

MEDIEVAL HERPETOLOGY, PART 15 EEN LELEC DIER ENDE ONBEQUAME

By: Marcel van der Voort, Heerbaan 14, 5721 LS Asten. The Netherlands.

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INTRODUCTION

This time serpent names in T are subject. In earlier articles it was already shown that before the activities of the eminent scientist Linnaeus the concept 'serpent' was a strange collection of animals which have now been classified in different biological classes. This time the tortoise (tortuca), the spider (tharans; presumably this stands for the tarantula, the Italian wolfspider *Tarentula apuliae*), a rather strange worm (tiliacus) and a couple of 'ordinary snakes' - which does not implicate that they are well known (tirus and tisus) - will be discussed.

TORTUCA

- Tortuca es der tortuwe name,
730 Een lelec dier ende onbequame,
Ende es onder serpente ghetelt,
Omme dat sie cruupt achter tfelt,
Ende leghet tusschen II starken scilden,
Die haer gaf die nature milde,
735 Diemen qualike mach dorslaen.
Haer hoeft es na der padde ghedaen,
Ghestaert es si na tscorpioen.
Eyere leghet si als een hoen,
Ende die niet ghesont en sijn.
740 Levende es si zonder venijn;
Maer doet, als Ambrosis seghet,
Die tert daer haer lendine leghet,
Die wert van hare ghepijnt,
Want hi blivet ghevenijnt.
(vss 729-744)*

TRANSLATION

The tortoise is named tortuca, an ugly and ghastly animal which is classified as a serpent because it crawls and is pinched between two strong shields which are very difficult to destroy and were offered to him by a kind nature. The head of a tortoise looks like that of a toad, while his tail is similar to that of the scorpion. Tortoises lay eggs, just as chickens do, which

however are unhealthy. It is not a venomous animal but, as Ambrosius states, he who treads on the sexual organs of a tortoise will be poisoned, since such a touch is a painful event.

THARANS

- 745 *Tharans dats een serpent,
Als ons Plinius bekennt,
Van gheslachte van scorpioene,
Ende vliegheit na sine doene,
Want dien et steect es emmer doet,*
- 750 *Hine hebben triacle ter noet,
Ende daer toe andre medicine.
In Ytalien pleghet te sine
Sonder venijn, si bekennt,
Maer die quaden sijn in Orient,*
- 755 *Die moeghen leven, sonder saghe,
Sonder eten XX daghe.
Men sal doet slaen dat tarant,
Ende latent in olye roten te hant,
Die olie die es medicine*
- 760 *Fraie ende goet te dien venine
(vss 745-760)*

TRANSLATION

According to Pliny a tharans is a snake which belongs to the genus of scorpions and also moves like a scorpion. A person who is bitten by this animal and has no antidote and additional medicines will always die. As is known, a non-venomous species lives in Italy, however, the most evil ones live in the East. Those are - honestly - able to live for 20 days without food. A tharans should be beaten to death and subsequently left to decay in oil, for then the oil will turn into a medicine that will efficaciously cures the bite of the tharans.

COMMENT

Presumably the tarantula (*Lycosa tarentula*) is meant by the tharans. The bite of this spider would not be more dangerous than that of other similar sized spiders (Grzimek I, p. 478). According to popular belief however, such a bite can result in tarantism or dance rage. It is a phenomenon whereby women from the Italian region of Taranto show an uncontrollable urge to dance which can persist for days. Generally it concerns women under the age of forty - the phenomenon is thought to still occur nowadays -, who worked in the fields and ran the risk to be bitten by a spider. They would show acute symptoms of stupor (strong decrease or total abolition of mental functions accompanied by immobility of the body), loss of appetite, sexual lust and overall apathy. However, on the strains of a specific musical rhythm (that of the tarantella), those who have been bitten could suddenly 'regain life': they start to dance enthusiastically, jumping in all directions, singing and touching those parts of their body that have presumably been bitten by the spider. Ultimately the women

get exhausted completely and retrospectively they can't remember anything, until the symptoms of the bite have eventually shrunk (Weyer, 750-751).

TISUS

- Tisus dat serpent, horic lien,
Es omtrent Padine in Lombardien,
VI voete of VII lanc ghemene,
Achter groet ende voren clene.*
- 765 *Scarp es sijn staert, clene ende niet cranc,
Omtrent ere palmen lanc.
Ghelijc den paelding cruuptet wel,
Maer ets utermaten snel.*
- 770 *Verre spronghe soe cant gheven,
Ende altoes thoeft opgheheven,
Ende doet altoes niemen quat,
Ensi datment swaerlike bestaet.
Op den ric heeftet III rode streken.
Die met laserscepe sijn ontsteken,*
- 775 *Die doen rotten dat vleesch van desen,
Ende et nuttet, als wi lesen,
Beide in dranken ende oec in ate,
Want et esser toe goet utermaten.*
(vss 761-778)

TRANSLATION

As it is told, the tibus is a snake which, as she appears in the surroundings of Padua in Lombardy, can be up to 6 to 7 feet long and having a big (fat) posterior and a small (narrow) front end. The tibus has a sharp tail which is small but not weak at all and which has a length of a palm of the hand. The animal moves like an eel but nevertheless it is very fast. It is also able to jump quite a distance and it keeps its head always upright. The tibus hurts no man except when she is approached to closely. Its back carries three red stripes. Anyone infected with leprosy should let the flesh of a tibus decay and subsequently use it in both his drinks and food since it is a very effective medicine against leprosy.

TIRUS

- 780 *Tirus, spreect Jacob van Vetri
Ende Liber Rerum oec daer bi,
Es een serpent ende heet also.
Omme dat lant van Jherico
Ende omtrent die Jordane
Gherne plechtet te bestane.*
- 785 *Voghele ende oec haer eyere mede
Die verteertet talre stede.
Dit vleesch hierof es datmen bringhet,*

- Ende met andren specien gheminghet,
Daermen triacle of maket,
790 Die doet dat al venijn slaket.
Sulke segghen dat dit dier
Fel was ende sere onghehier,
Allen lieden te pijnlec sere
Voer die passie van onsen Here,
795 So datmen een dat felste vinc,
Als Jhesus an dien cruce hinc,
Ende hinghent hem ter siden.
Vortwaerd me in aleen tiden
Metter cracht van Jhesus bloede
800 So quam ons ghont venijn te goede.
Triacle seghtmen medicine
Jeghen alrehanden venine,
Sonder jeghen tyrus venijn,
Dat tyricon heet in Latijn.
805 Sijn vel doetet of na sire sede,
Ende verjoeghet al daer mede.
(vss 779-806)

TRANSLATION

According to Jacob of Vitry and the *Liber rerum*, the tirus lives in the surroundings of Jericho and of the river Jordan. Birds as well as bird eggs are on the menu of the tirus. The flesh of this animal is to be mixed with herbs to obtain a *theriac*, a medicine which can combat any venom. According to some people, before the death of Jesus the tirus was a very aggressive snake whose venom has a terrible effect. When Jesus was nailed on the cross one of the most malicious species was caught and hung at Jesus' side. From that moment on the power of His blood has made the tirus' venom favourable for us. As it is told, this theriac is very effective against all kinds of poisons but not to that of the tirus itself. In Latin this theriac is called *tiricon*. The tirus sloughs in the usual way and rejuvenates by that.

COMMENT

Topsell also mentions Jericho as the habitat of the tirus (Topsell, 1973, pg. 280). Besides that he fully agrees with the food of the tirus. He is more detailed about the tirus-ingredient for the famous theriac as Maerlant is. He discriminates between e.g. *trochiscos tyri* and *trochiscos vipera*, tirus and viper cake respectively, the famous antidotes for lots of diseases, i.a. poisonings. Topsell tends to regard the tirus and the viper as one species, as they both are very important for the preparation of theriac. His argument is that both snakes keep the eggs in their body and give birth to vivid young (Topsell, 1973, pg. 280).

For almost two millennia - from the first century before Christ till the beginning of our century, theriac has been a very popular medicine. For herpetologists this is very interesting, since one of the ingredients was snake meat (Van der Voort, 1993, 106-112).

The strange appearance of the tirus during Christ's death on the cross as it is told in vers 795, also occurs in Topsell's bestiarium. He handles this anecdote with care. Before

the death of Christ, the venom of the tirus could not be cured. On the contrary: not-venomous snakes like the dragon borrowed the venom from the tirus because it was so effective. After this snake had been hung next to Christ's side, the venom suddenly seemed to be less lethal and the meat of the animals could be used as an ingredient for theriac (Topsell, 1973, pg. 280).

TILIACUS

- Tiliacus, als Liber Rerum seghet,
Es een worm die te sijn pleghet
In menighen lande omtrent,
810 Ende als hi wast woert een serpent.
Lentwoerme heetment, als ict kende,
Want dat hi wast uter lende.
Et verteert den boem met allen
Binnen so, dat hi moet vallen.*
- 815 Dit serpent wort sere groet,
Ende doet, als men seghet, grote noet
Beide den beesten ende den man,
Waer soet comen mach daer an.
Van der T sprekec nemme nu.*
- 820 Nu hoert een serpent in U.
(vss 807-820)*

TRANSLATION

According to the *Liber rerum*, the tiliacus is a worm which occurs in quite a lot of countries around here. As this worm grows it becomes a snake. This snake is called a tape-worm because it grows inside lime-trees (tilia = lime). The tape-worm affects the inside of the tree so badly that it causes the tree to die. This snake grows very large and causes both in animals and man a lot of trouble if she can catch them. I have no more snakes 'in T', closes Maerlant, I will continue with one snake in 'U.'

COMMENT

The name 'tape-worm' is a tautological composition since the composed parts both mean 'snake'. According to the 'Middelnederlandsch' dictionary it is the name of a, more or less, mythological animal, which has been imagined in the shape of a equally mythical dragon or giant snake (MNW, IV, p. 652).

'Tiliacus' is the latin name for 'tape-worm'. Following Latin Maerlant tries to connect this word with lime-tree. Thomas van Cantimpré tells how this snake is born in the 'hart' of the lime-tree, where she eats the complete inner part, until the tree is fully consumed. After that the tree dies (Cantimpré p. 311, column B).

The tape-worm too - like so many other snakes - is out to get humans. In the Lancelot-compilation, a passage occurs in the 'Roman van Walewein ende Keye' in which the bravest of the knights has to do superhuman efforts not to taste defeat in the fight with the tape-worm. The animal has completely destroyed a district and driven away the inhabitants.

The king of this sad territory is left with only one possibility to ever be rehabilitated: he offers his daughter for marriage to that hero who will defeat the monster.

In this passage we then immediately encounter additional information on the tape-worm. Just like in *Der Naturen Bloeme* the tape-worm is a very big animal in the Lancelot-compilation: *Daerom began hem* (= the tape-worm) *oprechten/ Gelyc enen groten maste* (verses 19482-19483; ed. Jonckbloet II, p. 132). Moreover the monster posses claws with which it badly beats up Walewein: *Want die worm mit sinen clauwen/ Wat dat hi conde gelauwen/ Trac hi hem af, groet ende smal. Hi scorde Waleweins wapine al/ ende maecte hem daer menege wonde* (Lancelot-compilation, verses 19501-19505, ed. Jonckbloet II, p. 132). Fighting the animal is further made unpleasant, because it also has fire as a weapon; when Walewein finally succeeded in killing the snake it looses not only a lot of blood, but also fire. The latter causes all clothes that are not yet removed by the dangerous claws of the tape-worm, is burnt by the fire: *Doe viel daer neder die viant,/ Daer bloet ende vier ute scoet thant,/ Dat Waleweine verbernde na das/ Al dat an sine live was* (Lancelot-compilation, verses 19513-19516, ed. Jonckbloet II, p. 133). For that matter, in the Lancelot-compilation housing of the tape-worm in a tree is not confirmed: the animal lives in a cave:*Ende quam ut sisen hole gerede...*

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