

The Excremental Miracle Cure

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INTRODUCTION

In ancient Rome, there were plenty of odd ingredients used in medical remedies, one of the more peculiar additives being the fecal matter of a wide variety of animals. This controversial ingredient may seem strange by modern standards, but the ancient Roman reasoning for using animal dung is sound. Another way of analyzing the ancient Roman use of fecal matter is to look at the way it was used to treat various illnesses. The analysis of the use of animal excrement in ancient Rome achieves a small insight into the world of ancient medicine.

ROMAN REASONING

The idea of using fecal matter in medicine seems preposterous modern standards. Despite the modern idea that this use is absurd- the ancient Romans had what could be considered sound reasoning for the time in which they lived.

A common practice for the for farming in ancient Rome was to use manure to grow crops. Having witnessed how manure seemingly turned uncultivable land into fertile farmlands, the ancient Romans came to believe the fecal matter would also have a regenerative effect on the human body.

Observation was a common way for the ancient Romans to come to reasonable deductions. [Aulus Cornelius Celsus](https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/223898/view) Scrutiny of various animals' dung is expressed in Volume Eight of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*. Pliny had arrived at was that animals were often observed to have eaten various herbs that were known to hold medicinal properties; therefore, the fecal matter that the animals produced should have contained medicinal properties as well.

While Pliny's observations came from theoretical deductions, Aulus Cornelius Celsus's conclusions in *De Medicina* were more empirical in nature. He witnessed the effects that certain types of animal dung had on the human body, such as caustic, cleansing, etc.



[Aulus Cornelius Celsus](https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/223898/view)
<https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/223898/view>

CELSUS'S OBSERVATIONS

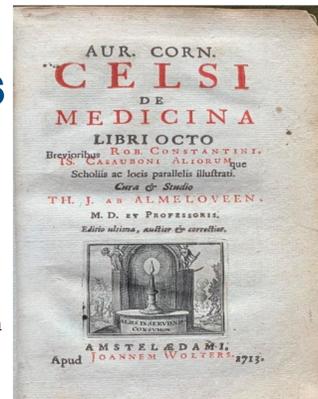
Celsus managed a modicum of scientific reasoning in deducing that various types of animal excrement had medicinal effects. The following points were his observations.

- **As an emollient:** Observed to sooth the skin was Ape dung mixed with mistletoe juice, resin and untreated sulfur.
- **As an epispastic :** The excrement of a pigeon was noticed causing blisters and other discharges by causing inflammation. This discovery was not an observation of a cure, but a rare observation of the negative effects of attempting to use a specific type of dung.
- **As a caustic agent:** Feces of a lizard, as well as of a sheep, was noted to burn the area of the skin that it was applied to. This revelation was particularly useful in removing dead tissue or diseased areas of the skin.
- **As a cleansing agent:** While it is unclear what type of cleansing agent Celsus meant, recommended was fecal matter of a lizard.

ROMAN MEDICINAL USES FOR FECAL MATTER

Already established is the ancient Romans had what they believed to be sound reasons for using animal excrement, but the question remains of what ailments required the use of dung. The following ailments and remedies provided in *Natural History* are only a few out of a plethora of examples.

- **Opisthotonus (a certain type of meningitis):** One of the remedies that could be tried was an interesting concoction of a ball of dried female goat's dung bound with an unspecified animal's crushed nails, and the gall of any animal. Then one was to take dried whitlow and dissolve it in hot water with a bull's gall, adding in alum and sulfur, equal in measure, and finally applying the solution to the painful area.



[Celsus's De Medicina](https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/223898/view)
<https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/223898/view>

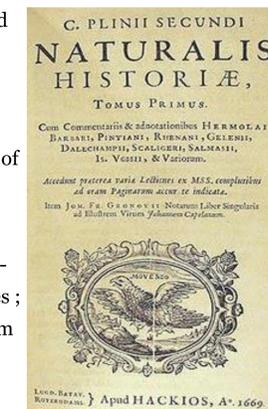


[Bust of Pliny the Elder](http://www.didache.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Pliny-the-Elder-copy.png)
<http://www.didache.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Pliny-the-Elder-copy.png>



[Roman Hunting a Hare \(Perhaps for its fecal matter\)](http://www.venetoinnimage.com/svc.htm)
<http://www.venetoinnimage.com/svc.htm>

- **Night Coughs:** To cure a nighttime cough, Pliny suggested taking the ash of hare excrement with wine before going to sleep.
- **Dysentery:** Part of the cure for dysentery, was the dusting of a hare's excrement over a glass of warmed wine.
- **Barrenness:** For a woman who could not get pregnant, administered was a pessary made from the defecation of babies ; this pessary is termed meconium (meconium is now the term used for a baby's first fecal matter).
- **Gout:** This combination of ingredients said to cure gout was the suet (fat from around the kidneys) of a male goat, saffron, mustard, the blossom of a wild cucumber, stalks of ivy, and the fecal matter of a female goat. One of the other dung-related suggestions is to mix the excrement of an ox with the fecal matter of a calf that had not eaten grass yet
- **Snapping Turtle Bite:** Celsus noted the application of a goat's feces to the bite of a snapping turtle (chelydrus). The observation was also made that goat feces worked on a horned viper (cerastes) bite as well.
- **Coeliac Disorder:** Instructions to treat coeliac disorder was that an individual combine a donkey's dung and milk with honey, burn it down to ash, and then mix it with wine and drink it. If one was underage, by today's standards, there was the option to place the mixture in boiled cows milk and consume it that way.
- **Constipation:** For those suffering from constipation, mix the ash of a deer's antlers with powdered pig excrement and cumin. Then crush African snails, mix with the previous concoction and take with wine.



[Pliny's Natural History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_History_(Pliny))
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_History_\(Pliny\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_History_(Pliny))

- **Fever:** The idea of curing a fever included using cold hippopotamus feces and humidifying, or fumigating, the suffering person with it. Consequently, when applied to toothaches this chilled dung brought relief.
- **Non-Horned Viper Snake Bites:** Pliny claimed that a deadly snakebite could be healed by mixing hot female goat feces with vinegar and consuming the concoction. He also claimed that substituting vinegar for wine would work but result in a slower recovery. For an immediate treatment, a female goat was slaughtered and any fecal matter found inside used in the mixture.
- **Dog Bite:** To heal a wound from by a dog, Romans would mix wine with the excrement of a swallow, a cuckoo, and a badger and then drink it. While drinking this potion, Romans applied feces from a female goat to the wound.
- **Obstruction in Throat:** Pliny believed that the best way to clean objects from the throat was to swallow cat dung.

CONCLUSION

Ancient Romans were inventive when responding to the conundrums that affected them. Sometimes questions were answered through observation, as Celsus demonstrated in *De Medicina*. Other authors, such as Pliny were not as directly involved in the process and instead chose to relay the information they came across through their writing. While using the excrement of various animals cannot be confirmed as a healthy idea, Celsus was not unwise to point out that certain types of dung may burn or soothe skin. Examining the ancient Roman use of fecal matter provides researchers a glimpse into the mindset of a people that existed thousands of years ago and demonstrates how far humanity has progressed over time.

PRIMARY SOURCES USED

Celsus, Aulus Cornelius. *De Medicina*. Edited by Walter George Spencer. Vol. 2. 3 vols. The Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press; Heinemann, 1935.
Plinius Secundus, Gaius. *Natural History: in ten volumes. 8: Libri XXVIII -XXXII*. Edited by William H. S. Jones. Reprinted. The Loeb Classical Library 418. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975.