

SNAKES AND ELEPHANTS

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One of the characteristics that fascinates me about snakes, is their incredible ability to devour large prey. Sometimes I witness this in my own terrarium if, for lack of mice, I have to feed my two *Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta* rather larger rats. More often however I encounter this phenomena in literature: Anaconda's devour alligators, pythons feast on gazelles and pot-belly pigs, or ophiophagous snakes eat congeners of the same or even bigger size. The ultimate of this phenomenon I read in ancient literature and deals with the natural animosity between the snake and the elephant and the everlasting battle that results from it.

It is the famous Roman author Plinius († 79 AD) who, in book VIII, 33 of his *Historia naturalis* describes the fight between an elephant and a giant snake. To overcome the elephant, the snake climbs a tree along the path the elephant usually takes, to suddenly attack a passing animal. The elephant knows that, once grabbed by the snake, it does not stand much of a chance against the snakes' coils and it tries to free itself of its attacker, by rubbing against rocks and trees. The snake in return, tries to prevent this by making it impossible for the elephant to walk. Using his trunk the elephant tries to unravel the coils of the snake but the snake bites the trunk. This makes it impossible for the elephant to breathe. The snake also goes for the elephants' eyes. Plinius claims that fights like these are the reason elephants are often blind and in a miserable state.

The description of such a fight has, quite understandably, appealed to the imagination of many authors. In Medieval natural history encyclopaedia's, books that had a serious scientific status at that time, the battle between the elephant and the giant snake,

often called *draco* or dragon, is mentioned regularly. In 1270 AD the Flemish phenomenon Jacob van Maerlant in his bestiarius *Der Nature Bloeme*, translates the description of such a battle between an elephant and a dragon, from Latin into his own language. Some centuries later in 1608, Edward Topsell made an English translation, although from another Latin source. With both authors we find the same ingredients as with Plinius.

The first question that one, as a reader of this time, must ask oneself is: do snakes indeed eat elephants? I can imagine that your answer would be a deep NO! Rather than seriously contemplating the question, readers nowadays would see it as proof of the unreliability of older authors. Plinius and his fellow writers must have been credulous semi-scientists, simply accepting these stories as true and passing them on. In the case of Plinius such a thought is indeed valid, since he was known to literally believe everything he was told. Although he did do some research on natural phenomena himself, he eagerly copied everything he read and heard from others, for his above-mentioned book. Believing both Plinius and his followers for their word would be unwise from a modern scientific point of view.

Yet modern scientists have seriously studied the information provided by Plinius. As I have noted before, again this story is not treated as mere nonsense. Keimer for instance, elaborately pays attention to the heroic battle between snake and elephant. In his considerations he includes reports of Greek and Roman authors, as well as illustrations on Egyptian archaeological findings from pre-dynastic period. He noticed that on these illustrations the snake does not wind itself around the legs of the elephant but rather twists between them. Keimer believes (as far as Africa and Egypt in particular is concerned) that a venomous, rather than a constricting snake, is in-



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volved. The size of the Egyptian cobra (he mentions in particular *Naja haje*, a snake that can reach a length of 1.8 meters) makes it impossible that the fight would be between a predator and its prey. To him it seems also impossible that the venom of *Naja haje* could kill an elephant. The King cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*) that lives in India can however kill an elephant. It is recorded that wood-logging companies in the former Siam, lost two to three elephants yearly due to snake bites (Keimer 1947: 26; Ditmars 1937: 154). This could well mean a mixing of different stories: on the one hand there are snakes that can kill an elephant, particularly the King cobra, on the other hand there are snakes, for instance of the genus *Dendrelaphis*, *Ahaetulla* and *Oxybelis*, that, hidden in a tree, wait for passing prey to attack it from above (Anajeva and Orlov, 1983: 112).

Recently I was rather surprised to learn that there is no need for an elaborate explanation for what Plinius wrote and others have copied blindly for centuries. In Oliver, I found a report of such an incredible fight between a snake and an elephant. A large reticulated python (*Python reticulatus*) had attacked an elephant calf. It had grabbed the calf at the hind leg and anchored itself to a tree. An hour-long fight for life or death followed that because of its violence, attracted the attention of several jungle dwellers. Finally the python started to eat the hind leg of the calf until the moment came where the calf could no longer move and the snake could no longer continue eating. Then the spectators stopped the show. Using knives and axes they cut up the snake and freed the elephant. In the same area, some 17 years earlier, a similar fight had taken place between a reticulated python and an adult elephant. The battle had lasted for no less than three days and finally ended as described above (Oliver, 1958: 45). Plinius and all translators and copyists in the centuries afterwards, could well

have described an historic fact. A fact, that even today, seems very unrealistic.

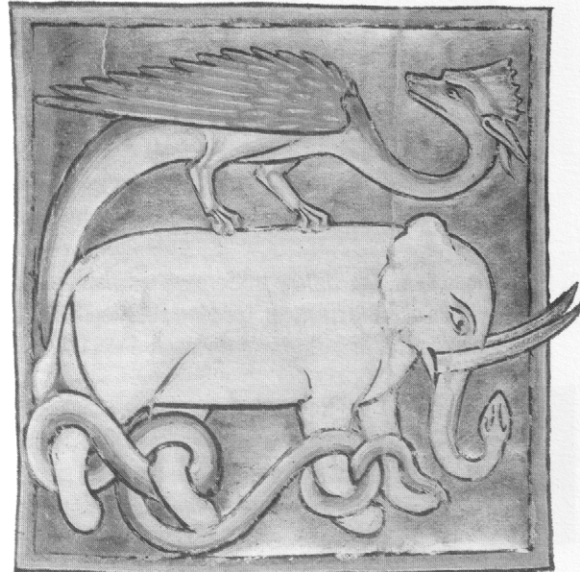
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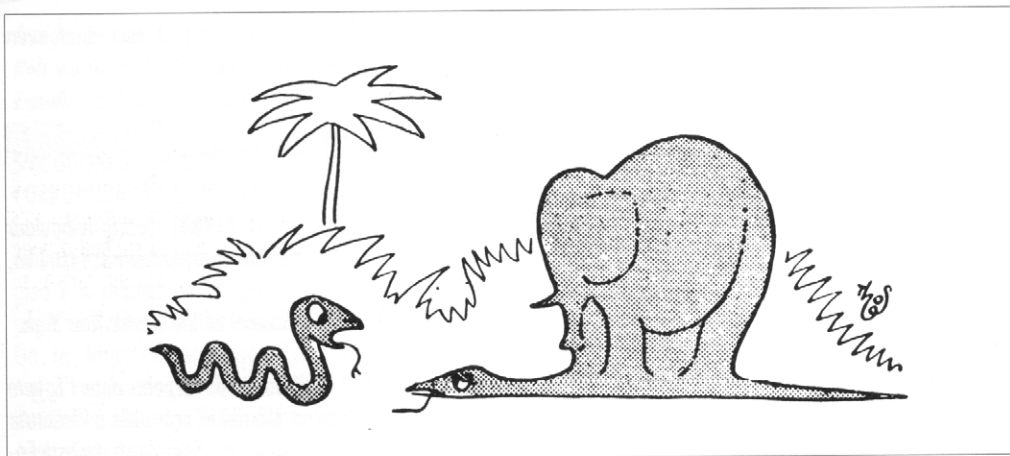
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A Medieval giant snake, a draco, goes for dinner.
From: Ann Payne, *Medieval Beasts* (London 1990), page 82.



'No wonder you've got indigestion'; cartoon from 'Adam Magazine'. From: Morris 1968.

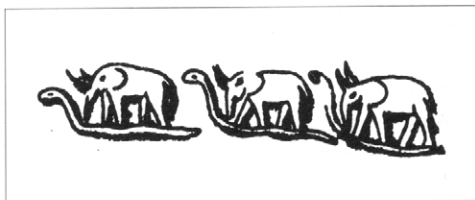
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*Translated from Dutch by René van der Vlugt
English corrections by Mark Wootten.*



*Fight between a snake and an elephant;
From: Keimer 1947, 28*

