster evolved from the freshwater crayfish; not the other way around.

Rather recently, an expedition to the Antarctic region discovered that crayfish evolved at least 65 million years sooner than previously believed. Researchers found crayfish burrows in the Shackleton glacier and a crayfish fossil claw that turned out to be 285 million years old. Yet, these fossil remnants of crayfish look surprisingly much like the ones we search for and find today.

But we don't have to go as far as Antarctica to find fossilized crayfish. As close to me as the Painted Desert in Arizona, fossil freshwater crayfish have been discovered in the Triassic Chinle formation and in Canyonlands National Park in Utah. Many of the finds are in sediment layers as thick as 400 meters which remind us of how much land levels, lakes and rivers have changed over the eons.

Most of my examples of historic crayfish are much younger. Scandinavian garbage heaps, middens, the treasure trove of anthropologists, showed traces of stone age settlers eating crayfish already 10,000 years ago, soon after the last ice age retreated.

Further south, down in the Roman Empire, where gluttony reigned until their empire collapsed, epicures kept crayfish well-fed in large earthenware pots while preparing for the next crustacean gorge. The ancient Romans enjoyed already then what we have later come to appreciate over the past 150 years. The Roman poet Juvenal even mentioned crayfish in his poetry. Crayfish in Rome were also used as medicine and Romans with poor eyesight were advised to carry with them the eye of a live crayfish and cooked crays were used in fighting atrophy.

Both Romans and Greeks enjoyed their crayfish, and Aristotle, the great Greek thinker and writer, mentioned crayfish 300 years BC. In Greece, crayfish were considered having not only medical powers but magical such as well. A solution made from burned crayfish and alcohol was used as an antidote for snake and scorpion bites, high fevers and bites by dogs with rabies. To what extent these crayfish medicines were actually successful, is not revealed. Greek coins from this era have images of crayfish. And the Greek town of Astakos even gave its name to one of the main branches of crustaceans that we call crayfish. (*Astacos astacos* or *Pasifastacos leniusculus*)

Aristotle, apparently not only a great thinker but also something of a scientific biologist, started a long line of biologists who used the crayfish as a favored specimen for scientific studies and was followed later by such crayfish scientists as Thomas Huxley, Sigmund Freud(!) and Robert Yerkes. Aristotle mentions in his book *On the Gait of Animals*, the peculiar style of locomotion of decapod animals, using as an example the crayfish he observed in the streams and lakes surrounding his home in Greece.

Even Assyrians and Babylonians of biblical times were interested in crayfish and are reported to have enjoyed large crayfish parties. They even gave a constellation a crustaceous name – the crab or cancer.

Over the years, myths regarding crayfish have appeared. The one about crayfish and pigs is rather unique. According to Van Helmont, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Flemish chemist, physiologist, physician, mystic, alchemist and a careful observer of nature believed that crayfish eyes were a medicinal remedy for e.g. kidney or bladder stones. He also thought that pigs had a dangerous influence on crayfish. Enough so that crayfish had to be transported to market at night lest a pig would run under the carriage causing all the crayfish to die! He also believed that the mere smell of pigs will kill crayfish, but also that the smell of dead crayfish will drive moles away from their burrows. At least you can't blame him for lack of imagination.

From the Dark Ages also comes this report on what religious people dined on during lent. Crayfish! It seems that in their effort to find non-meat dishes, some turned to crayfish which were at that time considered 'fish' as were also otters and seals. In a report from Bavaria we read that the monks in one monastery devoured over 30,000 crayfish one year, and a German cook book of 1485 includes no less than five recipes for crayfish as suitable dishes during lent. (This is remarkable for this time of intense Roman Catholic fervor, since the Old Testament clearly forbids its readers to eat creatures 'with many' legs, such as crustaceans.) A book printed in Austria in 1499 shows a detailed picture of how crayfish are gathered by hand and with traps using torches, placing them in a huge barrell pulled by four horses, all supervised by a representative from a nearby castle.

Royalty in Scandinavia were attracted to crayfish and we read how Queen Christina of Denmark in 1504 orders crayfish from Lübeck in Germany. But maybe they were intended for medicinal use. But when King Eric XIV of Sweden in 1562 wrote to his castle manager to collect as many crayfish as he could find, it was no doubt as food for the King's guests and for his sister princess Anna's wedding.

While the upper social crust in Scandinavia enjoyed eating crayfish, the simple folks were still leery about it. Maybe they took the bible more seriously. Or maybe they believed the myth that crayfish eat decayed meat while the opposite actually is closer to the truth. Anyway, the habit of eating crayfish, having started at the top of the social ladder, soon descended to the ordinary folks overcoming their religious or mythical hang-ups.

Crayfish have obviously been around for a long time, and it is my sincere belief, and hope, that they are here to stay for a while longer.

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