

HERPETOLOGICAL GATHERINGS 2 'ENE SCALC INT BELESEN'

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INTRODUCTION

In verses 107-114 of the sixth book of *Der Naturen Bloeme* (1266) dealing with serpents, the mediaeval author Jacob van Maerlant informs us about a curious habit of the aspis (= cobra):

110 *Maer nu es ene nature in desen,
 Dat sere scalc es int belesen;
 Want alst den toevenare verstaet,
 Diet met sulken arte vaet,
 So steectet in teen ore den staert,
 Ende worpet tander nederwaert
 Jeghen daerde, ende stopt sijn oren,
 Also dat niet en mach hoeren.*

In modern language this means: 'the aspis is very crafty in the field of charming. When she hears the snake-charmer, who wants to catch her by such a trick, she puts her tail in one ear and lays the other on the ground. In this way she closes her ears.'

This habit makes the cobra, particularly *Naja haje* or the ureus snake mentioned here, a dangerous opponent to humans. The animal has deadly venom and can't be caught easily not even by people who are specialized in this. The country dealing with these animals is, according to Maerlant in verse 127: Egypt.

Modern herpetologists will consign this phenomenon to the realm of fancy. For a snake is as good as deaf. The animal lacks an external auditory organ like a tube of Eustachius or ear drums. Nevertheless, an internal ear is present. Low frequencies of 100 to 500 Hertz cause an impulse in the auditory nerve. In practice, however, auditory organs are to be neglected as a organ for snakes. The only clear function of the internal auditory organ is being a receptor for vibrations coming via the ground to the snake (Engelman and Obst, p 31). Below I present modern practices with snakes, reflecting the charming of snakes according to Maerlant.

ANTIQUAE ASSOCIATE WITH SNAKES

In antique times a snake was considered chthonic (i.e. an animal belonging to the earth) and ruler of the Realm of the Death due to its hidden way of living; on the other hand she was known as house-snake having a protective function (Schouten, 1963, pp.34-35). Hence, in every house a snake was present, sometimes even more than one. This must have caused in, for example, Rome such a problem that Pliny sighed that when the eggs of *Elaphe longissima* were not destroyed in the fire now and then, a real plague of these animals would have started (Pliny, XXIX, xii, p.231). Also remarks of the English clergyman Edward Topsell show that snakes occurred in higher numbers in England in 1608 than nowadays (Topsell, 1973, *passim*).

A house-snake, especially cobra's were kept, didn't lead a dog's life in antique times. The animals were put near the children in their cradles and they ate and played together. Specially prepared food existing of honey, wine and flower was even licked from the table, when the animals were invited by finger snapping. During the night the cobra's were borne in mind as well: someone leaving his bed for a moment, snapped his fingers and the snakes returned to their caves till the one who had warned them had returned to his bed (Topsell, 1973, p.58).

When the snakes wounded a child, it was regarded as a divine and lucky miscalculation (Topsell, 1973, p.242; Egli, p.113). Maerlant mentions in his verses dealing with the 'aspis' such an accident that would have happened in Egypt: verses 126 to 136 tell a sad story of a man who kept a cobra as house-snake. The female animal gave birth to two young and one killed one of the man's children. When the snake mother discovered what had happened, she tore the offender in pieces, disappeared and never returned.

ANTIQUAE SNAKE-CHARMERS

On one hand snakes were kept as pets, on the other hand there must have been moments, also in that time, that people were not happy with their presence. Consequently, people specialized in dealing with snakes were needed. An author named Lucanus describes the activities of these people in detail. In the ninth book of his *Pharsalia* he informs the reader about the members of a tribe, the Psylli, with extraordinary, herpetological habits. The passage in question is the following:

Of all races inhabiting the earth, there is only one, the Psylli of Marmarica, who comes to no harm when they receive a deadly bite of snakes. Their voice has the activity of powerful herbs, their own blood is protected and keeps down all venoms, even without using charms. The circumstances in their country made it possible to live among snakes without any problems. By making a living in a place surrounded by snakes, they obtained the privilege from death to live safely (comprehend: at least when death caused by venom is concerned). They put extreme trust in their blood. When a new born baby is suspected to have the wrong blood, they test the child using a venomous aspis. When the baby doesn't hesitate to touch the snake and subsequently starts to play with the snake, only then, the Psylli are convinced of the purity of the descendant. The Psylli are not content with only their own safety, but also watch over strangers and help humanity to combat deadly monsters. They followed the Roman army; and as soon as the leader orders to pitch the camp, the Psylli started to clean the sand within the area of the camp from snakes using charms and incantations. The borders of the camp were pegged out with smoking fires in which wood crackled and resin sizzled. Spare

tamarisk branches, eastern costoes, centaury from Thessalia, fennel and Italian thapsos were noisy in the flames. Furthermore, the Psylli burnt larch and southernwood, resulting in smoke of which snakes are averse from, and horns of deer deer born far outside Africa. In this way, the soldiers were protected during the night. When someone was bitten during the day and nearly died, the magic powers of the Psylli became active and a tremendous battle started between the Psyllus and the administered venom. The native starts by marking the spot of the bite; this stabilizes the venom and keeps it restricted to the wound. Then, his foaming mouth produces many charms in a continuous muttering. The seriousness of the wound forces him not to breath, neither is there a moment of silence permitted by the death. Indeed, the venom, after penetrating the blackening marrow is cast out by magic. However, when the venom doesn't obey properly, and refuses, despite all orders, to appear, the curer bends over and licks the bloodless spot, sucks the venom and drains the limbs with his teeth, till he drags the death with a triumphant gesture from the cold body and spits it out. It is a piece of cake for the Psylli to determine by the taste of the venom the snake species, whose bite was triumphed over by the curer. (Lucanus, IX, 890-939, pp.571-575).

MODERN SNAKE-CHARMERS

Bertus Aafjes

Like the Psylli in former times, some people nowadays still provide their cost of living by tracking down snakes in places they are not wanted. The novelist Bertus Aafjes spends a travel account on this in his 'Morgen bloeien de abrikozen' (Aafjes, 1966, pp. 163-172). It appears to be necessary that his house and garden are cleaned from scorpions and snakes. The famous snake-charmer Moestafa Aboedi, who comes to do the job, gives an impressive performance. He produces hissing sounds alternated with incantations cited monotonously:

I charm you with Allah...whether you are above...whether you are below... appear... I charm you by the highest name... obey and appear... and if you don't appear... just die, just die...

Next he grabbes into the bushes on the left and on the right and appears every time with a twisting snake in his hands. According to Aafjes the snake-charmer could smell the reptiles, which were charmed by his queer voice. The animals left their hiding places themselves.

However, a literary text is not convincing, even when it is a travel account and thus not primarily fiction, to illustrate data from a mediaeval text. Surprisingly the essential part of Aafjes' account is supported by more scientific references.

Paul Brunton

I am not sure whether the qualification 'scientific' is appropriate to the following book of Paul Burton, a writer unknown to me. I picked his 'A search in Secret Egypt' (1935), like I was guided from a higher quarter, out of thousands of books in an antiquarian in Eindhoven. This globetrotter spends two chapters on the occupation Lucanus already wrote about, and on which the verses cited above were written by Maerlant some centuries later. In addition, his story correlates surprisingly well to the experiences of Aafjes.

It is the famous sheikh Moussa (of whom Keimer - see below - also tells extensively) in Brunton's book, who reigned as a king in the realm of the snakes, and of whom he was very fascinated. At numerous previous occasions Brunton had already seen snake-charmers in action and was therefore well informed about the tricks these people performed to obtain

the desired effect on the audience. The cheapest tricks are removal of the fangs (even the secondary teeth in the upper jaw of the animals are often removed), burning away the poison bladder, forcing the snakes to bite repeatedly in a piece of meat before the performance starts. This is to empty the poison bladder. Furthermore, forcing the animals to bite in soft material, by which the fangs get clogged up, and handling harmless animals: the average tourist is herpetologically an illiterate person and by definition afraid of every snake!

Brunton emphasizes, however, that sheikh Moussa is different. He doesn't belong to the category of snake-charmers who use flute-music to force a deaf snake to 'dance'. Moussa is a descendant of a famous snake-charming family, who used charms to strip gardens and houses of poisonous animals. Brunton extensively describes a performance of Moussa, in which we recognize some parts Maerlant writes about in the verses cited. The sheikh cites repeatedly certain passages of the Koran, mixed with magic charms and orders for scorpions and snakes to appear. Brunton never neglected to watch Moussa and has been very alert on remarking possible fraudulent practices, however, he never could find something like that. In contrast, before sheikh Moussa started to charm, he stripped most of his clothes to make clear to everyone that he didn't carry any snakes to release secretly and to catch later on triumphantly. There are indeed snake-charmers who have admitted that they bring snakes along to release secretly in the area to be cleaned before they start charming (Keimer, 1947, p.47).

When the sheikh finally, after his charming has failed (!), has to put his arm up to his shoulder in a hole to pull a giant cobra out, he throws the animal on the ground. The snake winds violently for some time and it doesn't seem too strong to suppose that possibly these movements, that have been copied for centuries by bestiary authors, may have led to the idea that a snake puts one ear on the ground and closes the other with the tip of its tail.

Brunton continues with a passage which is illustrative to a passage in Lucanus' description: the Psylli seemed to be people having a heritable 'dominance over snakes' and immunity against bites of venomous animals. Well, also sheikh Moussa owned these qualities. He forbids the cobra to bite and orders the animal to put her head on his hand, and this happens!

The prohibition to bite turns up again during another occasion. During manipulation of the horned adder (*Cerastes cerastes*) Moussa had been bitten heavily in his lower arm. The sheikh kept calm and finished this happening with the remark: 'The adder can't hurt me. Not one snake is allowed to bite me with her fangs.' To illustrate this he put his fingers in the beak of the horned adder, perilous for humans, gave the animal plenty opportunity to bite and pulled his fingers back after some time. Nothing disastrous has happened (Brunton, 1950, p.255).

Louis Keimer

Lucanus, Maerlant, Brunton and Aafjes are supported by 'modern' science. In his study, published in 1947, Louis Keimer goes further into the different forms of snake-charming. What has been written by Brunton and Aafjes, is confirmed by him and sometimes slightly differentiated.

He gives, for example, some charming-formulae. What has been said correlates roughly to what Aafjes tells of Moestafa Aboedi. For example:

You, snake, appear. By the command of Solomon the Wise Man, appear. By the command of God, the most merciful. For most certain merciful. I, your master, serve the king of the judgement day. Listen! Appear! By the command of God. The most merciful one.

Keimer stresses that these charmings were intended especially for the audience. They are spoken with a special voice and contains several dragged inflexions, so that the whole must be an impressive business to hear.

Keimer gives a considerable series of examples of 'performances' of snake-charmers who searched houses for the presence of snakes. He gives the word of numerous eye-witnesses. It is remarkable how different the opinions are about these performances. Many people are convinced that there is question of fraud: despite the fact that most snake-charmers stripped to show that they didn't carry animals, some people think that they were nevertheless either able to smuggle the snakes, or they have been hidden inside for handing on by a confederate.

Others wanted to investigate the phenomenon expressly for genuineness and created circumstances to make fraud by the snake-charmer barely possible. To this purpose the place of performance was kept secretly till the last moment. Therefore 'precautions' could not have been taken by the snake-charmer. In addition, the snake-charmers were watched so closely by the investigators, that it finally had to be concluded that he really possessed magic power. The monotonous formulae as cited above were never omitted.

Some people think the obedience of the snakes is due to their training. However, snakes are animals who can not or hardly be trained. Sometimes snake-charmers force their animals to bite repeatedly in a wooden image of a human face. The purpose is that this unpleasant and painful experience the animals will stop to bite the face of the snake-charmer during a performance. After a while, it turns out indeed that snakes take care not to bite a human face. However, in general snakes are difficult to affect (Zimniok, 1984, p.99).

Another assumption is the following. Snakes have an extraordinarily sense to smell. Possibly the snake-charmer carries a body odour, artificial or not, which is attractive to snakes and makes them appear after detecting the smell. Keimer's literature reference, a German living in Egypt for a while during the nineteenth century, names the herb Scheich being very aromatic. Although this herb is chemically analyzed, and it therefore might be known what compound is attractive to snakes, I can't give a definite answer; I couldn't obtain the book Keimer refers to (Keimer, 1947, p.55). A similar olfactory hypothesis also applies to the staff carried by the snake-charmers. Such a staff, cut out the top of a palm tree, contains sweet juices, by which the snakes could be attracted (Keimer, 1947, p.55).

In the passage of Lucanus cited above, it is raised that the burning of herbs would chase the snakes away. Also Keimer mentions the use of herb smoke during snake-charming. In contrast to what the Psylli aimed at burning herbs, the aromatic smoke as described in the eye-witness account of last century, just served to attract snakes, so that they could be caught (Keimer, 1947, p.55).

CLOSING

The description of the typical behaviour, copied by Maerlant from well-known sources without doing any empirical research, is more realistic than it seems at first sight. A snake would not have performed the conscious actions described by Maerlant during a charming: putting one ear on the ground, and closing the other with its tail. Possibly the account of actions of antique snake-charmers, dealing with violently resisting snakes, has been elementarily correct. In the course of time the repeated copying of this information by other authors could have caused the existing of a more fantastic version which is, to be honest, nicer to believe than the truth.

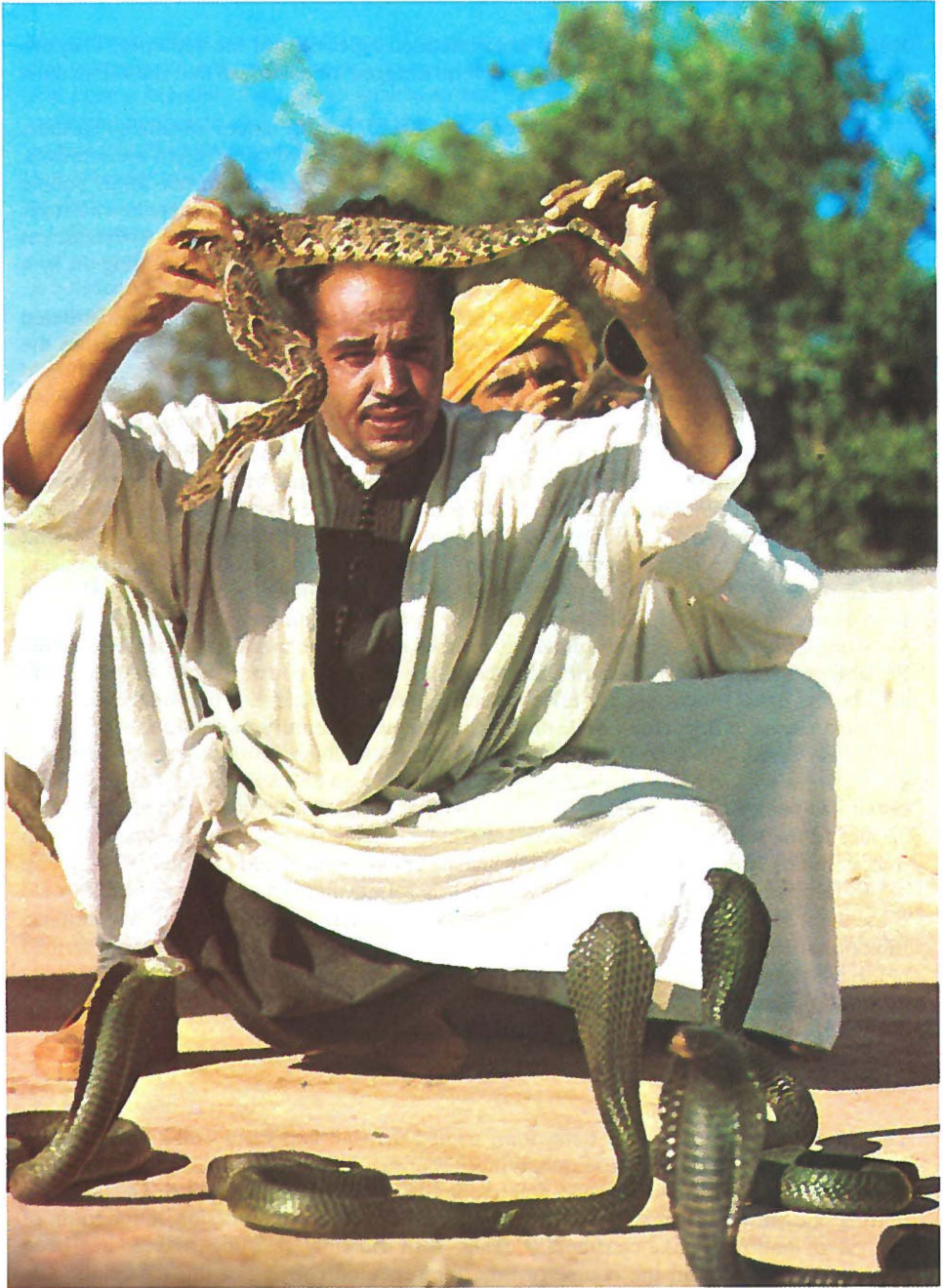


Foto 1: Slangenbezweerder in Marrakech, Marokko.
Snake-charmer in Marrakech, Marokko.

The mediaeval bestiary *Der Naturen Bloeme* by Jacob van Maerlant contains a treasure of completely unbelievable remarks, which after further study, could be supplied with an acceptable explanation.

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