



ABOUT SNAKES AND PARRICIDES

Herpetological gatherings, part 6

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Not expecting to find anything of a herpetological nature I sat myself to the *Annales*, written by the Roman historian Tacitus (55-118 AD). After a short while I came upon an intriguing note (passage IV 29) which described the punishment for parricides. It explained that anyone that had committed such a crime was punished by first being lashed with a whip after which he was put in a leather bag together with a dog, a cock, a viper and a monkey and thrown into the sea (also see Supplement).

This explanation was satisfactory as far as the concept of fathermurder (called *parricide* by the ancient Romans) was concerned but it didn't explain why the animals should also become the victim of a *parricida* (= the parricide).

The explanation of this phenomenon is very interesting and I am happy that I am able to report it, thanks to the friendly cooperation of some readers of the magazine for classicists *Hermeneus* in which I had asked for some more information. Their suggestions put me on the track of a famous speech by the Roman rhetor Cicero on which Dr. C. Landgraf has published a almost as famous comment (Landgraf 1914, 145-151).

In this comment I found more than one explanation for the presence of animals mentioned above.

Initially, the simultaneous execution of the dog, the cock, the viper and the monkey was explained by the fact that the dog was despised by the Greeks and the Romans alike. The dog had failed as a guard during the battle of the Romans against the Gaul. The latter had almost been able to conquer the last stronghold of Rome, the Capitol, if it had not been for the geese also present at the Capitol.

In those days the cock was seen as a cruel animal which was also scrupulous towards his family. From the classic literature examples are known in which sons excuse the beating of their fathers by referring to the cock. The viper was thought to be born at the expense of its mother. At that time she the object of a nice fable: the Greek historian Herodotus (485-425 or 420 BC) described how peculiar the conception and delivery of the viper took place:

But it is so, that when they unite in pairs, and when the male is about to ejaculate, the female will grab the neck of the male when he loses his sperm. She won't let go before she has completely bitten off his head. The male dies this way but the female must pay as follow: The young take revenge on the female by biting their way out of the womb and through her intestines (Herodotus, III, 109)

A few centuries later the Roman writer Plinius (23-79 AD) will confirm this belief in his *Naturalis Historian*.

In the 13th century it was the Flemish author Jacob van Maerlant, who extensively described this strange mating in his nature encyclopedia *Der naturen bloeme*. This mating had to take place this way, because it was believed that the size of the cloaca of the female was the size of the eye of a needle. Therefore, the conception could not take place in the usual way (Boese 1973, 291; Van der Voort 1993, 135-139). These opinions would hold until the 17th century. The magnificent works of Topsell, 'History of Serpents' (1608, reprint 1973) still quotes them.

The monkey had the unfortunate luck to be considered a bad caricature of man. However, further clues are missing.

According to Landgraf, this specific punishment for patricide was also known outside Greece and Rome (supposedly the Germans also used this punishment). Furthermore this form of execution was also known for mothers who had killed their own child and its origin lies further back in the past.

Also not always all four animals would be involved. Furthermore, from the old days other punishments for humans are known in which animals were executed the same time.

For example the Germanic would hang a criminal as a sacrifice to the god Wodan to reconcile the crime. To make the offer more attractive for the god Wodan, they executed two wolves, Wodan's favourite animals, at the same time. The tree which was used for the hanging (the gallows was of a later time) was called the *Wargtree* or wolves tree. If ravens, Wodan's birds, pitched out the eyes of the hanged criminal it was considered a sign that the sacrifice was accepted (Lulofs 1983, 246).

Although all of this appears to be a reasonable expla-

nation for this bizarre form of execution, Landgraf further explores his beliefs that an explanation should not only be sought in ancient Greek or Roman culture. When he also includes the cultural history of the Indogermanic people, he comes across some interesting alternatives opinions.

In the Zoroaster religion, both the cock and the dog are sacred animals. The dog because he is the guardian of the house, the cock because he is the announcer of the break of dawn and, with his crows, scares away the evil spirits of the night. The drowning of the dog and cock together with the parricide happens in the assumption that the cleaning power of the water is supplemented with the powers of the dog and cock as the conquerors of evil.

The dog and cock always appear together as do the viper and the monkey, with the latter two as representatives of evil. Together with the parricida sown in one bag, the four animals represents the struggle between good and evil.

■ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mr. M. Honig was so kind to send me the photocopies of Landgrafs comment on Cicero's speech. Dr. P. van Kempen-Van Dijk from Abcoude and mr. A. Kleywegt from Rotterdam I owe my gratitude for their additional literature and culture-literature references. Drs L. de Graaf supplied me with the reference to the surprising book of Saylor.

■ SUPPLEMENT

The Roman detective 'Roman blood' gives a detailed description and explanation of the execution of a parricide. I quote:

'When the crowd has gathered, the parricide is undressed, until he is as naked as on the day of his birth. Two low crutches are put down, a few footlengths from each other. The parricide is made to stand on them, one foot on each crutch. He must squat, with his hands tied behind his back. In this way every part of his body is accessible for his tortures which are obligated by the law to lash him with the whips with knots until his blood runs down his body like water. When he falls he will be forced to climb back on the crutches. The whips must come down on every part of his body, also under his soles and between his legs. The blood that flows from his body is the same blood which ran through the veins of his father who gave him his life. While he sees the blood running out of his wounds, he can think about its shedding.

A bag will be taken, made of pelts and sewed so strong that no air or water can get through and large enough to hold a human body. When the tortures are finished with their whips and every part of his body is bleeding so strongly that one can no longer distinguish where the bleeding stops and raw flesh begins, the condemned is made to crawl into the sack. (.....)

In the sack the parricide is brought back into the womb, unborn. According to the philosophers it is a hard struggle to be born. To become unborn is an even harder struggle.

Four living animals are put in the sack with the wounded, bleeding body of the condemned. First of all a dog, the most slavishly and despicable animal, and a cock with its beak and claws sharpened. They are very old symbols: the dog and cock, the watchman and waker, the herdsman of the house; because they failed guarding the father they take his place with the father-murderer. Also a snake is added to the sack, the male principle that can both kill and give life, and a monkey

as the divine parody of man. (...)

Together the four together sealed into the sack and carried to the riverside. The sack may not be rolled or beaten with sticks because the animals must stay alive to torment the parricide as long as possible. While priests speak out the concluding curses, the sack is thrown into the Tiber. Watchmen are posted along the river till Ostia for if the sack gets stuck it should immediately be pushed back into the stream until it reaches the sea and disappears out of sight. The parricide destroys the roots of his own existence. He ends his life devoid of the elements that give life to the world: earth, air, water and even sunlight are denied to him in the last hours of his agony. Until the sack finally bursts and is swallowed by the sea so that the prize of Jupiter goes to Neptune and after that to Pluto, out of reach of love and the memory or even disgust of humanity.' (Saylor 1996, 63-64)

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Translated from Dutch by Paul Schooneveld