

# ANCIENT WARRIOR GODDESSES?

## An Examination of the role and worship of Ancient Near-Eastern Goddesses

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### Introduction & Overview

Over the summers of 2019 and 2020, I have spent ten weeks researching into the worship of some of the main goddesses from the Ancient Near East and Mesopotamia. The geographical area I am concerned with is roughly comprised of modern-day Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Palestine, as shown in Figure 1. The temporal and societal location of my research spans several millennia, and several different civilisations, including the Canaanites, Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians, who spoke different languages and worshiped different deities. The main goddesses of each of these ancient pantheons have similar attributes and personality traits, as well as iconographical similarities. My research has focused on three of these main goddesses: Ishtar, Astarte, and Asherah. Scholarship has tended to associate ancient goddesses with fertility, motherhood, and sexuality; the emphasis on these attributes has often eclipsed other important aspects and attributes of the goddesses, leading to a mischaracterisation of the goddesses and their worship, as well as an underestimation of their religious importance. My research has focused on examining the textual and archaeological record, re-examining each of the goddesses mentioned above, in order to highlight not only their religious and cultural importance, but also their overlooked attributes, particularly those relating to violence and war. Here I will focus on the four goddesses mentioned above – Ishtar, Inanna, Astarte, and Asherah – highlighting the ways in which they have been misinterpreted and misrepresented by previous scholarship, as well as examining their function and attributes.

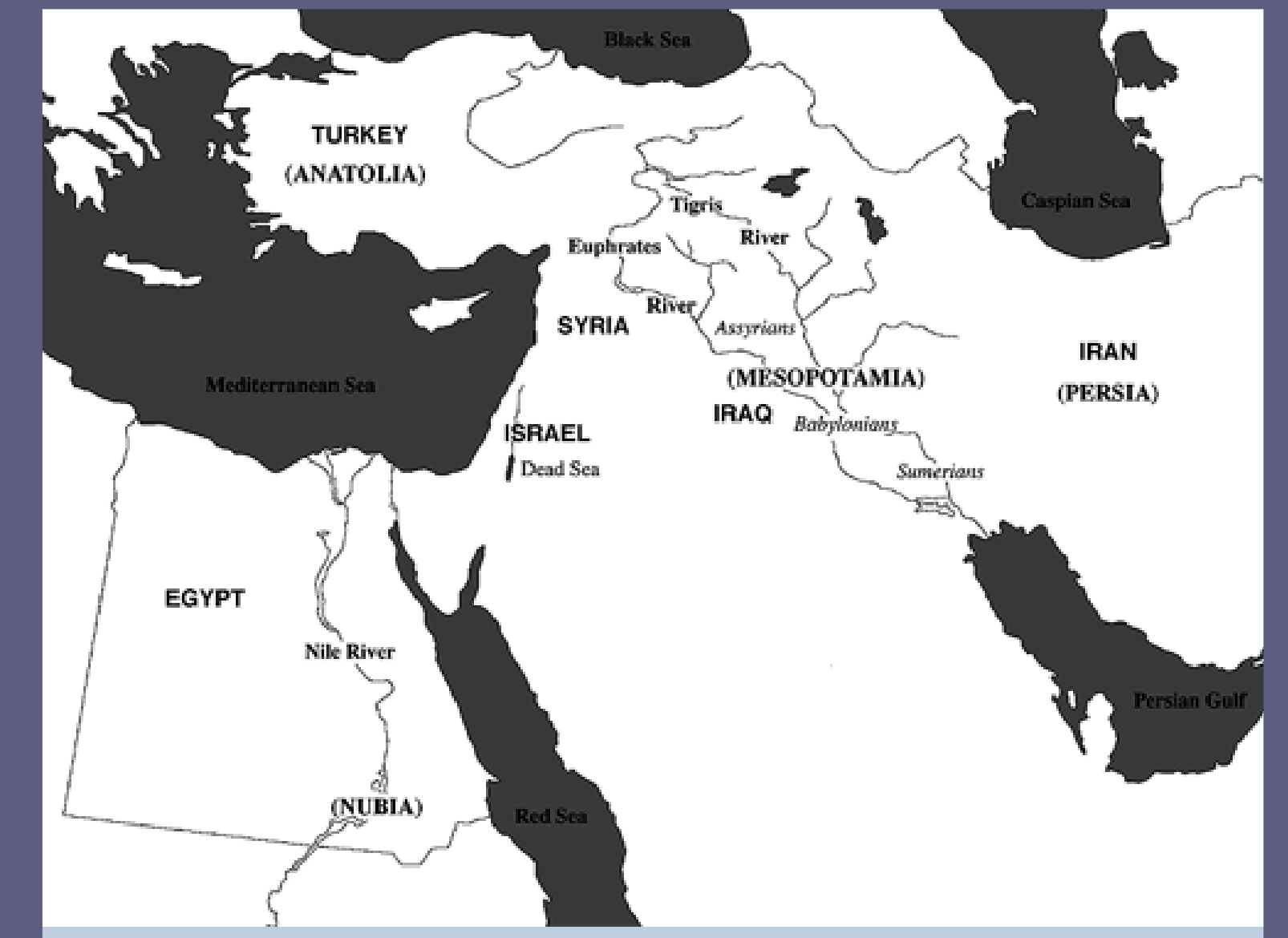


Figure 1: Map of the Ancient Near East. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Accessed September 11, 2020. <https://oi.uchicago.edu/neareastmap>

### Ishtar & Inanna

Ishtar, the most prominent and enduring deity from the Mesopotamian pantheon, is essentially fusion of the Sumerian goddess Inanna and other Sumerian deities; although the two are not entirely synonymous, they are similar enough to be examined together (Pryke 2017, 6-7). Ishtar is the oldest deity we have written evidence for; the earliest attestation of her cult in the late 4th millennia BCE, where she is described as the patron deity of Uruk, Mesopotamia (Pryke 2017, 7). The earliest individually identifiable poet Enheduanna, high priestess at the temple in Ur and daughter of Sargon of Akkad – the king who united northern and southern Mesopotamia – wrote many poems and hymns dedicated to the goddess (Pryke 2017, 16; Frymer-Kensky 1992, 11-12). Although sexuality is a major theme of this literature, myths such as *Inanna's Descent into the Underworld* show an association with mourning, death, vengeance and conflict (Pryke 2027, 5).

Ishtar's image contributed to the identity of the Phoenician goddess Astarte (Pryke 2017, 7; 191-192), as well as heavily influencing the Greek goddess Aphrodite. There are also similarities between the myths and characteristic of Ishtar, and Buffy, the titular character of the hit TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Pryke 2017, 202)!

### Astarte

Like Ishtar, Astarte is often mentioned in relation to fertility and fertility cults, erotic and sexual rites, cultic prostitution (Schmitt 2013, 213). This likely stems from classical writers' accounts of the ecstatic cults of Syrian goddesses in the Roman period (Schmitt 2013, 214). Contrary to these accounts, the inscriptional and iconographical evidence shows that she is most often associated with healing and luck, which fed into association with war. In Ugaritic mythical texts, she is mentioned in relation to horses and hunting, as well as being described as having a violent character (Schmitt 2013, 223). She was adopted into the Egyptian pantheon, where she is most prominent during the 18th and 19th dynasties, which spanned c.1500 – 1189 BCE (Schmitt 2013, 219-220). At this time, the ruling power was held by military leaders: a military dictatorship based upon the power of chariotry thus adopted Astarte, a violent goddess associated with horses, as the goddess of choice (Schmitt 2013, 220).

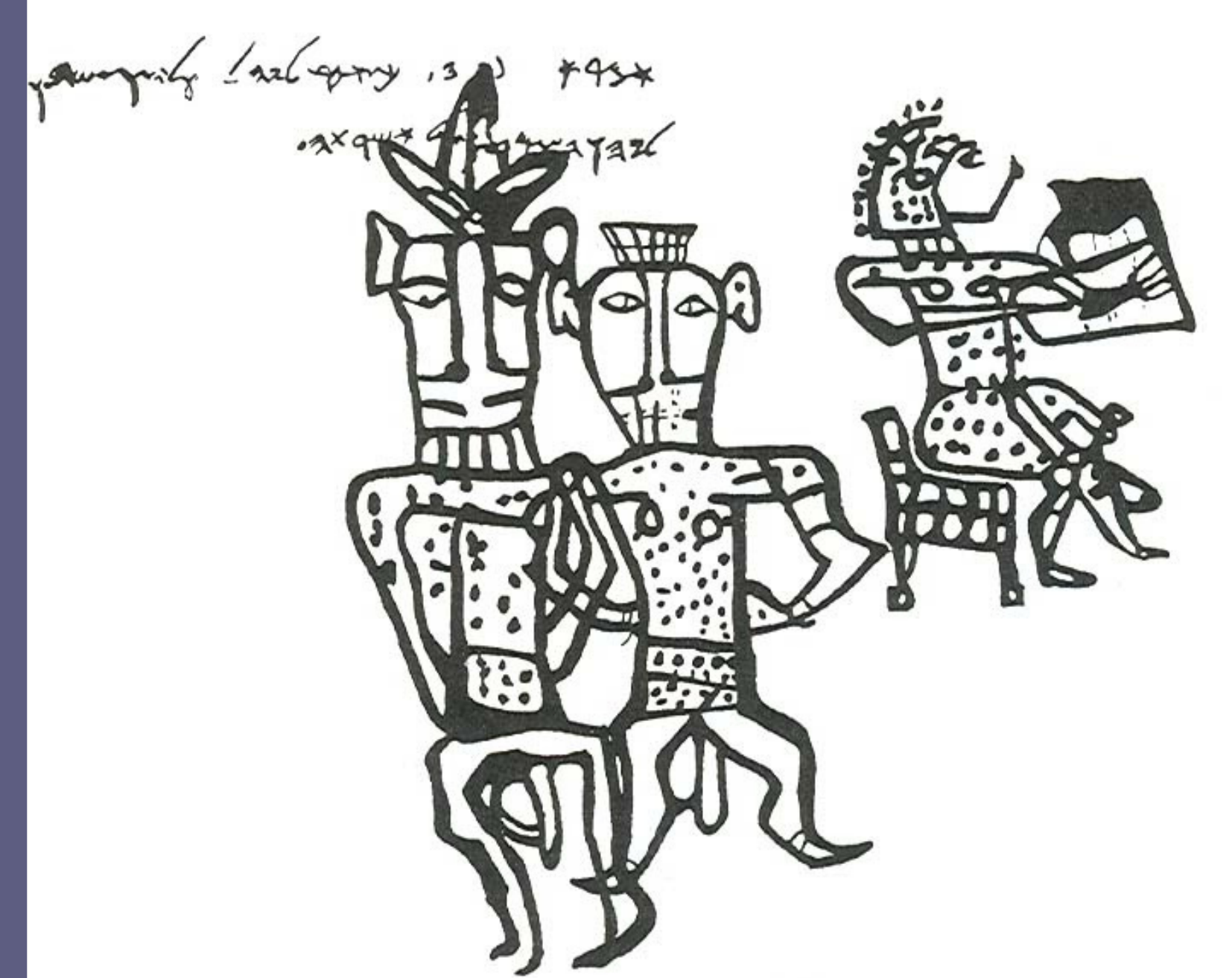


Figure 3: Drawing of the Kuntilet 'Ajrud inscription, caravan station, northern Sinai desert, 8th century BC. Image taken from Saul M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988.

### Asherah

Unlike both of the goddesses previously mentioned, Asherah is not associated with sexuality and fertility (Binger 1997). Figure 3 shows a drawing accompanied by an inscription dedicated to 'Yahweh and his Asherah', indicating a marital relationship between the deities. Although the term 'Asherah' is used 40 times in the Old Testament, many of these refer to a cultic object resembling a tree, rather than the goddess herself.

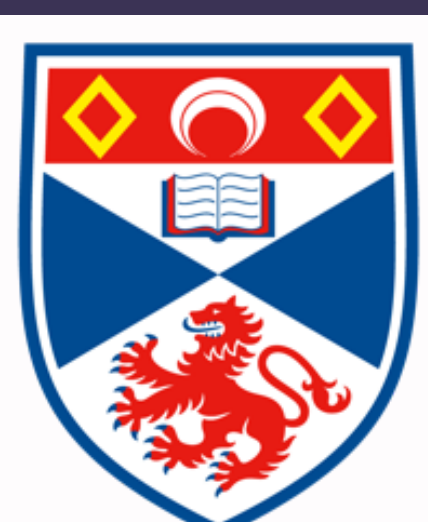


Figure 2: Bronze amulet showing the goddess Ishtar carrying arms standing on a lion in front of a worshipper. Courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum. Accessed September 13, 2020. [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W\\_1852-0901-16](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1852-0901-16)

### References

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### Concluding Remarks



By taking a feminist approach to the re-examination of archaeological and textual sources, I have been able to find previously overlooked attributes of the goddesses, and aspects of their worship, as discussed above, as well as – to an extent – examine the reasons why these attributes and aspects have been overlooked. For more information about this research project, please see the virtual exhibition I have curated on Instagram, under the account name @makebelievemuseum, which will be posted in September 2020. I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Madhavi Nevader, for all of her support, help, and guidance throughout this research project. It has been brilliant working with Dr Nevader, and I am thankful that she decided to supervise me for this project, which is completely outside of my area of usual academic study. I would also like to thank the Laidlaw Team at the University of St Andrews for their support throughout the whole scholarship. Finally, I would like to thank Lord Laidlaw for allowing me the opportunity to undertake this research as part of the Laidlaw Scholarship, which would not be possible without his generosity.

