

# WESTERN ASIATIC TREE-GODDESSES<sup>1</sup>

By Irit Ziffer

Trees, both real and artificial, have been the object of veneration and worship in the Near East from the end of the fourth millennium BCE until this very day. Most probably trees were associated with female deities, as both the tree and the female bear fruit, and therefore are conceived as symbols of fertility, abundance and nourishment as well as carnal love. This presentation focuses on the specific visual image combining a female figure and a tree in all its varieties in western Asia. I contend that the tree was conceived as a manifestation of the female, be she naked or dressed to kill. I deliberately refrain from identifying the goddess by name unless the identification is explicit and beyond doubt, since the goddess and her offshoots were worshipped under many names and various forms. Unlike Egyptian tree goddesses,<sup>2</sup> the western Asiatic goddess was never depicted as a personified tree.<sup>3</sup> She may interchange with the tree, or the tree may be part of

her features. One wonders whether the western Asiatic goddess associated with the tree may have been the catalyst to the appearance of the Egyptian tree goddess, a sycamore or a date palm or a combination of the two,<sup>4</sup> in the New Kingdom.

## THE NAKED FEMALE AND THE TREE

The earliest extant evidence for the association of the tree with a female is an incised bone tube from a Neolithic site at HaGoshrim in the Hulah Valley featuring a caprid beside a stylized palm tree above a pubic triangle. The upper part of the tube has a pair of large eyes and eyebrows.<sup>5</sup> The iconography of this tube idol forecasts the imagery on the alabaster stele (measuring 35.3 × 18.5 cm) found along with other ceremonial objects in pit dug under an altar of the Ninhursag temple at Mari of the 29<sup>th</sup>–26<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> On the face of the stele a human figure is incised: eyes made of concentric circles, eyebrows and a nose

<sup>1</sup> Miriam Tadmor *in memoriam*.

<sup>2</sup> For the various manifestations of the Egyptian tree goddess see GOLDWASSER 1995: 120–126. A unique 7<sup>th</sup> century bronze shield from Miletus shows a stylized tree with teat-like appendages suckling a pair of bull calves. In the tondon a lion bites the neck of a bull (KLEINER 1967: 18). Possibly this extraordinary representation echoes the idea of the Egyptian nursing Tree Goddess combined with the suckling cow motif, known from rock art as early as Pre-Dynastic Egypt (Wadi Umm Salam in the Eastern Desert, see WILKINSON 2003:109), which became the hieroglyph *3mš* signifying motherly love and compassion as well as rejoicing (ERMAN and GRAPOW, Wörterbuch I: 11; KEEL 1980: 82, Compare Arabic *r'm* „to love tenderly, to treat tenderly“ (mother towards children, said also of cattle), see WELLHAUSEN 1897: 163. I am indebted to Professor Günter Kopcke of New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, for calling my attention to this work of art.

<sup>3</sup> To the best of my knowledge the goddesses depicted on an Akkadian El cylinder seal from Mari of the 24<sup>th</sup>–23<sup>rd</sup> century BCE cannot be classified as tree goddesses, as postulated by KEEL 1998: 21 and fig. 7. The two goddesses flank a god seated on a scaled mountain, their feet submerged in streams spewed from animals' heads whose necks emanate from the sides of the mountain.

The leafy branches that grow from the goddesses' shoulders and body are depicted in the characteristic convention of representing gods with their attributes in Akkadian art, where the attributes emanate from the gods' bodies, particularly the shoulders. P. AMIET (1960: 219) interpreted these goddesses as manifestations of the reunion of water and the powers of fertility. These goddesses, who cannot be identified in Mesopotamian texts, are reminiscent of the Old Hittite depictions of a goddess holding a cup sitting under a tree, her feet in a stream of water on Middle Bronze Age seals from Acemhöyük in central Anatolia, see MELLINK 1992: 197–198. Indeed, in Hittite texts that describe deities of springs and streams, these deities are depicted as females – women or young girls, holding a cup (GÜTERBOCK 1983: 205, 211). They should perhaps be understood as loci goddesses, signifying a mountainous location where a spring gushed forth, that watered a leafy tree. Such 'holy places'. erected on heights near old spreading trees are termed in the Bible as *'ašērīm*, not to be confused with *'ašērāh*, the cult idol, whatever its form (LIPÍŃSKI 1986: 93–94). For the significance of Landscape in Akkadian art see WINTER 1999.

<sup>4</sup> KEEL 1992a: 61–138.

<sup>5</sup> GETZOV 2008: 1760.

<sup>6</sup> FORTIN 1999: 234, 285: cat. no. 295; COLLINS 2003: 165.

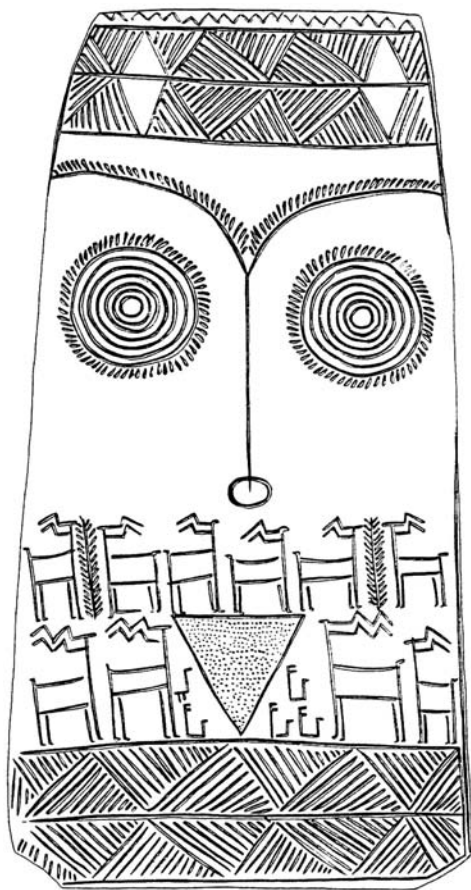


Fig. 1 Stele from Mari, Drawing: Rodika Penhas

that ends in a faint oval form, perhaps a navel. Below the nose is a pubic triangle flanked by caprids and stylized birds. Above the triangle two central caprids are flanked by two pairs of caprids, each pair flanking a branch-like tree. An abbreviated version of the Mari stele are two Early Dynastic III pottery stands from Ur, one showing two triangles beside a tree and what looks like a reed emblem and a comb, the other stand having a tree incised along its stemmed foot that rises above several such triangles (Fig. 2a, b).<sup>7</sup> The reed emblem (or standard with scarf) was the goddess Inanna/Ishtar's archaic symbol identified with the archaic sign MÙŠ/INANNA,<sup>8</sup> the comb yet another attribute of femininity, further emphasizes the

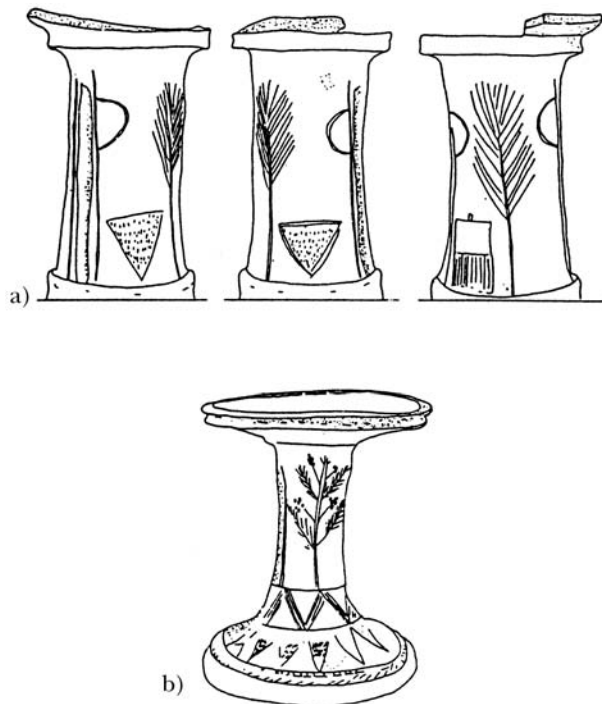


Fig. 2 Incised pottery stands from Ur, after SCHROER 1989: figs. 013, 013a

female presence.<sup>9</sup> In the third millennium the branch above pubic triangle motif seems to have been wide-spread – as evidenced by naked female figurines with branch rising from their pubes from Altn Tepe and Turang Tepe.<sup>10</sup> On the 'Ain Samiya silver cup, the hybrid creature grasps in both hands branches that sprout from a distinct pubic triangle (TADMOR 1986). This replacement of tree by the pubic triangle conveys the idea that both elements – the tree and the woman – were conceived as nurturing beings, and strengthens the supposition that the tree was perceived as a manifestation of the goddess, and that goddess and tree were interchangeable.

The Tell al-Yahudiyeh rhyton-juglet with a female head from Jericho embodies the same concept (Fig. 3).<sup>11</sup> The juglet has two openings – one, placed in her braided hair, through which the vessel was filled, while the other, placed in her mouth, served for pouring. A tree trunk that

<sup>7</sup> HOWARD-CARTER 1983: 66; SCHROER 1989: 104, figs. 013, 013a.

<sup>8</sup> SZARZYŃSKA 1987–1988. STEINKELLER (1998) and BEAULIEU (1998) propose that the sign depicts a scarf or head-band.

<sup>9</sup> EDZARD 1976–1980: 332; SPYCKET 1976–1980: 332–335; FARBER 1983: 442.

<sup>10</sup> BÁNFFY 2001: figs. 14:3, 16:1.

<sup>11</sup> BALENSI 1987: 99; ZEVULUN and ZIFFER 2007: 23–24.

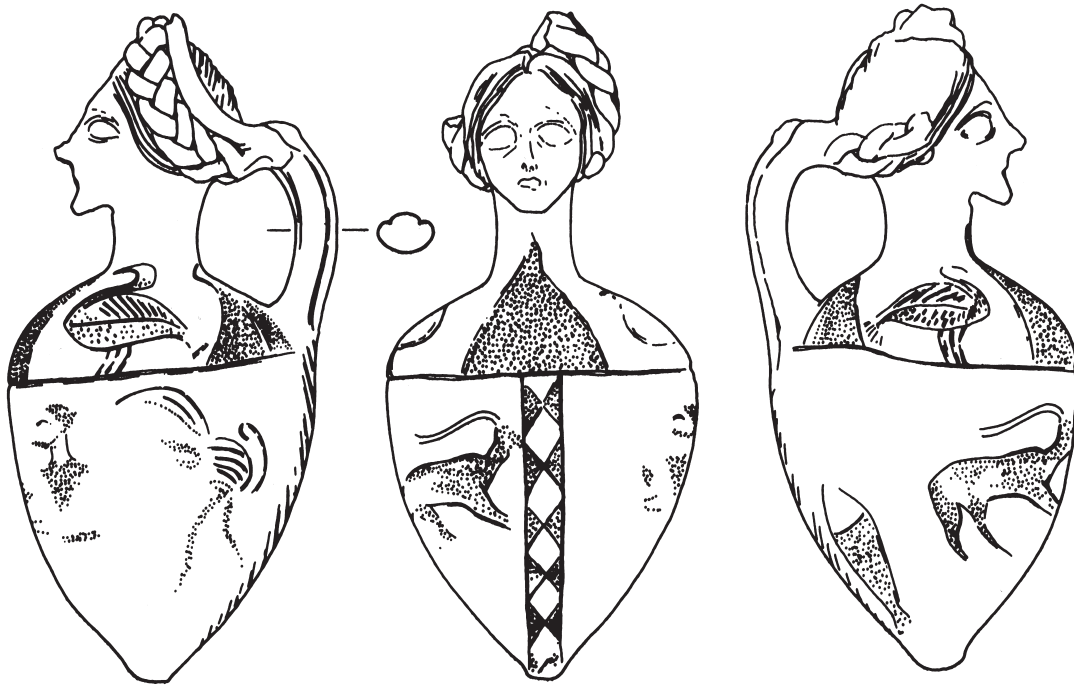


Fig. 3 Female-shaped juglet from Jericho, after BALENSI 1987: 99

grows from the base of the juglet virtually functions the body of the female figure. Flanking the tree are: on the left a horned animal and a fish behind; on the right of the trunk a human figure and a long-legged bird (ostrich?) are shown. The vase probably is a concrete example of the nurturing woman-tree: when in use the liquid would flow from the mouth, watering the tree. The well-watered life-giving tree nourishes humankind and animals alike.

A group of pear-shaped (some with an accentuated head) sheet-gold or electrum pendants from the end of the Middle Bronze Age and the beginning of the Late Bronze Age clearly demonstrates the connection between goddess and tree (Fig. 4). These piriform pendants, found mainly at Minet el-Beida, Ugarit and Tell el-'Ajjul, feature a female figure reduced to head with Hathor wig and body, with breasts and navel crudely sketched, whereas the pubic triangle is emphatically rendered. A branch grows from the pubic triangle or from the navel. The branch is not easily distinguished, it may represent the tree as a whole, an offshoot or a frond. Thus both the female and the tree are represented by parts that stand for the whole. The Syrian-Palestinian pendants have been associated with an Old Assyrian silver pudendum dedicated to Ishtar by a woman. The votive inscription calls the object TĒŠ/*baštu*,

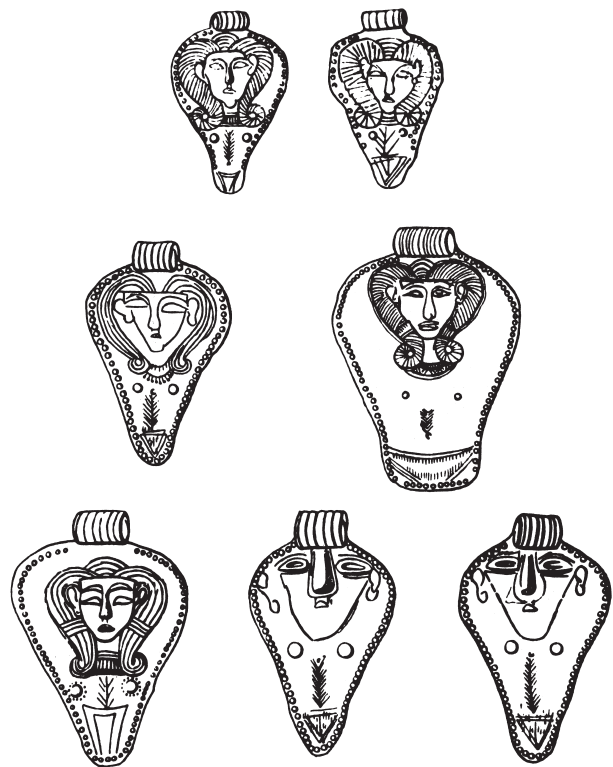


Fig. 4 Pendants, after HESTRIN 1991: 57

“bloom, dignity” (*CAD*), “Lebenskraft” (*AHw*), „dignity, (source of) pride? of deity, person, especially in personal names of protective spirits“

(CDA).<sup>12</sup> Linguistically *baštu* derives from *bāšu* “to come to shame”, which in the context of nudity of the naked goddess should perhaps be understood in the Hebrew sense of the word pair<sup>13</sup> *‘eryah-bošet* “nakedness and shame” (Micah 1:11, see also *bošet-‘erwah* in 1 Samuel 20:30) or Mishnaic *beyt bošet* “the place of the pudendum” (Tractate *Hullin*, 9:2; Jerusalem Talmud, *Yebamot*, 7:2), therefore clearly belonging to the sexual sphere.<sup>14</sup> In Mesopotamia nudity and private parts belong to Ishtar’s or Nanaya’s sphere and interest of

beauty, lust and family affairs.<sup>15</sup> Nudity in the ancient Near East, Akkadian *e/urû* was, in fact, a variation of attire,<sup>16</sup> with most textual examples occurring in contexts of poverty and want, signifying “lacking sufficient clothing” rather than “naked”.<sup>17</sup> Nudity was an attribute of the goddess. In this light, the Syrian-Palestinian pendants should be seen as signifying the sexual aspect of a local goddess, whose symbol was the tree. The small-scale pendants were amulets,<sup>18</sup> used in private, perhaps as visual evocations of courtship,



Fig. 5 Lachish ewer, after KEEL and UEHLINGER 1992: fig. 81

<sup>12</sup> WIGGERMANN 1998: 47; see also SELZ 2005: 583. ANDRAE 1922: 107 and latest reading of the inscription with bibliography therein: DELLER 1983: 14. Pudenda in frit: ANDRAE 1967: 90–91, pl. 36.

<sup>13</sup> Word pairs construct the poetic parallelism so language in Biblical and ancient Semitic literature. Word pairs are made up of a pair of synonyms, where the word used rarely is glossed by the more frequently used word. See AVISHUR 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Male pudenda are derived from the same root, *mebušim* (Deuteronomy 25:11).

<sup>15</sup> Different goddesses split off from Inanna/Ishtar’s figure, with Nanaya as goddess of love appearing in Uruk in the late third millennium BCE. See WESTENHOLZ 2002: 20.

<sup>16</sup> MOOREY 2002: 205.

<sup>17</sup> BIGGS 1998: 65b; SASSON 2000: 213.

<sup>18</sup> According to E. LIPÍŃSKI 1986: 89–90 these metal pendants were worn as earrings, as attested by the later Neo-Babylonian and Aramaic noun *qudāšu*, *qudassu* derived from West Semitic *qudāšu*, *q’dāšā*, an earring (with a nude standing figure) worn by women.

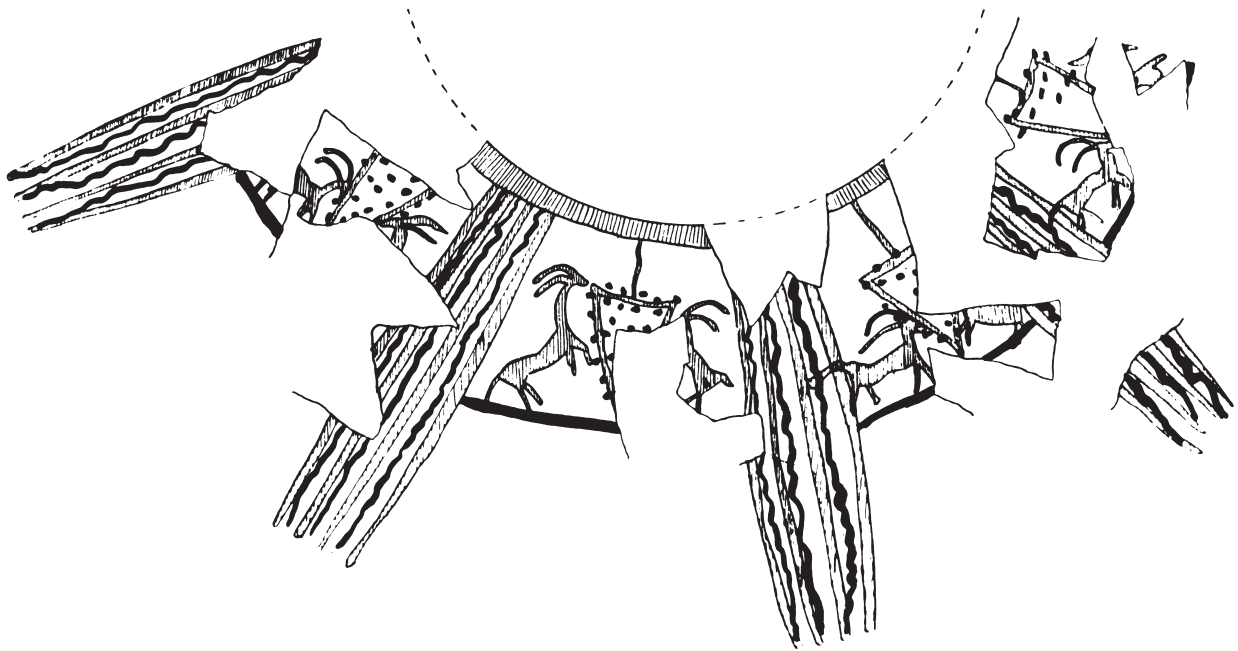


Fig. 6 Goblet from Lachish, after KEEL and UEHLINGER 1992: fig. 80

love making, childbearing and domestic harmony. Plant substituting for pubes is encountered in New Kingdom Egypt, albeit with a lily pattern, in concert with the concept of the lily in Egypt. The lily pattern representing female genitals is used in stones resembling pregnant women found at Deir el-Medina (PINCH 1993: 210).

Two pottery vessels – a ewer and a goblet – from the Fosse temple at Lachish of the 13<sup>th</sup> century demonstrate the interchangeability of trees and pubic triangles. The ewer (Fig. 5) bears an inscription on the shoulder which reads from left to right *mtn šy [l] [rb] ty 'lt* “Mattan (the donor), an offering to my lady 'Elat”.<sup>19</sup> Below the inscription, on the shoulder from left to right, a freeze of animals and trees is drawn – a lion, fallow deer, male and female of the species, a bird with spread wings and tail and a stylized tree flanked by goats. The animals move towards the tree and goats. R. Hestrin believed that the same person who decorated the ewer added the inscription in Old Canaanite script, dedicating the vessel to the goddess 'Elat (feminine of El, one of the double names of

Ashera),<sup>20</sup> whose name appears right above the tree flanked by goats.<sup>21</sup> Hestrin suggested that the tree is a manifestation of the goddess mentioned on the ewer.<sup>22</sup> Hestrin drew attention to another vessel discovered outside the same Fosse temple, a goblet on which pairs of goats flank not a tree but a pubic triangle (Fig. 6). This motif recurs in metopes that are separated by vertical undulating bands representing streams of water. This combination is reminiscent of the Jericho juglet in that it conveys the idea of a female/tree nourishing the animal world.

The combination – nude female and tree – occurs once more in a telling type of Late Bronze Age figurines, extant in a small fragment – from Tel Aphek, Tel Harasim and in a better preserved fragment from Revadim (Fig. 7).<sup>23</sup> The hands of this nude female, whose hair falls in two curls to her navel, hold open her vulva, above which is a ridge that stands for the pubic hair. Two naked babies with uplifted arms are placed in the area between arms and curls, below each breast, possibly representing suckling infants, or twin foetus-

<sup>19</sup> The offering being the ewer itself and perhaps its contents, presented to the goddess 'Elat at her temple (NAVEH 1987: 33).

<sup>20</sup> DEL OLMO LETE 2004: 52.

<sup>21</sup> 'Elat “goddess” parallels Akkadian *iltum*. Binger (quoted in STUCKEY 2002: 41) proposed that 'Elat should be

understood in the sense of a living tree “oak” or “terebinth”.

<sup>22</sup> HESTRIN 1987: 74.

<sup>23</sup> BECK 2002b; GIVON 2002. For an interpretation see MARGALIT 1994.

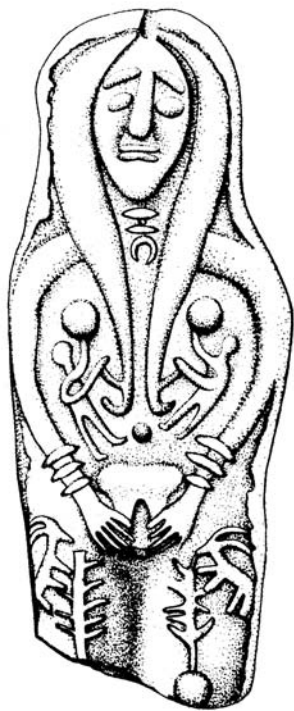


Fig. 7 Figurine from Revadim, after ORNAN 2007: fig. 3



Fig. 8 Goddess suckling child under the date palm, after KEEL 1992b: fig. 129

es.<sup>24</sup> A tree flanked by a caprid nibbling at its branches is modeled on each thigh. She wears three bracelets on each wrist and a crescent pendant on her neck. The crescent pendant is most probably associated with the waxing moon, whose Akkadian title is *inbu*, “fruit, flower, sexual appeal”.<sup>25</sup> This title refers to the cyclical self-begetting of the moon, and is therefore associated with the menstrual cycle as well as with the fruit of the womb.<sup>26</sup> Thus this type of figurine: a naked woman nursing her babies, wearing crescent pendant and decorated with trees and goats is loaded with allusions to sexual appeal and fertility. The same idea of woman suckling an infant in combi-

nation with a tree is reflected on an orthostat from the North Gate at Karatepe (last third of the 8<sup>th</sup> century), configuring a goddess nursing a child under a date palm (Fig. 8), a scene ultimately of Egyptian derivation,<sup>27</sup> but known already from the interior ivory panel of the royal bed from Ras Shamra – Ugarit (14<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century BCE).<sup>28</sup> The suckling goddess finds its counterpart in the Cretan like bare breasted goddess on a 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE ivory pyxis lid from Tomb 3 at Minet al-Beidha, shown seated atop a mountain and holding out branches for two caprids to feed on.<sup>29</sup>

A recently published stand from a sacred precinct at Tel Rehov, dating from the 10<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup>

<sup>24</sup> ORNAN 2007 interprets the figure on the plaques as a mortal female pregnant with twins in a state of pain or labour pangs, and not as a goddess. She argues that the plaques were used as amulets for the protection of the mother of twins.

<sup>25</sup> CDA: 129, s.v. *inbu*. KREBERNIK 1995: 361. In an Ishtar hymn the goddess is said to be *za'nat inbi miqeam u kuzbam*, “she possesses freshness, good color, and youthful charm in abundance”, see LANDSBERGER 1967: 17 n. 52.

<sup>26</sup> KREBERNIK 1995: 366. The title of the moon-god *inbu bēl arhi* “fruit, lord of the new month” refers to the self-begetting of the child-moon from the old moon of the

last month, see LAMBERT 1987: 27–31 for the sexual overtones of “Fruit” in Sumerian love lyrics.

<sup>27</sup> GACHET-BIZOLLON 2001: 33–40; Isis – anthropomorphic or as tree goddess – suckling the king in 15<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century representations (Thutmose III, Amenophis II, Sethos I, FRANKFORT 1969: 188; KEEL 1992a: 64–66, 96).

<sup>28</sup> WINTER 1979: 121; 1985: 341–342. The bare-chested goddess suckling twin figures symmetrically wears a Hittite symbol between the horns of her headdress and a Hathor wig. Yet the overall style is clearly Syrian.

<sup>29</sup> POURSAT 1977: 231–232, 242; DAY 1992: 187–189; CAUBET 2002: 224.

centuries has two molded and applied naked goddesses with arms stretched to the sides of their bodies flanking two oval openings which in turn flank an incised palm tree. Three round openings, the middle one centered above the top of the palm tree, were cut above tree and goddesses.<sup>30</sup> The excavator has proposed that the front panel with its openings represents a temple or city façade. Yet the position of the oval openings in regard to the trunk may be construed as heavy date clusters, while the three round openings may stand for celestial bodies.

#### THE DRESSED FEMALE AND THE TREE

In the 25<sup>th</sup> excavation season a square stone base was unearthed in the center of court 106 of Zimri-Lim's palace at Mari.<sup>31</sup> The base is situated exactly at the intersection of the two diagonals of the court and on the axis of room complex 106/64/65 (Fig. 10). The base consists of two superimposed limestone tiles, the lower larger stone (110 × 120) measuring 42 cm in height, the upper stone (60 × 90) measuring 25–26 cm tall. A large hole, measuring 31/32 × 30, 70 cm deep cuts through both stones. No object connected with

this base was found, neither during A. Parrot's excavation nor in the renewed excavation by J. Margueron, who reconstructed the hollow base as a "flower pot" for a date palm. In a recent study by Durand and Charpin of the text utilized by Parrot to identify court 131, the epigraphists pointed out the fact that the palm mentioned in the Mari texts in conjunction with a court appears in the single, not the plural form.<sup>32</sup> Therefore the combination reads "court of the palm", not "court of palms", as has been previously read, proving that the court was not a palm grove but housed a single palm tree. Indeed, palm trees are rare in the area, since the drop of temperature in the winter renders regular cultivation of the date palm difficult. This adds to the significance of the single palm tree planted in the middle of court 106, which we may imagine embellished with precious materials, conceived as the source of life for its abundance of fruit. Therefore it should come as no surprise, that the palm features in the investiture painting (Fig. 9), which was found in situ at eye level on the southern wall of the same court to the right of the doorway leading from court 106 to the audience hall 64 (in other words on the right hand façade of the audi-

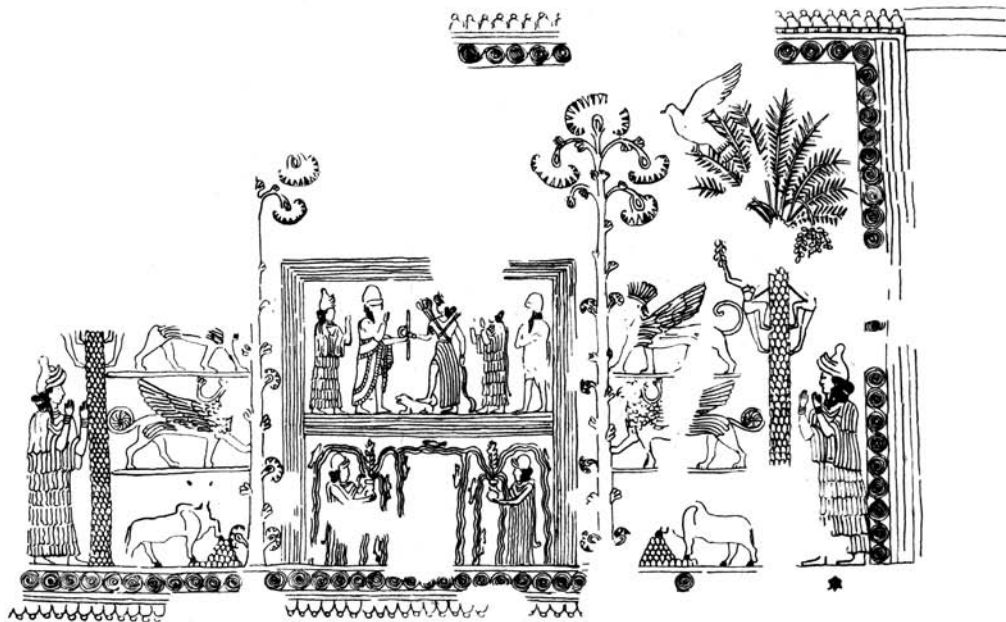


Fig. 9 Wall painting from Court 106 in the palace of Mari

<sup>30</sup> MAZAR 2003: 148–152, esp. 150–151.

<sup>31</sup> MARGUERON 1987.

<sup>32</sup> ARM XXI, 259: 14'–15' *bit kunukkim ša kisal gišimmarim*; CHARPIN 1983: 213.

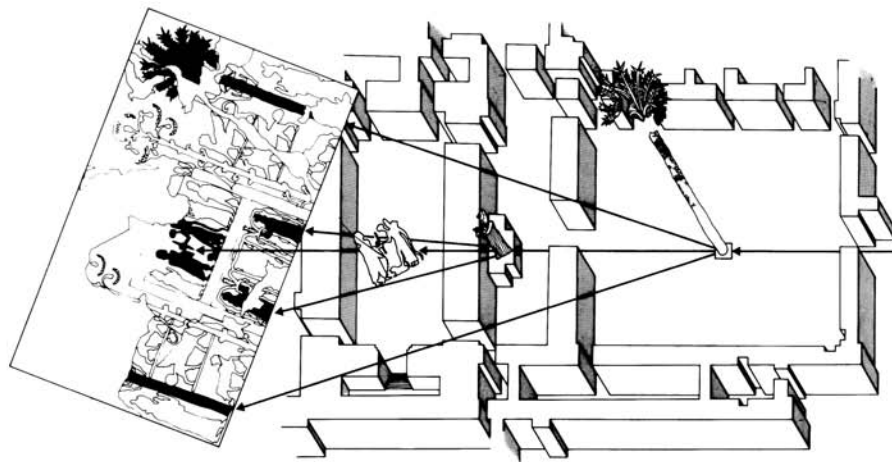


Fig. 10 Program of Court 106 and the Investiture painting, after MARGUERON 1992: pl. 46

ence hall. In a more recent study Margueron investigated the program of the investiture painting exploring rhythm and measures that rule this unparalleled composition.<sup>33</sup> Margueron observed that the mural, measuring  $175 \times 2.50$  m is based on a tripartite division. Flanking the central panel are tall date palms, rising the entire height of the painting. Two men are climbing the trunk, grasping the date clusters.<sup>34</sup> A bluish dove, definitely a feral pigeon, flies off the uppermost crest of the palm. Next is a vertical frieze of three quadruped

fantastic creatures (a winged human-headed lion, a winged bird-headed lion and a bull man), facing a palmette tree, definitely based upon the date palm.<sup>35</sup> The investiture panel, showing the king in a tall oval headdress receiving the ring and the rod, insignia of authority and power,<sup>36</sup> from the warrior Ishtar, her right foot resting on a couchant lion, occupies the central part of the painting. Below the investiture scene two minor goddesses holding overflowing vases are shown. Placing the two scenes one on top of the other was the

<sup>33</sup> MARGUERON 1992.

<sup>34</sup> The men climbing the date palm gather the date clusters, compare, for example a date harvest in association with the warrior Ishtar approached by two votaries BOEHMER 1965: no. 379, see below Fig. 16. METZGER 1983 in his caption to fig. 17a interprets the date gathering as a ritual harvest of dates. If indeed date gathering preceded or accompanied the investiture of the king at Mari, it may be concluded that the ceremony took place in September-October, the time of the date harvest and the autumnal equinox. The re-establishment of a king's rule was celebrated on the New Year, which, according to *ARMI* 50: 5–20 (Yasmah-Addu) at Mari took place in the 12 month, Addar, that is at the spring equinox (FALKENSTEIN 1959: 157; DALLEY 1984: 135). Nonetheless, according to Syrian tradition, for example at third millennium Ebla, the New year coincided with the autumnal equinox; or it may have been celebrated twice a year, as at Ur (see BLACK 1981: 41), and later in Seleucid Uruk (COHEN 1993: 427). The Mari letter would exclude that the date harvest actually preceded the investiture. This would mean that the goddess' identification with the tree gains double importance: although the re-investiture of the king took place in the spring, the tree is shown carrying

an abundance of fruit, as befits the goddess who was perceived as the *numen* in the date palm. According to Mesopotamian tradition, the king's rule was re-established through rituals of divine love (NISSINEN 2001: 128), see discussion of the date-palm as a metaphor for the bride on the *Song of Songs*, below.

<sup>35</sup> WINTER 2003: 253\* (see, however, YORK 1975: 274, who suggests an Egyptian papyrus umbel prototype for the "flowering tree" of the Mari investiture scene). These stylized trees have been dubbed "Tree of Life" or "Sacred Tree", though these names are unknown in cuneiform texts. See WATANABE 1994: 580.

<sup>36</sup> Ishtar's function as bestower of kingship and protectress of her city may have contributed to her bellicose character, since according to Sumerian tradition, kingship followed the fortune of arms. See WESTENHOLZ 2002: 19. This association between Ishtar and kingship is also evident in the façade of the throne room of the southern palace of Babylon. The façade was decorated with colored glazed bricks including a lower frieze of striding lions, above which is a representation of palm columns with volute capitals. The whole field has rosette borders. Lions, palms and rosettes are all emblematic of the goddess Ishtar. See MARZAHN 1995: 32–33.



Mesopotamian way to create the illusion of three dimensional space and perspective, as has been demonstrated by M.-Th. Barrelet.<sup>37</sup> The linear layout of the painting orders the eye to follow the trail from the trees towards the goddesses with flowing vases into the innermost hall, where the ceremony of investing the king took place. M.-Th. Barrelet proposed that the painting reproduced the reality of the place where the investiture actually was enacted, and suggested it was the Ishtar temple.<sup>38</sup> A. Parrot maintained that the mural was a faithful copy of court 106, where it had been found in situ, with the adjacent audience hall 64, where the fountain statue of the goddess with flowing vase was placed, undoubtedly one of a pair, according to Mesopotamian law of symmetry,<sup>39</sup> and the innermost hall 65, where the investiture ceremony took place.<sup>40</sup> Margueron further demonstrated that when two diagonals are drawn from the corners of the painting they intersect on Ishtar's chin, indicating that she is the heart of the entire composition, and parallels the date palm, at the core of the Court of the Palm (Fig. 10). It seems that the painter designed the whole composition according to the focal point of the event – the goddess Ishtar meeting the king – and from there subtly developed his compositional scheme on several planes in a most intellectually inventive spirit that accorded with the symbolism of the event. Margueron's reconstruction allows for the identification of the goddess Ishtar in the painting with the date palm, the life-giving tree and the focal point of the palace, after which the court had been named. The duplication of the actual date palm flanking the panel served a decorative purpose that accorded with the tripartite scheme of the composition.<sup>41</sup> The stylized trees and fantastic creatures represent



Fig. 11 Neo-Assyrian seal, after KEEL 1992b: fig. 88

elements flanking the doorway, the fantastic beings guarding the stylized tree<sup>42</sup> as well as the entrance to the throne room, similarly to the façade of the Sin temple at Khorsabad of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>43</sup> At the same time this duplication underscores the meaning of the tree as emblematic of abundance.<sup>44</sup> This identification of the Ishtar with the tree is further confirmed by a Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal in the British Museum (Fig. 11).<sup>45</sup> The seal depicts a beardless male (eunuch) votary approaching the warrior Ishtar who stands on a couchant lion. The lion is looking back at a palm tree that stands behind the goddess. Crossed rampant ibexes follow behind the tree.<sup>46</sup> Ishtar and the tree stand as apposition for each other. This Neo-Assyrian seal features in A. Livingstone's *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* (SAA 3) as an illustration (fig. 4) to Assurbanipal's hymn to Ishtar of Nineveh. The opening line reads: "O palm tree, daughter of Nineveh, stag of the lands!"<sup>47</sup> The caption to the illustration reads: "Ishtar, standing on a panther, flanked by a palm tree and ibexes symbolizing her lover Tammuz".<sup>48</sup> The palm tree is also an epithet of Ishtar of Babylon, who is addressed as mother,

<sup>37</sup> BARRELET 1968: 209.

<sup>38</sup> BARRELET 1950.

<sup>39</sup> Note also that the frame of the whole panel is made of a guilloche band, representing water, see ALEXANDER 1991: 180–181.

<sup>40</sup> PARROT 1950.

<sup>41</sup> A slab depicting "Lady (Ištar) between Palms" flanked (together with a Humbaba mask) the portal complex at Tell al-Rimah in its initial Old Assyrian phase. In the Nuzi phase it was removed and defaced, and then replaced by another slab depicting a bull man between palms. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Middle Assyrians restored the palm lady to the pedestal flanking the door of the temple (HOWARD-CARTER 1983).

<sup>42</sup> For fantastic creatures guarding the stylized tree compare the Cherubs guarding the Tree of Life in *Genesis* 3:24.

<sup>43</sup> BARRELET 1950: 25.

<sup>44</sup> WINTER 2003: 254\*.

<sup>45</sup> COLLON 1987: no. 773.

<sup>46</sup> For crossed ibexes near a date palm, see Middle Assyrian cylinder seal MOORTGAT VAR 587 (MATTHEWS 1990: no. 302), where the pair of crossed ibexes comprises a male and a female suckling its young.

<sup>47</sup> LIVINGSTONE 1989: 18–20.

<sup>48</sup> Note that COLLON 2001: 128 identifies the palm tree as the topos symbol of Babylonia.

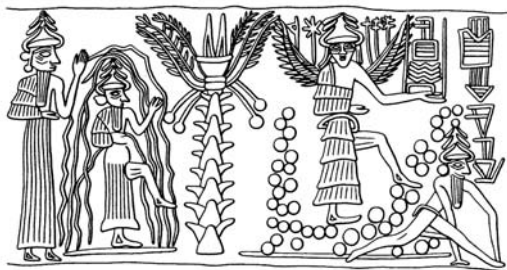


Fig. 12 Seal of Zagganita, after KEEL 1992b: fig. 86a

“a palm of carnelian, most beautiful of the beautiful ones”.<sup>49</sup> Both passages establish beyond question that Ishtar was associated with the date palm. S. Parpola contends that in Assyrian iconography Ishtar as the date palm was represented by the trunk of the stylized sacred tree. He believes that the Assyrian sacred tree evolved into the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, where the trunk – Tif’eret, equals Ishtar as beauty.<sup>50</sup>

The association of the warrior goddess with the tree dates back to the third millennium BCE, as exemplified by two Akkadian cylinder seals. That of Zagganita the scribe in the Louvre (Fig. 12) shows the winged and armed goddess triumphantly climbing a mountain next to which grows a date palm.<sup>51</sup> Two gods advance towards the tree, their hands raised in blessing, indicating that the tree, embodying Ishtar’s aspect of abundance, is perceived as the focus of veneration. On the other seal the goddess, approached by two devotees, is seated on a lions flanked throne. Two figures harvest fruit from the date palm growing behind the devotees.<sup>52</sup> The surroundings have been interpreted as the goddesses’ temple garden.<sup>53</sup>

The very same symbolism, which includes goddess, palm tree and caprids, and lions features on the 10<sup>th</sup> century cult stand from Ta’anakh found by Lapp (Fig. 13). On this stand, however, the combination occurs with a naked goddess: in the

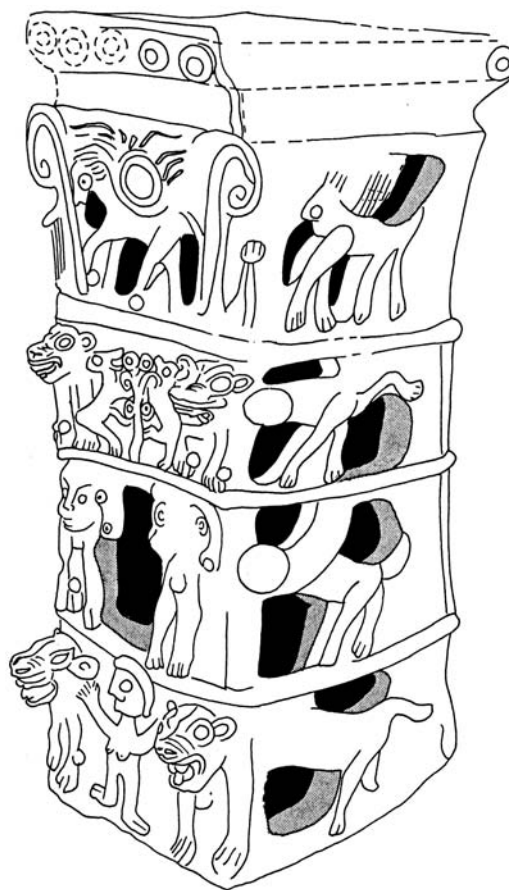


Fig. 13 Ta’anakh cult stand, after BECK 2002: 403, fig. 8

lower register the goddess places her hands on the heads of two lionesses, while in the third register lions flank tree and rampant goats.<sup>54</sup> Lions flanking tree are depicted on the painted cult stand from Megiddo VIIB, where the date palm, whose trunk is cut out, stands in the *cella* thus representing the idol of worship.<sup>55</sup> A drawing on pithos A from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud (c. 800 BCE), which also bears an inscription mentioning Yahweh and his Asherah, combines a stylized palm and goats placed over a striding lion (Fig. 14).<sup>56</sup>

<sup>49</sup> W.G. LAMBERT in *Unity and Diversity* 1975 H. GOEDICKE and J.J.M ROBERTS, eds: 123, quoted in PARPOLA 1997: n. 133 p. XCV. See also NISSINEN 2001: 124.

<sup>50</sup> PARPOLA 1993: 177, and note 73; Id. 1997: n. 133 p. XCV.

<sup>51</sup> BOEHMER 1965: 67, no. 379; AMIET 1973: no. 257.

<sup>52</sup> BOEHMER 1965: no. 383.

<sup>53</sup> DIETRICH 2001: 291.

<sup>54</sup> BECK 2002c: 403–411.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*: 413.

<sup>56</sup> J. HADLEY identifies this configuration as the Asherah mentioned in the inscription, see HADLEY 1987: 204; 2000: 153. The lion is an acolyte of both the dressed and the naked goddess in the Levant. For representations of the naked goddess with the lion in the Late Bronze Levant, see KEEL and UEHLINGER 1992: 75–76, fig. 70 from Tel Harasim. For the combination palmette and lion as manifestations of the goddess on lion stone bowls, see HESTRIN 1988.

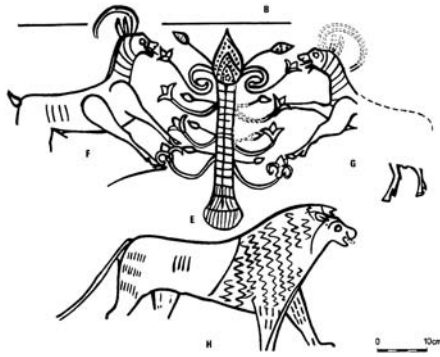


Fig. 14 Painting on Pithos A, Kuntillet 'Ajrud, after BECK 2002: 98, fig. 4

In the 'Ajrud drawing, the lion supports the tree, which is the botanical manifestation of the female goddess mounted on a lion, whose anthropomorphic form was eliminated from the drawing.<sup>57</sup> Several cult stands from the favissa of Yavneh (9<sup>th</sup> century BCE) in Philistia feature a tree (and goats) flanked by naked women. The naked women are sometimes shown standing on bull head pedestals, or the bullheads are slightly set off the feet of the women (Fig. 15a).<sup>58</sup> On one of these stands, the females mounted on bull heads originally flanked a bull head (now missing)<sup>59</sup> surmounted by a tree-trunk with imbrication, the supplemental image representing the naked female (Fig. 15b).<sup>60</sup> Also at Yavneh, the female, modeled in the round, appears in a doorway

(whose lintel morphs into a winged disk) between highly naturalistic palm trees applied to the walls of an elaborate red-slipped stand (Fig. 15c).

The biblical goddess represented as a tree was Asherah. Asherah is the female counterpart or spouse of the male god, and is envisioned as a tree, though the scripture does not say what kind tree it is. In *Deuteronomy* 16:21 Asherah is planted. In *Deuteronomy* 7:5 it is felled and in *Judges* 6:26–29 the Asherah that stands by the altar of Baal is cut down, its wood used as fuel for the burnt offering. During the Monarchial period an “abominable image” *mip̄lešet* (I Kings 15:13) and a “graven image”, *pešel* (II Kings 21:7) of Asherah are mentioned, indicating that Asherah was introduced into the official cult of the Jerusalem temple by Judean kings (II Kings 23:6–7), and was considered spouse of Yahweh in some circles.<sup>61</sup>

#### THE DATE-PALM IN LOVE POETRY

When the Biblical lover sings his beloved's praises in the Song of Songs he compares her stature and to the female date-palm (*SoS* 7:8–9a), while she compares him to a cedar tree (5:15,<sup>62</sup> Just as the date palm is tall and hard to climb, so the bride is unattainable, a locked garden (4:12).<sup>63</sup> The bride's breasts are envisioned as clusters (7:8 *'aškolot*)<sup>64</sup> – yet, whereas cluster usually designates a bunch of grapes, there is no doubt that here date clusters are meant, heavy with sweet, succulent golden-hued fruit. Indeed, in the next verse the lover says: “I

<sup>57</sup> BECK 2002a: 105–109, fig. 4. In the 'Ajrud drawing the eliminated anthropomorphic goddess could be a naked goddess standing on the back of a lion, as known from Late Bronze Age representations on two gold plaques from Minet el-Beida (NEGBI 1976: 99–100, nos. 1700–1701, pls. 53–54), on a bronze pendant from Akko (BEN-ARIEH and EDELSTEIN 1977) and on the clay plaque from Tel Harasim (GIVON 2002: 26\*, figs. 2:1, 3:1); or a warrior goddess, as on the two Iron Age pendants – one from Tel Miqne, the other from Tel Dan – warrior goddess on a bull (BIRAN 1999). The Iron Age pendants with the warrior goddess exemplify Assyrian impact on Philistia (GITIN 1997: 92–93). For an iconographic study of the pendant from Tel Miqne see ORNAN 2001: 246–249.

<sup>58</sup> ZIFFER and KLETTER 2007: 58–63; ZIFFER 2010: 77–79.

<sup>59</sup> Indicated by the hole for insertion of the bull head. At Yavneh, bull heads were pegged into small round holes prior to firing. The necks were pulled through these sockets; once pegged, the surface was smoothed so that

the holes could not be seen anymore. So far unknown in Palestine, this technical detail is reminiscent of the Cypriot potter's tradition of handles attached by use of a tenon pushed through the body of a vessel from the Early Bronze Age through the Late Bronze Age also employed for attachment of legs in Base Ring bull statuettes.

<sup>60</sup> Hittite Anatolia saw a proliferation of divine representations of one and the same deity, who could also be manifested in various forms: human or animal shaped, as well as taking the forms of an object or a stone monument (COLLINS 2005: 23–29).

<sup>61</sup> KLETTER 1996: 76. Jaroš has suggested that the adoration of the tree may be traced visually in Late Bronze through Iron Age II seals from Palestine and the Phoenician coast configurating a central tree flanked by human figures with raised arms (JAROŠ 1980: 210–211).

<sup>62</sup> For a gendered reading of the date-palm as feminine and conifers as male, see COLLINS 2006.

<sup>63</sup> ZAKOVITCH 1992: 124.

<sup>64</sup> BLOCH 1995: 14–15.



Fig. 15 a–c Stands from Yavneh, Photos: Leonid Padrul, Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv



Fig. 16 Date harvest cylinder seal, after METZGER 1983: fig. 17a

said: ‘I will climb up into the palm-tree, I will take hold of the branches thereof’. The branches, the object he lusts to lay hold of, are the date palm spadix with fruit, Hebrew: *sansinnim*, Akkadian: *sissinu*, Sumerian: AN, a word play on Ishtar’s Sumerian counterpart’s name: in-an-na(k) meaning “Lady of Heaven” and also “Lady of the Date Clusters”. An Akkadian seal shows figures grasping date clusters (Fig. 16)<sup>65</sup> which may be interpreted as harvesting, or as veneration. Curiously, a Middle Bronze Age scarab from Gezer depicts a palm tree bearing heavy date clusters flanked by a falcon-headed figure and a crocodile-headed figure, both raising their hands in adoration towards the tree (KEEL 1995: 225, fig. 512). Moreover, freshly harvested dates are the jewels of the bride Inanna, who welcomes her lover at the gate of her store house in Sumerian love poetry. Sumerians had a word for date cluster shaped pieces of jewellery (a-an-šu-ša-lá). A bracelet of date spadix charms is mentioned among the jewellery pieces in an Old

Babylonian love song, whereby the woman portrays herself as being fully bedecked with the most precious jewels.<sup>66</sup> The diadem of Queen Puabi of Ur has items of gold sewn onto it in spadix shape (with a carnelian date), in the form of male inflorescence and apple shaped pieces. All these vegetal forms are associated with sexuality.<sup>67</sup>

The Biblical verse recalls the Mari investiture mural, the two reapers in basket-work slings climbing the palm,<sup>68</sup> reaching for the date clusters. Since the preceding verse and the following verse refer to the bride’s breasts, the spadix with fruit may be a metaphor for her breasts. The lover refers to the palm as the epitome of sensuality and fruitfulness, an image fit to describe carnal love. It would seem that the Mari painting and the poet in the Song of Songs drew from a common Near Eastern repertoire of love imagery that found its way into art and literature alike.<sup>69</sup>

This rapid survey of the Western Asiatic tree-goddess indicates that the home of the goddess identified with the tree was in the Levant. In Mesopotamia proper, where the portrayal of naked goddesses was avoided, except when seen as an attribute of the goddess, it was Inanna/Ishtar, the warrior and love goddess who was identified with the tree, specifically the date-palm.

#### EPILOGUE

The pagan Arab worship<sup>70</sup> of the date-palm as a goddess (Fig. 17) is reflected in the Qur’an, Sura

<sup>65</sup> LANDSBERGER 1967: 19b. Inanna as “Lady of the Date Palm” represented the *numen* of the city’s storehouse. See JACOBSEN 1970: 323, 375. Also see BOEHMER 1965: no. 383. SCHROER 1989: 127, fig. 049.

<sup>66</sup> PAUL 1995: 591.

<sup>67</sup> PITTMAN 1998: 92–94. MILLER 1999, 2000. The goddess Aruru (later another name for the generic “mother goddess”) was “mother of dates” (Sumerian: ama zú-lum-ma-ke<sub>4</sub>) and “mother of apples” (Sumerian: ama hašhur-ra-ke<sub>4</sub>) (BLACK 2005: 47). For apples as erotic metaphors compare Song of Songs 2: 3,5; 7: 9; 8: 5. For apple shaped jewellery in the Bible: Proverbs 25: 11. “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.” See, however, LAMBERT 1987: 31, contending that apples are nowhere to be found in Mesopotamian art, compares with Greek *Melon*, that can be used of other tree fruits.

<sup>68</sup> For Akkadian *tubatū*, the sling-like support and its survival into Aramean *tublyā*, Arabic *ṭabliyyah*, see LANDSBERGER 1967: 28. Date harvest is depicted in Akkadian cylinder seals, see BOEHMER 1965: 125.

<sup>69</sup> See n. 25, 26.

<sup>70</sup> In the valleys of Nakhla; the name derives from *nakhl*, “date palm”, presumably due to the abundance of palms in the valleys, see SIMA 2000: 217–239. A Ugaritic place name “Grove of Date-Palms” has been suggested, see WATSON 2004: 116. (compare *kinhalim niṭṭayu*, “like palm-groves that stretch out” in Numbers 24: 6; *Jewish Study Bible*: 333). On the way from Mecca to al-Ta’if was an idol of al-‘Uzza which was specially venerated by Quraysh and Banu Kinana. Three *Samura* trees were associated with the deity. After the conquest of Mecca Muhammad ordered Khalid b. al-Walid to cut down the trees and destroyed the idol (MONTGOMERY-WATT 1993: 924). The palm tree was associated with a goddess. The Prophet was associated with the “olive tree” or the “tree of Muhammad”, which may be interpreted as the *sidrat al-muntaha* “the tree of utmost bounds” or the tree of light, whose roots are in Paradise and whose crest in the realm of God (*Sura* 53:16), see MILSTEIN 1999: 35–39.

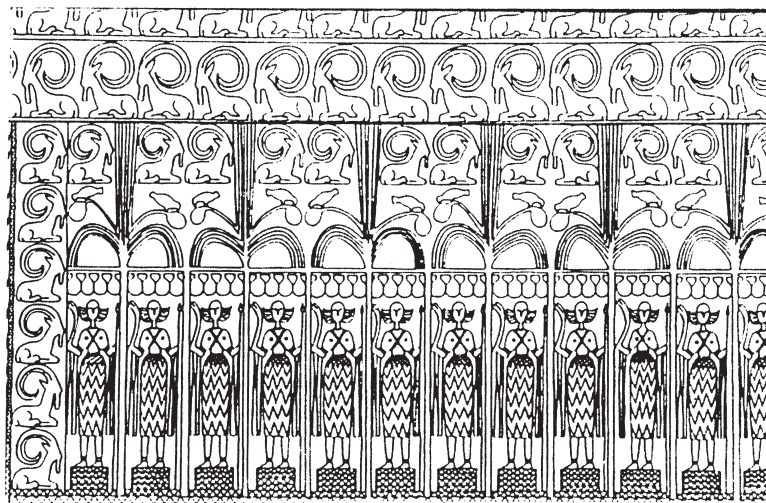


Fig. 17 Lintel of the portal of a temple at Hatam, showing goddesses flanking a date-palm, on the branches of which birds (doves?) are perched, and rows of ibexes, c. mid-first millennium BCE, after HOYLAND 2001: 168 fig. 4

19:24–26, which states that the Virgin retires alone beneath the palm tree to give birth to her child. The child having arrived she laments, driven to despair by her desolation and loneliness. But the God-child immediately speaks and advises his mother to shake the tree; succulent dates fall from it in abundance, while a spring of fresh water emerges from the sand. Refreshed and nourished, the Virgin rejoins her kinsfolk with her child.

The balsam tree at Matariyyah, known today as the Tree of the Virgin, is one of the pilgrimage sites of Coptic Christianity, connected with the Holy Family's stay in Egypt (Matthew 2:13–20), of which Egyptian tradition makes a great deal. The tree of Matariyyah (Fig. 18) is said to have offered shade to the Holy Family. According to the Ethiopian *synaxarion*, when the Holy Family approached Matariyyah there was a staff in Joseph's hand, where-with he used to smite Jesus, but Joseph gave the rod to Jesus. Jesus said to his mother that they should tarry there, near the tree. Jesus took the rod and broke it into little pieces that he planted at the place, and dug with his own divine hands a well,

whose water had an exceedingly sweet odour. Jesus watered with his hands the pieces of wood which he had planted, and they took root, and put forth leaves, and an exceedingly sweet perfume was emitted by them. As these pieces grew they were called 'balsam'. And Jesus said to his mother: "these balsam which I have planted shall abide here forever, and from them shall be taken the oil for Christian baptism".<sup>71</sup> The Pseudo-Matthew Gospel replaces the balsam with a palm tree, a tradition that is also preserved in the Qur'an: the Virgin saw the palm tree and wished to rest under it.<sup>72</sup> Christians considered the Matariyyah fountain's water thaumaturgic, and its fame spread far and wide. A Coptic priest of the twelfth century, Abu l-Makarim, writes that the when envoys of the Greeks, the Franks, the Ethiopians and the Nubians came to the caliph's court they would customarily go to Matariyyah, immerse in the water and pray.<sup>73</sup> The caliphs used to distribute the oil of the balsam among the sovereigns of Europe and of the Orient, to be used in religious ceremonies and in the anointing of kings.<sup>74</sup> The spring attracted

<sup>71</sup> MEINARDUS 2002: 75; WISSA-WASSEF 1988: 122–124 on the production of holy oils.

<sup>72</sup> The Virgin resting under the palm tree brings to mind another biblical heroine, who sat under the palm named after her – the prophetess Deborah, who judged Israel as "she sat under the palm-tree of Deborah between Ramah and Beth-el" (Judges 4:5). OT feminist scholarship has tended to ascribe Deborah's military role to Canaanite or Mesopotamian prototypes of the

bellicose goddess – Anat and Ishtar respectively (ACKERMAN 2003: 177 and there previous literature; FRYMER-KENSKY 2002: 46, 50).

<sup>73</sup> KEDAR 2001: 89.

<sup>74</sup> WISSA-WASSEF 1988: 71–72. Today the balsam oil is used for the confirmation and baptizing, as well as for consecration of new churches, altars, baptistries, icons and sacred vases. Only the priest is allowed to touch the vase containing the oil. See *ibid.*: 122.



Fig. 18 Tree of the Virgin, Matariyya, November 2004

also Muslim worshippers, because of Islam's positive perception of Mary and Jesus. The balsam shrubs have long disappeared. The sycamore that now stands at Matariyyah was planted in 1672. This venerable tree fell, due to old age on June 14, 1904, but fortunately a living shoot of it remains to this day. Opposite the garden with the Tree of the Virgin the Jesuites dedicated in 1904 a

church to the Holy Family. Annually on December 8, the Catholics participate in a pilgrimage to both the church and the Tree of the Virgin. The cult of the Tree of the Virgin, celebrated on the 24<sup>th</sup> of the month of Pakhons (May) of the Coptic calendar, to commemorate Christ's entry to Egypt and the balsam tree, must be a heritage of Pharaonic Egypt.

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