

A PHOENICIAN “INCENSE ALTAR” FROM TELL EL-BURAK, LEBANON

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Abstract: This paper discusses an Iron Age incense altar which was found out of context in Tell el-Burak, South Lebanon. It is the fourth of its kind to be found in that country. The small stone altar is characterized by the presence of a band on its upper part and by the absence of horns. It belongs to the category of freestanding altars defined by Gitin. The study suggests that this altar did not have a cultic function as no traces of burning and no depression on its surface were detected. Rather, and by analogy with the Ekron evidence, it is proposed that it may have been connected with an industry, wine or olive oil production, that was taking place probably on Tell el-Burak. This hypothetical function was suggested in the light of the discovery of a large vat on the southern slope of the Tell which was obviously part of an industrial installation and in the presence of *in situ* broken amphorae in one of the houses.

Keywords: Incense Altar; Tell el-Burak; Phoenician.

Tell el-Burak is a coastal site on the south Lebanese coast between Sidon and Sarepta. The site was occupied in the Middle Bronze and in the Iron Age II and III.¹ The Phoenician settlement at Tell el-Burak was exposed in area 3 on the southern slope of the mound (FIG. 1). Excavations in this area took place in 2003 and 2005 and uncovered two contiguous structures which were labelled House 1 and 2.² After a long interruption work was resumed in this area in 2011. In that year, while removing the topsoil in Square 29/24 south of House 1, a small “incense altar” (inv. No. TB11: 11) was found (FIG. 2). West of the area where this object was exposed was a 7th c. BC building labeled House 3. This house, probably a storage building, collapsed and its site together with the space south of House 1 became an open area which was not rebuilt until the end of the site occupation around 350 BC.³ It is possible that this altar was originally either in House 1 or in House 3 but it was found out of context in the topsoil and it is difficult to determine both its original location and its exact date. This short paper will try to place it in the context of incense altars of the southern Levant. I offer this modest contribution to Sandro Bondi, a dear colleague and an internationally renowned scholar who contributed greatly to the field of Phoenician archaeology.

1. DESCRIPTION (FIG. 2)

TB11: 11 is a rectangular altar made of porous sandstone with sides tapering towards the top. It is 18 cm high and measures 11 x 11.5 cm at its base and 7 x 9 cm at its top. At two-thirds of its height, 5 cm from the top, is a 1.5 cm wide protruding rounded band that runs around three of the four sides. According to Gitin

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1 KAMLAH – SADER 2003 and 2008; KAMLAH – SADER – SCHMITT forthcoming.

2 KAMLAH – SADER 2003.

3 KAMLAH – SADER – SCHMITT forthcoming.

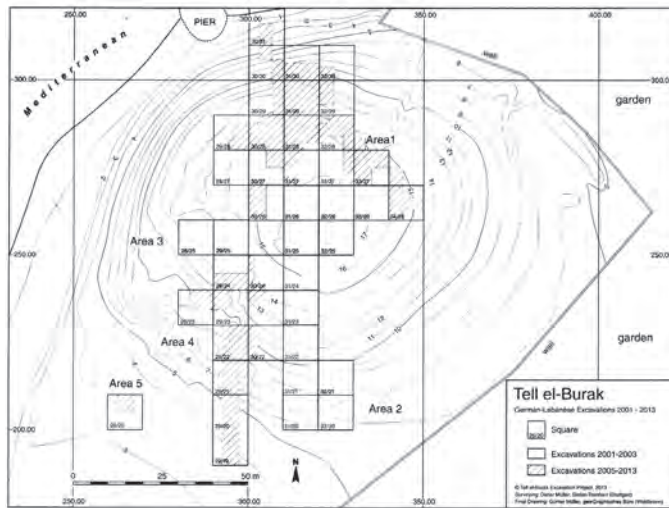


FIG. 1. Plan of Tell el-Burak showing the location of areas 3 and 4 (Tell el-Burak Archaeological Project. Surveyors Dieter Müller and Stefan Reinhardt. Drawing Günther Müller).

bands were «probably the result of the stone cutter's technique of fashioning the shaft and groove»⁴ but he adds that even when the grooves disappeared «the bands continued to appear... most probably fashioned for their own sake».⁵ This seems to be the case of the Tell el-Burak altar which does not have a groove. The three sides where the band appears are smoothed while the fourth is either broken or left unworked (FIG. 2 right). One of the stones upper corners is damaged and a fragment is missing from one of its lower corners. The top surface of the stone is flat and does not show any depression nor is there a protuberance at the corners reminding of horns. Furthermore, no trace of burning could be detected.

2. COMPARATIVE STUDY

TB11: 11 belongs to the category of “incense altars”, a conventional term which does not necessarily reflect the actual function of these items since the majority of the altars that were discovered in Palestine bore no traces of burning.⁶ After having thoroughly reviewed scholarly opinion about their function Gitin concluded that «the identification of these altars as incense burners is adopted as a form of designation» only.⁷ This is also the case of the Tell el-Burak example which has no depression on its upper surface and which does not present any trace of burning to suggest its use as incense burner. There remains of course the possibility that incense was burned in a bowl placed on the altar but the absence of a depression to hold the bowl makes this suggestion unlikely.

Gitin has collected and studied all the incense altars found in Palestine⁸ and has classified them based on their form as well as on their archaeological context.⁹ More recently, Spagnoli¹⁰ has reviewed all the incense altars found in the southern Levant and in the Phoenician settlements in the Mediterranean. She has adopted¹¹ the classification of Gitin¹² who identified mainly two large categories of incense altars: the free-standing and the engaged ones. The former are finished on all sides while the latter have one unfinished side which indicates that they were leaning on or engaged in a wall. These incense altars can be horned, T- or block-shaped, have grooves or bands and a depression on their upper surface.

4 GITIN 1989, p. 63.

5 GITIN 1989, p. 63.

6 GITIN 1992, p. 47.

7 GITIN 1992, p. 45.

8 GITIN 1989 and 1992.

9 GITIN 1992, p. 45.

10 SPAGNOLI 2015.

11 SPAGNOLI 2015, p. 216.

12 GITIN 1989, p. 61.

From a typological point of view the Tell el-Burak altar belongs to the free-standing type with a band. The fact that one side may have been left unfinished may suggest that it was leaning against the wall or the entrance of a room. However, such engaged altars are normally larger than the Burak example and this assumption does not seem plausible. Small altars like the Tell el-Burak example were meant to be transportable and easily movable.

From a formal point of view, the Tell el-Burak altar finds its closest parallel in the three examples which were discovered by Brahim Kaoukabani in Kharayeb, a site between Sidon and Tyre.¹³ They were found in the lower stratum (*couche 2*)

of a cultic building and they were dated to the 6th c. BC.¹⁴ These three small fragmentary altars are made of a soft local limestone, and they are very badly damaged. They are slightly larger than the Tell el-Burak example and measure respectively: 0,49 x 0,31 m; 0,30 x 0,19 m; 0,29 x 0,305 m. However, they present the same characteristic rounded band at two thirds of their height but they display a slight molding or groove reminiscent of an Egyptian gorge. Unlike the Burak example they have a square depression on their upper surface which suggests their use as burners or as stands to receive a bowl with a burning material, whether incense or any other substance. This function is also suggested by the cultic nature of the building where they were found. These three altars are the only examples of this type of incense altars that were found in Lebanon. No other site, even those where a cultic building was exposed such as Beirut,¹⁵ Tell Arqa¹⁶ or Sarepta¹⁷ has yielded similar objects. The Tell el-Burak example is the fourth incense altar to be found in Lebanon and is therefore a welcome addition to the Lebanese corpus. The four described altars from Kharayeb and Tell el-Burak differ from the Palestinian examples illustrated by Gitin and present some affinities with the small-size altars found in the Phoenician settlements in the west, such as the one from Motya.¹⁸ The larger and more monumental freestanding Sidonian examples from Bustan esh-Sheikh¹⁹ are of a different type and can be compared to the large altars of the Phoenician west whose cultic function is clear. Spagnoli observed that one characteristic feature of Phoenician incense altars in Lebanon and the west is that they do not have horns.

Based on its typology and on the nature of the building where it probably once stood, the Tell el-Burak altar can be dated to the late 7th or early 6th c. BC.

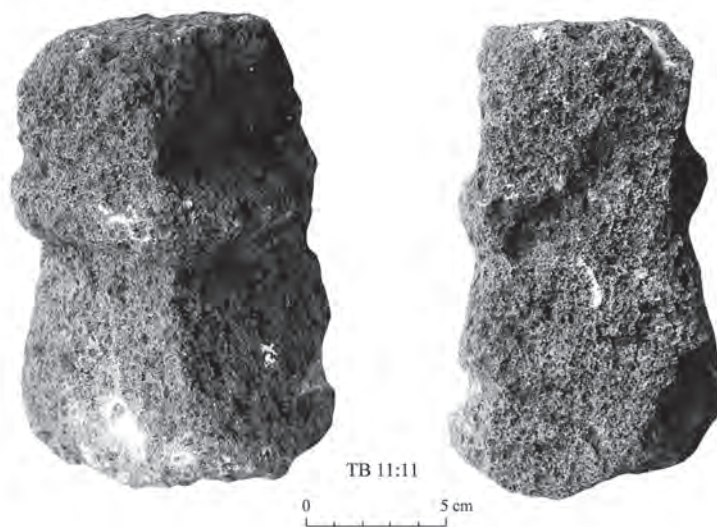


FIG. 2. Stone incense altar from Tell el-Burak inv. No. TB11: 11 showing the sides with the band (left) and the unfinished or damaged backside (right) (Tell el-Burak Archaeological Project).

13 KAOUKABANI 1973, p. 54, Kh 1631, 1632, 1633, D. N. 4, 5, 6. Pl. XVIII, 3.

14 SPAGNOLI 2015, p. 220.

15 ELAYI – SAYEGH 2000, pp. 153, 264; WIGHTMAN 2008.

16 THALMANN 1997, p. 132.

17 PRITCHARD 1975.

18 SPAGNOLI 2015, fig. 260.

19 STUCKY 1993, pp. 62-65, Pl. 16.

3. FUNCTION AND USE OF THE TELL EL-BURAK INCENSE ALTAR

Since the Tell el-Burak altar was found in the topsoil out of its original context, and since it shows no depression or traces of burning, its function and use seem difficult to determine. However, the study of the forty altars from Palestine undertaken by Gitin²⁰ may shed some light on that issue. Gitin has noted that contrary to the situation prevailing in Israel and Judah where the altars were found in cultic contexts, the Ekron altars came from completely different ones: «In terms of context, unlike the Israelite altars, none of the Ekron altars were found in a locus that was part of a temple, shrine, or cult room, and none came from a locus containing assemblages of cultic indicators such as figurines, votive vessels, cult stands, chalices, or burnt animal bones». They were found in «almost every house of the 7th century BCE stratum, both in dwellings and in the industrial quarters».²¹ Their presence in the industrial quarters where olive oil was produced has led Gitin²² to assume «a special role for incense altars in connection with the olive oil industry» and to suggest that «altars were used in the administration of the industry, perhaps by the local priestly class on behalf of the royal authority». Gitin's suggestion does not clearly explain how and in which specific way olive oil industry and incense altars are connected and why so many altars were needed in that area. He suggests that the cult was less centralized than at other sites²³ without elaborating or substantiating his argument. Notwithstanding this fact, the important information gathered from the Ekron evidence is that altars were not found in religious buildings only but that they were used in non-cultic areas and in private dwellings too. Stern also mentions one example from Ashkelon which was originally located on the roof of a public building.²⁴

Although the Tell el-Burak altar was found out of context there is nevertheless enough evidence to suggest that it may have been connected with either House 1 or House 3. In Ekron «the altars were only found indoors near entrance-ways in rooms containing large and varied assemblages of pottery and small objects and sealed by a heavy destruction layer».²⁵ The same situation could be assumed for Tell el-Burak. The 2013-2014 excavations at that site have demonstrated that House 3 was a three-room storage house where at least 65 amphorae broken *in situ* by a roof collapse were found in Room 3.1 dated to the end of the 7th or even the early 6th c. BC, while the other two rooms, 3.2 and 3.3, contained a varied assemblage of pottery covering their floor. House 1 did not yield evidence for storage but it was obviously connected to House 3 with which it shared a wall and probably both were part of the same building complex. Therefore it would not be far-fetched to assume that the Tell el-Burak altar may have been connected with what seems to be either a private dwelling or an administrative building.

On the other hand, the analysis of the botanical remains from area 3 has indicated that grape and olive seeds formed the larger part of the remains²⁶ thus suggesting the existence of an industry relating to either wine or olive oil or both. Moreover, the preliminary results of the organic residue analysis undertaken by the laboratory of the University of Mainz have shown that the amphorae contained fat acids. Finally, in area 4 a sort of bin or vat was uncovered.²⁷ It is too early to define the nature of this installation but in view of the recent botanical and residue results it may have been part of an olive or wine press

20 GITIN 1989, p. 60.

21 STERN 2001, p. 123.

22 GITIN 1989, p. 60.

23 Also STERN 2001, p. 123.

24 STERN 2001, p. 123.

25 GITIN 1992, p. 43.

26 ORENDI forthcoming.

27 KAMLAH – SADER 2008, p. 20, fig. 4.

installation. If future excavations confirm the existence of olive oil in the amphorae as well as the presence of an oil press in area 4, the situation in Tell el-Burak would be very close to that of Ekron. The Tell el-Burak altar was most probably not connected with a cultic area and may have been connected to olive oil industry. A small cultic installation with a baetyl was found within the enclosure wall south of House 3 but it is too far from the area where the altar was found²⁸ to make a connection between the two likely.

A last observation should be made also in this context: in Room 3.1 a structure made of ashlar stones was found against the southern wall of the room (Fig. 3). Its function is still unclear and it is too early to venture an explanation. However, notwithstanding the difficulty, it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that this structure had something to do with altars. In Ekron most altars were either near entrances or in special niches.²⁹ Could the Tell el-Burak structure be a sort of platform or niche where incense altars were placed? Only future investigations may help find an answer to this question.



FIG. 3. The ashlar structure against the south wall of room 3.1 of House 3 (Tell el-Burak Archaeological Project. Photo Jens Kamlah).

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28 KAMLAH – SCHMITT – SADER forthcoming.

29 STERN 2001, p. 123.

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