

A Religious Revolution Devours Its Children: The Iconography of the Persian-Period Cuboid Incense Burners*

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Cultic Objects Ready to be Removed? Incense Burners according to E. Stern

In his famous and learned study, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period*, E. Stern writes the following concerning cuboid incense burners:

The second [most] widespread cult object in Palestine in the Persian period is the incense altar. The altars in this period differ in shape from the usual altars of the Israelite period which were larger and horned. In the Persian period they have the form of a small chest of limestone standing on four legs. This change [...] was the result of the influence of a foreign cult [...]. (STERN 1982: 182; 2001: 287)

Two aspects of this statement are remarkable: (1) that the cuboid incense burners are interpreted as *cultic* objects without any reservation; and (2) that they are linked to *foreign* cultic influence. This influence is further specified as Assyrian and dated to the end of the Iron Age: “It seems, therefore, that these altars whether of limestone or clay, were introduced to Palestine under the influence of the Assyrian cult, and remained in use here until the Hellenistic period” (STERN 2001: 513). Paralleling the cuboid incense burners with terracotta figurines, STERN (1982) considered that in the Persian period, both originated in Phoenician workshops. After excluding a chronological relationship between the cuboid incense burners and their parallels from South Arabia, STERN (1982: 194) stressed their Phoenician manufacture based on the following arguments:

(1) their discovery in the Phoenician temple at Makmish; (2) their discovery at Shiqmona in a workshop for spices located in a room of the fort which also contained store jars with Phoenician inscriptions; (3) the specialization of Phoenician craftsmen in producing cult objects and small art objects in general; and (4) the unique composite style represented on the altars, which is the distinctive characteristic of Phoenician art. Our conclusion is accordingly identical with the one reached regarding the figurines and it seems that the two main types of cult objects prevalent in Palestine in the Persian period were derived from a single source: the Phoenician workshops.

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By comparing figurines and the cuboid incense burners, the latter are implicitly integrated into Stern's argument for a "religious revolution" (STERN 2006)¹ that is predominantly based on the striking distribution patterns of terracotta figurines. While in Iron Age Judah hundreds of Judean (pillar) figurines are attested, Stern states for the Persian period:

From now on all the figurines are only found in areas outside the region settled by the returning Judean exiles – in Indumea (sic), Philistia, Phoenicia and Galilee – that is, in those parts of the country which are still dominated by pagans. At the same time, in the areas of the country occupied by Jews, not a single cultic figurine has been found! (STERN 2010: 401)

Stern explains this absence of figurines in Yehud by assuming a purification of all pagan-popular elements during the Persian period, which finally led to the consolidation of Jewish monotheism (cf. STERN 2006; 2010). This argument, in particular the bold statement "not a single figurine," which he repeats several times, has received a lot of attention in recent research (SCHMITT 2003; 2014; CORNELIUS 2011; 2014; DE HULSTER 2012).

By contrast, the comparison of the origin and distribution of Persian-era figurines with cuboid incense burners has not been analyzed thus far. Although Stern does not include the cuboid incense burners explicitly in his alleged religious revolution, they implicitly become part of the evidence for it by being placed parallel to the figurines. Therefore, it is appropriate to reevaluate the cuboid incense burners in terms of their distribution, function, and interpretation. Since there is only one example within Yehud in the Persian period (see map fig. 1), at first sight, the distribution of the cuboid incense burners seems to correspond with the distribution patterns of the figurines during that time. Stern understands this as a deliberate change motivated by religious concerns, because outside Yehud there were pagan cults, while Yehud was strictly "orthodox":

we can state that, in contrast to the cult prevailing among the inhabitants of Judah at the end of the period of the monarchy, the latest archaeological evidence clearly indicates that all the pagan-popular elements had undergone purification during the Persian Period (and also in the Samaritan cult that replaced the Israelite). (STERN 2006: 204)

Stern associates this deliberate "purification" with the rise of monotheism: "Apparently, pagan cults ceased to exist among the Judeans, who purified their worship, and Jewish monotheism was at last consolidated. And from this newly established monotheism also sprang the Samaritans" (STERN 2010: 401). Are these conclusions applicable, by implication, to the cuboid incense burners from the Persian period?

The present paper will not go deeper into the appropriateness of Stern's framing hypothesis (see FREVEL/PYSCHNY 2014) or the question of monotheism in the Persian period (see FREVEL 2013). Instead, it will focus on evaluating Stern's proposals concerning the origins and functions of the cuboid incense burners, especially on their association with a *foreign cult*. We begin with remarks about their distribution and provenance, their find contexts and functions, and then move to aspects of their decoration. Finally, we will discuss the religious affinity of the iconographic program and reassess

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of Stern's hypothesis see FREVEL/PYSCHNY/CORNELIUS 2014.

Stern's claim that the objects show, as quoted above, "the distinctive characteristic of Phoenician art".

Find Distribution and Provenance

More than 300 cuboid incense burners are known from Israel/Palestine dating mostly to the Persian period. Within this collection, the finds from three depositories in Lachish (217 items; TUFNELL 1953: 383) play a special role. Almost all of them are fragmentary, comprising at times just chips of limestone. Since the fragments could not be reassembled into complete exemplars, an intentional destruction or an interpretation as votives is highly unlikely. As there is no conclusive connection to the "solar shrine," as was argued by MARTIN (2007: 183), the depositories should not be taken as *favissae*. Thus, an explanatory approach beyond an assignment to the local cult practice may be more rewarding. Although no indicative industrial zone was found in the vicinity of the depositories, they may rather be associated with a stone carver's workshop. Compared to the other cuboid incense burners, the Lachish exemplars differ typologically, since their height is often much taller than their width, but on the other hand, they resemble each other in material and iconographic design (FREVEL/PYSCHNY 2014).

Assigning the Lachish finds to a special group, the remaining chest-shaped objects form a mostly homogenous group. The standard measurements of the small cuboid burners vary slightly but tend to be about 10 cm in length, width, and height. They are made predominantly of (local) limestone; only a few examples are made of basalt or clay. The cuboid incense burners usually sit on four legs located at the corners of the base, though some examples have a flat base. Often, the top is hollowed out to different degrees and in various shapes; commonly, traces of burning or soot are found inside the basins. Decorations that are carved or less often painted on the sides of the cube vary from simple geometric to figurative design.

The regional distribution of the cuboid incense burners is remarkable (see map fig. 1): only three examples are attested in the north, one each from Shiqmona, Beth-Shean, and Sepphoris. Just two examples from Samaria can be added for the heartland of the province of Samaria. Transjordan lacks significant evidence apart from a single example from Tell es-Sa'idiyeh and three finds from Tell Jalul. The only exemplar that was uncovered inside the commonly assumed borders of Yehud is a specimen from Mizpah. A higher density of finds is attested in the coastal plain, with four cuboid incense burners from Makmish, six examples from Tel Michal, a single find from Ashdod, and ten specimens from Tel Abu Salima. All other finds are concentrated in the Shephelah or in the fringes of the Judean hills: one from Tell el-Ḥesī, four from Tell Ḥalif, one from Tel Sera', and two from Tell el-Far'ah (South). Significantly, larger numbers of cuboid incense burners were uncovered in two locations in the province of Ashdod: twelve specimens in Gezer and twenty-five examples in Tell Jemmeh.

Though dating these objects is often difficult due to methodological and stratigraphical reasons, most of the cuboid incense burners from Israel/Palestine appear to date to the Persian and the early Hellenistic periods. Some additional, slightly larger but generally similar specimens date to the Byzantine period (RAHMANI 1980; for the

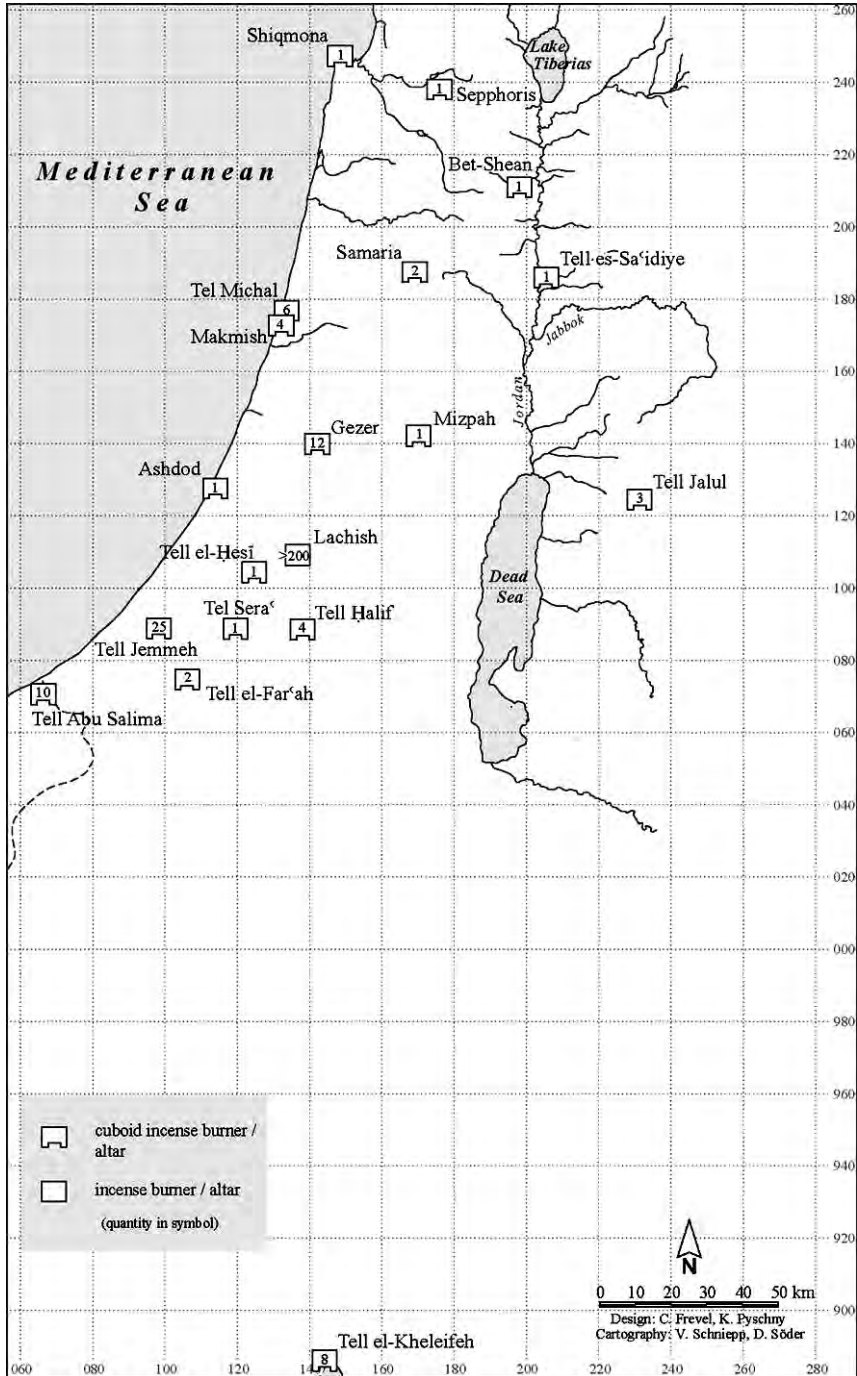


Figure 1: Distribution of Incense Burners

Arabian peninsula LE MAGUER 2011; 2014). Nevertheless, evidence indicates that these objects were introduced into the area already by the end of the Iron Age. Although Stern stresses a discontinuity between the cuboid incense burners and the horned altars that predominated during the preceding Iron Age, a close look at the evidence reveals certain continuity.

The corpus of Iron Age altars includes 92 altars in total: 35 with horns, 29 miniature altars, and 28 without horns. Focusing on their measurements, these altars can be divided into two subgroups. The majority, namely 63 altars (35 with and 28 without horns), are considerably larger than the cuboid incense burners from the Persian period, since they vary in height from 11 to 166 cm. They stem from Philistine and coastal sites (25), from north Israel/Palestine (19), from south Israel/Palestine (9), from Transjordan (7), and from Judah (3).² The second group, which appears especially at the end of the Iron Age II, consists of 29 miniature altars/incense burners that generally are not higher than 10 cm, just the standard size of the Persian cuboid altars. These miniature altars come from south Israel/Palestine (19), from Transjordan (8), and from Judah (2). A significant number are attested in Khirbet el-Mudeina (8), Tell es-Seba' (7) and in Ēn Ḥaṣeva (6), while Ḥorvat Qitmit (1), Bozra (1), Aroer (2), and Kadesh-Barnea (2) have provided just a few exemplars (FREVEL/PYSCHNY 2014).

On this basis, it becomes clear that the Iron Age was characterized by a plurality of altar-types that cannot have resulted from a chronological or geographical linear development; however, regional tendencies are distinguishable. The altars without horns show the widest regional distribution, being attested in northern and southern Israel/Palestine, in the coastal plain, as well as in Transjordan. Horned altars are restricted to northern Israel/Palestine and the coastal plain, while the miniature altars are limited to the south of Israel/Palestine.³ The marginal number of altars/incense burners in Judah in the Iron Age is remarkable. The absence of these objects in the material culture of the later province of Yehud is not, therefore, a unique characteristic of the Persian period but already was the situation in the Iron Age. The lack of distribution in the region of Judah/Yehud in both periods is to be explained by its economic situation rather than by religious factors. While Philistia and Israel could benefit from the new trade routes and political and economic relations with the Arab tribes established during the "*Pax Assyriaca*" in the 7th century BCE, Judah could not to the same degree.

In contrast to the typological discontinuity stressed by Stern, we highlight typological continuity pointing to (1) the plurality and simultaneity of altar-types at the end of the Iron Age and (2) the fact that the earliest attested cuboid incense burners derive from Transjordan and the south of Israel/Palestine at the end of the Iron Age, being contemporaneous with the latest attested horned altars. The plurality and simultaneity of different altar-types can be illustrated by looking at the typology of the altars from a few different sites. At Philistine Ekron, 17 horned altars and 2 examples without horns

² This geographical distribution classifies the (cuboid) incense burners according to regional areas. The boundaries drawn here are geographical and not historical in nature.

³ The distribution pattern and the small number of horned altars from the core region of Judah provides a significant challenge to the proposal of ZWICKEL 2007 to identify some of the incense equipment on seals of the 7th and 6th century BCE from Judah as representations of the horned altars.

have been found in stratum IB, which was destroyed in 605 or 602 BCE (GITIN 1989; 1992; 2002; 2012). The types of altars at Ekron are far from homogenous. They include block-, shaft- and round-altars in nearly equal numbers. The measurements of these types vary widely, from 11–32 cm. These altars are much smaller than the older parallels from Megiddo or Arad, for example; thus, a tendency toward miniaturization and portability is apparent already at Ekron at the end of the 7th century BCE.

The plurality of altar forms is strengthened by the finds from Ashkelon (GITIN 2009), where three specimens from the 7th century BCE were found, measuring between 18–45 cm in height. One of them is of a horned type; the two others are in a shaft shape without horns. While two exemplars were found in secondary use in walls, one exemplar was found *in situ* on a collapsed roof of a building. Insofar as the cuboid incense burners are miniatures of the horned altars, a typological continuity can be assumed: “Coming at the very end of the four-horned altar sequence in the late Iron Age, these small, portable altars may have adumbrated the predominant use of portable altars in the form of small limestone chests with four legs in the sixth century B.C.E.” (GITIN 2009: 133).

The coexistence of different altar-types at the end of the Iron Age is also attested at Khirbet el-Mudeina in Jordan (DAVIAU 2007: 125–47) and Tell es-Seba'. The sixteen altars found at Khirbet el-Mudeina vary extremely in shape and form (shaft-altar, cubic altars, and miniature altars). Of eight miniature altars, none of which was higher than 10 cm, five examples are cuboid/square in shape and qualify, therefore, as the earliest known examples of cuboid incense burners from Israel/Palestine. They are assigned to the latest phase of Iron Age occupation in Khirbet el-Mudeina, dating to the 7th century BCE, since several have been found in debris layers above the latest road surface (DAVIAU 2007: 138–39). At Tell es-Seba' stratum II, eight altars without horns – six made of limestone and two of basalt – and seven cuboid incense burners were found in public buildings and private dwellings (SINGER-AVITZ 2011; ZIFFER forthcoming⁴). These examples have been found in comparable find contexts to the altars from Ekron, which stem predominantly from industrial, domestic, elite and public zones (GITIN 1989: 60*) and precisely not from cultic contexts. On this basis, and given the fact that the specimens from Tell es-Seba' have been found in the same stratum as other altar-types, the finds from both sites strengthen the continuity of Iron Age altars and cuboid incense burners typologically and functionally.

The cuboid incense burners were not a novelty of the Persian period but had been introduced already at the end of the Iron Age. In addition to the aforementioned examples from Ekron (7th century BCE), Khirbet el-Mudeina (7th century BCE) and Tell es-Seba' (late 8th century BCE), several more have been discovered in excavated levels mostly dating to the end of the 8th century, the late 7th century, or the beginning of the 6th century (e.g. Aroer [end of the 8th century BCE], Kadash-Barnea [8th/7th century BCE], 'En Ḥaṣeva [7th/6th century BCE]). Like the seven miniaturized altars from Tell es-Seba', the incense burners from 'En Ḥaṣeva stand out quantitatively and typologically. The latter do not constitute a homogenous group but vary in measurement, style, and

⁴ We thank Irit Ziffer for providing the manuscript, which she is preparing for the forthcoming excavation report.

decoration (BEN-ARIEH 2011: 159–63). The plurality and simultaneity of different altar-types at the end of the Iron Age contradicts Stern’s claim of strict discontinuity between the Iron Age altars and the cuboid incense burners from the Persian period. The transition from horned and unhorned altars towards cuboid incense burners is fluid. A seamless functional continuity cannot be proven but seems particularly likely in the case of miniaturized altars from Iron Age IIB–C and the cuboid incense burners from Iron Age III.

The distribution pattern and the suggested inclusion of the cuboid incense burners in a wider development that has a tendency toward miniaturization have consequences for the alleged provenance and assignment of this find category. Assyrian influence remains possible only for the development in the Iron Age II, but the horned altars in Israel and Judah, i.e. in Dan, Megiddo, Tel Rehov (clay), Shechem, Lachish, Arad, and Tell es-Seba’, cannot all be attributed to any foreign cult. Rather than attesting to Assyrian influence, these objects belong to the *indigenous* cult in Judah and Israel. If the miniaturized cuboid incense burners are either contemporaneous with or in continuity with the horned altars, and if they stem from similar contexts, their “foreignness” becomes doubtful, too.

Although Stern does not employ the biblical references to incense rituals in his argument, 2 Kgs 23:12; Jer 19:13; 32:29 and Zeph 1:5 relate incense rituals on rooftops to the host of heaven (צבא השמים) and to Baal (HUTTON 2013). Beyond certain aspects of polemics, one may suppose an astral cultic practice associated with divination (IRSIGLER 2002: 110–13). The presence of Neo-Assyrian divinatory practice in the Jerusalemite temple is corroborated by 2 Kgs 23:11 (FREVEL 2006: 272).

But the age-old question as to whether there is clear evidence for the presence of “pure” Assyrian cults is still undecided. Although a broader impact of Neo-Assyrian “religious” imperialism or of Assyrian cults imposed on the client state of Judah cannot be sustained, the discussion has never neglected Assyrian influence (MORROW 2013: 54–60). However, the ability to identify the presence of Assyrian cultic practice fails even in the case of Ekron, as W. S. MORROW (2013) has convincingly shown. Thus, the abundance of altars in Ekron should not be connected with Assyrian presence at the site or their interest in the olive oil industry of the Shephelah. The emergence of the altars in the southern Levant cannot be assigned convincingly to the influence of Assyrian cult. Since there is no compelling evidence to distinguish between the function and attribution of horned altars and those of the small-scale altars, one should not differentiate between objects used in Yahwistic cultic practice (Arad, Megiddo etc.) and objects used in allegedly foreign practice. Nothing except the supposed connection between the biblical text and (parts of the) archaeological evidence makes the relation feasible. Although it cannot be excluded that altars may have been used in astral and Assyrianized cultic practice in Judah in the 7th century BCE, this is not the pivotal clue for the interpretation of all altars from the 7th and 6th centuries.

The general assignment of these altars to Phoenician workshops is also questionable, and we need to return to the four parts of Stern’s argument quoted above. The two examples from what might or might not have been a sanctuary at Makmish (see below) cannot be used to argue that all altars or incense burners originated in the Phoenician realm or had a cultic function. Even if these specimens were found in a Phoenician

context, this does not prove the *provenance* of all cuboid incense burners to be “Phoenician”. Analysis of the source of the stone used to make the exemplars from Tel Ḥalif and the evidence of stone chip residue from Lachish corroborate their local production. Similarly, the finding of Phoenician inscriptions on jars near an incense burner at the Phoenician site of Shiqmona does not make all cuboid incense altars “Phoenician” in origin. Finally, that Phoenician craftsmen were specialized in producing (even) cult objects is unquestionable (see NUNN 2000), but this cannot be the basis for associating the origin of the cuboid incense burners with Phoenician workshops more generally. The only point among the four advanced by Stern that might support a Phoenician origin is that the particular decoration is in a composite Phoenician style. This will be discussed below in detail and its cogency evaluated there.

In sum: The transition between altar-types used in Iron Age II and the cuboid incense burners used in the Persian era is much more fluid than attested. Although there is no direct continuity at a single location, a general tendency toward miniaturization has been determined, and horned altars and small cuboid incense burners have been found in comparable stratigraphical horizons in different locations in the late Iron Age. The proposed provenance from Phoenician workshops cannot be proven. The distribution pattern does not provide supporting evidence for Stern’s claim that the lack of these cuboid incense burners in Judah/Yehud constitutes evidence that a “religious revolution” took place there in the transition from the (Neo-)Babylonian to the Persian period. The absence of altars or incense burners in the material culture of Judah/Yehud is not a unique characteristic of the Persian period; it was already the case in Iron Age II. This reveals the need to look for another influencing factor within Judah’s socio-historical context to account for this anomaly. We will suggest that an economic interpretation provides a more compelling explanation than a religious one.

The distribution patterns of the cuboid incense burners are in line with the increased importance of the South Arabian incense trade (GITIN 1992: 46*). Since traces of burning or soot are attested on most examples, it can be concluded that the cuboid incense burners were used for burning small quantities of combustible substances. The Aramaic inscription on a stone altar from Lachish in the Persian period, for example, specifies the burnt substance as *lbnt* (*lěbonta*), ‘frankincense’ (LEMAIRE 1974). The variety of possible aromatic substances that could be burnt to produce a pleasant scent is wide (FREVEL/PYSCHNY 2014) and not easily narrowed, due to the lack of chemical analysis of the combustion residues. Nevertheless, in light of the concentration of the early examples of miniature cuboid altars in areas along and near the terminus of the Arabian spice trade routes established in the 7th century BCE, their linkage to the Arabian trade of perfumes and aromas becomes plausible, even if it cannot yet be fully verified (O’DWYER SHEA 1983; FINKELSTEIN 1992; DAVIAU 2007).

The new availability of incense and other aromas surely would have supported a manifold spectrum of use, which corresponds with the large number of incense burners that have been found, their regional spread, and their various find contexts. The use patterns of the altars and incense burners remain an unresolved issue, but it is likely that the spectrum went beyond burning incense in temple rituals or in cultic practice. It may also be possible to assume a change over time, reflected in the tendency toward miniaturization. As the residue analysis of the buried, larger altars in the sanctuary of

Arad has indicated, fruits, flour, cereals, animal fat, and pieces of meat were burnt as offerings on larger altars used in a cultic context (AHARONI 1967: 247; HERZOG 2002: 64; ZWICKEL 1990: 124–28); whether such altars were used for any secular purposes is unclear. The “evidence for burning on the altars themselves may be lacking, and where it is present, a floral/vegetal incense rather than resin was used” (DAVIAU 2007: 143).

The tendency toward miniaturization, which can be observed at the end of the Iron Age, might particularly relate to the more restricted function of burning small quantities of spices, incense, frankincense, or other valuable aromatic substances. This includes miniaturized altars that show no signs of burning, like the eight small specimens from Khirbet el-Mudeina. “In view of their small size, these objects may indeed be related to the use of an expensive, high status commodity such as frankincense, although there is no evidence of burning on these altars” (DAVIAU 2007: 139). For the exemplars that contain soot, no chemical analysis has yet been undertaken to prove this assumption.

Find Contexts and Function

The find contexts of the cuboid incense burners in the Persian period are varied. They include private dwellings, public buildings, tombs, caves, and depositories. A valid and reliable analysis of the find contexts is complicated by the fact that only about 25 % of the cuboid incense burners originate from a stratified or defined context. Most of the examples stem from public buildings (e.g. Samaria, Mizpah, Tell es-Sa‘idiye, and Tell Jemmeh), private dwellings (e.g. Tel Michal and Tell Jalul), or extended domestic contexts like tombs (e.g. Gezer and Tell el-Far‘ah South). Even if we cannot compare the find contexts of the Persian-period cuboid incense burners and the Iron Age altars here in detail, the lack of cultic context is obvious.

Although the evidence is far from clear, only a few examples of cuboid incense burner can be linked to a cultic context at a sanctuary in the Persian period: two of the four incense burners found at Makmish were located in an annex of the sanctuary (AVIGAD 1960: 92, 95), but explicit evidence for their use in cultic worship is quite scarce. Even if one accepts the interpretation of the archaeological structures as a “sanctuary” – which is by no means clear – the context does not provide enough information to say definitively that these objects were used in cultic service rather than being deposited as votives, as suggested by N. AVIGAD (1960: 95; 1993: 934). Two of the four are quite peculiar, with a crouching lion and a monkey (?) attached as supports on one side. As already noted, the Phoenician context of these four specimens does not prove that the provenance of all cuboid incense burners was “Phoenician,” nor that all were used cultically.

Although it must be acknowledged that to date, remains of any cultic structures or temple dating to the Persian period are few at all (KAMLAH 1999), a difference from Iron Age contexts is obvious: the evidence of the Iron Age clearly attests to the use of altars/burners in cultic structures. This is unambiguously true for the two altars of the sanctuary of Arad, although the altars were not found *in situ*. In addition, two shaft altars and the candelabrum-like altar were found in the inner sanctuary at Khirbet el-Mudeina (temple 149), while surprisingly, cultic structures at Wādi ath-Thamad (WT-13) and cultic assemblages at Khirbet ‘Atarus did not yield stone altars (DAVIAU 2007:

128). Seven of the seventeen horned altars from Ekron were found in the temple's auxiliary buildings (GITIN 2012: 229), while others were found in industrial and domestic areas, as was the case also at Khirbet el-Mudeina (GITIN 1989: 60*; 2002: 104–6; 2012: 229). The six small altars from 'Ēn Ḥaṣeva were found in a cultic *favissa* within the sanctuary precinct (BEN-ARIEH 2011: 107). The specimen from Ḥorvat Qitmit was also associated with the cultic complex. Furthermore, the find contexts of the exemplars from Megiddo and Dan might link them with cultic activity.

On the basis of this earlier evidence, one might be inclined to assume a certain cultic use of the cuboid incense burners in the Persian period, too. But as already indicated, these were not found in explicit cultic contexts. It appears unwise to insist that the sole function of the cuboid burners was cultic. It needs to be noted that they are poorly made, with very crude drawings incised on their sides in many instances. Although this is not a compelling argument, if one takes into account, for instance, the Yavneh shrine models or the pinched nose figurines from Iron Age IIB or the one from 'Ēn Ḥaṣeva in Iron IIC, one would tend to expect better quality luxury goods to have been used when worshipping the gods. Certainly, those found in domestic settings could arguably have been used in household rituals to petition family gods or in healing rituals, where bitter aromatics could have been burned to drive out evil spirits from a house or an individual. Others may have been used to serve a possible deodorizing or insect-averting function. Besides the assumed cultic use of the incense burners, a more or less secular function for the objects also needs to be considered. A sole purpose of offering incense to make a pleasant odor for a deity or perhaps to send a prayer toward heaven or to seek aid in a healing ritual cannot be asserted. A plausible case could be made for their use in domestic settings to improve the smell inside houses, where ventilation conditions were far from ideal or of persons who bathed infrequently, and the rising, pungent smoke might have driven away insects like mosquitos, possibly preventing disease (SINGER-AVITZ 2011: 294). In addition, incense or aromatic smoke could have been used as a fumigant for clothing or bedding.

Thus, hygienic/sanitary and cosmetic uses are equally possible functions in addition to, or instead of, cultic use (FREVEL/PYSCHNY 2014). None can be excluded as such. It needs to be noted that in sanctuary and shrine settings, one cannot exclude more practical deodorizing and insect-repelling functions for incense alongside usage in cultic rituals. The prescription forbidding the use of YHWH'S special incense blend for any other purposes than honoring the deity (Exod 30:37) tends to indicate that incense was used in secular contexts in addition to cultic ones. Thus, it is best not to limit the use of the small cuboid burners to a single purpose but to allow for a range of uses in the sacred and secular realms.

In sum: It is unfortunate that not enough chemical analyses have been done on residue samples from cuboid burners to determine which substances had been burnt or carbonized on them. The restriction of the use of the cuboid incense burners to a single primary purpose is unlikely in either the late Iron Age, when they make their first appearance in the southern Levant, or in the same region in the Persian period. It is likely that aromatic or even acrid smoke was produced by burning one or more substances on them in religious and non-religious contexts, for hygienic/sanitary and therapeutic purposes, cosmetic purposes, and in various cultic rituals to petition deities or engage in

certain healing rituals. However, the explicitness of cultic and ritual usage is reduced in the Persian period in comparison with Iron Age practice. Stern's attempt to restrict them to cultic use is misguided.

The Iconography of the Cuboid Incense Burners

Based on their decoration, the cuboid incense burners fall into three different types: (1) examples decorated with geometric and figural designs (e.g. Tell Jemmeh, fig. 2), (2) examples decorated with geometric designs alone (e.g. Tell el-Kheleifeh, fig. 4), and (3) undecorated examples (e.g. Samaria, fig. 3).

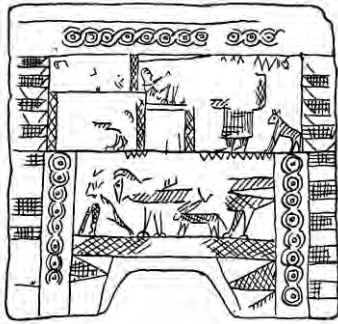


Figure 2: Tell Jemmeh

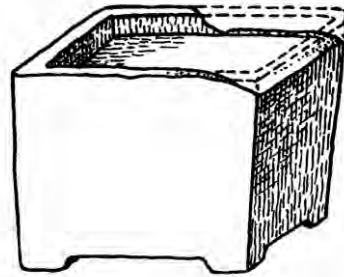


Figure 3: Samaria

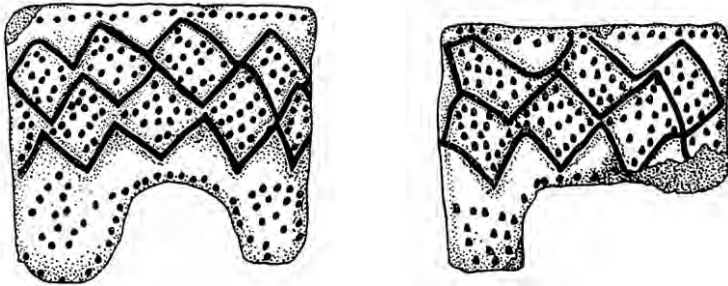


Figure 4: Tell el-Kheleifeh

Two methods of decoration are attested: in the more popular approach, figures and geometric designs are incised into the soft limestone. Much less frequently, decoration is painted in red, brown, or black. Examples with both incised and painted decoration are rather rare but are known (e.g. some examples from Lachish, one specimen from Tel Ḥalif, and one side of the “Jordanian” burner; see below). The geometric and conventional designs include vertical and horizontal lines, cross-hatching, zigzag lines, triangles, chevrons, guilloches, spirals, lozenges, panels, half-circles, circles (with dot inside), and scallops. Except for a small number of highly elaborated designs, the

majority of the geometric designs are rather crude and sketchy. In many cases, intentional decoration is shallow and barely visible. On the other hand, there are some examples with figural design within well-planned panels. If the objects are decorated, the incised sketches or paintings are placed on one or more visible side(s) of the cube, though in rare instances, all four sides plus the top and bottom were decorated (e.g. Tell es-Sa'idiye, fig. 5). A few exemplars, for instance from Tell es-Seba' in the Iron Age and from Lachish in the Persian period, bear reliefs or sculptured elements instead of incised or painted decoration.

For the first two types mentioned above, Stern reconstructs their typological development as a process of degeneration: "The first group, in which the designs are rendered with care and symmetry, represents the earliest of the three groups; the second, in which several of the preceding designs have been retained in a crude form, is later; and the third group representing a totally debased form of the designs, is the latest in date" (STERN 1982: 192).



Figure 5: Tell es-Sa'idiye

Examples of his first group with the most highly developed designs representing the earliest stage are Tell es-Sa'idiye (fig. 5) or Tell Jemmeh (fig. 6). Examples of his second group, which retain several of the preceding designs (a guilloche, a triangle, a lattice, and an hour-glass) and motifs (humans, heroes, animal processions, animals attacking and being attacked, plants) but in crude and mediocre execution would include, for instance, some objects from Lachish (figs. 7–8). Finally, examples of his latest deteriorated designs also would be from Lachish (figs. 9–10).

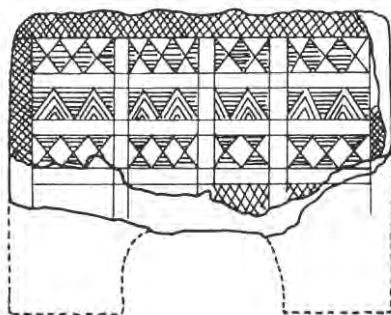


Figure 6: Tell Jemmeh

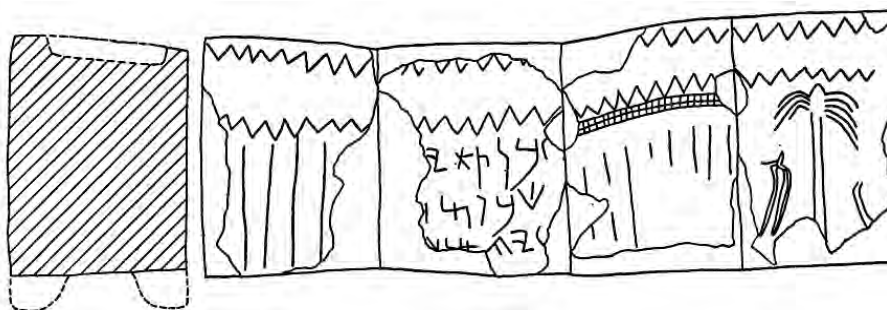


Figure 7: Lachish

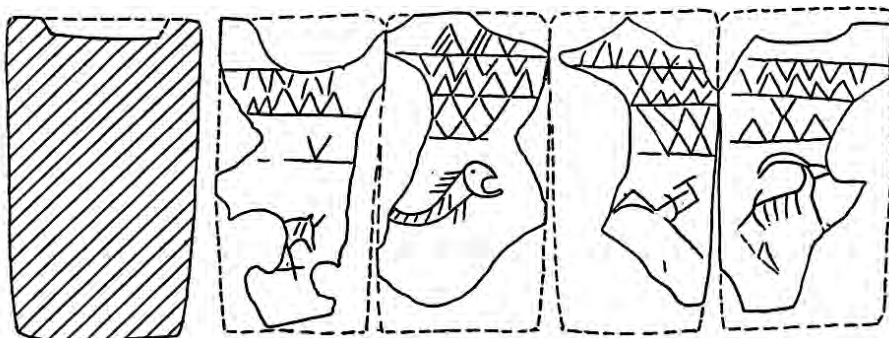


Figure 8: Lachish

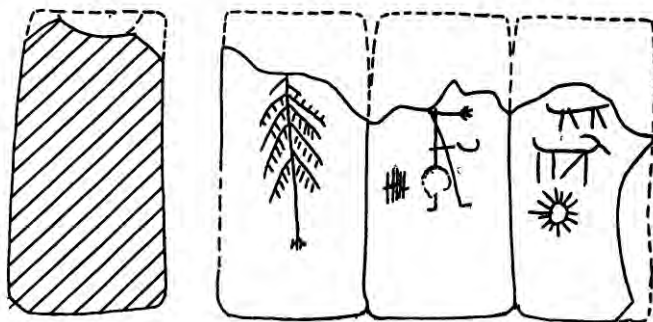


Figure 9: Lachish

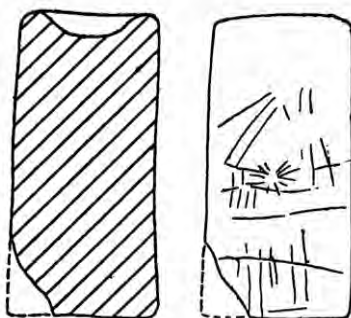


Figure 10: Lachish

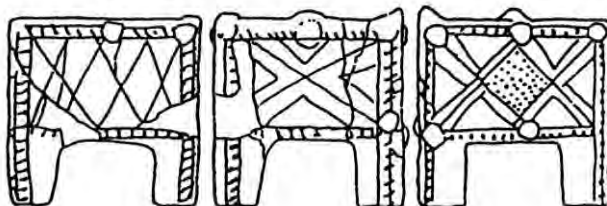


Figure 11: Uruk

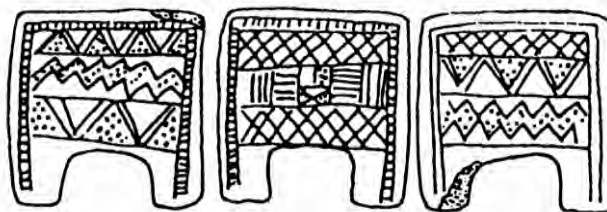


Figure 12: Uruk

According to Stern, a similar process of deterioration from the finely formed to the crude, asymmetrical examples can also be witnessed in the shapes of the cuboid incense burners. His hypothesis of development is grounded on an assumption of dependence on Assyrian design, in which the patterns are usually rendered with care (figs. 11–12).

However, the general assignment of deteriorated exemplars to later phases of development does not fit, for instance, for the incense burner from Sepphoris (MEYERS/MEYERS 2009: 138*), which stems from the 4th century BCE but is neatly decorated. The same holds true for a Hellenistic cuboid incense burner from Ashdod (fig. 15) that bears carefully incised designs on all sides. Stern's typological and chronological remarks are most easily challenged, however, by considering several crudely decorated incense burners from 'Ēn Ḥaṣeva (fig. 13), Tell es-Seba' (fig. 14), or Tell Jemmeh (HASSELL 2005: figs. 6, 7) that are early in date, probably from the very end of Iron Age II. Although the general tendency he proposed might be valid, a linear process of degeneration in shape or iconographical design is not supported, when the evidence from the Iron Age and the Persian period is taken into consideration. While Stern's typology can be partially helpful for classifying cuboid incense burners, it cannot be used as a criterion for dating.

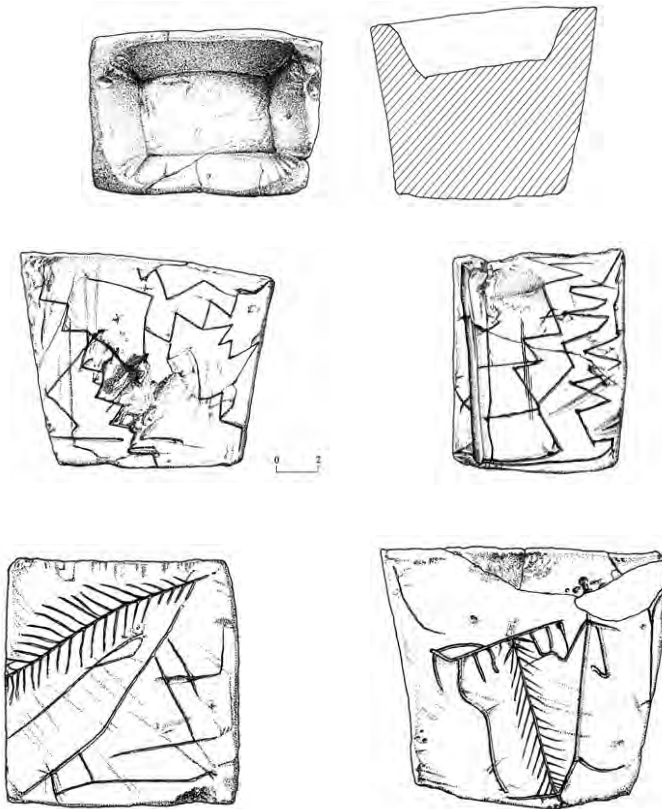


Figure 13: 'Ēn Ḥaṣeva

To characterize the iconography of the cuboid incense burners is quite difficult. On the one hand, their iconographic design does not fit the repertoire of motifs or style found on other materials like coins, seals, pottery, terracotta objects, or figurines in the Persian period. For instance, Achaemenid imperial motifs (the Persian king as archer, combatting hero, or master of animals) or distinctive clothing like the Persian cap of the horse-and-rider figurines or other Persian dress, both of which are attested frequently on coins and seals, are not used to illustrate the cuboid incense burners. Pair constellations or sphinxes that are frequent on seal impressions and coins are lacking in the decoration of the cuboid incense burners. Instead, hunting scenes are important in that group. While there are many motifs influenced by Greek iconography on seal impressions, coins, and pottery, there is no Hellenizing tendency within the iconography of the cuboid incense burners.

On the other hand, however, there is partial comparability in figural design. For example, the abundant evidence of wild animals on Samarian coinage can be compared with some of the decoration on the cuboid incense burners. Bes, who is prominent on seals and coins and is represented, for example, on ceramic vases from Tel Mevorakh, Samaria and Tell Jemmeh (STERN 1982: 131; 2001: 507–10), is possibly attested twice: on an exemplar from Ashdod and on one from Gezer (figs. 22, 21, on p. 112). The motif on another exemplar from Gezer (fig. 28, on p. 116) resembles the prominence of heroic combat scenes, but the way in which the motifs are represented is quite different in detail, as will be shown below. What can be stated clearly in a general way is the following: There is nothing Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, Persian, nor even distinctively “Phoenician” in the decoration of the incense burners.

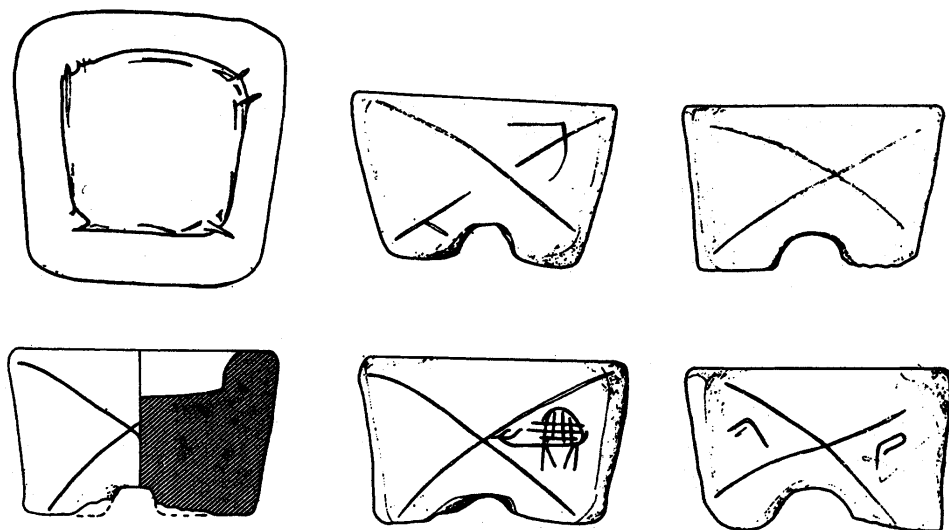


Figure 14: Tell es-Seba⁴

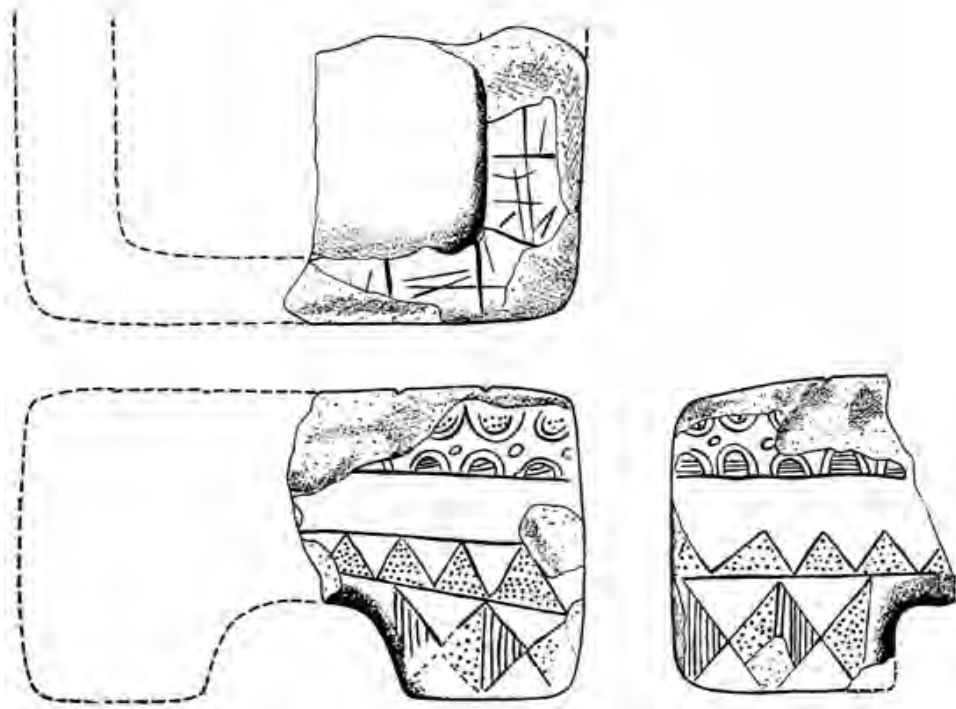


Figure 15: Ashdod

We have to note here that what exactly Stern meant by “composite style” when arguing about the origin of the iconography of the incense burners remains obscure. It is generally admitted that what constitutes Phoenician style is not easily defined, and it is considerably less clear what is specifically Phoenician in the iconography on the cuboid altars (UEHLINGER 1993: 266–67; MARTIN 2007: 165; WINTER 2010: 187–204). If, for example, the repertoire used in their decoration is compared to the constellations and motifs attested in Samaria and especially in Yehud, no one would categorize the two as disparate, even though the styles are different. The figural decoration on the cuboid incense burners represents neither constellations nor motifs that are clearly to be identified as “foreign,” as Stern is inclined to assume.

Nor does the style of decoration parallel the South Arabian specimens, which are composed using predominantly geometric decoration (triangles, zigzag patterning, criss-crossed lines, and recessed windows). The astral symbols (crescent moon and disk) that are characteristic of South Arabian specimens (HASSELL 2002: 165, 178) are not attested on the cuboid incense burners from Palestine. Although the latter are special, they fit into the ancient Near Eastern artistic tradition of the southern Levant (NUNN 2000: 178). The style of decoration and selection of motifs have their own character, which contrasts with that used on other find categories, although ties can be identified (see below). In light of our emphasis on evaluating the cogency of Stern’s hypothesis,

we will set aside the geometric and conventional designs here and focus particularly on the figural designs, which, more logically, might contain religious imagery.

Before discussing some of the cuboid incense burners in detail, let us begin with a few general remarks. If it is possible to draw inferences at all from the iconographic repertoire of the cuboid incense burners, they seem to point to (a) a rural rather than an urban background and to exhibit (b) a prominent presence of the steppe and the wilderness. If any theme predominates, it is hunting, based on men bearing weapons and the prevalence of animal representations, which include Arabian oryxes and other antilopinae, ibexes, goats and other caprinae, deer (stags and does), donkeys, onagers, (Arabian) camels, Zebu bulls, horses, lions, hyenas, jackals, dogs, snakes, scorpions, pigs, (wild) boars, birds, and fish.⁵ Particularly striking is the frequency of unmounted camels on cuboid incense burners found at Tell Jemmeh (see fig. 16), Tell el-Kheleifeh (fig. 17), Khirbet el-Ruġm/Gil'ām, Tell es-Seba' (fig. 18), and perhaps, Tell el-Far'ah (South) (ZWICKEL 1990: 98).

The depiction of riderless camels seems intended to emphasize camels that are wild rather than domesticated, with an accompanying symbolic representation of the wilderness (STAUBLI 1991: 184–99). However, camelidae may also be connected with Arab traders (GITLER/TAL 2006: 271) or to trade, particularly if they are not in constellation with other wild animals, as, for instance, at Tell el-Kheleifeh (fig. 17). The association of camels with trade is illustrated in an elaborate scene on a burner in the Bible Lands Museum, which depicts two camels as part of a caravan (fig. 41; see below,

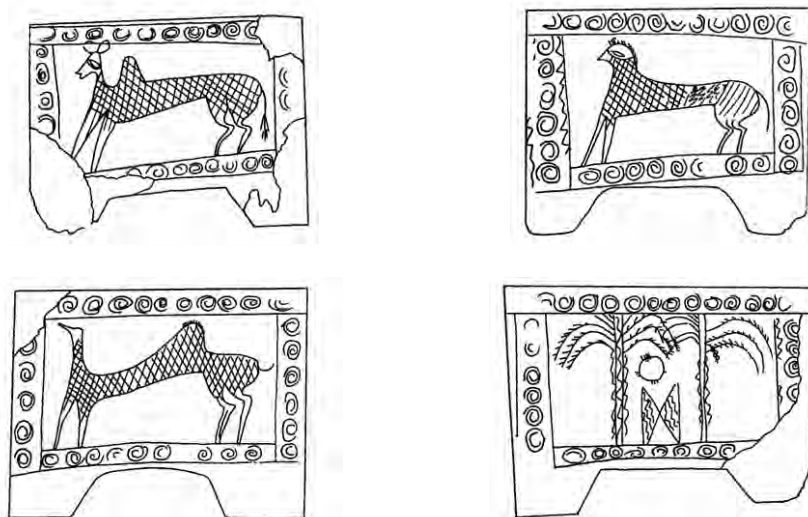


Figure 16: Tell Jemmeh

⁵ See table in FREVEL/PYSCHNY 2014. For a discussion of the generic hunting scene on seals in the western Achaemenid world, which reflect an elite pastime, see the article in this volume by D. KAPTAN, "Religious Practices and Seal Imagery in Achaemenid Hellenistic Phrygia," pp. 349–367.

p. 121). Scenes with other wild animals also seem to focus on the menacing nature of the wilderness, e.g. the attacking canidae from Tell es-Seba' (fig. 18), the boar from Samaria (fig. 19), and the Zebu bulls from Tell Jemmeh (fig. 16) and Tell Ḥalif.⁶

Hunting scenes are frequent, often involving deer or boar, as on exemplars from Gezer (figs. 28, 29, on p. 116) and from Tell Ḥalif, but also other animals. An incense burner found at Tel Ḥalif features salukis hunting a Zebu bull, gazelles, and an oryx, and ones from 'Ēn Ḥaṣeva (fig. 14) and Lachish (fig. 9) depict a gazelle hunted by a man. An exemplar from Beth-Shean contains a hunting scene that probably is narrated over several sides (DAYAGI-MENDELS 1996: 164). The burner at the Bible Lands Museum (fig. 41) has the most elaborated hunting scene known to date on another of its sides (see below). Few scenes on cuboid incense burners found at Gezer are of armed and/or mounted men (DEVER et al. 1970: pl. 41,2; MACALISTER 1912b: 12, fig. 213), which may indicate hunting or military scenes. O'DWYER SHEA (1986: 164) associated a scene with three men on an exemplar from Tell el-Far'ah South (fig. 20) with men collecting resins, but the instruments they carry are more likely double lances (FREVEL/PYSCHNY 2014: 114–15), so the illustration appears to be a military scene instead.

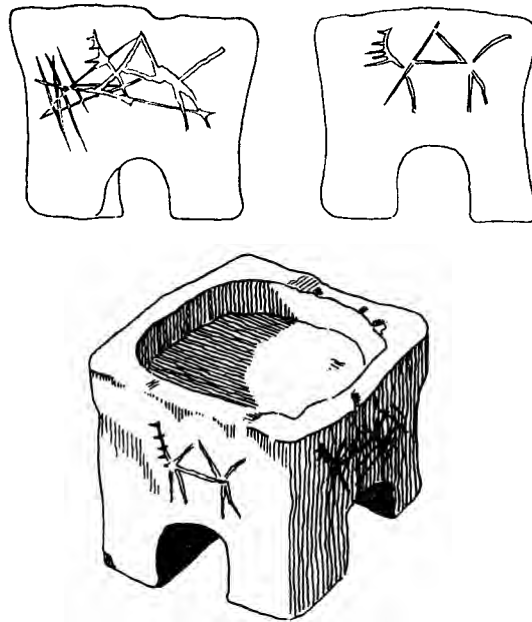


Figure 17: Tell el-Kheleifeh

⁶ Four exemplars made from local limestone were excavated in Tell Ḥalif (<http://itellhalif.wordpress.com/?2012/08/10/friday-10-august-2012/>; last accessed on 4.12.2013). We are grateful to the director of the Lahav Research Project, Oded Borowski, and to Seung Ho Bang for providing us with drawings of the decorated object.

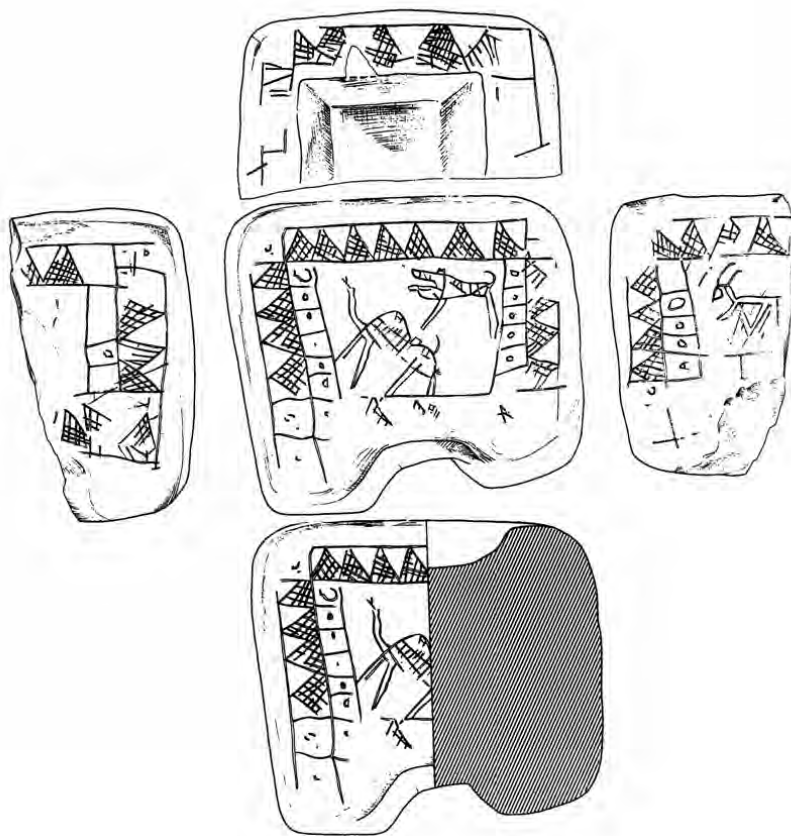


Figure 18: Tell es-Seba'



Figure 19: Samaria

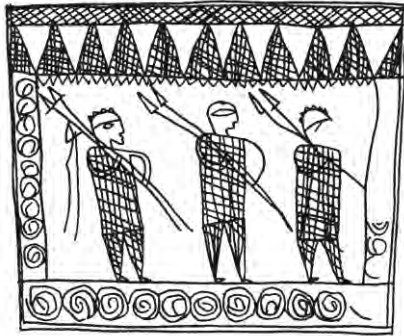


Figure 20: Tell el-Far'ah South

In addition to scenes of wilderness, hunt, combat, and trade, less frequently used motifs involving palm trees, stylized trees, and branches appear on exemplars from 'Ēn Ḥaṣeva (fig. 13), Tell Jemmeh (fig. 16), and Lachish (e.g. figs. 7, 9). Symbols like stars, lions, snakes, caprids and others are multivalent in ancient Near Eastern iconography, and their interpretation depends very much on the context. The same holds true for palm trees and twigs, which may express order, cosmic unimpaired arrangement, prosperity, well-being, nourishment, and life; in short, all of what is included in the broad term 'fertility' (DANTHINE 1937; KEEL 1992; PORTER 2003: 11–30). In the Middle and Late Bronze Ages, palm trees are often (but not always) associated with goddesses as the providers of this sort of fertility (KEEL 1998: 20–38).

As symbols of order, trees are attributes of male deities, especially in the southern Levantine iconography of the 1st millennium BCE (KEEL/UEHLINGER 2012: 349–51, 360–61). Although the palm tree may have religious connotations, it cannot be regarded as a religious symbol *per se*, especially not as a definitive indicator of the cult of a goddess (FREVEL 1995: 780–853). We cannot discuss the methodological flaws of the goddess discourse in Levantine iconography here, but let us emphasize that any interpretation depends on the context of a motif within a *symbol system*, especially in constellations. The symbolic representation of trees and twigs on some of the cuboid incense burners (see already a tree on an Iron Age IIB incense altar from Tel Reḥov and a twig on an Iron Age I altar-like stand from Pella [FREVEL 1995: 848–52]) are a more or less functional aspective expression of fertility rather than a representation of a specific religious context. The palm trees on the cuboid incense burners usually occur without a specifying context (TUFNELL 1953: pls. 68–71). They thus express prosperity more generally or hint at the vital fertility of oases (e.g. figs. 16, 21, 22, 41); it is hard to decide whether or not they have to be regarded as religious symbols. The presentation of a proto-Aeolian capital on the cuboid incense burner from Tel Sera' is unique, although it echoes the use of such capitals on some late Iron Age seals from Judah (KEEL/UEHLINGER 2012: 353a, 353b; SASS 1993: 207–9).

If we consider the iconographic repertoire of scenes and imagery on the cuboid incense burners in general, Stern's claim that (1) it contains distinctive characteristics of Phoenician art and (2) reflects a pagan religious background (STERN 1982: 194) cannot

stand in general. The set of motifs and their execution does not support the Phoenician origin as characteristic. Compared to figurines, seals and coins, the iconography is distinctive and has its peculiarities. In particular, clear Greek or Egyptian motifs are lacking, and the Persian iconographic set is underrepresented. As will be seen in a moment, only one motif, the demonly half-god Bes, used on incense burners found in Ashdod and Gezer (figs. 21–22), has clear associations with the Phoenician tradition, though it is not unique to that tradition. The second assertion about a pagan religious background will be evaluated in the ensuing section, where the few examples of imagery that can be interpreted religiously will be discussed.

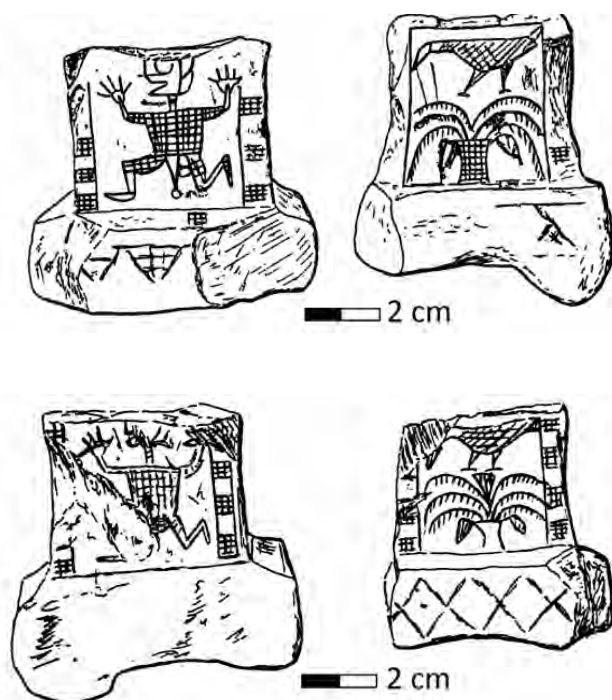


Figure 21: Gezer

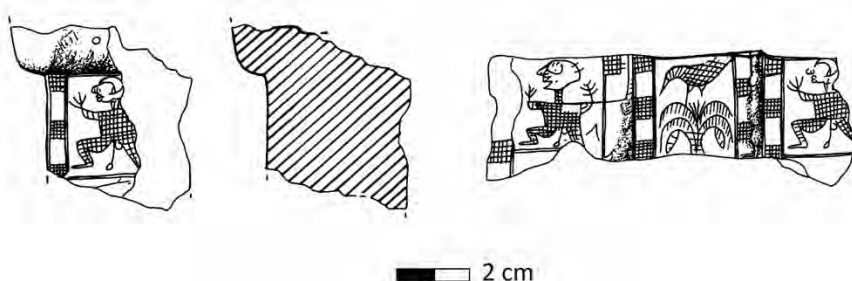


Figure 22: Ashdod

Religious Content in the Iconography of the Cuboid Incense Burners

Interestingly enough, two of the relevant objects we have to discuss come from Gezer, the place with the second highest density of cuboid incense burners. Gezer is located in the transversal and transitional zone between the Shephelah and the western fringe of the province of Yehud. Although eight Yehud stamps were found there (LIPSCHITS/VANDERHOOF 2011: 19–22),⁷ Gezer was probably not part of the province but played a significant role in the economic exchange of commodities. Twelve burners discovered in tombs and on the surface in the early excavations (MACALISTER 1912a: 357–58, 363, 371; 1912b: 442–46; 1912c: 114) have been dated to the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Typologically, they should be assigned to the Persian period (STERN 1982: 184; O'DWYER SHEA 1983: 95; KNOWLES 2006: 76).

Most significant for the group of incense burners is one exemplar (fig. 21), because it has a close parallel in a surface find from Ashdod (fig. 22; DOTHAN/PORATH 1982: 47–48, fig. 33:1). Such a parallel in motif, style, and design is rare among the larger collection of known incense burners. All four sides are decorated, and each two sets of opposing sides bear the same motif. A palm tree with a big game bird above it appears on two sides, while a standing figure with raised arms is featured on the remaining two.

R. A. S. MACALISTER (1912b: 443) considered the scene to depict a fertility cult: “On two sides are figures, one male, the other female, executing a wild dance. On the other two are palm-trees, with birds above (possibly the male and female palm-trees are intended, the bird perhaps being supposed to be fertilizing them: this would accord with the class of ideas that evidently were in the mind of the artist).” But this interpretation derives from Macalister’s own mind and “class of ideas”. As M. DOTHAN and Y. PORATH (1982: 47) emphasized, the figures are not a male and a female but are both male; testicles and a penis or a tail are visible on each.

On the parallel incense burner from Ashdod (fig. 22), the figure is standing in the *Knielauf*-position, right foot in front. The forearms are raised with upright hands and splayed out fingers. Who is this figure? Macalister’s interpretation of the scenes to be depicting a wild dance has not found wide acceptance in academic circles, though Dothan describes the Ashdod scene as “two dancing figures” (DOTHAN/PORATH 1982: 47). Several other suggestions have been made, all assigning primary importance to the *Knielauf*-position.

W. ZWICKEL (1990: 77) interpreted the bird above the palm tree as a representation of a phoenix and suggested the standing figure was Harpocrates. The tradition of the phoenix in a (paradisiacal) palm is attested in Ovid, who is of the opinion that the sun-bird “lived on aromatics: ‘Not from fruits or herbs does it live, but from drops of frankincense and juice of *amomum*’” (VAN DEN BROEK 1972: 353). However, iconographical representations of the constellation “bird and palm = phoenix” are usually much later (VAN DEN BROEK 1999: 655; VOLLKOMMER 1997: 990), and a bird in or

⁷ This is nearly 7 % of the 112 total other than those stemming from Ramat Raḥel and Jerusalem (470 of the 582 stamped handles); see LIPSCHITS/VANDERHOOF 2011: 23–24. The majority of stamps (5) belong to the late type dated to the Hellenistic period. This is remarkable, because all other places revealed only one or two of the late type stamps.

above a tree is a common and widespread motif in ancient Near Eastern art that is thought to express prosperity, welfare, and fertility (DANTHINE 1937). An identification of the bird with a phoenix is arguable. The moving figure has nothing in common stylistically with the widely attested Harpocrates: typical attributes like the plaited lock of hair on the right side, the finger to the lips, or a youthful demeanor are missing (see MEEKS 2010). Thus, we cannot accept Zwickel's proposal to identify the scene on the burners from Ashdod and Gezer to portray a known theme in Egyptian religion that has been executed in a Greco-Roman style (ZWICKEL 1990: 77).

The posture of the figure with both arms raised gives the impression of an apotropaic character, like a demon or half-demon (CORNELIUS 1994: 256–57; KEEL 1997: 290–91). The female Mesopotamian demon Lamashtu, who threatens pregnant women particularly, is a remote possibility. She is associated with several diseases as well (GÖTTING 2011), so depictions of her would tend to suggest the use of incense or aromatic substances in rituals with an apotropaic intention. Lamashtu, although prominent until and still in the Persian period, is usually depicted on amulets and on other objects used for apotropaic purposes, which would be consistent with this case. However, although the *Knielauf*-stance, the “lion tail,” the raised arms, and the frontal view might resemble some of the Assyrian Lamashtu depictions, identifying attributes like the lion paws, the snakes, the suckling position breastfeeding a dog and a pig, and a position standing on an onager's back or in a boat are missing (GÖTTING 2011: 441). So, the figure is not likely to be Lamashtu after all.



Figure 23: Samaria

More importantly, one has to explain the testicles as part of a male or at least a bisexual entity on the Gezer and Ashdod specimens. This being the case, the Persian king or the kingly hero, although often displayed in the *Knielauf*-position on Achaemenid gold darics or on an obol from Samaria (fig. 23), has to be ruled out. The king is usually armed with bow and arrow or a spear, which is missing from the scene. The raised arms with fingers splayed out, the slightly squat body, and finally, the testicles and the “lion tail” may suggest instead a depiction of Bes, who often is displayed on Persian coins, with examples minted in Gaza and Samaria and also found in the Samaritan hoards (figs. 24, 25, 26).⁸ Bes in a *Knielauf*-stance is rare, but the pose can be traced in Phoe-

⁸ MESHORER/QEDAR 1999: nos. 16, 53, 54, 120, 152, 153, 157, 158, 170, 179, 180; GITLER/TAL 2006: 62, 82, 83: II.3Da–c (?), 88, 89: II.10Da, 90, 91: II.11Da–c, 138, 139: VI.13Da–d, 140, 141: VI.14Da–c, 142, 143: VI.14Oa–b, 237–44 with plates.

nician and Cypriote tradition (WILSON 1975: 97). A seal from the antiquities market thought to date to the Persian period shows Bes with two lions (fig. 27), and a relief from Athienou-Malloura in Cyprus displays three Bes figures, with the central one in an awkward posture that resembles the *Knielauf* (COUNTS/TOUMAZU 2006: 598–99, figs. 2 and 3). Finally, the famous Amathous Sarcophagus depicts Bes in movement (COUNTS/TOUMAZU 2006: 600, fig. 4). Apart from the lion tail, other Bes characteristics, like the lion skin or the feather crown, are missing. Although it is not definitive, the most probable interpretation of the figure on the Gezer and Ashdod objects is Bes.



Figure 24: Samaria



Figure 25: Samaria



Figure 26: Ashdod



Figure 27: Antiquity Market

The association of Bes with the protection of women during childbirth and with warding off demons more generally might suggest a cultic or semi-cultic use of these two incense burners. The depiction alongside the palm tree with the bird signifies a context of prosperity, well-being and protection. Bes was obviously fashionable in Persian times, but, as is the case on the coinage of Samaria, this imagery does not venerate Bes in connection with a specific cultic act but more or less represents this half-god in a profane context (MILDENBERG 1995). At best, it is the apotropaic and protective aspect of the demonly “all-rounder” that is addressed by using Bes-imaginary. Just as the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud paintings of Bes (and Beset) alongside the inscriptions mentioning YHWH and his Asherah suggest (MESHEL 2012: 165–69; KEEL/UEHLINGER 1992: 244–50; FREVEL 1995: 853–912), we should not consider the depiction of Bes to oppose the head of the pantheon in Ashdod or Gezer or to be a religious infringement in any way. The Bes imaginary is symbolic and ‘open’ (*komplexe Assoziationsmöglichkeiten*, KEEL/UEHLINGER 1992: 251); it does not represent an elaborated Bes-cult that could have challenged the Yehudite monotheism in the Persian period (FREVEL 2012).

The second example to be considered when searching for possible religious content in the iconography of the cuboid incense burners is a fragmentary object stemming from Gezer (fig. 28). One complete and two fragmented scenes of the supposed four are preserved. The complete scene shows a prancing lion with a tiny man before him. The mouth of the lion is wide open, ready to devour the man, who is much smaller in scale than the lion. In his left outstretched hand, the man seems to hold a dagger approximately on a level with the throat of the lion. Above the lion's back, a sun or an eight-pointed star with a circle inside is depicted. This motif is repeated as a shoulder ornament in the lion's body above the forelegs.

By taking the lion and the star as a point of departure, this scene has been attributed to the goddess Ishtar (FRIDMAN 2013), but this is erroneous. Although the shoulder rosette on lions is attributed to Ishtar in Mesopotamia (KANTOR 1947: 253; BUDDE 2000: 129), and although the eight-pointed star is a symbol of the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Ishtar that had a long period of use in various contexts (ORNAN 2005: 151–52; COMPARETI 2007), the fact that the man with the dagger defeats the lion does not fit the identification of a goddess. It is not methodologically sound to assume that every lion points to a goddess in any time period (CORNELIUS 1989; FREVEL 1995: 825–30). If this holds true in the 2nd millennium and the first half of the 1st millennium BCE, it should do so even more in the second half of the 1st millennium BCE.



Figure 28: Gezer

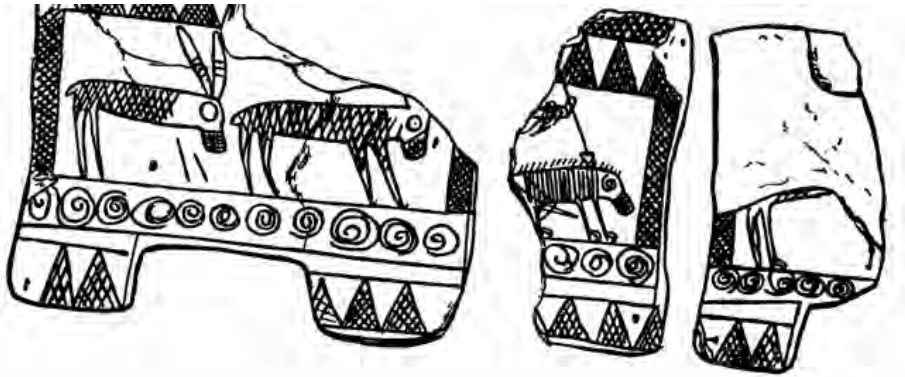


Figure 29: Gezer



Figures 30–32: 'Atlit

O. KEEL and C. UEHLINGER (2012: 438–39) have identified the scene with Heracles. This interpretation has more plausibility than the goddess hypothesis, even if it remains uncertain as well. Heracles is prominent in the iconography of the late Persian and early Hellenistic periods, as can be shown, for instance, by seals from 'Atlit (figs. 30–32) or seal impressions from the Wadi ed-Daliyeh (figs. 33–35).



Figures 33–35: Wadi ed-Daliyeh

But he usually is depicted with his most prominent attribute, the club, or with his right arm raised, or, in many instances, both characteristics. Heracles defeating the Nemean lion is primarily expressed as a kind of dominance over the lion (BONNET 2010: 1–4; SCHROER/LIPPKE 2014: 317–19), but this is lacking here. He usually is not accompanied by the multivalent eight-pointed star (BOARDMAN et al. 1990). However, this symbol may be connected with Regulus, “the bright star ‘on the heart’” of the Leonis constellation (HORNBLOWER et al. 2012: 367; MCKAY 1973: 46; WILKINSON 1989: 60–62), which may have been assigned to Heracles in a Graeco-Roman *context*. But there is nothing Greek in the style of this scene, and a Heracles picture with astral symbols in the southern Levant is without comparison in the Persian or Hellenistic period, to the best of our knowledge. The shoulder rosette is a widespread detail in lion depictions in ancient Near Eastern art, and in Egypt and Mesopotamia, it is strikingly often eight-segmented (KANTOR 1947: 250 with pl. VIII B–C, pl. C–D, and pl. XI A–B). Although the repetition of the star above the lion and as a shoulder ornament “on the heart” (that might indicate the vitality and strength of the lion; so BUDDE 2000: 127, 134) is significant, assigning the scene to Heracles remains precarious. However, Regulus – associated with the king – was “frequently believed to rule over human, and especially royal affairs” (WILKINSON 1989: 61).



Figures 36–40: Samaria and Wadi ed-Daliyeh

Nevertheless, the heroic encounter or heroic combat scene displaying the Achaemenid king struggling with a lion is a very popular, if not the most popular “Persianism” (as C. Uehlinger puts it) on seals and seal impressions (NUNN 2000: 106–8; BALZER 2007: 181–201; UEHLINGER 1999: 143–60; SCHROER/LIPPKE 2014: 308–12) and on Samarian and Sidonian coins (figs. 36–40).⁹

We may conclude that as far as miniature media are concerned, the image of the Persian royal hero, which western provincials would easily identify either with the king or with Achaemenid kingship in general, must have been the most powerful and renowned among the visual expressions of Persian imperial ideology in Palestine (UEHLINGER 1999: 160).

Since clear kingly attributes like the jagged crown (GITLER 2011) or inscriptions (as on the most popular cylinder seal motif from Daskyleion; cf. SCHROER/LIPPKE 2014: 310, 312) are missing in the western provincial impressions, it is not possible to decide whether it is a *royal* hero or not (NUNN 2000: 106, n. 205; UEHLINGER 1999: 175), but one may consider the motif as transparent for Achaemenid kingship. In any event, the dagger in the hero’s right hand stabbing the lion is part and parcel of this prominent scene of heroic combat (fig. 29).¹⁰

The other two opposing fragmentary sides of the specimen from Gezer feature a hind and a deer on one side, which might also point to a hunting scene (ZWICKEL 1990: 80), and another combat scene with an animal with a bushy tail – a fox or a jackal – on the other. Hunting scenes and the lion-versus-hero combat scene are part of Persian imperial iconography. Thus, the interpretation of the lion scene as part of the *Herrschaftsikonographie* may be not too farfetched.

In sum: The few examples of scenes with potential religious import among the hundreds of illustrations on miniature cuboid incense burners indicate that religious iconography was not routinely foregrounded on these objects but instead, was an unstressed topic. The rare iconography of Bes and the lion-vs.-hero combat scene do not seem intended to convey religious meaning primarily but instead, need to be interpreted within the context of Persian-era iconography present on seals and coins. When this is done, the Bes imagery can be seen to be widespread throughout Egypt and the southern Levant and to be an expression of widespread personal piety and superstition more than organized religion. The palm imagery, while possibly associated with various forms of the mother goddess, is more likely a *koine*, shorthand image for well-being and prosperity in local culture. Finally, the lion-vs.-hero combat scene seems to express an empire-wide Persian ethos, whether specifically royal or not. This, in turn, means that the iconography on these cuboid incense burners is not primarily religious in origin but associated with scenes of wilderness life, the hunt, combat, trade, well-being, and protection from harm. Thus, the iconography argues against Stern’s second

⁹ MESHORER/QEDAR 1991: nos. 16, 33, 44, 45, 48, 49, 50, 51; 1999: nos. 4–7, 22, 23, 35, 55, 56, 74, 96, 127, 199–204 etc. See in addition MAGEN 2007: K31423, K17007, K18533, K21107 et al.

¹⁰ For another discussion of the heroic combat scene and its meaning on Sidonian coinage, see the article in this volume by D. V. EDELMAN, “Iconography on Double-Shekel Sidonian Coinage in the Persian Period: Is It a God or a King in the Chariot?,” pp. 228–286.

assertion that the burners have a pagan religious background, deriving from a foreign cult; the scenes are primarily secular in nature rather than religious.

Out of Competition: An Exemplar with Religious Content from the Bible Lands Museum

To widen the perspective, let us focus finally on a piece hosted in the Jerusalem Bible Lands Museum (fig. 41), particularly because it displays a certain religious background in its decoration. Its provenance is said to be Jordan, but this is by no means proven, because it does not stem from a controlled excavation.¹¹ Since many indications suggest it belongs in a group with the incense burners described in the previous paragraphs, it most probably dates to the Persian period or the early Hellenistic period. The nearly cubic object measures 12 x 11 cm, with a height of 11 cm. The incised decoration is performed in the same way as the other exemplars; one side features traces of red painting. Taking the date for granted, the “Jordanian” exemplar is exceptional in several ways. All four sides are incised with elaborate scenes that relate to “Bedouin” life in the wilderness. As with some other examples, like the Gezer specimen discussed above, the scenes form a whole. On the first side, we see three men and four fish. All three figures have a quiver-like repository suspended from their left shoulders. Their arms are positioned differently: the left one raises its right hand that holds a dagger, the middle one clutches a lance or short javelin, and the right one just raises its arms. The figure in the middle bends its head to the side and seems to look at the fish intensively. Perhaps a hunting scene in flat water is depicted here: The fish are cornered, speared, and then disembowelled.

The next scene is a hunting scene with various animals of the steppe. Deer, stags, and does or hinds, a scimitar-horned oryx, ibexes, gazelles, and an ostrich are moving away from the figure in the lower left, who has a long javelin in both hands, aiming it at a deer.

The third scene features an oasis with a centered tripartite palm tree bearing dates hanging down from each crown. Two birds are sitting in the treetop and a deer is walking in the lower left. The figure on the right raises its right arm as if it would throw an item. Before its waist, a flat fish, perhaps a flounder, is depicted. This scene depicts food acquisition beyond animal husbandry: fishing, hunting, and collecting fruits. It is a scene befitting the life of long distance trade Bedouin, who cannot farm or breed animals.

That this interpretation goes in the right direction becomes clear in the fourth, final scene. It depicts a caravan with two riders sitting on a large *palan*-saddle (a packsaddle) or the *Kissensattel*, an early, pillow-like camel riding saddle (STAUBLI 1991: 184–202; 2010: fig. 9). A rope connects the two camels. The front one has a sagging rope around its snout, which ends in the hand of a big figure on the left. This figure, with a different headdress than the riders, has a spear or long javelin in its right hand. In the lower

¹¹ We are grateful to the Bible Lands Museum, Jerusalem, for providing us with photos by Z. Radovan. The drawing fig. 41 was made by Ulrike Zurkinden-Kolberg based on these photographs.

right, a rider on a horse holding the reins is depicted. He has the same hairstyle of the figure on the left. Ibexes, a deer, and an ostrich complete the scene.



Figure 41: Bible Lands Museum

We propose an identification of the two figures as a pair of protector gods of the caravan trade, who escort and protect the travellers and their commodities in the dangerous desert. On the basis of later attestations, these deities are most probably named 'Aršû/Monimos (the armed camel guide) and 'Azizû (riding horseback), although the names of the pair can vary (DIRVEN 1999: 92–93; HVIDBERG-HANSEN 2007: 95). These deities are attested iconographically with astral connotations (morning and evening star) on much later reliefs and tesserae from Edessa, Palmyra, Europos and other sites (HVIDBERG-HANSEN 2007; EL-KHOURI 2001: 67–68; DIRVEN 1999: 91–98; LINANT DE BELLEFONDS 1990) (figs. 42, 43).

Often, 'Aršû carries a small round shield and is accompanied by a camel, features characteristic of warrior gods of the desert. A relief found on the wall of an arch in the temple of Bel pictures 'Aršû with the Arab deity 'Azizû, whose name means 'the

strong one'. The relief is dedicated by a priest of 'Azizû to 'Arşû and 'Azizû, 'the good and rewarding gods', and is probably dated 113 or 213 CE. 'Arşû is mounted on a camel, whereas 'Azizû rides a horse (DIRVEN 1999: 94).¹²



Figure 42: Palmyra

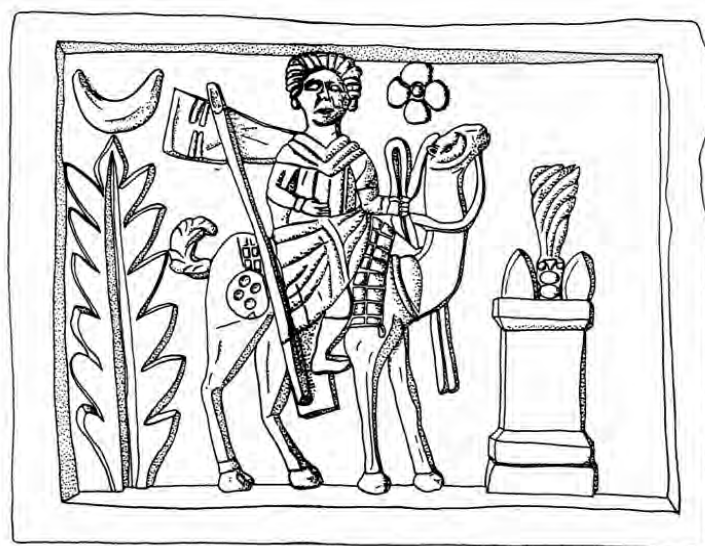


Figure 43: Dura Europos

¹² The date of the relief *CIS* 2.3974 (= *PAT* 0320) that is housed in the National Museum of Damascus is disputed, because the inscription only mentions the 25th year, but a fixed reference point is missing. While *DIRVEN* 1999: 94 dates it to 113 CE, *DIJKSTRA* 1995: 100 puts it in 213 CE, as does *HVIDBERG-HANSEN* 2007: 6, 17, 113, 123, who also posits 273 CE as yet another alternative.

The history of the two protector gods 'Aršû and 'Azizû traces back certainly into the Persian period (and earlier), as is often emphasized (esp. HVIDBERG-HANSEN 2007: 94–95). E. A. KNAUF (1985: 23–24, fig. 2; 1990: 179–80) has suggested that a “Philis-to-Arabian” coin from Gaza (BMC XIX 25; fig. 44) shows Ruđâ/Shai' al-Qaum, who may be equated with 'Aršû.¹³ A later relief from Dura Europos (fig. 43) and a tessera from Palmyra (HVIDBERG-HANSEN 2007: fig. 10 = RTP 178) might corroborate this reading.



Figure 44: Gaza

If this interpretation is correct, the incense burner in the Bible Lands Museum displays one of the earliest representations of the two caravan gods. Although exceptional within the group of incense burners, a religious content would be represented here. The exemplar strengthens the connection of the small objects with Arabian trade carried out by proto-Arabian Bedouin tribes on the incense road and the King's Highway as well. It is extraordinary in depicting scenes from the lives of these traders and their everyday food requirement. Thus, if this exemplar belongs to the same Late Iron Age/Persian-Hellenistic group by its date, style, and function, it remains exceptional. It does not make the other exemplars religiously 'pagan,' nor does it strengthen the assignment of the cuboid incense burners to Phoenician workshops. Instead, it corroborates the assumption that the cuboid incense burners were sometimes carried by caravaners but generally, were locally made, employing an iconographic repertoire that suited the tastes of the local owners.

¹³ For the identification of Ruđâ and 'Aršû, see also HVIDBERG-HANSEN 2007: 37. For camels on the coins of Philistia, see GITLER/TAL 2006: 35, 271, 274–75, 292–93, XXIII.10, XXV.Da–b, XXVIII.18Da, XXVIII.18Oa.

Conclusion

The starting point of the present paper has been a hypothesis proposed by E. Stern in several articles since his ground-breaking 1982 monograph on the material culture of the Persian period: that there was some sort of ‘religious revolution’ in Yehud that swept away objects that were associated with certain paganism. He mentions two prominent find categories in his argument; figurines and cuboid incense burners. While the first has received much attention, the cuboid incense burners have been virtually neglected, perhaps due to their frequently crude execution and decoration. All the arguments made by Stern for assigning them to ‘pagan’ cultic practice have been reviewed in this paper. In particular, we have investigated whether the iconography of the cuboid incense burners contains religious motifs or scenes that can be traced back to a polytheistic background that might have threatened the Judeans. If anything, the continuity with the horned and unhorned altars from the end of Iron Age II may favor a particular cultic use for the cuboid incense burners. But if so, they were not part of cultic installations, although a specific cultic use or use in religious rituals cannot be excluded as such. The lack of positive evidence for that is unsurprising; we have very few inscriptions from the region that might mention their use for such rituals, and when found outside confirmed cultic installations, they could have served multiple functions: cultic, sanitizing, deodorizing, and repelling insects.

Stern’s assertion that the cuboid incense burners are executed in a “unique composite style ... which is the distinctive characteristic of Phoenician art” (STERN 1982: 194) and that they derived from Phoenician workshops was found to be deficient in terms of the proposed Phoenician production, although it is the case that the collection bears a distinctive style. The iconographical repertoire of the cuboid incense burners cannot be assigned to one cultural sphere exclusively but is characterized by an unusual variety of motifs unparalleled in South Arabian iconography or in other figurative types of finds, like seals, coins, and coroplastic art from the southern Levant in the Persian period. Representations of wild animals dominate the repertoire in hunting-scenes, less frequent combat scenes, or as isolated depictions. There is a remarkable frequency of (Arabian) camels. In the 1st millennium BCE, these camels could be linked to long distance trade from the Arabian peninsula to the southern Levantine coastal cities, especially Gaza, the western end-point of the so-called incense road. Therefore, one iconographical aspect matches particularly well with the regional spread of the cuboid incense burners.

The number of examples with distinctively religious or mythological motifs is strikingly lower than what is found on Persian period coins. A single likely depiction of Bes and perhaps even a glimpse of Heracles appear on two burners found at Gezer, although we have argued the latter was more likely a heroic combat scene. If its owner derived from a Greek background, it could have been seen to represent Heracles. Thus, Stern’s attributed function of the cuboid incense burners as cultic objects used in a “foreign” cult cannot be substantiated by their iconography.

Nevertheless, the distribution pattern, which does not include the province of Yehud, is undeniable. That this was due to a religious revolution driven by exilic and post-exilic Yahwists who set out to purify their religion from outside influences and prac-

tices cannot be proven by the absence of these miniature incense burners from the material culture of Yehud. Such an absence does not indicate a specific orthodox restraint against heterodox religious practice. Instead, the distribution pattern, which parallels other find categories, may have its background in the distinctive, depressed regional economic situation in Yehud in comparison to the coastal areas or sites along established trade routes, rather than in a religious distinctiveness. Before searching for a distinctive material Jewishness in terms of the use of cultic paraphernalia, all other factors should be taken into account.

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