

# **Unusual stones**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes four kinds of stones: bezoars, mustika pearls, snakestones, and thunderstones. All are unusual in regard to their actual or supposed origin, and some have mystical powers ascribed to them.

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# Unusual stones

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La Bale carefully unfolded the cloth to reveal two crystals nestled inside. They appeared to be nothing other than common quartz. “Are these valuable?” he asked. I politely told him I didn’t think so, and he put the crystals away. As I look back on this incident, I realize I had missed a valuable opportunity. *I’m* the one who should have been asking *him* the questions.

This paper<sup>1</sup> describes four kinds of stones: bezoars, mustika pearls, snakestones, and thunderstones. All are unusual in regard to their actual or supposed origin, and some have mystical powers ascribed to them. Investigating local people’s beliefs about these and perhaps other stones could prove interesting from both a lexicographical and an ethnographical perspective.

## Bezoars

*We opened the seal that we had killed, and  
we found several large stones in the stomach,  
as big as a fist and very smooth.*

Andres de Urdaneta  
*Narrative of the Loaysa Expedition*

*Buntat hendak jadi gemala.*

The gallstone desires to become a bezoar.

Malay proverb  
meaning to have grandiose pretensions

A bezoar (pronounced BEE-zor or BEE-zowr, the last syllable rhyming with ‘sore’ or ‘sower,’ ultimately from Persian *pâd* ‘protecting’ + *zahr* ‘poison’), also called an enterolith, is a kind of stony concretion found in the stomach (usual) or intestines (less usual) of larger animals such as deer, goats and cows.<sup>2</sup> Bezoars are formed similarly to pearls in an oyster: layers of calcium and other gastric compounds are deposited around an

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<sup>1</sup> This paper originated from a running email conversation which I had with Michael Martens. I would also like to thank René van den Berg for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Technically, a bezoar found in the digestive tract is a gastric bezoar. A bezoar found in the gall bladder is a biliary bezoar, or better known as a gallstone (Malay *batu empedu*). Sometimes on the internet gastric bezoars are incorrectly referred to as ‘gallstones.’

Under certain medical conditions gastric bezoars can also develop in humans, for example when the stomach doesn’t empty properly, or if a person—usually mentally disturbed—is given to ingesting foreign objects.

object such as a hairball or undigested vegetable matter. Depending on the type of animal, some bezoars may grow as large as several inches.



horse bezoars, a.k.a. equine enteroliths

photo courtesy of Steinbeck Country Equine Clinic, <http://www.steinbeckequine.com/>; used by permission.

In Indonesian a bezoar can be referred to as a *buntat* (any common bezoar or gallstone, lacking in value) or (*batu*) *gemala* or (*batu*) *kemala* (for more valuable kinds). The latter terms are from Sanskrit *kamala* ‘rose-colored.’ The semantic pathway seems to have been rose-colored > carbuncle (a deep red gem, such as garnet) > jewel > bezoar (Gonda 1952:555), cf. Modern Javanese *kumala* ‘jewel, diamond’ from the same source. As noted in the following account, some bezoars were once considered very valuable:

“The term bezoar comes from the Arabic *badzahr* or the Persian *pahdzahr*, both of which mean ‘antidote’ or ‘counter-poison.’ Bezoars occur most commonly in ruminant animals, and the original bezoars were found in the fourth stomach of a Syrian goat [*Capra hircus mambrica*]. The first reports of bezoars date from the 12th century BC. A great deal of mysticism was associated with bezoars. They were thought to be universal remedies and were used to treat poisons and venoms, leprosy, old age, epilepsy, dysentery, and the plague. Bezoars were highly prized in the Middle Ages and were commonly set in gold and decorated with jewels. They were carried as charms or ground into powder and taken internally. A bezoar-stone, which was set in gold, was included in an inventory of the Crown Jewels of Queen Elizabeth I, which attested to their popularity with English royalty. Because of the scarcity of ‘true’ bezoars (those from the Syrian goat), bezoars from other animals were used, and at the height of their popularity in the Middle Ages, counterfeit bezoars were produced. Tests were even devised by which true bezoars could be distinguished from counterfeit ones.” from:

[http://www.ddc.musc.edu/ddc\\_pro/pro\\_development/case\\_studies/case040.htm](http://www.ddc.musc.edu/ddc_pro/pro_development/case_studies/case040.htm)

In some places in Indonesia, such bezoar stones were included among the *harta pusaka*, the holy or benefit-bearing heirlooms passed down from generation to generation. Pretty amazing for something which could have started out as a hairball.

## Mustika pearls

*They have also wilde Kine in this countrey,  
in the heads of whom they finde stones,  
which are of vertue to bring good hap and  
fortune to Merchants.*

Samuel Purchas  
*Hakluytus Posthumus, Volume X*

I haven't yet found the term 'mustika' or 'mustika pearl' in any English dictionary, but you can find it on the internet. The word comes from Javanese *mustika*<sup>3</sup> or Malay *mustika*, *mastika*, *mestika* (according to *Kamus Besar*, the last of these is the 'proper' spelling). Mustika pearls are magical stones which are often thought to originate from inside of living things, and thus include bezoars. The first definition given to *mestika* in *Kamus Besar* is *batu hablur yg sakti (terdapat dl kepala ular, teripang, dsb)*. The word *mestika* comes from Sanskrit *sphaṭika* 'crystal, quartz.'

Calling something a mustika pearl emphasizes its spiritual, mystical power. In English the term 'bezoar' is used even by medical professionals, while the term 'mustika pearl' is apparently used only by people who also believe in healing crystals and who spell magick with a '-k' (and, I suppose, also by hucksters: I have seen some mustika pearls priced at over US\$300). They can also be named instead after their actual or fabled place of origin, thus boar pearl, elephant pearl, monkey pearl, fish pearl, sea cucumber pearl, whale pearl, conch pearl, snake pearl, cobra pearl (Indian: *naga mani*), dragon pearl; but there are also stones called bamboo pearls, honey pearls, cloud pearls and dew pearls. Some mustika pearls are translucent and crystal-like, others are not.<sup>4</sup> As you can imagine, some of these are indeed bezoars; others are obviously not. Regarding Indonesian equivalents of the above, I have seen in print only *mestika gamat* (from sea cucumber), *mestika embun* (large crystal, said to be able to revive the dead), and *mestika delima* (perhaps named after the color, *delima* = pomegranate).

If you thought that the mysticism associated with bezoars was dead, read the following:

“Magickal Mustika pearls or Bezoar stones are formed in the body of an animal or plant by an elemental spirit that has made its home there. They are rare and only found in wild places of high elemental energy. The elemental spirit will have found an affinity with a particular animal or plant, in much the same way a shaman does, and will then form a symbiotic relationship with its host. The elemental will live in the animal or plant for

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<sup>3</sup> With dot below the *t*, indicating retroflexion; today sometimes spelled instead *musthika* (Robson and Wibisono 2002).

<sup>4</sup> To see what some mustika pearls look like, try [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine\\_Pearls](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine_Pearls) the 'nine pearls' from Indian Vedic texts; and <http://www.bezoarmustikapearls.com/index.html> mustika pearls from literally A (anteater, areca palm) to Z (zebra, zalacca palm).

many years, and its presence gradually forms the Mustika Pearls.” from:  
<http://www.manizone.co.uk/magickal-pearls-a-53.html>

Hmm, no mention of hairballs ...

“Snake and dragon pearls in particular, are the treasures of the Naga beings, the Draconic Lords—the preservers of the dharma and esoteric doctrine of the Ages. To paraphrase a biblical text, when two or more pearls are gathered together for a certain spiritual objective, there the supreme intelligence will create a focus and appoint or re-appoint spiritual guardians to oversee their preservation and their harmonious radiations all over the site of their installation.” from:  
<http://www.articlemonk.com/Article/Magickal-Shrines-of-Mustika-Pearls/11176>

And you thought you already knew what Matthew 18:20 meant. It just goes to show that sometimes old ideas don't really die, they just get reborn under a new name.

Probably in our own dictionary work, we should avoid the term ‘mustika pearl’ as an English definition, or at least further define it. As an example, note how David Andersen has defined *montia* (sense 1) in his Moronene dictionary:

**montia** *n.* 1. precious stone from living thing, sometimes with magical powers; *mustika, batu ajaib dari mahluk hidup.* 2. jewel; *permata.*

## Snakestones

*Apa nak takut ular belerang,  
 Guliga ada di tangan kami.  
 Why fear the dreaded sea snake?  
 We have the snakestone in hand.*

from a Malay pantun

A stone which is believed to have the specific power of curing snake bites (e.g. usually by pressing the stone against the location of the bite) can be called a ‘snakestone’ in English or a *guliga* (or *batu guliga*) in Malay. However, both of these words have other meanings, therefore if you use either term in your dictionary be sure and further define it. Malay *guliga* (from Sanskrit *gulikā* ‘ball, globule, pearl, pill’) can also refer to any bezoar (read: mustika pearl) with supposed healing or curative powers, or loosely to bezoars in general, or even to glass beads (Wilkinson 1959:s.v.). In English, the term ‘snakestone’ has also been used to refer to the spiral-shaped fossils of ammonites, the name being applied

because to Medieval Europeans these ‘unusual stones’ gave the impression of a coiled snake.<sup>5</sup>

As for snakestones which can cure snake bites, there is no one description of what they look like. Some say it is black and white, others picture translucent yellow, while yet others say chalky/calciferous. A common thread in most tales, however, is that you must obtain a snakestone from snakes themselves.

## Thunderstones

*Are there no stones in heaven  
But what serve for thunder?*

William Shakespeare  
*Othello*, Act 5, Scene 2

A thunderstone is a kind of rock which is thought to originate from or be the physical manifestation of a lightning strike. *Webster’s Unabridged* defines thunderstone as: 1. a rounded stone, fossil, prehistoric implement, etc. formerly thought to have been hurled to earth by lightning and thunder; 2. a belemnite. In case you were wondering, a belemnite is a pointed, cigar-shaped fossil shell of an extinct kind of cuttlefish.<sup>6</sup>

I assume the Indonesian term for thunderstone is *batu petir*. However, *Kamus Besar* defines *batu petir* as *batu yg menyerupai mata kapak* ‘a stone resembling the blade of an axe.’ Another name encountered in the Indonesian context is *gigi guntur*, literally ‘thunder teeth,’ so-named because of their wedge-shaped appearance (Van Limburg Brouwer 1868:67). Adriani (1928:64) reports a parallel term from the Pamona area of Central Sulawesi, *ngisi berese*, which he identified as a belemnite. However, no fossils were described among the nineteenth-century collection of thunderstones at the Ethnology Museum in Batavia, and it appears that, apart from a few ‘natural stones,’ the majority could be identified as remnants of neolithic implements (Van Limburg Brouwer 1868:84 ff.).

So, in areas where I’ve worked in Sulawesi, what shape exactly are the objects which people call thunderstones? From a Dutch source, I have learned the Mori term for ‘thunderstone’: *kilowu*. And at one point in a folktale one of the characters—a monkey—stuffs a *kilowu* in his mouth. While that gives me a general idea of the size, I’ve never actually seen a thunderstone, nor have I ever asked about shape or composition. For the interim, rather than concentrate on shape I have defined Mori *kilowu* as: *batu petir, sj batu yg dianggap berasal dr petir*.

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<sup>5</sup> For pictures of ammonites and to explore myths and folklore surrounding these and other fossils with colloquial names such as ‘toadstones,’ ‘snakestones,’ ‘devil’s toenails,’ ‘shepherd’s crowns,’ ‘thunderstones’ and ‘fairy loaves,’ see the “Fossil Folklore” site <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/earth/fossils/fossil-folklore/index.htm> maintained by the Natural History Museum of London.

<sup>6</sup> See the preceding footnote.

Is it possible that there could actually be a kind of stone formed by a lightning strike? Well, my son Jonathan and I both remember watching a TV program where they showed that if lightning strikes sand, it can turn it into glass. There was even an artist who lived near the shore, and he would place lightning rods in the beach during inclement weather, hoping for just such a strike. He'd use the twisty, fantastic glass in his artwork. But that doesn't sound like a thunderstone as defined in *Webster's* or *Kamus Besar*.

Are mystical powers ascribed to thunderstones? Or is this simply a way to 'explain' the origin of certain stone artifacts or fossils? I have no idea what Mori people's conceptions are regarding thunderstones. But if another opportunity to find out arises, I'll not let it slip through my fingers again.

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