
MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY; PART 2: PLINIUS DIE MAECT
ONS CONT.

By: Marcel van der Voort, Heerbaan 14, 5721 LS
Asten, The Netherlands.

Contents: Introduction - Plinius die maect ons
cont - References.

INTRODUCTION

In the first part of 'Medieval herpetology' only van Maerlant's introduction of the sixth volume was discussed, in which Aristotle tells us of his knowledge of snakes. This time, we are going to listen to Pliny. Pliny Major (the Elder) lived from 23 or 24 till 79 after Christ. Initially he was an officer in the Roman army, but during Nero's reign he devoted himself to literature.

He had a wide scientific interest, which in effect cost him his life; in 79 A.D. he hurried to the eruption of Vesuvius. He did not live to tell the tale.

Only one of his seven works has remained; his *Naturalis historia*, a work that reveals his wide scientific interest. It deals with geography, ethnology, anthropology, physiology, zoology, botany, mineralogy, metallurgy. Twenty thousand subjects are broached, for which Pliny consulted 473 authors. It is important for us to know, that his enormous love for natural science was inversely proportional to the accuracy with which he studied it: in his encyclopedian superficiality are many inaccuracies and he is rarely critical.

PLINIUS DIE MAECT ONS COUT

Plinius die maect ons cont,
30 *Als dat serpent enen man wont,*
Dat daerde selve wreeckt den man,
Want in haer et niet gheduren en can,
Ende moet sterven daerna saen.
(vss 29-33)

On authority of Pliny, Van Maerlant tells us that the snake itself can become the victim if it wounds man, for it cannot stay alive and soon dies, for a snake was the same as a bee, which after having stung, dies as well.

Elc serpent en mach verslaen
35 *Altoes maer enen man te samen,*
Sonder salamander bi namen.
(vss 34-36)

A snake can only kill one man; Pliny tells us, with exception of the salamander. The salamander however, -of which in the Middle Ages it was said that it could live in fire- would be able to kill more than one man at the same time. This implicates namely that the salamander in Van Maerlant's time still was grouped with the snakes and that it was poisonous.

Plinius spreect dat vander gallen
Dat venijn coemt hem allen.
(vss 37-38)

Apparently not much was known in the Middle Ages about the toxic system of snakes. Pliny holds

the gall responsible for the poison, though accountable in many cases the gall is the cause of meat being denatured, when cleaning a butcher's beast the gall is damaged.

In den winter crupen si ghemene
40 *In aerde, in boemen ende in stenen;*
Metten lentine coemen si voert.
(vss 39-41)

Pliny was a better observer, when he wrote about the hibernating behaviour of (some) snakes: in winter they creep together under the ground, in trees, and under stones, in spring they come up again.

"In Yrlant, als men over waer hoert,
En mach altoes gheen serpent sijn,
Noch niet dat draghen mach venijn;
45 *Ja, Iertsche aerde vintmen hier,*
Werptmense op een ghevenijnt dier,
Weder et es clene of groet,
Et blivet op der stede doet."
(vss 42-48)

In this passage again we come across a typical example of medieval belief. Van Maerlant tells 'over waer' (being true) that there are no snakes in Ireland, nor any other poisonous animals. That there were no poisonous snakes in Ireland was due to the fact that the soil had a magic power: if Irish soil was thrown on a poisonous animal, it was killed on the spot, whether it was great or small.

Incidentally I note that in the Middle Ages one assumed that all snakes were poisonous. When discussing some individual kinds several clear examples turn up.

Van Maerlant continues with a historic incident

*"Dies leesmen dat wilen gheschiede
50 Tusschen den Inghelschen ende den Scotten
lieden*

*Ene werringhe op een eylant.
Die Yrsche hesceden te hant,
Datmen serpente in dat lant brochte.
Waer daer sulc dier dat leven mochte,
55 So soude dat lant der Scotten wesen,
Ende storven si, et bleve hem bi desen.
Men deet, ende die woerme storven:
Dus hebben die Yrsche tlant verworven."
(vss 49-58)*

"Once upon a time", Van Maerlant says, "there was a quarrel between the English and the Scottish about an island. If the snakes should stay alive, the island was for the Scotsmen, did they - however - die, it fell to the share of the Irish. And so they did. The snakes died and thus the island was for the Irish".

(N.B.: verse 50 is probably corrupt, for the English are mentioned and not the Irish. In another handwriting of *Der Naturen Bloeme* one speaks of "d'Ingelsce ende Hirce liede".

Up to now Van Maerlant has consulted Pliny. The last part of his general introduction has been based on some less illustrious authors. Together they will be my next subject.

REFERENCES

Maerlant, Jacob van, "Der Naturen Bloeme"
Ed. dr. E. Verwijs, 1878.
Herdruk 1980.

Translation: Antoinette van der Voort-Van den
Heuvel.