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Natternzungen-Kredenz: tableware for the Renaissance nobility

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Fossil sharks' teeth might seem unusual objects to grace the tables of European nobility. Not just decorative items, they were esteemed as essential, highly functional items; in an age when poisoning was a common tool to despatch one's enemies, glossopetrae *(tonguestones) were the ultimate vouchsafe of culinary safety.*

Sharks produce teeth in a conveyor-belt-like fashion throughout their life. Amongst the most collectible are those of large predators like *Carcharocles megalodon*. This huge extinct relative of the Great White Shark preyed on whales, and is found in rocks ranging from 28 to 1.5 million years old. Large (up to 15 cm high) triangular specimens with serrated margins, together with smaller blade- and sword-like specimens from other species, were collected from Palaeolithic times onward.

Pliny (died 79 AD) called them *glossopetrae* (tonguestones) and described them as falling from the sky during a lunar eclipse. He recorded that they were used to 'appease winds' – the digestive variety, rather than the meteorological!

Their use as an antivenin relied upon sympathetic magic; the shapes of the objects determined their use. Georgius Agricola (1494-1555) remarked that his specimens were more like the tongue of a woodpecker than a human tongue, and that the Germans called them *Schlangenzungen* (serpents' tongues), and *Natternzungen* (adders' tongues).

Whilst any fossil shark's tooth could theoretically be useful in detecting poison, Maltese specimens were universally acknowledged as the best, and a lively export trade was established with the apothecaries and jewellers of Europe. This relates back to the Biblical account of St Paul being bitten by an adder in a woodpile, after being shipwrecked on the Maltese coast (Acts 28:1-6).

Fig 1. *Natternzungen-Kredenz (IV 108) by kind permission of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden.*

Local legend recounts that Paul rid the island of all venomous reptiles, and that representations of his tongue appeared in the rocks as *Ilsien San Pawl* (St Paul's tongues). They were integrated into Maltese folk medicine, being reputed to ease cramp and childbirth, and to be effective against diseases caused by magic. A number of handbills were published from the 16th century onwards proclaiming the virtues of *Ilsien San Pawl* when worn as a pendant or bracelet, and closing with stern warnings against frauds. In 1565, Conrad Gesner devised a test by which to distinguish genuine *glossopetrae* from the 'teeth of the still existing monsters' (i.e. modern Great White Sharks) which were substitutes. A fine thread should be very carefully wound around the stone so that none of its surface was eventually visible, but the string circuits should never overlap each other. The object was then laid in hoar frost. The genuine article could be distinguished from the fake by the thread becoming damp.

Several reactions were reported when the stone came near poison. The Sloane Lapidary (late 16th century) reports that it sweats, whilst other sources say that it changes colour. Virtually all sources agree that the tonguestone is eminently reliable, should be mounted and, in the words of the Sloane Lapidary 'set in silver, both for kings [&] lords at their meate, so yt they mey be kept ye safer from poison.' Aldrovandus (1648) cautioned users of *glossopetrae* that the stones would 'sweat' if exposed to the steam from hot food, whether or not poison was present.

Regularly cited in papal and noblemens' inventories from the 13th to the 15th century, in four spectacular cases of survival they form part of an ornate item of tableware. A favourite means of despatching an enemy during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was to poison their food or drink, usually with arsenical compounds which were soluble and tasteless. The nobility were particularly fearful as banquets provided ample opportunities for would-be assassins, as they were crowded, busy and noisy places.

Fig 2. *Natternzungen-Kredenz (K-037) by kind permission of the Schatzkammer und Museum in Vienna.*

Tasters were therefore employed to sample the food at side tables before it was conducted to the main table ready for consumption by the dignitaries. The side tables therefore were a comfort to the guests as they indicated that their health was being taken seriously. These items of furniture were called *credenzas*, 'credence tables', referring to the fact that if the food passed muster here, it was believed (Medieval Latin: *credentia*) to be free of poison. A household official, the *Credentarius* (trusted person), rather than an expendable minion, sampled the food and, in turn, fed some to the household dogs.

The *Natternzungenbaum* ('adder's tongue tree'; *languier* in French) offered a third line of defence. Standing on the *credenza*, it was dressed with fossil shark's tooth amulets in order to detect poison, and all the regulations for the Table Ceremonial demanded their use from the 15th to the 18th century. The amulets were suspended from a central tree-like structure, ready for picking and dipping into the wine before it was drunk. If the tooth did not undergo a colour change on being extracted from the wine, the beverage was safe to drink.

The *Natternzungen-Kredenz* in the Green Room of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden is crafted in the form of a Tree of Jesse (fig 1). The silver base has Jesse, the father of David and hence ancestor of Jesus, reclining at the base of a tree and flanked by a snake. The branches

of the silver tree give way to a profuse foliage of serrated leaves. Six long pedicels then emerge through the canopy, each terminating in a drooping flower from which an *Isurus* (a variety of mako shark) tooth is suspended. The baby Jesus lies in the lap of Mary at the crown of the tree. She is leaning against a large specimen of *Carcharocles megalodon*.

The treasury of the German Order in Vienna houses a 32 cm high coral tree with 14 *megalodon* teeth hanging from the branches (fig 2). The tree dates from the period 1400-1540 and may have been commissioned by Kaiser Frederick III from Nuremberg in 1453. The base and pedestal are both made of silver gilt. The coral itself, as well as providing a convenient frame from which to hang the shark's tooth amulets, was believed to respond to poisons by changing colour. One mid-16th century writer records himself as a witness to the paling of red coral if ever the wearer was ill, threatened by severe illness, or had taken poison. A second coral tree, lacking the suspended sharks' teeth, is recorded in the Treasury of the Cathedral Museum at Mdina in Malta.

The fourth and final *Natternzungenbaum* known is kept in the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna. Fashioned in Germany during the 15th century it stands on a petaloid base, with a long stem decorated half way up with leaves leading to a crown of silver flowers surmounted by a goblet ornamented with topaz. Fossil sharks' teeth are mounted in the corolla of each flower, projecting radially from the central stand (fig 3). Being fixed, rather than suspended as amulets, it is likely that these teeth would have been examined for sweating and colour change, as noted above, in the presence of poison, rather than being dipped into the wine.

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Fig 3. *Natternzungen-Kredenz (KK 89) by kind permission of the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna.*