

MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY, PART 13

ETS TRAGHER DAN MEN VINT IET EL

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STELLIO

- Stellio, scrivet Ysidorus,
Es bedi gheheten dus,*
635 *Om dat es al oppenbare,
Ghelijc dat ghesterret ware.
So waer tscorpioen dit siet
Ist vervaert ende vliet.
Sijn venijn es van fellen doene,*
640 *Maer dat vleesch van den scorpioene
Ghewreven ende daer toe ghebonden
Gheneset in corten stonden.
Stellio verdrongen in wine,
Ende ghedwaghen daarmede tanscine,*
645 *Doet die lelike sproeten ofgaen,
Als ons meesters doen verstaen.*
(vss 633-646)

TRANSLATION

According to Isidorus stellio is called stellio, for this animal is clearly star-spangled. When a scorpion sees a stellio it becomes scared and runs away. Stellio's venom is very malicious but if you rub the flesh of a scorpion and put it on the wound you will soon be cured. Scientists tell us that washing one's face with wine in which a stellio was drowned will remove dirty freckles.

COMMENTARY

In English this animal might be called a star-lizard, although Grzimek does not know this kind of reptile. In *De Animalibus*, written by the famous German scientist Albertus Magnus the stellio is also mentioned. It is Albertus Magnus too who gives an indication that the stellio and the salamander are often confused (Orbàn, 1985, page 228). Nevertheless we do not find references to the salamander. It has its own peculiarities.

Topsell mentions the stellio explicitly under the four-footed serpents. He deals with the stellio in detail, but Maerlant gives us too little startingpoints with his unobtrusive contribution. White stresses that the star drawings are on stellio's back (White, 1960, page 185).

SCAURA

- Scaura draghet oec venijn.
Jacob seghet ende Solijn,
Alst oud es dat et wort blent;*
650 *Ende alst sine faute kent,
Soectet enen wech daer een gat staet,
Datten oesten heine gaet.
Daer statet voren ende siet,
Alse die sonne risen pliet,*
655 *Ende verniewet eer iet lanc
Sijn sien an der sonnen ganc.
Mensche, al bistu worden blent,
Kere dijn herte in orient,
Daer die fraie sonne riset:*
660 *Al bistu leec, du worts ghewiset.
Du sout van hem ontfaen dijn lecht,
Die niemen en doet onrecht.
(vss 647-662)*

TRANSLATION

Like the stellio scaura is a venomous animal. Jacob of Vitry and Solinus say this snake becomes blind when it grows old. If the scaura notices this lack it looks for a hole in a wall which overlooks the East. In front of this hole the scaura waits until the sun rises. The sunlight gives back her eye-sight. Man, although you have become blind, look to the East where the sun rises. Although you are a layman you wil get the light from Him Who never does a person wrong.

COMMENTARY

Topsell does not mention the scaura, neither does White. Te Winkel says that with the scaura the sunlizard is meant, *Scaura heliace*, an animal which is originally mentioned in *The Physiologus* (Te Winkel, 1979, page 485).

In version Y of the Latin *Physiologus*, one of the earliest translations of the original Greek pendant, *Scaura heliace* is mentioned as number 49 (McCulloch, 1960, page 22 and 26). The Greek *Physiologus* knows this lizard as numer 2 (Seel, 1960, pag. 4). Grzimek's reference book neither knows the scientific nor the vulgarized name given by Te Winkel.

In the verzes 657-662 Maerlant ventures upon a moralising level as happens continually in *The Physiologus*, the first source.

SITULA

- Situla draghet venijn,
Als ons seghet Jacob ende Solijn.*
- 665 *Een serpent ist ne buere groet.
Dient steect hi blijft van derste doet.
Ets tragher dan men vint iet el,
Maer et heeft so scone een vel,
Dat et den lieden doet stille staen,*
- 670 *Diet sien so schone zonder waen.
Dus houd staende met sire ghedane
Die niet vervolghen mach met gane.
So heet ist dat et te wintere wel,
Alst somer ware, ofdoet sijn vel.*
- 675 *Wien soet steket, hine van verwinnen,
Hine blivet doet van droechten binnen.*
(vss 663-676)

TRANSLATION

Situla is venomous say Jacob of Vitry and Solinus. It is not a very large snake. But being bitten by a situla you will die of thirst. Situla is slower than any other animal but she has such a beautiful skin that people who see her stop in admiration. This way the snake holds up men she would not be able to pursue because of her slowness. This animal is so hot that she sloughs in winter as though it were summertime. The one who is bitten by a situla undoubtedly dies as he dries up internally.

COMMENTARY

White calls the situla *scitalis*, which is derived from the Latin *scitulus* meaning 'elegant.' For Topsell (Topsell, 1973, page 48) situla is a variety on the dipsas (about this snake, Van der Voort, 1990, page 96-97).

Unwillingly one would associate the short, subjective description of this snake with the appearance of the *Elaphe situla*, the leopard snake. Grzimek calls this animal for instance the most beautiful European snake having modest proportions: length up to at most 1 meter (Grzimek 1972, page 480).

A contra-indication for the identification of the medieval situla as being the contemporary leopard snake is the fact that the last is not venomous at all. Neither is its slowness so clear that it meets the requirements of vers 667, although I have to add Trutnau's remark about *Elaphe situla*: 'Sie bewegt sich nicht flink' - she does not move fast (Trutnau, 1988, page 198).

Besides, more than once it has become clear that medieval names are still used in modern herpetology, but some of them have come undone from their old owners (White, 1960, pag. 185, note).

Topsell, however, has given a lot of information about the connection between the dipsas and the situla (not to be found in 'Medieval Herpetology, part 8,' but extensively discussed in my integral and extremely enlarged *Medieval Herpetology*, a future Dutch edition in 1993). Because of the terrible effects of the situla's venom Topsell has pointed out that it is very inviting to think

that the situla is rather more a cobra specimen than an elaphe one. Further research might make things more clear.

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