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► **To cite this version:**

Philippe Clancier, Damien Agut-Labordere. Charming Snakes (and Kings), from Egypt to Persia. Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History, In press, 10.1515/janeh-2020-0019 . hal-03190184

**HAL Id: hal-03190184**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03190184>**

Submitted on 8 Apr 2021

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# Charming Snakes (and Kings), from Egypt to Persia

<https://doi.org/10.1515/janeh-2020-0019>

Published online February 26, 2021

**Abstract:** The war between Assyria and Egypt resulted in the deportation of scholars from the Nile Valley to Mesopotamia. Among them were the so-called “snake charmers.” While it was a well-known profession in Egypt, this was not the case in Assyria or Babylonia, where the treatment of snakebites and scorpion stings was left to exorcist doctors. A number of clues from the late Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid Persian periods suggest that the “snake charmers” from Egypt enjoyed success with the kings of the great empires in the Middle East. Their presence most likely resulted from the professional structure and visibility of the Egyptian “snake charmers,” which were relatively absent in Mesopotamia.

**Keywords:** snake charmers, exorcism, medicine, Egypt, Assyria

*Je lui demandais de quelle manière il traitait ces sortes de plaies, et de quels remèdes il se servait, il s'excusa de me dire le nom de toutes les herbes qui entraient dans la composition de son remède, parce que ce secret lui faisait gagner sa vie, il ne voulait pas le rendre public. Il me promit de me traiter avec tout le soin possible si je venais à être mordu, je le remerciai de ses offres, souhaitant très fort ne jamais en avoir besoin.*

Jean-Baptiste Labat,  
*Voyage aux Isles, Phébus, Libretto: 68.*

## 1 Introduction

In most cases, when discussing scholars, priests, temples and science, a peaceful context is concerned, where knowledge predominates. However, in this case, we wish to present an example where war initiated a long-term process of cultural exchange between Egypt and Assyria. This war was between the two major empires of the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE. From the time of Assyrian kings Tiglath-pileser III to Aššurbanipal and Egyptian kings Piye to Tantamani, Assyria and Kuš were often in a state of open warfare. With the

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accession of Esarhaddon, the situation changed dramatically, as his troops conquered Lower Egypt.<sup>1</sup> There are few representations of this conquest in Kalhu.<sup>2</sup> Before 671 BCE, some individual Egyptians were known in Assyria, but they did not belong to a specific group. With the deportations carried out by Esarhaddon, that situation changed.

What we would like to highlight in this paper is the impact the Assyrian conquest of Egypt had on the spread of Egyptian scholars and Egyptian science in the Near Eastern kingdoms of the first millennium BCE. To that end, we will first present the invasion of Egypt and the deportation of Egyptian scholars. Then, we will focus on a specific category of deportees: the so-called *mušlahḫu* in the Akkadian language, or “snake charmers.” Finally, we will propose a possible explanation for the success of the Egyptian *mušlahḫu* in the royal courts of the ancient Near East.

## 2 Invasion and Deportation

### 2.1 The Assyrian Invasion of Egypt

As stated by S. Parpola, until 671 BCE, there was no evidence of Egyptian scholars as a professional organised group in Assyria.<sup>3</sup> This is demonstrated by the fact that only Mesopotamian and, possibly Syro-Anatolian, expert augurs swore to the succession protocol of 672 BCE, ensuring Aššurbanipal’s succession to Esarhaddon’s throne:

*[To] the king, my lord: your [servant] Issar-šum-ereš. [Good] health to the king, my lord! May Nabû and Marduk bless the king, my lord!*

*The scribes (<sup>lú</sup>A.BA-MEŠ), the haruspices (<sup>lú</sup>ḪAL-MEŠ), the exorcists (<sup>lú</sup>MAŠ.MAŠ-MEŠ), the “physicians” (<sup>lú</sup>A.ZU-MEŠ), (and) the augurs (<sup>lú</sup>da-gil-MUŠEN-MEŠ) staying in the palace (and) living in the town will enter the treaty on the 16<sup>th</sup> of Nisan (i).*

*Now, let them conclude the treaty tomorrow.*<sup>4</sup>

In 671 BCE, Esarhaddon entered and invaded Egypt as far as Memphis. This great military success was emphasised in his royal inscriptions:

<sup>1</sup> Esarhaddon victory stele unearthed in Zinçirli, ancient Sam’al.

<sup>2</sup> Layard (1853, pl. 53 & 54).

<sup>3</sup> Parpola (1993: xxxiv, note 4).

<sup>4</sup> SAA X, 7 (= Parpola 1993). Radner (2009: 223 and no. 10). In K. Radner’s work, the Anatolian people appear under the entry *dāgil miššūrāti*. It is not quite clear but there appear to be no Egyptians in this list.

*I counted as [booty ... of] his palace, the gods (and) goddesses of Taharqa, king of Kush, together with their possessions [... I ... his] wife, his [court] ladies, Ušanaḥuru, his crown prince, [...] ... courtiers, his personal attendants, [...], (...). [..., his] in-laws, his clan, [...] ... stone ..., his [...], and [the sons] of the kings [...] ... [...] ... [...] physicians, diviners, [...] ... [...] carpenters], gold-smiths, metal-workers, [...] ... [...] ... [...] ... (...).<sup>5</sup>*

This extract is evidence of the deportation of elites such as members of the Taharqa royal family, as well as specialists like physicians and diviners. In another, significantly damaged text inscribed on a prism recently studied by K. Radner,<sup>6</sup> it can be observed that many Egyptian experts in various fields were indeed deported:

*[...] regu[lar ...] baked bricks [...] ... tribute and [...] precious stones without number [...] ... they blackened [...] the seed of his father's house, descendants of earlier kings, ditto; [...] of his house, third-men, charioteers, ..., [...] re]in-[holders], archers, shield bearers, ditto; [...] ..., exorcists, ḥarṭibû (dream interpreters), [...] veterinarians, Egyptian scribes, [...], snake charmers, together with their helpers, ditto; [...], kāṣīru-craftsmen (tailor?), singers (<sup>lu</sup>NAR-MEŠ), bakers, [...], brewers, (together with) their supply managers, ditto; [...] clothes] menders, hunters, leather workers, ditto; [...] wheelwrights, shipwrights [...] of their ..., ditto; [...] iron-smiths].<sup>7</sup>*

This document is reputed to date from the time of Esarhaddon. However, as it is badly damaged, it could also date from the reign of his successor, Aššurbanipal, who invaded Egypt twice (in 667 BCE and 664 BCE). In the latter invasion, the Assyrian army fought Tantamani, the nephew of Taharqa, as far as the city of Thebes. Of interest in this case are lines 4–5 of K. Radner's translation and 9'–11' below (our translation). It can be seen that many Egyptian scholars were taken prisoner, among them exorcists, ḥarṭibû, veterinarians, scribes, and snake charmers:

i'9'. [...] GAL-MEŠ <sup>lu</sup>MAŠ.MAŠ-MEŠ <sup>lu</sup>ḥar-ṭi-bi-[MEŠ]  
 [...] ... exorcists, ḥarṭibû (dream interpreters),

i'10'. [...] <sup>lu</sup>mu-na-i-ši <sup>lu</sup>A.BA <sup>kur</sup>mu-ṣur-a-<sup>r</sup>a<sup>7</sup>  
 [...] veterinarians, Egyptian scribes,

i'11'. [...] <sup>lu</sup>MUŠ.LAH<sub>4</sub>-MEŠ a-di <sup>lu</sup>GAL-DU<sub>12</sub>-MEŠ-šú-nu  
 [...] snake charmers (*mušlahḥū*) together with their chief singer.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> RINAP 4 (= Leichty 2011): 191–193 (Esarhaddon 103), l. 11–29 (Nahr el-Kelb rock cliff inscription).

<sup>6</sup> Radner (2009: 224 and f.n. 11).

<sup>7</sup> RINAP 4 (= Leichty 2011): 54–56, Esarhaddon 9, col. i, l. 1'–17'.

<sup>8</sup> See below for translation.

As previously stated, K. Radner has already studied this list. In her article, she focused on the *hartībû*, whom she referred to as “dream interpreters,” the Akkadian version of the Egyptian *ḥry-tb*, or “ritualist/magician.”<sup>9</sup> In this paper, we specifically investigate the MUŠ.LAH<sub>4</sub>, the Sumerian word for *mušlahḥu*, meaning “snake charmer.”<sup>10</sup> This will help unearth the Egyptian reality behind the Akkadian word. We shall begin this investigation with the Mesopotamian “snake charmer.”

## 2.2 The *mušlahḥu*: “Snake Charmer”

In this text, line 11’ poses some difficulties. First, the Assyrian scribe used Sumerian words to designate the profession of snake charmer, instead of the original Egyptian title. Secondly, the scribe added “*a-di* <sup>li</sup>GAL-DU<sub>12</sub>-MEŠ-šú-nu,” which has not been found yet anywhere else. One possible meaning is “chief singer,” or *rab zammāri*.<sup>11</sup> In any case, the term means the head of a group following the Egyptian *mušlahḥu*.

Unlike in Egypt, the *mušlahḥu*, the snake charmer, was not a specific profession in Mesopotamia, but rather a role assigned to exorcists or *āšipu*, or *mašmaššu* in Akkadian, as can be observed in the following two lexical lists studied by M. Geller, listing synonyms for “exorcist”:<sup>12</sup>

1. MSL XII: 133, l. 146–155
 

146.	[TIGI]	:	<i>a-ṛši-pu</i> <sup>7</sup>	=	exorcist
147.	ṛLÚ <sup>7</sup> -TU <sub>6</sub> -GÁL	:	KI-MIN	=	ditto
148.	KA <sup>ka</sup> -TU <sub>6</sub> -GÁL	:	KI-MIN	=	ditto

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149.	KA-KÚ-GÁL	:	KI-MIN	=	ditto
150.	KA <sup>ka-ap-ri-ig</sup> PIRIG	:	KI-MIN	=	ditto
151.	ŠIM- <sup>mu</sup> SAR	:	KI-MIN	=	ditto
152.	INIM-KÚ-GÁL	:	KI-MIN	=	ditto
153.	<sup>ni-ig-ru</sup> KAxAD.KÚ	:	KI-MIN	=	ditto

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<sup>9</sup> This similarity between Akkadian and Egyptian was suggested for the first time by Gardiner (1938: 165).

<sup>10</sup> *Mušlahhu* is the Akkadized version of a Sumerian term. The Sumerian, MUŠ.LAH<sub>4</sub> is composed of the term “MUŠ,” meaning “snake,” and “LAH<sub>4</sub>” meaning “to bring.” The *mušlahhu* is thus the one who is capable of controlling snakes. The traditional translation of these terms, which we outline here, is “snake charmer” (CAD M/2, pp. 276–277).

<sup>11</sup> Sign “TUG” which, when read as “DU<sub>12</sub>,” means “song.” A substantive exists based on this root, which is “*zammāru*,” or “singer” (CAD Z: 39b), but is not evidenced by this ideogram. However, the title *rab zammāri*, “chief singer,” is evidenced in Medio and Neo-Assyrian, as well as Neo-Babylonian texts (CAD Z: 40a and AHw: 1509).

<sup>12</sup> Geller (2010a: 45). For NIGRU=*āšipu* cf. Jean (2006: 29–32).

- |      |                      |                        |                    |
|------|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 154. | NIGRU <sup>13</sup>  | : MUŠ.LAH <sub>4</sub> | = snake charmer    |
| 155. | MUŠ-LAH <sub>4</sub> | : KI-MIN               | = ditto (exorcist) |
2. MSL XII: 102, l. 204–208
- |      |  |                   |                           |
|------|--|-------------------|---------------------------|
| 204. | [MAŠ]-MAŠ                                  | : maš-maš-šu      | = exorcist                |
| 205. | TIGI                                       | : a-ši-pu         | = exorcist (lit. harpist) |
| 206. | KA-PIRIG                                   | : MIN             | = ditto                   |
| 207. | MUŠ-DU <sup>14</sup> la-la-abDU            | : muš-la-la-aḥ-ḥu | = snake-charmer           |
| 208. | LÚ <sup>15</sup> GIŠGĀM-ŠU-DU <sub>7</sub> | : muš-ši-pu       | = exorcist                |

In these lists, the “snake charmer” in Mesopotamia was an exorcist who was also a doctor. So, among the deportees from Egypt at the time of Esarhaddon (or Aššurbanipal), there would have been no need to add “snake charmer” to the term “exorcist,” if this was not a specific profession in Egypt.

### 3 Akk. *mušlahḥu*=Eg. *ḥrp Srqt*

In Egypt, the treatment of bites from poisonous snakes was traditionally performed by the *ḥrp.w Srqt*. This title is usually translated as “Conjurer of Serqet”. In evidence since the third millennium BCE, it was first studied by Alan Gardiner in his seminal article, “Professional Magicians in Ancient Egypt” in 1917.<sup>14</sup> Among other things, Gardiner showed that this title should be understood as “One who has power on the charmer of Serqet.” During the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, Serqet was interpreted as a scorpion goddess. However, it is apparent that the origin of the divinity is far more complicated than it may appear at first.

Pierre Lacau proposed labelling the animal version of the goddess Serqet  as a water scorpion (*Nepinae*), an insect with a superficial resemblance to a scorpion due to its raptorial forelegs.<sup>15</sup> A decade later, Frédérique von Känel devoted an important book<sup>16</sup> to the goddess, where she argued that the name “*Srqt*” comes from the verb *srq*, “to inhale,” or “to permit to breathe.”<sup>17</sup> Based on this etymology, Serqet is “the one who makes breath.” This identification of the “breathing goddess” with the water scorpion is likely due to the peculiar morphology of the insect, which lives

<sup>13</sup> List Ea, MSL 14: 308, 122. *ni-ig-ru* = KAXAD+KÙ [*a-ši-pu*], Jean (2006: 29 and note 131).

<sup>14</sup> Gardiner (1917).

<sup>15</sup> Lacau (1971: 243).

<sup>16</sup> von Känel (1984).

<sup>17</sup> *Wb.* IV. 200.

in the water, breathing through a caudal appendage that sticks out above the surface, like a snorkel.

This hypothesis fits well with a passage from the inscription carved on the statue of Djedher, nicknamed “The Saviour.” Djedher was one of the great men in the city of Athribis in the Nile Delta during the second half of the fourth century BCE. In the famous black statue (Cairo 46341), he appears carrying a stela of “Horus on the Crocodiles” in his hands. This type of stela (featuring Horus the Child, Bes, or both) was designed to protect people from snakes, scorpions and crocodiles<sup>18</sup> through spells. The presence of this apotropaic and therapeutic artefact on a statue of a private person such as this means that the statue of Djedher was a healing monument.

According to ancient Egyptian belief, poisonous bites could be healed by drinking water that had been poured over the magical inscriptions on the statue and stele. Supporting Lacau and von Känel’s hypothesis, in the hieroglyphic text that runs across the statue, Horus is presented as a *hꜣrp Sꜣꜣt* who cures Ra of a bite from the snake Apophis. In this version, he is able: “to revive humans and animals by making them breathe” (l. 161–163).<sup>19</sup> According to this hypothesis, the name “Serqet” was originally in the title of poisonous animal specialists because the goddess was closely associated with breath, vital for life. Difficulty breathing is one of the first symptoms of poisoning by hemotoxic venom, which affects the cardiovascular system and causes pulmonary oedema.

Later, during the Hellenistic Period, after the original meaning of “Serqet” had been forgotten, she became a scorpion goddess. This is most likely because her name appeared in the titles of specialists in poisonous animals, not because Serqet was intrinsically a “venomous goddess.”

The title of *hꜣrp Sꜣꜣt* was the subject of an extensive monograph by Frédérique von Känel, *Les prêtres-ouab de Sekhmet et les conjurateurs de Serket*, published in 1984. In the catalogue, which constitutes the first part of the book, the author unearths a biographical text of great interest. Approximately dated to the second century BCE, this inscription was engraved on a statue (Cairo Museum JE 38545)

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**18** The crocodile could be perceived as a venomous animal, see P. Insinger x + 29, 15 (Agut-Labordère and Chauveau 2011: 353, no. 136). A Demotic spell to ward off crocodiles features on an ostrakon found in the sacred animal necropolis in North Saqqara, DO Saqqara 5 (Ray 2013).

**19** Jelinková-Reymond (1956: 13, note 4), for an extensive discussion on spells involving snakes and scorpions. Concerning Djedher, it’s worthwhile noting that, while he mentions that he was able to “save everyone from the poison of every male and female viper and all snakes” (Chicago OIC 10589 F4; F5; B13), he never presents himself as a *hꜣrp Sꜣꜣt*. It’s true that, in contrast to Wennefer, Djedher appears mainly to be a local notable figure in Athribis, not a royal courtier (Gorre 2009: 382–383).

found in Tell Faraoun, in the eastern part of the Nile Delta.<sup>20</sup> The statue is a figure standing with its hands by its sides, dressed in a cloak, conforming to the traditional style of the Egyptian male.<sup>21</sup> According to a short biography later written in Classical Egyptian, the owner of the statue, named *Hr-ḥb* (or *Hr-n-t3-b3.t*), was a courtier who combined the disciplines of astronomy and medicine under Ptolemy Philometor and/or Evergete II.<sup>22</sup> In addition to these professional abilities, he was also a *ḥrp Srqt*. At the end of the text, *Hr-ḥb* provides a unique summary of the specific role he played: he was one “who calms the children of Serket, who knows the holes where snakes seek refuge, where they go as fast as lightning, and seals their mouths,<sup>23</sup> suppressing the venom in their bodies, protecting the royal house, cleaning up after its vermin, protecting their journeys, securing the road.”

As the expression “children of Serket” usually refers to snakes and also scorpions, it can be deduced from this text that the capabilities of the *ḥrp.w n Srqt* were twofold. First, they had extensive knowledge of snakes and their behaviours. Second, they were able to neutralise them before they bit. As we know from other documents that will be further examined below, the *ḥrp.w Srqt* also specialised in the treatment of snake bites, so it would therefore be reasonable to draw parallels between the Assyrian *mušlalahū* and the Egyptian *ḥrp Srqt*.

While documentary sources attest to the presence of *mušlalahū/ḥrp.w Srqt* in the Assyrian court during the seventh century BCE, this was also the case in the Persian court in the fourth century BCE. In this period, Wennefer, son of Painu, whose tomb is located in Saqqarah, was the *mr ḥrp Srqt*, or the “Overseer of the *ḥrp Srqt*.” Wennefer was present in the Persian court as part of the entourage of unnamed Persian kings, most likely Artaxerxes II or III.<sup>24</sup>

Some decades later, during the Second Persian period of dominance, Somtutefnakht, whose life was documented in a biographic stela in Naples, was appointed to the priestly rank of “Overseer of the wab priests of (the goddess) Sekhmet” (l.9. *ir.n=f n=y i3.t imy-r w'b (n) Šhm.t*) by one of the last Achaemenid

<sup>20</sup> Neugebauer and Parker (1969) (containing important corrections made by H. de Meulenaere): 214–216; von Känel (1984: 201–203, no. 30); Derchain (1989); Jansen-Winkel (1998: 9–10); Satzinger (1996: 261 note 3); Fissolo (2001); Gorre (2009: 368–372).

<sup>21</sup> Fissolo (2001: 22, fig. 7). Jean-Luc Fissolo kindly accepted to share pictures of the statue recently taken by Vincent Razanajao. We would like to thank them both.

<sup>22</sup> Derchain (1989: 88).

<sup>23</sup> The “sealing of the snakes’ mouths” appears in the first text of the “Ritual of the four balls,” an Osiride magic ritual (see P. Louvre inv. E3239 l. 13–14, Barbotin and Devauchelle (2006: 118).

<sup>24</sup> von Känel (1980).

rulers of Egypt (very likely Darius III).<sup>25</sup> As rightly pointed out by Ivan Ladynin in a recent article, this was a totally unique intervention from Achaemenid power in the inner life of Egyptian clergies.<sup>26</sup> The fact that this intervention took place when Somtutefnakht was in the Persian court proves that the Persian kings were personally involved in organising this priestly institution.

There is a reluctance to categorise these specialists as priests as such, as they don't correspond to the standard criteria used to describe Egyptian clergies. While these priests may have had a local religious title, the title of “*hrp Sqrt*” is not connected to a specific city or village. The importance of these Egyptian specialists to Achaemenid power sheds new light on the restoration of the “House of Life” in Sais undertaken under by Darius I. This is referred to in the biography of Udjahorresnet carved on the Naoforo Vaticano: “His Majesty did this because he was aware of the usefulness of this knowledge to make all sick persons live” (l. 43).<sup>27</sup> By restoring the House of Life in Sais, Darius I could have ensured, among other things, that precious Egyptian knowledge on the control of poisonous snakes and treatment of their bites would not be lost.

In this context, the discovery of an Egyptian cippus of Horus on the Crocodiles during the excavations in Susa in 1931 (now in the Iran National Museum in Tehran) takes on a new meaning. Kamyar Abdi, who first published this document, estimated that the cippus was brought to Susa by “an Egyptian of lower status,” a soldier or a craftsman working for the Achaemenid kings.<sup>28</sup> Given the importance attached by the great kings and the Persian elite to Egyptian snake “exorcism” techniques, it is also possible that the object was imported from Egypt by a member of the Persian court.<sup>29</sup>

## 4 Explaining the Success of Egyptian Snake Charmers in the Near Eastern Kingdoms

The success of Egyptian snake charmers in the courts of the Near East could be attributed to mere chance. However, in this paper, we hypothesise that this was

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<sup>25</sup> Perdu (1985).

<sup>26</sup> Ladynin (2014: 405).

<sup>27</sup> Posener (1936: 21 and 24–25 note o).

<sup>28</sup> MNI inv. no. 103 (2103), Qaheri (2020: 98).

<sup>29</sup> Also of note: the discovery (Abdi 2002b) of an Egyptian cippus of Horus on the Crocodiles in Carthage (Tunis, Musée national du Bardo, inv. 01-02-18-1) dating from the fourth or third century BCE (Aounallah 2016: 378). It confirms the interest of the royal courts in the western Mediterranean basin in Egyptian protections against poisonous animals.

more due to the sophistication of Egyptian knowledge concerning not only reptiles but also the care of injuries caused by reptiles.

## 4.1 Comparison of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian Approaches to the Same Danger

It has already been outlined that, in Mesopotamia, “snake charmer” was not a specific profession; there were only exorcist-doctors, known as the *āšipu* or *maš-maššu*. This is the first point of difference from the Egyptian snake charmer. Were there any differences in professional skill between the Mesopotamian exorcist and the Egyptian snake charmer?

### 4.1.1 The Mesopotamian Snake Charmer

The professional skill of the Assyrian and Babylonian *āšipu* concerning snakes (and scorpions) came from knowledge in three related disciplines: divination, exorcism and medicine.

1. Divination is well documented in, for example, the series, “*If a city is set on a height,*” commonly known as *Šumma ālu* in Akkadian. In this text, tablets 22<sup>30</sup> to 26<sup>31</sup> are about snakes and 30 and 31 are about scorpions.<sup>32</sup> The text deals with the appearance and behaviours of these animals. Divination involving snakes or scorpions also appears in the second tablet in the major medical series *Sakikkû*,<sup>33</sup> which begins with omens involving the patient. The snakes and scorpions’ behaviours<sup>34</sup> here are sometimes parallel to those in the *Šumma ālu*.<sup>35</sup>

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**30** For example: “*if a snake falls on a man who is engaged in a lawsuit, his suit will be long*” (Freedman 2006a: 19). A scorpion appears in tablet 23 l. 63, killing a snake.

**31** Nothing is known about tablets 27–29 (Freedman 2006a: 131), so it is possible that snakes and scorpions were directly connected in the *Šumma ālu*, as is the case in the *Sakikkû*.

**32** For example: “[*If a scor*]pion stings a man in the 11th month, that man will experience heartache” (tab. 30, l. 11’ Freedman 2006a: 135). Tablets 34 to 40 are about different insects and small animals (Freedman 2006b: 3).

**33** Also known as the *TDP*, *Traité de Diagnostiques et de Pronostiques* (Labat 1951) and as the Akkadian incipit *Enūma ina bit marši āšipu illaku*, “When the exorcist doctor goes to the house of a patient.”

**34** Snakes and scorpions’ actions are reported in the *Sakikkû*, not their appearance, which is of primary importance in the *Šumma ālu*.

**35** Freedman (2006b: 6 sq.) for snakes (tablet 22 of *Šumma ālu*) and p. 132 sq. for scorpions (tablet 30 in the *Šumma ālu*); *Sakikkû* tablet 2, l. 19–30 on snakes, 31–35 on scorpions and 32 on both. Example involving a scorpion in *Sakikkû*: l. 31: “*If a scorpion falls on a sick person, he will die within 10 days.*” For a prediction of death by snakebite, see Geller (1997: 57, n. 55).

2. Exorcism concerning snakes and scorpions is also the subject of some studies, including those of N. Veldhuis and I. Finkel, for example.<sup>36</sup> In many cases, injuries caused by snakes and scorpions (and dogs) are described together. Exorcism was used in two ways to fight these animals: firstly, by preventing attacks, and secondly by magically curing bites and stings, mostly using incantations. A text published by I. Finkel, with at least two sources, dating from the second millennium BCE, shows that the first action by the exorcist was to prevent the snake from biting<sup>37</sup>:

1. *I seized the mouth of all snakes, even the kuršindu-snake,*
2. *the snake that cannot be conjured, the aš(šu)nugallu-snake, the burubalû-snake,*
3. *the (šan)apšaḥuru-snake, of speckled eyes,*
4. *the eel snake, the hissing snake, (even) the hisser, the snake at the window,*
5. *it entered the hole, went out by the drainpipe.*
6. *It smote the sleeping gazelle, betook itself to(?) the withered oak.*
7. *The snake lies coiled in ...*
8. *The serpent lies coiled in wool/rushes.*
9. *Six are the mouths of the serpent, seven his tongues,*
10. *Seven (and seven) are the ... inside him/of his heart.*
11. *He is wild of hair, fearful of appearance.*
12. *His eyes are of awful brightness, fearfulness issues from his mouth.*
13. *His very spittle can split stone!*
14. *En-e-nu-ru incantation.*<sup>38</sup>

I. Finkel studied the incantations against snakebites and scorpion stings<sup>39</sup> and concluded that exorcism had an essential role in treatment. This is highlighted in a text dating from the first millennium BCE:

*If ditto (a man, a snake bites him) (and) he seeks shadow, arrange that a processional boat passes in front of him and he will get better.*<sup>40</sup>

3. However, some medical treatments did exist, even if there was no specific text devoted to them; the path of the exorcist doctor to curing bites and stings began with training, as explicitly mentioned in the *Āṣīpu's Handbook*, the exorcist's handbook: ZÚ-MUŠ TI.LA GÍR.TAB TI.LA="to cure the snakebite; to cure the scorpion(’s sting)."<sup>41</sup> Secondly, the exorcist doctor had certain sources to rely on to help

<sup>36</sup> Veldhuis (1993); Finkel (1999, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Finkel (1999: 226) (IM 51292 and IM 51328). See also Geller (2010b: 72).

<sup>38</sup> Finkel (1999: 223).

<sup>39</sup> Finkel (1999).

<sup>40</sup> BAM 42, l. 67 (Geller 2010b: 18, fn. 24).

<sup>41</sup> KAR 44 o. l. 19.

cure a patient. Currently, we are aware of two sources they would have used: the *Abnu šikinšu*, which deals with the form and nature of stones, and the *Šammu šikinšu*, on plants. The exorcist doctor would have used these sources for recipe ingredients. A third source, “*šikinšu*,” existed, specifically about snakes. It was called *Šēru šikinšu*, “*the snake: form/nature*.” Little is known about this text, as it is only mentioned twice. First, in a Hellenistic Urukian tablet, which only refers to its title, *Šēru šikinšu*.<sup>42</sup> Fortunately, there is also a composite text recently published by S. Mirelman concerning birds and snakes.<sup>43</sup> This tablet conveys a short abstract of the *Šēru šikinšu* series. This document dates from the Neo-Assyrian period and was part of Aššurbanipal’s library. However, this abstract cannot be used to identify any specific snake, as all snakes in the text are mythological and related to demons or gods. The list resembles the incantation text studied by I. Finkel.<sup>44</sup>

18. [The snake, its for]m: It has two heads. It has seven tongues. Its ear[s are ...]  
(...)
21. [The snake, its form:] It has a beard. It is bound in hair. [... ..]
22. [... .. It is an] abnormal<sup>2</sup> [creature], a sign. This snake, En[lil ... ..]  
.....]  
(...)<sup>45</sup>

Currently, it is not known if the *Šēru šikinšu* was used to identify snakes or help heal bites.

In spite of the fact that there were no texts to help the exorcist doctor identify snakes or scorpions, they had recipes at their disposal to try to alleviate the suffering of patients.<sup>46</sup> Recipes for treating snakebites and scorpion stings are generally short passages in larger documents. For example, when someone experienced numbness in their hand due to a scorpion sting, the exorcist had to look for the treatment in recipes for numbness or paralysis.<sup>47</sup> Two main methods for administering medicine can be observed in the recipes: a potion to drink or eat and lotions to be applied directly on the wound, as can be seen in the following examples:

<sup>42</sup> TCL VI, 12 (MUŠ GAR-ŠÚ, l. o.29).

<sup>43</sup> Mirelman (2015).

<sup>44</sup> See for example l. 9–11.

<sup>45</sup> Mirelman (2015: 178).

<sup>46</sup> Some “Late Assyrian” treatments of snakebites (i.e. BAM 42, rev. 63–68 and BAM 176 11’–15’) are, according to I. Finkel, “something of an afterthought.”

<sup>47</sup> AMT 91/1, rev. 4’–13’.

**Snakebites**<sup>48</sup>

63. DIŠ NA MUŠ ʿišʿ-šuk-šú ʿSUHUŠʿ ur-ba-ʿtìʿ ta-qàl-lu KÚ-ma né-eš  
*If a man, a snake bites him, you roast root of rushes, he eats (it) and he will recover.*
64. DIŠ NA MUŠ ʿišʿ-šuk-šú [ú]ʿIGIʿ-lim SÚD ina KAŠ NAG-ma né-eš DIŠ-MIN  
úIGIʿ-lim ina UGU niš-ki-šú GAR-an né-[eš]  
*If a man, a snake bites him, you pound imhur-lim-plant, he drinks (it) in beer and he will get better. If ditto, you put imhur-lim-plant on his bite and he will recover.*

**Scorpion sting**<sup>49</sup>

- 14'. [DIŠ] ʿNA GÍRʿ .TAB TAG-su EME.DIR SAGʿ .DU-su KU<sub>5</sub>-is ÚŠ-MEŠ-šú IGI ziq-ti EŠ-MEŠ ina-eš  
*If a man, a scorpion touched him, a lizard, you cut his head, anoint the sting with its blood and he will recover.*
- 16'. [DIŠ KI]-ʿMINʿ úGAMUN SÚD ina KAŠ NAG u KÚ-ma ina-eš  
*Ditto, you pound cumin, he drinks and eats (it) in beer and he will recover.*

Given the scarcity of sources concerning the cure for snakebites or scorpion stings, we agree with Geller's statement that: "*The job of snake charmer would hardly describe the exorcist's primary occupation or concern.*"<sup>50</sup>

**4.1.2 The Egyptian Snake Charmer**

The situation was different in Egypt, where the treatment of snake bites was the subject of specific knowledge, with specific training. Two handbooks dating from the sixth century BCE<sup>51</sup> (stored in the Brooklyn Museum) were written in Hieratic for the use of the *hṛp.w Sqrt*.<sup>52</sup> One of the handbooks, P. Brooklyn 47.218.48 and 85, is divided into two sections: the first is on the classification and description of snakes and the second is on the medical treatment of snake bites using drugs and,

<sup>48</sup> BAM 42.

<sup>49</sup> RA 15, l. 14' et 16'.

<sup>50</sup> Geller (2010a: 46).

<sup>51</sup> Verhoeven (2001: 304–307); Quack (2013: 256).

<sup>52</sup> P. Brooklyn 47.218.48 and 85 (Sauneron 1989) and P. Brooklyn 47.218.138 (Goyon 2012). These texts are compilations of spells from various sources. For example, spell VII on the prophylactic statue of Ramesses III (Cairo JE 69771, posterior face l. 12–17) has parallels with P. Brooklyn 47.218.48, col. x+13, l. 9–14 (included) in the Brooklyn Museum Papyrus (Goyon 1971).

in some cases, incantations. The title of the second treatise<sup>53</sup> merits full quotation and comparison with the text on the contemporary statue of *Ḥr-ḥb* (or *Ḥr-n-t3-b3.t*), quoted above:

*Collection aiming to help men get rid of the venom of any male or female reptile, all scorpions, all ..., all reptilian djedfet, through the actions of the ḥrp Srqt and to remove all reptiles and seal their mouths. (2.17)*

Both documents concur in recognising that the art of the *ḥrp Srqt* is twofold.<sup>54</sup> Firstly, the *ḥrp Srqt* is a physician who can cure people poisoned by venom. Secondly, they can also magically protect a group venturing into an area infested with snakes.<sup>55</sup> This is a dual approach combining protective magic and medicine in Egyptian medical literature, as summarised by Ivan Guerneur: “si (...) magie et médecine sont mêlées, c’est d’une manière très logique : la magie traite de la protection tandis que le pronostic et l’éventuel traitement relèvent exclusivement du domaine médical.”<sup>56</sup> More than simply a person who treated wounds, a *swnw*, the *ḥrp Srqt* was therefore a magical tamer who could impose their will on snakes.

This skill explains why they are called “*ḥrp*,” a substantive derived from the verb *ḥrp* “to dominate,” or “to subjugate.” In spite of the potentially old-fashioned orientalism evoked, the translation as “snake charmer” is in fact an accurate description of the last two non-medical competencies in the field of the *ḥrp Srqt*, as demonstrated both on the Cairo statue and the Brooklyn Papyrus. With this in mind, the activity of the Egyptian *ḥrp Srqt* seems similar to that of the Mesopotamian snake charmer. However, while there are common features between the Egyptian and Mesopotamian snake charmers, this fact alone does not

<sup>53</sup> The medical section is presented as a copy of an ancient manuscript discovered during the reign of pharaoh Nefer-ka-Re, presumably Pepi II of the sixth dynasty (2246–2152 BCE).

<sup>54</sup> The role of the *ḥrp Srqt* is also described in the *Buch von Tempel*, Quack (2003: 17).

<sup>55</sup> On the statue Cairo JE 38545, it is written that *Ḥr-ḥb* (or *Ḥr-n-t3-b3.t*) “travels and his road is protected. The chief of those who open? [the way]” (1.4). As noted by von Känel (1984: 203 note (g)), “Peut-être les *ḥrp Srqt* [étaient] chargés de protéger des serpents et scorpions les gens des expéditions.” This role fits perfectly with the fact that, in the Middle Kingdom, the title of the *ḥrp Srqt*, and also of the *šd wh.wt* “scorpion repeller,” was much in evidence in the desert expeditions crossing the Sinai (Tallet 2002: 372–374; Abd el-Raziq et al. 2002: 44–47 (inscription no. 6) and Tallet 2011). On the same topic of protecting desert roads, a statue of Ramesses III bearing prophylactic texts against snakes and scorpions was discovered at Almaza, near Heliopolis, on a route leading to Suez via the Darb al-Hagg (Cairo JE 69771, Grandet 1994: 257). A demotic incantation against scorpions dated paleographically to the end of the sixth or the beginning of the fifth century BCE was found in Wadi Hammamat (first published by Vittmann 1984). This inscription contains Aramaic sections (Steiner 2001).

<sup>56</sup> Guerneur (2013: 21). See also Shaw (2012: 44–47).

explain the popularity of the Egyptian snake charmers in the Assyrian and Achaemenid courts.

## 4.2 Why Were Egyptian Snake Charmers so Popular in the Near Eastern Courts?

Most likely, the answer to this question partly lies in the aforementioned Egyptian handbook stored in the Brooklyn Museum. Serge Sauneron, who published the text, was struck by the precision of the treatise and chose to give it a title that evoked a contemporary scientific book, “*Traité d’Ophiologie*.” This book was both a zoological treatise and a medical manual. It included a typology of snakes based on careful observation of their anatomy, colour, size and behaviour, which have to be taken into account by the practitioner in their diagnosis.<sup>57</sup>

Treatment also required accurate observation of the appearance of the bite and the symptoms.<sup>58</sup> The medical section contains 62 recipes, only nine of which are accompanied by incantations. These incantations were essential—no cure would work without them.<sup>59</sup> Many of the drugs mentioned have an emetic effect. For the *hrp.w Sqrt*, venom was an active substance that had to be expelled from the body of the patient: “its venom is extracted by vomiting profusely” (§.28).<sup>60</sup> Compared with the sophisticated content of the Egyptian *Traité d’ophiologie*, the treatment of snake bites in Mesopotamian medical texts appears to have been more rudimentary:

- The description of the symptoms is poor: “If a man is sick with numbness” (in the case of a scorpion bite) AMT9/11 4.
- The remedies are mainly poultices or potions to be drunk by the patient.

Despite the sophistication of the Egyptian snake charmer’s handbook, this does not mean that the Egyptian remedies used by the Egyptian *hrp.w Sqrt* were more effective than those of the Mesopotamian *mušlahhu*. The exception to this was trying extract venom by incising the wound (as done by the Mesopotamians), rather by vomiting (as done by the Egyptians), which is more efficient from a

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<sup>57</sup> Concerning the Egyptian conception of the physiology of ophidians, Brix (2010: vol. 1, 36–121) (chap. IV to VII).

<sup>58</sup> Aufrère (2012).

<sup>59</sup> For another example of an incantation against scorpions’ venom, see P. Turin CGT 5405: vol. 4, 5–7 (Roccati 2001: 77), with similar outlined by Meeks (2016: 83) in Berlin P.14208 (Fischer-Elfert 2015: 338–341).

<sup>60</sup> Such a treatment is also mentioned in medical texts from the second millennium BCE Rouffet (2009).

medical point of view. In any case, it can be supposed that some of the prestige accorded to the *ḥrp.w Srqt* came from the sophistication of their knowledge. The treatments dispensed by Egyptian snake charmers were perceived as superior because they were based on extensively and meticulously documented medical treatises. Furthermore, the Egyptian snake charmers may have evoked apotropaic Egyptian deities such as Bes, who were popular in Assyrian and Achaemenid courts.<sup>61</sup> All of these factors created an impression of control, of mastery, which would be reassuring to patients and observers alike.

## 5 Conclusion

The study of the situation of the Egyptian “snake charmers” in the Near Eastern empires, Assyrian and Persian, is an example of how the creation of knowledge can be influenced by political history. The relative lack of interest on the part of Mesopotamian scholars in curing the damage caused by poisonous animals paved the way for Egyptian specialists, whose skills were recognised by the Assyrian kings from at least the eighth century BCE.<sup>62</sup> Egyptian expertise in this field was deeply rooted in a long tradition dating from at least the third millennium BCE.<sup>63</sup> No doubt, the extreme sophistication of the knowledge of the “conjurers of Serqet” impressed Assyrian rulers, contributing to their fame and ultimately leading to their deportation to Assyria. Two and a half centuries later, under Achaemenid domination, the Egyptian snake charmers were again present in the court of the Great Kings of Persia.

During the first and, even more so, the second period of Persian domination, the *ḥrp.w Srqt* took advantage of their proximity to the great kings to increase their political influence. This priestly body therefore played an important role in the internal political life of Egypt, where they seem to have been a powerful political

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**61** A slab of pottery dating from the seventh century BCE representing Bes was found in Aššur by the Deutsche Gesellschaft in 1927, Perdu (2012: 244 no. 120) (Laurent Coulon). Concerning the attitude to Bes by the Persian elite, see Abdi (2002a).

**62** A similar case of ethnic specialisation concerning snakes is described by Arrian in India (*Indika* VIII. 15.11): “No Greek physicians have discovered a remedy against an Indian snake-bite; but the Indians themselves used to cure those who were struck. And Nearchus adds that Alexander had gathered about him Indians very skilled in physical medicine, and orders were sent round the camp that anyone bitten by a snake was to report to the royal pavilion.” (Thanks to Julien Monerie for drawing our attention to this passage).

**63** During the Hellenistic period, the expertise of Egyptian physicians also involved the use of clysters. UPZ I, 148, a private letter written in Greek, mentions a young man who learns “Egyptian writing” (i.e. Demotic) for the purpose of studying medicine with a well-renowned Egyptian clyster specialist (Rémondon 1964).

network. The stela and statues in the sanctuaries demonstrate that the *hrp.w Srqt* were in a position to be influential figures in several important cities in Egypt, such as Athribis and Heracleopolis.

It is likely no coincidence that most documents relating to this body date from the fourth to second centuries BCE, when the political influence of the Egyptian “snake charmers” was at its peak. Knowledge was not, in this case, a separate entity, but proceeded directly from the political role played by those who created it.

With this in mind, we need to understand the significance of the change in the political position of the *hrp.w Srqt* between the Assyrian invasions of the eighth century BCE and the Achaemenid period. While under the Assyrians, the snake charmers were deported, similarly to their predecessors, under the Persians, they clearly had the ear of the great kings and were major power brokers in Egypt.

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