

Lucian of Samosata
Dipsas, the Thirst-Snake

Translated by H.W. Fowler

Περὶ τῶν Διψάδων
Dipsades
The Dipsads

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A long-winded introductory lecture

The southern parts of Libya are all deep sand and parched soil, a desert of wide extent that produces nothing, one vast plain destitute of grass, herb, vegetation, and water; or if a remnant of the scanty rain stands here and there in a hollow place, it is turbid and evil-smelling, undrinkable even in the extremity of thirst. The land is consequently uninhabited; savage, dried up, barren, droughty, how should it support life? The mere temperature, an atmosphere that is rather fire than air, and a haze of burning sand, make the district quite inaccessible.

On its borders dwell the Garamantians, a lightly clad, agile tribe of tent-dwellers subsisting mainly by the chase. These are the only people who occasionally penetrate the desert, in pursuit of game. They wait till rain falls, about the winter solstice, mitigating the excessive heat, moistening the sand, and making it just passable. Their quarry consists chiefly of wild asses, the giant ostrich that runs instead of flying, and monkeys, to which the elephant is sometimes added; these are the only creatures sufficiently proof against thirst and capable of bearing that incessant fiery sunshine. But the Garamantians, as soon as they have consumed the provisions they brought with them, instantly hurry back, in fear of the sand's recovering its heat and becoming difficult or impassable, in which case they would be trapped, and lose their lives as well as their game. For if the sun draws up the vapour, dries the ground rapidly, and has an access of heat, throwing into its rays the fresh vigour derived from that moisture which is its aliment, there is then no escape.

But all that I have yet mentioned, heat, thirst, desolation, barrenness, you will count less formidable than what I now come to, a sufficient reason in itself for avoiding that land. It is beset by all sorts of reptiles, of huge size, in enormous numbers, hideous and venomous beyond belief or cure. Some of them have burrows in the sand, others live on the surface — toads, asps, vipers, horned snakes and stinging beetles, lance-

snakes, reversible snakes,¹ dragons, and two kinds of scorpion, one of great size and many joints that runs on the ground, the other aerial, with gauzy wings like those of the locust, grasshopper, or bat. With the multitude of flying things like these, that part of Libya has no attraction for the traveller.

But the direst of all the reptiles bred in the sand is the dipsas or thirst-snake; it is of no great size, and resembles the viper; its bite is sharp, and the venom acts at once, inducing agonies to which there is no relief. The flesh is burnt up and mortified, the victims feel as if on fire, and yell like men at the stake. But the most overpowering of their torments is that indicated by the creature's name. They have an intolerable thirst; and the remarkable thing is, the more they drink, the more they want to drink, the appetite growing with what it feeds on. You will never quench their thirst, though you give them all the water in Nile or Danube; water will be fuel, as much as if you tried to put out a fire with oil.

Doctors explain this by saying that the venom is originally thick, and gains in activity when diluted with the drink, becoming naturally more fluid and circulating more widely.

I have not seen a man in this condition, and I pray Heaven I never may behold such human sufferings; I am happy to say I have not set foot upon Libyan soil. But I have had an epitaph repeated to me, which a friend assured me he had read on the grave of a victim. My friend, going from Libya to Egypt, had taken the only practicable land route by the Great Syrtis. He there found a tomb on the beach at the sea's very edge, with a pillar setting forth the manner of death. On it a man was carved in the attitude familiar in pictures of Tantalus, standing by a lake's side scooping up water to drink; the dipsas was wound about his foot, in which its fangs were fastened, while a number of women with jars were pouring water over him. Hard by were lying eggs like those of the ostrich hunted, as I mentioned, by the Gararnantians. And then there was the epitaph, which it may be worth while to give you:

See the envenom'd cravings Tantalus
 Could find no thirst-assuaging charm to still,
The cask that daughter-brood of Danaus,
 For ever filling, might not ever fill.

There are four more lines about the eggs, and how he was bitten while taking them; but I forget how they go.

The neighbouring tribes, however, do collect and value these eggs, and not only for food; they use the empty shells for vessels and make cups of them; for, as there is nothing but sand for material, they have no pottery. A particularly large egg is a find; bisected, it furnishes two hats big enough for the human head.

Accordingly the dipsas conceals himself near the eggs, and when a man comes, crawls out and bites the unfortunate, who then goes through the experiences just described, drinking and increasing his thirst and getting no relief.

¹ The amphisbaena, supposed to have a head at each end and move either way.

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LUCIAN ON DIPSAS, THE THIRST-SNAKE

Now, gentlemen, I have not told you all this to show you I could do as well as the poet Nicander, nor yet by way of proof that I have taken some trouble with the natural history of Libyan reptiles; that would be more in the doctor's line, who must know about such things with a view to treatment. No, it is only that I am conscious (and now pray do not be offended by my going to the reptiles for my illustration) — I am conscious of the same feelings towards you as a dipsas victim has towards drink; the more I have of your company, the more of it I want; my thirst for it rages uncontrollably; I shall never have enough of this drink. And no wonder; where else could one find such clear sparkling water? You must pardon me, then, if, bitten to the soul (most agreeably and wholesomely bitten), I put my head under the fountain and gulp the liquor down. My only prayer is that the stream that flows from you may never fail; never may your willingness to listen run dry and leave me thirstily gaping! On my side there is no reason why drinking should not go on for ever; the wise Plato says that you cannot have too much of a good thing.

