1. Statistics

2a. Literal Use
The word occurs three times, viz., Ezek. 9:2, 3, and 11. Though all three instances belong to the same vision of Ezekiel, the object is used in literal way. It is in the possession of a man in linen dress, possibly a clergyman, who belongs to a group of six persons. God ordered this group to kill the unfaithful people of Jerusalem. The godfearing people, however, had to be saved from death. Therefore they should get a mark on their foreheads. While in the verses 2 and 3 the word is used with the genitive רפסא, ‘of the scribe’, in the third case this addition is lacking. Unfortunately the genitive merely confirms that the object was a piece of scribal equipment, but does not throw light on its exact nature. However, the mere fact that רפסא had to be added would seem to exclude a technical term that was clear in itself. If it were a more general term like ‘equipment’ or ‘utensils’ (cf. Siegfried & Stade, HWAT, 669: ‘das Schreibzeug . . . am Gürtel getragen’; KBL, 845: ‘Schreibzeug writing-case’; Alonso Schökel, DBHE, 640: ‘Avíos, instrumentos’; Block 1997, 300-301, 305: ‘kit’; HAHAT, 1178: ‘Schreibzeug’), the addition of the genitive ‘of a scribe’ would become understandable.

The man in white linen has to pass through the city and has to put a mark, probably a Taw – a cross in ancient Hebrew (cf. Van Staaldhuine-Sulman 1993, 290) – on the foreheads of the faithful who are disturbed because of the defilement of Jerusalem (v. 4). This renders the current hypothesis that the רפסא was an inkpot more or less plausible (see the references below). However, the man clothed in linen is walking with the רפסא on his waist ( wyn:תנ). This expression cannot mean anything else (Gen. 37:34; 1 Kgs 2:5; 20:31-32; 2 Kgs 1:8; Ezek. 23:15; Ps. 66:11; Job 12:18) and explains some of the renderings found in the ancient versions (see section 5 below). It seems unlikely that a person walking in a white tunic would let an inkpot or palette with wet ink pads dangle from his girdle. The matter cannot be decided on the basis
of context alone.

2b. Figurative Use
Not attested.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew
Not attested.

4. Cognates

Semitic: The etymology is unclear. Some scholars suppose it to be related to Hebr. → נְפָנָה, a vessel (Gesenius & Roediger, TPC, 1240; Klein, CEDHL, 586), but both the sibilant and the last radical are problematic in that case.

Egyptian: Some authors connect the word with Egyptian gstj, ‘palette of a scribe’ (e.g. GB, 719; Kelso, CVOT, 39; Lambdin 1953, 154; Driver 1954, 86; KBL, 844; HALAT, 1042; Kaddari, MHH, 953; HAHAT. 1178 (with [?]); cf. Erman & Grapow, WÄS, 207; Hannig, SP, 822). However, Helck, BAV and Hoch, SWET, do not accept this connection.

Old and Imperial Aramaic: Connection with gšwt is highly uncertain (Hoftijzer & Jongeling, DNSI, vol. 1, 236).

Syriac: Syriac qestā, a pint or pot, is a loan from Greek ξεστης (Payne Smith [Margoliouth], CSD, 511) but might be considered, in spite of the different final consonant. Cf. Gesenius & Roediger, LTC, 1240; Fürst & V. Ryssel, HCHAT, Bd. 2, 323.

Classical Arabic: LTC, 1240, and BDB, 903, compare Arabic qašwah, a basket of palm-leaves (De Biberstein Kazimirski, DAF, t. 2, 744), but both the sibilant and the last radical are problematic in that case.

Modern South Arabic: If the word has a general meaning (see above), Oman Arabic qašš, ‘utensil’ (Leslau, CDG, 448) and Mehri qaš or qeš, ‘hand-bagage’ (Johnstone, ML, 241) might be considered.

Ethiopic: König, HAWAT, 413, and Leslau, CDG, 448, consider the possibility that Geez qašut, ‘vase, water pot, container for mead’ is related, but Leslau rejects the idea.

Greek: A connection with Greek χιστη, ‘basket, hamper’, but
also ‘writing-case’ (LSJ, 954) is certainly not to be excluded now that it has become clear that contacts between the Levant and Greece started much earlier than hitherto thought. See also Latin cista, ‘a wooden box or basket, often woven of slips or twigs, used for keeping money, clothes, books, fruit, etc.’ (LD, 344). The only dictionary considering this possibility is Zorell, LHA, 729.

5. Ancient Versions

ο and other Greek versions: The ο has ζωνὴ σαφφείρου, ‘sapphire belt’, apparently partly an erroneous vocalisation of the Hebrew. ι and ι are said to have κάστῳ γραμματέως, vocalising ῥθφ correctly, but probably simply transcribing ΡΗ. Another manuscript states that ι translated ῥθφ by μελανοθηκέων, ‘inkstand’. ι has πινακίδιον γραφέως, ‘a scribe’s small writing-tablet’.

τ: Targum Jonathan seems to agree with ι in rendering ρθφ κόσμος, ‘a scribe’s writing-tablet’.

υ: Follows ο with ῥα’sr ḥṣ’ dpqly’ bhṣwhy, ‘and a sapphire belt was girded on his loins’.

6. Judaic Sources

Not attested.

7. Illustrations

No suggestions.

8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

The Hebrew text implies that the utensil under investigation belongs to the equipment of a scribe. Moreover, the context gives the impression that the skin of the forehead of a number of persons should be marked during a hectic and turbulent incident.

Unfortunately the exact meaning of ῥθφ cannot be established with certainty, as was recognised by Honeyman 1939. From antiquity on translators have guessed after its meaning. Some opted
for ‘inkpot’ or ‘inkstand’. After the discovery of the palettes of Egyptian scribes some proposed a connection with the Egyptian word for ‘palette’, but other experts rejected this. Since the object was apparently carried on the loins, it is unlikely that a man would risk to soil his white tunic with wet ink (see section 1).

The explicit addition of the genitive ‘of a scribe’ in two of the three instances might suggest a rather general term like ‘equipment’ (section 1) and there is some very weak etymological support for this (section 4 under Modern South Arabic). But why would such a rare word have been chosen in a verse in which the common Hebrew word for equipment (→ הַשְׁקִינָה) is also used?

The best option would seem to accept that הַשְׁקִינָה is a Greek loan word meaning ‘writing-case’ (see section 4 under Greek), a possibility mentioned by Zorell. LHA, 729, who renders accordingly ‘vasculum utensilia scribae continens’ (a vessel containing a scribe’s utensils). In Egypt a wooden box has been found containing all the equipment a scribe might need: papyri, cakes of black and red ink, writing reeds and a mortar (Piacentini 2001, 190; cf. Lucas & Harris, textitAEMI, index s.v. ink). This is a more likely object to be carried around by a scribe in a white cloak who might hook the case on his girdle while walking.

10. Bibliography


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