



Poisons: Their Effects and Detection: A Manual for the Use of Analytical Chemists and Experts

Alexander Wynter Blyth

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It is significant that the root “tox” of the modern word toxicology can be traced back to a very ancient word meaning “bow” or “arrow,” or, in its broadest sense, some “tool” used for slaying: hence it is no far-fetched supposition that the first poison-knowledge was that of the septic poisons. Perchance the savage found that weapons soiled with the blood of former victims made wounds fatal; from this observation the next step naturally would be that of experiment—the arrow or spear would be steeped in all manner of offensive pastes, and smeared with the vegetable juices of those plants which were deemed noxious; and as the effects were mysterious, they would be ascribed to the supernatural powers, and covered with a veil of superstition. The history of the poison-lehre, like all history, begins in the region of the myths: there was a dark saga prevailing in Greece, that in the far north existed a land ruled by sorcerers—all children of the sun—and named Aeëtes, Perses, Hecate, Medea, and Circe. Later on, the enchanted land was localised at Colchis, and Aeëtes and Perses were said to be brothers. Hecate was the daughter of Perses; she was married to Aeëtes, and their daughters were Medea and Circe. Hecate was the discoverer of poisonous herbs, and learned in remedies both evil and good. Her knowledge passed to Medea, who narcotised the dragon, the guardian of the golden fleece, and incited Jason to great undertakings. In the expedition of the Argonauts, the poets loved to describe Hecate’s garden, with its lofty walls. Thrice-folding doors of ebony barred the entrance, which was guarded by terrible forms: only the initiated few, only they who bore the leavened rod of expiation, and the concealed conciliatory offering of the Medea, could enter into the sanctuary. Towering above all was the temple of the dread Hecate, whose priestesses offered to the gods ghastly sacrifices.

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