

## Asherah

**I. Introduction.** *West Semitic goddess*, →DDD. The last decades have witnessed flourishing research on A.'s iconography despite the fact that so far no iconographic material accompanied by epigraphs clearly identifying the goddess has been found. This situation had two main consequences: on the one hand, single attempts to identify a definite iconographic typology have increased greatly; on the other hand, each of these attempts has raised scholars' doubts or criticism (see WIGGINS 1991; WIGGINS 2001; FREVEL 1995: 739-898; KLETTER 1996: 16-22, 76f; MERLO 1997). The major methodological problem is still how a particular iconographic typology can be attributed to A. When examining the numerous attempts at identification, one may note that the interpretational process is often based on the correlation of a particular textual interpretation with limited iconographic evidence (e.g., the tree depicted on the Lachish ewer [→Tree #]) and the conclusion's subsequent generalization onto other representations. From a methodological point of view, it seems more accurate to link textual and iconographic data only after having analyzed all available epigraphic evidence for A. (WIGGINS 1993; MERLO 1998). Only then is it possible to verify whether the suggested iconographic correlation is compatible with A.s historical-religious profile as derived from the epigraphic sources.

Due to the present lack of certainty, phenotypes regarding this lemma can only be classified as probable, uncertain or even unlikely.

### II. Typology

#### II.1. Phenotypes

A. *ANTHROPOMORPHIC* 1. PROBABLE: Pillar figurine (1-4) 2. UNCERTAIN B. *HYBRID*: UNLIKELY C. *NATURAL PHENOMENON*: UNCERTAIN

##### A. *ANTHROPOMORPHIC*

###### 1. PROBABLE: Pillar figurine.

Hundreds of female pillar figurines and fragments thereof dating to the 8th and 7th cent. were found in Judah (854 are catalogued in KLETTER 1996). All these clay figurines portray a standing female figure supporting prominent breasts with her hands. The lower part of the body forms a sort of round pedestal of pillar-like form widening at its base, which allows the figurine to stand in an upright position. No representation of legs or genitals is shown. Two main variations can be distinguished: the hand-made or "pinched" figurines where eyes are simply represented by a hole

shaped by finger pressure (1\*) and those of more elaborate workmanship, with a separately molded head attached to the body by means of a conical peg, which presents facial details with a light smile, big eyes, and a wig including several rows of curls above the forehead (2\*). The lower part of the body of both types is similar, generally hand-made; figurines with a wheel-made hollow body are rarely found (3\*).

The characteristic pillar-shaped body should not be interpreted as a pole or →tree trunk, A.'s putative symbol (as e.g. in HESTRIN 1987a: 222), but rather as a schematic representation of a long robe (WENNING 1991: 91; KEEL/UEHLINGER 1998: 332). On a pillar figurine from Mt. Nebo in Transjordan (4) the wheel-made body even has a ridge near the base, probably indicating the end of the robe. The second main feature of the pillar figurines, their prominent breasts, does not emphasize the aspect of fertility but rather underlines the nourishing or *dea nutrix* aspect. Whether or not this relates to reproduction is disputed.

These features are not strictly typical of a particular female deity but could represent several among the numerous Near Eastern goddesses. This has led various scholars to put forward different identifications, such as →Astarte, →Anat, or A. (KLETTER 1996: 75-77). As the pillar figurine is typical for 8th-7th cent. Judah we should search for its identification among goddesses worshipped in this region and period. There is no doubt that in these centuries the major female deity in Judah was A. If a deity at all, the Judean pillar figurines thus probably represent A. (KLETTER 1996: 76f; MERLO 1997: 54f; HADLEY 2000: 204f), despite the lack of undisputable evidence.

#### 2. UNCERTAIN

2.1. A peculiar type of pottery plaques showing a frontal →nude goddess with V-folded arms holding plants in her hands is well attested in Late Bronze Age Palestine. The goddess is often portrayed with a headdress of the →Hathor-type. These plaques (e.g., →Qudshu 14\*) represent a typical Syro-Palestinian development of an iconography found on different Egyptian media, where a frontally depicted nude goddess holding lotus flowers and →serpents is usually shown standing on a →lion (→Qudshu 3; CORNELIUS 2004: pl. 5.17) and sometimes flanked by two gods, typically →Resheph and →Min (→Qudshu 7\*). On some Egyptian stelae, the term *qds(t)* indicating the goddess appears in the epigraph, hence the type's designation as "Qudshu-type". The

distinctive features of the Palestinian plaque figurines are nudity, frontal representation, and association with plants. Other elements, such as the lion on which the goddess may stand (e.g., on two plaques found at Tel Ḥarasim [→**Qudshu 4\*-5**]), are not distinctive. The explicit nudity of the goddess and the association with plants emphasize the aspects of fertility and vitality. These general characteristics are not sufficient to identify the goddess with A.

The identification of Palestinian “Qudshu-type” plaque figurines with A. is mainly based on the hypothetical premise that the term *qđš* in Ugaritic is an epithet of the goddess Aṭīratu (CROSS 1973: 33; MAIER 1986: 90f; more cautiously HADLEY 2000: 47-49). However, all the passages quoted to corroborate such a hypothesis can receive better and alternative interpretations (WIGGINS 1991: 387-389; MERLO 1997: 49f; DEL OLMO LETE/SANMARTÍN 1996-2000: 363f). The name of the goddess portrayed by the Palestinian “Qudshu-type” plaque figurines cannot be inferred with absolute certainty at present.

**2.2.** Some representations of the former type (→**Qudshu 4\*-5, 8\*-9\***) can be included into a more general iconographic category representing a nude goddess standing on animals. Examples are attested throughout the ancient Near East during the Late Bronze Age, both in Mesopotamia and Syro-Palestine as well as in Egypt (mainly 19th dyn.). Only few examples of this type have been found in Palestine/Israel, among them the above-mentioned plaques from Tel Ḥarasim. A bronze applique from a Late Bronze Age tomb at Acco (→**Qudshu 10**) depicts a nude goddess with a horned Hathoric headdress standing on a lion and holding lotus plants in her hands. A variation of this figure appears on a clay mould for a plaque from Tel Qarnayim (→**Qudshu 8\***), produced locally in Egyptian style, which portrays a nude frontal goddess wearing a long wig, standing on a horse and flanked by two male figures, probably gods. A nude goddess holding two lotus flowers in each hand and standing on a →horse is shown on a gold leaf plaque from Lachish (→**Qudshu 9\***). Often identified with →Astarte (e.g., HADLEY 2000: 163), this goddess wears an elaborated headdress and a crown.

In past studies the nude goddess standing on a lion has been identified with Astarte, →Anat, Qudshu, or A. (see CORNELIUS 1993). The identification with A. is based upon the allegedly intimate

connection between A. and the lion. This supposed association is grounded on the fact that some “Qudshu-type” plaques (see above) depict the goddess standing on a lion, and on the personal name *‘bdlb’t* engraved on the arrow heads from el-Khadr, supposed to contain the archaic epithet of the goddess Aṭīratu “Lion (Lady)” (e.g., CROSS 1973: 33, quoted by numerous scholars). However, these correlations are ungrounded, because neither the “Qudshu-type” plaques (see above and WIGGINS 1991: 387-389) nor the epithet can be definitely related to A. (WIGGINS 1991: 390f; MERLO 1997: 51f; KEEL/UEHLINGER 1998: 126-128 with n. 8).

**2.3.** On some items representing the “Qudshu-type” the nude goddess is shown holding animals on either side, i.e. according to a convention usually termed →“Mistress-of-animals”. Among the most relevant are a mid-18th cent. Old Syrian cylinder seal (→**Mistress-of-animals 3\***) and the 14th-cent. gold pendant from Minet el-Beida (→**Mistress-of-animals 4\***). Both depict a nude goddess standing on a lion and holding two →caprids in her hands. The latter shows next to her the →storm god armed with a spear. The hypothesis according to which the “Qudshu-type Mistress-of-animals” can be identified with A. has led some scholars (HESTRIN 1987: 68-71; TAYLOR 1988: 560) to identify the nude female figure grasping two flanking lions in the lowest register of the 10th cent. cult stand at Tanaach (→Mistress-of-animals § I) with A. In the light of the above, such an identification is not certain at all. BECK (1994) and KEEL/UEHLINGER (1998: 157f) have demonstrated that the overall iconography of the cult stand refers to the concept of a temple, whereby the opening in the second register is supposed to represent the entrance door to the temple, similarly to many other models of Near Eastern temple facades (see BRETSCHNEIDER 1991: 82, 145-149; WARD 1996). The lowest register, as well as the figures in other registers, signals the presence of a goddess in more general terms, who cannot be identified with certainty (note that STUCKEY 2002: 42 is inclined for an identification with Astarte; see KEEL/UEHLINGER 1998: 160).

**2.4.** A further proposal for the iconographic identification of A. was put forward after two fragments of female plaque figurines, probably made of the same mould, had been found near Aphek. The first fragment, dating to the 13th cent., comes from regular excavations (KOCHAVI 1990: 20, 38, fig. 17), while the more

complete one surfaced at Revadim, some 4,5 km east of Ekron (→**Mother [Levant, Syria, Mesopotamia] #\***). The plaques depict a frontal nude goddess with shoulder-length hair who exposes her vagina, opening it with her fingers. She is suckling two babies and on both her thighs there is a palmette →tree flanked by two caprids. The plaque thus shows a combination of several fertility themes typical of a →mother goddess. The emphasis on fertility has led some scholars to claim that this figure should be identified with A. (MARGALITH 1994; KEEL/UEHLINGER 1998: 74), since in Ugaritic texts Aṭīratu is mentioned in the act of breast-feeding two divinities (KTU 1.23 58-63), while according to other texts, Aṭīratu is allegedly called by the name *rhmy* meaning “womb” and has the epithet *qnyt ilm* “creatrix of the gods” (KTU 1.4 i 22, iii 26, 30, 35 etc.). However, the alleged identification of the breast-feeding goddess mentioned in KTU 1.23 58-63 with Aṭīratu is not certain at all (MERLO 1997: 46f). The correlation of *rhmy* and Aṭīratu is equally problematic, since the Ugaritic term *rhmy* has also been interpreted as the name of another, independent goddess (DAY 1986: 390) or as an epithet of Anat (XELLA 1973: 120f). Finally, Aṭīratu’s epithet “creatrix of the gods” does not seem to highlight the aspect as “mother goddess”; it simply suggests that Aṭīratu was considered the “mother of the gods” in the same way as the god →El was considered the “father of the gods”. From a religio-historical point of view, the conceptual step from “mother of the gods” to “mother goddess” is unjustified. In no mythological text from Ugarit does Aṭīratu appear to be closely connected either with either earth or female fertility (WIGGINS 1993: 70f; MERLO 1998: 64-67, 102f).

**2.5.** That ancient Near Eastern representations of trees may relate to goddesses since the 3rd mill. has been demonstrated by KEEL (1998: 20ff). Here, however, we should focus on its particular development in Palestine/Israel beginning in 18th cent. Dozens of Palestinian stamp seals depict a nude female figure associated with two twigs, which led SCHROER (1987; 1989: 92-138) to call her “twig goddess” (→Twig). These seals portray a nude and frontal female figure placing great emphasis on her erotic traits: e.g., an Egyptian scarab from Gezer dating to 1650-1550 (GIVEON 1985: 115, no. 16) portrays an Egyptian-style nude goddess stretching her arms out and holding two branches with her hands. On numerous other seals of the same period found in Palestine/Israel the nude goddess does hold

the two branches but is flanked by them, as for instance on the scarab from Lachish (TUFNELL et al. 1958: pl. 32:99) showing a nude goddess standing on an *nb*-sign with an Egyptian-style necklace and two big ears. The association of the twig with female fertility and more precisely with the vagina is even more evident on a scarab from Aphek (GIVEON 1988: pl. 4:44), where the pubic area of a standing nude goddess is represented by a big leaf. The link between the twig and the nude goddess, and in particular her vagina, highlights life-giving and erotic aspects typical of the mother earth (→Mother, →*Ptgyh*). Still, this evidence does not allow us to name the represented goddess with certainty. Drawing upon the fact that the only major female divinity worshipped in Palestine/Israel in the first mill. was A. and that in the OT she is associated with the tree, some scholars are inclined to hypothesize a connection between the “twig goddess” and A. already in that early period. In my opinion, there is no certainty in this regard mainly because of the great chronological gap (more radical criticism is expressed by FREVEL 1995: 780-791).

**2.6.** UEHLINGER has recently suggested to identify a terracotta group acquired from the antiquities market (JEREMIAS 1993: pls. 6-7; KEEL 2005: 186f) as depicting the divine couple →Yahweh and A. The group shows two anthropomorphic figures on a throne-podium (or chariot?) with four legs. One figure, bigger and bearded, is shown sitting and faces the viewer; the other, smaller figure, unbearded and thus potentially female, stands at his side and is slightly turned outwards. The two figures are flanked by others elements (→sphinxes or →lions?), roughly depicted and only partially preserved. JEREMIAS interpreted this group as representing a warrior with his attendant (see 2 Kgs 9:25), or less probably, a royal couple, while UEHLINGER (1997: 149-152), who claims an 8th cent. date for the object, considers the relationship of the two figures to be reminiscent to the syntagm “Yahweh and his A.” known from contemporary Israelite and Judahite inscriptions (see below). However appealing, the suggestion remains uncertain due to the impossibility to identify precisely the group’s characters.

**B. HYBRID: UNLIKELY.** Two figures depicted frontally on pithos A from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (→**Bes #\***), overlapping the famous blessing *lyhwh šmrn wlpšrth* “in front of Yahweh of Samaria and his A.” (MERLO 1994: 28-36; RENZ 1995: 61; HADLEY 2000: 121-125) led SCHMIDT to

claim a possible identification with the divine couple *Yhwh* and *A.* (1995: 96ff; 2003). SCHMIDT'S proposal relies on the assumptions that the inscription and the drawings are related to each other. In his opinion the overlapping of the two figures with the inscription mentioning "*Yhwh* and his *Asherah*" should be interpreted as a deliberate association. Accordingly, the two figures should be interpreted as male and female. Since the two figures are usually interpreted as →Bes figures, SCHMIDT suggests that outside of Egypt these could be assimilated to other deities. In his opinion the two figures portray *Yahweh* and *A.* in a hybrid form with human and animal elements typical of Bes-like iconography. This hypothesis raises many objections: first of all, a relationship between the drawings and the inscriptions cannot be positively demonstrated and is usually denied (see BECK 1982; KEEL/UEHLINGER 1998: 240); second, there is no other evidence for an assimilation or connection of Bes figures with *Yahweh*; finally, the left Bes figure does not show any unambiguous indications of femininity (see KEEL/UEHLINGER 1998: 218f). It is thus hardly possible to identify the two figures as a couple.

**C. NATURAL PHENOMENON: UNCERTAIN.** It has long been known that the widespread motif of the stylized →tree can assume a religious meaning and may, among other things, symbolize a female deity (see DANTHINE 1937: 152-164; for 1st mill. examples of the "sacred tree" in Palestinian territory and their religious meaning see STERN/MAGEN 2002: 52-54). The association of →caprids flanking some sorts of stylized tree, attested already in the 3rd mill. (KEEL 1998: fig. 3) and during the Syrian Middle Bronze Age (KEEL 1998: fig. 13), becomes more consistent in Palestine during the Late Bronze Age. A Mitanni cylinder seal from Megiddo (→**Nude goddess #**) shows a stylized tree flanked by two ibexes, a head and a →fish appearing above a →lion. The scene also shows a →nude goddess, praying worshipper, and →cherub standing by. The most outstanding Palestinian example of the association between a goddess and the stylized tree flanked by caprids is a jug from the Fosse temple of Lachish dated to the 13th cent. (→**Tree goddess #/Tree #**). On the partially preserved shoulder of the jug an inscription reads *mtn šy [ ]ty 'lt* and various animals are represented, among which a stylized tree flanked by caprids just below the term *'lt* "goddess". According to some scholars this close proximity of the word *'lt* and the stylized tree is not

accidental (HESTRIN 1987: 220; KEEL 1998: 33f). Numerous scholars have reached the conclusion that this stylized tree flanked by caprids might be identified with *A.*, based on the hypothesis by CROSS (1954: 20, n. 17), according to which *'lt* can be paralleled with *ilt*, the latter being a standard epithet of the goddess *Aṭiratu* used in the Ugaritic texts (it should be noted that CROSS'S reconstruction [*rb*]ty "my lady" in the gap of the inscription is also based on the alleged identification between *'lt* and *Aṭiratu*). The identification of the stylized tree with *A.* (as in MAIER 1986: 166; HESTRIN 1987a; KEEL/UEHLINGER 1998: 72) assumes but does not test the original hypothesis formed by CROSS. Close analysis of the Ugaritic texts shows that *ilt* can also be an epithet of →Anat (KTU 1.50 2-4) as well as of the goddess 'Aṭtart (KTU 1.112 25); moreover, it often appears as a common noun (KTU 1.39 11; 1.41 24; 1.87 26). Cross' hypothesis concerning the identification of *ilt* with *A.* cannot thus be confirmed by the Ugaritic texts (PARDEE 2000: 181f).

The motif of the stylized tree flanked by caprids also appears in the 3rd register of the above-mentioned cult stand from Taanach (LAPP 1969). However, also in this case there are difficulties in the identification of the goddess represented by it (see above).

Finally, the evidence of the famous painted storage jar (pithos) A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (BECK 1982) should be considered. It shows on both sides a series of inscriptions as well as figures that do not form a coherent composition but rather a patchwork of various iconographic motifs, most of which are recurrent themes in ancient Near Eastern iconography. One of these motifs, painted just below the shoulder of the pithos, is a stylized tree flanked by two caprids above a lion (→**Tree goddess #/[Caprid #]/Lion #**). The famous inscription mentioning the blessing *lyhwh šmrn w'l'srth* "in front of *Yhwh* of Samaria and his *Asherah*" (MERLO 1994: 28-36; RENZ 1995: 61; HADLEY 2000: 121-125) appears slightly below the handle on the opposite side of the pithos, alongside another series of motifs (including the above-mentioned Bes-type figures). Some scholars are inclined to connect the stylized tree flanked by caprids with *A.* mentioned in the inscription placed on the other side of the pithos, because the stylized tree flanked by caprids is traditionally associated with a female deity and because it is represented on a lion's back in a position similar to Qudshu-type iconography (→**Qudshu 4\***,

10, →**Mistress-of-animals 4\***). As likely as the proposal might seem, it remains uncertain because of the doubtful link between the paintings and inscriptions (BECK 1982: 45-47).

## II.2. Associations

A. *ANTHROPOMORPHIC*. ASSOCIATED WITH ANIMALS: Uncertain B. *NATURAL PHENOMENON*. ASSOCIATED WITH ANIMALS: Uncertain

While from an epigraphic point of view the association of A. with →Yahweh is proven by the Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Kom inscriptions, the same association within visual sources is not certain as it is affected by interpretative uncertainties regarding the iconography of both deities.

### A. *ANTHROPOMORPHIC*

ASSOCIATED WITH ANIMALS:  
**Uncertain.**

TAYLOR (1988), assuming that the scene represented in the upper register of the cult stand of Taanach (LAPP 1969) might depict Yahweh in theriomorphic form, relates the overall composition of the stand to the cult of Yahweh and A. In the lower register of the cult stand from Taanach →lions are shown flanking the goddess.

The main role played by the lion in the iconography attributed to A. is however that of a pedestal on which the goddess stands. It can be found on some Egyptian stelae that portray the "Qudshu-type" goddess (→**Qudshu 3, 7\***), on the Palestinian clay plaques found at Tel H̄arasim (→**Qudshu 4\*-5**), a gold pendant from Minet el-Beida (→**Mistress-of-animals 4\***) and the bronze applique from Acco (→**Qudshu 10**). Since the lion appears rather frequently in the iconography dealt with in this article, some scholars have gone so far as to name A. "Lion Lady" (see however the strong reservations expressed by WIGGINS 1991 with regard to the iconographical implications).

### B. *NATURAL PHENOMENON*

ASSOCIATED WITH ANIMALS:  
**Uncertain**

1. The →lion as pedestal also appears in one of the scenes on pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (→**Tree goddess #/(Caprid #)/Lion #**); as mentioned, the stylized →tree flanked by →caprids appears above a lion, a composition, which according to some authors is supposed to be the symbol of A. However, the association between figures of pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and "Yahweh and his A." is highly problematic (see above).

2. Caprids appear next to the stylized tree that seems to symbolize the goddess in her role of a nourishing and life-giving →mother. This iconography can be

observed in a fairly stylized way on the Lachish ewer (→**Tree goddess #/Tree #**) or more artistically rendered in the 3rd register of the cult stand from Taanach (LAPP 1969) and on pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (→**Tree goddess #/(Caprid #)/Lion #**). An image of caprids flanked by a stylized palmetto also appears on each of the two thighs of the deity represented on the Revadim clay plaque (→**Mother #\*/Tree goddess #\***).

## III. Sources

III.1. **Chronological range.** The most ancient representations, which may – although with a considerable degree of uncertainty – be attributed to A., are related to the so-called "twig goddess" flourishing particularly in Palestine/Israel during the Middle Bronze Age IIB (e.g., GIVEON 1985: 115, no. 16; TUFNELL et al. 1958: pl. 32:99; GIVEON 1988: pl. 4:44). It should not be overlooked that during the Middle Bronze Age, A. is not yet epigraphically attested in Palestine but only in Mesopotamia (MERLO 1998: 12-27). The link between the "twig goddess" and A. thus faces difficulties of historical-geographical nature. Later on, the iconography of the "twig goddess" was drawn upon in numerous ways, being also subject to considerable changes and developments.

As mentioned above, the "Qudshu-type" plaque figurines (→**Qudshu 4\*, 14\***) enjoyed great popularity in Late Bronze Age Palestine. Despite borrowing some features from the "twig goddess", these figures also contain Egyptianizing elements. As for the clay plaques portraying a →Mistress-of-animals, they have roots in earlier times despite being typical of the Late Bronze Age (→**Qudshu 10**), as demonstrated for instance by a Syrian cylinder seal in the Louvre dated c. 1750 (→**Mistress-of-animals 3\***). The plaque fragments from Apeh and Revadim (→**Mother #\*/Tree goddess #\***) date back to the end of the Late Bronze Age. All these anthropomorphic representations put great emphasis on the goddess' nudity.

The first and the most ancient example of a stylized →tree flanked by →caprids considered related to A. is the 13th cent. ewer from Lachish (→**Tree goddess #/Tree #**). This iconographic motif also occurs during the Iron Age (Taanach; [LAPP 1969], Kuntillet 'Ajrud pithos A [→**Tree goddess #/(Caprid #)/Lion #**]).

The youngest items attributed to A. are the Judean pillar figurines (1\*-4), particularly widespread in Judea from the 8th cent. onwards, and a probably contemporaneous terracotta group from the

antiquities market (JEREMIAS 1993: pls. 6-7; KEEL 2005: 186f).

### III.2. Geographical distribution.

From a geographical point of view, this article has focused on Palestine/Israel, but several iconographic types examined (such as the motifs of the stylized →tree or the →Mistress-of-animals) are known throughout the ancient Near East.

The seals, which portray the so-called “twig goddess” are distributed all over the Palestinian territory: starting from Megiddo northwards (→Nude goddess #), through Aphek (GIVEON 1988: pl. 4:44), and Gezer (GIVEON 1985: 115, no. 16) in the center, to Lachish (TUFNELL et al. 1958: pl. 32:99) in Southern Judah.

Some of the above mentioned examples of the Mistress-of-animals come from the Syria (→Mistress-of-animals 3\*-4), but such iconography is also present elsewhere: in the south of Phoenicia at Acco (→Qudshu 10), or at Tanaach (LAPP 1969), Tel Ḥarasim (→Qudshu 4\*) or Lachish (→Qudshu 9\*) in Palestine/Israel.

The →nude goddess of the “Qudshu type” is frequently found in Palestine/Israel (→Qudshu 4\*, 14\*), but their at times very Egyptian-like appearance suggests that they are a typical Palestinian development of an Egyptian tradition (→Qudshu 3, 7\*).

The two fragments of the breast-feeding female figure come from the coastal area of Palestine/Israel (→Mother #\*/Tree goddess #\*). Distinctive of the territory of Judah are the hundreds of female Iron Age II pillar figurines (1\*-3\*). Comparable figurines were also found outside of Judah (4\*), but these have features that easily distinguish them from the Judahite figurines. The terracotta group purchased by JEREMIAS (1993: pls. 6-7; KEEL 2005: 186f) from the antiquities market is also said to come from the territory of Judah.

The iconographic motif of the stylized tree flanked by →caprids occurs throughout the ancient Near East, but it was correlated with A. on the ground of the geographical origin of three objects: the Canaanite jug from Lachish (→Tree goddess #/Tree #), the Taanach stand and pithos A from Israelite resp. Judahite Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (→Tree goddess #/(Caprid #)/Lion #).

III.3. Object types. Middle Bronze Age scarabs represent the so-called “twig goddess” (GIVEON 1985: 115, no. 16; TUFNELL et al. 1958: pl. 32:99; GIVEON 1988: pl. 4:44), while the bronze applique from Acco (→Qudshu 10) and the gold leaf plaque from Lachish (→Qudshu 9\*)

attest the employment of more precious and finer materials during the Late Bronze Age. However, most objects put forward as representative of A. are clay plaques, figurines or vessels. Both, the terracotta pillar figurines (1\*-4) and plaques (→Qudshu 4\*, 8\*, 14\*, →Mother #\*/Tree goddess #\*) as well as the rudimentary drawings on the Lachish ewer (→Tree goddess #/Tree #) and on pithos A from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (→Tree goddess #/(Caprid #)/Lion #, →Bes #\*) reveal the usage of inexpensive materials typical of popular cult practices.

IV. Conclusion. The prevailing feature of the most ancient iconographic typology attributed to A., the Middle Bronze Age IIB “twig goddess” (→Twig; GIVEON 1985: 115, no. 16; TUFNELL et al. 1958: pl. 32:99; GIVEON 1988: pl. 4:44), is explicit nudity associated with vegetation fertility. This characteristic of the presumed A. iconography is confirmed or even emphasized in various iconographic types of the Late Bronze Age, particularly the obvious nudity of the goddess represented on “Qudshu-type” plaque figurines (→Qudshu 3-4\*, 7\*, 14\*) and of the →Mistress-of-animals from Taanach. Vagina exposition is even more explicit on the Aphek and Revadim plaques (→Mother #\*/Tree goddess #\*). Again, the association with vegetation confirms the fertility character of in the presumed A. iconographies during this period.

Such emphasis on nudity and fertility leads to the conclusion that the main feature of the suggested visual sources of A. in the Middle Bronze Age and Late Bronze Age was that of a →mother goddess, donor and protector of life and vitality. It should be stressed, however, that such a characterization is not in accordance with what may be inferred on A. from contemporary epigraphic sources. As a matter of fact, there is virtually no association of A. with fertility, sex, or vegetation in 2nd mill. Ugaritic and Akkadian texts (MERLO 1998: 38f, 106-108). This dichotomy between the presumed iconographic depictions of A. and the epigraphic sources is further aggravated by the geographical gap between epigraphic and iconographic attestations, since the goddess is not documented in Palestine earlier than the first mill. During the earlier 2nd mill. or Middle Bronze Age A. is attested only in Mesopotamia as one of the spouses of the god →Amurru, while during the Late Bronze Age she is known from

Ugaritic texts and an Hittite myth as the spouse of →El (MERLO 1998: 11-111).

We are faced with a completely different situation in the first mill. Both epigraphic sources and the biblical text document a considerable relevance of a goddess named A. in Palestine/Israel, whereas the iconographic documentation seems to become more sporadic. Only few iconographic types from the Iron Age have been proposed as representations of A.: the Judean pillar figurines (1\*-3\*), the stylized →tree flanked by →caprids on pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (→Tree goddess #/(Caprid #)/Lion #), and a figure belonging to an unprovenanced terracotta group (JEREMIAS 1993: pls. 6-7; KEEL 2005: 186f).

The difficulties in the identification of the last two items have been mentioned above. The Judean pillar figurines (1\*-3\*) convey instead a different religious meaning. Their main characteristic the large breasts emphasizing the motherly and feeding aspect of the goddess rather than that of eroticism and/or fertility. Although the aspect of the nursing mother is not distinctive of A. in contemporary epigraphic sources, the pillar figurines should probably be considered as most representative for A., since they are best attested in the same period and area as the major epigraphic attestations of an A. cult.

#### V. Catalogue

1\* Pillar figurine, clay, 13.5 x 6.6 cm, Lachish, 800-600. \*TUFNELL et al. 1953: pl. 27:3; KLETTER 1996: no. 82 2\* Pillar figurine, clay, Gezer, 800-600. \*MACALISTER 1912: II 417 fig. 502; KLETTER 1996: fig. 4:2 3\* Pillar figurine, clay, 15 x 8.5 x 7 cm, Lachish, 700-600. Jerusalem, Rockefeller Museum, PM 34.128. \*TUFNELL et al. 1953: pl. 28:10; KLETTER 1996: no. 78, fig. 4:5 4 Pillar figurine, clay, Nebo, 800-700. SALLER 1965-1966: fig. 28:2; KLETTER 1996: fig. 10:1

#### VI. Selected Bibliography

MERLO 1997 • MERLO 1998 • HADLEY 2000

*Paolo Merlo*

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