
MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY; PART IV: "NU HOERT VAN ELKEN
ALLENE, TEERST IN A.

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

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screven" - "Ausibena, als wijt horen" - References.



Foto 1: Aspis; v. Maerlant, folio 122.

INTRODUCTION

Van Maerlant ended his general introduction with the announcement that he will be dealing with a series of individual "serpents" in alphabetical order.

Although the word "serpents" means "snake" in Middle Dutch, it proves to have a wider range of

meanings in Antiquity and the Middle Ages and so with Van Maerlant. Namely, what follows is a colourful collection of amphibians, lizards, snakes and probably mythological animals too. His descriptions give us a fairly good idea of the state of affairs in the field of the then herpetological classification and nomenclature. The serpents Van Maerlant passes in review did not always get a clear name.

Actually it is often not obvious what animal is meant by the Latin name Van Maerlant used. The description following the name, does not help us any further either.

Sometimes we come across snakes that should originate from tropical areas when our contemporary snakes are meant. But Van Maerlant wrote his works in 1270!

VAN ENEN ASPIS ES BESCREVEN

To me it was so obvious to suppose that with *Aspis* the present-day asp viper was meant that I neglected to consider another possibility. After initially having omitted to do so, it turned out that a second interpretation, less problematic than my first supposition, is possible.

Thanks to P. Burger's information I can reveal that without any doubt by *Aspis* the *Ureus* snake, *Naja haje*, is meant, which is present in the area Van Maerlant mentions in verse 127, Egypt, an area where the 'asp viper' will not be found (Grzimek, 1973, page 510; Pauly V, 1975, page 14).

It is about the colour of this snake Van Maerlant starts his first individual snake in "A".

Aspis es een serpent ghedaen
Gheleu blaeu, hebbic verstaen.
(vss 97-98)

"The Aspis", Van Maeralant says, " is a snake which according to what I was told, looks yellowish blue".

This colour links to Pauly's description of the Ureus snake (Pauly, 14).

*Dient bijt, hi es metter doet ghemeene,
100 Maer met behendicheit niet clene
Belesement ende so begaet,
Dat sijn venijn niet en scaet,
Ende ment mach vanghen met ghemake.
(vss 99-103)*

Being bitten by an Aspis you normally die, but with enormous shrewdness you will be able to charm the snake. In this way you can achieve that the poison cannot come to any harm. Thereupon the snake can easily be caught.

Pauly (1975) records about this Aspis that in Egypt it was used as a painless execution of people. In a following contribution I will return to this subject.

*Dats om sonderlinghe sake,
105 Wantmen hem uten hoofde doet
Enen steen dier ende goet;
(vss 104-106)*

There is a remarkable reason for catching an Aspis, for you take from its head an expensive and useful stone.

For what purpose such a stone should be used Van Maerlant does not tell us here, but in another place in "Der Naturen Bloeme", in volume XII, he deals with (precious) stones. At the lemma "Jaspis" it says that the stone taken from an Aspis's head has a beneficial influence on many a man, without any further detail.

Precedingly Van Maerlant says that the same kind of stone can also be derived from a donkey, having

a special effect for instance as an antidote. Ameling (1978, page 102) also mentions the serpentine in his monography about the viper. Contrary to what Van Maerlant says (the stones are taken from the heads of the snakes) he says that long ago people were convinced that these stones were shaped by the poisonous saliva of a great number of poisonous snakes being intertwined on a suffocatingly hot summer's day. That wisdom emanates from Pliny.

In reality, Ameling continues, such a stone was a stone or a piece of glass with a specific kind of natural marking. The object was especially used as a panacea for snake bites. In case of a snake bite you had to press the stone at the bite in order to prevent nasty consequences. Later he remarked that long ago one took it for granted that such a Bezoar stone came from the head of a cobra.

Not only thin serpentine was used as medical therapy, but also the rest of the snake was eagerly used in the historical pharmacy.

Thus De Waal (1989) mentions that it appears from preserved bills of chemists that "Veneetse driakel" (Venetian theriac), craftly produced, was a favourite drug against all kinds of contagious diseases, especially against the plague. In addition to opium, this medicine also contained fresh viper meat.

The vipers that were privileged to serve the well-being of man in this way, were bred in the snake gardens of Venetian dispensers in order to have a fresh supply on hand at all times.

Viper meat obtained from Venice as "theriac" or "triakel", was a guarantee of this cure, which was originally an antidote for bites of poisonous animals. (At the risk of labouring the obvious: here it concerns the European viper and no longer the Egyptian cobra. See further, however, also a following article on the "Basilicus".)

*Maer nu es ene nature in desen,
Dat sere scalc es int belesen;
Want alst den toevenare verstaet,
110 Diet met sulken arte vaet,
So steectet in teen ore den staert,
Ende worpet tander nederwaert
Jeghen daerde, ende stopt sijn oren,
Also dat niet en mach hoeren.
(vss 107-114)*

At this point, namely on the point of being exorcized, Van Maerlant tells us that the *Aspis* is very shrewd. For if it hears the wizard (snake charmer), who wants to catch her with this kind of trick, it would put its tail in one ear and place the other on the ground, so it will not be able to hear anything.

Apparently the fact that snakes are deaf was not known in the Middle Ages!

*115 Solinus bescreven heeft
Dat elc met sinen noten levet;
Want als men slaet dat een doet,
Tander heeft den rouwe so groet,
Dat et navolghet den mordenare:
120 Hine stonde nemmer in sulker scare,
En sallen willen anevaerden:
Dat en latet om ghene vrese van swaerden.
Men cant hem oec beneemen niet,
Hine si vroet of hine ontvliet,
125 Hi sal hem emmer nemen tleven.
(vss 115-125)*

Solinus (circa 200 A.D., author of a geographical handbook with all kinds of things worth knowing, based on Pliny) wrote that an *aspis* lives together with his partner.

In those days that was a lasting and loyal bond. "For if you beat to death one of the couple, the other is so grieved that it pursuits the killer;

even if he stood in a group of people as large as possible the snake would attack him; and the animal could not be stopped by any sword. On authority of Solinus Van Maerlant continues: you cannot prevent it from doing so: however clever you are, you cannot escape, the snake will certainly take his (the killer's) life.

*Van enen aspis es bescreven,
Dat in Egipten wilen een man
Voer sinen tafle een voeden began,
So dat niemen en dede onsochte.
130 Te lesten dat twe jonghen brochte,
Ende een sijn jonc dode ghinder
Een van des goets mans kinder.
Als die moeder om tetene quam,
Ende si die misdaet vernam,
135 Scoerde si daer om haer kint ontwe,
Ende sine quam weder nemmermee.
(vss 126-136)*

"Once was written about an Aspsis", Van Maerlant says, "that there was a man in Egypt who fed it at his table, and never did anyone harm".

(Probably is meant that the man had the aspsis as a pet. That formerly this was not such a strange thing tot do Ameling shows on page 77 of his monography.)

At a given moment the animal gave birth to two off-spings and one of them killed one of this good man's children. When the mother-snake came to eat and discovered the felony she tore her child in two pieces and disappeared never to come back again.

*Na die maniere van everswine
Sijn ghescepen die tande sine.
(vs 137-138)*

"By the way," Van maerlant finally adds," the

teeth of an Aspis are like those of a wild boar".

AUSIBENA, ALS WIJT HOREN

Nowadays scholars assume that by this animal the *Amphisbaena* is meant (Burger, 1989).

We are dealing with the innocent wormlizard (Grzimek, 1973, page 402 ff.), an animal by which it is hard to make out head or tail.

A former supposition for this animal was the Indian sandboa or the two-headed snake, as it was also known, *Eryx johnnii* (White, 1960, page 179). It is, however, possible that Ausibena is a transcriber's slip of the pen and should be Anfibena: when copying books, as was done by monks in the old days, it regularly happened that certain characters were confused. It concerns for instance the characters *n* and *u* and *f* and *s*.

Of course exceptional animals can be created because of these mistakes. This might be the case here (Burger b, 1989).

Nevertheless, I will stick to the name Ausibena.

*Ausibena, als wijt horen,
140 Dat heeft staende een hovet voren
Ende een ander in den staert.
(vss 139-141)*

The Ausibena as we learn, has one head at the front and a second head at the tail, Van Maerlant tells us.

*Nu loeptet hare, nu dare waert,
Windende na spaeldrinx wise.
(vss 142-143)*

The Ausibena now goes here and then goes there, winding the way an eel does.

*Beide die hoofde nutten spise,
145 Beide striden si ende vechten.
(vss 144-145)*

Both Ausibena's heads take food, both heads fight
as well.

*Plinius horic berechten,
Dattet hem eerst na winter toghet,
Want et coude heeft ghedoghet.
Voer den cuchuut coemtet, dats waer.
(vss 146-149)*

From Pliny Van Maerlant learnt that the Ausibena
shows first after winter, as the animal can stand
the cold fairly well.
The Ausibena shows up before the cuckoo does.

*150 Sijn oghen sijn als dat vier claer.
Ic en vant nemmeer in A,
Nu hoert van der B hier na.
(vss 150-152)*

One final speciality of this remarkable animal is,
that the eyes are as clear as fire.
Now Van Maerlant has written himself out concern-
ing the Ausibena but also concerning the "Serpents
in A" and announces to go on with those "beginning
with B".
And that is also what I am going to do next time.

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