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Basilisk - the History of the Legend

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Abstract

The article traces the development of the legendary features of one of the most menacing creatures of Graeco-Roman antiquity, *i.e.*, the basilisk. The authors refer to the earliest description (Nicander of Colophon), where the basilisk's extraordinary features are "limited" (it cannot yet kill with its sight, breath or hiss). Later depictions, however, do endow the creature with these abilities. The authors aim to demonstrate that various corruptions of the source texts have occurred in the transmission of the content. Later the creature's characteristics were exaggerated and dramatized. The pre-existing *topoi* depicting other dangerous creatures and their venomousness – after their import and adaptation – have further embellished the basilisk's description. Some mutually exclusive qualities have even been combined. Due to textual errors some features (ill-fitting to the convention of this creature's characterisation) have appeared, *i.e.*, the power to crack rocks. The authors try to establish how such mistakes might have happened.

Keywords: Pliny the Elder; Nicander of Colophon; paradoxography; basilisk; snakes in literature; *topos* in literature.

Resumo

O artigo traça o desenvolvimento das características lendárias de uma das criaturas mais ameaçadoras da antiguidade greco-romana: o basilisco. Os autores referem-se à descrição mais antiga (Nicandro de Cólofon), na qual as características extraordinárias do basilisco são 'limitadas' (ainda não pode matar com sua visão, respiração ou sibilo). Representações posteriores, no entanto, dotam a criatura com essas habilidades. Os autores pretendem demonstrar que várias corrupções dos textos de origem ocorreram na transmissão do conteúdo.

Résumé

Cet article retrace l'évolution des caractéristiques légendaires de l'une des créatures les plus menaçantes de l'antiquité gréco-romaine : le basilic. Les auteurs examinent tout d'abord la description la plus ancienne du basilic (Nicandre de Colophon) dans laquelle ses caractéristiques extraordinaires sont encore « limitées » (il ne peut en effet tuer avec sa vue, son souffle ou son sifflement). En étudiant les représentations ultérieures de cette créature, on constate qu'elles le dotent de ces nouvelles capacités. Ils essaient de démontrer que diverses

Mais tarde, as características da criatura foram exageradas e dramatizadas. Os *topoi* pré-existentes representando outras criaturas perigosas e sua venenosidade – após a sua incorporação e adaptação – embelezaram ainda mais a descrição do basilisco. Algumas qualidades mutuamente exclusivas foram misturadas. Devido a erros textuais, algumas características (mal adequadas à convenção de caracterização desta criatura) apareceram, por exemplo, o poder de fender pedras. Os autores tentam estabelecer como tais erros podem ter acontecido.

Palavras-chave: Plínio, o Velho; Nicandro de Cólofon; paradoxografia; basilisco; serpentes na literatura; *tópos* na literatura.

corruptions des sources textuelles ont eu lieu lors de la transmission des descriptions du basilic. Avec le temps, les caractéristiques du basilic ont été exagérées et dramatisées. Ayant été importés et adaptés, des *topoi* préexistants décrivant d'autres créatures dangereuses et leur vénénosité, ont enjolivé les descriptions du basilic. Certaines qualités, qui s'excluaient pourtant mutuellement, ont même été combinées. En raison d'erreurs textuelles dans les sources, certaines caractéristiques (ne correspondant pas à la caractérisation conventionnelle de cette créature) sont apparues, comme par exemple le pouvoir de fendre les rochers. Les auteurs essaient d'établir comment de telles erreurs ont pu se produire.

Mots-clefs: Pline l'Ancien; Nicandre de Colophon; paradoxographie; basilic; serpents en littérature; *topos* en littérature.

The story of the basilisk exemplifies a dynamic development of the creature's legend and its mythicisation.¹ It also reveals an extremely interesting metamorphosis on the part of the basilisk from the world of venomous snakes to a legendary being. The basilisk came into existence equipped with unusual, but still quite realistic features that in the course of time have been augmented with fabulous and fantastical properties. All these changes have not happened, however, due to new accounts based on observations and experiments carried out by researchers. They have arisen in the comfort of scholarly study, as a result of their explorations, misinterpretations, associations and rhetorical and poetic embellishments. The increasingly fantastical descriptions in the story of the basilisk have appeared mostly by the use and adaptation of

¹ The terms *fantastical*, *fabulous* found in our article are used in today's meanings of those words. In antiquity the line between reality and fantasy was very thin. Academic literature dedicated to the basilisk makes use of these terms. See: KRAUS, 2020, p. 1534-1535: "These references prove that the earliest accounts were already steeped in fabulous or legendary features. [...] In both of these occurrences in the LXX, the word βασιλίσκος denotes a dangerous serpent-like animal possibly with fabulous or mythical connotations"; WELLMANN, 1897, p. 100: "Von dem Tiere wurde allerlei gefabelt: er bewege seinen Körper nicht wie die übrigen Schlangen in vielfachen Windungen vorwärts, sondern krieche in der Mitte sich hoch aufrichtend, seine blosse Berührung und sein Gifthauch lasse Sträucher vergehen und sprengte Steine (Plin. a. a. O.)". Cf. SAMMER, 1998.

already existing, universal *topoi*. This process has also been influenced by the hyperbolising of the creature's qualities and, importantly, the unconscious distortion of content during its communication by successive authors in their descriptions of the creature. The legend has developed largely due to human error or misunderstanding of the source texts. It appears that from a certain point the ancient authors lost control over the ever-growing reference material and created descriptions that lacked consistency and logic. The accumulation, superimposition and automatic intertwining of many individuals, independent stories and tales about the basilisk led to the emergence of information that was so mutually contradictory that seemingly nobody could control it any longer. We may quote here the prominent baroque Spanish poet, Fransisco de Quevedo, who wrote:

Si está vivo quien te vio,
Toda tu historia es mentira,
Pues si no murió, te ignora,
Y si murió no lo afirma. (QUEVEDO, 2002, p. 14)

The spinning machine of imagination created a being so frighteningly menacing that it could belong only to fantastical creatures, bidding goodbye to the real world. The basilisk's terrifying qualities influenced the Church Fathers, who perceived it as a diabolic allegoresis and compared it to Satan. The information about the creature being the king of serpents, due to the negative connotation of a snake, helped St. Augustine form a link between the basilisk-the king of serpents and the devil-the king of demons: "Rex est serpentium basiliscus, sicut diabolus rex est daemoniorum. «Et conculcabis leonem et draconem»" (AUGUSTINUS, 1956, p. 9).

This article's goal is to indicate the key factors that influenced the emergence of the basilisk's fantastical properties, *i.e.*, the *topos* and the distortion of content during its communication.

Mediaeval readers of bestiaries and encyclopaedias perceived the basilisk not only as a perpetual poisoner, but also as a peculiar-looking hybrid of a cock with a snake's tail (COHEN, 2019, p. 178-179; McCULLOCH, [1962] 2018, p. 93, 191-192, 194, 199-200; HASSIG, 1995, p. 32-33). An interesting example of the evolution of the basilisk's appearance in the Middle Ages may be found in the illustrated manuscripts of the encyclopaedia by Thomas de Cantimpré (*ca.* 1200-1272) entitled *Liber de natura rerum* (p. 4.). The characteristic of the basilisk found in this very work – which is mostly a compilation of ancient Roman authors such as Pliny the Elder and Solinus – depicts the creature as a small snake. The miniature illustrating this description in the 14th century manuscript from Wrocław, however, shows

the basilisk already as a cock (THOMAS DE CANTIMPRÉ, fol. 139^r)². All this happened because the cock-like image of the creature penetrated the illustrator's imagination more. Further, around 100 years after Thomas' death, the artist created the miniature based not on the content of the illustrated work, but on the already existing patterns used by the illustrators.

The reference to the basilisk in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (Isaiah 59:5; Psalm 90:13), as well as in the Latin rendition of the Bible by St. Jerome³ gave the creature an additional authentication and legitimisation of its existence, so long as the Bible remained an unquestionable authority. It is no wonder then that in many different commentaries on the Bible the creature has been treated as a genuine specimen of fauna, defined by unusual qualities. For instance, in a biblical commentary by the French theologian from the turn of the 18th century, Bernard Lamy, we find an uncritical note on the identification of a Hebrew name for a viper in the Vulgate: "Tsepha vel Tsiphoni, est Regulus vel Basiliscus, qui non solo morsu, sed visu et sibilo nocet" (LAMY, 1696, p. 467).

Therefore, it is no wonder that even in the modern age researchers looked for evidence of the basilisk's existence. Let us recall here only one story where a basilisk appears as a real threat. In 1587, in a cellar of one of many dilapidated tenement houses in Warsaw, a maidservant found the bodies of two missing girls. An extraordinary city council and a doctor named Benedictus gathered together and, after the inspection of the bodies, the physician announced that the cause of death of those wretched girls had been a basilisk attack. Benedictus advised the councillors to have a man go down to the cellar. The man was to be covered with mirrors on all sides and to use this peculiar weapon to kill the basilisk. A Silesian convict who had been condemned to death, Jan Taurer,⁴ dared to do this in return for the sparing of his life. He went down to the cellar and in the rubble found a dead basilisk. He took it out on a pitchfork and it was seen by two thousand people. It was supposed to be the size of a cock, have a turkey-like neck and eyes similar to those of a frog. These Warsaw events resonated widely in the whole of Europe and were reflected in various different tales

2 Available at: https://glam.uni.wroc.pl/index.php?s=RKP_R_174_2755&p=142.

3 Isaiah 11:8 (*caverna reguli*), 14:29 (*regulus*), 30:6 (*regulus volans*), 59:5 (*regulum*); Jeremiah 8:17 (*serpentes regulos*), Psalm 90:13 (*basiliscus*), Proverbs 23:32 (*regulus*). St. Jerome, writing at the turn of the 5th century CE, conjured up a much more threatening and extraordinary image of the basilisk. While referring to it in some specific places in the Bible, he bestowed on it a stronger element of horror and a more sinister character than in the times when the Septuagint had been translated (3rd–2nd century BC).

4 Compare the description of Taurer descending to the cellar from 1691: "[T]he man descended into the cellar, a mass of mirrors from head to foot" (KIRCHMAYER, 1736, 2.5, translation by the authors).

relating the hunt for a basilisk in 1587.⁵ Similar stories, allegedly confirming the existence of the basilisk, were also recorded in other European cities.⁶

If we refer to the earliest pieces of information on the basilisk in Greek texts, we note that nobody at that time thought to use mirrors as a means of protection and a weapon against the creature. There was also no mention of its bizarre appearance. We should look for the earliest references to the basilisk in the works of Xenocrates of Chalcedon (396-314 BC; Cf. GALENUS, 1826, *De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis et facultatibus*, 12.250n) – a Greek philosopher; and of Erasistratus of Ceos (304-257 BC; cf. ERASISTRATUS, 1988, fragment 278 A-B: βασιλίσκος) – a co-founder of a medical school in Alexandria. What poses a problem is that now we have at our disposal only very fragmented information about the creature from the texts of later writers. Nicander of Colophon, a 2nd-century BC author, provides us with the first surviving description of the basilisk. It lets us assume how the authors of the Greek translation of the Bible might have imagined this creature. In Nicander's didactical poem *Theriaca*, we can find a passage dedicated to this being (OVERDUIN, 2014, p. 331):

Consider too the King of Snakes, small indeed yet far excelling all others: his head is pointed; he is golden-hued and three palms' width in outstretched length. Truly none of the heavy-coiled monsters of earth abide his hissing when to feeding-ground or forest or in craving for a watering-place they dart forth at noontide, but they turn and flee. His bite swells a man's body, and from the limbs the flesh falls away livid and blackening. Nor even will a bird pursuing its track above the corpse, be it eagle or vulture or raven that croaks of rain, nor yet any species of wild beast that pastures upon the hills, feed upon it; such the terrible stench that it sends forth. Yet if so be that fatal greed draws one of them near in ignorance, death and a swift ending are wrought for it on the spot.⁷ (NICANDER, 1953, p. 55)

⁵ Compare, for instance, the pamphlet by Georg Kaspar Kirchmayer (1635-1700) entitled *On the Basilisk* (KIRCHMAYER, 1736, 2.4-5). For more information about the European reception of the Warsaw events see BONDESON, 1999, p. 173-174.

⁶ Like the stone (a piece of sandstone) found a few centuries ago in Vienna, resembling cock-like shapes, reminded the locals of this dangerous creature. The effect of this attribution is still visible today on the facade of the townhouse in Schönlaterngasse 7, which is called "the house under the basilisk" (Basiliskenhäus). Cf. KISCH, 1967, p. 608.

⁷ Τεκμαίρεν δ' ὀλίγον μὲν ἀτὰρ προφερέστατον ἄλλων
ἐρπηστῶν βασιλῆα· τὸ μὲν δέμας ὀζυκάρηνος,
ξανθός, ἐπὶ τρία δῶρα φέρων μῆκος τε καὶ ἰθύν.
οὐκ ἄρα δὴ κείνου σπειραχθέα κνώδαλα γαίης
ἰυγὴν μίμνουσιν ὅτ' ἐς νομόν ἤε καὶ ὕλην
ἤε καὶ ἀρδημοῖο μεσημβρινὸν αἴξαντες
μείρονται, φύξῃ δὲ παλιντροπέες φορέονται.
τύμματι δ' ἐπρήσθη φωτὸς δέμας, αἱ δ' ἀπὸ γυίων
σάρκες ἀπορρεῖουσι πελιδναί τε ζοφεραί τε·

The reader's first impression, or even disappointment, is the rather limited number (in our modern understanding) of the basilisk's fantastical qualities, as well as an utterly different image than the one found in mediaeval descriptions. In fact, the only characteristic feature of this yellowish snake with a pointy head – as Nicander describes it – is its exceptional venomousness, and this trait had been developed in a poetic, and not mythicising, way (NICANDRO, 2007, p. 134).

Nicander's depiction emphasises the contrast: the snake is small⁸ but also the deadliest (“δ’ ὀλίγον μὲν ἀτὰρ προφερέστατον⁹ ἄλλων ἐρπηστῶν βασιλῆα”). It is also called the king of serpents – but according to Nicander, the creature is entitled to this honour due to its venomousness and fear inspired in other snakes, and not due to its appearance. For the sake of clarity, the snake zoonym known today as basilisk (βασιλίσκος – kingling; diminutivum due to its size) does not appear in the text. There are, however, grounds for developing this name in the shape of Nicander's expression “ὀλίγον βασιλῆα” (little king). Death caused by a basilisk can be inflicted directly (by biting) or indirectly (by eating carrion of its venom-poisoned prey). Nicander does not mention the basilisk's extraordinary abilities of killing with its gaze (or provoking its victim's death merely upon looking at it), and also with its breath or sound – hissing. There is only a reference to the foetor emitted from the basilisk's prey. There is as yet no information that the creature poisons the land and air in its habitat and that it has the ability to crack rocks. Moreover, the description says that the basilisk dwells in mountainous, forested areas that are completely different from the desert indicated in later accounts. We might say that such a depiction of the basilisk and its baneful properties does not differ much from the descriptions of such snakes as dipsas, seps or prester, which, however, did not gain such popularity (cf. LUCAN, 1928, 9.738-804).

οὐδέ τις οὐδ’ οἰωνὸς ὑπὲρ νέκυν ἰχθια τείνας,
αἰγυπιοὶ γῦπές τε κόραξ τ’ ὀμβρήρεα κρώζων,
οὐδὲ μὲν ὄσσα τε φύλα νομάζεται οὔρεσι θηρῶν
δαίνυνται· τοῖόν περ αὐτμένα δεινὸν ἐφίει.
εἰ δ’ ὅλοι βούβρωστις ἀνδρείηφι πελάσση,
αὐτοῦ οἱ θάνατός τε καὶ ὥκα μοῖρα τέτυκται. (NICANDRO, 2007, p. 396-410)

8 It is worth noting that Nicander's basilisk is three hands long (ἐπὶ τρία δῶρα φέρων), i.e., around 22 cm (similarly to Philumenus's: μεγέθει παλαιστῶν τριῶν, ca. 22 cm). And this measurement survived up until Pliny's times (ca. 22 cm). Not until Solinus did this terrifying snake shrink to the size of an earthworm (ca. 15 cm), and so it would have been problematic to even notice it. This diminishing of its size in ancient accounts could be due to ill-read measurement units from the source texts and that poses a separate problem.

9 The superlative προφερέστατον, describing the basilisk, means ‘the most excellent, the outstanding’. It seems, however, that the context points at standing out in terms of its venomousness.

Thus, we should not wonder that such a description, lacking the extraordinary aspects of later legend, led many different scholars to search for this snake's archetype in the real world. They tried to prove that the Egyptian cobra (*Naja haje*; McNEILL ALEXANDER, 1972, p. 54; BARBARA, 2006, p. 143-154) is indeed known under the name of the basilisk. The origins of the basilisk's legend, therefore, are not very impressive. The creature's main features are: a small size, an exceptional venomousness and an instant death caused by its bite.

The information found in Nicander's description was repeated by Philumenus, an author from the 2nd century CE (JACQUES, 2008), who, despite the time that had passed since the *Theriaca*, retained the author's original version of the basilisk's history, devoid of fantastical embellishments:

This animal is three hands long, has a pointed head and is yellow, but stands out with the power [of its venom] from all the other snakes and to such a point that when it hisses, they flee. While feeding, it chases away all the competition that might be a potential threat while hunting for food. The creature does so even if the other animals feed on something different than the basilisk does. Such is its power. The whole body of those bitten by it turns red and there are purple bruises [appearing] from the powerful venom; the body also loses all its hair. No creature has chances of survival after its [the basilisk's] attack. So much as no carrion eater even touches the prey that was killed by it, and, if hungry, a scavenger does taste the prey, death immediately comes upon it. That is why we believe it futile and needless to note down any medicinal remedies as absolutely nobody is able to help the victim of its violence. Erasistratus [however] says, drinking castoreum with wine can help, and also poppy juice.¹⁰ (PHILUMENUS, *De veneratis*, p. 31, our translation¹¹).

There are some elements in Nicander's and Philumenus' descriptions that might have opened doors for developing more fantastical interpretations.

10 Τὸ ζῷον τοῦτο ἐστὶ μὲν μεγέθει παλαιστῶν τριῶν, ὀξυκέφαλον δὲ καὶ κατὰ χροάν ξανθόν. δύναμιν δὲ ἔχει μεγίστην ὑπὲρ τὰ ἄλλα ἐρπετὰ πάντα, ὥς μὴδὲ ἐν αὐτοῦ τὸν συριγμὸν ὑπομένειν, ἀλλὰ κἂν εἰς τροφήν ἢ ποτόν τινα τῶν ζῶων ἐπείγῃται καὶ αἰσθῇται τῆς τοῦ θηρίου περὶ τὸν τόπον παρουσίας, πάλιν πορεύεται καὶ ἀναχωρεῖ, ὅθεν καὶ ἐλήλυθεν, μὴδὲ τῆς ἀναγκαίας πρὸς ζωὴν τροφῆς φροντίσαντα· τηλικαύτην ἔχει δύναμιν. τοῖς δὲ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ δηχθεῖσιν συμβαίνει φλόγῳσις ὅλου τοῦ σώματος καὶ πελώσις ὑπὸ τῆς ὑπερκαύσεως τοῦ ἰοῦ· ἀπορρέουσιν δὲ αἱ τρίχες ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος, ὥς μὴδὲ ζωῆς τὸν τυχόντα χρόνον ἔχειν τὸν ὑπὸ τούτου πληγέντα, ἀλλὰ μὴν οὐδὲ τοῦ σώματος τοῦ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ θανόντος οὐδὲ ἐν σαρκοφάγον θιγγάνει. εἰ δέ τι τούτου ὑπὸ λιμῷ ἐγεύσατο, αὐτόθι καὶ αὐτῷ ὁ θάνατος ἐπισκῆπτει, ὅθεν μάταιον καὶ περισσὸν ἡγοῦμεθα βοηθήματα ἀναγράψαι, οὐδενὸς τὸ καθ' ὅλου σφῆζεσθαι δυναμένου τῶν ὑπὸ τούτου πεπληγμένων. [ὥς] Ἐρασίστρατος δὲ φησι καστορίου πινομένας σὺν οἴνῳ βοηθεῖν, ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ τὸν τῆς μήκωνος ὀπὸν.

11 All translations are our own unless otherwise indicated.

Such pieces of information could be, firstly, that all other snakes escape from a basilisk, and more precisely from its hiss¹² (there is no reference, however, to the creature's ability to kill them with its hissing, but then the logical question arises: why are they afraid of it?). Secondly, the mention that scavenging birds avoid the carrion of animals killed by a basilisk could have been interpreted in various ways by later authors, *e.g.*, that even the air above the carcass was dangerous to any flying creature. We can observe this evolution when we compare the (relevant) parallel fragments from Nicander with the authors describing the basilisk a few centuries later.¹³ The ambiguity of the source texts, the interpretative possibilities and also the language barrier could all have conduced to corruptions or distortions.

Another factor fuelling literary imagination and contributing to the growth of the legend is the information that a basilisk can kill even indirectly, through an animal that it has previously killed. All of these aspects developed the concept of its exceptional venomousness and the attribution to the creature of the ability to kill even by means of inanimate objects – such as a lance or a cane – with which it had been touched.

If we look closer at the description of the basilisk by Pliny (1940, p. 78)¹⁴ – a depiction that was created two centuries after that of Nicander – we note some significant differences. For Pliny's account had already become a stage in the mythicisation of the basilisk:

The basilisk/serpent also has the same power.¹⁵ It is a native of the province of Cyrenaica, not more than 12 inches long,¹⁶ and adorned with a bright white marking on the head like a sort of diadem. It routs all snakes with its

¹² Also, the information on the sibilus, a snake equated with the basilisk (see St. Isidore's description at the end of the article) can be linked with Nicander's depiction: "Il n'est donc pas impossible que Nicandre soit ainsi involontairement lié au développement postérieur de la légende du sibilus" (BARBARA, 2006, p. 137).

¹³ For instance, we note some resemblance between Nicander's (NICANDRO, 2007, p. 405-408) and Solinus's (3rd century CE; SOLINUS, 1864, 27. 51) fragments about birds, respectively: "σάρκες ἀπορρείουσι πελιδναί τε ζοφεραί τε: / οὐδέ τις οὐδ' οἰωνὸς ὑπὲρ νέκυν ἔχνια τείνας, / (...) τοῖόν περ ἀντμένα δεινὸν ἐφίει" and "ita ut in aere nulla alitum inpune transvolet infectum spiritu pestilenti". Comparing these two extracts we can see some major distortions in Nicander's account, the reasons for which it could have perhaps originated in misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the source text. A transfer of the dangerous foetor emitted by basilisk's prey onto the basilisk itself must have happened throughout the ages. Further, the idea that no bird of prey flies to the poisoned carrion has been dramatised. The origin of this issue could have been an inaccurate translation of the Greek term οἰωνὸς (predatory, scavenging bird), rendered in Latin in a more general way as any bird, *ales*. The consequence of this might have been the interpretation that the danger from a basilisk threatens all birds, even in the air.

¹⁴ In addition to Nicander's version, Pliny's text also shows some other traditions, accumulated around the basilisk's history (see SANTAMARÍA HERNÁNDEZ, 2014, p. 1276). They survived in rudimentary forms in Greek toxicological literature, upbuilding the basilisk's story with additional motifs.

¹⁵ That is killing with its eyesight.

¹⁶ About 22 cm.

hiss, and does not move its body forward in manifold coils like the other snakes but advancing with its middle raised high. It kills bushes not only by its touch but also by its breath, scorches up grass and bursts rocks. Its effect on other animals is disastrous: it is believed that once one was killed with a spear by a man on horseback and the infection rising through the spear killed not only the rider but also the horse. Yet to a creature so marvelous as this indeed kings have often wished to see a specimen when safely dead the venom of weasels is fatal: so fixed is the decree of nature that nothing shall be without its match. They throw the basilisks into weasels' holes, which are easily known by the foulness of the ground, and the weasels kill them by their stench and die themselves at the same time, and nature's battle is accomplished.¹⁷ (PLINY, 1940, p. 57-58)

In Pliny's description the motif of the basilisk's deadly properties and its fatal influence on the living beings and areas where it dwells were particularly emphasised.¹⁸ In this fragment of the characterisation the author tends to adequately embellish and dramatise the depiction. Those extraordinary pieces of information are usually over-developed and hyperbolised in the content. We may observe a few things exploited in this process: *topoi*, pre-existing descriptions, examples and phrases used in accounts involving other menacing and dangerous creatures or unusual phenomena. This part of the description is liable to myth-making processes and exaggerated narration. Thus, it should not be a surprise that in the fragment describing the dangerous 'influence' of the basilisk we find the *topoi* already present in ancient literature. It was enough to adapt those ready-made depictions – not necessarily concerning the factual truth, but rather trying to be more attractive to the readers, making an impression on them – to a specific incident or particular characterisation.

One such motif in Graeco-Roman literature may be the depiction of supernatural valour of the heroes, fighting to the end, *usque ad finem*, in spite of losing their limbs. This kind of description may refer not only to people but also to animals, *e.g.*, in Claudius Aelianus' characterisation of the Indian

¹⁷ Eadem et basilisci serpentis est vis. Cyrenaica hunc generat provincia, duodecim non amplius digitorum magnitudine, candida in capite macula ut quodam diademate insignem. sibilo omnes fugat serpentes nec flexu multiplici, ut reliquae, corpus inpellit, sed celsus et erectus in medio incedens. necat frutices, non contactos modo, verum et adflatos, exurit herbas, rumpit saxa: talis vis malo est. creditum quondam ex equo occisum hasta et per eam subeunte vi non equitem modo, sed equum quoque absumptum. atque huic tali monstro - saepe enim enectum concupivere reges videre - mustellarum virus exitio est: adeo naturae nihil placuit esse sine pare. inferciunt has cavernis facile cognitis soli tabe. necant illae simul odore moriuntur que, et naturae pugna conficitur.

¹⁸ We could say that a thing similar to the description of Herodotus' 'Indian ants' happened in the case of the basilisk, too. In Herodote's *Livre III* (1939, p. 102-105), in addition to the real-life based premises, other bizarre stories related to some unusual, menacing qualities of the creature and the *topos* used along the way became evident. See MORTA, 1998, p. 191-194.

dogs.¹⁹ In his *Pharsalia* (3.609n) Lucan in a similar way describes one of the twin brothers fighting in an episode about the naval battle near Marseille. While holding on to an enemy galley he loses his right hand, but in spite of this he does not stop to fight. And even after his left arm is cut off, he still shields his brother with his body and, as if that were not enough, pierced with multiple arrows, he jumps onto the enemy ship to help sink it. This unbelievable ‘vitality’ of our hero had been strongly developed by Lucan²⁰ and in the poem plays its rhetorical role, enhancing the message through an adequately emotional and dramatised action scene. Lucan’s extraordinary hero formulaically resembles the story of the Greek hero from the battle of Marathon, Cynaegirus, who distinguished himself with his exceptional bravery, fighting to the end. As we read in Justin’s *Epitome* (2nd century CE)²¹ to the historical work by Pompeius Trogus, Cynaegirus grabs an enemy vessel’s stern with his bare hand and after his arm is cut off, he grasps the Persian ship with his left hand. When he loses this arm too, he still hangs on with his teeth. Also in this case his motif has grown in comparison to, for instance, Herodotus’ account of this event (HERODOTE, 1948, p. 114).

In regard to the basilisk, when the build-up process of its lethal features began, some formulaic motifs and *topoi*, well-known in ancient classical literature and culture, have been used. As noted earlier in this paper, the very first descriptions of this snake did not abound in extraordinary references to its baneful nature. Since its mythicisation began to develop, all the unusual properties have been added based, understandably, not on new information accrued from that animal’s observation but, quite the contrary, on ready-made motifs which are not necessarily consistent with reality. On the one hand, some features have been conveyed in a literary manner and more strongly accentuated and magnified. On the other hand, they may have been simply misread (usually unconsciously), distorting the source material.

¹⁹ See the description of the fierceness of the Indian dogs: “An Indian dog bites into a lion’s nape and holds onto it so relentlessly that you could, in turn, cut off its tail, all four of its legs, one by one, and finally its head, too” (ÉLIEN, 2001, 8.1).

²⁰ A version similar to Lucan’s can also be found in Valerius Maximus’s text. The name of this sturdy warrior – Acilius – appears there: “Ne Acilium quidem praeterire possumus, qui, cum decumae legionis miles pro C. Caesaris partibus maritima pugna proeliaretur, abscisa dextra, quam Massiliensium naui iniecerat, laeua puppim adprehendit nec ante dimicare destitit quam captam profundo mergeret” (VALERE MAXIME, 1995, p. 1-2). A more rationalised version of this story can be found in Suetone (1981, p. 68).

²¹ Cynegiri quoque, militis Atheniensis, gloria magnis scriptorum laudibus celebrata est, qui post proelii innumeras caedes, cum fugientes hostes ad naves egisset, onustam navem dextra manu tenuit nec prius dimisit, quam manum amitteret; tum quoque amputata dextera navem sinistra comprehendit, quam et ipsam cum amississet, ad postremum morsu navem detinuit. Tantam in eo virtutem fuisse, ut non tot caedibus fatigatus, non duabus manibus amissis, victus, truncus ad postremum et velut rabida fera dentibus dimicaverit (JUSTIN, 2016, p. 9).

And so, Pliny's information about the basilisk's venom influencing even the habitat in which it dwells constituted an element characterising a dangerous and venomous creature. This allusion follows the rules of convention in referring to such depictions of qualities as found in literary descriptions, an example of which may be the account by Valerius Maximus concerning the Romans' killing of an enormous, threatening snake in Africa: "etiam cruore suo gurgitibus inbutis corporisque iacentis pestifero adflatu uicina regione polluta Romana inde summouisse castra" (VALERE MAXIME, 1995, 1.8, ext. 19). Even dead the serpent was supposed to be extremely dangerous so the Romans, due to the reptile's poisonous foetor spreading throughout the area, had to move their military camp. We may also refer to Strabo and a surviving account in which the whole neighbourhood rots from snake poison (cf. STRABON, 2016, p. 40). We should also add here that while describing the effects of venomous and generally deadly snakes the authors used certain specific vocabulary and comparisons with fire (cf. LUCAN, 1928, 9.784). These stylistic devices of expression were supposed to emphasise an impression of searing pain. For instance, Lucan uses such expressions referring to different kinds of snakes. Firstly, the seps' venom boiled the limbs of the body: "saevum sed membra venenum decoquit" (LUCAN, 1928, 9.775). Then, the fiery prester: "illi rubor igneus ora succendit" (LUCAN, 1928, 9.791). Secondly, the smoky trail behind the chelydrus: "tractique via fumante chelydrid" (LUCAN, 1928, 9.711). Therefore, Pliny's information that the basilisk burns the grass (*exurit herbas*) is appropriate to the convention.

If authors wanted to point out some exceptional venomousness on the part of a certain creature, they referred to examples of the effects of its poison even through indirect contact. For instance, the venom of a salamander was so strong that any fruit touched by the animal instantly killed people eating it (cf. ISIDORE, 12.4.36). People even tasting the bread baked over the wood which was previously in contact with a salamander also dropped dead (PLINY, 1963, 29.74).²²

As we have already mentioned, there are examples in the description of the basilisk's venom where the poison can reach the potential victim even through some indirect objects. We find such information in Pliny's characterisation. The hyperbolic depiction indicates that the venom of a basilisk transfixed with a lance travels through the weapon, killing not only the rider, but also his horse. A similar story, but less hyperbolised, is found in

²² Claudius Aelianus, in turn, states that a man who even tastes the meat of a pig that previously ate a salamander dies (ÉLIEN, 2001, 9.28). To be precise, we should mention that such stories were sometimes rationally rejected already by the ancients. Lucan's polemical remark to the superstition that a man can die after drinking water in which poisonous snakes previously swam may attest to this (LUCAN, 1928, 9.612-616).

Lucan's *Pharsalia*, where the local hero, Murrus, heedless of the consequences, pierces a basilisk with a spear. To stop the venom from spreading through his body, he then cuts off his own hand – which the poison reached almost at once – and thus saves his life (cf. LUCAN, 1928, 9.828-833).

Claudius Aelianus (ÉLIEN, 2001, 2.5) also writes about the basilisk's venom acting even through indirect objects. Instead of a rider's, here we have an example of an ordinary man's death. The poison reaches him through his cane that was bitten by the creature. The motif of the venom's indirect killing power remains the same, only the circumstances and the protagonists change.

In his depiction of the basilisk, Pliny does not extend the issue of the creature's hissing as influencing other snakes. In his text, just as in Nicander's and Philumenus', the other serpents escape at the sound of a basilisk's hiss. For the hiss signifies that a venomous basilisk is nearby and it makes the other snakes flee. In Lucan's text (1928, 9.724–726), however, this issue can be interpreted differently: it is strongly emphasised, and not only does the basilisk terrify the other venomous creatures with its hiss, it also kills them in this way, before even touching or biting them. "[A]nd there the basilisk terrifies all the other snakes by the hissing it sends forth, and kills before it bites; it compels all the inferior serpents to keep their distance, and lords it over the empty desert"²³ (LUCAN, 1928, p. 559).

The phrase *ante uenena nocens* can be understood in two different ways: we may refer to it either as the hiss (*sibila*), or to the basilisk itself. If it is the former, it means that the sound that terrifies and can be harmful even before the basilisk's venom kills the victim. If it is the latter, the basilisk's hiss only terrifies (is not harmful) and constitutes a sinister warning signal that the deadly creature is approaching. In reading the fragments of commentaries on Lucan we note that in time *ante uenena nocens* has been perceived as a reference to *sibila* and in this way, in some later descriptions (cf. ISIDORE, 12.4.9), the hiss has been added as another lethal property of the basilisk (cf. WICK, 2004, p. 306).

In the abovementioned passage about the basilisk, writing about its damaging influence from afar, Pliny points out its breath and eyesight. Those features are usually mentioned by later authors, for instance Heliodorus (HELIODORE, 1935, 3.8), a romance writer from the turn of the 4th century CE: "You have surely heard that one of the snakes, called a basilisk, withers and destroys whatever lies in its way with its breath and eyesight only"²⁴.

23 [S]ibilaque effundens cunctas terrentia pestes,
ante uenena nocens, late sibi summouet omne
uolgus et in uacua regnat basiliscus harena.

24 Καὶ ὄφρων δὲ ὁ καλούμενος βασιλίσκος ὅτι καὶ πνεύματι μόνον καὶ βλέμματι πᾶν ἀφαναίνει καὶ λυμάνεται τὸ ὑποπίπτον ἴσως ἀκήκοας·

Pliny refers to those extraordinary qualities in a wider sense in a different fragment of his work (PLINY, 1963, 29.66), where he writes of the basilisk's blood being used, among others, against different diseases (*morborum remedia*):

The basilisk, which puts to flight even the very serpents, killing them sometimes by its smell, is said to be fatal to a man if it only looks at him. Its blood the Magi praise to the skies, telling how it thickens as does pitch, and resembles pitch in colour, but becomes a brighter red than cinnabar when diluted. They claim that by it petitions to potentates, and even prayers to the gods, are made successful; that it provides cures for disease and amulets against sorcery. Some call it "Saturn's blood"²⁵. (PLINY, 1963, p. 225-227)

An especially characteristic and impressive property of the basilisk, and one that fuelled imagination the most, is the ability to kill with its gaze.²⁶ It was a feature possessed by some creatures from Greek mythology. One of the most well-known mythical beings that could kill with her eyes was a Gorgon. This myth is referred to, among others, by the author of the epigram cited by Athenaeus (1887, p. 345b), where, for greater effect, the image of a Gorgon turning people into stone (λιθούμεθα πάντες ἀπλάτου) had been evoked as a hyperbole for describing the food that Cleio had prepared.

The motif of killing with the eyes, however, also appeared in a description concerning presumably real ancient creatures. One of these was supposed to be the catoblepas – an animal that was to kill any human who looked into its eyes ("qui oculos eius videre", PLINY, 1940, 8.77). According to an account by Alexander of Myndus (and cited by ATHENAEUS NAUCRATITA, 1887, 5.64.1, p. 221b-f), the catoblepas (κατώβλεπον) was allegedly an animal inhabiting Libya. Nowadays, it is very hard to tell what exactly that animal was. The existence of catoblepas was to be proved during Marius' expedition against Jugurtha. This very creature supposedly killed a few of Marius' soldiers, but ultimately was ambushed, killed and sent to Rome as a trophy.

²⁵ Basilisci, quem etiam serpentes ipsae fugiunt alias olfactu necantem, qui hominem, vel si aspicat tantum, dicitur interemere, sanguinem Magi miris laudibus celebrant: coeuntem picis modo et colore, dilutum cinnabari clariorem fieri. attribuant ei successus petitionum a potestatibus et a diis etiam precum, morborum remedia, veneficiorum amuleta. quidam et Saturni sanguinem appellant.

²⁶ The result of this is also that merely looking into a basilisk's eyes was supposed to be fatal. And so a paralysing, harmful and finally deadly gaze is also a *topos*. For the basilisk's ability to kill from afar cf. AMMIEN (1984, 28.1.41): "etiam longius nocens, ut basilisci serpentes"; GALENUS, 1927, 14.233 (*De theriaca ad Pisonem* 8): "ὅτι καὶ ὄραθεις μόνον καὶ συρίττων ἀκούσθεις ἀναίρει τοὺς ἀκούσαντας καὶ τοὺς ἰδόντας αὐτόν.". The ancients also tried to rationally explain this unusual feature of harming from a distance. The basilisk's venomousness from afar is related to a natural philosopher's idea concerning transmitting of airborne diseases. This way the poisoned air could get, through a victim's eyes, nose and other orifices, inside their body. Compare PLUTARCHUS, 1862, p. 680c-683b, HELIODORE, 1935, 3.7-8. This issue was also keenly addressed by mediaeval scholars (cf. Experimentator 13.64.2, ed. DEUS, 1998, p. 259: "Emittit a se radios uenenosos, qui radii corrumpunt spiritum uisibilem in homine, quo corrupto corrumpuntur alii spiritus, et ita homo moritur").

The concept of a death-bringing gaze also applied to some less exotic creatures. It was believed, *e.g.*, in Italy, that a wolf's gaze is harmful (*luporum visus esse noxius*) and that it can take a person's voice away if the wolf looks at them before the person looks at the animal ("vocemque homini, quem priores contemplantur, adimere ad praesens"; PLINY, 1940, 8.80; *cf.* VIRGILE, 1942, 9.53-54). The issue of the basilisk's gaze having the power of not only taking away speech (as in the case of Italian wolves), but also killing potential victims before they even notice it appeared in St. Ambrose's work.²⁷ From his description we learn that if a human had looked at a basilisk first, they could save their lives in an encounter with this venomous snake. Moreover, if this was the case, the basilisk itself died. This motif concerning the first sighting had probably originated from folklore and superstitions involving wolves. Further, due to its analogy with the basilisk's description, St. Ambrose collaterally developed the account of this creature, including its unusual ability to kill this most venomous snake with the gaze itself. The most common means of protection and weaponry against the deadly eyes of a basilisk had become a *topos* known from the myth about the Gorgon using a mirror-shield by Perseus.²⁸

This theme, however, does not yet appear in Pliny's texts. Following the rule that each venomous creature, even the deadliest one, must have a counterbalance, some mortal enemy, the author of the *Natural History* added the information about a weasel being able to kill a basilisk. Let us not forget that in the original depiction of the basilisk there is no mention of its natural enemies, and merely about some herbs that could help against a basilisk's bite.²⁹ During the ongoing mythicisation of the creature and the development of its extreme venomousness, these herbs would have made little impact and that is probably why they quietly disappeared from later descriptions. They were replaced with other depictions, more graphic, vivid and thought-provoking, that (just like the information about the weasel) had been transferred from other stories about natural enemies among animals; for instance, the fight between the vipers and the ichneumons or the mongooses. We may read about this in Aristotle (ARISTOTELES, 1837, 612a.15-20).

27 [N]am sicut prodesse diximus mutum animal cum videtur, ita obesse percipimus lupum, si aliquem videndo praevenierit; vocem enim feruntur amittere quos prius lupus viderit. basiliscus quoque, hoc est noxius serpens, si quodcumque prior viderit animal, fertur occidere, et allegatur statim necari qui potuerit a serpente huiusmodi praevideri. ipse quoque serpens mori dicitur, si fuerit hominis praeventus aspectu. ergo si tanta virtus vel in oculis serpentis vel in oculis est hominis, ut, si alter alterum prior viderit, possit occidere, non est virtus in oculis iusti qui repletus virtutis est gratia (AMBROSIUS, 1845, *In psalm. CXVIII* 10.24).

28 *Cf.*, *e.g.*, SERVIUS, 2012, 6.289: "Sed Perseus, Iovis et Danae filius, cum ad eam occidendam volaret, prae se scutum ferens speculi candore perlucidum, sicut Minerva monstraverat, in umbra eius vidit caput Gorgonae et ita aversus accedens id amputavit".

29 *Cf.* PHILUMENUS, 1908, *Ven.* 31: "[ὥς] Ἐρασίστρατος δὲ φησι καστορίου πινομένας σὺν οἴνῳ βοηθεῖν, ὡσαύτως δὲ καὶ τὸν τῆς μήκωνος ὀπὸν".

In Claudius Aelianus' texts, in turn, there survived crucial information mentioning the cock's crowing as being harmful to basilisks. For instance, in Claudius Aelianus' account (175-235) a basilisk should tremble before a cock³⁰ because when the creature hears the crowing, it dies (ÉLIEN, 2001, 3.31; 5.50). The author also gives a word of practical advice for those travelling to Libya to arm themselves with a cock for protection against a basilisk. The surprising later cock-like appearance of the basilisk may originate from this type of account in ancient sources which describe a cock (cf. BREINER, 1979, p. 34-36).

As we can see, Pliny's much developed account concerning the lethal properties of the basilisk is based on previously known stories and episodes illustrating the venomousness of certain dangerous creatures. The examples cited, however, had been introduced to the description in a rather chaotic and disorganised manner. Equipping the basilisk with extraordinary qualities that have been selected in such a way turns out to be partly illogical. At the very beginning of his description, Pliny says that the basilisk kills with its gaze from afar. Then he adds that the creature kills and destroys all animals and plants, everything that lives, not only with its touch but also with its breath. It does that no longer with its eyes but now with its exhaled breath. How then – we could ask the account's author – was it possible for a rider to kill a basilisk with his spear and not drop dead beforehand from its deadly poison released from afar?

In the basilisk's case, as we mentioned before, there has been a somewhat uncontrolled endowing of the creature with various menacing abilities. They all evolve from its venomous properties, but come from different traditions. Separately, they magnified its dangerousness; together, they only introduced chaos and mutually exclusive actions/influences, to say nothing of the coherence of the message. We find many motifs present in the basilisk's description that are found in similar, sinister depictions. What poses a particular problem is, however, the mention of the unusual ability to crack rocks (*saxa rumpit*) that appears in the description by Pliny and by nobody else (!). The singularity of this feature is even more extensive when we take into account its context, namely that the basilisk was supposed to do it with its breath.

What would the cracking of rocks by a basilisk actually mean? And how would the creature do it? With its breath? Do we know of such an ability among other menacing qualities of different creatures? Roman and Greek literature does not offer any examples of this, neither in the descriptions of unusual animals, nor in relation to mythological beings. And yet, this extraordinary feature had become indelibly associated with the basilisk (see WELLMANN, 1897, p. 100, v. 37-41; COOPER, 1992, p. 23-24).

30 Cf. ÉLIEN, 2001, 8.28: “Φύσεως δὲ ἀπόρρητα ἐλέγχειν οὐκ ἔμὸν, καὶ εἰκότως, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἀλεκτρυόνα δέδοικε λέων καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν βασιλίσκος καὶ μέντοι καὶ ὕν ἐλέφας.”

Other philological and popular science compilations also point out this unusual property.

The power of cracking rocks is not – unlike the theme of turning people into stone (the myth about the Gorgon) – an ability known in ancient texts in relation to any unusual qualities of various strange beings. All the more so if it concerns venomous creatures and the influence of their poisons. We also have to emphasise that even Pliny points out and describes the basilisk's poison, its venomousness, and not some nondescript, unspecified destructive power (telepathic maybe?). So the ambiguous term *vis* should be perceived as such. In the case of snakes and other poisonous creatures the Roman authors used this noun in relation to their venom. That is why the basilisk's poison – as Pliny writes – that the creature has in its whole body, but also in its breath, destroys and burns the plants. *Vis*³¹ in this meaning, as the deadly venom's power destroying everything that grows and lives around, does not give rise to the existence of the information about cracking rocks. Such an effect does not fall within the scope of any venom's influence that poisons and kills but does not crack rocks or stones.

Where then did this ill-fitting quality – added in the development of the basilisk's menacing features – come from?

Unlike the plant burning with venom and air poisoning with lethal exhaled breath (the features that have been known in literature describing venomous and dangerous creatures), an ability such as *saxa rumpit* poses no small problem. For it is not, as we understand it, a real feature, related to a specific animal and noted as *mirabile* by ancient authors. The unusual qualities of the basilisk, mentioned by Pliny, belong to hyperbolically overgrown literary portrayals based on a certain pattern, and are not a part of a factual description. Likewise, the example of the venom travelling from a dead basilisk through the spear to the rider and further on to his horse had been depicted in a literary, unreal way – a motif, as we showed before, noted in various descriptions.³²

³¹ Compare with the information about the poison (*vi*) getting to the horse: “credittum quondam ex equo occisum hasta et per eam subeunte vi non equitem modo, sed equum quoque absumptum” (PLINY, 1940, 8.36).

³² The only trace of the motif of cracking stones survived in the previously mentioned Pedanius Dioscorides's text: “Τραγλοδύτης στρουθίον ἐστὶ πάντων τῶν ὀρνέων μικρότερον, πλὴν τοῦ λεγομένου βασιλίσκου, ἐν φραγμοῖς μάλιστα διατρώμενον, ὅπερ ὀπτὸν τε καὶ ὠμὸν τεταριχευμένον ἐσθιόμενον τοὺς ἐν νεφροῖς λίθους θρύπτει, καὶ καυθέντος δὲ αὐτοῦ ἡ τέφρα πινομένη τὸ αὐτὸ δρᾷ” (Fragment 167 from Dioscorides is quoted by ZURETTI, 1934, p. 167). Dioscorides describes a small bird called a troglodyte (a wren?) which, though the smallest of all birds, is supposed to have healing properties. Due to the fact that a reference to a basilisk (τοῦ λεγομένου βασιλίσκου) also appears in this description, a potential misunderstanding might have occurred. A basilisk-small bird might have been mistaken for a basilisk-small snake. τῶν ὀφείων μικρότερον might have been read as τῶν ὀρνέων μικρότερον). This bird's meat was meant to help with kidney ailments. The text states clearly that it cracks stones (λίθους θρύπτει), only that they are kidney stones (ἐν νεφροῖς). And so, was it possible that this feature

It seems that we should look for the solution to this problem by referring to an author writing two centuries after Pliny. It is in Solinus and his *Collection of Curiosities* (*Collectanea rerum memorabilium*) that we can read about the basilisk:

Cyrenaica has Africa on its left, and Egypt on its right, in front the sea, wild and devoid of ports, whereas in the back various barbaric tribes and impenetrable wasteland from which the basilisk – a singular evil in the world – originates. It is a snake almost half a foot long (ca. 15 cm), its head as though rimmed with a white band. It brings ruin not only upon people and other living beings, but also upon the land itself as it scorches and pollutes the place which [the creature] chooses for its ominous dwelling. It burns the grasses, destroys the trees, and even poisons the air so much that no bird can safely fly above the area polluted by its venomous breath. When it moves, half of its body crawls, the other half rises upright. Its hiss terrifies even snakes that, upon hearing it, flee wherever they can. Nothing killed by its bite is eaten by any wild animal neither touched by a bird. However, it is defeated by weasels that are thrown by men to the holes where the basilisk hides. Even dead it has power. At great cost, Pergamumians bought the remains of the basilisk to make the temple decorated by the hand of Apelles free from cobwebs and birds³³. (SOLINUS, 1864, 126.10-127.5)

The author, though pointing out various aspects of the basilisk's venomousness, never mentions anything about it cracking rocks. Solinus's description has, however, crucial value for our research as his characterisation of this creature is quite similar to that of Pliny. As we mentioned earlier, many researchers perceive Solinus as a follower of the author of the *Natural History* (see WALTER, 1969, p. 2-5). In our opinion, in the case of the basilisk it is impossible to demonstrate and prove any direct correlation between those two authors. However, we can, without fail, speak about indirect relations, *i.e.*, the use of a similar source. This is why, besides some similarities in the creature's appearance, we also find some differences resulting from firstly, the

was mistakenly transferred from a bird to a snake? Theoretically, such a possibility cannot be ruled out although, in our opinion, it is unlikely.

33 Cyrenis ab laeva Africa est et a dextra Aegyptus, a fronte saevum et in portuosum mare, a tergo barbarorum variae nationes et solitudo inaccessa, quae basiliscum creat, malum in terris singulare. Serpens est paene ad semipedem longitudinis, alba quasi mitrula lineatus caput, nec hominis tantum uel aliorum animantium exitiis datus, sed terrae quoque ipsius, quam polluit et exurit, ubicumque feralis sortitur receptaculum. Denique extinguit herbas, necat arbores, ipsas etiam corrumpit auras, ita ut in aere nulla alitum inpune transvolet infectum spiritu pestilenti. Cum movetur, media corporis parte serpit, media arduus est et excelsus. Sibilum eius etiam serpentes perhorrescunt et cum acceperint, fugam quaeque quoquo potest properant. Quicquid morsu eius occiderit non depascitur fera, non attrahat ales. Mustelis tamen vincitur, quas illic homines inferciunt cavernis in quibus delitescit. Vis tamen ne defuncto quidem deest. Denique basilisci reliquias amplo sestertio Pergameni conparaverunt, ut aedem Apellis manu insignem nec araneae intexerent nec alites involarent.

addition of other different motifs; secondly, the probable misreading of the source material. In particular, the depiction of the basilisk's venomousness has been hyperbolised with additional examples. This is also why the theme of a basilisk's venom killing by means of a stick or a spear does not appear in Solinus's texts. The depiction of the basilisk's poisonous influence on its surroundings is, however, very similar. It resembles the other author's description both in terms of content and formal structure, where, apart from using the same vocabulary (*e.g.*, synonyms), the same word order in a sentence had been applied: three times the predicate appears before the direct object: "Denique extinguit herbas, necat arbores ipsas etiam corrumpit auras" (SOLINUS, 1864, 126.10-127.5). As we can see, there is no mention of rock cracking in Solinus's text, but there is information about poisoning the air with the basilisk's breath.

The motif of contamination, of air poisoning by various baleful creatures or dangerous natural phenomena is known from ancient literature. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (OVIDE, 1925) we read about a dragon killing Cadmus's companions. There are features in the reptile's description that magnify its lethal actions (3.44): a body swollen with venom (*corpus tumet omne venenis*; 3.33), its terrifying hiss (*serpens horrendaque sibila misit*; 3.38). The dragon, apart from the crushing coils of his body, was supposed to kill with its breath's deadly venom (*hos necat adflati funesta tabe veneni*; 3.49).

The very vivid description of the dragon's agony from Cadmus's spear also evokes well-known images and motifs associated with menacing and deadly creatures: "[...] quique halitus exit ore niger Stygio, vitiat inficit auras" (3.76). Black smoke spews from the mouth of the Styx, poisons the air with the venom.

Here we have a description resembling Solinus's depiction of the basilisk's influence on its surroundings, all the more so because *inficio* is a synonym of *corrumpo* (THESAURUS, 1934-1964, col. 1413-1414).

A similar account about a different dangerous creature can be found in Claudian's text, where the author even uses the same vocabulary (*corrumpit auras*): "[S]anguine frena calent ; corrumpit spiritus auras / letifer; infectae spumis vitiantur harenae" (CLAUDIANUS, 1922, *De raptu Proserpinae* 2.202n, p. 333) ("Their bits are warm with blood, their death-bringing breath infects the air, the polluted dust is poisoned with their foam" (CLAUDIANUS, 1922, p. 333)). The characteristic literary description that appears here to portray some exceptionally menacing and dangerous creatures includes two complementary elements of these beings' influence on their surroundings.

One is the poisoning of the air with the deadly breath, the other is the destruction of the area where the creature treads. So, to emphasise the full terror of the protagonist, Lucan, *e.g.*, in his description of the witch Erichtho

(LUCAN, 1928, 6.521) uses the same pattern of characterisation: “Semina fecundae segetis calcata perussit / et non letiferas spirando perdidit auras”³⁴ = *rumpit auras*. Erichtho, on the one hand, destroys the crops on her way; on the other hand, poisons the air.

In another description, Ovid’s this time, we have the pejoratively personified Envy – *Invidia*, the great misery. She also contaminates and destroys everything she encounters on her way: “(Envy) floats in a black cloud, and where she treads, she tramples the blooming crops, burns the grasses, plucks the poppy tops, with her breath she contaminates people, cities and homes”³⁵ (OVIDE, 1925, 2,790n.)³⁶.

This type of full description of the destructive abilities of an exceptionally toxic creature can be found in Solinus’s depiction of the basilisk. The appearance of this motif, well-known in classical literature, is thus not surprising and fits the convention of this type of characterisation. Solinus’s description, as we mentioned earlier, resembles, to some extent, that of Pliny – and this is especially important in our analysis. Even though the accounts are written mostly in a different type of language, using different vocabulary, we can still perceive some relationship between them. And this, in turn, indicates that the authors drew partially from the same tradition. It shows in a few places shared or similar information:

Cyrenaica as the place of the basilisk’s appearances
A destroyed area where the snake dwells
Its looks
Its size
The way it moves
The hiss terrifying other snakes

³⁴ In regard to the description of Erichtho’s influence on her surroundings, the expression found there: “perdidit auras” is also synonymous to *corrumpit auras*. See OBERMEIER, 1886, p. 86.

³⁵ Adopertaque nubibus atris,
quacumque ingreditur, florentia proterit arva
exuritque herbas et summa papavera carpit
adflatuque suo populos urbesque domosque
polluit.

³⁶ Following a prior characterisation, this description is meant to show Envy as a particular evil and we find there many references and comparisons to vipers. Envy lives in a house imbrued with blood. It is a dark and cold cavern (OVIDE, 1925, 2.760-764) that, in its bleak setting, resembles the place where Erichtho lived: “protinus Invidiae nigro squalentia tabo / tecta petit: domus est imis in vallibus huius / abdita, sole carens, non ulli pervia vento, / tristis et ignavi plenissima frigoris et quae / igne vacet semper, caligine semper abundet”. Envy’s diet, consisting of vipers (OVIDE, 1925, 2,768-770), also fits the situation: “[...] videt intus edentem / vipereas carnes, vitiorum alimenta suorum”. Envy is an evil as dangerous and venomous as a viper. That is why there are so many references to this dangerous reptile and in Envy’s description, too: “lingua est suffusa veneno” (OVIDE, 1925, 2.777). Also in Envy’s appearance we can see a semblance to Erichtho (OVIDE, 1925, 2.775): “pallor in ore sedet, macies in corpore toto”.

The weasel as the natural enemy and killer of the basilisk
The destruction of its surroundings with its breath.

The theme of destruction, the poisoning of the basilisk's surroundings, is very similar in both authors' accounts. The essential difference is that Pliny omits the information on the poisoning of the air which, as we have already emphasised, is quite significant as it completes the idea of the basilisk's harmful influence on its surroundings. According to the *topos*, the description here should have included the destruction of everything that is around the basilisk on the ground and everything that is located above it in the air – that is an all-encompassing influence of the venom on the creature's environment. Therefore, Pliny's depiction lacks this significant element of poisoning the air with toxic exhaled breath, and it makes the description incomplete and the horror of the situation less powerful and expressive. Moreover, there is a forerunner of such a depiction when Pliny writes that the basilisk destroys its surroundings not only with its touch but also with its breath ("non contactos modo, verum et adflatos"; PLINY, 1940, 8.36). This part of the description lacks, however, the addition that we find, *e.g.*, in the abovementioned fragment by Claudian, where the author writes about the creature's lethal breath (*spiritus letifer*) that "corrumpit auras" (CLAUDIANUS, 1922, *De raptu Proserpinae* 6.521). In the *Natural History* there is, in turn, the information about cracking rocks, ill-fitting to the description of the venom's influence. We have to strongly underline here that *rumpit* cannot be translated in a causative way – 'makes the rocks crack'. Neither can it suggest that the 'activity' of the basilisk's venom crushes stones and they crumble. The message here is clear: it cracks the rocks. Thereby, this ability exceeds the hyperbolic description of poisonous properties and, context-wise, is strange and incomprehensible.

In Solinus's depiction we find an influence that the basilisk has on its surroundings that is similar to the account of Pliny. The only difference is that Pliny refers to the entire space around the creature, including the air. This is why, in our opinion, Pliny³⁷ had misread the source text and, in lieu of *corrumpit auras* introduced the form of *rumpit saxa*.³⁸

37 Cf. WALTER, 1969, p. 6. Compare also Cicero's punditry about textual mistakes in Latin books: "[D]e Latinis vero [libris] quo me vertam nescio; ita mendose et scribuntur et veneunt" (CICERO, 1980, 3.6.6).

38 We cannot rule out an error at an early stage of the handwriting tradition of the *Natural History* due to the fact that none of the authors subsequent to Pliny the Elder who wrote about the basilisk has ever mentioned the cracking of rocks. The oldest manuscript containing Pliny's account about the basilisk from book VIII comes from Northern France (it is stored in Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana with the shelf mark of Vat.lat. 3861: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.lat.3861) and was created in 8th/9th century. (see BISCHOFF, 2014, p. 450-451; BORST, 1995, p. 164; DESANGES, 1966, p. 512-515). Here we would like to wholeheartedly thank Professor Michael D. Reeve for his helpful information on the handwriting tradition of the *Natural History* by Pliny the Elder.

As we demonstrated earlier, although there are some differences between Pliny's and Solinus's descriptions, we find so much coincidental information about the basilisk in both of them that we must acknowledge that both authors accessed very similar source information. We may observe the same relationship in the portrayal of the emanation of the venomous and deadly properties of the basilisk. Hence, it is easy to juxtapose those two corresponding descriptions:

Pliny	Solinus
<i>necat frutices</i>	<i>extinguit herbas</i>
<i>exurit herbas</i>	<i>necat arbores</i>
<i>rumpit saxa</i>	<i>corrumpit auras</i>

The two first images coincide with each other through identical or synonymous vocabulary. A big difference occurs in the third example of the deadly basilisk activity, though even here the common verb *rumpere* appears.

Therefore, it seems that Solinus may serve as additional proof of the original description which, as we stated before, was a well-known motif of portraying the lethal properties of dangerous beings. It was a literary depiction in a hyperbolic account of those features.

We may also draw some conclusions regarding the distortion of content in the communication of the basilisk's properties. We should question why in Pliny's description we find the same verb used by Solinus, namely *rumpo*. It is possible that the omission of the prefix *con* had led to the misreading of the source material. It is also possible that the meaning of this shortened verb form of *rumpere* (to crack, to crush) had caused, or rather, suggested a reading of *auras* as *saxa*. It is difficult to state explicitly whether a dynamic inversion or rather a different type of textual mistake occurred here. Textual changes are often observed in manuscripts, for instance, the codex confirmed in the 11th/12th century (*codex Laurentianus*) lection "*vitiatas inficit herbas*" instead of the *vitiatas inficit auras* customarily accepted by the publishers (OVIDE, 1925, 3.76). In the case of the *Natural History*, we note various corrupted words: *enixu*] *exinu* (PLINY, 1951, 20.6); *pacta*] *capta* (PLINY, 1945, 15.136); *nisi E*] *sine r* (PLINY, 1940, 9.100).

And so, the basilisk's extraordinary ability to crack rocks did not include some motifs from other stories, *e.g.*, the concept of the weasel being its enemy – the theme of the weasel fighting against the vipers was known as early as Aristotle's time – and it was not a literary embellishment designed to make

some account or plot more appealing. We believe it resulted from a mistake, a misreading, a distortion of content in the process of its communication.³⁹

The further metamorphosis of the basilisk, based on the corruption or distortion of content and not on the topos, can be observed in *The Etymologies* by Isidore of Seville.⁴⁰ The description included there – due to the great popularity of this encyclopaedia – would prominently influence the image and perception of the basilisk in iconography and literature (encyclopaedias, bestiaries, biblical commentaries).

‘Basilisk’ (basiliscus) is a Greek word, translated into Latin as “little king” (...), because it is the king of the snakes, so that they flee when they see it because it kills them with its odor – it also kills a human if it looks at one. Indeed no flying bird may pass unharmed by the basilisk’s face, but however distant it may be it is burnt up and devoured by this animal’s mouth. However, the basilisk may be overcome by weasels. For this reason people take weasels into caves where the basilisk lies hidden; and as the basilisk takes flight at the sight, the weasel chases it down and kills it. Thus the Creator of nature sets forth nothing without a remedy. It is half a foot in length, and marked with white spots. Basilisks, like scorpions, seek after parched places, and when they come to water they become hydrophobic (...) and frantic. The sibilus (lit. “the hissing one”) is the same as the basilisk, and it kills by means of a hissing, before it bites and burns⁴¹. (ISIDORE, 2006, p. 255)

There is no doubt, that Isidore’s sources were Solinus (directly or indirectly), Pliny the Elder, St. Jerome.⁴² They are, therefore, the same pieces of information, repeated in a shortened form to follow the rule of an encyclopaedic entry.

However, we can find other information here that is new in the basilisk’s description. For we can read here an account of its appearance, unconfirmed

³⁹ Misreading of source texts and corrupted content were, unfortunately, common occurrences in the communication of information. See MORTA, 2014, p. 121-123.

⁴⁰ For the method of Isidore’s work, compare MAGALLÓN GARCÍA, 2000.

⁴¹ Basiliscus graece, latine interpretatur regulus, eo quod rex serpentium sit, adeo ut eum videntes fugiant, quia olfactu suo eos necat; nam et hominem vel si aspiciat interimit. Siquidem et eius aspectu nulla avis volans inlaesa transit, sed quam procul sit, eius ore combusta devoratur. A mustelis tamen vincitur, quas illic homines inferunt cavernis in quibus delitescit; itaque eo visu fugit, quem illa persequitur et occidit. Nihil enim parens ille rerum sine remedio constituit. Est autem longitudine semipedalis; albis maculis liniatus. Reguli autem, sicut scorpiones, arentia quaeque sectantur, et postquam ad aquas venerint, idrophobas et lymphaticos faciunt. Sibilus idem est qui et regulus. Sibilo enim occidit, antequam mordeat vel exurat (ISIDORO DE SEVILLA, 2004, 12.4.6-9).

Note we have decided to use the form *liniatus* after the latest critical edition by Jacques André (ISIDORE DE SÉVILLE, 2012, p. 139), although the form *lineatus* is also commonly used, e.g., in the edition by Wallace Martin Lindsay, and various others (e.g., ISIDORO DE SEVILLA, 2004).

⁴² For more information on the sources of Isidore’s description of the basilisk, see SANTAMARÍA HERNÁNDEZ, 2014, p. 1276-1278.

elsewhere, that says the creature is marked with white spots (*albis maculis liniatus*).⁴³ This feature originates from Solinus's corrupted account. A rather uncommon construction of *accusativus Graecus* appears in Solinus's passage. This could influence the misinterpretation of the textual sense and further lead to the omission of the reference to the head. There are many examples in Isidore's work where such source textual distortion occurs, whereby the omission of some words in a sentence leads to a completely different meaning.

As we may note, this encyclopaedic entry is largely a repetition of the information known from Pliny's and Solinus's descriptions. It has, however, been broadened with information from Christian writings. One example is a remark taken almost word for word from St. Jerome concerning the sickness caused in a basilisk (and also in a scorpion) by coming into contact with water. Another is the detail concerning the danger a basilisk presents even for birds flying far away from it. In Isidore's depiction there is a reference to another lethal quality of the basilisk's remote influence, namely, killing with its hiss. This property had not been mentioned either by Pliny or by Solinus and is, as we have already observed, quite uncertain in Lucan. The appearance of this feature has been quite predictable in the development of the basilisk's deadly powers as a consequence of the original detail regarding its terrifying hiss. Before Isidore, a reference to this dangerous ability may be found in Galen's texts. Consequently, the basilisk depicted in *The Etymologies* reaches the peak of its venomousness, killing from afar with its breath, gaze and hiss.

This description also includes some completely new information. This concerns a feature of the deadly snake's appearance. According to St. Isidore, the basilisk is supposed to have a line of white spots (*albis maculis liniatus*) along its body. This property, however, is nothing other than a deformation of the source text. It is without doubt based on the depiction known from Solinus's account, as indicated by the similar vocabulary, including the usage of the very rare adjective *liniatus* in both cases. It is evident if we compare the parallel descriptions by the two authors:

Solinus (SOLINUS, 1864, 51.27): "Serpens est paene ad semipedem longitudinis alba quasi mitrula lineatus caput"

St. Isidore (ISIDORE DE SÉVILLE, 2012, 12.4.7): *Est autem longitudine semipedalis; albis maculis⁴⁴ liniatus.*

⁴³ See e.g. the portrayal of the basilisk in the manuscript with the shelf mark of Gl. kgl. S. 1633 4° (fol. 51r), stored in Kongelige Bibliotek in Copenhagen: <http://www5.kb.dk/permalink/2006/manus/221/dan/51+recto/>. For more info about the manuscript itself, see JØRGENSEN, 1926, p. 445; OLSEN; NORDENFALK, 1952, no. 58.

⁴⁴ We can suspect that Solinus's source had additional information about the colour of the spot (*macula alba*), the indication of which can be the same info found in the characterisation by Pliny: "candida in capite macula ut quodam diademate insignem" (PLINY, 1940, 8.78), where *candida macula* – a white spot – is mentioned.

A rather uncommon construction of *accusativus Graecus* appears in Solinus's sentence. This could lead to further misinterpretation of the textual meaning and to the omission of the reference to the head.⁴⁵

We have traced back the development of the dangerous features and abilities of the most venomous snake. The original descriptions of the basilisk, however, did not diverge much in its characteristics from those of other deadly creatures. From the depictions of this essentially small reptile, we may distinguish two aspects: 1) the characterisation of its appearance and behaviour (this aspect is more stable); and 2) the description of its deadly properties. It is notable that the second part especially is prone to exaggeration through the addition of increasingly dangerous qualities related to the creature's venomousness and lethal influence. The universal *topoi* present in Graeco-Roman literature that were meant to magnify and depict the fearsomeness and danger of various creatures and phenomena were often adapted to new descriptions. Those ready-made *topoi* allowed the authors to embellish and depict in an evocative way the basilisk's destructive influence on its environment, other snakes, animals and finally human beings.

Thus, in the case of the basilisk we have aimed to demonstrate how the incorporated and adapted motifs have embellished its image and description, thereby building up its mythical status. These motifs appeared earlier in relation to various other poisonous and dangerous creatures (*e.g.*, dragons), literary characters (*e.g.*, the witch Erichtho) or personifications of feelings (*e.g.*, Envy – Invidia). The development of the basilisk's properties has been also influenced by the unintended mistakes related to the misreading of the source text, or to corruptions arising from the deformation of content during its transmission. We may cite here two such 'mistakes': for instance, an unusual feature of cracking rocks with its breath, attributed to the basilisk; or its body as marked with a line of white spots. The legend of the basilisk, evoked in ancient times, and the creature's 'fabling' have fuelled people's imagination throughout the ages, provoking its further development. But it has also led to scientific deliberations aimed at explaining the power of its deadly influence (or killing) from afar. Contrary to Borges's words that the basilisk eventually vanishes: "En el curso de las edades, el basilisco se modifica hacia la fealdad y el horror y ahora se lo olvida" (BORGES; GUERRERO, 1957, p. 36); it seems that the creature and the development of its legend have not been completed.

⁴⁵ Compare the changes in the descriptions of Indian bulls in the accounts by Isidore and Solinus (MORTA, 2014, p. 121-124).

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