

The World's Most Familiar Unfamiliar Snake

By Frederick Boyce

Ironically, the world's most familiar snake is not likely to be that familiar to most people, especially outside of Europe. *Zamenis longissimus* is a rather ordinary-looking and nondescript type of ratsnake native to much of central and eastern Europe, occurring from the Spanish Pyrenees across France to Switzerland and Austria, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, and down the Balkan Peninsula to Greece and Asia Minor. Isolated populations are found in western Germany, Turkey and Iran, and the snake has been accidentally introduced in Wales.

Juveniles have handsome yellow markings on the sides of the head, but the overall color is normally a drab olive-bronze or greenish-brown, sometimes

black, with very little in the way of a distinctive pattern other than small white flecks on the edges of the scales that give these snakes a speckled appearance. Like our own native ratsnakes, they can grow to be rather long, up to about two meters (6.5 feet), and they are excellent climbers, often ascending to the upper canopies of trees where they remain unseen.

While most people have never seen one in its natural habitat, and likely wouldn't recognize it if they did, these snakes are nonetheless a common sight on any given day, almost anywhere in the world. You may have

seen one on your last visit to the doctor's office, or hiding somewhere in your medicine cabinet, or on the back doors of the ambulance in front of you on your way to work. If you are



Juvenile Aesculapian snake, *Zamenis longissimus*, a personal pet of the author—Photo by Fred Boyce



Aesculapius with his daughter, Hygieia, the Greek goddess of health, and their pet snake.—Public Domain Image

Aesculapius (or Asclepius). His mortal mother, Coronis, was killed by his father, Apollo, upon discovering that she was pregnant, but overcome by remorse after placing her body on a funeral pyre, he leapt into the flames and cut the baby from her womb with his sword, performing what is said to have been the first Cesarean section. Apollo then gave the baby to the centaur Chiron to raise.

The Staff of Aesculapius—a rough-hewn branch around which was entwined a single snake, later became his symbol. Different (but equally unlikely) stories describe the origin of Aesculapius' association with snakes. In one story, a serpent was said to have whispered the secrets of healing into his ear, though another maintains that he was given instruction in the healing arts by his foster father, Chiron. In another account, Asclepius killed a snake and then watched as a second snake revived it with medicinal herbs, which Asclepius then used to revive a dead man.

For hundreds of years, the cult of Asclepius maintained healing temples, called Asclepeions, where Aesculapian snakes were allowed to roam freely. Fever patients were often covered in the snakes to cool them down. Hippocrates, known as the Father of Western Medicine, received his training in an Asclepeion on the island of Kos, off the coast of Turkey, and the names of Asclepius and two of his daughters appear in the text of the Hippocratic Oath, which begins: "I swear by Apollo the physician, and Aesculapius the surgeon, as well as Hygieia and Panacea . . ."

Whereas the Staff of Aesculapius with its single snake is the true symbol of the medical arts, it is often confused with the caduceus, the winged staff of Hermes (or Mercury), the messenger of the gods. The caduceus, or "herald's wand,"

a medical professional, you almost certainly have one on your diploma, or perhaps wear one pinned to your lapel. That's right—we are talking about that familiar snake on a stick, the international symbol of medicine.

Few people realize that this symbol is based upon an actual living snake, but it is. *Zamenis longissimus*, commonly known as the Aesculapian snake, was closely associated with Asklepios, the Greek god of medicine and healing, who also goes by his Roman name

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