

AELIANUS

The Roman scientist Aelianus lived in the second century AD (160-230). He is the author of a book that, had it been published in English, probably would have been titled "On the peculiarities of animals". The work consists of seventeen so-called books in which randomly all kinds of facts on many different animals are listed. Aelianus collected these facts from Greek scientists of which some, like the famous Aristoteles, had recorded personal observations of animals in the wild. Observation to which, over time, many strange notes were added. Also on snakes Aelianus had much to say. In the coming issues of *Litteratura Serpentina* you may now and again find a small piece of information on snakes, taken from Aelianus. Particularly so whenever we need a small piece of text to fill a page. For those who are interested in the works of Aelianus: all text is taken from 'Aelian, On the characteristics of animals', with an English translation by A.F. Scholfield. In three volumes. Loeb Classical Library. London. 1971 (I), 1969 (II), 1972 (III).

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 pitiably 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.

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

