

Article

Moon, Rain, Womb, Mercy

The Imagery of The Shrine Model from Tell el-Far'ah North—Biblical Tirzah

For Othmar Keel

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Received: 6 January 2019; Accepted: 12 February 2019; Published: 25 February 2019

Abstract: The present article focuses on the imagery of the shrine model found at Tell el-Far'ah North, Biblical Tirzah, seat of the ruling dynasty of the Northern Kingdom in the early days of the Israelite monarchy. It examines the multiplicity of connotations, changeability and ambiguity in the representation of the lunar crescent image in the figurative language of the ancient Near East. Finally, the article offers a reconstruction of the model's place within the cult of the late 10th–early 9th century BCE.

Keywords: Tell el-Far'ah North; shrine model; moon; rain; womb; mercy; household religion

The present article seeks to examine the multiplicity of connotations, changeability and ambiguity in the representation of the crescent moon image in the ancient Near East in visuals and texts. My point of departure is the shrine model found at Tell el-Far'ah North, Biblical Tirzah, seat of the ruling dynasty of the Northern Kingdom in the early days of the Israelite monarchy. I shall look into the various qualities of the moon crescent and the multi-level figurative language it carried, and attempt a possible reconstruction of how the imagery was understood in its time.

The model under discussion (Figure 1) is a hand-built cubical house-shaped structure with a large front opening and a single niche, representing a shrine. The rectangular opening with a grooved threshold is flanked by two fluted pillars with applied capitals of inward curling volutes topped by buds. The fronton bears an applied crescent shape whose horns terminate in punctured pellets. The crescent form is filled with four columns delineated by incised lines, holding four (two outer columns), five and six punctures. Three dots punctured vertically flank the crescent shape. Incised zigzags lines appear above the capital volutes, the junctures of their lines emphasized by punctures.

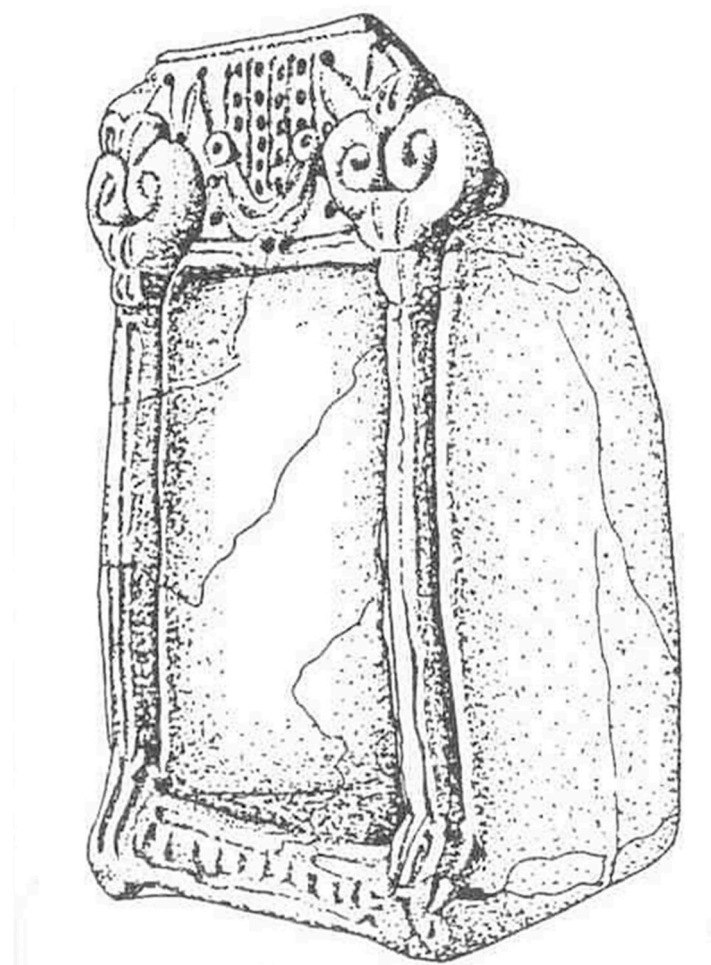


Figure 1. Tell el-Far'ah shrine model (Keel and Uehlinger 1992: Figure 188a).

The shrine model, kept in the Louvre, Paris (AO 2689), was retrieved from pit 241 (therefore stratigraphic context not secure) dug in relation to house 149B near the city gate in stratum VIIb. Stratum VIIb is dated to the Late Iron IIA, late 10th–early 9th century BCE, after Omri had already moved the capital to Samaria (Kleiman 2018 and previous literature therein). A standing stone and a basin found near the city gate of testify to cultic activities that took place there (Chambon 1984, pp. 38, 77–78, Plan B; Bennett and Keel 1998, pp. 53–59). Fragments of two additional shrine models were unearthed at the site. One is a painted round column with drooping petals. The other, found on the floor of house 440, stratum VIIb, comprising the lower left corner of an architectural model similar to the complete shrine, seems to have been imported to Tell el-Far'ah from a distant workshop located in Phoenicia, according to petrographic analysis, or in Northern Israel, perhaps the vicinity of Tel Dan, according to Neutron Activation Analysis results (Muller 2002, pp. 53–54; Katz 2016, pp. 43–44, 60). Such shrine models were uncovered in tombs, private houses, temples and shrines as well as in temple-related context (Daviau 2008; Berkheij-Dol 2012: Appendix B; Kletter 2015). In the domestic context, they served as prophylactic amulets protecting the family and promoting procreation and the abundance of the home and were used in household ritual activity (Mazar 2016, pp. 32e–35e, 52–54). They kept the real shrines and real images alive and kindled the devotion of those who possessed or dedicated them (van der Toorn 1999, p. 94; van der Toorn 2002, pp. 58–59).

Presumably, the niche, referring to the inner room in the real temple, the Holy of Holies, housed a figurine of a deity, its attribute animal or a scared emblem. Perhaps the niche was left empty, evoking rather than displaying the divine figure (Kletter 2015, p. 75).

1. Previous Interpretations

Previous interpretations have taken the fronton motifs and palmette pillars as symbols of a goddess. Michaël Jasmin related the crescent and columns to a fertility goddess of the Astarte or Asherah type, who is usually represented by the crescent, dove, lion and date palm (Jasmin 2013, p. 397). Silvia Schroer has pointed out that the female aspect of the moon is enhanced by the palmette volutes, an abbreviated form of the date palm, the tree or palmette pillars substituting for the figure of the (naked) goddess (Schroer 2018, pp. 68, 270–71, 284). Ziony Zevit noted the uniqueness of the punctures pattern within the crescent, where a disc is usually found (Zevit 2001, p. 337). Zevit's observation is important, since it supports the idea, that the dots in the crescent shape held special significance within the imagery, not just a mere decorative device or the outcome of fear of empty space. William Dever postulated that the dots represent the stars of the Pleiades, astronomical symbols closely associated with “Asherah/Astarte” and later with Tanit (Dever 2016, p. 195). However, the dots count numbers more than the 7 stars of the Pleiades. Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger suggested that the dots may represent rain drops, in accordance with the Northern Syrian tradition of depicting rain (Keel and Uehlinger 1992, p. 184).

2. Suggested Reading of Motifs

I embrace Keel and Uehlinger's reading of the motifs and wish to add on the multivalence of the image of raindrops falling into the lunar crescent. Interestingly, the crescent appears on a seal impressed handle found in stratum VIIb at Tell el-Far'ah, showing two figures next to a crescent on a pole (Keel 2010, pp. 6–7, no. 9) (Figure 2). Unlike other depictions of the crescent moon flanked by human figures who raise their hands towards the crescent, on a pole or hovering between them (Ornan et al. 2017), the arms of the figures on the seal impressed handle stretch down along the sides of their bodies.



Figure 2. Tell el-Far'ah seal impressed handle, depicting figures flanking a lunar crescent on a pole (Keel 2010, pp. 6–7, no. 9).

2.1. Rain Imagery in the Ancient Near East

Jacques Cauvin demonstrated that two dominant ideological symbols, the woman and the bull, appear in art on both sides of the Taurus Mountains as early as the eighth millennium BCE, representing the advent of the woman and bull religion. Woman and bull, emblematic of the female fertility goddess responsible for both rain and birth, and the virile male god, appear at the very same time as the earliest evidence of rain-fed agriculture and animal husbandry. To this day in Northern Syria and Northern Mesopotamia, agriculture is based almost entirely on rainfall with its concomitant thunderstorms and rainbows. The rolling thunder recalls the lowing of a bull or the sound it makes

when it paws the ground. Bull heads, even bull figures, surrounded by dots, appear on the Halaf painted pottery of Northern Mesopotamia, dating 6600/6500–6000 BCE. It seems reasonable to interpret these dots as raindrops. Most revealing is the scene on a Halaf bowl from Arpachiya (Figure 3). Here, the outer face of the bowl shows bull heads surrounded by dots, while the inner face of the bowl's wall features next to a bull hunt scene two naked women flanking and holding a square form fringed on three sides, which may be interpreted as a sheet of rain (Ziffer and Shalem 2015, pp. 462–63).¹

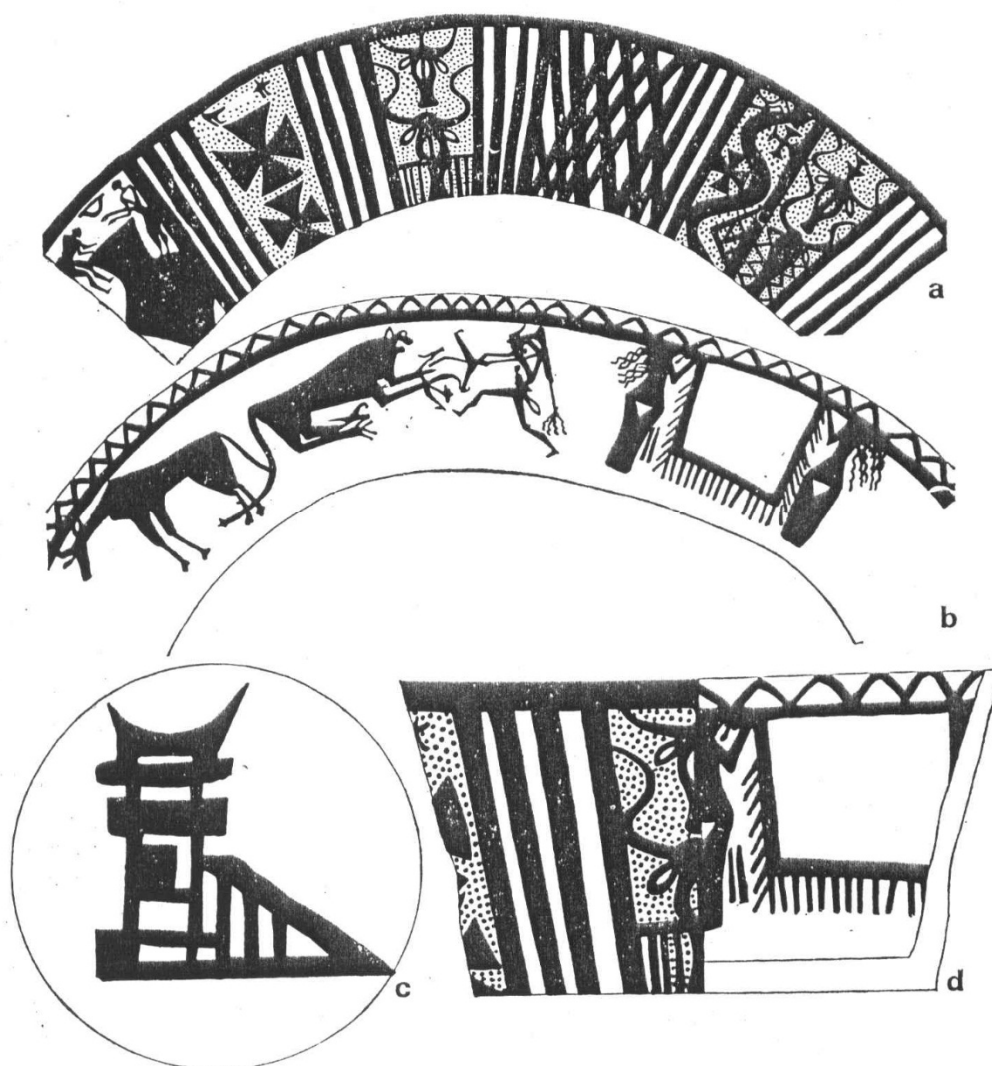


Figure 3. Bowl from Arpachiya, depicting bulls, naked women and rain (Hijara et al. 1980: Figure 10).

In the Akkadian glyptic period, the storm god, holding flail and forked lightning on a winged lion spewing water streams (Boehmer 1965, pls. XXX: 363, 366, XXXI: 367, 369, 371), stands or drives a chariot drawn by a lion dragon spewing jets of water (Boehmer 1965, pl. XXXI: 372–374). The storm god cracks a whip or carries a mace.² He is depicted with his consort, the naked goddess, holding with both hands a lightning rod or bundles of lightning rods (Figure 4) or a watery strap, standing on her own lion dragon spewing water (Boehmer 1965, pl. XXXI: 368) or on the lion dragon harnessed to the god's chariot (Boehmer 1965, pp. 372–73). Mounted on a bull with outstretched arms, she stands

¹ (Garfinkel 2018), who regards the scene as the earliest representation of weaving with a loom.

² (Black and Green 1992, pp. 110–11), Figure 89. Boehmer tends to interpret the whip as thunder, to van Loon the cracking of the whip signifies lightning, (van Loon 1990, p. 365).

in a rain shower depicted as a sheet of wavy lines (Boehmer 1965, pp. 63–64, pl. XXXI: 369; Mayer-Opificius 1984, p. 202). In the background, moon crescent and sun may be depicted, or the moon may be represented alone. One seal shows winged lion dragons diving from heaven along with the storm god and the naked goddess on their lion dragon mounts. The lion dragons represent the roaring dark thunderclouds (Jacobsen 1976, p. 7). Likewise, the lowing of the goddess' bull was the thunder that brought rain. The bull would become the storm god's symbol in the west, and the storm clouds were called "Adad's bull-calves" (Lambert 1985, p. 436; Black and Green 1992, pp. 110–11).



Figure 4. Naked goddess with lightning bundles on a lion dragon harnessed to the storm god's chariot (Leinwand 1992: Figure 13).

In the Anatolian glyptic of the Assyrian trade colonies period, the storm god stands on a lion holding a forked lightning symbol and a spear (Özgüç 1965, nos. 8, 11a–b, 13), or on a bull grasping a limp snake by the head (a defeated enemy). A god wearing a moon crescent mounted on a bull may appear with the storm god, possibly signaling him as a local lunar storm god (Özgüç 1965, no. 71; Leinwand 1992: Figure 16; Ornan 2001, p. 16) (Figure 5). He appears with his consort, the naked goddess, who grasps a circle of strokes indicating rain. Between the goddess and the god on the bull grasping a snake are diagonal strokes, possibly rain.



Figure 5. Anatolian seal impression showing the storm god on a bull, a naked goddess lifting her skirt and rain (Leinwand 1992: Figure 16).

In the Old Babylonian glyptic, the storm god is identified by his name in the seal inscription. Grasping the lightning fork, he rests his foot on a recumbent bull, his attribute animal, below a crescent. The inscription reads “Adad (dIshkur), son of An-na” (Fales and Del Fabbro 2017, pp. 164–65, cat. no. 110). The lightning fork, the storm god’s symbol, appears on a bull without the anthropomorphic manifestation of the god, together with the naked goddess, moon and sun above her (Figure 6). The seal inscription reads: Adad (dIškur) Shala (dša-la), providing the naked goddess’ name.³ Shala was the consort of the god Ishkur/Adad. Adad was the storm god of the north and the west, whose name was derived from the Western Semitic root **h-d-d*, meaning “thunder”, as in the name of the Syrian storm god, Baal/Hadad (Schwemer 2008, pp. 125, 135–37). Shala was a goddess of Hurrian extraction, her name meaning “daughter”. Her epithets indicate that she was the goddess of rainfall and therefore she was invested with power over harvests. Her light features allude to lightening (Schwemer 2006, 2008, pp. 147–49). In the god lists, Shala is the consort of the storm god Ishkur. She was venerated with Adad in the Mesopotamian cult centers from the second millennium BCE on. A hymn to the temple of the storm god Ishkur at Karkara, é-u4-gal-gal(-la), “House of Great Storms”, where he was head of the pantheon, reads “House of Ishkur, your front (is) abundance, your ‘back’ (is) luxury/ Your foundation (is) a steer, ...”. The text is broken and then reads: “the sacred furrow, Holy furrow, teat of heaven (sending) rain for the late barley” (Sjöberg and Bergamann 1969, p. 36, Temple Hymn 27: lines 328–32; 116–17). Here, Shala is described specifically as a rain-giving breast.



Figure 6. Cylinder seal inscribed Adad, Shala. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

In Syrian glyptic of the second quarter of the second millennium BCE, the goddess frequently appears lifting her skirt with diagonal protrusions (Figures 7–9), reminiscent of her Anatolian counterpart (Figure 5).⁴ She is depicted with the storm god in a smiting stance, holding a spear, or a snake or plant symbolizing his power to generate vegetation. He stands on mountains tethering a kneeling bull, with the animal acting as her pedestal (Figure 9). The bull-mounted structure housing the stripping goddess may take the form of a guilloche (Figure 7) or of striations, resembling those on the goddess’ skirt (Figure 8). In ancient Near Eastern art, wings signified the celestial sphere, while the guilloche signified flowing water (Collon 1975, p. 194) and represented fertility in general (Otto

³ https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?ass.

⁴ According to van Loon (1992) the goddess with up-lifted skirt represented the rainbow.

2016). The configurations of guilloche and wings are therefore pictorial expressions of rain from heaven.⁵



Figure 7. Syrian seal: Naked goddess on the back of a bull, lifting her skirt, under a winged guilloche (Amiet 1960: Figure 11).



Figure 8. Syrian seal: Naked goddess in a winged structure and storm god (Amiet 1960: Figure 10).

⁵ Compare the Urnamma stele upper register of both faces, showing flying goddesses pouring undulating streams of water from vases above the seated king, which Jacobsen construed as mythopoetic representations of the rain clouds ((Jacobsen 1987), p. 393 note 24; (Suter 2000): Figure 33a–f for the various reconstructions of the stele). The same goddess dives down on Gudea's stele top in Berlin ST. 1–2 (Suter 2000): Figures 17, 19d, pl. B.

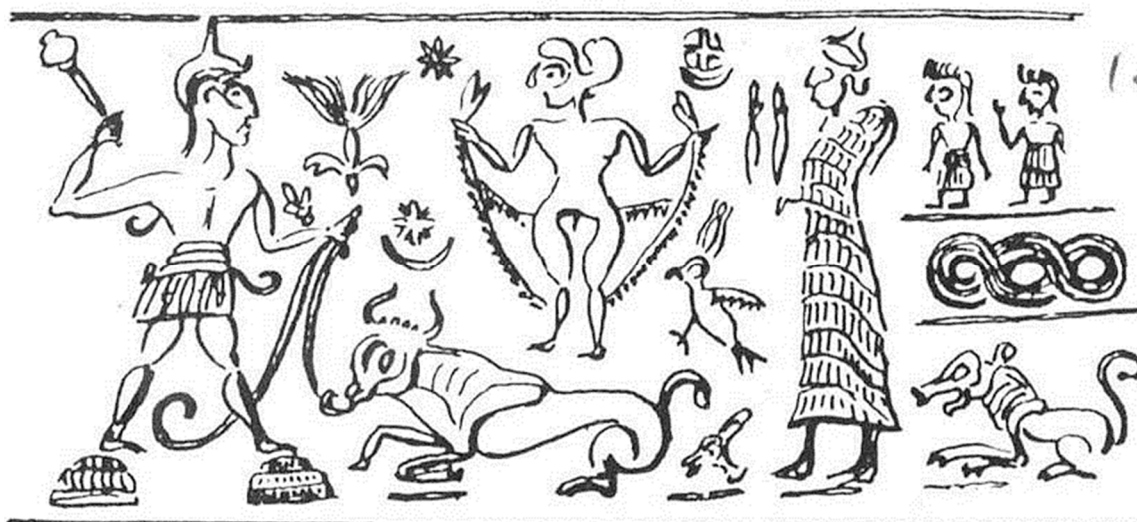


Figure 9. Syrian seal showing goddess lifting her skirt on a bull tethered by the storm god (Amiet 1960: Figure 14).

In the Hittite-Hurrian sphere, the naked goddess maintained her association with the storm god. Surrounded by a guilloche band, the two deities standing on the back of bulls face each other, with the goddess spreading her sheet garment (Otto 2016: Figure 10d). Disrobing, she stands facing the storm god in his chariot, pulled by a pair of bulls that he controls by reins. Streams flow from her shoulders, which connect to the guilloche (water) that stretches above the storm god's chariot (Figure 10). At Emar, the goddess' skirt is made of globules representing raindrops (Beyer 2001, p. 213, nos. E9, E10).



Figure 10. Hittite seal: Disrobing goddess facing the god riding his chariot, guilloche between (Leinwand 1992: Figure 23).

On a seal impression from Nuzi of the 14th century BCE, rain is pictured as a splash of globules accompanying the storm god on his lion dragon, grasping lightning forks with both hands (Figure 11). Instead of the naked goddess, two goats standing back to back stand on (her) lion (Stein 1988, pp. 176–78, Figure 1).⁶

⁶ Undulated lines, possibly rain, appear behind a god on a bull on a Mitannian seal impression from (Beyer 2001, p. 227, no. E41).

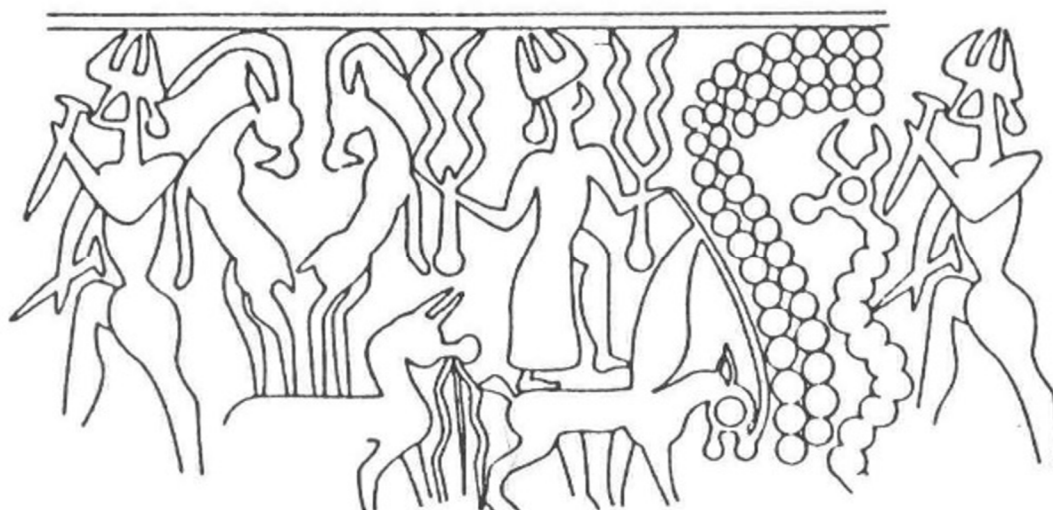
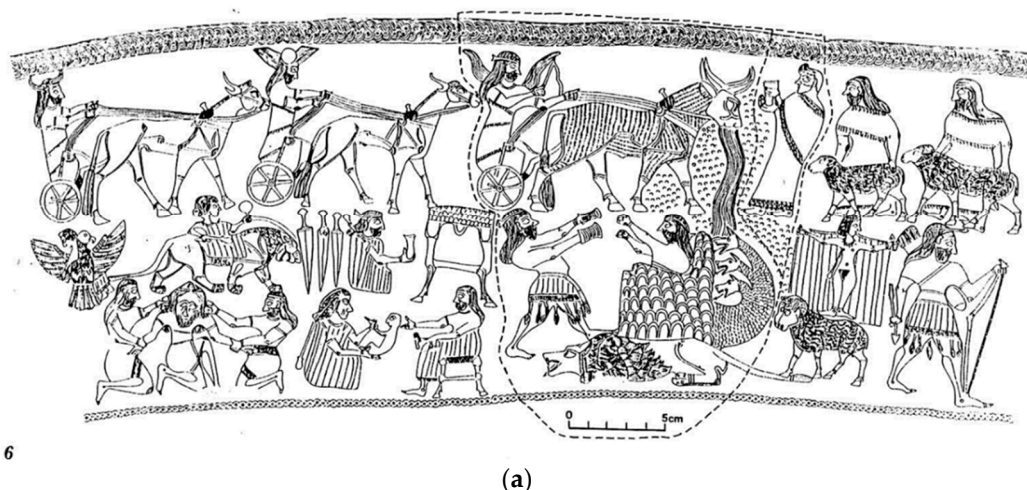


Figure 11. Splash of dots before the weather god holding lightning forks who stands on a lion dragon (Stein 1988: Figure 1).

The last appearance of the goddess holding open her rain-sheet garment behind her back is on the Hasanlu gold bowl, found in a 9th century BCE context (Figure 12) (Winter 1989). Here, she stands on two rams, alongside Teshshup the storm god, who subdues the stone monster, son of the god Kumarbi, as he fights for preeminence among the Hurrian storm gods. Globules (raindrops or hail) connect the storm god in his chariot, harnessed to a bull spewing jets of water, with the same god as he fights the monster, and with the naked goddess who unfolds her robe, made of a square sheet with delineated columns filled with dots, symbolizing rain. The goddess wears a crescent-shaped pendant on her neck (Figure 12a). Behind the storm god are the sun god and the moon god in their chariots pulled by equids.⁷



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(a)

⁷ For the moon god's chariot functioning as a celestial visible effect, the halo, see (Rochberg 1996, pp. 479–82).

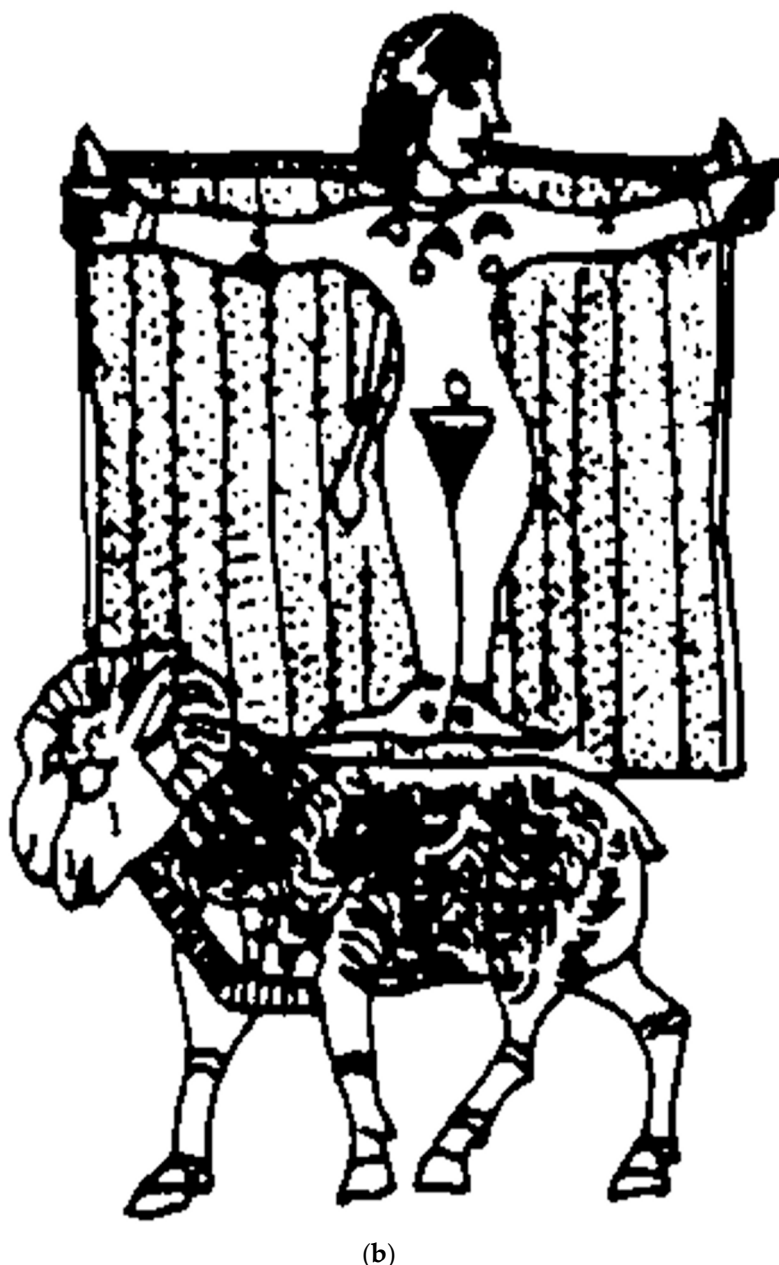


Figure 12. (a) Hasanlu gold bowl: rain drops connecting storm god and disrobing goddess (Winter 1989: Figure 6); (b) Hasanlu gold bowl, detail: rain goddess wearing three crescent pendants.

The moon and sun that appear along with the storm god and the rain goddess are celestial bodies, and hence they may be understood as a metaphor for the firmament that separates the waters above from the waters below, where the celestial bodies are visible (Mayer-Opificius 1984, p. 201; Rochberg 2010a, pp. 341, 344).⁸ Additionally, belonging to the celestial sphere are meteorological phenomena—dew, rain, snow, hail, lightning and storm winds—that issue from openings in the sky to release them (Bartelmus 2001, pp. 93–95, 98, 106).⁹ An Akkadian cylinder seal from Nippur shows the stars as the source for rain above the enthroned sun god (Collon 1987, no. 765). In the Middle Assyrian period, a winged disk supported by a kneeling Atlantid figure separates the upper waters from the lower ones. Undulating lines, indicating water, may issue from the winged disk, embodying the firmament (Matthews 1990, p. 110, note 236, nos. 499, 501) (Figure 13). In Mesopotamian literature, the divine sky had generative powers often described metaphorically in terms of the sky's rains as

⁸ Compare Genesis 1: 15–17.

⁹ Compare Deuteronomy 28: 12; Jeremiah 10: 12–13, 51: 15–16; Psalms 135: 6–7.

the semen engendering the vegetation on earth (Rochberg 2010a, p. 341).¹⁰ In Akkadian, the sky is explained as *ša mē* “of water” (Hebrew: *šāmayim*) and the rain is the “water of heaven”, *ŠĒG* (written A.AN) (Rochberg 2010a, pp. 344, 354). The iconography of the “water of heaven” always shows the rain coming down from the upper field of the artwork, whether by means of undulated lines, globules or as a sheet of columns filled with dots. The Tell el-Far’ah model conforms with the latter convention.

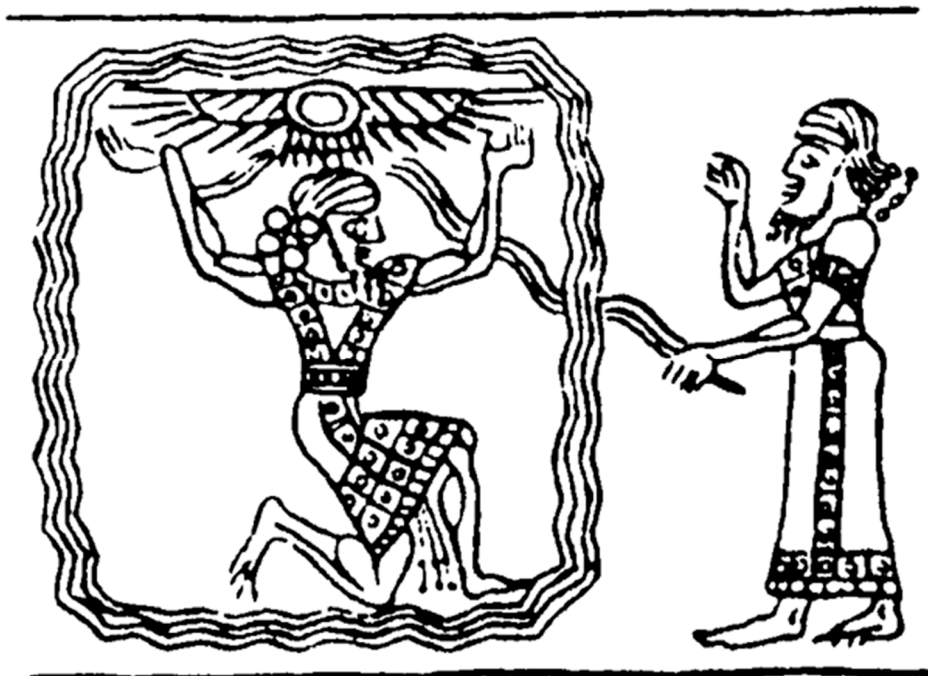


Figure 13. Middle Assyrian seal depicting a kneeling figure supporting a winged sun that separates the waters above from the waters below (Matthews 1990, no. 501).

2.2. Moon Imagery, Womb and Compassion

In the ancient Near East time was defined according to the lunar calendar, marking the beginning of the month by the first sighting of the thin moon crescent. Therefore, the moon god was the most important deity of the three luminary siblings. The moon god Nanna/Suen/Sin was the big brother of the sun god Utu/Shamash and Venus (Inanna/Ishtar), his little brother and little sister (Horowitz 2012, p. 9).¹¹ In art, the moon was depicted as the thin recumbent new moon crescent as observed in the Middle Eastern sky, like a bowl or a boat. The lunar crescent, Akkadian: *uskaru*, from Sumerian U₄.SAKAR = Nanna (CAD U/W 278–79; Krebern timer 1995, p. 360), was the moon god’s most common attribute and his epithet (Collon 1992, pp. 20–21).

At the beginning of the month, Sin rises with horns (cusps), associating the moon waxing with cattle and with the herdsmen and referring to the astral and pastoral aspects of the god (Jacobsen 1976, p. 124; Veldhuis 1991, p. 1). In Mesopotamian literature, the moon god Nanna/Suen/Sin, was referred to as the “astral holy bull calf” who shines in the heavens and spreads bright light in the night. The horns of the moon god (crescent) carry the bovine metaphor (Rochberg 2010b, p. 352), with the white brightness recalling milk (Verderame 2014, p. 93). Because of his horns, the moon god is *bēl qarni* “Lord of the Horns”, (CAD Q: 137, *qarnu* 3a). A sealing from Choga Mish dating from the late fourth millennium BCE depicts a large figure seated on a bull (-throne), while a squatting small figure behind him touches a crescent moon standard (Kantor and Delougaz 1996: pl. 151:B).

¹⁰ Halos surrounding the sun and the moon can be an indication of rainstorms (Rochberg 2016, pp. 142, 187).

¹¹ In the Sumerian tradition Nanna was the father of Inanna and Utu (Black and Green 1992, p. 182).

The month (Akkadian: (*w*)*arḫu*) lasted from the evening of the first visibility of the new moon ((Akkadian: (*w*)*arḫu*) CAD A/2: 259–263, *arḫu* A)¹² after a night or two when the moon is invisible until the next new moon crescent was seen, and lasted 29 or 30 days. Calculating an average month close to 29½ days, and the twelve new moons calendar equal to about 354 days, the lunar calendar is 11¼ days short of the solar year. To achieve synchronization between the solar year and the lunar month and keep pace with the major festivals that are connected to the agricultural seasons, an extra intercalary lunar month is necessary, slightly more often than once every three years (Hunger 2009; Steele 2011; Horowitz 2012).

The unevenness of a 29½ day-lunar cycle was corrected in the early third millennium BCE, when archaic administrative accounts were based on a 30-day month and a 360-day year (Bauer et al. 1998, pp. 121, 126). Thirty, the number of days in the ideal month was used to write the name of the Mesopotamian moon god, ^d30 (Black and Green 1992, p. 135). The writing ^d30 for labeling the moon god spreads westward and is attested in the second millennium at Emar for Šaggar (also written ^dĪAR, Fleming 2000, p. 32), god of the moon (Dalley and Teissier 1992, p. 90). The god Šaggar also occurs at Ugarit, in god lists (Pardee 2002, pp. 17, 19 line 14 ^dĪAR= Šaggar, 46 line 31) and in the Baal Cycle (Smith 1997, p. 145).¹³

The moon god's name 30, referring to the lunar cycle, brings to mind the moon god's title *inbu bēl arḫi* "fruit, lord of the new month", referring to the cyclical self-begetting of the child-moon from the old moon of the last month (Lambert 1987, pp. 2, 29).¹⁴ The lunar cycle of 29–30 days was therefore associated with the menstrual cycle (Verderame 2014, p. 93) as well as with the fruit of the womb. Small wonder, therefore, that new-moon crescent shaped ornaments, Akkadian: *uskaru* (CAD U/W: 278, c) Hebrew: *šahārōn* שָׁהָרֹן (Isaiah 3:18), were a popular piece of female adornment (Golani 2013, pp. 157–59), and were connected with birth giving and nursing (Figures 12a and 14) (Beck 2002, pp. 385–91; Ornan 2007).¹⁵

¹² Compare the West Semitic root ר'ח used to designate "month" and "moon" (Rendsburg 2009, p. 170).

¹³ At Emar, the god Šaggar had a significant role in promoting the welfare of the herds (Fleming 2000, pp. 156–57). It has been connected with Hebrew *šeger* (שֶׁגֶר) in the Aramean Ballam text from Deir 'Alla (שגר ועשתר). In the Bible, שגר refers to the firstling of cattle drop and sheep flocks (ועשתרות צאנך) and parallels the issue of the human womb (רחם) (Exodus 13: 12) and (פרי בטן) (Deuteronomy 7:13, 28:4, 8,51). There may be a connection between the name Šaggar and the Sumerian logogram U4. SAKAR, Akkadian *uskaru* "lunar crescent" or Sin. Thus, it may refer to the moon metaphorically as a young bull. The same moon god appears at Ebla in the third millennium in a literary text as ^dSa-nu-ga-ru corresponding to I ITI "one month"/new moon" in a parallel text and is preceded by 2 SI, perhaps "two horns", which reinforces the metaphor of the new moon as a young bull (Dalley and Teissier 1992, pp. 90–91).

¹⁴ In Mesopotamian love lyrics, *inbu* had sexual overtones "fruit, flower, sexual appeal" (Krebernik 1995, pp. 361, 366).

¹⁵ For New Kingdom feeding bottles in the shape of a woman wearing a crescent pendant, nursing a baby, or pressing her breast to collect the milk in a vessel, see (Brunner-Traut 1970: Figures 5 and 10). For crescent pendants worn by male figures in the Bronze and Iron Ages Near East, see (Ilan 2016). Iconography as well as archaeological finds confirm the use of crescent pendants by women, children and animals (as charms to promote harmonious growth) since ancient Egypt. In Greece, they go back to the Mycenaean period (Dasen 2003, p. 280); when buried with the dead, crescent pendants carried the hope of re-birth (Ziffer 1990, pp. 82*, 116).

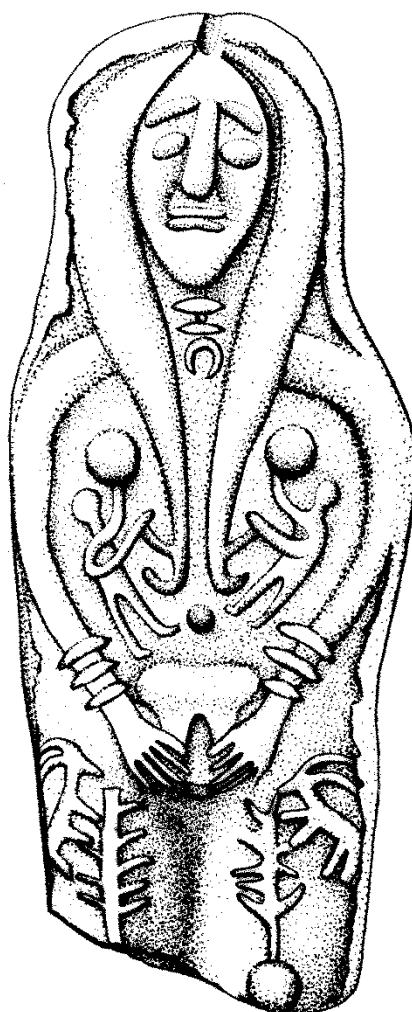


Figure 14. Revadim plaque figurine of a naked woman with babies wearing a crescent pendant (Ornan 2007: Figure 3).

Another name of the Nanna/Suen, ^dGIŠ.NU₁₁.GAL “alabaster”, suggests the lustrous white appearance of the moon crescent (Rochberg 2010a, p. 326). Yet another name of the moon god was DILIM₂.BABBAR “shining bowl”, a loanword from Akkadian *tilimtu*, which was considered to be an attribute of the moon god. Moreover, the *tilimtu* bowl was shaped as a boat, another metaphor for the moon god (Steinkeller 2016). Among the surviving finds which may be connected with *tilimtu* “shining bowl”, are the gold and silver bowls that were found in the tomb of Puabi, moonlike and boat-like (Woolley 1934, pls. 164, 171b with bull’s head engraved on side).¹⁶ Picturing the moon god as a shining bowl brings to mind Song of Songs 7:3: שְׁרָרָה אֵגֶן הַסֶּהֶר, אֶל־יְחֹסֶר הַמֶּזֶג; בִּלְבָד עֶרְמַת חֲטִיִּם, סוּגָה: “Your navel is a rounded bowl—may it not lack mixed wine! Your belly, a heap of wheat encircled with lilies”. Literally, the navel (LXX: omphalos) is like a half-moon bowl *’āgan hassahar* (Jastrow 1903, p. 960 סהר).

In the Bible, the belly, בֶּטֶן (here swollen like a heap of wheat) is synonymous with the womb, רֶחֶם, for example Isaiah 49: 15 מְרַחֵם בֶּן-בִּלְנָה and Jeremiah 1:5 יִדְעָתִיד, בֶּרֶם אֶצְרָה בְּבֶטֶן יִדְעָתִיד. The fruit of the womb is a metaphor for baby, for example, Deuteronomy 7:13 (Erbele 1999, p. 138). The Aramaic root *b-ṭ-n* appears as a noun “womb” and as a verb “to be

¹⁶ Stol (1992, p. 249) concludes that the moon as bowl, boat and fruit represent the moon in all stages of growth, particularly the last one, which is the brightest.

pregnant”, “pregnant woman”, “pregnancy” and “conception” (ירחי בִּנְיָא “the nine months of pregnancy”) (Jastrow 1903, p. 158; Sokoloff 1990, p. 91; Sokoloff 2009, p. 137; Tal 2000, p. 94).¹⁷

The womb is a metaphor for a virgin. At Ugarit, the noun *rh̄m* signifies the “womb” and by metonymy also “nubile girl, damsel”, said of the goddess Anat (Del Olmo Lete and Sanmartín 2003, p. 737; Smith 1997, p. 121), *rh̄m nt* and *rh̄my*, Raḥmay is a goddess’ name (Smith 2006, p. 20, lines 13, 16; 89–90). *rh̄mt*, a nubile woman, appears in the Mesha inscription, describing the king’s massacre at Nebo of “seven thousand men and boys, women and girls and maidens” (Na’aman 2007, p. 147): שבעת אלפין ג[ב]רין וגרן וגברת וג[ר]ת ורקמת כי ל עשת ר כ מש . החרמתה ואקה (Donner and Röllig 2002, pp. 41–42, no. 181: 16–17) and in Judges 5:30 “Are they not finding, are they not dividing the spoil? A damsel, two damsels (רַחֲמַיִם רַחֲמַיִם) to every man”.

In Semitic languages, the root *r-h-m* is multivalent. Derived from the root are the noun “womb”, the verb “to pity” and the noun “pity, mercy”. Thus, Akkadian *rēmu*, *rīmu*, *rēmu* (CAD R: 262–265) denotes “womb” “uterus”, written syllabically or with the Sumerian logogram ARḪUŠ, which by extension means “pity, compassion” (Attinger 1993, p. 441 §275); Ugaritic *rh̄m* “womb” and “to have feelings, to be compassionate”; Hebrew רַחֵם *reḥem*, לְרַחֵם “to have pity” and the noun רַחֲמִים *raḥāmīm* (Jenni and Westermann 1976, pp. 762–68; Maier 2014, pp. 182–89). In Qumran Aramaic and Samaritan Aramaic רַחַם denotes “womb”, “to love”, “love”, and רַחֲמִין denotes “mercy” (Cook 2015, pp. 221–22; Tal 2000, p. 828). In Arabic رَحِمَ *raḥim*, *riḥm* denote “womb”, and by metonymy “relationship, kinship”. From the same root are the verb رَحِمَ “to have mercy, to have compassion”, and رَحْمَةٌ *raḥmah* “pity, compassion, sympathy” (Wehr 1980, pp. 331–32). The Semitic roots indicate that birthing/motherhood and mercy are connected. Dorothea Erbele argued that רַחַם “womb” is a gendered term, the singular form reserved for the womb of women, and רַחֲמִים, the abstract plural, refers to the inner site of compassionate emotions (Erbele 1999, p. 136; Levine 2002, pp. 338–39).

Moreover, Gary Rendsburg has demonstrated that the Semitic root *r-h-m* occasionally bore the meaning “rain” in the Bible (Isaiah 49:10; Hosea 2:23–25; Psalms 110:3) as well as South Arabian (Rendsburg 1983, p. 361; Johnstone 1977, p. 103) and Ethiopian (Rendsburg 1983, p. 357; Leslau 1991, p. 336).

The multiple meanings associated with the root *r-h-m* may be traced in the visual evidence. As mentioned above, Akkadian *rēmu*, *rīmu* may be written with the logogram ÁRḪUŠ. The archaic sign is composed of the signs TÙR “cow pen” with inscribed MUNUS “woman”. TÙRxMUNUS also means *littu* “cow”. The sign TÙR = Akkadian *tarbašu* “cow pen” closely resembles the reed hut from which calves and newborn sheep emerge in Uruk art (Figure 15a,b). In ancient Mesopotamia, TÙR = *tarbašu* “cow pen”, also denoted “halo” (Figure 16). The lunar halo, TÙR *ša Sin*, alluded not only to the closed circle of the cattle pen, but was also related the moon god’s association with animal husbandry and the pastoral and bovine world (Verderame 2014, pp. 92–93).¹⁸ Notably, in the mid-third millennium BCE, a crescent moon appears on the pen lintel above the open door (Figure 17a,b). The image renders the concept of the inner, protected place, the womb, enclosing the embryo, the open door expressing the child’s release at birth. The crescent may represent the image the fetus moving like a boat along the birth canal (Couto-Ferreira 2014, pp. 294–95).

¹⁷ (Sharvit 1972) on the oriental version (Genizah, Cochin and Singili, India) of “Eḥad mi yodea” song in the Passover Haggadah, employing the Aramaic term for the nine months of pregnancy.

¹⁸ Compare סוּרָה “an enclosed place, especially the enclosure for cattle near a dwelling” (Jastrow 1903, p. 960).

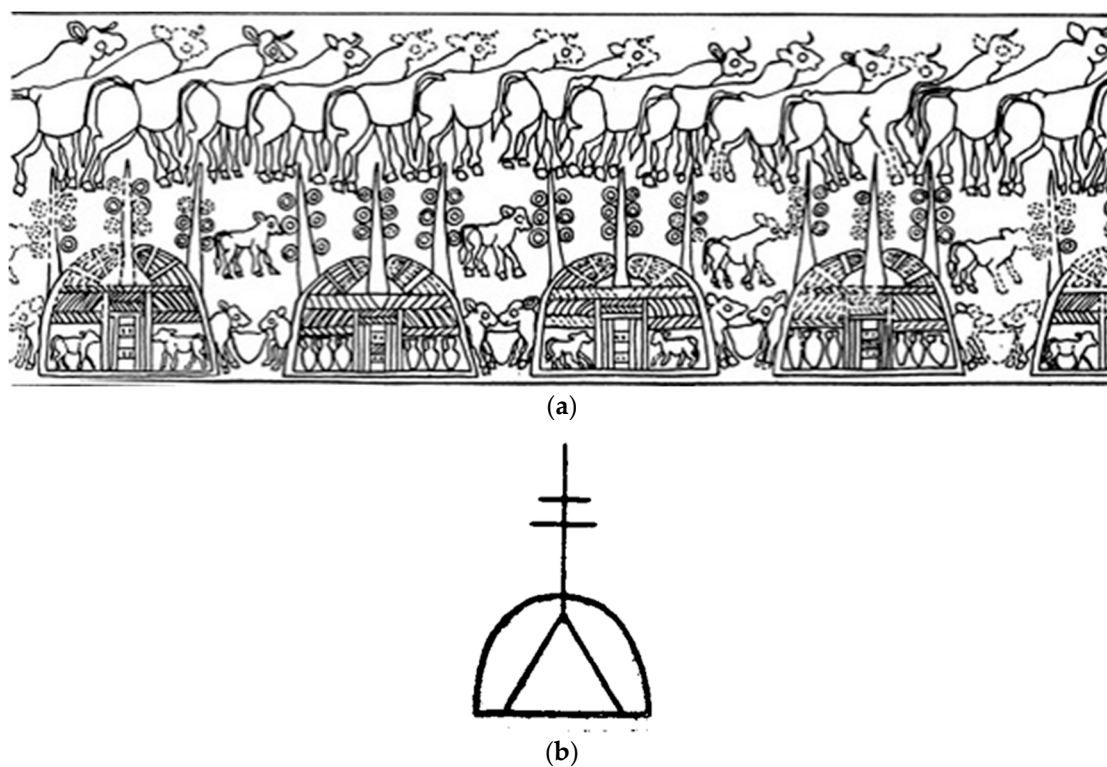
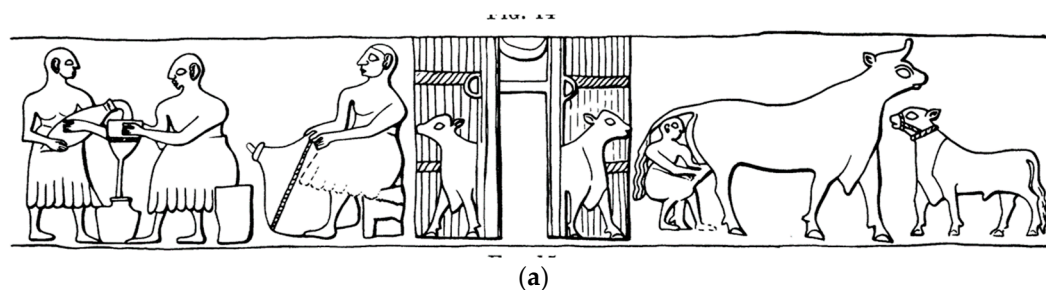


Figure 15. (a) Cylinder seal depicting cows emerging from the cow pen (Delougaz 1968: Figure 11). (b) Archaic sign TÙR, cow pen.



Figure 16. Babylonian *kudurru*-relief (11th century BCE), depicting the lunar halo: crescent enclosed within a sphere (Seidl 1989: Figure 13).



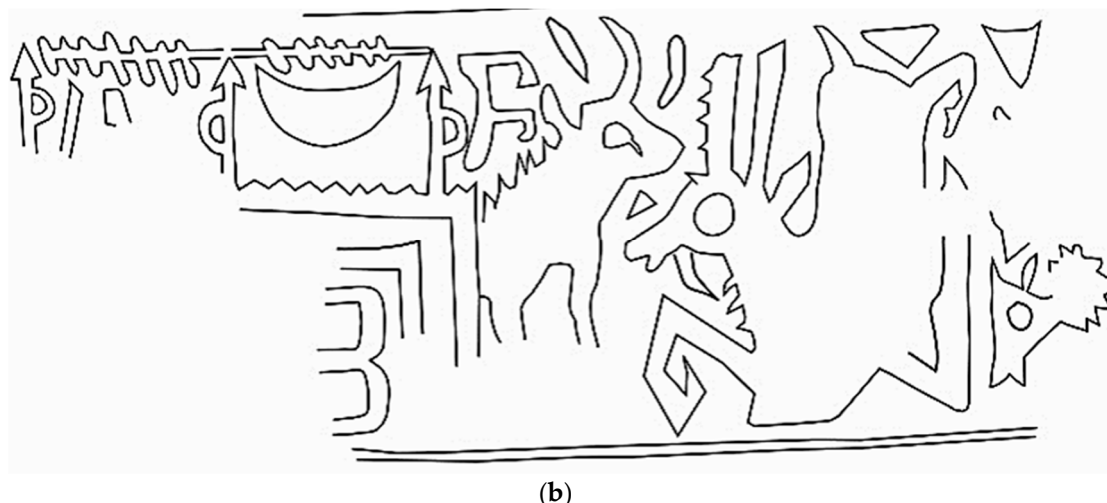


Figure 17. (a) Ubaïd temple inlaid frieze: cow pen with lunar crescent (Delougaz 1968: Figure 15).
 (b) Seal impression showing cow pen with lunar crescent from Konar Sandal (Pittman 2012: Figure 5b).

The Sumerian goddess responsible for both human and animal fertility was Nintur, literally “mistress birth hut”. The element TUR in her name was written with the sign TUR₅, TU(D), which seems to have been originally the “birth hut” of the cow pens and sheepfolds, picturing a hut with a reed bundle on top (Figure 18), where cows were taken when they were ready to calve. Metaphorically, it designated the human womb, Sumerian ŠĀ.TÛR, “inside the cow-pen”, Akkadian *šassuru*, signifying the inner, sheltered place in the woman’s body, from which the baby emerges (Jacobsen 1976, pp. 107, 250 n. 130; Stol 2000, p. 75; Steinert 2017, pp. 205–6), as well as the birth goddesses’ name, the personified womb (CAD Š: 146, *šassuru* Ac). This explains the meaning of the sign TUR₅, TU(D) “to give birth”, Akkadian (*w*)*alādu*. The birth goddess was also named *bēlet rēme* “lady of the womb” and her attribute was the omega-shaped sign, interpreted after Egyptian parallels as a representation of a cow’s uterus (Frankfort 1944). The omega sign was also associated with the moon as evidenced by a Middle Assyrian seal found at Samsat, depicting the moon god in a boat, holding a crescent standard and an omega symbol, connecting him with conception and childbirth (Collon 1992, p. 25) (Figure 19).¹⁹

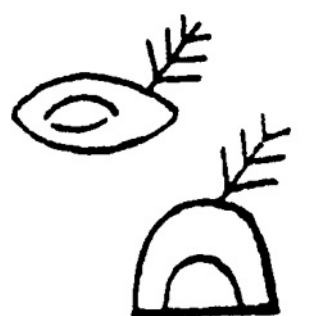


Figure 18. Archaic sign TUR₅.

¹⁹ The configuration of the crescent with the omega symbol has its antecedents in the art of the Middle Bronze Age in Babylonia and Syria (Keel 1989): Figures 34–36. Ulrike Steinert concludes that the omega symbol could stand for the womb and birth, a sign for divine mercy and good fortune, as well as an apotropaic sign (Steinert 2017, pp. 206–23).

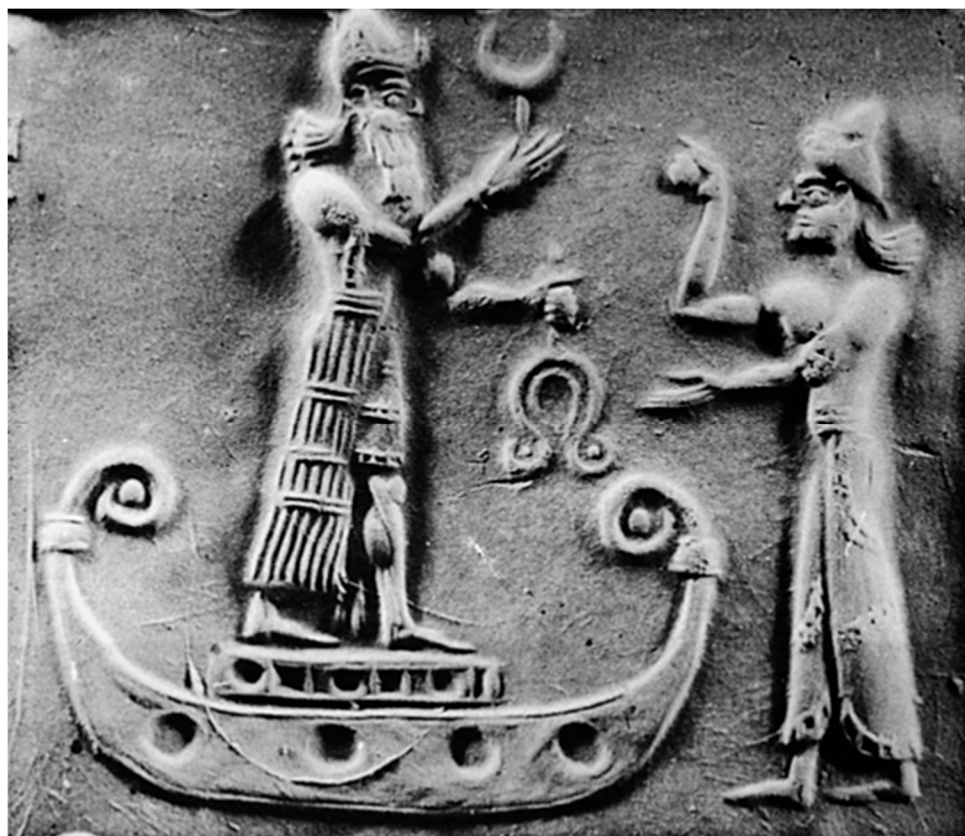


Figure 19. Seal from Samsat: Moon god in a boat, holding crescent and omega signs (Özgüç 1987, p. 436, no. 13).

Calving became a metaphor for human delivery. The incantation “A Cow of Sin”, which goes back to the Ur III period, was recited for the woman in travail. It relates that moon god Sin lusted for a cow, mounted her and impregnated her. When the cow was due to give birth, labor pangs gripped her and became too exhausting and unable to deliver the calf until the moon god sent two spirits to assist her and she finally gave birth. The supplication is that like the cow, the woman in labor should give birth easily. Niek Veldhuis drew attention to the word-play in the incantation, *littu* “cow” a pun for *ālittu* “childbearing woman”, and *arḫu* “cow” placed in chiastic position to the homonym *arḫu* “month” (Veldhuis 1991, pp. 22, 37, 49). Birth incantations of the Cow of Sin, or incantations containing references to cows and cattle pens used during childbirth to accelerate the delivery and protect the newborn child, are attested in the second millennium BCE, not only in Mesopotamia but also in Ugarit and Anatolia (Couto-Ferreira 2014, p. 296). The reference to the cow must reflect observations of calving, which has the potential of being very exhausting and strenuous for the cow, and it is possible that the cow gives up on the delivery. Soon after the calf is born, it is up and nurses. An Akkadian seal found, at Tell Brak, graphically picturing the stages of calving and nursing could easily have served as a prophylactic amulet for childbirth (Figure 20). The image of the cow-suckling-calf became a metaphor for motherly love and care of which an Egyptian tableau on the sarcophagus of queen Kawit (c. 2051–2030) from Deir el-Bahri is a visual manifestation. In this milking scene, the cow sheds a tear in distress, because she cannot suckle the newborn calf, tied to her left front leg, while a herdsman milks her for his own purposes (Keel 1980, pp. 48–49, Figure 6). From the New Kingdom on, the Egyptian expression “to feel compassion, to love” *3mś* was written with the cow-suckling-calf signifier (Keel 1980, pp. 82, 84, Figure 46), a “mute” hieroglyph that provided additional information about the word (Goldwasser and Grinevald 2012, p. 17), namely the phenomenon of the cow’s feelings for her calf as a graphic icon for love. Telling is the passage in the Baal myth, where the loving virgin Anat (*rh̄m ʿnt*) longing for Baal is described in terms of a cow’s love for calf or a ewe’s love for her lamb (Smith 1997, p. 155). The design of an Old Babylonian seal picturing the storm god on his lion dragon, brandishing the lightning fork, together with the cow-suckling-calf alludes

to the god's dispensing rains, thus assuring the fertility of the land, as well as the procreation of animals and humans alike (Figure 21).



Figure 20. Akkadian stamp seal from Tell Brak, depicting the calving process (Delougaz 1968: Figure 18).



Figure 21. Old Babylonian cylinder seal with storm god on a lion dragon holding a forked lightning and a cow-suckling-calf. CC Metropolitan Museum of Art CS1987.96.6.

3. The Tell el-Far'ah Shrine Model: Meaning and Conclusions

What insights may be gained from the above discussion on the composite imagery and related concepts integrated in the shrine model from Tell el-Far'ah, biblical Tirzah? How was this visual makeup possibly perceived in its time and how may the life of this artefact be evaluated?

The owner of the model may have ordered for himself/herself a model with crescent, rain drops and trees, or perhaps he or she acquired a ready-made artefact with for its imagery at the potter's workshop. It is doubtful that the owner was aware of the laden multivalence of the images. However, he or she was aware of the numinous strength of these emblems. The owner perceived the images as ambiguous. By ambiguity, I follow Robert Koehl's definition, namely that ambiguity is something that is "capable of being understood in more than one way, something that covers a wider range of

human experience, expression and behavior” (Koehl 2016, p. 469). Thus, the believer may have associated the horned moon not only with the moon god but also with the storm god, generator of rain clouds. The visual amalgamation of moon and storm is known from the first millennium imagery, perhaps a lunar storm god, as represented by reliefs from Malatya, Carchemish and the 9th–8th century BCE Aramean stele from Bethsaida (Bernett and Keel 1998, pp. 87–92; Ornan 2001). The clay model of sacred architecture, a cheap object for humble piety, kindled the devotion of the person who possessed it, who attributed divine power and efficacy derived from the deity to the replica. For the believer, the model functioned as a means to call upon the deity in supplication. The emblems were a visual manifestation of the natural cycles and seasons (moon), and carried the promise of blessing, correlating the various cycles of agriculture (rain, and tree) and animal husbandry, as well as the fruit of the womb and a wish for a speedy parturition.

Shrine models were part of the domestic cult in Israel. Domestic cult was practiced in the individual’s home, and in larger households, where communal feasting took place. Building CP at Tel Rehov (stratum IV, 9th century BCE) with its halls of benches and cult objects, cooking facilities and serving vessels, dubbed “Elisha’s House” after the name Elisha inscribed on a sherd (partly reconstructed) found in one of its chambers, may have hosted such cultic activities (Mazar 2016, p. 35e). Amihai Mazar cautiously suggested a connection between the inscription and the biblical figure of Elisha, a “Man of God”, a mediator, charmer, miracle worker and healer, speculating whether Building CP could have been the place where such a person may have been approached while conducting rituals and public meals (Mazar 2015, pp. 43–45). The Bible tells us that Elisha held new moon and Sabbath celebrations at his home (2 Kings 4: 23). In view of the finds from Tel Rehov, I suggest that the Tell el-Far’ah shrine model may have served on such rituals celebrated in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Being portable, shrine models could be used anywhere to invoke the deity.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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