

CHAPTER 9

MOLLUSC SHELLS

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Seven shell fragments were found at Yesodot. By comparison with the very large sample from Lachish (Bar-Yosef Mayer 2004), our assemblage has been identified as follows: six shells of a very common Mediterranean species (*Glycymeris violacescens*); and one of non-specifiable mother-of-pearl (*Pinctada margaritifera* / *Aspatharia rubens* / *Unio terminalis*), also known from contemporaneous sites in the region, e.g. Lachish (Bar-Yosef Mayer 2004: 2491). Further details on this small assemblage are given in Table 9.1.

Discussion

Glycymeris violacescens: This is the most common shell on eastern Mediterranean shores today, and their presence at Yesodot is in that respect unsurprising. However, as Bar-Yosef Mayer (*ibid.* 2500) has noted, the wear patterns on many of these shells—both at this site and across the region—suggest that the molluscs were not harvested from the sea itself but

were taken from ancient geological outcrops (*ibid.* 2500). Also, there is precious little evidence that *Glycymeris violacescens* shells were worked. But, Bar-Yosef Mayer (*ibid.*) asks, if they were not harvested for food and were not decorated, what then might the function of such shells have been, and why were they transported so far inland? She proposes that they were used principally in construction, for paving floors and covering walls. Examples of this are cited from Megiddo's Canaanite palace (*ibid.*, citing Loud 1948: 25, Figs. 50, 52) and Tell Kazel, where mudbrick walls were also covered in sea shell (*ibid.*, citing Chiodo 1999). And in fact, one of the Yesodot shells was found in a wall (WB111). Bar-Yosef Mayer (*ibid.*) notes that shell was also used as a pottery temper. Whatever their function, such shells also may represent an MB-LB trade pattern that concentrated on the coastal rivers of the southern Levant.

Mother-of-pearl (*Pinctada margaritifera* / *Aspatharia rubens* / *Unio terminalis*): The fragmentary

Table 9.1. Mollusc shells.

Shell No.	Species	(N=)	Comments	Locus	Field no.
1.	<i>Glycymeris violacescens</i>	1		140	1056
2.		1		111	1050
3.		1	Pierced by gastropod boring. Shows signs of wearing or weathering.	115	1035
4.		2	One marked with gastropod perforation.	133	1087
5.		1		133	1090
6.	Mother-of-pearl (<i>Pinctada margaritifera</i> / <i>Aspatharia rubens</i> / <i>Unio terminalis</i>)	1	In very fragmentary condition, making precise identification difficult.	336	3160

state of the single mother-of-pearl shell find (Table 9.1:6) precluded the identification of its specific family, but most likely *Pinctada margaritifera* is represented, if we follow the general pattern from LB Lachish (*ibid.* 2491). However, some interesting points about the other two possible species are worth noting. *Unio terminalis* is a freshwater mollusc, which at EB III Tell Handaqq South (in Jordan) was perhaps used for burnishing pottery (it is worth noting that no signs of such use were found on either the Yesodot or Lachish specimens [*ibid.*]). *Aspatharia rubens* is a mother-of-pearl species from the River Nile, which was exported to regions including the Levant (e.g. LB Lachish [*ibid.*]). Scholars have proposed medicinal/magical ancient functions for this mollusc (*ibid.*). Bar-Yosef Mayer affirms that the ‘cultic’ find contexts at Lachish support this contention.

The majority of the sampled shells came from the LB Building B1. This group includes all of the

Glycymeris violacescens. The mother-of-pearl find came from contemporaneous Building B2. This separation is perhaps noteworthy.

Conclusions

The Yesodot shell finds do not provide conclusive evidence of any particular activity in the settlement, but neither do they offer grounds for challenging the taxonomical patterns and functional interpretations given—with much greater authority, and using a much larger sample—for at-least partly contemporaneous Lachish. I feel comfortable in supporting the proposal that shells were being imported to the settlement mainly for construction purposes, if only here and there according to individual taste, needs or means.

References

- Bar-Yosef Mayer, D.E. The mollusc shells. In: Ussishkin, D. (ed.), *The Renewed Archaeological Excavations at Lachish (1973-1994)* (Monograph Series of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University, No. 22). Tel Aviv. Pp. 2490-2503.
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