

# Asherah and textiles

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## 1. Asherah and textile production

In literature textile production is sometimes related to the goddess Asherah. In Ugaritic texts Asherah, the consort of El, is described as the motherly caring goddess. In KTU1.4, II 3-11 she is described at the beach with a spindle in her hand, dropping the spindle from her hand (= spinning). (Smith, Baal 122; Becking / Dijkstra, God 96; Meyers, Material 433) From the Old Testament we know that weaving garments for Asherah was practiced in the Jerusalem temple. (2 Kings 23, 7) Women wove clothing to be draped over a cult statue dedicated to the goddess Asherah. (Ackerman, Deborah 180) These women produced the textile within the compound of the YHWH temple. They are described as working in "houses" erected within the temple complex. Workshops in which woman were weaving garments for Asherah were also known elsewhere in Judah and were apparently part of the textile storehouses known as *miltahot*, which existed in royal palaces and temples both in Jerusalem (Jer 38, 11) and in Samaria (2 Kings 10, 22). Similar workshops and storehouses were found in temple compounds in Mesopotamia and Egypt. (Sheffer / Tidhar, Textiles 12 note 33) The practice of clothing cult statues is also known from other countries in the eastern Mediterranean world. (Oppenheim, Garments 172-193).

Production of textile can be related to the shrines of the goddess Asherah. Loom weights are often found at Iron Age sites near and within cultic structures, pointing to the existence of workshops for the production of fabrics inside the sacred enclosures. (Lapp, Excavation 28; Mazar, Excavations 80; Sheffer / Tidhar, Textiles 12) Both in Deir 'Alla and in Kuntillet 'Ajrud textiles were woven within a compound where textual finds written and drawn on plastered walls mention the name of the goddess Asherah or Shagar which may be an other name of Asherah.

## 2. Comparing Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Iron Age Deir 'Alla

The similarities between Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Iron Age Deir 'Alla are striking. Both sites are situated on a junction of trading routes; on both sites textiles of special high quality were produced, and the weaving activities were concentrated around a benched room that had religious texts and motives on its plastered walls.



## 2.1. Kuntillet 'Ajrud

Kuntillet 'Ajrud lies in the eastern Sinai desert some 50 km south of Kadesh Barnea. It is built on top of a steep hill, on a crossroads leading into the Sinai desert, and close to water wells. The settlement consists of two buildings, dated to circa 800 BC by the excavator. (Meshel, Kuntillat 'Ajrud) Kuntillet has been interpreted as a fortress, although the main building differs architecturally from the other Negev fortresses. Meshel has suggested that the site served as a religious centre on the road to the Red Sea serving Israelite trade activity. (Meshel, Kuntillat 'Ajrud) Other suggestions include a caravanserai or fortress with a small sanctuary. (Dever, discoveries, 140; Zevit, Religions, 370) Mazar attributes the religious activity at the site to an Israelite group, such as the Rechabites. (Mazar, Archaeology 449).

The most significant finds of Kuntillet 'Ajrud are the inscriptions and drawings. The script used in the inscriptions is regarded as Phoenician-Hebrew. (Meshel, Kuntillat 'Ajrud; Horvat Teman 1461; Zevit, Religions 376-378) The "bent axis" entrance room to the main building was decorated with floral motives. It had benches along its northern walls, and in the open southern part of the 'bend' a bench was constructed running into the open plaza. The broad room that was entered through this entrance room also had plastered walls and benches along the walls. Its entrance divided the room into two wings. The plastered stone benches surrounding each wing occupied most of the area, with only a narrow passage way in between. This construction gave the room its name, "bench room". The benches appear to have been the most important element in this room. The benched room yielded two wall inscriptions, inscribed votive offerings and a pithos decorated with human figures, cultic scenes and blessing formulae mentioning YHWH and Asherah, while fragments of a third inscription were discovered on the north jamb of this room leading into the courtyard. On the door jamb of the entrance leading from the bench room into the courtyard was the only inscription that was discovered in situ. It was extremely fragmentary and faded. Only very small parts of the wall-inscriptions could be preserved. The drawings on the wall plaster, several of which are in black, red and yellow, differ in subject matter from the depictions on the pithoi and are more decorative. (Meshel, Horvat Teman 1463) The inscriptions and drawings on the wall plaster define the site as a religious centre but their significance goes far beyond that. The drawings and wall decorations are unique in Iron Age Israel, both in quantity and in variety. The palaeography and the reading of the motifs has led to the conclusion that the site represents a mixture of both southern and northern Judaite and Israelite religious practices (Zevit, Religions 376, contra Meshel, Kuntillet 'Ajrud 108-109; Horvat



Teman 1464), while Dever speaks of syncretism of Israelite, Canaanite, Phoenician and Egyptian worship. (Dever, Discoveries 140-148).

In Kuntillet 'Ajrud some hundred textile fragments were found, as well as a bundle of flax fibres, yarn for weaving and twisted thread for sewing. The textile fragments are small, mostly less than 5 cm in length, a few of circa 20 cm and only two of circa 50 cm in length. No item was complete enough to be identified as part of a particular garment or textile object, but they consisted of high quality textiles reflecting skilled craftsmanship. (Sheffer / Tidhar, Textiles 14) The significance of the textiles for interpreting the site lies in the presence of three fragments identified as "*sha'atnez*", a mixture of linen and wool.<sup>1</sup> Two of these were undyed, both made with linen warp and wool weft. The third fragment combined red wool and blue linen ornamentation.<sup>2</sup> Dyed wool gives brighter colours and is easier to produce than dyed linen threads. This could be the reason of combining the two materials. The "*sha'atnez*" items are of special importance because of their religious significance. The fact that most of the textiles in Kuntillet 'Ajrud were made of linen and only a small percentage of wool is surprising for a Negev site, where the locally available raw material for producing fabric was sheep's wool. A possible explanation for the high amount of linen finds may be the religious function of the site. (Sheffer / Tidhar, Textiles 14) Linen garments had special cultic significance in both Egypt and Mesopotamia and in ancient Israel. In Mesopotamia linen garments characterized a person as a priest. (Oppenheim, Texts, cited by Sheffer / Tidhar, Textiles 23) According to the Old Testament priests had to wear linen garments in the cult (Ex 28, 42-43). In Ezekiel 44, 17-18 wool is especially mentioned as forbidden for priests within the gates of the inner court of the temple. At the same time, linen was also the clothing of the Israelite male (Ias 5, 27; Jer, 13, 1) this twofold use of linen, cultic versus domestic, is also mentioned neo-Babylonian documents. (Oppenheim, Garments 178).

## 2.2. Deir 'Alla

Deir 'Alla was located on the crossroads of the north-south trade route through the Jordan Valley. (Van der Kooij, Vicissitudes 299) It was the last village in the Jordan Valley before the road from Beit Shean and Pella to Rabbat Ammon led inland, following the river Zerqa. (Van der Steen,

<sup>1</sup> *Sha'atnez* is mentioned in the Old Testament. Wearing garments made of a mixture of wool and linen is prohibited for common use according to Lev 19, 19. The holy clothes for the High Priest were made of a mixture of wool and linen as ordained in Ex 28, 4-8.

<sup>2</sup> The only colour observed on both early and late linens is blue. (Sheffer / Tidhar Textiles 6 and note 14)



Tribes) In the Iron Age phase M / IX the settlement consisted of an unfortified village of circa fifteen households. (Van der Kooij / Ibrahim, *Threads* 86-87; Van der Kooij, *Matters* 63.70) The excavated architecture shows a conglomerate of small mud brick rooms. In one of the rooms of the settlement a text mentioning Balaam Bar Beor was written in ink on the plastered western wall (see Hofstijzer / Van der Kooij *Texts and Text*). Phase M / IX was destroyed by an earthquake and partly by fire, leaving the contents of the rooms largely undisturbed. (Van der Kooij, *Tell Deir 'Alla* 341) The destruction of Deir 'Alla phase M / IX has been dated to ca. 800 BC on the basis of C14-analysis. (Van der Kooij / Ibrahim, *Threads* 82; Van der Kooij, *Context* 297, 301; *Matters* 63), while Vilders dates the pottery of phase M to between 850 and 700 BC. (1992, 198) Therefore the complex was in use in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> and possibly the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. The village consisted of a conglomerate of some forty small rooms, tightly built together. Most rooms shared their walls with their neighbours, and were not freestanding units. No fortification has been found surrounding the settlement, and no temple has been identified. However in one of the buildings a small room with benches was found, which had a text on the plastered western wall, written in red and black ink. (In the publications this room is referred to as room EE33).

The benched room with the plaster text is a small room measuring 3 x 4.3 m. About 1 m<sup>2</sup> of inscribed and illustrated wall plaster was found in this room. One concentration of fragments had collapsed into room EE334 west of the benched room, the other into room EE335, the room in which it originally belonged. The text has been reconstructed and published by Hofstijzer / Van der Kooij, *Texts; Text*. The preserved fragments deal with “the seer of the gods Balaam, son of Beor” (usually identified with Balaam in Numbers 22-24), with his visions, prophesies and curses. Because of the fragmentary state of the plaster text, the combination of the different fragments and the reconstruction of the contents remain problematic. The text is linguistically puzzling, and scholars even argue over in which language the text is written.<sup>3</sup>

The interpretation of Deir 'Alla in the Iron Age has been a point of discussion, the question is: Was this village an agricultural settlement or did it have a religious function in this period as it had in the Bronze Age? The excavator of the benched room with the Balaam inscription Prof. Dr. H.J.

<sup>3</sup> Some scholars see the language as basically Aramaic, others think it is basically Canaanite and several scholars hold this language to be neither Aramaic nor Canaanite and characterize it as “Proto Aramaic”, an intermediate stage of the evolution of Aramaic out of second millennium B.C. For a detailed survey see Moore, *Traditions* 7, note 27.



Franken (Franken, Evidence 4.8.13; Deir 322; Balaam at all and Studies) suggests that the Iron Age village had a sanctuary. "The combination of the artificial hill (tell) with the building on top, the Balaam text and a number of associated objects justify the present attempt to interpret the ruins as the remains of a Baal height." (Franken, Balaam 193) Franken sees a relation between the textile production and the religious function of the site. Vilders (Stratigraphy 192) sees for the Iron Age complex of Deir 'Alla besides a practical function also a religious one. She suggests a similar function as Beth Shan upper level V, store rooms and workshops belonging to a central administration building or a sanctuary. Wenning / Zenger (Heiligtum 172.181) conclude that there is no continuity for the function as a sanctuary, because the Iron Age benched room and the Late Bronze Age temple are not on the same place at the site. The unoccupied period of 200 years between the end of the Late Bronze Age temple and the beginning of the Iron Age village causes Wenning / Zenger to reject the idea of the function as a sanctuary. Wenning / Zenger, who formulated the main question as: "Heiligtum ohne Stadt – Stadt ohne Heiligtum" was it a sanctuary without a town or a town without a sanctuary? They came up with an alternative interpretation for the benched room their idea is that the room was a meeting-room: for local prophets. (Wenning / Zenger, Heiligtum 193) Van der Kooij who published the Balaam inscription (Hoftijzer / Van der Kooij, Texts, Text) and continued the excavations at tell Deir 'Alla from 1979 onward, describes the Iron Age settlement of phase IX as an agricultural village starting at full scale and settled by agricultural villagers directly coming from another village. (Van der Kooij, Matters 70) He describes separate households, in which weaving for home use generally featured, and indicates a trade specialisation, by exceptional number of looms. (Van der Kooij / Ibrahim, Threads 87.88) Van der Kooij rejects the interpretation of the Iron Age complex as a religious centre. About the Benched room with the Balaam text he writes: "Historically texts of this kind may have a religious use, but also a use in a teaching context ('class room')." (Van der Kooij, Matters 69).

A large number of loom weights were found in this phase as well. A total of 675 loom weights was registered, 589 of which have subsequently been studied. (Boertien, Iron Age) The function of the loom weight is to stretch the warp threads on the vertical loom, the so called warp-weighted loom. The weights are attached to bundles of warp threads. More than thirty warp-weighted looms were in use in the settlement of phase M / IX. (Boertien, Iron Age 323-324) If the suggestion of fifteen households (Van der Kooij / Ibrahim, Threads 86-87; Van der Kooij, Matters 63.70) is correct, then more than two looms were in use in each household. This



suggests that weaving was an important activity in this village.<sup>4</sup> It was not done only for household production, but tell Deir 'Alla can be regarded as a textile production centre. Its location on a crossroad of trade routes suggests that this production was related to a local and regional exchange network.

Fragments of textile were also found. Most were carbonised threads retrieved from the holes of some loom weights. In a room directly south of the benched room a small fragment of fabric, measuring 52 x 32 mm, was still lying in situ between 38 loom weights. These finds were analysed by Dr. W.D. Cook of the Manchester Department of Textiles using a Scanning Electron Microscope. (Vogelsang-Eastwood, *Textiles* 61, fig.76 and 77) The fabric turned out to be a very fine hemp cloth, a textile rarely encountered in the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> (Boertien, *Iron Age; Studies*) Deir 'Alla is the only known site in the Levant where hemp fibre has been identified in an archaeological context. The find of a fragment of finely woven hemp cloth in phase M / IX is very exceptional, as hemp cloth has never before been reported from Iron Age levels in the Levant. Beside wool is linen the most commonly used plant fiber. The presence of cloth made of the fibre hemp in the same complex in which a cult room with a religious inscription is found raises the question whether this special kind of cloth could have had a cultic use. (Boertien, *Studies*).

### 3. Concluding

Kuntillet 'Ajrud has been interpreted as a shrine where textiles were produced, at least partly for religious purposes. (Meshel, *Kuntillat 'Ajrud; Sheffer / Tidhar, Textiles*) Likewise, the compound of tell Deir 'Alla Phase M / IX can be seen as the place of residence of a small group of people, living and working near a shrine complex, producing textiles not only for their own use and for exchange, but also for some religious needs. (Boertien, *Iron Age; Studies*) Interesting is that at both sites ABCDaries have been found. In Deir 'Alla an alphabet was inscribed on the rim of a bowl. Probably the whole alphabet had been written round the rim of the

<sup>4</sup> The warp-weighted loom is the only kind of loom traceable in an excavation, but it is possible that other techniques to make cloth were used as well, such as the horizontal loom and tablet or card weaving.

<sup>5</sup> Hemp is derived from the stem of *Cannabis Sativa*, which is closely related to flax. It is currently known as a fibre to make ropes and cords. There are no literary and documentary sources for the use of hemp in the Iron Age in the Levant, and it is only from tell Deir 'Alla that actual hemp textiles are recorded. However, hemp is difficult to distinguish from linen without the use of the Scanning Electron microscope and it is very well possible that some hemp cloth found was taken for linen.



bowl. (Van der Kooij / Ibrahim, Threads 70) In Kuntillet 'Ajrud four ABCDdaries were found, mentioned by Meshel in his description of the ink inscriptions and drawings on pottery vessels. "Noteworthy among the inscriptions are four repetitions of the alphabet, with the letter *pe* preceding '*ain*.'" (Meshel, Horvat Teman 1462) An interesting ABCDdary has been excavated by R. E. Tappy at Tell Zayit (not far from Lachish). It is a complete alphabet inscribed (scratched) in a stone boulder belonging to a building, dedicated to the late tenth century. (Lectures R.E. Tappy held at ASOR and SBL in Philadelphia November 2005, and the site of Tel Zayit: ([www.zeitah.net/UpdateTelZayit.html](http://www.zeitah.net/UpdateTelZayit.html).) (16.11.2006) The function of these alphabets is not clear, the scripts used often show an experienced writing, and thus they are not a writing exercise, a magical religious explanation has to be considered. (Van der Kooij / Ibrahim, Threads 70).

### 3.1. Texts and textiles

The use of a special fabric for sacred or liturgical garments is well-known in religious history. The specialized textile production at both sites, where very fine fabrics of very rare material or in a rare combination of materials were made on the looms in the village, stresses religious aspect of the sites. At both sites very special fabrics were found. In Deir 'Alla a fine hemp-textile was produced, while in Kuntillet 'Ajrud a fine wool /linen mixture was woven. The production of special fabrics may be interpreted in the light of the religious function of the sites. The fabrics are thought to be produced for the shrine. Textile production is often related to the goddess Asherah / Ishtar and weaving for Asherah is a usual ritual in the Levant during this period.

A closer look at the texts from tell Deir 'Alla and Kuntillet 'Ajrud also reveals some surprising relations. It is remarkable that on the inscriptions of both sites a goddess is present, although the texts belong to a different cultural / religious sphere and the goddesses are at home in a different pantheon. Comparing the texts from Deir 'Alla and Kuntillet 'Ajrud the inscriptions show different personal names, it is striking that in the plaster text from Deir 'Alla the god JHWH is not mentioned while this name is often used in Kuntillet 'Ajrud. The ink inscriptions at both sites speak of the god El as head of the pantheon and a female god is mentioned, in Deir 'Alla the goddess is Shagar and in Kuntillet 'Ajrud the female god is Asherah. But the pantheon of both sites is different, in the Balaam text the god El, originally the chief god of this world is mentioned. His role is not entirely clear. There is also the male god Mot: he is the personification of death. The goddess is Shagar, known as a goddess from northern Syria. In the text she



is mentioned together with Ashtar (*Shagar we Ashtar*). There is a discussion whether Ashtar is a god or a goddess.

Hoftijzer sees a narrow relation between Ashtar and Astarte (Hoftijzer writes “*Ashtarte*”) on the one side and Shagar on the other side. Shagar and Ashtar are connected with the fertility of animals. (Keel / Uehlinger, *Gods* 208, Hoftijzer / Van der Kooij, *Texts* 273) In Moab Ashtar is identified with Kemosh (Hoftijzer / Van der Kooij, *Texts* 273) The god Ashtar-Kemosh is referred to in the Moab inscription. (ANET 320) Zevit sees Ishtar as the same goddess as Astarte, she is an Assyrian goddess (Zevit, *Religions* 541) and finally Hoftijzer states in Van der Kooij / Ibrahim (*Threads* 69) that Ashtar is the male equivalent of Ashtarte. The correlation between Astarte / Ishtar and the “Queen of Heavens” in this and related passages is reasonable in the light of the available data. (Zevit, *Religions* 541 note 91) Ishtar is also a Babylonian goddess with a relationship to Anu king of the gods. (Zevit, *Religions* 369) From all these different ideas it is difficult to tell who is meant in the Balaam inscription. In the council of the gods which Balaam saw in his vision, it is not clear if the *Shadday* are gods or goddesses. Hoftijzer suggests a feminine plural of *Shadday*, the *Shaddayim* goddesses they are the council of the gods. (Hoftijzer / Van der Kooij, *Texts* 179.275; Van der Kooij / Ibrahim, *Threads* 69)

### 3.2. About the male gods

In Kuntillet ‘Ajrud besides El two other male gods are mentioned, YHWH and Baal, it attracts attention that in Kuntillet ‘Ajrud the male gods are an interesting international group. In Samaria and throughout Israel reigned a religious pluralism that was later to be represented as a struggle between the popular, national god JHWH and the foreign deity Baal who predominated at court (...) Baal was the traditional god, or better the god-type of the countryside, along with the goddesses Astarte and Asherah. (Liverani, *History* 119) There were also many other deities who appear occasionally even in a text such as the Bible, where Deuteronomistic and post-exile editors wished to reduce the situation to an alternative between JHWH and Baal. (Liverani, *History* 119) In Deir ‘Alla the male gods are El and Mot, the goddesses are Shagar and possibly Astarte. The names used in the plaster texts from Deir ‘Alla and Kuntillet ‘Ajrud show different personal names, it is striking that in the plaster text from Deir ‘Alla the god JHWH is not mentioned while this name is often used in Kuntillet ‘Ajrud. The reason could be the fact that JHWH is supposed to be of a southern origin. (Liverani, *History* 140).



### 3.3. The goddesses

In Kuntillet 'Ajrud Asherah the consort of El is the Magna Mater and the Dea Nutrix of the Canaanite pantheon, the goddess of fecundity (Becking / Dijkstra, God 114) referred to as Qudshu. She is also known from Ugaritic texts. The name 'šrt Asherat (Meshel, Kuntillat 'Ajrud un-paged) is used in Kuntillet 'Ajrud. The name 'šrt Asherat is used in the same way in an altar inscription excavated in Ekron. (Gitin, Century 250) The official cult of Asherah and JHWH is mentioned in Kuntillet 'Ajrud, Ekron (Tel Miqne) and in the inscription from Khirbet El-Qom (10km south-east of Lachish), reading: "May Uriyahu be blessed by JHWH and his Asherah, he saved him from his enemies." What clearly emerges from these is a cult that combines JHWH and his consort Asherah. (Liverani, History 140) Besides the goddess Asherah the goddess Anat the Virgin (standing on the Lion), the goddess of war is mentioned, in the inscription she is singing for Baal. She is considered to be the sister of Asherah, they are the daughters of Re originally kept distinct from each other. Anat is also known from Ugarit. (Zevit, Religions 359-370) She is also referred to as Qudshu. (Zevit, Religions 323-324 and note 132,133 and 134)

In Deir 'Alla the goddess Shagar is mentioned as a Canaanite goddess that had a function in animal fertility, but the name Shagar is also known from Punic and Ugaritic texts. (Hoftijzer / Van der Kooij, Texts 273) She is referred to as a double goddess *Shagar-we-Ashtar* (comparable to the double gods *Shahar-we-Salem* and *Sede-we-Mesar*. (Becking / Dijkstra, God 96.113) The god Ashtar is also a fertility god, he is mentioned on the stele of Mesha, from the nearby kingdom of Moab, there he is identified as the national god Kemosh. There is a narrow relation between Ashtar and Astarte on the one side and Shagar on the other. It is unknown which role Ashtar played in the local pantheon of Deir 'Alla, but it is possible that Ashtar was one of the more important gods of Deir 'Alla as he was in Moab. (Hoftijzer / Van der Kooij, Texts 273 and note 8) In the text the goddess Shagar is the one who announces the doom to Balaam. Hoftijzer / Van der Kooij suggest that Shagar was more important in the pantheon of Deir 'Alla than Ashtar because she is mentioned first in the name combination. We do not know whether Astarte also belonged to the local pantheon, but it is possible that Shagar has taken her place. (Hoftijzer / Van der Kooij, Texts 274) This would mean that Shagar is Astarte.



<i>Names used in Kuntillet 'Ajrud</i>	<i>Names used in Deir 'Alla</i>
	The Shadday gods /goddesses
<i>The god EL</i>	<i>The god EL</i>
Anath the Virgin Asherah the goddess, consort of YHWH	Shagar the goddess, consort of Ashtar
The god YHWH , [or YHWH and his Ashera] YHWH... the Teiman YHWH of Shomron and Asherata YHWH Teiman and Asherata	<i>The god</i> Ashtar
<i>The god Baal</i>	<i>The god Mot</i>
<i>Different names mentioned</i> Amaryo Yehal(el) Yoasah	<i>Different names mentioned</i> Balaam son of Beor the prophet Shar'a' Stone of Shar'a'

Table 1. The pantheons of Deir 'Alla and Kuntillet 'Ajrud

When Shagar is Astarte then there is an interesting link between the goddesses of Iron Age Deir 'Alla and Kuntillet 'Ajrud. Because the worship of Asherah finally resulted in an admixture of the characteristics of Asherah and Anat and later they formed a triad with Astarte, the goddess of sexual love.<sup>6</sup> (Oden, Persistence 34; Becking / Dijkstra, God 122; Nakhai, Archaeology 146, discussion in Zevit, Religions 137 note 25) Though each goddess had a

<sup>6</sup> Her native name is Atarata which became Atargatis in Greek. Later she is called Hera or Athena, Aphrodite, Selena, Rhea, Artemis or Nemesis, and her original consort Baal is later called Zeus.



distinct character, the three goddesses share attributes titles and husbands. It seems clear that at every period the three goddesses could be worshipped separately or together. (Oden, Persistence 34)<sup>7</sup> In the Canaanite pantheon Asherah, the consort of El, was finally absorbed in the triad Anat-Asherah-Astarte. (Hoffner, Myths 69-70). The triad of major Canaanite goddesses, Asherah, Astarte and Anat, their Egyptian hypostatization Qudshu and the Egyptian goddess Hathor shared many characteristics. (Nakhai, Archaeology 146) The Ugaritic mythological texts are witness of a religion whose basic shape remained constant. In the flexible pantheon was place for an amalgamation of different deities, with a place of honour for a female deity. (Oden, Persistence 32-33) To show how this amalgamation took place in the Levant Oden describes the female deity. Her name combines the names of Asherah, Astarte and Anat. The major Canaanite goddess Asherah / Tanit combined with Astarte. Though each goddess has and continues to have a distinctive character as early as the mid-second millennium B.C. the three goddesses share attributes, titles, and husbands. It seems clear that at every period the three goddesses could be worshiped separate or together. (Oden, Persistence 34).

The relation between the different goddesses as mentioned above is interesting because it could point to an unexpected relation between these two sites. Both in Deir 'Alla and in Kuntillet 'Ajrud textiles were woven within a compound that contained textual finds mentioning the name of a goddess Asherah or Shagar. Because Shagar is possibly another name for Asherah the pantheon of both sites is less different than the names do suggest. The head of the pantheon is El, the female is Asherah / Ishtar / Anat / Shagar her male consort is YHWH in Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Ashtar in Deir 'Alla. The different female goddesses seem to be the same mythological motif, an admixture of different female deities, the Dea Nutrix, the Magna Mater, the goddess of fertility, the goddess of war, the goddess of sexual love, she is an important female deity with different attributes, and one of her known attributes is the spindle. The function of this female goddess associated with spinning could point to a similarity in the function of the benched room in Deir 'Alla and Kuntillet 'Ajrud. At both sites the material culture shows that weaving textiles played an important role, in combination with the plaster texts mentioning a female deity be it Shagar of Asherah, it is tempting to say that the inhabitants of Iron Age Deir 'Alla and

<sup>7</sup> Ackermann sees a difference in the worship of Asherah at one side and Astarte/Ishtar at the other side. Astarte the West Semitic goddess and Ishtar the East Semitic goddess are both associated with the planet Venus and embody the astral characteristics of the 'Queen of Heaven' / 'Lady of Heaven'. (Ackermann, Debo-rah 461).



Kuntillet 'Ajrud wove their special textiles for Asherah. Further research is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

### Summary

Texts and textile finds from Iron Age Deir 'Alla in the Jordan Valley and Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the North-Eastern Sinai shed some light on a female goddess. Both sites are dated about 800 BC, and revealed unique inscriptions and drawings on plastered walls and on both sites a special kind of textile was produced. In Kuntillet 'Ajrud a collection of about a hundred textile fragments was discovered, amongst these pieces of textile was a fabric made of a mixture of wool and linen: the so called "sha'atnez" (Lev 19, 19 Ex 28, 4-8). In Deir 'Alla too a special textile has been excavated, in the complex in which the Balaam plaster text was found. Here a very fine hemp cloth was made. The benched (cult) room in Deir 'Alla and Kuntillet 'Ajrud and the production of a special cloth could point to a similarity in the function of both sites. The production of special fabrics may be interpreted in the light of the religious function of the sites because at least parts of the fabrics are thought to be produced for the shrine. The names used in the texts from Deir 'Alla and Kuntillet 'Ajrud point to a female goddess. Textile production is often related to the goddess Asherah / Ishtar and weaving for Asherah is a usual ritual in the Levant during this period. Whether the production of textile in Deir 'Alla and Kuntillet 'Ajrud can be related to the goddess Asherah is debated.

### Zusammenfassung

Texte und Textilfunde von Deir 'Alla im Jordantal und von Kuntillet 'Ajrud im nordöstlichen Sinai werfen neues Licht auf eine altbekannte weibliche Gottheit. Beide Stätten datieren in die Eisenzeit, näher hin in die Zeit um 800 v. Chr. An beiden Stätten konnten einzigartige Inschriften und Zeichnungen an verputzten Mauern entdeckt werden. Und an beiden Stätten wurde nachweislich eine spezielle Art von Textilien produziert. In Kuntillet 'Ajrud wurden über einhundert Textilfragmente entdeckt, darunter auch Stücke, die aus einem Mischgewebe aus Wolle und Leinen gefertigt waren, so genannte sha'atnez (Lev 19,19 und Ex 28,4-8). Auch in Deir 'Alla konnten spezielle Textilien entdeckt werden, und zwar in jenem Komplex, in dem auch der Balaam-Text entdeckt wurde. Hier wurde feiner Stoff aus Hanffaser hergestellt. Die Kulträume mit Bänken sowie die Produktion spezieller Stoffe sowohl in Deir 'Alla als auch in Kuntillet 'Ajrud könnte auf eine ähnliche Funktion beider Stätten hinweisen. Die Produktion spezieller Gewebe könnte im Licht der religiösen Bedeutung der beiden Stätten interpretiert werden, da zumindest Teile der Gewebe für die Kultstätten produziert wurden. Die Namen in den Inschriften von Deir 'Alla und Kuntillet 'Ajrud weisen auf eine weibliche Gottheit hin. Textilproduktion ist oftmals mit der Göttin Asherah / Ishtar verbunden und das Weben für Asherah ist ein übliches Ritual in der Levante in dieser Zeit. Ob die Textilproduktion in Deir 'Alla und in Kuntillet 'Ajrud mit der Göttin Asherah in Verbindung gebracht werden kann, ist Gegenstand der Diskussion.



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