

**CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE GODDESS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
(10,000 - 330 BCE)**

by

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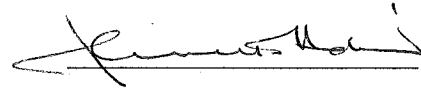
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I, Jennette Adair declare that, *Certain aspects of the Goddess in the Ancient Near East (10,000 – 330 BCE)* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jennette Adair', written over a horizontal line.

15th August 2008.

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**CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE GODDESS WITHIN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
(10,000 – 330 BCE).**

SUMMARY

In the historical tapestry of the development of the Goddess, from 10,000 – 330 BCE one golden thread shines through. Despite the vicissitudes of differing status, she remained essentially the same, namely divine. She was continuously sought in the many mysteries, mystic ideologies and through the manifestations that she inspired. In all the countries of the Ancient Near East, the mother goddess was the life giving creatrix and regenerator of the world and the essence of the generating force that seeds new life. While her name may have altered in the various areas, along with that of her consort/lover/child, the myths and rituals which formed a major force in forming the ancient cultures would become manifest in a consciousness and a spiritual awareness.

Key Terms.

Goddess; Ancient Near East; Pre-history; Neolithic Age; Figures: Çatalhöyük (Anatolia; modern Turkey); Bronze Age: writings: Goddess, in Mesopotamia, Inanna/Ishtar; in Canaan, Asherah/Athirat/Ashratu; Iron Age goddess; Asherah in Canaan and Israel.

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INTRODUCTION

<u>Archaeological Periods.</u>			
Stone Age			
Paleolithic	Old Stone Age.	- 10,000	BCE
Mesolithic	Middle Stone Age.	10,000 - 7500	BCE
Neolithic	New Stone Age	7500 - 4000	BCE.
Chalcolithic Age		4000 - 3150	BCE.
Bronze Age		3150 - 1200	BCE
Iron Age		1200 - 330	BCE

Dates are described as BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) rather than BC and AD (Anno Domini).¹

At the commencement of this dissertation the aim was to trace the development, history and status of the goddess in the ANE, dating as far back as 10,000 years BCE. Having had the privilege of visiting many of the sites mentioned in the dissertation, and having researched the many books, journals and articles (see Bibliography) it soon became evident that the scope of “The Goddess of the Ancient Near East” was far too wide a subject for a mini-thesis, thereby doing an injustice to the goddess. It therefore seemed necessary to “prune” a great deal of the rich material researched. The decision with regards to which material should be eliminated was in itself a major problem since I did not wish to exclude any of her rich cultural history. It seemed logical to work within a time frame as well as that within a space/area.

The title was consequently changed to “*Aspects of the history of the goddess in certain specified areas in the Ancient Near East (ANE)*”, and in *a reduced time frame*, namely

¹ Bimson, Kane, Paterson, & Wiseman, 1992:24.

10,000 years BCE to 330 years BCE, which commenced in the hunting and gathering period of the Paleolithic Age and ran to the end of the period which historians regard as the *terminus ad quem* of the “ancient”, and bordered as what we might characterize as “modern”. Subsequently, I was able to offer a more detailed analysis of the goddess, her origins and an overview of the most important regions relevant to her.

The goddess appeared in oral tradition as long ago as the pre-historic Palaeolithic era. Subsequently she featured in written and artistic forms – carved tablets, papyrus scrolls, statues and scenes both individual and in bas and raised relief forms. The “story” of the goddess is her brave descent to the underworld to rescue her lover or son. The world experienced the cold sterility of winter until her return to the world above when spring and a renewal of life commenced. The same “story” that has appeared in so many different lands meant that the belief was indelibly engraved on the soul of humankind in many countries. It is not impossible that the tale was carried to these other lands once travel began and art could be borrowed from elsewhere. This stirred my curiosity and inspired the present research. To those whose faith stems from the monotheistic theological belief, which maintains the principle of one god, who created the world and all humankind, it was especially interesting to discover that a millennium before the written word came into being, there was an established pantheonic hierarchy, headed by a goddess.

HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis, therefore, was to evaluate the history of this concept within these regions, together with the vicissitudes, the changes and stability of the cultures of the ANE. Throughout this evaluation the goddess continued to be regarded as the “divine feminine”, despite the fact that at times she became very much the hidden divinity!

In understanding the history of the development of the goddess in the ANE, it is important to understand both her birth and her origins. Consequently, notice will be taken of her attributes, and her function within the emerging societies, in relation to her place

within the pantheon of the subsequent gods and goddesses in each society. Within each of these societies the same goddess has been given different names in the different regions. For example, in Sumeria the goddess is known as Inanna whilst, in the later Akkadian era, her name is Ishtar.

In every culture, in order for stability and equilibrium to be attained and maintained, it is essential that there always be a positive and negative aspect to the realm of life. This is no less so with respect to the relationship of the goddess with the gods of the pantheon and the people of the various cultures.

This may be perceived as the Yin and Yang ideology found in the Taoist philosophy. The Yin is viewed as the female aspect, the “dark”, whilst the Yang is the masculine aspect: the “light”, the negative and the positive, are held in complete balance and so wield equal power (Cooper 1972:27)².

This concept becomes a mode of consciousness which can be evaluated in terms of archetypes, in which regard the ideas of Freud and his disciple Erich Neumann (1963) are considered as invaluable (Hutton 1996:97).

At the beginning of her history the goddess was supreme, but over time her attributes and functions changed. The matriarchal goddess, with her caring and nurturing during the earlier eras, later adopted a lesser role with the domination of the patriarchal elements. In her association with the “father god”, the goddess either gained more war-like attributes or was relegated to a secondary position.

² The Yin is the eternally creative feminine and the primordial chaos and darkness from which the Yang, the light, becomes the essential spirit or the intellect (Cooper 1972:28) and as such the Mother and Father of the creation. What this could mean is that at all times male and female are necessarily complementary and cannot be separated from the whole.

METHODOLOGY

By virtue of the fact that I am a student of history and not a linguist, this dissertation will of necessity utilize secondary, rather than original textual sources. Using these secondary sources, the goddess can be evaluated by following the historical and archaeological sequence in association with the relevant art and iconography. The various regions of the ANE witnessed the goddess mature over time but not necessarily always in the same manner. Tracing the development of the concept through the pre-historic phases, employing archaeological finds, and thus archaeology, is the prime source of assessment within the various geographical areas.

Humankind, during the Paleolithic Era, lived instinctively as the child of the Great Mother, in magical harmony with her body, that is, creation, and knew life and death as two modes of her divine reality. During the Palaeolithic era the moon provided people with the concepts of time, sequence, duration and recurrence. Figures discovered from this period, however, by means of the evaluation of ethnographic studies, suggest that they were not necessarily those of a goddess, but females as protectors of the home or in a birthing situation which may or may not have been associated with the goddess concept.

During the Neolithic era, the cycles of the moon were experienced in the cycle of the crops, where the light and dark phases of the moon were reflected in the fertile and barren seasons.

Primitive goddess figurines found in many areas date back to this era, well before the introduction of writing, and are conceivably votive figurines regarded as portraying the mother goddess of fertility.

From the Bronze Age, with the advent of a writing system and the beginning of the history of humankind, the archaeological artifacts are now augmented by the additional finds of the written documents. These latter were found in Mesopotamia on clay tablets

and have been, and can be, categorized into a variety of genres which portray the worldview of the society. This was evident at the levels of spiritual and daily life, both of which were closely linked. The spiritual level included the religious, mysterious and mythological aspects of the civilization while the writings pertaining to these genres offer profound insight into the way in which the people viewed their world and its surroundings

The notion of continuous infiltration from the Syro-Arabian and Central Asian steppes helps us to understand how and why the goddess culture fundamentally changed. The various kinds of activity which gave rise to the myth of the “hero” presented challenges. The hero was thought to be a person of great wisdom, power and strength, able to respond to a whole new dimension of endeavour, and offering a model to emulate. The heroic action of the gifted individual was needed in every sphere of life and the appearance of the hero shifted the focus of attention from the goddess. Once settled villages and towns evolved, the cosmology of the settled agriculturalist was eventually undermined, and a pattern of war and conflict was established in the Near East which has endured to the present day.

Concurrently with these changes, the female deities in the pantheons of the cultures also lost some of their former positions. Frymer-Kensky (1992:80) is adamant, and I concur, that the eclipse of the goddess witnessed a decline in the public role of women, with both reflecting the fundamental change in the societies. The down sizing of the goddess occurred in tandem with that of the life and position of women; socially, culturally, religiously: in all spheres the goddess and her real-life daughters became less important. In fact, in many spheres women became mere chattels.

SOURCES

A. Textual Sources.

A form of writing, namely a cuneiform script, was pioneered by the Sumerians and Babylonians. It came to be used for some 15 different languages in its 3000 year long

history (Hooker 1996:50). These early writings form part of the textual sources that have enabled us to assess the cultures of the peoples of the ANE.

Ebla, a site in Syria, prominent in the ANE as a trading post/city state, contained a library of some 10,000 tablets. Matthiae (1977:8) acknowledges that Giovanni Pettinato was the first to interpret the documents and the North-West Semitic language on which the library tablets were written.

Ugarit on the Syrian coast (a later city state than that of Ebla) witnessed a new variation of the cuneiform script, dated about the 14th century BCE, which contained only 30 signs and what seemed like word dividers. This script appeared to be the prototype of an alphabetical script (Hooker 1996:50).

Ugarit was a city state in the land of Canaan. The language, both written and spoken, may well have been related to Hebrew since the writings here reflect the mythologies, hymns and poems of the culture which have clearly shown influences and parallels that can be found in certain writings of the Hebrew Bible (The Great Flood. Genesis 6,7 & 8. Gilgamesh Epic Tablet XI (Tigay 1982)).

The Hebrew Bible is a source for the history, poems, hymns and wisdom literature of the Israelites. Their ancestry is viewed by certain scholars (of the German school; Mendenhall 1973; Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250 – 1050 BCE*. 1979)) as being part of the Canaanite culture, which is reflected in the mythologies of an earlier era.

Biblical scholars and archaeologists suggest that by the evidence that is continually being unearthed the Hebrew Bible reveals a true and authentic history of the Jewish people, the Israelites. It is not within the scope of this discussion to advance arguments for or against this authenticity except to say that reference is made to the goddess within these sources. (Asherah is mentioned 40 times in the Bible (Hadley 2000:54).)

B. Archaeological Sources.

Archaeological recovery and discoveries throughout the ANE, all of which continue, furnish insight into the effects and changes that occurred, not only in the ideas of the daily lives of the people, but at a meta-level which relates to their ideologies and mythologies. To some extent, these were often governed by the geographical awareness and the history of the culture. One can assess this in terms of the monumental happenings which often caused the changes within the time continuum.

A major archaeological breakthrough was the deciphering of the cuneiform and hieroglyphic writings. This, together with the discovery of the Phoenician single consonant alphabet, afforded scholars the ability to decipher the languages, which gave insight to the meanings of the volumes of written material found in the archaeological discoveries.

Mesopotamian writings were inscribed on clay tablets and on the monumental plastic art forms. These writings were often found in “libraries”: for example, those at Ebla (2500 BCE), Ugarit (1500 BCE) and those of Ashurbanipal (656 BCE) at Ninevah have provided much written evidence (Layard and Rassam (B.M., 1995:16) as have, latterly, those found by the department of Antiquities in Iraq. Modern scholars and philologists have translated these writings from the said libraries, revealing the culture as well as deciphering the meanings of the artistic renderings and the iconography found on temple walls, the statues etcetera.

Archaeology, ethnography, historical and geographical awareness are tools for obtaining answers to the cultures of the ANE. By these means it has been, and is, the task of many scholars, decipherers, translators and evaluators, who in their writings and lectures, and pictorial assessments, have brought to life the cultures of the people of the ANE. As examples, ethnographers assess the living conditions of the people, and the purpose of each living space, while architects have reconstructed temples and palaces of which the edifices proclaim the essence of the culture.

It was found that religion formed a major part in the lives of the people. Although it is often only the practice of the elite that is recorded, “popular beliefs” have also been examined and in this field, as with the traditional religion, the goddess has continued to play a major role (Dever 2005:5).

Consequently, in all the vicissitudes of the changes in the cultures in the ANE that have been unearthed throughout the ages it will be evident that the goddess has, on the whole, always been relevant.

C. The Writings of the Present Day

Scholars’ books, translations of hymns, poetry and myths, have been a source of inspiration and knowledge while they acclaim the cultures of the ANE, in particular the references to the goddess.³ In all these writings the goddess has been prominent and I am of the opinion that she exhibits a history which was relevant, lasting and a vital aspect of all the cultures of the ANE

OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter 1 deals with the evolution of the goddess from the early Palaeolithic era. The question arises whether the images found by archaeologists were of goddess-like statues; or were they only images pertaining to the lives of the people and did these images depict the lives of mothers in the households?

The Neolithic Period witnessed tremendous strides in the mythologies and ideologies which now began to pass the stage of animism and appeared to represent a more definite set of beliefs. Here, it is considered that the goddess made her appearance, evidence of which can be seen at the ruins of Çatalhöyük, in present day central Turkey in the ANE. The male god was still represented in his animistic form as the bull or ram and evidenced significant associations with the goddess.

³ .See Bibliography.

In Chapter 2 the author discusses the rise of the goddess in the Bronze Age where magnificent written and plastic arts propelled her cult to its zenith. The rise of the goddess, as exemplified in Mesopotamia, will show how she achieved her prominence, her attributes, and the reverence that she attracted from her followers. She was loyal and protective. The beautiful poetry that has survived expounds the attributes of the goddess which were achieved and recognized by her devotees.

In Sumeria, the goddess, now called Inanna, would grow in maturity until she reached the ultimate when she ascended the “throne” and acquired wisdom. Wisdom, the attribute of the goddess, survived in its many manifest forms to portray her eternity.

She became known by her Akkadian name, Ishtar, and underwent a period of disfavour, owing to her jealous nature. These changes may sometimes have reflected the political changes in the regime of the time. For example, the Gilgamesh Epic is a recounting of the politics of the era, together with the sacred practices of the society, which were still paramount in the culture (Moran 1995:24).

Chapter 3 indicates that the Babylonian goddess, Ishtar, remained the goddess supreme although she was not considered as the consort of the principal god, Marduk. She retained all her attributes but became known as the goddess of both love and war. With the domination of the Assyrians over the area of the ANE, the god Ashur became the principal god, but Ishtar remained the great goddess, not as the consort of Ashur, but situated by his side during the battles that were fought by the Assyrians, their “holy” wars, in order to secure their Empire.

Chapter 4 affirms that the goddess was part of all the cultures of the Canaanite region. From approximately 2000 BCE she evolved as the goddess of the Eblaites, the Ugarites and in the south, the Arabian culture, to become a prominent goddess in Phoenicia, through which her influence spread to the regions of the Mediterranean. In his findings at Knossos on the island of Crete, Evans identified the statuettes as representing the Babylonian mother goddess (Hutton 1996:93).

Chapter 5 discusses the presence of the goddess in Israelite and Judean cultures, during this Iron Age period, which may have been influenced by the earlier Canaanite cultures and other nations whose traders crisscrossed the territory even though Yahweh would reign supreme as the One God.

Changes occurred in ideology with the exile of the Israelites to Babylon in 586 BCE. Inevitably there would have been some local influence from the existing religious ideologies of the state in which the “Exiles” were living, although they kept their own ideology alive.

The return to Judah occurred as a result of the instigation of Cyrus, the Great, and the Persian king who had conquered Babylon in October 539 BCE. In the following year (538 BCE), Cyrus issued a decree, *The Edict of Restoration*, which allowed the Jewish community to return to Palestine to renew their cult (Bright 1976:361). Permission was given for the temple to be rebuilt and this restored their ideology to the exiled people who returned to Judah and Israel. To those who had remained in the land of Judah and Israel, it would have afforded a new dimension to their ideological aspirations.

According to Raphael Patai (1978:279) at this time the goddess appeared to be hidden, in the Wisdom writings of the Hebrew Bible and the works of some philosophers (for example Philo of Alexandria; 1st Century C.E.); consequently her history was mainly retained in the esoteric and philosophical ideologies.

In considering the various strands concerning the mother goddess, it was realized with reluctance that this study would have to omit Egypt from the ANE. Egypt’s position regarding women in general, let alone in the cultic sphere, was completely unique, with women enjoying virtually an equal status with men. The enormous pantheon of deities in Egypt, being depicted both as women and animals (for example, the goddess Hathor is depicted as a cow suckling a human infant, usually a royal child, or as a human goddess with bovine horns which gave her name and status), made it clear to me that the sheer

volume would have been too great for this dissertation. Hence as regards Egypt, the writer had to be satisfied with the general observation that the goddess Isis typified most of the nurturing aspects of the mother goddess and in her relationship with her husband/brother Osiris. So powerful was the belief in her that even up to about the 6th century CE she was worshipped in her temples, her aid invoked, and her medical ability legendary throughout Greece and the Roman Empire.

CHAPTER I

ANATOLIAN GODDESS

1 Introduction

The Paleolithic era (prior to 10,000 BCE) witnessed the first signs of the civilization of humankind. Deep in caves archaeologists have found images and figurines which suggest a feminine divinity; or, as the question arises, did these only relate to the lives of the people themselves and those of the mothers in the households?

During the Neolithic Period (10,000 BCE) enormous strides were evident in what were to become the mythologies and ideologies which, in their conceptualization of a divinity, passed the animism stage to present a more definite set of beliefs.

This is evidenced at the ruins of Çatalhöyük in central Turkey where a goddess figure emerged together with a male god who was still represented in his animistic form as the Bull or Ram: she evidenced a significant association with this divine figure.

According to Mircea Eliade (1987:17), the experiences of people within their worlds have given rise to the symbols which represent their lives that centred round their sacred space and these create an understanding of their world.

The life of the primitive humankind of the Paleolithic era was dominated by their culture as hunters and gatherers. The discoveries of paintings in the caves and the sculptures have afforded us a glimpse into the nature of this understanding. Deep in the caves were the paintings depicting the animals hunted. According to a reference in Campbell (1960:308), Dr Herbert Kuhn describes a cavern at Les Trois Freres in France: "From the top to the bottom, the whole wall is covered in engravings. The surface has been worked with tools of stone and marshaled the beasts that lived at the time in Southern France:

mammoth, rhinoceros, bison, wild horse, bear, ass reindeer, wolverine, musk, and ox. And one sees darts everywhere, flying at the game. Truly a picture of the hunt: the picture of the magic of the hunt.”

One may instance a picture of a wounded bear: an animal that symbolized power as well as providing life through the consumption of its meat. The animals were depicted as the power giving life to people. Outside the caves, at their entrances, were the sculptures carved into the walls or painted figures which in their connotation and symbolism represented female forms. Figurines in the feminine form were also carved from ivory and bone, depicted with large breasts, rotund bodies and buttocks. In many cases red ochre had been sprinkled on the statues, which may have symbolized the life giving blood (Baring & Cashford 1991: 6). These figures may have represented women of the household, small figures often looking pregnant, large figurines with pendulous breasts being mother figures, or small thin figures belying the great capacity of the mother figure. The most beautiful was a sculpture of which only the tiny head has survived, carved from mammoth ivory. It features long hair bound in a net, a long elongated neck and perfectly carved features. Is this the ultimate female, a representation of the “Goddess”? The sacredness of Mother Earth may not have been as significant to the society of hunters and gatherers but the many depictions of this female form may have represented the power of the symbolism of life and death and its regeneration in the heirophany of the “Goddess”.



Figure 1. Head of a Goddess? In ivory.

Little is known of the peoples and conditions of the Near East during the Paleolithic era but, it seems, a low density of population lived in the caves of Anatolia, Kurdistan and Lebanon (Mellaart 1971:14). A change in climate may well have partly been a reason for the enormous change that was to take place from this time onward. It became warmer and wetter. In the Near East these changes seemed less severe than in Europe (Mellaart 1971:11) and, being warmer, larger areas of grasslands appeared which resulted in the peoples of the Neolithic era gravitating to the regions that were well watered by both the rainfall and the rivers. The people settled, with the first permanent villages, and ultimately towns, emerging. According to Mellaart (1971:13), the origins of agriculture and stock breeding were more likely to have occurred in the ANE since the wild ancestors of sheep, goats and the grains were found naturally in these areas. The domestication of animals and grain formed part of improved conditions which again witnessed socio-cultural and technological innovations. Permanent dwellings became more abundant, leading to what could be termed villages, followed by the growth of “cities”. As V. Gordon Childe suggests, this was a time during which spectacular change occurred, albeit at a slow pace: he termed it the Neolithic or Agricultural Revolution (Mellaart 1975:273).

2. Çatalhöyük

The Çatalhöyük⁴ finds during the 1960s inspired Mellaart to posit the birth of “The Goddess”, a mother goddess. According to Mellaart (1967:53) the Neolithic civilization

⁴ Çatalhöyük (previously written Catal Huyuk) is situated on the Konya Plain, on the Anatolia Plateau some 3000 meters above sea level (see **current website for new information**). This plateau is bordered in the South by the Taurus Mountain range, to the east the twin peaks of Hasan Dag, an active volcano until the 2nd millennium, and the Kara Dag where much of the obsidian found at Çatalhöyük was probably “mined”. A salt lake lay to the north. Çatalhöyük was situated near the Carsamba Cay whose source was the Taurus Mountains. This alluvial plain was thus watered from the river as well as enjoying an annual rainfall of about 400 mm which generally fell in the winter and early spring. The summers were hot and dry. Çatalhöyük would thus have been a culture based on agriculture with a simple irrigation system to augment the water supply. Sheep, goats and cattle breeding were also practised. There were also elements of trade, of which the local obsidian was an important product (Mellaart 1967:213). It is presumed that the early settlers came from the hilly east and south east and the obsidian region of the Taurus and ante-Taurus mountain ranges. The twin mounds of the settlement that is Çatalhöyük, which cover about 32 acres, have revealed some 12 layers of continuous occupation from 6500 BCE to 5500 BCE (Mellaart 1975:53), which have preserved for us the cultural

revealed at Çatalhöyük “shines like a supernova among the dim galaxy of contemporary peasant cultures”. This exciting discovery of a prehistoric site in Anatolia, discovered on the fringe of the Fertile Crescent by Mellaart in 1957, gave insight into a civilization whose culture can only be described as inspiring in its configuration. The people appear to have been of a mixed population, Euro–Africans and Proto Mediterraneans whose finer features were their longer shaped skulls, (*dolichocephalic*) while broader shaped features were also present (*brachycephalic*) (Mellaart 1975:99). The animals, which were domesticated, were sheep, goats and cattle (*bos primigenius*), and the wild bull or auroch, which was evident for the first time in domestic use. Wild animals in the areas included the onger, red deer, bear, wolf and the cat family, in particular, the leopard. Hunting was indicated by the skins found. As the settlement became more established the hunting became less prominent (Mellaart 1967:223).

Anne Barstowe (1978:7–17) observed in this urban settlement the beginnings of a female cult. She is in agreement with Mellaart that the buildings were early shrines dominated by their annual painting, with the goddess only appearing in plaster reliefs around 6200 BCE. As women began to dominate the food sources, and the weaving and textile accomplishments, so their wealth and status and, later, their power grew.

Shortly after Ian Hodder arrived at the Çatalhöyük⁵ site he was taken aback by the arrival of a group of men and women, sponsored by the Istanbul Friends, whose interest was in finding out whether there had been further evidence of the goddess. At the site they stood in a circle, held hands and prayed. “They said that the presence of the goddess was strong. You could feel her coming up through the earth” (Hodder 1998:132). The Goddess Tours became regular events and consisted mainly of professional women both from the USA and Europe. Çatalhöyük, for all its academic and technological

aspects of the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük, as well as revealing their way of life and anatomical features (**refer to new archaeological reports and 1998 bibliography of Ian Hodder**).

⁵ Mellaart’s excavations at Çatalhöyük were stopped in 1965 due to his permit being withdrawn by the Turkish Government. They were re-opened in 1993 under the leadership of Ian Hodder, a Cambridge graduate, who, together with his team, are still on the site to the present day. Ian Hodder attempts to deduce more about Çatalhöyük in his reconstructions which include not only its symbolism and art but the nature of the climate, landscape, plant and animal life and how they integrated and interacted with the people who lived as a community which had settled by the Carsamba River (Balter 2005:97).

excavations and assessments, still “fosters a plurality and multi-vocality with its communication part of the process of globalism. It remains caught in a maelstrom of perspectives and special interests” (Hodder 1998:138). It can only be argued, given all the knowledge that has been gained from the unearthing of the Neolithic town of Çatalhöyük since 1960 by James Mellaart and again from 1993 until the present under the leadership of Ian Hodder, that this community was highly sophisticated at the dawn of history.

It is the richness of these wall paintings, some of the earliest found on man made walls, (Mellaart 1962:57) which affords us insight into the lives of the people of Neolithic Çatalhöyük. These murals, together with the plaster reliefs, suggest that the people possessed an ideology/ethos and religious cult, as well as a sense of decorative purpose. Mellaart found the paintings again reflecting symbols which represented the great goddess, who for the inhabitants was both the source of life as well as the instrument of death. The paintings in the “shrines” were positioned above the main platforms under which the burials took place, on the north and east walls although there were some exceptions. The south wall was generally left unpainted.

However, Voight (1991: 31-38), in her article on her comments from “The Goddess from Anatolia” by Mellaart, Hirsch & Balpınar, does not agree with Mellaart’s interpretation that the iconography of Çatalhöyük related to a religion based on “the great goddess, source and mistress of life, the Creatress, the great mother and symbol of life itself” (1989:23).

Again, according to Hodder (1999:179), certain buildings were more elaborate than others but were randomly situated. Hodder therefore interpreted this as signs of a widespread domestic cult, rather than “shrines” belonging to a priestly or “priestess” elite. The more complex the building, the more numerous were the bins and platforms within. The walls were more richly painted, a feature that continued in the rebuilding, replastering and repainting phases of such a building. In this, Hodder suggests that certain

buildings and therefore the inhabitants played a more central role in the cultural activities, not necessarily cultic, of the people.

Reconstructing prehistoric religions from iconography, in particular at Çatalhöyük, from the murals, wall paintings and statues is actually scientifically impossible (Voight, 1989:35). However, through the small figures of people and animals that were discovered in most Neolithic sites, and based on the history of these sites, one can often divide these figures into categories such as:

- Cult figures which therefore may represent the Goddess or God;
- Vehicles to do with magical rituals. These were to prevent illness and increase fertility;
- Teaching figures for initiation rites; and
- Toys – playthings for children.

3. Symbolism At Çatalhöyük

The paintings, mouldings and figures of Çatalhöyük are all bound up in meanings (Last 1998:375), which reflect the everyday life of the living and their linkage with the dead, which in turn created and guaranteed the lives of the household and thus the people of the society. Life is always a challenge. For those of Çatalhöyük their ideas in this respect were expressed in the artifacts. Their “art” was an expression of their existence and its continuum, bound up in coming to terms with their world of life and death of which the care of the Goddess may have been paramount. In the end, if these images and ideas had been taken away from the people of Çatalhöyük, they and their power would have been destroyed (Last 1998:376). In this power was a Goddess tradition which would evolve and thereby spread.

3.1 Configuration of the Houses or Possible Shrines

Mellaart (1962:72) found the houses grouped together, no “city” streets, with each house being a rectangle of about 25 square metres. The walls were of mud brick, the roofs flat, each of which had an aperture on the southern side which served as an entrance and exit as well as the chimney for the oven. A ladder was placed for access against the south wall. There were no windows. Mellaart regarded the houses as consisting of a main living area off which, accessed by a small opening, was a small “store” room. Mellaart noted the imprints of reed mats in his 1961 – 1965 excavations (1962:11), deducing that the floors of the main room of the Building 1 (Hodder 1999:180) were carefully swept with these mats placed on them. Mellaart also discovered that the main room had raised platforms on three sides, which he suggested were sleeping platforms. It was beneath these platforms that the dead were buried. These burials appeared to be in particular groups and, as noted by Barstowe (1978:11), the children and the adults were buried apart with the men separate from the women.

The walls of the buildings were plastered, painted and re-plastered almost annually, it appears, during the life time of the houses (Hodder 1999:180). In some of these buildings/houses Mellaart came across extravagant murals, wall paintings, reliefs and sculptured figures. He designated these buildings as evidence of shrines, thereby interpreting what is thought to be a religion and cult of Neolithic people, where evidence suggested that the goddess was supreme. It is yet to be determined whether these demarcated areas, which were centrally placed within the groups of houses and which had open spaces and courtyards, could indeed be considered “shrines.”

The houses appeared to be built in terraces: some faced an E/W axis and others, N/W. The ensuing façade was a city surrounded by an unbroken row of houses and storerooms (Mellaart 1967:68) which, owing to the openings being only in the roof area, was virtually unassailable by an outsider. In view of this only means of accessing houses it would appear that much of the social infrastructure could have taken place at roof level. This

amazingly structured ancient city, which perhaps gave the appearance of a beehive, was well defended in this manner: the attacker might breach the walls only to find himself in a house with no escape and the defenders waiting with slingshot, lances, spears etcetera.

The family centred on the women. There was no central political organization such as a palace which would play a dominant role in fostering both warfare and hunting rituals. Control over wealth was agricultural in nature and this was able to mould the religion to one of fertility in the crops and the people. The “religion” did not depend on sacrifices but on the power of life-giving and nurturing.

If this is evidence of shrines within this archaic city, it has given extraordinary insight into the cult of the time and its development through the reliefs, wall painting and statues, which demonstrated continuity from the evidence of the successive layers of civilization. This interpretation suggests that the most important aspect was that of the Mother Goddess. About 40 “shrines” and “sanctuaries” were excavated on the levels of occupation at Çatalhöyük. The artistic decorations of the shrines were practised throughout the eras, and mostly illustrated the cultic beliefs of the inhabitants of the Çatalhöyüks. The shrines and sanctuaries were richly decorated whilst the houses were fairly plain with only the lower walls decorated. Simple woven rugs may have been placed on the floors of the shrines and houses (Mellaart 1967:155).

There is no evidence of burnt offerings or sacrifices within the shrines or houses. In fact there is little evidence of animals being kept within the city at all. They may have been herded into corrals on the edge of the settlement at night (Mellaart, 1965:82). However, as mentioned, small deposits of grain, used and unused pots and a few animal bones which may have been small meat offerings were discovered. Bull’s horns and egg shells may have also been offerings of a sort.

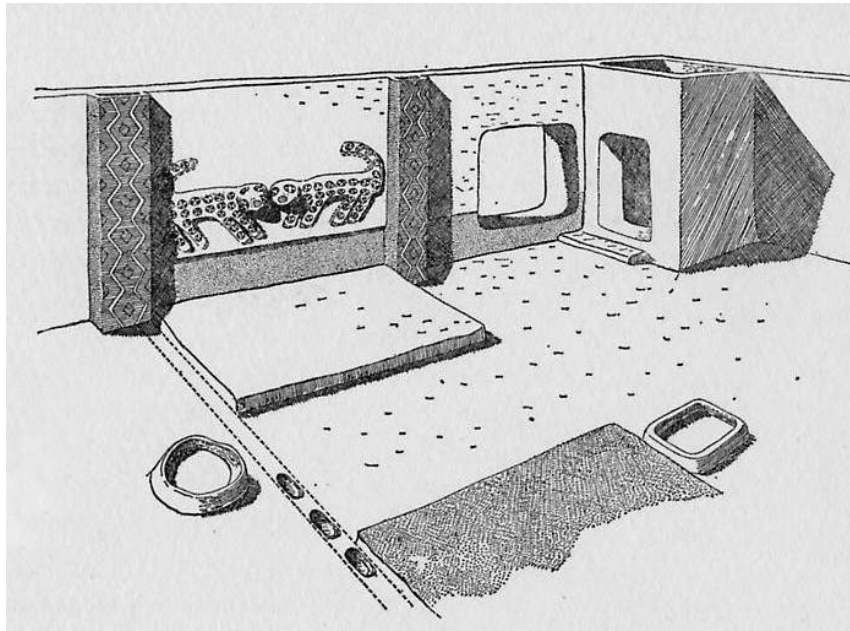
The shrines which exhibited the most numerous decorations were:

3.2.1 “Shrines”

1. *Leopard shrine*

Here two leopards face each other with raised tails. The female is regarded as the fatter on the right, whilst on the left the more slender male is featured (Mellaart 1976:119).

Because of the replastering of the walls the colours of the leopards changed and the spots became rosettes, now black on a white background (Mellaart 1963:42).



Leopard shrine

Figure 2.

2. *Two shrines on Level VI*

A. Shrine with horns plastered onto the east and west walls together with a painting of a bull. It seemed simple to begin with, but over time the redecorations became more elaborate.

B. On the North West wall of this shrine appears a figure without a head but with arms and legs outstretched. It is surrounded by bull's heads and the horns of the auroch, the wild ox of Anatolia. This figure, with its outstretched arms and legs, Mellaart (1967:122) may be perceived as the Goddess giving birth.

A discovery at the site of Çatalhöyük in May 2005 revealed a stamp seal represented by the shape of a bear with the caption “The Goddess is a Bear”. The stamp seal is similar to the figure found in the Shrine as discovered by Mellaart (1961 – 1965) but its

interpretation as a goddess now lacks plausibility. The stamp seals were thought to have been used on clothing and skins.

Many animals have been depicted in the houses, such as leopards, bulls and deer on the wall paintings. Since the plaster reliefs in the “Shrines” lacked heads or hands the figure suggested as the Goddess need not have possessed human connotations (May 2005: Çatalhöyük Communications).



Figure 3. Bear Stamp Seal.

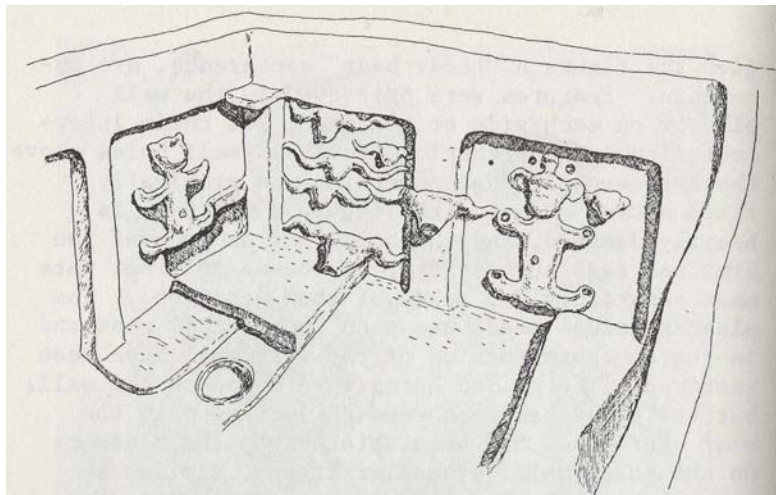


Figure4.

3.2.2. Wall Paintings and Murals

The walls of the houses and those of the “shrines” were re-plastered and then re-painted. In many instances some 40 layers of paintings existed.

The murals portrayed:

- Geometric patterns painted in reds, white and black;
- Symbols of hands, horns and a painting which appears to be the town of Çatalhöyük witnessing the eruption of the volcano of the Hasan Dag;
- Scenes involving the hunt; and
- Scenes of vultures, a bird said to have had cultic significance.

a. Paintings of geometric patterns consisted of triangles, crosses and flower-like motives which appeared to represent Anatolian type kilims that may have inspired the weaving and matting. However, analysis of the matting showed no coloured patterning. Most of these early finds recorded were of patterns found in the “Shrines” on Level VI.

In 1989, *The Goddess from Anatolia* by Mellaart, Hirsch and Balpınar was published. Here Mellaart described additional geometric patterned wall paintings which he had spent the years reconstructing from the sketches of the small pieces found at the site. Here the motifs were, according to Mellaart, associated with goddess figures. They indicated patterns which could be construed as a goddess. The reconstructions of these wall paintings were derived from the “Shrines” on Level II, “Shrines AII I & AIII.

Debate as to their authenticity has raged since this publication (Mallet 1993:8). But Marija Gimbutas considers the reconstructions as genuine and “the imagery of kelim decoration as not ‘folk art’ but a highly sophisticated adaptation of what was basically religious concepts from a much earlier age” (1990:1).

These reconstructions clearly depict figures, some resembling that of the goddess. Others were similar to the reliefs found in a shrine which was later perceived as similar to the stamp seal of “the bear” found by Hodder’s team of excavators in May 2005, who

thought that this was perhaps not the goddess but would have been a design used on clothing or in weaving which had also been incorporated into the wall paintings.

b. Animals and birds were also represented. On Level VIII the vulture “shrines” are the most important.

These shrines portray what has been interpreted as the exposure and excarnation of the dead. In Shrine I the huge vultures are seen pecking at headless human bodies. The birds are painted red. They are found on the south, east and north walls. Shrine 2. depicts the birds hovering over the headless figures but now the latter have human legs. It is suggested that these were human beings, disguised, and were the priests and priestesses of the Shrine.

Shrine II shows the vultures being warded off by a figure with a sling (Todd 1976:40).

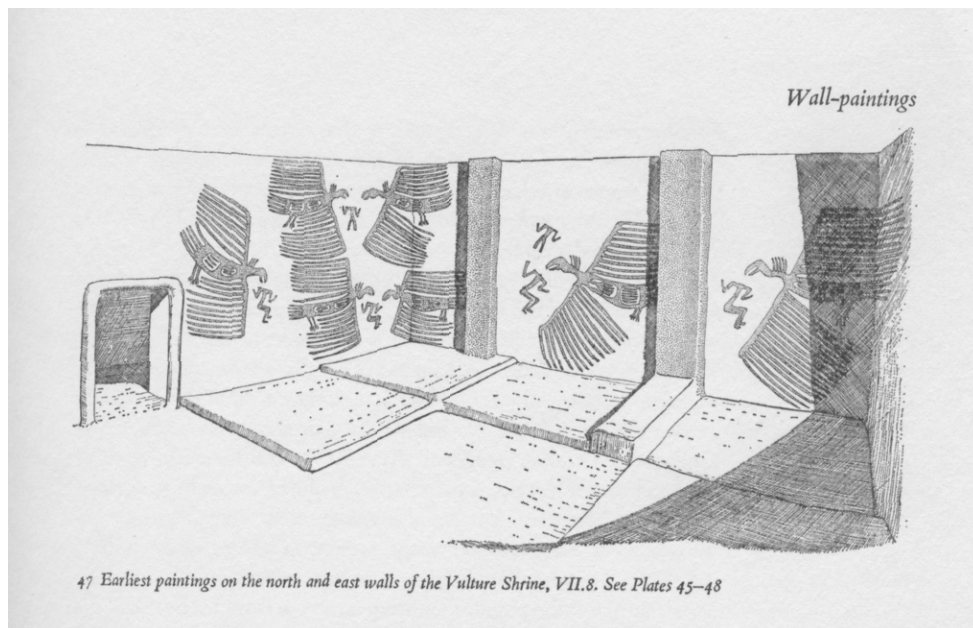


Figure 5.

Mellaart thought, “What an awesome sight this must have been for Neolithic mankind of 6200 BCE” (1967:167).

In reality, burial customs at Çatalhöyük are unknown. One is led to believe that, together with the burial remains, excarnation was practised before secondary burials of the bones within the shrine/ houses. The head was left intact. The burials took place under the platforms. Grave goods were not prominent although some artifacts such as weapons for the males and jewellery for the women were found. The bodies / skeletons were often wrapped in skins or textiles and laid on mats or in baskets (Todd 1976:69).

Mellaart (1967:64) considered the vulture as being a symbol of the Great Goddess and argued that in these paintings she is revealed as the goddess of death and will claim her own while Marija Gimbutas (1989:3) views the goddess in many manifestations, the vulture being that of the goddess of death. As a bee or butterfly or frog, she is the regenerator of life. Many of the geometric patterns of the wall paintings have a honeycomb effect, with some exhibiting a “bear like” or possibly a “frog like” patterning.

c. Hunting Frescos.

These were found in houses and shrines on the later levels of Çatalhöyük: V – III.

i. Level V

The scenes from the hunt here are evident on three walls, the north, west and east walls.

- a. There are several species of animals surrounded by men in different attitudes, all of whom are wearing spotted loin cloths. These may have been leopard skins since leopards were found in the Taurus Mountains and are still to be found in small numbers in Turkey (Anatolia) to-day.

The men, although some of the figures appear quite feminine, are all painted in red (Todd 1976:42). Some have beards. The figures appear in a more jovial mood rather than in the serious hunt. They are dancing and teasing the animals, of which there is a large bull, a deer and a wild boar.

In interpreting them it can be argued that these images were involved in shamanistic practices (Last 1998:361): a transmutation of the individuals into part of the animals; or that these scenes recorded part of the daily life within the household.

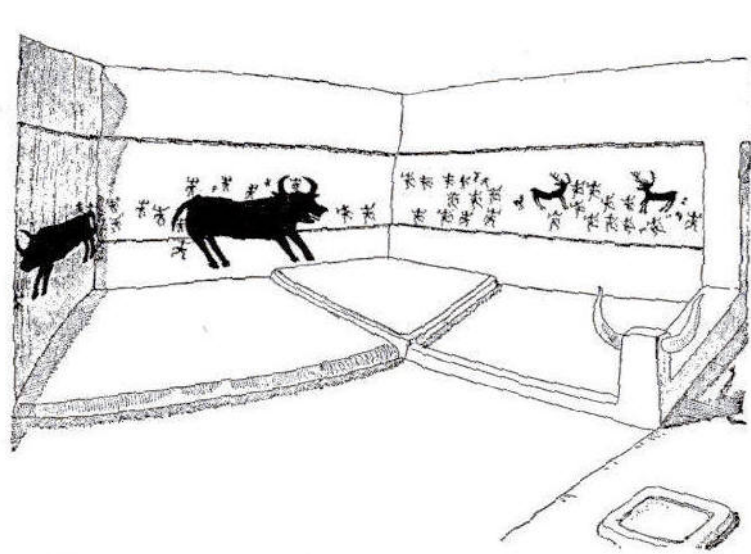


Hunting Scene

Figure 6.

ii. Level III.

This hunting scene showed a man and his dog hunting deer. In contrast to the earlier paintings which may have been symbolic in their depiction of the hunt, this scene seems to indicate a definite portrayal of the hunt (Todd 1976:44).



Hunting Scene

Figure 7.

In these scenes of the hunt, as with those of an architectural nature, it could be suggested that they did not form part of the elements of a belief system but rather, according to Hodder (1998:178), the everyday life and domestic activities of the household.

d. Level VII. Town of Çatalhöyük.

The most remarkable wall painting was found by Mellaart in 1964: it represents what appears to be the town of Çatalhöyük. The scene took up both the north and east walls of the building. It is the famous picture of the volcano, the Hasan Dag, with the town in the foreground.

Rows of rectangular squares suggest rows of houses. They gradually increase in number, implying the houses rising up to the centre of the site. Above the “houses” are the twin peaks of the Hasan Dag. From the mountain red dots and lines streak out, connoting fire coming from the top of the peaks. Lava streams down the mountain and a cloud of smoke hangs above it. This is a striking picture of Çatalhöyük witnessing the eruption of the volcano, rich in obsidian, which together with other volcanos in central Anatolia only became extinct in the 2nd millennium BCE. Thus, according to Mellaart (1967:176), “If the picture is unique so was the occasion and probably only at Çatalhöyük was it witnessed by a peoples who were so civilized to have possessed the artistic genius to record such an event for posterity.”

It is interesting to note that the burial under this magnificent painting was that of a rich woman, interred with the stuffed lower jaws of wild boars surrounding her head. She could be considered as having been a person of great importance and may have been the matriarch of the city or the chief priestess (Gimbutas 1989:3).

In conclusion Marija Gimbutas (1989:4) perceives the main paintings as religious art, their symbolism a way of showing the importance of the continuity of life.

3.2.3. Sculptures and Figurines

Figures were found in the “shrines”, which depicted both males and females, the latter being in the majority. Animals alone and potsherds were scarce within the buildings (Todd 1976:93) and generally the statuettes were found on the floors. The most famous statuette was discovered in a grain bin within the “store” room and consequently suggested an association with vegetable matter. The figures were generally small in size (Mellaart 1967:181), mostly made from clay and stone.

The large figure of the female found in the grain bin implied, according to Mellaart, (1967:32) that the goddess is giving birth, the head of the child seen clearly between her legs. She sits on a “throne” and is supported by two felines (or leopards) on either side. This statue, together with others, the wall paintings and reliefs led Mellaart (1964) to believe that there was a religious cult which regarded the goddess as supreme: reflecting a Neolithic people’s belief in a mistress of life and death (1963:32)

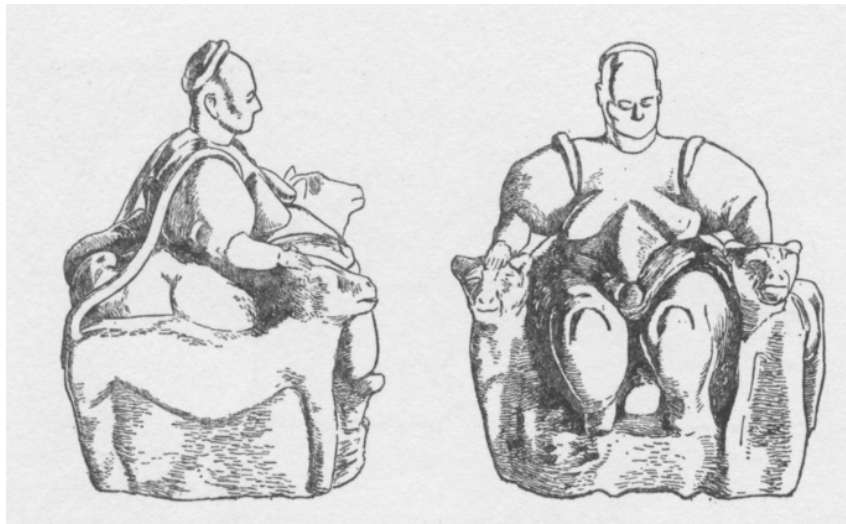


Figure 8

Another group of statuettes and votive figures were found in the Leopard “Shrine”, two of a standing goddess bold and naked. There were two figures of a younger and older female representing perhaps a mother and daughter or the goddess growing older. Male figures discovered were those of a young boy, riding on a spotted animal thought to be a

leopard, and an older bearded figure. These figures, together with the wall painting and reliefs, found by Mellaart (1964) within the buildings designated as shrines led him to believe that these afforded proof of a cult of the goddess.

Middens and pits outside the houses also contained statuettes and crude figures. These, Voight (1991:35) suggests, were toys or playthings for the children.

Richard Lesure in *The Goddess Diffracted* (2002:587) is of the opinion that the figures can be placed in various categories, similar to those suggested by Voight (1991:35).⁶ They have social uses, symbolism and iconographic connotations, but did not belong to a Goddess cult. However, Voight saw figures at the Neolithic site of Gitrille on the Euphrates River which were broken and dispersed, which suggested that they had been vehicles of magic (1991:36).

At Jarmo, a Neolithic village dated to the mid 7th millennium, further to the East, near Kirkuk (present day Iraq), archaeologists discovered female figurines. They possessed large breasts and prominent buttocks, and were squatting, a posture natural to childbirth. The question that arises is whether they were dedicated to the Mother Goddess by the women, who through these figures would be favoured, or whether they were merely magical charms to increase fertility or allow for a successful childbirth (Maisels 1993:111).

Cult figures, however, would be found within the buildings and were rarely thrown out into the midden sections, broken or haphazardly disposed of (Voight 1991:36). In this respect most of the figurines with female connotations were discovered within the household contexts and buildings at Çatalhöyük (Ozdogan 2005:604) and had not been discarded.

⁶ i. Cult figures which therefore represented the god or goddess. ii. Vehicles to do with magic rituals. These were to prevent illness or increase fertility. iii. Teaching figures for initiation rites. iv. Toys or playthings for children.

Some of these figures are at times inserted into the walls and can be perceived as symbols for protection, for example, to ward off spirits. Voight concurs with Mellaart's opinion that the "Goddess" in the bin is an important cult figure, significant in childbirth and thus fertility. This is confirmed by the symbolic elements of the chair, with arms representing the two large cats upon whose heads she, the figure, rests her hands (Voight 1991:39). Both Mellaart (1963:78) and Voight agree that the stone figures are deities representing both the male and female elements. The male is symbolized by the young boy riding the leopard. This however does not mean that "The Goddess" was the dominant religion of the community (1991:36).

The figurines, according to Ozdogan (2004:604), together with the wall paintings, exhibited a unique symbolism and in so doing portrayed a personal domestic belief system with the figure of a goddess in a dominating position.

4. Çatalhöyük: Closed and Reopened

The site of Çatalhöyük remained closed to the world of archaeology from 1965 until 1993. As noted, it would be reopened under the auspices of the archaeologist Ian Hodder, from Cambridge, England, who, together with his international team and Turkish archaeologists with permits from the Turkish ministry worked under the auspices of the British Institute of Archaeology.

During the first three seasons the surface of the mound was cleared toward the south, Mellaart's site, and a new area was opened toward the north of the Tell where Ian Hodder was to concentrate on his excavation of Building I, as it was to be named (Hodder 1999:179).

The surface clearings in both the northern area and Mellaart's southern area revealed that, of the Neolithic buildings uncovered, some were more elaborately decorated than others but that there could be no clear demarcation of shrines and non- shrines. In addition to the micro morphological studies carried out by the Matthews's at the site in 1997 (Archive

Report), it was revealed that charred fragments of cereals and grasses were found in and around those areas, so that it seemed possible that, although the elaborate burials continued under the floors of the platforms, domestic activities also took place within these “shrines”.

The excavations in the north eastern section of the site of Çatalhöyük revealed densely packed small buildings which were simpler than those excavated in the southern part of the Tell by Mellaart (1961 – 1965). These buildings were interspersed with open spaces, midden areas.

4.1 Building I: The North Eastern Mound.

The building was divided into two parts. The cleaner space contained the platforms under which the burials were found, situated under the north and western walls, away from the main food preparation and storage areas. The burials were separated, with the north west area containing a high number of young people, over which there were more elaborate paintings.

The paintings were plastered over and repainted annually but the relief sculptures, mainly on the western wall, remained during the life cycle of the building and only then were destroyed. These relief sculptures found in the new area, the northern area, were similar to those excavated by Mellaart (1962 - 1963).

The protracted excavation of Building I in all its eight phases, through which it was estimated that the “family” grew, revealed an art which indicated the social character of the family. The paintings, in their symbolic association with the burials and the reliefs, may have been a means of communication with the spirits of both animals and ancestors and thus, in the opinion of Hodder, not a shrine to “The Goddess”. The stretching out of hands was a communication with another world (1999:190).

4.2. Trench Works

During the 2003 season of excavation the decision was made to open an enormous area: a 40 metre x 40 metre trench. It was to be called the 4040 area and here there would be two methods of excavation:

- One where a limited number of samples would be taken for specialist analyses but where the dig would also reveal the structure of the houses of the village; and
- The other, where samples only would be fully analysed.

The surface scraping technique, which had been used at the beginning of the excavations in 1993, revealed the beginnings of structures grouped in different segments. In 2005 spectacular finds were discovered which then led to reassessments. The established view of Mellaart's discoveries during the 1960s, which had revealed the presence of a Goddess cult, was altered during these subsequent excavations from 1993 onwards, to that of a domestic goddess cult.

4.3. New Discoveries

The new discoveries were:

a. Stamp Seal

A stamp seal was discovered in the form of what appears to be a bear. It is thought that this may have been used on clothing or skins. This seal strongly resembles the relief found in a "shrine" by Mellaart (1963), which he suggested was a figure of The Goddess. The hands and feet of the relief were always missing. It is possible that the figure in the shrine could have been a bear since animals, leopard, bulls and rams appear in these shrine buildings. These animal figures may have possessed an iconographic symbolism of the divine feminine. Generally the female representation of the Goddess in the reliefs took an anthropomorphic form. The symbolism of the bucrania was said to depict the male element within the cult.

b. Clay Figure

The clay figure discovered within a house employs strange and unusual imagery (Çatalhöyük, Seasons review, 2005:2). The figure is small and squat – a goddess figure – possessing full breasts with hands resting on a protruding stomach. The head is missing. On turning the figure the arms now appear thin, with the back being almost skeletal. This appears to be a depleted human being (2005:2). The ribs, vertebra and scapula are clearly emphasized. This is a truly remarkable portrayal.



Old woman figure of pathos. Figure 9.

It is suggested that this is a figure of a voluptuous woman, who as time progresses, is returning to her ancestors: a figure of pathos. She seems to be associated with both life and death and the imagery of Çatalhöyük, the society of which may have viewed the role of the woman as a mother, nurturer, giver of life, while also playing a special role in death.

c. Bulls Heads & Horns.

In this 4040 area a house contained a bull's head and horns. Next to these finds of the head and the horns was a bench set with bull's horns. Paintings appeared beside the bull's skull which had not been plastered. This building was similar to those that Mellaart (1963) had unearthed on the eastern portion of the site.

In these finds a similar patterning of the houses is observed to that in the earlier discoveries, where certain of them were more highly decorated. Burials were also found in these houses within which the artifacts were of cultic figures.

5. Conclusion

It is still possible that within the agrarian culture of Çatalhöyük where the nurturing of life and fertility were important, special emphasis was placed on the feminine and in this regard, if not on the goddess within the domestic cult, there was an acceptance of the divine feminine and a female cult.

Since the town of Çatalhöyük had no palaces, plaza or major elaborate shrines to suggest a temple, it is presumed that the cult was of a more domestic nature rather than being dominated by either male or female individuals which suggests a sharing and cooperative society with regard to power. The new Neolithic agricultural society with its domestication of animals, the weaving and pottery was more closely associated with women and their activities (Barstowe 1978:15). The hunt became more in essence a sport or a form of shamanistic spiritualism, as it was found that sheep and goats provided the general protein diet, together with the cereals (Last 1998:368).

Whether the inhabitants of Çatalhöyük espoused a special deity, a Goddess cult or not, their daily lives were bound in the rituals and acts which linked all the groups of the society (Last 1998:375).

The excavations of 2005 have confirmed Mellaart's suggestion that the houses, with their main room and dividing sections, were grouped, perhaps with certain buildings holding a more prominent place, being the burial places for the "family". These special burial places were more highly decorated and although the cult may have remained domestic in nature, these buildings could be termed "shrines". The cult may have focussed on The divine feminine, the voluptuous figure of the woman giving birth (1965) or that of the figure found in 2005 of the voluptuous woman who in turning becomes skeletal, emaciated and old, which indicates that life is both birth and death. Life is a caring and nurturing experience and in this the divine feminine is instrumental. Is this a concept of the Goddess?

CHAPTER II

THE SUMERIAN AND AKKADIAN GODDESS

The Bronze Age saw the cult of the goddess reach its zenith in the ANE. This chapter deals with the rising of the goddess from Mesopotamia, her prominence, her attributes and the reverence she achieved from her followers. At times she seems to have displayed certain jealousies in her actions, as it were, but these resulted in an ability to become a warrior goddess. In this manner she was also able to assist her devout followers. The beautiful poetry that has survived tells how these attributes of the goddess were achieved and recognized by her devotees.

2.1 Introduction

During the Bronze Age (3500 – 1250 BCE), spanning some 3000 years, developments led to bronze being made from copper and an alloy, usually tin, but beginning with arsenic. This resulted in the more advanced technology of harder, more resilient artifacts in the form of tools, weapons, containers and the plastic art forms. Though the change was gradual it nonetheless brought about an alteration in the culture. Agriculture flourished and, with a great deal more food production, saw a burgeoning of the population. Towns and cities grew, particularly in the areas around the great river systems of Mesopotamia and Egypt (Kuhrt 1995:25).

A period of monumental buildings came into being. Temples and palaces were built in the cities, which needed an imposing edifice in order to honour their deities, who in their responsibilities to their subjects, saw to their prosperity (Kramer 1969:12).The imposing structures also constituted a show of strength towards opposing foes. All this called for the acquisition of raw materials, which brought about an economy, and concomitantly the need for trade. Since records needed to be kept, a writing system began to emerge.

Hence the beginning of recorded history dawned alongside the so called “dawn” of civilizations with the recording, at first, probably of accounts but later, letters, laws and literature of which the religious aspects were probably the most significant (Kramer 1963:34). The writing evolved by the Sumerians, who had settled in the lower reaches of the rivers of the Euphrates and Tigris, was, in its stylized form, known as Cuneiform, meaning wedge-shaped (Hooker 1990:17). With this art of writing appearing in the world, documented history begins (Campbell 1960:147) and according to Kramer (1963:35), “History begins at Sumer”.

The momentous invention of a writing system and its art, led to a more permanent form of communication (Kramer 1969:20). Subsequently the cultural mythologies, which had previously been only an oral tradition, now furnished us with the knowledge of the daily and spiritual lives of the ancient people. Through these writings we can follow the adoration, power and magnitude that the “Goddess” brought to the lives of the people of the developing civilizations of the ANE.

The great mother goddess of the Palaeolithic and Neolithic years was now chronicled through hymns, myths, and poetry, where her many attributes were manifest. In the ANE the goddess of the Bronze Age, and subsequent ages, is known by many names but throughout it is evident that she becomes separated from her loved one who in death falls down to the Netherworld/ underworld or to darkness. She descended to rescue him, so that in bringing him to light and life she brought the world to light and life⁷ (Kramer 1969:20).

⁷ The legend of Osiris & Isis: Osiris, the Egyptian god of vegetation and therefore civilization, is slain by his brother Seth and his corpse is cut into pieces. Osiris’ sister/wife Isis collects the pieces without the “membrum virile” but is able to bring him back to life long enough for her to magically conceive a son, Horus. Osiris returns to the western regions where he has eternal life. The conflict between Osiris and Seth is that of life and death but Osiris is resurrected in the guise of Horus who is seen as Osiris reborn. This is in reality a belief in eternal life. Canaanite mythologies tell of the conflict between Baal, the master god, who at the hands of Mot is slain and taken to the Underworld. The land lies parched until Anat, the sister/wife of Baal, rescues him and Mot is slain, scattered to the winds, so that the earth is revitalized.

This cycle represented by the Goddess coincided with the phases of the moon, whose changing ways would have been noted, from its waxing to fullness and waning to the dark of the moon, and subsequent rebirth with the sighting of the new moon: a pattern evident in plant, animal and human life.

Birth – decay – death and rebirth – continue in a cyclical pattern which is eternal yet also transient (Baring & Cashford 1993:21). Together these comprise the two images of life, eternal and transitory, un-manifest and manifest, invisible and visible. Darkness is always followed by light.

The Sacred Marriage would give meaning to this in the ANE mythologies, which evidenced, as early as the 4th millennium BCE, a philosophical outlook (Jones 2003:96). This accorded people the impetus to achieve and to persevere and a philosophy which, through the “Goddess” mythologies, would continue.

It is the opinion of the present writer that the earliest writings, with regard to the goddess, were those that stemmed from the Sumerians’ culture and their cities. These writings dealt with the mythologies which explained the role of the gods in the beginning of the universe and their continued influence on both the earth and its peoples. Inanna was the Great Goddess of Sumeria and Akkad, the Babylonians and the Assyrians within their pantheons. At the beginning, she did not, assume the role of the goddess within the Sumerian pantheon, nor in the Akkadian pantheon where she was known by her Semitic name, Ishtar (Kramer 1963:122). It is in these writings that Inanna/Ishtar developed and matured to be the Great Goddess of Ancient Sumer, Akkad and Assyria (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983: xix).

2.2. History

History reveals a change in the dominant cultures when the Sumerians were ousted by the first great Akkadian Empire, 2340 BCE (Kuhrt 1997:44); the rise to power of Sargon (2340 – 2519 BCE) whose origins are obscure, although legends have told of him being

abandoned in a reed basket and brought up by a gardener⁸ (Kuhrt 1997:48) began the period of the Empire of Agade (2340 BCE). Sumer in the South and Akkad in the more northerly area were brought together to form a cohesive political entity. Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin (2213 – 2176 BCE) was able to bring greater stability to the political situation whereby the Empire reached its zenith.

Together with the formation of the Empire of Agade (2340 BCE), the Sumerian written language continued to be used in literal writings. Akkadian became the official language and as such the Goddess Inanna became known by her Akkadian name, Ishtar.

Both Hallo & van Dijk (1968:10) and Frymer-Kensky (1992:64) concur in their hypothesis that this may also have been considered a politico-religious reformation. For Sargon, the Sumerian Inanna and the Akkadian Ishtar acknowledged a theological foundation which could enhance and stabilize the united Empire of Sumer and Akkad. The Akkadian kings believed themselves to be the beloved of Ishtar and their successes were all attributed to her. The temples and centres of the cult of Akkad became linked to those of Sumer.

The fall of the Akkadian Empire witnessed the rise of the Ur III Dynasty (2100 – 2000 BCE). A revival of Sumerian cultural aspects and literature together with the Sumerian language occurred during this period. During the subsequent Old Babylonian era (1750 BCE) the hymns and myths were again written in Akkadian, where Inanna's role remained the same though, as mentioned, she was known as Ishtar.

The writings of Sumerian literature and especially those that relate to the myths are singularly beautiful. The poetry records the life of Inanna, the great goddess: "*The Huluppa Tree*", "*Inanna and the God of Wisdom*", the poem of "*The Courtship of*

⁸ Long time spans are often continued in the mythologies of nations, where ideas and deities appeared to have similar functions. There was considerable borrowing throughout the cultures whose themes were basic to the culture.

Moses, who led the Israelites from Egypt, working with their G-D Yahweh, had his life spared through his adoption by the Egyptian Pharaoh's daughter when the order came to slay all Israelite babies. Moses was found floating in a reed basket, brought up by his biological mother until he was old enough to be presented to the Egyptian court where he lived as a Prince of Egypt (Exodus 2:1-10).

Inanna, “*The Descent to the Netherworld*” and “*Dumuzi’s Dream*” “*The Return*” are of great significance.

The writings, together with the hymns – one of which is that of “The sacred marriage” – all reflect a people of great understanding, sensibility, intelligence and cultural achievement. Their ability to record their understanding of their esoteric and spiritual levels of their worldview demonstrate great knowledge of their world around them.

2.3 Hierarchy of the Gods and Goddesses

A pantheon of the gods, in all cultures, was never simple. In essence, the gods ruled the universe, regulated and controlled the sun, moon and the stars, as well as the natural, political and cultural life of the people. They were important in the life of humans within the cosmos which they supervised and determined (Frymer- Kensky 1992:9).

2.3.1 The Beginning of the Universe.

According to Sumerian mythology, Nammu is the great goddess of the watery deep who gives birth to the sky god, An and the earth goddess, Ki. Heaven and earth were united and from their union the air god, Enlil, was begotten. Enlil separated heaven, his father An, from his mother Ki. Enlil took his mother, Ki, to be his wife: she then assumed the name of the cosmic mountain, Ninhursag, who became Queen of the Universe. Ninhursag, in establishing the universe, gave birth to all the other gods, humankind, animal and plant life and the subsequent civilization (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:123).

Nanna, the moon god and a major astral deity, was conceived through Enlil and his consort Ninlil (the air god and goddess). Nanna was to be the father of Utu the sun god and a daughter, Inanna, who was to be the goddess of the morning and evening stars. Inanna was the granddaughter of the god, Enki, the god of wisdom and waters who was conceived through the god, An and the goddess Ki (Kramer 1961:74).

Sumer, historically, comprised a series of city states. They were not united but also not entirely isolated from each other. The city states were home to the gods. According to Samuel Kramer (1971:47), Nippur was the spiritual centre of the city states and was home to Enlil, leading god of the pantheon. His temple was known as the Ekur while Eridu was the home of Enki. Ur was the seat of the moon god, Nanna, Sippar, the place of the sun god Utu and Uruk the home of Inanna, the goddess of the morning and evening stars.

The relationships between these gods and goddesses constituted the forces that created allegiances as well as rivalry throughout Mesopotamian history. Unification occurred during the Sargonic Empire (Akkadian; 2300 – 2100 BCE), again in the Ur III Dynasty (2100 – 2000 BCE) and finally the Babylonian Empire under Hammurabi (1800 BCE).

Samuel Noah Kramer averred that “Sumerian literary compositions represent the oldest literature of any appreciable and significant amount ever uncovered” (1961:12). These texts consisted of epics, myths, hymns and lamentations, proverbs and wisdom compositions.

The hymns are both royal and divine (Kramer 1961:13), consisting of songs of praise and exultations directed at the deities. To Inanna, hymns and exultations were also written by Enheduanna, the priestess at Ur, the seat of the Moon God, Nanna. Enheduanna was the daughter of King Sargon: the unifier of Sumer, in Southern Mesopotamia and Akkad, Northern Mesopotamia, who in so doing created the first and most ancient Empire of the known world. (Kuhrt 1997:44).

The myths will demonstrate Inanna’s role and position within the hierarchy of the gods and goddesses, why she became known as the Queen of Heaven and Earth, Goddess of Love, Goddess of the Morning and Evening Star and her role as the goddess of war. Inanna/Ishtar was to play a greater role than any other of the deities of the Sumerian and Assyrian religion (Kramer 1979:71).

2.4 The Goddess Inanna

Goddesses, it seems, reflected to some extent the role of women in their society but nevertheless, possessed the power and characteristics of the divine (Frymer-Kensky 1992:14). They were viewed as the “women” of the divine world and as such, were worshipped. They were the protagonists of the women of the society and, in their nurturing, caring and control over life and death were, according to Frymer-Kensky (1992:14), also viewed as the archetypes of woman in the family.

Inanna, as the great Goddess of Mesopotamia, possessed enormous power over heaven and earth as well as a role in war, and yet despite all this her role in the society of the hierarchy of the gods and goddess at first appeared ambiguous (Averbach 2003:766). Inanna began her role as a soft spoken young goddess but took on the role of the Great Goddess, which would have given her the power over Life and Death.

2.4.1. Inanna, Queen of heaven & Earth, Goddess of Love, the Morning and Evening Star

Inanna is the daughter of the moon god and granddaughter of Enki, god of the flowing water and wisdom. She is essentially a lunar goddess and her life-giving powers are reflected in the waxing and withdrawal of the Moon. Her descent to the underworld, to the darkness and subsequent return, which will be discussed later, is also reflected in a lunar mythology. Not only is this reflected in the cycles of the moon but also in the control exercised by the goddess over reproduction, fertility and sexuality.

Mythologies and mythological writings furnish us with insight into the nature of this goddess and her great role in the hierarchy of Life and into how this role of the great goddess was achieved (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:4). It is on Inanna that copulation depends: hence she is important for the fertility of the land and its consequences. The mythologies, and the poetry written, which describe the rise of Inanna to be *the* Goddess,

have been used in the following discussion according to the translations by Wolkstein (1983), who was inspired and assisted by the renowned Assyriologist, Samuel Kramer.

2.4.2. The first of the myths in the unfolding of the growth of Inanna and one of the earliest stories is that of

2.4.2.1. “Inanna and the Huluppu Tree”

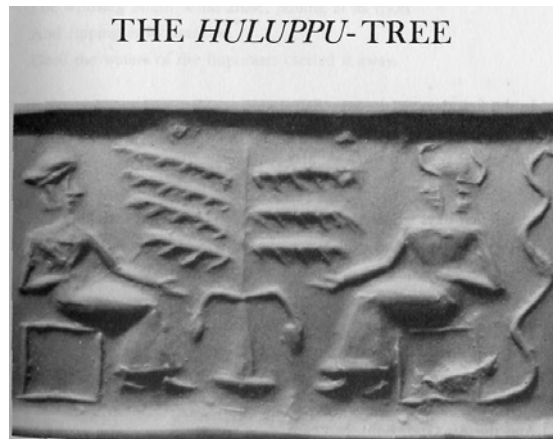


Figure 10. The Huluppu Tree.

The first thirteen stanzas of this writing relate to the first days and the formation of the sky, the earth and the great below:

“and the name of man was fixed.”

“A woman walked in fear of the word of the Sky God, An
Walked in fear of the Air God, Enlil”.

Inanna was often afraid of Enlil who caused her grief and despair (Kramer 1979:92). Inanna found a tree which she pulled from the waters of the Euphrates: the Huluppu Tree, which had been ripped out from the earth. She planted it in her holy garden at Uruk. Inanna carefully nurtured the tree and wondered how long it would take until she could construct a throne and bed from the wood.

“Then a serpent made its nest in the roots.

The Anzu bird in the branches

And the dark maid Lilith a home in the trunk.
Inanna wept.”

The tree had not fulfilled her desires but it became home to her fears which are, allegorically, represented by the snake, Anzu Bird and the dark Lilith (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:143).

Her half brother, Gilgamesh, was able to rescue her from the snake and her fears and was to carve a throne and bed for his holy sister. Gifts are given to Gilgamesh, a “Pukka” (possibly a drum and drum stick) and a “Mikka” which accorded him the strength, courage and power to rule in a civilized manner. He, unfortunately, does not use them wisely and they are lost through his arrogance and immaturity (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:143).

This interpretation of the story suggests that the tree as the first living thing on earth, the Tree of Life, had been rescued and planted in Inanna’s garden where it flourished after having been buffeted by the opposing forces of life, wind and water. The tree embodies the dual forces of the universe: consciousness and unconsciousness, light and darkness, male and female and the power of life and death. The symbolism of the Tree of Life growing from the darkness to the light is symbolic of the Creation whereby it is rooted in the underworld, and grows in the Earth to reach the heavens before dying to return to the underworld.⁹

This story of the Creation is related in many mythologies of the cultures of the ANE (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:144). The snake within the tree suggests a rebirth and sexuality.

⁹ The Tree of life is common to most cultures.

- a. Tree of Life, Genesis 2:9: “In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.
- b. The Axis Mundi in Scandinavian mythologies was the ash, Yggdrasil. The tree supports the sky and spreads branches over the earth. These branches represent the various gods. Its strength is in the order of heaven and earth (Buhl 1983:87).

Lilith, appearing only in this text, “*Inanna and the Huluppu Tree*”, is also found in Hebrew legend. Lilith, together with the snake and Anzu bird, are sexual, lawless creatures, which represent Inanna’s fears and desires: once she has conquered them, they allow Inanna her gifts of a “throne and bed”. Gilgamesh, the hero King, helps Inanna to vanquish her fears, and brings her strength and courage to allow her to be ready to act on her own. Her rule now begins with her acquisition of the throne, giving her understanding of life and death. The symbolism of the bed embodies a new knowledge of light and darkness.

2.4.2.2. Inanna & the God of Wisdom – Enki: The second story of the Trilogy

“Inanna placed the ‘shugurra’, the crown of the steppe on her head.
She went to the sheepfold, to the shepherd.¹⁰
She leans back against the apple tree.
When she leaned against the tree, her vulva was wondrous to behold.
Rejoicing at the wondrous vulva – the young woman Inanna applauded herself.”

She said:

“I, the Queen of heaven shall visit the God of Wisdom.
I shall go to the Abzu, the sacred place in Eridu.
I shall honour Enki, the god of Wisdom in Eridu.
I shall utter a prayer to Enki at the deep sweet waters.

Inanna set out by herself.....

He who knows the “me” – the holy laws of heaven and earth.
Enki the God of Wisdom, he knows all things.”

¹⁰. Enki is, according to the genealogy of the gods, the “grandfather” of Inanna. In mythology as recounted in “The Huluppu Tree” Enki is the god of waters and wisdom. Enki’s sacred shrine is the Abzu which is said to be built above the underworld. His sacred city Eridu is located where the salt of the marshy lands near the Persian Gulf meets the convergence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:47).

These first lines of the writing indicate how Inanna has matured and become self confident. By placing the crown on her head she assumes the role of queen of the land and as such takes on responsibility for its resources and fertility. She had gained the throne in the myth of *The Huluppu Tree* and now possesses the crown. Inanna , in her mature role, is now anxious to ensure that her city, Uruk, where she is the goddess, will prosper and become the centre of the Sumerian civilization (Kramer 1961:65). This cannot be accomplished without the precious “me” which are the foundation of urban life (Kramer & Maier 1989:15). However these “me” were kept at Eridu, the seat of the god of wisdom, Enki, and are well guarded. It is at this point that Inanna decides to visit Enki.

Enki is also the god of waters, which is also important in life since without water there can be no life. Enki features as the god of waters as well as of wisdom in many of the Sumerian myths and in this manifestation he is vital to the general wellbeing of humanity.

In Sumerian mythologies Enki adopts many roles, such as mediator, and magician, organiser of creation or world order and fertilizer of the lands (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:147). Inanna decides to visit Enki: it has been suggested that the reason for her journey is that as “Queen of the Land” she needed to be “fertilized” by the waters of “wisdom” – both sexually, magically, spiritually and culturally (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:147). Allegorically, this would allow Uruk to be the greatest Sumerian city.

“Inanna set out by herself.

When she was a short distance from Abzu,

He whose ears are wide open,

He who knows the ‘me’, the holy laws of Heaven and Earth,

He who knows the heart of the Gods, Enki, the God of Wisdom, who knows all things.

Called to his servant Isimund.....

When Inanna enters the Holy Shrine treat her as an equal.

‘Greet Inanna at the Holy table, the table of Heaven’”.

Inanna is welcomed at the Abzu where food and wine are offered.

During this feast Enki in his intoxication becomes liberal with his gifts.



Figure 11. Inanna's visit to Enki.

Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:13 believe the translations are as follows:

“Enki, swaying with drink toasted Inanna.

“In the name of my power! In the name of my Holy Shrine!

To my daughter, Inanna I shall give the High Priesthood! Godship!

The noble enduring Crown! The Throne of Kingship!”

Inanna replied:

“I take them!”

“To my daughter, Inanna, I give, Truth! Descent into the underworld! Ascent from the underworld! The art of Love making! The kissing of the phallus”

“I take them!”

Fourteen times Enki raised his cup to Inanna in which he offered the “me” and fourteen times Inanna accepted the holy “me”.

Inanna now acquires the “*me*” from Enki – the Laws of Civilization. The story enumerates the “*me*”, fourteen in all, which Enki bestows on Inanna and which are grouped according to their values:

- The first grouping, of eight, is to do with the priesthood, rituals and the services of the king and the temple to the gods.
- The second, of six, relate to the “cult of the hero” (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983 147), It is connected to political and economic aspects, secure dwellings, emotions, family counselling and decisions.

This “*me*” of the Decisions is most important since without this ability or will, nothing can happen: it accords the ability and power to rule and take decisive actions. With wisdom now in her possession Inanna incarnates the principle of justice, the greatest decision making power with which to rule the Kingdom (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:148).

The “*me*” presented to Inanna, one hundred or more times, are the divine decrees for the basis of the early Sumerian cultural pattern and civilization. Inanna willingly and gladly accepts these gifts from Enki which he, in his exuberance and overindulgence in imbibing, has bestowed on her (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:148). She loads them onto her “Boat of Heaven” and leaves to return to her holy city of Uruk. However, when he sobers up, Enki realizes his divine decrees are missing and immediately summons Isimund, his servant, who together with various “henchmen”, the sea monsters, are sent to retrieve the “*me*” for Enki. Isimund explains that Inanna may leave Eridu but must leave the “*me*” behind.

“Inanna cried:

My father has changed his word to me!

He has violated his pledge – broken his promise!”

The Boat of Heaven arrives at Uruk. Inanna has achieved heroic shaman status and in so doing becomes a “fuller woman”, both physically and spiritually, which will therefore protect the well-being of her community.

Enki accepts that the “me” have reached Uruk.

“Enki says:

Let the people of Uruk rejoice.

The people of Uruk are allies of the people of Eridu.

Let the city of Uruk be restored to its great place.”

This could have held another meaning in that politically the two cities now formed an alliance. Many of these myths, in their essence, may well have possessed political overtones.

In her maturity we see the completion of a cycle. The Inanna of The Huluppu Tree is a young woman in search of her womanhood. “Inanna and the God of Wisdom” perceives her maturity as the “Queen of the Universe”.

The final story in the cycle of Inanna in her role of the Great Goddess is that of her relationship to Dumuzi.

2.4.2.3. The Courtship

The courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi is thought to have been the oldest love story and it expresses the fulfilment of Inanna as the goddess of fertility: life and rebirth. At the same time, one senses, it is a story of betrayal.

It is Utu, Inanna’s brother, the sun god, who now urges Inanna to full womanhood and maturity in that she should take a husband, the shepherd King Dumuzi. She at last acquiesces: the bed prepared for her from the Huluppu Tree becomes the marriage bed and the sacred marriage is consummated.

Wolkstein (1983:153) avers that after this consummation, the King, Dumuzi, asks Inanna to set him free to exercise his kingly duty. The passion of the earlier time dissolves but Inanna has enabled the King to “fertilize” himself and so in this symbolic act gained fertility for his land and people.

2.4.2.4. The Sacred Marriage

To the Sumerians, it was always realized that the goddess was important to the continuing cycle of life, so Inanna takes on the role of the giver and taker of life. Nevertheless there is always an acceptance of renewal.

The womb and its entrance, the vulva, is likened to the sheepfold wherein the sheep are safe. In itself sexuality becomes an important force for renewal. Sexuality here relates to a dynamic union, the Sacred Marriage, the coming together of the many elements that make the world fertile and regenerative (Frymer-Kensky 1992:56). The cosmic elements are all united in a positive manner. Human sexuality is aligned to the esoteric and is a ritual seen through the visible component of the world’s regenerative process or as an aspect of cosmic renewal (Frymer-Kensky 1992:56). At the same time, it is evident that a joint effort between human beings and the gods and goddesses is necessary to the fertility of the world. The gods bring fertility through rain, air, sun and soil, both to mortals, through their work in the fields and canals, and to animal husbandry.

The sacred marriage becomes a dramatic expression of the divine and human partnership. The goddess arrives from the heavens to consummate the marriage and in so doing immediately transfers the divine power into the human sphere (Jones 2003:296). This divine and human partnership was necessary for all eternity, in order to maintain the equilibrium of the world. Without this there could be no renewal, no rebirth, and no progress.

Frymer-Kensky (1992:56) argues that this was a ritual which, in its elaborateness, nevertheless expressed an interaction between human beings and the gods and goddesses. The ritual comprised the goddess, the Great Goddess and their king, in the guise of the shepherd king, Dumuzi. In consummation and prayers the forces of nature allowed for abundant fertility of the land, its animals, peoples and vegetation. The subsequent kings of Sumer/Akkad, Babylon and Assyria would later all represent the early shepherd king.

The sacred marriage ritual commenced with a great procession led by the king going to the temple of Inanna. Preparations were made by washing, anointing and adorning both the king and his selected “partner” who would represent the goddess, Inanna. A wedding banquet was celebrated prior to the “couple” coming to the fertile bed (made from the Huluppu Tree). “The King came to the “Holy Lap” of Inanna” and the subsequent sexual union was to promote the fertility of the land (Frymer-Kensky 1992:51).

This event was both a state occasion and a royal ritual. Songs, hymns and prayers were sung and recited and many were written only for this occasion. The most elaborate hymn was a lengthy one to Inanna by King Iddin-Dagan of Isin, ca.1900 BCE (Frymer-Kensky 1992:52).

“Let me say “Hail” to the one who ascends.... To the holy torch who fills heaven, the light, Inanna, the respected one who fills heaven and earth with her huge brilliance”(Jones 2003:294).

The “Sacred Marriage” concerned “union”: the coming together of the elements involved in making the land and, for the ancient cultures, their world full of abundance and fertility. Again one notes the symbolism of the union with the male aspect. Dumuzi was enacted by the king with the female, the goddess Inanna, which in unifying the cosmos saw the interlocking of the male and female (Frymer-Kensky 1992:56), thus unlocking the richness of the Universe. This symbolic force for the fertility of the earth and the continuance of life was a ritual that dated back to prehistoric times (Frymer-Kensky 1992:51).

For the Sumerian peoples this symbolic ritual of the Sacred Marriage, where the king of a Sumerian city associated with Dumuzi, weds the Goddess, who is represented by the high Priestess, becomes an occasion for a joyous festival which constitutes part of a New Year Festival, a time of rebirth. At the same time Inanna would appear in dreams to judge the evil doers and determine the good fate of the just (Jones 2003:295).

Hymns were written for this occasion, with many exalting Inanna:

Joy of Sumer

“The people of Sumer assemble in the palace.
And in the day of the disappearing moon.
On the day of the sleeping moon
The ‘me’ are perfectly carried out
So that the New Year’s day, the day of rite is properly determined”.

After the consummation.....

“The Palace is festive. The King is joyous.
In the pure clean place the celebrate Inanna in song.
She is the ornament of assembly, the Joy of Sumer!”

During the New Year Festival rite the cosmic powers of Inanna were transferred to the King in order to secure the leadership and successful flourishing of the land. The spirit of love has descended and is reborn on earth (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:110).

“Mighty, majestic, radiant, and ever youthful –
To you, Inanna, I sing!”

This particular New Year rite became part of the New Year festival: the Akitu Festival, which was celebrated throughout the history of Sumer, Akkad, well into the Old Babylonian Period (ca. 1750 BCE) as well as in the festivals of the Assyrian Empire and

subsequently the Neo Babylonian Period (ca. 586 BCE). The rite was prominent for more than 2500 years (Larue 1975:35).

2.4.2.5. Inanna's "Descent into the Netherworld"

In this poem Inanna's reason for her descent is her need to know the Underworld, to understand the Great Below. It is suggested by Wolkstein & Kramer (1983:160), in their translations of the texts, that her "sister" Ereshkigal, Queen of the Great Below, is Inanna's alter ego, the dark side and/or neglected side, and that by travelling through the seven gates of the underworld, Inanna is led to know and understand the aspects of life and death and thus the subsequent rebirth. It is a rebirth on a spiritual plane and thus reveals a new knowledge and understanding which will accord Inanna the ability to guide the land (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:156). It is implicit that this descent to the underworld is also the fate of all mortals.

"From the Great Above she opened her ear¹¹ to the Great Below"
(Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:52).

.In preparation for her journey Inanna takes with her seven "*me*". They are the divine decrees and are the orders of the civilized world. Inanna will take these, as represented by her crown, jewellery and her clothes, as her protection. On entry to the underworld, Inanna must pass through the seven gates to meet the Queen of the Great Below, Ereshkigal. As she does so, Inanna's earthly powers, symbolised by her clothes and jewellery, are removed and she meets her fate and the Queen, naked.

The descent to the underworld awaits all mortals, but to the Sumerians death was not the end so much as the separation of the body from the spirit, which then remained in the *kur* of the underworld to be at the mercy of its Queen. Inanna is rescued from the underworld, however, at a price since there must be a replacement. In Sumerian mythology no one is

¹¹ In Sumerian the words for ear and wisdom are synonymous (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:156).

allowed to return from the underworld. Inanna, however, has been reborn there and the rules are consequently altered (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:161).

“No one ascends from the underworld unmarked.

If Inanna wishes to return,

She must find a replacement.”

Inanna’s eyes fall upon Dumuzi who is chosen as the replacement because he is the only one who seems not to have missed or lamented Inanna’s absence. Yet he is also not eager in greeting her on her return (Kramer 1969:118). He calls on Utu, his brother-in-law the sun god, for help, who endeavours to assist by transforming Dumuzi into an animal, but this is unfortunately to no avail. Dumuzi is able to visit his earthly sister, Geshtianna, once more before his so-called death.

Inanna realises her error and recognizes that she is losing her husband. She and Dumuzi’s sister, Geshtinanna, weep for Dumuzi. Geshtianna, in her grief, offers her life for her brother. Dumuzi has now lost his earthly kingdom, perhaps because of his present inability to feel anything but the power of his kingship. The curse on Dumuzi is lifted and Geshtinanna takes his place in the Underworld, but this sacrifice is for only half of the year. For Dumuzi and Geshtinanna there are eternal life and eternal death.¹²

This cycle allows for the continued union of the queen of heaven and earth, the sky goddess and the earthly hero, so that in their diversity they can achieve a union of the “fixed, willful judgmental aspects of the sky deities with the ever changing emotional aspects of earthly mortals” (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:167). At the same time this eternal life and eternal death reflect the continual effects of the forces of nature on the earth.

For half of the year Dumuzi and Inanna, the life giving Goddess, would be united. He would rule Sumer; there would be the New Year celebrations of the sacred marriage which the Sumerian people celebrated with rejoicing.

¹² Cf. the legend of Osiris & Isis, discussed previously.

The harvesting of wheat, the ripening of the fruit and the birth of new life amongst the animals were joyous occasions. Upon the change in the seasons – the winter quietude - Dumuzi surrenders his earthly powers, returning to the Great Below and Ereshkigal, which might represent the darker side of Inanna, her other self (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:169).

The seasonal renewal and rebirth of the earth provided by Inanna, through and together with the pattern of the lunar cycles, gave the Sumerians an understanding and acceptance of their own lives. Death was a fate to which all were levelled. Although the great below appeared frightening, there was “eternal life”. That this must be perceived as but a pathway to a new “cycle” in life is witnessed by the descent of Inanna and her return. This follows the lunar cycle of three days of darkness¹³ for her, in her submission to her sister, Ereshkigal – which again, psychologically, can reflect the other self of Inanna – namely the unconscious aspect of the human consciousness (Wolkstein 1983:160).

This unconsciousness can be frightening, but in terms of this understanding the Great Above and the Great Below were necessary opposites, consciousness and unconsciousness, for human life in general.

As Wolkstein and Kramer (1983:167) point out, this renewal is a gift from Inanna, who in changing the cosmic order, has offered eternal life, through love, to Dumuzi, the Shepherd King, for only half of the year. In his turn, Dumuzi returns, full of wisdom and inner strength (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:168), which will provide the energy for this renewal. For the Sumerians, and in fact all humanity, this can also be viewed as the acceptance and knowledge that in life there is death and their rituals were intended to renew this life in terms of their relationship to the cosmos and to their Goddess, Inanna.

¹³ The great importance of the three day period in the religion of the pagan Near East was already well known but this is the first text in which it occurs (Kramer 1940:21).

2.4.3 Conclusion

Other nations followed the Sumerians, these being the Babylonians (ca. 1750 BCE) and the Assyrians (ca. 900 BCE) where it appeared that they would lose this notion of eternal life in death. Again, the Netherworld became a fearful place inhabited by demons, with its retainers and emissaries.

Old Babylonian literature however indicates that Inanna was replaced by her Semitic name, Ishtar, while Dumuzi became Tammuz. There are certain differences in this myth, the descent to the netherworld.

Ishtar's son/lover, Tammuz, is wounded by a wild boar and she descends to the underworld to bring him back, to awaken him from a sleep that has been cast upon him through his wound. During his time in the Underworld – the three days of Lunar darkness – fertility is suspended as all fall asleep.

“Bull springs not upon the cow, ass impregnates not the jenny.
In the street, a man impregnates not a maiden.
Man lies down in his (own) chamber
Maiden lies down on her side.”

(Translation by Frymer-Kensky 1992:47)

This innuendo regarding the Netherworld – a place of sleep to be reawakened – may have been the Babylonian and Assyrian palliative way of understanding the meaning of death.

2.5. Inanna/Ishtar – Goddess of War

Inanna displays her protective attributes towards kings in her role as goddess of war. “*The Exultation of Inanna*”, which was written by the “*en*” (high) priestess Enhedunna at the temple in Ur, and whose hymns and poetry continued to be used during the Old Babylonian Period (1750 BCE), expresses the divine attributes of Inanna. It narrates how

she achieved the “*me*”, therefore gaining supremacy over the gods; but also refers to how, through her intercession, the king of Sumer became triumphant against the barbarians of Mount Ebih (a mountainous area said to be north of Sumer. Jebel Hamrin (Hallo & van Dijk 1968:53)).

“In the mountain where homage is withheld from you – vegetation is accursed.

Its grand entrance is reduced to ashes

Blood rises in its rivers for you, its people have nought to drink.

It leads its army captive before you of its own accord.”

(Hallo & van Dijk 1968:21).

Inanna is connected with warfare and can become angry. Divine rage is inexhaustible and Ebil is her opponent. She is coupled with a storm god, Iskur :

“In the van of battle, every thing is struck down by you”.

Oh my lady propelled on your own wings.

In the guise of the charging storm you charge.”

(Hallo & van Dijk 1968:17)

Sargon, King of Agade, Vice Regent of Inanna/Ishtar, needed to fight many battles to create his Empire and in this he relied on the help of Inanna/Ishtar. Naram–Sin, his grandson, whose reign was more stable, also invoked the help of Inanna/Ishtar to curb some resistance in various areas.

Enheduanna, an en priestess, a princess and daughter to King Sargon, has, in her hymns, also expressed the cultural unity between Sumer and Akkad, but she does also depict Inanna as a powerful force, supreme amongst the gods and goddesses where her primacy is praised.

Inanna/Ishtar as the goddess of War would become of greater importance as the years continued, with Babylonia becoming the new ruling power and Empire as a result of the

rise of Hammurabi as King of Babylon, ca. 1750 BCE and the subsequent Great Empire of Assyria, ca. 750 BCE.

2.6. Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Priestess

The translations of poetry by Wolkstein & Kramer (1983) record other aspects of the divine nature of Inanna in the cultures of the Sumerians and later the Babylonians and Assyrians who frequently displayed a fascination with the stars and the night sky. The poetry written to Inanna hails her as a shining star, an evening and a morning star, Venus, who is always associated with love.

2.6.1. Holy Priestess of Heaven

“Hail to the Holy One who appears in the heavens”.

I say “Hail” to Inanna, First daughter of the Moon.

Mighty, majestic and radiant,

You shine brightly in the evening.

You brighten the day at dawn.”



Figure 12. Inanna as Queen of Heaven.

2.6.2. The Lady of the Evening

“At the end of the day, the Radiant Star,
the Great light that fills the Sky,
The lady of the Evening appears in the heavens.
The People of Sumer parade before the holy Inanna
Inanna, the lady of the Evening is radiant.”

2.6.3. The Lady of the Morning

“Honoured Counsellor, Ornament of heaven, Joy of An!
When sweet sleep has ended in the bedchamber,
You appear like bright daylight.
When all the lands and the people of Sumer assemble,
Those sleeping on the roofs and those sleeping on the walls,
When they sing your praises, bringing their concerns to you,
You study their words.

My Lady looks in sweet wonder from heaven.
The people of Sumer parade before the holy Inanna.
Inanna, the lady of the Morning, is radiant.
I sing your praises, holy Inanna.
The lady of the Morning is radiant on the horizon.”

(Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:103).



Figure 13

Both the Sumerians and Babylonians noted the movements of the stars and planets and named and identified most of them. The Zodiacal planets may well have been named then and later became known as “Ishtar’s Girdle”. Eight was the number of years it took for a “Radiant Star” or planet to return to its same place in the sky. This number became sacred and consequently eight pointed rosettes were used when crowning Inanna and Ishtar. Below, Inanna/Ishtar is seen standing on a Lion, a symbol of her sacred beast (Hooke 1962:20). Lions were especially associated with Ishtar, the only goddess to have been accorded this epithet (Harris 1988:272).



Figure 14. Cylinder Seal

Inanna crowned with a Star next to the Tree of Life

The Sumerians devised a writing system, as well as a mathematical one, and through their myths expressed an overwhelmingly religious ideology. The mathematical system began with simple and basic accounting, but in their fascination with the cosmos and the skies, their ideas and knowledge developed to such an extent that astronomy and astrology became a part of their ideology. This led to the development of the “science” of divination, which was based on beliefs that were to develop into an accurate system of astrology under the auspices of the priests of Babylonia and later Assyria.

According to Jastrow (1981:209), the theory upon which astrology rests is no mere fancy or caprice. It is the assumption of co-ordination between the occurrences on earth and the phenomena observed in the heavens. It could well have been this inspiration and

discovery that ordered the new civilization, which the cosmos reflected the life on earth and the rulers of the cosmos, who were the gods while the goddesses were paramount, with Inanna/Ishtar becoming the Great Goddess (Campbell 1960:146).

2.7. Conclusion

The cult of Inanna or Ishtar, as she became known, was to change, evolve and spread to the entire region of the ANE. How and why this happened began with the advent of the first Empire that Sargon of Agade established, the Akkadian Empire (2300 BCE). Sargon not only united Sumer and Akkad but spread his empire by means of the far-flung conquests of Syria, Phoenicia, Canaan, Anatolia and even as far away as Cyprus, where, whatever the language spoken, the writing was in cuneiform based on the Semitic language known as Akkadian.

The Empire reached its zenith under Sargon's grandson, Naram-Sin (2213 BCE), with its structure well defined (Kuhrt 1995:50). Campaigns to Ebla, Diyarbakir in Turkey and in Iran are all recorded on rock reliefs. Quotations offered by Kuhrt (1995:50 – 54) of these recordings are:

“Naram-Sin, the mighty King of Agade:

When the four corners of the world opposed him with hostility, he remained victorious in nine battles because of the love of Ishtar and even took Kings who had campaigned against him as prisoners...”.

Another inscription again refers to Inanna: “Naram-Sin took it and Inanna gave him no rivals. The governors of Subartu and the lords of the high countries brought their tribute before him”. Inanna/Ishtar's cult similarly spread far and wide during its development.

Inanna was, as Kramer (1979:96) concurs, adored and worshipped. Her powers were acknowledged by kings as well as the ordinary person and she had her way with animals too. “She was brave, bright, ambitious, aggressive and vindictive but nevertheless loveable and desirable” (Kramer 1979:96).

Her great dynamism as the Goddess is portrayed in the poetry.

“My father gave me heaven, gave me earth,
I, the Queen of Heaven, am I,
Is there a god who can vie with me?
Enlil gave me heaven, gave me earth,
I, Queen of Heaven am I!
He has given me lordship,
He has given me queenship.
He has given me battle, he has given me combat,
He has given me the Flood, he has given me the Tempest,
He has placed heaven as a crown on my head,
He has tied the earth as a sandal at my foot,
He has fastened the holy garment of the *me* about my body,
He has placed the holy sceptre in my hand.
Heaven is mine, earth is mine – I, a warrior am I!
Is there a god who can vie with me?”

(Kramer 1979:96).

At all times Inanna/Ishtar is viewed as a paradox. However, for all her contrariness, she, was able to transcend the antitheses mentioned and it was in this ability to represent her dynamism of structure and anti-structure (Harris 1988:263) that her profound theological significance to the Mesopotamians, the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians is apparent.

CHAPTER III

THE BABYLONIAN AND ASSYRIAN GODDESS

The Babylonian goddess, Ishtar, remained the goddess supreme although, as already mentioned, she was not perceived as the consort of the principal god, Marduk,. She retained all her attributes but also became known as the goddess of love and war.

3.1. Introduction

The political ascendancy of the Babylonians, upon the creation of the Old Babylonian Empire under Hammurabi (1750 BCE), brought about significant changes in religious ideology. The great goddess and the goddess supreme became overshadowed by the figure of the supreme god, which would alter the general paradigm of consciousness in the theology and ideology of the ANE.

The reason for this change is difficult actually to define, but it was a gradual process that had begun toward the end of the Bronze Age. By the end of the 2nd millennium BCE the cosmos was dominated by male gods, with only Ishtar maintaining her position of power (Frymer-Kensky 1992: 79).

This change may have been a reflection of the social status of women, which began to decline. Earlier writings revealed the diminished power of women in their society, and thus the role they would have played in the religion of the society. With the emergence of nation states over against the smaller city states, there was a need for the hero or king to lead and protect. This likewise undermined the public and social role of women.

The known world by the end of the 2nd millennium BCE saw the end of an era where the goddess as “earth mother” with powers over life and death became eclipsed. That which was above, the heavens with the gods, and that which was below, the earth of humankind, became patriarchal and the ancient goddesses as the protectors of human life disappeared (Frymer-Kensky 1992:80). The people of the villages, cities and states felt that a male deity would be stronger and more able to protect them.

However, Ishtar was able to retain her role, with her attributes allowing her to remain supportive of the gender order (Frymer-Kensky 1992:80). She was associated with the god but not necessarily as his consort. It was necessary for the “Sacred Marriage” of the goddess to the god to continue so that the fertility, success and well-being of the land were assured. The nurturing aspect of the goddess had been reduced but her capacity as procreator remained. However, after the Old Babylonian Period (1750 BCE) the king no longer acted the part of the god in the cult, with the hierodule priestess representing Istar (Frymer-Kensky 1992: 76). Statues of the gods, instead of human actors, were used in this ritual of the “Sacred Marriage” which involved a procession with hymns and praises. These statues were then left together overnight (Frymer-Kensky 1992:77). The original ritual thus represented a relationship of the divine with the human which was later lost (Frymer-Kensky 1992:77).

The political creation of empires and monarchies resulted in an alteration in the hierarchy and configuration of the gods and goddesses. The Supreme God evolved.

3.2. History

During the fall of the Ur III Dynasty, in 2000 BCE, the Sumerian supremacy was overthrown. The Amorites, part of the Semitic group of people, originally nomadic peoples from the southern desert regions, became completely integrated (Postgate 1999:86), took total control of “Sumer & Akkad” in the Euphrates valley, and established their dynasty. Thus began the Babylonian Era with Babylon as the capital city.

By 1750 BCE, Hammurabi had ascended the throne and during his reign of some 40 years, considerably revolutionized both political and religious conditions, according to Jastrow (1911:32). It was, however, not until the 30th year of his reign that he was able to become master of the region. After this time he managed to forge further north to Assyria and the Hittite areas. Jastrow (1911:32) avers that Hammurabi was far more than a mere conqueror. He founded an empire by truly uniting the north and south. By his codification of existing laws and establishing others, which were promulgated throughout the land, an authoritative and recognized guide to government emerged (Jastrow 1911:32).

After the fall of the Dynasty of Babylon, foreigners, the Kassites, ruled until the assault by the Assyrians which began in 747 BCE. Babylon was to remain an important centre, with a short resurgence in power during the Neo-Babylonian era (626 – 539 BCE) until the advent of Alexander the Great, 331 BCE.

Since the time of Hammurabi, the codes and laws brought Babylonian culture and religion into a closer relationship. According to one particular writing (Jastrow 1911:35):

“When the supreme Anu, King of the Annunaki, and Enlil, the lord of heaven and earth, who fixes the destiny of the land, had committed to Marduk, the first born of Ea, the rule of all mankind, making him great among the Igigi, gave Babylon his supreme name, making it pre-eminent in the regions (of the world), and establishing therein an enduring Kingdom, firm in its foundation like heaven and earth – at that time they appointed me, Hammurapi, the exalted ruler, the one who fears the gods, to let justice shine in the land, to destroy the wicked and unjust that the strong should not oppress the weak, that I go forth like the sun over mankind.”.....“Law and Justice – I established in the land and promoted the well being of my people.”

Its religion and its ethical spirit are viewed as the determining power and perhaps the most important aspect of the reign of Hammurabi. The interdependence of culture and religion also altered the pantheon of the gods. Henceforth, the Bronze Age gradually reached fulfilment by the time of the Iron Age (1250 BCE): a transference from the “Mother Goddess” to the father God.

3.3. The Enuma Elish

.The New Order of the World was recounted in the myth of the Enuma Elish. This section furnishes a brief synopsis of this Epic – the Enuma Elish (When on High) – the conquest of Tiamat, the original Mother goddess, by her great, great grandson, Marduk.

The Babylonian Epic of Creation



Figure 15. Marduk slaying Tiamat

The gods were brought into being by Apsu, the primeval father, and Tiamat, the primeval mother. The principal gods were Anu, the sky god, Enlil, the god of the earth and Ea/Enki, the god of waters and the abyss but also the god of wisdom. Jealousies caused the death of Apsu.

Tiamat was angered at this disruption of the order with the death of Apsu. Now instead of a life-giving mother Tiamat was transformed into a dragon, giving birth to monsters. Chief of Tiamat's monsters, and her son, was Kingu who now also becomes her husband and to whom is given the tablets of the law which he is to defend.¹

The gods, Anu of the sky and Ea of the waters, together with the assembly of the gods, place Marduk on the throne and give him the power to overcome Tiamat and her consort, Kingu, who are then both destroyed. Marduk creates the heavens and earth from her body.

A change from the old order to the new emerged from this. The earlier supremacy of the Lunar Goddess (Inanna/Ishtar) and her association with the solar god altered. The defeat

¹Tablets of the Law were given to Hammurabi and to Moses (Exodus 20.) . This seemed to denote authority symbolically.

of the dragon, Tiamat, the mother goddess, by the new supreme solar god rendered divine power to the solar deity – father god. The myth relates the god, as represented by the sun, exercising his powers to overcome the powers of darkness, resulting in the dominant lunar religion, as represented by the goddess, being eclipsed.

The Enuma Elish recounts the principle underlying the order of ideas which were present from the Iron Age (1200 BCE) onwards, represented by the father god being superior to the mother goddess. The supremacy of the former over the latter, in the association of light, represented order and good against darkness and chaos.

The goddess here represents both order and disorder, structure and antistructure (Harris 1988:263). It is suggested by Harris (1988:264) that this difference between good and evil – the opposition of which is perceived as “male” against “female” – would lead to “holy wars” between these forces. The father became the One God who stands above all others and alone. In Babylon he was Marduk and in Assyria Ashur.

But despite the changes in the theogony and theology, there remained the great goddess, the deity who remained supreme in Babylonia and later in Assyria, and whose influence would continue to constitute part of the cultures of the ANE in various forms: Ishtar.

3.4. The Goddess Ishtar

In the Babylonian theogony, Ishtar now occupied a central place and became the only goddess to possess any power. She was still revered as the Mother Goddess but this role appeared to differ from that of the late Bronze Age where she was involved with nature.

Although she was still viewed as the goddess of fertility and vegetation, by virtue of her capacity to bring forth the annual renewal of the earth, she was now considered as being both the goddess of war and of love.

The temples of Ishtar were situated at those centres where the sun worship was most prevalent. Uruk, her principal seat, witnesses the enactment of the myth of Ishtar and

Tammuz, the young sun god, who descends into the underworld and in so doing sees the death of all vegetation. This myth was described earlier

In Babylonia Ishtar's role as the mother goddess began to alter when she became the consort of the principal god, Marduk. Ishtar's origins fade and her new attributes and monuments demonstrate that she became universal and the supreme goddess of the pantheons in Babylonia and later, Assyria.

The cult of Ishtar, as Inanna, was restricted to the city-state of Uruk; nevertheless, with the growth in her cult status, the cult spread and consequently, her transformation as a universal Supreme Goddess. As such, Ishtar's presence was prominent at any centre where the sun cult was foremost.

During his reign, Sargon, the original Semitic King of Mesopotamia, may well have spread her influence, for wherever Semites were settled Ishtar was prominent. As the influence of Ishtar travelled further to the West, spreading to other nations, her name was continually transformed in order to suit the language of the culture. For example there was Ashtarte/Ashart (Greek) of the Phoenician pantheon, and Astoreth, of the Canaanite pantheon, the supreme goddess associated with the Father God, El.

3.5. Conclusion

The demise of Babylonia as a "superpower" in the ANE in 1595 BCE was begun by the Hittites, when King Mursilis I sacked the city of Babylon. This devastating attack brought the era of Old Babylonia to an end. The Hittites, however, did not consolidate their authority in Babylonia, leaving political chaos (Kuhrt 1995:333).

The Kassites, thought to be from the Zagros area, became the dominant political power, with their supremacy lasting some 500 years. From then onward Babylon underwent what was considered a "dark age". By 900 BCE an alliance with Assyria brought some stability until 747 BCE, when Babylon was turned into a province of the Assyrian Empire. It possessed this status until 626 BCE (Kuhrt 1995:576 – 578). With the domination of the Assyrians spreading over the area of the ANE, Ashur became the

principal god; however, as noted above, Ishtar remained the great goddess, again not as the consort of Ashur but by his side.

3.6. The Assyrian Goddess, Ishtar

As the power of the Assyrians grew they came to dominate the area of the ANE. The god Ashur became the principal god of Assyria. The king of Assyria possessed absolute power, as noted in the Coronation Hymn of Ashurbanipal:

“Ashur is King – indeed Ashur is King!

Ashurbanipal is the representative of Ashur, the creation of his hands.”

(Kuhrt 1995:587)

The king, in his role as warrior, fulfilled the most prominent aspect of his kingship. Assyria was a military nation which was held together as such through the auspices of the god, Ashur and the goddess, Ishtar in her association with war and battles.

During the Old (2000-1600 BCE) and Middle Assyrian Periods (1400-1050 BCE), the principal seat of Ashur was the major city of Ashur itself: situated on the west bank of the Tigris River about 100 kms south of present day Mosul. However, in their cultural and religious development the Assyrians had also acquired many of the gods and goddesses of the earlier Babylonian pantheon. Temples to these deities were built by the various kings, to the triad of Anu, Ea and Enki, to the moon god, Sin and the sun god, Shamash as well as a temple to the goddess, Ishtar.

As early as 1900 BCE a text from the reign of King Illushuna relates:

“Illushuna, the vice regent of Ashur, beloved of the God, Ashur and the Goddess Ishtar.....

Illushuna, vice regent of Ashur, built a temple for the Goddess, Ishtar – his mistress for life” (Kuhrt 1995:87).

Ashur would remain a premier cultic city during the Neo-Assyrian Empire Period (1050-935 BCE) and the Assyrian Empire (935-610 BCE). However, the new capital city

became Nineveh, the city which was built by Sennacherib (704-681 BCE). It was to be the seat of the temple and the shrine of Ishtar while another shrine and temple in Arbela was also a major site of the cult.

During the Neo-Assyrian Period and in order to reinforce the structure of the Empire, war became a divine commandment. Public prayers were involved to assist the duties of the king and prayers were offered by him, together with the diviners who agreed with the portents: “Expand your land! Your heroic deeds are guaranteed” (Kuhrt 1995:507).

3.6.1 Ishtar as the lady of war and battle

In the mountain regions, north of Nineveh (near modern Mosul in Iraq), on the cliffs at Maltai, reliefs were cut into the rock which portray a divine procession. They are said to have been carved during the reign of Sennacherib (704 – 681 BCE). The figures are typical of those that were represented during the Babylonian and Assyrian eras. They are heavy in proportion, depicting a stocky body, full face and much hair (Rodney 1993:211). The headdress of the goddess/deity is a tiara, which was typical of Ishtar. She is seen holding a “harpe” which seemingly was a weapon but became a symbol of authority and power. (Rodney 1993:213). The goddess is observed standing on an animal: a lion.

A smaller relief shows the goddess, Ishtar, also standing on the back of a lion. The lion, considered the sacred beast of the Goddess (Hooke 1962:20) had been associated with the Goddess since the 3rd millennium. She is the only goddess to be associated with the lion whose qualities she emulated in the strength, power and fierceness which she could display (Harris 1988:272).

Ashurbanipal (668 BCE) considered Ishtar as his foremost deity and his saviour, particularly with reference to his assault against the Elamites. At Arbela, in a vision, Ishtar appears with quivers which hung to the right and left of her; she held a bow in her hand and sharp sword unsheathed, ready to do battle. “She spoke to you like a real mother, Ishtar, the highest of the gods addressed you, giving you instructions” (Kuhrt 1995:510).

Through the help of Istar, Ashurbanipal was successful in his campaigns, in which he conquered Susa, the capital of Elam and defeated the Elamites. The statue of Ishtar was restored to her resting place in the Temple at Uruk, which Ashurbanipal's father had previously rebuilt. Ashurbanipal was commanded by Ashur and Ishtar, who vouched for his success, to enter into the campaign. Such was the power of these gods, representing the sun and the earth, as well as the male and female principle (Jastrow 1911:135), that Ashurbanipal had no fear of losing and believed that Ashur and Ishtar would stand by his side at all times.

Esharhaddon (680 BCE) the father of Ashurbanipal, was also devoted to Ishtar. The following words appear in Sayce (1887:275):

“I am Ishtar of Arbela, O Esarhaddon, King of Assyria; in Assyria, in Ninevah, in Arbela, long days and everlasting years will I give to Esarhaddon, my King.

I am the lover of thy limbs, thy nurse and thy guardian, am I”.

The reason why the Assyrians perceived Ishtar in her war-like guise has been explained. Emanating from Babylonian traditions, their sacred teachings and literature, the Assyrians perceived in Ishtar her total individuality, her attributes as the Morning and Evening Star and the goddess who was the principal symbol of the creation, of humankind, vegetation and human love. In this she was the protector, not only of the domestic flocks but of all animals while the people were her children; but at the same time she could assert her equality with the gods.

The destruction of the world through the Great Flood, as told in the Gilgamesh Epic, and the destruction of her people who now “fill the sea like as many fish” (Jastrow 1911:135) caused her to “cry like a woman in travail” (Pritchard 1995:94). She has exhibited an all consuming passion and swears “by her necklace never to let it happen again” (Hooke 1962:65).

In other writings her protective role is perceived through the eyes of the rulers. Both Esarhaddon and his son, Ashurbanipal, were privy to her protection: “I am the senior midwife at your birth and I am your kindly wet nurse” (Jacobsen 1976:237).

Ashurbanipal was believed to have lain in the lap of the Queen of Nineveh. This reference was not necessarily to his mother but to Ishtar, who thus granted her protection as would an over protective mother (Jastrow 1911:137).

3.6.2 Ishtar as Hierodule

This polarity of hers, in which Ishtar remains the “Hierodule”, implied that the rituals of sexual unions, concerning fertility and the abundance of life, constituted the meaning of the “sacred work” within the temple precincts. Her ability to wield her power in this respect rendered her patroness of the prostitutes, marginalised women belonging to the fringes of society (Harris 1988:271). Ishtar was therefore often referred to as the harlot.

“O harlot, you set out for the alehouse,
O Inanna/Ishtar you are bent on going to your usual window for a lover,
O Inanna/ Ishtar, mistress of myriad offices, no god rivals you!”

(Jacobsen 1976:140)

Women and girls were summoned to her temple, and in sacrificing their virginity to the goddess, would also take on the energy of the goddess. It was in this regard that men sought union with the priestesses of Ishtar so that they could receive the god given power to gain energy for fertility: “Be it slave, unattached girl, Ishtar preserves her. Women and men indeed revere her” (Harris 1988:277). Consequently her fierce, protective nature rendered her also a personal saviour as well as a national one.

3.7. Conclusion

Ishtar/Inanna was worshipped in Mesopotamia for more than 3500 years in her various and myriad roles and as such her individuality was paramount. Her power and energy were manifested in various ways. The Goddess and Queen of Heaven and Earth was always associated with life, love and death. She was able to be the lover, bride and the widow in her associations and as such her passions were paramount.

It is suggested that Ishtar, is best seen as a paradox, a goddess of infinite variety (Jacobsen 1976:135). The variations and antitheses in the prayers, hymns, myths and

festivals were associated with her. She embodies much more than a simple goddess. She is the goddess of love, fertility, war and the evening and morning stars, the star of Venus (Harris 1988:263).

She is portrayed as being kind and caring yet there is a cruel fierceness in her personality. She could be wild and savage, showing great excesses in her character which often led to social disorder (Harris 1988:264) and yet she could still be nurturing. Ishtar was both a wife, in her marriage to Dumuzi/Tammuz which was enacted through the Sacred Marriage rite, and a mother in her nurturing of kings, but these attributes were not the only elements of her power. Ishtar was never involved with domestic pursuits (Frymer-Kensky 1992:27). Her power lay in her ability to create passions that were both sexual and violent. This was the paradox of her nature which combines the fundamentals of both order and disorder (Harris 1988:269).

The cult of the Semitic goddess Ishtar survived and spread although the decline in the status of the goddesses of the ANE was a consequence of the need for a dominant hero or king who would be able to expand and protect the land and the nation, a role which, it was believed, a woman could not fulfill. This was especially so in Assyria, during the 1st millennium BCE, where the acquisition of land was imperative. The decline of the status of women in both their private and public roles was a certainty by the time of the Assyrian period: the women of Assyria were treated abominably (Frymer-Kensky 1992:80; Wellard 1976:145).

However, Ishtar, in all guises, never lost her influence, even though, from the Iron Age onwards, it appears that the goddess image evolved into a new consciousness. It is in this awareness and its influences in different guises that we can notice how the religions of the Canaanites, Phoenicians and Israelites reflect the mother goddess. She was part of the Canaanite pantheon and in this land where there was a mingling of the peoples, the need for her power, her nurturing and caring did not abate.

CHAPTER IV

THE CANAANITE GODDESS

The Goddess was likewise a part of all the cultures that emerged from the Canaanite region of the ANE, beginning at the time of the Early Bronze Age (ca. 2500 BCE) and well into the Iron Age period.(ca. 1250 BCE).

The manner in which the goddess, whose name altered according to each culture, but etymologically held the same root meaning, was worshipped, however, was related to how the different ideologies had evolved, depending on where the inhabitants lived. The goddess was known as Asherah/Ashratu, Atirat/Athirat and sometimes Elat, as the consort of El (Betlyon 1985:55). In the present dissertation, she will be referred to by these various names depending on her cultural background and the references quoted. The evolution of the goddess in the Eblaite, Ugaritic, and Arabian cultures, together with the Sumero-Akkadian goddess, exerted some influence on the subsequent ideology of the Israelites, who were also part of the Canaanite continuum. Documentation and archaeology and even references in the Hebrew Canon, where the word Asherah occurs forty times in the writings (Judges 6:25,26,28 and 30; I Kings 15: 13; 16:33; 18:19; II Kings 16:6; 17:16; 18:4; II Chron.17: 6; 24:18.) (Day 2002:42. Hadley 1989:79), attest to this.

4.1. Cultural Background

The original Semitic peoples had their root language in common and populated the areas of Arabia, Palestine and Syria. Generally, they were nomadic peoples. Their infiltration into the Mesopotamian areas contributed to many of their cultural attributes, while they also assimilated certain of the established non-Semitic cultures, such as those of the Sumerians. These Semitic peoples were known as the Akkadians.

The complex assimilation of civilizations, first by Sargon of the Akkadians (2340 BCE) and later the Babylonians (1750 BCE) and Assyrians (1100 BCE), exerted a far reaching influence on all the surrounding regions (see Chapters 2 and 3). The aspects of the civilizations became interdependent as is evident from their religion, politics, economics, literature, science and art. In fact, in every aspect of their societies these concepts and presuppositions would dominate. Thus, religion was the ruling factor in every aspect of human life. This resulted in a syncretism of religious institutions and philosophies which became evident throughout the ANE, and in which a goddess was prominently present.

4.2. Canaanites

The Canaanites were a Semitic people of the areas of Syro-Palestine and Phoenicia. According to Moscati (1957:99) they constituted a linguistic group of people who did not enjoy a true unity. Their spoken language could be recorded in any system; nevertheless, it was mainly written in the Akkadian cuneiform script (Tubb 1998:14). Primarily, modern archaeological finds, mainly from Ebla, Ugarit in Canaan and Palestine/Israel, have become the means to assess the lives and worldviews of these people. In their ideologies the supreme god was El who was associated with the goddess. She was Asherah, the mother of all the gods.

In the geographical area of Canaan, the Canaanites established themselves in a number of city states, such as Ebla, Ugarit, Emar and to the north Aleppo, Qatna and Carchemish. The earliest of these city states was Ebla 2500 – 2000 BCE: the writings which have been discovered there furnished insight into the culture of the Canaanites.

Furthermore, the territory of Canaan was also crisscrossed by many other nations trading to the coastal areas and beyond and because of this the history of Canaan was influenced by nations such as Babylon, Egypt and Asia Minor (Saggs 1989:62). From the archaeological findings and writings that have emerged, especially those from both Ebla and Ugarit, much more of the cultural way of life of the Canaanites has been revealed. In their ideology the gods and goddesses adopted major roles, the hierarchy of which, the

writer believes, may have been influenced by the earlier Sumerian society and its ideology (Knapp 1988:130).

4.2.1. Writings.

From these writings it is evident that the established pantheon of the gods comprised:

- The Supreme God – El (the god par excellence) who remained fairly remote and was often an obscure figure;
- The Goddess Asherah, considered to be the spouse of El; and
- Baal – meaning “Master”, who was the god of storms, lightning and rain, and could be likened to the Babylonian God, Hadad (Tubb,1998:74). In Canaan Baal became a god in his own right, with his sister/wife Anat as his consort.

4.2.2. Sanctuaries

During the *Early Bronze Age* (2200 BCE), only a few shrines or temples appeared. By the time of the *Middle Bronze Age* (1750 BCE) a distinctive type of temple was evident, called a “*migdol*”, meaning a fortress-like edifice, rectangular with towers on either side. This rectangular interior was divided into an anteroom and a main chamber. These structures were found at Hazor and Megiddo, in northern Israel and in Syria at Ebla.

By the *late Bronze Age*, temples had become more elaborate and ground plans began to form the tripartite layout of the porch, hall and the holy of holies.¹⁵

By the *Iron Age* (1200 BCE) this tripartite layout had become the traditional building plan of which the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem was a prime example (Tubb 1998:72). Worship was also conducted in outdoor sanctuaries situated near springs or trees and on a hilltop or high place known as *bamot* (Dever 2005:159). These sanctuaries often included an enclosure where an altar or sacred stone (*masseba*) was erected (Dever 2005:151).

¹⁵ This format follows the description of the Israelites’ tent for worship during their sojourn in the desert, prior to their arrival in the Promised Land (Exodus 26).

It was here that the religious rites, with sacrifices carried out by the priests, took place. Usually animals were sacrificed although human sacrifice has also been attested to (Genesis 22:1). The Ta'anach and Pella Cultic Stands found on high places in Canaan and Jordan respectively were conclusive examples of these altars or *massebah*, according to Hadley (2000:169 - 173)..

4.3. Ebla (2500-2000 BCE)

The city state of Ebla came into prominence as a powerful trading centre. The cultural aspirations of the inhabitants were Canaanite, enjoying a relationship with the surrounding areas although they were also influenced by, and more dependent on the Mesopotamian/Sumerian world, from which the Eblaites had learned their writing and management techniques. According to Pettinato (1991: 89), the library archives found in Ebla revealed that knowledge gained in all fields from Sumeria was enriched and perfected by the Eblaite academics.

Although most of the writings of the royal archives and library dealt with the administration of the State, there were some which elucidated the ideology and the religious nature of the Eblaites. From these archives a startling revelation emerged (Pettinato 1991:177) in that, for the first time in the civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, politics and religion were separated.

Ebla was a secular state. The king did not possess any divine powers but was the head of the council, who represented the people so that the power was essentially in the hands of the citizens (Pettinato 1991:177). However, Pettinato (1991: 177) suggests that the Eblaites were still deeply religious. Politics and religion operated separately but functioned side by side, whereby the gods were worshipped both in the temples with their religious edifices and in the homes of the people, all of which were found in the lower city. Gifts and offerings were presented to the gods and goddesses of the Eblaite pantheon and many religious festivals were enacted.

The Eblaite Pantheon was essentially West Semitic, comprising:

- Dagan, the principal god of the city and state. He was the head of the Eblaite Pantheon and was referred to as “the Lord of the Land” or “Lord” in various sources, which in its connotation meant god. He was the “Lord of the Gods” too and, according to Pettinato (1991:179), may well have been so superior as to possess a certain uniqueness.
- Ishtar was the goddess whose attributes resembled the great goddess and mother goddess. In the bilingual vocabulary at Ebla she is associated with Inanna (Matai 1977:188).

The Eblaite culture was essentially secular. Its writings revealed a society that was not entirely dependent on its religion. However, the ruler and the people realised their human frailty and asked for blessings and help in their decision making (Pettinato 1991:180).

Dagan was all important but the goddess, Ishtar, her protection and devotion to her, remained constant as evident in the hymns which were written to her by the ruling king, Ibbit-Lim (Pettinato 1991:21).

By the second millennium, Ishtar was to play a positive role in the official religion of the Eblaites, by her divine manifestations. Thus, according to Pettinato (1991: 22), Ishtar remained the most prestigious goddess throughout the Syro-Palestinian area during this second millennium where she also became the Semitic goddess of the Amorites.

4.4. Ugarit (1400-1200 BCE)

The realm of Ugarit was an expansive territory with many outlying villages of the city itself. It was situated near the Syrian coast and as a result Ugarit was able to dominate the coastal areas as well as the hinterland. To-day it is known as modern Ras Shamra.

The many texts found at this site indicate that Ugarit was the centre of extensive trade both locally and internationally. Because of this, many merchant groups from elsewhere were based in the city (Kuhrt 1997:302). Ugarit was ideally placed for both North /South and East/ West trading activities.

Writings were also found in the “local alphabetic” script (Kuhrt 1997:303) which, in its expansion by using only consonants, reduced the number of cuneiform signs of the Akkadian script to about 30 (Tubb 1998:14). These consonants ultimately constituted the basis of the later Phoenician alphabet.

The city of Ugarit was destroyed in about 1200 BCE. There may be many reasons for this destruction, one of which was perhaps the disappearance of the great Hittite empire on which Ugarit depended for its safety from the raiding and incursions of the likes of the “Sea Peoples” (Kuhrt 1997:314). The foreign elements of the resident traders, however, did not appear to be one of the influences with regard to the culture which was essentially Canaanite. This would directly link with the cultures of the Old Testament which depict another picture and can be regarded as an indirect source of knowledge of the worldview of these people.

The hundreds of tablets and fragments from Ugarit have revolutionized our knowledge of both Canaanite literature and religious practices. The writings of Ugarit not only shed light on her trading and economic aspects, but also on the ideology, the rituals, beliefs, practices and mythologies which indicate that the majority of Canaanites all revered the same gods and goddesses. These deities, including El, who was head of the pantheon, and Asherah, his female counterpart and mother of the gods, would later even influence the Israelite ideologies, as related in the Old Testament, albeit in a negative manner when concerning the prophets (Tubb 1998:73).

The major groups of literature were those of the epics, poetry and the mythologies, all of which portrayed the religion. The Baal Epic recorded the ways of the gods while the

Epics of Keret and Aqhat recorded the ways of the Kings. In these records the extreme devotion to the goddess, Asherah and the major role that she earned are apparent.

4.4.1. Asherah as revealed in the writings from Ugarit

The discovery of the Ugarit literature in the Ras Shamra investigation has been significant in furnishing us with insight into the Canaanite Goddess (Hadley 2000:38). Asherah is the protector and mother of the gods and the great interceder to the great god El, who is often more remote. Her personality, her ability to give life and take it away, her caring and influence in important decision making are evident in the writings. Her titles as the great goddess refer to her as “Lady of the Sea” = “*rbt atrt ym*”. This association with her name perceives her as:

“Lady Atirat of the Sea”

“Elat” consort and chief female counterpart of the great father god, El.

“Creatress of the Gods”

“Qdsu”, meaning the Holy One

“Elat of Sidon”

(Maier 1986:193).

Her importance permitted her worshippers to consider her as their nurturer, protector and provider of their needs.

In the mythical traditions, her name refers to her as treading on the Sea Dragon “*artrt ym*” and consequently bringing order to the chaos ensuing from its defeat. This goddess was mostly, as at Ugarit, connected with the coastal cities; hence the merchants, sailors and the fishermen of these cities regarded her as giving protection to these followers. According to Maier (1986:194) she chose “*ads wamrr*”, the Fisherman, as her faithful servant, who may well have been a fisherman himself.

Apart from being the Lady of the Sea, the Creatress and Mother of the gods, she was “wet nurse” to the gods, thus demonstrating the goddess’s connection with childbirth. The artefacts of figurines in and around the dwellings, together with those of the

Egyptian god, Bes, found throughout the area of Canaan, portray her as guarding mothers and their newborn infants (Hadley 2000:197).

4.4.2. The epic writings from Ugarit

- The Baal Cycle.
According to Wiggins (1992:39) Asherah/Athirat's role in this writing is extremely important; and
- The poem of Kirta/Keret also shows the awe and power of Asherah/Atirat.¹⁶

4.4.2.1. The Baal Cycle

4.2.2.1.1. *Baal and Yam*

As stated above, in this episode Athirat is represented by the title “Goddess” and her epithet “*rbt atrt ym*”, which alludes to her connections to the sea and thus indicates her close association with Yam who was the god of the seas.

The text describes a scene which illustrates a ceremony in which El is presiding over the crowning of Yam as King over the gods. But in this event El asks Atirat to confirm the name and the nomination, or, as in the text, to “rename”, Yam,

“the name of my son is Yam, O Elat....

So do you proclaim a new name for Yam” (Wiggins 1992:39) .

Renaming at a later stage in life was a common occurrence in the ancient cultures.¹⁷

Wiggins (1992:39) has noted that there has been a great deal of discussion as to the significance of these words.

¹⁶ It should be noted that these Epics use the name Athirat and not Asherah.

¹⁷ It is noted that the phenomenon of renaming a person or, in this case, a divinity, the god Yam, was quite common in the ANE. It is prevalent in the writings of the Old Testament, such as in Gen 17: Abraham and Sarah are renamed, Jacob to Israel (Gen 32:28). The Egyptian Pharaoh would also take on a throne name dedicated to the Gods. Amenhotep IV became Akenaten – beloved of the Aten. Tutmosis I names Hatshepsut, his daughter, his successor, who is then named Khnemet- Amun Hatshepsut. (Kemp 1989:200). In the New Testament (Matt 16:18), Simon is renamed Peter.

Athirat chose not to rename her son, Yam, which El subsequently did. A palace was built for Yam, which appears to have been a sign of confirming his kingship. Here, Athirat plays an important role as the consort of El as well as “queen mother”.¹⁸ Athirat has been afforded special status with the renaming of Yam, a pattern reflected in the story of Baal’s desire for kingship as evident in the building of his palace.

4.2.2.1.2. The Palace of Baal

In this episode of the epic cycle, Athirat adopts a greater, more dominant role. Baal, in order to assert his sovereignty, needs a palace and he bemoans this fact to both El, his father, and mentor, and to Athirat and all the gods and goddesses. Apparently, Baal is to live in the house with El. Athirat and El are presented here as the parents of the gods, and Athirat as mother of the gods (Wiggins 1992:54).

Baal needs the approval of El to build his own house, but his appeal has been dismissed. El was angry at the forceful approach made to him by Baal, who approached him with his sister/ wife, Anat. Baal and Anat now implore Athirat to intercede on their behalf to El, and in order to seal his petition, Baal has a special gift made for Athirat, for which the instruction for its creation was given to the artist and divine craftsman, Kotar wa-Hasis who lived in Egypt (Maier 1982:33).

“I say to you, make ready, I pray,
A gift for Lady Athirat of the Sea,
A present for the Bearer of the gods.”¹⁹

This gift also appears to allay the fears of Athirat which she expresses at the approach of Baal and Anat. At the time that Baal and Anat arrive in Athirat she is involved in what

¹⁸ The role of the Queen Mother also played a significant part in the royal households of the ANE. They were able to name the successors to the throne: Bathsheba and David (1 Kings 1:17), sat on the throne next to the King (1 Kings 2:19). Maacah, Queen Mother of Asa had cultic influence (1 Kings 15:13) and the Hittite Queen Mother’s position became part of the theocratic system in the religious cult (Bin-Nun 1975:194).

¹⁹ This is a reference to the fact that Athirat/Asherah is the mother of the gods (Maier 1986:32 & 21). The spelling of the name of the goddess is “Athirat” according to Maier (1986) and Athirat according to Wiggins (1982).

appear to be “wifely duties”, women’s work such as spinning, weaving and the laundry. This may reflect the role of the Mother Goddess in her nurturing aspect.

The reference to the spindle and the spindle whorl in the following lines,

“She fluttered her eyelids at Bull El, the Compassionate.

She winked at the Creator of Creatures” (Wiggins 1992:62)

may have sexual connotations or as suggested, the spindle may be, a symbol of the sovereignty of Athirat. El, as the head of the pantheon, does not display any major symbols of authority except for his beard, which indicated his authority owing to his age (Wiggins 1982: 84) and the reference to a sceptre, a symbol giving the right to rule. According to Wiggins (1992:62), the translations of these texts do not clearly indicate whether these are symbolic or actual references.

At the approach of Baal and Anat, Athirat stops her “work” and her mood changes as though this is ominous. Wiggins’ rendering of the translation is explicit and very beautiful (1982:68):

“with lifting of her eyes

she saw the approach of Baal

Athirat indeed perceived the approach of the Virgin Anat

the joints of her loins convulsed

those of her back became weak

She lifted her voice and cries

Why is Mighty Baal approaching?

Why is Virgin Anat approaching?

Are they my smiters, or the smiters of my children, or the destroyers of my gathered kin?

“The plating of silver Athirat indeed saw,

the plating of silver and gold.

The Lady Athirat of the Sea rejoiced.”

She sees the gifts and is relieved since these are signs of peace but she nevertheless asks:

“Why do you petition Lady Athirat of the Sea,
Why do you give presents to the Bearer of the Gods?”

She listens to their petition and lends the requested support. It is explained that only through Athirat will El give permission for Baal to build his palace, which will accord him the status he needs as the king of the gods. Here Athirat is acknowledged as the mother of the gods, the mother goddess and creatress of all. She is again seen in her role as the Queen Mother who has acknowledged and pledged her support for the “heir to the throne”, so to speak.

Athirat has her donkey saddled by her servant, who is referred to as Qodesh²⁰, Amur, Holy Amur, or sometimes “O Fisherman of the Sea”, and who will accompany her on her visit to El. Her high rank as *the* Goddess is confirmed by the fact that she rides on her ass, whose harness is decorated with gold and silver (Binger 1997:73-74) accompanied by her servant (Maier 1982:35).

El accedes to Athirat’s request for Baal to build his palace, Athirat having found El in his “tent” at the source of the Two Rivers (Maier 1986:35 ; Wiggins 1992:80). Athirat is offered wine and food.

4.4.2.2. The Kirta epic

In the Kirta epic, which was written on 3 tablets and according to Binger (1997:41) recounts the history of a King and may also refer to the political succession of Ugarit, the king, Keret/Kirta, is grieving, because he has lost his wives and therefore, he has no heir.

²⁰ Qodesh /Kodesh is the Hebrew word for Holy.

Here again one observes Athirat in her nurturing capacity yet, at the same time, as the Goddess standing beside Kirta on his way to conquer the city of Udum. Kirta is marching to the city of Udum, where, as instructed by El, he will conquer the city and take the daughter of the king as his bride. El has promised him victory and success but Keret needs reassurance by having Athirat acting on his behalf too (Maier 1986:37). On his way he passes a shrine dedicated to the goddess Athirat.

“They went a day.....

He came to the sanctuary of Athirat of the two Tyres

Even the sanctuary of the goddess of the Sidonians,

The noble Keret vowed a gift”. (Translations by Wiggins 1992:30)

El has promised Keret that he will take Hurriya to wife and she will bear him sons and daughters. However, this added vow to Athirat suggests the special veneration of Athirat, who is the Goddess of Canaan as well as of the renowned Phoenician cities, predominantly Byblos, Sidon and Tyre (Maier 1986:37). Keret is successful and is blessed with sons and daughters of which one son, Yassib, is nursed by the goddesses.

“To you (Kirta) she will bear a boy.

He will drink the milk of Asherah.

He will suckle the nipple of the virgin Anat, the wet nurse of the gods.”

Here Athirat, referred to here as Asherah, is seen not only as being mother of the gods but also of special human children, giving them semi-divine qualities (Binger 1997:83-84). Here the Goddess adopts the role of the mother figure and again that of creatress of the gods so that the suckling of the child probably designates him as the successor to the King – implying his divine right to rule. However, Keret does not honour, or forgets to honour, his vow to Athirat and she becomes angry.

“Look, I beg, has Keret then broken or changed his vow?

I will break....”

Perhaps Athirat will break her vow to Keret now, which in so doing will again cause the destruction of the house of Keret which has so recently been restored. Keret falls gravely ill and Yassib, his son and heir, threatens to usurp the kingship (Wiggins 1992:37). Athirat can therefore be perceived in the role of an angry goddess, her nurturing and caring and her blessed qualities turning to calamities (Maier 1986:37) as a result of this cry which, undoubtedly, is a curse. It is only El who can and does restore Keret back to health upon which equilibrium is restored. El has overruled the curse of Athirat (Wiggins 1992:3).

Asherah in these writings and mythologies is the *Great* and Mother Goddess of the Canaanites and consort of El, the great God. She performs loyal “wifely duties”, and appears as the Queen Mother, “*rabitu*”, whose influence and decrees were included in the choosing of the king of the gods, which possessed powerful “political” aspects. Her role as Queen Mother and consort of “El” in its political connotations would have a far reaching general effect on the role of the Queen Mother in the societies and cultures of the ANE and thus on their close connection with this Goddess.

Her titles as the Canaanite Goddess, “*rbt atrt ym*”, “Lady Asherah of the Sea” refer to her in this role too, as nurturing those whose lives depend on the sea. She will become the goddess of the Phoenicians. As noted, she is the goddess in Sumero-Akkadian and Arabia where Asherah is referred to as Athratu and Athirat in Southern Arabian inscriptions (Wiggins 1992:188).

4.5. Sumero-Akkadian Goddess

4.5.1. Ashratu

It is suggested by Yamashita (1964:1) that when the Amorites created the First Dynasty of Babylon, with Hammurabi as its king (1792-1750 BCE), the goddess Asherah, known

by her Amorite name of Ashratu²¹, became the consort of the principal Amorite deity, Amurru. Ashratu, in terms of this association, became Lady of the Steppe and the Mountains.

This conclusion is borne out by the finding of a text, a votive inscription, on a limestone slab/stele which also has a *bas-relief* of Hammurabi (Wiggins, 1992:193). It is dedicated in Hammurabi's honour, from the governor Itur-Asdu, and bears an inscription dedicated to the goddess Ashratu which reads:

“For Asratum, the daughter-in-law of Anu, who was created in ladyship, the lady of voluptuousness and exuberance, the lady of the mountain, the one faithfully cherished, merciful lady who prays for her spouse, for the life of Hammurabi – the king of Amurru, Itur-Asdu, governor of the river region, the servant who reveres her in her protective divinity who resides in her beloved dwelling place”.

According to this translation by Yamashita (1963:7) Ashratu as lady of the mountain is an Amorite goddess who is also the daughter-in-law of the sky god, Anu, and as a merciful lady may have acquired attributes which were similar to those of Ishtar, the Babylonian great goddess of the earlier Sumer and Akkadian dynasties.

Yamashita (1964:13) perceives Ashratu as the chosen bride of the principal god, of the Amorites, Amurru, thus becoming his consort. She is chosen by Anu, the god of heaven who is father to Amurru.

In the Ugarit text the goddess is considered the perfect daughter-in-law (Yamashita 1964:14:

“the abode of the Lady Asherah of the Sea,
Is the abode of the perfect daughter-in-law.”

²¹ In Hebrew and Aramaic the “U” means *our*. Thus Ashratu means *our* Asherah. This emphasises the great feeling and reverence shown toward Asherah.

Asherah has come from another place to be the bride of Amurru, that is, to become the “crown princess”.

The Athirat of Ugarit and the Ashratu of the neighbouring kingdom of Amurru from the Babylonian era 1750 BCE were in close association, which suggests (Wiggins 1994:213) that they were of the same origin but in their individuality would develop characteristics which would be specific to their own cultural backgrounds.

Asherah, in the Ugarit literature, was viewed as the mother goddess. For the Amorites, on her “marriage” to the god Amurru, she was to become his consort and achieve the status of principal goddess. She would move into the place of Nin-hur-sag, the Sumerian mother goddess, and in so doing become known as Lady of the Mountain. Ashratu in the Sumero-Akkadian literature and the Amorite Dynasty of Babylon became the great mother goddess. Her attributes and characteristics were similar to those of the Ugarit writings but understandably, now, as the goddess of the hinterland, she would lose her association with the sea.

Her suitability for the role of lady refers to her divine qualities as a goddess while that of lady of the mountains portrays her role as caring for the peoples of the hinterland and emphasizes her great capacity to create happiness. It is suggested that Ashratu may therefore be viewed as a fertility figure; yet as the Goddess Athirat/Asherah of Canaan, she was mother to the gods, mother of kings: *the* Great Mother Goddess, but not an erotic figure. “Voluptuousness and exuberance”, which could also be translated, according to Wiggins, (1992:196) as “happiness”, are not necessarily erotic. She is more likely to be viewed in her caring capacity and as the “protective divinity”.

The association with the mountains, “Lady of the Mountain” may refer to her caring for her people of the hinterland. She was espoused to the god Amurru whose epithet was lord of the mountain – ‘bel sadi’’, and Ashratu, as the mistress of the wilderness, was accorded the epithet “belit seri” (Yamashita 1980:9). This was the place, the mountains, where the deities often lived. These areas, the steppe and the desert, could sometimes be linked with

places that were hostile to humankind, and in this respect, were believed to be haunted by demons.

When Ashratu took on the role of the mother goddess, that which had belonged to her “mother-in-law”, Nin-hursag, also known as the lady of the mountains, Ashratu could have been closely associated with what were considered aspects of the netherworld (Yamashita 1980:10). According to Wiggins (1992:207), however, this is not an association that we can assume. What is affirmed is that Amurru and Ashratu possessed similar attributes and were the great god and goddess of the Amorites. “The merciful lady” was usually associated with the attribute of Ishtar. Often similar epithets were shared by the deities of Mesopotamia (Wiggins 1992:195), but with a separate temple dedicated to Ashratu in Babylon. Here, writings referring to “Asrat of Esagila” (Wiggins 1992:208), clearly indicate that whatever her attributes, even if they were similar to those of Ishtar, she was a goddess in her own right, the great goddess of the Amorites and consort of the god, Amurru.

4.5.2. Ta’anach letters

These letters discovered at Ta’anach in northern Palestine also refer to the goddess Asherah. They are dated from the Egyptian Amarna period (1350 BCE), at the time when Ugarit was a prominent city-state. They are addressed to Rewassa and one letter, in particular, refers to the goddess Asherah. “Further, if there is a wizard of Asherah, let him tell our fortunes, and let me hear quickly: and the (oracular) sign and interpretation send to me” (Yamashita 1980:28). Rawassa may have been a priest or a diviner for the goddess, Asherah, who had been known in Palestine through the infiltration of the Amorites from as early as the 15th Century BCE (Yamashita 1982:29), in her role as protector. From the letters dated to the Amarna period (1350 BCE), we learn that the city-state of Ugarit in northern Palestine, was also at its zenith.

The Ta’anach stand is dated to the 10th century BCE, and indicates that her influence remained prominent, into the period of the Israelites. This influence travelled eastwards

and southwards to the mountains and the deserts where Asherah, here known as Ashratu, became the primary goddess in the Mesopotamian/Babylonian hierarchy while being associated with Amurru.

4.5.3. Conclusion.

Yamashita (1908:25) is of the opinion that Ashratu became the principal goddess of the Amorites whose influence spread eastwards with her consort the chief god, Amurru. Her epithet as the daughter-in-law stems from the mythological writings wherein Martu, the son of An and Nin-hursag, begs for a wife. Once Martu has built a temple in the city of Babylon, in which he lives (Yamashita, 1980:26), Asherah is chosen as his consort. This is recorded on the stele to Hammurabi, where she takes on many attributes of a caring and protective goddess to her people while being loyal and loving to her spouse. She has therefore become the principal goddess of the Amorites who have now become masters of Babylon under Hammurabi (1792 – 1750 BCE).

The eminence of Asherah, now known as Ashratu, the Amorite Goddess and consort of Amurru in the Old Babylonian writings during the reign of Hammurabi (1750 BCE), coincides with the rise and influx of the Amorites to the areas of Southern Mesopotamia (Wiggins, 1992:213), as noted previously.

These regions may have been influenced by the neighbouring, Ugarit areas where Akkadian was also spoken, and consequently, the characteristics of the goddesses Athirat/Asherah and Ashratu, *the* Great Goddess, were similar in origin. However, owing to the different cultural backgrounds, *the* Goddess also developed individually (Wiggins, 1992:213).

4.6. Arabia

Further south of Mesopotamia, the Semitic speaking nomads of Arabia may well have penetrated both southern Mesopotamia and Canaan. Athirat was worshipped here

although material relating to all her attributes is scarce (Maier 1986:200; Wiggins 1992:220).

The Arabian religion was basically an astral triad consisting of the lunar *father* God, a solar *mother* Goddess and their son, Athtar, as god of Venus.²²

The Arabian Peninsula consisted of states; the most prominent of which were the Minean, Sabean, Qataban and Hadramawt (Moscati 1957:187). It is here, according to the writings, that Athirat is mentioned as a solar deity and, in association with the lunar deity, as his consort. Inscriptions from the kingdom of Qataban, in the south west of Arabia, indicate that Athirat was worshipped in this region, with her being the consort of the principal god, Amm. Amm was the national god of Qataba and a moon god, associated with Athirat; hence the suggestion that Athirat was a solar goddess.

The writings from Qataban read: “and he restored the temple of Wadd and Atirat and the *makkatan* of the King”²³. Other inscriptions from Qataban are dedicated to the goddess: “Have dedicated/vowed to Atirat, nine young she-camels” and “Voluntary offering and gift and promise to Amm and Atirat” (Maier 1986:201).

Athirat was linked with these two lunar gods, Amm and Wadd., seemingly as their consort but from all the inscriptions and writings she was nonetheless a major goddess of the Arabians with her epithets being meaningful, according to Wiggins (1992:236) since they needed to have been ascribed to her within the cultural setting.

4.6.1. Tema/Tayma

Towards the north of Arabia, an inscription from Tema/Tayma mentions the “gods of Tayma” of which the principal god was Sin-galla, Sin the great. These are confirmed in

²² Athtar has an epithet similar to that of the Mesopotamian/Babylonian Ishtar, who was, however a lunar deity (Moscati 1957:181).

²³ The inscription is Qatabanian, but the temple whose restoration is commemorated may have originally been Sabean (Lipinski 1968 103). Amm and Wadd may have been the same god who was known by different names in the different states. Wadd is recorded as the god of the Sabeans and Sin as the major deity of Hadramawt (Moscati 1957:187).

Babylonian writings from the 5th century BCE which inform one that the king, Nabonidus (555 – 539 BCE) of Babylon, spent many years (10) in Arabia. Here he worshipped the moon god, Sin, who was supported by his consort “Asira” who was possibly a sun goddess (Lipinski 1968:103). Personal names found here, such as *Bi-Atirat* and *Tur’-Atirat*, “Uplifted by Atirat”, speak of the presence of the goddess.

All that one can suggest at the present is that Athirat was spouse and consort of a prominent god, Wadd or Amm and as such may have possessed attributes of *the* goddess which the cultures in the surrounding neighbourhoods were likely to manifest. She was nurturing and caring.

4.6.2. Conclusion

As shown in the above discussion, *the* goddess remained prominent in her role in Canaan, Arabia and Mesopotamia. It is hardly surprising that, in this major capacity, she would become part of the Phoenician hierarchy. This, in itself, would have far reaching implications for the Western Mediterranean and, not surprisingly, for the emerging cultures of the hinterland.

4.7. The Phoenicians

The history and evolution of the goddess in Phoenicia led to her influence spreading, not only to her neighbours of the ANE, the Israelites and the Philistines but also to the West and the Mediterranean regions.

The Phoenician coastline comprised the city states of Byblos, Tyre, Sidon, Beirut, Arwad and Sarepta. They remained Canaanite in tradition, a part of the cultural continuum that embraced the whole Levant (Tubb 1998:140), yet were largely unaffected by incursions. These coastal city states were bordered by a narrow strip of land which cut them off from the hinterland by a steep mountain range, the Lebanon and the Ante-Lebanon mountain ranges.

Their rise to becoming the great seafaring nation of the ANE may well have been due to the continual shifting of borders during the upheavals around 1200 BCE, leaving them almost isolated on the coast so that, according to Tubb (1998:142), they were now obliged to resort to their craft skills and their life associated with the sea, and consequently, to trade.

They remained independent of the political organisations of the surrounding states, which according to Moscati (1957:111), was a result of their being apolitical nation building peoples who only engaged in mercantile interests. This economic and commercial expansion resulted in their incursion and expansion into the Mediterranean region which, in turn, spread their culture and language beyond the boundaries of the motherland and, concomitantly, their religious ideals in which *the* goddess played a major role.

The Phoenicians, essentially Canaanite, held religious ideals commensurate with those of their neighbours. Asherah/Athirat was a great goddess:

“O Athirat of the Two Tyres
and Goddess of the Sidonians”
in the declaration of Keret” (Wiggins 1992:30).

Asherah, the goddess of Tyre and Sidon, continued to influence the Phoenicians in her capacity as “The Lady of the Sea”. The cult of Asherah was evident from both archaeological evidence and the (albeit limited) writings, of the history of the Phoenicians (Kuhrt 1995:404).

4.7.1 History

The history of the Phoenicians is gleaned from writings in the Old Testament of the Hebrew canon, Annals of Tyre, writings of the 1st century BCE by Josephus, a Jewish historian and those of Philo of Byblos, whose account is not a direct source but is taken from the writings of a priest of ancient Phoenicia, Sanchuniathon. According to Moscati

(1957:105) and Kuhrt (1995:404), this account by Philo is authentic – Ugarit documents confirm this. Within Phoenicia, one or other of the city-states were supreme at different times.

4.7.2 Byblos

Byblos is one of the earliest city-states to have emerged, with archaeological finds dating back from as early as the Chalcolithic Period (3800 – 3200 BCE). They show bone figures representing what appeared to be a statue of “*the* mother goddess” (Durand 1973:17). According to writings in Phoenician history, by Philo of Byblos, “Kronos gave the city of Byblos to Baalitis”.

Maier (1986:61) equates Kronos with *the* god, El and Baalitis with Ba’et, which would therefore refer to Elat, another name for the goddess Asherah (Maier 1986:63). From the beginning of their history, *the* goddess was an important figure. As Asherah, being important in Tyre and Sidon, continued to wield power over the sea, she destroyed the Sea Dragon (discussed previously) so that El could create the earth. She was known as the “one who begets creatures” and “she who gives birth to gods”, and in Tyre and Sidon she was the consort of El, where she is sometimes referred to as Elat (Betlyon 1985:55).

4.7.3. Tyre

Her importance in Tyre, the city which reached its zenith in the 1st millennium BCE when Hiram, the King of Tyre, joined the two islets, thus enlarging the city (Durand 1973:31), is well attested. This influence would be seen in the cult which had been established in Israel at the time of the United Monarchy (950 BCE) and during the reign of Solomon wherein he had temples constructed for his foreign wives, possibly with the help of Hiram (I Kings 11:5).²⁴ During the reign of Ahab and Jezebel (868 BCE), the worship of

²⁴ I Kings 11:5. He [Solomon] followed Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians. It should also be noted that Solomon had to cede twenty three villages in the Galilee to Hiram to fulfill his debt.

Asherah, the goddess, was brought to Israel through Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Tyre, Ittoba'al (Bright 1976:238).

4.7.4 Sidon

Sidon became the leading Phoenician city during the Persian Period (450 BCE) and Asherah, known as Elat, became the patron goddess of the city. A temple found near Sidon at Bastan esh-Sheikh revealed a huge throne carved with a sphinx on the seat, which was surrounded by a pool of water. This throne, according to Betlyon (1985:56), was the throne of Asherah / Elat, the dedicated goddess of the city of Sidon.

4.7.5. Coins

By 580 BCE coins that expressed the importance of the worship of Asherah, as Elat, had been struck. These early coins from Sidon depict a war galley from the city with symbols of crescents and discs surrounding this picture. Asherah / Elat, according to Betlyon (1985:55), was represented by these symbols. This clearly illustrates the importance of commemorating Asherah and her ability to protect her people from the sea. Later Tyrian coins struck during the 1st century CE show the continued worship of "Elat of Tyre", the patron and protectress of sailors, the "Lady of the Seas" (Maier 1986:175.).

As suggested, Asherah / Elat remained prominent in Phoenicia throughout the era. Her influence as the Canaanite goddess would be felt in the hinterland of the Israelites and along the coastal areas of the Philistines. Her association with the sea was preserved (Maier 1986:195) and in so doing she would be worshipped as Tannit in Carthage, the Phoenician North African state which soon became independent of the homeland (ca 850 BCE).

11.I Kings 11:11 -13. "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant... I will certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. Nevertheless, for the sake of your father, David I will not do it in your lifetime."

4.7.6. Carthage

In Carthage, the worship of Asherah as Tannit is indicated by the many references on the stelae found throughout the area. More recent discoveries during excavations in Phoenicia/Lebanon at the sites near Byblos and Sarepta, generally under the direction of Maurice Dunard (Maier 1986:117), suggest that Tannit was always a goddess of the Phoenicians and thus that when the colony of Carthage was established, ca 815 BCE, the goddess remained part of the pantheon.

The goddess Tannit has been so named owing to the *tannit* signs, which were first recorded in the many stelae found in the Carthaginian civilization. She is regarded as the consort of the god of Carthage but since her name appeared on the inscriptions before the name of the god, according to Maier (1986:115) she was the chief divinity. She was known as “tnt pane ba’l”, the lady of Baal, and the translation of “tnt” (Maier 1986:96) equates her with Asherah or Qudsu (the Holy One).

4.7.6.1. The Tannit sign

The goddess, as represented by the tannit sign, depicted a standing, clothed female figure, representing the goddess wearing a long garment which widened at her feet. This suggested a triangular shape. Her arms at her sides are bent upwards at the elbow and she is holding either serpents or vegetation in the form of lilies, lotus stems, pomegranates or grapes. These signs would illustrate her overall capacity for bounty, caring and continuing nurturing and fertility. The tannit sign, through the work and excavations of Maurice Dunard (1964), appeared in the findings regarding a temple dedicated to Esmoun, near Sidon, and again on ostraca found near Sarepta, bearing inscriptions which referred to *the* goddess. Therefore it can be deduced that Tannit was worshipped in the homeland of Phoenicia, with the further evidence on the plaques and inscriptions that, in Phoenicia, she was also known by her Canaanite name of Asherah. The Punic Goddess, Tannit and Asherah, were one and the same goddess and thus the cult of Asherah, *the* goddess, had spread westwards to the Mediterranean regions.



Figure 16. The Tannit Sign.

4.7.6.2. The Caduceus

Often a sign of intertwined serpents on a pole was found together with the tannit sign; therefore this was associated with the goddess: the Caduceus. The description by Maier (1986:115) of two strings or streamers attached to the poles suggests that they gave the appearance of movement and thus a life-like quality. The Lady Tannit was always associated with serpents whose emblems were also associated with life, with which the goddess as Creatress was linked. To the present day, the Caduceus continues to represent life giving qualities in its association with the field of medicine and healing.

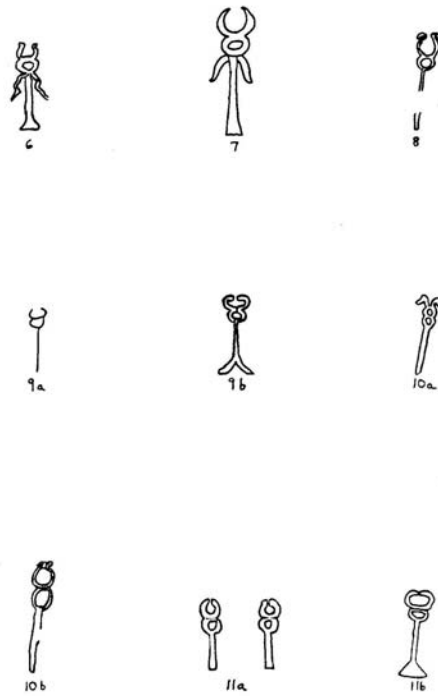


Figure 17. The Caduceus Symbols

4.7.6.3. The Qudsu (holy) signs

The sign of Tannit is very similar to the Qudsu signs. Asherah was also known as the Qudsu, The Holy One, in many inscriptions and emblems in both Syro-Palestine and Egypt. The Qudsu depicts the goddess naked, enface, standing on a lion, wearing a Hathor type wig or crown. She is holding flowers. Unlike the Tannit signs depicting the goddess as “The Holy One”, the Qudsu sign always portrays a naked figure (Hadley 2000:161; Maier 1986:102).

Asherah is termed Qudsu and consort of El in the Ugarit writings of the Epic of Keret (Yamashita 1964:119). She is present on an Egyptian stele where the inscription reads “Qudsu, Astarte, Anat” and therefore, she merges into one Egyptian deity Qadesh, Qudshu, according to Yamashita (1964:117).



Figure 18. The Qudsu Sign.

Hathor was recognised both inside and outside of the land of Egypt, being likened to the Lady of Byblos. She and Asherah possess many of the same qualities and characteristics. For example, she was a mother, bestowed her blessings on children, and assisted in childbirth. In Egypt her role was to deal with the divine childbirth of the Pharaoh and she was wet nurse to his heirs. The Egyptian goddess Hathor possesses so many similar attributes that it is possible that the Qudshu and Hathor, for the Egyptians, were one and the same Goddess and that this goddess was also the Canaanite goddess, Asherah.

4.8. Conclusion

Through the Phoenicians, the influence of the goddess Asherah spread to the regions of the Mediterranean where they had developed their colonies in North Africa, Sicily, Sardinia and Spain. She was known as Tannit, Asherah or Qudsu, the Holy One. Her influence was also felt along the coastline of Palestine, being part of the Philistine pantheon, where she was also known as Derketo, a goddess with the body of a fish, a marine goddess having a manservant who was a Fisherman (Yamashita 1964:98). Derketo's standard, carried in her right hand, appeared similar to the Tannit sign (Maier 1986:119).

Along the coastline of Canaan, Asherah is identified as “Lady Asherah of the Sea” (Yamashita 1964:87). She was worshipped as *the* goddess throughout Canaan, to the North as early as 2500 BCE at Ebla and also later, according to the writings from Ugarit (1400 BCE), where her great qualities are exhibited as the mother of the gods, the spouse of El, the Great God. She demonstrates nurturing and caring roles towards gods, kings and her people, wielding influence over Baal, whom El appointed as the master God.

These attributes were also reflected in Ashratu, the goddess of the Amorites, whose territory turned eastwards towards the mountainous regions. In the Ugarit writings Asherah is given as a bride to the god, Amurru. Only in the cultural backgrounds would any different attributes emerge: for example, along the coastline, she was known as “Lady Asherah of the Sea” and in the mountainous regions “Lady of the Mountains”. To the South, in Arabia, in her association with the gods, Wadd and Amm, she was their counterpart and exhibited qualities of the sun goddess. It is possible that, according to Hadley (2000:53), in these cultures that surrounded the peoples of the Old Testament, the Israelites, *the* Goddess, Asherah continued to be *the* Goddess, whom they, the Israelites, may have adopted and adapted to their own purposes.

CHAPTER V

THE HEBREW GODDESS ASHERAH IN ISRAEL AND JUDAH

The Goddess became part of the Israelite and Judean cultures as a result of the influences of the Canaanites, their neighbours, as well as those of other nations whose travellers crisscrossed the territory. The history of the Israelites and Judeans is written in the Hebrew Bible, throughout which Yahweh is named as the supreme God. However, within these writings and through the archaeology there is evidence of the influence of a divine feminine, the goddess, who in some way was associated with Yahweh within the state cult as well as that of the people, which Dever (2003:6) calls “folk religion”, “popular religion” or “family religion”.

5.1. Israel, and Her History

By the 1st millennium, the Levant, south Anatolia and Upper Mesopotamia represented a mosaic of small city states all of whom espoused basically a Canaanite culture. They interacted politically and economically, which also impinged on their religious philosophy, although, perhaps, some degree of cultic ritual was peculiar to each city state.

Along the coastal region the Canaanite city states were dominated by the Philistines who also may have been migrant “sea peoples” in origin and /or could have merged with the remains of the people from Egyptian garrisons who had been stationed there earlier and had not returned to Egypt (Tubb 1998:96 – 108). Beyond the Trans Jordanian plateau were the states of Moab, Ammon and Edom.

Israel as a nation and an entity of people began to emerge in about 1200 BCE to in 1000 BCE, later becoming a strong united monarchy. The first king was Saul, then David, followed by his son Solomon (950 BCE). The nation began to dominate a very large portion of the area from the south, bordering on the Sinai desert, and to the north as far as the Syrian state of Damascus. To the east it controlled the Trans Jordan plateau and to the west it overcame the Canaanite Philistines of the coastal area.

The question that arises concerns the origins of the Israelites, which is debated in many theories. Essentially, their history is recorded in the Old Testament or Hebrew canon. The American scholars, Albright and Wright, favoured the Conquest Theory, as recorded in the Book of Joshua. They suggested that the nation of Israel gained entrance into Palestine by a carefully planned invasion (Scheepers & Roberts 1993: 50).

On the other hand, the German scholars, Alt in 1920 and later Noth believed that the Israelites peacefully infiltrated the central hills of Palestine, which were not as heavily populated by the indigenous Canaanites who had mainly settled in the coastal regions where they had established city states. Their deductions stemmed from the history and a study of the settlement patterns based on archaeological evidence (Dever 1990: 53).

Mendenhall, an American archaeologist, suggested that by 1200 CE, the Israelite nation had developed as a distinct and cohesive ethnic group through the socio-political process where, as peasants of the hilly countryside, they revolted against their richer neighbours, the Canaanite city states, and in so doing espoused a new religious and political ideology, the rule of Yahweh (Dever 1990: 55).

During the first 200 years of the settlements they were ruled by Judges or tribal chiefs. In the case of incursions, primarily by the Philistines, the twelve tribes were called upon, on an ad hoc basis, to fight these invaders. The Hebrew canon of the Old Testament may furnish an insight into the lives of the peoples of the area; however, it is not a straightforward historical source, (Kuhrt 1997:417). Nevertheless, the writings, a collection of “stories”, reveal a complex ideological motivation; narratives which were

fashioned to drive home lessons of the past, giving a set of laws by which to abide and demonstrating an interaction of the people, the Israelites, with their god, Yahweh, which resulted in their ideology and offered them direction in their lives (Garbini 25:1986).

However, the nation emerged by whatever means, regardless of whether its members were at all times part of the landed peasantry of the highlands who in their dissatisfaction revolted against their “lordly” Canaanite city dwellers of the plains, and in their revolt were able to form a tribal confederacy which, once united, expressed a desire for a king like other nations, despite the dire warnings of the prophet, Samuel (Samuel 12:12).

It may well have been that this new Israelite society, whose first king was Saul in 1000 BCE, in order to strengthen their cause, believed their history to be an act of God. Yahweh and the ideology of his cult therefore became paramount. In the struggle for a humanitarian society the “divine element” was evoked and thus the power of Yahweh, who would ensure the survival of his chosen people, Israel.

The subsequent monarchy, however, fell apart rapidly when Solomon died and his arrogant son Rehoboam took the throne as the King of Judah. The remaining nine or ten tribes opted to ally themselves in the north, as Israel, where assorted generals tried to form dynasties. Only Omri (876 – 879 BCE) and his successor, Ahab (879 – 850 BCE) managed to keep the tribes of Israel together. Finally the state was overthrown by the Assyrian King, Sennacherib in 721 BCE.

Yahweh was now revered as the one and only God, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, inscrutable as well as incomprehensible. Yahweh’s traits, all encompassing as they were, nevertheless represented a continuation of a syncretism and symbiosis of the early Canaanite cult despite the condemnation of the Priesthood and Prophets.

Certain periods in this history were distinctive as a so called “cleansing” of idolatrous practices. Hezekiah (716 – 687 BCE) and Josiah (640 – 609 BCE), his grandson, called for purity, yet in essence, until the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (586 BCE)

when the majority of the Judeans were taken into exile to Babylon, the so called idolatrous practices continued, and in terms of these, Asherah, the goddess, the divine feminine, would continue to be “espoused” to Yahweh..

It is in the writings of the Hebrew canon, the Old Testament of the Bible, and the archaeological sources that the cult of the goddess is revealed as constituting part of the lives of the Israelite and Judean people.

5.2. Asherah, Goddess of the Old Testament

The word Asherah occurs 40 times in the nine books of the Hebrew Canon (Hadley 2000: 54; Olyan 1988:1) and according to Day (2002:42), both in the singular and the plural. These references suggest that wooden cult objects symbolized the goddess and at other times, directly referred to the goddess. However, it has been difficult to define the representation of the physical shape of Asherah from these references (Patai 1990:38).

An early reference to the worship of Asherah in the Hebrew texts is found in Judges (6:25 – 27) which relates to the story of Gideon who was one of the tribal leaders in the 12th century BCE. The name of Gideon was altered from Jerub-baal and it was he who worshipped the one god Yahweh, although his family remained steadfast in their worship of Baal and Asherah.

Judges 3:7 mentions the “baalim and asheroth” which suggest the possibility of the Israelites worshipping a male and female deity. It is argued that the “asheroth” may have been a symbolic pole placed next to altars and therefore considered a cultic object. However all mentions of Asherah in the stories in Judges refer to Asherah in the singular and therefore one must conclude that “Asherah” remained a goddess who was worshipped as the female deity together with Yahweh.

The book of Judges may have contained the earliest references to Asherah although the patriarch, Abraham (Gen 21:33) planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba and invoked the

Lord. Jacob, who was called Israel (Genesis 35:7– 8), also erected altars to God at Bethel and Hebron. As a symbolic cult object, the tree was considered sacred in association with the sacred pillars (Olyan 1988:5).

Genesis 30:9 – 13 announces the birth of the two sons of Leah, Jacob's wife, who were called Gad and Asher, to her slave girl, Zilpah. Patai (1998: 39) proposes that these boys were named for the joy in their birth and were named after the Canaanite god, Gad and the goddess Asherah. Asherah, in particular, as attested later by figurines found in archaeological sites, also referred to as the *teraphim*, was believed to promote fertility and childbirth. Asherah, the goddess, from the Patriarchal era, was worshipped beside Yahweh, who was not necessarily known by this name at this stage of the history of the Israelites.

5.2.1. Biblical writings

The presence of Asherah in the cult of the Hebrew religion was evident from the early eras. She featured in the popular religion, her iconography being found in local sanctuaries. At the advent of the monarchial period (1000 BCE) and during the centralization of the worship to the capital city of Jerusalem, her symbolic representation was introduced into the temple (Patai 1998:39).

This is evident in the writings of the Books of Kings and Chronicles wherein it is clear that the Israelites were to defy the adjuncts of Yahweh as the One God, his wrath ensuing, until the demise of the monarchy, firstly the united monarchy in 950 BCE and then the divided kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE, followed in Judah by the destruction of the temple in 586 BCE. This denoted the beginning of the period of the exile of the Hebrews, during which, the cult of Asherah, the goddess supreme, consort to Yahweh, continued. At certain times reforms were implemented within the central sanctuary and the temple of Jerusalem.

5.2.1.1. I Kings 15 :13 and II Chronicles 15:16

These references parallel each other in their account of the earliest reforms as regards the worship of Yahweh (Hadley 2000:64) in the Jerusalem temple, located in the kingdom of Judah. Asa removed Maacah, his grandmother from the position of Queen Mother (Hadley 2000:64):

“He deprived Maacah, his grandmother of her rank as queen mother because she had made an obscene object for the worship of Asherah. Asa cut it down and burnt it....”

The comment is added that “Although the shrines were allowed to remain, Asa himself remained faithful to the Lord all his life”. What the obscene object was is unknown but it must have been a defilement of the symbol representing the goddess that was acceptable to the local cult. In cleansing the cult symbol of its obscenity and loathsome idols, Asa however did not condemn the worship at other shrines.

5.2.1.2 II Kings 16:29 and I Kings 18:18

The king of Israel, Ahab (850 BCE) was summoned by the prophet Elijah to be present at the contest between Yahweh and Baal while Ahab summoned all the prophets throughout the land of Israel to the event. There were 450 prophets of Baal and 400 belonging to the goddess, Asherah, who were attached to the household of the Queen, Jezebel.

At the end of the contest, Yahweh was proclaimed the rightful god and the prophets of Baal were slaughtered. No mention is made of the prophets of Asherah, who remained unmolested. Patai (1998) suggests that it was only the worship of Baal which was viewed as being idolatrous but that the cult of Yahweh and his consort Asherah was acceptable. The sanctuaries in Samaria continued to show evidence of the worship of Asherah throughout the reigns of the kings who succeeded Ahab (Hadley 2000: 67).

5.2.1.3. II Kings 13: 6

“The goddess Asherah remained in Samaria”.

The end of the kingdom of Israel occurred in 721 BCE at the hands of the Assyrians, who deported many of the inhabitants of the land. Their demise, as suggested by the writers of Kings, occurred as a result of the wickedness of the people setting up sacred pillars and

sacred poles, symbolic of the goddess, Asherah, under every spreading tree (II Kings 17:10).

It appears that the worship of Asherah did survive this catastrophe by 100 years (Patai 1998:45). At Bethel, King Josiah, was the great Judean reformer, and according to the records, II Kings 23:15, “at Bethel, he dismantled the altar next to the shrine made by Jeroboam” while Verse 19 indicates that he also destroyed, “all the shrines at high places...built in the town of Samaria that had provoked the Lord’s anger”, abolishing the worship of Asherah.

5.2.1.4. Isaiah 17:18 and 27:9

In Judah, (Isaiah 17:18 and 27:9) at the time of the fall of Samaria, 721 BCE, Hezekiah rose to the throne. Here, through the prophetic urging of Isaiah (17:18) and in II Chronicles 31:1, the sacred pillars and sacred poles and shrines were demolished and the House of the Lord in Jerusalem was purified for the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Certain scholars opine that these reforms of Hezekiah were a political move in that the sacred shrines and high places needed to be removed for fear of them falling into the hands of the advancing Assyrians: Sennacherib and his forces (Hadley 2000:71.). It was a manner of protecting the outer shrines from desecration and violation.

The reign of Hezekiah, according to II Chronicles 32:32, was characterised by his works of piety. His son, Manasseh (698 – 642 BCE), however, reversed Hezekiah’s so called reforms and reinstated the worship of Asherah (II Kings 21:3 & II Chronicles 33: 3- 7). “He rebuilt the shrines which his father Hezekiah had destroyed, he set up altars for Baal and made sacred poles.... He built altars in the House of the Lord” and “He made an image of the goddess, Asherah and set it up in the House of the Lord....” (II Kings 21:7)

The restoration of Asherah to her place in the temple, according to Patai (1998:49), was viewed by her worshippers as the great mother goddess being restored to her rightful place beside Yahweh, the almighty God.

5.2.1.5. Josiah

By 639 BCE the Biblical historians were describing another reformer of the cult of Yahweh, King Josiah. According to Patai (1998:49), Josiah's zeal surpassed that of Hezekiah. His reforms were based on the revelation in the Book of Law found in the temple during repair work which had been undertaken by the high priest: "When the king heard what had been written in the book of law, he tore his clothes" (II Kings 22:10 – 11) and "Then standing by the pillar, the king entered into the covenant before the Lord to obey and keep his commandments" (II Kings 23: 3).

The reforms of Josiah were far reaching, as recorded in II Kings 23:

- "He took the Asherah from the house of the Lord" (v. 6);
- "He did away with the horses Set up in honour of the sun..."(v. 11);
- "He smashed the sacred pillars and cut down the sacred poles" (v.14);
- "At Bethel he dismantled the altars by the shrines" (v.15); and
- "He also pulled down the quarters of the male prostitutes attached to the house of the lord where the women wove vestments in honour of Asherah" (v. 7).

There is scholarly debate regarding the translations of what the women were weaving; whether they were garments or vestments for the goddess, or hangings or curtains for the enclosures, such as tent partitions or partitions around the various sections of the Temple, especially the Holy of Holies (Hadley 2000 :74). Patai (1998:49) and Hadley (2000:74) also suggest that the cloth was woven for the statue of Asherah; Dever (2005:213) concurs.

Patai (1998:49) calls the book of the Law, found by Josiah in the 18th year of his reign, the Book of Deuteronomy. The Deuteronomy legislation displayed no leniency toward the goddess, Asherah. Upon the death of Josiah (609 BCE), Asherah was once again

restored to her place as the consort of Yahweh despite the cries of the prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea (8th century BCE) who at various intervals predicted the destruction of the Judeans as a result of their apostasy.

5.2.1.5. The prophets of doom

5.2.1.5.1. Ezekiel

Ezekiel refers to the carved images in the temple and the women outside wailing for Tammuz, the Babylonian god who represented the renewal of fertility, as being deplorable. Six years before the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 592 BCE, Ezekiel in a vision saw this impending doom of Judah (Ezek. 8:12 – 14).

5.2.1.5.2. Hosea

Hosea hears the Lord declare to Ephraim:

“What feelings has Ephraim with idols.

I declare it and affirm it.

I am the pine tree that shelters you,

Your prosperity comes from me” (Hosea 14:8).

The translation of this passage has caused much debate: Patai (1998:62) avers that the tree and its prosperity is related to the goddess, Asherah, who stands in relation to Yahweh; Day (1986:406) agrees that Hosea was referring to the symbol of the goddess whilst Olyan (1988:21) and Hadley (2000:76) opine that this was a “luxuriant tree bearing fruit” which stressed the ability of Yahweh to function as a god of fertility and that he had no need of a goddess to play this role in the cult. Dever (2005:224) and Patai (1998:52) believe that the goddess Asherah was seen as the loving mother goddess who gives life, in the form of luxuriant trees, to a barren land.

5.2.1.5.3. Jeremiah

Jeremiah 44:16 – 19, remonstrates with the Judeans who have fled after the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE, and are now residing in Egypt. He also predicted the downfall of

this community of “Jews” as those who had done likewise earlier in Judah, if their sin of idolatry was to continue. The people did not acknowledge the divine punishment of the destruction of the temple or their exile as a religious sin stemming from their veneration of the “Queen of Heaven”, Asherah (Jeremiah 44:19), the Holy One, the Qudsu, became venerated throughout Egypt. To her the exiles continued to burn incense and honour her, and thus continued their lives without fear of famine or the sword. They felt that the cultic reforms by Josiah had resulted in the loss of the protection and patronage of the Queen of Heaven which in their view was essential together with the veneration of Yahweh.

They would therefore persist in their libations to the Queen of Heaven in the hope that she would renew her protection:

“We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord! We will certainly do everything we said we would; we will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and will pour out drink offerings to her just as we and our fathers, our kings and our officials did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm. But ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have nothing and have been perishing by the sword and famine. ...did not our husbands know that we were making cakes like her image and pouring out drink offerings to her?”

Jeremiah 44:19.

The worship of Asherah by the Judeans in exile in Egypt, in the colony at Elephantine, would continue together with that of Yahweh for at least another two centuries.

Yahweh in the Biblical writings had often been named the “King of Heaven”; consequently Asherah as the “Queen of Heaven” could only be interpreted as his consort. The worship of the One God was not a static situation (Becking 2001:197) since the Deuteronomic writings and the later priesthood were determined that the goddess, consort of Yahweh, be stamped out. In their determination to purify the worship of Yahweh, they viewed Asherah as only a representation of a cult object such as a tree, that is, a wooden

pole, and not a goddess. The desecration of the shrines of the goddess made the monotheistic and centralized cult of Yahweh acceptable.

By ignoring the divine presence in the wooden object, the Deuteronomists could pretend not to be dealing with a divinity but rather with a manufactured object (Binger 1997:139), and by desecrating the goddess, Yahweh would stand alone as the one, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent supreme god; God to His Chosen People.

New and further archaeological evidence has however also demonstrated that the worship and veneration of the goddess existed within the context of the Hebrew and Israelite culture and that it remained a part of the folk religion (Dever 2005) as well as of the official state cult.

5.3. Archaeological Evidence

5.3.1 Inscriptions from Judah

5.3.1.1. Khirbet -el- Qom

This site is situated between Hebron and Lachish. There is an inscription on a pillar between two burial rooms. In 1967, Dever discovered the tomb and its writings (Dijkstra 2001:32). The translation by Hadley is considered to be the best. The inscription consisted of four lines scratched on the surface. It is thought that tomb robbers had tried to erase the wording. The translation by Hadley (2000:85), from the original copy of the inscription which is housed in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, is as follows:

“1.Uriyahu the rich wrote it.

2. Blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh

3. for from his enemies by his (Yahweh’s) asherah he (Yahweh) has saved them.

4. by Quiyahu

5. by his asherah

6. and by his asherah.”

This writing was in Hebrew and, according to Hadley (2000:86), suggests that Yahweh and Asherah were considered a paired set. It has been dated to the 8th century BCE.

Also engraved on the rock is a small right hand pointing downwards. Hands are often a symbol whereby the supplicant wishes for God’s remembrance and so salvation. The hand may also suggest a prayer by the supplicant, or an amulet which together with Yahweh’s blessing will keep evil away from the tomb. The hand is shown open palmed, which may also imply generosity as the “Hand” of Asherah (Hadley 2000:104.).

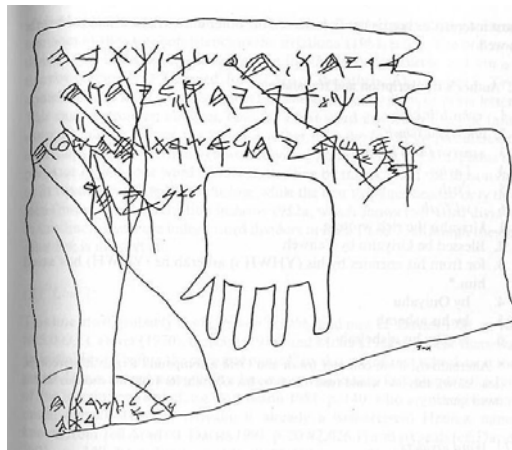


Figure 19. Hand of Asherah.

John Day also employs Judith Hadley’s transcription. He reads the inscription as Asherah, not necessarily referring to the goddess but possibly to some cultic object – a wooden cult symbol – but is inconclusive in his final analysis (Day 2000:50).

Dever (2005:132) avers that “*asherah*” is not an object of blessing – a tree or wooden pole – but is *the* name for the goddess Asherah, and that the engraved hand, human as it is, represents a good luck sign, as an amulet would, to keep evil at bay.

5.3.1.2. Dan: Northern Israel

This site is located on the Syrian border and consists of a high place or “*bamah*” which is reached by a monumental flight of steps (Dever 2005:139), situated in a grove of trees with a spring close by. It appears to have been an open air sanctuary and many cultic

artifacts have been unearthed here, such as a horned altar. Figurines were also found, five in all, of which only one is female. In relation to high altars, biblical writers in Judges (18) refer to Micah and his priestly sons who helped erect images, while, in Amos 8 13 – 14, one reads: “All who take their oath by Ashimah, goddess of Samaria, all who swear, ‘as surely as your god lives, O Dan and as surely as the god of Beersheba lives’, they will never fall, never rise again”.

These writings are thought to refer to Asherah, goddess of Samaria, who is also attested to in the finds of Kuntillet Ajrud, the caravansery in the Sinai desert. Therefore archaeological finds at Dan as well as at Khirbet-el-Qom witness to the Israelite worship of Asherah outside the central worship of that of Yahweh in the temple of Jerusalem. The findings at Kuntillet Ajrud, which was probably an Israelite fort and caravansery in the Sinai desert, dated between the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, seem to confirm this worship of the goddess, Asherah, together with that of the one god, Yahweh.

5.3.1.3. Kuntillet Ajrud

According to Dever (2005:160), this one period site reveals pottery that is essentially Israelite and considering its situation, could have been a halt on one of the desert crossing routes from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Aqaba. It suggests a fort which served both as an “inn” and a shrine or sanctuary. The configuration of the shrine or sanctuary consisted of two rooms, flanking the gateway as one comes into the courtyard (Dever 2005:160), which contained the remains of two ovens (Hadley 2000:106). The orientation of the building was east/west with the entrance on the eastern side:

- The two rooms were bench rooms and it is here and in the courtyard that, according to Dever (2005:162), the inscriptions in Hebrew and drawings were discovered on the painted plaster. In addition a large heavy stone bowl was found with an inscription on the rim “Belonging to Obadiah, the son of Adnah; Blessed be he by Yahweh” (Dever 2005:162).
- Fragments of two stone jars were also unearthed with inscriptions in Hebrew on them as well as “exotic” painted scenes which presented motifs incorporating

Canaanite iconography, although the inscriptions refer to “Yahweh of Teiman (Yemen) and his Asherah” and “Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah” (Dever 2005:162). These inscriptions may have been standard greetings or blessings of the time and as such affirm that Yahweh and his Asherah were worshipped in Israel (Hadley 2000:136).

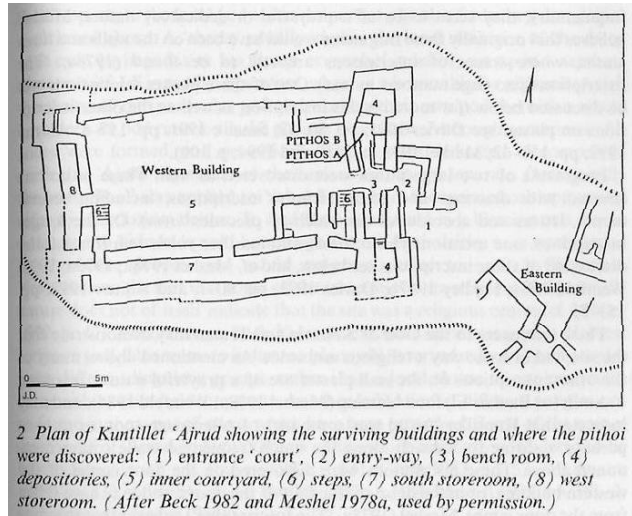


Figure 20. Kuntillet 'Ajrud.

5.3.1.3.1. Stone jar/Pithos A

- The inscription here reads:

“X says: say to Yehallel and to Yoasah and (to Z): I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his asherah.”

(Hadley 2000:121)
- The painted scenes depict Canaanite iconography but in their relationship reflect what according to Dever (2005:163) comprises part of a “syncretistic folk art” which, by virtue of the inscriptions being in Hebrew, constitutes an aspect of Israelite religious concepts:
 - The stylized palm tree or sacred tree flanked by two ibex. The sacred tree is often related to the iconography of the goddess Asherah;
 - The calf being suckled; and
 - A large lion

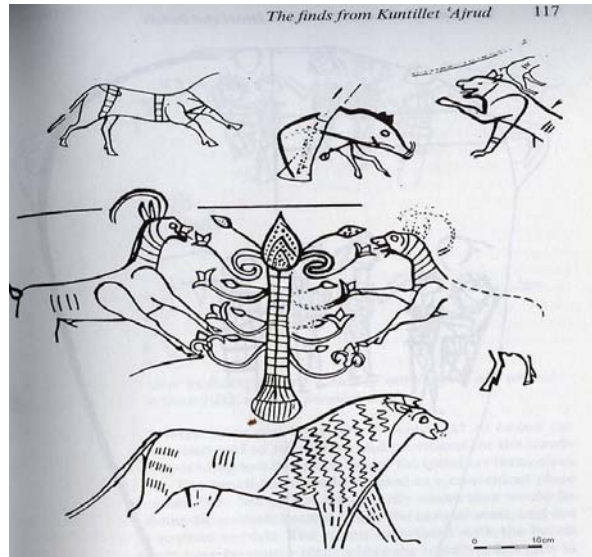


Figure 21. .Pithos A: the stylized tree flanked by caprids, with striding lion.

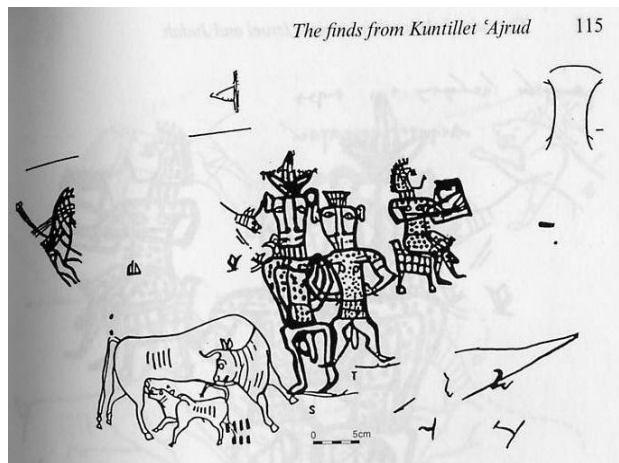


Figure 22. Suckling calf & Bes figure with lyre player.

- These emblems are associated with the goddess in the mythologies and iconography.
- In addition to these emblems there are:
 - Two male figures together that appear to resemble the Egyptian god Bes. Bes was a popular androgynous god who was responsible for the protection of the

family and especially children. Bes was a dwarf god and these figures depict a dwarflike configuration although they are large in relation to the seated figure.

- Bes is usually portrayed with leonine head and crown and wearing a leopard skin. The figure on the left appears to be male, whilst that on the right is female since there appear to be breasts on this figure. The tails between the legs form part of the leopard skin (Dever 2005:164). Other scholars see the “dress” of the figures as kilts with dots which may represent the Horus eye, whose protective abilities were legendary (Hadley 2000:141).
- Dever suggests that the lady seated on the lion throne, holding a lyre, is the “Lady of Ajrud”, the goddess Asherah (2005:164). She can be identified by her garments, hair, lyre and the throne, which,, according to Dever (2005:166), with its splayed claw-like feet, a lion’s paw and the paneled sides representing the wings of cherubs, is tilted back. The feet are in the air which indicates a missing footstool.

By virtue of the inscriptions and the iconography on Pithos A and using the arguments of many scholars, such as Hadley (2000:153), Binger (1997:109), & Dever (2005:164), it may be posited that the goddess Asherah is represented here on this stone jar. The sacred tree, the striding lion, which is possibly the goddess herself, and the cow which represents her caring and nurturing, all invoke the goddess.



Bes figure and lyre player. Figure 23.

5.3.1.3.2. *Stone Jar/ Pithos B*

This jar bears an inscription which is similar to that on Pithos A and can be translated as:

“Amaryau says; say my Lord;

Is it well with you? I bless you by Yahweh of Teman and by his asherah.

May he bless and keep you and be with my lord....”

(Hadley 2000:125).

The artwork on the jar also depicts a procession of people who appear as worshippers, who Dever believes are worshipping the deity, Asherah, whilst J.G. Taylor, according to Hadley, thinks that they are worshipping the sun.

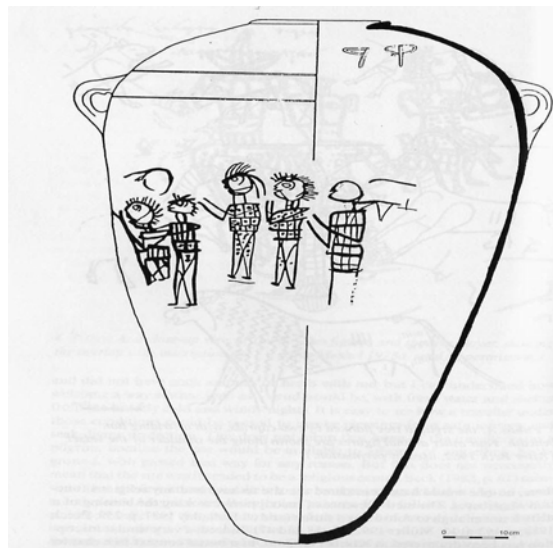


Figure 24. Procession of Worshippers.

At Kuntillet Ajrud, one may argue that Asherah was revered as the goddess represented together with Yahweh where they are called upon to preserve the well-being of those who spent time there. All the inscriptions and blessings, arranged at the entrance of the building, form part of its architecture, there for all travellers. In addition, the Bes figure

also guards the building so that no harm can come to those sojourning inside and in order that they may rest peacefully during their perilous journey.

In this respect one should recall that Asherah acted as consort to Yahweh in the cult of the time, both officially as well as in the “folk religion” (Dever 2005) Her own functions were to secure the wellbeing of her adherents (Binger 1997:109).

5.3.2. Other related archaeological data found in Israel

These finds suggested the revealed presence of Asherah, the goddess of the Yahwehist movement near the ancient city of Lachish.

5.3.2.1. A late Bronze Age Ewer

A late Bronze Age ewer made up of fragments was found near a temple and on the floor of the sanctuary. There was an inscription on it as well as figures of animals:

- “Mattan, an offering to my Lady Elat” (translation by Cross 1967). It is suggested that Mattan presented the ewer and its contents as a gift (Vriezen 2001:62) to the goddess who was known here by her Ugarit name of Elat (Hadley 2000:160);
- The animals represented on the ewer were lions with feathery tails, two deer, a male and female, indigenous to Israel and a bird, similar to a hoopoe; and
- There is also a stylized tree flanked by two ibexes, reminiscent of the drawing depicted on the jar at Kuntillett Arjud. Here again the tree may be symbolic of the goddess, Asherah.

5.3.2.2. The Gold Plaque

This was discovered in the ruins of another temple in Lachish and may have been part of the cultic equipment. The plaque depicts a figure of a naked goddess standing on trotting horses. She is holding two lotus blossoms in each hand and is wearing a large feathered headdress which was similar to the “Atef” crown of Egypt. Her hair is long, and curls to represent the Hathor wig. It is thought that this plaque indicates a connection to the Egyptian Qdsu, meaning the holy one. However, this Qdsu usually stands on a lion.

The Qudsu in Canaan is associated with Asherah but the horse is usually associated with Astarte, another Canaanite goddess. Confusion has arisen as to which goddess is represented by the plaque but, according to Clamer, this is more likely to be the goddess Astarte (in Hadley 2000:163). There were two temples in Lachish, the one on the mound, possibly dedicated to Astarte, and the one lower down dedicated to Asherah. Most scholars, owing to the other iconography associated with the goddess, suggest that the gold plaque was dedicated to Asherah. It may well have been so (Hadley 2000:162).



Figure 25. Goddess standing on a horse.

5.3.2.3. Female figurines

Female figurines were found throughout the area of Canaan, some of which could be interpreted as goddess figures, of which most were dated to the Iron Age Period (1200 BCE) (Hadley 2000:200).

The earlier plaque-like figures, with their exaggerated breasts, fell into disuse while the solid pillar-like figurines were occasionally found in tombs but usually in the houses and domestic areas. These latter figurines were often thought to have been toys in their domestic setting but when they appear with other cultic objects, their symbolism was ascribed to that of the “female deity”, which in Israel and Judah referred to Asherah.

The figures possessed exaggerated breasts supported by arms. The body below was plain and flared at the base. It is thought that the symbolism portrayed the goddess in her nurturing capacity, as the mother goddess, and therefore represented Asherah or her cult symbol (Hadley 2000:197).

The figurines were part of the household. Small portable images of the goddess belonged to the domestic cult, since they were numerous. They were household icons. They may have been associated with the *Teraphim* which had been in existence since the days of the Patriarchs (Genesis 31: 33 – 35). The nurturing aspect of the mother goddess is represented by the exaggerated breasts and for this reason it is possible that the figurines possessed divine properties. It is thought they may have been smaller representations of the “asherah poles” found in the Jerusalem Temple (Hadley 2000:205).

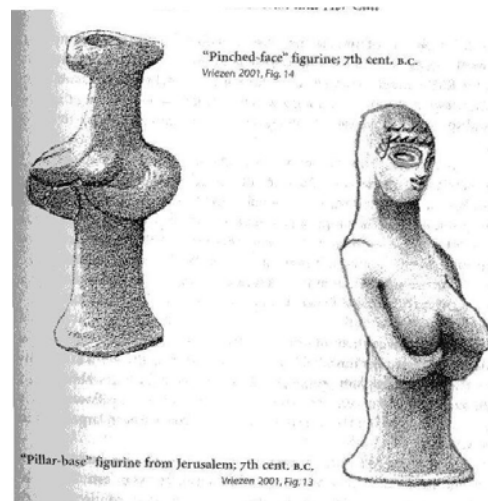


Figure 26. Female figurines

Whatever the reasoning, it appears likely that the goddess was worshipped and revered both in the domestic households, regional centres and most likely, in the central Temple in Jerusalem.

5.4. Conclusion

Deuteronomic history is very adamant with respect to the uniqueness of Yahweh, the role of the Levites, which was the priesthood, and adds that the temple in Jerusalem would be the only religious centre of Yahweh (Olyan 1988:73).

The cleansing of the high places of Asherah and the various reforms that took place under Hezekiah, Asa and Josiah were again intended to centralize the worship of Yahweh. However, popular religion continued, expressing the need for the goddess, which is again reflected in the talismans, amulets and figurines of the goddess and in their recreation, the toys and the aspects of their board games (Vermaak 1996:164).

There was no denying the existence of other gods (Olyan 1988:73); rather it was the need to see Yahweh worshipped and venerated above all others, as God, the saviour. The Biblical texts portray a jealous God, one who does not wish to share the love of his people (Becking 2001:193). One of the Ten Commandments exhorts the Israelites not to venerate other deities before Yahweh: “You must have no other gods *before* me” (Ex 2:17).

“Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles. Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Ex 34: 14-15).

But despite these strong words, the writings of Jeremiah indicate that the “Queen of Heaven” became and was an integral part of the worship together with Yahweh, until the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE when the cream of the society of Judeans, the scholars, priests and skilled artisans, were taken into exile to Babylon.

In all the writings and the archaeological studies, Asherah, her cult objects and symbols representing the goddess, revealed a close relationship with Yahweh. Until the Exile, Yahweh was the One God with his consort, Asherah (Day 2002:60).

With the fall of the Judean Kingdom (586 BCE), a great many people, mostly from the higher echelons, were taken to Babylon, where they were to live for the next 50 years. Those remaining were mainly the peasant population, who probably continued in their ways with sanctuaries on high places and no central cultic establishment. In all likelihood the cult of Asherah continued to flourish in this rural population as part of their folk religion.

Those in exile, however, would work hard to keep their faith in Yahweh alive. It was a time of great testing of their faith in this one God. The continual stern admonishments of the priests and prophets when a deviation from the worship of Yahweh appeared, threatening death and destruction, may well have exerted a very devastating effect on the morale of the people. Compare this statement: “We wept by the Rivers of Babylon” (Ps 137).

That the temple was destroyed and the country ravaged by the Babylonians may well have been a political movement in its execution, which nevertheless would and could have had a serious cultic consequence. The state was destroyed and as a result the state cult was held in suspension (Bright 1972:343).

A “rethink” in the religion of Yahweh was experienced during the time of the exile. In the heart-searching and profound adjustment during the exile and beyond, Judaism was born (Bright 1972:343). The goddess and her imagery became totally displaced and, it seems, banished completely, a situation which was to continue, at least officially, after the return to Israel and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

The old myths of the goddess culture had died, to be replaced in a new form: according to Boyce (1979:77), worship of one Supreme God, belief in the advent of a Messiah,²⁵

²⁵ Isaiah 42:1. “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen delight: I will put my spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.”

Isaiah 42:6: “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and make you a covenant for the people and a light for the gentiles.”

together with a way of life which combined moral and spiritual aspirations with a strict code of behaviour (including the purity laws) and became the basis of the Judaic ideology. Yahweh was still the Father God who was no longer represented by an earthly king. His counterpart and consort were seen as incarnate in his Chosen People, Israel.

It was during this time too that those in exile, in keeping their faith, turned to more philosophical ideas and sought the esoteric nature of the cult. The writings of the Wisdom literature emerged. The Book of Proverbs was always considered part of Solomon's wisdom writings, but was compiled in the post exilic period, 538 BCE (Bright 1972:440). The Wisdom of Solomon, and Ecclesiasticus or The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach, constituted part of these writings.

Here we see a much more poetical, lyrical and softer approach in the literature and the homilies than the terseness of the god Yahweh in the historical writings of the Hebrew Bible. The stern admonitions of the priests and prophets with their premonition of death and destruction gave way to this more spiritual approach and it is here in the earlier writings of Proverbs that Wisdom is seen as the "divine feminine".

The simple imagery of the goddess, Asherah, the alleged female counterpart of Yahweh, which had been so largely condemned by the priests and prophets, was eclipsed and the "divine feminine" as at first portrayed in Proverbs, probably compiled in the 4th century BCE by scholars who remained in Babylon, was now personified as Wisdom.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

6.1. Summary

The aim of this dissertation was to demonstrate that a history, and therefore a development of a “goddess” culture in various areas of the ANE, was a relevant hypothesis.

Therefore, taking the beginning of this discussion (in the first chapter), at the site of Çatalhöyük in Anatolia (Turkey) as an example, the present century, the 21st CE, has inspired the gathering of men and women who felt the presence of a goddess. This mother goddess, emanating from the earth, is not necessarily conclusive proof that the early Neolithic inhabitants of the town also worshipped a goddess (Hodder 1998: 132). However, historically, the need for human beings to understand their place within the cosmos and the need to express their relationship, the reasons for and the nature of this have conditioned their cultures.

For the settled agriculturalists at Çatalhöyük, the peoples of the Neolithic era, it was possible to realize through their symbolism, art and iconography that in their experience, the goddess, mother earth, would be part of the sacred nature within the society. These symbols depict the birth of life through the great mother figure giving birth, and death as represented by the paintings of the carrion bird, the symbolism of the vulture.

For a civilization that could, in its art, portray their town witnessing the volcanic eruption of the Hasan Dag, their sophistication could only lead to there being a cult of a religious nature, maybe only within each household, since there was no evidence of a single central shrine. Nevertheless, it showed a people who perceived the sacredness associated with mother earth and thus with the goddess.

Prehistory can only be assessed through the symbols portrayed by the said society and at Çatalhöyük these images and ideas have given credence to the dominance of a divine feminine being. It is essential to realize that the people of the Neolithic era in the ANE, of which Çatalhöyük is perhaps only one example, possessed a sacred image of divine beings. For archaic mankind, the whole of life is capable of being sanctified (Eliade 1987:165).

Chapter 2 gives rise to a discussion of the Bronze Age when, throughout the areas of the ANE from Sumer – Mesopotamia to Canaan, the goddess became manifest in her various roles. The early nurturing role of the mother goddess as the giver and sustainer of life and yet possessing the power of death now became more clearly defined. *History begins at Sumer*, a book written by Samuel Noah Kramer (1979) evokes the question, why? It was in Sumer that the earliest writings of the ANE emerged, which began to evaluate and elaborate on the sacredness of the earlier Neolithic society.

At about the same time as the writings, the alloy, bronze, was discovered which in its manufacture produced superior tools, artifacts and weapons. This period from about 2800 BCE until 1000 BCE became known as the Bronze Age. In these writings the symbolism of the earlier ages was interpreted into words and thereby the divine cosmic beings were named gods and goddesses. The numinous Divine Feminine was the goddess.

For the Sumerians, Inanna became the Great Goddess of the pantheon, maturing through her ability to have enjoyed access to the “Wisdom” granted to her through the gifts of her grandfather Enki, the god of wisdom and waters (Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:148). Through this “Wisdom” she would have control over life and death, the birth and rebirth of both the land and its peoples, and thus her role was paramount in the religion of the Sumerian and Akkadians (Kramer 1979:71).

The sacred beast of Inanna was the lion which was both her protection as well as the symbol of her strength. This is portrayed in the art and iconography. The strength and protection of the leopard, and of the lion, are the divine symbols of the Goddess: “Inanna,

brave, bright, ambitious, adored and worshiped with powers acknowledged by kings and the ordinary man” (Kramer 1979:96).

Chapter 3 covers the time of the late Bronze Age during which the empires emerged. Babylon under the Amorite king, Hammurabi, saw the Akkadian goddess, Ishtar being adopted into the Amorite pantheon. She became equal with the Amorite goddess Ashratu, the daughter of the god An and consort of the god Amurru. Ashratu, in the neighbouring territory of Canaan, was known as Ashram, where she was the “mother goddess”. She was to achieve this status in the Amorite kingdom when she became known as the “Lady of the mountain”. Both Ishtar, and Ashratu for Hammurabi (1750 BCE), were great goddesses in their own right in the Babylonian Empire exhibiting attributes that were similar in nature.

During this time of the empires the appearance of the hero king was needed to expand and protect the land and the nation, leading to a supreme god. This gave rise to the “new order” narrated in the myth of the Enuma Elish. The “great god”, a divine power associated with the sun, became dominant and the lunar religion of the goddess was eclipsed. However, Ishtar was to remain an important goddess. The Amorite gods and goddesses of the old order were merged and in such a manner, disappeared.

The death of a civilization and the rise of another led to the beginnings of flourishing empires which were gained through military prowess in the ANE. The god standing beside the king possessed the greater status but Ishtar remained the great goddess: all caring and nurturing, suckling, kings. Ashur came into prominence in the Assyrian empire. The creating and securing of this Empire constituted a “holy war”, won with the help of Ashur and the lady of the battle, Ishtar,.

Wisdom was retained in decision making through divination which had begun as a divine “science” during the Babylonian Era (via the Chaldeans), and was to become of great importance to the Assyrian Kings (1000 BCE). Ishtar was perceived in her capacity as a goddess of wisdom.

In Chapter 4, it was noted that, as the Bronze Age continued into the Iron Age, the worship of the goddess moved toward the western coastal region, the land of Canaan. Canaan was inhabited by the Semites, who also worshipped a great goddess, known by the name of Asherah/Ashratu (Asherah/Athirat). She was perceived as the mother of the gods and was the consort of the great god, El. She was also regarded as “mother” to the kings, to special human children, giving them “divine” qualities (Binger 1997:83-84) and thereby being privy to their attaining the throne of the kingdom. Asherah’s role as the “Queen Mother” to the gods accorded her the power to choose the successor to the “kingly” throne and in this respect her role was ceded to the Queen Mother of the earthly kings. The goddess’s role in nurturing and caring enabled her to name the successors to the “throne” (Wiggins 1992:88).

Letters from Ta’anach in Palestine, written to the Egyptian King during the Amarna Period (1350BCE), indicate the priests working as diviners for Asherah, which would indicate her capacity for wisdom (Wiggins 1992:213).

Chapter 5 begins with the history of the Israelites who had settled in the land of Canaan. Their great god El was to adopt the name of Yahweh. He became supreme and omniscient. The Canaanite goddess, Asherah, however, is mentioned in the writings of the Israelites (Hadley 2000:42).

The state religion in Israel espoused the God, Yahweh – omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent – but within the realm of the “folk religion” the goddess, Asherah, also expressed in the form of the artifacts, appears as being important in her nurturing and caring role.

The people, according to the writings of Jeremiah (44:16:19), were adamant that this role of Asherah should continue within their lives despite his remonstrations.

Cult objects found in the households were of female forms with exaggerated breasts, very reminiscent of those found on the Neolithic sites of 4000 years earlier, and inscriptions dedicated to the goddess were found on jars and pottery at the “holy” caravansery sites of Kuntillet Arjud and Khirbet-el-Qom (Dever 2005:160).

The goddess carried a great deal of influence in the religion of the Israelite people and until the exile to Babylon (586 BCE) they believed that there was a relationship between Asherah and Yahweh, the One God (Day 2002:60). From the time of this exile, “when we wept by the rivers of Babylon” (Ps 137) the goddess in her capacity would become a hidden goddess (Patai 1990:33), “hidden” but remaining in the noetic notion of the “divine” feminine as evinced by “Wisdom”.

From the beginning of history the goddess has been associated with “wisdom”, together with her caring and nurturing. This is her strength, which before the dawn of history was shown by the iconographic symbols of the leopard and the lion. Wherever there is such a representation we may feel the strength of the Goddess: “Qudsu” – the “holy one” from Syro-Palestine to Egypt (Hadley 2000:161), proudly standing on a lion. The “holy one” has been prominent throughout the ANE but her favours and manifestations were so strong that they were carried beyond the shores of Canaan and Anatolia, and thus beyond the shores of the ANE itself, to the areas of the Mediterranean.

Ishtar, Asherah, the Qudsu, the “holy one” were manifested in their goddess roles in Carthage, Greece and Rome where, as Kyble/Cybele, the Anatolian goddess became known as “Meter”, the mother. In this capacity she would reach Rome by 204 BCE. She is depicted riding in her chariot, pulled by lions through the streets of Rome. The cult of the Magna Mater would pervade the whole of the Roman Empire (Burkert 1979:104).

Therefore I contend that there is a thread running through 9000 years: the divine feminine, the goddess, linked through similar attributes of which, as early as 2500 BCE, wisdom was foremost, finally to become the divine esoteric nature of God’s alter ego, the manifestation of the divine feminine.

6.2. Conclusion

In researching this dissertation it became ever clearer that the past could often be regarded as the age where cultures began to flourish and women held greater power than men since the goddess was in her ascendancy.

The early Neolithic era suggested the beginning of a goddess cult in its voluptuous clay figurines, which in being bound up in the daily lives of the people, suggested the beginning of an ideology that revolved around life-giving and life-taking, manifest through the representation of a cultic figure.

During the Bronze Age, throughout the areas of the ANE from Sumeria – Mesopotamia to Canaan, the various roles of the goddess, especially in her nurturing role, as the giver and assistant of both life and death, became more clearly defined. In Canaan her role as mother figure remained prominent whilst in Israel her role was less specific. The goddess, however, was to reach her zenith during this period of the Bronze Age.

The beginning of the Iron Age was a time of destruction where the position of the goddess was less prominent, or was suppressed, as were the women of a now male dominant society. The Empire of Assyria was expanding and Ishtar stood beside Ashur. Here she was regarded as a goddess of war with her nurturing and caring roles taking second place. The great god was to rule supreme even as the male secular powers ruled the socio-political and religious ideas and ideologies of the society. A time of war, destruction, immorality, crime and greed ensued, reflecting the norms of a society not unlike our own, where present day chaos now begins to threaten the world of the 21st century C.E.

There is no return to a goddess religion / ideology (according to Barstow, quoted by Townsend (Hurtado 1990:198)), but to view the goddess as part of or within the Deity is to manifest female values and inspiration which will lead to women achieving a sense of

fulfillment both spiritually and in their daily lives. The Goddess Myth belongs to past ages, but myths, according to Townsend (1990:197), are essential within a society – they are a healthy sign and provides a sense of belonging, oneness and organization.

“When the legends die, the dreams end.

When the dreams end, there is no more greatness”.

(Hal Borland 1963)

The divine power and attributes of the goddess lasted for more than 9000 years in all her glory in the ANE. This, together with the myths and rituals which would form a major force in forming the ancient cultures (Burkett 1979:58), would become manifest in a consciousness and a spiritual awareness

Jung, in his theory of the collective unconsciousness, avers that the soul or the psyche of individual and groups are the deepest dimension of humankind. It is the mould from which all historical consciousness is born: it is all meaningful and becomes part of the myth, religion, philosophy and all creative ideas. But this mould is the Creation: the mother of all consciousness, seeking to become real in each individual.

I contend that the reality of the collective unconsciousness is the Great Mother – The Goddess.

According to Dourley’s (1990:48) assessment of Jung’s ideas, the goddess is the matrix of the collective unconsciousness who creates, destroys and renews human consciousness, which is reflected in her manifestations as the source of consciousness, the essence of the soul and the psyche and therefore the source of all that is, and so it may have been for the peoples of the ANE.

The present writer concurs with Frymer-Kensky (1992:1) that the goddess is within each one of us and so She, the Divine, is continuously sought in the many mysteries, mystical ideologies and manifestations that she has inspired. The divine feminine, the mother goddess, the all life giving creatrix and re-creator of the world, is the essence of the

generative force that seeds new life. “The Goddess – earth centered, immanent and immediate – serves as a refuge from and a counterbalance to what may be considered a remote and punitive God” (Frymer-Kensky 1992:1).

In this analysis, stretching from 10,000BCE to 330 BCE, the present author hopes to have shown that, despite the many controversial writings²⁶ for and against her existence, “She”, the goddess, played a very important and relevant part in the lives of all the peoples of the ANE. She survived and continued through the cross-cultural phenomena of the later classical period of Greece and Rome from 330 BCE, until the beginning of the 1st Century CE, where again this evidence is present in the written mythologies, iconography and monuments (Burkett 1979:99), to be revealed in the present day philosophies. I believe that this study has unequivocally shown that for each culture there was a “Goddess” whose diversity must be appreciated, and as such in the history of religions, the “Goddess” and her mythologies and ideologies did bring warmth, caring, healing and Wisdom (Dever 2005:309).

²⁶ E.g. Townsend 1990 in “*Goddess in religion and the Modern debate*”. and Hutton 1996.

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ABBREVIATION OF JOURNAL NAMES

CA	Current Anthropology.
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly.
FS	Feminist Studies.
JAOS	Journal of American Oriental Society.
JMC	Journal of Material Culture.
JNES	Journal of Near East Studies.
JS	Journal of Semitics.
ORR	Oriental Rug Review.
RAI	Recontre Assyriologique Internationale.
ROA	The Review of Archaeology.

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