

A History of the Ferret

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ALTHOUGH ferrets have in all probability been tamed for considerably more than two thousand years, their early history in the service of man, like that of most other domestic animals, is obscure. This is due partly to the scarcity of written records and partly to difficulties of identification. Vernacular names for the animal frequently vary from district to district, while ancient scientists may have added to the confusion by incorrect translations from one language to another.

As far as can be told, Aristotle, about 350 B.C., gave the earliest description of an animal which might have been a ferret, although Aristophanes had mentioned a similar animal in one of his comedies about one hundred years before in relation to its use at Boeotian feasts. The Greek word 'ictis,' as used by these two writers, is sometimes translated 'ferret' and sometimes 'polecat.' Among various authorities who imply that 'ictis' means 'ferret' are Ray (1693), Buffon (1812), and the editors of the *Oxford Junior Encyclopaedia* (1950). On the other hand Gesner (1551) maintains that 'ictis' is 'polecat,' which he says is very similar to the ferret, while Taylor (1809) translates 'ictis' as 'polecat' without admitting any alternative meaning. The following is Taylor's translation from the relevant paragraph from Aristotle:

With respect to the polecat, it is an animal of the size of a small dog of Malta; but in the thickness of its hair, its form, and the whiteness of its belly, and, also, the craftiness of its manners, it resembles the weasel; and becomes very mild and tame. This animal, however, is injurious to bee-hives, for it delights in honey. It, likewise, eats birds in the same manner as cats. But its genital parts are bony, as we have before observed; and the pudendum of the male appears to be a remedy against the strangury; for which purpose the scrapings of it are given.

It may be inferred from these references that the animal, whether ferret or polecat, was well known to the ancient Greeks, for it is unlikely that Aristophanes would have used an obscure animal in his ironical allusions to the neighbouring Boeotians. A significant aspect of Aristotle's description is the statement that the animal could become very mild and tame—an obvious reference to a close association with man.

While it is unfortunate that Aristotle did not record the purpose for which the animal was tamed it could hardly have been used for hunting

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rabbits since these animals were unknown to the ancient Greeks (Daremberg & Saglio, 1887). However, some later Greek and Roman writers describe rabbit-catching animals which, again, might have been ferrets. Thus Strabo (63 B.C.?-? 24 A.D.) and Pliny (23-79 A.D.) recorded that a plague of rabbits on the Balearic Islands was hunted with ferrets. It is worth giving translations from these two writers as they are often quoted, sometimes wrongly, in connection with the origin of the ferret.

Strabo, in a description of Spain (Book III.2, 6), writes:

But there are scarcely any destructive animals, except the burrowing hares, by some called "peelers"; for they damage both plants and seeds by eating the roots. This pest occurs throughout almost the whole of Iberia [Spain] and extends even as far as Masilia [Marseilles], and infests the islands as well. The inhabitants of the Gymnesian [Balearic] Islands, it is said, once sent an embassy to Rome to ask for a new place of abode, for they were being driven out by these animals, because they could not hold out against them on account of their great numbers. Now perhaps such a remedy is needed against so great a warfare (which is not always the case, but only when there is some destructive plague like that of snakes or field mice), but, against the moderate pest, several methods of hunting have been discovered; more than that, they make a point of breeding Libyan ferrets, which they muzzle and send into the holes. The ferrets with their claws drag outside all the rabbits they catch, or else force them to flee into the open, where men, stationed at the hole, catch them as they are driven out. (Jones 1803)

This early account of rabbiting appears to be the basis of the belief that ferrets originally came from North Africa.

Strabo's thumbnail sketch of rabbit hunting was repeated a few years later by Pliny (*Historia naturalis*, Lib. VIII.55) thus:

There is also a species of hare, in Spain, which is called the rabbit; it is extremely prolific, and produces famine in the Balearic Islands, by destroying the harvests. . . . It is a well known fact, that the inhabitants of the Balearic Islands begged of the late Emperor Augustus the aid of a number of soldiers, to prevent the too rapid increase of these animals. The ferret (*viverra*) is greatly esteemed for its skill in catching them. It is thrown into the burrows, with their numerous outlets, which the rabbits form, . . . and as it drives them out, they are taken above.

Although some translators of Strabo and Pliny use the word 'ferret,' there are several reasons why the animal referred to might not have been the creature we know today: (a) not all translators infer that the animals in question were ferrets—Wolters, 1707, used the word 'felis' signifying a cat or polecat; (b) many of the animals in the weasel group will attack and destroy rabbits; (c) others of them can be tamed—polecat (Buffon 1812, Harting 1891, and others)—weasel (Buffon, cited by Harting 1898, and English, cited by Millais 1905)—*Mustela siberica* (Swinhoe 1861); (d) the weasel group has an extensive geographical distribution (Miller

1912); (e) the evidence that the ancestral ferret existed in North Africa derives entirely from (i) Strabo, and (ii) hearsay evidence of the presence of wild polecats, e.g., in the Rif (Cabrera 1930), and in Libya (information supplied in reply to questions submitted to H.M. Consular Offices Tripoli by the present author). On the other hand, it is probably true that tamed ferrets are to be found in North Africa (Shaw 1738, and Cabrera 1930). But it may well be that the conditions which prevailed when ferrets were first domesticated no longer exist either in North Africa or elsewhere; and (f) Thomas (1901) omitted to mention ferrets among the fauna of the Balearic Islands.

On the other hand, the creatures mentioned by Strabo and Pliny were obviously employed in much the same way as modern ferreters use their animals, e.g., they were bred specially for the purpose, and muzzled before being sent into the rabbit burrows. Perhaps these details are important in establishing that the Balearic islanders did in fact hunt with ferrets, although it is possible that a similar description could apply to the use of any member of the weasel family tamed to catch rabbits. There is no doubt, however, that when the idea became known by the Middle Ages that ferrets (or some animal akin to them) could be used for rabbiting, the habit spread throughout Europe, Asia, and probably also the Far East.

The Romans are sometimes credited with the introduction of ferrets into Britain, but no reliable evidence has been found to support that belief. Whitaker (1773) asserts that "when the Romans introduced the rabbit into Italy and Britain they brought the same custom of attacking it with ferrets." If he based his statements on the references he gave (viz. Strabo p. 214* and Pliny Lib. VIII.55), then he is in error, for neither of these writers mentioned or implied that ferrets (or rabbits, for that matter) were introduced into Britain in Roman times. Actually references to their presence in Britain are later in time than are those concerning the Continent.

Isidore of Seville (560?–636 A.D.) gave an account of what was probably a ferret (as shown by descriptions of later writers). He named the animal *furo* because it was thievish (Latin *fur*, a thief) and it was employed in rabbit hunting. This short reference to the ferret is important because it shows that the classical Latin term 'viverra,' used by Pliny, had been replaced by a low Latin word which now provides the basis of subsequent identification of the ferret in written records. These are of particular interest to us in Anglo-Saxon and Old English documents.

In the eighth century Egbert, Archbishop of York, founded a library

* J. Wolters' edition of Strabo's *Geographia* (1707, p. 214) contains Book III.2, 6.

TABLE I
SOME LATIN, ANGLO-SAXON, AND OLD ENGLISH NAMES APPLIED TO FERRETS*

Century A.D.	Latin	Anglo-Saxon	Old English	Source	Authority
1st 6th-7th	viverra furo			Pliny, Lib. VIII Opera omnia	Bostock & Riley, 1855 Isidore of Seville
8th	furuncus	meard		Anglo-Sax. vocab.	Wright, 1884
10th	furunculus	mearp		Anglo-Sax. gloss.	Wright, 1884
10th	furunca and ferniculus	meard		Archb. Alfric's vocab.	Wright, 1884
11th	furo, furuus, furniculus, and fur	mearp		Anglo-Sax. MS.	Wright, 1884
11th	feruncus	meard		Anglo-Sax. vocab.	Wright, 1884
13th	furo, furectus, furunculus			Opera omnia	Albertus Magnus
14th	ferrettus			Pat. Roll, 1384, 318 m 6.	Turner, 1901
14th			fyret	Statute, 13 Rich. II	Harting, 1888
14th			fyrette	New English Dictionary	Murray, 1901
15th	furo		foret	Pictorial vocab.	Wright, 1884
15th	furniculus		fferet	Latin-Eng. vocab.	Wright, 1884
15th	ferutus		forytt	A nominale	Wright, 1884
16th	viverra, furo, furunculus, furuus, furectus, etc.		feret, ferette	Histor. animal.	Gesner, 1551
16th			frette	Book of hawking (Vele)	Hodgkin, 1907
16th			ferret	Book of hawking (Alde)	Hodgkin, 1907
17th	furo, viverra		ferret	De quadruped, etc.	Aldrovandus, 1645
17th	furo, viverra		ferret	Pinax rerum, etc.	Merret, 1667
17th	furo, viverra, furunculus		ferret	Synopsis meth., etc.	Ray, 1693

* For further examples of variations in spelling of 'ferret' see *New English Dictionary* (1901) and J. Hodgkin's *The Book of St. Albans*, 1481.

which contained works by Aristotle and Pliny, and among the studies cultivated at York were "the natures of man, cattle, birds and wild beasts: their various species and figures" (Turner 1823). It is reasonable to suppose therefore that the use of ferrets for rabbiting was known to early Anglo-Saxons. This appears to be borne out by an examination of Anglo-Saxon-Latin vocabularies where the low Latin word '*furo*' (or some other derivative of the root *fur*) occurs from the eighth century onwards. Yet before the eleventh century the equivalent Anglo-Saxon word is 'meard' or 'mearp,' whereas the word 'ferret' (or some recognisable variation) does not appear in English until the fourteenth century (Table I). It is apparent that Anglo-Saxon and Continental authorities identified the animal '*furo*' with the animal 'meard' up to the eleventh century, after which the animal '*furo*' was the 'ferret.' The word 'meard' vanishes at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period. It is of interest to note that a Frankish form of the Anglo-Saxon word 'meard' exists in modern English as 'marter' or 'marten' (*New English Dictionary*, 1901) and that translation of 'meard' from Anglo-Saxon documents into modern English is rendered, not as 'ferret,' but as 'marten,' e.g., Alfred's account of a voyage by Ohthere, translated by Turner (1823), and Ross (1940).

It may also be significant that references to and illustrations of the use of ferrets for rabbiting in Britain do not appear until the fourteenth century (Fig. 1). In 1384 Richard II granted a sporting license to one of

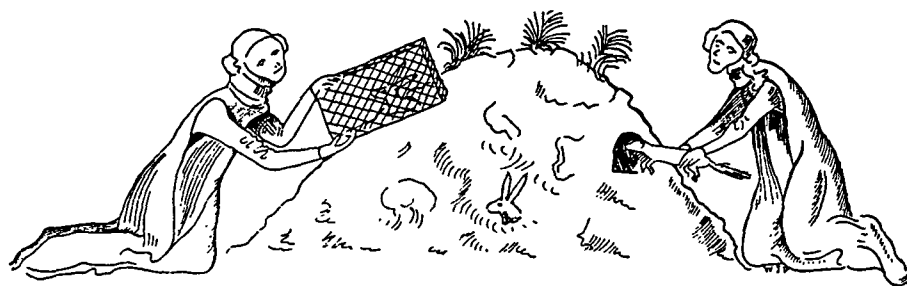


Fig. 1. Ferreting in the Middle Ages—about 1300 A.D. (From *The Oxford Junior Encyclopaedia*, 1950, Vol. IX).

his clerks allowing him to hunt rabbits with ferrets (Patent Roll 318, m. 6, of 16th Feb. 1384, quoted by Turner 1901). The same monarch issued a Statute about the year 1390 prohibiting the use of ferrets ('fyrets') on Sundays (Harting 1888).

Together these facts may indicate that ferrets as known today were unknown to the Anglo-Saxons and that the animals first made their ap-

pearance and were first used for rabbiting in England after the Norman Conquest when possibly the rabbit was brought contemporaneously to these islands. Further support is given to that idea by the etymology of the word 'cony' (the first reference in English being said to occur in the thirteenth century—a century *before* the appearance of 'ferret' [*New English Dictionary*, 1901]) and the suggestion that the English word 'ferret' was without doubt borrowed from French through the language of the chase (*Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Française*, Block, O. and Wartburg, W. V., Eds., 1932).

Whether or not there were ferrets in Britain before 1300, their presence on the Continent was fairly accurately described by Albertus Magnus, a German, who wrote in the thirteenth century:

The Gauls call it *furo* or *furunculus* or *furectus*. It is a small animal, larger than the weasel, between white and yellow in colour. It is both fierce and brave, and drives out rabbits from their holes into nets. It is hostile to all animals, either on account of anger as some say, or because of blood which it drinks, yet it does not eat flesh. It is indeed fertile, sometimes seven or even nine young may be born. It is said to copulate lying down. The female in heat and lacking the male will swell up and die. The gestation period is forty days. Up till thirty days the young cannot see and when they are aged seventy days they can hunt. . . .

Two other thirteenth century references to ferrets show how widely distributed the animals were in Europe and Asia. In the winter of 1221 Genghis Khan, conqueror of North China, India, Afghanistan, and much of the Middle East used ferrets in an imperial hunting circle at Termed. (It is almost certain that Termed is the present-day town of Termez located just north of Afghanistan.) It was apparently an ancient custom to organise hunts on a gigantic scale like military operations. From every direction soldiers drove entire animal populations from a huge tract of land into a small area where the animals were eventually slaughtered. Such a hunt might last several months, and as the circle grew smaller and smaller, the driven beasts retreated into holes and burrows "but spades, mattocks and ferrets brought them out" (Ranking 1826).

About this time, too, ferrets were being used in Germany. They were included in a list of animals used in hunting by Emperor Frederick II in 1245 (Schneider 1788, quoted by Harting 1898).

In the middle of the sixteenth century we find a description and illustration of the ferret by Gesner (1551) (Fig. 2). His account makes it clear that there was considerable confusion as to the origin, identification, and names applied to the various weasels then known. However, he quite clearly separates them into two groups. The first he calls *Mustela domestica* because the animals in this group were to be found in the neighbourhood

of dwelling houses. The other he calls *Mustela sylvestris*, and in it he includes an animal which was employed for catching rabbits. If Gesner's transcriptions from ancient authorities are to be trusted, there would appear to be no doubt that the animal which Strabo said was brought from Africa into Europe for rabbiting was indeed the ferret, and that the same animal was used for this purpose in Gesner's time. On the other hand, there was also a view that ferrets were to be found in the wild state in England where they were reported to be easily captured and tamed—presum-

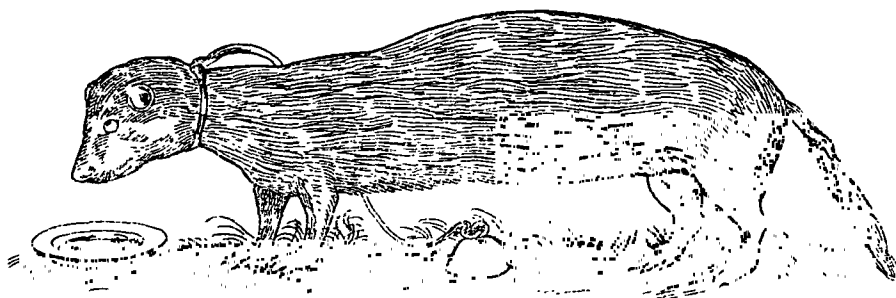


Fig. 2. The Ferret, after Gesner, 1551.

ably to catch rabbits: “. . . in Anglia enim hoc genus sylvestre reperiri audio: tamen facillime cicuratur, & domi capsis quibusdam ligneus alitur, . . .” Indeed the wild variety was itself hunted in order to limit the depredation of rabbits which it carried out on its own account. Gesner expresses surprise that wild ferrets could be found in England in view of the fact that Strabo had said that the animal had been originally introduced in a domesticated state from Africa. Presumably if Gesner had known that ferrets had been introduced into Britain at the time of the Roman conquest it is likely that he would have mentioned it, if only to explain the occurrence of the wild variety. But he makes no such reference. Perhaps he, too, was confusing ‘furo’ with the Anglo-Saxon ‘meard.’

Gesner's whole account is interesting. He gives many synonyms for the animal and enters into long textual arguments concerning their origins. He gives an extensive account of the folklore relating to ferrets and repeats Aristotle's remedy for strangury. He also states that the animal was used by French nobles for rabbiting, particularly in the province of Narbo, and that the first ferret he saw was at Nimes.

About a century later Aldrovandus (1645) repeated most of what Gesner had already written about the ferret without material addition.

Meanwhile the ferret had been mentioned in several English works: the Authorised Version of the Bible (1611); the household books of Lord

William Howard of Naworth Castle in Northumberland; and some books on hunting (e.g. Tuberville 1575). In the Bible the ferret is listed among the unclean animals (Lev. XI. 29 and 30):

These things shall be unclean to you among the creeping things that creepeth upon the earth; the weasel and the mouse, and the tortoise after its kind, and the ferret and the chameleon, and the lizard and the snail and the mole.

There would appear to be some ground for believing that the word 'ferret' is a misnomer, and that some other animal was meant, but not all the arguments in favour of this view are convincing; for example, it is said that the ferret does not creep, yet the inclusion of the weasel in the above quotation is not questioned (*vide* Tristram 1868; Wood 1876; and *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 1901).

Out of all the apparent uncertainty of ancient times and of the Middle Ages the identity of the ferret began to emerge clearly when Merret (1667) named it "Viverra, Ictis, Furo, a Ferret." Ray (1693) named the animal "*Mustela sylvestris*, VIVERRA dicta, The Ferret" allowing three synonyms—furo, furunculus, and ictis. Ray repeated the statement that the animal was thought to have come from Africa, and that it had been introduced subsequently into Britain giving, without detail, D. Willughby as the authority. It was not until Linnaeus (1758) named the ferret *Mustela furo** that its identity became established finally. Since then, the question has not been so much one of identity, but one of discussion as to whether the ferret is a distinct species, or merely a variety of a wild polecat. The general view today is that they are the same.

SUMMARY

The early history of the ferret is obscure. Its first description, as far as can be told, was made by Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. About 350 years later Strabo gave an account of perhaps the earliest use of the animal for rabbiting. Strabo refers to the taming of Libyan ferrets and this appears to have been interpreted to indicate that the ancestral ferret originated in North Africa. Apart from a belief that wild ferrets were to be found in England in the sixteenth century (Gesner 1551) and in North Africa in the twentieth century (Cabrera 1930), no other reference to the occurrence of ferrets in the wild state has been found.

There is no reliable evidence to show that ferrets were introduced into Britain at the time of the Roman invasion. Rather it would appear that the

* Miller (1912) stated (in error) that Linnaeus, named the ferret *Martes furo*. Pocock (1932) *Systema Naturae*, 1758, ed. 10, Vol. I, p. 46, made the same mistake.

animal was first introduced and first used for rabbit hunting in Britain between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, although it can be inferred that the ferret and its use were known to the Anglo-Saxons through the writings of Continental scientists, particularly Aristotle and Pliny.

There is little doubt about the identity of the ferret, as used for rabbiting, from about the thirteenth century, when it appears to have been widely used for this purpose in Europe and Asia. The earliest illustration found showing the use of ferrets against rabbits occurs in a fourteenth century MS. The animal itself was figured in the sixteenth century by Gesner whose account probably contains most of what was known of the animal at that time.

From the sixteenth century onwards there are increasing numbers of reference to ferrets in both scientific and non-scientific writings, and its taxonomic identification began when Ray (1693) named the animal '*Mustela sylvestris*.' Linnaeus (1758) finally established the identity of the ferret when he named it *Mustela furo*. Since then the question has not been so much one of identity but one of discussion as to whether the ferret is a distinct species or merely a variety of a wild polecat.

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