trimming knife, sniffer (?)

1. Statistics

2a. Literal Use

חָסַמּוּת, in form a feminine participium of the pi’el of the verb רָכָם, ‘to trim, prune’, occurs only in the plural absolute and, with the exception of 2 Kgs 12:14, always with the article (1 Kgs 7:50 = 2 Chr. 4:22; 2 Kgs 25:14 = Jer. 52:18). The חָסַמּוּת are mentioned among the utensils of the Temple of Solomon in partly stereotype enumerations. As such they are preceded by בָּשָׁמַל plur. in 1 Kgs 7:50 (lacking in the parallel 2 Chr. 4:22); 2 Kgs 12:14, by בָּשָׁמַל plur. and בָּשָׁמַל plur. in 2 Kgs 25:14 = Jer. 25:18, and followed by בָּשָׁמַל plur. (2 Kgs 12:14 + קֵתִיבָה plur., ‘clarions, trumpets’) as well as בָּשָׁמַל plur. (1 Kgs 7:50 = 2 Chr. 4:22 [+ בָּשָׁמַל plur]; Jer. 52:18 [בָּשָׁמַל plur. is lacking in the parallel 2 Kgs 25:14]). According to 1 Kgs 7:50 = 2 Chr. 4:22 the חָסַמּוּת were made of ‘“closed” gold’ (בָּשָׁמַל, ‘closed’ meaning that the gold plating was soldered with silver, Korpel 1991; cf. 2 Kgs 12:14, of gold or silver [בָּשָׁמַל]), according to 2 Kgs 25:14 = Jer. 52:18 they were of bronze (גָּבָה; cf. 1 Kgs 7:45). The √רָכָם (see section 4 below) points to some sort of cutting instrument, a kind of knife or a pair of scissors (cf. → מֹצֵר). Often the חָסַמּוּת are identified as snuffers (e.g. Dalman, AuS, Bd. 7, 232; ‘Dochtmesser’) for trimming the wicks (→ בָּשָׁמַל) of the lamps (→ מֹצֵר) of the lampstand (→ מֹצֵר). The meaning ‘snuffers’ is also attributed to another term, מֹצֵר, but these are rather forceps or tongs (→ מֹצֵר).

In view of the context of their occurrence knives with a more general cultic or another specific cultic use might have been intended. It has been suggested that they might be identified with pincers (‘Zwicker’) which look like pruning knives, and were used in treating the sacrificial meat to remove the fat and to press out the blood (‘den Winzerscheeren ähnliche Zwicker bei Behandlung des Opferfleisches [Fettablösen, Blutausdrücken]’, see Böttcher 1864, 64).

For practical reasons a pair of scissors is the most unlikely option. There is no evidence for the use of scissors in ancient
Egypt (*AEMI*, 282). In Greece scissors were used since the fifth century BCE (Hurschmann 2009). It is unlikely that they were invented earlier in Israel.

The closest cognates are Arabic *mizbar*, a small sickle (Dozy, *SDA*, t. 1, 579), and Palestinian Arabic *zābūra*, also a sickle (Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 3, 23-4, Pl. 16; Bd. 4, 312). For the equivalence of *m* and *b*, see Lipiński, *SLOC*, §11.6. The reason why a small, very sharp sickle-knife may have been used for trimming the wicks is that, as with a sickle cutting a cornstalk, the curved blade provided sufficient counter-pressure to cut off a piece of wick. Perhaps the מפרץ ‘forceps’ held the wick during this operation. For the use of such small sickles as pruning-knives on vines see Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 4, 312 and Avishur, Plates 90-1.

2b. Figurative Use
Not attested.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew
Not attested.

4. Cognates

**Semitic**: \(\sqrt{\text{zmr}/\text{zbr}/\text{dmr}}\) is attested in both South-Semitic and Northwest-Semitic dialects. In most cases it describes a careful mode of cutting, such as pruning a vine. Cf. *DRS*, 677-9; *CDG*, 631; *H AHAT*, 304; *DULAT*, 999; *DOSA*, 96-7. The root should not be confused with \(\text{dmr}/\text{zmr}/\text{šmr} \) ‘to guard, protect’ and \(\text{dmr}/\text{zmr} \) ‘to play music’.

**Ugaritic**: The verb *zbr* is used for the pruning of a vine. Cf. *DULAT*, 999.

**Jewish Aramaic**: Usually אָֽלוֹמּוֹזְכֶא or אָֽלוֹמָזְכֶא ‘scalpel, very sharp small knife’ is seen as a Greek loanword (so e.g. Levy, *CWT*, vol. 1, 170), but see below under Greek.

**Syriac**: Usually אָ‰מְלַיָא or א‰מַלָיָא ‘scalpel, very sharp small knife’ is seen as a Greek loanword (so e.g. Brockelmann, *LS*, 199), but see below under Greek.

**Arabic**: See above, section 2a.

**Greek**: Because in many languages, including Semitic dialects
and Greek, interchanges between l and r are frequent (cf. Lipiński, *SLOCG*, § 17.5) there is a remote possibility that Greek 

σμίλη, a ‘scalpel’, but also ‘a vinedresser’s pruning-knife’ (*LSJ*, 1619), is an early Semitic loanword.

5. Ancient Versions

Ø and other Greek versions: 1 Kgs 7:50; 2 Kgs 12:14(13) ἕλος plur. (hearing error or guesswork, cf. ἕλος as rendering of נְסֵמָה [Jer. 10:4]; ἕλος for נְסֵמָה [2 Chr. 3:9]), ‘nails’ (*LSJ*, 769; *GELS-L*, 198); Jer. 52:18 κρεάγρα, a neologism meaning ‘flesh-hook, fork for meat’ (*GELS-L*, 267), elsewhere used as a rendering for → רַכֶּם. Not translated in Ø 2 Kgs 25:14; 2 Chr. 4:22(21). The traditions about the renderings of α and σ and θ in Jer. 52:18 are too uncertain to be trusted.

ם: It is unclear whether כ נַחַר is an aramaicised transliteration meaning ‘musical instruments’ (so Levy, *CWT*, Bd. 2, 21) or a true Jewish-Aramaic equivalent (so Jastrow, *DTT*, 756: ‘snuffers’ and Dalman, *ANHT*, 230: ‘Lichtputze’, which was followed by most modern specialists in Targumic studies).

ץ: 1 Kgs 7:50 par. naftira ‘lamp, lantern’; 2 Kgs 12:14 selhā ‘hide, skin’; 2 Kgs 25:14 qardā ‘basket’; 2 Chr. 4:22 is lacking.

ף: 1 Kgs 7:50; 2 Kgs 12:14(13) fuscinulae ‘small three-pronged forks’; 2 Kgs 25:14 tridentes ‘tridents’; Jer. 52:18 psalteria ‘psalteries’ (a kind of lute); 2 Chr. 4:22 thymiateria ‘censers’.

6. Judaic Sources

Not attested as a utensil.

7. Illustrations

See section 2a above.

8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

Already the ancient versions were guessing about the nature of this cultic implement that was apparently used in connection with
the lamps of the temple. Modern scholars waver between ‘snuffer’ and ‘scissors’, but the latter are unlikely in the pre-exilic period. A third possibility, though also rather remote, is a special type of butcher’s knife used to remove fat and blood from the sacrificial meat. Finally some Arabic cognates point in the direction of a very sharp trimming knife in the shape of a small sickle. This would seem the best option.

10. Bibliography

This article should be cited as: