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Snakestones, Black Stones, and the Limits of Evidence

Raywat Deonandan

Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada
Email: rdeonand@uottawa.ca

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Abstract

Snakestones (objects applied to snakebite wounds with the purported ability to absorb venom) have persisted in traditional medicine across South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America for at least four centuries. Despite their longevity, the evidence base for their efficacy remains remarkably thin. This commentary synthesizes what is actually known about snakestones, examines the persistent confusion in the literature between "snakestones" broadly and the specific object known as the "black stone," and considers what the nearly complete absence of rigorous testing means from an anthropological perspective. The snakestone is a compelling case study in the way folk taxonomy, colonial transmission, and evidentiary ambiguity together sustain a therapeutic tradition across centuries.

Keywords

Snakestone, Black Stone, Envenomation, Ethnopharmacology, Traditional Medicine, Medical Anthropology

1. Introduction

Somewhere in rural India and parts of the Indian diaspora, a snakebite victim may be treated with a small dark "snake stone" pressed against the wound. The stone is believed to adhere to the skin and draw out venom, falling away once saturated and subsequently cleansed in milk before reuse [1] [2]. Variants of this practice have been documented for centuries and continue to be reported in contemporary rural settings [3] [4]. Despite its persistence across time and geography, experimental evidence has consistently failed to demonstrate any therapeutic efficacy [5] [6]. The snakestone thus represents one of the more enduring objects in the history of medicine.

Recent reviews of non-allopathic interventions for snakebite envenoming provide a useful lens on the current state of evidence. Across this literature, ethnopharmacological approaches (particularly plant-based ones) dominate, with hundreds of botanical treatments documented across many regions and cultures [7] [8]. In contrast, only a small and fragmented body of research has examined the efficacy of so-called "snakestones." Such studies consist largely of experimental or animal studies rather than clinical investigations [5] [6]. This imbalance is striking given the continued use of snakestones across parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where they remain embedded in local therapeutic traditions despite the absence of convincing evidence of clinical benefit [9] [10].

More broadly, reviews of snakebite management consistently emphasize the uneven distribution and generally low quality of evidence for many traditional treatments [11]. In this context, the small number of studies on snakestones assumes disproportionate importance. This commentary examines what this limited evidence base establishes, what it leaves unresolved, and how future research might more rigorously interrogate one of the most enduring yet least substantiated interventions in the history of snakebite treatment.

2. A Taxonomy of Stones

Any attempt to evaluate snakestone evidence immediately runs into a problem of definition. The examined reviews note with some frustration that the literature uses "snakestone," "black stone," and "serpent stone" interchangeably, even though these names apparently refer to historically distinct objects with different purported compositions and origins.

The earliest accounts, traceable to Athanasius Kircher's 1656 documentation, describe stones extracted from the heads of cobras by snake charmers; these objects are said to be red, green, brown, or black [2]. Later historical sources, however, suggest that snakestones were made from toasted deer antler or, alternatively, from gallstones and renal bezoars harvested from specific animals [2]. The term, it seems, was applied to any object believed to have venom-absorbing properties when held against a wound, regardless of its actual material composition.

The so-called "black stone" represents a more clearly defined intervention than the broader and heterogeneous category of snakestones. Ethnographic and experimental accounts describe black stones as typically manufactured from charred animal bone, producing a porous material with adsorptive properties [5] [6] [10]. While such materials are sometimes compared to activated charcoal, their composition and medical efficacy are not equivalent and should not be assumed to confer similar therapeutic effects.

The two controlled animal studies most commonly cited in discussions of snakestones focus on black stone specifically, rather than the broader, inconsistently defined class of objects referred to as snakestones [5] [6]. Nonetheless, findings from these studies are often generalized to snakestones as a whole, despite the latter encompassing a range of materially distinct substances and practices.

This conceptual slippage represents a significant limitation in the existing evidence base.

3. What Testing Has Shown

The two animal studies in question were both conducted by Chippaux and colleagues and published in 2007 [5] [6]. Their results showed that the substance showed measurable activity in vitro but failed in vivo. When powder from black stones was incubated with cobra and viper venoms before injection into mice, toxicity decreased. But when the stone was applied topically to snakebite wounds (replicating actual use conditions), it offered no meaningful protection. The researchers concluded that there was insufficient evidence to justify proceeding to clinical trials.

The reasons are not mysterious. Snake venom does not wait at the wound site for an absorbent object to arrive. Once injected, it rapidly disseminates into surrounding tissues and the lymphatic system. Based on known rates of subcutaneous venom absorption into the lymphatic circulation, even a genuinely adsorptive material would need to be applied within seconds to a few minutes of the bite to intercept meaningful venom quantities—a timeframe that is virtually impossible to achieve in real-world practice. This effectively forecloses any plausible toxicological mechanism for efficacy. A surface-applied stone can only absorb what remains accessible at the entry point. It competes with blood, lymph, and other bodily fluids for that absorption, probably saturating the stone before it can capture meaningful quantities of venom. The in vitro result, while real, is clinically irrelevant because the conditions of the laboratory (*i.e.*, venom and stone powder incubated together in isolation) bear no resemblance to the conditions of an actual envenomation event.

This is not a new finding. Empirical skepticism can be traced back to at least the seventeenth century, when Francesco Redi, working at the Medici court of Florence, conducted what appear to be the first systematic animal trials of snakestones and concluded that they were ineffective [1]. Kircher had reached similar skeptical conclusions somewhat earlier. The modern Chippaux studies are, in this sense, a reiteration of a verdict that was available almost four hundred years ago.

But three centuries after Redi's experiments, organizations operating in India were reporting snakestone treatment success rates of 95% to 98%. The statistic appears in an editorial [9] that provides no data to support the figure. The statistic is uninterpretable without knowing whether the treated bites were actually venomous, what species were involved, and what "success" was defined to mean. If success simply meant patient survival, and if many treated bites were dry bites or from species with low-lethality venom, the number could be technically accurate and entirely uninformative about the stone's therapeutic action.

4. Why Does the Snakestone Persist?

From an anthropological standpoint, the interesting question is not whether snakestones work by the mechanistic standard of pharmacological testing, but why the practice has proven so remarkably durable and geographically diffuse across populations with vastly different epistemological frameworks.

Several factors are worth considering. First, snakebite treatment contexts are among the most epistemically difficult for any folk medical system to navigate. Snakebite outcomes are highly variable: the same species may deliver a so-called dry bite (*i.e.*, no venom) some fraction of the time, venom dosage varies considerably, and victim physiology plays a significant role in survival. Traditional healers assessing their own treatments have no reliable way to distinguish a successful therapeutic intervention from a dry bite or a spontaneous recovery.

The literature specifically flags this as a source of potential false reputation-building for ethnopharmacological treatments. But this failing applies equally to snakestones. A stone that is applied after a dry bite, or after a bite from a relatively low-toxicity snake, will appear to have worked [12]. Over generations of use, such appearances accumulate into a reputation. Epidemiological data underscore how substantial this confounder is: Approximately one-quarter of pit viper bites and a substantial minority of bites from certain cobra species may involve little or no venom injection ("dry bites"), suggesting that some proportion of treated patients would have improved without antivenom administration [12]. The apparent "success" of snakestone treatment in many traditional accounts is thus substantially explicable by baseline biology rather than therapeutic action.

Second, the transmission history of snakestones is itself a revealing object of study. Jesuit missionaries played a significant role in distributing stones from Asia to Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, effectively transplanting the practice across distinct cultural contexts and snake faunas [2]. This is an unusually well-documented case of colonial-era medical technology transfer, and one where the transferred object carried neither verified efficacy nor a clear mechanism of action, only accumulated cultural authority. That it took hold across such different environments suggests that local populations found something in the practice worth adopting. The question remains whether that attractive aspect was merely as a concrete ritual object to anchor therapeutic action in a moment of crisis, or as a kind of social and psychological reassurance that some kind of treatment was being actively administered.

Third, the snakestone occupies a therapeutic niche that is otherwise empty. This is especially true in regions where antivenom is expensive, requires refrigeration, and may be hours of travel away. Even if it provides no direct pharmacological benefit, the stone represents an immediate response to envenomation. It might reduce panic, moderate the patient's physiological stress response, and keep the individual still (thus slowing the spread of venom). Shamanism case studies are instructive here: two patients survived snakebites treated solely with shamanistic calming rituals, though both subsequently required amputation due to infection [13]. By one measure, this is a treatment failure; by another, it is survival in conditions where mortality was otherwise probable.

5. Gaps in the Science

Both reviews discussed in this paper identify the same fundamental gap: only the black stone has been tested [5] [6], and the black stone may or may not be representative of the full range of objects referred to as snakestones in practice. The historical literature mentions bezoars, antler-derived objects, and stones of varied color and claimed provenance [2]. The conclusion that "snakestones don't work" should more accurately be stated as "one specific type of object referred to as a snakestone showed no protective effect in a mouse model." That is a much narrower claim.

There is also the question of what kind of evidence would be meaningful. Both reviews conclude that deliberately exposing human subjects to potentially lethal venoms in a controlled trial would be ethically impermissible. It is worth noting, however, that this constraint does not rule out all human evidence: observational studies of patients who already receive snakestone treatment in the course of routine traditional practice are both feasible and potentially informative, and such a research design would not require any experimental exposure. The absence of such studies to date is itself a gap worth acknowledging. Hence, the preference for animal models. But animal models have their own limitations in this context: the speed of venom dissemination, the anatomical features of the wound site, and the surface area available for stone contact all differ between mice and humans in ways that could matter for the stone's marginal efficacy. The reviews are appropriately cautious about overgeneralizing from murine results, but this caution is sometimes lost when their conclusions are summarized.

6. Conclusion

Although early empirical testing found snakestones ineffective, the practice spread globally anyway. Therapeutic traditions routinely outlast the evidence that undermines them, particularly in contexts where they provide psychological, ritual, or social functions that effective biomedical alternatives do not or cannot serve. What is unusual about the snakestone case is how little careful anthropological work has accompanied the biomedical interest. There is also a contemporary public health dimension that deserves explicit attention: the commodification of snakestones through informal commercial markets and online channels risks not merely perpetuating an ineffective treatment but actively displacing the timely use of antivenom and emergency care, creating a new and preventable harm that should be monitored and addressed by public health authorities.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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