

# ANCIENT HERPETOLOGY PART 3, SUBSERVIENT SERPENTS

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

The previous article described how snake bites were avoided and cured, this article gives a survey on the pharmacological use of snakes for curing snake bites and a lot of other diseases.

## ■ SUBSERVIENT SERPENTS



*The man on the illustration prepares vipers as one of the ingredients of theriac (From: Van Dijk, pag. 198.)*

Snakes were always regarded as animals that should be destroyed whenever possible and whose bites caused a lot of inconvenience and were hard to cure. However, snakes were also useful in draughts, pills, powders and salves for curing all kinds of diseases, varying from an ear inflammation to varicose veins. Plinius gives a review of diseases and the therapies necessary to cure them.

In a systematic way he starts at the top of the human body and during his review he gets to the "lower" anatomic parts.

In Plinius' opinion hardness of hearing can be cured by rinsing the ear with a mixture of gall bladder and a mother's milk, while there were also people who added a snake's slough and vinegar to this mixture.

Deafness could be cured by using saliva of a horse or fresh horse manure that has been cremated. This should be mixed with rose oil, fresh butter, kidney fat of a cow, goose fat, urine of a goat or a bull or the fluid used by fullers (stale/liquid manure); this mixture should be heated until steam comes out of the bottle neck; then add a third part of vinegar, a bit of myrrh, dung mixed with the gall bladder of a calf that has not yet eaten grass and finally add the slough of a snake. Plinius does not say if this 'medicine' should be drunk or used externally. For the sake of the patient I hope it was for external use only.

Adders were used to make health tablets which were called *theriaci* by the Greek. The recipe for preparing the pills was as follows: take three finger lengths behind the head and tail and cut off these parts. Remove the entrails including the pale part that is connected to the spine. Add flower to the rest of the body with the vertebra removed and boil it in water with dill. Then the mixture should be dried in the shade. After this procedure one could make tablets out of it, which could be used for the making of numerous other medicines. Plinius says explicitly that these tablets should be made

from adders only.

Others however only use the fat of an adder, but as described above, boil it in some oil and add three drops of another kind of oil. This blend protects against all kind of monsters.

Cataracts and diminishing sight were cured by a medicine that could be obtained in the following way: burn a living adder in new pottery, add fennel juice until one cyathus (which is about half a deciliter) and add a corn of incense. This medicine is called *echeon*. As usual, Plinius does not say how to use it.

Staying with sight: very beneficial was an eye salve that was obtained by letting an adder rot in a glass jar. The maggots that were bred in this way should, after adding saffron, be crushed. If this was too grubby, the alternative was to lick an adder that had been salted in a stone bottle.

The salting of adders tempted Plinius to a digression. Some people use adders as food. As soon as an adder is killed, one should put salt into the mouth and this salt should melt. Then cut the snake in pieces that should measure one finger length each and remove the entrails. The rest should be boiled in water. Add oil, dill and salt and eat it pure or mixed with bread, so that one can eat more of it. Have a nice meal!

Salve of asses and adders head is an excellent remedy against eye diseases. Fat of an adder has the same effect. Plinius is very reluctant where the snakes gall bladder is concerned. The gall bladder of other animals is often used in medicines, but according to Plinius the gall bladder of the snake is the same as the venom. Therefore it should not be used, except if one did not have the curing of people in mind. In Rome, the city where Plinius lived, this way of dealing with enemies was not unusual.

A crack of the eye could be excellently treated with a salve made of snake fat mixed with rust of bronze. One's sight was improved by rubbing adder skin or a

snake's slough from the spring.

In contradiction to his remark on snake gall bladders, Plinius advises explicitly to use the gall bladder of a Boa to cure white ulcers, cataracts or bad eyes. The Boa's fat gives sharp eyes. Wearing a Boa's head protects against inflammation of the eyes for one year. And bleeding of the eyes could be prevented by wearing the right eye of a serpent as an amulet, provided that the snake was released after the eye has been removed. By the way: Aristotle, who is quoted often by Plinius, tells that snakes just like young swallows can regenerate lost eyes. This is the so called Wolffian Regeneration, which means that after the eye lens has been removed, a new lens will be regenerated. In salamanders this could take place up to twenty times (Aristotle, page 141, note).

The Magi advise the use among others of the vertebra of a draco or *Enhydris*, at which the latter should be a white female. It is also enough to eat the heart of a snake. The heart can also be worn like an amulet. Snake teeth had the same effect.

Ashes of a cobra mixed with kidney fat of a bull just as ashes of snakes in oil or wax could be used for gland diseases. Gland diseases could also be cured by eating the middle part of a snake, after both extreme ends were removed. One could also benefit by drinking the ashes of this middle part, that had to be burned in new pottery. This medicine was even more effective if the snake was killed on a road between two cart-ruts. This draught had to be taken three times a day for one week. Easier perhaps was a therapy in which the patient wound around his body a linen thread with which an adder was hung by its neck to death.

The one who got dysentery from any of these therapies, had no need to panic. Even for his problem there was a medicine: use a tin barrel to boil the slough of a snake in rose oil. Problems with the bladder could be washed away by drinking a draught of the liver of

a water snake or the ashes of a scorpion. The ashes could also be mixed with bread.

Problems in the anal region could be cured with the slough of a snake or with vinegar. But how to use it? As a salve? In an oral way? Like a suppository? Plinius does not give the answer; to his opinion he has been intimate enough. He only remarks that fat of a boa is also very appropriate. These same medicines are helpful for diseases of the sexual organs.

Furthermore downwards people can have varicose veins. Well, these problems and those of the veins in general, just like gout, could be cured by burning an adder in new pottery and adding salt. Plinius advises to do this often, but he neglects to tell how to do it exactly. On the other hand he says explicitly that in case of foot gout the foot should be rubbed with adder fat. Gout was easy to relieve with the help of a snake's slough.

At the end Plinius makes some useful remarks in general. According to the Magi, to get delirious people back to their senses and help those who are haunted by gots and dwarves find their peace, if tongue, eyes, gall bladder and entrails of a python are boiled in wine and oil. This draught has to cool down during the night in the open air and should be used as a salve in the morning and at night. Against the shivering of fever a certain Nicander recommends to use a dead snake, especially the so called *amphisbaena*, for which again the use of the skin was enough.

The Magi had discovered that epilepsy could be relieved or cured by wearing the tail of a Python. The tail should be tied with the tendon of a deer into the fur of a gazelle. An alternative to get rid of epilepsy was eating the slough.

According to Plinius 'regular' medicine were worthless against third degree fever. He recommends magic therapies. Two of these have a herpetological input: cut off the head of an adder and wind it in a piece of linen. The

alternative: take the heart of a living adder. According to the Magi the heart had to be removed by the left hand. When they had third degree fever, the Parths used the skin of a cobra and ate it with a certain quantity of pepper.

In the days of Plinius they did not have shampoo like Head & Shoulders to get rid of dandruff. The recommended shampoo in those days was made of dried and then burned head of an adder in vinegar. This draught was used like shampoo. For another type of hair they had another kind of shampoo: add a slough in water, earth pitch and kidney fat of a lamb and use all this after washing.

Burns were treated with adder fat, pain in tendons with a dead *amphisbaena* that had to be worn as an amulet. For cramps a slough that was attached as an amulet to a piece of bull leather was considered as helpful.

Against ulcers sun dried fat of a python was an adequate medicine. Adder salt, on the preparation of which Plinius wrote before, improves the treatment of ulcers if used during meals. Experiments of doctor Antonius showed that after a failed treatment of ulcers a quick recovery was possible if adders were added to the patient's food. Skin problems and scars could be treated well by sloughs boiled in wine.

If arrows, weapons and so on had penetrated into the body, the wounds could be treated with the bones of a snake in the coagulant of a hare.

Plinius gives an full account of typical female diseases. Superstition taught that a pregnant woman would get a miscarriage if she stepped over an adder. The same would happen if she passed an *amphisbaena*, provided that the snake was dead. However, if one had a living species somewhere on the body, one could pass a dead one without any problems (this passage in the manuscript is hard to understand). A dead and prepared species makes giving birth easier. Smoking a pipe with dried snake made the menstruation easier to bear.

A slough worn as an amulet around the loins made the delivery easier. This slough however should be removed immediately after delivery. Such a slough was sometimes also consumed with wine and incense. Miscarriage was the consequence if consumed in another way. For that matter, a stick with which a frog had been pushed off a snake was a great help for women in labour.

Just like in our days, babies could cause problems. The adder brains tied with a piece of the snake's skin, stimulated, according to the theories of those days, teeth coming through. Using the longest teeth of a snake got the same effect. From the boa, it was told that this animal wore a small stone inside its head. If this snake was in life danger, it would spit out this stone. Now, to stimulate teeth coming through, one should unexpectedly cut off the snake's head and remove the stone out of its head. This stone should be used as an amulet. For the same purpose, it was also possible to wear the boa's brains or the small stone or bone that was found on the back of a snail. Undoubtedly, boa's preferred the last.

The gall bladder of turtles enriched with a snake's slough and vinegar was an appropriate medicine against ear inflammations. Stings of scorpions were eliminated by flesh of river snails. Raw or boiled. The Magi recommended to burn sea-urchins with adder skins and frogs and to strew the ashes into draught. Drinking this mixture would improve one's sight.

Also domestic animals could be cured by herpetological medicines. For the eyes of draught-animals one should use the spring slough of a cobra and mingle it with the fat of the same animal in order to get a salve. This salve would improve the sight of draught-animals. And to keep an ox healthy throughout the year, it was helpful to make a mixture of snake skin, salt, corn and wild thyme. Together with white wine this mixture should be thrown down the throat of the ox at the

moment that the grapes are ripening.

*Translation from Dutch by Jan-Cor Jacobs.*

*English corrections by Mark Wootten.*