Animal Crackers

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You would think that we have come a long way from the belief of medieval travellers in the *borametz* – a cross between a plant and an animal. Whilst never encountered in real life it was thought that this plant produced melon-like fruit which when ripened burst open to reveal miniature lambs with fleece as soft as cotton (which is what it was!).

In a new twist on having a ‘frog in the throat’ it comes as a shock to us today to hear of a man in the province of Hunan (China) whose doctor prescribed six raw frogs a day for his patient to cure the man’s neck pain. The sick man nearly died after eating 130 of the frogs because they were infected with parasites. There is no mention in the article of the expected effect of parasiteless frogs on human health. Although the case seems medieval it only happened this year, and in true modern fashion the patient sued his doctor.

We can wonder if we have made real progress since another article relates that a man bought a bottle of *Assisi Tea Tree Concentrated Shampoo for Rabbits and Small Animals*. After reading through the small print detailing the chemistry of the product and its benefits there appeared the ecologically and ethically correct statement: ‘Not tested on animals’!

This last point reminds us that animals and human health have been intimately connected and not necessarily through animal cruelty or vivisection. Observing animals and investigating how they go about their lives and survive may help to advance human health and well-being. Researchers at Kyoto Pharmaceutical University (Japan) have had hippos under the microscope. Not the whole animal you will understand, but their sticky reddish sweat.

It seems that hippopotamus’ sweat has at least two qualities which – if understood – may be useful to human health. The sweat contains two pigments – red and orange. The red one has superior antibacterial properties which protects hippos from particular pathogens and speeds recovery from the many wounds gained in fights. Both pigments act as an anti-UV screen so protecting the hippos’ sensitive skin from overexposure to the sun.
Scientists are now working on the chemistry of the red (or *hipposudoric acid*), and the orange (or *norhipposudoric acid*) to see if products can be made from synthetic pigments which can be used as anti-bacterial and anti-UV preparations for human use.

There was much that was of wonderment to the medieval mind and since cotton was a finer version of the fleece that travelers were familiar with, the *borametz* was as good as explanation as any. Scientists are discovering that there is still much to wonder at and investigate in our own world. There are animal crackers out there just waiting to be revealed!

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