Venomous creatures and their poisons loom large in the medieval medical European imagination. Physicians and surgeons, drawing on and adapting ancient and Arabic medical lore, wrote copiously on venomous animals and how to treat their bites. Nearly all of the sources focus on animal bites, and few venomous animals with poisonous skin or hairs are mentioned. Rabid dogs were considered to be venomous animals, as it was believed that their saliva was poisonous.

Texts from classical antiquity whose views on venomous beasts were influential in the Middle Ages included Pliny the Elder’s *Natural history*, Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, Dioscorides’ *De materia medica* and assorted treatises by Galen. In Pseudo-Apuleius’ widely circulated fifth-century herbal, *Haermon*, out of 131 herbs, twenty-seven of them are recommended for treating venomous bites, mostly from snakes, but also rabid dogs, spiders and scorpions. The two snakes identified by name are the viper (*Vipera berus*) and the asp. Medical treatsises translated from Arabic in between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries AD would have been highly influential, in particular those by Haly Abbas, Rhasis, Averroes, Serapion, Avenzoar and Maimonides. Avicenna’s primacy in the medieval medical curriculum would ensure that his comments on venomous beasts would have been highly significant for medieval physicians and surgeons. A huge variety of venomous beasts are presented in Avicenna’s *Canon of medicine*, from vipers to ‘the snake that makes blood come out of all pores’ or ‘the animal with forty-four feet’.

When medieval scholars adopted and adapted the Graeco-Arabic discourse on poisons, it would often reflect the different environmental reality, as western Europe had distinctly fewer venomous snakes, spiders, scorpions and other beasts. Many authors would limit the animals covered to those that abound in their broad geographical area. However, if an encyclopaedic coverage was desired, then a huge multitude of both local and foreign venomous fauna could be present. Albertus Magnus, the great thirteenth-century Dominican author, lists sixty-one serpents in his huge treatise *On animals*, although he notes that the snakes of Nubia and India are larger and with more deadly

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**Bites and stings: A medieval perspective**

A basilisk with other snakes, *Bestiary, England, thirteenth century. British Library Harley Ms 4751 f. 59r*

A man with a serpent and a scorpion, *Medical and herbal compendia, including Pseudo-Apuleius’s herbal, late twelfth century. British Library Sloane MS 1973 f. 13r*

A man is bitten on the ankle by a large snake, *Pharmacopeia, including Pseudo-Apuleius and Sextus Placitus, late twelfth century. British Library Harley Ms 5294 f. 42r*
venom than those found in colder climes (and the lack of snakes in Ireland is due to the cold climate). Similarly Sante Arduino of Pisa, in his On poisons, composed in the 1420s, covers a huge variety of venomous animals, from horned serpents to ‘the little poisonous beast born in beans’. 6

Bernard of Gordon, a professor of medicine in Montpellier in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, would note that the most deadly snakes such as the tyrus, dragon, asp, or basilisk, did not live in his region and thus one would only need to concern oneself with small scorpions and serpents that were not highly venomous and would only strike if attacked. 7

Similarly, the French surgeon Henri de Mondeville in his early fourteenth-century treatise, Consilium ad morsum aspidis surdi (an account of medical practice and 1340s, is the first comprehensive account of ‘scaly’ solutions. Foligno blamed this situation on the patient sleeping and failing to take the medicines and ordered the forcible administration of all three medicines. When Foligno visited his patient in the late morning, he found him much improved and ordered a diet of chicken soup and fat (with emerald powder and citrus seeds sprinkled on top for good measuring of the evening’s theriac) and balm applied again on the bite, and arrangements made so that the patient did not sleep soundly.

In the morning of the fourth day, Foligno visited his patient, who mentioned pain in his stomach and kidneys, although his urine was much improved (better colour and without sediment). Foligno prescribed a chyzer of either milk or a decoction of mallows, followed by the patient being washed with a decoction of round aristolgo leaf, to make him sweat, along with drinking some more Haly Abbas theriac. By the fifth day, the patient did not appear to have any serious symptoms and a diet of good food and wine was prescribed, without the need to ingest any more theriac. Foligno finished his account by noting that many people bitten by ‘deaf asps’ do not open their eyelids for months. The treatment of animal bites involved a wide variety of cures. Unguents, plasters, syrups, simple medicines, assorted theriacs and other compound medicines, purgatives, and special diets were all prescribed, along with the use of ligatures, scarification, opening of wounds, use of cautis, cupping, use of catheries, sucking the wound, applying pigeons or roosters to the bite site, leeches, evacuants such as clysters, special diets and, usually as a final resort, in order to hasten the process, the animal would have to be identified. Animal bites of all kinds were believed to contain venom than those found in colder climes (and the lack of snakes in Ireland is due to the cold climate). Similarly Sante Arduino of Pisa, in his On poisons, composed in the 1420s, covers a huge variety of venomous animals, from horned serpents to ‘the little poisonous beast born in beans’. 6
The 'theriac of Haly Abbas (‘Ali ibn al-‘ Abbas al-Majusi)’ consisted of half a dram each of castor oil, cassia wood, and round

similarly, in Sextus Placitus' Medicina ex animalibus, a fourth-century text on medical uses of animals that often travels with Pseudo-Apuleius' herbal, a third of all the animal entries (eleven out of thirty-two animals) contain remedies against animal bites. E Howald and HE Sigerist, ‘Deer asps’ were considered to be very venomous
types of asps. The name is a reference from Psalm 58:5–6: ‘they are like the deaf adder that stops her ear; which will not

Theriac and mithridatium: A study in therapeutics (wild or poisonous beasts). theriakós such as a ‘walnut theriac’. The word comes from the Greek theriakós, ‘beast-herb’, from the noun therios, ‘beast’ (found in Europe) rather than theros, ‘field’ or ‘garden’.

Author going to meet two men who have been bitten by snakes.jpg

Venom: Fear, fascination and discovery, Medical History Museum

4 Avicenna (Abu ‘Ali al-Hasan ibn Abd Allah ibn Sina, tenth/ninth/eleventh century AD) covers the bites of animals in ninety-eight chapters in his Canon of medicine, book 4, f. 68. He divides them into ‘crawling things’ (covering a huge multitude of snakes, scorpions, beetles, ants, bees, wasps, spiders, lizards, frogs and assorted venomous marine animals) and ‘quadrupeds’ (covering everything from crocodiles to cats). See (Venetian edition, Hildesheim: G Ohms, 1964, reprint).


