339 Snake (*Serpens*)

There are some praiseworthy properties of the snake.[[1]](#endnote-1) Therefore, Christ warned that his disciples should be “wise as serpents,” Matt. 10[:16].

Of which the first is the custody of its head for which it exposes its whole body. So, the saints expose their bodies for Christ the head of the Church, Philip. 3[:7]: “The things that were gain to me, the same I have counted loss for Christ.”

Second,[[2]](#endnote-2) prudence is the shedding of its skin and body which it does in his way according to Aristotle,[[3]](#endnote-3) Pliny,[[4]](#endnote-4) and Avicenna,[[5]](#endnote-5) and it is touched on in the *Glossa* upon that of Matt. 10[:16]:[[6]](#endnote-6) “Be wise.” When snakes feel themselves weighed down with sickness or sleep, they abstain for several days and thus their skin grows loose. After these things it tastes a certain bitter herb, then it vomits every harmful humor. After these things it bathes itself in water so that it may moisten the skin. Then going across through a narrow opening in rock it puts off its skin. It exposes itself to the sun, not before it recovers its skin and then it sees more clearly, finds itself more powerful, and eats more avidly than before. So, the saints have renewed themselves through penitence, Eph. 4[:22]: “To put off, according to former conversation, the old man, who is corrupted according to the desire of” the flesh.

However, this happens four ways. First the removal of food which happens through the detestation of sin. Second the vomit of harmful honor happens through spoken confession. Third the putting off the old habit by the desertion of the customary. Fourth turning to the sun of justice by a firm adhesion of the heart.

Third,[[7]](#endnote-7) prudence is the diffusion of the incantations because it blocks them with one ear on the ground and the other ear with its tail, lest it pay attention to the song of the enchanter. Just as the *Gloss* upon that of Psal. [57:5]:[[8]](#endnote-8) “Like the deaf asp that stops her ears.” With the tail, which is the last part in the animal, that is, with the memory of death, according to that of Eccli. 7[:40]: “Remember your last end, and you shall never sin.” And the other ear it blocked with the earth, that is, with the consideration of its own fragility, Gen. 3[[:19]: “Dust you are, and into dust you shall return.”

Fourth,[[9]](#endnote-9) wariness is an ambush of the feet, because it happens more to the heel than the head, that is, the end of the work. So, the saints conquered evil desires by the consideration of the end, that is, death, Rom. 6[:21]: “The end of them is death.” For imitating these things Christ said, [Matt. 10:16], “Be wise as serpents.” But lest this prudence become harmful, let the simplicity of a dove temper it.

But how and in what manner, see above in chapter [302] Prudence (*Prudencia*).

However, a snake has other conditions not to be imitated. Of which kind are the payment of its venom, the poking of its tail, the leaping into a man’s clothing, but it flees from the naked body of such a man. The saliva of a fasting man kills the snake.

1. William de Lancea, *Diaetae Salutis* 5.5 (8:301a): Et nota, quod quinque astutiis utitur serpens, quas vir prudens imitatur. Prima astutia sapientis, est custodia capitis: nam caput summe custodit, pro quo servando, totum corpus exponit; sic sancti Christum, qui est caput nostrum, summe custodiunt, et pro ips omnia alia exponunt, sicut Apostolus, qui dicebat: *Quae mihi fuerunt lucra, haec arbitratus sum propter Christum detrimenta*. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William de Lancea, *Diaetae Salutis* 5.5 (8:301a): Secunda astutia serpentis est depositio pellis; ponit enim se in arcto foramine, ubi renovatur, deposita veteri pelle: sic sancti in arcto poenitentiae seipsos incarcerant, ut veterem conversationem deponant, sicut monet Apostolus: *Deponite vos secundum pristinam conversationem veterem hominem, qui corrumpitur secundum desideria erroris.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Aristotle, *History of Animals* 5.17 549b25 (Barnes, 1:867): just as serpents shed their so-called 'old-age' or slough), both directly after birth and in later life; [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 25.19 (LCL 393:150-151): ad primas serpentium vernationes bipedali fere altitudine, rursusque cum isdem in terram condenti, nec omnino occultato eo apparet serpens, vel hoc per se satis officioso naturae munere, si tantum praemoneret tempusque formidinis demonstraret. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Avicenna cf. Christopher Lawrence, “The Healing Serpent: The Snake in Medical Iconography,” *Ulster Med J*. 1978; 47(2): 134–140. (p. 137): …the snake retained all its pristine healing power and this was transmitted through scholastic and popular culture. For instance Avicenna the Arabic physician whose *Canon* was the major medical text of the Middle Ages, recommended snake for leprosy. Snake remedies were ubiquitous in the orthodox medicine of the Middle Ages.

Cf. Kathleen Walker-Meikle, “Toxicology and Treatment: Medical Authorities and Snake-bite in the Middle Ages,” Korot. 2014 Dec 1; 22: 85–104 : Bernard de Gordon, quoting Avicenna, noted that some male snakes were more dangerous than the female ones, that snakes in dry places were worse than those in damp areas, hungry snakes worse than those which had just eaten, younger ones were worse than old, and fast-moving ones more dangerous as they could accidentally bite people. [22. de Gordon Bernard. Lilium medicinae. (cit. n. 19), f. 18r.; Avicenna, Canon (cit. n. 4), 4.6.3.21.] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4340534/> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Marginal Gloss* on Matt. 10[:16]: SICUT SERPENTES. Serpentis astutia est quod toto corpore caput in quo vita est occultat et protegit. Ita et nostri periculo corporis caput nostrum quod est Christus custodiamus. Vel quod per angustias se coartans, veteri tunica exutus innovatur. Sic intrans per angustam portam, veterem exuit hominem.

<https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?livre=../sources/editions/GLOSS-liber55.xml&chapitre=55_10> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. William de Lancea, *Diaetae Salutis* 5.5 (8:301a): Tertia astutia serpentis, est delusio incantatoris: deludit enim incantatorem, obturando unam au cum terra, et aliam cum cauda, ut dicitur: *Sicut aspidis surdæ, et obturantis aures suas:* sic viri sancti et prudentes deludunt incantatorem, id est, tentationem diaboli, quia unam aurem obturant cauda, id est, memoria mortis, juxta illud: *Memorare novissima tua et in æternum non peccabis*; et aliam obturant terra, id est, consideratione propriæ fragilitatis, quia dicitur: *Pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris.* [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Marginal Gloss* on Psal. 57:5 *aures suas*: SURDE ET OBTURANTIS. CASSIODORUS. Non solum non faciunt sed nec audire volunt. <https://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions_chapitre.php?livre=../sources/editions/GLOSS-liber26_4.xml&chapitre=26_4_57> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. William de Lancea, *Diaetae Salutis* 5.5 (8:301a-b): Quarta astutia serpentis est insidiatio pedis: insidiatur enim calcaneo, non capiti: sic viri sancti superant desideria carnis, attendentes quis finis delectationis, scilicet mors immortalis, vel infernalis juxta illud: *Finis illorum mors.* ... Ad imitandas istas serpentis astutias dicit Salvator: *Estote prudentes sicut serpentes*; ... Et ne serpentis astutia fiat virulenta, temperat eam simplicitas columbina; unde addit: *Et simplices sicut columbae*. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)