

AELIANUS



The Roman scientist Aelianus lived in the second century AD (160 – 230). He is the author of a book that, had it been published in English, probably would have been titled "On the peculiarities of animals".

The work consists of seventeen so-called books in which randomly all kinds of facts on many different animals are listed. Aelianus collected these facts from Greek scientists of which some, like the famous Aristoteles, had recorded personal observations of animals in the wild. Observation to which, over time, many strange notes were added.

*Also on snakes Aelianus had much to say. In the coming issues of *Litteratura Serpentiū* you may now and again find a small piece of information on snakes, taken from Aelianus. Particularly so whenever we need a small piece of text to fill a page.*

■ The land of Ethiopia (the place where the gods bathe, celebrated by Homer under the name of Ocean, is an excellent and desirable neighbour), this land, I say, is the mother of the very largest Serpents. For, you must know, they attain to a length of one hundred and eighty feet, and they are not called by the name of any species, but people say that they kill elephants, and these Serpents rival the longest-lived animals. Thus far the accounts from Ethiopia. But according to accounts from Phrygia there are Serpents in Phrygia too, and these grow to a length of sixty feet, and every day in midsummer some time after noon they creep out of their lairs. And on the banks of the river Rhyndacus while supporting part of their

coils on the ground, they raise all the rest of their body and, steadily and silently extending their neck, open their mouth and attract birds by their breath, as it were by a spell. And the birds descend, feathers and all, into their stomach, drawn in by the Serpents' breathing. And these singular practices they continue until sundown; next, the Serpents hide and lie in wait for the flocks, and as they return to the sheepfolds from the pasture they fall upon them, and after a terrible slaughter they have frequently killed the herdsmen as well, thus obtaining a generous and abundant feast.

■ The poison of serpents is a thing to be dreaded, but that of the Asp is far worse. Nor are remedies and antidotes easy to discover, however ingenious one may be at beguiling and dispelling acute pains. Yet after all there is in man also a certain mysterious poison, and this is how it has been discovered. If you capture a Viper and grasp its neck very firmly and with a strong hand, and then open its mouth and spit into it, the spittle slides down into its bell and spittle has so disastrous an effect upon it as to cause the Viper to rot away. From this you see how foul can be the bite of one man to another and as dangerous as the bite of any beast.

(For those who are interested in the works of Aelianus: all text is taken from 'Aelian, On the characteristics of animals', with an English translation by A. F. Scholfield. In three volumes. Loeb Classical Library. London. 1971 (I), 1969 (II), 1972 (III).)