

MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY, PART 16 HARE BETE ES SONDER GHENESEN

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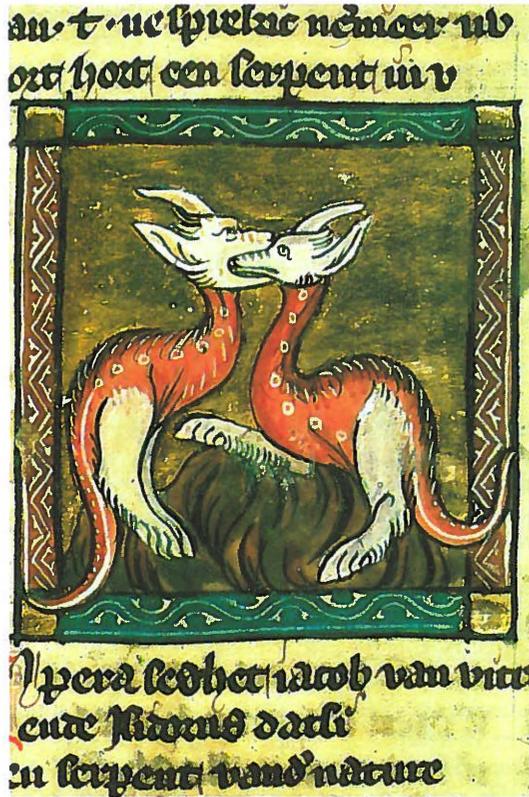


Foto 1: Vipera, van Maerlant, folio 128R.

VIPERA

*Vipera, seghet Jacob van Vetri
Ende Ysidorus, dat si
Een serpent van der nature,
Als noten sal dese creature,*

825 *Die soe gaept van groter hitte,
Ende die hie, die anesiet ditte,
Steect haer thovet in den mont,
Entie soe bitet of tier stont,
Ende si ontfact jonghen daer mede;*

- 830 *Ende alsi coemen te rijpheden,
Dan scoeren si der moeder siden,
Ende coemen voert in corten tiden.
Drie tanden vintmen in desen,
Ende hare bete es sonder ghenesen.*
- 835 *Haer inadre sijn goet ende sijn
Jeghen alre serpentes venijn,
Doet ons Plinius te weten wel.
Experimentator seght: harde wel,
Dat si ten saisoene ofdoet,*
- 840 *Es et an den oghen goet,
Ghesonden in goeden wine.
Haer smaer maect donker oghen fine.
Twi datse die moeder versliten,
Sprect Plinius in sinen viten.*
- 845 *Hi spreect dus in sine tale:
Vipera dreechter XX te male,
Ende worpt maer een daghes te samen,
So dat hem dandre vergramen,
Die binder moeder sijn besloten,*
- 850 *Ende scoeren met haren roten
Der moeder ontwe die siden,
Ende comen uut in corten tiden.
Lettel serpentes vintmen so fel,
Nochtan es sachter niet el*
- 855 *Jeghen die sie ghene hie,
Dit seghet sinte Baselius mi;
Want alsie es over enighe side,
Hi wispelt na haer ende es blide,
Als hise bevoelt bi hem sijn.*
- 860 *Dan spuwet hi uut sijn venijn,
Ende ontfact met groter minne
Sine lieve veinoetinne.
Onsalech dorperre grongaert,
Scame di, dat du heves onwaerd*
- 865 *Sonder redene dijn wijf!
Lere an dit felle dier keytijf,
Dat sijn venijn van hem spuwet,
Alst hem an sijn ghenoeft vernuwet.
Laet varen dine felheit quaet,*
- 870 *Ende laet ute dinen quaden saet
Hoveschlike met bliden sinne,
Ende dele haer weder dine minne.
Hier endt der serpentes boec.
Haddicker in minen ondersoec*
- 875 *Meer vonden, ic hadse bescreven.
(vss 821-875)*

TRANSLATION

As Jacob of Vitry and Isidorus of Sevilla say, vipera is a snake which practises the following behavior when it mates: the female distends her mouth voluptuously and the male, seeing this puts his head in there. Next she bites off her partner's head, which achieves pregnancy in her. When the young snakes have grown they tear up their mother's belly and come out. Vipera has three teeth and her bite is deadly.

Pliny tells that the bowels of this animal are an effective medicin against every kind of snake poison. As Experimentator says, the periodical sloughing of the vipera, if boiled in good wine, is beneficent for the eyes. Viper's fat even cures blindness. Pliny explains in his books why the young ones tear up their mother: the vipera bears twenty youngs, but she litters only one young a day. The other youngs, who are still in the belly of the mother, are very angry about that and they all tear up the mother and come out rapidly.

Only less snakes are as malicious as the vipera says Holy Basileus (who lived 330-379 A.D.; author of a book about the six days of creation of the world). Nevertheless the male is very tender for his wife. If she is in another place, he whistles and he is very glad if he sees she returns to him. He vomits his venom and gives his beloved wife a warm reception.

Bloody country bumpkin, be ashamed because you disdain your wife without any reason. Take an example by this malicious beast, you cur, that vomits his venom when making love to his wife, get rid of your malignity, keep your rascals and share your happiness with her.

Here ends the book of serpents. If I had found more of them I would have given more descriptions.

COMMENTARY

It is a strange way of mating, of which Maerlant informs us in vers 824. Topsell gives information about empirical research into this strange matter. Scientists wanted to know exactly the truth about the viper's copulation and caught males as well as females of this species. They put the snakes in a vivarium and observations proved next that vipers copulate in the same way other animals do. Neither the male, nor the female got any injury by that (Topsell, 1973, pag. 294).

Because snakes cannot tear up their prey they have to swallow it in one large piece. Perhaps it once has happened, that someone has observed that a snake was eaten by another snake. This could happen because both snakes had started to eat a different side of the same prey. Next the largest snake, most of the time the female, has eaten her species fellow as well as the prey. The snakes allaying their hunger, wrongly inspired an observer to a copulation.

Not only the viper's mating stimulated the imagination of the ancient and medieval scientists. So did the strange delivery of the female and their have been made remarkable statements about this matter too. This rather improbable procedure annoyed Topsell as much as the bizarre copulation of the vipera. He spends an extensive research to the delivery of this animal and makes the following conclusions: Aristotle has already observed that young vipers can be born in a membrane which they can tear up already in the female's belly. It is Pliny who is responsible for the misunderstanding that the juveniles eat themselves out of the belly and for the fairy tale that only one young a day was born. Topsell translates the Greek of Aristotle as follows: *she bringeth forth every one in one day, and shee bringeth forth more then twentie*. He gives an interpretation of it as he thinks it is Aristotle's meaning:

a viper delivers twenty youngs one by one but all in one day. The viper does develop eggs in her body which you can see when you make a post mortem in a dead species.

EPILOGUE

In a rash moment in 1988 I thought it would be nice to translate the sixth book of Maerlant's *Der Naturen Bloeme* from the medieval Dutch. I had not been a snake keeper for a long time and Maerlant seemed to make it possible to combine my new interest in snakes with my professional love for the medieval literature.

In retrospect I have thought about this all very easily. I could not foresee at all that medieval herpetology was so interdisciplinary, implied such a scale of angles of incidence, would lead me from Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. to June 1992, to a last contribution in *Litteratura Serpantium* by Ton Steehouder.

My first intention was to give a translation of Maerlant's 875 rimes in pairs. 'Some commentary' (because I was a starting herpetologist) I wanted to give at those verses which would stay difficult without that commentary. At this very moment I realise, although I have given more than 'some commentary', that I still have given too less information to say: Maerlant's snake book is in a filological as well as in a herpetological sense explained efficaciously.

On the contrary. The filological aspects has stayed limited and of the 35 serpents Maerlant has described quite a lot kept its problematic identity. Besides, not all serpents which were recognizable or have become so have abandoned all the mysteries. Indeed there were some cases that might have got a 'natural explanation' for their wonderful herpetological qualities. For example there was the strange long distance weapon of the basiliscus; the power of snakes to kill flying birds; the strange fertilization and delivery of the female vipera and so on. But in many other cases I have found no satisfying explanation. I am still fascinated by flying dracos. So does the large variety in this species. And how is to explain the temporary vomiting of poison when a snake goes into the water? What is true about the antidotes Maerlant gives us against snake bites? Maerlant has kept alive the mysterie of milk drinking snakes too.

A great stumbling-block for identifying the snakes dealt with is the fact that Maerlant has used names for his snakes which are nowadays unknown, have got out of use or in the meantime have been given to reptiles which cannot be meant by him for sure. Defiant is the problem of the descriptions of the bestiary authors of the dryine, dipsas, situla, hidra, chersydrus and chelidrus.

The two other old bestiaries I have consulted - those of White and Topsell - corresponded to Maerlant's information many times. Besides they gave surprising supplements. I think it will be possible to identify more ancient snakes if more contemporaine bestiaries are drawn into research.

It is inevitable: copying and translating authoritative sources for centuries must have had bad consequences for the contents. Many copyists for example will only from their layer have got the knowledge about the animals they did not know at all and of which the descriptions defied their imagination. If the beasts really lookde like the way they were described, why should not their remarkable qualities also be true? In the extreme this all was also in force perhaps for the illustrators of the manuscripts who had to visualise the descriptions and who have come by doing so to the strangest portraits.

As far as I know there has not yet taken place a profound comparison between *Der Naturen Bloeme* and Maerlant's Latin source *De Naturis rerum* by Thomas of Cantimpré, of whose *magnus opum* I - alas - do not know the contents. That is why I cannot say a pregnant

word about for example the possibility that translation mistakes are the cause that Maerlant describes serpents which are hardly or not at all to determinate. How intricate things can be when an author copies or translates his source shows Gerritsen (Gerritsen, 1968). Besides it might be so, that Thomas, who based himself on famous predecessors too, had already mistakes in his bestiary which Maerlant in his turn translated correctly and forced the knowledge in the shackles of poetry. I wonder if the last fact - the necessity of rhyming - has contributed to an inadequate reproduction of the herpetological information.

In the meantime Maerlant stays fascinating. We should like to know more about appearance, behavior, distribution areas, poisonousness of the snakes of that time and the consequences of their bites. The problem is, that it is hardly to guess in how far distribution areas in what time exactly were known to the generally known world. I assume it is also important to compare the brief symptom descriptions of the bestiary authors with the knowledge about that of our days. It is worth trying to determinate ancient snakes in this way.

Topsell states in his bestiary more than once that he empirical established that snakes were not rare at all in England. This remark from 1608 is in accordance with information of ancient sources in which sometimes is told about snake plagues. Although this last fact is not to be pursued, the herpetological situation of our days contrasts violently with the ancient one: in no time an enormous destruction of important areas for beasts in general takes place all over the world - a destruction which is disastrous for snakes in particular: they love a hidden an undisturbed way of live. Besides snakes are - simply by the fact they are snakes - rooted out without grace. For a point of view of our century concerning the viper, see the disgusting articles Ton Steehouder collected (Steehouder, 1986). Alas it is not likely this situation will change in a short time.

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