

griddle, (baking-)plate

מַחֲבֵת

1. Statistics

Torah: 3. Nebiim: 1. Ketubim: 1. Total: 5.

Attested in Lev. 2:5; 6:14; 7:9; Ezek. 4:3; 1 Chron. 23:29.

2a. Literal Use

In the first chapters of Leviticus the מַחֲבֵת figures in the preparation of the מִנְחָה (grain-offering), together with the → תַּנּוּר ('oven') and the → מִרְחֶשֶׁת ('frying-pan'). In Lev. 7:9 the three of them are mentioned together: 'Every cereal offering that is baked (אָשָׁר וְכָל־נִעְשָׂה) in the oven and all that is prepared (הֵאָפָה, cf. 6:10) in the oven and all that is prepared (וְכָל־נִעְשָׂה) in the frying-pan and on (עַל) a מַחֲבֵת (א: המחבת 'the מַחֲבֵת')— all these offerings shall be for the priest who offers it. This looks like a summary of the law on the מִנְחָה in the second chapter: it shall consist of fine flour (סֵלֶת, 'wheat groats, semolina'), with oil (שֶׁמֶן) and frankincense (לְבָנָה) (Lev. 2:1). When it is baked in the oven this shall result in unleavened cakes (חֲלֹוֹת מִצֵּת) or unleavened wafers (רִקְיָקֵי מִצֵּוֹת), mixed (בְּלוּלָה) or spread (מְשָׁחִים) with oil (Lev. 2:4, cf. 7:12). Verses 5-6 describe the product obtained from a מַחֲבֵת: if your offering (קָרְבָּנְךָ) is a מִנְחָה עַל־הַמַּחֲבֵת, then it shall be of unleavened fine flour mixed (בְּלוּלָה, cf. v. 4) with oil (v. 5): after it has been broken into pieces (פְּתוּת . . . פְּתוּתִים) you shall sprinkle oil on it (v. 6). The מִנְחָה from the frying-pan is also made of fine flour with oil (v. 7). Unlike v. 4, no word for 'baking' or 'cooking' is used in verses 5 and 7. Had this been indicated already sufficiently by the nouns used for the heating utensils themselves?

The use of the preposition עַל before מַחֲבֵת in Lev. 7:9 (as against בָּ for the other utensils) argues in favour of a 'baking-plate' on which the cakes are baked as distinct from the 'frying-pan'. The מִצֵּת that were baked on it, could be broken into pieces (cf. 6:14).

In Ezek. 4:3 a מַחֲבֵת בְּרֹזֶל, 'an iron griddle' is mentioned (cf. Section 2b). Probably also the 'griddle' in the tabernacle/temple (Lev. 6-7) was an iron plate, although griddles of clay were and are known to exist too (see below, Section 8). Obviously heavy use made iron a more practical material. Kelso, *CVOT*, 23, considers

copper a suitable metal too. The griddle cannot have been small because the cakes baked on it had to be broken into pieces and because several cakes were baked on it at the same time. Also the rendering of the ס points to a fairly large object (see Section 5 below). However, there is no indication of its exact shape or size in Lev. 2:5 and 7:9.

For the offering on the day of the anointing of the high priest Lev. 6:13(20) mentions a tenth of an ephah of fine flour: half of it in the morning and half in the evening. On the basis of the traditional content of an ephah (about 35 litres; cf. De Vaux, *IAT*, t. 1, 306-09, a.o.) just under two litres should cover the מִחְבֵּת each morning and evening. A plate of about 40 cm (16 inches) diameter (or: length and width) would then be required. However, since it is impossible to establish the capacity of the ephah with any degree of certainty (\rightarrow אִיפֶה), the real dimension of the מִחְבֵּת remains in doubt.

In the description of Lev. 6:14, the מִנְחָה is made again ‘on a griddle with oil’ (עַל-מִחְבֵּת בַּשֶּׁמֶן). The dough had to be מְרֻבֶּכֶת – the meaning of the latter participle of the Hofal is disputed (Milgrom 1991, 399-400). On the basis of Lev. 7:12, where it goes together with בְּלוּלָה ‘mixed’, it has often been rendered ‘well-mixed’, but exactly the proximity of the two terms suggests a different meaning, possibly ‘decocted dough’, dough heated until all water has evaporated (cf. Akkadian *rabāku* ‘to decoct, reduce’).

1 Chron. 23 describes the subdivision of the Levites and their tasks. These included assisting the Aaronites in ‘the care for the courts and the chambers, the cleansing of all that is holy’ (v. 28, cf. 9:26), continued in v. 29 (cf. 9:29.31-32) with (the care) for the showbread (לְלֶחֶם הַמִּעֲרֹכֶת, cf. 9:32), for the fine flour, the cereal offering, and the wafers of unleavened bread (לְסֻלֹת לְמִנְחָה), for the baking plate (לְמִחְבֵּת), for the ‘decocted dough’ (לְמְרֻבֶּכֶת), and for ‘all measures of quantity and size’. In this series it would appear that מִחְבֵּת does not signify the baking-plate proper, but stands for its products, that which in 1 Chron. 9:31 is indicated with הַחֲבִיתִים (from the same stem, see Section 4 below). In this connection, it could also be a matter of debate whether ‘all measures of quantity and size’

should be understood as (watching over) ‘the required quantity of the offerings’ (thus De Vaux, *IAT*, t. 1, 297-298), or as (taking care of) ‘the measuring vessels’.

2b. Figurative Use

In Ezekiel 4-5 YHWH instructs the prophet to perform a number of symbolic acts (cf. Viberg 2007, 182-207). In Ezek. 4:1-2 he engraves in the still soft clay of a brick <a plan of> the city of Jerusalem and surrounds it with the whole armoury of the siegeworks of his days: a siege wall, a mound, camps of the besiegers, and battering rams all around. In v. 3 he has to take a **מַחֲבֵת בַּרְזֶל**, apparently ‘A household utensil which would be close at hand’ (Cooke 1936, 51, cf. Zimmerli 1969, 114: ‘Aus den Haushaltsgeräten herausgegriffen’). The prophet has to put it <as a> wall of iron (**קִיר בַּרְזֶל**) between himself and the city. From behind this wall he shall fasten his eyes (literally: his face) on her, bringing her in a state of siege and hemming her in. This will be a sign for the house of Israel. Again, nothing is said about the shape of the iron plate, but in this case a rectangular shape seems obvious. Because Ezekiel must represent the attackers, the iron plate between him and the city could be understood as the iron armour-plating protecting the warriors operating the battering rams (**פְּרִים**, v. 2) from the arrows of the defenders (see Fig. 1 on next page).

So the iron baking plate seems to convey the message that God will protect the enemies instead of sinful Jerusalem. In addition to the symbolic act of vv. 1-2, the severity and irrevocability of YHWH’s intention are emphasized by the iron plate and by the relentless gaze of the prophet: ‘Härte, Undurchdringlichkeit und Unzerbrechbarkeit der Platte verbildlichen die entsprechenden Züge an Jahwes Tun’ (Zimmerli 1969, 114).

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.



Fig. 1: Scene from Sennacherib's siege of Lachish.

4. Cognates

SEMITIC: The *hapax legomenon* מִחְבֵּתִים in 1 Chron. 9:31 which evidently refers to the priestly cakes baked on the מִחְבֵּתָה seemingly points to a root *h/hbt*. Because this root is rare in all Semitic languages, it was suggested early on that it might be connected with the well-known root *h/hbz* which in many Semitic languages means 'to bake', cf. Arabic. *hubz* 'flat bread' (so e.g. Gesenius & Roediger, *TPC*, 443; Fürst & Ryssel, *HCHAT*, Bd. 1, 374; *GB*, 412; Klein, *CEDHL*, 207). However, Leslau, *CDG*, 257 rightly deems this proposal 'unlikely'.

From an etymological point of view a connection with the root *hbt* or the root *hbs* 'to beat' (suggested by Lewy, *WTM*, Bd. 2, 13) is somewhat less unlikely (cf. English 'batter'), but it is not a mixing bowl we are looking for.

If the root is *h/hbt* indeed, not all problems are resolved, however, because the grammatically correct form should have been

מִקְבֵּתָה*¹. Of course it is possible to surmise that this in turn was contracted to מִקְבֵּת (thus already Gesenius & Roediger, *TPC*, 444a), but this is obviously a makeshift solution.

A possibility which hitherto does not seem to have been explored is that the root *hbt* is a denominative from a noun **ḥabbat* ‘grains, semolina’ which itself would have been derived from a root *hbb* (see below under Arabic).

CLASSICAL ARABIC: Perhaps *ḥabb*, *ḥabbat* ‘grains, bread’; *ḥabbāb* ‘merchant of corn’; *muḥabbab* ‘full of grains’ (Lane, *AEL*, 496-7; Kazimirski, *DAF*, 363-4; Dozy, *SDA*, 239-242).

MODERN EGYPTIAN ARABIC: Perhaps *ḥubūb* ‘a dish prepared from wheat that has been soaked in water for two or three days, and is then cooked with sugar’ (Kazimirski, *DAF*, 364).

MODERN PALESTINIAN ARABIC: Perhaps *ḥabb*, *ḥbāt* ‘grains’ (Barthélemy, *DAFA*, 141).

5. Ancient Versions

⊖ and other Greek versions: ⊖ has τήγανον in all instances, also for מִקְבֵּתָה in 1 Chron. 9:31. The Greek word is usually rendered ‘frying-pan’ or the like in modern dictionaries (see e.g. *GELS-L*, 474b; *GELS-M*, 678a). The same word describes a fairly large instrument of torture by heat in 2 Macc. 7:3, cf. the derivative verb in 2 Macc. 7:5. In 2 Sam. 13:9 τήγανον is the rendering of → מִשְׁרָתָה, a baking-pan.

⊕: In all places the Targumim have מסררהא or מסריהא, apparently derived from the Hebrew term in 2 Sam. 13:9. Jastrow, *DTT*, 812a: ‘a mould for frying a batter’, in gen. ‘pan’; Dalman, *ANHT*, 244b: ‘Pfanne’.

⊗: Follows ⊖ closely by choosing the Greek loanword *t[?]gn* = τήγανον in all instances, except 1 Chron. 23:29, where it is left untranslated. Brockelmann, *LS*, 268: ‘sartago’; Payne Smith, *TS*, 1431: ‘sartago’; Payne Smith (Margoliouth), *CSD*, 167b: <Gr> τήγανον, ‘a grid iron, an instrument of torture’.

⊘: *sartago* ‘frying-pan, baking pan’ (Lewis & Short, *LD*, 1632), but 2 Sam. 13:9 ‘quod coxerat’, 1 Chron. 9:31 ‘[quae] in sartagine [frigebantur]’.

6. Judaic Sources

The word is not attested in Qumran. In Mishnah and Talmud מִחְבֵּת is discussed several times, cf. Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 4, 42: ‘Das jüdische Recht (Men. V.8) unterscheidet *maḥabat* als deckellos oder flach von der mit Deckel versehenen oder tiefen *marḥéšet*: Platte und Pfanne oder Tiegel wären also wohl die richtigen Übersetzungen’ (see also *AuS*, Bd. 7, 211; Forbes, *SAT*, vol. 6, 63). The מִחְבֵּת should be prepared in a special room in the temple (Men. XI.3; Mid. I.4, cf. Tam. I.3 – *AuS*, Bd. 4, 42, cf. 66), but מִחְבֵּת and → מִרְחֶשֶׁת also formed part of the private household (Men. V.8, Sifra, 11a, cf. Ezek. 4:3! – *AuS*, Bd. 4, 42).

7. Illustrations

Cf. Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 4, Abb. 9-12; Galling, *BRL*², 30, Fig. 1; Avitzur, 107-8 (both rectangular and circular griddles); *LBI*, 145, Fig. 70b.

8. Archaeological Remarks

Galling, *BRL*², 29-30 (art. ‘Backen und Backofen’ [M. Kellerman]). Baking plates of clay have been unearthed in Megiddo and Taanakh. [More will be added later on].

9. Conclusion

All evidence points to the meaning ‘griddle, baking-plate’ (Backplatte) for מִחְבֵּת, as distinct from the → תַּנּוּר (oven) and the → מִרְחֶשֶׁת, (frying-pan, cf. Lev. 7:9, discussed in Section 2a).

In scholarly works one often finds references to the Arabic *ṣāḡ*, a circular, convex iron plate to bake very thin bread on (e.g. Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 1.D, 39-73). It could help us to form our idea of the מִחְבֵּת of TeNaKh. However, griddles come in different shapes, also rectangular and flat. The plate is placed on some stones and is heated by a charcoal fire.

At least in the case of Ezek. 4:3 (where it is of iron, see Section 2b.) it seems to have had a rectangular shape, not unlike modern flat griddles, though the heating will have been far less sophisticated in Antiquity.



Baking wafer-thin bread on a round iron griddle in Oman
(photo Janny de Moor).

There is archaeological evidence for ceramic baking-plates, but Ezek. 4:3 proves that also iron griddles were in use. 'It may be of iron in every instance, as in Ezek. iv,3, but the purpose would earlier be served by convex discs of pottery' (Honeyman 1939, 11). 'A ceramic disc would be the griddle of the common man of all periods', etc. (Kelso, *CVOT*, 51).

The מִנְחָה-offering of Lev. 2 could be home-made, but those prepared by the priests (Lev. 6 and 7, cf. 1 Chron. 9 and 23) were made in the temple. According to later tradition there was a special room in the temple for baking the מִנְחָה (see Section 6.). Because of the heavy use the מַחְבֵּת in the temple surely would have been made of iron.

In 1 Chron. 23:29 מַחְבֵּת rather indicates the product of the baking plate, like its cognate חֲבִיטִים in 1 Chron. 9:31. This product

consisted of a thin, hard-baked cake, made from fine grain mixed with oil, that should be broken into pieces (Lev. 2:6, 6:14).

10. Bibliography

Dalman, *AuS*, Bd. 4, 42f., 66, 125: 'Platte'; pfannenähnlich (Bd. 7, 211) – Baentsch 1903: B. Baentsch, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numeri* (HKAT, 2), Göttingen 1903, 316: <ad Lev. 2:5>: 'rundes, eisernes Backblech, wie sie noch heute bei den Bed. i. Gebr. sind, Burckhardt, Bed. 46' – *BDB*, 290a: 'flat plate, pan, or griddle for baking'; 2. <Ez. 4:3> 'a plate of iron' – *BRL*², 30a: 'Backplatte' – Cooke 1936: G.A. Cooke, *The Book of Ezekiel* (ICC), Edinburgh 1936, 51 – Kelso, *CVOT*, No. 51: 'flat disc/pan or griddle', 'a pan-cake griddle' – Alonso Schökel, *DBHE*, 391: 'Sartén' – *DCH*, vol. 5, 214b: 1a. 'griddle, baking tray of clay or iron, for grain offering', b. <Ez. 4:3> 'plate'; 2. <1 Chron. 23:29> 'cake, baked on griddle' – *GB*, 412b: 'eiserne Platte z. Backen u. Rösten' – *HAHAT*, 656: '1. Backplatte, aus Eisen Ez 4,3, f. Speiseopfer Lv 2,5. 6,14. 7,9. – 2. Pfannengebäck 1Ch 23,29' – *HALAT*, 537b: 1. '(metallene) Platte, Blech zum Rösten u. Backen'; 2. <1 Chron. 23:29> 'Plattengebäck' – *HAWAT*, 217a: 'Tiegel' – *HCHAT*, Bd. 1, 720: 'Russtiegel, -pfanne, worin Brodfladen gebacken wird' – Honeyman 1939: A.M. Honeyman, 'The Pottery Vessels of the O.T.', *PEQ* 1939, 76-90 (84, No. 11): 'The references are all late (...) a griddle on which a sort of pancake, made of oil and flour, was baked or fried' – *HWAT*, 336: 'ein flaches Blech zum Backen' – *KBL*, 511b: '(metallene) Platte (z. Rösten u. Backen) *griddle* (of metal; for frying a. baking)' – Stager, *LBI*, 66-67, 145, Fig. 70b – *LHA*, 425a/b: 'sartago, vas planum metalleum in quo panis coquitur' – *MHH*, 598: אֶף נְחוֹשֶׁת אִו חָרָס ... כְּלִי בְרִזָּל – Milgrom 1991: J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (AncB, 3), New York 1991 – Forbes, *SAT*, vol. 6, 63: '(frying-) pan (flat metal plate)' – Gesenius & Roediger, *TPC*, 444a: 'sartago' – Viberg 2007: Å. Viberg, *Prophets in Action: An Analysis of Prophetic Symbolic Acts in the Old Testament* (CB.OT, 55), Stockholm 2007 – Zimmerli 1969: W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* (BK 13/1), Neukirchen 1969.

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