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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS: ANCIENT LIVES, NEW STORIES: CURRENT RESEARCH ON THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST[2]

A Seventh Century BCE Pendant, Ištar and Cross-Cultural Artistic Exchange

Taylor O. Gray

Abstract: What is the proper approach that scholars should use for understanding cross-cultural artistic exchange in the ancient Near East? There are certainly a number of ways one group may borrow another group's artistic motifs and incorporate them into their own system. This paper examines a seventh-century BCE silver pendant that was discovered at Tel Miqne-Ekron in 1992. Since the time of publication, the pendant is usually understood as depicting the Mesopotamian goddess Ištar. The present paper challenges the prevailing scholarly opinion on the grounds that the consensus is too simplistic. It is not always the case that when a culture borrows 'foreign' imagery it also adopts the meaning that the image possessed in the source culture. It is argued that there is good reason to conclude that the pendant from Ekron incorporated an Assyrianising artistic style, which looks like Ištar but was intended to show a local goddess.

Introduction

What is the proper approach that scholars should use for understanding cross-cultural artistic exchange? What happens when one culture borrows a motif from another? Should scholars presume that the meaning the motif possessed in the source culture remained stable after it was absorbed into the new culture? Does the incorporation of 'foreign' artwork indicate religious syncretism, the adoption of alternative ideologies or new ways of life? These sorts of questions sit at the forefront

[2]**Ancient Lives, New Stories: Current Research on the Ancient Near East** was a conference held at the British Museum in London between 1st and 2nd December 2018, organised by Xosé L. Hermoso-Buxán and Mathilde Touillon-Ricci. This paper is part of the proceedings of that conference and have been edited by the organisers, with the support of *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*.

of any number of studies related to ancient Near Eastern visual art. The mechanisms pertaining to cross-cultural interaction are of primary concern.

In 1992 a silver pendant dated to the seventh century BCE. was discovered in the Philistine city of Tel Miqne-Ekron (**Fig. 1**) (Gitin 1995: Fig. 4.14; Golani & Sass 1998: 57-58). Incised on the obverse of the small ovoid object is a crudely engraved worship scene. Despite the 'slovenly' (Kletter et al. 2010: 87) execution, two anthropomorphic figures are intelligible. A male human is shown on the right side of the scene. Adjacent to the worshiper is a deity that stands atop a lion. The lion that the figure stands on marks the figure's status as only deities stand on animals in Near Eastern art. Since the time of its discovery, scholars almost ubiquitously identify the deity in question as Mesopotamian Ištar (=Sumerian Inanna). Because the constellation of artistic motifs used to depict the deity on the pendant are all associated with Ištar in visual art known from Syro-Mesopotamia in the Neo-Assyrian period (911 - 609 BCE), many scholars conclude that the Ekron pendant is *borrowing* Neo-Assyrian iconography (e.g., Gitin 1995:69; Maher 2014: 116; Strawn 2009: 60-61; Cornelius 2009: 24-25; Ben-Shlomo 2010: 84-85; Kletter et al. 2010: 87; Golani & Sass 1998: 72; Ornan 2001: 240-241; Moriconi and Tucci 2015: 499). It is assumed because the deity looks like representations of Ištar that the pedant refers to the same goddess. By extension, since the pendant depicts Mesopotamian Ištar, the pendant indicates that Ištar was worshipped in seventh century Ekron.

Figure 1: Silver pendant from Tel Miqne-Ekron. Golani & Sass 1998: Fig. 14.2

The focus of the present essay concerns the scholarly consensus just outlined. Despite the overwhelming consensus, we should rightfully ask: How do we know that the pendant depicts Ištar? What is the evidence for such a conclusion? How did an Ekronite individual end up possessing a pendant that shows a Mesopotamian deity? Did the owner of the pendant think that the deity shown was Ištar? Moreover, to what extent does the pendant evince the veneration of Ištar in ancient Ekron? To date, scholars have focused too much on iconographic traditions found in Mesopotamia (or Syria) and have failed to consider the more immediate contextual issues surrounding the pendant. By paying closer attention to how ancient Near Eastern art was incorporated cross-culturally, a new interpretation emerges that better accounts for the Ekron pendant and how the pendant might have been understood in its immediate context. *In short, my premise is when a motif is borrowed from*

one symbol system and incorporated into another, the meaning that the motif possessed in the source symbol system does not necessarily stay the same. In this paper, I draw on the work of Irene Winter and her notion of non-literal borrowing, as well as the work of Tom Anderson, Zainab Bahrani, Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson. Their work indicates that to account for cross-cultural artistic exchange in the ancient Near East scholars must attend to other methods of analysis besides the iconographic approach.

The Pendant

The silver pendant in question was discovered among a hoard of silver, deemed Hoard 4 by the excavators. The hoard was found hidden away in a perforated oil press-weight in Field I of the Northeast Acropolis in Ekron (Gitin & Golani 2001: 33). The stratigraphic layer of the hoard, Stratum IB, is dated to 604 BCE., and is a destruction layer attributed to one of Nebuchadnezzar II's westward campaigns. The layer also marks the last major occupational phase of the city (Gitin 2012: 2-11; 2017: 62; Gitin & Golani 2001: 29; Maher 2006-2007).

The occupational history of Ekron is divisible into two periods: the pre-Philistine or Canaanite phase (Middle-Late Bronze Age) and the Philistine phase (Iron Age). The earliest period of the city's history dates to the Middle Bronze Age (Stratum XI) and is continuously occupied until the end of the seventh century BCE (for overview Gitin & Golani 2001). During the Middle and Late Bronze Age, Canaanite populations inhabited the city. In the thirteenth century BCE the so-called 'Sea Peoples' destroyed Ekron and took control of the city. The Philistines then occupied Ekron alongside local Canaanite populations for some six-hundred years (Gitin & Golani 2001: 29). The Philistine presence is marked by the intrusion of Mycenaean style pottery and other material culture features (Dothan 1982).

The Iron Age assemblage at Ekron indicates that the distinctly Philistine material culture slowly subsided. In the earlier occupational phases of Iron Age I, Aegean-based traditions are well-represented; however, moving into the Iron Age II, Canaanite traditions become more apparent in the assemblage (Ben-Shlomo 2019: 1). The merger of Canaanite and Philistine traditions resulted in what Uziel calls a Neo-Philistine culture (Uziel 2007). Yet, Ekron maintained a level of distinctiveness

when compared to the non-Philistine polities further inland, indicating that the Philistines maintained a sense of cultural unity. (Ben-Shlomo 2019: 1).

Until the final third of the eighth century, Philistia maintained relative socio-economic autonomy. In 734 BCE Tiglath-pileser III invaded the Levant and subdued several Philistine rulers as vassals of the Neo-Assyrian empire (Gitin 2012: 225). Sennacherib campaigned throughout the Levant in 701 BCE to snuff out an anti-Assyrian coalition (e.g., Hezekiah in 2 Kgs 18). Sennacherib cleansed Ekron of any would-be rebellion and reinstalled Padi as ruler in Ekron after taking Padi back from Hezekiah of Jerusalem's control (Prichard 1969: 287-288).

Under Assyrian rule, Ekron emerged as an economic powerhouse on the international stage in the seventh century. Thanks to the *pax assyriaca*, Ekron developed the largest olive oil industry the ancient Near East had ever seen (Gitin 2017: 64; Moriconi & Tucci 2015: 495). During the Iron Age IIC (i.e., the seventh century BCE), the urban profile of the city expanded from a meagre ten-acre plot concentrated in the acropolis to seventy-five acres, extending well into the lower city (Gitin & Golani 2001: 29). It was during this same period that Ikausu son of Padi constructed one of the largest Levantine temple-complexes so far discovered (Gitin 2012: 231).

Around 645 BCE, the Neo-Assyrian empire withdrew from the southern Levant under the reign of Ashurbanipal. As is well-known, the last great Neo-Assyrian emperor had to return to Mesopotamia to stop a Babylonian rebellion that his brother, Shamash-shumu-ukin, led. Once Assyria left the Levant, Egypt stepped in to fill the power vacuum and maintained control until Nebuchadnezzar II arrived at the end of the seventh century BCE (Na'aman 2003). Even under Egyptian control, Ekron maintained its prestigious olive oil industry.

Based on Ekron's economic development during the seventh century BCE and because Assyria controlled Ekron, the silver pendant is typically dated to the period of Assyrian hegemony (though see Naʾaman 2003: 85-86; cf. Gitin 2017). As we shall see, the imagery that the pendant contains resembles several Neo-Assyrian period artefacts and may have been produced based on similar exempla. Consequently, even though the pendant was found in the destruction layer attributed to Nebuchadnezzar

II, the pendant dates to earlier in the seventh century BCE, or even the late-eighth century BCE (Kletter et al. 2010: 87).

Despite being a mere three by five centimetres and ovoid in shape, this little pendant has received a fair amount of attention in the scholarly literature. This is doubtlessly because the pendant is thought to show the goddess Ištar on an artefact that comes from the land of Israel. Though it is imperative to note that the Ekronites are *not* the Judahites.

To date, the most detailed analysis of the pendant is Tallay Ornan's 2001 study. Typical of Ornan, she provides a robust analysis that is both thorough and insightful. Her assessment is that the Ekron pendant is a 'locally' produced objected that shows a 'clear dependence on Assyrian iconography' (Ornan 2001: 249). To demonstrate the dependence on Assyrian iconography, Ornan marshals several artefacts dated to the Neo-Assyrian period. The best comparanda she offers are several seventh century silver pendants from Zincirli and Urartu (also Winter 1983: 503; Cornelius 2012:19). Like the pendant from Ekron, the Urartian and Samalian pendants show a human worshipper standing before a lion-mounted goddess. The goddess is also encircled by a starry nimbus.

Ornan also compares the Ekron pendant with several other artefacts to illustrate the dependency on Assyrian iconography. One key pieces of evidence is an eighth century stele from Til Barsip. A lion-mounted goddess who bears a variety of weapons is carved in low relief. The accompanying cuneiform inscription identifies her as Ištar-of-Arbela (Ornan 2001: 240-241). According to Ornan, the goddess on the Ekron pendant and the Til Barsip stele are closely related. She judges that both goddesses wear weapons, for instance. Although it is debatable whether the Ekron pendant shows the goddess with weapons (Cornelius 2009: 24-25). A seal impression attributed to Sennacherib and a cylinder seal of one Nabu-uṣalla also serve as comparanda (Ornan 2001: 248).

The scholarly argument is essentially analogical. For most, the goddess on the pedant most closely resembles Neo-Assyrian renditions of Ištar (e.g., Gitin 1995:69; Maher 2014: 116; Strawn 2009: 60-61; Cornelius 2009: 24-25; Ben-Shlomo 2010: 84-85;

Kletter et al. 2010: 87; Golani & Sass 1998: 72; Ornan 2001: 240-241; Moriconi and Tucci 2015: 499). Therefore, the morphological similarities between the Ekron pendant and the Neo-Assyrian imagery produce the conclusion that both corpora represent the same goddess. In other words, because the Ekron pendant shows a goddess that *looks like* Mesopotamian Isˇtar, the goddess necessarily *is* Isˇtar. By extension, a number of scholars argue that the pedant attests to the veneration of Isˇtar in the seventh century at Ekron, or in 'Israel' (e.g., Ornan 2001: 251; Strawn 2005: 259; 2009: 60).

Despite the overwhelming consensus that the Ekron pendant shows Isˇtar and indexes Isˇtar-worship in the region, there are two immediate problems that such an interpretation faces. First, it remains unclear to what extent can we say the pendant is in fact dependent on Assyrian iconography. As I shall discuss momentarily, the pendant is clearly a Phoenician production, or at least a Phoenician inspired piece. Second, since the pendant is thought to borrow Assyrian iconography, we should rightfully ask: What exactly is the Ekron pendant borrowing? What iconographic traditions specifically? And is the 'original' Assyrian meaning transferred in the cross-cultural exchange as so many assume?

How one classifies the Ekron pendant inevitably leads to how one interprets the object. In the case of so many studies, the pedant is an example of cross-cultural borrowing, which is derivative but nevertheless marks the absorption of Neo-Assyrian religious ideology. So, before moving any further, a classification of the pendant is in order.

Even a cursory knowledge of Neo-Assyrian artistic conventions would lead one to conclude that the Ekron pendant displays several Neo-Assyrian motifs. The starry nimbus that (partially) encircles the goddess is a motif that emerged in Assyrian art in the first millennium BCE and is mainly restricted to a gods and goddesses (e.g., Gula, Isˇtar, Mullissu, Marduk and Ninurta) (Garrison 2013: 1-3; Porada 1948: 84). The *Pleiades*, crescent and winged-sun disc are all common elements in cylinder seal art and appear frequently on *kudurru*-stones and Neo-Assyrian stelae. The feathered 'crown' that the goddess wears on the Ekron pendant is probably inspired by Mesopotamian artwork (Ornan 2001: 247).

Notwithstanding, there are two features that the Ekron pendant showcases which are distinctly *non-Assyrian*. To start, the motif of an animal-mounted deity is an artistic tradition that emerged in Hittite art in Anatolia and worked its way into Old Syrian and Middle Assyrian artwork (Winter 2010: 546). Only during the seventh century, beginning with Sennacherib, were Assyrian deities displayed atop animals in monumental art (Ornan 2005b: 80-81).

Figure 2: Silver pendant from Silver pendant from Zincirli. Golani & Sass 1998: Fig. 14. Winter 1983: Fig. 503.

More importantly are the several *Phoenician* elements that the pendant contains. Unsurprisingly, Ornan also draws attention to these features (2001: 247-248). To highlight the Phoenician features, compare the pendant with the Zincirli pendants (**Fig. 2**), as they contain more stereotypical Syro-Mesopotamian artistry. First, the 'floor' in the Zincirli exempla is marked with a scale pattern, most often used to represent mountains or rock in Syro-Mesopotamian art in the first millennium BCE. The Ekron pendant signifies the floor with a 'net-like pattern', which also appears on multiple Phoenician seals (Ornan 2001: 247; Avigad & Sass 1997: Nos. 725, 728, 745; Keel & Uehlinger 1998: Figs. 361b, 363a, 363d, 364-366). Third, the posture of both the goddess and the worshipper on the Ekron pendant is characteristically Phoenician. Whereas on the Zincirli pendants the worshipper turns her palms facing herself, the Ekron worshipper exposes his palms to the goddess. The Zincirli pendants follow a common Syro-Mesopotamian posture that is well-known in both monumental and portable art. In Phoenician art worshippers and deities express blessing by turning the palms outward. The posture is seen for at least five centuries between the tenth century sarcophagus of Ahiram and the fifth century BCE Yehawmilk stele (**Fig. 3**).

It is important to underline the importance of the "Zoroastrian" approach in the analysis of Sasanian iconographies, particularly regarding sigillography representations. These representations are generally studied in isolation and compared with Zoroastrian orthodoxy as known to us from textual sources[3]. This comparison leads sometimes to an exact interpretation by correspondence with a cosmogonic, astrological, etc. motive of Zoroastrian doctrine (Grenet 2013; Gnoli 1993).

3 These textual sources are, on the one hand, the books of the Avesta, a collection of texts of a liturgical nature (Lecoq 2016); and, on the other hand, the commentary on the books of the Avesta and the development of Zoroastrian doctrine in the Middle Persian language (Macuch 2009 and Daryaee 2018).

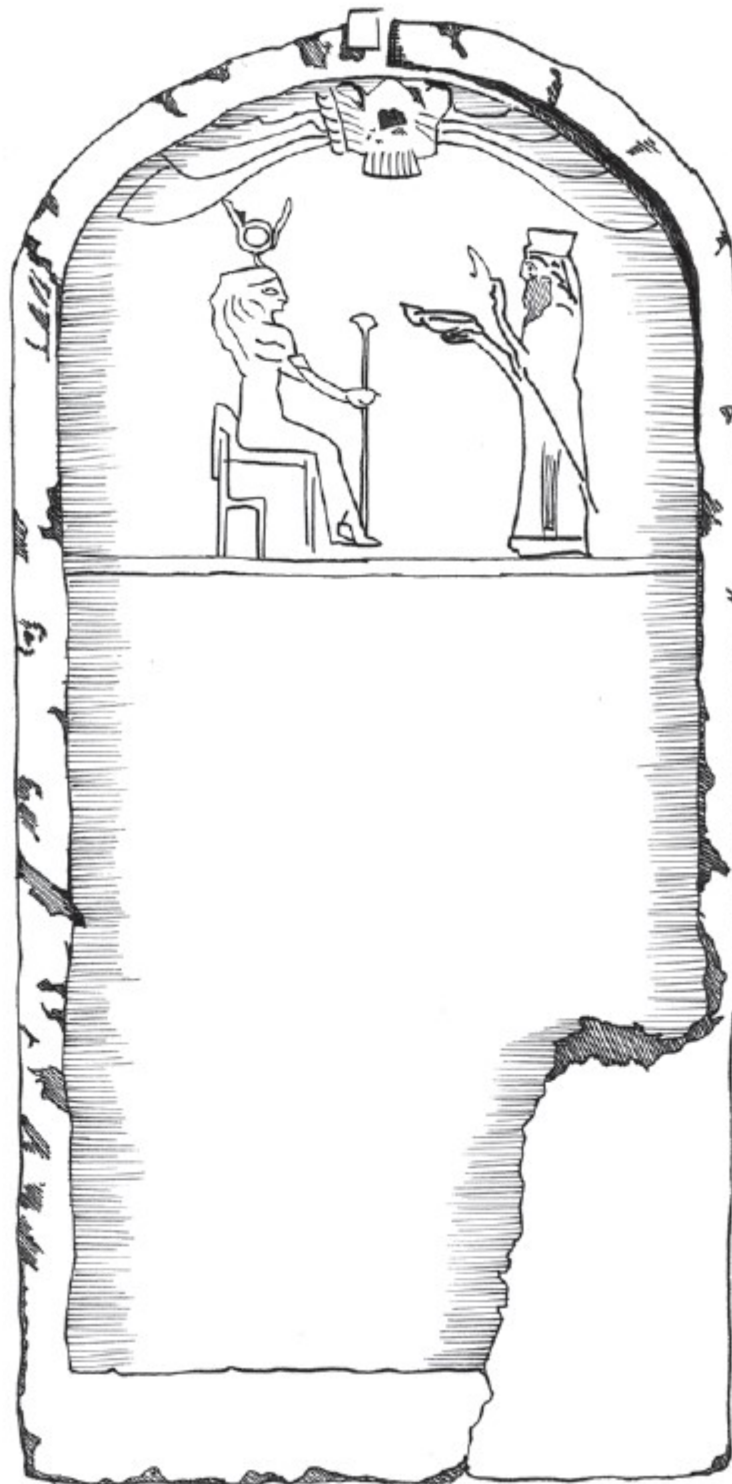

Figure 3: Yehawmilk Stele from Byblos. Doak 2015: Fig. 4.10.

Phoenician seals also show the same convention. The clothing that both figures wear is also Phoenician, posits Ornan (2001: 248). She puts forward a few seals from Keel and Uehlinger's work, but some of those objects show Assyrian-style garb (e.g. Keel

& Uehlinger 1998: Fig. 299). Additionally, the incense-stand on the Ekron pendant that is shown between the two figures might reflect local Ekronite cultic practices (Ornan 2001: 247; Gitin 1997: Fig. 12.20). A chalice discovered in a favissa near Tel Yavneh shows signs of burning, which may correspond to a rite of some kind (Ben-Shlomo 2010: Pl. 28.1).

Whilst Ornan's assessment is not perfect, it is certainly illuminating. Her identification of several Phoenician features on the Ekron pendant are typically overlooked in the literature. It is as if the Phoenician features are non-consequential for interpreting the goddess in question. As I see it, this is a significant misstep in the scholarly literature. The Phoenician features are *significant* components of the composition and one cannot extract the goddess from the Phoenician style in which it is embedded. Properly oriented, the Ekron pendant is a Phoenician-type pendant that incorporates Assyrianising motifs. Perhaps in the same way that Phoenician artists admired and incorporated Egyptian artistic traditions, the individual responsible for the Ekron pendant used an artistic tradition he admired.

The mixture of both Assyrian and Phoenician tradition confirms that the Ekron pendant was produced 'locally' as Ornan judged. However, it is unlikely that the pendant was created in Ekron. To date, there is no evidence of a jewellery workshop in the city (Golani & Sass 1993: 60). Therefore, the pendant was probably produced outside of Ekron, perhaps in a Phoenician workshop and exported to Ekron. It might even be the case that the pendant came to Ekron along with the other Phoenician style jewellery found in Hoard 4 (Golani & Sass 1993: 73-74).

The emphasis on the Phoenician aspects of the pendant is consequential for several reasons. First of all, scholars mainly prioritise what they consider to be the Assyrian components of the pendant. As just discussed, the imagery is not properly Assyrian, but Assyrianising or 'Assyrian inspired' (Ben-Shlomo 2010: 85). The individual responsible for the pendant is using some Assyrian motifs, yet the overall scene is Phoenician in style and contains motifs that are Phoenician. Second, and as a consequence, the Phoenician-ness of the pendant indicates that the imagery is one step removed from being an Assyrian artefact proper. It is unconvincing to maintain that the pendant came from Assyrian or was made by an Assyrian artist.

'Ištar' in the Neo-Assyrian Period

One issue that is not adequately addressed in the literature pertaining to the Ekron pendant, and to the question of 'Ištar' imagery more generally, is the reality of multiple Ištar-goddesses. Due to spatial constraints, only a brief overview of the topic is possible. In recent decades, scholars have argued that there is more than one Ištar in the Neo-Assyrian period (e.g., Allen 2015; Meinhold 2009; Porter 2004; Lambert 2004; Asher-Greve & Westenholz 2013). Numerous Neo-Assyrian documents mention Ištar-of-Nineveh, Ištar-of-Arbela, Assyrian-Ištar, Ištar-of-Akkad, Ištar//Lady-of-Battle (the notation method is taken from Allen 2015). Whilst some maintain that these Ištars are hypostases of a single supreme Ištar, other Assyriologists argue for the distinct individuality of the Ištar-goddesses, though the data is admittedly complex (e.g., Asher-Greve & Westenholz 2013: 109). Whatever mechanism of development one holds to, Neo-Assyrian period texts make it clear that we are not dealing with just *one* Ištar, a fact that scholars of ancient Near Eastern visual art cannot ignore. If the textual tradition distinguishes between Ištar-goddesses, modern scholars should try to be as precise as possible. It is insufficient to simply refer to an image of a goddess as 'Ištar'. Which Ištar? Ištar-of-Nineveh? Ištar-of-Arbela?

We do know that ancient peoples distinguished between Ištar-goddesses in pictorial form. The evidence for such are a handful of inscribed artefacts that explicitly identify the goddesses that are represented. The first example is an eighth century BCE stele from Til Barsip (**Fig. 4**)

Figure 4: Stele from Til Barsip carved in low relief. Ornan 2001: Fig. 9.10.

The city is located in modern day north-central Syria on the banks of the Euphrates. Displayed in low relief on the stele is a female postured in a striding position atop a leashed lion, which marks her status as a divinity. She is adorned with weapons on her back and a sword at her side. The feathered crown she wears is topped with a rosette. The goddess in question is explicitly identified in the accompanying Akkadian inscription as Ištar-of-Arbela. It is periodically emphasised that the Til Barsip stele embodies the militaristic characteristics that Ištar-of-Arbela exhibits in the textual tradition of the Neo-Assyrian period (Pongratz-Leisten 1994: 80). However, one should not over-emphasise the association between the text and image (Allen 2015: 172 n. 83). Ištar-goddesses are frequently associated with militaristic and violent

language; we should not assume that every depiction of a militarised Ištar-goddess is Ištar-of-Arbela (Cornelius 2009: 26). For instance, in a dedicatory text Esarhaddon addresses Ištar-of-Uruk after renovating her temple, Enrigalana. Therein he identifies Ištar-of-Uruk as the 'goddess of war and battle' (*i-lat* MURUB_4 *ù ta-ḫa-zi*). Further on in the inscription, he also requests that Ištar-of-Uruk come to his aid in battle 'so that I may squash all my enemies like ants' (Leichty 2011: No. 134:4, 19). The point is that whilst the Til Barsip stele transparently associates Ištar-of-Arbela with martial characteristics, we should not then assume that based on this stele alone that *all* representations of a militaristic goddess are Ištar-of-Arbela (Allen 2015: 172 n. 83; Cornelius 2009: 26).

Sennacherib's so-called 'seal of destinies' is a second example of a specific identification of a goddess depicted in the guise of an Ištar-goddess. The multimedia seal contains a lengthy inscription and a pictorial scene showing three anthropomorphic figures. According to the inscription, the humanoids are Sennacherib, Aššur and Mullissu (**Fig. 5**) (Wiseman 1958: 16, Fig. 2).

Figure 5: Inscribed cylinder seal of Sennacherib. Wiseman 1958: Fig. 2.

Mullissu's relationship with the Ištar-goddesses during the Neo-Assyrian period is quite complicated. Prior to the reign of Sennacherib, the textual corpora indicate that Mullissu was a distinct goddess that was rarely (if ever) identified with 'Ištar' (Allen 2015: 177). However, starting in the early seventh century, Mullissu became associated with 'Ištar'; so much so that 'Mullissu' and 'Ištar' become interchangeable

names for the national goddess. Indeed, the inscriptions of Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal all freely switch between 'Ištar' and 'Mullissu' in their inscriptions (Meinhold 2009: 200). Importantly, though, the inscriptions still also mention *other* Ištar-goddesses, such as Ištar-of-Nineveh, Ištar-of-Arbela and Assyrian-Ištar. So, whilst Mullissu can be called 'Ištar' in the seventh century BCE, she is still distinguishable from the other Ištar-goddess. Because of Mullissu's close association with 'Ištar' in the seventh century, scholars rightly see that Mullissu is *depicted* as an Ištar-goddess on Sennacherib's 'seal of destines'. Like other Ištar-goddess, she stands on a lion, for example. Yet, Sennacherib does not call her 'Ištar'; she is Mullissu in this case. Thus, in the 'seal of destines' we have a representation of the national goddess Mullissu in the guise of Ištar. And this is clear because like the Til Barsip stele, the inscription accompanying the image identifies the *specific* goddess shown.

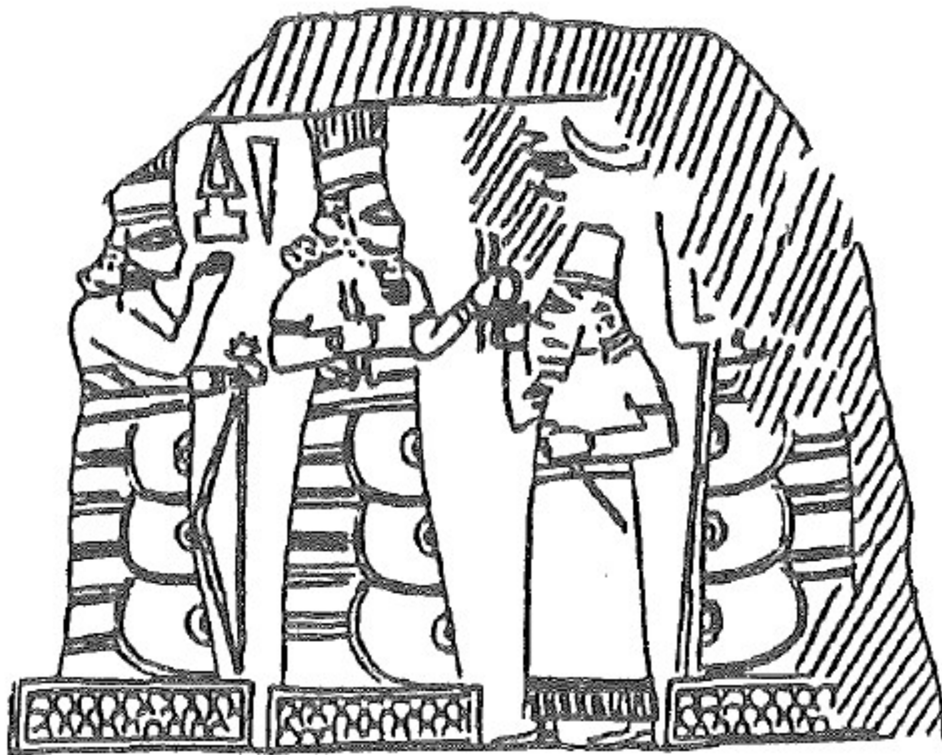

Figure 6: Stele of one Šamaš-reš-uṣur from Suḫu. Cavigneaux and Ismail 1990: 324.

A third object that frequently appears in discussions of Ištar-imagery is a relief fragment from the region of Suḫu (**Fig. 6**), ascribed to one Šamaš-reš-uṣur, the governor of the region (Naʾaman 2003: 101-102). The relief is dated to the eighth

century BCE and was discovered in Babylon, suggesting that the fragment was taken there as a war-prize (Ornan 2001: 238; Cornelius 2009: 18). The relief is inscribed and identifies three deities: Adad, Anat and Isťar. There are two points worth making regarding the relief fragment. First, the inscription does not specify the Isťar-goddess in question. She is simply 'Ištar': i.e., what Allen calls the 'unspecified Isťar' (Allen 2015). One could account for this ambiguity in a few ways, but most likely the goddess in mind is simply assumed. In other words, the goddess worshipped under the 'first name' 'Ištar' would have been specific to the people in the region, but due to historical distance we are unaware of who this goddess is (Allen 2015: vii; Porter 2004). The second point is that the imagery used for 'Ištar' is quite different from the other images considered so far. She stands on a rocky/mountainous pedestal, not a lion. She holds a bow at her side but wears no other weapons. Her clothing is markedly different as well: she is dressed in a Syrian style garment, in comparison to the Neo-Assyrian garb shown on Sennacherib's seal and the Til Barsip stele. Most importantly, when compared with the Ekron pendant, there is hardly any overlap at all. Perhaps the only commonality is that the two representations both show goddesses; yet, per scholars both show the *same* goddess.

Before moving forward, one additional discussion is necessary. The above survey might lead one to conclude that various Isťar-goddesses each possess their own, distinct iconographies. As I see it, the data does not point in this direction. Rather, the pictorial record indicates that there was a more *generic* convention of representation that appropriate for *any* Isťar-goddess, including late-comers to the group like Mullissu.

On a seventh century rock-relief from Maltai (**Fig. 7**) is a scene showing a procession of seven animal-mounted deities and Sennacherib. Interestingly, the king appears twice in the relief at both the front and back.

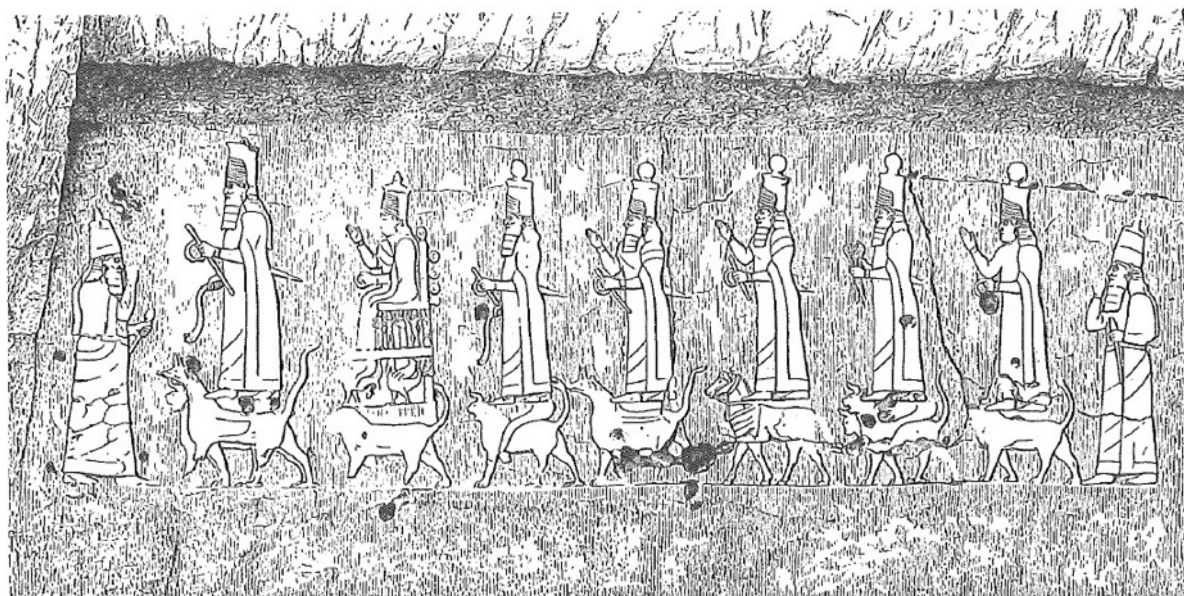

Figure 7: Rock-relief from Maltai. Prichard 1954: Fig. 537.

The doubling may represent the unboundedness that cylinder seal compositions signify (Bahrani 2014: 123). Setting aside the semiotic aspect of the relief, I draw attention to two of the deities contained in the image. According to Ornan, 'Ištar' is shown twice on the relief (2001: 238). On the far left of the scene is Sennacherib facing the god Ashur, who is identifiable in Assyrian art because of the *muḫuššu* he stands on. Behind Aššur is a goddess enthroned upon a lion. One can identify the goddess as Mullissu for a number of reasons. First of all, the 'seal of destinies' witnesses to the explicit convention of pairing Aššur with Mullissu. Second, Neo-Assyrian period documents also closely associate the two deities. Not only is Mullissu the (usual) consort of Aššur, but she is typically listed after Aššur in embedded god-lists (Allen 2015: 177-188). Some also argue that Mullissu is the only goddess shown enthroned in Neo-Assyrian art (May 2018: 261). With respect, this cannot be correct. Ištar-of-Nineveh likely appears on the White Obelisk of Ashunasirpal I (Reade 2005: 347-351, Fig. 5) and Gula is shown enthroned on a dog on a Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal, for instance (Teisser 1984 no. 220; also, see a West Semitic seal Ornan 1993: Fig. 34). Notwithstanding, Mullissu on the Maltai relief is distinguishable given that her pedestal animal is a lion. The same goddess likely appears on a seal belonging to the queen Ḫama, wherein the queen is shown venerating the enthroned-Mullissu. Similarly, Sennacherib and Tašmetum-šarrat, the queen, stand before Mullissu enthroned on a lion on a different seal (Radner 2012).

If we turn our attention to the back of the procession on the Maltai relief, we also see another lion-mounted goddess who is also frequently identified as 'Ištar' in the literature. Since there is no text that identifies the goddess, it is impossible to identify her specifically. However, logically speaking, we might discard Mullissu as an option. Whilst it is true that the same figure can feature twice in a relief (cf. Sennacherib in this relief!), a different interpretation is more appropriate. Rather than suggest that 'Ištar' appears twice, the second goddess is likely a lower-level Ištar-goddess, such as Ištar-of-Nineveh, Ištar-of-Arbela or Assyrian-Ištar. If the procession is conceptualised as a visual god-list, we might find a relative ranking system at work in the relief. The imperial divine couple, Aššur and Mullissu, appear at the front and the deities that follow appear in descending order of rank. At the very end is the Ištar-goddess. This relative ranking scheme corresponds to the textual tradition in which Ištar-goddesses appear as relatively middle- to low-ranking deities (Allen 2015: 198). Or at least, they are not of the same tier as the 'major' gods such as Aššur, Mullissu, Šamaš, Sîn, Ninurta or Marduk. Therefore, it is more likely that rather than showing 'Ištar' twice, the Maltai relief shows Mullissu and an unknown Ištar-goddess, perhaps Ištar-of-Nineveh, Ištar-of-Arbela or Assyrian-Ištar.

According to some, that Mullissu also appears on another royal seal belonging to Sennacherib (**Fig. 8**) (Klengel-Brandt 1994: Fig. 1). Here, the royal couple appear before a goddess standing on a lion, but this time the goddess is encircled with a nimbus.

Figure 8: Royal seal impression of Sennacherib. Klengel-Brandt 1994: Fig. 1.

Several decades ago, scholars argued that the encircled goddess was identifiable as Ištar-of-Arbela (Seidl 1976-1980: 88; Wilcke 1976-1980: 82). The nimbus was thought to represent the circle of fire that is mentioned in a seventh century Akkadian oneiric text (Thureau-Dangin & Dunand 1936: 156-157). More recent scholarship rightfully questions the exclusive association between the nimbus and Ištar-of-Arbela (Ornan 2001: 240-241; Cornelius 2009: 26; Garrison 2013: 1) and should caution against concluding that *because* of the nimbus the Ekron pendant shows Ištar-of-Arbela (cf. Keel & Uehlinger 1998: 541). Indeed, the nimbus is not exclusive to Ištar-*goddesses* generally. A ninth-eighth century cylinder seal shows Gula on her dog encircled with a nimbus (Teisser & Keel-Leu 2004: Fig. 205; Porada 1948: 84). It is also important to note that the single certain depiction of Ištar-of-Arbela, the Til Barsip stele, does *not* show her with a nimbus. The evidence suggests that the nimbus emerged as an artistic motif in first-millennium Assyrian art (Garrison 2013: 1) and was applicable to any number of male and female deities (Porada 1948: 84). In cases where a female goddess is encircled with a nimbus, it is inappropriate only to consider an Ištar-goddess as the possible referent. As we have seen, Gula appears in a nimbus as well. If Mullissu and Gula could be encircled, why could other goddesses not be as well? As such, the nimbus is an insufficient marker for identifying a goddess. One might argue that in certain circumstances an Ištar-goddess is in mind because the goddess is adorned with a star, normally considered her symbol (Ornan 2005a: 151-

152). However, Gula is also shown wearing a star on her head in a Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal (Collon 2001: pl. 19: 238).

Besides the seal impression of Sennacherib, which shows him and the queen before Mullissu encircled with a nimbus, identifying the goddess in the nimbus is quite difficult. Collon theorises that Mullissu is shown on a seal belonging to Nabu-uṣalla, for example (Collon 2001: 138; Watanabe 1992: 357). The seal is composed of both text and image. The inscription identities the owner as Nabu-uṣalla and describes him as the governor of Tam(a)nūna ([LÚ]GAR.KUR [URU] *tam(a)-nu-na*). The image shows Nabu-uṣalla standing before an unidentified goddess encircled with a nimbus and standing on a lion. The imagery is a familiar Ištar-goddess constellation. Nabu-uṣalla dates his governance to the reign of Sargon II, which covers the final quarter of the eighth century (722-705 BCE). If we hold to the argument that the amalgamation between Mullissu and the Ištar-goddesses did not take place until Sennacherib (the successor of Sargon II), Collon's interpretation might be dismissed. It is true that Sargon II's texts do not show the same kind of association between 'Ištar' and Mullissu, but given the historical proximity between Sargon II and Sennacherib, it seems too rigid simply to dismiss Collon's interpretation. Given the available data it is unlikely, however.

If the above interpretation is accepted, we can draw several tentative conclusions regarding the representational conventions for Ištar-goddesses in the late Neo-Assyrian period. First, the distinctiveness of the Ištar-goddesses is not a scholarly invention, but is a complex reality presented in the Neo-Assyrian textual and pictorial corpora. Therefore, scholars must use more precise language regarding Ištar-goddesses; it is insufficient to use flippantly the nomenclature 'Ištar' (Porter 2004: 44). Second, though once unrelated to Ištar-goddesses, during the seventh century Mullissu is depicted in the guise of an Ištar-goddess and is identified as 'Ištar' in a variety of texts. Sennacherib's 'seal of destinies' provides explicit confirmation. Third, the same goddess can be represented differently during the same period. As we saw, Mullissu is shown standing on a lion on the 'seal of destinies' but is seated in other instances (cf. the Maltai relief). The second goddess on the Maltai relief is probably another Ištar-goddess, perhaps Ištar-of-Nineveh or Ištar-of-Arbela. Mullissu is also probably shown encircled on a seal impression ascribed to the royal couple

Sennacherib and Tašmetum-šarrat. But the seal of Nabu-uṣalla may *not* show Mullissu, because the seal antedates the merger of Mullissu with 'Ištar' during the time of Sennacherib. In combination with the Šamaš-reš-uṣur fragment, we see that there are a variety of ways to depict Ištar-goddesses in the Neo-Assyrian period. The same goddess can even be shown in a variety of ways. Therefore, in the Neo-Assyrian period individual Ištar-goddesses did not possess corresponding, individual iconographies. Instead, there is a general constellation of representation applied to them. In short, token Ištar-goddesses are represented with a type.

How did a viewer know *which* Ištar-goddess they were looking at, especially in lieu of an inscription (or a proper cuneiform education)? Let me first address the textual question. As I see it, the texts that identify the Ištar-goddess in the image are essentially *ad hoc*. Since the iconography is generic, the text functioned as an interpretive marker, funnelling the 'intended' interpretation. In scholarship, the tendency is to see the inscription as an omnipotent arbiter of knowledge, which then indicates what iconographic constellation is associated with a given deity. But the material reviewed here indicates that the process was much less dogmatic. The text gives the *impression* that there is a unique iconography to one goddess. This is of course all the more common when the presumption is that there is only *one* Ištar.

As such, when scholars suggest that the Ekron pendant displays 'Ištar' and borrows Neo-Assyrian iconography in the process, the problem is not fully solved. Insofar as the Neo-Assyrian pictorial record is concerned, the imagery used to represent the Ištar-goddesses is *generic*. There are loose conventions associated with the class of goddesses, but specific artistic motifs are not coopted by one Ištar-goddess. It is not the case the Ištar-of-Arbela is the only Ištar-goddess that is martial. Nor is Mullissu confined to the throne, for instance. Indeed, without an accompanying inscription, it is unclear how a viewer could/can identify the goddess in question. The pictorial record indicates that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the number of goddesses and images. Rather, there is an imbalance in the ration of goddesses-to-images; there are far fewer constellations than individual goddesses (Asher-Greve & Westenholz 2013: 157; Cornelius 2008: 6; Keel 1998: 60). And as such, 'not every goddess depicted is identifiable' (Asher-Greve & Westenholz 2013: 157).

A Contextual Approach

If not every goddess could be identified iconographically, surely other factors were involved because presumably these images meant something. How one determined which goddess is represented is partly related to other, *non-iconographic* components. One of which is textual, as just discussed. The other, I would like to argue, is contextual. To explain, contextual factors such as personal religious belief or location of the image influenced the interpretive process. In an essay written over a century ago, George Barton discussed the multiplicity of the Ištar-goddesses and developed what he deemed two methodological 'canons' that the scholar can use to help identify individual Ištar goddesses. The method he proposes is to identify certain characteristics of explicitly mentioned individual Ištar-goddesses and then extrapolate that information to cases where the goddess is not explicitly identified. For example, if Ištar-of-Nineveh is described as a wet-nurse of a king and then in another text, an unspecific-Ištar is mentioned as a wet-nurse of the same king, the two goddesses are probably one and the same (Barton 1893: 131). The second 'canon' that Barton puts forward is based on 'some historical guide'. He explains, 'when a king speaks of Ištar it may be considered probably that he refers to the Ištar worshipped at his capital unless he takes the pains to tell us that he refers to the Ištar of another shrine' (Barton 1893: 131). The second method is broadly conceived of as a contextual approach. In Barton's case, non-literary features such as the historical situation of a king and his association with a temple or goddess informs how we interpret ambiguous mentions of 'Ištar'.

The same logic is applicable to *visual* representation of Ištar-goddesses. Indeed, this seems to be an implicit mechanism underlying the use of many depictions of the Ištar-goddesses in the Neo-Assyrian material discussed above. How one identified the goddess in question is only partly based on the iconographic features of the object in question. For instance, a relief from Ashurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh shows an encircled goddess that is typically identified as 'Ištar' (**Fig. 9**) (e.g., Reade 2005: 347-351, Fig. 5). Because the relief was displayed in Nineveh, one might tentatively conclude that the Ištar-goddess in question is Ištar-of-Nineveh. Similarly, when the Babylonians stole the relief of Šamaš-reš-uṣur and brought it to Babylon,

the goddess was likely associated with a local, Babylonian Ištar-goddess, perhaps Ištar-of-Babylon.

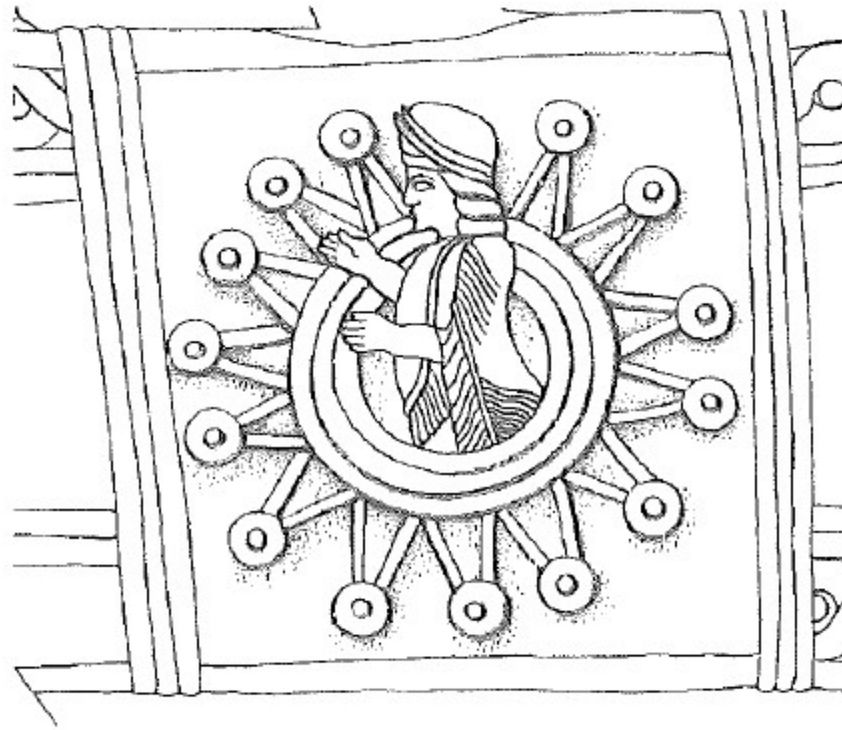

Figure 9: Element of a wall relief from Ashurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh. (Ornan 2001: 9.9).

I do not mean to suggest that Barton's method is a foolproof methodology, however. Determining contextual factors and how they are relevant for the interpretive process is by no means impartial or devoid of subjective selectivity on the part of the scholar, especially with regard to visual art (Bal & Bryson 1991: 175-180). The sort of information that the modern scholar possesses is almost certainly more comprehensive than most ancient audiences would have possessed. Therefore, contextualising artefacts does not solve the interpretive problem, but it does function as another tool for the scholar alongside the iconographic method.

A contextual approach to ancient visual art is also helpful in another regard. In cases of cross-cultural artistic exchange, like the Ekron pendant, a contextual approach takes seriously the reception of the imagery and how it would have been incorporated into its new cultural matrix. Tom Anderson explains that 'artwork must be presented and examined in their own cultural contexts to the greatest extent that can be

managed' (Anderson 1990: 203). We should not simply abstract the iconography of the image and evaluate it within a synchronic symbol system. Though one can discover important information in doing so, we must also attend to how the images would have been meaningful outside of the source culture or 'original' symbol system (Bahrani 2013: 517). We should start by trying to understand how an image might have been received in a new symbol system. Rather than assuming that adopted imagery indicates the adoption of ideas, we should inquire as to how the image would have been absorbed and given meaning according to traditional ideas rather than innovative ones. For instance, in the Levant, 'foreign' imagery was often absorbed but seems to function according to Levantine traditions, rather than the source culture's (Beck 2000: 165-166).

Turning now to the Ekron pendant, it is reasonable to suggest that the goddess shown on the pendant refers to a goddess from Ekron. In the same way that Mullissu took on the guise of Ištar-imagery during the seventh century, it is entirely possible that an Ekronite goddess also took on Ištar-imagery. Using the context of Ekron's cultic profile, we can see how the pendant would have been used to represent a local goddess. Susan Ackerman and Mark Smith both make similar observations, albeit cautiously. Even though the goddess 'looks like' an Ištar-goddess, the Ekronites could have understood the goddess on the pendant as Asherah (Smith 2001: 71; Ackerman 1992: 250-251). The Northwest Semitic goddess Asherah is attested in a number of sherd inscriptions that were found near Temple Complex 650 in Ekron and indicates that the goddess was venerated in the city (Gitin 1993: 250-251; Gitin and Brandl 2018: 300). One of the inscriptions reads *qdš l'šrt*, 'dedicated to Asherat' (Gitin 1993: 250-251, Fig. 2). Smith's and Ackerman's observation seems possible given the general Phoenician influence in Ekron (Gitin and Brandl 2018), as well as the obvious Phoenician style imagery on the pendant. Furthermore, the *possible* link between Asherah and lions in Levantine traditions contributes to their interpretation (e.g., Dever 1984; Smith 2002: 53; but see Wiggins 2007).

The Asherah interpretation is all the more likely when considered from a contextual perspective. If one does not *a priori* privilege the Assyrianising elements on the pendant, one can readily understand how the pendant is a Phoenician production that incorporates Assyrian motifs to represent a Levantine goddess. Other

Phoenician artefacts attests to the use of foreign signifiers to represent local goddesses. One such example is a depiction of the Lady of Byblos in the guise of Hathor-Isis on the fifth century Yehawmilk stele (Prichard 1954: Fig. 103). Although the Byblian goddess is shown in a thoroughly Egyptianised form, recent studies have shown that the Lady of Byblos is an indigenous goddess. Her periodic association with Hathor-Isis is therefore due to cultural interaction between Byblos and Egypt, not because the goddess is Egyptian (Zernecke 2013).

One may also consider how the Ekron pendant might represent another goddess known at Ekron. When Ekron was at the height of its economic prowess, Padi's son, Ikausu (biblical *ʾākîš* [e.g., 1 Sam 21.10-15]; Naveh 1998) constructed a temple-palace on the cities acropolis, labelled now as Temple Complex 650. Excavators and other experts explain that the architectural features of the temple show a variety of Assyrian, Phoenician and perhaps Aegean influences (Gitin 2012). During excavation, an impressive dedicatory inscription was found in northwest corner of the inner sanctum, suggesting that the inscription was the 'focal point' of the western wall (Gitin, Dothan & Naveh 1997: 7). The language of the inscription is a Canaanite idiolect closely resembling Phoenician and, to a lesser extent, Hebrew. Find context and palaeography place the inscription squarely in the seventh century (Rollston 2010: 49-51; Gitin, Dothan & Naveh 1997).

The inscription identifies the deity to whom the temple is dedicated to as *ptgyh*, 'The temple (which) Ikausu son of Padi, son of *Ysd*, son of Ada, son of Yair, ruler of Ekron, for *ptgyh* his lady (*ʾdth*). May she bless him, and prote[ct] him, and prolong his days and bless his [l]and' (adapted from Gitin, Dothan & Navehn 1997: 9). The same goddess is likely mentioned in Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty from Tell Tayinat, in this case as the 'Lady of Ekron' ([d]*šar-rat a-am-qár-ru-u-na*; Lauinger 2012). Within the scholarly literature there is an ongoing debate regarding both the morphology of the divine name and the deity to which the name refers (e.g., Schäfer-Lichtenberger 2000; Press 2012; Fantalkin 2017). Thankfully, whether the third letter of the name is a *nun* or *gimel* or if the goddess is Aegean or Semitic is irrelevant for the present discussion. What is most significant is that the deity in question is a *goddess* and the tutelary deity of Ekron's royal dynasty. It is entirely possible that in the same way Assyrian Mullissu became associated with Ištar-goddesses and visually represented as one, *ptgyh* is

represented as an Ištar-type goddess on the Ekron pendant (Kletter et al. 2010: 87). Therefore, the imagery does not mean to show a Mesopotamian Ištar-goddess *per se*. Instead, *ptgyh* is shown in the guise *of* an Ištar-goddess. The imagery is borrowed and re-coded to show a local goddess with the veneer of a mighty Assyrian goddess.

In the ancient Near East, many artistic traditions incorporated or borrowed imagery from other cultures and baptised the borrowed imagery with new meanings. Irene Winter refers to this process as 'non-literal borrowing'. Non-literal borrowing often obtains between a highly developed artistic tradition and a tradition that self-perceives its tradition as lagging (2010: 527). In some cases, the adopting tradition incorporates both signifier and signified into the artistic encyclopaedia; but in other cases, the imagery is taken over and endowed with new meaning (I. Winter 2010: 528-529). Hence the 'non-literal' qualifier. Usually, the imagery is stylistically distinguishable from the source culture's tradition. Though conceptually derivative, the imagery is often stylistically renovated. Think, for example, of the numerous adaptations to the Egyptian winged-sun disc (Parayre 1990). The various adaptations not only mark the artistic style, but also help recode the image in its new context; the imagery is now marked with its new meaning(s). Indeed, depending on the historical and geographic context, the symbol can represent any number of things include royalty, divinities, the heavens more generally or serve as an apotropaic icon (Parayre 1990: 293; Ornan 2005b; Lambert 1985: 439; Cornelius 2014).

When considered against the contextual backdrop of Ekron's environment, the pendant also displays non-literal borrowing. Rather than adopt signifier and signified as a bundle package, the pendant endows the Assyrian imagery with different meaning. Moreover, the imagery is also derivative; especially in comparison to the Zincirli pendants. Though it would be a mistake to suggest that the Assyrianising style is taken up because the Phoenicians lacked a robust artistic tradition. As is well-known, the Phoenicians were sophisticated artisans, and their artwork was widely revered throughout the Mediterranean basin and ancient Near East.

A key reason for conceptualising the Ekron pendant as 'not literally' borrowing Assyrian imagery is because the imagery is also Phoenician. As I discussed in detail above, there is ample reason to understand the pendant as a Phoenician production

that is *incorporating* an Assyrian motif. The borrowing process is not mimetic but cooperative. The posture of the figures, the 'floor' in the scene, the clothing and other features give the impression that the scene is wholly Phoenician with a dash of Assyrian flavour.

It is the process of incorporation that recodes the pendant to serve different ends, or at least provide an opportunity to be interpreted differently. The mistake in research pertaining to the Ekron pendant is to prioritise the Assyrian-style motifs and interpret them within the context of Neo-Assyrian iconography. The presumption is that it is in the Neo-Assyrian iconographic tradition that the meaning of the Ekron pendant awaits discovery. Yet, this flirts with an etymological fallacy. What the image means in one context is presumed for another context. Cross-cultural artistic exchange in the ancient Near East complicates such a presumption. It is true that certain motifs were borrowed along with their meanings; but it is reductive to presume that every instance of motif-borrowing is also an instance of meaning-borrowing (Uziel 2007: 165; Bal & Bryson 1991: 207). Specifically speaking about the Philistines of Iron Age II, the material culture reflects a complicated process of give and take, adaptation, innovation, assimilation and so on (e.g., Gitin 2012; Gitin & Brandl 2018; Ben-Shlomo, Shai & Meir 2004; Stone 1995; Dothan 1982; Uziel 2007; Ben-Shlomo 2019).

Conclusion

The assumption that meaning follows form in cross-cultural artistic exchange is misguided. We cannot presume a mechanism of intercultural borrowing; rather, we must describe observable phenomena. Moreover, it seems reductive to suppose a single mechanism of cross-cultural artistic exchange. Scholars ostensibly presume a close relationship between form and meaning and often fail to consider how an image might have been re-coded in a new context (I. Winter 2010: 141). In this essay, I endeavoured to push back against the commonly held interpretation that a seventh century silver pendant from Tel Miqne-Ekron shows the goddess 'Ištar'. By considering non-iconographic data as contextually relevant, it seems that the pendant is borrowing the imagery, not the meaning. Or put differently, the imagery is re-coded in the new context (cf. Stone 1995: 21). We will never know for certain what

the Ekron pendant 'meant' in the past. Who owned the object, where it came from and for what purpose(s) are all unknown. Our pursuit of historical knowledge and *possible* meanings is not futile, however. Iconographic analysis is an indispensable tool for interpreting ancient artwork, there is no doubt about that. Though we should keep in mind that it is not a one-size-fits-all methodology. Scholars can (and should) incorporate other methods, interrogate artefacts and imagery from different angles and offer alternative interpretations (Lorenz 2016: 117). In all likelihood, we will not arrive at 'The Meaning' (if such a thing exists), but what we will find is that ancient peoples interacted with the world in ways that were just as complicated as we do. The Ekron pendant may have represented an Ištar-goddess to its owner, or it might have represented Asherah, *Ptgyh* or some unattested deity. Whoever the goddess might be, it is insufficient to appeal *only* to iconographic data for historical investigations. By paying closer attention to the cultural context of Ekron, Philistia and the Levant along with how imagery transferred cross-culturally, we can see that there is more than one way to understand this pendant and account for its meaning in Iron Age II Ekron.

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I, Taylor O. Gray, declare that there are has been no financial, professional, or personal interests that have influenced the research or writing of this essay.

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