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LEARNING BY DOING—DISTINGUISHING DIFFERENT HANDS AT WORK IN THE DRAWINGS AND PAINTINGS OF KUNTILLET ʿAJRUD

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עור אחרד? (B. S., Jerusalem, September 2, 1987)

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The inscriptions, drawings and paintings discovered during three short seasons of excavations (1975–1976) at Kuntillet ʿAjrud figure among the most heavily debated archaeological finds from the southern Levant of the last century. The reasons these findings have been so intensely discussed among archaeologists, epigraphers, biblical scholars and historians are manifold, one of them and not the least paradoxical being that reliable information and documentation on many aspects of the findings from Kuntillet ʿAjrud were difficult to obtain over years and decades.² Luckily, this situation has changed with the publication of a final report coordinated by the excavator

1 Motto and date refer to my first meeting with Benny Sass, who at the time was working on a thesaurus project for the IDAM (later the IAA) at the Rockefeller Museum where I came to examine a Philistine-related scarab from Tell el-Farʿah (South). Our cooperation intensified five years later when we co-edited a volume on the iconography of Northwest Semitic inscribed seals (see below, n. 6), greatly benefiting from the advantages of the early years of the internet. I have learned much from Benny's critical, incorruptible scholarship and ever since that time I have been deeply grateful for his friendship.

The current study was finished when I came across, incidentally via Academia.edu, an article recently published in Hebrew by Tallay Ornan (2015); my modern Hebrew being too poor to fully interact with her article, it is my pleasure to refer more talented readers to that piece. A fuller English version (Ornan 2016), well documented and thoughtful, appeared at the time of editing this piece; I shall refer to it in passing. See below, n. 15. My sincere thanks also to Irit Ziffer, who kindly responded to my questions about the late Pirhiya Beck's teaching at Tel Aviv University, in an email which reads like a most sensible tribute to her teacher; and to Brian Schmidt for sharing a paper prior to publication (Schmidt 2016).

2 If I remember correctly, Keel and Uehlinger 1992: Fig. 220 (based on separate preliminary publications by P. Beck and Z. Meshel and on a personal visit to the Israel Museum) was among the first combined presentations (if not the first published) showing the position, on Pithos A, of the chariot horse fragment and its inscription in relation to the Bes-like figures and the same inscription's right-hand section above them.

(Meshel *et al.* 2012).³ We now know more than ever many aspects of these findings, and we can better evaluate which questions may and should be further pursued on the basis of the published report, and which other questions will probably remain unresolved or unresolvable forever due to fragmentary evidence and/or limited documentation. It is well known that the original findings themselves cannot for various reasons be checked at present—neither the objects returned to the Egyptian authorities in December 1994⁴ nor the remains left at the site.

Benny Sass, whose *rayonnement* as a scholar and friend this volume celebrates, was a member of the excavation team and served as an area supervisor during all three seasons.⁵ Given his long-standing interest in both Northwest Semitic epigraphy⁶ and ancient Near Eastern iconography, especially from the southern Levant,⁷ it may be appropriate to share with him what remains an under-researched question in spite of hundreds of articles and book chapters on Kuntillet ‘Ajrud: How many different hands contributed to the inscriptions, paintings and drawings found at that site, and particularly to the paintings on the pithoi (Figs. 1–2)?⁸ In this article, I shall briefly comment on spatial relations of drawings and inscriptions on the two well-known pithoi, and their actual visibility in antiquity. I shall then sketch a few theoretical assumptions and issues of methodology before taking advice from the late Pirhiya Beck, whose discussion of the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud paintings and drawings remains the most authoritative to this day.⁹ I shall add a few observations of my own

3 This has prompted a new series of scholarly engagements with many different aspects of the site and the findings it produced. The bibliography at the end of my paper lists only a small part of this new momentum.

4 Unfortunately, Meshel *et al.* 2012 remain silent on the present whereabouts of the materials returned to Egypt (Qantara, Isma‘iliya, Cairo?). Cf. Schmidt 2015: 8 n. 2.

5 For visual evidence, see Meshel *et al.* 2012: XII–XIII, Figs. 6–8, and acknowledgments *ibid.*: XV.

6 On one of the most controversial issues pertaining to Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, see recently Sass 2014.

7 It is in this domain that we became close associates on the initiative of Othmar Keel (see Sass and Uehlinger 1993 with Benny’s important contribution on the iconography of pre-exilic Hebrew seals, *ibid.*: 194–256, later to be followed by the monumental *WSS* [Avigad and Sass 1997]).

8 On the historical context and background of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, see Na‘aman 2011; Finkelstein 2013; and Niehr 2013 (all with references to earlier literature).

9 Beck’s groundbreaking study (1982, republished 2002) was entitled “The Drawings from Horvat Teman (Kuntillet Ajrud).” Part I addressed “The Pithoi Drawings,” Part II “The Wall Paintings.” Having stood the passage of time, the article was published again, with a different introduction (entitled “Summary” and, I guess, written by Z. Meshel?), minor modifications in the text and the major addition of color plates, as Ch. 6 of the final report entitled “The Drawings and Decorative Designs” (Meshel *et al.* 2012: 143–203). See now Ornan 2016 for a new, original treatment moving beyond previous studies.

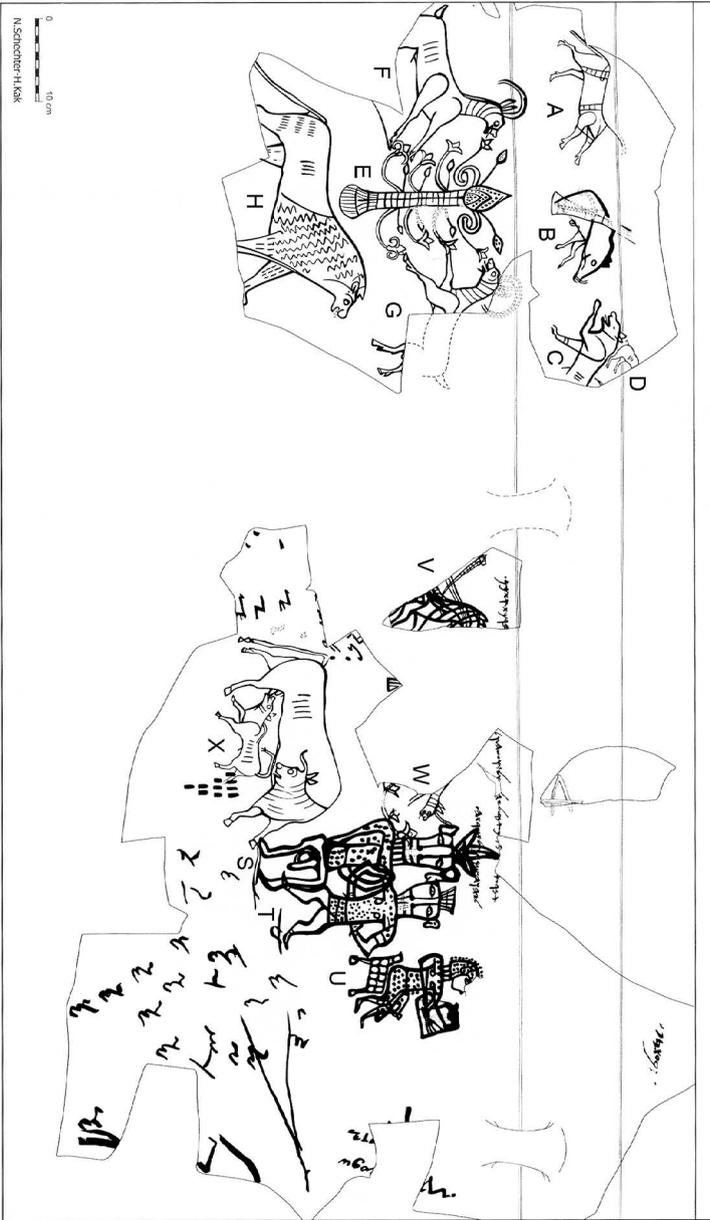


Figure 1: Projection drawing of Pithos A, Meshel et al. 2012: 87, Fig. 5.24 \cong 147, Fig. 6.5 (tags added).

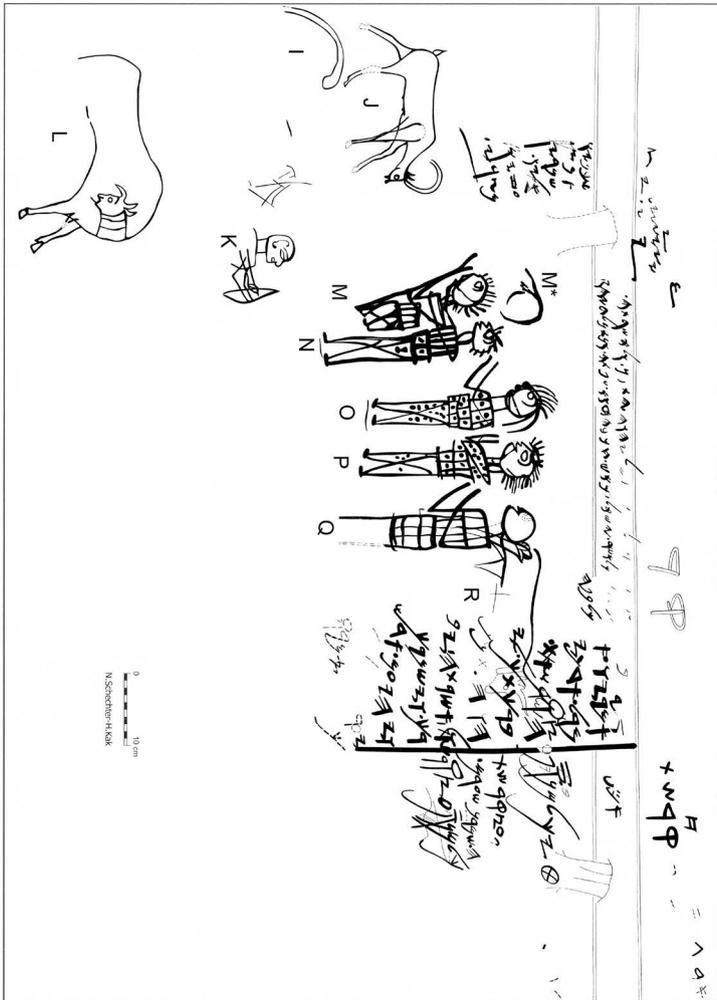


Figure 2: Projection drawing of Pithos B, Meshel et al. 2012: 92, Fig. 5.35 ≙ 148, Fig. 6.6 (tags added).

on selected pithoi drawings and mural paintings,¹⁰ arguing that the overall evidence, however fragmentary it may be, clearly allows us to distinguish between different hands, whose precise number is however difficult if not impossible to establish. Different hands can be postulated not only on stylistic grounds, but also because the evidence attests to copying operations, some of which are perhaps best understood in terms of a formal master-apprentice relation while others may have a less formal background, implying the presence of several draftsmen working alongside each other. I shall conclude with a few suggestions about how best to make sense of the overall relation between wall paintings, drawings and inscriptions, on the one hand, and pithoi drawings and inscriptions, on the other.

SPACES AND OVERLAPS

Considering myself hardly more than an amateur epigrapher,¹¹ I shall focus this paper on the paintings and drawings, discussing matters of style, iconography and non-epigraphic craftsmanship. Our starting point may, however, be the passing observation that the epigraphical remains on the pithoi from Kuntillet 'Ajrud alone allow the distinction of at least a dozen different handwritings.¹² Moreover, the presence of individual words repeated once or several times on the same pithos may well point to some sort of copying operations, an observation on which André Lemaire built his theory, advanced as early as 1981, of a school based at the site.¹³ A majority of scholars, myself included, has remained skeptical with regard to the school hypothesis (not every master-apprentice-relation or copying operation makes a school), but many of Lemaire's epigraphic observations remain valid and need

10 Terminology is tentative here, but we should differentiate between "drawings" and "paintings" according to at least three criteria: (a) different surface (plastered walls vs. pithoi or sherds; see already Keel and Uehlinger 1992/1998: §145), (b) mere outline or contour drawings vs. paintings including filled-in surfaces, and (c) monochrome, bichrome or polychrome execution.

11 Whereas the experienced epigrapher tends to see formally defined script traditions behind any single inscription or even letter, the iconographer's attention is first of all captured by the visual form, shape and extension, of script, lining, layout, etc. Both expertises need of course to take into account material surface, tools and techniques, skills and competences as preconditions for any inscription or image to be produced.

12 I am told by Israel Finkelstein that a multidisciplinary research project will investigate this issue in the near future.

13 See Lemaire 1981: esp. 25–32. Back in 1992, my own interpretation of the simultaneous presence on the pithoi of letter prescripts, single words and abecedaries was that some of the writers had put down a draft, while others showed off with their skills and yet others would have demonstrated that they, too, had received some formal education (Keel and Uehlinger 1992/1998: §143). In other words, I tried to make sense of the different types of pithos inscriptions by framing them in a (admittedly somewhat speculative) real-life situation. An alternative interpretation recently suggested by Mandell (2012) likewise stresses a performative aspect at least some of the inscriptions.

to be taken into account for any alternative interpretation. Before heading off for a grand theory, however, one should start with the basics: The ink inscriptions on pottery were written down on two pithoi, whose size enabled them to function as “blackboards” of sorts. These were not, however, evenly covered with inscriptions, drawings or scribbles. As can be seen on Figs. 1–2, some inscriptions on Pithos A clearly overlap, while others were set, it seems deliberately, into free spaces. Weighing each individual inscription against others and against the overall evidence, it is obvious that some “scribes” (not all of them professionals, to be sure) cared for layout and virgin surface when putting down their inscriptions, while others did not. Furthermore, ink inscriptions not only overlap with other inscriptions, but some overlap drawings (which has prompted scholars to ask whether any such overlap, and particularly the one above the Bes-like figure ^AS, was intentional or not). As for the drawings, some of them overlap with others, too, which prompted Beck to suggest a “stratigraphy” and even a chronological sequence of three different painters (see below).

Musing on the degree, intensity and intentionality of overlaps, I have often wondered whether our scholarly judgment is not at times altered and led astray by the clear-cut scientific reproduction of the epigraphic and iconographic evidence as black-and-white line drawings. I presume that, in contrast to Beck and others who were lucky to work on the original artifacts, most scholars writing on Kuntillet ‘Ajrud inscriptions or drawings have based their interpretations on published black-and-white drawings. One does not have to think twice to admit that in contrast to grayshade or color, black-and-white drawings exaggerate the presence or absence of a trace of ink on pottery. As a matter of fact, such renderings presuppose virtually hundreds of options and decisions on behalf of the modern draftsman and his or her advisors. For sure many scholars writing on Kuntillet ‘Ajrud will also have gazed at the pithoi when they were exhibited at the Israel Museum in the 1980s and early 1990s, appreciating from a distance the difference between line drawings and the “real thing.” But looking at the color photographs now published in the final report helps to better appreciate the “real evidence” and results in a different perception, more nuanced and accounting for many different shades of red, black or brown and gray than the standard black-and-white renderings. One gets another sense of how the material looked when it was discovered and a better basis to imagine (is not history informed imagination, after all?) how it might have looked in ancient times. Consider that Kuntillet ‘Ajrud is after all a rather dusty place. At the time of their discovery, some inscriptions as a whole or parts of individual inscriptions had faded away much more than others when they were discovered by the excavators; it is probable that they had faded already, at least to

some extent, in antiquity, that is by the time some of them were partly covered by overlapping new ones. Similarly, some drawings have clearly been incompletely preserved: Think of a conspicuously raised lion's tail (my ^BI on Fig. 2) visible just below ibex ^BJ (Meshel *et al.* 2012: 148 Fig. 6.6, 179 Fig. 6.28), a feature so fragmentary that it did not even get a tag in Beck's analysis. It must once, in some way or another, have referred to a proud lion roaring to the right. If I try to modestly make sense of this tail, either the lion was once complete and has largely faded away; or the tail was a trial piece of a draftsman who exercised his hand before drawing a complete roaring lion on one of the walls. Or think of Beck's motive ^AW left of the famous Bes-like figures (best seen on the color photograph in Meshel *et al.* 2012: 166 Fig. 6.20a), which she understood as the remains of an ibex and a garland. It probably once belonged to a garland tree with an ibex on either side. These and other features and motifs were more complete and well visible immediately after execution; but they dried up rapidly and may have partly faded away before further drawings or inscriptions were charged over them. When looking at some of the color photographs in Meshel's report one gets a vivid sense indeed of how the fading process must have affected individual drawings or inscriptions.¹⁴

Close examination of the published photographs and drawings shows that in some cases, an inscription or a drawing was placed such as to intentionally avoid an overlap, while in other cases there was clearly no attempt not to overlap whatever. In the latter cases, one may ask whether the overlap was intentional or not.¹⁵ As mentioned this question has more often than not been discussed in splendid isolation with regard to the partly overlapping pair of Bes-like figures and the latter's partial overlap with one of the "Yahweh and his a/Asherah" inscriptions. Personally, I think that the more probable alternative in most cases of overlap is that they were unintentional. After all and

14 The best examples are from Pithos A: Meshel *et al.* 2012: 146 Fig. 6.3 and 158 Fig. 6.14a (note especially boar ^AB on the shoulder), 148 Fig. 6.7a (cow ^AL, possibly unfinished), and 167 Fig. 20a (Bes-like figure ^AS).

15 Overlaps are also discussed, with very different explanations offered, by Ornan (2015, 2016) and Schmidt (2013, 2016). This is not the place to engage their explanations in detail. Suffice it to point out that both consider the pithos drawings as drafts for wall paintings. The main difference between the two approaches is that Schmidt assumes relative coherence of images and inscriptions, that is composition, already on the pithoi, whereas Ornan refrains from correlating inscriptions with images (except when she relates the asherah to motifs ^E-^H following an intuition first expressed by Ruth Hestrin [1987] and supported, *inter alia*, by Irit Ziffer [2010]). The real originality of Ornan's proposal (partly taken up by Schmidt 2013) lies in the suggestion that we should take pithos drawings and mural paintings as a "single assemblage" featuring two main subject matters: royal activity (including ceremonial appearance, feasting, warfare and hunt) and apotropaic, beneficial and protective "religious" motifs.

generally speaking, if on the one hand writers and painters will have almost naturally favored a virgin surface if easily available, they had no particular need to avoid overlap in other cases, for four reasons: (1) previous inscriptions or drawings had rapidly dried up or partly faded away; (2) a new drawing or inscription would naturally be much more visible than any earlier one and thus stand out from the surface; (3) time and again it must have been easier just to use the closest surface at hand rather than move what were after all quite heavy pithoi, or move around them; (4) neither inscriptions nor drawings on the pithoi were made for eternity. Indirect proof for the latter point is given by the many scribbles, particularly on Pithos A. I take these scribbles, numerous but rarely addressed in scholarly studies, to be traces of a normal operation for anyone working with a brush: When having been charged with ink or paint it carries too much liquid; you need to discharge a little before drawing if you want to obtain a decent line. Taking into account such rather practical considerations, the burden of proof is in my view on scholars who do assume intentional correlations (whether through overlap or in terms of copying) between individual drawings or drawings and inscriptions, rather than on their more skeptical colleagues who refrain from too closely correlating drawings and inscriptions. Yet there are some examples of overlap where to ponder on a correlation does not seem unreasonable. I shall turn to some of them in what follows, focusing as mentioned on non-epigraphic examples.

DISTINGUISHING HANDS

How can we distinguish hands when dealing with pictorial evidence?

This is not the place to expose a thorough and detailed methodology,¹⁶ but I should outline some of the assumptions which guide the analysis presented below. Examining the drawings and following Beck's masterful description and analysis, it is clear that none of the pithoi drawings—except perhaps the row of gesturing men on Pithos B—are spontaneous, *ad hoc* inventions, nor are they creations *ex nihilo* by

16 One might refer to a plethora of publications on “style” and “attribution,” ranging from connoisseurship to art history, which need to be enriched by social-historical and anthropological perspectives. Gombrich's classic *Art and Illusion* (1983 [orig. 1959]) remains helpful as theoretical background, see below n. 22. Beck herself referred to Barasch 1977; compare, e.g., Brassat and Kohle 2003; Weissert 2009. Closer to Levantine archaeology, see, e.g., Conkey and Hastorf 1993; Dietler and Herbich 1998; Conkey 2013; and Feldman 2014, whose programmatic aim is to move beyond the common concern with attributing stylistic minutiae to geographically located workshops; and several contributions (esp. those of Silvana Di Paolo, Allison Thomason and Francesca Onnis) in Brown and Feldman 2014. These studies rarely address brushwork, however, which has its own constraints, very different from, say, wood-, bone- or ivory-carving, seal-cutting, let alone metalwork.

unskilled amateurs.¹⁷ As demonstrated by Beck, they generally follow specific and well-established representational conventions well known to specialists of ancient Near Eastern, especially Levantine (so-called “Syro-Phoenician”) minor arts. If the term “professional” may seem slightly abusive in view of the Kuntillet 'Ajrud drawings, it is obvious that the author(s) of several of these drawings, especially on Pithos A from the northern bench-room, relied on and made use of definite artistic knowledge and skills. He (or they) may have occasionally executed some details in a slightly hasty or sketchy mode, for instance in the treatment of a lion's mane (^AH). But he (or they) would also pay considerable attention to significant details, for instance when representing the harness of horses ^AA or ^AV. As a rule, the drawings on Pithos A follow a middle way of sorts, showing neither carelessness nor exaggerated obsession with all too many details. More important for my argument, most drawings display a rather confident and determined brushwork; as a matter of fact, there are few traces of corrections or second tracing. Coming from a world where learning how to draw was not part of elementary education as in many contemporary societies, such determined brushwork and self-confident artistry evidences an experienced hand, which almost habitually knew, for instance, how to render a cow and her suckling calf, both in posture and proportion (^AX); how to distinguish the attitude of a cow turning back her head towards her calf from that of a bull walking straight with his head slightly lowered (^BR); how to distinguish the hooves, legs and thighs of goats, horses and bovines from the rounder paws of felines; or how to render ribs, muscles and wrinkles with a few lines soberly apposed on the animal's appropriate body part. Much of this must result from skill and practice, if not habit, and cannot be accounted for in terms of “popular art” by “untrained artists.”¹⁸

Any attempt to distinguish hands in the context of Near Eastern art and craftsmanship that was largely traditional, conditioned by type models and their reproduction, convention and habitual skills, should rely on the combined observation and analysis of three sets of evidence:

1. Technical differences, e.g., in terms of brushes, paint or inks;
2. Unintentional details, which are more diagnostic for hand differentiation and attribution than semantically relevant differences;
3. Stylistic differences.

These three criteria can be handled with reasonable precision when the evidence allows for comparison of closely comparable artistic

17 Pace Z. Meshel's (?) opinion that “the pithoi were decorated spontaneously by untrained artists” (2012: 143).

18 Pace Meshel *et al.* 2012: 143 (Z. Meshel?) and 198 (P. Beck).

products: similar surface, similar genre, same motifs, etc. Still, the first and third criteria may often be difficult to apply in practice, for obvious reasons: A painter will generally use a set of brushes, not just a single one, and several inks or colors (but how many brushes would have been available in the northern benchroom?); and a skilled artist or craftsman may well master different styles (although to train such a competence would only be relevant in a social context that appreciates sophistication and distinction). In the case of the paintings and drawings from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, Beck as early as 1982 suggested distinguishing three or four hands for the pithoi drawings and an unspecified number of artists for the mural paintings. It is to her analysis that we now turn.

How Many Hands? Taking Stock with Pirhiya Beck

As mentioned above, any discussion of the paintings and drawings from Kuntillet 'Ajrud should start from Beck's seminal and groundbreaking article. That this important study was reprinted with only minimal modifications in the final report, 30 years after its first publication, is a tribute to its quality and exceptionally long academic half-life.¹⁹ Beck's study is divided into two parts, Part I dealing with the pithoi drawings, Part II with the wall paintings. The first part is organized mainly according to motifs (I.1 cow-and-calf motif, I.2 ibexes flanking a tree, I.3 isolated animals, I.5 Bes figures and lyre player, I.6 procession of worshippers, I.7 archer); four sections (I.4, entitled "The Animal Painter," I.8 on drawings on potsherds, I.9 which summarizes the analysis of the pithoi drawings and I.10 on the relationship between the pithoi drawings and the inscriptions) have a slightly different orientation and purpose. Part II has its own introduction, a description of the individual, very fragmentary wall paintings, and a general summary which among other questions addresses the relation of the wall paintings to the pithoi drawings. The latter section together with Sections I.4 and I.9 are the most relevant for the present discussion.

As indicated by the use of the singular, Beck was of the opinion that all animal drawings (including Bull ^BR) were the work of a single "Animal Painter," although she qualified that judgment: "Several details of the animal drawings are shared by all of them, thus indicating that they were all the product of the same hand—or if not the selfsame hand, then by one or two artists with identical technique and background." She expressed "some doubt about the painter of Lion H and Ibex J,

19 I don't know how much of her research on the drawings from Kuntillet 'Ajrud Beck could share at the time with her students. Raz Kletter, Tallay Ornan, and Irit Ziffer, to name but a few colleagues who have since engaged in iconographical work, were doctoral students after 1982, when she had turned to other projects.

although we believe [!] they were also drawn by the same hand.”²⁰ The main argument for assuming a single artist was the observation of strong similarities (supported by appropriate tables) in the treatment of animal heads and foreparts. To be sure, Beck did notice a number of differences, which she attributed to difficulties experienced by the artist in the treatment of particular details: “Throughout our discussion we have noted the artist’s unsuccessful struggles with the problem of representing the forelegs and coordinating them with the hind legs. He also had difficulties in dealing with the parts that—in keeping with visual reality—would have been concealed from the eye of the viewer.”²¹ Interestingly, Beck seems to have assumed a direct relation between what a viewer may physically recognize in reality and what he or she would try to represent by a drawing, bypassing as it were Ernst Gombrich’s famous statement on Malraux (fully supported, I would argue, by the drawings from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud) that “art is born of art, not of nature”²²; that is, a figurative drawing *construes* a picture and represents a figure known from nature according to skills and conventions learned and applied by the artist (or craftsman), and it is *interpreted* or *decoded* by the viewer not on the basis of his or her physical knowledge of the “real” (natural) object but via his or her shared knowledge of representational conventions.²³ According to Beck, differences in the treatment of

20 Beck 2002: 116 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 161.

21 Beck 2002: 120 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 162.

22 Gombrich 1983: 20. “We are accustomed to looking at all images as if they were photographs or illustrations and to interpreting them as the reflection of an actual or imaginary reality” (*ibid.*: 105).

23 Gombrich spoke of a “reliance on construction rather than on imitation” (*ibid.*: 76), and of “guided projection” (*ibid.*: 170). Cf. in a nutshell *ibid.*: 30 (“the artist, too, cannot transcribe what he sees; he can only translate it into the terms of his medium”), 40 (“all graphic techniques operate with conventional notation”), 56 (“style rules even where the artist wishes to represent nature faithfully [...]. The artist, clearly, can render only what his tool and his medium [and his skill, C. U.] are capable of rendering”), 247 (“in all styles the artist has to rely on a vocabulary of forms and [...] it is the knowledge of this vocabulary rather than a knowledge of things that distinguishes the skilled from the unskilled artist”), 263 (“all representations are grounded on schemata which the artist learns to use”), 94 (“the test of the image is not its lifelikeness but its efficacy within a context of action”), 53 (“it is the ‘more’ or ‘less’ that counts, the relationship between the expected and the experienced”), 78 (“styles, like languages, differ in the sequence of articulation and in the number of questions they allow the artist to ask [...]. The form of a representation cannot be divorced from its purpose and the requirements of the society in which the given visual language gains currency”), 63 (“it makes no sense to look at a motif unless one has learned how to classify and catch it within the network of a schematic form”), 54 (“I believe the historical imagination can overstep these barriers, that we can attune ourselves to different styles no less than we can adjust our mental set to different media and different notations”). Note that all this does not, in my view, require explanations in terms of cultural psychology, a concern to Gombrich which must not be projected into the materials now being discussed. My own interest here is exclusively in figurative “art” (i.e., brushwork) as a particular set of acquired bodily practice, framed by both cultural and social rules and expectations (such as theorized in terms of *habitus* and *know-how* by Pierre Bourdieu).

details should be interpreted in terms of inferior drawing skills, or poor assimilation of the relevant conventions by the painter: “it would seem that all the animals on the pithoi were drawn by the same painter (with the possible exception of the chariot horse), who repeated his ‘mistakes,’ yet managed to convey the characteristic features of each species. This is a painter who could not have been of the first rank of artisans, and whose efforts fall below the standard of contemporary works, such as ivory carvings or seals, manufactured by artists of the highest ability for the royal court.”²⁴ In a way, Beck’s measure of quality concluded from a few parts to the whole, and from one material genre and technique to another; her argument based on some “inferior” features in the animal drawings affected her evaluation of the drawings as such, which she considered to result from relatively poor artistic abilities.

Why should Chariot horse ^{AV} be the work of possibly another painter? The reason for Beck’s hesitating evaluation of this motif is that, while “the joined outline of the horse’s forelegs are similar to those of the other animals on the pithoi,” it was executed with a wider brush, a similar one or the same thick brush as the one that served for Lyre player ^{AU} (as well as the Bes-like figures ^{AS} and ^{AT}).²⁵ “However,” Beck wrote, “considering the little we have to go on, we prefer to leave the question of the horse painter’s identity open.”²⁶ On second thought, it seems more than doubtful to base hand attribution on the thickness of a brush alone, especially in the presence of contradictory evidence.

The wide brush, iconographical considerations and observations on the drawings’ “stratigraphy” on Pithos A (“Bes” ^{AS} overlapping “Bes” ^{AT}, Garland ^{AW} and Cow ^{AX}) and Pithos B (Worshipper Q overlapping Bull ^{BR}) led Beck to move one step forward (her Section I.9) and identify at least three hands at work on the pithoi, which she called Painters A (the “Animal painter”), B and C. In her opinion, Painter B using the wider brush did the Bes-like figures ^{AS} and ^{AT} and Lyre player ^{AU}, and he shared with Painter A an acquaintance with Phoenician iconography. As for Painter C, to whom Beck attributed the procession of “worshippers” on Pithos B, he “also used a wide brush but in a more primitive style” which reminded her of drawings on Midianite pottery and some rock drawings from Sinai and Arabia, representing an altogether different cultural horizon.²⁷ That the procession should be the result of one or several hands clearly less experienced in the manipulation of a brush for the purpose of figurative drawing seems indeed obvious at a single glance.

24 Beck 2002: 121 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 164–165.

25 Beck 2002: 116 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 161.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Beck 2002: 116 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 182–183.

Turning to the wall paintings, recovered in a most fragmentary state which allowed only tentative reconstructions of a few larger compositions, Beck found it “difficult to distinguish specific features of any significance that would enable us to identify a particular artist.”²⁸ Considering such aspects as “sureness of line” vs. “uneven lines of varying width,” different color schemes or the use, in one instance, “of a black outline around the yellow leaves of the lotus blossoms in the lowermost band,” she remained undecided “as to whether they are of any significance in distinguishing between different painters.”²⁹ Still, in her opinion, “the scale and execution of the murals suggests [*sic*] that they were planned in advance, and painted by artists [note the plural, C. U.] who were either commissioned or otherwise retained for this purpose.”³⁰

To sum up, Beck assumed—on admittedly tentative grounds—that the mural paintings had been executed by a limited number of artists, who operated as itinerant craftsmen within a framework of official planning and commission; whereas the pithoi drawings were the work of three different painters, one of whom came from a peripheral background (“desert art”). “In comparison to the pithoi, the murals exhibit a higher standard of craftsmanship, perhaps because they were planned in advance, while the pithoi drawings were spontaneous.”³¹ As for the question whether the wall paintings were in some way or another related to the pithoi drawings (or vice versa), Beck considered three hypotheses without firmly opting for one of them: (a) that at least some of the drawings on the pithoi (and on sherd Z³²) could have served as sketches for mural paintings; (b) “that the mural artists were simply ‘keeping in practice’ by drawing on the pithoi the motifs from their repertoires, without any intention of transferring these specific sketches to the walls”; and (c), less probable according to her, that the pithoi drawings were intended to illustrate the dedications in the inscriptions, or were pictorial dedications in their own right.³³

28 Beck 2002: 159 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 197.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Beck 2002: 160 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 197.

31 *Ibid.*

32 See below, n. 46.

33 *Ibid.* One major difficulty of the latter hypothesis, which has been brought into the discussion mainly because one of the “Yahweh and his A/asherah” inscriptions overlaps with Bes-like figure ^AS, is the impossibility to understand all the pithoi inscriptions (to be sure, not even a majority among them) as dedications.

My own evaluation of the pictorial evidence from Kuntillet ʿAjrud, more indebted to Beck’s insights than to anyone else’s, nevertheless departs from her interpretation in three ways:

1. I doubt that the pithoi drawings can be attributed to merely three or four hands.
2. While I recognize that most of the mural paintings required more elaborate planning than any of the pithoi drawings, I do not think that the difference between the two sets of evidence should be interpreted in artificially dichotomic terms such as formal vs. popular, planned vs. spontaneous or the like (see above, “Spaces and Overlaps,” for considerations on representational conventions and artistic habit). If the mural paintings did obviously require a different kind of investment and advance planning, their artistic quality is not too far away from that of the pithoi drawings.
3. I do not think that the features interpreted by Beck as “mistakes” especially in the treatment of anatomic details by her “Animal painter” should be attributed to an individual artist’s failure to appropriately translate physical view, nor to this painter’s limited artistic skills, but that at least some of these features are better understood when viewed in the context of master-apprentice or master-and-colleague relationships and copying processes.

The aim of the following section is to substantiate the latter point.

OBSERVATIONS ON PITHOI DRAWINGS

Composition ^AF-E-G (two ibexes flanking a tree, Fig. 3) is one of the most discussed in the literature on Kuntillet ʿAjrud because it has been heavily mobilized (with or without Lion ^AH striding underneath) for the a/Asherah discussion. For the present purpose, we can ignore this debate—and the lion. I simply want to draw attention to a feature already (and unsurprisingly) noticed by Beck: “Although neither ibex is completely preserved, it is clear that they are not identical in appearance nor in their position vis-à-vis the tree. The forelegs of the ibex at the right touch the lower and third-from-lower lotus flowers, whereas the forelegs of the opposite animal are drawn on either side of the lower flower.”³⁴ It is notable that, when describing the two ibexes, Beck started with Ibex ^AG, which is anatomically more sophisticated (note the eyebrow, the well-proportioned depiction of the animal’s left leg-and-thigh in the foreground, the rather acute position of the right leg in the background, and the feet resting on flowers), before describing Ibex ^AF *in comparative terms* in relation to ^AG: “The head is similar, *except*

34 Beck 2002: 108 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 155.

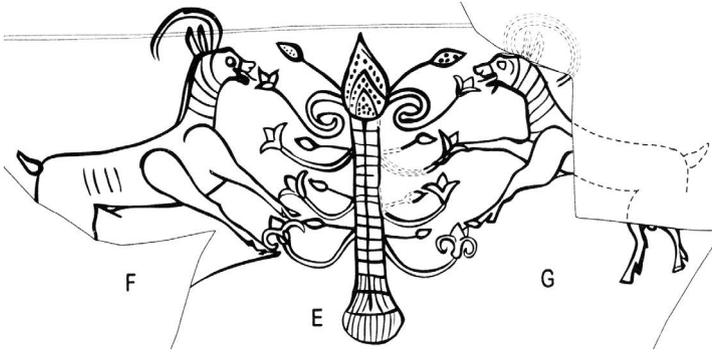


Figure 3: Stylized tree flanked by ibexes, AF-E-G: detail taken from Meshel et al. 2012: 147, Fig. 6.4 (animals AA–D and AH deleted); cf. color photographs in Meshel et al. 2012: 146, Fig. 6.3, and 153, Fig. 6.10.

for the missing eyebrow. (...) The throat is shorter and more rounded than that of Ibex F [sic, read G (C. U.)], and joins the neck at a more natural angle (...).³⁵ The latter comment confirms Beck's idea of images reflecting nature in a more or less appropriate way. Unsurprisingly, Beck also noted the somewhat strange way of representing the left animal's shoulders, especially the left shoulder, "which according to visual reality would not be seen." But it did not apparently occur to her that the differences noted might be indications of different hands.

Let us, by way of hypothesis, examine that option further: Taking into account that these drawings are not, in all probability, inkings of designs that would have been previously sketched with chalk or the like, but genuine freehand tracings, we can tentatively reconstruct the drawing process that resulted in Ibex ^AF. It must have started with the back and head (note that the neck was drawn twice), and the belly was only drawn after the forelegs were in place. The latter are drawn in a rather schematic, unsophisticated way, with round, non-anatomical shoulders, legs extended straight and almost parallel, little attention to the knees and the two feet resting "in the air" (if not meant to rest on the same flower): Given all these incongruencies, I find it hard to admit that Ibex ^AF should be the work of the same draftsman as Ibex ^AG. It seems more appropriate to hypothesize that a more experienced hand drew Ibex ^AG first, followed by another hand trying to mirror and copy the animal on the opposite side of the tree but doing so but with more limited skills—and perhaps a habit of his own: Note that the position of ^AF's forelegs recalls Horse ^AA just above.³⁶ The other anatomical details such as the face, ears and horns, wrinkles on the

³⁵ *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

³⁶ Yet another variant of resolving the problem of forelegs can be seen with Ibex ^BJ.

neck and ribs were added at the final stage of the drawing; they could easily be (and apparently were) copied from IbeX ^AG as well, the only actual “mistake” being the omission of the eyebrow.

A second example reveals more distance in skill between two different hands: Compare Cow-and-calf ^AX (Fig. 4a) with Cow[-and-calf] ^BL (Fig. 4b), an “evidently unfinished” drawing according to Beck,³⁷ who in this instance described the infelicitous version before the more successful one. I am tempted to speculate that “composition” ^BL may have remained unfinished due to its rather poor execution, which led the painter to abandon his failed attempt; yet parts of the back may have faded away. Beck aptly noted that the head of Cow ^BL was far too small, and its neck too short, so that it “would not have been able to make contact with a calf if such had been drawn.”³⁸ One may note several significant differences in the treatment of the two cows (which, we should recall, appear on two different pithoi): compare the treatment of the horns, the eyebrow, the wrinkles, the hooves... Beck recognized such differences and placed style and skills of Cow-and-calf ^AX close to those of Syrian ivory carvings, that is rather high quality craftsmanship. Yet she insisted that despite all differences “most of the details in the execution of the heads and foreparts of the cows seem to betray the same hand.”³⁹ She even pushed her interpretation so far as to “assume that the artist started with Cow ^BL, but since he did not succeed in placing the head in a position that would bring it anywhere near the calf he intended to draw, he left the picture unfinished and moved on to the other pithos, where he was more successful in portraying the desired motif.”⁴⁰ While I sympathize with Beck’s courage to offer such an almost midrashic, real-life scenario, I find it difficult to accept given the too many, straightforward differences, which would imply that the painter made tremendous progress from only one drawing to the other. Methodologically speaking, it is of course interesting that in a comparative analysis, one scholar may privilege similarities, whereas another will insist on the differences. I do not deny that ^AX and ^BL show similarities in treatment, but these should in my view be attributed to two different painters’ shared training background and technical habit rather than to a single hand. My third example is again a most famous one, namely the two Bes-like figures ^AS and ^AT (Fig. 5). Much ink has been spilled about the physical relation of the two figures. That ^AS was added after ^AT, producing a partial overlap especially on the level of arms and shoulders, neither

37 Beck 2002: 98 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 148.

38 Beck 2002: 99 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 148.

39 Beck 2002: 102 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 151.

40 *Ibid.*

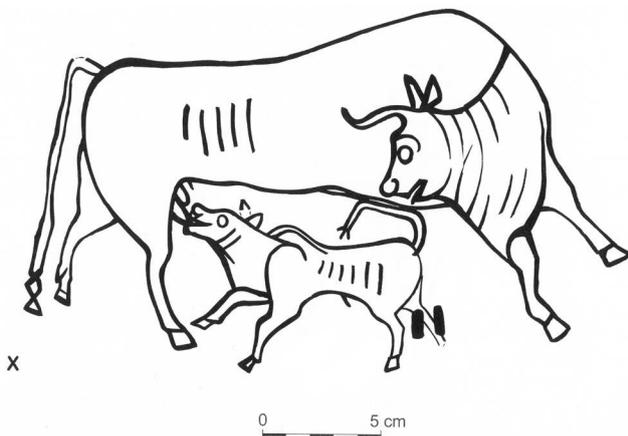


Figure 4a: Cow-and-calf AX, Meshel et al. 2012: 150, Fig. 6.8; cf. color photograph *ibid.*: Fig. 6.8a.

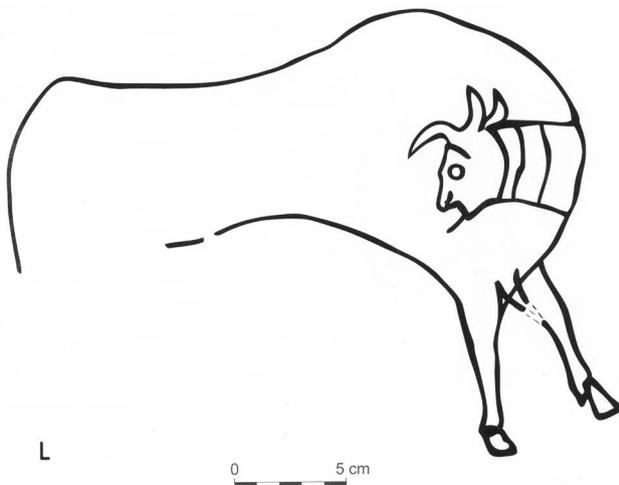


Figure 4b: Cow BL, Meshel et al. 2012: 149 Fig. 6.7; cf. color photograph *ibid.*: Fig. 6.7a.

precludes nor requires that the two figures were intentionally related (in the extreme, and put in a deliberately sloppy way to stress the absurd: “Mr. and Mrs. Yahweh going for a walk on Sabbath morning”). Joel LeMon and Brent Strawn have recently visualized the “stratigraphy” of the two figures and the inscription above them, which was added at a third stage.⁴¹ My concern here is with the figures alone. Given the use of the same or a similar wide brush, it is reasonable to assume that

⁴¹ See LeMon and Strawn 2013: esp. 106–110.



Figure 5: Bes-like figures AS and AT, Meshel et al. 2012: 166, Fig. 6.20 (Lyre player AU deleted); cf. color photograph *ibid.*: Fig. 6.20a.

Lyre player ^{AU} (and possibly Horse[-and-chariot] ^{AV}, which however shares features with other animal depictions) were drawn within a short period of time. But regardless of their specific identification (as Bes, Beset, Yahweh, a/Asherah, etc.), Figures ^{AS} and ^{AT} represent *two artistic versions*, if anything, of how to depict a “Bes-type,” apotropaic hybrid. The most down-to-earth interpretation I can imagine at present would be that someone drew Figure ^{AT} (perhaps as a sketch in view of an ulterior task to be performed on one of the walls) in a quite sophisticated way—as a matter of fact, many details (eyes, ears, arms, legs, feet position...) are more finely executed than in Figure ^{AS}, which in comparison looks crude, asymmetrical, angular and bony (if not arthritic altogether). I find it hard to attribute both drawings to the same hand—and in this instance enjoy the company of Beck, who doubted “whether the two Bes figures on Pithos A (...) were drawn by the same painter.”⁴² It is more plausible to consider ^{AT} as a *variant* to ^{AS}, sketched by another hand drawing on a slightly different artistic tradition or model type—and skills. As for the overlap of the two figures—quite untypical for ancient Near Eastern art⁴³—its significance should in my view not be overemphasized, given the manifest differences in size and height between the two figures. Figure ^{AS} appears to be somewhat

42 Beck 2002: 126 = Meshel et al. 2012: 169.

43 Beck 2002: 132 = Meshel et al. 2012: 173.

squeezed into what little free space remained when it was drawn, the surface to the left having already been occupied by Ibex-and-garland (*Ibexes-and-tree?) ^AW and Cow-and-calf ^AX.

To sum up this section, I suggest that all three examples discussed point to the plausible existence of different hands and a certain communicative interchange between different draftsmen. They also indicate differences in skills, which in two cases may reflect a gradient between master and apprentice.

OBSERVATIONS ON PITHOI DRAWINGS AND MURAL PAINTINGS

For reasons of space I shall not go into detail in this section, which would require a much more thorough treatment. But let me consider briefly the relation between pithoi drawings and mural paintings. The latter were restricted to Building B and to the entranceway and benchroom area of Building A. The bad state of preservation of only a few fragments does not allow us to be affirmative beyond the fact that a number of functionally significant walls and rooms *were* decorated in a rather formal, but surprisingly varied way. Decoration ranged from dotted surfaces⁴⁴ and chequered designs⁴⁵ through lotus-and-guilloche bands⁴⁶ and voluted palmettes⁴⁷ to figurative scenes, among which a figure enthroned at the entryway to the casemate fort stands out as the most conspicuous and prominent one.⁴⁸ Beck hypothesized that a drawing on an isolated sherd (Sherd Z⁴⁹) found west of Building B (L. 161) might have been a preliminary sketch for that figure,⁵⁰ which must have represented a person of royal status, perhaps even a king.⁵¹

For the present discussion, other items may provide even better evidence that we should understand many motifs on the pithoi (if perhaps not all of them) in close relation to decorated walls, rather than take them as “pictorial dedications,” graffiti or the like. My first example is the single quadruped on “wall painting”⁵² no. 12,

44 Beck 2002: 148 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 187 no. 5.

45 *Ibid.*: no. 6.

46 Beck 2002: 150–151 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 188–189 no. 7.

47 Beck 2002: 154–157 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 192–194 no. 10.

48 Beck 2002: 152–154 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 189–192 no. 9.

49 Beck 2002: 139–140 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 180–181 with Figs. 6.30 and 30a. See now Schmidt 2013: 58–60.

50 See above, n. 29.

51 Beck 2000: 180–181 = 2002: 218; Keel and Uehlinger 1992/1998: §145; Ziffer 2013 and 2014.

52 As a matter of fact, this piece does not qualify as a wall painting in the same sense as the plastered fragments, since it displays four or five isolated motifs (petals of a lotus flower, one or two animals, a human head of a figure carrying a stick, and the head of a lion or lioness), probably trial sketches, painted directly onto the unplastered surface of a stone of the doorjamb.

which Beck interpreted as a goat.⁵³ The zoological identification may well be correct, but the anatomy and stylistic rendering of the animal's body is strongly reminiscent of Horse ^AA.⁵⁴ The two drawings should probably be attributed to the same hand. In other words, our draftsmen did not use pithoi only as “blackboards”; at least some of them left sketches elsewhere on (vertical) stone or plaster surfaces as well. A second motif, the image of a goat or ibex grazing among lotus flowers (wall painting no. 8), recalled to Beck what she understood as an Ibex-and-garland composition (^AW). Since the latter could originally have represented a scene of ibexes flanking a flower tree not unlike composition ^AF-E-G discussed above, one may add Goat⁵ ^AD and Ibex ^BJ to the argument and conclude that grazing goats and/or ibexes must once have occupied a rather prominent position at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud.⁵⁵ Third, on the opposite end of the scale of artistic sophistication, one might mention the use of clustered dots to mark certain spaces (wall painting no. 5), a feature which recalls the use of dots by people handling a wide brush on either pithoi A and B.⁵⁶ Taken together, and considered in the light of variant drawings and copying processes discussed above, this suggests that most of the motifs on the pithoi, and perhaps all of them, were sketch drawings that originally had some equivalents somewhere on the plastered and mural paintings.

CONCLUSION

I hope to have drawn the reader's attention to some hitherto overlooked details and issues that may carry our understanding of the drawings and paintings from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud beyond the point reached in 1982 by Pirhiya Beck. On the basis of presently available information, re-evaluated in the light of a “close reading” and critical historical imagination, the most appropriate way to make sense of the evidence seems to hypothesize that the two famous pithoi served as “blackboards” of sorts to the artists who painted the murals. These draftsmen definitely numbered more than three.

53 Beck 2002: 158–159 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 196.

54 Beck 2002: 112 = Meshel *et al.* 2012: 158 with Fig. 6.14.

55 Ornan (2016: 4, 8) reminds me that I once suggested that the hoofed leg on wall painting no. 8 belonged to a horse rather than a caprid (Keel and Uehlinger 1992: 242; 1998: 215). It is unclear how this quadruped (whose leg appears partly upside down on the photograph in Meshel *et al.* 2012: 190, Fig. 6.38a) relates to the flower fragments with which Beck associated the animal.

56 Since these dots do not follow the exact outlines of the figures to which they belong—Bes-like figures ^AS and ^AT, Lyre player ^AU on Pithos A, some of the “worshippers” on Pithos B—they have occasionally been understood as secondary additions.

It remains that both the evidence from the pithoi and, even more, from the wall paintings are fragmentary. Considering however that a good deal of motifs and subject matter is positively attested in both media, it does not seem unreasonable to hypothesize that many motifs figuring on the pithoi—some of which refer to larger compositions by implication—and perhaps all of them, once had their equivalents among the mural paintings.⁵⁷ If I insisted 25 years ago on the necessary methodological distinction of pithoi drawings and mural paintings, taking the latter as witnesses for the role of Kuntillet 'Ajrud as a state-supported outpost,⁵⁸ I would now argue that the draftsmen responsible for the murals were the same as those who drew their sketches on the pithoi. Only the so-called “worshipper” figures of Pithos B clearly reflect a different background. Whether this difference should be interpreted in terms of a social dichotomy (trained and skilled artists/draftsmen vs. untrained and unskilled people who left some more spontaneous marks of their presence), different ethnic origin (e.g., Phoenicians alongside Israelites) and/or cultural background will be left open here, but I hope that there will be other opportunities to return to Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the future—in a context which, unlike writing for his festschrift, will allow me to freely discuss matters with Benny again.⁵⁹

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57 See now Ornan 2015, 2016 and above, n. 14.

58 Keel and Uehlinger 1992/1998: §§145–147.

59 Some of the observations made above have been presented on various occasions, e.g., in academic talks at the University of Pittsburgh (November 19, 2013), where I enjoyed the hospitality of Ron Tappy; at a retreat of the *Asia and Europe* research consortium of the University of Zurich (June 3, 2014), where we discussed issues of materiality, images and texts, and master-apprentice relations in transcultural perspective; and at Emory University (November 17, 2015) where Joel LeMon and Brent Strawn allowed me to interact with their graduate students. I am grateful to colleagues and audiences to have raised critical questions and put my interpretations to test. All errors are mine.

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**ALPHABETS,
TEXTS AND ARTIFACTS
IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST**

Studies presented to
Benjamin Sass

edited by
Israel Finkelstein, Christian Robin, Thomas Römer



VAN DIEREN ÉDITEUR

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