

ANCIENT HERPETOLOGY 2

Ancient prophylaxis

Marcel van der Voort
Heerbaan 14, 5721 LS Asten,
The Netherlands

■ INTRODUCTION

In a previous article (*Litteratura Serpentina* 15: 142-145) I have written about ancient societies, whose members had a remarkable association with venomous animals, especially with snakes. In the following contribution I want to inform you about their rituals and ways to avoid confrontations with snakes. In spite of all the precautions, an encounter with snakes could not be avoided, they appeared to have a large number of means to control any irksome effects.

■ ANCIENT PROPHYLAXIS

These more or less strongly appreciated snake charmers knew various kinds of spells. Using some you could gather snakes, in fact, the power of the spell was sometimes so strong that the snakes even 'listened' during their sleep and had to obey. Other spells immediately destroyed the snakes while often only the touch of a charmer was efficient. The snake, however, was able to break the spell. Maerlant tells us in detail about a snake putting her tail in one ear and lying with the other on the ground in order to prevent hearing the spells (Maerlant, VI, 107-114; Van der Voort, 1993b, p34).

A simple repellent against snakes was carried by everybody: the saliva of a sober human was a sovereign means. In those days, snakes absolutely could not stand that. According to a certain Ofilius or Opilius, snakes would burst wide open when one spitted in their open mouth. However, for this a direct confrontation with the serpent in question is necessary. When you even wanted to avoid this and stay at a respectable distance of the venomous snake, you could burn the hairs of a woman. The smell of that was anything but pleasant for snakes and so they cleared out. The same goes for burning of hyena-grease or for throwing the gall of a chameleon in the fire.

In nature one often finds oppositions of animals that especially seem to dislike each other: in India for example, this goes for the elephant and the python, or in our neighbourhood the weasel and the basiliscus (Van der Voort 1993, p42-55); also the deer and the snake are on bad terms. Deer fight snakes whenever they encounter them: they drag them away after they have chased them out of their holes with their breath, and eat them. Also when dead deer are still very effective against snakes: the smoke coming from burning deer horns drives snakes away. A passage in Lucanus, cited in the previous article already mentions this. Burn the upper parts of the neck of a deer and snakes in the vicinity come towards it. From the skin of this animal you can make a bed on which you can sleep without



having to fear for snakes. Moreover, you could also take deer-rennet mixed with vinegar, something that is a strong prophylactic, and in my opinion, keeps a lot more at a distance than just snakes.

Furthermore, snakes stay away from someone carrying the tooth of a deer, which, to enlarge its activity, has been rubbed with the marrow or the kidney-grease of a deer. A final, rather complicated servitude of deer to men is obtained in the following way: mix deer blood with *dracontio*, *cunilago* and *anchusa* and burn all of this on a fire, made out of wood of *Pistacia lentiscus*, the mastic-tree (provider of costly resins) and all snakes in the vicinity will gather. If you apply the same trick, but use *pyrethrum* instead of blood, the serpents will be dispersed.

What goes for deer, also goes for the wild bear. His brains and blood are also an efficacious protection against snakes, as is preserved liver with wine, and bear-grease with honey and resin. In the same way you can

A snake covering its ears with its tail to avoid hearing the sorcerers charms.



use the liver of a bear and the fibres of its gall-bladder (a dose with a value of four denarii), or use the brains soaked in wine.

According to sayings, snakes are kept away if you burn the horn or the hair of a goat. The ashes of the horn, consumed with wine or administered on a wound, are assumed to be effective against snake bites. Furthermore, a hare could also be used for prophylaxis. When you rub yourself with the rennet of this animal, you are protected against bites and stings. And it is generally hold that venomous animals flee when you burn the lung of a donkey.

All snakes were mortally afraid of the basiliscus. However, this was such a dangerous animal that the presence of snakes was preferred above that of a basiliscus. Nevertheless, when something of a basiliscus (e.g. its ashes) was kept in a house, you had absolutely nothing to fear from snakes: even a spider would not dare to weave a web in your house (Van der Voort, 1993, p 42-55).

Plinius, with the necessary reservation, gives a prophylactic expedient of the Marsi: grease of pythons is loathed by venomous animals. The burning of it also drives away the *Ichneumon* (mongoose). In those days it was also generally known that the application of the intestines of a snake itself were an efficient remedy against snake bites. Anyone who had eaten a cooked snake's liver would never be bitten by a snake again. An excellent expedient to be protected from snakes comes from vultures. The smoke of their burnt feathers drives the snakes away. When you carry the heart of a vulture with you, you will not only be protected against the attacks of snakes, but also against those of - and the sequence is characteristic - wild animals, bandits and malicious rulers. Plinius adds to this that black vultures are less powerful than others.

■ ANCIENT THERAPIES

But what to do, when there were no Marsi-, Psylli- or Ophiogenes-members in the neighbourhood and when things were at their blackest? Then they had a lot of possibilities for their own medication. In some cases it remains indistinct how the therapy exactly took place: should the described medicine be taken or was an external application meant? In Plinius examples are found in which it is explicitly noted that a certain expedient had to be taken. Expedients mentioned are a lot more unsavoury than those who are mentioned below, however, it mostly remained obscure how it had to be done. In those cases we have to rely on our twentieth century imagination.

To start with, people who were bitten by a snake or a dog in the past had to stay away from the person who was bitten, because they could cause a deterioration of the bite. Subsequently, you could take some ear-wax, preferably of the patient himself, and apply this on the wound.

The earlier mentioned coitus was also an efficacious expedient, but just male sperm could also suffice - in any case for scorpion stings. Plinius adds to this that he does not believe in this remedy.

Snake bites were also very well controlled with urine. In general, urine, especially that of the bitten person, mixed with ashes had to be applied on the wound (or, according to Marcus Varo, had to be taken, what he discovered when he was 38 years old) and healing would follow. Against the saliva of the ptyas - the spitting cobra - the urine of children who had not yet reached puberty, was very effective.

A certain amount of testicles of a hippopotamus, taken with water, was also an efficacious expedient against a snakebite. You could also take raw milk. This expedient could even neutralize the extremely strong venom

of the salamander. When you accidentally did not have the disposal of raw goat milk, you could resort to goat urine with sea-onion vinegar. What would also help sometimes, was goat-cheese with marjoram and kidney-grease of the goat, mixed with wax.

Goat-manure, boiled in vinegar, has proven its value in the healing of snakebites, just like the ashes of fresh manure boiled in wine. As a general therapeutic indication, Plinius mentions also that people who recover very slowly after a snake bite, in general, heal faster in a goat shed.

The treatment of applying an open cut stomach of a slaughtered goat on the wound as a plaster was very effective. Doing so, it was not necessary to remove the heap inside first. Others 'disinfect' the wound with the fresh meat of a young goat of which the hairs were not removed. The same vapour also drove the snakes in the vicinity away. Goat-manure, boiled in vinegar was, according to Plinius, an excellent expedient against the stings of scorpions and because these stings and snake bites are often discussed together, one can assume that this also works for just snake bites. Because of this, the following therapy accounts also against a scorpion sting: whisper in the ear of a donkey that you have been stung or bitten and the disaster will immediately go to the donkey.

When they were out of goats but there were still sheep available, you could also survive an snake bite: fresh sheep manure, boiled in wine and applied to the wound was a good alternative. This also goes for mice and rats that had to be applied to the wound after they had been cut in two. The head of an adder held on the wound was immediately beneficial, even when the therapeutic adder was not the same animal that had caused the bite. Equally active is the snake itself, held on a stick in steam through which the harm it had caused

was controlled. You can also burn the adder and use the ashes. Some cleaved the heed exactly in the middle, right between the two ears so they could take out the pebble that was inside. Others just used the whole head.

In those days snakes were only venomous during the time of the month in which they were disturbed by the moon. It was beneficial when a living snake was pulverized in water and a bite of this animal was bathed with this preparation.

Plinius mentions the amphibic Hydrus the most venomous snake of all. The cooked liver of this animal is extremely beneficial to for the person who was bitten. The meat of chicken, torn loose and administered to a snake bite wins over the venom. This venom can also be fought with chicken brains taken with wine. The Parths (Iranian tribe) controlled snake bites by putting the brains of a hen on the wound. A small pigeon or swallow could also supply the meat while some burned the foot of an owl together with the herb plum-bago.

An expedient of bad blood and thisthels was recommended by the Magi as the best against snake bites but Plinius has warned us for them more then once. Beneficial are the ashes of burned chicken manure or the liver of a python. But also a lizard or a mouse that is torn open, or the scorpion that caused the sting were all relished therapies. The scorpion, if desired, could be grilled and put in the food or could be drunk with wine. Plinius names as a speciality of scorpions that they never sting in the palm of the hand or in hairy parts of the body. Their sting could be well controlled by pushing a pebble onto the wound with the side with which it had laid on the ground. Also pulverized earthworms were used. Another therapeutic expedient against snake bites was salt, mixed with oregano, honey and hyssop.

However, anyone bitten by a *Cerastes* was better off using salt mixed with oregano and cedar resin or honey. Some pages later Plinius mentions another expedient against the bite of a *Cerastes*. This time beaver-rank, mixed with wine is to be an excellent application. Soda mixed with wagon grease, vinegar and resin also makes an expedient against snake bites.

An excellent expedient was the blood of a tortoise because this not only controlled the venom of snakes but also that of spiders and frogs and similar creatures. The Magi - so be careful! - used the urine of the turtle as a healing expedient against the bite of a cobra. Not one of the worst therapies was eating salted fish although Plinius recommends to drink pure wine with it so as to vomit all the food. Here Plinius also tells us something about the quality of Roman wines! From a certain Thrasyllus Plinius got the idea that nothing could match crabs as an antidote. Stings of scorpion are fought off by the meat of river snails, raw or cooked. Amusing in this respect is the remark that for snakes it is a torture to live in the period that the Sun is in the constellation of Cancer.

Bibliography after the last episode.

Translation from Dutch by Fons Sleypen.