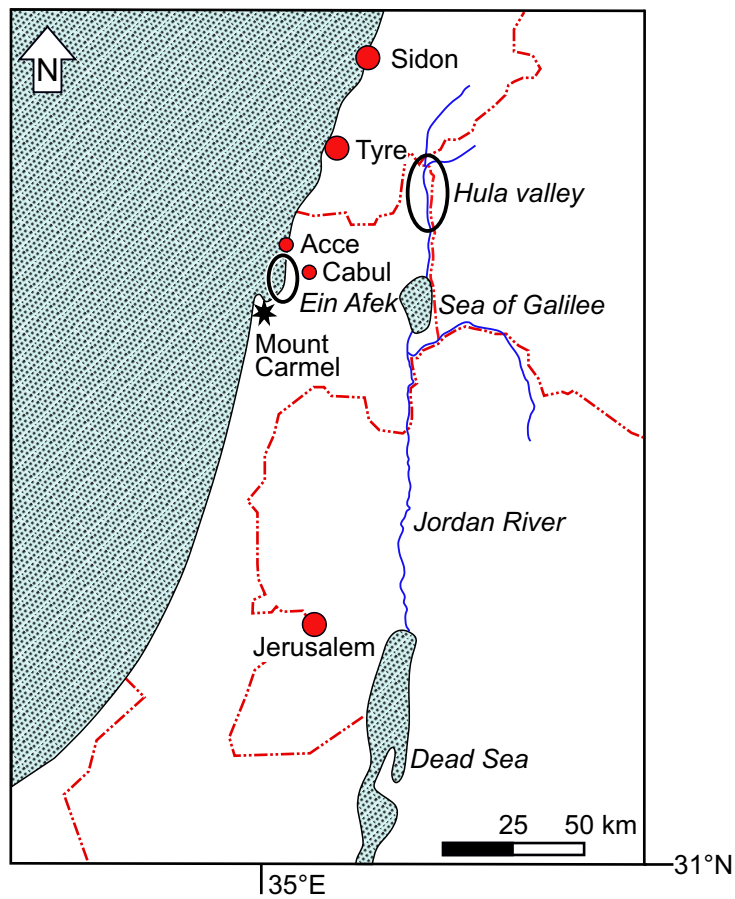


Pim de Klerk

## Peatland prose from the past: The displeasing land of Cabul (NW Israel)

IMCG Bulletin 2021-6: Nov – Dec 2021  
pages 18-21



*iuxta Getta, Geba, rivus Pacida sive Belus, vitri fertiles harenas parvo litori miscens;  
ipse e palude Cendebia a radicibus Carmeli profluit. iuxta colonia Claudii Caesaris  
Ptolemais, quae quondam Acce (Pliny the Elder, 'Natural History' 5:17).*



Looking towards Glen Coe valley, Scotland. Photo: Hans Joosten.

## IMCG Bulletin 2021-6: Nov – Dec 2021

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## Papers

### Peatland prose from the past: The displeasing land of Cabul (NW Israel)

Pim de Klerk (Greifswald Mire Centre/State Museum of Natural History Karlsruhe; [pimdeklerk@email.de](mailto:pimdeklerk@email.de), [www.pimdeklerk-palynology.eu](http://www.pimdeklerk-palynology.eu))

Mires are rare in the regions east of the Mediterranean Sea because the hot and dry climate (cf. Rogerson 1989) hampers their development. In Israel luxurious reed marshes occur almost exclusively along the River Jordan, especially along the Sea of Galilee and in the Hula valley. References to mires and wetlands are, therefore, rare in the Hebrew Tanakh and the Christian Bible, except for the texts dealing with ancient Egypt and the River Nile. There is, however, an intriguing passage in the 'First book of kings' (according to some old numberings the 'Third book of kings') that mentions a region in present-day northwestern Israel named "Cabul" (alternatively also transliterated as "Kabul"). At present "Cabul" is the Hebrew word for peat, and the question arises how peat connects to the passage in the Tanakh. The text tells that Hiram, the king of Tyre (Phoenicia), had helped king Solomon to build the temple and palace in Jerusalem, after which Solomon expressed his gratitude by giving Hiram 20 cities.

*"And Hiram came from Tyre to see the cities that Solomon had given him: and he did not like them. He said: 'What cities did you give me, my brother?' And they are called the land of Cabul unto this day."*

וַיָּצֵא חִירָם, מֶזֶר, לְרֵאוֹת אֶת-הָעָרִים, אֲשֶׁר נָתַן-לּוֹ שְׁלֹמֹה; וְלֹא יָשְׁרוּ, בְּעֵינָיו.  
וַיֹּאמֶר--מָה הָעָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, אֲשֶׁר-נָתַתָּה לִּי אֹחִי; וַיִּקְרָא לָהֶם אֲבֻל, עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.  
(*1<sup>st</sup> book of kings' 9:12/13*).

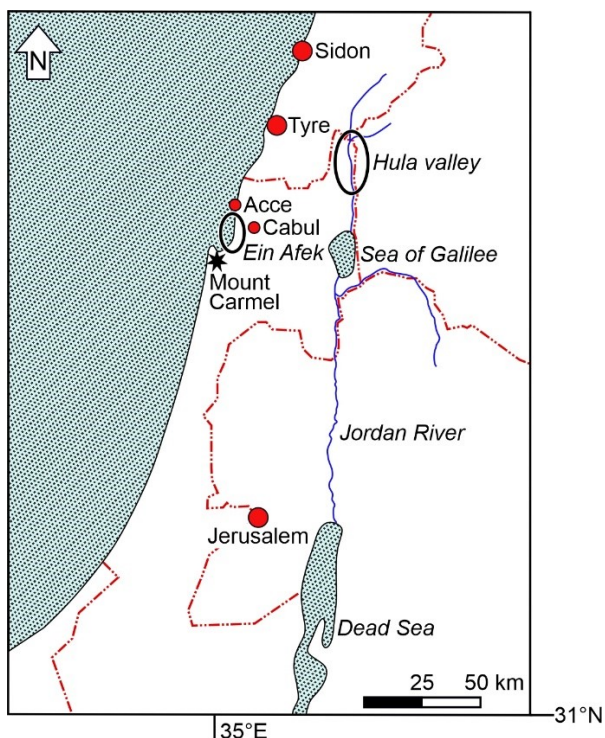
The subsequent verse 14 tells that Hiram gave 120 talents of gold to Solomon, and some commentators assumed that the cities were part of a repayment for money borrowed by Solomon (Easton 1893; Unger 1988; Lipiński 2010), or – in contrast – that Hiram had bought the cities for 120 talents of gold (Noth 1983; Parker 1988; Markoe 2003). The 'Second book of chronicles' (8:2) mentions that Solomon had rebuilt cities given to him by Hiram, and Easton (1893), Unger (1988) and Douglas & Tenney (2011) hypothesized that these were the 20 cities that Hiram had given back because he did not like them. According to Finkelstein (2013) the story may be a mere etiological tale to explain why parts of Galilee were in possession of the kingdom of Tyre (see also Frankel 2008; Keimer 2020). Regardless of whether the tale is historical or mythological, the region itself actually existed and the Hebrew text has, thus, (palaeo)geographical significance. The reign of Solomon – if he was a historical person – is estimated to 967-928 BCE (Rogerson 1989), 965-932 BCE (Clauss 2014), 965/964-926/925 BCE (Schipper 2018) or 960-922 BCE (Bryce & Birkett-Rees 2016). The reign of Hiram is envisaged between 969-936 BCE (Clauss 2014).

Among specialists there is no consensus where the land of Cabul was located precisely (see Keimer 2020). The 'Book of Joshua' (19:27) positioned it in the land of the Jewish tribe Asher, which corresponded approximately to the region between Mount Carmel and Sidon (Rogerson 1989; Hull & Jotischky 2009). Lehmann (2008) posed some doubt to the attribution of the cities to the land of Asher but is not sure about this. According to Easton (1893) the 20 cities were in the mountains of the tribe Naphtali east of Asher.

The present-day town Cabul lies at the western margins of the hills of lower Galilee. It was probably not established prior to the last centuries BCE (Gal 1990; see also Lehmann 2008) and postdates the writing of the 'First book of kings' (see Schipper 2018). However, the town may have been named after an older geographical designation. Keimer (2020) assumed that the land of Cabul corresponded to the lower hills adjacent to the town. Gal (1990, 1993) posed that Cabul was the archaeological site Ḥorvat Rosh Zayit, also known as Khirbet Rās ez-Zētūn, a Phoenician fortress around 1-1.5 km northeast of present-day Cabul.

Even more diverse are the opinions of the meaning of the word "cabul" ("כָּבֻל" in Hebrew), that predominantly derive from works from Antiquity that – already confusingly - tried to explain it.

The Jewish historian Josephus (37-c.100 CE) - who used the Greek designation Χαβαλών (Chaballo) - wrote that the name came from the Phoenician language and meant “what does not please” (‘Jewish antiquities’ 8:5,3). There is, however, according to Cheyne & Sutherland Black (1899) no evidence preserved for this. A footnote in the Loeb edition of the work by Josephus states that he probably interpreted this meaning from the original notion in the Tanakh that Hiram was not pleased. Following Josephus specialists provided various more or less synonymous translations. For example, a footnote in the consulted edition of the ‘King James Bible’ states that “cabul” means “displeasing” or “dirty”. Easton (1893) wrote that it meant “how little”, “as nothing”, or “good for nothing”, and Rawlinson (1896) provided the meaning “disgusting”. Unger (1988) thought that Hiram – since the Phoenicians were seafaring people – was not pleased because the cities were not coastal, but Unger (1988) also posed that the cities – inhabited by heathens – were in an awfully bad condition.



The ‘Septuagint’ - the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE Greek translations of Hebrew holy books - contains the Greek word “ὄριον” (“Orion”; “boundary”): this translation will originate from the interpretation of the word “cabul” as “גבול” (“gevul”) (Frankel 2008), which means “border”, “boundary”, “limit” etc. Following this interpretation there are explanations that the land of Cabul was named as such since it was a border region (see Frankel 2008; Keimer 2020), either between the lands of Solomon and Hiram, or between the lands of Asher and Zebulon (immediately south of the lands of Asher and Naphtali). Lipiński (2010) wrote that “gevul” could also have meant “hill country”, and similarly Keimer (2020) stated that an interpretation as “mountain” is feasible and – since he assumed that the land of Cabul corresponded to the lower hills of southern Galilee - posed that the region was considered worthless because of its hilly / mountainous character with forests and poor soils.

The ‘Babylonian Talmud’ – the collection of Jewish texts from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE explaining the Tanakh - tells that the area may have been named Cabul because the inhabitants were dressed (“מכלמ”, “mekubalim”) in silver and gold, and that Hiram was not satisfied because the wealthy inhabitants did not perform corvée. The ‘Babylonian Talmud’ furthermore contains the explanation that the area was dry and “did not produce fruits”, i.e. was infertile. It furthermore includes an explanation that the name related to salty soils, in which the foot sank to the ankle (“כבלה”, “kabla”). Following this “sinking” hypothesis, Bochart (1681) quoted sources that claimed that the foot sank in mud or sand, and Schallinger (1983) wrote that it sank in peat.

Sommer (2008) noted that “cabul” meant “dry wood” but did not provide a source for this. Lipiński (2010), apart from his “hilly country” interpretation quoted above, added that Hiram may have characterised Cabul as “a land like a lump” (“ביל”, “bul”), i.e. “a shapeless mass of things thrown together”.

Apart from “peat”, the present-day word “cabul” also means “bound”, “chained” or similarly, and Noth (1983) indeed interpreted “cabul” as such. Keimer (2020) speculated that this could imply that Hiram considered the region to fetter him.

Contrary to the assumed negative meaning, Markoe (2003) noted that the land of Cabul was prosperous because of cultivation of wheat and production of olive oil. Similarly, Noth (1983) remarked that the area around present-day Cabul – i.e. the hills – was by no means unpleasant.

An unrelated text is reported by Hoover & Hoover (1950) in a footnote in their translation of ‘De re metallica’ by Georgius Agricola (published in 1556 CE). The footnote contains a passage from ‘Sarepia oder Bergpostill’ by



Johann Mathesius (published 1562 CE) that states that the word “cobalt” – a detested metal – was named after the land of Cabul where it may have been mined in the 20 cities, of which Mathesius assumed that they were mining towns. He posed that Hiram – according to him an excellent and experienced miner - was displeased with the 20 cities because the mines provided relatively much of this “displeased” cobalt rather than gold and silver. In reality, however, the word “cobalt” comes from the German “Kobold” (“goblin”) (Seebold 2011), which was also mentioned as possibility by Hoover & Hoover (1950) in the same footnote.

These different opinions show that readers / translators / commentators did not really know what to do with the word “cabul” or the name Cabul, but none of them has thought about a connection to the substance peat.

Between the hills with the town of Cabul and the Mediterranean Sea lies the Ramsar Nature reserve Ein Afek, which is a remnant of a large wetland fed by the Na`aman River (Olsvig-Whittaker et al. 2005). Most organic sediments in the area consist of organic clay, but peat layers of less than 2 m thickness occur along the margins of the wetlands (Zviely et al. 2006).

The Na`aman River was known in Antiquity because here sand was found that was used to produce glass. Within this context Tacitus mentioned it as Belus in ‘The histories’ (5:7), and Josephus as Beleos (“Βήλεος”) in the ‘Jewish war’ (2:10,2), but both authors did not write about wetlands. Pliny the Elder, however, wrote:

*“Nearby are Getta and Gebas, and the river Pacida or Belus, whose small banks consist of a sand suitable for glass: this river flows from the marshes of Cendebia at the foot of Mount Carmelus [mount Carmel]. Nearby is the colony Ptolemais of Emperor Claudius, previously called Acce [present-day Acre or Akko] ...” (“iuxta Getta, Geba, rivus Pacida sive Belus, vitri fertiles harenas parvo litori miscens; ipse e palude Cendebia a radicibus Carmeli profluit. iuxta colonia Claudii Caesaris Ptolemais, quae quondam Acce...”)* (‘Natural History’ 5:17).

and:

*“In a part of Syria, adjacent to Judea, there is a region called Phoenicia, where the marsh Candebia [note that Pliny alternatively named it Cendebia and Candebia] lies at the foot of Mount Carmelus. From here, they believe, the River Belus springs which after a course of five miles flows into the sea near the colony Ptolemais. It flows slowly, the water is unhealthy, but [the river] is holy, it is muddy and very deep...” (“Pars Syriae, quae Phoenice vocatur, finitima Iudaeae intra montis Carmeli radices paludem habet, quae vocatur Candebia. ex ea creditur nasci Belus amnis quinque milium passuum spatio in mare perfluens iuxta Ptolemaidem coloniam. lentus hic cursu, insaluber potu, sed caerimoniis sacer, limosus, vado profundus...”)* (‘Natural History’ XXXVI:65).

It is very likely that the land of Cabul of the Tanakh was the Cendebia marsh, or at least that the Cendebia marsh was part of the land of Cabul. It will have been considered worthless since as a marshland it had not really value for ancient Hebrews and Phoenicians. It is, however, unlikely that 20 cities existed in this marsh.

It is at present unknown what the original meaning of the word “cabul” may have been: if the Land of Cabul was named after the substance peat, the translators and commentators would have known this since the word would have been sufficiently common to have entered everyday speech in ancient times. It seems, therefore, more likely that - when in the course of time the substance “peat” got its own word in the Hebrew language – it was derived from the region where peat actually occurs.

I am grateful to Immanuel Musäus for crucial linguistic advice and critical comments.

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