

HERPETOLOGICAL GATHERINGS PART IV ALEXANDER AND THE POISON GIRL

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INTRODUCTION

A long time ago I learned in a history class that Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) was a man of small stature but of great action. Everything about this man was supposed to be special, even the age at which he died: 33 years. On moral grounds our history teacher - I was at a Roman Catholic school - omitted some other details: that Alexander's mother Olympias was a very temperamental lady with a predilection for conjurations and magical rituals where she used to dance with snakes coiled around her neck and head (Keller, 1913, page 286-287). How she was seduced and impregnated by the sorcerer Neptabanus who had taken the shape of a dragon (draco = python) and his father Philippus must have been a simpleton not to have noticed anything. Fortunately, later on I had the opportunity to take note of these most interesting facts.

ALEXANDER AND THE POISON GIRL

One can measure the quality of someone's achievements in two ways, one can indicate on a map all the areas someone has conquered, in the case of Alexander quite a big area has to be coloured on a historical map. Another way is to look at what his adversaries have tried in order to eliminate him. In this case you will also come to the justifiable conclusion that Alexander fully deserved his epithet 'the Great'. The most remarkable attempt ever made on Alexander's life was what the Queen of India did to prevent the conquest of her land. She sent him a gorgeous girl who had been fed poison since the day she was born, so that she had developed into an unprecedented lethal weapon. I came across this intriguing story in one of the books of Jacob van Maerlant.

ALEXANDER'S QUESTS

Alexander's actions have had such a tremendous influence, and have appealed to the imagination of the people so much that even in 1260 it was worth the effort for a devotee to have Jacob van Maerlant make a Middle Dutch translation of a French example of Alexander's adventures.

Maerlant called this translation 'Alexander's quests'; the notion 'quests' is derived from the French word 'geste' and means 'conduct of war' and also 'heroic deed'. Maerlant's

translation of Alexander's heroic deeds is one of many versions, many others exist in quite a lot of languages. Well then, the attempt which may be interesting to other herpetologists is described by Maerlant in the first part of his 'biography' of Alexander the Great. I just give you the translation of the Middle Dutch in modern English (Alexander's Quests I, vss. 1150-1180):

Shortly after the Queen of India sent [to Alexander] a courtly and free (i.e. non-predial) virgin so perfect in mind and limb that in her days one could not have found her equal. She was indeed so pretty, that everyone who saw her with his own eyes said that nobody was as perfect as she. Moreover, she was so excellent, that she could tell her message in Greek. Alexander instantly fell in love with her and wished to make her his mistress at once. He ordered his shield bearer to release her. As Aristotle saw this, he noticed something strange about her behaviour and he discovered by cunning - since he was very wise - that she had been raised since her youth on snakes and poison. He drew the king's attention to this and showed him that anyone, no matter how strong he was, would die before the ninth hour if he had anything to do with her. Therefore the king would have been dead if his master had not prevented it.

Obviously Alexander has inherited his mother's temperament. He has hardly seen the pretty girl and already the fire of love has to be extinguished. This time he would not have come off so well as the girl would have poisoned him.

QUESTIONS

Although Maerlant devotes thousands of lines to Alexander, unfortunately he does not waste any more words on this story. However, we would like to know more about this poison girl; what exactly was her food, and in what way would the poisoning of Alexander have taken place? How exactly did Aristotle, the greatest of all philosophers, discover that the girl was perilous for his pupil? And what happened to the girl afterwards?

ANSWERS

The answers have to be collected from various versions and translations of the Alexander story. Fortunately this labour has already been done in 1893 by the German scientist Wilhelm Hertz. In the following I will gratefully take advantage of his information.

According to one of the versions the female present could have killed Alexander merely by her breath. Her exclusively poisonous food supposedly enabled her to do so. A look at her eyes had the same effect (she resembles the dreadful basiliscus, a monster which terrorised ancient and medieval times - Van der Voort, 1993, page 42-55). The intention of the Queen of India was that the mere sight of this gorgeous girl would kill Alexander. Aristotle could only avert this threat by putting a special herb in the mouth of his Lord. The name of this herb has not been handed down.

Another version tells how the girl entered while Alexander was sitting at the table. She was so indescribably beautiful that Alexander could not take his eyes off her, which would have meant a certain death for him. Fortunately, Aristotle asked his Lord to follow him, withdrawing him from the lethal gaze. Aristotle told him that the girl had been fed viper meat since the day she was born and due to this she obtained her lethal powers. Obviously Aristotle's remarks were investigated. In those days this happened as follows,

Alexander ordered in a condemned man, he made the girl bite the man, who died immediately. In another version merely a kiss of the girl sufficed to kill the condemned man. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

In another variation the poison girl is one of the persons given to Alexander as a sign of submission: made up seductively she is sent to Alexander together with four other gorgeous girls and slaves. Alexander, after all he has inherited his mother's sensuality, immediately wants to embrace the most beautiful one, but Socrates and Aristotle (the first was the master of the latter and seemingly both were in Alexander's service) stopped him. Two slaves are drummed up and they die immediately after having kissed the young lady. The same thing happens to dogs and horses as she touches them. Immediately Alexander has the girl decapitated and her body burned. In the course of that evening a lot of knights who had not been able to control their libido and had given in to their desire to kiss the girl before she was admitted to Alexander, died.

According to some philosophers the active poison was napellus (see appendix at page 104 and Thomasset, 1982, page 89). In another version this poison was the cause that the girl was exposed as a murderess; at the table she refuses all dishes and asks for napellus. To Socrates this is a clear indication. He observed her and he can almost see the poison coming out of her eyes. He advises his Lord not to spend the night with her, but to leave that to others. Well, there were plenty of candidates, but next morning they were all lying dead on the bed.

Interesting too is a story that goes into detail about the birth and upbringing of the poison girl. In this land where snakes occurred that could swallow a deer (just like the Ancient and Medieval 'boa' - see Van der Voort, 1993, pages 56-62), a queen put a newborn baby girl in a snake's egg. In those days the eggs of giant snakes had the size of a bushel, about 1 decalitre, so this should not have been a problem. She let the mother snake breed her eggs and the baby girl is born a second time, together with her snake brothers and sisters. The mother also gives them snake food. The child cannot speak, only hiss. When her snake mother decides it is time for her to go and live on her own, the queen puts her in a cage in the palace. There she teaches the girl to speak and to accept normal food. Many years later this girl is offered to Alexander, but once again it is Aristotle who discovers the snakelike nature of this present and warns his lord. Aristotle then carries out a test in order to convince him. He has pulverized a bucketful of Dictam and with the juice which is released he draws a circle around a vessel under which a dangerous snake is lying. As the vessel is removed and the snake released, it can only crawl along the line of the circle, not being able to cross it. It has to crawl continuously until it eventually dies. The poison girl is also put in the circle, together with the two other girls and when Alexander tells them to walk towards him the two normal girls can do this, but the poison girl cannot. She desperately tries to find a way out of the circle and eventually she dies in the same way as the snake before her.

There are many variations on this theme; the gaze of the girl is supposed to be as poisonous as that of the *Basiliscus*, even her sweat is supposed to be poisonous and she leaves a trace of her victims in history.

A STRANGE CUSTOM

There are also other poison damsels in history. For medievists John Mandeville's report of his voyage around the world - as far as it was known in that days - is a very famous book (it is still disputed how far Sir John Mandeville actually travelled; one critic has remarked

brusquely that his longest journey appears to have been to the nearest library!). I quote his remarks about the inhabitants of a 'fair and good isle':

There is another fair and good isle, full of people, where the custom is that when a woman is newly married, she shall not sleep the first night with her husband, but with another young man, who shall have ado with her that night and take her maidenhead, taking in the morning a certain sum of money for his trouble. In each town there are certain young men set apart to do that service, which are called 'gadlibiriens', which is to say 'fools of despair'. They say and affirm as a truth, that it is a very dangerous thing to take the maidenhead of a virgin; for, so they say, whoever does puts himself in peril of death. And if the husband of the woman find her still virgin on the next night following (...) then he shall have an action at law against the young man before the justice of the land - as serious as if the young man had intended to kill him. (...) I asked them what the cause and reason was for such a custom there. They told me that in ancient times some men had died in that land in deflowering maidens, for the latter had snakes within them, which stung the husbands on their penises inside the women's bodies; and thus many men were slain, and so they follow that custom there to make other men test out the route before they themselves set out on that adventure (Mandeville, 1983, page 175.)

SNAKE-EATING

According to Jacob van Maerlant Aristotle told Alexander that the beautiful girl had grown up on a diet of snakes and poison. Although nowadays snakes are found on the menu for quite a lot of people in the United States (rattlesnakes) and in Asia, in those days snakes were also ingredients for a gastronomical diner. Therefore I would like to make a final comment about the eating of snakes. The source of this information is Keimer's very informative account about the history of snakes in old and modern Egypt.

In the second part of his study more than once Keimer pays attention to the public appearance of ophiophagi (snake eaters). Each time it is a group of people who carry along a huge number of poisonous snakes, mainly vipers. The animals are alive, they obviously try to escape, but they are not given the chance. With their teeth the snake eaters tear pieces of flesh from the snake's body, the blood dripping from their mouths and as in ecstasy they try to snatch away each other's snakes. Of course there are also snake charmers who demonstrate this for money. They enter a hotel and offer to eat a live snake for a small fee. After some showing with a cobra whose fangs have been meticulously removed, he holds the poor animal by the head and tail, grasps its body in the middle with his mouth and bites the snake into two. Then he take one of the two parts and rips off a big piece while the blood drips over his face.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to express my thanks to the people of the Public Library of Astén, where I live, who managed to obtain the microfilms of the precious book of Hertz.

APPENDIX

Aconitum napellus is monkshood or devil's weed. The aconitine is a strong alkaloid which may cause deadly poisoning (van Hellemont, p.14).

Dictamnus albus contains dictamnine which may cause a cardiac arrest (van Hellemont, p. 203).

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