

AELIANUS

■ Historians say that India is rich in drugs and remarkably prolific of medicinal plants, of which some save life and rescue from danger men who have been brought to death's door through the bites of noxious creatures (and there are many such in India); while other drugs are swift to kill and destroy; and to this class might be assigned the drug which comes from the Purple Snake. Now this snake appears to be a span long; its colour is like the deepest purple, but its head they describe as white and not purple like the rest, and not just white, but whiter even than snow or milk. But this snake has no fangs and is found in the hottest regions of India, and though it is quite unable to bite - hence you might pronounce it to be tame and gentle - yet if it vomits upon anyone (so I am told), be it man or animal, the entire limb inevitably putrefies. Therefore when caught men hang it up by the tail, and naturally it has its head hanging down, looking at the ground. And below the creature's mouth they place a bronze vessel, into which there ooze drops from its mouth; and the liquid sets and congeals, and if you saw it you would say that it was gum from an almond-tree. So when the snake is dead they remove the vessel and substitute another, also of bronze; and again from the dead body there flows a liquid serum which looks like water. This they leave for three days, and it too sets; but there will be a difference in colour between the two, for the latter is a deep black and the former the colour of amber. Now if you give a man a piece of this no bigger than a sesame seed, dropping it into his wine or his food, first he will be seized with convulsions of the utmost violence; next, his eyes squint and his brain dissolves and drips through his nostrils, and he dies most pitifully yet very quickly. And if he takes a smaller dose of the poison, there is no escape for him hereafter, for in time he dies. If however you administer some of the black matter which has flowed from the snake

when dead, again a piece the size of a sesame seed, the man's body begins to suppurate, a wasting sickness overtakes him, and within a year he is carried off by consumption. But there are many whose lives have been prolonged for as much as two years, while little by little they died.

■ The land of Ethiopia (the place where the gods bathe, celebrated by Homer under the name of Ocean, is an excellent and desirable neighbour), this land, I say, is the mother of the very largest Serpents. For, you must know, they attain to a length of one hundred and eighty feet, and they are not called by the name of any species, but people say that they kill elephants, and these Serpents rival the longest-lived animals. Thus far the accounts from Ethiopia. But according to accounts from Phrygia there are Serpents in Phrygia too, and these grow to a length of sixty feet, and every day in midsummer some time after noon they creep out of their lairs. And on the banks of the river Rhyndacus while supporting part of their coils on the ground, they raise all the rest of their body and, steadily and silently extending their neck, open their mouth and attract birds by their breath, as it were by a spell. And the birds descend, feathers and all, into their stomach, drawn in by the Serpents' breathing. And these singular practices they continue until sundown; next, the Serpents hide and lie in wait for the flocks, and as they return to the sheepfolds from the pasture they fall upon them, and after a terrible slaughter they have frequently killed the herdsmen as well, thus obtaining a generous and abundant feast.

(Aelian, On the characteristics of animals. With an english translation by A.F. Scholfield. In three volumes. Loeb Classical Library. London, 1971, II,21, IV,36.)

