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MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY

PART 10: HIER COEMT L - HOERT VAN DER N

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INTRODUCTION

In the days of old the word "serpent" was  
used in a much broader sense than nowadays.  
That is why here Van Maerlant can deal with



Foto 1: Nadera, v. Maerlant, folio 125.

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the lizard without any constraints, under the term serpent. He devotes a small number of verses to the lizard and the natrix. The Nader is dealt with more extensively.

SIJN VENIJN ES NIET SO SWAER

*Lacerta es een clene serpent,  
510 Datmen in vele landen kent,  
Ende heeft IIII voete, als wijt weten.  
Sine tonghe es in tween ghespleten.  
Sijn venijn es niet so swaer  
Als menech wormes, wet overwaer.  
(vss 509-514)*

The lacerta is a small serpent, which you can find in many countries. The animal has four feet and its tongue is split. The poison of the lacerta is certainly not as strong as that of many other snakes.

*515 Clene jonghekine si draghen.  
Some boeken hoermen ghewaghen,  
Datse die moeder alle verslaet  
Tote ene, dat haer ontgaet,  
Dat wreict up vader ende up moeder  
520 Daer na suster ende broeder.  
(vss 515-520)*

The lacerta is found with small young ones. In some books you can read that its mother kills all her young ones except for one, which escapes. The survivor subsequently takes revenge on the parents for its killed brothers and sisters.

*In India vindmense, horic gewagen,  
die XXIIII voete draghen,  
Van ghedaene scoen ende claer.*

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Nu hoert van der N hier naer.  
(vss 521-524)

In India, it is said, you can find animals having 24 feet and looking very beautiful and glittering. Now listen to what is to be told about the N.

#### NATRIX ES EEN SERPENT

525 *Natrix es een serpent,*  
*Als Lucaen ende Ysidorus kent,*  
*Dat met orine maect onreine*  
*Putten, beken ende fonteine,*  
*Daert in luuschet ende leghet,*  
530 *Des anders gheen serpent en pleghet.*

Lucan and Isidore (of Seville) tell us about a snake called Natrix that poisons wells, ponds and water courses with its urine by hiding itself in the water; something no other snake does.

#### DITS DIE MACHT VAN DER NADER

With the nadera we are in our own region (vs 532). My Middle Dutch dictionary contains as varieties of nadere: adere, adre, adder.

It is reasonable to assume that this time it is indeed a *Vipera berus* we deal with. The difference between nadere and adere is easily explained etymologically. The n at the beginning of nadere has been erroneously looked upon as the n at the ending of the particle "an", after which a wrongly chosen boundary of the words produced the alternative form (Franck et al., 1971, p. 9).

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*Nadera dats een serpent,  
Datmen in Dietschen lande bekend.  
Men vintse beide cleen ende groet.  
(vss 531-533)*

The viper is a snake that you come across in the "Dietse" country. Van Maerlant presumably means the countries that we now call The Netherlands and Belgium and probably a small part of Germany. Great and small are the sizes that can be found.

*Sijn venijn dats harde groet,  
535 Men heeften triacle jegenhen.  
(vss 534-535)*

The viper possesses a deadly poison, if you have no serum against it (see further).

*Scone vel si te hebben plegen.  
Haer blasen es snel van moghentheden.  
Men neme een roede versch ghesneden,  
Ende doe den naderen blasen daer an,  
540 Te hant verdroeghet si dan.  
(vss 536-540)*

Vipers usually have a beautiful skin. Their hissing has considerable powers. Take for instance a freshly cut branch and have a viper breathe against it. The branch will dry out immediately.

*Neemt oec een swaert scoen ende claer,  
Ende laetse daer op blasen daer,  
Dat swaert ontvaerwet altegader:  
Dits die macht van der nader.  
(vss 541-544)*

The malignity of the viper's breath can also be proved another way: you take a beautiful and well shone sword. Then you

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let a viper breathe against it. The sword changes colour at once. That powerful is the viper's breath.

545 *Woert oec een man in den voet ghebeten,*  
*Dat venijn loopt upwaerts, alswi weten,*  
*Ende ommeget des menschen lede,*  
*Ende coemter herten mede,*  
*So valt die mensche neder doet:*  
550 *Dat doet sine hitte groet.*  
*Die hier of ghebeten waerd,*  
*Men hanghe sijn hoeft neder waerd,*  
*So moet tfenijn in den voet bliven,*  
*Want sine nature wille becliven;*  
555 *Ende men sal die bete uutsniden,*  
*So gheneesment in corten tiden.*  
(vss 545-556)

Van Maerlant informs us about contemporary knowledge of the human anatomy and physiology and at the same time he suggests a therapy against poisonous bites which will not be known to many people: (you should try it when opportunity offers!).

Things go as follows: when a human being is bitten in the foot, the poison crawls upwards, then, as is known, through all human limbs, finally to arrive at the heart. Once there, the poison causes the human being to drop dead. This is caused by the enormous heat of the poison.

And now the therapy: you will have to hang the bitten person upside down, for the poison (that is travelling upwards) will then stay in the foot. A property of the poison is that it has the tendency to remain in the place where it has entered. Tacitly we disregard the contradictions of Van Maerlant's utterances in the verses 546

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and 545. Having done so, you have to carve out the wound and presently it heals.

*Die seker gaen wille ende wesen  
In steden, daer men ontsiet van desen,  
Wrive sine blote leden  
560 Met alsine ende met ruten mede,  
So sullen hem dese wormen vlien.  
Nu suldi namen in P besien.  
(vss 557-562)*

He who does not want to take any risks in places where vipers wander, should rub his nude limbs with absinth and rue. The latter we came across earlier as a sovereign remedy against snakes (Van der Voort, 1989). In that case vipers will flee from human beings. Next time we are going to have a look at P.

#### REFERENCES

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