
MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY

PART 5: PLINIUS DIE MAECT ONS CONT.

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

N.B.: The correct caption of Photo 1 is:
Basiliscus, not Aspis.

INTRODUCTION

The first "serpent van der B" discussed by Van Maerlant, is a controversial animal. To illustrate the point: my Medieval Concise Dictionary gives as translation for "basilisk": kingsnake (a description that will prove to be more important than it seems to be at this moment); my edition of Van Dale, Dictionary of the Modern Dutch Language gives the definition of basilisk as follows: 1. fabulous animal, snake-dragon, according to the superstition so poisonous that even its look could kill somebody; 2. harmless tree-lizard in South-America and Asia. The Medieval and Modern Dutch dictionaries seem to contradict. A less than obvious interpretation is provided at the end of this article.

BASILISCUS IN LATIN ...

Basiliscus in Latijn
Es in Dietsche een kueninxkijn,
155 Ende ets oec coninc op allen venine.
(vss 153-155)

The creature, that is called "Basiliscus" in latin is called in Diets (= the language of the diet = the people, so: in the language that passed for Dutch at that time) a little king, and it is also the king of all poisonous animals, namely it surpasses all other animals with its potency of poison.

Dese aertsche plaghe pleght te sine
Halfs voets lanc, ghespekelt wit.
Op sijn hovet hevet hit
Spekelde in der ghebare
160 Als oft ene crone ware.
(vss 156-160)

The Medieval author only presents us with a brief description of the basilisk: he calls the creature a plague of the Earth, although it is only half a foot long and white spotted. On its head the creature has white spots arranged as if they form a crown. Mudde (1988) gives a description of a basilisk, namely *Basiliscus basiliscus barbouri*, that could have been the model for the animal that Van Maerlant means, only, this animal lives in South-America and was most probably unknown in this part of the world in that time.

*Alle serpente sijn voer hem bloed,
Want etse metten ademe doet;
Met opsiene doetet den man.*
(vss 161-163)

In spite of its small size, all other snakes fear the basilisk, because it kills them with its breath. It is also able to kill a human, just by looking at him ("opsiene"). While reading this statement of Van Maerlant, we should remember the first definition of Van Dale in his dictionary.

*Wie so andren teerst ghesien can,
165 Hi blivet doet, hoe dat si.
Dit scrivet Jacob van Vetri,
(vss 164-166)*

"The one who sees the other first, causes the other to remain dead". Van Maerlant has taken this statement from Jacobus van Vitry.

*Ende Plinius doet ons verstaen:
Niet allene maghet verslaen
Den Mensche, maer al dat levet
170 Ja tlant, daert sien wone hevet.*
(vss 167-170)

(Verses 169 and 170 are probably corrupt in the handwriting, so I have reproduced for these verses a variant of a probably more reliable handwriting). Pliny tells us that the basilisk can not only kill a human, but everything that lives, even the land on which it dwells. This last declaration, which is very unlikely, is explained with several examples, which are quite something:

*Sijn venijn doet oec uut ende uut
Verderven beide boem ende cruut
Ende al dat wast groet ende clene.
Et scoert, met sinen ademe stene,
175 Et venijnt die lucht oec mede.
Vlieght een voghel daer ter stede,
Hine mach niet min verdinghen,
Dan hem die vederen besinghen.
(vss 171-178)*

The poison of the basilisk is excessively harmful for trees as well as other plants, and furthermore for everything that grows, irrespective of whether it is big or small. It is even able to split rocks and to poison the air with its breath. When a bird flies above such a spot (where the basilisk breathes) it cannot escape from scorching its feathers.

*Sijn wispelen alle serpentes ontsien,
180 Ende alsijt vernemen, si vlien.
(vss 179-180)*

The hissing, spitting of the basilisk is feared by all snakes and when they hear it, they flee away (again Medieval snakes prove to have excellent auditory organs).

*Allene die wesele die verwinnet,
Want als men in dat lant bekinnet*

*In wat holen dat si wonen,
Comen die lieden metten ghoenen,
185 Met ruten al om behanghen,
Ende latense in die holen ganghen.
Daer bitet doet ter stede,
Ende dan moet hi selve sterven mede.
(vss 181-188)*

However, there is one animal that can defeat the basilisk, and that is the weasel. When people find out in which dens the basilisk lives, they go there with a weasel that has been decorated with common rue. Dressed up in this way the weasel is driven into the den of the basilisk, where he bites it to death. However, the result is that the weasel lays down its own life in exchange. Even after its death the basilisk remains a creature with great power.

*Nochtan doch dat et blijft doet,
190 Hem blivet nochtan macht so groet,
Waer soemen bestrijct ene masiere
Met pulvere van siere maniere,
Niet venijns en comter inne,
Noch oec selfs spinter an die spinne.
195 In Grieken, als wi horen spreken,
Es een monster daer mede bestreken.
(vss 189-196)*

Despite the fact that the basilisk is dead, its remains retain remarkable powers: when a wall is smeared with its dead body, no poison can penetrate through it, and even a spider cannot make a web against it. It is reported that in Greece a sanctuary was smeared with the entrails of a dead basilisk.

*Men seghet ons, en es gheen huus mede,
Esser een stic van sinen lede,
Die serpente en vlien dane.*

(vss 197-199)

Furthermore we read that snakes flee from a house if a part of a basilisk is kept inside.

*Men seghet ons, en es gheen huus mede,
Esser een stic van sinen lede,
Die serpente en vlien dane.*

(vss 197-199)

It is not only possible to make silver look like gold by not polishing silver, but also by smearing it with a macerated basilisk: the silver then starts to look like gold.

*Vliegende vintmense some mede,
Die Got niet en laet uut hare stede
205 Verre varen om die saken,
Dat sijt al woeste souden maken.*

(vss 203-206)

A basilisk is also able to fly. This happens infrequently, and God ensures that they cannot fly too far from their nests because otherwise they would lay all the land to waste.

*Van den andren balisische, ic wane,
Vintmen in den boec van den hane.
Diet weten wille, lese hir voren,
210 Daer mach hi die maniere horen.*

(vss 207-210)

Van Maerlant has also written about the basilisk in another place in his "Der Naturen Bloeme", namely in the third book, that deals with birds. For completeness I give here the passage, because it gives interesting information.

Oude boeken doen verstaen,

*Dat doude haen een ey leghet,
Daermen over waer of seghet,
1985 Daer dat basiliscus of coemt,
Een dier dat die warelt verdoemt.
.....
In waermen drecke leghetijt,
1990 Daer broet natuere bi siere tijt.
Dan coemt dat dier uut na sijn aert,
Ende hevet eens serpenten staert,
Ende anders eist ghelijc den hane.
(vss 1982-1993 3e boek
Der Naturen Bloeme*

Old books teach us that an old cock can lay an egg. It is truthfully told that from this egg a basilisk is born, a creature that is damned by the world. The cock lays his egg in warm dirt, and nature ensures that the egg hatches in due time. When the animal hatches it has the tail of a snake and the rest of its body looks like a cock.

*Die ghesien hebben sine ghedane
1995 Segghen, dat tey es sonder scale,
In een vel gheloken altemale,
Dicke ende staerc ende wel behoet.
Sulke wanen dat dit broet
Ene padde oft een serpent,
2000 Maer dit es buerde bekent.
(vss 1994-2000)*

Those who have seen such an egg say that it is an egg without a shell. Instead of that it has a thick and strong skin that protects well. There are people who think that such an egg is incubated by a toad or a snake, but it is known that this is an invention.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Almost 300 years later, many a person still believes what we have just read about the basilisk. The Zealand physician Levinus Lemnius (1505-1568) mentions the basilisk in his works. He calls it a fabulous animal, and bases his description principally on Pliny, who was also the source for Van Maerlant. In the work of Lemnius we read again about the deadly look of the basilisk (using a mirror you could employ this look against the creature itself) and the weasel, that can resist the basilisk after eating common rue. Also the popular belief of the cock that lays and incubates an egg, which results in the birth of a basilisk, is described by Lemnius. In the Zealand village of Zierikzee two old cocks should have started egg-laying and incubating. They could hardly be driven away from their nests. Because the inhabitants of Zierikzee were afraid of the birth of a basilisk they crushed the eggs and strangled the cocks. In Lemnius I also read that the tainted sperm of a cock can procreate a poisonous animal, just as from the filthy marrow of the backbone of a human a snake could be born (Van Hoorn, 1978).

In Timmers (1947) I found some nice additional information: he writes that Pliny also states that it is impossible for a hunter to kill a basilisk with a spear, because the poison ascends along the shaft of the spear. It seems that Pliny also has said that it is only necessary to sniff in the scent of a basilisk to be killed by it. Furthermore it is considered unlikely that a basilisk-egg is incubated by a snake or an owl. It was better to arm yourself with a glass bell over your head, than with any weapons. The poison that was in the eyes of a basilisk, glanced off the glass, and reflected back onto the basilisk (Timmers, 1947). In Christian

symbolism the basilisk has quite a negative definition: it represents Death, Satan and Sin (Timmers, 1947, Nos. 740-744, 1867-1868). The Medieval illustrator produced a picture which I think is well coordinated to contemporary iconography. The basilisk is usually depicted as a cock with the tail of a dragon, or as a snake with the wings of a cock (Chevalier, 1973, p. 179). Chevalier also adds that not only the glancing look kills a basilisk, but that the same goes for its poisonous breath: if you manage to return it, you kill the creature that wanted to kill you. To all appearances it was a beloved animal of alchemists, who saw in it the destructive fire which they needed to melt metals (that was needed to create the philosophers' stone) (Chevalier, 1973, p. 180).

A SNAKE AFTER ALL?

Snake lovers, who have skipped over these pages with a shrug, because they did not deal with their pets, should perhaps reconsider. This basilisk could be more probably a snake than would appear at first sight. I dare to make this suggestion because of several considerations. First of all there is the patent statement that basilisk means "king" and so in these verses implies "king of the snakes". Considering consequently we end up at the king cobra, *Ophiophagus hannah*. For the king cobra is what its name already suggests: ophiophagous. It is therefore not surprising that all snakes flee away from it (vs. 161).

Furthermore it is said expressly, that the basilisk is "king over all poisons" (vs. 155), which agrees with the venom toxicity of these animals. Trutnau (1982) mentions that the bite of a king cobra can cause death within a few minutes under certain circumstances. Continuing: when we take a more

specific cobra, like the spitting cobra (*Naja naja sputatrix* or *Naja nigricollis*; Grzimek, 1973). The basilisk kills its opponents with its breath, from which we comprehend: the snake uses his "long distance-weapon" (spitting venom), and to eye-witnesses it seems perhaps as if the snake kills with its breath? A fourth consideration links up with this: the cobras have their "hood"; was this considered as being a crown long before Van Maerlant lived (vs. 160)? The white spots to which vss. 158-160 refer, could form the spectacle marks on the hood. Also: the basilisk has as its enemy - apart from the cock, which can kill the basilisk with his crowing (Pauly, 1975, I, p. 838) - the weasel, too. We might identify the weasel as the (Indian) mongoose, that is well known as a destroyer of venomous snakes. In literature we are informed about a battle between the above mentioned opponents in Rudyard Kipling's "Jungle book". More scientific is the extensive description of the settlement of the mongoose with venomous snakes in Grzimek (1973). A picture of a fight between a mongoose and a cobra is published by Burton (1986). A final consideration is the following. In a former article I mentioned a type of historical pharmacy (Van der Voort, 1989). Although I have no concrete data on similar treatment specifically of cobras in these ancient times, I think that it can be supposed, that the verses 189-202 refer to a reality, practised in the ancient ages.

AT THE LAST MINUTE

I had completed this script for some time, when my daughter - who saw me working on Van Maerlant, and especially on the basilisk - drew my attention to a passage in a book for young people, which she was reading at that moment. From this it transpires

that the fables about the basilisk are being used in literature (for young people) even today. In the most recent book of the well known Dutch children's author, Thea Beckman, "De val van de Vredeborch", on pages 20-33 in the second chapter, an extensive description of the dangers posed by a basilisk is given. The creature in this story has killed a servant in a brewer's cellar and we are treated to all the above mentioned qualities of this creature almost completely. In answer to the question: "What is a basilisk" we are told: *when a cock of seven years old lays an egg on a dung-hill and the egg is incubated by a snake, then a basilisk will hatch. This creature is a cock with the wings of a dragon, the beak of an eagle and the tail of a squirrel. It wears a little crown on its head instead of a comb, because it is the king of the snakes.* A little further on the book says: *Such a basilisk prefers to live in a cavern in the mountains, in a cellar or in a deep pit, because it can hardly bear the light. Its poisonous breath kills animals, withers the grass and makes the stones split. The most dangerous of all is its horrible fixed stare. Its eyes are like two fierce fires. If you look into those eyes, your heart will scorch and you will drop dead.* The one who finally descends into the cellar to ascertain what is wrong (this honest fellow does not really believe what he is told about the basilisk), is advised to carry a mirror with him, because the basilisk's look kills, so it is safest to reflect this look, so that it cannot harm him. The people, who are watching the brave fellow outside the brewery from a safe distance, pray for the welfare of his soul ...

Thea Beckman always does a lot of preliminary investigation before writing her books. In this book she gives a list of bibliographic references. It is a pity that I could not find a reference from which she possibly took the data for the above

cited passage.

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