cresset, torch

1. Statistics

2a. Literal Use
The occurrences of the word can be divided into two groups: texts using just the word לֶפֶץ (10x) and texts using the combination of וַלֶּפֶץ (4x). The latter would seem to indicate that the object has been kindled.

The most informative text with regard to the use of לֶפֶץ is Judg. 7:16 (see also Jud. 7:20). Gideon uses a ruse to surprise the Midianites. With only 300 man he goes to the outskirts of the camp of the Midianites. His men all get a trumpet in their hands, and empty jars with torches inside (לָכְרָסָה מַחָרְרָה וַרְחִימָה) in the other hand. After a signal the men have to shatter the jars, simultaneously blowing their trumpets. They hold (פִּי) the torches in the left hand and the trumpets in the right hand. Though it seems rather complicated to do three things at the same time with only one pair of hands, this is not something bothering the narraror. Perhaps they hit their neighbour’s jar with their own. The לֶפֶץ must have been a torch smouldering within the jar, a ploy still used by the Cairo police in the 19th century as a kind of dark lantern (see section 8).

This kind of torch was used also by Samson in Jud. 15:4-5. He turned the foxes tail to tail and put a torch between each pair of tails. Evidently he used torches the fire of which was burning at the very end of the handle to make the foxes run without burning their tails. If the description is correct the torches must have consisted of sticks with inflammable material on top. Probably in this case too the torches were kept smouldering in jars until the moment the animals could be released almost simultaneously.

In Gen. 15:17 a strange scene is depicted: Abraham is waiting for God to appear and between the pieces of meat on the ground a smoking oven (← עֵצֶר עֵצֶר) and a torch of fire pass (שֶׁבֶר). In this text the smoking oven and the torch of fire have to be interpreted as symbols accompanying the appearance of God, anticipating more or less the theophany on Mt. Sinai (Westermann 1981, 271).
2b. Figurative Use

Exod. 20:18 mentions the perception of thundering (תְלֹו), lightning (‘torches’, כְּפָסִים) and the sound of the horn (זָהָב). As in other ancient oriental descriptions of the theophany, thunder and lightning accompany the theophany on Mt. Sinai. Because such theophanies were symbolically re-enacted in the cult, the torches may be a remnant of such an earlier ritual.

In a prophecy (Isa. 62:1) the vindication of Zion is said to go forth like brightness (יַשְׂפָּר, and her salvation as a burning torch (לֶשֶׂך). In the vision Ezek. 1:13 the appearance of heavenly creatures is accompanied by light that is described as something that looked like burning coals of fire (שֵׁם, like torches moving (יִזְדוּב). The fire was bright (יַשְׂפָּר) and lightning (בָּרָם) came out of the fire. Similarly chariots are described in Nah. 2:3, they gleam like torches, they dart (ןֶרֶד Pi.) like lightning (בָּרָם).

Zech. 12:6 announces that the clans of Judah will be made like a blazing pot (שֵׁם, בְּתוֹת) in the woods and like a flaming torch (שָׁם כּלְתֶּבֶת) among the sheaves. This means they will destroy (‘devour’, אֲסַכֵּל) everything around them (cf. Judg. 15:4-5).

Out of the mouth of the monster described in Job 41:11 flaming torches go up, sparks of fire (שֵׁם כּוֹדֶר) leap forth. Daniel, in one of his visions (Dan. 10:6), sees a man whose face is like the appearance of lightning (מְרָאָה בָּרָם) and whose eyes are like flaming torches (שֵׁם כּוֹדֶר).

The difficult text Job 12:5 is not taken into consideration here. Usually is analysed as the preposition + the article + ‘calamity’. It is possible, however, to render, ‘Contempt is a torch for the thinking of the care-free, it directs their unsteady feet’. The statement would mean then that the affluent mask their uncertainty about their unethical behaviour by treating less lucky people with contempt. Contempt is the torch lighting their way (cf. Ps. 119:105).

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

4. Cognates

Akkadian: Zimmern 1914 and Segert 1962 suggested that Akka-
dian dipāru, ‘torch’, might be at the origin of Hebrew lappid. This was adapted by Salonen (Hausgeräte, 139). However, this derivation is phonetically improbable. According to the examples Salonen mentions the dipāru was used ‘to light up the darkness’, and it could glow ‘to shine out high in the sky’. It could also be used for fire signals (Salonen, 140). All texts Salonen discusses clearly point to a torch made of wood and wool (→ ג”י ‘fiery missile’).

HITTITE: Rabin 1963 suggested that the origin of the word has to be sought in Hittite lappiya- ‘glowing thing, torch’, Luwian lappi(ya)-. For this word Friedrich, HW, 127, gives ‘Glut’; 1. Erg., 12: ‘Kienspan (?)’.

UGARITIC: The word itself is not attested in Ugaritic, but Salonen (Hausgeräte, 140) mentions RS 16.146 + 161 (PRU III, 186:38 where he word dipāru is used, ‘seven bronze torches, with a weight of 170 Shekel each’. The ‘bronze’ probably refers to the firepot on top of a wooden shaft. See section 9.

PHOENICIAN, PUNIC: Hoftijzer & Jongeling, DNSI, 580 and Krahmalkov, PPD, 261, mention a vessel ṭp. For possible identifications see Hoftijzer & Jongeling. Perhaps < λαμπάζ might be added.

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: Jastrow, DTT, 715: ‘a pot in which light is carried; torch; lightning; flash’. JEWISHARAMAIC: יָפֵל, Jastrow, DTT, 715: ‘a pot in which light is carried; torch; lightning; flash.’ Also as יָפֵל, ‘lamp’, a direct loan from Greek λαμπάζ, cf. Sokoloff, DJPA, 284.


CLASSICAL ARABIC: The proposal to connect it with the Arab. √nafaṭa (Guillaume 1959) does not merit serious consideration.

ETHIOPIC: Leslau, ESAC, 316: lampā, ‘lamp’; lanpās ‘lamp, torch, flame’.

GREEK: From antiquity on people have connected יָפֵל with Greek
λαμπτάς ‘torch’ (LSJ, 1027). More recently e.g. Gordon 1955; Segert 1962; Brown 1995-2001. This is possible from a very early time on (cf. Hittite), but it can also have been a more recent loan directly from Greek.

5. Ancient Versions


The Job Targum of Qumran (11Q10, 36:4) renders Job 41:11 fairly literally, בַּעֲרָו דָּאָשׁוֹת, ‘from its mouth torches emerge’. Gen. 15:17 גלע, ‘a fiery torch’; גל, and some other Palestinian targums, נשר בָּר נוֹר שֶלדֶבֵי דָאָשׁוֹת, ‘fiery sparks and flames of fire’; גלJon נשר דָאָשׁוֹת לַמַּכָּר, ‘coals of fire and burning of fiery sparks’.

Exod. 20:18 גלJon, ‘the darkness that was there’; גל, ‘torches’; גלJon נשר ‘torches’.


lampas, ‘torch’, in Gen. 15:17; Exod. 20:18, etc., lampidā ‘torch’.

6. Judaic Sources

Jud.10:22 mentions that Holofernes came out of his tent with silver torches (λαμπτάδες ἄργυρα) carried before him. This suggests torches in a (silver) pot or container, that can be held in the hand, or even torches with a silver handle. 1 Macc. 6:39, when the sun is shining on bronze and golden shields, the mountains also reflect this light, and gleam like torches of fire (λαμπτάδες πυρίζ). Sir. 48:1 states that the prophet Elijah arose like a fire, and his word flares like a torch (λαμπτάς). The Hebrew text has כּנֶר ‘oven’ here.

According to the War Scroll of Qumran God will ignite the stricken of spirit ‘like a blazing torch in straw’ (לכלפי אֶת בֵּנֵנָר, 1 QM 11:10).
According to rabbinic sources the כресת always had a shaft on which a cup of clay or metal containing an impregnated wick was mounted (Krauss, *TA*, Bd. 1, 68, 401; Brand, *KHV*, 261-2).

7. Illustrations

On Sennacherib’s well-known relief depicting the siege of Lachish an Assyrian soldier is kindling a tightly wrapped missile with a torch (→ צי/צו). 

8. Archaeological Remarks

Cf. (→ צי/צו).

9. Conclusion

In all texts where כресת is attested, it is accompanied by words denoting fire and heat. In comparisons the word is paralleled by an oven (Gen. 15:7), a blazing pot (Zech. 12:6), burning coals (Ezek. 1:13; Job 41:11-13), fire and lightning (Exod. 20:18; Dan. 10:6). The כресת can burn and give light (Isa. 62:1), and is narrow enough to be put into a jar (Judg. 7:16, 20). It also can burn down sheaves, grain and olive orchards (Judg. 15:5; Zech. 12:6). In that case it is used as a kind of weapon, the kindling potential of which is more important than its light. The literal use in Judg. 7:16, 20 and 15:4-5 clearly points to a lightpot or lamp-post, just as young people nowadays sometimes make torches of an empty tin and a stick.

According to Dalman (*AuS*, Bd. 6, 58) the כресת consists of a torch in an earthen pot. Beduins called it the *mašʿal*, an iron firepot for burning wood, on long sticks (*AuS*, Bd. 6, 58; Bd. 8, 22). This description is somewhat misleading (see below on the Arabic word). The torches mentioned in Matt. 25:1ff. and John 18:3 might also be compared with this kind of lightpot on a stick (*AuS*, Bd. 4, 271).

Lane 1860, 120, provides an interesting parallel from modern Egypt,

‘The Zábiṭ, or Ághà of the police, used frequently to go about the metropolis at night, often accompanied by the executioner and the “shealegee,” or bearer of a kind of torch called “sheaλeh,”
which is still in use. This torch burns, soon after it is lighted, without a flame, except when it is waved through the air, when it suddenly blazes forth: it therefore answers the same purpose as our dark lantern. The burning end is sometimes concealed in a small pot or jar, or covered with something else, when not required to give light.’

Lane, AEL, 1564, offers a more detailed description of this type of torch called muṣ̄alah or saʿlah (Lane 1860, 178) in Arabic, ‘A particular sort of large support for a light: (KL:) [i.e. a sort of cresset, consisting of a staff with a cylindrical frame of iron at the top which is filled with flaming pine-wood or the like or tarred rags . . . it is borne before travellers and others at night’ . . . ].

Whereas the → qyz consisted of a bundle of tightly wrapped rushes or kindle-wood, the dyPīl always had a shaft and a cup of clay or metal on top containing an impregnated cloth serving as a wick. It may be assumed that this type of torch with a cup on a handle developed out of the more primitive Egyptian torch with only a conical lump of fat at the top of a stick (H.G. Fischer, LÄ, Bd. 2, 79-81).

10. Bibliography

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