

ABSTRACT

Furniture of the Home in the Mishnah

This book attempts to reach a better understanding of the realia relating to interior furniture in the Mishnaic period. Our goal is to identify and describe the interior furniture which appears in the Mishnah, and in so doing to provide a better understanding of the diverse laws concerning furniture.

Throughout our research we encountered many differences of opinion concerning the identification of specific pieces of furniture. In some instances the suggested identification is incompatible with a halachic ruling in the Mishnah or does not fit the context of a specific text. Therefore we have suggested new identifications for certain items of furniture and their parts which are in keeping with the context of the rabbinic text and with the archaeological research of the period.

In order to reach an understanding of the “*pshat*” (the simple meaning of a Biblical or rabbinic text) in everything related to the form and use of tangible objects mentioned in the Mishnah, we must familiarize ourselves with the realia of the Mishnaic period as opposed to that of later periods.

We have used sources from the Tannaitic period and occasionally from the Palestinian Amoraic period. Another source is the detailed description of architecture and utensils occurring in Roman literature of the Mishnaic period.

After ascertaining the correct reading, we have tried to clarify the meaning of technical terms and their etymology, which is often derived from a foreign language (Aramaic, Latin, Greek, etc.). We have made use of the fundamental works of early authorities.

Following the lexicographic-etymological clarification, we have made use of archaeological research in order to identify a piece of furniture referred to in the Mishnah with a remnant of furniture, a relief, or an artifact from the Roman period, found in excavations in Israel. In the absence of local findings we turned to archaeological evidence from the Roman Empire.

After identifying the piece of furniture with tangible remnants of the period, we have a better understanding of what the Sages were referring to when mentioning certain objects in the context of Halachah and Midrash.

The book is divided into four main chapters: Tables, Chairs, Beds and Cabinets.

In the first chapter we discuss different types of **tables**: “table”, “board”, “perakim table”, “double table”, “delphike” and “epikaulus”. We have referred to different characteristics of the tables we surveyed, the table’s mobility, why one table is susceptible to defilement whereas another is not, different uses of these tables, the base of the table, the material from which tables are built and the structure of the different tables. In addition, we see how the laws of defilement and purity affected the manufacturing of the tables.

We have concluded that when the Tannaim called a table by the term “delphike” they did not refer to one model alone, but to several models of a tall table on which utensils could be placed, which was not used for eating. The “monopodium”, the one-legged table, examples of which have been found in excavations of the upper city of Jerusalem¹ and in excavations of the southern Temple Mount and the City of David² is one type of “delphike”. There was another type of a “delphike” as well, with three legs, unlike the low portable three-legged table on which people ate. The second type of “delphike” was as high as the monopodium (the height of a modern dining table) and stood in a fixed location. The “delphike” is usually depicted with utensils upon it, or as a side table filled with vessels. These items might be utensils for use at a nearby dining table, for example, pitchers as described in the Mishnah, Avodah Zarah 5:5, or beautiful utensils as pictured³ on the margins of the ornamented table.

In light of the description of these two high tables (the “monopodium” and the “delphike”), one can see the similarity in their function, and understand how the Sages designated them both by the same name — “delphike”. Both tables were high, relatively heavy and stood in a fixed location loaded with vessels, therefore effort was invested in their ornamentation. The ornamented statues which often formed the table legs were so prevalent that the sages proclaimed, in Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:2: “He who finds fragments of images these are

1 N. Avigad, *The Upper City of Jerusalem*, Jerusalem 1981, p. 173, plate 195 and p. 197, plate 230. Y. Magen, *The Stone Vessel Industry in the Second Temple Period*, Jerusalem 2002, plates 14–15.

2 Y. Magen, *The Stone Vessel Industry in the Second Temple Period*, *ibid*, p. 109–111.

3 L.Y. Rachmani, “Table Board from the End of the Second Temple Period”, *Atikot*, 7 (5734) pp.65–68.

permitted...” The Yerushalmi⁴ which deals with this Mishnah gives the reason for permitting fragments of images: “R. Yossi in the name of R. Yochanan: because most of them come from the ‘delphike’...” That is, most ornamented fragments such as animals and statues come from these table legs.

The low portable table that was used for dining did not stand permanently in the triclinium, but was brought in for the meal and taken out after the meal. At times it was hung on the wall⁵ or stored under the couch.⁶ It is possible that less effort was invested in its ornamentation, as it was not permanently displayed in the house.

The second chapter deals with different types of **chairs**. In addition to the simple chair which appears in the Mishnah, we also find names of special types of chairs such as the “bridal chair” and the “cathedra”.

The most common form of chair — prevalent in the Roman period — was the “sella”, a chair without a back or arm rests.⁷ All classes of people used it, men as well as women. This chair was used in the home as well as in public places such as stores and schools,⁸ although it appears that in schools pupils generally sat on benches and not on chairs.⁹ At times this chair was elaborate and ornamented and at times it was quite plain. Its basic form was a four legged seat without a back or arm rests and without upholstery. When in use, a pillow or blanket was placed on the seat.

We have also discussed the “folding chair” and the “cathedra”. In Mishnah Kelim 4:3 there is a discussion of the form of the “gastra”, a fragment of a vessel which can become defiled, even though it is not a whole vessel. The Mishnah states: “It was placed on its side as a kind of ‘cathedra’”; here we gain some information as to the appearance of the “cathedra”. The shape of the “gastra” is reminiscent of the “cathedra”. Mishnah Kelim 24:2 describes another object which is also compared to a “cathedra” — “there are three wagons: one which is made like a ‘cathedra’ is defiled by ‘midras’— (uncleanness arising from contact by treading on, leaning against etc.) ...”.

4 Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah Chapter 3 Halachah 2, 42c. (ירושלמי ע"ז פ"ג ה"ב מב' (ע"ג))

5 See: S. Krauss, *Kadmoniot HaTalmud*, Tel Aviv 1929, Vol. 2 Part 1, p. 17., and: J. Krengel, *Das Hausgerät in der Mišnah*, Breslau 1898, p. 3.

6 G.M.A.Richter, *The Furniture of the Greeks Etruscans and Romans*, London 1966, p. 63.

7 W. Smith, W. Wayte, G.E. Marindin, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, London 1891, vol. II, p. 619.

8 *ibid.* and see: Cicero, *In Catilinam*, trans. by L. Lord, London 1967, IV,8,17, pp. 132–133.

9 Smith, *ibid.*

We have suggested identifying the “cathedra” (with the help of the information drawn from these Mishnahs) with a picture of a model of a chair which frequently appears on Roman reliefs, although Richter¹⁰ points out that the name of the Roman chair “cathedra” refers to a chair with a back but without armrests resembling the Greek chair — “klismos”. It seems to us that the Sages took the name “cathedra” from a different Roman chair. This chair or armchair was common and appears on remnants of many reliefs from the Roman-Caesarian era. Liversidge¹¹ explains that there are no extant chairs of this type, but we can achieve a good understanding of the form of this chair from chairs illustrated on reliefs and statues. This chair is characterized by a curving rounded back set on a semicircular or rectangular base, without legs. The rounded sides, which were a continuation of the back, served as arm rests, and the back itself was high enough to provide comfortable support for the shoulders.

We have surveyed the “safsal” (bench) and the bridal chair and its “chipuyim” (coverings) as found in Tractate Kelim. We conclude that the bridal chair was built in a square shape, with back, armrests and full sides. The space below the seat was closed in, so that the lower part of the chair could be used as a small cabinet. We have identified a model of such a chair on a stone relief from Arlon.¹²

We also discuss “thronus” and “epiphoren”. We suggest new identifications for these pieces of furniture which are in keeping with the context of the rabbinic text in which they are mentioned.

In the third chapter we discuss the **bed**, its different parts and its construction. The Greek word “κλίνη” — bed, referred both to a bed made for sleeping and to a couch on which people reclined during their meals. Indeed, we find the bed both in the triclinium and in the bedroom. The bed in the Roman era was the most elaborate and expensive piece of furniture in the house.¹³

In order to understand the appearance and construction of the bed, we have tried to identify its different parts as found in our sources, such as: “malbane”, “pikot and leshonot”, “mizran”, “kinof”, “zahav and peder”, “bed ropes”, “bed supports”, “bolsters and pillows”; which parts of the bed are susceptible to defilement and which are not, and what causes the difference in these laws.

We have also discussed the identification of the “dargash” and the way in

¹⁰ Richter, *ibid.* pp.101–102.

¹¹ J. Liversidge, *Furniture in Roman Britain*, London 1955, pp.16–20.

¹² É. Espérandieu, *Recueil Général des Bas-Reliefs, Statues et Bustes de la Gaule Romaine*, Paris 1913, (republished England 1965) vol. V, p. 228, fig. 4037.

¹³ Richter, *ibid.* p.106.

which it differs from the bed. In order to understand how the “dargash” looked, we had to identify its “kalmentrin”. (Their removal enables the “dargash” to serve as a bed suitable for mourning.) We suggest a new identification for the “kalmentrin”.

In the fourth chapter we deal with storage **cabinets**; “shidda” and “teva” (chests), and the “migdal”. In most of the sources in the Mishnah and Tosefta, these pieces of furniture are referred to as a unit: “shidda teva and migdal”. First we check the Mishnahs where the “shidda teva and migdal” are brought together. Based on the sources, we have identified these pieces with cabinets from the Roman period. In our discussion we also explain terms related to these pieces such as: “kimron”, “muchni”, “megurot” and “prestakin”.

We see that these cabinets were common in the home of the Mishnaic period. The “migdal” was a relatively late invention and it first appeared in the Hellenistic period. The “migdal” resembles a high standing closet, with doors which open in front. The inner part of the “migdal” is divided into compartments or shelves. Occasionally the “migdal” had an additional drawer beneath the doors which opened separately. The top of the “migdal” was at times flat and at times ornamented with a dome. When the top of the “migdal” was flat, a railing could be built around it on three sides allowing for the placement of vessels. The “migdal” resembles the standing wall closet called ‘armarium’ — cupboard. We have identified the “migdal’s” railing described in Tosefta Kelim¹⁴ with the picture of a cupboard found on a relief decorating a sarcophagus from Ostia.¹⁵

The chests “shidda” and “teva” are older than the “armarium” (cupboard) and their forms have not undergone many changes over the years. They were found in the Egyptian and classical Greek periods and continued to be in use in the Roman period. These chests are rectangular and low and were primarily opened from the top, although sometimes they were opened from the side. At times they had an internal subdivision, a kind of compartment termed “megurot”. Some of the chests had gabled lids, and some flat covers, some with rims, and some without.

In contrast to the “migdal”, these chests, when built without a dome, occasionally served as an additional seat in the house. The rectangular shape of the chests was well suited for storage of cloth and clothing in the Egyptian and Greek periods and later in the Mishnaic period. People’s clothing resembled

¹⁴ Tosefta, M. Zuckerman edition, Jerusalem 1963, p. 587.

¹⁵ Furhmann, Neg. D-DAI-ROM 1938.1165, (Detail) Rom, Thermenmuseum, Sarkophag.

“talithot”, large rectangular pieces of cloth, which could be folded and stored in large rectangular boxes. These boxes were called chests — ‘arca, arcula’.

Throughout our research we have encountered many differences of opinion concerning the identification of specific pieces of furniture. In other instances the suggested identification is incompatible with a halachic ruling in the Mishnah or does not fit the context of a specific text. Therefore we have suggested new identifications for certain items of furniture and their parts which are in keeping with the context of the rabbinic text and with the archaeological research of the period. In so doing we hope we have shed light on the understanding of the text.