POUCH, PURSE

1. Statistics

Three occurrences of נָעַרְוָא with apparently different meanings are left out of consideration: 1 Sam. 9:1; 2 Sam. 17:13; Amos 9:9.

2a. Literal Use

In Gen. 42:35 נָעַרְוָא is used twice in the construct state with פָּקַם, קָנָה ‘silver, money’ (the second time in double plural, cf. Brockelman 1956). It is a designation of a kind of money pouch here. Joseph had ordered to put the money with which his brothers had bought grain surreptitiously back into their → תְּנֵה or → לְחַמְמָא (Gen. 42:25, 27; 43:32; 44:1). Apparently the נָעַרְוָא was smaller than these containers. Every brother – distributive use of פָּי – finds his money pouch in his own sack. Apparently it was not unusual to include the purse with the payment. Possibly the latter consisted in small silver bars (German ‘Hacksilber’, a common tender) which were wrapped up in a piece of cloth, the root being נָעַרְוָא, ‘to tie up, bind in, wrap’. פָּקַם, קָנָה in Prov. 7:20 has the same meaning. Here the ‘loose woman’ who wants to seduce the unsuspecting young man assures him that her husband will not come home for some time because he is on a business trip and has taken with him the נָעַרְוָא. A money purse was taken along only if someone was planning to do important business which would occupy him for some time.

Less well-filled is the נָעַרְוָא in Hag. 1:6 where the general economical depression is sketched with some catching phrases recalling the wording of curses (cf. Lev. 26:26; Hos. 4:10; Mic. 6:14; Zech. 8:10). The situation is so desperate that the wages of a daily labourer (מטאָמ) are insufficient for his daily sustenance. He earns his money נָעַרְוָא, so to say, for a purse with holes (pass. part. Qal יִקַּב ‘to perforate’). The imagery is recognisable: uncoined, sharp-edged pieces of silver cause wear on the bottom of the purse the top of which is tied up. Exactly because the text mentions a purse with holes in it, Hag. 1:6 is rightly seen as the first biblical evidence for the use of a money purse (Loewe 1955).

In these cases it is unclear how and where the purse or sachet
was kept, but Song 1:13 suggests that normally it was attached to a string around the neck and worn on the most safe place, directly on the skin of the breast, hidden by the garment. Not unlike the neck wallets tourists wear nowadays. Like the signet ring (→ מְלֹחָן), it was not removed, not even at night, when people were sleeping in the nude (cf. Cant. 5:3; KTU 1.2.III.20). In Song 1:13 מִרְיָם is a pouch containing myrrh. The ‘bride’ compares her beloved to a מִרְיָם מִנְשָׁרָה which rests (ipf. √לִינָן) between her breasts. In the ambiguous language of love it is he who is represented by the pouch (cf. v. 12). As the myrrh is resting on her breast, so is his head resting lovingly on her breast, he is like a permanent perfume to her, adorably close. A pouch or bag to wear treasured objects on the breast was very common, cf. the pictures in the literature cited under section 7 as well as Keel 1986 who interprets מִרְיָם מִנְשָׁרָה as an amulet: ‘Seine intime und sichere Zugehörigkeit zu ihr schützt sie. Er verleiht ihr Lebenskraft und Ansehen.’ (cf. Fabry, TWAT, Bd. 6, 1120). Others deem it more likely that מִרְיָם מִנְשָׁרָה is a bundle or posy (e.g. Garrett 2004; Stoop-Van Paridon 2005), but this is difficult to reconcile with the other occurrences of the word. Because it was the girl’s intention to intoxicate her lover with her fragrance, it is unlikely that the מִרְיָם was made of leather. Rather it was made some kind of fabric. Initially myrrh is an oily resin exuding from the incised stems and branches of the Commiphora abyssinica (Berg.) shrub, but eventually it solidifies and can be crushed into granules which give off their perfume when warmed (Feliks 1968; Zohary 1982; Exum 2005).

2b. Figurative Use

In Job 14:17a מִרְיָם is used in a figurative sense, as a term describing the ‘pouch’ in which Job’s transgression (תַּשֵׁת) is ‘sealed’ (√משתת). Both the fact that a word for a relatively small container is used and that thrice a singular is chosen to describe Job’s sin (Job 14:16-17) would seem to indicate that Job does not have the feeling that he has to account for much. In v. 17b it is stated that his iniquity must be ‘plastered over’ (√משלט, meaning somewhat uncertain). This partially explains the image of a pouch in which something precious is tucked away or hidden, but exegetes differ of opinion with regard to the question whether this hid-
ing is for the better (God will not come back to it) or the worse (God keeps it in store for the day of judgment, cf. Hos. 13:12). Job 14:13 would seem to indicate that Job is still hoping for a positive verdict.

Tur-Sinai 1957 and Clines 1989 erroneously state that the sealing (\(\sqrt{\text{µtj}}\)) of the \(\text{ר"וּץ}\) means that we are not dealing with a pouch here, but with a kind of napkin-ring around a folded document. If one tucks away something of great value or importance in a \(\text{ר"וּץ}\), it is certainly possible to draw its string extra tight and to seal it with a clay bulla or stick it down with wax (cf. Lambert 1960; Fohrer 1963; Wildberger 1972; Hartley 1988).

Nabal’s wife Abigail is confident that if someone would rise up to pursue David and to seek his life (\(\text{לָכֵכְס תאָדָג} \text{מְסֵנ} \), 1 Sam. 25:29a), David’s \(\text{מְסֵנ}\) will be safely bound ‘in the pouch of the living’ (\(\text{מְשַׁמְרָר} \text{תְּיִיצְנָה} \), v. 29b) kept close to God’s heart, but that God will sling out (\(\sqrt{\text{לכָּל}}\), v. 29c) the \(\text{מְסֵנ}\) of his enemies like a slingstone. Several exegetes connect the \(\text{גָּשַׁם} \text{ר"וּץ}\) with ‘the book of life / of the living’ (Ps. 69:29, cf. Exod. 32:32; Isa. 4:3; Dan. 12:1; Mal. 3:16) which entails understanding \(\text{ר"וּץ}\) as a tied-up document. This interpretation seems unlikely if one takes into consideration a) the fact that nowhere in the O.T. \(\text{ר"וּץ}\) describes tying up a document (not even in Isa. 8:16, cf. Wildberger 1972), and that b) the careful structure of the verse (cf. Fokkelman 1986) indicates an antithetical correspondence between the content of v. 29b and v. 29c. David’s \(\text{מְסֵנ}\) is protected by putting it into the \(\text{גָּשַׁם} \text{ר"וּץ}\), the enemy’s \(\text{מְסֵנ}\) is hurled out of the sling.

Cuneiform texts from Nuzi have thrown new light on this passage (Oppenheim 1959; Eissfeldt 1960; Abusch 1981; Glassner 2000). A number of small pebbles corresponding to the number of sheep entrusted to a shepherd was enclosed in a ‘pouch’ of clay. Every pebble represented a sheep. On the outside a few lines of text and a seal impression identified the shepherd’s master. Subsequently the clay ball was baked in the sun so that its contents could not be changed without breaking it. When the shepherd returned from pasturing his flock, the owner broke into the clay ball and established how many full-grown sheep were missing. Usually this was offset against the number of new-born lambs.
Because part of the increase of the herd represented the wages of the shepherd (cf. Isa. 40:10), unaccountable loss was deducted from his earnings. This background definitely favours the translation ‘pouch of the living’ over ‘pouch of life’ in 1 Sam. 25:29 and also excludes the magical interpretation proposed by Marmorstein 1925 (cf. Fabry, TWAT, Bd. 6, 1121).

3. Epigraphic Hebrew
Not attested.

4. Cognates

SEMITIC: The √ 실행 with the basic meaning of ‘to be narrow, tight’, and/or transitive ‘to make narrow, tighten’, is attested in many Semitic languages (cf. TWAT, Bd. 6, 1113; HALAT, 987, 990; Klein, CEDHL, 556-7).

AKKADIAN: suraru ‘Beutel’ (Salonen, Hausgeräte, Teil 1, 192) is regarded as a loan from Aramaic by Von Soden, AHw, 1113 (‘Bündel, Geldbeutel’).

UGARITIC: Connection with Ugar. šrrτ ‘peaks, heights’ (Del Olmo Lete & Sanmartín, DULAT, 791) is unlikely.

POSTBIBLICAL HEBREW: צִפְרִי with the basic meaning of ‘bundle, packet, money-bag, purse’; Jastrow, DTT, 1300 ‘knot, bundle, bag’.


MANDAIC: švarā ‘Geldbeutel’ (Macuch, MD, 397).

CLASSICAL ARABIC: šurrat ‘purse for money’ (Lane, AEL, 1672); ‘petit sachet dans lequel on met la poudre d’or . . . [ou] les drogues
et les épices dont on se sert pour assaisonner des viandes’ (‘small sachet in which people put gold dust . . . [or] drugs and spices which people use for seasoning meat’ (Dozy, SDA, t. 1, 826). šarirat ‘coins wrapped in a purse’ (Wehr, DWMA, 510).

5. Ancient Versions


ו: נרדה תכסים ‘their money-purses’.

ס: Gen. 42:35 כ ‘his money-purse’; מ ‘money-purse’; ק ‘the knot with his money’.


Job 14:17 ידוע בכסף ידankind אפר.loads ‘sealed in the book of records (of) the rebellious’.

Prov. 7:20 ב ‘sealed in the book of records’.

Song 1:13: the elaborate paraphrasis connects נרדה with the binding of Isaac.

ד: Gen. 42:35 נרדה דקסק ‘his money-purse’.

1 Sam. 25:29 נרדה דחק ‘in the pouch of life/the living’.

Hag. 1:6 נרדה נתיב ‘a perforated purse’.

Job 14:17 ידוע בנב ‘sealed in a purse’.

Prov. 7:20 נרדה דקסק ‘a money-purse’.

Song 1:13 נרדה דמע ‘a sachet of myrrh’.

ו: Mostly sacculum ‘small bag’ (Hag. 1:6; Job 14:17; Prov. 7:20), but fasciculus ‘bundle’ in 1 Sam. 25:29 (fasciculum viventium ‘bundle of the living’) and Song 1:13. Gen. 42:35 ligata pecunias ‘the money bound in (the opening of the sacks)’.
6. Judaic Sources

In rabbinic sources the literal meaning of יָרָיחַ is still attested. The pouch was used to keep precious things like pearls (Krauss, TA, Bd. 1, 200). A possible allusion to 1 Sam. 25:29 is found in Sir. 6:15 (16), ‘A faithful friend is a pouch of life’. There is no connotation of future bliss here. In 1QH 10:20 (22) the singer exults with an obvious allusion to 1 Sam. 25:29, אֲרוֹן יָרָיחַ מַעְשֶׁה יָפִי מְסֹפֵר בּוֹ ‘I give you thanks, Lord, because you have put my soul in the pouch of the living’. The context indicates clearly that he feared for his life because ‘vicious men have sought my soul’, so he does not apply this phrase to the afterlife, as was the case in later Judaism (e.g. b. Shab., 152b; b. Ḥag., 12b; b. Meg., 14b; Sifre Num., 139; Deut. R., 10:4; Qoh. R., 3:25; Midr. Ps., 30:3; for an exceptional reference to terrestrial life, cf. Num. R., 11:5). A sixth-century CE Jewish epitaph (CIJ 661:4-5) from Tortosa, Spain, confirms this late interpretation: יָפִי מַעְשֶׁה אֲרוֹן יָרָיחַ ‘May her soul come into the pouch of the living’. The inscription is trilingual. In the shorter Greek and Latin versions this phrase is missing, probably because the translator was unable to render the biblical metaphor for a public unacquainted with its background. On Jewish graves one often finds the abbreviation יָפִי מַעְשֶׁה יָרָיחַ מְסֹפֵר בּוֹ which stands for יָפִי מַעְשֶׁה אֲרוֹן יָרָיחַ מְסֹפֵר בּוֹ ‘May his soul be bound up in the pouch of the living’.

7. Illustrations

Illustrations in Eissfeldt 1960, Fig. 1-7; Abusch 1981, 5, Pl. 2; Keel 1986, 69, Fig. 20.

8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

The יָרָיחַ was an object which meant much to its owner. Its sole purpose was to put away precious matters: gems, silver bars, money, expensive perfumery. Both context and cognates suggest that the יָרָיחַ was a small pouch or purse, usually tied with a string through its upper part. The cord went around the neck so that the יָרָיחַ rested on the naked breast to prevent robbery,
under garments during the day, but because its contents were so precious, also during the night if people slept in the nude. This lended a special aura of intimacy to the צדרח and explains why it could become a metaphor for one’s beloved. The circumstance that Joseph put the purses of his brothers surreptitiously back in their donkey-sacks should probably be seen as exceptional.

Although it is possible that the צדרח was sometimes made of leather, its use as a device to release a pleasant scent when warmed by the skin suggests that in some cases textile was the preferred material. Despite some renderings of the ancient versions there is no hard evidence for the fairly popular translation ‘bundle’.

Its status as a container for precious items made the צדרח also an ideal metaphor to express the feeling that some immaterial things were too precious (David’s life) or too important (the evidence of Job’s presumed misbehaviour) to treat them carelessly. The expression צדרח ירוחם יְהִי in 1 Sam. 25:29 should be translated ‘in the pouch of the living’. Initially this had nothing to do with the afterlife. Only in later Judaism it was interpreted in this way.

10. Bibliography

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