

Evidence for the Role of *Asherah* in Israelite Religion

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ABSTRACT

In the early days of Israelite religion, cultic practices and icon worship were common. One example of such practice involves the term *asherah*. In the Ancient Near East, *asherah* referred to a sacred object crafted from wood that was located near places of religious gathering. It is also possible that the term *asherah* is a reference to the ancient goddess Astarte worshipped by Ugaritic cultures. A third possibility, evidenced by the tendency of cultures of the ancient Near East to have little to no separation between deities and their physical representations and the non-static nature of religion, is that the *asherim* existed originally as a means to invoke the goddess Asherah, facilitating her role in ancient society. Over time, the line between deity and cultic object would have become more defined, simultaneously creating literary confusion for ancient sources such as the Deuteronomist.

Whether an entity or an object, *asherah* was eventually purged from Israelite society. Evidence of attempts to do so lie in the reforms of King Josiah laid out in the second book of Kings. This presentation will explore the possibilities of the nature of *asherim* through the analysis of ancient texts and the language within used to describe the *asherim* and their function in Israelite society. It will synthesize the arguments for common perception of *asherah* and describe the role of the deity and/or relic in non-Israelite cultures of the Ancient Near East. Beyond literary description and analysis, this presentation will focus on material culture remains to describe the actual presence of *asherim* in Ancient Israelite cultural practice, drawing on data gathered from the excavations of Kuntillet 'ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom.

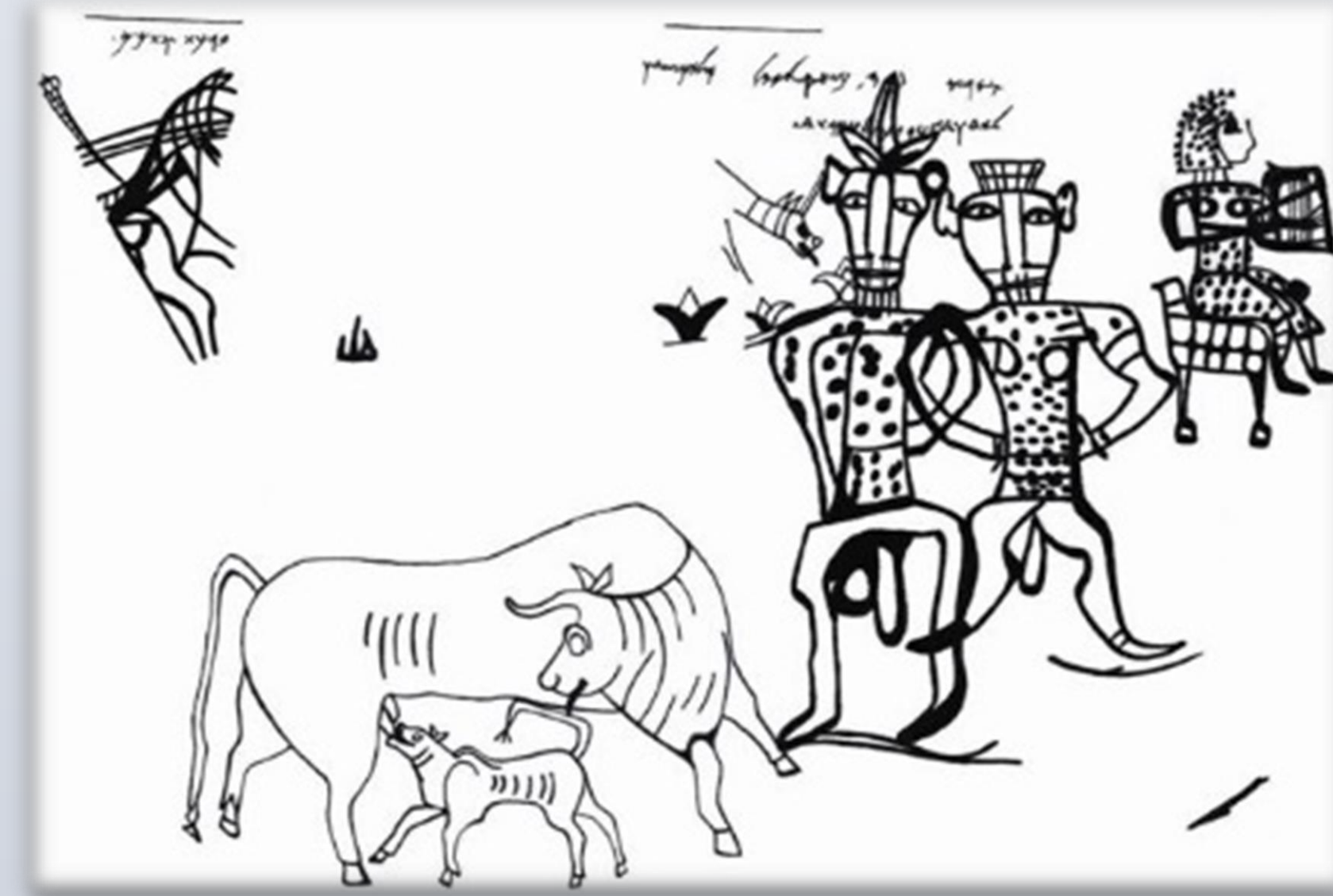
BACKGROUND

Most scholars never considered the possibility that the *asherim* of the Hebrew Bible could be referring to a goddess of that name (the few mentions of Asherah that could not be reconciled as referring to cultic relics were assumed to be speaking of the goddess Astarte) until Ugaritic texts were analyzed and found to contain passages describing a goddess known as Athirat (the linguistic equivalent to Asherah) -- "ideal woman," creator of the other gods, goddess of fertility, and one whom other gods go to for permissions.² Because of the presence of Athirat (Asherah) in other cultures of the Ancient Near East, it is tempting to think that there is a connection with the *asherah* of the Hebrew Bible. It is especially noteworthy because of Athirat's place in the Ugaritic pantheon alongside El and Baal, two deities that were certainly recognized by ancient Israelite religion. This study will attempt to synthesize existing evidence for Asherah in Israelite sources to determine the nature and function of the term.

EVIDENCE OF ASHERAH IN EPIGRAPHIC SOURCES

Illegally excavated at the site of Khirbet el-Qom in Judah, this find features what appears to be an engraving of a downward facing humanoid right hand. 36 cm wide and 30 cm high, paleographic evidence dates the inscription to about 750 BCE. Due to naturally occurring cracks and breakage that occurred during removal, reading the inscription is difficult. It features six lines of text, which Judith Hadley has translated as "*Uriyahu the Rich wrote it. / Blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh / for from his enemies by his asherah he has saved him / by Oniyahu / by his asherah / and by his a[she]rah.*"³ Alternatively, scholars such as Spronk have omitted reference to Asherah altogether in the third lines of text, translating it as, "*and from the distress as much as comes to him over there may He deliver them, Uriyahu, because of his service.*"⁸

Given the Asherah translation, it seems that the phrase "by his Asherah" could mean that the dedication is to Yahweh via the *asherah*, the cultic object. It also features a suffix not attested on personal names in Hebrew, though this is allowed in Ugaritic, so if Asherah was a borrowed word, it is possible that it carried over. However, there is insufficient evidence to support this.



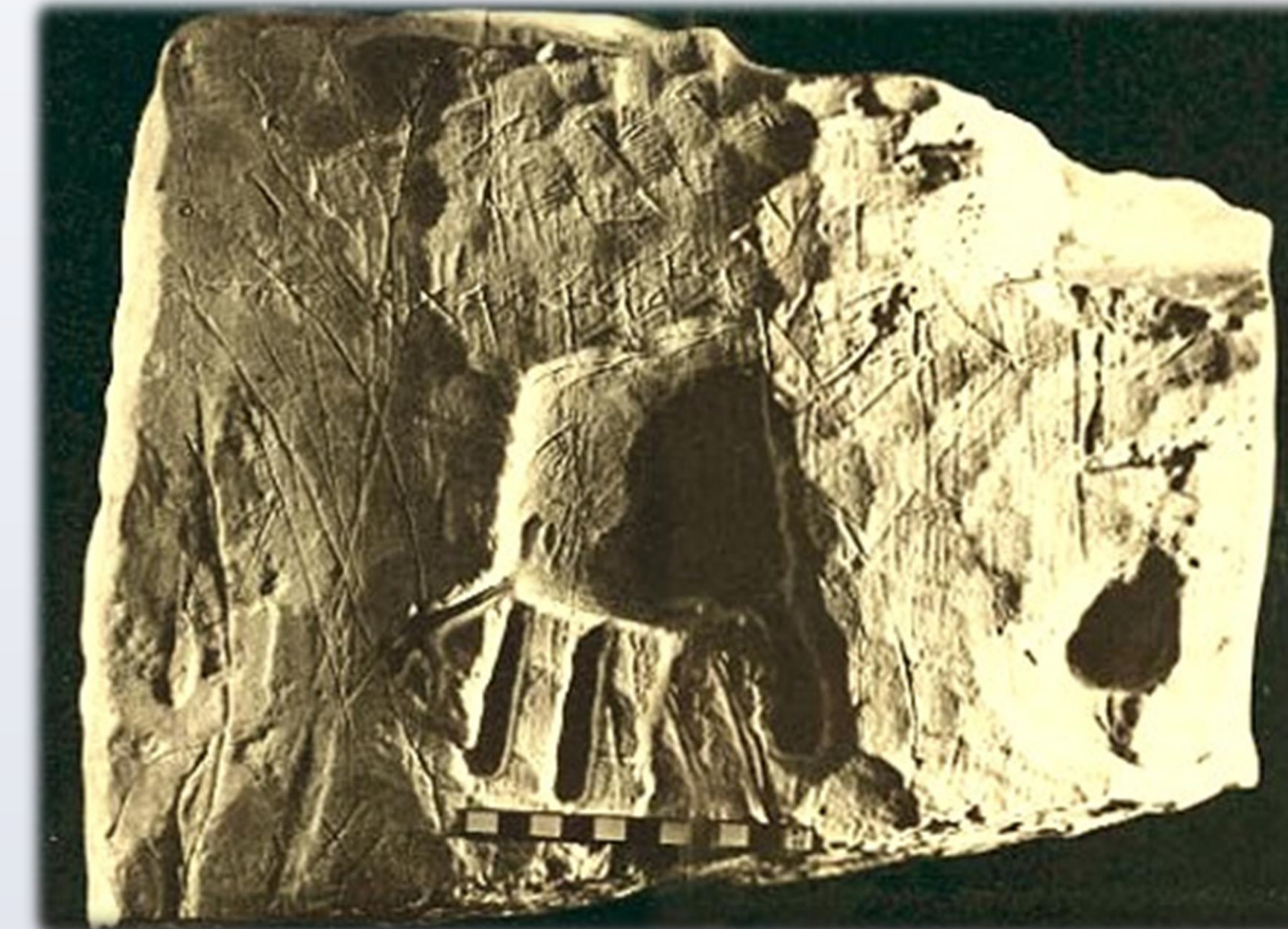
"? says: say to Yehal[lel'el] and to Yo'asah and ?: I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his asherah."
- Inscription at Kuntillet 'Ajrud

ASHERAH IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Within the Hebrew bible, the language used to describe *asherim* is ambiguous. The term is referenced forty times. Nineteen of those times are in the masculine plural; three are in the feminine; 13 are in the pure form; and 6 times it is used with suffixes.² Most of these passages almost certainly refer to the cultic relic *asherah* as opposed to the goddess Asherah. Beyond this, in all but one of the passages where it is possible that the deity was being mentioned, the definitive article is used, which makes the function of the term even less certain.⁶ B. Halpern has asserted that the term *asherah* should be treated as a generic term for a female goddess (similar to the way ba'al was generalized to refer to a nonspecific male deity).⁴ Following this idea, instances containing the definitive article would refer to a goddess, while instances with no article would indicate a cultic object.

Interestingly, in various places where the *Asherah* is referred to (I Kings 18, II Kings 23), it is used alongside Baal. In these passages, Baal is referenced many times, whereas *Asherah* is only referenced once in connection with Baal. A possible explanation for this is that *Asherah* was not originally present in the text and was a textual gloss added by a Deuteronomistic author at a later date in an attempt to discourage *Asherah*-worship. In addition to this, I Kings 18 illustrates that the definitive article can indeed be used in conjunction with a deity, as is the case with Baal.⁷

Traditionally, scholars have interpreted *asherah* to mean a carved, wooden object based on



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Excavated from the site of Kuntillet 'Ajrud, roughly 50 kilometers south of Kadesh-Barnea and dating to the late Iron Age II, this pithos was found in what appeared to be a fort-like structure that was scattered with religious relics. The inscription reads, "? says: say to Yehal[lel'el] and to Yo'asah and ?: I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his asherah."³

Beneath this inscription on Pithos A, there is an illustration of what appears to be three figurines. Two of these figures are standing and one appears to be seated, playing the lute. There have been several interpretations of this illustration. Some have interpreted the seated figure to be a female human and the two standing figures as deities, one of which he identifies as the god Bes. Other interpretations include Asherah and Yahweh as the bovine, though it is uncertain if the illustration on Pithos A is related to the inscription.³

the language used in the Hebrew Bible. The corresponding verbs, *krt* (to cut), *gd'* (to cut down), *s'rp* (to burn), *b'r* (to consume), *s'br* (to break into pieces), *nts'* (to pull or break down), *nts* (to pluck up), *s'h* (to make), *bnh* (to build), *'md* (to stand up), and *nsb* (to set up)¹³ have been pointed to as evidence for this idea (although use of the verb *nt'* (to plant) has led to some debate.)³

II Kings 23 features Josiah ordering priests to "remove from the temple of the Lord all the articles made for Baal and Asherah and all the starry hosts". It seems as though this verse is referring to a personified deity rather than an object. However, (as the account was likely documented later) this may reflect a gradually blurring line between the goddess and her image. It is interesting to note that in II Kings 23, 5, Baal and the heavenly hosts are mentioned again, but *asherah* is not (similar to the case discussed with I Kings 18). This is questionable if we assume *asherah* to be the goddess.

Furthermore, the sixth verse features Josiah burning the *asherah* and beating it to dust. Obviously, this verse seems to indicate a tangible *asherah*, creating a confusing shift in the passage. It is important to remember, however, that in the ancient world, making an offering to a deity's likeness was not unlike offering it to the deity themselves, and thus the text becomes less problematic. Another explanation is that Asherah worship was considered okay and was then not addressed. In this explanation, the inclusion of Asherah in the text is then a device employed by the Deuteronomist to pair her with Baal in an attempt to discredit her cult.

CONCLUSIONS

Asherah likely refers to a cultic object, perhaps one with lingering connections to a goddess(es) it once represented. This may reflect the continuing shift in Israelite culture from polytheistic tendencies to Yahweh's sole place of power. In the Hebrew bible, regardless of whether *Asherah* is a goddess or an object, the function of *Asherah* is ultimately the same -- to rid authority and significance from religious objects and distractions that weren't tied to Yahweh worship. Though no definitive conclusions can be reached, it can at the very least be said that Israelite religion was not a static concept, undergoing changes and evolution of practices and beliefs throughout the course of literary and material history.



Drawing found at Kuntillet 'Ajrud depicting a cultic relic.
Asherah?

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