MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY, PART 11: 'VRESELIJK SERE ES DAT VENIJN'

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INTRODUCTION

Succesive mentions of unidentifiable or hard to identify snakes occur, namely the *pister, pareas* and *rucela.* The first and last names are unknown in for instance Grzimek; pareas and rucela are not mentioned in White. Perhaps they are snakes of the *Colubridae* subgenus *Pareinae.* Grzimek knows *Pareas carinatus*, a snail eating snake which lives on some Indonesian islands (Grzimek, 1973, p. 454 and 486, map). And again the question is whether Maerlant (and before him elder authors like Aristotle, Plinius and others) could have been familiar with this Asian snail eater, in view of the geographic site of the snake's bitope. It is also possible that Topsell gives enough details to allow a firm identification of *Pareas.*

UTER KELEN GAET HEM ROEC

Pister sprect Jacobe van Vetri,
Ende Solinus die meester vri,
Es een serpent dat talre stonde
Gapende gaet metten monde,
Ende uter kelen gaet hem roec.
So wien dit wonder bijt oec,
Die swellet ende schijnt in de ghebare,
Al of hi vol waters ware,
Ende moet also bliven doet,
Hine hebbe triacle ter noet.
(vss. 563-572)

About pister Jacobus van Vitry and Solinus tell us, that this is a snake that keeps his mouth permanently widely opened while smoke is coming out. Bitten by this animal, one swells up and starts looking as if one is full of water. And death is inevitable, unless one has the right antidote. These same facts on pister or prester we find in White (White, 1960, p. 175).

Topsell (Topsell, 1608, pp. 214-216) confirms what Maerlant says on prester, but gives some more information. He remarks that there are some authors who believe dipsas and prester are the same genus (Van der Voort, 1990, pp. 96-97), but that other authors make a distinction: the venom of dipsas causing dipsomania, which leads to death (see appendix A), whereas the venom of prester causes an enormous body heat. Some people believe that these were the snakes by which the Jews were bitten in the desert as punishment by Jahwe.

As a matter of fact Maerlant does not mention the antidote which one should use, Topsell does. The medicine against the venom of pister or prester are the flowers and stems of a wild herb, *Portulaca grandiflora*. Another helpful medicine was oil, driven out of the testicles of a beaver (the so called castoreum), mixed with opponax (whatever that may be) and the herb *Ruta graveolens* in wine, in which a sprat *(Sprattus sprattus)* had died.

It was the Roman historian Lucan who gave a full report on the effects of a bite by the prester. His story is written down in appendix B.

VRESELIJC SERE ES DAT VENIJN

Pareas, als ons doet verstaen
Ysidorus ende Lucaen,
Es een serpent dat sine vaert
Ende sine ganc heeft achterwaert:
Dat es die nature sijn.
Vreselijc sere es dat venijn.
Van der P vindic nemme voert,
Hier coemt in R een serpents woert.
(vss. 573-580)

Both Lucanus and Isidore of Sevilla tell that pareas is a snake that moves backwards. It is just the reptiles nature. The venoms effect is really terrible.

This last remark of Maerlant is denied by Topsell. In his bestarium he counts the pareas among the harmless snakes. He writes that this snake lives in the east. And there they are the only harmless snakes. They have a yellowish colour, looking like gold, and measure about four span (which is about 80 cm). On each side they have two lines, which begin about a hand wide from the head and end at the tip of the tail. Topsell proves that this snake is innocent by referring to a story of a man, who keeps this snake in his hand, without dying on the spot. Of course, this does not prove the remark that this snake moves backwards (Topsell, p. 203).

It is a temptation to try to identify the so called pareas from Topsell's description. But I must confess that my herpetological knowledge is limited, and therefore I am grateful for everyone who has a better solution. The indication of the four lines on the side of the snake seems very important.

In Trutnau (Trutnau, 1988, p. 189) I found *Elaphe quadrivirgata*, a japanese ratsnake, which - according to its length and colour - has more right to claim to be the pareas than *Elaphe quatorlineata*, which is darker of colour and longer than Topsells's description of the pareas. On the other hand, it seems unlikely that Maerlants earlier colleagues already were familiar with Japanese snakes, for instance *Elaphe quadrivirgata*. *Elaphe quatorlineata*, which lives in south-east Europe and Western Asia is a more likely candidate. I am waiting for any other suggestion.

Maerlant has no other snakes starting with P left, and continues with a last animal for this moment. This one starts with R.

DAT APOTECARISE VAEN

Rucela dats een serpent,
Datmen vint in Orient.
Aristoteles te wetene doet,
Dat nuttelic es ende sere goet,

Want hi doet ons verstaen,
Dat apotecarise vaen,
Ende houdent in hare apoteken.
Met crude, die si daer toe reken,
Maken si van hem specie diere,
Nuttelic van menegher maniere.
Nemmeer sone vandic des,
Hoert voert serpente namen in S.
(vss. 581-592)

Rucela is a snake that lives in the east. According to Aristotle this snake is very useful, as chemists caught and kept these animals in their shops. And here Maerlant mentions explicitly, what he mentioned before about aspis implicitly (Van der Voort, 1989, p. 159). Prepeared with herbs this snake makes an excellent medicine against all kinds of diseases.

Maerlant has no snakes left starting with a R. He continues with salamandra, and so will I in a next episode on medieval herpetology.

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APPENDIX A

Lucan gives a description of the consequences of a dipsas bite (Lucan, 1988, book IX, p. 561):

So Aulus, a standard-bearer of Etruskan blood, trod on a dipsas, and it drew back his head and bit him. He had hardly any pain or feeling of the bite; the mere appearance of the deadly wound was innocent, nor did the injury threaten any consequences. But lo! the hidden venom rises; devouring flame catches hold of the marrow and kindles the inmost parts with destroying fire. The poison dried up the moisture that surrounds the vital organs, and began to consume the tongue in the parched mouth; no sweat was left to run down over the suffering limbs, and the flow of tears deserted the eyes. The man was on fire; and neither national pride nor the authority of grief-stricken Cato could stop him: boldly he threw down the standard and searched

everywhere in his frenzy for the water which the thirsty poison at his hart demanded. If he were plunged into the Tanais, The Rhone, or the Po, he would go on burning, or if he drank of the Nile when it floods the fields. But Libya made death more deadly; and the dipsas, when aided by the heat of that country, deservers less fame for its powers of destruction. Aulus searches for water deep down in the barren sand, and then returns to the Syrtes, and swallows the brine; the sea-water gives him pleasure, but there is not enough of it. The nature of his suffering and his death by poison were unperceived by him: he tought it was merely thirst, and ventured to open his swollen veins with his sword, and fill his mouth with the blood.

APPENDIX B

Lucan gives a description of the consequences of a pister bite (Lucan, 1988, book IX, p. 565):

But lo! a form of death is seen, the opposite to death by piquefaction. Nasidius, once a tiller of Marsian soil, was smitten by a burning prester. His face grwe fiery red, and swelling distended the skin till all shape was lost and all features were confounded; then, as the strong poison spread, the hurt, larger than the whole body or than any human body, was blown out over all the limbs; the man himself was buried deep within his bloated frame, nor could his breast-plate contain the growth of his swollen chest. The foaming cloud of steam pours forth less strongly from a heated caldron; and smaller are the curves of bellying sails in a tempest. The distended limbs can no longer be contained by the body, a round and featureless mass with no distinct parts. The body remained untouched by the beaks of birds, and menaced death to wild beasts that feasted on it; the soldiers deared not consign it to a pyre, but fled from it, leaving it still swelling, with a growth not yet arrested.

N.B.: it is strange that Nausidius has been poisoned, because he was a member of the Marsi tribe. The Marsi had an interesting way in handling venomous animals. See my future article about Herpetology of the Antiquity.