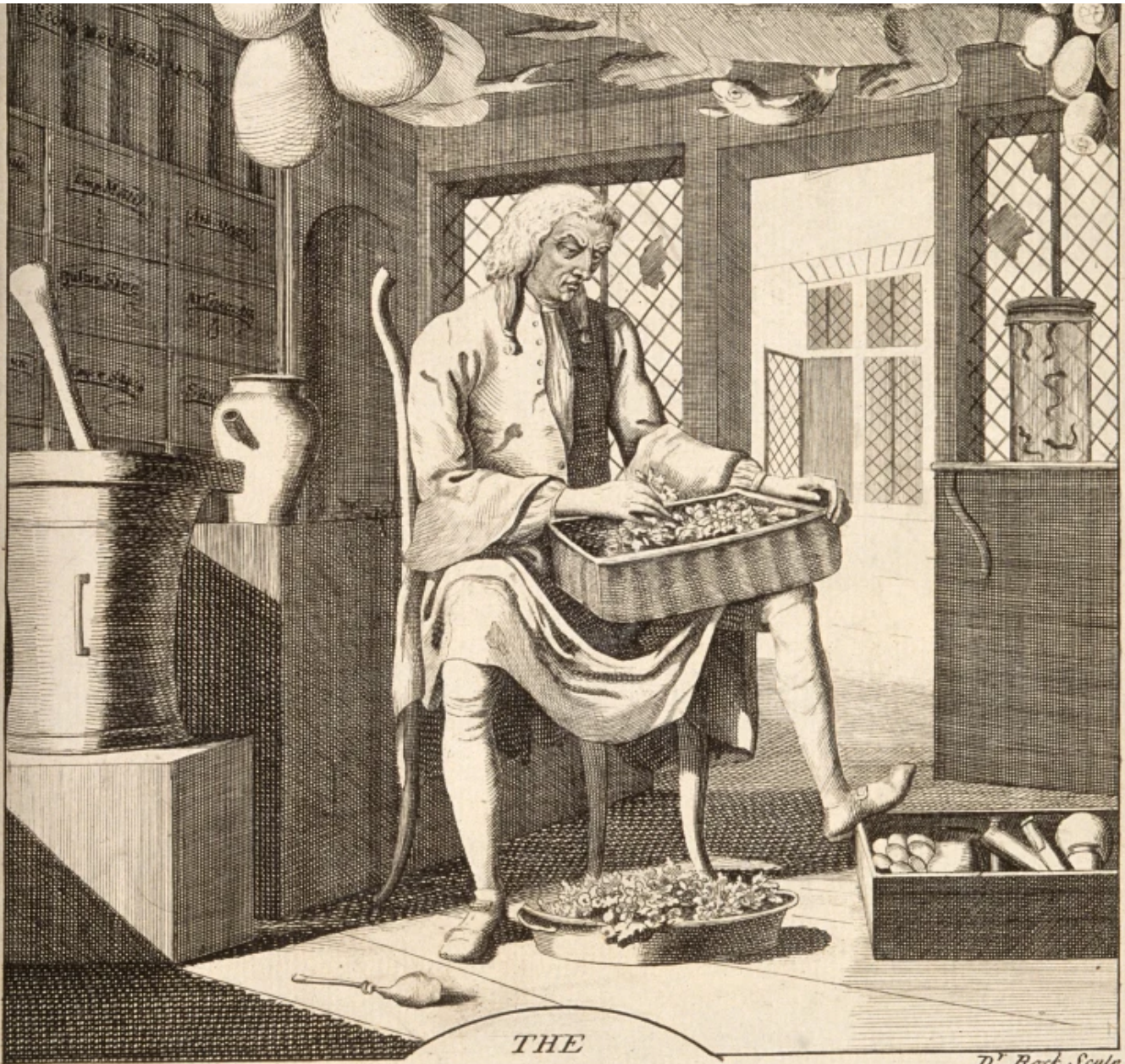


# Looking through art meaning turtles. a small history

*Posted by ERMA HERMENS on AUGUST 5, 2020*

‘And in his needy shop a tortoise hung’, recalls Romeo in his search for an apothecary to buy poison after he learned from Juliette’s death. We all know the sad ending of this story. However, the turtle may have been displayed in the apothecary’s shop simply as a curiosity, or as one of the more exotic materials used for remedies, and its connotation of longevity and hence good health. Indeed, the medicinal virtues of turtles, land-dwelling as much as the marine species, are praised in many historical texts. Every part of the turtle was used to treat a wide variety of illnesses and conditions.

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W. Shakespear Inv<sup>t</sup>

## THE APOTHECARY

D<sup>r</sup>. Rock Sculp

I do remember an Apothecary,  
And hereabouts he dwells, which late I noted  
In tatter'd Weeds, with overwhelming Brows,  
Culling of Simples; meager were his Looks,  
Sharp Misery had worn him to the Bones:

And in his needy Shop a Tortoise hung,

*Accord<sup>t</sup> to y<sup>e</sup> Act. To be had of T. Enart facing Old Slaughters Coffee House S<sup>t</sup>. Martins Lane Long Acre.*

An Alligator stuf, and other Skins  
Of ill shap'd Fishes, and about his Shelves  
A beggarly Account of empty Boxes;  
Green earthen Pots, Bladders, and musty Seeds,  
Remnants of Packthread, and old Cakes of Roses  
Where thinly scattered to make up a shew.

*Price 6:*



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Wellcome Collection, London.

## Early uses of turtle in medicine

Pliny the Elder, Roman naturalist and philosopher (CE 23-79), already describes such therapies in his *Naturalis Historia* (CE 77), an encyclopaedic scientific work, composed of 37 books. In book IX, *The Natural History of Fishes*, he writes: 'The Indian Sea produces turtles of such vast size, that with the shell of a single animal they are able to roof a habitable cottage; and among the islands of the Red Sea, the navigation is mostly carried on in boats formed of these shells.' (Chap. 12). He also already references the use of the turtle's scutes: 'Carvilius Pollio, a man of prodigal habits and ingenious in inventing the refinements of luxury, was the first to cut the shell of the tortoise into laminae, and to veneer beds and cabinets with it.' (Chap. 13).

In book XXXII, *Remedies derived from Aquatic Animals*, there is an intriguing section about the turtle's remarkable healing properties listing sixty-six remedies made from almost every part of the tortoises and sea-turtles:

*The flesh of this tortoise, with its head and feet cut off, is said to be given as an antidote, and taken in its broth as food to disperse scrofulous sores, to reduce the spleen, and to cure epilepsy. The blood clarifies the vision and arrests cataracts. For the poisons of all serpents, spiders and similar creatures, and of frogs, it is of service; the blood is preserved in flour, made up into pills, and given in wine when necessary. It is beneficial to use the gall of tortoises with Attic honey as*

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*shell and given in drink are antaphrodisiac. This is all the more surprising because the whole shell, reduced to powder, is said to incite to lust. [...] The eggs are applied hard boiled to scrofulous sores, frost bites and burns. They are swallowed for pains in the stomach. The flesh of sea tortoises mixed with that of frog is an excellent remedy for salamander bites, and nothing is more opposed to the salamander than the tortoise. Its blood is good treatment for the bare patches of mange, for dandruff, and for all sores on the head. [...] It is also given for asthma [...]. The mouths of epileptics are opened and the blood poured by drops into them [...]. If teeth are rinsed with tortoise blood three times a year they will become immune to toothache. It is a remedy too for shortness of breath and for what is called orthopnoea [...]. Tortoise gall gives clearness of vision, effaces scars, relieves sore tonsils, quinsy, and all diseases of the mouth, being specific for malignant sores there.*

(Chapter 14)

Even older medicinal uses of turtle date back to Ancient Egypt. Medical practice from that period has been considered advanced for its time, and was recorded in so-called *pharmacopoeia*: encyclopaedias presenting information about the raw materials and medicinal formulae exploited for medical practice. The Ebers papyrus, a 20 meter long scroll, written around 1550 BCE, but also based on older texts, is one of the oldest medical papyri known, and the most important source on Ancient Egyptian remedies (collection of the Leipzig University Library). It contains around 700 remedies, as well as



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turtle, are referred to as raw material for treatments. One of these curious and enigmatic formulas is a cure for an injured cornea. While mixing turtle bile with honey, one would pronounce: “There is noise in the southern sky since nightfall, and a storm in the northern sky. A heap of severed heads fell into the water. Re’s crew hits his devouts because heads fell into the water. Who will carry them then...? It will be me, who will bring them back”...

## The leprosy islands

Many centuries later, many written down stories from explorers report on curious things they witnessed during their voyages. For example, Eustache Delafosse (ca. 1451-1523), a Flemish merchant, who travelled on board of Portuguese ships to Africa’s occidental coast during 1479-80, and reported his voyage in *Trip to the coast of Guinea, Portugal and Spain* (1481), describes the miraculous healing virtues of turtles. It was during his travels to Cape Verde, an Archipelago in the central Atlantic Ocean, and a stopping over point for explorers, where since the 1530s lepers were send to be treated in so-called leprosaria, that he witnessed the use of turtle-based remedies:

*There we also took a large turtle, which we ate, and we found it very tasty. It is thanks to these turtles that lepers heal themselves: one eats, smears oneself with its blood, and uses its fat to adjust his food; this is how, after two years, the ill find themselves cleansed and healed from their leprosy. This way, after I came back from this journey, I found myself in Ghent, where Sir Jean de Luxembourg was staying at the*

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Delafosse, 1481, 41)

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), witnessed the same at the island of Buonavista in 1498, where lepers cured themselves with turtle blood, which together with eating the nutritious turtle flesh, must have seemed to be a miracle cure. Other travellers and settlers also praised the healing properties of turtles, and these accounts must have encouraged the exploration of the therapeutic properties of these animals in Europe. For instance, between 1505-18, Valentim Fernandes (14..- ca. 1518), a German printer living in Lisbon, compiled and edited several texts and maps documenting Portuguese explorations of both Africa and Asia in the so-called Codex Valentim Fernandes (Codex Hispanicus 27, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek). Here too observations are made on typical uses of turtles: “There is in these islands a great abundance of turtles, which the lepers cure in salt. These islands were initially so healthy that any lepers arriving there were cured.” In 1557, the French explorer André Thevet, in his *Singularitez de la France Antarctique*, describes how a Portuguese nobleman ill with leprosy, travelled to Cape Verde, where he ate turtle eggs for two years until he was cured. Centuries later, Peter Simmond (1814-1897), a Danish writer and journalist, wrote in *The Animal Food Resources of Different Nations, with Mention of Some of the Special Dainties of Various People Derived from the Animal Kingdom*, 1885: “In Portugal, syphilitic patients are often sent to the Cape Verde islands to be cured by feeding on turtle flesh.” And many more examples can be given.

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Were such turtle-based remedies actually available in Europe? Early references are rare. In an anonymous Italian herbal, *Tractatus de Herbis*, an illustrated manuscript on medicinal plants and other materials for remedies, from c. 1440 ([British Library](#)), accompanied only by captions making it a visual aid for quick reference, contains one page where a *testuto*, or turtle is illustrated, together with several other plants and a man making *terbentina*: turpentine.



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prescribed for medical use. In the 1827 edition of the French pharmacopeia, it is written that “Turtle is one of the medicated foods”. This simple statement hides a more complex definition of what turtle remedies really were supposed to heal. As Pliny the Elder already indicated, next to leprosy, many other illnesses could be cured by using some part of the animal. Ophthalmology benefited from marine turtle gall, their blood was recommended against poisonous venom and epilepsy, and turtle broth and sirup were prescribed for respiratory diseases. A French natural history dictionary, the *Nouveau dictionnaire d’histoire naturelle, appliquée aux arts, à l’agriculture, à l’économie rurale et domestique* from 1819, even mentions the presence of living turtles kept in store by pharmacists: “There are still living European pond turtle at several apothecaries in Paris, who bring them from Provence to make broths, considered very useful in diseases of the pulmonary diseases, and to repair the forces exhausted by the excess pleasure of love”.



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A seventeenth-century German apothecary's shop with a stuffed turtle hanging from the ceiling; recreated for the German National Museum in Nürnberg. Photograph by Christof Müller. [Wellcome Collection](#), London.

## The decline of turtle remedies in Europe and its continuous use in other cultures

Some cultures do still use turtle-based cures. In traditional Chinese medicine, turtles and tortoises are still sought after for their nutritious and healing properties. This has a long history. For instance, Li Shizhen (1418-93), a pharmacologist from the Ming Dynasty, describes in his *Compendium of*



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Although modern medicine refutes such healing properties, balancing traditional uses of turtles with, for many species, their status as endangered species is a challenge. The increasing emergence of national laws, including fishery bans and official lists of endangered species, oppose these traditional uses of sea turtles. However, research projects led by anthropologists collaborating with scientists, are trying to create a mutual understanding of both tradition and preservation. For instance, the Wayuú people, living on the Guajira peninsula in the most northern parts of Columbia and Venezuela, have strong relations with marine life and especially sea turtles, which are rooted in ancient traditions and rituals. Traditional practices are carefully being documented, to understand the value of marine turtles as part of medicinal, food, and rituals, and find ways to combine those with sea turtle protection.

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Wayuu community leader Teresa Fernandez from the Urariyu clan poses with a green turtle that she and her family rescued on the Guajira Peninsula. See [Wayuu, Shepherds of the Sea](#). © PATRICIA VITALE / VERDE SALVA

Similarly, the traditional uses of endangered species in local communities in [Cape Verde](#) are acknowledged, based on interviews between marine biologists and local fishermen, in the establishment of conservation plans to develop a sustainable handling of sea turtles, focus on biodiversity and simultaneously respect the socio-cultural aspects of these communities.

The many uses of turtles (the scutes for decoration, the flesh for food and medicine...) make us think again and again about the meaning of each of our three carapaces in the Rijksmuseum collection. What kind of connotations do they evoke? A curiosity about nature, and the exotic New World, and the development of the natural sciences, hence knowledge? The connection to

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