

DIVINE OR HUMAN? AN INTRIGUING LATE BRONZE AGE PLAQUE FIGURINE FROM TEL BETH-SHEMESH

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A unique Late Bronze plaque figurine found during the eighteenth season (2008) of the current excavations at Tel Beth-Shemesh stands at the focus of our discussion.¹ Unconventionally depicting a male figure, the figurine raises intriguing questions: is the figure of a divine nature or does the imagery commemorate a human male/female related to the government of 14th century BCE Beth-Shemesh?

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT: THE LATE BRONZE AGE AT TEL BETH-SHEMESH

The Canaanite city of Beth-Shemesh was first uncovered by Duncan Mackenzie in 1911–12. Late Bronze remains were found in his limited ‘Central City Area’ and included imported Mycenaean and Cypriote pottery (1911: 61–72; 1912–1913: 1–39). A much larger exposure of the Late Bronze city was achieved by the American expedition from Haverford College, Pennsylvania, headed by Elihu Grant in 1928–1933. In the final synthesis of these excavations, conducted by G. Ernst Wright, two prosperous Late Bronze phases separated by destruction were distinguished within Stratum IV: Late Bronze I (15th century BCE); and Late Bronze II (14th–13th centuries BCE) (GRANT and WRIGHT 1939: 9–12, 35–50). The rich repertoire of finds from house-ruins, cisterns and tombs included local and imported Cypriote and Mycenaean pottery, spectacular jewelry (TADMOR and MISCHBRANDEL 1980), figurines, numerous Egyptian scarabs and artifacts, and two significant written documents: a cuneiform tablet written in the Ugaritic alphabet (SASS 1991 with earlier bibliography) and an ostrakon with a Proto-Canaanite inscription (CROSS 1967).

In recent years, Late Bronze remains are being uncovered by the current expedition (for a comprehensive summary about the Iron Age levels

exposed in the new excavations see BUNIMOVITZ and LEDERMAN 2009). A destroyed Late Bronze I layer was found just above the Middle Bronze IIB city gate at the southern part of the mound. More extensive Late Bronze remains are being uncovered on the northern quarter of the mound. Here a tight stratigraphical sequence of three superimposed Late Bronze cities – Levels 10–8 – were exposed so far, spanning the 14th–13th centuries BCE. The main architectural features of Level 8 (13th century BCE) are two spacious buildings, with beautiful cobble and plaster floors, separated by an alley. The remains of Level 9, within which the plaque figurine was found, are very impressive. Over the entire area of excavation – about 500 sq.m. – a heavy mantle of hundreds of toppled mudbricks fired by a tremendous fire was exposed. Apparently, entire walls had collapsed over the contents of a large multi-roomed building.

The plaque figurine (Reg. No. 5850.01) was found in Square B22, within a layer of decomposed mudbricks and ash (L1530), which comprises part of Level 9 destruction debris.

Description (Pl. 1²)

Relief plaque figurine, impressed into a delicately carved open mold, as evidenced by minute details: head fillet rendered by a fine ridge, belt, pointed toes and a developed muscular chest. The plaque is flat, of uniform thickness, measuring 88 × 50 × 12 mm. A fine rectangle frames a slender male figure with short hair and a fillet, clad in a short kilt which is held in place by a broad belt. The figure strides to the left, both heels firm on the delineated ground-line. The head is rendered in profile, the upper body frontal, then from the belted waist down in profile again. His bent (V-shaped) arms are extended sideward, each holding lotus stems that curve inward at the bottom.

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¹ The renewed excavations at Tel Beth-Shemesh is an ongoing project which is directed by S. Bunimovitz and Z. Lederman since 1990. Currently the project is under

the auspices of the Marco and Sonia Nadler Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University.

² All plates for this paper were prepared by Rodica Penchas and Yulia Gottlieb, from the Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University.



Pl. 1 The plaque figurine from Tel Beth-Shemesh

Two diagonal sketchy lines appear under the ground-line. The portraiture: elongated figure and the way the feet are firmly planted on the ground, signals the Canaanite artisan's familiarity with Egyptian 18th Dynasty artistic style.

Contextual discussion: the plaque in its Near Eastern setting

The plaque belongs to a special class of anthropomorphic cult objects of small clay, mold-impressed figurines, that make their first appearance in Palestine in the middle of the second millennium BCE

and become abundant in the third quarter of the millennium. Characteristically, they depict a naked female, whose Hathor-wig coiffed head is always en-face, in a variety of postures, sometimes holding plants or animals (TADMOR 1982: 140). Unlike their ancestors, the mass-produced Mesopotamian plaques that first appear in the second half of the third millennium BCE, which abound in themes including both female and male deities and humans, and Late Bronze Age North Syrian plaques, amongst which the naked female plaques predominate, although some plaques depict

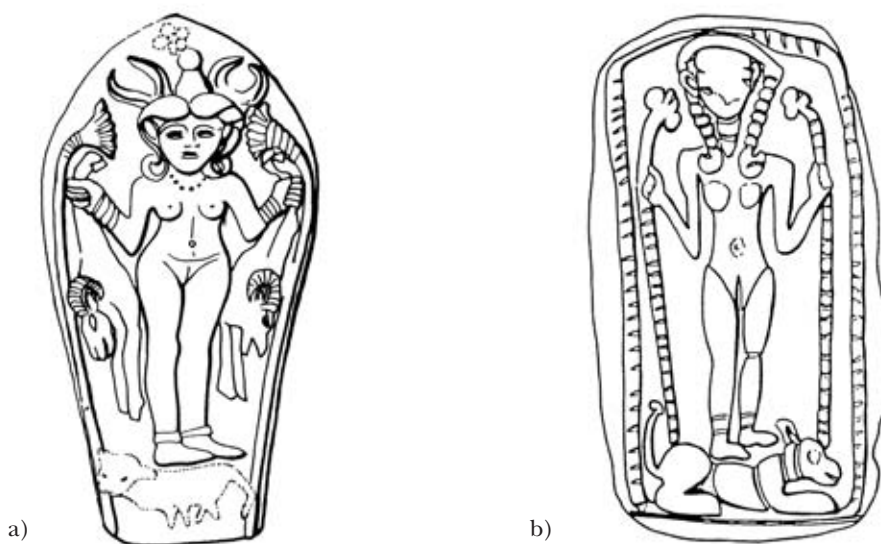


Fig. 1 a. Gold plaque, Minet el-Beida (NEGBI 1976: fig. 118);
 b. Mold-impressed clay plaque, Tel Harasim (GIVON 2002: fig. 2:1)

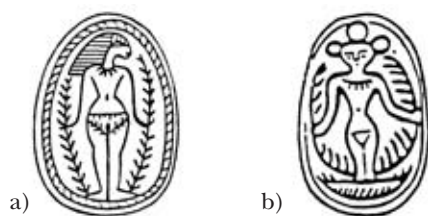


Fig. 2 Hathor-type goddess holding plants on Canaanite scarabs, a. Gezer, b. unprovenanced (SCHROER 1989: 97, nos. 6, 8)

enthroned male gods (Meskene-Emar, MARGUERON 1995: 137; Munbaqa: WERNER 1998: 4162, 4163, 325, pls. 165, 226; BLOCHER *et al.* 2000: 129–131, applied to the wall of a rectangular stand) and mortal males playing the lute (Munbaqa: WERNER 1998: 4165–4169, 325–328, pls. 165, 227; Tell Hadidi: DORNEMANN 1979: fig. 28) or engaged in action (Munbaqa, boxers, WERNER 1998: 4174, pls. 165, 227), the Late Bronze Age Palestinian humanoid clay repertoire was exclusively female and restricted to the nude woman. The fact that male statuary was produced in metal has been taken to support the view that in Canaan female terracottas illustrate private piety within the home, predominantly associated with women (MOOREY 2003: 38). The male lute player plaque figurine from Tel Dan, dated to the 14th–13th centuries BCE, seems to be an exception (BIRAN 1986: 168–173; BRAUN 1999: fig. III/2–2; TADMOR 2006: 330).

Iconographic discussion

Females grasping lotus stems in both hands usually stand on the back of an animal, most often a lion (for prestigious metal and gold plaques, NEGBI 1976: nos. 1697–1699). They belong to the Qadesh (Qudshu/Qedeshet/Qadishtu) type of Egyptianizing naked female figures with Hathor hairstyle in a frontal nudity, whose V-shaped arms are extended sideward, and holding plants, flowers, animals (serpents, caprids, lions), classified by UEHLINGER under Type VIII of the naked goddess (UEHLINGER 1998: 47; Fig. 1). They did not survive the fall of the Egyptian Empire in Canaan (MOOREY 2003: 39). Of Asiatic origin (Fig. 2), Qadesh was introduced into Egypt along with the cults of other Asiatic divinities during the 18th Dynasty. Her image is only identified in Egypt (Fig. 3). In Egypt, Qadesh, whose full frontal nudity suggesting sexuality and fertility, stands on the back of a lion, usually holding snakes and lotuses in her bent and extended arms, alone, or more commonly, together with an Egyptian god and a foreign god: between the indigenous mummiform ithyphallic god of sexual potency Min, to



Fig. 3 Winchester College stela inscribed Qadesh, Astarte, Anat (KEEL 1992: fig. 206)

whom she offers the lilies, and the Asiatic god Reshep, lord of war and thunder, to whom she offers the snakes (Fig. 4); between the war god Onuris and Reshep or between Baal Zaphon and Reshep. Reshep is a martial god: he holds in one hand a battle axe, occasionally replaced by an *ankh* or an Egyptian *was* scepter, and Asiatic weapons, in the other. In spite of Reshep's warlike character and the fact that he also was god of lightning, plague and destruction, he was often addressed as "he who hears prayers" and sometimes asked for healing (SHOEMAKER 2001: 5). Min's attributes, which stand behind him, include a round hut, lettuces and a double lily. The lily is a New Kingdom development, and it is tempting to see a connection between these lilies and the flowers Qadesh extends to the god (SHOEMAKER 2001: 8).

In Egypt Qadesh was associated with two other Asiatic goddesses worshipped in Egypt from the 18th Dynasty on and mentioned together in the texts of Ugarit, Astarte and Anat (MANNICHE 2002: 10–11). These two goddesses have both sexual connotations, and a bellicose nature (CORNELIUS 1993: 23–25). During the New Kingdom Astarte was depicted horseback-riding, and wielding her weapons, shield and mace/blade (CORNELIUS 1994: 73–82). She may even be enthroned on the back of a horse (HOFFMEIER and KITCHEN 2007;

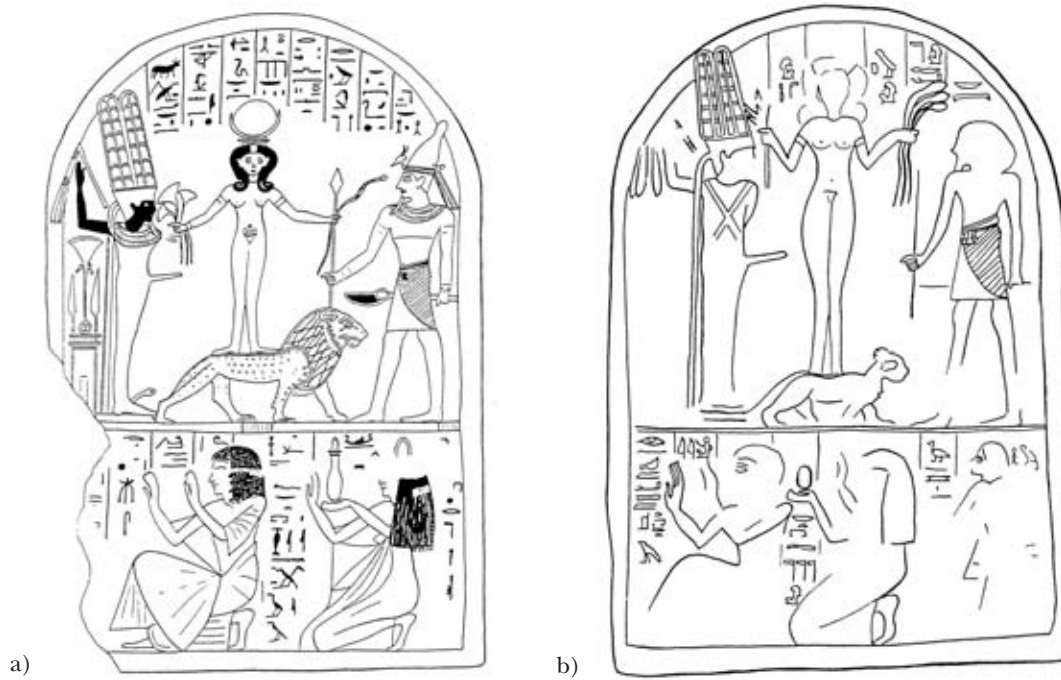


Fig. 4 Qadesh between Min and Reshep; a. Turin: Deir el-Medina; b. British Museum: Deir el-Medina (KEEL 1992: figs. 211, 210)

Fig. 5). She may ride the horse without weapons, or with just one piece of arms (LECLANT 1960: figs. 18–23, pl. IIIA). These weapons the goddess shares with the god Reshep (LECLANT 1960: 26).

On two monuments of the Qadesh-type goddess a horse takes the place of the ubiquitous lion mount of the goddess as her divine attribute. It

should be emphasized that in the Late Bronze Age the horse had exclusively bellicose connotations, even though the goddesses in both monuments do not carry weapons, but attributes of peace. In the pottery mold from Tel Qarnayim (BEN-ARIEH 1983) the frontal goddess with V-shaped arms holds a flower and a mirror (Fig. 6). The gold plaque from Lachish, found in the temple on the tell and dating from the 13th–12th century BCE (CLAMER 1980; KEEL and UEHLINGER 1992: 76, fig. 71) shows the goddess with V-shaped arms, holding oversized lotus flowers, both feet pointed right, and her head



Fig. 5 Stela from Tell el-Borg, Sinai (HOFFMEIER and KITCHEN 2007: fig. 1b)



Fig. 6 Pottery mold, Tel Qarnayim (KEEL and UEHLINGER 1992: fig. 72)

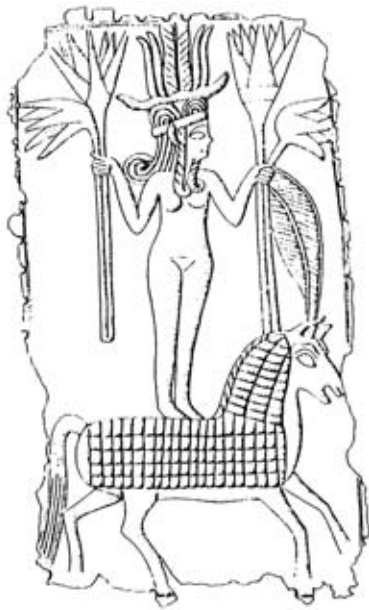


Fig. 7 Gold plaque, Tel Lachish (CLAMER 1980: fig. 1)



Fig. 8 Metal figurine of a smiting god, Minet el-Beida (NEGBI 1976: fig. 128)

in profile to the right (Fig. 7). In this unusual rendering of the head in profile the goddess assumes the active role of striding male figures.

In our plaque, the head in profile and the wide stride, are typically male, evidence the warrior in smiting pose (Fig. 8), which was also used to depict the warrior goddess. The fillet on the figure's brow is typical of Egyptian depictions of Asiatics, including the Semitic god Reshep (FIG 4b), whose gazelle's head emblem is secured to the forehead by a fillet (CORNELIUS 1994: pl. 22).

Although the V-shaped arms are typically feminine, a unique representation of a male god with a V-shaped arms is known from a Late Bronze Age scaraboid of unknown provenance (GIVEON 1980: pl. 20:1; CORNELIUS 1994:121–124: RM40; Fig. 9). He wears a white crown with an unclear emblem on his brow (Reshep's gazelle?), a short kilt, his right arm hanging down, grasping an *ankh*, reminiscent of Egyptian renditions of Reshep and of the standing goddesses identified by inscriptions as Anat or Astarte (CORNELIUS 2000: 72–73). In his outward extended V-shaped arm he clutches the legs of an upright caprid in the attitude typical of the Qadesh-type goddess, witness the two sheet gold pendants, one from Minet el-Beida (NEGBI 1976: 99–100; Fig. 10), the other retrieved from the Ulu Burun shipwreck (BASS and PULAK 1989: 3–4). To his right a caprid rears; a papyrus stalk and a lion appear to his left. Striding to the right, the god treads on a guilloche, often used

Near Eastern art as a ground-line and emblematic of water streams. Because of the horned animals he may be identified as Reshep, in his role as life-giving Master of Animals.

The ground-line with two faint diagonals may indicate a mount for the figure, similarly to the guilloche on the scaraboid (Fig. 9). It slightly resembles an Egyptian *nb*-sign, reminiscent of the



Fig. 9 Scaraboid showing god with V-shaped arm (Drawing: Rodica Penchas)



Fig. 10 Qadesh type goddess on lion, Gold pendant, Minet el-Beida (NEGBI 1976: 100: fig. 119)

design in Middle Bronze Age Canaanite scarabs. In the scarabs figures sometimes appear above a *nb*-sign. Like many Egyptian symbols, it first appeared in Palestinian scarabs as an imitation of Egyptian Middle Kingdom scarab design and evolved into a local motif of local context (DAPHNA BEN-TOR, personal communication December 15, 2008). Human figures appearing above the sign, which seems to have been perceived as a pedestal or mount, include royal and divine figures, single or in pairs, sometimes holding a flowering stem (KEEL 1995: figs. 389, 410a-c, 452, 498, 499, 503–504, 518–526; 2002: 199, fig. 21; TEISSIER 1996: 113:2v, 115:2x; Fig. 11). On the other hand, the diagonal striations may be a very sketchy rendition of a crescent, another emblem of the goddess, witness the gold plaque from Minet el-Beida, dépôt 213 bis depicting Qadesh holding flowers standing above a crescent moon and stars (Fig. 12).

INTERPRETATION

Ceramic plaques must be a cheap version intended for the wide public of elite-style plaques wrought in copper alloys and gold jewelry, espe-



Fig. 11 Figure striding above *nb*-sign, Canaanite scarab, Tell el-Far'ah South (KEEL 1995: no. 392)

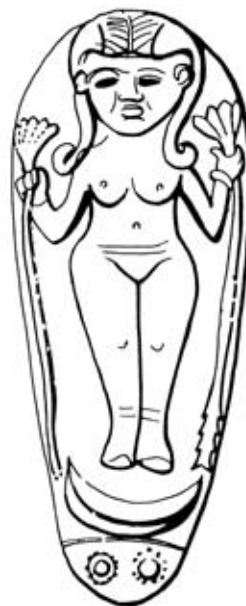


Fig. 12 Qadesh-type goddess on lunar crescent (NEGBI 1976: 99, fig. 117)

cially amulets (LIPÍŃSKI 1986: 89). Both precious metal figurines and the humble clay figurines were “reflections of the official cult images used outside the cult for devotional and prophylactic purposes” (VAN DER TOORN 1998: 94). The striding posture of our figure is suggestive of aggressive warriors, both divine and human. The figure’s gesture with V-shaped arms and distinct floral attributes, suggest divine nature, in spite of the fact that he does not wear a divine headdress. In our figure, traits of Reshep and Qadesh-types converge to represent not a martial figure, but rather a peaceful one, whose floral emblem, was considered by Albright to be the Canaanite symbol of feminine appeal (ALBRIGHT 1969:75; SHOEMAKER 2001: 6). However, on a unique unprovenanced Late Bronze Age stele in the Hecht Museum, said to have come from the area of Tell Beit Mirsim, (MERHAV 1994), an enthroned god is portrayed raising his hand in greeting towards three long-



Fig. 13 Hecht Museum Stela, courtesy of the Hecht Museum, Haifa

stemmed lotus flowers which emerge from his footstool (Fig. 13). The lotus flower, held by an enthroned mortal male, was a mark of kingship (ZIFFER 2005: 138, 153). Does our plaque proclaim a divinity who confounds the boundaries of gender, or does it depict a mortal?

A queen at Beth-Shemesh?

In Canaan, the clay figurines are mostly found in urban debris, within areas of housing, storage and craft activities, in streets, pools and cisterns. This is also true of our figurine. Its imagery must have been significant to the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh. Divine or mortal: whose portrait does our plaque commemorate? It may be a local god. Yet it may also depict a local ruler of the time.

Incidentally, two of El-Amarna tablets (EA 273–274) were sent over to the Egyptian court by a female ruler from Canaan (MORAN 1992: 318–319). The name of the addressor is Bēlit-nēšeti (𐎎𐎗𐎒𐎗𐎓𐎗𐎓𐎗𐎓 “Mistress of lions/the lioness”), yet the locale of her seat is not mentioned in her letters. Like many other Canaanite rulers at the time, she sent to Pharaoh her desperate request for help in face of violence and turmoil in the vicinity of her city. Since Bēlit-nēšeti mentions the sons of Milkilu, king of Gezer, Ayyaluna (biblical Aijalon) and Šarḥa (biblical Zorah), all related to the northern Shephelah, it is quite plausible that her seat was in this region. NA’AMAN suggested that she was the ruler of Beth-Shemesh (GOREN *et al.* 2004: 277). His hypothesis seems to be further confirmed by the petrographic analysis of EA 273 (GOREN *et al.* 2004: 276).³ Apparently, during the Amarna period Beth-Shemesh took advantage of its location in the Sorek Valley on the border between the major city-kingdoms of Gath (Tell es-Šafi) and Gezer, and kept its political independency (NA’AMAN 1988:18; BUNIMOVITZ 1995:326; Fig. 6. For the role of Beth-Shemesh as a border town in the Iron Age see BUNIMOVITZ and LEDERMAN 2006; 2008; 2009)

Bēlit-nēšeti’s assuming name hails the image of Mistress of Animals. There may have been some sense of conflict with her sex and her masculine role as ruler. Such conflict is not unknown in the ancient Near East and Egypt. The Sumerian King List designates the Early Dynastic female ruler of Kish, Kù/Ku(g)-Baba, a barmaid, “King” (JACOBSEN 1939: 104–105). In Egypt, the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut was portrayed as if she were physically male, with a male royal costume and a false beard. However, her royal names and title were written with feminine grammatical endings (SHAW 2004: 89; ROTH 2005: 12). It may be that to resolve that conflict and perhaps also to legitimize her authority with a symbolic display of masculinity (MCCAFFREY 2002: 391) the female ruler of Beth-Shemesh in the Amarna period presented herself as male, yet preserved the feminine Qadesh gesture along with the floral attribute, which in Canaan was an emblem of kingship.

³ It seems that FINKELSTEIN (1996:230; also in GOREN *et al.* 2004:277) erred in assuming that Beth-Shemesh could not be a proper seat for a Canaanite ruler. By doing so

he ignores the vast evidence of a prosperous Late Bronze city exposed at the site by three expeditions since 1911.

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