

A Piece of the Snake in Pliny's Pharmacological Texts:
a reinterpretation of the snake in Roman medicine

This paper addresses the ambiguity and the human-animal relationship through a close textual analysis of the snake in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, Books 28-30. The snake has been classified as an ambiguous creature due to the plethora of roles it had in antiquity. The aim is to reconcile this ambiguity through the snake's pharmacological relationship with humans rather than its religious and mythological properties, which are foregrounded in the study of Asclepius and of health in antiquity in greater detail within the scholarship. This is a significant topic to examine because of the medical context and how this research speaks directly to the situation we are living in with the pandemic, COVID-19. As we are dealing with this pandemic, there has been a substantial amount of research regarding the virus' spread and contamination. As scientists and researchers are nearing a viable vaccine and are now in the trial phases, they would need to consider the role of animals in pharmacology during this process. The human-animal relationship has been continuous over time and has acted as a positive and negative entity in the environment and our daily lives, which is why it is valuable for researchers to understand the importance and relativity of including animals in pharmaceuticals. The impact and development of pharmacology has offered further insight into the medicaments and treatments used against ailments and the ingredients necessary for these concoctions.

The aim of this paper is to divulge into the ambiguous role of the snake, and its establishment as a healing agent in the ancient world. By recontextualizing the snake within a wider body of Asclepian scholarship and its purpose as a medical object, its symbolic role can be altered to that of a piece of medicine. The snake is a biomedical object and was used by members of Roman society that would create medicinal treatments with its by-products. To make this

argument clear, this study is broken down into two sections, both interconnecting with the snake's affiliation in ancient health. The first half addresses why the snake has a positive and negative relationship within health, and why it is difficult to place the snake within one distinctive sector. This is evident in Pliny's discussion on ailments caused by the snake and the afflictions that are remedied by snake products. This is supplemented with evidence from Celsus, Galen and Nicander who all acknowledged the snake as both a threat and benefit towards health. With the snake's trait of rejuvenation, by means of shedding its skin, it was believed that the snake possessed healing 'powers', however this study removes this perception by arguing that by deconstructing this image of the snake in health, through its religious and mythological representations, it was the inclusion of its by-products that aided in healing process. The latter half of this study further examines the snake as a piece of medicine by reconsidering the types of snakes utilized in medicaments and how the type had a relationship with the illness it alleviated. Pliny lists several types of snakes in Books 28-30, all the while some of these snakes are ambiguously mentioned; he deems them *anguis* or *serpens*, and other areas of the text only specify a general type; *aspis*, *vipera* or *boae*. Through analyzing these instances along with other ancient works and scholarship based on animals in antiquity, this research reveals the specific typologies of these snakes, their origins and why a specific type was necessary in medical recipes. In addition, by considering the user and the patient's role in medical treatments that include the snake, this reinterpretation of Pliny's text can thereby remove the vagueness that complicates his medical thoughts.

The study of pharmacology is becoming more mainstream in the Classical world as it is connected with the study of health and human-animal relationships, both past and present. The role animals played in antiquity was immense and was fundamental in daily life. In-depth studies

have allowed scholars to understand this interconnectedness and the purpose animals had in antiquity. However, the snake was seen as an anomaly, an abomination, and an ambiguous creature, but by exploring ancient texts and modern scholarship, it becomes clear that its role in health was not just symbolic but was biomedical, which was highly valued in the human-animal relationship within ancient health. Concluding that, as a healing agent, the snake was not just a symbol but a piece of medicine.