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Athirat: As Found at Ras Shamra

Justin Watkins

THE Mother Goddess figure that is found throughout the ancient Near East can be seen very clearly in the texts and artifacts of Ras Shamra, site of the ancient Canaanite city of Ugarit. She is portrayed as a powerful deity, a mother of gods, a consort of El, a wet nurse to men and gods, and a goddess of the sea. In Ugarit she is called Athirat, but is also known to us as Asherah, Elath, and Qudshu. Her prominent role in the myths of the Canaanites gives her great status though it is not reflected in the cultic lists as worship of her declined as time passed. She clearly stood as the greatest goddess of her time.

History of Athirat

The first mention of Athirat in history is found in Babylonian texts dating to the first dynasty (1830–1531 B.C.).¹ Her appearance in these texts coincides with an arrival of Amorite elements into southern

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1. Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 43.

Mesopotamia.² Here she is called Ashratum, the consort of Amurru, the chief god of the Amorites from whom their name probably derives. She bears several titles in these texts including “Lady of the Steppe,” “Bride of the King of Heaven,” and “Mistress of Sexual Vigor and Rejoicing.” These titles reveal something of her character including being the patron of the steppe and a goddess of fertility, both of which have been related to Athirat and her roles by scholars. Aside from being paired with an Amorite deity, her title “Lady of the Steppe” also points to her place of origin being in northern Syria, the homeland of the Amorites. In the El-Amarna letters, which date to the 14th century B.C., the leader/king of the Amorites is called Abdi-Ashirta, which is best rendered “servant of Ashirta,” where Ashirta is almost certainly the same name as Ashratum. It is probable that Athirat began life in the Levant as Ashratum.

The connection between Ashratum and Athirat is a strong one. Athirat may be the “Lady of the Sea,” but she also had a connection to the inland where she is patron of fields.³ Also, she travels on a donkey, an unusual mode of transportation for a sea goddess.⁴ Both are consorts to the highest god of the land. The roots of their names are indistinguishable and likely identical. This conclusion is drawn when it is considered that the Canaanite “th” sound is equivalent to most other Semitic languages “sh” sound.⁵ Thus the root of both names is *ʾšrt*.⁶ With the Canaanites of Ugarit bordering the Amorites throughout the latter half of the second millennium it is very likely that these goddesses had a common ancestor.⁷

2. Steven A. Wiggins, *A Reassessment of 'Asherah'* (Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon and Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993), 149.

3. “CTA 23.13,” (Walter A. Maier, III *ʾAšerah Extrabiblical Evidence* [Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986], 31).

4. “CTA 4.4.1–7,” Maier, *ʾAšerah*, 12–13.

5. Including Hebrew, hence Asherah where the feminine ending “t” in Ugarit becomes an “h.”

6. Hadley, *Cult*, 49.

7. Wiggins, *Reassessment*, 149–50.

Etymology and Titles

Within the Ugaritic texts of Ras Shamra, the goddess is most commonly called *rbt atrt ym* which is most commonly translated as “Lady Athirat of the Sea” and it appears in the texts 19 times.⁸ However, this is far from clear and much debate surrounds this title. The difficulties stem from the words *atrt* and *ym*, with the former being the most problematic. Scholars have questioned whether this word is a proper name, an epithet of the goddess’, or a participle that makes up part of a title. Dever favors the latter and thus translates it, “She who treads/subdues the Sea,” which follows the NW Semitic tradition of making a name into a sentence.⁹ Hadley lists several ideas put forth by scholars including “ruler/queen of the gods” (Ahlstrom),¹⁰ “luck” or “good fortune” (Burney), “holy” or “holy place” (Albright), “sanctuary by the sea” (DeMoor), and “she who determines the day” (Watson).¹¹ Binger, after listing all the possible roots and their meanings in five relevant languages, asserts that it is impossible to determine the original meaning because of the many possible meanings for the possible roots.¹² Others have argued on similar grounds that its meaning is so ancient that it is lost to us and so we should simply take it as a personal name.¹³ These restrictions lead us to regarding Athirat as a personal name.

The second word in question, *ym*, could mean either “sea” or “day.” Hence Watson translates her title as “she who determines the day.” Binger also prefers this, translating the title “Asherah, Lady of the Day” arguing that Ashratum had no connection to the sea.¹⁴ Wiggins adds that much later southern Arabian inscriptions also connect

8. Tilde Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel, and the Old Testament* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 42–43.

9. William, G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 210.

10. Hadley, *Cult*, 41.

11. Hadley, *Cult*, 50–51.

12. Binger, *Asherah*, 143–45.

13. Hadley, *Cult*, 40.

14. Binger, *Asherah*, 48–49.

Asherah to the sun.¹⁵ However, a stronger case can be made for “sea” than for “day.” Pettey recognizes Athirat’s connection to the sea but believes that the association with the inland and desert comes from her position in another culture’s ancient pantheon.¹⁶ Ugarit is a coastal city whose industry was driven by their port. This would make for a logical change from the Amorite “Lady of the Steppe” to the Ugaritic “Lady of the Sea.” Also, Athirat’s servant is called “Fisherman,”¹⁷ a strange name that would be less out of place for the servant of a sea goddess.¹⁸ In the Baal cycle we first see Athirat sitting next to the sea where she later commands Fisherman to cast his net.¹⁹ She also notes that Yam, who was the son of Athirat and god of the sea (his name means “sea”) was El’s darling and hence it makes sense for his consort/wife to be placed over it.²⁰ Wiggins argues that as each new culture adopted Asherah worship they altered her traits to fit their needs.²¹ Thus the most common rendering, “Lady Athirat of the Sea,” is likely the best.

Another title that is commonly ascribed to Athirat in the Ugaritic texts is *qnyt ilm*. This is most often translated as “Creatress of the Gods,” or “Progenitor of the Gods.” There is virtually no contention about this translation among scholars. Athirat is referenced in the texts as being the mother of the gods in many places.²² The traditional view of scholars has been that Athirat begat many gods by El, but that perhaps they were no longer together, possibly because of El’s apparent impotence. El is viewed as an old man while Athirat is somewhat younger. Later texts pair Athirat with Baal,²³ as do the biblical writers,²⁴ which is also seen as a possible consequence of El’s impotence. Binger

15. Wiggins, *Reassessment*, 191.

16. Richard J. Pettey, *Asherah: Goddess of Israel* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 16.

17. “CTA 3.6.9–25,” Maier, *’Ašerah*, 3–4.

18. Hadley, *Cult*, 40.

19. “CTA 4.2.3–11; 26–35,” Maier, *’Ašerah*, 10.

20. Hadley, *Cult*, 41.

21. Wiggins, *Reassessment*, 149–50.

22. “CTA 4.2.12–26, 4.4.40–57, 6.1.38–61, 6.5.1–11,” Maier, *’Ašerah*, 7–8, 16–17, 23–25.

23. “CTA 34.6.36.8,” Maier, *’Ašerah*, 39–40.

24. See 1 Kings 18:19.

challenges these traditions arguing that they are very Western in context. She points out that the Greek mythologies have a female deity creating the world, having children without a consort, and making her son her consort. She is the older and he the younger.²⁵ She adds that the creation myth from the Enuma Elish is essentially the same, where Tiamat creates the gods before everything else and then takes her son as a consort who then creates the universe. She wonders if this could be the case also with El and Athirat. Admittedly, the Ugaritic text would appear to resemble the Enuma Elish in this as El carries the titles “the Builder/maker of what is Built/made” and “Father of Man.”²⁶ This argument is compelling but unsubstantiated. In any case Athirat stands in the highest regard among the gods of the Ugaritic pantheon.

Another title that is applied to Athirat is “Wet-nurse of the Gods.” Within the Kirta epic El names her this.²⁷ Kirta secures the promise from El that Hurriya will bear him Yassib and that he will be nursed/suckled by Athirat and Anat. Wiggins points out that this promise that Athirat will suckle him amounts to legitimizing him as Kirta’s heir.²⁸ Being a wet-nurse only adds to Athirat’s honor here, and those she nurses are brought honor.

Baal Cycle

The primary source of information about Athirat is the Baal Cycle found at Ugarit. Pettey dates the text from the 17th to 15th century B.C..²⁹ The Baal Cycle is a lengthy text that focuses primarily on the story of Baal and his attempts to obtain a palace like the other gods in order to secure his status among them. In this narrative Athirat plays a large roll that demonstrates much of what we know about her. The bulk of the story concerning Athirat is found in the *Corpus Tablettes Alphabetiques* or CTA 4.2.3–4.5.81.³⁰

25. Binger, *Asherah*, 51.

26. Binger, *Asherah*, 51.

27. “CTA 15.2.21–28,” Maier, *’Ašerah*, 28–29.

28. Wiggins, *Reassessment*, 190.

29. Pettey, *Goddess of Israel*, 5.

30. Maier, *’Ašerah*, 6–20.

We first hear about the Goddess when Baal and Anat approach Athirat's servant, Fisherman. Previous to this meeting Anat attempted to secure El's favor in allowing the palace to be built, but failed. As a change of plan they send Fisherman to Egypt to entreat the god Kothar to make a present that they could present to Athirat to win her favor.³¹ Maier feels that Baal and Anat believe that only Athirat will be successful in obtaining El's permission.³² If true, this stands as a significant testimony to the influence of Athirat among the pantheon, particularly with El. Later we find out that Fisherman is successful in his errand.³³

The next section begins the bulk of the text concerning Athirat. We first see her sitting by the sea using a spindle and doing laundry. She is identified in advance as the one who entertains El.³⁴ During her labors, she sees Baal and Anat coming and begins to fear and tremble. She wonders aloud if they have come to kill her sons.³⁵ This appears to scholars to be a reference to something that was a part of the myths of Ugarit that is not preserved among our current texts. The story of Baal killing the children of Athirat is alluded to here and elsewhere in the Ugaritic texts but is nowhere found.³⁶ In order to complete their understanding scholars turn to a Hittite myth that they think is probably Canaanite in origin. In this myth Ashertum (Athirat) tries to convince the Storm God (Baal) to sleep with her. She is refused and the Storm God tells El-kunirsha (El), Ashertum's husband, of what has happened. El-kunirsha advises the Storm God to sleep with Ashertum and then humiliate her. The Storm God then accepts Ashertum's invitation but upon finishing the act informs her "that he slew seventy-seven, even eighty-eight of her sons."³⁷ Ashertum is humiliated and terrified.

31. "CTA 3.6.9–25," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 3–4.

32. Maier, *'Ašerah*, 33.

33. "CTA 4.1.20–25," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 5–6.

34. "CTA 4.2.3–11," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 6–7.

35. "CTA 4.2.12–26," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 7–8.

36. "CTA 6.1.38–61; 6.5.1–11," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 23–24, 25–26.

37. Maier, *'Ašerah*, 34.

Baal and Anat present Athirat with their presents of gold and silver and are rewarded by her excited reaction.³⁸ Athirat, still happy, asks why they have presented her with presents and not El.³⁹ Anat puts her off by saying they will another time. Athirat agrees to their proposal and commands Fisherman to saddle her donkey so that she can travel to El's palace.⁴⁰ Fisherman does so and Athirat sets out for El's place while Baal and Anat go their separate way.⁴¹ In this section we can see the respect that Baal and Anat have for Athirat, not just in coming to her for assistance but also in precious gifts they present to her. One gets the impression that Baal is buying her off, but that it is noteworthy that it can not be done without a respectable gift.

Upon arriving at El's palace she enters his tent and bows down before him and honors him. El seems pleased to see her and offers her food, drink, and sex if she desires it. Athirat praises El and flatters him before telling him about the plight of Baal. She entreats him to give his permission that a palace be built for Baal just as the other gods and calls El Baal's father.⁴² El asks her if he or she are slaves and then commands that others build Baal his palace. Athirat praises El again and points out the good things that Baal will do once he receives his palace. She then invokes a blessing of prosperity upon El.⁴³ Maier believes that the success of Athirat where Anat failed points out her power and prestige being "the senior wife of El and Creatress of the Gods."⁴⁴ It seems significant to me that she is able to bless El with great prosperity. Perhaps this is one of the blessings that the Canaanites sought from Athirat.

One other passage in the Baal cycle that mentions Athirat is worth mention. When Baal dies El calls out to Athirat and tells her to choose one of her sons to be Baal's replacement. She chooses one whom El

38. "CTA 4.2.26-35," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 10.

39. "CTA 4.3.23-36," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 11.

40. "CTA 4.4.1-7," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 12-13.

41. "CTA 4.4.8-22," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 13-14.

42. "CTA 4.4.23.57," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 14-15.

43. "CTA 4.4.58-5.81," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 19-21.

44. Maier, *'Ašerah*, 35.

rejects as weak and then selects another whom El accepts.⁴⁵ Here we see a limit to her influence and power but the fact that El looks to her in this important decision points to her high rank in the pantheon.

Kirta Epic

The Kirta epic is a myth that is about a man, Kirta, who is desperate to be married and have sons so that he can secure his posterity. At first he approaches El who promises him that he will be successful in his quest to obtain Hurriya as a wife and that she will bear him children. Not satisfied, on the way to take Hurriya he comes to Athirat and seeks her blessing also, identifying her as Qudshu, Athirat of Tyre, and Elath of Sidon. He vowed to her that he would give her silver and gold in abundance in exchange, we assume, for the same promises.⁴⁶ We know Athirat accepts the terms though we do not have her response directly. Later in the text El promises Kirta that Hurriya will bear him 7 even 8 sons and that his eldest Yassib will be nursed by Athirat and Anat.⁴⁷ After seven years have passed, and Hurriya has born him the promised sons, Athirat becomes angry with him, apparently because he has failed to keep his promise to her, and she shouts at El to punish him or else she will.⁴⁸

Maier points out that Athirat's importance is dramatically shown in this epic. He specifically notes the significance of Kirta securing El's promise and then still going to Athirat in order to gain her favor also. To him this reveals her great power and command of respect.⁴⁹ The identification of Athirat of Tyre with Qudshu and Elath of Sidon adds to the respect due to her, as we see clearly that she is also being venerated outside of Canaan at this time. The promised offering is reminiscent of Baal and Anat's offering to her, respectable and large; her favor is a thing highly sought after. When El tells Kirta that his son

45. "CTA 6.1.38–61," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 23–24.

46. "CTA 14.4.197–206," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 27–28.

47. "CTA 15.2.21–28," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 28–29.

48. "CTA 15.3.22–30," Maier, *'Ašerah*, 29–30.

49. Maier, *'Ašerah*, 37.

will be suckled by Athirat and Anat, it is Athirat's name that is put first, showing her place above the other goddess. Perhaps most impressive though is Athirat's anger. In her rage she commands El to act against Kirta and possibly threatens to carry out the punishment herself if he refuses her demand. We expect that very few even of the gods would have the bravery and position to demand anything of El the high god. Clearly Athirat deserves her high standing and regard.

Shahar and Shalim Epic

This epic is poorly preserved and only two direct references refer to Athirat directly. CTA 23.13/28 (the lines are nearly identical) mention the field of Athirat wa-Rahmay.⁵⁰ CTA 23.23–24 mentions gods being nursed by Athirat.⁵¹ The first reference is taken by many scholars to be a reference to Athirat's connection to Ashratum and to show that she is connected to the land, perhaps the steppe and desert.⁵² A second part to the myth speaks of El finding two nameless women in the desert and taking them back to be his wives, whereupon they bear him Shahar and Shalim (dawn and dusk). It has been suggested that these two women were Athirat and Rahmay but many scholars today do not believe that we can make that assertion with any confidence.⁵³

Cultic Texts

The cultic texts also found at Ras Shamra consist of god lists and sacrifice lists containing references to Athirat. Surprisingly, she does not appear as near to the top as one would expect. Maier notes however that El also is not as high up and Athirat still appears before Anat and Athtart, the other two major goddesses mentioned in the mythical texts.⁵⁴ Binger simply concludes that Athirat was not a god to whom

50. Maier, *'Ašerah*, 31.

51. Maier, *'Ašerah*, 31.

52. Pettey, *Goddess of Israel*, 15.

53. Maier, *'Ašerah*, 31; Hadley, *Cult*, 43.

54. Maier, *'Ašerah*, 39.

extensive sacrifice was made.⁵⁵ However, Maier notes that the myths seem to reflect an older tradition than the cultic texts which may explain why the gods of the myths were not as prominent as in the cultic lists.⁵⁶ This would seem to be supported by the fact that many more gods are listed in the cultic texts than in the myths.

Some scholars have tried to determine some changes in worship and myth in the sacrifice lists. This is usually determined by seeing who Athirat and others are paired up with. For example, in CTA 30:1–5 she is paired with El.⁵⁷ In CTA 34.6 and 36.8 Athirat is paired with Baal.⁵⁸ Some have taken this to mean that perhaps she left El and joined Baal as his cohort. But in 36.6 and RS 24.256.24 she is found near both El and Baal.⁵⁹ Binger concludes that Athirat is connected to and paired with so many gods in the lists that it is impossible to deduce anything about her cultic connections.⁶⁰ Perhaps the best evidence that Athirat did eventually get paired with Baal is the witness of the OT writers that affiliate Asherah with Baal often. However, it is likely that worship of Athirat in Ugarit declined before the city was destroyed.

Archaeological Evidence

Several artifacts found at Ras Shamra are of interest in a study of Athirat. Female figurines found at the site have few features and cannot be equated with any of the several Ugaritic goddesses because they bear no distinguishing markings. Other artifacts are perhaps more promising. At the site was found a pendant carved with a goddess with two snakes crossing her while standing on a lion. The lion in particular, according to Pettey, could identify this as an Asherah figure since Asherah has been associated with lions in other places.⁶¹ Also

55. Binger, *Asherah*, 89.

56. Maier, 'Ašerah, 38.

57. Maier, 'Ašerah, 39.

58. Maier, 'Ašerah, 39, 40.

59. Maier, 'Ašerah, 40, 41.

60. Binger, *Asherah*, 89.

61. Pettey, *Goddess of Israel*, 176.

found was an ivory bas-relief from c. 1300 B.C. that depicted a goddess nursing two boys. This too is considered to be a good candidate of portraying Asherah as she has been seen to nurse men and gods, though Pettey admits that the connection is purely speculative.⁶² An ivory lid to an unguent box depicting a goddess carved in the Mycenaean style wearing Cretan clothes was also found at Ras Shamra. The goddess is taking the place of a tree between two caprids. This has caught the attention of scholars because of Asherah's being depicted in places as a post or stylized tree. Combined with her affinity with the sea and the seafaring nature of the Mycenaean, Athirat stands as the best candidate for this artifact.⁶³ However, Cornelius reminds us that no iconographic items have ever been found that can conclusively be connected with Asherah because none of them have her name inscribed on them.⁶⁴ He also warns us that texts cannot be directly applied to interpreting iconography, saying that they can only paint a general background.

Conclusion

Athirat is portrayed in the texts of Ugarit as a dominant goddess. The valuable artifacts found at the site that are probably connected to Athirat further incline our thinking this way. She has the power to persuade El and the bravery to command him. She commands the respect of gods and mortals alike. Called the mother and wet-nurse of the god, it is even plausible that she is the first god, the father of El. Her connections and associations range from the steppes to the sea. Her ability to bless is enormous, extending even to the gods. Humanity's association with her brings honor. Though it is likely that worship of Athirat declined in the latter years of Ugarit she survives to be worshipped later by the Israelites and others. As a Mother Goddess, she is a dominant figure for centuries throughout the pantheons of the ancient Near East.

62. Pettey, *Goddess of Israel*, 176–77.

63. Pettey, *Goddess of Israel*, 177.

64. Izak Cornelius, *The Many Faces of the Goddess* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Academic Press: Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2004), 99.