
MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY

PART 7: HOERT SERPENTEN NAMEN IN C.

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INTRODUCTION

In typical alphabetical order Van Maerlant discusses the serpents which begin with a "C". There are four of those, of which at least one is an animal that we do not call a serpent any more. Respectively *Cornuti*, *Cameleon*, *Carastes* and *Chelidrus* are discussed. Only the Cameleon gets some more detailed attention, the other "serpents" are treated very briefly: Van Maerlant devotes only 10 verses to the *Cornuti*, 14 to the *Carastes*, and a little more than half of this number of verses to the *Chelidrus*. Possibly *Cornuti* refers to a snake from the genus *Bitis*, for instance *Bitis cornuta*, which has 2-7 horn-like projections above the eyes. It remains questionable, however, as to how far the distribution area of this snake (or of other snakes of the same genus; Trutnau, 1982) agrees with the brief geographic indications given by Van Maerlant in verses 270-272.

We can be more certain with the identity of the *Carastes*: in all probability we are dealing with *Cerastes cerastes*, the sand viper. This snake was used by Dante (1265-1321) in his description of the devilish

"Furies" and is partly responsible for the deterrent outward appearance of these Grecian avenging goddesses (*Vivid-green hydras, they wear as a girdle, as locks viperous brood and cerasts, which hung down winding around the cruel temples - Dante*). Regarding the Chelidrus it is a little more complicated, however. I am afraid that the description of this serpent is so brief, that we can not make any firm suggestions about the identity of it. I also did not get much help from the Medieval sources that are at my service.

OMME DAT SI HORNE DRAGHEN

*Cornuti dat sijn serpente,
Seghet Solinus, in Oriente,
265 Omme dat si horne draghen,
Daer si mede steken ende jaghen;
(vss. 263-266)*

Van Maerlant writes that Solinus says: "Cornuti are serpents which live in the Orient. They are called Cornuti because they have horns, with which they sting and hunt".

*Nochtan hebben si ander venijn,
Daer liede of sterven of daer moet sijn
Triacle toe, salmen ghenesen.
(vss 267-269)*

Nevertheless the Cornuti have a second poison of which people die. Did the Medieval people think that the horns of these serpents are venomous? Anyway, people die of the venom, unless they possessed an anti-venom. In this case they remained alive.

270 Van hem es et dat wi lesen,



Foto 1: Cornuti, v. Maerlant, folio 123r.



Foto 2: Carastus, v. Maerlant, folio 123v.

*Dat Got desen liet verbiten
In Egipten die heremiten.
(vss 270-272)*

According to the Medieval literature, these serpents have bitten, as instructed by God, the hermits in Egypt, after which they died.

NEMMERME EN LUUCTET OGHEN

*Cameleon, als Ysidorus seghet,
Es een serpent dat te levne pleghet
275 Bider lucht al sonder eten.
(vss 273-275)*

According to Isidorus, the Cameleon is a serpent that can live without food, by only living on air.

*Ghescepen ist, als wijt weten,
Na die lacerte met voeten viere,
Scaerp gheclauwet ende quadertiere,
Lanc ghestaert, crom ende smal,
280 Buulrigde na den kemel al.
(vss 276-280)*

The Cameleon is an ordinary lizard, just as the Lacerta, and has four legs, on which it has sharp claws. It has an ill-natured character, a long tail, is crooked and narrow and has a hump like a camel.

*Nemmerme en luuctet oghen.
Sijn vel dat mach vele ghedoghen.
Sijn buuc heeft altoes niet in.
Traech als die slecke meer no min.
(vss 281-285)*

The Cameleon never closes its eyes. It has a skin that can bear much. Its stomach is

continually empty, because it never has to eat (see vs. 275). Furthermore it is as slow as a snail.

285 *Bloet heeftet utermate clene,
Sonder in die herte allene:
Dies ist bloed in sinen moet,
Want die coenheit leghet int' bloet.*
(vss 285-288)

The Cameleon has extremely little blood, except in its heart. Therefore this serpent is very cowardly, because bravery is in the blood.

*Sine vaerwe cant wel verkeren,
290 Als ons die wise meesters leren,
Daer et al sulke vaerwe ontfaet,
Alst ghedaen es, daert op gaet.*
(vss 289-292)

Wise masters taught in previous times that a Cameleon can change the colour of its skin: it gets the colour of the subject upon which it is sitting.

*Et laet hem den raven sliten,
Maer sal hi iet van hem onbiten,
295 Hi moet sterven omme dat,
Hine hebbe een lauwre blat.*
(vss 293-296)

The Cameleon is sometimes torn to pieces by ravens, but if it is at all possible for it to bite the raven, this will die, unless it has a laurel-leaf (as antivenom).

*Winter tijt woentet in daerde,
Te lentine gaetet sire vaerde.
In Asia, als wi lesen,
300 Vintmen vele diere van desen.*
(vss 297-300)

During Winter the Cameleon lives under the ground and in Spring it comes out again. Van Maerlant has read in his books that many Cameleons live in Asia.

ET DECT HEM IN DEN SANDE NEDER

*Carastes, als Solinus seghet,
Es een serpent, dat te hebben pleghet
VIII horne als een weder.
(vss 301-303)*

The Carastes is a serpent which usually has eight horns, which look like those of a ram. The number of horns is a little bit curious, but perhaps explicable: most probably *Cerastes cerastes* and *Bitis cornuta* are confused here: both snake species have as a characteristic little horn-like projections above the eyes and in *Bitis cornuta* the number of "horns" can go up to seven (Trutnau, 1982). Both snakes can present the behaviour Van Maerlant describes in the next piece of text.

*Et dect hem in den sande neder
305 Sonder sine horne allene,
So comen vogle groet ende clene,
Ende wanen daer op rusten gaen,
Dan worden si verbeten saen.
(vss 304-308)*

The Carastes can dig in under the sand, with the exception of its horns. Then large and small birds come and think of resting on these projections, but then they are immediately killed by the serpent. The "digging in" is described in Grzimek (1973) and good photographic evidence is provided by

Kundert (1984).

*Et cruupt na lampereide maniere.
310 Die horne hier of si sijn diere:
Men maecter of ten messen hechte,
Die comen ter tafel voer al gherechte;
Ende bringhmer enech venijn naer,
So wordt die hecht swetende daer.
(vss 309-314)*

The Carastes moves like a lamprey, a fish which we already encountered with *Berus* (Van der Voort, 1989). The horns of this serpent are of great monetary value: one makes handles for knives from them. Probably their high value is especially caused by the following: the knives can be used for all courses that are brought to the table, and the special thing is that when food is poisoned, the handle that has been made from the horn of a Carastes, starts sweating! Ameling (1978) shows us that this belief was still important in the nineteenth century: "Rich people bought Carastes horns for high prices to have knife-handles made out of them. These were used to trace poison, because poisoned food and drinks will curdle when one touches them with a "Carastes horn". In 1899 a judge on Cyprus claimed a compensation of £ 80.00 from someone who borrowed such a "serpent horn" and had lost it."

INT WATER LEEFTET ENDE OP TLANT

*315 Chelidrus es een serpent.
Ysidorus spreect, dats bekend,
Dat sijn venijn es so quat,
Dat tlant daert over gaet
Roken doet in der maniere
320 Als oft ware van viere.*

*Int water leeftet ende op tlant.
Hier coemt van der D na te hant.
(vss 315-322)*

The Chelidrus is a serpent, says Van Maerlant; Isodorus, in discussing this creature, states that its poison is so potent, that it causes the land on which the Chelidrus creeps to smoke as if it is on fire. The Chelidrus lives in the water as well as on the land.

Van Maerlant closes this chapter with the information that serpents beginning with the letter "D" are to follow.

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