scribe, scratch awl

1. Statistics

2a. Literal Use
The Old Testament preserves but one occurrence of the word סֵפֶר, viz. Isaiah 44:13. Here four utensils are mentioned which a carpenter used to shape a wooden image of a god (→ סֵפֶר; סֵפֶר; סֵפֶר; סֵפֶר). With the exception of סֵפֶר, ‘measuring line’, the precise meaning of these technical terms is difficult to establish. The imperfect סֵפֶר, ‘he traces it, outlines it’, is used with both סֵפֶר and סֵפֶר which suggests that the enumeration does not intend to describe successive stages in the carpenter’s work and that both tools were used in drawing lines.

2b. Figurative Use
Not attested.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew
Not attested.

4. Cognates
SEMITIC: The etymology is uncertain according to Klein, CEDHL, 681. For an overview of previous proposals see HAHAT, 1299. Since the interchange between ס and צ occurs more often (cf. Guillaume, HAL, Part 1, 27; Lipiński, SLOCG, §12.2), a connection with סֶפֶר, ‘to make incisions’, סֶפֶר, ‘incision’, and its cognates (HAHAT, 1299-1300) might be considered.

AKKADIAN: A connection with סירד, ‘pole of a chariot’ (CAD (S), 312) [not: ‘awl’ which is מָרֵשָׁ, in Assyrian → מָרֵשָׁ, ‘incision’, and its cognates (HAHAT, 1299-1300) might be considered. However, Old Assyrian סֶרַד, ‘to harness, load’ and מֶסֶר, ‘pack-saddle’ (Veenhof 1972, 9-11) might be related if perforated leather straps were used.

UGARITIC: A connection with סֶפֶר, according to Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, DULAT, 770, ‘a type of projectile or missile’, seems unlikely, both because of the different sibilant and because of the
entirely different context.

SYRIAC: If the connection with √ṣṛṭ proposed above is tenable, comparison with Syriac šraṭ ‘to scratch, make a line or stroke ...to draw or write a line’, serṭā ‘scratch, gash, line, character’, masrṭā ‘scalpel’ (Payne Smith (Margoliouth), CSD, 286, 391; Brockelmann, LS, 498-9) is certainly enlightening.

CLASSICAL ARABIC: Several authors have proposed a connection with sarada in the meaning of ‘to perforate’ (Lane, AEL, 1346-7), sarid, sirrad, ‘awl’ (Kazimirski, 1080). The correspondence between Hebr. š and Arab. s is problematic, but not decisive (cf. König, HAWAT, 470-1; Thomas 1971, 325; Lipiński, SLOC, 123-5). See also below, section 9.

MODERN ARABIC: Syro-Palestinian Arabic masrad, ‘awl’ (Denizeau, DPASyr, 243).

GREEK: Lewy, SFG, 57-8, considered the possibility that σάρδιον, ‘the Sardian stone’ or ‘sard’, also attested in Rev. 4:3, would be a Semitic loanword. König, HAWAT, 471, calls this difficult, without giving his reasons. Lewy misunderstood the quotation from Pliny he gave. The sard was used as a stone for seals because it was relatively soft and therefore easy to engrave (Bolman 1938, 93-95). For this reason it is unlikely that it was used in a tool for engraving gems or in shaping a wooden image.

5. Ancient Versions

Θ and other Greek versions: The Greek Version of Isaiah 44:13 raises a text-critical problem. It does not run in accordance with Μ. In fact, Μ and Θ present a different picture of the making of cult objects or idols. In its description of the activities of the carpenter Μ contains four technical terms (→ wq’ → drʾ → h[;xu]Mʾ and → hg:WjM] in four cola. The Θ does not provide an exact correspondence of this. The main manuscripts inexplicably connect ἐκλεξάμενος, ‘having chosen’, with v. 12. Moreover, ὥσπερ is rendered inaccurately by ἔστησεν αὐτὸ ἐν μέτρῳ, ‘he sets it up with a measure’. The next two cola are skipped and θαρεῖ ἥττὰ ἡμᾶς is translated καὶ ἐν κόλλῃ ἔφρυθομεν, ‘and he composed it with glue’. Possibly ἐν κόλλῃ is an early error for ἐν κυκλῳ ‘with a circle’ (→ πλάθος).
It seems therefore that the Θ does not help much in establishing the meaning of צריר. However, in vv. 12 καὶ ἐν τερέτρῳ ἔτρησεν άυτό, ‘and he bored it with an awl’, is Θ’s strange rendering of צריר צָרִירֶה יָדֵי, ‘and with hammers he shapes it’. Because the translators of Θ knew the correct rendering of צריר well (Muraoka, HIS, 87), it is possible that originally ‘and he bored it with an awl’ was the rendering of צריר צָרִירֶה יָדֵי, but that somehow the difficult text of vv. 12-13 got into disorder.

α’ renders καὶ ἐμὼρφωσεν άυτό ἐν παραγραφίδι, ‘he shapes it with a writing instrument’ (cf. LSJ, 1306). In the Syro-Hexapla this is interpreted as βοσργδν’, ‘with a ruler’.

β: צָרִירֶה יָדֵי, ‘plummet’, apparently a guess based on the parallelism in the Hebrew text with וּ.

δ: Probably influenced by Θ, renders וֹֽיִֽב תָּבָֽח, ‘he fastens it with glue’, but adds וֹֽיִֽבָּלפ, ‘and engraves it’ which looks like the remnant of an earlier rendering.

ζ: runcina, a ‘plane’.

6. Judaic Sources

Only in the Middle Ages rabbinical interpretations of צריר crop up which explain the word as a red-dyed cord. As Blau 1995 has demonstrated convincingly, this interpretation goes back to an erroneous understanding of the Arabic translation of Saadya Gaon by the famous Hebrew lexicographer Ibn Janah who was responsible for the theory that צריר would be a red-dyed cord or red marking tool. This theory was perpetuated up to modern times (see below, section 10), but should definitely be discarded.

As noted by Blau 1995, 691, the correct interpretation is found in the Hebrew-Arabic dictionary of David ben Abraham: ‘a carpenter’s tool having a sharp point’.

7. Illustrations

No suggestions.

8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]
9. Conclusion

Both the embracing parallelism between רפ and מזח, and the vertical verse-line parallelism between הָרָאָן, ‘he traces it, outlines it’, in vv. 13aB and 13bB suggest that מזח and רפ were measuring tools. The etymological cognates, especially the Syriac and Arabic ones, suggest a sharp-pointed tool used to incise a line in the wood, what we would call a ‘scriber’, or ‘scratch awl’. This is supported by Aquila’s rendering and by the medieval Hebrew-Arabic lexicographer David ben Abraham. Joshua Blau has demonstrated that other Jewish renderings from the Middle Ages, though repeated up till modern times, rested on an erroneous interpretation of the Arabic translation of Saadya Gaon. It is possible that the original rendering of the Old Greek was ‘awl’ but that the text got into disorder as a result of which the phrase landed in v. 12. Also the Peshitta seems to reflect an earlier translation which involved an engraving tool.

The description of a Palestinian carpenter’s work in Avitzur, 166, renders it likely that מזח was more or less a synonym of →ตร. Thin-blade awls have been found in ancient Egypt (Nicholson & Shaw, AEMT, 356).

The broader context of the polemic in Isa. 44:9-20 does not aim at providing the student with either an exact knowledge of the making of cult objects or a complete survey of the tools of the craftsmen. Its distinctive purpose is the denunciation of idolatry and the proclamation that YHWH’s power is indisputable against the vain boasting of the Mesopotamian deities and their physical representations. The description wants to bring home the message that making an idol is an utterly human, very clumsy process. It is not impossible that in choosing the term מזח the author wanted to make a contrasting pun on →תַּמּוּנָה, ‘span’, the term he used in his magisterial description of God’s creation of the heavens (Isa. 40:12).

10. Bibliography

Only primary choices are quoted. Authors marked by * mention alternative solutions: Nicholson & Shaw, AEMT, 356 – Avitzur, 162: מזח (a kind of awl) – BDB, 975: ‘from context, a marking-

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