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Pompeian Shrine Serpents: Re-evaluating the Significance of Serpents in Lararium Paintings

Katie Anders
Classics
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Lora Holland

Abstract

The common interpretation for the presence of a serpent in Pompeian shrine paintings is that the serpent represents the *genius* of the *paterfamilias*. This paper calls into question this interpretation and argues that the serpent does not represent the *genius* and had a far greater significance to the Romans. This paper explores the significance of the serpent in *lararium* paintings by analyzing examples found in Pompeii. The serpent iconography is compared to that of native Italic gods and goddess who were associated with serpents. The use of serpents in Etruscan funerary art is explored, as well as the use of snakes in Greco-Roman myth. The conclusions that are drawn are that the serpents depicted in the *lararium* paintings had an apotropaic function that were intended to ward off harmful spirits, and grant fertility, health and prosperity to the household.

1. Introduction

The majority of *lararium* paintings discovered in Pompeii contain one or more serpents. The common interpretation for the presence of the serpent is that it represents the *genius* of the *paterfamilias.*[1] This interpretation has problems with it, however, and the significance of the serpent must be re-evaluated. Considering the size and prominence of the serpent in the *lararium* painting, the snake was significant in Roman religion, and indicates snake worship in cult practices. This paper explores the significance of the serpents found in household shrines by analyzing *lararium* paintings found in Pompeii and the ways in which serpents are depicted. The serpent iconography is compared to that of native Italic gods and goddesses who were associated with serpents, the use of serpents in Etruscan funerary art, and the use of snakes in Greco-Roman myth. This illustrates that serpents held significance in Roman religion and serpents in the *lararium* had an apotropaic function that worked to ward off harmful spirits from the house, and grant fertility, health and prosperity to the *familias.*

2. Shrine Painting Analysis

The accepted interpretation[2] since the second half of the nineteenth century has been that the serpent represents the *genius.* This interpretation comes from Georg Wissowa, who as part of his evidence, cites a story from Plutarch. In this story, Tiberius Gracchus finds two snakes in his house and was advised by priests that he should kill one and release the other. If he killed the male, he would die, and if he killed the female, his wife would die. Wissowa interpreted this as the snakes representing Gracchus' *genius* and his wife's *Iuno*.[3] Thus, in *lararium* paintings that show two serpents, a male and female since one is bigger and bearded, have been interpreted to represent the *genius* of the *paterfamilias* and the *Iuno* of his wife. The appearance of only one serpent is thought to represent an unmarried man. The problem with this interpretation is that many houses have more than one shrine, one shrine

having two snakes and the other having only one.[4] Another issue is the fact that there is already a figure representing the *genius*, it would seem redundant to represent the *genius* in two different ways in a single painting. Furthermore, there is no literary evidence to support the idea of the serpent representing the *genius.*[5]

The serpent cannot represent the *genius* of a man; there are many native Italic cults which include serpent worship and the iconography is quite similar to the iconography depicted on the shrine paintings. The appearance of the serpent on the *lararium* painting must then have a greater significance than previously believed.

The importance of the serpent in Roman cult can be seen from the depictions of the serpents in wall paintings. Serpents occur in a majority of the painted shrines in Pompeii, and are rather large in their depictions, occupying a large portion of the shrine's space (figure 1).

Figure 1. Painted lararium on west wall near portico. House of Cryptoporticus. Pompeii, Italy. May 2006.

The *genius* usually appears wearing priestly garb making sacrifice at the altar. The snakes are depicted slithering up to the altar or are curled around the altar, eating the sacrifice. Figure 2 shows the two *lares* flanking the central scene which appears to be that of a sacrifice. The *genius* stands next to an altar with a veil over his head, holding a *patera*, ready to give an offering. Down below, two serpents are shown eating an offering of eggs from an altar. It would appear that the *genius* is making a sacrifice to the serpents. The serpents appear to be in the underworld since they are depicted in a register beneath the human level, giving the sense that they are underground. The serpents occupy the majority of their space in the bottom register, and are among plants which may reference their association with fertility. The offering of eggs is also significant since eggs have an association with fertility and birth.

Figure 2. Opera Parietale. Lararium painting. Casa di Championnet II. Pompeii, Italy. Naples Archeological Museum, Naples, Italy.

In figure 3, the *lares* seem to watch over as the *genius* makes a sacrifice in the center of the image. This time, however, there is only one serpent and he slithers up out of the ground, and wraps himself around the altar to devour the sacrifice as the *genius* burns it. Again, there seems to be a distinct ground level in which the human figures are standing, and through which the snake emerges. Plants are depicted beneath the ground level of the serpent once again indicating the fertility aspect of the serpent.

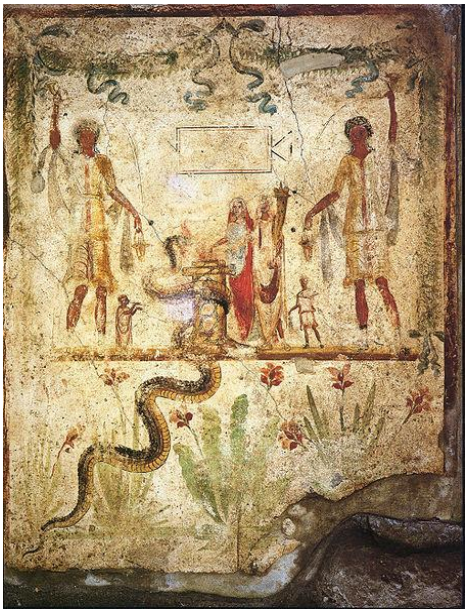

Figure 3. Roman fresco from the lararium of the house of Iulius Polybius (IX 13,3) in Pompeii.

Both of these examples represent the chthonic nature of the serpent. The serpent was seen as slithering upon the ground, and living within it. As chthonic creatures, they are closely associated with the earth in which they dwell. They can be seen as being associated with agricultural fertility, protection of the location, or as spirits of the underworld.

3. Comparing Iconography

There are many cultures that worshipped snakes or had snake deities which may have influenced the placement of the serpent in the *lararium*. The cultures that had the most influence on Roman cult practices would have been the native Italic tribes that Rome absorbed, the Etruscans who had great influence over much of Italy, and the Greeks who occupied southern Italy. The Romans are primarily known for having assumed the Greek gods as their own, but in fact the Romans had native gods that they later associated with many of the Greek gods. Juno was one of these gods.

3.1 Italic Snake Gods and Goddesses

Juno had many different epithets, one of these was Juno Sospita who had a prosperous temple in Lanuvium. [6] Juno Hospital was an ancient Italic goddess, and in Lanuvium part of her worship involved a cult which required virgins to descend into a cave blindfolded to feed the sacred serpent of Juno. If the serpent ate from the girl's hand, then her chastity was proven, and the fertility of the land would be ensured.[7] In this cult practice, an offering was made to a serpent in an attempt to guarantee agricultural fertility, the serpent being an attribute of the goddess Juno, a protector of her people. When Rome conquered Lanuvium, the cult of Juno Sospita was integrated into Roman religion, and the temple and grove of Juno continued to prosper.[8]

Figure 4. Denarius of L. Roscius Fabatus. 59 BCE. Reverse shows the feeding of the goddess Juno's serpent. On the front is the image of Juno wearing the goat-skin.

Figure 4 shows a coin with the image of this cultic ritual, the virgin offering food to the serpent who rises before her. The image in figure 5 is painted on the back interior wall of an aedicule lararium and shows the genius making an offering at the altar, on which the serpent is coiled around about to devour the offering as it is made. The two images are strikingly similar. It is possible that the cultic practice of making offerings to the serpent of Juno to guarantee fertility, was adapted into the domestic shrine.

Figure 5. West wall in lararium on west side of atrium, Small well preserved house. I.16.3 Pompeii. December 2006.

Figure 6 shows another coin with a scene almost exactly like the one in the *lararium* in figure 5. On this coin is a depiction of Salus, an ancient Roman goddess of healing who came to be identified with the Greek goddess Hygeia. Salus was often depicted on coins such as this, either seated or standing, holding a *patera* feeding a sacred snake that is coiled around an altar.[9] This image of Salus is so similar to images of the *genius* making sacrifice to the serpent coiled around the altar, that it seems likely that the image of Salus inspired this type of shrine painting. Shrine paintings as seen in figures 3 and 5 may be intended to show sacrifice to a single sacred serpent in order to ensure fertility, or continued health and prosperity.

Figure 6. Coin depicting Salus holding out a patera to a snake coiled around an altar.

The serpent was also associated with healing and rejuvenation. The snake sheds its skin, making it a symbol of renewal, this can be seen as a renewal of the harvest each year, or as a symbol of immortality as the snake continually renews itself.[10] Another native Italic goddess that was associated with snakes was Angitia, a goddess of the Marsi and other tribes of central Italy. Angitia was revered for her ability to heal snake bites.[11]

Another god of healing that was associated with serpents was Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine. Asclepius was depicted holding a rod with a serpent coiled around it. The worship of Asclepius was brought to Rome after a plague broke out in 293 BCE. An embassy was sent to the temple in Epidaurus in Greece to bring back a large sacred snake, which was a requirement for establishing a new Asclepieium, as the serpent represented the god himself.[12] Snakes would inhabit the Asclepieium, and were thought to cure ailments by biting or licking the afflicted area[13]. Snakes are also thought to have been kept in the temple of Bona Dea. These would have been non-poisonous serpents serving the same medicinal purposes. Bona Dea was a fertility and healing goddess worshiped by women. The serpent was sacred to Bona Dea, and she was often depicted similar to Salus, sitting in a chair holding a cornucopia in her left hand and feeding a serpent from a bowl in her right hand. Inscriptions dedicated to Bona Dea would show either one serpent or two serpents, one on either side of an altar, much like on *lararium* paintings.[14]

3.2 Etruscan Underworld

Serpents also have a strong association with the underworld, and feature prominently in Etruscan funerary art. Etruscan demons are often portrayed with serpents and with serpentine qualities. The demon Tuchulcha, as seen in figure 7, is depicted with the face of a vulture, with snakes protruding from his head, and brandishing a serpent around his arm in a threatening manner. His wings even appear serpent-like and have the same markings as the serpent he is holding. The markings on the serpents identify them as *Viper Berus Berus,* a highly poisonous adder found in Italy.[15] The Etruscans would have been quite familiar with the adders and the painful bite and the sickness which would have killed the victim.[16] The mere image of this snake would likely cause fear, making it the perfect image to use to depict a menacing demon of death.

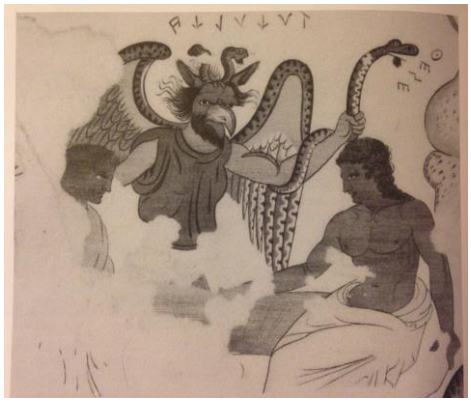

Figure 7. Wall painting of Tuchulcha. c. 323-300 BCE. Tomb of Orcus II, Tarquinia.

Another underworld demon found in over a hundred depictions is Charu. Charu is usually depicted as having bluish skin, carrying a mallet and sometimes brandishing serpents.[17] The demon's blue color is typically interpreted as representing the look of dead flesh. Some images show the demon as having blue skin with black splotches, Hostetler interprets this as representing the look of the flesh after a bite from the Italian adder. After a bite from the viper, the skin would swell, turn blue, and blisters appear leaving black splotches.[18] The demon then visually represents the ill effects of an adder bite that would cause death. The 'ruling' deities of the underworld also have serpent attributes. Figure 8 shows an image of Aita and Phersipnei, the Etruscan equivalent of Pluto and Proserpina. Aita is shown holding up a snake in his left hand, and Phersipnei is shown with snakes in her hair.[19] The Etruscans obviously associated these snakes with death.

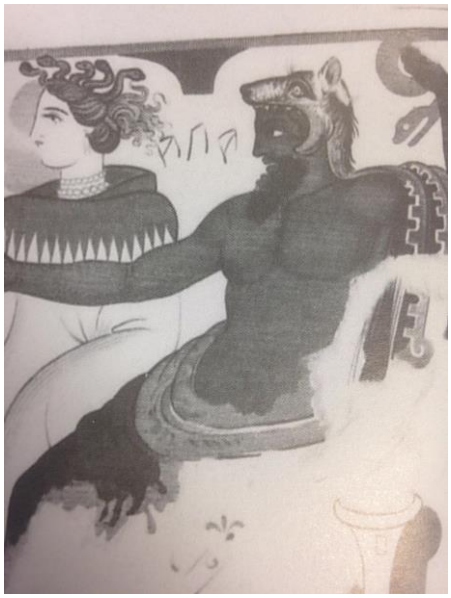

Figure 8. Aita and Phersipnei, rulers of the underworld. Wall painting from the Tomb of Orcus II, Tarquinia, ca. 325-300 BCE.

The Etruscan representations of the underworld and the demons within, illustrate the fear they had of these highly poisonous serpents and represented them as terrifying minions of the underworld. This association with spirits of the underworld may explain why serpents are often shown beneath the level which the *genius* and *lares* are standing

in *lararia* paintings (figures 2 and 9). These images may depict offerings being made to underworld spirits in an attempt to stave off death, or misfortune.

Figure 9. Lararium Painting at the Bar of Lucius Vetutius Placidus (I.8.9) Pompeii, Italy.

3.3 Greco-Roman Myth

Serpents appear not only as spirits of the underworld but also as harbingers of death. In Greco-Roman myths snakes can be an instrument of death, or are omens of impending death. In the myth of Orpheus, his wife, Eurydice, steps on a viper which bites her and she dies instantly. Orpheus then proceeds to descend into the underworld to try to bring her back.[20] The story is about Orpheus' *katabasis*, but he needs a reason first to go into the underworld. It is significant that the way in which Eurydice dies is by snake bite. Eurydice could have been killed some other way, but it was the bite of a viper, which is common in Italy, and is associated with the underworld, which kills her and draws Orpheus to the underworld after her.

The second book of the Aeneid tells about the death of Laocoon and his sons by massive serpents. "Laocoon has justly paid the penalty -- they say -- for outrage, since his spearhead had profaned the sacred oak, his cursed shaft been cast against the horse's back."[21] The serpents were a divine punishment from Athena as she was on the side of the Greeks, and Laocoon saw through the Greek's deception. Aeneas describes the sight of the serpents as a "dreadful omen," when they saw the two giant snakes, they knew death was coming.

Another example of snakes being the vehicle of divine retribution is in the myth of Heracles. Hera, always jealous of Zeus' affairs, sought to kill the baby Heracles for being her husband's illegitimate son. She sent two serpents to kill him in his crib, but Heracles strangled the serpents before they could bite him.[22] In this case, the serpents failed in their objective to kill, but illustrates how two serpents could be sent by a god in order to exact punishment.

As mentioned previously, Plutarch tells a legend about Tiberius Gracchus, the father of the famous Gracchi brothers, in which he finds two serpents in his house, a male and a female.

> There is a story told that he once found in his bed-chamber a couple of snakes, and that the soothsayers, being consulted concerning the prodigy, advised that he should neither kill them both nor let them both escape; adding, that if the male serpent was killed, Tiberius should die, and if the female, Cornelia. And that therefore Tiberius, who extremely loved his wife, and thought, besides, that it was much more his part, who was an old man, to die, than it was hers, who as yet was but a young woman, killed the male serpent, and let the female escape; and soon after himself died, leaving behind him twelve children borne to him by Cornelia.[23]

In this case the serpents were not intended to kill Gracchus but functioned as an omen of death. Rather than representing the *genius* and *Iuno* of the couple, as Wissowa suggested, they were harbingers of death.

Another version of this story is told by Livy, in which Gracchus was making a sacrifice outside his tent in Lucania when the serpents appear. "An unlucky prodigy occurred to Gracchus, while sacrificing, previous to his departure from Lucania. Two snakes gliding from a secret place to the entrails, after the sacrifice was completed, ate the liver; and after having been observed, suddenly vanished out of sight."[24] Two serpents came out of the ground and ate the

liver of the offering off of the altar, they must not have liked his offering, because this was interpreted as being a bad omen. Cicero mentions another similar story that when Sulla made a sacrifice one snake appeared at the foot of the altar, this was a good omen and Sulla won the battle that followed.[25] It seems perhaps one snake was a good omen and two snakes was a bad omen. Both stories show the men making sacrifices at an altar then serpents appearing at the altar. This sounds like what is visually represented in *lararium* paintings, either one serpent or two serpents approaching an altar to eat the sacrifice. It appears that sacrifice may have been made in order to secure good fortune, in the case of Sulla and Gracchus, it was fortune in war.

In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas makes offerings at his father, Anchises' tomb when he witnesses a serpent rise out of the tomb, eat the offerings then slither back where he came from.

> So he had spoken when a slippery serpent dragged from the bottom of the shrine its seven enormous coils that wound in seven spirals, while twining gently around the burial mound, gliding between the altars...The serpent, weaving slowly through the bowls and polished goblets, tasted of the feast, then, harmless, made its way back to the tomb and left the altars it had fed upon.[26]

Aeneas witnesses this and is unsure of what it means, "uncertain if that serpent is the *genius* of the place or the attendant spirit of Anchises."[27] The story moves on and the occurrence is not explained. It seems the Romans were even unsure of the meaning of the serpent. Aeneas wonders if maybe the serpent is an attendant spirit of his father, since his father is in the underworld, maybe the snake represents an underworld spirit that is partaking of the sacrifice on his behalf. Or, Aeneas wonders if the snake is the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, since it seems to guard Anchises' tomb.

The *genius loci* is a possibility for the serpent in the *lararium* paintings. Serpents were associated with protection of a place and the *genius loci* was a protective spirit. The Romans depicted the *genius loci* as a serpent, figure 10 for example, shows an image of a serpent coiled around an altar eating a sacrifice. The inscription next to the serpent says: GENIUS HUIUS LOCI MONTIS, identifying the serpent as the *genius loci* of the mountain. On the Capua Theater relief (figure 11) there is an image on the far right of a figure holding a *patera* making a sacrifice, and next to him is a large serpent. There is an inscription above that reads: GENIUS THEATRI, identifying the serpent as the spirit of the theater. The relief was a votive offering likely dedicated by the contractor who built the theater in order to gain divine protection for his work.[28] While the snake on shrine paintings may not represent the *genius* of a man, it may have represented the *genius loci*, a protective spirit who would have guarded the home.

Figure 10. Painting of a *Genius Loci* from Herculaneum, Italy.

Figure 11. Mold of relief from the Theatre of Capua, Museo dela Civilta Romana, Rome.

In Greek mythology there are several stories in which a serpent guards a sacred place. The serpent Ladon guarded the golden apples in the Garden of the Hesperides. The Golden Fleece was placed in a tree that was guarded by a never sleeping serpent.[29] Herodotus tells about the sacred serpent of Athens that guards the city:

> The Athenians say that they have in their Acropolis a huge serpent, which lives in the temple, and is the guardian of the whole place. Nor do they only say this, but, as if the serpent really dwelt there, every month they lay out its food, which consists of a honey-cake. Up to this time the honey-cake had always been consumed; but now it remained untouched. So the priestess told the people what had happened; whereupon they left Athens the more readily, since they believed that the goddess had already abandoned the citadel.[30]

The serpent was the guardian and protector of the city, and an attribute of Athena. When it was believed the serpent had left, they no longer had divine protection and so they fled. These examples show serpents acting as a guardian, lending protection to a particular place.

4. Conclusions

Overall, the representation of the serpent in *lararium* paintings cannot represent the *genius* of a man, as the iconography is strikingly similar to the iconography associated with ancient Italic goddesses. Also, there is typically a figure of the *genius* represented that makes sacrifice to the serpents, so it would make no sense for the *genius* to worship the *genius.* The serpent has strong associations with gods and goddesses of fertility and healing, with spirits of the underworld, and with protection of a place. The serpents in the paintings must be apotropaic in nature, representing all these different aspects. As part of the domestic cult, sacrifices would have been made on the altar to ensure continued health and prosperity of the family, as well as ward off misfortune and malignant spirits. The serpent in the *lararium* paintings represent a continuation of the Italic beliefs in serpents bringing both fortune, in the form of fertility and health, and misfortune in the form of evil spirits from the underworld. The serpent was used in the household shrines as an apotropaic figure to bring good fortune to the household and to avert misfortune.

5. Images Cited

Figure 1. Painted lararium on west wall near portico. House of Cryptoporticus. I.6.2 Pompeii, Italy. May 2006. Available from PompeiiinPictures, http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2006%2002%20p1_files/image015.jpg (accessed 26 October, 2014).

Figure 2. *Opera Parietale*. Lararium painting. Casa di Championnet II. Pompeii, Italy. Naples Archeological Museum, Naples, Italy. http://cir.campania.beniculturali.it/museoarcheologiconazionale/itinerari-tematici/galleria-di-immagini/RA00086931/?searchterm=8905 (accessed 6 December, 2014).

Figure 3. Roman fresco from the lararium of the house of Iulius Polybius (IX 13,3) in Marisa Ranieri Panetta (ed.): Pompeii: The History, Life and Art of the Buried City. Belser, Stuttgart 2005, p. 108.

Figure 4. Denarius of L. Roscius Fabatus. Reverse shows the feeding of Juno's serpent, Front shows Juno wearing a goatskin. 59 BCE. Serratus Denarius, 3.87 gm.; 18 mm. http://www.franic.info/coins/pics/Sospita_bg.jpg (accessed 26 October, 2014).

Figure 5. Detail of Painting of Genius with serpent winding around a round altar. West wall in lararium on west side of atrium. I.16.3 Pompeii. December 2006. Available from PompeiiinPictures, http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2016%2003_files/image011.jpg (accessed 26 October, 2014).

Figure 6. Sestertius of Antoninus Pius. c. 144 CE. Coin depicting Salus holding out a patera to a snake coiled around an altar. Pergamon Museum, Berlin. Source: Barbara McManus, 2005. http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/salus_ap.jpg (accessed 6 December, 2014).

Figure 7. Wall painting of Tuchulcha. c. 323-300 BCE. Tomb of Orcus II, Tarquinia. From Nancy De Grummond, *Etruscan Myth, Sacred History, and Legend.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2006. Image X.14.

Figure 8. Aita and Phersipnei, rulers of the underworld. Wall painting from the Tomb of Orcus II, Tarquinia, ca. 325-300 BCE. From Nancy De Grummond, *Etruscan Myth, Sacred History, and Legend.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2006. Image X.26.

Figure 9. Lararium at the Bar of Lucius Vetutius Placidus (I.8.9) Pompeii, Italy. Available from: Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_Bar,_Pompeii.jpg (accessed: 26 October, 2014).

Figure 10. Painting of a *Genius Loci* from Herculaneum, Italy. From G. Boyce, *Significance of the serpents on Pompeian House Shrines.* <<American Journal of Archaeology>>, 46 (1942) Fig. 5.

Figure 11. Mold of relief from the Theatre of Capua, Museo dela Civilta Romana, Rome. Available from http://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/resrep00_01/images/Jahresbericht_img/59.jpg

6. Endnotes

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