
MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY, PART 9: ENDE VOLGHET
NAER E - I GAET UUT.

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INTRODUCTION

Van Maerlant pays attention this time to
Emorois, Jaculum, Ipnale, Idrus and Idros,
in relatively short pieces of text, appea-
ring to be in non-alphabetical order. Howe-
ver, in old Dutch the J and I are inter-
changeable.

It does not appear possible to identify any
of these creatures with known living ani-
mals.

EMOROIS

Emorois, seght Solijn,
430 *Es een serpent, ende sijn venijn*
Heeft sulke cracht so wient slaet,
Dat hem al sijn bloet ontgaet,
So dat hem twint en blivet,
Ende dan es die mensche saen ontlivet,
435 *Ende daer nes gheen stremmen nemmee.*
In vinde nemmeer namen in E.

(vss 429-436)

Solinus says about the Emorois that this
creature has such a strong venom, that

anyone bitten by it loses all his blood. It is not possible to stop the bleeding so the victim dies.

There is something curious with the bite of this creature as apparently the venom has a strong haemotoxic effect, that has an effect on the inside of the victims body. Yet Van Maerlant adds in verse 435 the comment that the bleeding that has been caused by the bite cannot be stopped. This suggests a death by excessive loss of blood and not a death caused by the destroying effect of the venom on blood and blood vessels.

Yet this last observation can be defended. I remember my visit to the reptile exhibition "Reptielenland" in Brugge, shortly before the complex, in which the snake collection was housed, burned down. There was an amount of somewhat suggestive pictures depicting the unbelievable necrotising effects venomous snakebites can have [see also Mirtschin & Davis (1987, p. 79)]. Trutnau (1982, p. 13) tells how the haemotoxic elements of the venom destroy the red blood cells and make the blood vessels porous, by which severe internal bleeding is caused.

Probably it is this effect that justifies the statement in verse 435.

Finally White (1960, p. 175) mentions that one who has been bitten by the Emorrhoidis (sic) becomes so weak, that all the life that is within, together with the blood, will be withdrawn from the body as soon as the vessels have been cracked.

DESE LUSCEN IN DEN BOEMEN

*Jaculum, seghet Solijn,
Es een clene serpentkijn,*



Foto 1: Jaculum, v. Maerlant, folio 124



Foto 2: Idros, v. Maerlant, folio 125.

Ende vliegheet als of een quareel qua-
me,
440 Ende daerof heeftet dien name.
Dese luscen in den boemen,
Ende maerken ende goemen
Wien dat si veninen moghen,
Ende comen onversien ghevloghen.
(vss 437-444)

Solinus tells us that *Jaculum* is a little serpent that can fly as if it is an arrow [*jaculum* (Lat.) = spear].

Thanks to this habit it received its name. It lays coiled up in a tree waiting and looking for a victim. Then it suddenly "flies" down on its chosen victim.

Grzimek (1973, p. 491) mentions the genus *Chrysopelea* as "flying snakes" (Grzimek uses quotation marks). The snakes that belong to this genus have ventral scales with a clear keel that have no function with flying, but with the climbing up of a tree. These snakes cannot really fly, not even float in the air. They push off from the top of a tree and travel by gliding at a downwards for quite a distance.

Trutnau (1988, p. 222) mentions that *Chrysopelea paradisi* can flatten its body, which makes a kind of parachute flight possible.

Grzimek (1973, p. 491) mentions an "experiment": on Borneo Schmidt & Inger experimented with the Flying snake, to discover the truth about its capabilities of flying: "Although our snake did not seem to care much for travelling through the air, we could observe at least that he suddenly out-stretched his tail, that is curled up normally and so jumped a little distance forward".

The above experiment connects quite well with the note in the book of White that

gives an impression of a bestiary of the twelfth century. Van Maerlant and White (1960, p. 180, note) tell us that *Jaculum* "jumps" up a tree and waits to surprise a passing by prey.

In a note White adds to this "Goldsmith (...) states that: the manner of progression in (...) the *Jaculum*, is by instantly coiling itself upon its tail and darting from thence to its full extent" (White, 1960, p. 180, note).

It is tempting to identify the *Jaculum* with *Chrysopelea* on the base of these interesting resemblances. The question is, however, can this be true considering the distribution of *Chrysopelea*: Southeast Asia and the Indo-Australian Archipelago.

Also the body length makes it questionable, because Van Maerlant speaks about a little snake, while Grzimek and Trutnau give measurements for *Chrysopelea* of 150 and 140 cm length respectively.

The fact that the *Jaculum* is said to be venomous, while *Chrysopelea* is not, is nothing to be surprised of: for to the Antique and Medieval people all serpents were apparently venomous, even though they knew that there were non-venomous species (Pauly, 1979, V, p. 13).

As a matter of fact, from the descriptions we have had so far, it seems as if the serpents of that time were especially interested in people.

DIT SERPENT DOET STERVEN SACHTE

445 *Ipnale dats een serpent.
Solinus seghet ons, diet bekent,
Dat et es van aspis gheslachte.
Dit serpent doet sterven sachte.
Wien dat bijt, daers gheen ontgaen,*

450 *Hi moet in slape worden saen.
No roupen, noch steken, noch trecken
Ne machgen nemmermeer ghewecken,
Dat hi ontwaket daerna.
vss. 445-453*

The Ipnale (or Hypnale, following the Greek "hypnos" = sleep) is a serpent of the genus *Aspis*.

This serpent causes a quick death with its bite. Anyone who has been bitten by it falls asleep, and there is no return.

N.B.: The qualification "of the genus *Aspis*" is an antique one, not a modern.

*Dustanech hadde Cleopatra
455 Tien tiden dat Augustus verwan
Antonise haren man,
Die hem dode met venine,
Want hi verwonnen was ende die sine.
Sie ledene in enen grave diere,
460 Si nam serpente van diere maniere,
Ende settetse haren borsten an,
Ende ghinc ligghen bi haren man,
Ende nam slapende daer haer leven:
Dus heeft die Roemsche ystorie bescre
ven.*

(vss 454-464)

Cleopatra had such snakes in her possession at the time that Antonius, her husband, was beaten by the Roman emperor Augustus. Antonius killed himself by taking poison. Cleopatra then buried him in a sumptuous grave, took snakes of the above mentioned species and let them bite in her breasts, after which she laid down alongside her husband. In this way she left this life sleeping.

Van Maerlant took this description from "The history of Rome", a book that has not been positively identified, but possibly is

a historical work of Livius (Burger, 1989).
N.B.: I strongly remember one of those
interesting history colleges in secondary
school, some thirty years ago.

The history teacher told us Cleopatra had a
fear of being poisoned and dayly took small
amounts of venom to immunise herself.

In the medical world this is called mitri-
datism, after king Mithridates (120-63
before Christ), who immunised himself a-
gainst poison by taking slowly increasing
doses of poison (Coelho, 1986, p. 475).
When Mithridates wanted to kill himself, he
had to ask a soldier to kill him (Burger,
1989).

The same was for Cleopatra: because of her
immunity against all kinds of poison, when
she wanted to kill herself she had to turn
to the Ureus, a snake which is known was
used in antique times for a painless execu-
tion of people and of which, one believes
could be trained a little (Pauly, 1979, V,
p. 13).

Any way, the strong neurotoxic effect of
the venom had the result Cleopatra wanted:
she died on 12 August 30 BC (Pauly, 1979,
III, p. 250).

ET GAET IN COCODRILLUS KELE

*465 Idrus, seghet Ysidorus,
Es in Egipten in Nilus,
Ende heeft scaerper dorne vele.
(vss 465-467)*

The Idrus (or Hydrus; in Greek hydros =
water), Isidorus said, lives in Egypt in
the Nile. This creature has sharp spines.

*Et gaet in cocodrillus kele,
Daer hi leghet ende slaept*

470 Ende met der kele wide gaept;
Maer eerst heeftet hem beslegghen
Met muederen, dits sijn plieghen,
Omme dat sachte wesen sal.
(vss 468-473)

When the sleeping crocodile has opened his mouth, the Idrus goes into his throat. But first the serpent rolls in the mud, so as to soften itself.

Die grote viant slont in al,
475 Ende alst dan in die daerme leghet,
So toghetet den aert dies et pleghet,
Ende steect hem die daerme dure.
Dan steerft dander in corter ure,
Ende et cruupt dan uut van beneden.
(vss 474-479)

The big enemy (the crocodile) of the Idrus then swallows it. When it arrives in the bowels it reveals its true identity and pierces the bowels of the crocodile which soon dies. The Idrus then leaves its host via the vent. "Viant" or "Viant of the hell" was in the Middle Ages an euphemism for "devil", as one did not like to pronounce his name: talk of the devil and he is sure to appear. Hell was often depicted as the distended mouth of a crocodile-like monster, in which Idrus descended. In several bestiaries this animal stands as a symbol for Jesus Christ (Burger, 1989).

480 Die liede swellen in allen leden,
Die het ontreint met venine:
Coemes es daer of medicine.
Sijn levere es goet, als wi weten,
Jeghen der serpente beten.
(vss 480-484)

People bitten by an Idrus suffer swollen limbs, if no medicine is administered to them.

As we have already seen the originator of a (deathly) disease often supplies the medicine, e.g. the liver of this serpent is an approved remedy against snakebite.

White mentions that the disease caused by the bite of the Idrus is called cow-pocks, because the remedy against it consists of the excrements of cows.

Also the Idrus and the crocodile are as the Basilisk and the weasel: they are mortal enemies of each other (White, 1960, p. 178).

IDROS WANDELT IN DEN BROEC

*485 Idros wandelt in den broec,
Seghet Kirammidarium boec,
Ende es een serpent, als men seghet,
Dat hem boven watere te rechten ple-
ghet.*

(vss 485-488)

The habitat of the Idros consists of swampy areas, according to the book Koiranides. A habit of this serpent is to lift itself up above the water.

The "Liber Kyrannidarum" is a tract written during the time of the emperors, originally written in Greek and ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus. During the Middle Ages it has been translated several times into Latin (Orbàn, 1985, p. 235 and 362, note 78).

The book deals with medicine and talismans, which can be prepared from plants, animals and precious stones (Burger, 1989).

*Enen steen so draeghet binnen,
490 Daerment om vaet, wilmen kinnen,*

*Jof so berooct dat et en spuwet.
Met worden datment oec so beduwet
Ende metter name oec mede van Gode,
Dat et en spuwet, al doet node.*
(vss 489-494)

As with *Aspis*, *Idros* has a stone inside its body, and that is the reason that people catch these creatures forcing them to spit out the stone.

It is also possible that one presses the serpent so hard with words, that it will, reluctantly, spit out the stone. This can also be achieved by having it listen to the name of God.

495 *Broeder Alebrecht spreect over een,
Dat hi selve proefde den steen,
Als hi seghet, an een wijf,
Die vol waters hadde dat lijf.
Hi goerdene an haren lichame*
500 *Daer si hadde die mesquame,
Ende III vingheren alle daghe
Sanc haer lichaem sonder saghe,
Onthier ende twater was ghedaelt,
Ende haer lechame ghesmaelt.*
(vss 495-504)

Albertus Magnus confides his experiments with a stone to us. It concerns a woman who suffered from dropsy (oedema). He tied the stone to the body of the woman at the spot where the complaint was localized. The result was that her body (and that is not a fable, he tells) every day decreased three fingers in circumference, until all the water had disappeared and her body was slim.

Albertus Magnus (about 1193-1280), the greatest scientist of the Middle Ages, combined the traditional science of his time with his own experiments and laid with

that the foundation of the cultivation of modern natural sciences, especially the fields of botany (*De vegetabilibus*) and zoology (*De animalibus*) (Orbàn, 1985, p. 228).

505 *Jeghen reume ende tranende oghen*
Can hi sine macht wel toghen.
Dits te ghelovene vele wel.
I gaet uut, hier coemt L.
(vss 505-508)

The stone effectively treats catarrh and watering eyes. These two complaints are connected, because *Catarra aestivus* is hay-fever and one of the accompanying symptoms can be watering eyes. The I is finished, Van Maerlant says, and now the L follows.

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