

HERPETOLOGICAL GATHERINGS 5

Drugs for a Krait

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In his latest novel *The Cu Chi Case*, that features commissioner Vincken and inspector Verstuyft, the Flemish author Jef Geeraerts - creator of an extensive literary oeuvre - used an interesting herpetological fact. The two police officers are called to a rather horrifying murder case.

A pastel coloured sofa; on it a corpulent man with short white hair dressed in a dark blue three-piece suit. Under his chin stuck out something that looked like piece of insulation piping. His mouth was open as if he was about to say something. His pale eyes stared to some point in space. The colour of his shirt was indeterminable because of the blood. Both hands were cut of. The wrists looked like two pieces of raw ossobuco (Geeraerts, 13).

I think that if you are mutilated like that there is little chance you can survive. The autopsy gives some interesting additional information. Inspector Verstuyft summarises it as follows:

'Cause of death: shock and coma but not the pierced throat or loss of blood. This was so peculiar the Jew Süß (the nickname of the pathologist - MvdV) kept looking for further evidence. What do you think? (...) In the neck near the

left main artery two tiny needle like wounds were found, together with a light swelling from an infection caused by some kind of neurotoxin. Jew Süß thinks they were caused by a snake bite. The distance between them is too small to be caused by a Cobra or Viper as he has already learned from a colleague at the university' (Geeraerts, 29).

Bungarus fasciatus



The investigation shows that the victim was bitten by a banded Krait *Bungarus fasciatus*. The remarkable behaviour of this snake is soon known to the Antwerp police. During a briefing those involved in the investigation are given the following information:

*'The snake Sullivan was bitten by is called *Bungarus fasciatus* or banded Krait. It occurs throughout Southeast Asia*

and is one of the few poisonous snakes that bite only at night. So, if the sun is out it is a very neat and discreet pet. During the day Vietnamese sometimes walk around with one coiled around their necks. However, as soon as it gets dark it becomes aggressive. Its bite is absolutely lethal within a few minutes. You don't even have time to inject anti-venom. It grows up to one meter and fifty centimetres and is as thin as your little finger. It is very beautiful so it seems. Yellow with black crossbands, very Flemish, so you don't have to fear anything. It is from the same family as the Cobra, the Mamba, the Taipan and the Coral snake, called the Elapids...(...). The poison contains mainly neurotoxins and some haemotoxins. As a result mainly the nervous system is affected and to a lesser extent the blood. (...) In addition dizziness, dribbling, paralysis of the facial muscles, the lips, the tongue and the larynx occur. The pulse is weak and the blood pressure falls rapidly. Breathing becomes increasingly hard with eventually total paralysis, shock and coma' (Geerearts, 61-62).

Geeraerts is known for his thorough research when writing books and this book is no exception. If you check Grzimek you will find a confirmation that a Krait is only dangerous at night. This is what Grzimek writes:

'During the daytime one can beat, torment, stab, decapitate or even nail the Krait to the ground and release it - it stays phlegmatic up to the point of suicide. As far I know no one has ever succeed to persuade an adult Bungarus to bite during the daytime' (Grzimek VI, 418).

It is remarkable that those that had all the reasons to kill Sullivan (the name of the victim) did this during daytime. A time when according to Grzimek a banded Krait cannot be persuaded to bite. According to Geerearts however, there is a way to bring a Krait to a different behaviour. In a herpetological centre in Vietnam com-

missioner Vincken asks a vietnamese herpetologist: Does a banded Krait ever bite during the daytime, professor?

Yes, she does, when treated with stimulants...

Which kind of stimulants?

Amphetamines.' (Geerearts, 174)

Why am I telling you all this. To make a long story short: for the last couple of years I have been studying the book of serpent by the medieval Dutch author Jacob van Maerlant. One of the interesting things of his book is the fact that Maerlant - like a true representative of a culture in which for centuries things were uncritically copied from each other - makes remarks on snakes that one moment seem undoubtedly wrong while sometimes seem to be products of his imagination. He provides us with information that at first sight seems plausible but which should not unreservedly be considered the truth. Finding out the 'herpetological truth' of this putative nonsense I find intriguing.

One of the medieval 'serpents' Maerlant deals with is the *draco*. The author of another bestiary, Topsell, mentions an Indian *draco* species that does not wound during the day but does at night. These animals produce some kind of urine that, when it comes in contact with it, causes all the flesh of living animals to rot away (Topsell, 161).

The problem is that there is no antique serpent species that covers so many different species of snakes as the *draco* does. It would be nice if one could bring some order into this. With this article I hope that not only that those herpetologists who share my love of a cultural-historical approach of snakes have enjoyed this contribution but also that those who can provide more information on the toxic properties of a Krait or its drugging will share this information with me and the readers of *Litteratura Serpentina* in the form of an article.

■ LITERATURE

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