

Meeting of the Scripts Institute

Minutes for

Tuesday, March 10, 2015

Attendants: Tom Palaima, Kevin Pluta, Joann Gulizio, Jo Ann Hackett, Sara Kimball, Aren Wilson-Wright, Tiffany Montgomery, Sarah Buchanan, and Wil Shrout.

The meeting commenced at 4:00 pm.

This week's meeting focused on Jo Ann Hackett's research interests related to the term Asherah. This term has been found on a few inscriptions that also mention Yahweh and it is often debated what the term Asherah means in these contexts. Hackett believes that Asherah most likely refers to some type of sacred tree and began by providing some background on references to sacred trees in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, kings are crowned in the presence of trees (e.g. Abimilekh was made king by the Oaks at Mamre) and images of foreign gods are buried under trees (e.g. Jacob buries images in Shechem so his people will always worship only Yahweh). These tree shrines seem to have been Canaanite originally, but continued to be used after the unification of Israel. However, the original etiology for the shrines has been lost and new etiologies explaining their existence were subsequently fashioned.

Two verses from the Bible suggest that the goddess Asherah may have been worshipped as a tree (Judg 6:25 and Deut 16.21). In the Judges passage, a shrine to Baal seems to consist of an altar to the god with a tree planted beside it. The tree seems to represent the embodiment of the goddess Asherah and is worshipped alongside Baal. The Deuteronomy passage states that one is not allowed to plant a tree as an Asherah beside an altar sacred to Yahweh (see attachment for full citations).

More recently, archaeological excavations in Tell el-Dab'a, Egypt provide physical evidence for tree cults. The careful and meticulous excavation of this site has revealed a Canaanite temple along with a courtyard and one or two tree pits. The excavators concluded that these pits were for evergreen oak trees which were transplanted from Canaan, an interpretation based on a cache of acorns from that tree that were found on a nearby altar. This evidence renders the debate concerning whether "the Asherah" in the Bible refers to a pole, tree, or an image of the goddess moot. It seems that a tree planted next to an altar of a god represented the goddess Asherah and she was worshipped together with that god.

The goddess Asherah also occurs in Ugaritic texts. A few thousand tablets were found in Ugarit (modern day Syria) dating to c. 1250 BC. Ugaritic is written with an alphabetic script consisting of 27 consonants that were made like Akkadian cuneiform, i.e with a stylus on wet clay. In these tablets, Asherah is a goddess of the sea and may have defeated the god Yamm (sea); she is the mother of 70 gods (and El is the father of 70 gods so it is assumed that they ruled together); she tries (like Bathesba) to install her favorite son on the throne of Baal but fails; and a man looking for a wife makes a vow to Tyrian Asherah/Asherah of the Sidonians. She does not seem to be a fertility goddess in these texts; rather the male divinities El and Baal are the gods to pray to if one wanted a child or fertile land. Asherah, on the other hand, seems to be one of the old, high goddesses with El as her consort. In addition, she is never viewed as a "mother goddess" in that, although she bears 70 children, she is not shown to play a nurturing role for human beings.

Other Biblical sources deal with Asherah worship in the Temple in Jerusalem (Kings 15:13, 21:7 and 23:7). In these references, kings are either cutting down or burning the Asherah in the Temple or restoring the Asherah that had been removed. Here it seems fairly clear that the Asherah refers to trees that are being worshipped in the Temple (see attachment for more specific citations).

Hackett then began to address the evidence from the site of Kuntillet 'Ajrud, a one-period site located in the Sinai peninsula dating to c. 800 BC. It is a caravanserai, situated on a trade route between the Red Sea and Gaza on the Mediterranean, and was probably near some source of water. An interesting feature of this site is the so-called "Bench room," a shrine where numerous votive objects were found, including idols in the form of women with up-raised arms and large pots inscribed with blessings and pictures. One large pithos was inscribed with a blessing on one side, an abcedary on the other, and quite a bit of graffiti. Though the inscription may appear to be carelessly executed, the writing is actually quite nice and a scribe was probably paid to inscribe this vessel. A processional scene is somewhat sloppily drawn on the vase and depicts gifts being offered, presumably to Yahweh. There is also a drawing of a tree of life with flanking animals. A separate drawing shows two main figures, probably gods of fortune, a woman playing the lyre who may represent Asherah, and calf suckling on a cow.

Overlapping these images is an inscribed blessing to Yahweh of Samaria and to his (or its) Asherah. Asherah has a pronominal suffix which is a bit unusual; it is uncertain whether the pronominal suffix means "Yahweh's Asherah" or "the Asherah of Samaria." Two other inscriptions on vessels from the Bench room are similar and contain the phrase: "Say to my lord ... I bless you Yahweh of Teman/the Southland and to his/its Asherah" (see attachment for fuller citations). The spelling conventions used in these inscriptions are indicative of spellings used in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and in Judah. The presumption then is that at least some northerners and some Judahites worshiped Asherah along with Yahweh. In addition, Samaria is the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and Teman, which will become Edam, is in southern Israel. Several Israeli poems mention marches made by Yahweh which start out from Edam.

At this point, Hackett invited questions, comments and discussion. Tom Palaima asked if there were any known depiction of these sacred trees. Hackett mentioned that the tree of life is common in religious iconography and there is one depicted on the vase from Kuntillet 'Ajrud. She also mentioned another vase with an inscription to a female El. Palaima noted that at the Minoan site of Knossos on Crete, in the paved courtyard just outside the palace are large circular pits that are often interpreted as granaries. Hood, however, has suggested that these pits may have been for planting trees, since Minoan religious imagery suggest some type of tree worship. He also noted that the bench sanctuary is a common type of Minoan shrine. Tiffany Montgomery agreed that these shrine types are often found in Minoan settlement sites including Azoria where she has excavated. Gulizio also mentioned the Shrine of the Double Axes in the palace at Knossos, which shares striking similarities with the Kuntillet 'Ajrud Bench room, including a bench for the placement of offerings and a number of the so-called "Minoan goddesses with upraised arms" figures (a.k.a. MGUAs). Hackett asked if bench rooms were common among Edamites, perhaps at the site of Hvorvat (?). [Jo Ann – I wasn't sure about this last part and what the response to your question was. Any help would be greatly appreciated.]

There was some question as to the relationship between the inscriptions on the vessels and the images depicted. Hackett explained that the inscriptions are written over and across the images, so it is clear that the images were drawn first and the inscriptions second. It also seems likely that the inscriptions on this vessel were written by two different scribes.

Palaima was curious about the female lyre player and was wondering if there were references to female bards. Hackett replied that female singers are mentioned in written sources. On this vessel, there is some debate about whether this figure is in fact a woman, and if so, if she is meant to represent Asherah, especially since she appears to be seated on a throne. Other possible interpretations are that she is a queen or a different goddess.

Palaima asked about the quality of the drawings on the vessel, since Hackett had suggested that they were sloppily drawn. Palaima thought that they were actually rendered skillfully and are quite similar in execution to motifs found in contemporary Greek Geometric vase painting. Gulizio asked how the quality of these drawings compared to contemporary vase painting at this time and place. Hackett admitted that

there is not much material to compare it to and that perhaps they are better executed than she had originally thought. She also noted that the pithos was found in a bench room suggesting that it must have been considered valuable and that the images were probably meant to convey some meaning. So even though the images may not be aesthetically pleasing to a modern eye, it is unlikely that an offering of poor quality would have been placed in such an important place.

Palaima wondered if perhaps the scribe who wrote the inscriptions and the artist who made the drawings could be the same person. His reasons for this considering this is that in Linear B inscriptions, some ideograms (such as the horse ideogram) demonstrate some artistic talent on the part of the scribe. Kevin Pluta asked if the inscriptions were made before or after firing and Hackett responded that they were post-firing inscriptions.

Palaima was curious about the possible connection between Asherah, the tree of life, and Potnia Theron (“Mistress of Animals”) iconography. Potnia Theron imagery consists of a female figure (presumably a goddess) flanked by wild animals. Would it be possible that the Potnia is replaced by the tree of life? Gulizio wondered if there was a connection between the image of the tree of life with the goddess Asherah and Hackett noted a strong connection between the two. Sara Kimball mentioned that there are also images of the tree of life with oaks and terebinth trees. Palaima noted the connection between terebinth trees and the Bronze Age site of Nichoria mentioned in the Linear B tablets as *ti-mi-to-a-ko*. Hackett noted that Asherah in Ancient Greek is linguistically related to the term ἄλσος meaning “grove.” Lastly, Hackett mentioned an Ekron inscription from the Philistines dating to c. 700 BC written in Hebrew that may contain the term Potnia meaning “for my lady.” Unfortunately, the inscription is damaged and one of the letters is difficult to read. What is preserved is P T __ Y H. The P T could be Pot- and the Y H ending would result in -ia of Potnia. However, the middle letter which is damaged cannot be the letter N, so reconstructing this word as Potnia is problematic.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 pm.

Minutes were taken by Joann Gulizio.

Attachment

Judg 6:25: “That night Yahweh said to [Gideon], ‘Take your father’s bull ... and pull down the altar of the Baal [or the Baal altar] that belongs to your father, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it ...’”

Deut 16:21: “You shall not plant any tree as an Asherah beside the altar that you make for Yahweh your god.”

From 1999 article called “The Fortress-Temple at Shechem” on the excavation of the temple site: “One of the most remarkable discoveries of sacred trees in the courtyard of Canaanite temples occurred not in Canaan but in Egypt, at Tell el-Dab’a. There Manfred Bietak and his Austrian team, using meticulous digging techniques, have excavated the largest Canaanite temple ever discovered. ... In its open-air courtyard, 70 feet from the main entrance, stood a great altar for animal sacrifice. Next to the altar were one or two tree pits. The sacred trees must have been evergreen oaks transplanted from Canaan, for still lying in place on the altar was a cache of acorns.”

Kings 15:13: A king of Judah named Asa has his mother removed as “queen mother” because she had made an image of Asherah

Kings 21:7: Manasseh, king of Judah made a carved image of Asherah and put it in the Jerusalem temple.

Kings 23:7: King Josiah of Judah tore down the shrines of the “holy men” in the Temple where women wove garments for Asherah.

Inscriptions on vessels from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud:

1. “Say to PN₁ and PN₂, ‘I bless you to Yahweh of Samaria and to his/its Asherah.’”
2. PN₃ said, “Say to my lord [boss, overlord] ... I bless you to Yahweh of Teman/the Southland and to his/its Asherah. May he bless you and keep you and may he be with my lord.”
3. A long inscription with the following portion: “to Yahweh of Teman/the Southland and to his/its Asherah.”