

Mode of Capture of Lizards in Southern Europe. By Dr. T. EIMER.

In my memoir on *Lacerta muralis cærulea* I described the peculiar method, usual in Italy, by which the boys there catch lizards: they make a noose at the end of a long stiff haulm of grass, and fill this with saliva so as to appear like a shining mirror. They hold the grass-haulm towards a lizard, which, being very inquisitive, comes nearer and nearer in order to examine the apparatus, and in the midst of its curiosity easily allows the noose to be drawn over its head.

The celebrated statue of the Sauroctonus*, as is well known, represents a youth, still of tender age, who, leaning with his left arm upon the trunk of a tree, and holding in his right hand a piece of a rod, in a watchful attitude follows with his eyes a lizard running up the trunk of the tree, with the object, as the archæologists think, either of tickling or transfixing it with the above-mentioned rod, as with a dart, a fragment of which the rod would represent. The latter opinion, so far as I know, relates to the statement of Pliny†,

* Σαυροκτόνος, lizard-killer.

† Hist. Nat. xxxiv. 70.

who says, "fecit" (ex ære Praxiteles, to whom he ascribes the statue) "puberem Apollinem subrepenti lacertæ cominus sagitta insidiantem, quem sauroctonon vocant." Apollo is supposed to wish to obtain predictions from the struggles of the dying lizard. An epigram of Martial* relating to our statue runs as follows:—

"*Sauroctonos Corinthius*" [i. e. of Corinthian brass].

"Ad te reptanti, puer insidiose, lacertæ
Parce, cupit digitis illa perire tuis."

The lizard, therefore, is creeping up to the boy. This and the whole bearing of the Sauroctonus, which is quietly expectant and almost negligent, the attitude of the right arm and hand, the mode in which the latter holds the rod in its fingers, lightly and easily, not firmly and securely as one holds a dart with which one intends to kill, and, lastly, the peaceable expression of the face, indicating sport rather than any thing serious, all appear to me to show most definitely that in the Sauroctonus we have before us a boy waiting for a lizard with a grass noose and not with a dart. It is by this explanation that the whole statue becomes intelligible, and appears in all its harmonious truth to life.

It is well known that there is in the Vatican a copy of the original in marble, which was dug up on the Palatine Hill in 1777; another, smaller one, in bronze, found near S. Balbina, in the Villa Albani, in Rome; another in Paris, &c. The first two I know well by personal inspection. In the best-known and finest of them, that in the Vatican, both arms from the shoulders are new. In the example in the Villa Albani the arms are old; according to one of the statements accessible to me at the moment, the right hand has, however, been restored in this†. Be this as it may, the attitude of the right arm, hand, and fingers in both cases is such that it can be connected only with the light and easy holding of a grass-haulm, and not of a dart. I would, however, lay the chief stress upon the other characters of the statue, which, as already stated, can only be brought into accordance with the former conception.

It would be interesting to know whether the method of capturing lizards with the noose is practised in Greece, as is very probable, considering the old relations of the Greeks and Romans; but even if this should not be the case, these relations would suffice to have given Praxiteles the material for his statue.

Thus the practice of this method would be shown to be very ancient. To what ancient times similar practices may be traced back, how tenaciously they transmit themselves to later ages and maintain themselves therein, is proved by a fresco painting in the Etruscan Museum of the Vatican, representing a boy who allows a

* xiv. 172.

† In the example in Paris also the right forearm and hand are new, as also the fingers of the left hand.

bird held by a thread attached to its legs to flutter about. This is a practice which is still one of the commonest acts of the daily cruelty to animals witnessed in Italy, and has consequently occupied thoughtless human creatures at least since the time of the Etruscan people, which loses itself in the obscurity of an unknown past.—*Archiv für Naturgeschichte*, xlvii. (1881) pp. 514–516.