Perforated Tripodal Vessels at Iron II Bethsaida-Tzer[1]

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In July, 1997, excavations in and around the newly discovered Iron IIB four-chambered gate complex (Fig. 1) at Bethsaida-Tzer (Level 5) revealed a stepped cultic installation integrated into the outer face of the gate's northern tower, as well as an iconic basalt stela representing a Mesopotamian lunar deity (Fig. 2), which once stood before the *bamah*'s recessed altar.[2] Inside this shallow basalt tray two perforated, tripodal cup-shaped vessels with handles (Fig. 3) were recovered *in situ*, effectively sealed by two large chunks from the base of the shattered stela. A third cup (Fig. 4) was later recovered from Chamber 4, located directly behind the cultic place, on the other side of the roughly twenty-foot thick main wall. Additionally, four diagnostic shards which had been found a few seasons earlier in the vicinity of the *bît hilāni*-style palace Level 5) were recorded as "strainers or possibly incense burners" and may also be of this type.[3] Operating under the assumption that the vessels found at the *bamah ha-sha'ar* served sacerdotal purposes, excavators tentatively identified them as probable incense burners (Fig. 5).[4]

Figure 2.

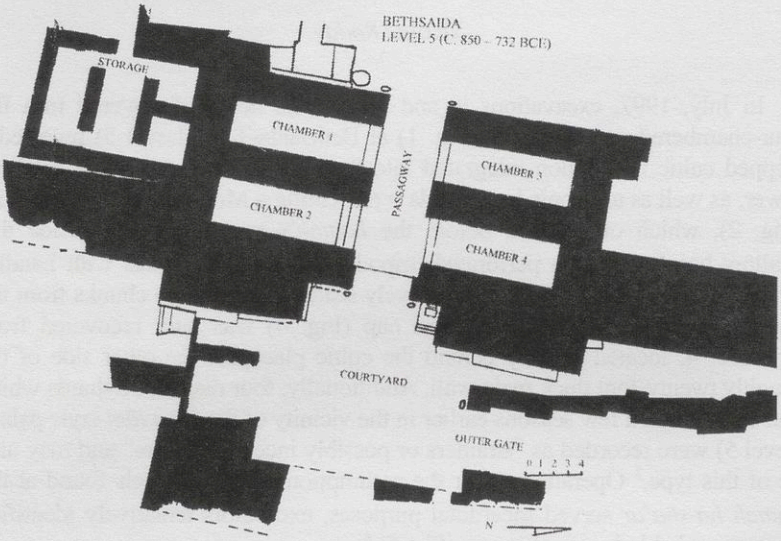
1 A form of this paper was presented at the SBL International Meeting, Vienna, July 24, 2007.

2 Bernett / Keel, Mond 22-44.

3 London / Shuster, Bethsaida 177.

4 Arav, History 20.

Figure 1.



Based on suspicions arising from the fact that neither of the vessels found sealed in the basalt tray showed any evidence of charring,[5] C. Haunton conducted a series of replicative experiments that cast additional doubt on their use as censers, suggesting that the vessels may have been used in libation rituals performed before the stela.[6] More recently, C. Clarke has drawn iconic connections with Mesopotamian lunar deity Nanna / Sin.[7] Building on both of these studies, R. Arav also attempts to argue that libation rituals took place at Bethsaida-Tzer in the context of Mesopotamian religion.[8]

It is not the purpose here either to refute or discount the presence of libation ritual activity at the gate, whether Mesopotamian or otherwise, but rather to: 1) identify the problems involved in identifying these perforated tripodal vessels either as thuribles or libation bowls, and 2) propose a more plausible function for their use. In the absence of the conclusive evidence a simple pollen wash

5 The vessel recovered from Chamber 4 was thoroughly charred inside and out from the conflagration that engulfed the main gate area during Tiglath-Pileser's campaign in 732 BCE, which even melted bricks from the upper story.

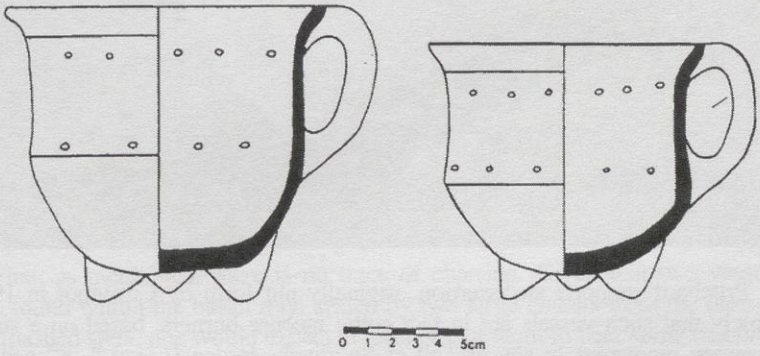
6 Haunton, Archaeology; and Haunton, Tripod Vessel.

7 Derived from personal exchanges in connection with preparing these notes. Clarke's work is ongoing.

8 Arav, Evidence; and Arav, Fresh Water.

would have provided, the present paper argues that the perforated tripodal cups at Bethsaida served an intermediary stage of ritual purpose, holding and dispensing any number of naturally-occurring aromatic herbs and spices for enhancing the aroma of a sacrifice. The case is constructed upon a critical appraisal of the vessel's functional attributes; an appreciation for the restored role of the human sense of smell especially in religious experience; and a cursory examination of examples of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, with the fair assumption that these practices are not altogether unique to Israel but find parallels among its neighboring societies like Geshurite Bethsaida-Tzer.

Fig. 3



Macalister identified a similar vessel from Tell Gezer (1912) as a strainer of "moderately frequent" type. Since that time over a hundred tripod cups, with and without holes, have been found throughout the Jordan Valley region.[9]

Apart from the basic size and shape of the cup, the tripodal base is the feature that consistently prevails and by which its type is identified. The three-footed design, which is also common in larger vessels, is easily explained in that it serves an effective stabilizing function governed by the simple human principle: As many supports as necessary; as few as possible. The variable factors associated with the tripod cup include the arrangement or absence of perforations, the absence or number of handles, as well as the quality of materials, firing, and workmanship. In terms of function, the general tendency has been to identify tripodal cups as incense burners, whether or not they were found in sacred contexts.

9 Pritchard, Use 127.

Figure 4.

Pritchard supports an assertion originally put forth by Crowfoot in 1940, namely that such vessels are in fact cultic incense burners, based on a single specimen recovered *in situ* at Tell es-Sa'idiyeh, Jordan (Level 4, 8th century BCE), surrounded by charcoal and ashes and lying atop an altar with similar vessels discovered nearby.[10] But a problem arises in identifying all such vessels as cultic incense burners, for association of these vessels with ritual activity fails to take into account specimens drawn from other contexts, especially domestic and funerary, ignoring the fact that incense was used widely for reasons other than cultic. To be sure, the use of incense in the Near East, and so censers, has ranged from curing disease to purifying the air; from marking rites of passage from birth to death, to warding off insects; and from sealing oaths to fumigating hair.[11] While it is almost certainly the case that Pritchard's specimen from Tell es-Sa'idiyeh is best interpreted as a cultic incense burner, along with similar vessels exhibiting charring and found in apparent cultic contexts, one cannot conclude that all perforated tripodal vessels were used as such. In any case, serious problems stand in the way of interpreting the Bethsaida vessels as burners.

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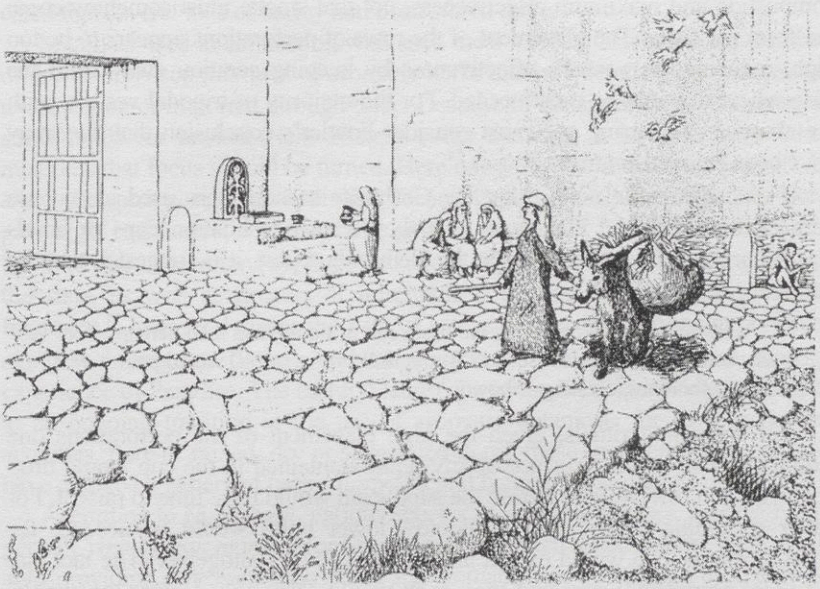
10 Pritchard, Use 129-130.

11 Fowler, BA Guide 184.

Fig. 5



First, as mentioned, there is no trace of charring. Given that two vessels were found within the basalt tray, sealed by two large chunks from the base of the smashed stela, one would expect at least one of them to bear some carbonic residue from use.[12] Moreover, this peculiarity is not limited to Bethsaida. The generalization advanced by Pritchard and others is unsupported by the material record, for many of the so-called incense burners found at various sites in Palestine show no evidence of combustion whatsoever.[13] Thus it is not simply that the Bethsaida vessels show no signs of charring; rather, it appears to be the norm.

Second, replicative experiments carried out by Haunton demonstrated that the size, number, and placement of the perforations precludes effective use of the Bethsaida vessels as incense burners, largely on the basis that without lids (there is nothing to indicate these vessels were lidded), the updraft prevents smoke from escaping from the holes (see note 3/6). This writer agrees with Haunton's conclusion, but for different reasons. The fact that smoke does not exit the perforations fails to argue against the identification of these vessels as

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[12] The fragmented specimen found in Chamber 4 was completely charred inside and out, like everything else affected by the conflagration inside the main gate; thus it is of no use for this study.

[13] Fowler, BA Guide 185.

thuribles; for it is the case that air must be drawn into the censer for proper combustion and maximum effectiveness, not that smoke must somehow come out from the sides. The placement of the rows of perforations appears to be too high, reducing the vessel's effectiveness by keeping aeration away from the base where it would be most needed. For the majority of tripodal vessels, with the absence of charring one must consider Fowler's conclusion that they may have been enjoyed a variety of uses.[14]

If one rejects the notion that the Geshurite vessels were used as incense burners, one finds the hypothesis that they served as libation cups or bowls equally problematic. According to the Bethsaida report, it is suggested that the vessels

> ... were presumably dipped in the basin full of liquid, and then perhaps were elevated and the liquids (such as water, milk, wine, or oil) would pour out of the perforations, creating a shower.[15]

For sprinkling rituals, given the high placement of the perforations one would suppose that the surface of any liquid contained in the cup would drop below the top row of holes before the supplicant would have time to raise it. For either sprinkling or straining of liquids, lower holes would be needed; for pouring rituals, one would expect an absence of holes altogether. The fact that the holes completely surround the vessel would seemingly require the supplicant to get wet, assuming that the libation can be lifted rapidly enough. If the ritually prescribed method involves simple pouring, then a number of holes, roughly the back two-thirds of each row, suddenly become useless. The perforations on the vessel are too high to make any ceremonial pouring, dribbling, or sprinkling practical. Having said all of this, on the basis of Haunton's experimental archaeology the point becomes moot, for the gravitational influence upon liquid as thin as watered-down milk was not sufficient to draw it freely through the perforations. (see note 3/6) Instead, the liquid dribbles weakly down the sides of the vessel until the surface of the fluid drops below the perforations and runs down and off the feet of the cup. In sum, the perforations appear to be superfluous for use in any type of libation ritual. There is no reason to suppose that these vessels were intended to hold or catch any liquid at all.

Ostensibly, the roughly 100 cm x 60 cm basalt tray before the stela could be used to collect liquids poured above it, but at roughly 10 cm deep it would hardly have been practical for scooping out liquid, thus requiring an additional reservoir. The overall design seems better suited as a kind of holding tray for the collection of dry materials, grain most likely, perhaps enhanced with spices and heaped as a meal offering in homage to the deity before which it lay. Excava-

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[14] Fowler, BA Guide 186.

[15] Arav, History 20.

tions in Chamber 3, near the locus where the cultic artifacts were found, indicated that several tons of barley had been stored there.

Materials used in connection with such meal offerings included any number of dry or oil-based mixtures of aromatic herbs and powdered spices indigenous to the region or imported through trade. Because of the significance the sense of smell holds for ancient Near Eastern cultic contexts, it is upon these other materials that focus should be turned. Here one finds that the sense of smell can allow the spirit access to the divine. Second Enoch (MS J) states that the Lord gave sight to the eyes, while smell he gave to the spirit.[16] Fourth Ezra states that the third day of creation saw fruit in endless abundance and of varied appeal to the taste, as well as flowers of inimitable color and odors of inexpressible fragrance.[17] In several places the Tree of Life is said to offer a fragrant perfume, along with fragrant flowers and sweet grasses, also providing the sensory experience of Paradise. The cultural landscape of the Near East today witnesses to an ongoing tradition in the use of aromatic botanicals for various human activities. Pure or mixed, dry or suspended in oil, these specimens for centuries have enjoyed a variety of uses – domestic and medicinal, as well as cultic.

According to M. Zohary, various species of aromatic grasses, especially the genus *Cymbopogon martinii* (or Sweet Calamus) mentioned earlier, were available, providing a pleasant atmosphere and aromatic oils.[18] Although used domestically in perfume, cosmetics, and medicinal tonics, *qaneh*, as this grass is known in Hebrew, served cultic purposes throughout the region (e.g., Jer 6.20).

Several other plants and plant by-products were used in non-cultic and cultic contexts throughout the Levant. Chief among them *Boswellia sacra*, the biblical *leboneh*, commonly known as frankincense, which is a gum-resin used medicinally, mixed with oil and other spices to create a strong perfume, and burned as incense for cultic use (see Neh 13.5).[19] *Ladanum* (*Cistus incanus*), also known as *labdanum* (biblical *loth*), is sometimes erroneously translated, along with *mor*, as myrrh (*Balsamodendron Myrrh*) in the biblical text. This distinctive brownish resin is used medicinally around the Mediterranean basin; its distinctively pungent odor is found in perfumes and it is still used today in some mixtures of incense used in the Eastern Orthodox Church.[20] Other perfumes, for which the Hebrew Bible possesses a specialized vocabulary (e.g., *roqeah*, *raqah*, *qetoret*, *bosem*), were derived from a host of herbs and spices, many of which were also used in anointing oil (Exod 25:5-7; 35:8), as well as the

16 Anderson, 2 Enoch 150.

17 Metzger, Ezra 536.

18 Zohary, Plants 196.

19 Zohary, Plants 197.

20 Zohary, Plants 194.

making of incense (Exod 30:34-35).[21] The priestly Chronicler's account of the death of King Asa provides a rare biblical insight into the use of aromatics in funerary rituals.

> They buried him in the tomb that he had hewn out for himself in the city of David. They laid him on a bier that had been filled with various kinds of spices prepared by the perfumer's art; and they made a great fire in his honor" (2Chr 16.14, NRSV).

The perfumer's art was a specialized profession (*maaseh roqeah*) and the mixing of aromatics in various amounts a specialized science. Fowler observes that to use the term *incense* indiscriminately, with its cultic overtones, conceals the variety of use to which various spices and the like were put to use.[22]

Haran's thorough analysis of the use of incense in ancient Israelite ritual as described in the Hebrew Bible identifies three uses of aromatic herbs and spices: 1) the *qetoret hasammim*, described in the Priestly tradition as a type of *tamid* offering in which altar incense is burnt at regular intervals inside the sanctuary on the special altar of gold; 2) a separate offering, identified in the Priestly source by the noun *qetoret* and referring to a powder made up of mixed spices, usually *leboneh*, i.e., frankincense, but also *qaneh hatov*, the Sweet Calamus grass mentioned earlier; and, 3) the use of spices as a powdered aromatic supplement to the meal offering, usually added as part of the "memorial portion" (*'azekah*) of the *minhah* and thus eventually offered upon an altar.[23] It is the last of these that seems best to satisfy the practical demands of the Bethsaida tripodal design, suggesting that an offering of dry goods (e.g., flour, spice additives, or a mixture of both) would have been added to the regular meal offering, just as at other altars priests would shake powdered aromatics over burnt animal offerings, blending their aroma with the burning flesh in order to create a pleasing odor.

In sum, the ritual use of powdered spices in the religious practices in the region, seems to find its complement in the perforated tripodal cup. The overall design of the vessel suggests that the shaking, sprinkling, and/or pouring of a dry, pulverized mixture of aromatic spices, and possibly flour, would be its most plausible function, strongly supported by experimental archaeology in ways not satisfied by any previously suggested. This conclusion awaits support from palynological analysis, a method which for various reasons – partly econo-

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21 Haran, Uses 113-129.

22 Fowler, BA Guide 186.

23 Haran, Uses 114-129.

mical, partly attitudinal – is largely under-utilized by archaeology.[24] Until then, reasoned speculation such as this will have to suffice.

Summary

During the past few years a debate has ensued over the possible function of perforated, tripodal cups found *in situ* at the cultic installation at the city gate of Iron II Bethsaida (Stratum 5). Discussion has been polarized over whether the vessels served as thuribles (i.e., incense burners) or as libation cups. The present paper argues on a number of counts that neither side is correct. In the absence of the conclusive evidence a simple pollen wash would have provided, the paper argues that the perforated tripodal cups at Bethsaida served an intermediary stage of ritual purpose in holding and dispensing any number of naturally-occurring aromatic herbs and spices for enhancing the aroma of meal offerings at the gate.

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten Jahren ist eine Debatte über die mögliche Funktion eines durchlöcherten dreibeinigen Bechers entbrannt, der *in situ* in einer Kultstätte beim Stadttor Iron II Bethsaida (Stratum 5) gefunden wurde. Zur Diskussion stehen vor allem die Nutzung entweder als *thuribles*, d.h. Weihrauchbecher, oder als Trankopferbecher. Die vorliegende Arbeit zeigt mit mehreren Argumenten auf, warum keiner der beiden Standpunkte korrekt ist. Angesichts des Mangels an schlüssigen Beweisen, die etwa eine einfache Pollenanalyse erbracht hätte, argumentiert die vorliegende Arbeit, dass der durchlöcherte dreibeinige Becher für eine rituelle Zwischenstufe genutzt wurde. In ihm wurde eine Vielzahl von Kräutern und Gewürzen aufbewahrt, mit dem die am Stadttor angebotenen Mahlzeiten gewürzt wurden.

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[24] I am in agreement with Schoenwetter / Geyer that the "failure to collect and curate pollen samples [...] amounts to unethical destruction of a form of archaeological data," Implications 63.

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