burin, stylus

1. Statistics

2a. Literal Use
The meaning of הָיָם in Exod. 32:4 is disputed. Houtman 2000 enumerates no less than six different interpretations and finally prefers to render כָּבָא וַתִּנָּה וֹא הַלֹּא as '(Aaron) tied the (gold) in a cloth' (similarly HCHAT, Bd. 1, 438; Loewenstamm 1967; 1975; Gevitz 1984, and others) because he believes that a rendering like 'he shaped it with a הָיָם' requires a repointing of the Hebrew. However, this is an unnecessary assumption if one accepts the existence of a √רָו III 'to draw, design, shape, form' that is also attested in several other Semitic languages (cf. Childs 1974; Schroer 1987; HALAT, 952; DCH, vol. 7, 107) and is supported by the ancient versions (see section 5 below). The hypothesis that הָיָם should be regarded as a cloth bag or purse (identical to or repointed as → יִסְעַּם, for which 2 Kgs 5:23 is invoked) leaves unexplained how the gold became an image of cast metal (יִשְׁבַּה). The assumption of a miracle has no basis in the text.

It is highly unlikely that the chief priest Aaron himself would have engaged in the specialist’s work of casting a molten image of a bull-calf (on the techniques required see e.g. Forbes, SAT, vol. 8, 105-95; M. Weippert, in: BRL2, 219-24; Moorey, AMMI, 216-40; J. Ogden in: AEMT, 161-6; Notebaart, MMHB, 231-235). Small images of cast metal bulls and bull-calves have been found in many places in Israel and the neighbouring countries, but Exod. 32:2-3 and 32:19-20 create the impression that it was a big image which would have complicated the smith’s task considerably. Therefore it is more likely that it was the writer’s intention to indicate that it was Aaron who commissioned and outlined the shape of the calf with a הָיָם, whereas others did the actual casting, probably in the form of gold sheets which were subsequently hammered into shape over a wooden base (cf. Exod. 31:1-11; 35:30-36:1 and Notebaart, textitMMHB, 234). If this was the case, the נַעַשׂ, ‘he made it’, of Exod. 32:4, 35 must be understood as ‘he had it made’, as was the oriental way of giving
the employer all the credit for building or making things (see the building inscriptions of many kings, Baal’s boast to have built his palace in KTU 1.4:VI.35-37 whereas actually it was built by the technician among the gods Kotharu, and for the OT, e.g. 1 Kgs 10:12, 16, 18; 12:28, 31-32; 16:33 and especially 2 Kgs 16:10-11). So in Exod. 32:4 is most likely a burin or stylus with which one could draw a sketch of an object on a writing tablet (for a similar interpretation, cf. Propp 2006, 549-50).

According to Isa. 8:1 the prophet has to write characters on a large bronze mirror (or a stone tablet) with a “a man’s (normal, as distinct from the finer jeweller’s tool) ‘to incise, engrave’ was commonly used for making notes on a wax or clay tablet, or to mark jars (after firing), weapons and tools with indications of ownership. Since the lettering on Isaiah’s mirror (or tablet) had to be clearly readable to all passers-by (→ ח’יון) it may be assumed that a was a rather thick engraving tool, a burin or stylus. If it was a mirror of bronze on which Isaiah wrote, as has been suggested, the stylus must have been harder than that metal and therefore it may have had a point of iron or sapphire (cf. Jer. 17:1). There is certainly no basis for Van der Toorn’s guess that a “a man’s would have been a ‘brush’ (Van der Toorn 2007, 180, 336).

2b. Figurative Use
Not attested.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew
Not attested.

4. Cognates
√ is considered a variant form of √, ‘to incise, engrave’ (HAHAT, 396, 401; Leslau, CDG, 264). An original connection with √ ‘to plough’ (Syr. √ also ‘hollow out’), Hebr. √ ‘to plough’, and √ ‘to incise, engrave’ is not excluded.

AKKADIAN: harāsu ‘to cut down, to cut off, to incise’ (CAD (H), 92). mahrušu ‘graver, chisel, burin’ (AEAD, 58).

UGARITIC: hř ‘to cut, bite’ (?) (Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, DULAT, 369). However, also Ugar. hřn, a PN of uncertain de-
rivation, might be related.


Syriac: ḥ ur ṭ a ‘cutting, laceration’; ḥ ṭ ṭ ‘to scrape, scratch, make incisions’; ṭ ᵃ ṭ a ‘gash, scratch’ (Payne Smith [Margoliouth], *CSD*, 134, 157; Brockelmann, *LS*, 256).

Classical Arabic: ḥ araṣa ‘to rend, cleave’ (Lane, *AEL*, 547), less likely ḥ ara ṭ a ‘to peel, rub off’ (Lane, *AEL*, 723), though this is also attested as ‘to cut off’ (Dozy, *SDA*, t. 1, 362).

Greek: χραγμα ‘any mark engraved, character’; χαρακτήρ ‘graving tool, mark engraved, character’; χραπόσσω ‘to whet, cut into, engrave’ (*LSJ*, 1976-70) may ultimately go back on Semitic ḫ ṭ s because the Greeks learned how to write from the Semitic world.

5. Ancient Versions

For Exodus 32:4 the corresponding passage in Ḥ clearly expresses the idea of giving the essential shape (πλάσσω) to the idol with the help of a stylus or chisel (γραφις, cf. *GELS*-L, 93). Also in Isa. 8:1 Ḥ renders ḫ ṭ by γραφις.


י: יב renders אב ויד אב ‘and he shaped it with pitch’ in Exod. 32:4, apparently interpreting the verb as a form of ויד ‘to shape’ (Dalman, *ANHT*, 361) and assuming that the cast was hollow because in antiquity pitch was used to achieve a hollow shape (see the literature cited under section 2a).
has a double rendering, ‘and he shaped it in a mould’.

In Isa. 8:1 the Targumist avoids the difficult הָרֵם by rendering וַיָּשֶׁר הָרֵם וַיַּבֶּן הָרֵם וַיְסֶמֶר הָרֵם ‘and he cast it in a mould’.

In Exod. 32:4 ס presents a connection between the verb סִיר ‘to form, shape’ (Payne Smith [Margoliouth], CSD, 476) and the Greek LW ῥάσα, ‘type’, ‘model’ or ‘mould’. It appears that ס has understood הָרֵם as a mould, possibly under the influence of the Palestinian Targum (see above) and perhaps יס.

In Isa. 8:1 י renders בְּקֹת בְּדַנְּשׁ, ‘in human script’. The two passages together render it likely that the Syriac translator did not know what to do with the Hebrew word הָרֵם, but was acquainted with the Palestinian exegetical traditions about its meaning.

6. Judaic Sources

1QM XII.3 חֶרֶם יִשְׁרָאֵל וַיָּשֶׁר נִבְּלָה מְעַמָּה ‘and the covenant of your peace you engraved for them with the stylus of life’ definitely favours the interpretation as an engraving tool.

7. Illustrations

No suggestions.

8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

Because the Old Testament provides the scholar with but two instances, the meaning of the word חֶרֶם depends mainly on its context. Though in this case the two instances are very different, ‘stylus’ may be taken as the basic meaning of the word under discussion. Several ancient versions, an important passage in a Qumran text, as well as the most likely etymology support this choice which makes good sense in each of the passages quoted.
The word belongs to the small category of technical terms (→ סֶפֶר, ← מָסָר, ← חֶסֶר, ← לֶאָר, ← מַעֲשָׂה), the basic function of which is either the essential shaping of artefacts or the writing of characters.

10. Bibliography
