

## MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY, PART 14 IN TANSCIJN HARDE SOETELIJC GHEDAEN

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Contents: Syrene - Translation - Commentary - Scorpio - Translation - Commentary - Literature.

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### SYRENE

*Syrene sijn serpente mede  
Van utermate groter snelhede.  
Experimentator die ontbint,  
680 Datmense in Arabien vint,  
Ende sijn snelre dan paerde.  
Some vlieghe si hare vaerde.  
Haer venijn heeft macht so groet,  
Want eermens bevoelt so es men doet.  
(vss 677-684)*

### TRANSLATION

Syrens are snakes which can achieve a high speed. Experimentator states that they live in Arabia and that their speed might surpass those of horses. They also have the capability to fly. Their venom has such a great power that you are dead before you feel the strike.

### COMMENTARY

Maerlant has already spoken about the syrens, namely in the fourth book of *Der Naturen Bloeme*, which deals with water animals. His treatment of those syrens has mythological implications. Maerlant refers to the ancient syrens which lured sailors by their wonderful singing to the rocks on which the wretched seamen were shipwrecked.

White suggests that the syrens might stand for our modern *Chrysopelea ornata*, the flying snake from Southeast Asia and Indonesia (White, 1960, pag. 186, note). His suggestion however is to deny. *Chrysopelea ornata* has not such a powerful venom that it is as deadly as Maerlant suggests.

### SCORPIO

685 *Scorpio dats een serpent.  
Solinus scrijft, diet bekent,  
Dat et in tanscijn sonder waen  
Harde soetelijc es ghedaen,*

Ende hevet enen ghecnachten staert,  
690 Die sere scaerp es achterwaert,  
Dies ghevenijnt talre stont.  
Ende et cromtene alster mede wont;  
Ende tallen tiden poghetet ende pijn,  
Hoet den mensche ghevenijnt.  
695 Wien meent het dit schorpioen  
Dan die oerscalc, die sijn doen  
Also gheset heeft ende poghet,  
Woet dat scoenste buten toghet  
Met sprekene, met scone ghelate;  
700 Maer als dan een gaet sire strate,  
Steeet hi die tonghe uut na dien man,  
Ende visiert hoe hi best can  
Hem gedoen scennessse ende scade  
Met sinen ghevenijnden rade.



Syrene, van Maerlant, folio 126.

- 705 *Die ghevenijnt es met scorpioens slaghe,  
Levet tote an den darden daghe.  
Psilli sijn erehande liede,  
Die om ghewin ende om miede  
Venijn sughen uten wonden.*
- 710 *Deze brochten in ouden stonden  
In Italien om bejach  
Menech dier daer venijn in lach.  
Doe brochten si scorpioen int lant,  
Maer si storven altehant.*
- 715 *Doch heeftmer scorpioen ghesien,  
Die niet te scadene plien.  
Die mensche die van scorpioene  
Ghequest es in enighen doene,  
Sine aschen ghedronken in wine*
- 720 *Doeten ghenesen van der pine.  
Scorpioen aerde tetene pleghet,  
Als ons Experimentator seghet.  
Ist datment in olie versmoert,  
Brinctment dan ter sonne voert,*
- 725 *Ende mer op ghiet aysijn dan,  
Et gheneset ende levet vort an.  
Van der S vindix nemmee.  
Hoert vort serpente namen in T.  
(vss 692-728)*

#### TRANSLATION

Solinus writes that the exterior scorpio looks very friendly, has a tail with knots and a sharp point and is always prepared to poison someone. In order to wound someone he bends his tail. And poisoning human beings is its constant aim. The scorpion looks familiar to the mudslinger whose aim it is to deceive people with a hypocritical face and soft words. And having left him he shoots out his tongue and ponders on the best way to get them. A man who is bitten by a scorpion has only three days left to live. Psylli were a tribe in early days who earned their living by sucking venom from wounds. In those days they imported many venomous animals in Italy for their own profit. Scorpions too, but those animals died shortly afterwards. Nevertheless there have been non venomous scorpions in Italy. When struck by a scorpion one has to drink wine mixed with the ashes of the animal itself and the pain will disappear. In Experimentator can be read that scorpions eat soil. If drowned in oil and put in the sun a scorpion returns to life when vinegar is poured over it. There are no snake names left in S and I continu in T.

#### COMMENTARY

Maerlant copies his source when he tells that a person who has been bitten by a scorpion has only three days left to live. Topsell stresses this information as he says the bite of the Indian scorpion still causes death after three months. There are species that kill as the victims laugh or cry themselves to death (Topsell, 1973, pag. 230).

In the verses 693-694 Maerlant informs us about the eagerness with which a scorpion kills men. An amusing example of this behavior is given by Topsell. Among other things scorpions like to creep into beds. That is why the Lybians - who suffered a lot from these creatures - never installate their beds against a wall. Besides they made their beds quite high above the floor. In case such an animal could not reach his victim from down under he made his poisoning attempt once more from above. Therefore it crept to the ceiling just above the sleeping victim and then he tried to hurt it with a painful or deadly sting. If it covered the distance the scorpion called a colleague which hung down from the first one's tail and tried on his turn to sting the sleeping man. If this still did not do more scorpions were raked up until the last one of the scorpion chain was able to give the fatal sting at last. The offender hurried back over the backs of the others, then the followed last by one and so on, and so on until all animals had disappeared. Moreover they had a predilection for women and virgins who would never fully recover after a bite (Topsell, 1973, pag. 226).

The venomousness of scorpions is quite diverse. For example Grzimek says, the sting of the Italian scorpion (*Euscorpius italicus*) is hardly dangerous, whereas other species might cause painful stings, swellings and fever. Most of the time these symptoms will disappear after some days. Nevertheless there are more dangerous species. The bite of these animals can for example be mortal for children. It is the venom of the Sahara scorpion (*Androctonus australis*) in particular that is as deadly as the cobra's and which causes the death of a dog within a few seconds (Grzimek, 1972, II pag. 460).

Maerlant's verses 707-711 consider the manipulations of the Psylli in a conceited way. Topsell agrees with him (Topsell, 1973, pag. 223). Psylli, Magi and Ophiogenes were in ancient times tribes of snake charmers, people that had a peculiar acquaintanceship with venomous animals. Pliny expresses his opinion in rather negative terms on numerous places about the Magi, their medical therapeutics and medics. Herodotus and Lucan inform us about the Psylli. Herodotus just narrates the way the Psylli went to wrack and ruin:

*The lasting blowing of the southwind in their place dried up the rainwater cisterns and their land, lying totally in the east of Syrtè, had no water. They decided unanimously to march upon the southwind (I inform what the Lybians tell) and when they had reached the desert the wind spring up and covered them over with the sand* (Herodotus, 1974, IV, 173).

The story of Herodotus is mostly considered a fairy tale. Frazer explains primitive people thought they are able to have influence on the wind. A menacing simoom (a hot, dry wind in the Arabic and North African deserts with clouds of raised sand which obscure the sky; the skin is desiccated and the respiration is accelerated) like the Psylli's might be fought. That is why they marched up. It is quite acceptable they had been covered over with 'a red cloud of whirling sand' (Frazer, 1963, pag. 92).

Herodotus spends no words to the remarkable herpetological qualities of the Psylli as distinct from Lucan. For ample information about Lucan and the Psylli I refer to a future contribution in *Litteratura Serpentiū* about ancient herpetology, part 1: 'About snake bites and involuntary pregnancies.'

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