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*‘The household snake’: Detection and eradication of pests  
in the home by means of snakes, as reflected in  
Talmudic sources*

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### Abstract

*Literary sources of the classical era (first-fifth centuries), both Greco-Roman and Jewish, indicate that snakes were used for different purposes, such as for medicine, as raw materials for manufacturing objects, and as pets. This article discusses the use of snakes to deal with pests in the ancient homes as reflected in the Talmudic sources as well as in classical literature. The Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi) brings a story of how a house snake helped a family locate a wild snake that entered the house and left its venom in the food. The impression is that the origin of the story is from a non-Jewish environment, and not necessarily from Eretz Israel. It is not impossible that the story is one version of stories about Aesculapian snakes that helped exterminate and drive away pests, as related by Pliny. This narrative variation was absorbed by the sages from their own non-Jewish environment, who adapted the story to the religious-educational messages that they sought to convey. It seems that the practice of using snakes to exterminate domestic pests was relatively limited and less common than that of small predators, such as cats, mongooses or weasels.*

**Keywords:** Mishnah and Talmud; Greco-Roman period; pests in ancient homes; Aesculapian snake; ‘mountain snake’; tamed snakes; pet snakes; household snake; pest control; Ophidiophobia

Harm to humans and human property by animals is a well-known phenomenon, from ancient times to current days.<sup>1</sup> Varied historical sources report damage inflicted by large predators—lions, tigers, and wolves, as well as by smaller animals such as worms, ants, scorpions,

<sup>1</sup>On pests in the Bible, see, for example, Exodus 8:1–10:20; Joshua 24:12; Isaiah 30:6; Jonah 4:10; Joel 1–2. On pests in Mishnah and Talmud literature, see, for example, M. Pea 2:7; B. Ta’anit 14a; B. Shabbat 121b and at length David Nevo, ‘Harms in Agricultural Crops and their Control in Bible, Mishnah and Talmud Era’, (unpublished PhD dissertation, Bar Ilan University, Israel, 1992); Y. Feliks, *Fruit Trees in the Bible and Talmudic Literature* (Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 58–60 (Heb.); D. Nevo, ‘The Desert Locust, *Schistocerca gregaria*, and its Control in the Land of Israel and

snakes, mice and rats.<sup>2</sup> One method utilised by the ancients to deal with domestic pests was that currently called ‘biological pest control’, namely, killing the pests or driving them away by means of their natural enemies. Animals used to exterminate domestic pests in ancient Egypt, India, Greece and Rome were cats, polecats, ferrets and mongooses.<sup>3</sup> Some of these exterminators are mentioned in Talmudic sources in various contexts, for instance regarding the question of whether they can be traded or with regard to legal suits associated with their extermination activities or damage they cause to humans.<sup>4</sup> Biological exterminators had an important role in home sanitation and in preventing diseases and epidemics caused by rats and mice.

The presence of rodents and snakes in ancient homes was a routine matter. This stemmed from two main factors:

- A. Rodents searching for food were attracted to an array of food products in the home, for instance wheat kernels stored in home granaries and in external storerooms and fed on food remnants left after feasts and meals. During festive Roman meals, participants would lounge on low couches and it was customary to throw food remains on the floor. ‘The Unswept Floor’, a Roman mosaic from the second century CE describes a dirty house floor after a meal contains. Among other things, it displays a drawing of a mouse eating a nut (*Juglans regia*), indicating that rodents enjoyed the food remnants left by diners.<sup>5</sup> Following the rodents, snakes who feed on mice and rats entered the home as well. Hence, the domestic food chain included rodents and snakes, in addition to invertebrates such as ants, spiders, and common house geckos.
- B. The homes of the ancients were accessible to small animals through cracks and holes in the walls, the main door and even the windows.<sup>6</sup> As noted by Shmuel Safrai, one of the problems in ancient homes was sealing the windows. On one hand, windows were intended to let light and fresh air into the home, but on the other, it was not possible

the Near East in Antiquity, with Some Reflections on its Appearance in Israel in Modern Times’, *Phytoparasitica* 24 (1996), pp. 7–32.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, M. Baba Metziah 7:9; Y. Baba Kama 1:2, 5c; B. Moed Katan, 6b; B. Ta’anit 22a; B. Horayot 13a; H. S. Horowitz, *Sifri on Numbers and Sifri Zuta* (Leipzig, 1917), piska 157, p. 209. See also M. Kislev, ‘The Zizim in the Lentils, the Mosquitoes in the Pods, and the Worm in Dates and in the Dried Fig’, *Rotem* 22 (1987), pp. 90–99.

<sup>3</sup>Mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon*) was considered a sacred animal in ancient Egypt because of its ability to handle venomous snakes and rodents. See Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, Vol. I (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1933), 1.35, 1.87; J. Clutton-Brock, *A Natural History of Domesticated Mammals* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 195; D. J. Osborn & I. Helmy, *The contemporary land mammals of Egypt (including Sinai)*, Field Museum of Natural History (Chicago, 1980), p. 422; H. Mendelsohn and Y. Yom-Tov, ‘Mongoose’, in *Plants and Animals of the Land of Israel: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, VII: Mammals*, (ed.) A. Alon (Tel Aviv, 1990), pp. 201–204 (Heb.). On the use of the mongoose for pest control in India, see D. O. Lodrick, ‘Man and Mongoose in Indian Culture’, *Anthropos* 77, 1–2 (1982), pp. 191–214. On the use of cats for pest control in ancient Egypt, see J. A. Serpell, ‘Domestication and History of the Cat’, in *The Domestic Cat: The Biology of its Behavior*, (eds.) D. C. Turner and P. Bateson (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 83–100. On the use of polecats and ferrets for killing rodents in ancient Greece and Rome see Serpell, ‘Domestication’, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup>*Tosefta*, Avodah Zarah 2:3, M. S. Zuckerman edition (Jerusalem, 1937), p. 462; *Tosefta*, Sheviit 5:9, S. Lieberman edition (New York, 1955), p. 187; S. Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-Pshuta: Zeraim* (New York, 1962) p. 553; B. Baba Metziah 97a; B. Baba Kama 80b.

<sup>5</sup>The Heraklitos mosaic, Asarotos Oikos (‘The Unswept Floor’), The Vatican Museum.

<sup>6</sup>On descriptions of cracks and holes in the ancient houses, see M. Eduyot 4:12; T. Pesahim 1:3, Lieberman edition, p. 140; T. Oalot 7:5, Zuckerman edition, p. 604; Y. Pesahim 1:1, 27b.

to efficiently cover the openings and hence the ancients were compelled to block them in different ways, though not hermetically.<sup>7</sup>

The presence of mice, rats, and snakes in the home occasioned religious questions that led to the determination of various halakhic norms.<sup>8</sup> For instance, one question discussed was the law regarding liquor in which a mouse had drowned (B. Avodah Zara 68b), or how to compensate a person who had deposited various types of food (fruits, wheat and rice) with a friend and these were eaten by mice (M. Baba Metziah 3:7), and also whether one should be concerned about whether a mouse or rat had dragged bread from one home to another on Passover.<sup>9</sup> In another case, the sages argued that the impurity of stillbirths raises no concern, i.e., newborns who had died in public bath houses or been thrown into pits in homes or yards, as the rats that live there would eat the stillborn or drag it away.<sup>10</sup>

The presence of snakes in the homes led Talmudic sages to forbid people from drinking from uncovered vessels (“uncovered water”) in the concern that snakes had left their venom in the water.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, this article will discuss the use of snakes to deal with pests in the home during the sages’ times (first to fifth centuries CE), as reflected by Talmudic sources as well as in classical literature. It has two main aims:

1. To present sources and testimonies on holding snakes captive in ancient times and how the snakes were used;
2. To propose an identification of the types of snakes used for biological pest control according to Talmudic sources.

### **Keeping snakes by the ancients in Mishna and Talmud sources: a general background**

That holding snakes captive as domesticated animals was a reality is evident in the Mishna where it deals with the law concerning damages caused by hazardous animals possessed by people: “The wolf, the lion, the bear, the leopard, the cheetah and the snake are *mu’ad* [=who are expected to inflict damage]. R. Eleazar says: if they have been tamed, they are not *mu’ad*; the snake, however, is always *mu’ad* (M. Baba Kama 1:4)”.

The Mishna enumerates the major large predators that were native to Eretz Israel in ancient times, i.e. the wolf (*Canis lupus*), the lion (*Panthera leo persica*), the bear (*Ursus arctos syriacus*), the leopard (*Panthera pardus*) and the cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*).<sup>12</sup> The “snake”

<sup>7</sup>S. Safrai, *At the End of the Second Temple and the Mishnaic Period: Chapters in the History of the Society and Culture* (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 58 (Heb.). On the windows of the ancient houses and the ways to seal it see M. Sabbat 17:7; T. Sabbat, 6:4, Lieberman edition, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup>On the presence of snakes in houses in the ancient world, see B. Pesahim 112b. On snakes in agricultural fields and pasture, see Y. Trumot, 8:3, 46a; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahanah* 11:1, D. Mandelbaum edition (New York, 1962), pp. 175–176; *Genesis Rabbah*, parashah 10, 2:1, Judah Theodor & Hanoah Albeck edition (Berlin, 1903), pp. 80–81. On snakes strikes, see also B. Yoma 83b; B. Sabbath 121b.

<sup>9</sup>M. Pesahim 1:2.

<sup>10</sup>T. Niddah, 6:15, Zuckerman edition, p. 648; B. Niddah 15b; B. Avodah Zarah 42a.

<sup>11</sup>B. Sabbat 128b; B. Hullin 10a.

<sup>12</sup>On these predators in Mishnah and Talmud literature, see S. F. Bodenheimer, *Animals in biblical lands* (Jerusalem, 1957), ii, pp. 71–74; Y. Feliks, *The Animals in the Mishnah* (Jerusalem, 1972), pp. 20–21 (Heb.); Y. Feliks, *The Plants and the Animals in the Mishnah* (Jerusalem, 1983), p. 220 (Heb.); U. Paz, “There were bears [in Israel]”, *Teva*

mentioned in the Mishna relates to all poisonous snakes, and apparently in particular to the Palestine viper (*Daboia palaestinae* = *Vipera palaestinae*), which is the most common and also the most dangerous due to its large amount of venom and its toxicity.<sup>13</sup>

The Mishna does not give the context for keeping these animals (see below), rather it discusses in a matter-of-fact fashion the legal question of what should be done when they inflict damage. The sages were of the opinion that predators and poisonous snakes in human possession are to be considered, to begin with, *mu'ad* animals, for which full damages must be paid, even on the first occasion that they inflict damage. The reason for this is that although trained, their animal instincts are still ingrained in them.

In contrast, the Tanna R. Eliezer, who lived in the second generation (first-second centuries CE), was of the opinion that when predators have been “domesticated”, i.e., when people raise them and train them to avoid inflicting harm, they are not considered *mu'ad* and only half the damages should be paid. Nevertheless snakes, even if raised in a home, are aggressive by nature and might inflict damage, and therefore in civil law their owners must pay full damages.

According to ancient Jewish and Roman law, animals that inflicted damage were judged in a court of law.<sup>14</sup> The Mishna presents a controversy between the sages R. Eliezer and R. Akiva, regarding the appropriate court of law for discussing the matter of predators or snakes kept by owners, who had killed a human being. The sages were of the opinion that the appropriate court of law should be one comprised of 23 judges, while R. Eliezer who lived in the second generation argued that they do not have to be brought before a court but can be killed immediately without a court hearing.<sup>15</sup> R. Akiva, in contrast, distinguishes between predators and snakes, where all predators require a court of 23 judges to render a judgement of death, while snakes can be killed immediately as this will prevent future damage.<sup>16</sup>

The distinction made by R. Eliezer and R. Akiva between snakes and predators that are hazardous too and have a strong preying instinct, is based on the primeval concern of snakes (*Ophidiophobia*, compare to Gen. 3:15) or the ‘sly’ and dangerous image of the snake in the ethics, folklore, culture and faith of the ancients in general,<sup>17</sup> and among Jews in particular,

*va-Eretz* 250 (1992), pp. 21–25; M. Dor, *Animals in Biblical, Mishnah and Talmudic periods* (Tel Aviv, 1997), pp. 65–66; H. Mendelsohn and Y. Yom-Tov, ‘The Distribution of mammals in Israel and the local factors which influenced it’, in *Plants and Animals of the Land of Israel: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, vii: Mammals*, (ed.) A. Alon (Tel Aviv, 1990), pp. 44–47; *ibid.* ‘Syrian brown bear’, in *Plants and Animals of the Land of Israel*, pp. 165–166; A. O. Shemesh, ‘The “Bardelas” in Sages Literature: A Test Case of Geography of Identification’, *Mo'ed* 14 (2004), pp. 70–80 (Heb).

<sup>13</sup>A. Arbel, ‘Palestine viper’, in *Plants and Animals of the Land of Israel: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, v: Reptiles and Amphibians*, (ed.) A. Alon (Tel Aviv, 1990), pp. 149–150 (Heb.)

<sup>14</sup>See A. O. Shemesh, ‘Penalties for Canine as Reflected in Jewish Law’, in *The Manchester Conference Volume: Jewish Law Association Studies XX*, (ed.) L. Moscovitz (Liverpool, 2010), pp. 231–245.

<sup>15</sup>M. Sanhedrin 1:4

<sup>16</sup>B. Sanhedrin 15b.

<sup>17</sup>A. Ohman and S. Mineka, ‘The malicious serpent: snakes as a prototypical stimulus for an evolved module of fear’, *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12 (2003), pp. 5–9; D. S. Fita, E. M. C. Neto and A. Schiavetti, ‘“Offensive” snakes: cultural beliefs and practices related to snakebites in a Brazilian rural settlement’, *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 6, 13 (2010), <https://ethnobiomed.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1746-4269-6-13> (accessed 2 November 2020); L. M. P. Ceriaco, ‘Human attitudes towards herpetofauna: The influence of folklore and negative values on the conservation of amphibians and reptiles in Portugal’, *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* 8, 8 (2012), <https://ethnobiomed.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1746-4269-8-8> (accessed 2 November 2020).

as reflected in negative statements by the sages against snakes and their evasive nature.<sup>18</sup> It is not impossible, however, that the statement of the two Tannaim is based on experience with keeping snakes, which might be aggressive even if raised in a domestic environment. The Mishnaic source shows, as stated, that predators and snakes were indeed held in captivity, but it does not explain why they were kept by the ancients.

### Uses of snakes in the classical era

Literary sources of the Talmudic period, both Greco-Roman and Jewish, indicate that rulers and the affluent kept a large variety of animals, both dangerous and harmless, for various purposes, such as for protection and domination, showing in private zoos, and also fun and entertainment, as in hunting and amphitheatre games.<sup>19</sup>

Reptiles, including snakes, are used in cultures around the world for different reasons up to current times, including consumption, medical purposes, raw materials for manufacturing objects, and as pets.<sup>20</sup> The use of snakes for fun and entertainment was customary in the Roman world. Francis D. Lazenby presents a list of Greek and Roman people who kept snakes as pets:

According to Philostratus, Ajax had a pet snake (five cubits in length) which drank with its master and followed him like a dog [Heroicus, 9.1]. In Macedonia, says Lucian, Alexander the false prophet and his quack friend saw “great serpents, quite tame and gentle, so that they were kept by women, slept with children, let themselves be stepped on, were not angry when they were stroked, and took milk from the breast just like babies. There are many such in the country, and that, probably, is what gave currency in former days to the story about Olympias; no doubt a serpent of that sort slept with her when she was carrying Alexander”.<sup>21</sup> Pausanias [2.28.1] tells us of snakes among the Epidaurians that were “tame with men”.<sup>22</sup>

The stories collected by Lazenby on “pet snakes”, which slept with young children in their bed or were nursed by women, are cross-cultural, originate from the world of ancient popular beliefs, and have already been discussed by other researchers.<sup>23</sup> As we shall see below, “house snakes” of this type are described in the Talmudic literature not simply as pets but also as those creatures whose presence in the human environment is beneficial, whether for exterminating pests or for saving people from hazards in the home.

<sup>18</sup>Masekhet Sofrim 15:7, M. Higer edition (New York, 1937), p. 282; Y. Kidushin 4:9, 66b.

<sup>19</sup>See for example M. Avodah Zarah 1:7; B. Baba Kama 39a, 80b.

<sup>20</sup>See F. H. Pough, R. M. Andrews, J. E. Cadle, M. L. Crump, A. H. Savitzky and K. D. Wells, *Herpetology* (NJ, 1998); F. Pasmans, S. Bogaerts, J. Braeckman, A. Cunningham, T. Hellebuyck, R. A. Griffiths, M. Sparreboom, B. R. Schmidt and A. Martel, ‘Future of keeping pet reptiles and amphibians: towards integrating animal welfare, human health and environmental sustainability’, *Veterinary Record* 181, 17 (2017), p. 450.

<sup>21</sup>Lucian, (trans.) A. M. Harmon, Loeb Classical Library [LCL] (London, 1936), 4.185. On Tiberius’s pet snake see Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, (trans.) J. C. Rolfe, LCL, (London, 1913), Tiberius 72.2.

<sup>22</sup>F. D. Lazenby, ‘Greek and Roman Household Pets’, *The Classical Journal* 44, 4 (1949), pp. 245–305. See also I. C. Beavis, *Insects and other Invertebrates in Classical Antiquity* (Devon, 1988), pp. 76, 103, 167; G. Jennison, *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome* (Manchester, 1937); R. Scalera, ‘An overview of the natural history of non-indigenous amphibians and reptiles’, in *Biological invaders in inland waters: Profiles, distribution, and threats*, (ed.) F. Gherardi (Dordrecht, 2007), ii, pp. 141–160.

<sup>23</sup>On this phenomenon, see at length D. Ermacora, ‘The comparative milk-suckling reptile’, *Anthropozoologica* 52, 1 (2017), pp. 59–81.

Mishna and Talmud sources report that snakes were hunted and kept captive to prepare antidotes for venom or to use their skin.<sup>24</sup> Other sources relate that snakes were kept by “snake enchanters” to demonstrate control over them in public performances, as is customary to this day in some countries in the region.<sup>25</sup> Genesis Rabbah, an Amoraic Midrash from Eretz Israel (third to fifth centuries), even describes the use of poisonous snakes to kill rulers. These were the circumstances that underlie the Midrashic narrative concerning Bigtan and Teresh, the gatekeepers in the palace of King Ahasuerus (Esther 2: 21–23) who tried to assassinate the ruler by means of a snake concealed in a large cup given to him.<sup>26</sup> There are different versions of Cleopatra’s suicide in the first century BCE. According to Plutarch, she was bitten by a poisonous adder smuggled into her room in a basket of figs.<sup>27</sup> In the following section, I shall focus on the use of snakes in order to exterminate pests.

### **House snakes that protect the home from wild snakes: the Yerushalmi’s homiletical interpretation**

The Talmud Yerushalmi relates the story of a house snake that helped a family locate a wild snake that had entered the house and left its venom in the food:

It is written [Prov. 16: 7]: “When a man’s ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him”.

R. Meir says: “[Scripture] refers to a dog, [which can be made a friend and helper of man].” But R. Joshua b. Levi says: “[Scripture] refers to the snake”.

Shepherds milked and [when they were not looking] a snake came and drank of [the milk]. [Their] dog saw [this happen] and started to bark at them. The shepherds did not pay attention to him [and continued to drink the milk]. In the end, the dog drank [the poisoned milk] and died.

A certain man had ground garlic prepared in his house. A mountain snake came and ate of it while a snake that lived in the house watched. [When] the members of the household came to eat some of the garlic, it [=the household snake] began to crumble dust upon them, but they did not understand. Therefore [the snake] threw itself into the garlic, preventing the people from eating it.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup>M. Eduyot 2:5; M. Sabbat 14:1; Y. Sabbat 11:1, 13a; Y. Nedarim 3:9, 37d; B. Sabbat 107a; B. Sanhedrin 15b. On the use of snakes’ flesh or their venom to produce medicines, such as theriac see E. Lev, *Medicinal Substances of the Medieval Levant* (Tel Aviv, 2002), pp. 279–280; R. R. N. Alves, W. L. S. Vieira and G. G. Santana, ‘Reptiles used in traditional folk medicine: conservation implications’, *Biodiversity and Conservation* 17 (2008), pp. 2037–2049; A. O. Shemesh, *Medical Materials in Medieval and Modern Jewish Literature: Pharmacology, History and Halakha* (Ramat Gan, 2013), pp. 502–511.

<sup>25</sup>Y. Avodah Zara 1:6, 40a. The practice of snakes charming is still customary in present times in various places around the world, such as Morocco and India. See A. Arbel, ‘Elapidae’, in *Plants and Animals of the Land of Israel: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, v: Reptiles and Amphibians*, (ed.) A. Alon (Tel Aviv, 1990), p. 145.

<sup>26</sup>Genesis Rabbah, Vat.ebr.30, 162a; Vat.ebr.60, 163a; Genesis Rabbah, parashah 88: 40, 2, Theodor-Albeck edition, p. 1080. See A. Reizel, *Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* (Alon Shvut, 2013), pp. 105–116 (Heb.).

<sup>27</sup>Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, (trans.) B. Perrin, LCL (Cambridge and London, 1920), Life of Antony, LXXI, 5; LXXXVI 1–3.

<sup>28</sup>Y. Terumot 8:3, 46a. The translation is according to Alan J. Avery-Peck, *The Talmud of the Land of Israel*, Volume 6: Terumot (Chicago, 1988), p. 392 (with changes). The two stories are brought with slight changes in the Yerushalmi manuscripts and presses. See for example, Leiden manuscript, Ms. Or. 4720 (Scal. 3), Trumot

The source cited in the Yerushalmi is a homily on a verse in Proverbs (16:7) that describes the unusual circumstance wherein a man's enemy not only does not harm him but even saves him from danger. The theological-educational message of the homily is that when a person conducts himself well, God will come to his help and transform his enemies into benefactors. The exegetists demonstrate the message contained in the verse through their use of two stories concerning a dog and a snake, animals that might be aggressive and dangerous but may also benefit and serve humans.

In the Mishnah and Talmud era dogs were usually regarded negatively by Jews, although some sources display appreciation and sympathy for these animals, as evident from this source in the Yerushalmi.<sup>29</sup> While, as J. Schwartz has shown, the Greeks and Romans loved dogs, Jews, in contrast, usually did not keep dogs as pets and instead raised them for functional purposes, for instance to herd sheep, for guarding, and for security needs.<sup>30</sup> According to R. Meir, one of the greatest early sages ('Tannaim') in the fourth generation (second century), dogs are indeed capable of attacking people, biting, and scaring them by barking, but they may also save them from various dangers.<sup>31</sup>

The narrative in the Yerushalmi relates the story of a dog, apparently a sheepdog, which saved its owner from the venom left by a snake in milk produced by the owner's sheep. At first, the dog tried to alert the owner's attention to the poisoned beverage by barking, but when this did not work, it performed a heroic and fatal deed—lapping up the milk and saving the owner from death. Notably, the Vilna edition of the Yerushalmi has *akhil vamit* while the Vatican manuscript, Leiden manuscript and British Library Manuscript Or 2823, 174a have *akhal vamit*. According to the Vilna edition, there were those who understood that the shepherds, failing to heed the dog's warning, partook of the poisoned milk and died.<sup>32</sup> However, from the other versions it is evident, both linguistically and from the context, that it was the dog itself who died.<sup>33</sup>

R. Yehoshua ben Levi, one of the late sages ('Amorahim') who lived in Eretz Israel in the first generation (third century), goes even further and argues that it is not only dogs that may save a person from snakes but snakes, though known to be dangerous, may save and warn someone of other snakes. Moreover, dogs save shepherds in grazing lands, areas that are naturally exposed to danger and certainly to poisonous snakes. The snake in the second story saved a person in his home, where he should have been protected and felt safe. In other

45d; Manuscript - Vat.ebr.133, 120a; Jerusalem Talmud (Venice, 1523) 8:3, 46a. In *Pesikta de-Rav Kahanah*, Mandelbaum edition, 11:1, pp. 175–176, the tradition brought in the Yerushalmi is supplemented by the detail that the shepherds buried the dog and even erected a headstone, indicating the strong relationship between the loyal dog and its grateful owners.

<sup>29</sup>S. Lieberman, *Greek and Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 96 (Heb.).

<sup>30</sup>Joshua Schwartz, 'Dogs and Cats in Jewish Society in the Second Temple, Mishna and Talmud Period', *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Division ii (Jewish History) (2000), pp. 25–35; *idem*, 'Dogs, "Water" and Wall', *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 14 (2000), pp. 101–116; *idem*, 'Dogs in Jewish Society in the Second Temple Period and in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 55, 2 (2004), pp. 246–276, and recently, *idem*, *Jews and Christians in Roman-Byzantine Palestine: History, Daily Life and Material Culture* (Bern, 2018), ii, pp. 544–688.

<sup>31</sup>Indeed, Jewish sources often address the damage inflicted by dogs and the question of when it is permissible to raise dogs and what species. See Shemesh, 'Penalties', pp. 231–245; A. O. Shemesh, 'Breeding Dogs According to the Jewish Tradition', *Sinai* 139 (2007), pp. 112–130 (Heb.).

<sup>32</sup>See *Penei Moshe*, the commentary of R. Moshe Margalit to Jerusalem Talmud, in Vilna edition (1926), Terumat 44a and Avery-Peck, *ibid*.

<sup>33</sup>Compare to B. Baba Metziah 97a.

words, God assist those who have integrity even by a sly snake. Snakes whose nature it is to inflict damage and who do not accept authority (even of their master) may change their nature and save their master even in the privacy of his own home.

The story we have before us speaks of two snake species: A “mountain snake”, i.e., a poisonous wild snake that came into the family domain from outside, and a “house snake”, probably a nonpoisonous snake not supposed to inflict damage. However, the Talmudic passage does not contain two important details that might have enriched our knowledge concerning the ancient circumstances:

- A. The shepherds and household members who use the dog and the snake are not identified by their faith or culture. Are these Jews who keep dogs and snakes or is this a non-Jewish environment? Saul Lieberman’s assumption that the sages took the story of the dog’s devotion to human beings from Eastern tales common in the ancient world is certainly possible.<sup>34</sup> The question is whether the story of snakes that help exterminate or locate pests originates from the Greco-Roman world as well, and we shall discuss this further below.
- B. Is the house snake one brought in from nature and raised by household members or was this a snake that was raised in the domestic domain (snakes are territorial) and the household members grew used to it and to its presence and utilised it for their own purposes? Moreover, if the snake was brought in from nature, is the “house snake” in fact a pet as described by Lazenby or a snake kept (at least initially) to exterminate pests?

Notably, snakes normally do not kill or eat other snakes, aside from the King Cobra (*Ophiophagus hannah*) native to southeast Asia.<sup>35</sup> The house snake in our story did not attack the invading snake, rather only warned the household members of the latter’s presence. It appears that the house snake’s role was mostly to prey on rodents, but it was also beneficial against snakes, which reinforces the message whereby the snake, although a potential enemy, can be beneficial for humans.

In the next section, we shall address the historical context of using snakes for extermination purposes, as well as the question of whether the species of house snake mentioned in the Yerushalmi’s story can be identified.

### The “house snake” of the Yerushalmi – The Aesculapian snake?

One of the main sources in the classical era that describes the practice of keeping snakes in the home is the testimony of the Roman naturalist, Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE). He writes:

The Æsculapian snake was first brought to Rome from Epidaurus [=a small city on the Argolid Peninsula at the Saronic Gulf], but at the present day it is very commonly reared in our houses even; so much so, indeed, that if the breed were not kept down by the frequent conflagrations, it

<sup>34</sup>See Lieberman, *Greek and Hellenism*, p. 96. On stories of the devotion of dogs for humans in the classical literature see Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives*, (trans.) B. Perrin, LCL, (Cambridge, 1914), The Life of Themistocles X, 10; Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives*, LCL (Cambridge, 1914), The Life of Cato the Elder, V, 4, p. 319.

<sup>35</sup>F. Wall, ‘The Hamadryad or King Cobra *Naja hannah* (Cantor)’, *The Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 30, 1 (1924), pp. 189–195.

would be impossible to make head against the rapid increase of them. But the most beautiful of all the snakes are those which are of an amphibious nature. These snakes are known as “hydri”, or water-snakes: in virulence their venom is inferior to that of no other class of serpents, and their liver is preserved as a remedy for the ill effects of their sting.<sup>36</sup>

Pliny notes that Aesculapian snakes are raised in private homes.<sup>37</sup> This is a snake species whose area of distribution is southern Europe and Asia minor.<sup>38</sup> The origin of the snake’s name is its identification with the snake of Aesculapius, the Greek god of medicine, who used it for medical purposes, rendering it sacred for the Greeks and Romans. Aesculapius’ priests raised it in the sacred complexes (Asclepeions) of Epidaurus in Greece, a city considered Aesculapius’ hometown and in Pergamon in Asia minor.<sup>39</sup>

Pliny relates to several facts and details concerning the Elaphe and its use:

- A. It was brought from Epidaurus to Rome, but he does not state when and under what circumstances.
- B. In his time the Aesculapian snake was common in private homes. Pliny does not state explicitly for what purpose it was kept. It can be assumed that the reason that it was common in homes was to exterminate pests, rather than simply as a pet. Snakes were helpful for dealing with rodents, who were capable of devouring large quantities of food in a relatively short time.<sup>40</sup>
- C. Pliny claims that this species is characterised by two features:
  1. It lives on dry ground and also in the water, which is why it was called “hydri” or water snake.
  2. It is less poisonous than other snakes.

In fact, these two qualities made it possible to utilise it for human benefit. As a non-poisonous snake with an easy temperament and habituated to captivity, it could be kept at home while posing no danger. In fact, Aesculapian snakes not only kept private homes free of rats, but also helped the Romans to exterminate rats and snakes in their temples and baths.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Pliny, *Natural History*, (trans.) H. Rackham, LCL (London, 1938–62) XXIX 22. Pliny describes various snakes in his book. See for example, Pliny, *Natural History* VIII 14.

<sup>37</sup>Scientific name: *Zamenis longissimus* syn. *Elaphe longissimi*. Common names: Aesculapian snake; Aesculapian rat snake.

<sup>38</sup>Arbel, *Plants and Animals of the Land of Israel*, VI, pp. 133, 184. Alan Holman rejects the claim that the Aesculapian snake was brought into central Europe by the Romans in order to be kept in their Asclepeions. He notes that the fossil records show that the Aesculapian snake invaded areas far from its present distribution range during warmer eras. See A. J. Holman, *Pleistocene Amphibians and Reptiles in Britain and Europe* (Oxford, 1998), p. 111.

<sup>39</sup>On the use of the Aesculapian snakes for cult and medical treatment in Asclepian temples, see G. D. Hart, *Asclepius, the god of medicine* (London, 2000); L. Cilliers and F. P. Retief, ‘Dream healing in Asclepieia in the Mediterranean’, in *Dreams, Healing, and Medicine in Greece: From Antiquity to the Present*, (ed.) S. M. Oberhelman (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT, 2013), pp. 69–107. On snakes in temples in the classic world, see Vergil, *Aeneid*, (trans.) T. C. Williams (Boston 1910), V, p. 95. On the meaning of dreaming of snakes in temples see Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, LCL (Cambridge, 1916), Book XLV, 1, 2, p. 409.

<sup>40</sup>According to reports by Barash and Hoffien, four mature domestic rats (*Rattus* sp.) were found in the stomach of a black snake caught on a farm. In another case, a female mole-rat (*Spalax* sp.) and its four pups were found within a snake of the same species. See A. Barash and Y. H. Hoffien, *Reptiles: Handbook and Field Guide to the Reptiles of Land of Israel* (Tel Aviv, 1956), p. 63 (Heb.).

<sup>41</sup>On the use of snakes for pest control in Roman baths, see Arbel, *Plants and Animals of the Land of Israel*, VI, pp. 133, 183–184.

Lazenby further expands concerning the Aesculapian snake and its use for exterminating domestic pests by the Greeks and Romans:

Harmless snakes were kept in ancient households to destroy vermin and mice, whence the name *muothēra*, *muraria*. These reptiles seem to have been of the same kind as those of Epidaurus. In 290 BCE, during an epidemic, as Livy records, a delegation was sent to Epidaurus to bring back Aesculapian serpents. These tamed serpents were kept on the isle of the Tiber [...]. This house-snake of the Romans was regarded as the guardian of the penus [= ‘household provision’], which we can compare with the Agathos Daimon or the Zeus Ktesios of the Greek storeroom.<sup>42</sup>

Lazenby then links the spreading of the snakes to Rome and their use as common exterminators in private homes to a story about a delegation sent from Rome to Epidaurus following an epidemic that raged in the city at the end of the final decade of the third century BCE and the attempt to find a cure for it through Aesculapius. This epidemic was described in the words of historian Livy (64/59 BCE – CE 12/17) and Roman poet Ovidius (43 BCE–17 CE), but it is notable that according to Livy only one snake was brought back.<sup>43</sup>

The delegation was supposed to have taken Aesculapius’s sculpture to Rome, and the snake entered their ship independently. Edelstein’s interpretation that the snake appears in the story as representative or symbolic of Aesculapius and his curative skills is certainly reasonable.<sup>44</sup> This mythical event can hardly be seen as the realistic context for the spreading of snakes in Roman homes, particularly if it was a single individual that was unable to procreate. According to these testimonies, the snake and the sculpture were clearly brought back to solve the epidemic by magical means, but they contain no mention of the snake’s becoming an essential domestic exterminator.

Lazenby adds additional details about the snake that would subsequently be used for extermination:

- A. It was called *muothēra*, *muraria*. Israel Aharoni claims that the name *muraria* means “mice hunting” (in Latin: *murium*=mice).<sup>45</sup>
- B. The snake was used by the Romans to guard food warehouses from pests by which they were infested. As stated, the food chain in areas used to store food products included rodents that feed on grain and fruit and snakes that eat the rodents.

In practice, it is hard to identify for certain the species of snake in the Yerushalmi’s story and likewise whether it was indeed an Aesculapian snake. Some types of the genus *Elaphe* are native to Eretz Israel, but not the Aesculapian snake. To date, we have no historical

<sup>42</sup>Lazenby, ‘Greek and Roman Household Pets’, p. 248.

<sup>43</sup>Livy writes: “When the state was troubled with a pestilence, the envoys dispatched to bring over the image of Aesculapius from Epidaurus to Rome fetched away a serpent, which had crawled into their ship and in which it was generally believed that the god himself was present. On the serpent’s going ashore on the island of the Tiber, a temple was erected there to Aesculapius.” See Titus Livius (Livy), *The History of Rome*, (trans.) B. O. Foster, LCL (Cambridge, 1926), XI, p. 547; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, (trans.) F. J. Miller, LCL, (Cambridge, 1976), ii, XV, pp. 622–744. See also F. P. Retief and L. Cilliers, ‘Snake and staff symbolism in healing’, *Acta Theologica* 26, 2 (2005), pp. 189–199.

<sup>44</sup>Emma and Ludwig Edelstein argue that the serpent of Asklepius is a sign of the rejuvenation which Asklepius brought about and it was understood as a symbol of sharp-sightedness which the physician needs, and that the reptile, being itself mild and friendly, indicated the mildness of the god of medicine. See E. Edelstein and L. Edelstein, *Asclepius: Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (Baltimore, 1945), p. 228.

<sup>45</sup>I. Aharoni, *Memoirs of a Hebrew zoologist* (Jerusalem, 2000), p. 238.

information indicating that Aesculapian snakes were brought to Eretz Israel as they were in Epidaurus.

The story in the Yerushalmi may be a local Eretz Israel story about a local snake. However, the impression is that—similar to the story of the loyal dog that saved the shepherds—the origin of the story of the snake that came to the family's help was also a non-Jewish environment, and hence it not necessarily from Eretz Israel. It is not impossible that the story in the Yerushalmi is one version of stories about Aesculapian snakes that help exterminate and drive away pests as related by Pliny. This narrative variation was absorbed by the sages from their own non-Jewish environment, and they adapted the story to the religious-educational messages that they themselves sought to convey.

### Discussion and conclusions

The practice of using snakes to exterminate domestic pests was apparently relatively limited and less common than that of small predators. Moreover, it appears that snakes were kept in the home first and foremost to deal with rodents, and only marginally, perhaps incidentally, to locate invading snakes because the snake is territorial. Moreover, some Babylonian Talmudic sources recommend dealing with snakes in the home by using cats and it seems that these were the most popular for this purpose also in Eretz Israel.<sup>46</sup> Eretz Israel sources report the use of 'ḥuldōt snaim' and 'kifot' (or *kipot*) to 'clean the houses'.<sup>47</sup> Researchers have suggested identifying 'ḥuldōt snaim' with several small predators such the mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon*), the beech marten (*Martes foina*) and the weasel (*Mustela nivalis*) and the 'kifot' with hedgehogs (*Erinaceus* sp.).<sup>48</sup> According to them these animals may have been kept in the home to exterminate snakes because they (in contrast to dogs, for instance) are capable of dealing with snake attacks.

Several rabbinical sayings from the Mishnah and Talmud period can be interpreted as referring to keeping domesticated snakes in the home. The Talmudic saying "A person does not reside in a basket with a snake" (B. Ketubot 72a) may refer to wild snakes that invade homes, or it may reflect a reality or insight according to which it is hard to trust the services of domesticated house snakes and so small predators should be preferred. Moreover, the saying brought in the name of Tanna R. Shimon ben Yoḥai from the second century CE—"[] Even] the best snake—you have to smash its head" (Y. Kidushin 4:9, 66b)—may relate to snakes kept by humans. Here it is argued that although house snakes are domesticated and better than wild snakes, they still cannot be trusted and must be killed.

<sup>46</sup>On using cats for pest control in ancient Israel, see, at length, J. Schwartz, 'Cats in Ancient Jewish Society', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 52 (2001), pp. 211–234.

<sup>47</sup>See Tosefta Shevi'it, 5:9, Lieberman edition, p. 187. The word 'kifot' appears in the Vienna manuscript (Vienna National Library, Heb. 20). However, the Erfurt manuscript (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Or. fol. 1220) has 'kofot', that is 'kofim', monkeys. The 'kifot' (or 'kipot') in Vienna manuscript maybe means 'kipod', that is hedgehog. The word 'kipod' appears explicitly in the version of the Tosefta published with the Vilna Talmud (Shas Vilna), Reem press 1886, 17a, and it too might have been used to overcome pests in the home. Hedgehogs are useful mammals as they eat snails and insects, which harbour many pests, and hence their use to 'clean the house' (on the diet of the hedgehog, see H. Mendelssohn and Y. Yom-Tov, 'Erinaceidae', in *Plants and Animals of the Land of Israel: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, vii: Mammals*, (ed.) A. Alon (Tel Aviv, 1990), pp. 48–51). On the version 'kipod', see S. Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-Pshuta*, Shevi'it, p. 553.

<sup>48</sup>See I. Löw, *Die Flora der Juden* (Vienna-Leipzig, 1924–34), iii, p.185; Y. Feliks, *The animals of the Bible* (Jerusalem, 1954), p. 14; Dor, *Animals in Biblical, Mishnah and Talmudic periods*, p. 73.

As stated, it appears that the Yerushalmi's story of a house snake that saved a family originated from stories, or rumours, popular among the surrounding gentile society. The Romans had popular stories of domestic snakes that are not dangerous and maintain positive relationships with people, and so the sages who acquired this information used it for religious-moral purposes. While the reliability of the texts that describe keeping snakes in the home is not to be questioned, clearly some of the testimonies that exaggerate the man-snake relationship should be viewed as mere popular tales. The "good" domestic snakes are described as those that do not terrorise household members and are even intimately close to the women (nurse at their breasts). They entertain humans, assist them and repay them by exterminating rodents in the house and warning of dangerous wild snakes, as related in the Yerushalmi.

To date, aside from the testimonies from the classical era, we lack historical sources that record the practice of intentionally using snakes to exterminate rodents as well as its continuation over the generations. A single late example of the insight brought in the Yerushalmi whereby snakes might be helpful for exterminating pests in the home can be found in the writings of Ermete Pierotti, a civil and military architect-engineer who spent time in Jerusalem during the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup> In his book recording local customs, Pierotti devotes a chapter to the snakes of Eretz Israel and the beliefs relating to them that were common among local residents. He relates the sympathetic attitude of local Arabs to snakes and that these were perceived as "loyal friends of the house".

Pierotti wrote following his own attempt to capture a snake in his home and his servant's objection to the snake being harmed. As Pierotti explains, the servant refused to do as his master asked:

These "faithful friends" are rarely wanting in the old Arab houses at Jerusalem, where [their] presence is regarded as a good omen by the inhabitants. The most surprising thing is that neither the women nor the babies fear them, and the older children even make pets of them. Mothers are not unfrequently awakened in the night by the reptiles, which have fastened on their breasts, and are sucking their milk. Sometimes also they find them in their infants' cradles, but instead of being alarmed at this, they treat it as quite an ordinary matter. The serpents are sometimes seen crawling among the fowls, or with the cats and dogs; in fact, they appear thoroughly domesticated, and render considerable services in exterminating rats and insects [...] Serpents are also in the habit of entering the folds and grottoes, in which the flocks are penned, and during the night, quietly sucking the milk from the teats of the ewes or she-goat, without awaking them; which is as good a proof of their cunning as any that we could find.<sup>50</sup>

Pierotti's testimony indicates that these were snakes that resided naturally in homes and yards and "seemed domesticated for all purposes". Indeed, the locals did not keep snakes for this purpose, rather taking control of snakes that were in the domestic environment and using them for their benefit. For Pierotti, snakes in Arab villages were considered a desirable and beneficial element: on one hand, snakes served as children's pets, and on the other

<sup>49</sup>On Ermete Pierotti and his activity in Eretz Israel, see J. Ben-Arieh, *A City Reflected in its Times: Jerusalem in the Nineteenth Century, the old city* (Jerusalem, 1977), p. 20.

<sup>50</sup>Ermete Pierotti, *Customs and traditions of Palestine: illustrating the manners of the ancient Hebrew* (Cambridge, 1864), pp. 47–48.

ecological benefits were ascribed to them as they served as natural exterminators of pests in the home. Pierotti does not note the species of snake and it appears that these were nonpoisonous snakes that were recognised as such in Arab villages.

Pierotti arguably exaggerates the proximity and affection for snakes in Arab society, and particularly the fact that snakes nurse at the breasts of sleeping women and even of ewes in their enclosures. Moreover, the idealistic description of snake-human relations (particularly with women and children) completely disregards primeval human fear regarding snakes as well as traditional perceptions concerning the snake's slyness. However, as we saw above, these were ancient folkloristic beliefs that were recorded in the Roman world and appear to have survived in the Eretz Israel region and its surroundings up to the nineteenth century. In any case, there seems to be a kernel of truth in the practice he described, namely, the use of snakes as pets and the sympathetic attitude towards them due to their benefit as pest exterminators.

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