



# An Object Lesson: Rediscovering Iron Age Artifacts from the Israel Museum Collection

Eran Arie

This volume is dedicated to the Israel Museum's former curators of the Iron Age and Persian Period Department Ruth Hestrin and Michal Dayagi-Mendels.

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Cover: Detail of the kernos from Tel Sasa

IAA collection, Photo:  $\ensuremath{\mathbb{C}}$  The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by Laura Lachman

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# Introduction

This volume of Israel Museum Studies in Archaeology (IMSA) is special in its structure, content, and authorship. In contrast to this journal's usual mélange of topics and authors, this issue comprises five subjects of research on themes related to Iron Age objects from the Israel Museum Collection, all initiated and led by a single author (one co-authored with Prof. Yuval Goren). Some of these items have long been on display in the permanent exhibition of the Bronfman Archaeology Wing, while others have languished in obscurity owing to having been reburied in the darkness of the storerooms of the Department of Iron Age and Persian Period Archaeology. I had the privilege to study these objects during the period of 2013 to 2020, when I had the honor to serve as the department's curator. The lengthy process of preparing this publication culminated after I was appointed as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Cultural Heritage and a member of the Leon Recanati Institute for Maritime Studies, both in the University of Haifa.

These articles reflect my enthusiasm and love for archaeological artifacts, some of elite or symbolic function, but others of everyday use, lacking the requisite museum splendor and, thus, reducing their chances of ever being on display. I had the rare opportunity to have unfettered access to examine these objects closely in the department's storeroom, exploring their otherwise inaccessible parts, obtaining a tactile impression of their surface texture, searching for evidence their ancient treatment, divining their hidden secrets, and, ultimately, drawing out their innate, mute memories to reveal their long object biographies. In other words, in these studies, I sought to do what we curators do best—tell the story of objects!

Yet, some of the objects dealt with in these papers presented special challenges. Some were illicitly excavated from archaeological sites and, subsequently, via unknown intermediaries, sold or donated to the Museum. Naturally, this is a contentious issue, but I believe that since these artifacts are today in public hands, they indeed deserve publication and discussion by the archaeological community, both regarding

the ethical implications and their archaeological contribution. The articles herein do not shy away from these questions in any way. In fact, the precise provenance of some of these items is presented here for the first time.

Finally, it is my honor to dedicate this special IMSA volume to the two women who curated the Iron Age and Persian Period Department before me, Ruth Hestrin and Michal Dayagi-Mendels, and are more than deserving of public recognition for their contributions. Ruth, whom I unfortunately did not get to know, founded the department at the Museum's inauguration in 1965, and immediately understood the crucial importance of having a permanent display of the Biblical Periods, both to the Israeli audience and to world heritage culture (For more on her career, see the Israel Exploration Journal, Vol. 43, 1993, pp. 199-200). In the case of Michal, with whom I worked closely, she raised the profile of the department in many exhibitions and strengthened the department's connection with the general public by publishing catalogues and addressing broad and diverse topics. Michal also served as chief curator of the Archaeology Wing from 2004 to 2013 and successfully lead it through a challenging renovation process that culminated in 2010.

Moreover, in recent years, the Archaeology Wing of the Israel Museum has undergone massive changes in personnel, and, thus, I believe that there is great importance in mentioning these salient persons and their work to the younger generation. I believe that only if they are cognizant of the long journey taken by the Museum, will they be able to carry it forward along its future path. Curators mostly stand in the shadows, and museum visitors usually do not encounter them. Often the public does not realize how central is a curator's role in how they experience a display. Thus, the twenty-first century is not too late, but rather high time to acknowledge two dedicated individuals who labored at the museum for decades, and molded the public's experience we call 'The Israel Museum'.

Dr. Eran Arie, 14.3.2023



Cat. No. 5, see Fig. 1:2 (IAA collection, Photo by Eran Arie).

# Strain and Pour: Iron Age Composite Strainers

## **Abstract**

This article discusses Iron Age composite strainers as a defined pottery type for the very first time and presents a coherent discussion of its properties. Even though only seven examples of composite strainers are known to date, they consist of a unique form. This contribution examines morphological and technological aspects, their use, date, geographical distribution, and archaeological context. Consideration of this rare and almost unknown pottery type may help to identify additional examples in existing unpublished and future excavations.

The aim of this presentation is to discuss the typological and functional properties of a hitherto overlooked vessel type: the Iron Age composite strainer. Although this type is quite rare, it may be presumed that additional fragments from controlled excavations have remained unidentified. Hence, one of the goals of this article is to raise awareness to these vessels, and to provide a seminal source for the study of their morphology, chronology, geographical distribution and function. Four composite strainers from the Israel Museum collection and three additional ones from Tell Qasile, Tell el-Far'ah (South) and the Hecht Museum collection provide the basis for a characterization of this heretofore unclassified type.

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# Catalogue

# 1. Israel Museum Collection (Figs. 1:1; 2:1, 4).

Dimensions: H 7.8 cm; L 13.7 cm; W 11.3 cm; strainer's external diameter: 7.7 cm.

Provenance: Allegedly from the Hebron area. Gift of Abraham D. Sofaer and Marian Scheuer Sofaer, Palo Alto.

Description: Reddish-brown clay. Several impressions are visible on the surface of the lower bowl beneath the strainer, which were caused by the latter's piercing (Fig. 4). This demonstrates that the perforation of the strainer was done after it was attached to the bowl, when both components were leather-hard. The strainer is pierced by 109 small and very dense holes. Vessel intact.

Reference: unpublished.

Present location: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 81.22.71.

#### 2. Israel Museum Collection (Fig. 2:2)

Dimensions: H 7.1 cm; L 17.8 cm; W 12.7 cm; strainer's external diameter: 7 cm.

Provenance: Unknown. Gift of Tamar and Teddy Kollek, Jerusalem.

Description: Dark brown clay; two ridges below bowl rim; red slip outside that drizzled onto the inner part of the vessel; hand burnishing on most of slip. The strainer possesses eleven rather large holes. Three impressions are visible under the strainer, which demonstrate that its perforation was made after it was attached to the bowl; part of the strainer was reconstructed with Plaster of Paris.

Reference: Israeli 1990:19.

Present location: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 90.87.431.

# 3. Israel Museum Collection (Fig. 3:1)

*Dimensions:* H 11 cm; L 20.3 cm; W 10.6 cm; strainer's external diameter: 5.7 cm.

Provenance: Unknown. The Louis and Carmen Warschaw Collection; gift of Susan Warschaw Robertson and Hope Warschaw, Los Angeles, to the American Friends of the Israel Museum.

Description: Light greyish-brown clay; a ridge below rim of bowl; ring base. Strainer is composed of seventeen holes. Vessel intact.

Reference: Unpublished.

Present location: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2013.52.415.

#### 4. Israel Museum Collection (Fig. 3:2)

Dimensions: H 7.1 cm; L 17 cm; W 14.4 cm.

Provenance: Tel Zafit. Gift of Laurence and Wilma Tisch, New York, purchasers of the Dayan Collection. Although the collection was bought for the Museum in 1982 (Arie 2021), the three sherds used to reconstruct this vessel were only found in the Iron Age Storeroom of the Israel Museum in 2016, when they were registered for the first time. Fortunately, Dayan wrote on the small box that contained the sherds that they originated from Tell es-Safi (Tel Zafit, identified as Philistine Gath; e.g., Maeir 2012: 5–7, and see more below). Dayan had illicitly dug there for years and many vessels from this site are part of his collection. After the registration of the vessel, it was restored and reconstructed in the Israel Museum restoration laboratory with Plaster of Paris.

Description: Reddish-brown clay; hand-burnished red slip on exterior.

The strainer, most of the handle and most of the bowl are missing. Evidence for the strainer attachment can be seen on the bowl's 'rim' at the rear of the vessel (above the handle).

Reference: Unpublished.

Present location: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 82.2.1111.

**5. Tell Qasile** (Fig. 1:2 and unnumbered figure opposite the first page of the paper)

*Dimensions:* H 11.6 cm; L 17.8 cm; W 9.5 cm; strainer external diameter: 9.1 cm.

*Provenance*: Tell Qasile, Stratum X; domestic structure (Benjamin Mazar excavations).

Description: Reddish-brown clay; hand-burnished red slip on exterior, including on the flat base. Benjamin Mazar, who published this vessel, claimed that both of its sides were burnished with a net pattern (Maisler, B. 1951: 135, Fig. 6:7). However, close examination of the vessel shows that the so-called 'net pattern' appears only on one side of the vessel. Moreover, the net pattern that appears in the previously published drawing has an eye-shaped form, but seems in reality much less clear and lacks any real borders. Thus, in this author's opinion, this 'pattern' was

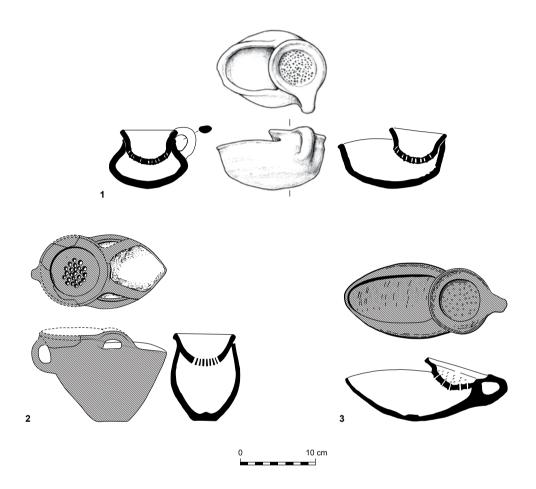


Fig. 1. Selected composite strainers: (1) Cat. No. 1 (Provenance unknown); (2) Cat. No. 5 (Tell Qasile); (3) Cat. No. 6 (Tell el-Far'ah, South; drawing courtesy of Dr. Susan Braunstein).

not purposely made, but is rather the incidental signs of burnishing made by the potter. The fact that no real parallels for this pattern were ever found strengthens this observation. I assume that the same is true regarding the two short 'bands' on the upper handle.

Several parts of the composite strainer were reconstructed with Plaster of Paris: part of the rim of the bowl (including the central pinch), part of the rim of the strainer, one of the upper handles; small body fragments. The strainer is composed of twenty-eight holes. The association of this vessel with Stratum X, dates it firmly to the Late Iron Age I, probably to the beginning of the tenth century BCE.

*References:* Maisler, B. 1951:135, Fig. 6:7; Mazar 2015: 18, Pl. 1.1.27:5. *Present:* location: Eretz-Israel Museum (IAA 1951-1877).

# 6. Tell el-Far'ah (South) (Fig. 1:3)

Dimensions: H 9 cm; L 21.7 cm; W 9.8 cm; Strainer's external diameter: 8.8 cm.

Provenance: Tell el-Far'ah (South), Tomb 104 (Cemetery 100) (Flinders Petrie's excavations).

Description: Light reddish-brown clay; red slip; hand burnished. The strainer is composed of thirty-nine holes.

Four skeletons were found in the disturbed Tomb 104 along with three additional pottery vessels: a chalice with

a flaring rim (Duncan 1930: Pl. 67: F4; Laemmel 2003: Vol. 3: Pl. 34:104/2), a juglet of the 'black juglet' type lacking its rim (Duncan 1930: Pl. 59: G5; Laemmel 2003: Vol. 3: Pl. 35:104/3) and a storage jar (Duncan 1930: Pl. 47: P). Both the chalice and juglet are red-slipped and hand-burnished, and thus should be dated to the Iron Age IIA. The storage jar is from the Byzantine Period and probably reflects a later disturbance. Other than pottery, a scarab, two amulets, three bracelets and many beads were also found in the tomb, but are of no chronological significance.

References: Duncan 1930: Pl. 67: C; Laemmel 2003: Vol. 1: 127, 128, Vol. 2:5; Vol. 3: Pl. 34:104/1.

Present location: University College, London (E.VII. 15/1).

#### 7. Hecht Museum Collection (Fig. 3:3)

Dimensions: H 9.5 cm; L 17.5 cm; W 9.8 cm; Strainer's external diameter: 7 cm.

Provenance: Unknown.

Description: Reddish-brown clay; red-slipped and handburnished; the area below the strainer is not slipped; the strainer is composed of 23 holes. Intact.

References: König et al. 1987: 216, 386.

Present location: Hecht Museum, University of Haifa (H-457).

## Morphological and Technological Aspects

I define the seven vessels in this catalogue as 'composite strainers', which are composed of two joined parts: an upper strainer-cup and a lower bowl. The bowl part was probably made initially as a typical rounded bowl, but when the clay was still soft, the walls of the bowls were bent or pinched from two sides, stretching and lengthening the shape, which terminates in either a pointed-narrow (Cat. Nos. 1, 3, 4-6) or a wide-flat end (Cat. Nos. 2, 4). Most of the bowls have rounded bases (Cat. Nos. 1, 2, 4, 6, 7), but two specimens have more stability with a flat (Cat. No. 5) or a ring (Cat. No. 3) base. The opposite end of the bent bowl was topped by a strainer-cup, either rounded (Cat. Nos. 2, 3, 5, 7) or carinated in shape (Cat. Nos. 1, 6).

The cup was manufactured separately and attached to the top of the bowl while leather hard. Its bottom was pierced from inside after it was attached to the bowl, as evidenced by the remains of marks on the bowl's interior surface, underneath the strainer (Cat. Nos. 1, 2; Fig. 4). Much of the surface of the strainer comprised pierced holes, which are small in diameter and closely spaced, ranging in number from 17 (Cat. 3) to 109 (Cat. 1); they were probably made by a pin/needle or a sharpened twig. Only one specimen (Cat. 2) presents larger holes, probably produced with a reed; this last example possessed the smallest number of holes (11).

In all instances, a vertical loop handle connects the exterior of the bowl to the rim of the strainer. However, in some examples the handle is attached along the long axis of the vessel (Cat. Nos. 3, 5, 6), and in others it is perpendicular (Cat. Nos. 1, 2, 4, 7). The two additional upper handles of the Tel Qasile example (Cat. 5) seem to be of a more decorative nature and were probably not functional. This is the only specimen with more than one loop handle.

More than half of the examples were red-slipped and handburnished (Cat. Nos. 2, 4–7), but it is notable that the interior of the vessel (especially below the strainer-cup) was not slipped. This proves that slipping (and burnishing) was performed at the final stage of production when the entire vessel was leather-hard, after its construction and following the piercing of the strainer, but before drying and firing.

## **Function**

The function of composite strainers has never been properly considered. König et al. (1987: 386) called the specimen from the Hecht Museum 'a drinking cup; or 'a drinking bowl', without any further explication. Israeli (1990: 19) claimed that it was difficult to reconstruct the use of the vessel she published, but called it 'a funnel-strainer'. The example from Tell el-Far'ah (South) was termed 'strainer-bowl' (Laemmel 2003: Vol. 1: 127–128) and was grouped with an additional vessel belonging to a completely different form¹ (a bowl with a strainer pierced on its outer wall and a spout; see, below, the notes on strainer-bowls). Benjamin Mazar called the example from Tel Qasile 'an exceptional strainer' (Maisler 1951: 135),



Fig. 2. Photographs of selected composite strainers: (1) Cat. No. 1 (Provenance unknown); (2) Cat. No. 2 (Provenance unknown) (Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by Vladimir Naikhin).



Fig. 3. Photographs of selected composite strainers: (1) Cat. No. 3 (Provenance unknown); (2) Cat. No. 4 (Tel Zafit); (3) Cat. No. 7 (Hecht Museum collection, courtesy of the Hecht Museum, University of Haifa, photo by Shay Levy).

while Amihai Mazar (2015: 18) termed the same vessel 'a unique closed strainer'. He assumed that liquids could be strained when poured either into or out of the vessel.

Strainers were never a very frequent type of pottery vessel in the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Southern Levant.<sup>2</sup> The most common type of strainer that was manufactured during these periods is the strainer-cup. They first appear during the Middle Bronze Age and their morphology changed little subsequently (Beeri 2008). They are shaped like a carinated bowl with a rather small, rounded, perforated base, with a loop handle attached either to their inner part (during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages) or to their outer part (during the Iron Age). They were meant to imitate metal strainers that are known in the Late Bronze and Iron Ages in the Southern Levant, especially as a part of wine sets (e.g., Gershuni 1985: Pls. 10, 11, 16-18; Artzy 2006: Fig. 2.3:2-4). As noted above, the composite strainers dealt with here are made of two parts: the upper pierced vessel is actually closely related to these strainer-cups, while their lower part is a rounded bowl.

Different types of strainer-bowls are also known, but they are even rarer than strainer-cups. One example includes a bowl with a strainer pierced on its wall and a spout attached to the outer part (spouted strainer-bowls), these are dated to the LB II (Tell el-Far'ah (South) Tomb 902, Laemmel 2003: Vol. 3: Pl. 247:902/10), LB III (Beth-Shean S-3, Panitz-Cohen, 2009: Pl. 65:9), Iron I (Tell Keisan 12, Burdajewicz 1994: 71, Pl. 17:20-22; Megiddo VIA, Arie 2013a: 485, Fig. 12.1: BL 10; Oasile X, Mazar 1985: Fig. 34:20; Gezer, Third Semitic Period, Macalister 1912: pl. 161:10) and Iron IIA (Tell el-Far'ah (North) VIIb, Chambon 1984: Pl. 54:11). Closely related vessels are Egyptian strainer bowls, which are composed of a strainer forming an inner wall inside the bowl. They are known from Dynasty XXI and XXII contexts at Deir el-Medina and Qantir in Egypt, but also in the Levant in Beth-Shean (Nagel 1938: Pl. 2K.S.50.a; Aston 1998: 592-593, n. 2441; Martin 2009: 453, Fig. 6.3:1).

The function of these strainer-bowls was different from the use of the composite strainers, as in contrast to the latter, the lower bowls of which are bent and designed for pouring,

the strainer-bowls have a round rim. Moreover, most of the strainer-bowls are handle-less (e.g., the specimens from Tell el-Far'ah (South) and Gezer), or include two loop handles (e.g., the examples from Megiddo and Tell Qasile). Only the example from Tell el-Far'ah (North), which has a single handle like the composite strainers, may have been used in the same way (see below).3 It is interesting to note that regardless of where the handle is located, the composite strainers studied here, attest to the fact that the vessel was designed to pour the liquids after being strained and collected in the lower bowl (and was not in itself a drinking vessel). It is worth mentioning that in cases where the handle is placed perpendicular to the strainer, it is always attached to the right side of the vessel (Cat. Nos. 1, 2, 4, 7), for the easy use by right-handed individuals. Moreover, in these cases, the lower bowl is bent into a more sharpened form, rendering the side opposing the strainer an ersatz spout. In contrast, the examples with a handle attached perpendicular to the strainer have a lower bowl that is folded into a wider form (see especially, Cat. Nos. 2, 4). Despite these differences, I do not find any real reason to believe that the function of these two sub-types was dissimilar.

Red slip and especially burnishing may have had both a decorative and functional purpose, as they could have contributed to sealing the porous clay. However, these surface treatments might just as well follow the standard decoration on most of open-forms of Early Iron Age pottery vessels (Mazar 1998; Arie 2013b: 733–735, Table 13.17). I prefer the latter explanation, as in most cases the red slip and burnishing are not applied to the inner part of the bowl, where the sealing of the clay is most crucial.

# Date, Geographical Distribution, and Archaeological Context

The two composite strainers that were found in controlled excavations are the key to understanding the date and geographical distribution of this type; the Tel Zafit specimen from the Dayan collection (Cat. No. 4) is also of much value. Since nearly all of the other finds which were illicitly dug by Dayan at Tel Zafit are from the massive destruction of the city



Fig. 4. Marks on the surface of the lower bowl inside Composite Strainer No. 1 caused by the piercing of the strainer cup (Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by Vladimir Naikhin).

dated to the Late Iron IIA (second half of the ninth century BCE), which was caused by Hazael, king of Aram-Damascus (c. 830 BCE; Maeir 2012: 26–49), it may be assumed that the composite strainer also originated in this destruction layer. The red slip and the burnish of the vessel reinforce this assumption.

Thus, while trying to understand the date and geographical distribution of this small group of vessels, it seems clear that all three dated and provenanced composite strainers are from the Iron Age I-IIA, and they were found in southwestern Israel, in the region of Philistia. However, given this very small sample, it may not be precluded that the use of composite strainers may have covered a longer period and a larger region, as may be reflected by the alleged provenance of Cat. No. 1 in the Hebron region, although this information should be treated with caution. In any event, none of the known examples have been subjected to provenience analysis (petrography or NAA); hopefully this will be part of future research.

The composite strainers studied here for which archaeological contexts are known comprise a tomb (Cat. No. 6) and a domestic

structure (Cat. No. 5). If indeed the Tel Zafit example (Cat. No. 4) is from the massive Hazael destruction, it probably indicates that this vessel also originated in a domestic context. However, the fact that three unprovenanced composite strainers (Cat. Nos. 1, 3, 7) are intact, possibly means that they originated from looted tombs. Hence, it seems that these rare composite strainers were used both in daily life and in funerary contexts, where they could have represented funerary gifts.

#### **Conclusions**

Although only seven examples of composite strainers are known to date, they constitute a unique and well-defined pottery type which can be summarized as follows:

- Composite strainers are made of two distinct parts (strainer-cup and bowl) that were manufactured separately and attached when leather-hard. Immediately afterwards the cup was pierced and became a strainer
- Composite strainers were designed to strain and pour small amount of liquids, probably from jugs. The strained liquid would probably have been poured into a drinking bowl for immediate consumption.
- Composite strainers can serve as fossiles directeurs for the Iron Age I-IIA in Philistia, although future examples might broaden these chronological and/or geographical ranges.
- Composite strainers were utilized in daily life and were also placed in tombs, where they could have been used as gifts or as part of funerary rites.

Once broken and separated into fragmentary parts, the strainer-cup and lower bowl sherds would be difficult to identify owing to their similarity to regular bowls, scoops, strainer-cups and even strainer-jugs. This difficulty is hard to resolve, although awareness of composite strainer form should aid in their identification in the future.

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# **Postscript**

As this article was going to press, an additional composite strainer came to my attention. It is an unprovenanced and unpublished vessel from the Dr. David and Jemima Jeselsohn Collection (Reg. No. J 3726). While not dealt with in this article, it fits the general conclusions presented here.

# **Notes**

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- Laemmel (2003: Vol. 1: 128) compared the composite strainer from Tell el-Far'ah (S) to an animal-headed bowl from Tomb 240 from the same site (Petrie 1930: Pl. 38: 28E). Except for its bent walls, there is no basis for this comparison.
- I do not refer here to strainer jugs or to other pottery vessels (e.g., bowls or goblets) that might include a pierced wall which function as a strainer, but only to complete vessels that can be labeled 'strainers'.
- Other vessels that recall the composite strainers are scoops with bent walls (Gitin 1993). However, they do not consist of a strainer and have two handles, suggesting they must have been designed for different purposes.

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