



***Trochus niloticus* on the beach of Tel Aviv-Yafo: A reminder of the pearl button industry in Israel**

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I examined a collection of molluscs that were gathered along the Mediterranean coast of Israel by the late Arie Hadar. This collection is now part of the National Mollusc Collection of the Tel Aviv University. This review revealed, to my surprise, two specimens of the commercial top shell *Trochus niloticus* Linnaeus, 1767. Hadar found these specimens on the beach of Tel Aviv-Yafo from 1948–1968. The two shells are medium sized and measure respectively, 67 x 60 mm and 86 x 76 mm. The latter shell is missing its top whorls.

How should the presence of these shells be explained? As another Lessepsian migrant²? As hitchhikers on the hulls of vessel? As discarded souvenirs? Or yet another possibility? Although the name *niloticus* brings to mind the Nile or Egypt, this Trochid does not live in the Red Sea (Dekker and Orlin 2000), therefore it can not be considered as another Lessepsian migrant. *Trochus niloticus* as a hitchhiker may also be ruled out although several other Indo-Pacific species managed to reach the Mediterranean Sea and even settle there in this way. Well-known examples of successful mollusc hitchhikers in the eastern Mediterranean are: *Conomurex persicus* (Swainson 1821), *Palmadusta lentiginosa* (Gray 1825), *Thais lacera* (von Born 1778) and most recently *Diodora funiculata* (Reeve 1850) (Mienis 1994, 1999, 2002a, b). It is unlikely that these top shells were discarded souvenirs because when Hadar collected both specimens (most probably in the early 1950s), such shells were still considered luxury items in the newly formed State of Israel, and it is rather unlikely that such expensive items were thrown back into the sea.

It is more likely that the two shells found on the beach of Tel Aviv-Yafo are left over from the pearl button industry. Both in Yafo and later in Bené Beraq, a township belonging to the greater Dan-district, of which Tel Aviv-Yafo forms the main

component, nacreous shells, including top shells, mother-of-pearl shells (*Pinctada margaritifera*) and various thick-shelled freshwater mussels, were imported for the manufacture of pearl buttons. Such a factory, called “dar”³, was still active in Bené Beraq in the 1960s until slowly but steadily there was a change to synthetic materials (Bergman 1975). Even in the early 1970s it was possible to collect shell scraps in the backyard of that factory. The shell material, imported among other goods from Japan and Australia, arrived via the harbour of Yafo and at a later stage via Tel Aviv. Usually the merchandise was unloaded and brought ashore by hand. Often, items fell into the water. This most likely occurred with the two top shells found by Hadar on the beach of Tel Aviv-Yafo.

References

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 2. A species extending its natural range of distribution in the Red Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean by means of the Suez Canal.
 3. “Dar” is the Hebrew word for the raw pearly material produced by certain mussels and snails.