



Foto 1: Draco, v. Maerlant, folio 124r.



Foto 2: Draconcopes, v. Maerlant, folio 124v.

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## MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY

### PART 8: HIER COEMT VAN DER D NA TE HANT.

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### INTRODUCTION

We continue with a very heterogeneous group. Jacob van Maerlant dedicates verses 323 to 334 of "Der Naturen Bloeme" to the Dipsas. It is very tempting, of course, to see in this creature a member of the genus *Dipsas*, a genus that is characterised by a distinct food preference: these snakes are primarily snail eaters and possess therefore an adapted set of teeth (for a picture see Engelmann, 1981, p. 39). In classical times, however, this creature was most probably the snake that nowadays is called *Cerastes vipera*, the Ancienna viper (Pauly, 1979, V, p. 14).

The second creature, presented by Van Maerlant, has the same problem: one could think it is to do with the flying *Draco* that inhabits the tropical rain forests of Asia. Again Pauly (1979, V, p. 14) gives an explanation, because *Draco* seems to be nothing less than the giant python *Python molurus* (for an interesting picture see Engelmann, 1981, p. 194). Classical authors wrote about this deceptive *Draco* that fit better with the *Python* than with the flying *Draco*. Pliny says, for example, explicitly,

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that the major enemy of Draco is the elephant (see verse 343). Finally: "Dragon" and "Serpent" were in classical times synonymous with each other (White, 1960, p. 165, footnote).

The Draconcopes, ultimately, is a creature that I cannot compare with any present-day living animal.

#### DIPSAS ES SO DOERCLENE

*Dipsas, spreect Jacob van Vetri  
Ende Solinus die meester vri,  
325 Es so doerclene een serpent,  
Datment cume met siene kent.  
Alsmen tret, men en cant ghesien,  
Ende een wort ghevenijnt mettien.  
(vss. 323-328)*

From the sources of Jacob van Vetri and Solinus, Van Maerlant learned that the Dipsas is such an extraordinary little snake, that one can hardly see it with the bare eyes. Trutnau (1982, p. 105) says that *Cerastes vipera* seldom reaches a length of 35 cm.

Even when you stand on it you cannot see it, but you do feel it, because you are poisoned immediately.

*Solinus die seghet al bloet:  
330 Dient bijt, hi blijft te handen doet.  
Experimentator die scrivet  
Van hem, diere doet of blivet,  
Datmen niet en can ghescouwen  
In sijn anschijn teiken van rouwen.  
(vss. 329-334)*

Furthermore, Solinus writes that a person who is bitten by this creature is immediately dead. Experimentator adds to this that

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one cannot trace any sign of pain in the face of the person who has been killed by this snake. Apparently the Dipsas causes a very painless death for the victim. A nice addition of White (1960, p. 174): everybody who is bitten by this snake, dies of thirst, because its bite has dipsomaniacal (addiction to drink) consequences -- dipsa (Gr.) = thirst.

NA SIRE GROTE ES CLENE SIJN MONT

335 *Draco, seght Jacob ende sinte Augus*  
*tijn,*  
*Dat onder alle dieren die sijn*  
*Die alremeeste es, dies gelovet.*  
(vss. 335-337)

Jacobus van Vitry and the church-father Saint Augustine unanimously say that you can be sure that Draco is the biggest of all existing animals.

*Enen cam heeft hi op sijn hovet.*  
*Na sire grote es clene sijn mont.*  
340 *Venijn nut hi talre stont.*  
*Wat dat hi metten staerte bint,*  
*Ets doet, en twivels niet een twint;*  
*Ja dolifant en cans ontgaen,*  
*Can hine binden staerte bevaen.*  
(vss. 338-344)

It has a crest on its head. Compared to its size its mouth is small. It is a creature that eats as many poisonous animals and plants as it can. What it holds with its tail dies, do not doubt that. Even the elephant cannot escape from Draco once it has wrapped its coils around him (for a misunderstanding between *Python molurus* and

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*Eunectes murinus* about this behaviour, see Abuys, 1982, p. 126).

- 345 *In steenroetsen ende in duwieren*  
*Es sijn wesen na sire manieren,*  
*Want sine nature es doerheet;*  
*Ende oec int lant, daermene weet,*  
*Es grote hitte van der zonne,*  
350 *Want wine selden gheweten connen,*  
*Den rechten drake, dat weet wel,*  
*Dan omtrent dien tor Babel,*  
*Dat woeste Babylonie heet,*  
*Daer sijn si so groet, alsmen weet,*  
355 *Mere dan XX cubitus.*  
(vss. 345-355)

Between rocks and caves it looks the same as its surroundings, that is it can change its colour to that of the surroundings. The explanation given for this, following Van Maerlant, is that the Draco is very hot. Similarly the land on which one finds Draco, is hot. On account of the sun a great heat prevails, because dragons almost only occur in the surroundings of the Tower of Babel. The dragons that occur there, are more than 20 Dutch ells long (about 14 m).

- Haer roepen, wi lesen dus,*  
*Vervaert den lieden die dit horen.*  
*Haer opsien doet den lieden verdoren,*  
*Dat sulc heeft die vrese so groet,*  
360 *Dat hi van opsien blivet doet.*  
(vss. 356-360)

We read that their roaring greatly frightens the people who hear it. When such a dragon looks into someone's eyes, it deprives him of his reason, so that this person is terrified so much, that he dies.

*Als si oud sijn, wilmen weten,*

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*Dat si lettel dan eten.  
Augustinus seit sonder lieghen,  
Dat si somwile in die lucht vlieghen,  
365 Ende hare vlogele sijn een vel,  
Als wi an die vledermuus sien wel;  
Ende daer een maect sine vlucht,  
Onsuvert hi altemale die lucht.  
(vss. 361-368)*

It is said that when they are old, they eat very little. The church-father Saint Augustine tells, without lying, that they can sometimes fly through the air, and their wings are skin, just as we know from bats. And where such a dragon flies it contaminates the air.

This is curious, a flying *Python*, but Costello (1979, p. 123) clarifies, that this is based on old memories: this phenomenon refers to a fire-dragon or meteor. On decisive moments in history such astronomical happenings were seen by the people positively or negatively, when they had to take important decisions. An example is the evening before the Battle of Hastings in 1066, when the Comet of Halley appeared. This is depicted by Bayeux on his famous hangings (Bertraud, 1982, p. 18).

*In sijn hovet draecht hi overeen  
370 Draguncia den dieren steen,  
Maer hi nes altoes niewer toe goet,  
Ensi datmen hem levende uitdoet.  
(vss. 369-372)*

Just like the *Aspis* (see Van der Voort, 1989), *Draco* has a valuable stone within its head. This stone is called here "*Draguncia*". This stone, however, is only effective, on the condition that it has been taken from a living dragon.

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Older information about the dragon stone is found in the "Etymologians" by Isidorus of Sevilla, where it is explained why the stone has to be taken from a living dragon: when the stone is not taken from its brains while it is still alive, the stone will not congeal to a precious stone (Burger, 1989).

*Sine tonghe ende sine galle  
In wine ghesoeden met alle,  
375 Ende daer mede bestreken dan  
Sine leden, ist wijf ist man,  
Dien die duvele incubi  
Quellen, si makene vri.  
(vss. 373-378)*

Anyone who takes from Draco the tongue and the gall, boils them together in wine, and smears his limbs with the brew, will be freed from the develish "incubus", no matter if he is a man or a woman. The brew prepared in this way can be used for exorcism. An incubus is according to the Catholic doctrine an angel that has fallen because of its lust for a woman. Such a spirit can be identified with a (in hierarchical sense) lower devil ("higher" devils have an aversion for sexual contact with humans). In the Middle Ages one assumed that angels, as well as devils, could take on the shape of a human by using air mixed with vapours from the earth to form an artificial body. In this way develish incubi and succubi (respectively overlayer and underlayer during sexual intercourse) could seduce people, turning their victims to witches. The inquisitors were especially sure of this. However, with the Draco elixir one could free a potential witch from such a threat. For the nth time it is reported here that special brews are prepared from parts of snakes. Even today che-

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mists in China sell "dragon-bones" (Costello, 1979, p. 123).

*Aldus mach hi ghevanghen wesen:*

380 *Talreerst moetmende belesen,  
Dat hi niet en si van felre voere.  
Dan slaetmen voer hem een tamboere,  
Dan wanet hi hoeren den donreslach,  
Want engheen eer sterven mach*

385 *Van donre ende van blixeme mede:  
Dus vervaertmense daer ter stede.*

(vss. 379-386)

In the following way you can catch a Draco: first of all you have to exorcize it [this procedure we have already seen in use for the Aspis (see Van der Voort, 1989)], because otherwise the creature will be too furious. After that you have to beat a drum in front of it, when it then thinks it can hear thunder. This is because no creature is more vulnerable to thunder and lightning than a dragon, and in this way one terrifies it.

*So bint hem daer op een man,  
Ende doet hem heine draghen dan,  
Daer hi wille, in verren lande;*

390 *Maer daer of coemt hem dicke scande,  
Want gheraken si ter wider zee,  
Ehi dan mach vliegghen nemme,  
So ist met hem gherekent saen.*

(vss. 387-393)

After that you bind a man onto it and take care that the Draco carries him away to far countries, where the man wants to go. However, often it turns out badly for him, because when they reach the big ocean and the dragon cannot fly any more, the man will drown.

*Oec canmense wel anders syns vaen.*



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- 395 *Men neem een calf ende doe hem wale*  
*Sine daerme uut altemale,*  
*Ende doet nieuwe bernets calx dan vul,*  
*So coemt die grote beeste dul*  
*Al daert staet onderset met staken,*  
400 *Ende slindet gheheel binden caken.*  
*Alst calf in haren buke legghet,*  
*Verhit gheen calc, als hi pleghet.*  
*Dan word drinkende die drake*  
*Ende tkalc verhit bi sulker sake,*  
405 *So dat hi so sere ontsteket,*  
*Dat hem therte binnen breket.*  
(vss. 394-406)

Van Maerlant continues that dragons can be caught in another way too. The method is simple and appropriate: you take a calf, carefully remove the bowels and take care that the inside of the calf is well dried. Then fill the abdominal cavity with quiclime and stand the calf up by sticks. The dragon will come and swallow the calf. When the dragon starts to drink the lime inside the stomach will become hot. The chemical reaction will overheat the dragon so much that this will break its heart. In the imagination of the people of the Middle Ages this breaking of a heart was seen very literally (Burger, 1989).

#### INT ANSCHIJN ALS DIE MAGHET GHEDAEN

- Draconcopes es een serpent,*  
*Als Adelinus wel bekend,*  
*Staerc ende groet, ende sonder waen*  
410 *Int anschijn als die maghet ghedaen*  
*Ende nederwaert ghelijc den draken.*  
(vss. 407-411)

Adelinus tells us that the Draconcopes is a snake, that is big and strong. Furthermore

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it is a snake that has the face of a woman, but the rest of the body looks like a dragon.

Adelinus is also known as Aldhelmus of Malmesbury (about 640-709), an English poet and bishop, author of the "Liber Monstrorum", a book on miraculous peoples, and of Latin riddles, in verse-form, of animals, plants, stones, and so on (Burger, 1989).

*Wi wanen dies in waren saken,  
Dat serpent was aldus ghedaen,  
Daer die duvel hadde mede bevaen*  
415 *Onser eerster moeder Even,  
Als wi noch lesen in brieven;*  
(vss. 412-416)

Van Maerlant is convinced, that this is the snake, with which the devil tempted our first mother Eve, as we still read in some books.

*Want Beda seghet sonder waen,  
Dat dat serpent was ghedaen  
Int anschijn ghelijc der maghet,*  
420 *Ende hadde der vrouwen so belaghet,  
Dat si niet dant anschijn en sach  
Want tander lijf bedect lach  
Met loveren ende met risen mede;*  
(vss. 417-423)

Beda (674-735, surnamed "Venerabilis" or "the Respectable", an English church-teacher) says in a peremptory tone, that the face of this snake looked like that of a woman and in this way could tempt Eve, because she only saw the face of the creature while the rest of the body was covered with leaves and branches.

*Ende die viant sprac daer ter stede*  
425 *Uten serpente ende loech,*

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Also dat hise bedroech.  
Noch hebbenwi alle daer of we.  
(vss. 424-427)

And the devil ("viant" is an euphemism for "devil") spoke through the snake and laughed because he deceived her. We even nowadays meet with the negative consequences of this trick. And who can deny that?  
Here the D ends and we continue with E.

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