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ANESTHESIOLOGY REFLECTIONS FROM THE WOOD LIBRARY-MUSEUM

From Darting Game to Darting Pain: How Benumbing Aconite Paved the Way for Local Anesthetics



From the buttercup family, Eurasia's most lethal plant genus, *Aconitum*, has figured prominently in Greek, Hindu, and Chinese traditions. Ancient Greek mythology had aconite drooling from Cerberus, the three-headed hound of Hades. According to Hindu tradition, after turning blue from drinking the world's poisons, the deity Shiva dripped a little poison onto the blue aconite plant. In some traditional Chinese battles, arrow shafts smeared with aconite poisoned would-be rescuers as they removed arrows from the impaled. Surveying east to west, hunting with aconite-tipped projectiles has proven toxic (Greek *toxikòn phármakon*: archer's bow poison) to Pacific whales, Japanese brown bears, Siberian ibex, Bengal tigers, and Grecian wolves. Ironically, the *canine* association of aconite ("wolfsbane")—with marauding wolves or rabid dogs—was not lost upon dentists, who used the potentially deadly herb to numb aching cavities in patients' dogteeth (canines) and other teeth. "Powdered Aconite Root" was bottled (*left*) as a dubious external remedy against tetanus and as a neurotoxic local anesthetic. Before numbing with cocaine or novocaine or lidocaine...doctors were numbing with aconite. (Copyright © the American Society of Anesthesiologists' Wood Library-Museum of Anesthesiology.)

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