

A PILGRIMAGE TO THE ABRUZZES SNAKE PROCESSION AT COCULLO

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INTRODUCTION

About 1216 A.D. a man of Spanish origin wandered across the mountains of the Abruzzes, his aim was to proclaim the gospel based on study and contemplation and join the battle against the heretics. The heretics were those people that deviated from the Roman Catholic dogma and were they were represented as the 'evil' snake. His fight against the heretics ('snakes') and his spiritual immunity against their venom would later be literally explained, creating legends and causing him to be depicted with a snake. This man's name was Dominicus de Guzman (\pm 1170-1221) and he was the founder of the Dominican Order (1215). His arrival in the Abruzzes would led to him being honoured by a village in the form of an annual procession, during which a statue of him, covered with living snakes, is carried through the village.

THE JOURNEY

This village, in which the snake procession takes place on the first Thursday of May every year, was the ultimate aim of our journey. The village is named Cocullo which is situated about halfway between Pescara and Rome, near the A25 motorway.

Our journey started on Saturday 27th April 1991, we left by car for our destination Pescara, a little town in the center of the National Park of The Abruzzes (Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo), Italy. Our route was via Munich (Germany), the Brenner pass (Austria), Verona (I) and Rimini. During a coffee break between Ancona and Pescara we made our first herpetological discovery. In the verge of a parking place we find some ruin lizards (*Podarcis sicula*) they appeared to be doing well on a diet of insects attracted by the rubbish. The lizards were not shy and could be approached to a distance of one meter.

After driving for a few hours more, we reached the junction of Cocullo, where we left the motorway. To the right of the motorway could be seen the village of Cocullo, built out of sandstone, contrasting against the brushwood covered mountains. The village consists of about 100 houses, in the center there is a square with a small old church. Whilst driving into the almost deserted village, we saw some posters announcing the *IL RITO DIE SERPARI* (the ritual of snakes). We visited the church, in the back stands a litter with a statue on it. It is the statue of 'San Domenico,' the holy Dominicus, which would be carried around the village later that week, covered with living snakes. After the visit to the church we drove via the western route to Pescasseroli where we decided to camp. The camp warden told us that the week before our arrival it had snowed for several days, this was apparent as several patches of snow existed between the caravans on our site. Although a park warden told us that we really were a month too early



Foto 1: Processie met San Domenico. Procession with San Domenico. Foto C.M. Langeveld.

for any herpetological observations, we still found an aspic viper (*Vipera aspis*) and some ruin lizards (*Podarcis sicula*). After a couple of frosty nights we left on the 1st of May for Cocullo where we made a reservation of a three bedded room,, owned by an old lady. We chose the sam route to Cocullo and on our way we found a second aspic viper which was found 10 meters from a waterfall. It was a young animal of about 25 cm in length. We were rather surprised to find it in this location as the sun had as yet not reached the area and the temperature was only 10°C. At a distance of 100 meters from the waterfall we found a dead ruin lizard close to a large stone. Hoping to find another viper we turned the stone, only to find a scorpion (*Euscropius italicus*) hiding there. At first the scorpion remained still but then moved away threateningly.

A few kilometers further on we stopped again to search for reptiles. Between the sprouting wild irises (*Iris marsica*) we saw emeralds lizards (*Lacerta viridis*) running away. Ruin lizards were also present again. We continued our journey and arrived in Cocullo in the afternoon, the village was now decorated with lamps, awaiting the big day. We moved into our room and retired to bed early, just like the villagers.

THURSDAY 2 MAY 1991

In the morning we awoke to the sound of fireworks, which were being set off by the villagers on the nearby mountain side. From the direction of the little village station, situated just outside the village, large groups of people came walking into the village. The access routes to Cocullo all had a number of vendors selling souvenirs and man's need for food was adequately catered for. The weather is cloudy, but later in the day it became brighter. Headed by a standard-bearer, a number of groups of people from nearby villages, also entered Cocullo in procession. Everybody gathered in the market square in front of the little church of 'San Domenico'.

People paraded across the square with four lined snakes (*Elaphe quatuorlineata quatuorlineata*) draped around their hands and necks. The snakes are caught by the men from the villages in the week before the procession. Every 'owner' of a snake had marked the animal on the head with a small spot of paint. Commercialism is evident in Cocullo, you can only have a photograph taken of yourself draped with snakes if you are prepared to pay. We were told that the snakes are released back into the wild the day after the procession. Apart from the four lined snake you can also see people walking about with grass snakes (*Natrix natrix*) and western whip snakes (*Coluber viridiflavus*). Strikingly the western whip snakes were all black (*Coluber viridiflavus carbonarius*).

In the square the crowd had now grown to several thousands, and at 11.00 hrs a mass was held in the church in honour of the sacred Dominicus. During the mass a large barrel of sand was blessed, the blessed sand when spread in your garden is believed to prevent snakes from entering it. After the blessing the barrel is placed next to a small bell which has a chain attached to it, before taking sand your are supposed to grab the chain with your teeth and ring the bell. Apparently Dominicus never had a toothache.

12.00 O'CLOCK, THE PROCESSION STARTS

The procession starts when the two heavy church doors are opened at this point hundreds of people crowd to the doors from the square. The Italian policemen, dressed up festively for the procession with large red and black feathers on their cocked hats have difficulty in controlling the crowd. In front of the church doors a typical Italian chaos develops. The policemen try desperately to remove people from around the door area, they are eventually succesfull in this task. A man steps outside the church, he is dressed in festive regional costume, on his head he

carries a large copper kettle with a large number of white glazed breads on top. He is followed by two girls also in festive costume, they are carrying baskets and have plaited breads on their heads.

Then the important moment arrives, the statue of Dominicus is carried into the square by four villagers who placed the litter in front of the church doors. The people from the region push themselves forward and drape their marked four lined snakes around the head and shoulders of Dominicus. The litter is then raised and the procession starts. Preceded by the priest, the village mayor, the girls and the man carrying the breads, the statue is carried around the village, followed by hundreds of people. From balconies and roofs all around the village people watch the procession pass by. It is interesting to note that the four lined snakes remain around the statue as if they have a certain 'respect' for the proceedings. The whole procession is followed around the village by camera crews from Italian and Japanese television. After the procession we went to the local post office to buy envelopes with first-day stamps especially issued for the occasion. We finished the day off by taking a nice walk near Cocullo where we found a large number of wild cyclamen (*Cyclamen spp.*).

The next day we began our return trip to Holland. Looking back it was a fantastic trip. I can remember well a poster in the entrance of the post office, portraying a young child with a snake around its shoulders, which read *IL RITO DEI SERPARI... UN AMORE SENZA ETA*. Indeed, the ritual of the snakes... a love without age.

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Foto 2: *Elaphe quatuorlineata quatuorlineata*, gemerkt voor de processie, marked for the procession.
Foto C.M. Langeveld.