
MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY.

PART VI: "NU HOERT VAN DER B HIER NA".

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Contents: Introduction - "Si verswelgen in sommige steden enen hert of ene coe" - "Berus dats een serpent" - References.



Foto 1: Boa, v. Maerlant, folio 122.

INTRODUCTION

Van Maerlant presents two more serpents beginning with 'B'. Apparently both are without any problem: Boa and Berus. The adverb "apparently" has been used intentionally, for there is a snag in it. The Boa is a south american snake and it seems to be

unlikely that Boas would have been introduced to Europe by 1270. Nevertheless the description given by Van Maerlant points to *Boa constrictor*: the animal is said to be large and incredibly strong. However, Van Maerlant gives a geographical indication in verse 212: this medieval *Boa* lives in Calabren and in Van Maerlants age this name could only indicate the Italian Calabria, the foot region of the Italian boot. This implies that it can not be *Boa*.

Another possibility was suggested by mr. Anton van Woerkom. He suggests the following: there is a Python (which is a boid snake) called *Calabaria reinhardti*, the Calabar ground python. Calaber is a harbour city in Nigeria, near to the Cameroun border. This area forms part of the distribution of some large Pythons which "comply with" the descriptions given by Van Maerlant. Verse 239 even mentions Africa as an area of distribution of this snake. *Calabaria reinhardti* does not fit Van Maerlants description, but *Python sebae*, which can reach up to six meters and even more, does. Perhaps the first possibility is not the worst, although it is necessary to make a comment and a reservation. It is difficult to forget our twentieth century scientific acquisitions for a while, but let us drop our contemporary *Boa* and Python. In *The Bestiary* from the twelfth century, which is edited by White, I found explicitly mentioned that in those days *Boa* was an Italian snake. Calabren could have been indeed the contemporary Calabria. Furthermore, White reports this so called *Boa* lived near cattle in order to do what Van Maerlant later describes in verses 215-217. In this case the name "*Boa*" or "*Bova*" can be explained from the Latin "*bos*", which means cow or ox (White, 1960, page 180). Against this theory is the fact that there is no Italian snake which reaches a size as suggested in this passage. And about this size, one cannot believe their eyes reading verse 241!

Not quite in alphabetical order Van Maerlant continues with Berus. Also in this case it is difficult to recognize a familiar snake because the description is very poor and this animal is not mentioned in other ancient sources from which I have read.

"SI VERSWELGEN IN SOMIGE STEDEN ENEN HERT
OF ENE COE"

*Boa dats een serpent
In Calabren bekent,
Also als ons Plinius seghet,
Dat hi harde groet te wassen pleghet.*
(vss. 211-214)

The Boa is a snake which is known in Calabria and which, according to Pliny, is pretty large. (How large we can read further on in this story.)

215 *Talreersten dats sijn doen,
Dat et suucht bufflen ende coen,
Ende wordt van hare melc si vet,
Dat et wast vele te bet,
Ende wordt so utermate groet,*
220 *Dat nieman en dar bestaen ter noet,
So dattet al verwoest die lande
Van creaturen menigherhande.*
(vss.215-222)

The first thing Boas do is to find a buffalo or cow to drink their milk and get so fat (which means: do oneself so well) that they grow enormously fast. This eating habit however, leads to the death of the cow (White, 1960, page 180). One can read about this prejudice, if I remember well, on the touring snake exhibition of mr. Walter Getreuer, who shows that the teeth of a snake make it absolutely impossible to suck from a cow.

So in this case, in a text of 1270, we find conception which is still vivid in our days and still needs correction!

Because the Boa drinks so much milk, it grows so large that nobody can resist it, which results in it devastating the entire country.

*Van ene serpente ghewassen dus
Scrivet ons sent Jeronimus,
225 Dat die goede Sinte Hilarioen
Dede ene hoep houts opclemmen doen,
Bi gods crachte, sonder andere maniere,
Ende verbernetse mit viere,
Om dats hem die lieden baden,
230 Diere mede waren verladen.
(vss. 223-230)*

After the "scientific" introduction Van Maerlant gets back to his, in our opinion, anecdotically slanted stories.

He tells us a story which he has copied from saint Jeronimus, whose real name is saint Hierony, who lived about 340 A.D. and who was a great translator and interpreter of the Bible. A legend shows us Saint Hierony as a great animal lover. One day a limping lion, which had one of its front legs injured with a thorn, came to his monastery. The saint took care of the injured lion and the beast became familiar with him and stayed in the monastery as his faithful companion. Well then, it is this saint Hierony who tells us something about Saint Hilarion, who also lived in the fourth century after Christ (about 291-371). It is a matter of common knowledge that this Hilarion consecrated Saint Martin as an exorcist, which leads to the assumption that Hilarion was an exorcist himself. This information corresponds fairly well with the following episode: once Hilarion let a Boa, with Gods help and nothing else, climb a stack of wood, where the Boa burned to death. Hilarion was asked

to do so by the people of a district which was bothered by the animal.

*Plinius scrivet al bloet
Datmen dit vint also groot,
Ende heilighe geesten scrivent mede,
Dat si verswelgen in sommige stede
235 Enen hert of ene coe
Met enen swelghen daer toe.
(vss 231-236)*

Once more Pliny writes, and in this case he is supported by holy authors, that one can find some Boas which are able to swallow an entire deer or cow in only one bite. The addition of "heilighe geesten" (verse 233) should be read as adstruction to the truth of this story: a heathen (= Pliny) can lie, but there are holy authors who write about it, so it must be true!

Dusteen serpent wast, als ic gome,
Dat wilen Regulus van Rome
In Africa slouch te doot,
240 Dat wast so utermate groet,
Dat C voete ende XX mede
Lanc was, scrijft die waerhede.
Men brochte te Rome sijn vel
Ende sine ribben also wel
245 Te sien doer die wonderlichede.
Ghelijc datmen wint ene stede
Moestmen dat dier bestaen,
Eerment mochte verslaen.
(vss. 237-248)

It must have been this kind of animal, Van Maerlant supposes, which Regul of Rome killed at the time in Africa. This must have happened in the third century before Christ, when Regul was consul of Rome. As a matter of fact he was in Africa during the first Punic War, and the Carthagians,

which failed. Perhaps the fighting of the Boa preceded this battle, which would give a reasonable explanation for the failure of the battle afterwards! After all, beating the Boa was not easy: the snake measured 120 foot, which is about 36 meters, as told according to the truth. His skin was brought to Rome, and his ribs. The beast had to be besieged like a town before it could be defeated.

Telling this anecdote I remember a similar story about an Anaconda, told by A. Abuys in his "Snakes of Surinam" (Litt. Serp., Abuys, 1982, page 1030), which shows that exaggerations are not restricted to the middle ages.

BERUS DATS EEN SERPENT

Berus dats een serpent.

*250 Experimentator die bekennt,
Dat et met wispelen die lampereide
Ut den watre loct op die heide,
Ende et dan met haer noet.*

(vss. 250-253)

"Berus, that is a snake" Van Maerlant tells us. A source, which cannot be identified, told Van Maerlant that Berus is a snake which allures by hissing (= wispelen) lampreys out of the water on to the heath. There are three kinds of lampreys:

a) the fresh-water lamprey (*Petromyzon fluviatilis*); b) the brook lamprey (*Petromyzon planeri*); c) the sea lamprey (*Petromyzon marinus*). It is a fish with a snake-like body and is not poisonous, in spite of a remark made by Van Maerlant further on. (About lampreys: Grzimek 1973, IV, page 31-45).

The lamprey has a mouth which is shaped to suck its prey and to drink its blood. When the berus succeeds in getting such a lamprey on land, it

will mate with the fish (noet, vs. 253 = mating).

*Dit es te wonderen harde groet,
Ende dicken ist also ghedaen,
Eer die lampereide conde ontgaen,
Dat sie wort ghevaen op tlant.*
(vss. 254-257)

This is very remarkable, Van Maerlant notices, and we readers living in the twentieth century, nod affirmatively. Often, continues Van Maerlant, the lamprey is caught before it can get back into the water.

*Bi deser reden es bekant,
Seghet dit waer ende Solijn,
260 Dat die lampereide draget venijn.*
(vss. 258-260)

This is the reason, which Solin keeps for the truth, that the lamprey is poisonous.

*Nemmeer hebbic name in B.
Hoert serpente namen in C.*
(vss. 261-262)

"I have no more names left beginning with the letter b"; Van Maerlant announces as he continues onto C. And so will I.

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