

History of the tooth worm

This is one chapter of the Encyclopedia of the History of Dentistry.

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Abstract

The earliest written record related to teeth relates to the “tooth worm”.

Keywords: caries, tooth decay, tooth worm, toothache, superstition

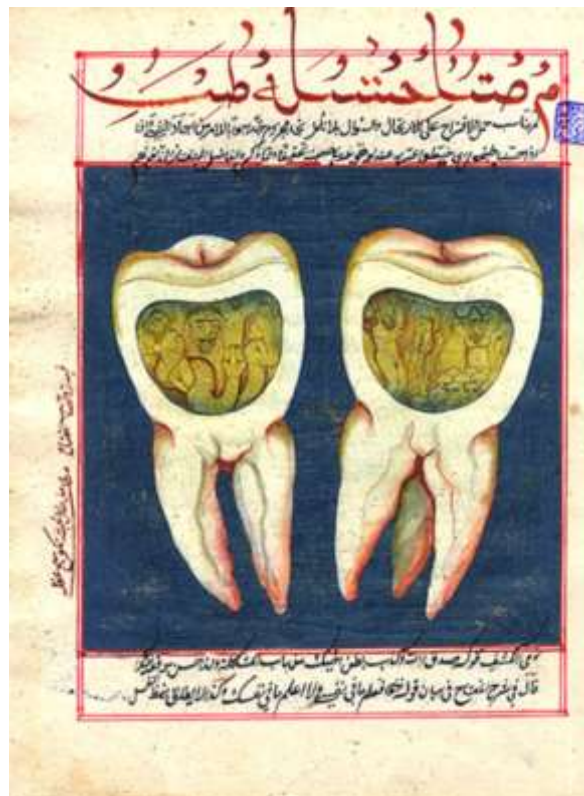
The earliest written record related to teeth relates to the “tooth worm”. It was an Assyro-Babylonian clay tablet with a cuneiform inscription found by Henry Layard dating to 3,000 BCE. The legend of the *tooth worm* was thought to cause tooth decay, dental pain, and the tormentor of humanity. An 18th-century representation of the tooth worm affecting the tooth shows an image from Hell (Figure).

To combat the *tooth worm*, a highly poisonous plant root, *Hyoscyamus nigra* (henbane), was employed to fumigate the tooth to lessen the suffering (1). The concept of the tooth worm also appeared in ancient Chinese and Indian cultures. Even Ambroise Paré, the great surgeon of four French Kings, believed in the tooth worm and used acid or hot iron cauterization to remove the damaged area of the tooth in the hope of stopping the progress of tooth decay. Pierre Fauchard, the 18th-century French surgeon dentist and the *Father of Dentistry*, suggested gargling with freshly collected urine to reduce tooth decay.

Medieval Anglo-Saxon Medicine also mentions tooth worms as the cause of toothache (3), as other cultures also thought as the explanation. The idea of a tooth worm persisted well into the 18th century until Jacob Christian Schaffer (2), a German botanist, disproved them. His book was *The Imaginary Worms in Teeth, with the presumed means of dispensing them*. The concept persisted well into the early 20th century, and removing it required fumigation, oaths, or magical spells (4). A detailed overview of the story of the tooth worm is found in Ref. #5.

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1. Figure. 18th-century hand-illustrated page from an Ottoman Turk dental book representing the toothache caused by tooth worms. (Image in the public domain)

