REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS
IN MALTESE MEDICAL
FOLKLORE

"Fillet of a fenny snake, In the caldron boil and
bake; Eye of newt and toe of frog, Wool of bat and
tongue of dog, Adder’s fork and blindworm’s sting,
Lizard’s leg and howlet’s wing. For a charm of
powerful trouble, Like a hellbroth boil and bubble."

Macbeth Act IV Sc.1

Since time immemorial, chemical substances ex­
tracted from animals and plants have interested
man for a variety of purposes including medicine and
magic potions. The medicinal use of a plant or
animal was in bygone days indicated by its visible
characteristics, so that for example kidney-shaped
leaves would be used to treat kidney disorders.

Although experimenting unscientifically, early
men occasionally discovered a useful drug. The
example par excellence is the discovery of digitalis
from foxglove extracts in 1775 by Dr. William
Withering.

Like so many plants, the reptiles and amphibians
were also regarded as having magical powers of
healing. One famous medicine from China was
Ch’an Su composed of dried substances prepared
from the secretions of a toad’s parotid glands. Ch’an
Su was thought to be valuable in healing some dis­
orders of the heart and blood vessels. Recent chemi­
cals and pharmacological investigations on the parotid
and skin secretions of a number of amphibian species
has yielded an impressive list of chemical substances
among which the most important are adrenalin and
bufogin (bufogenin). The latter group of compounds
have been found to be pharmacologically related to
the digitalis group of drugs important in the treat­
ment of heart failure.

Man on the Maltese Islands until relatively recent
times set great value to natural chemical substances
for use in medicine, very often in association with
religious beliefs and folklore. In spite of the limit­
atations of species number, reptiles and amphibians
like elsewhere received due notice.

Malta was for a long time associated with a cure
for poisonous snake-bites. This belief stems from the
visit by the apostle Paul to Malta in 60 A.D. (Acts 28;
1 – 6). While warming himself by a fire, the apostle
was bitten by a venomous viper and contrary to the
expectations of the inhabitants escaped unharmed.
Folklore further extends the bible story with the
belief that the apostle banished all poisonous animals
from the Islands. The same folklore further attrib­
utes miraculous therapeutic virtues for the cure of
poisonous snake-bite to fossil shark teeth (tongue of
St. Paul); fossil fish vertebrae (serpent eyes);
powdered Malta rock; earth dug out from St. Paul’s
cave at Rabat, Malta; and the saliva of persons
born on the feast of the conversion of St. Paul.

Reptiles and amphibians also formed part of the
Maltese folklore pharmacopea in a limited way.
Amphibians on the Islands are represented by only
one species of frog, which like in many other parts
of the world found a use in local folklore medicine
being given in the form of soup to sick children.
Unlike the Ch’an Su preparation from China, there
has been no definite therapeutic value identified in
the Painted Frog. However, an antidiuretic substance
named enteramine has been isolated from the skin of
this frog species.

More specific use was made of fresh tortoise blood
in the treatment of jaundice and epilepsy. Male sufferers of jaundice were told to bleed a female tortoise in the leg and make the sign of the cross with its blood on the joints of the arms and the legs. Females were to use a male tortoise. Drinking tortoise blood was also believed to cure epilepsy particularly if taken immediately after a fit. The land tortoise is not a natural inhabitant of the Maltese Islands, but has accompanied man since prehistoric times. Carapace remains have been found in association with human remains in neolithic deposits at Ghar Dalam and elsewhere.

Another reptile species which until relatively recent times found a place in Maltese pharmacopeia was the oil extract from the Ocellated Skink. The skink was until recently purchased by local pharmacists who extracted its fat. The medicinal properties of the skink originated in North Africa and Persian lands, and consequently it is not surprising that in Malta, it has been attributed with healing properties. Its ashes in oil and the fat extract of the animal was attributed with anaesthetic properties. The fat was also supposed to turn sterile women prolific. The internal ingredients and an ointment based on its excreta was used for eye trouble and to smooth the complexion. In Malta, another recorded use was to restore hair to bald heads.

Reptiles have also been associated with the aetiology of medical conditions. It is generally accepted that tortoises may serve as Salmonella carriers occasionally causing outbreaks of typhoid and paratyphoid. Without any scientific backing, the two species of gecko on the Maltese Islands have been, and in some places still are, associated with skin diseases particularly leprosy. This belief may be based on the warty appearance of these animals' skin which would be comparable to lepromatous or psoriatic lesions. This belief was so ingrained that the naturalist G. Despott in 1915 remarked that he found it difficult to get children to collect gecko specimens for his studies.

The use of natural substances for medicinal purposes has in recent years died out through the introduction of chemical products produced by established firms, and through a better understanding of disease processes. The old folklore beliefs serve as a reminder of the way of life and way of thought of people in bygone days. Reptiles in Maltese medical folklore through the snake-bite cures show the strong veneration of saints and ingrained religious beliefs of the Maltese. These beliefs coupled with object-shape associations resulted in the use of St. Paul's tongue, and serpent eyes as cures for poisonous snake-bites. The object-shape association is further reflected by the gecko-leprosy belief.

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FURTHER READING

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