
MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY

PART I: "DEN SESTEN BELOVIC TE SINE VAN SERPENTEN MET VENINE.

(Jacob van Maerlant, *Der Naturen Bloeme*
(vs 127-128)

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INTRODUCTION

At the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague under the pressmark KA XVI, fol. 121r-128r a famous handwriting is kept of a ditto medieval author, Jacob van Maerlant. About 1266 Van Maerlant, who lived from about 1220 until 1300, wrote a very extensive work, a kind of encyclopedia about nature, in which he has tried to record all that was known in those days about people, quadrupeds, birds, aquatic animals, reptiles, insects, trees, herbs, stones, metals, etc. He called his book "Der Naturen Bloeme", meaning as much as "the flower of Nature", "flower" being "the best" of nature, first rate. In order to realize this immense work he had diligently drawn what some illustrious predecessors had collected in the course of the centuries. The result is a kind of compilation of all the consulted works, although he is most obliged to Thomas van Cantimpré, whose *De Naturis Rerum* forms a solid base for Van Maerlant's impressive work. Reading the medieval work, two things are striking. First of all that in those days (and also long

afterwards) contrary to present opinions plagiarizing was not a doubtful occupation. By no means: by drawing on work of his predecessors you got a reliable base for your own work and some authority of the source reflected on you. Mentioning names such as Thomas van Cantimpré, Pliny, Homer, Cicero and Seneca for example, happens then with a certain pride: Van Maerlant is in intellectual company and he thinks that this is not the worst company. There is another thing that is strange, in view of present opinions, Van Maerlant tells sheer nonsense as being the truth. That has to do with the authority principal of books in his days. What was in a book, was per definition true. And "true" should not be understood as "according to the truth" but more "probalde", or also taken as a "moral truth": the way the writer told it things might have been so. Because of this prevailing principal at the age of Van Maerlant nobody thought of controlling the information in books. That is why he, on authority of others whose information was "sacred", told stories about snakes of which we think: if he had checked the information of his source, it would have been belied. Because Van Maerlant did not do so, we get little critical information of herpetological knowledge of the thirteenth century. But this information is however very amusing to read. And that is why I want to make the readers of the *Litteratura Serpentium* acquainted with the sixth volume by Van Maerlant "Der Naturen Bloeme", of which he promises "te sine van serpente met venine" (to be with the venomous serpents).

SOMETHING ABOUT MIDDLE DUTCH

In the Middle Ages and even long afterwards there was no homonized spelling. The handful of people that could read and write did this mainly in Latin or in their own dialect. Besides, Middle Dutch

syntaxis deviates from the present one. Certain grammatical constructions in Van Maerlant's writing are quite the contrary to what we say nowadays. Anyone making an effort to read the cited Middle Dutch verses, might profit by the following tips:

* read the lines aloud; like reading a dialect you will understand Middle Dutch better when you hear what has been written.

* the spelling is very inconsistent; every time and again you find proclitic and enclitic words, which means that words that are not stressed easily melt together with the previous or next stressed words. For instance: "hem leghet *therte*" (verse 6) = dat hert; "XXX ribben heeft *tserpent*" (verse 17) = "dat serpent"; "Wijn hebben si lief, ende daer mede *vaetmense*" (verse 23-24) = "vangt men ze."

* Where *sc* is written, *sch...* is meant: "gescepen" (verse 8) = "geschapen".

* In the Middle Ages one had not yet thought of writing long sounds in enclosed syllables with two identical vowels. One of the three ways to indicate that a sound should be long is regularly shown in Van Maerlant's writing: he puts after the vowel that should be lengthened an *e*. For instance: "Haer" (verse 5) = haar, "Oec" (verse 13) = ook etc.

* In Middle Dutch things like cases did exist. Any knowledge of German cases is quite useful when reading the cited verses.

VAN MAERLANT'S SIXTH VOLUME

Van Maerlant has divided his sixth volume into a general part about snakes and a part of some special species. My first contribution is about a fragment of his general part.

Aristoteles die seghet,

*Dat gheen serpent te hebben en pleghet
Hoeden, en ware dat sijn saet
Na der vische maniere gaet.*

(vs 1-4).

Van Maerlant first consults the famous Aristotle, who lived from 384 to 322 Before Christ and who among others achieved much in the field of Biology. On authority of this Greek philosopher he tells his medieval readers that snakes do not know any fertilization (keep eggs in a warm place after fertilization). In view of this proviso it may seem that he distinguishes between snakes who do fertilize their eggs "the way fishes do" and snakes who do not. It remains uncertain to what extent Van Maerlant hints at snakes being oviparous or ovoviparous.

*5 Haer tonghen swart ende lanc ghespleten.
Hem leghet therte, wilhi weten,
Recht na den halse, inder maniere
Ghescepen dat es ene niere.*

(vs 5-8)

Again on the authority of Aristotle Van Maerlant writes that snakes have black and long split tongues. The heart, which has the form of a kidney, is right behind the neck.

*Groete serpente hebben alle
10 Op die levere die galle;
Den clene, dat es haer pleghen,
Es sie op enen daerm ghelegen.*

(vs 9-12)

The external differences great and small of Van Maerlant after Aristotle were sufficient to make internal anatomic differences, the large animals have the gall next to the liver, the small ones next to some intestine. Leaving undecided what

exactly is a large and a small snake.

*Oec werd weder siende tserpent
Ist datment maect blent.
15 Ist datmen hem den staert ofslaet,
Hi wast als hem die tijd vortgaet.
(vs 13-16)*

Now we come to the extra-ordinary feats of Medieval snakes. Van Maerlant tells as if it were true that a snake, which has been blinded, can later regain sight. There are indications, which will be continued in this series, that might have more than one meaning, the eyes getting misty just before sloughing. But that is something that a snake causes itself, where as in *Der Naturen Bloeme* a snake is said to be made blind. As Van Maerlant lopped all snakes, lizards and amphibians together, it is no wonder, that the characteristics of the above mentioned animals got interchanged. A characteristic of the lizard, namely the ability to grow its tail again, is here ascribed to "de serpentes" (the serpent), so also to snakes. This animals tail grows again when it has been cut off.

*XXX ribben heeft tserpent,
Ende daer si noten, dats bekent,
So vaste cleven si te samen
20 Alst een ware, daer twe hoofde uut quamen.
(vs 17-20)*

In the Middle Ages one counted that a snake had thirty ribs. The mating ("noten", verse 18) struck the people then as the pair being one snake with two heads.

*Vleesch ende gras eten si ghemene,
Lettel drinken si ende clene;
Wijn hebben si lief, ende daer mede
Vaetmense in menigher stede.*

(vs 21-24)

In the Middle Ages snakes were omnivorous, because they ate both meat and grass. (See for "omnivore" snakes: Van Woerkom 1980, Bruyndonckx 1985). Furthermore is those days they were modest drinkers, who -however- were very fond of wine, for it was with wine that they had themselves caught at quite a lot of places.

25 *Sine pissen groet noch clene,
Want sine hebben blase negheene.
Oec smelten si utermate clene,
Na dat si grote sijn ghemene.*
(vs 25-28)

Urinating is omitted, for snakes have no bladder as Aristotle had already discovered. The verb "smelten" (vers 27) means as much as: "produce motions", or mayby have more applying.: "to this (sic) to have motion", "dunnen (sic) afgang hebben" (Middelnederlandsch Handwoordenboek). So Van Maerlant says: actually in proportion to their length, they produce little faeces. Up till now van Maerlant has consulted Aristotle; he concludes with a number of verses for which he for information turned to Pliny and others.

REFERENCES

For this article I have made use of books, which are of little interest for herpetologists, for they have more to do with Van Maerlant as a medieval author than with the subject he wrote about in his sixth volume of *Der Naturen Bloeme*. I restrict this list of references to those relevant for herpetologists.

Bruyndonckx, H., Herbivore *Thamnophis*?

Litt. Serp. V 1980, 71-72.

Maerlant, Jacob van, Der Naturen Bloeme.
Ed. Dr. E. Verwijs, Leiden 1878.
Ongewijzigde herdruk 1980.

Woerkom, A. van, Fruitetende slangen.
Litt. Serp. I 1980, 139-142.

The facsimiles of Van Maerlant's Der Naturen Bloeme are photocopy of his handwriting kindly handed to me by the "Koninklijke Bibliotheek" at the Haque, where the handwriting is kept under the pressmark KA XVI.

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