

ASHERAH AND FIGURINES: HOW THE WORSHIP OF A GODDESS AFFECTED THE  
ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN IN IRON AGE II MEGIDDO

By

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The Israelites' religious history is easily found documented in the Hebrew Bible. Certain aspects of their religion, though, have been expanded upon by the use of archaeology, especially looking at the idea of popular religion versus state religion. This study focused on the cultic worship of the goddess, Asherah, in the city of Megiddo, during the Iron Age II period. Both the religious cult and gendered spaces were analyzed in order to evaluate the extent that the state religion was involved in cultic worship, as well as to understand how women's economic and social activities were affected by the worship of Asherah. The information may then add to our understanding of the ancient Israelite's internal religious debate over what was deemed orthodox and it will further other studies about women's important economic roles in patriarchal societies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Life is full of uncertainties and situations that are beyond the control of humans and throughout history this is evident. Forced with different adversities and instabilities humans have a natural desire to combat the uncertain and a common weapon of choice is religion. The ancient Israelites are no exception to this behavior.

The Israelites' religious history is easily found documented in the Hebrew Bible. Certain aspects of their religion, though, have been expanded upon by the use of archaeology, especially looking at the idea of "popular religion" versus "state religion." William G. Dever refers to this popular religion as folk religion and asks, "How did the reality of everyday life affect the way in which Israelite religions were conceived and practiced?" (2005: 13). This question is posed for Israelites as a group, but what about just women?

Many previous investigations of Israelite religion either briefly mention or completely pass over the role of women, but in recent years their stories have moved to the forefront of studies concerning ancient Israel (Dever 2005; Ackerman 1989; Meyers 1988). This study will continue to explore women's roles as well as delve into an aspect of Hebrew religion that is not always readily discussed, polytheism. Specifically, it will focus on the cultic worship of the goddess, Asherah, in the city of Megiddo, during the Iron Age II period (1000-550 B.C.E.). This cultural phenomenon of the Israelites being polytheistic rather than monotheistic because of the worship of a goddess is not new, and many previous explorations and analyses have been offered (Ackerman 1989, Dever 2005; 2012, Meyers 1988). However, this study will differ from earlier studies in that it will involve both the religious cult and women's spaces combined. First,

an analysis of the figurines from Strata II, III and IV from the site of Megiddo will show whether these figurines were being mass produced as casts from the same mold or, were being made individually as an action outside of the state religion. Then, in order to understand if women occupied the same spaces as these figurines more than men, I examined the cultural material from the same loci as the figurines. In order to fully understand the role that Asherah worship played in women's activities, both of these analyses need to be conducted.

Before learning whether goddess worship had an impact on women's activities it is necessary to understand what those activities were and how an ancient Israelite woman's life was led during this time.

Hers would have been a life that was presented in predictable and obligatory stages, puberty, marriage, childbirth, raising her children, and inevitably running a household. Because of some of these stages women in ancient Israel were likely regarded more highly than originally thought. Carol Meyers argues that "the view of the household's function in socialization and education" (1988; 152) was largely dependent on women because they were full of wisdom.

So, how did goddess worship reflect the values of ancient Israelite culture and society during this specific time period? Is there more of a relationship between the deity and her followers than just that of a distant goddess and mere mortal worshippers?

The results from this study are used to evaluate the extent that the state religion was involved in cultic worship as well as understand how women's economic and social activities were affected by the worship of Asherah. The information may then add to our understanding of the ancient Israelite's internal religious debate over what was deemed orthodox and it will further other studies about women's important economic roles in patriarchal societies.

## BACKGROUND

The study of the religious history of the Israelites relies heavily on the Hebrew Bible. The reliance on this one text can hardly be punished, as this is one of the few, if not only, written sources on the time period of Ancient Israel and Judah in the first millennium B.C. The writers of the Bible, specifically the Old Testament, were male prophets and priests. Because it was written by prophets and priests, the traditional practices are portrayed at the highest level, while cultic practices, when even discussed, are almost always condemned (Ackerman 1989). 2 Kings 18 says, “He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles” (NIV 2 Kings 18:4). However, some rulers, like King Manasseh of Judah did not follow the traditional practices. 2 Kings 21 says, “He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole...” (NIV 2 Kings 21: 3). The Israelite religion had many internal conflicts concerning what was deemed “acceptable, orthodox, or mainstream” (Burke 2011; 897). These conflicts stem from the differentiation in state religion versus popular religion.

State religion was the official religion that was written and discussed in the Bible. It was, for the most part, practiced in the temples and palaces of bigger cities like Jerusalem. Popular religion is the beliefs and activities that are practiced by the masses. Often, the people who are part of the popular religion live in the outskirts of major cities and rural villages. They may never have traveled to a bigger city, or worshipped in a temple. For the masses, their religion is made more personal and is practiced within their households (Dever 2005; 2012). There is much more regional diversity in popular religion as opposed to the standardized and institutionalized state religion.

In order to fully understand the different aspects of Israelite religion, it is important to look at the ideas that are buried beneath the text. “Only when we acknowledge the polemical nature of many biblical texts can we see underlying their words evidence of the multifaceted nature of ancient Israelite religion” (Ackerman 1989: 110). This particular focus has created a shift from needing to prove all of the Bible’s texts to more of a desire for a “critical analysis of the biblical information” (Faust 2010: 24) through the use of archaeology. Therefore, in recent years archaeology has begun to ask not only questions concerning the “existence of multiple traditions of Israelite religious practice” (Burke 2011; 895), but it has also brought the role of women in ancient Israelite religion to the forefront of many scholars’ minds (Ackerman 1989; Bird 1991; Dever 2005; 2012; Ebeling 2010).

### **Feminist Theory**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Feminist Theory emerged as part of post-processualism, in an attempt to show how women had been largely ignored in archaeology up until that point.

“This is not to say that archaeologists [had] not said anything about gender structures or gender behavior in past human life. In spite of the absence of serious methodological or theoretical discourse on the subject, the archaeological literature [was] not silent on the subject of gender. Rather, it [was] permeated with assumptions, assertions, and statements of “fact” about gender” [Conkey and Spector 1984: 2].

Much of this can be attributed to androcentrism, a phenomenon that was and is not solely confined to archaeology and anthropology. This male-centered bias was reflected in scholar’s work based off of our own culture. In addition, the “Man the Hunter” model was the prevailing thought used to portray the difference between males and females. Males were displayed as the stronger, aggressive, and all around more important gender, while females were portrayed as weak and dependent on their counter-parts. These characteristics were carried over into the

activities and social roles that each gender carried out. “The conventional wisdom that saw women as passive and powerless in virtually all pre-modern societies is now recognized to be deeply flawed” (Meyers 2003: 435). Women’s activities had extreme economic value and were anything but secondary to men’s work. The problem with identifying women’s roles was “not so much [about] an invisibility of data, but invisibility in the archaeological record itself, a false notion of objectivity” (Conkey and Spector 1984: 6). The fact that some cultural materials, like stone tools, survive the archaeological record better than plant residues was not accounted for, which made male activities seem more prevalent and therefore more important than women’s. This means that female roles and activities were not just less visible than those of their male associates, but they were also distinct from one another (Conkey and Spector 1984).

### **Ancient Israelite Women**

A typical woman’s life in ancient Israel centered in and around the home. She would have had multiple responsibilities, including menial labor or economic activities, as well as maternal activities. While both of these responsibilities were equally important, childbearing posed a substantially bigger threat for women since with every pregnancy their life expectancy decreased (Meyers 1997). This inherent danger and uncertainty in this important aspect of womanhood was perhaps a reason why women turned to religion.

The role of women in Israelite religion has been largely ignored or just over-looked by biblical scholars. Women were “invisible in literary traditions...but [had] their own unique religious practices...better suited to the general rhythms...of their lives” (Bird 1991: 115). Men wrote the biblical texts so it was not unusual that they did not often mention women. Women are

discussed on rare occasions though, and one context in which they are is in reference to the goddess, Asherah.

## **Asherah**

The ancient Israelites adopted many ideas from the Canaanites, including many aspects of their religion. Asherah was the mother goddess of the Canaanites and she was soon incorporated into ancient Israelite religious life. “The generally accepted view is that Asherah was a goddess of fertility” (Stuckey 2003: 132) and that she was worshipped alongside Yahweh, as his consort.

Asherah is mentioned throughout the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Kings 15:13 and 2 Kings 21:7), but evidence of Asherah is also found in the material culture of ancient Israel. Over three thousand figurines (Figure 1) depicting a female figure have been found in sites from Israel and Judah, especially within household contexts (Noll 2001). In an extensive study of these figurines, James R. Pritchard, an archaeologist who worked in the Near East, classifies them into eight different types: Qadesh; hands holding breasts; nude female figure with arms hanging down to sides; archaic; figure holding disc; mother figurine; pillar figurine; and fragments, or unclassified (1945: 5).

Other scholars are not as quick to define Asherah as a goddess, but rather as a depiction of a tree, or a pole (Emerton, 1999). Biblical evidence for this interpretation is found in the book of Judges when an Asherah pole is cut down (NIV Judges 2:13). In 2 Kings 21 King Manasseh puts an Asherah pole in the temple, but later King Josiah has it removed in his desire for monotheism (NIV 2 Kings 21:7; 23:4). This would imply that the pole was still somehow used

in the worship of another god other than Yahweh if King Josiah was so eager to have them taken out of the temples.



Figure 1. Pillar-based figurines (Stern 2001).

These figurines are often “connected with the priority and prestige that was given to motherhood, with the dangers that women faced in achieving this status, and also with the concern to nurse and successfully raise children” (Hess 2007: 310). Differing viewpoints create a schism in ancient Israelite scholars who study these figurines. Other than these figurines depicting a goddess, there is a case for them being votives. Instead of one woman, they are depictions of multiple mortal women, and are presented as offerings as a request in prayer for whatever is affecting the woman at that given time.

## Megiddo

“The ancient name of Megiddo was lost in antiquity and later replaced by Arabic *tell el-mutesellim*—“hill of the commander” (May 1935: xxiii). Today, it is more commonly again called the city of Megiddo. Located in Israel, the tel is positioned to overlook the Jezreel Valley (Figures 2 and 3) and sits on the pass of Carmel Ridge, making it one of the main routes for international travel. This strategic position made Megiddo an important settlement to control for all Near Eastern powers of the time, including Egypt.



Figure 2. Location of Megiddo in Israel (Holtzendorff 2008).



Figure 3. Aerial View of Tel Megiddo (The Megiddo Expedition 2012).

Megiddo became a prominent city in the fourth millennium B.C.E. and dominated the area for six thousand years. The city changed hands often, with major powers from across the Near East, the “Canaanites, Egyptians, Israelites, Assyrians and Persians” each at various times controlling this strategic location. Perhaps this popularity is why the city is referred to as Armageddon in the Bible, which, according to the book of Revelation, is where the final battle between good and evil will inevitably take place (The Megiddo Expedition 2012).

The tel has been excavated several times. The first was by Gottlieb Schumacher, on behalf of the German Society for Oriental Research. Later, in 1925, the Oriental Institute of the

University of Chicago began their intensive and extensive excavations at the site. They attempted to peel the whole tel apart, excavating all of one stratum at once. However, this idea was abandoned and concentrated efforts were focused in Areas A to E. “The strata were numbered inversely to the order of deposition and are designated by Roman numerals. Thus “Stratum I” includes those ruins which lay nearest to the surface soil and which represented the latest occupation of the site as a town” (May 1935: xxiii). It was an immense project that was unfortunately halted by the onset of World War II in 1938 (May 1935).

Currently, excavations are being conducted by the collaborative efforts of Israel Finkelstein and Eric Cline, of the Tel Aviv University in Israel and the George Washington University, respectively (The Megiddo Expedition 2012). Since this study is focusing on Iron Age II (900-586 B.C.E.) the Megiddo information that I will be examining comes almost solely from the excavations in the 1930s by the Oriental Institute. (Lamon and Shipton 1939; May 1935).

## **Iron Age II**

The Iron Age II period remains at Megiddo date from 900-586 B.C.E. This was the beginning of the rise of the states of Judah and Israel between the tenth and ninth centuries. Although Israel and Judah were relatively small kingdoms in comparison to others, like Assyria and Egypt, they were just coming into their own in this time period, while the other great powers were in a time of slow, but brief decline. When their decline ended Israel would succumb to Assyria while Judah, left to defend itself, experienced a period of exile in Babylon (Aharoni 1978).

This time period saw new monumental architecture, an emergence of the four-room house and a growth in settled population in major cities like Megiddo. It is in these four-room houses that many Asherah figurines have been found (The Megiddo Expedition 2012).

## **METHODOLOGY**

I chose the city of Megiddo for this study because of the extensive excavations that have been conducted there. The findings from Megiddo have been compiled into multiple volumes by the Oriental Institute of Chicago. The discoveries from these excavations, specifically those found in Strata II, III and IV, were used to create a database of figurines found during Iron Age II using Pritchard's classifications of figurines (Pritchard 1945).

Since these figurines have been interpreted as representing the practice of folk religion as opposed to the sanctioned state religion, it is first necessary to examine the validity of this assumption. Presumably, if the official religion did sanction the worship of female figurines, and this worship was part of the religion being encouraged by the state, then it could be assumed that the figurines would have been manufactured and distributed by a central authority; i.e. the state. If that were the case, then I would expect there to be very little difference from one figurine to the next, within the same figurine type, since presumably they were being made from the same, or a limited number of molds, in a central workshop controlled by the temple and therefore, the state.

If, on the other hand, these figurines represent more local and folk religious practices, then I would expect that they are being manufactured at multiple workshops throughout the city and surrounding country, and maybe even by individuals within their own houses. In this case,

we should see a larger amount of variation between figurines. In order to test these two possible scenarios, a database of all figurines from the Iron Age II deposits (Strata II, III and IV) at Megiddo was created. Specifically information on the measurements of the faces (length, width and distance between the eyes), height of the whole figurine, length of the base of the figurine and special detailing on the figurine as a whole (veils, armlets, bracelets and braided hair) were compiled. The facial measurements were taken measuring from the inside corners of the eyes. The length of the face was measured from the bottom of the chin to the hairline. The width of the face was measured from where the hair fell on each side of the face. The height of the whole figurine was measured from the base of the neck (beginning at the shoulders) to the absolute base of the figurine. All of these measurements were taken in millimeters.

Once the variances were identified I then turned to understanding gender spaces and concluding whether the loci where the figurines were found could be determined to be predominantly women's spaces. I needed to know this so that I could show how women's activities were affected by the worship of the goddess. I accomplished this by examining the other material culture that was recovered from the same loci as the figurines. The Oriental Institute publications (Lamon and Shipton 1939) provided the necessary information contextualizing the figurines in all of the loci where they were found. By determining which specific artifacts could be attributed to women's activities I was able to infer what spaces women occupied more frequently.

## VARIATION WITHIN THE IRON AGE II MEGIDDO FIGURINE ASSEMBLAGE

The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago published brief descriptions and photographs of every figurine recovered from Strata I-V during their excavations in the 1930s (Lamon and Shipton 1939). This information allowed me to analyze the figurines based on the black and white images provided. All of the figurines were viewed at 2:3 scale and are presented in the same manner for this study. Some of the figurines were not found in their entirety and because of this there are a few that are just the head, or just the body. This was accounted for when I made comparisons. The figurines are classified into several types as according to Pritchard's classifications of figurines from the Near East (1945). The types that will be discussed in this study are as follows: hands holding breasts, nude female with arms hanging down to the sides, woman holding a disc/tambourine, a figure of a pregnant woman, detached heads only and fragments/unclassified. The detached heads show more detail in the face than the full figurines do, but I note that this may be due to the fact that they are shown closer up in the photographs from the early publications, than those of the full figurines. The emphasis on the detail in some of the heads could also be because they were pillar figurines. Pillar figurines usually have finely made heads with crudely made bodies (Pritchard 1945). The type is 'hands supporting the breasts', but below the waist the figurine has little to no detail, forming a pillar base.

The various strata under consideration are first presented individually and then later discussed and compared holistically for the entire time period of Iron Age II.

## **Stratum IV (ca. 1000-800 B.C.)**

This stratum marks the beginning of Iron Age II and has been divided into two substrata: IVB and IV. However, there is no cultural difference between the two substrata so the figurines are treated here as originating from a single stratum.

### Types

There were several detached heads in this stratum, one of them (M4561) is just the head, while the two others (M1138 and M4495) are the head and bust. Of all the figurines from this stratum, M5029 is the most damaged, with a very worn face and only a small portion of the neck and bust attached.

M4495, M967 and M5401 are fully intact, but each is standing in a different posture. M4495 is holding her breasts, while M967 looks to be the figure of a pregnant woman. M5401 is the odd one out and therefore, best put under the type miscellaneous/unsure, though it could arguably be a pillar figurine (Table 1).

### Faces

All but one of the figurines, M5393, has a face. It has no head or arms, and is broken off at the waist, leaving just the torso and therefore, little to discuss. I took specific measurements on all of the faces as discussed in my methodology. At first glance the figurines as a whole are not extremely variable, but when looking at the individual types there are differences, particularly in the distances between the eyes (Table 2).

Table 1. All Figurines and their Types Found in Stratum IV.

<b>Provenience</b>	<b>Type</b>
M5401	Bell-shaped (pillar?)
M1138	Hands Clutching Tambourine to Chest
M4495	Hands Support Breasts
M5376	Hands Support Breasts
M4561	Head Only
M5029	Head Only
M5400	Head Only
M5393	Fragment/Unclassified
M967	Pregnant Mother Goddess

Table 2. Stratum IV Figurine ‘Hands Support Breasts’ Type Facial Measurements.

<b>Provenience</b>	<b>Length of Face</b>	<b>Width of Face</b>	<b>Distance between Eyes</b>
M4495	1.5mm	1.3mm	0.4mm
M5376	0.69mm	0.72mm	0.1mm

But among all of the figurines I examined, only M4495 (Figure 4) is dressed. There is a robe going all the way down to her ankles and a suggestion of a cape, or a shawl (May 1935).

Figurines that are dressed are thought to be representative of deities. This is explained more in the context of the figurines section.

It is difficult to compare any other types from this stratum since only one example of each was recovered. Examining the faces side by side from the detached heads does not seem beneficial since it can not be said for certain what type of figurine those heads are specifically from.



Figure 4. Female Pottery Figurine M4495. Scale, 2:3 (May 1935).

### **Stratum III-II (ca. 780-600 B.C.)**

After the occupation of strata IV, Megiddo saw little to no occupation for almost three decades, and as a result, much of the city became ruins, with only the city wall being well preserved.

Unfortunately for my research strata III and II (ca. 650-600 B.C.) were comprised of one full occupation that had no middle period. This means that since it was a peaceful transition with no

upheaval, much of the archaeological evidence was transferred to stratum II from stratum III.

Because of this, I chose to look at the figurines from stratum II as well, despite the fact that the beginning of stratum II marks the end of Iron Age II (May 1945).

### Types

This stratum had a lot less preservation for its figurines (Table 3). However, this could be attributed, in part, to unwanted figurines being left behind in the transition period between stratum III and II. Only one figurine was found intact, M1222, and that may be because it is a limestone relief and therefore, more resilient to wear over time. M1222 is that of a nude female with her right arm raised above her head and the other arm hanging by her side. Interestingly, the woman's stance is similar to those found in Egyptian reliefs, the legs are separated and the feet are facing side-ways (Figure 5). These plaque type reliefs are common in Egypt and perhaps show evidence of the influence Egypt had on the Levant at this time, specifically on the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Four of the recovered figurines are detached heads and a fifth is a head with an attached bust (M787). Figurines M787 and M1906 are of the type, 'figure holding disc' or 'figure holding a tambourine to chest'. M4385 is supporting her breasts with her hands, but is missing her head. While another figurine, M878, is cut off at the start of the waist, it is clear that it is a figure of a pregnant woman.

Lastly, M4418 (Figure 6) is unusual because it was clearly made with special care and considerable skill (May 1935). It is cut off at the shoulders so that the head and neck are missing. The arms support the breasts, but below the chest the detail stops and the bottom forms a smaller cylinder shape, much like a pillar figurine.

Table 3. All Figurines and their Types Found in Stratum III.

<b>Provenience</b>	<b>Type</b>
M878	Pregnant Mother Goddess
M1222	Limestone Relief
M4418	Hands Support Breasts
M4385	Hands Support Breasts
M787	Hands Support Breasts
M1906	Hands Hold Object Beneath Breasts
M1088	Head Only
M4647	Head Only
M4306	Head Only
M4554	Head Only

The figurine type ‘hands support breasts’ is difficult to assess in this stratum by looking at the just the faces because M4385 and M4418 do not have their heads attached. So instead, measurements of their height and base widths were taken in order to make comparisons (Table 4).



Figure 5. Female Figurine of Stone, M1222 (May 1935).



Figure 6. Female Figurine of Stone, M4418. Scale, 2:3 (May 1935 modified).

Table 4. Stratum III Figurine Type ‘Hands Support Breasts’ Measurements.

<b>Provenienc</b>	<b>Height (neck to base)</b>	<b>Width of Base</b>
M787	Unavailable	Unavailable
M4385	7.1mm	2.1mm
M4418	4.1mm	1.6mm

Even though the measurements for M787 are unavailable, the conclusion of no similarity within this type is quickly drawn from looking at the measurement from the other two figurines. There is three millimeters difference in height between M4385 (Figure 7) and M4418. A bigger and more obvious difference that is not shown in the table is that M4418 is made of stone while M4385 is made from pottery.

From these two inferences it is not likely that these two specific figurines could have come from the same mold. Even though they are the same type, ‘hands support breasts,’ they are also both in different stages of a pillar figurine type. M4385 has little detail below the waist, it emphasizes the hips, but then it narrows down to a pillar base. As mentioned earlier, M4418 was made with extreme detail and special skill compared to any other figurine found in this stratum and its pillar shape is obvious.



Figure 7. Female Pottery Figurine. M4385. Scale, 2:3 (May 1935).

As discussed earlier, while the beginning of stratum III technically marks the end of Iron Age II, Strata III and II had no lapse time between them; it was one continuous occupation. This means that it is highly likely that figurines were brought along into stratum II's occupation from stratum III. For this reason I believed it to be both beneficial and important to examine the figurines from stratum II as well.

### Types

Despite the fact that there are a unique amount of types found within this stratum, half of the types are detached heads only, which made it difficult to make many comparisons within types (Table 5).

Table 5. All Figurines and their Types Found in Stratum II.

<b>Provenience</b>	<b>Type</b>
M4549	Hands Support Breasts
M3284	Head Only
M3287	Head Only
M4090	Head Only
M4117	Head Only
M4551	Head Only
M2653	Holding a Child to Chest
M4365	Holding a Disc to Chest
M4255	Legs Only
M2060	Pillar

As in stratum III, there may be a few figurines of multiple types, like M4549. Even though the hands are supporting her breasts, there is also suggestion of an object being originally held over the left breast that is now broken away (May 1935). Perhaps it was a disc or tambourine type, and only now, in its worn appearance, emerges to be the ‘hands support breasts’ type.

The detached heads, again, are difficult to compare since they could be from any type of figurine. M4090’s features are extremely obscure and my measurements are rough estimates at best, so I would not use those numbers even if I had other measurements to compare them. M4117 (Figure 8) is an example of how the head was attached to the body separately. The long thin necks were likely made along with the head, explaining why the necks are usually found connected to the detached heads rather than with the detached bodies.



Figure 8. Female Pottery Figurine. M4117. Scale, 2:3. (May 1935).

M4365 has traces of a back veil and chin veil, similar to M1138, M5376 and M4495 from stratum IV and M787 from stratum III. As far as the images allow me to see, these are the only figurines from this time period with veils. Other figurines have detailed hair or wigs, usually braiding.

### **POPULAR OR STATE RELIGION**

The variability in the measurements of the figurines from all three strata suggests that these figurines were not being mass-produced from a main source. Instead, they were likely being made in several different locations throughout the city, including workshops and within individual households. Just because these figurines were not being mass-produced does not mean that molds were not used in their manufacture. Most, if not all of them would have still been casts from molds in order to make at least the general type. The profile of M4117 shows a definite line or crease going down the middle that would be created from mold manufacturing.

However, because of the diversity of faces and bodies it would seem that a lot of manipulation was done to the casts after they were removed from the mold. This handling and shaping of the figurines also explains why on many of the figurines there is evidence of fingerprint marks. In addition, being made in different places can account for some figurines being formed more crudely than others (M4495 vs. M4385) and their general overall difference in appearances, even within types.

Of the twenty-nine figurines found from Strata II-IV, twelve are the head only and most of them seem to be clear breaks at the base of the neck. Many of the bodies without their heads are also broken at this same spot. This may suggest that most figurines' bodies and heads were made separately and then attached after each part was individually formed.

The heads have significantly more detail than any of the bodies recovered, except the anomalous M4418. Most have braided hair and several (M4365, M1138, M5376 and M4495) have veils covering the back of the head. Images of deities usually exhibit examples of "divine headdresses, divine garb, a typical deific pose, or an attached object" (Meyers 2003: 464). All of the attributes associated with deities mentioned by Meyers can be found on the figurines from Iron Age II Megiddo.

## **CONTEXT OF THE FIGURINES**

Now that we have established that a great amount of variability exists within the figurine assemblage, it is important to examine and understand the context of the spaces where the figurines were discovered. In particular, this examination is focused upon identifying whether these areas were predominantly female or male spaces. This process involved two steps; the first

entailed mapping out the distribution of the figurines within each of the strata under consideration. Because of the detailed nature of the plan maps and the provenience information provided in the publications of the Oriental Institute's excavations (Lamon and Shipton 1939), this task was easily accomplished. Using this information it was possible to identify the exact locus of each figurine find. These loci were a specific room, building or courtyard that were each part of a bigger complex, like a residential house or palace.

After establishing these locations I examined the other cultural materials recovered from the same loci where the figurines were found. Unfortunately, Lamon and Shipton (1939) did not provide full data for this, only one of each item found was listed, not the exact quantities. This slightly hindered my study because I was not able to determine which artifacts were more ubiquitous throughout the loci. Still, knowing what specific artifacts were found lent enough information for me to be able to make sense of what activities occurred in these specific spaces.

Combining these two sets of data allowed me to determine whether or not women were accessing these specific spaces more than men. In addition, this data allowed me to understand how different social classes of women may have practiced the worship of Asherah.

#### **Stratum IV**

M5401 and M5376 were both found in a lime-paved courtyard in Excavation Area B. Other than M967, which will be discussed later, these are the only two figurines found in such a large and open space. Specifically a palace (Figure 9), an area associated with elite members of Megiddo society.

In all of the loci where figurines were found several pottery types were also found, the two most common types were the jugs and jars. Other types included the bowl, lamp, chalice, flask and cooking bowl.

In the courtyard, where M5401 and M5376 were found, several different clay dishes (e.g. jug, bowl, chalice and cooking bowl) and other cultural materials like, limestone scaraboids, iron arrowheads, carnelian beads, steatite beads and bone spatulas were also discovered (Lamon and Shipton, 1939: 145, 154).

M4495, found in a building, also had the common jug, jar and bowl types, as well as a flask type. Other artifacts found in association with M4495 include blue composition scarabs, agate beads, steatite whorls, clay animal figurines, iron needles, and bone spatulas (Lamon and Shipton 1939: 142-144, 146).

M5029, was the only figurine in all three stratum to be found in the stables. This location also explains why there was less pottery (e.g. jug, jar and bowl) found in the loci as well. (Lamon and Shipton 1939: 142-144, 146-147).

M967 was found while excavating stratum III, but was documented as being below room 282, which places it in stratum IV on a street (Figure 10). However, because of this, it may not be accurate to assume that this was its actual location, seeing as how a street is such a public and probable high traffic area. This location does not fit when compared to the rest of the loci where figurines were found. Further, it was found with only pottery, nothing else that seems to accompany these figurines, like beads, whorls, palettes and weights.

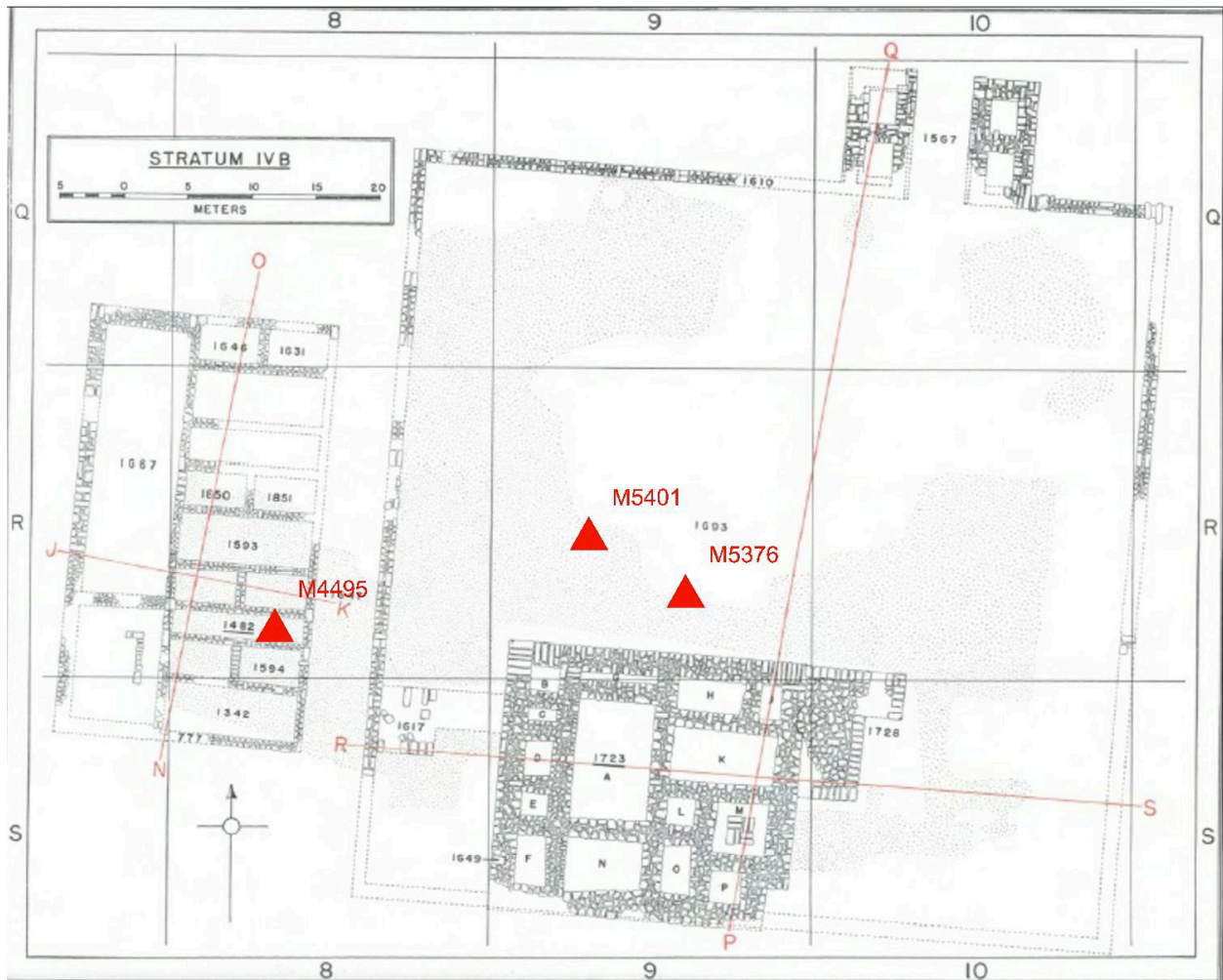


Figure 9. Figurines found in Plan of Area B, Stratum IVB. Scale 1:5 (Lamon and Shipton 1939: figure 123, modified)

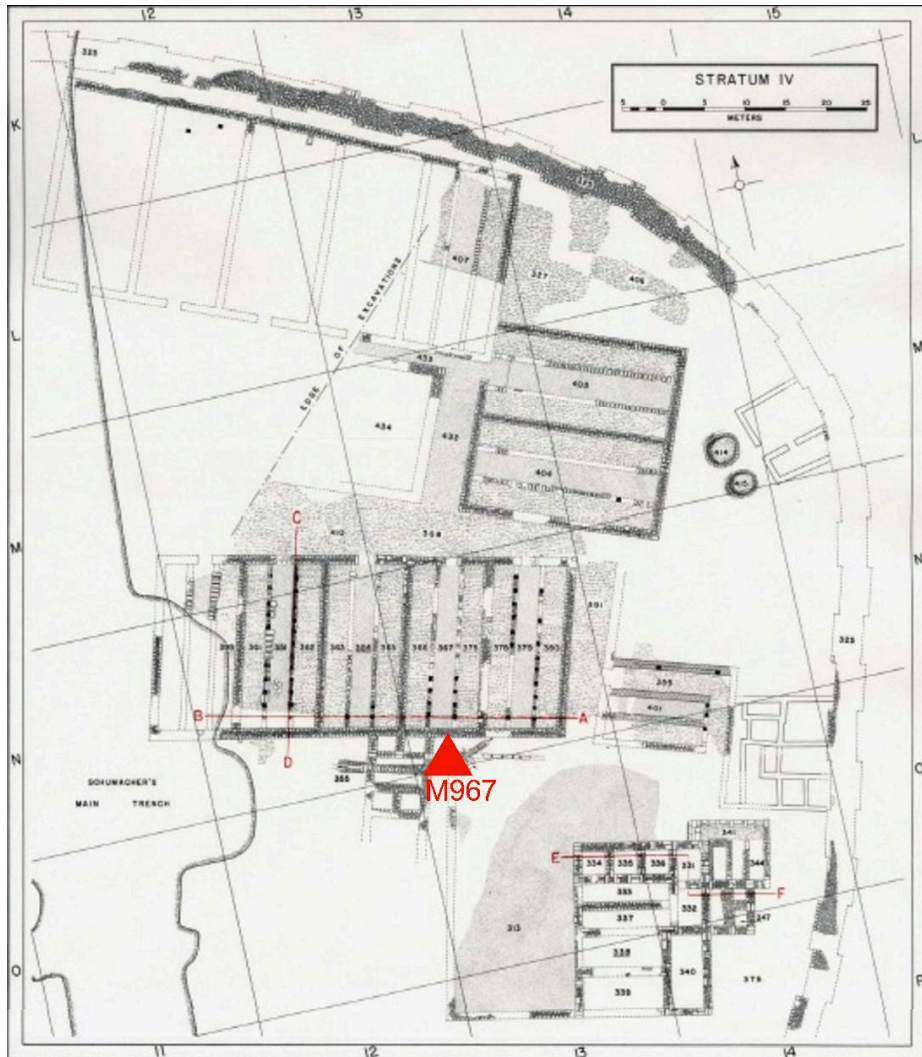


Figure 10. Figurine found in Plan of Area C, Stratum IV. Scale 1:5 (Lamon and Shipton 1939: figure 49 modified).

### Stratum III

Many of the figurines found in this stratum were found in rooms of larger houses within a residential area (Figure 11). Two of the figurines (M4306 and M4418) found in stratum III were found in walls, but in different loci. Both of these figurines were also found with jug types and palettes (Figure 12). However, M4306 was found also with a second type (bowl), a bone hairpin

and a basalt hammer, while M4418 was also found with a bronze bracelet (Lamon and Shipton 1939: 116, 125, 129).

All but one of these (M4554) was found with pottery, most commonly, again, the jug type. An interesting material culture remain that was found with M4554, among other artifacts (jug type, fayence bead, chert hammer and basalt rubber), was a limestone horned altar (Figure 13) (Lamon and Shipton 1939: 134). This is the only altar found in the same loci as a figurine in Iron Age II.



Figure 11. Figurine found in Plan of Area A, Stratum III. Scale 1:5 (Lamon and Shipton 1939: figure 72, modified).



Figure 12. Limestone Palette, Scale 1:2 (Lamon and Shipton 1939: Plate 108, No. 7).

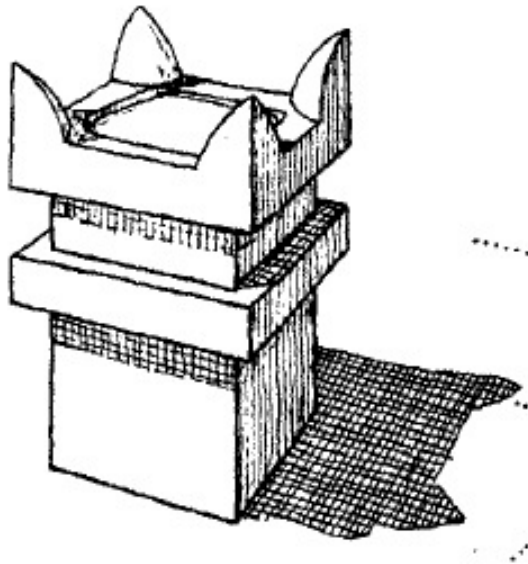


Figure 13. Four-Horned Altar (Lamon and Shipton 1939: figure 31a).

Many of the other figurines (M4647, M878 and M4385) were found with basalt or potsherd spindle whorls and sandstone or hematite weights. Both whorls and weights are tools used in textile production, specifically with looms.

## **Stratum II**

Almost all of these figurines were found in rooms of houses, unfortunately the maps provided by Lamon and Shipton for stratum II did not show the loci where these figurines were found, so I could not map their distribution (1939).

In general, there is less pottery found in the same loci as the figurines, and iron tools are more commonly recovered with this stratum's figurines (M2060 and M4365) than either Strata III or IV. However, while there is an increase, it is not a dominant artifact and other tools, like basalt hammers, are just as common in this stratum. Similar artifacts to the other two strata include a limestone palette, found with M4117 in a cupboard, a limestone whorl, found with M2060 in a room and lastly, a hematite weight, found with M4365 in a room as well (Lamon and Shipton 1939: 115, 117-118, 119).

## **DEFINING GENDER SPECIFICITY**

In order to recognize why the data above is connected to women's activities, the idea of gender space needs to be understood. "In every household, from antiquity to the present, there are certain loci used predominantly for task performance by one gender rather than the other" (Kent 1984:2 in Meyers 2003: 428). These task performances can be seen in the archaeological record. "Establishing gender specificity for an activity means taking the artifacts or artifact assemblages

used in that activity, which are not intrinsically gender articulate, and establishing whether they were used predominantly or exclusively by one gender or the other” (Meyers 2003: 430). Other than looking specifically at artifacts, another way to establish whether an activity was gender specific is through the use of ethnographic evidence and ethnohistorical materials.

“Ethnographic evidence from regions close to Syria-Palestine invariably show women controlling the production of bread and other food-stuffs... similarly Palestinian ethnographic data... reveal female control of the artifacts of bread-production and the associated space” (Hirschfeld 1996 in Meyers 2003: 431). Many of the artifacts found in relation with the figurines in Iron Age II Megiddo are used in cooking, most obviously, the cooking bowls found with M5401 and M5376 in stratum IV. Many other pottery types found may have been used in cooking or baking, but without residue analysis tests it remains a guess that they were used for these specific activities.

Women almost solely controlled the responsibilities for baking and cooking, and the process was often performed in large groups. Women gathered to work together and share in their labor. “Many, if not all, of the productive tasks in agrarian systems in an environment such as the highlands of ancient Israel would have involved group labor, whether the tasks were characterized by simple simultaneity, or complex simultaneity” (Meyers 2003: 429). So it is not difficult to believe that females from the same and nearby households typically worked together. While women of different social classes may not have worked together on said household duties, the upper class women still did a lot of their own household duties, like baking. “Egyptian sources... suggest that women of all social classes were associated with a variety of household technologies, especially those associated with baking” (Meyers 2003: 432).

Another aspect of women's roles in Iron Age II Megiddo that involved co-labor and is represented by the artifacts found is textile production. Ethnographic data collected by the Human Relations Area Files for the Middle East, about the division of labor in craft production, is also beneficial here. Their results showed loom weaving to be a woman's activity in eighty-four percent and spinning in eighty-seven percent of the societies in which these crafts occur (Meyers 2003). This is not to say that men played no role in this production, they were usually the ones working in the field as the fullers and shearers. This co-labor of production transcended class lines and is the same for both large-scale manufacturers and smaller households.

“Textile weaving from sheep wool and from flax was a common home industry. Stone and bone spindle whorls and loom weights are frequently discovered in Iron Age houses” (Mazar 1990: 491) and Megiddo is no exception. In Karel van der Toorn's *Anthropological Perspective on Local Religion in the Early Iron Age* he discusses the roles of women and men and their individual tasks, “Much of the afternoon and the early evening are spent spinning and weaving...considered exclusively female chores, so much so that the spindle whorl is like a symbol of womanhood” (2003: 399). This anthropological perspective, though based on many years of previous research, is still speculative. However, it lends support and credibility to the idea of women occupying the spaces where spindles, whorls, iron needles, and other objects used in textile production were found. As mentioned above in the data presentation section, whorls and weights were commonly found within the same context as figurines. Carol Meyers aids in Van der Toorn's speculative ethnographic approach by saying that,

“Scant remains of textiles themselves have been recovered from archaeological deposits. However, some of the implements used in the production of cloth and clothing—spindle whorls, needles, and loom weights—provide the hard data for considering spinning, sewing, and weaving as gendered activities” [Meyers 2003: 432].

Ethnohistorical data also supports the claim that women were more largely involved in the sewing and weaving specifically for Asherah. In 2 Kings 23 it says, "...in the temple of the Lord and where women did weaving for Asherah" (NIV 2 Kings 23:7). In Exodus 35 it talks about women sewing cloth to serve as offerings, "Every skilled woman spun with her hands and brought what she had spun...and all the women who were willing and had the skill spun the goat hair" (NIV Exodus 35:25-26). These verses show that the worship of Asherah affected how often women worked at the loom to please and honor their goddess.

It is important to note here that 'gendered spaces' does not mean that there is no crossover in spaces. Often men and women would use the same areas, but one gender would occupy it more often than the other, they would usually make use of the space at different times during the day, or even the year, depending on the specific activity.

Further, the public and private domains were often overlapping. "The economic activities and concomitant social relations of an Iron Age household would not have been separate from larger domains, including political alliances" (Meyers 2003: 435). Women played a key role in maintaining these alliances, which may be a way in which women as a whole held more power in a patriarchal society. Often laborious activities such as food production and weaving/sewing were carried out in large group settings, and working together and being constantly surrounded by other women allowed them to develop strong friendships and alliances. While these alliances probably did not breach social lines, it is important to realize that these alliances and co-labor groups did not stop with the lower-class groups.

This is evident in the large palace where two of the figurines (M5376 and M5401) were found in stratum IV. Figurines were found in the surrounding courtyard, an open and public area of the palace. However, within the specific loci of the courtyard where the figurines were found,

different pottery types, as well as bone spatulas were also found. Cooking bowl types as well as the spatulas are evidence that some level of food production was done there. I think that women also baked and cooked to please their goddess. The Goddess worship went beyond the common household in the city of Megiddo during this time period.

While there was significant expansion in Iron Age II sites, including Megiddo, (e.g. the four-room house) dependence on agriculture was still high. So, while some of those living in Megiddo may have been more than peasant farmers, the women were no less involved in both textiles and food production. Therefore, it is important not to rule out the fact that elite women may have also worshipped the goddess, same as the urban household women. Despite the fact that Asherah was not part of the state-sanctioned religion, some royal women probably did consider Her part of their religion. “I believe that our evidence increasingly suggests that, during at least some points in Israelite history, a significant cross section of the population...especially women—found themselves comfortably “at home with the goddess” (Ackerman 2003: 465). Women of all classes worshipped the goddess and used their skills to honor her. Their specific activities of cooking and sewing were performed near and around images of Her, in the form of figurines.

Further, I think that these responsibilities were also done for their Asherah, in the form of offerings and libations. As mentioned above, women wove clothes to cover images of Asherah and it is likely that women also left food as sacrifices. This would explain why where nearly all of the figurines were found pottery was also found. In order to further prove this idea, future studies would need to have residue analysis tests taken from the pottery found among the figurines.

## CONCLUSIONS

Debate over the role and interpretation of Asherah is not new, but it is a topic that continues to draw attention because of the implications for the ancient Israelite's religion. For this study, the worship of the goddess Asherah was related to and affected the way ancient Israelite women, specifically from Megiddo during Iron Age II, conducted their activities. The figurines found throughout Israel and Judah adds to the curiosity about goddess worship, but my findings suggest an aspect of dependence on the goddess from women. The worship of Asherah in Iron Age II Megiddo was not part of the state-sanctioned religion, but this did not hinder many women from following Her. Once we understood that, then it became clear that the places where these figurines were being found within Stratum II, III and IV (Iron Age II) were spaces that were predominantly occupied by women and where they carried out most of their daily activities, like cooking and sewing.

The women of Iron Age II Megiddo, whether royal or women of typical domestic households were influenced by their worship of Asherah. The figurines were all found in loci that also had cultural materials associated with women's domestic activities, meaning that women typically gathered and spent most of their time near the figurines.

Women looked to this goddess for help in their daily lives and were so devoted to her that they kept figurines of her in the most central spaces that they occupied throughout the day.

“To the women, these goddesses...are the paramount importance...El and Baal are the all-important gods, of course, but they are the gods with whom the men are concerned; their territory lies beyond the house. In the domestic realm, the goddesses prevail” [van der Toorn 2003: 399].

Asherah gave women a commonality outside of their everyday obligations. Their economic and household activities were usually performed in group settings, perhaps not just for

community in general, but also as a gathering of mutual respect for their Asherah. For them, she was the one that they identified with and sought answers and protection from. Women did not merely gather for their own social benefits while working, but to be among other fellow followers of the goddess that they revered so much as to plan their daily activities around her presence.

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