

Paul's attack by a snake on Malta

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WHEN THE APOSTLE Paul suffered the shock of the snake attack, as outlined in Acts 28:3-6, the language used tells us what type of snake it was, for we are told that it fastened on his hand. Most snakes, apart from spitting snakes and constricting snakes, strike very fast. On average the speed of a strike from start to bite is no more than $\frac{1}{5}$ second. The snake then returns to the strike position or retreats.

The brown snake found in Australia (see picture) is a very fast and highly venomous snake. Its tongue, visible in the picture, is not employed in the bite but is a sensory organ used for sampling the air. It performs a similar function to our nostrils, giving the snake information on its surroundings. It is the fangs, situated at the top of its mouth and to the front, and hollow like hypodermic syringes, which are used to inject venom into the prey.

Most biting snakes are equipped with these long hollow fangs. However, some species have only short fangs located towards the back of the mouth, which have grooves down the outside of the fangs where the venom runs. These snakes bite and hang on while chewing at their prey, creating a small wound into which the venom is gradually worked, giving the victim time to shake it off. We are told that the snake that attacked Paul fastened onto his hand, suggesting that it was of this short-fanged variety, thus allowing him the opportunity to shake off the animal into the fire.

It is not possible to identify with any certainty the species of snake that attacked Paul. Most translations use the name 'viper', but the Greek *echidna* is probably a generic term for any poisonous snake, according to Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*. There are reported to be four species of snake currently found in Malta,¹ although there may well have been others in the past.

The report of a recent field study of Maltese snakes and reptiles² mentions that three of the participants actually suffered long, chewing bites on the hand by an Algerian Whip Snake, and suffered no harm apart from slight swelling of the



Picture: Ed Wright

Australian brown snake.

lymph glands in the armpit. It may be significant that the text in Acts 28 does not actually say that a miracle occurred to spare Paul the effects of the snakebite, although this may have been inferred from Jesus' promise to the apostles that they would be able to handle serpents unharmed (Mk. 16:18; Lk. 10:19). However, the islanders certainly thought they had witnessed a miracle.

There are, in fact, many superstitions surrounding snakes, and they were once considered agents of judgement, hence the natives' initial conclusion that Paul must be a murderer. Among many Maltese traditions about Paul is one that claims that he removed the venom from all poisonous snakes on the island in gratitude for his kind treatment!³ Fortunately the preaching of the gospel by Paul, accompanied by many miracles of healing (Acts 28:8,9), ensured that at least some of the inhabitants of Malta were turned from such superstitions to the worship of the true God.

1. The Western Whip Snake, Algerian Whip Snake, Leopard Snake and Cat Snake.
2. To be found at www.hylawerkgroep.be/jeroen/index.php?id=38. The report is in English with lavish photographs, including one of a snakebite.
3. See www.aboutmalta.com/grazio/paulinetraditions.html.