

A Translation of the New Edition of the
Suśrutasamhitā

Jason Birch Dominik Wujastyk Andrey Klebanov
et alii

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Contents

The manuscripts and editions used in the vulgate editions by Yā-	
davaśarman Trivikrama Ācārya	5
The sources of the 1915 edition	5
The sources of the 1931 edition	5
The sources of the 1938 edition	6
Evaluation	7
The 1939 edition	8
The sources for the Bhānumatī	8
The sources for the Suśrutasaṃhitā	10
Evaluation	10
Features of the manuscript transmission	12
Palaeographical features	12
Chart of characters	12
Sūtrasthāna, adhyāya 1	13
Sūtrasthāna, adhyāya 2	20
Literature	20
Sūtrasthāna, adhyāya 13: On Leeches	21
Literature	21
Previous scholarship	21
Translation	21
Sūtrasthāna, adhyāya 16	28
Sūtrasthāna, adhyāya 28	36
Kalpasthāna, adhyāya 1	37
Literature	37
Manuscript notes	38
Translation	39
[Threats to the king]	39

Kalpasthāna, adhyāya 2	48
Introduction	48
Translation	48
The effects of poisons	53
Symptoms of tuber poisoning	54
Slow-acting poison	56
The stages of toxic shock	57
Remedies for the stages of slow poisoning	58
The invincible ghee	60
Curing the ‘slow-acting’ poison	60
Kalpasthāna, adhyāya 3	61
Introduction	61
Translation	61
The origin of poison	65
Patients beyond help	67
Kalpasthāna, adhyāya 4	69
Introduction	69
Literature	69
Translation	70
Uttaratantra, adhyāya 16 (17 in the vulgate)	73
Literature	73
Translation	73
[Complications]	82
[Characteristics of the probe]	83
[Complications]	83
Uttaratantra, adhyāya 38	86
Summary of the Content	86
Placement of the Chapter	86
Parallels	87
Philological notes	88
Metrical alterations	88
The original opening verses	88
Translation	89

Editions and Abbreviations	91
Index of Manuscripts	95
References	95
Glossary	117
Materia Medica Reference Works	117
Glossary and Index of Medical Substances	119
On digital critical editions	126

Kalpasthāna, adhyāya 4

Introduction

The fourth chapter of the Kalpasthāna of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā* addresses the topic of snake bites and snake venom. Unusually for the Nepalese version of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*, the discussion is framed as a question from Suśruta to the wise Dhanvantari. Suśruta's questions are about the number of snakes, how they are classified, the symptoms of their bites and the pulses or stages of poisoning experienced by a victim of snakebite and related topics. The taxonomy of snakes is presented in a presentational variant form in Figures 2 and 3.

Literature

A brief survey of this chapter's contents and a detailed assessment of the existing research on it to 2002 was provided by Meulenbeld.²⁴⁸ There also exists a herpetological literature from colonial India as well as more recent studies of snakes in the context of cultural and religious life.

The ophiological literature of the colonial period begins with Fayrer (1874), whose work included striking colour paintings of snakes.²⁴⁹ Fayrer provided a biological taxonomy of snakes as well as chapters on mortality statistics during the nineteenth century, treatment and effects of poison, and experimental data. Ewart (1878) included descriptions of appearance and behaviour of poisonous snakes and sometimes their local names; he also distinguished his publication by fine colour illustrations.²⁵⁰ Wall (1913: 75–124) provided a useful analysis of the medical effects of snake envenomation in India arranged by the varied symptomology of different snakes. He also discussed the difference between the symptoms of toxicity and fright (69–75) and also the difficulties arising out of uncertainty about the effects of snake-bite (124–126). Wall (1921) provided a wealth of detail of the snakes of Sri Lanka, including line drawings.

Doniger (2015) provided a good survey of snakes as protagonists in religious literature from the *Atharvaveda* through the epics, *Purāṇas* and

²⁴⁸ HIML: IA, 292–294.

²⁴⁹ The first edition of Fayrer's work was published two years earlier, in 1872.

²⁵⁰ Calling his work a supplement to Fayrer (1874), but also being cited by Fayrer, Ewart 1878 evidently also collected local knowledge from his "snake-man" (p. 22)

Buddhist literature. Slouber (2016: 31–33 *et passim*) discussed the *Suśruta-saṃhitā*'s *Kalpasthāna* as a precursor and influence on later Tantric traditions of snake-bite interpretation and therapy. Semeka-Pankratov (1979) traced semiotics of the term *nāga* through Vedic, Pali and Sanskrit literature.

A discussion of this chapter specifically in the light of the Nepalese manuscripts was published by Harimoto.²⁵¹ After a close comparative reading of lists of poisonous snakes, Harimoto concluded that, “the Nepalese version is internally consistent while the [vulgate] editions are not.” Harimoto showed how the vulgate editions had been adjusted textually to smooth over inconsistencies, and gave insights into these editorial processes.²⁵²

Translation

- 1 Now we shall explain the procedure (*kalpa*) about what should be known concerning the venom in those who have been bitten by snakes.²⁵³
- 3 Suśruta, grasping his feet, questions the wise Dhanvantari, the expert in all the sciences.
- 4 “My Lord, please speak about the number of snakes, and their divisions, the symptoms of someone who has been bitten, and the knowledge about the successive shocks (*vega*) of poisoning”.²⁵⁴
- 5 On hearing his query, that distinguished physician spoke.
“The venerable snakes such as Vāsukī and Takṣaka are uncountable.
- 6–9ab “They are snake-lords who support the earth, as bright as the ritual fire, ceaselessly roaring, raining and scorching. They hold up the earth, with its oceans, mountains and continents. If they are angered, they can destroy the whole world with a breath and a look. Honour to them. They have no role here in medicine.

²⁵¹ Harimoto 2011: 101–104.

²⁵² The two editions that Harimoto noted, Su 1938 and Su 1889, present identical texts.

²⁵³ The *Sarvāṅgasundarī*, commenting on 1.16.17 (Ah 1939: 246), glossed कल्प as प्रयोग.

²⁵⁴ The expression “successive shocks” translates वेग, which in other contexts may mean “(natural) urge.” Here, it is rather the discrete stages or phases of physiological reaction to envenomation. Cf. the symptoms of cobra poisoning described by Wall (1913: 80).

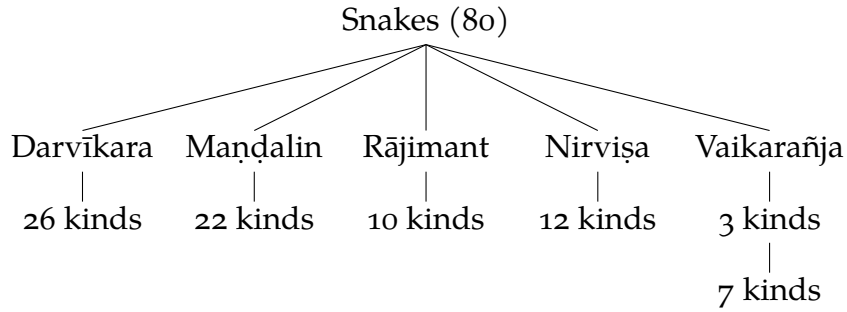


Figure 2: The taxonomy of snakes in the vulgate, 5.4.9–13ab (Su 1938: 571).

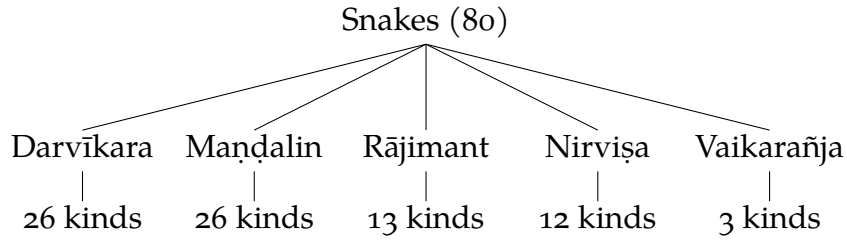


Figure 3: The taxonomy of snakes in the Nepalese version.

“The ones that I shall enumerate in due order are those mundane ones with poison in their fangs who bite humans.”²⁵⁵

- 9cd–10 “There are eighty kinds of snakes and they are divided in five ways: Darvīkaras, Maṇḍalins, Rājimats, and Nirviṣas. And Vaikarañjas that are traditionally of three kinds.”²⁵⁶
- 11 “Of those, there are twenty and six hooded snakes, and the same number of Maṇḍalins are known. There are thirteen Rājīmants.”²⁵⁷
- 12 “There are said to be twelve Niriviṣas and, according to tradition, three Vaikarañjas.

²⁵⁵ The next few verses are discussed in detail by Harimoto (2011: 101–104), who shows that in the taxonomy of snakes, the Nepalese version of the *Suśrutasamhitā* has greater internal coherence than the vulgate recension.

²⁵⁶ Harimoto (2011) translated these names as “hooded,” “spotted,” “striped,” “harmless,” and “hybrid.” Figure 2 shows the taxonomy described in the vulgate text; Figure 3 shows the different and more logical division of the Nepalese version of the *Suśrutasamhitā*.

²⁵⁷ The phrasing of this śloka is awkward.

- 13–14ef “If they are trodden on, ill-natured or provoked or even just looking for food, those very angry snakes will bite. And that is said to happen in three ways: serpented (*sarpita*), torn (*darita*) and thirdly without venom (*nirviṣa*). Some experts on this want to add “hurt by the snake’s body”.²⁵⁸
- 15–16 “The physician can recognize the following as “ophidian (*sarpita*)”: Where a rearing snake makes one, two or more puncture-marks of its teeth, when they are deep and without much blood,²⁵⁹ accompanied by a little ring of spots (*cuñcumālaka*),²⁶⁰ lead to degeneration, and are close together and swollen.
- 17 Where there are streaks with blood, whether it be blue or white, the physician should recognize that to be “torn (*darita*),” having a small amount of venom.

²⁵⁸ This might refer to constriction. The phrase reads like a commentarial addition rather than the main text of the *Suśrutasaṃhitā*.

²⁵⁹ The word उद्धृत “aroused” was glossed by Ḍalhaṇa at 5.4.15 (*Su* 1938: 571) as उन्मोद्य, a word not found as such in standard dictionaries (*MW*; *KEWA*; *AyMahā*; *Apte*). Semantic considerations suggest that the word is not related to √*muṭ* “break” or *mūta*/*mūṭa* “woven basket.” Perhaps it is related to the Tamil *மோதி* (*mōṭi*), whose meanings include “arrogance, grandeur, display” (*DED*₂: #5133) or to faintly-documented forms like *moṭyate* “is twisted” (*CDIAL*: #10186). Ḍalhaṇa’s उन्मोद्य may thus mean “twisting up” or “making an arrogant display.”

Note that पद “puncture-marks” (more literally, “foot marks”) is being used in the same sense as in 1.13.19 (*Su* 1938: 57) when describing the marks on the body where a knife scarifies the skin before leeching. See footnote 67.

²⁶⁰ The usual dictionary lexeme is चक्षु, not चुक्षु as in the Nepalese witnesses. We translate “spots” following Ḍalhaṇa and Gayadāsa on 5.4.15 (*Su* 1938: 571), where they described a group of spots or swellings at the site of the bite.

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- Anup *Anup Sanskrit Library.*
- Apte Apte, Vaman Shivaram (1992), *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Kyoto: Rinsen Book Company), ISBN: 4-653-00038-7; Reprinted from Gode and Karve 1957–59.
- AS *Asiatic Society.*
- As 1980 Āṭhavale, Ananta Dāmodara (1980) (ed.), अष्टाङ्गसङ्ग्रहः श्रीमद्द्ववाग्भटविरचितः इन्दुव्याख्यासहितः [= *Vāgbhaṭa's Aṣṭāṅgasanṅraha with Indu's Commentary*] (Pune: M. A. Āṭhavale, Śrīmad Ātreya Prakāśanam), ark:/13960/s25bwqsd0n7.
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- EWA Mayrhofer, Manfred (1986–2001), *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, Universitätsverlag), ISBN: 3-533-03826-2.
- HIML Meulenbeld, Gerrit Jan (1999–2002), *A History of Indian Medical Literature*, 5 vols. (Groningen: E. Forsten), ISBN: 9069801248.
- IOLR Eggeling, Julius, et al. (1887–1935), *Catalogue of the Sanskrit Manuscripts in the Library of the India Office* (London: Secretary of State for India), [ark:/13960/s2kbb5zcrg9](https://www.oxfordjournals.org/lookup/doi/10.1093/acref/9780197135501).
- KEWA Mayrhofer, Manfred (1953–72), *Kurzgefaßtes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindoarischen; a Concise Etymological Sanskrit Dictionary* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, Universitätsverlag).
- KL *Kaiser Library*.
- MN₁ Ācārya, Yādavaśarma Trivikrama (1920) (ed.), महामतिश्री-माधवकरप्रणीतं माधवनिदानम् श्रीविजयरक्षित-श्रीकण्ठदत्ताभ्यां विरचितया मधुकोशाख्यव्याख्या, श्रीवाचस्पतिवैद्यविरचितया आतङ्कदर्पणव्याख्या विशिष्टांशेन च समुल्लसितम् = *Mādhavanidāna by Mādhavakara with the Two Commentaries, Madhukosha by Vijayarakshita & Shrikanthadatta and Ātankadarpaṇa by Vāchaspati Vaidya*

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- śruta with Various Readings, Notes and Appendix etc.* (Mumbāi: Nirṇayasāgarākhyamudraṇālaye), [ark:/13960/t8kd4jh7n](https://nirṇayasagarakhyamudraṇa.org/ark:/13960/t8kd4jh7n).
- TMSSML *Tanjore Maharaja Serfoji Saraswati Mahal Library.*
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Index of Manuscripts

The numbers after the colon refer to pages in this document.

Thanjavur TMSSML 10773: 91

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Glossary

<i>cuñcumālaka</i>	- without venom:	- <i>sarpita</i> : 72
- little ring of spots:	72	successive shocks
72		- <i>vega</i> : 70
<i>darita</i>	ophidian	torn
- torn: 72	- <i>sarpita</i> : 72	- <i>darita</i> : 72
<i>kalpa</i>	procedure	<i>vega</i>
- procedure: 70	- <i>kalpa</i> : 70	- successive shocks:
little ring of spots	<i>sarpita</i>	70
- <i>cuñcumālaka</i> : 72	- ophidian: 72	without venom
<i>nirviṣa</i>	- serpented: 72	- <i>nirviṣa</i> : 72
	serpented	

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AVS	Warrier, P. K., Nambiar, V. P. K., and Ramankutty, C. (1994–96) (eds.), <i>Indian Medicinal Plants: A Compendium of 500 Species. Vaidyaratnam P. S. Varier's Arya Vaidya Sala, Kottakal</i> (Madras: Orient Longman).
BIA	Prater, S. H. (1993), <i>The Book of Indian Animals</i> (3rd edn., Bombay, Delhi, etc.: Oxford University Press); 4th impression of 3rd corrected 1980 edition.
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IW	Israel, Samuel, et al. (1988), <i>Indian Wildlife: Sri Lanka Nepal</i> (Insight Guides; Singapore etc.: APA Publications), ISBN: 9780245545238.
K&B	Kirtikar, K. R., Basu, B. D., and an I.C.S (1987), <i>Indian Medicinal Plants</i> , ed. E. Blatter, J. F. Caius, and K. S. Mhaskar, 8 vols. (2nd edn., Dehradun: International Book Distributors); First published in Allahabad, 1918.
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Glossary and Index of Medical Substances

