KUNTILLET ʿAJRUD, SACRED TREES AND THE ASHERAH

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Abstract
The point of departure for the article is the contrast between the abundance of unique artefacts, religious inscriptions and drawings unearthed at Kuntillet ʿAjrud and the absence of remains associated with cultic activity at the site. It is proposed that this discrepancy in the finding may be accounted for by a tradition of a sacred tree and a cult site around it. The discussion first explores the importance of the cult of sacred trees in the history of the Levant. Several ancient Levantine cult sites developed around prominent trees that drew sanctity to their vicinity. In this light, it is conjectured that at the site of Kuntillet ʿAjrud the actual cultic activity took place around a sacred tree (or sacred grove) and a nearby altar, while the main building served as a storehouse for the sancta of the goddess Asherata, her dedications and treasures. Such a building could also have served as an inn for pilgrims travelling along the Darb el-Ghazza, but its function as a caravanserai was secondary to its main purpose as the goddess' treasury.

Kuntillet ʿAjrud is located in northeastern Sinai, about 50 kms south of Kadesh Barnea and 12 kms west of the Darb el-Ghazza, the ancient route that connected the Mediterranean coast to Elat and southern Sinai. The site, situated on a hill overlooking Wadi Quraiya, was excavated by Meshel in 1975–1976 (Meshel 1978; 1979; 1982–83; 1992; 1993). The buildings feature a single stratum; but the remains of three ovens, built one on top of the other, each related to a successive floor, indicate that it was not very short-lived (Meshel 1993: 1460). Kuntillet ʿAjrud has usually been dated to the first half of the 8th century BCE (see, e.g., Meshel 1979: 34; Lemaire 1984: 131–132, 134, 138–139; Ayalon 1995: 196–198; Segal 1995; Carmi and Segal 1996), but recently Singer-Avitz (2006) suggested dating it to the last third of the 8th century BCE.

The site of Kuntillet ʿAjrud consists of two architectural units: a main building ('Building A'), extending over most of the area of the hill, and an additional, almost entirely eroded sub-structure on its eastern side ('Building B'). The main building is rectangular in plan with four protruding small rooms in its four corners. The internal part of the building includes an open courtyard, surrounded on three sides by long,

narrow rooms. Two staircases on the south side suggest that a second storey was built either on the south or on three sides of the building (for the ground plan and details of the findings, see Meshel 1978; 1993: 1459–1460; Beck 1982: 5; Ayalon 1995: 143, 188–192; Schmidt 2002: 93, 99–104).

Many important finds were discovered at the site, including a considerable amount of pottery (Ayalon 1995; Gunneweg, Perlman and Meshel 1985; Goren 1995; Singer-Avitz 2006), textiles (Sheffer and Tidhar 1991; Boertien 2007), a large number of drawings on plaster and pottery (Beck 1982; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 210–248; Schmidt 1996: 96–105; 2002: 104–122; Uehlinger 1997: 142–149; Hadley 2000: 136–152), and inscriptions in Hebrew and Phoenician script (Lemaire 1981: 25–33; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 225–248; Renz 1995: 47–66; Zevit 2001: 379–400; Dobbs-Allsopp *et al*. 2005: 277–298, with earlier literature).[1]

The assumed function of the site influenced the interpretation of the artefacts, inscriptions and drawings discovered there. Many scholars suggested that the building served as a caravanserai built by a (possibly Israelite) king on the desert route to Elat (Lemaire 1981: 25; 1984: 136; Beck 1982: 61; Hadley 1993; 2000: 106–120; Na'aman 1993: 233; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 247; Dijkstra 2001: 17–21). However, the site's location, 12 kms off the Darb el-Ghazza, the relatively small number of cooking-pots unearthed there (Ayalon 1995: 155–156, 186–188) and the many unique finds, do not support the assumption that the site was primarily a caravanserai.

The comparison of Kuntillet ʿAjrud to some Negev fortresses, such as Kadesh Barnea, Arad and Tell el-Kheleifeh (Ahlström 1982: 42–43; Hadley 1993: 117–118; Merlo 1994: 25, 47; Singer-Avitz 2006: 212–213), is misleading. The Negev fortresses were built to withstand attack and siege by armed troops, while Building A was not constructed to face such attacks. In fact, strong fortifications were unnecessary in this remote desert region, and the building was constructed to provide security to its inhabitants and visitors against sudden local raids, rather than attacks by regular troops. The image that arises from its plan is that of a small fort with four 'towers' in the corners and a single entrance from the east, which was probably closed by a heavy door. The two staircases on the southern side indicate

[1] Two textual restorations might be proposed. In lines 1–3 of the inscription on Pithos A (see Dobbs-Allsopp *et al*. 2005: 289–292) one may restore *'mr* '[*xy*]*w h*[*hl*]*k*; "A[xx-ya]w the traveller says". For the noun *hēlek* ("traveller", "visitor") see 2 Samuel 12:4. The inscription is the wayfarer's blessing to three persons who may have lived somewhere in the North Israelite kingdom (Na'aman 1993: 232 n. 12). The end of the inscription on Pithos B (see Dobbs-Allsopp *et al.* 2005: 293–294) may tentatively be restored [*hmlk*]. The inscription is a blessing by the traveller (Amaryau) to his lord, most probably the king of Israel; otherwise the latter's identity would have been disclosed in the introduction. Amaryau was probably an agent of the king of Israel, and arriving at the sacred place he blessed his master in the names of the local 'Lord' (YHWH of Teman) and the goddess Asherata.

that the building was high, and that a lookout on its roof could have observed the surrounding areas. These elements were sufficient to defend the dwellers from raids by desert nomads. But while the interpretation of the building as a well-protected way-station is self-evident, the question remains whether it was purposely-built as a caravanserai, or had a different original function. This problem should be discussed in detail in light of the findings from the site.

The extraordinary artefacts, inscriptions and drawings discovered at Kuntillet ʿAjrud make it a unique case in Palestinian archaeology. For this reason, some scholars considered it a special kind of cult centre, and various interpretations have been suggested regarding its religious function. Meshel (1992: 108) suggested that "the site, occupied for only a few years, was likely inhabited by a small group of priests dispatched from the N[orthern] kingdom of Israel with an officer (*śr ʿr*) at their head. They were sustained by the various sacrifices and tithes that were sent as provisions primarily from Judah; in return, they rendered their cultic services to travelers" (see also Meshel 1978; 1979: 34; 1993: 1464).[2] Weinfeld (1984: 127) conjectured that "ʿAjrud might then have served as a kind of a 'shrine' where kings spent some time before proceeding to the Red Sea. This was the right opportunity to receive divine blessing, especially before war-expeditions". Catastini (1982: 128–134) analyzed several inscriptions discovered at the site and suggested that the building was a shrine inhabited by members of the prophetic movement. Axelsson (1987: 62–63, 181) suggested that "the find from Kuntillet ʿAjrud provides us with archaeological evidence of the possibility of pilgrimages from northern Israel to the mountain of god in the south". Finally, Lemaire suggested that the place was both a way-station and a centre of learning (1981: 25–30). These suggestions were critically examined and dismissed by Hadley (1993: 120–123; 2000: 108–115). Hadley first presented several criteria for the identification of a shrine (i.e., the presence of the image of the deity in a separate structure, an altar for sacrifices, cultic artefacts), and demonstrated that they are missing from the Kuntillet ʿAjrud building (1993: 116–119; 2000: 108–110, 116–120). She concluded (1993: 122) that "the site was set up as a caravanserai, or way-station, as a place where travellers could stop and find water for their animals (and themselves) from the wells in the vicinity, and could spend the night in relative security". Keel and Uehlinger (1998: 247) endorsed Hadley's conclusions: "We ought to abandon the notion, once and for all, that the site was a pilgrimage shrine or some other kind of religious center…. The architecture and decoration at the site both characterize it much more clearly as

[2] In another article Meshel (1982–83: 52) noted the possibility that the site "served a dual purpose as a wayside shrine for the merchants of Phoenicia, Israel, Judah and the coastal strip, as they travelled to Eilat and Ophir, and as a place of prayer where votive offerings might be left by pilgrims going south to Mount Horeb. It may also have been a border shrine demarcating the end of the territory of Judah".

a state-run caravanserai". The dismissal of the pilgrimage hypothesis to this remote and isolated place is certainly correct, as long-distance pilgrimage is first known in the Byzantine period, when it resulted from the spread of Christianity and the desire of visiting believers from far away countries to see the places where Jesus and other figures mentioned in the Holy Scriptures had functioned. Short-distance pilgrimage to holy sites is well-known in ancient Near Eastern texts and in the Bible, but the assumption of a pilgrimage to a remote desert site like Kuntillet ʿAjrud is highly unlikely in the First Temple period.

Hadley's alternative of either shrine or caravanserai as the purpose of the site was criticized by Zevit (2001: 374–375 n. 47) and Schmidt (2002: 96, 98–99). Indeed, the exceptional artefacts and inscriptions discovered at Kuntillet ʿAjrud are not satisfactorily explained by the way-station hypothesis. H. Weippert (1988: 625–627) compared the 'Heiligtümer' of Kuntillet ʿAjrud and Tell Deir ʿAlla, where inscriptions written on door-posts and walls mentioning several gods were discovered. She emphasized that their respective ground plans differ from those of temples, and that there is no sign that a cult was conducted in the place. She cautiously suggested that they were "*Wahlfahrts- oder Memorialstätte*" for pilgrims arriving from the north and south. Zevit (2001: 374–381) raised further arguments in favour of the 'religious centre' hypothesis. Finally, Schmidt (2002: 98–104) concluded, after a detailed analysis of the site, its artefacts and inscriptions, that "while it is unlikely that the site as a whole was constructed and designed in its entirety as a temple or shrine, numerous artifacts recovered from Horvat Teman point to the extensive religious use of the site's architectural space and artistic design.… Kuntillet ʿAjrud might have served as a rest stop and fortified trade center situated on a major commercial route, but…the site also provided for the observance of religious ritual" (pp. 102–103).[3]

It is not necessary to re-examine the pros and cons of the 'religious centre' debate. An enormous amount of literature has already been published on Kuntillet ʿAjrud, and only the comprehensive publication of the excavations, including all the artefacts and inscriptions discovered there, might justify a detailed new discussion. It is evident that neither the royal caravanserai hypothesis, nor the 'religious centre' one (with all its variants), fully resolved the problems entailed in the interpretation of the site. The choice of a place located off the Darb el-Ghazza, the plastered entrance of the building, the large number of exceptional artefacts, inscriptions and drawings

[3] Dever (2005: 160–162) suggested that "the site is a fort; but it also serves quite sensibly as a sort of 'inn'; and it has…an indisputable 'gate shrine'". What makes the building's entrance a shrine? Its plan and the artefacts discovered in it do not fit the criteria set by Hadley (1993: 120–123; 2000: 108–115) for identifying a shrine. Dever himself (2005: 117–118) suggests a list of ten elements for identifying a shrine, the majority of which are missing in the Kuntillet ʿAjrud entrance. Therefore, the term 'gate shrine' is not justified by what has been found at the site.

unearthed in this marginal site, and the absence of cult objects and signs of cultic activity in Building A—all these facts are not satisfactorily explained by the various hypotheses proposed thus far by scholars and call for a different explanation.

We would like to suggest a daring hypothesis which might explain the unique character of the site. It seems to us that the site of Kuntillet ʿAjrud was chosen because a prominent sacred tree (or a sacred grove) grew in its vicinity—an outstanding tree (or grove) that drew sanctity to the place and led to the construction of the buildings next to it, attracting to the site caravaneers and local populace travelling on the Darb el-Ghazza. The close association of the goddess Asherata/Asherah with sacred trees is well known, and this connection could explain the exceptional elements discovered there. Of course, no trace of a tree/grove from the 8th century BCE could have survived to this day, so unfortunately the conjecture can neither be verified nor contradicted.

In what follows we first present evidence of the place of sacred trees in the cult and culture of ancient and modern Palestine. We then adduce evidence of other Levantine cult sites in which a renowned tree holds a central position. Finally, we analyze the site and its artefacts in light of the above conjecture.

SACRED TREES AND CULT PLACES IN THE HISTORY OF PALESTINE

The phenomenon of sacred trees has been known since time immemorial and in many cultures and civilizations all over the world. The cult associated with them is attested to by a variety of literary sources, both ancient and modern, and by archaeological finds (Philipot 1897; Patai 1942: 206–283; Dafni 2006; 2007b, with earlier literature). Different cultures independently developed sacred tree cults with similar characteristics, chiefly the sanctification of large, prominent trees together with their sites. There is usually a tradition associated with the place which underlies the tree's sacredness, or a supernatural property is attributed either to the tree itself, or to the tree in combination with a nearby object, such as a rock, a water source, a cave or a tomb. Today there are hundreds of such sites all over the Levant. Belief in the power of sacred trees is common to the four principal religious groups in the Land of Israel—Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze—enabling the cult to survive and the trees themselves to be preserved for many years, despite marked changes in perceptions, traditions and in the landscape itself (Smith 1889: 185–197; Frazer 1923: 30–61; Canaan 1927 [esp. pp 30–38, 69–73, 103–106]; Elan 1979; Benzinberg-Stein 1987: 123–131; Amar 1999: 155–164; Avivi 2000; Lissovsky 2004a; 2004b; 2007; 2008; Dafni 2007a).

A few examples will illustrate the broad distribution of sacred trees in 20th century Palestine. In his early 20th century survey of the hill country of Samaria, Canaan (1927: 31–34) examined 128 sacred trees and found that they comprised

seven species: 30 kermes oaks, 25 fig trees, 21 carobs, 16 olive trees, 12 jujubes, and 10 terebinths. Armoni and Shmida (1987: 43–44) conducted a detailed survey of about 88 old tree sites, most of them sacred, in the area between Jerusalem and Shechem. They identified 23 different species, of which the most common were the kermes oak (46%), stone pine (13%), Atlantic pistachio (9%), carob (5.8%), terebinth (*Pistacia palaestina*) (4%) and olive (4%). Lissovsky (2004a: 66–67, 76–77) surveyed 80 sacred sites with more than 500 trees in the Upper and Lower Galilee, the majority of which are sacred to Jews, Muslims and Druze, and only 4 sacred to Christians. She identified 14 different species, of which the most common were the kermes oak (15 sites), Atlantic pistachio (13 sites), carob (10 sites), Mount Tabor oak (8 sites), jujube (6 sites), fig (5 sites) and terebinth (*Pistacia palaestina*) (5 sites). Sacred trees were also found in southern Sinai, the most common species being acacia, but other trees like jujube, cypress and date palm were also sanctified (Levi 1980: 183–188). These surveys illustrate the importance of sacred trees in modern times. They also reveal that some species were widespread in various parts of the Mediterranean littoral, while others were endemic to particular areas.

Devotees of a sacred tree seek to invoke the magic potential of the site by performing a particular ritual: making a vow, praying, lighting candles, placing written wishes on stones or tying strips of cloth to the tree. Features of the cult vary according to the object of the prayer and the local cult practices, but they all express either a hope of future reward, or gratitude for a wish that was fulfilled. Many cult features are based on belief in magic contact—i.e., that an object that has been in contact with a person retains a connection with him or her. Visitors touch the tree or the tomb, take water from the cistern near the tree, leave a pebble at the site or tie a strip of cloth to a branch of the tree (Canaan 1927: 30–38, 69–73, 103–106; Dafni 2002, with earlier literature). All these actions are based on the belief that some special grace or blessing is transmitted by contact with the sacred site—or conversely, that contact with the site can rid the person of a curse or ailment. The bit of cloth left by the visitor as a memento of his/her visit to the sacred site and the performance of the religious ritual are to remind the saint of the petition.

There is a marked difference in the beliefs and cults of sacred trees in the pre-monotheistic and monotheistic societies. In early periods the cult around the sacred tree was directed to the god or goddess and included sacrifices and offerings on the altar. LaRocca-Pitts (2001: 195–197, 203) demonstrated that "of all the objects related to *ʾāšērîm*, *mizbeḥôt* are connected to them in all the sources which mention them, except Micah". The connection between the altars and the living trees is best illustrated by Hosea 4:13: "They sacrifice on the mountaintops and offer on the hills, under oaks, storax trees and terebinths, whose shade is so pleasant". Animals were

sacrificed and food offerings were burned for the god. It illustrates the activity in hilly open-air cult places, whose most prominent feature was the sacred tree.

With the rise of monotheism, the sacred tree—as well as other objects of the sacred place (i.e., tomb, cave, rock or spring)—ceased being associated directly with the deity, and became linked instead to divine power as personified by the patron saint of the sacred site. The figures of the saints associated with sacred tree sites are usually taken from the history and mythology of the various religions. They combine human qualities and miraculous powers, and their sanctity is conferred upon the tree and its surroundings. The local cult is essentially a cultural system of actions designed to influence these powers. The saint, having been a mortal, can understand human needs, can function as mediator and may supplicate God on the devotees' behalf.

With this background in mind, we can examine the place of sacred trees in the biblical and post-biblical periods. Great trees growing wild were conceived as representing the growth and fertility powers of the goddess, as were the tree-like wooden statues/poles erected in the temples of Israel and Judah—both were called Asherah/Asherim, implying the name of the goddess they represented. A characteristic of prominent trees in ancient and modern times is their attraction of sanctity.[4] The broad distribution of cult places situated near prominent trees explains the many references to the triad of altar, Asherim and stele in biblical texts. This suggests that an altar was built under a prominent tree, and a standing stone was erected beside it. This scene is illustrated in a narrative context in Judges 6:25–32; in law in Exodus 34:15; Deuteronomy 7:5; 12:3; in historiography in 1 Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 17:10; and in prophecy in Jeremiah 17:2. Sacred groves, where altars were built and steles erected, are also attested in the Pentateuch (Gen. 12:6–7; 13:18; 14:13; 18:1; Deut. 11:30) and the Book of Isaiah (1:29; 65:3; 66:17) (Blenkinsopp 2003: 270–271, 311; Williamson 2006: 149, 159–161). The latter three references indicate that cult was carried out in the groves (*gannôt*; usually translated "gardens") after the consecration and purification of the participants (Isa. 66:17).

The Greek and Latin translations of the Bible interpreted Asherah/Asherim as living tree(s), or sacred groves, devoted to a foreign deity (LaRocca-Pitts 2001: 253–265, 295–298). Rabbinical literature frequently used the term Asherah in reference to sacred living trees devoted to idolatry, reflecting the realities of their days (Elmslie 1911: 60–61; Berlin and Zevin 1941: 280–284; Hayes 1997: 63–67, 101–113; LaRocca-Pitts 2001: 319–329). The relative frequency of the term in

[4] Since the discovery of the Kuntillet ʿAjrud inscriptions and drawings numerous books and articles have discussed the biblical Asherah and related matters in great detail. For books and summary discussions in encyclopedias published in the last two decades, see Maier 1986; Olyan 1988; Pettey 1990; Dietrich and Loretz 1992; Day 1992: 483–487; Wiggins 1993; Binger 1994; Frevel 1995; Merlo 1998; Wyatt 1999: 99–105; Hadley 2000; LaRocca-Pitts 2001; Dever 2005.

the rabbinical literature is explained by its practical nature, covering the diverse situations in which Jews might encounter idolatry, and telling them how to sort the permitted from the forbidden. With their close contact to everyday life, rabbinical sources described the cult of sacred trees in greater detail than did the Bible. The new element in this literature is that Asherah became the name of every forbidden sacred tree, no matter which deity it was dedicated to, whereas in biblical Hebrew only trees sacred to the goddess Asherah were given that name.[5]

The following are some mentions of the Asherah in rabbinical literature. R. Akiva (Mishnah, ʿAvodah Zarah 3:5) defined idolatry in reference to the Asherah as follows: "Every place where you find a high mountain and a lofty hill and a green tree, be sure that idolatry is there" (Elmslie 1911: 50–51). The Mishnah (ʿAvodah Zarah 6:7) defines the Asherah as follows: "What is an Asherah? Any [tree] beneath which there is idolatry". The definition is further discussed in the Talmud Bavli (ʿAvodah Zarah 48a): "R. Simeon says: any [tree] which men worship. Which [tree] is presumed to be an Asherah? Rav said: Any [tree] under which gentile priests sit without tasting its fruit". Since the consumption of any part of a sacred tree, including the fruit, was prohibited, abstaining from it was a sign of its sacredness. This is borne out by the Tosefta (ʿAvodah Zarah 6:7): "What is an Asherah? Any [tree] that the gentiles worship and keep it and do not eat its fruit". The Tosefta goes on: "R. Simeon son of Eleazar says: There are three Asheroth in Eretz Israel: a carob tree in Kefar Qesem and Kefar Pagasha and a sycamore in Reno[9] on [Mount] Carmel" (see Reeg 1989: 366–369, 582–583).

In the Roman-Byzantine period, the famous 'oak' (in reality a terebinth) of Mamre had an important place in popular religion. Writing to Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, Emperor Constantine stated (Cameron and Hill 1999: 141–142): "The place of the oak which is known as Mamre…has been completely spoiled…by superstitious persons. Idols fit only for destruction have been set up beside it…and an altar stands nearby, and foul sacrifices are constantly conducted there". He then commanded that "without delay, such idols as he may find in the aforementioned site be consigned to the flames, the altar completely demolished".

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[5] In his detailed article on the Asherah and the tree, Wiggins (2002: 186) concluded that "the long-standing association of the Asherah with trees is based on minimal evidence…. What I do assert is that such a connection is far from obvious or definitive for her character". His discussion is largely confined to biblical texts in which the Asherah is mentioned, and ignores the biblical references to the Asherim (*'ašērîm*), to the term 'green tree' (*'ēṣ ra'anān*) and to other sacred trees mentioned in the Bible. Wiggins does not discuss the widespread cult of sacred trees in the ancient world, nor does he analyze the ancient translations of the terms Asherah and Asherim, or discuss the rich rabbinical literature that refers to these terms (all this material is systematically examined by LaRocca-Pitts 2002: 161–204). Wiggins failed to take into account most of the evidence for the association of the Asherah with sacred trees, and his conclusions must therefore be treated with great caution.

Some trees were planted near an existing altar, either to increase its sanctity or to replace an old tree. This is clearly stated in Deuteronomy 16:21: "You shall not plant an Asherah, any kind of tree, beside the altar of YHWH, your God, that you may make" (for discussion, see LaRocca-Pitts 2001: 173–174, 183–185). Abraham planted a tamarisk in Beersheba "and called there on the name of YHWH, the everlasting God" (Gen. 21:33). The Mishnah also emphasizes that the Asherah could be planted: "There are three sorts of Asherah. A tree, which a man has from the first planted for the purpose of idolatry, behold, this [tree] is forbidden" (ʿAvodah Zarah, 3:7; Elmslie 1911: 54–55). In discussing the biblical prohibition of Asherah, the Mishnah states: "And for what reason is an Asherah forbidden? Because there is manual labour connected with it, and everything connected with manual labour is forbidden" (ʿAvodah Zarah, 3:5; Elmslie 1911: 50–51). The 'manual labour' is the planting of the tree by human hand, so that it cannot be considered a natural object, and if worshipped, it must be forbidden.

Replacing trees in sacred places has also been done in recent periods (see Lissovsky 2004: 75, 77).[6] A modern example was described by Armoni and Shmida (1987: 42): In the Arab village of Al Funduq in Samaria, a large sacred mulberry tree was dying and a seedling was planted nearby, to replace it in future. It is evident that natural and planted sacred trees appeared in sacred sites in Palestine throughout its history, from biblical times to the present.

While in nature the goddess Asherah was identified with prominent trees, which embodied her powers of growth and fertility, in a temple the goddess was represented by a wooden pole/statue, possibly carved in the shape of a tree (Day 1986: 403–406; Olyan 1988: 31–34; Gangloff 1999; 2001). Long ago Kuenen (1874: 89) observed that "the ancients in general and the Israelites in particular made no distinction, or scarcely any, between the deity and its image or symbol. Thus nothing is more natural than that the name of the goddess Ashera should also have been given to the tree-stem which represents her". The observation was accepted by all scholars, and it is borne out by many biblical references.[7]

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[6] The early 16th century CE source, entitled "Venerated Gravesites in Eretz-Israel", describes the tomb of R. Hanina ben Dosa in ʿArabeh, a village located in Lower Galilee, as follows (Amar 1998: 292): "Arabeh; there is the grave of R. Hanina ben Dosa and his wife of blessed memory within a building …. built of ashlar stones, and above them are large tombstones, and two terebinth trees, male and female, come out of the entrance, facing the entrance, and the male is on the right side beside R. Hanina of blessed memory and the female [on his left side] beside his wife of blessed memory". R. Hanina's tomb is a Roman-Byzantine mausoleum and one of the trees described in the 16th century source is still growing today at the site. The two trees must therefore have been planted some time before the 16th century on either side of the entrance of the tomb, in order to replace an old tree or to heighten the site's sanctity.

[7] For Asherah as a goddess, see 1 Kings 15:13, 33; 18:19; 2 Kings 21:7; 23:4; for Asherah as

The Bible provides very little information about the distinctive cult of Asherah. No cult place dedicated to the goddess is mentioned, and its statue/pole was always erected in the temple/cult place of YHWH.[8] According to 2 Kings 23:7, Josiah smashed "the storehouses for the dedicated objects [*battê haqqodāšîm*] within the house of YHWH where women weave *bātîm* for the Asherah" (for the translation see Na'aman 1996; Bird 1997: 64–74). Jeremiah 7:17–18 mentions the baking of cakes and pouring of libation for the "Queen of Heaven". But it is not clear whether similar offerings were also served to the goddess Asherah.

In sum, the prominent tree in nature and the goddess Asherah and her sacred pole/statue should be seen as directly related; severing the links between the sacred tree, the goddess and her sancta and iconographic representations, reflects a modern concept that was unknown in the ancient Near East (cf. M. Weippert 1961: 103–109; *pace* Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 199–201, 232–234). Tree imagery that appears in the iconography might represent various deities, and sacred trees outside the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were sacred to the local deities, and were probably called by their names (certainly not 'Asherah'). In any case, in Israelite and Judahite contexts, where there is evident connection between sacred tree, the goddess and her statue/pole, they remained inseparable and were called by the goddess' name, Asherah.

EVIDENCE OF SACRED TREES IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND WRITTEN SOURCES

The suggestion that cultic sites in Palestine were established in places where sacred trees were growing is not a new one. A few years ago Mazar (2000) conjectured that a sacred tree had stood in the centre of the courtyard of a Chalcolithic temple, discovered on a high spur above the oasis of ʿEn Gedi. The evidence for its existence is the raised platform constructed at the highest point of the sanctuary, around an object that supposedly stood in its centre. Mazar observed that in some civilizations similar encircling platforms were often associated with sacred trees. He proposed that "the tree perhaps constituted the focal cultic point of the sanctuary, with the temple building to its north serving for rituals, ceremonies, making offerings, etc." (*ibid.*: 34–35).

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a statue/sacred pole made (verb 'śh) of wood in the temple, see 1 Kings 16:33; 2 Kings 13:6; 2 Kings 21:3, 7; 23:6, 15.

[8] Ackerman (1993: 389–401) suggested that the account of Maacah and the manufacture of a statue for the Asherah indicates a special role of the queen mother in the cult of the goddess. However, the episode related in 1 Kings 15:13 illustrates the queen mother's usurpation of power when her son was a minor, and her illegitimate seizure of the king's role in maintaining the cult in the temple. Contrary to Ackerman's suggestion, the episode shows that it was the king who usually directed the manufacture of cult objects in the Jerusalem temple, including that of the Asherah.

Mazar (2000: 31) further proposed that sacred trees "stood in the spacious courtyards in front of Canaanite temples, as well as in open-air sanctuaries". Indeed, the excavations at Tell ed-Dab'a (ancient Avaris) unearthed a major temple built in the 17th century BCE. A rectangular altar, from which a bunch of acorns was retrieved, stood in front of the temple. Three pits were discovered near the altar in which trees (apparently oaks) had been planted. Bietak (1996: 36–38; 2003: 15–16), who excavated the site, suggested that these indicate a tree-cult which might be compared to that of the biblical Asherah. Since the reigning dynasty of Avaris was of West Semitic origin, we may assume that the oak trees were brought from the dynasty's homeland and planted near the altar, according to the traditional custom of its ancestors in the Levant.

In his excavations of the Iron Age I 'Bull Site' (Daharat et-Tawileh) in the highlands of Samaria, Mazar (1982) exposed a long wall that surrounded the site. Near the assumed entrance to the site he discovered a standing stone surrounded by a row of stones, and speculated that a sacred tree had stood in the circle (1982: 35; 2000: 31). If the speculation is viable, we suggest that it could have been the prominent tree growing on the summit of the hill that attracted sanctity to the place and led the local inhabitants to establish their cultic site there.

Another Iron Age I cultic site was discovered at el-Burnat, on an elongated ridge of Mount Ebal (Zertal 1986–87). The exact nature of the main building (possibly a small shrine whose foundations alone have survived with two adjacent courtyards; certainly not an altar) is not our concern here. What matters is, why anyone would establish a cultic site in such a remote and isolated place. The only reasonable answer is that a prominent tree (or a sacred grove) grew in this place, and belief in its sanctity prompted the inhabitants of the surrounding area to build a cultic site in the place. We suggest, tentatively, that the circular wall that encompassed the so-called 'Corral' 210, and antedated the enclosing wall (Wall 99) (Zertal 1986–87: 122–123), originally surrounded a sacred tree. If that is the case, Wall 99 was built in order to encompass the tree within the enclosure. Whatever the exact location of the tree, it seems that el-Burnat is another example of a cultic site which derived its sanctity from a prominent sacred tree (or a sacred grove). With the demise of the tree/grove, the site must have lost its attraction, was gradually deserted and fell into oblivion.

Another case in point is the Edomite cultic site of Ḥorvat Qitmit, located in the eastern Negev, about 10 kms south of Tel Arad. 'Complex A' included a rectangular structure, a so-called '*bamah* enclosure' and an 'altar enclosure' (Beit-Arieh 1995: 9–20). The latter enclosure comprises an altar, a basin and a pit encircled by a wall (Beit-Arieh 1995: 18–20). Beit-Arieh suggested that the round basin served for collecting water. The nearby pit, 80 cms deep, was hewn out of the bedrock. We suggest that the pit marks a place where a sacred tree grew, with a nearby

basin as its source of water. The hewing proves that the tree was planted at the sacred site, an act that was explicitly prohibited near altars of YHWH (Deut. 16:21). The nature of the cultic site at Ḥorvat Qitmit is altogether different from that of Kuntillet ʿAjrud, but the combination of altar and sacred tree, with nearby structures, is instructive.

A Neo-Assyrian letter of the later years of Tiglath-pileser III, discovered at Nimrud (ancient Calah), refers to an episode related to the felling of a sacred tree near the city of Sidon (Saggs 1955: 130–131 and Pl. XXXI; 2001: 154–155 and Pl. 30). Here is a tentative translation of the relevant part of the letter (lines 1–19) (for details, see Na'aman forthcoming):

> To the king, my lord: Your servant Qurdi-Ashur-lāmur. Nabu-shezib brought this sealed document in Aramaic from within the city of Tyre saying: It is well in the palace of Tyre. In the palace of/n[ea]r[?] the New Town, Hiram has cut down the *ēqu* of the house of his gods, which is opposite Sidon, saying: "I will move it to Tyre". I sent and stopped him. The *ēqu* which he cut is constricted[?] at the foot of the […] mountain. Nabu-shezib made an in[quiery,[??] …. H]iram retu[rned[?] the *ēqu*[?] to the house[?] of] his [god]s[?]

The letter relates how Hiram, king of Tyre, sought to transfer a sacred tree (*ēqu*) from its location in a cult place near Sidon to a temple in his capital city. The felling of the sacred tree, probably an act of sacrilege, provoked strong opposition in Sidon. News reached the Assyrian governor Qurdi-Ashur-lāmur, who called a halt to the operation and sent his messenger (Nabu-shezib) to the court of Tyre to settle the dispute. It seems that Hiram was forced to give up the initiative and return the sacred object to the Sidonian temple. (Unfortunately, the last lines of the text are badly broken and their translation is uncertain.)

According to the Akkadian dictionaries, *ēqu* is a cult object, possibly a sacred pillar, and *bīt ēqi* is a shrine, an inner room of the temple of a goddess where the sacred pole was erected (for literature, see Na'aman forthcoming: n. 14). While in Assyria the *ēqu* and *bīt ēqi* were located in the city, beyond the borders of Assyria the term was applied to cult places outside cities. The use of the verb *nakāsu* ("to cut") in the letter indicates that the Sidonian tree/sacred pole was made of wood. The wooden object was doubtless of the kind called 'Asherah' in biblical terminology. A cult of sacred trees is attested in the Phoenician cities in the Hellenistic-Roman period, and the Assyrian letter shows that the origin of this cult goes back to the Iron Age.

Finally, Plutarch related the story of the sacred *erica* which was worshipped at the temple of Isis in Byblos (for an English translation of the myth, see Babbitt 1936: 39–43; Frazer 1940: 364–365). The sacred pillar was said to have been cut

down by Isis and presented to the kings of Byblos wrapped in a linen cloth saturated with perfume. Plutarch concludes the story with the statement, "Even to this day the people of Byblos venerate this wood which is preserved in the shrine of Isis". Typologically, the sacred *erica* resembles the biblical Asherah, which was also made of wood, draped in cloths (see 2 Kings 23:7) and erected in the temple (Smith 1889: 191 and n. 3).

KUNTILLET ʿAJRUD IN CONTEXT

In light of the importance of sacred trees in the cult of ancient and recent Levantine sacred sites, let us return to Kuntillet ʿAjrud. The point of departure for the discussion is the conjecture that a prominent sacred tree (or a sacred grove) grew in the vicinity of the site. Textual and archaeological evidence indicate that in many cases an altar was built near the tree and a standing stone was erected beside it. We therefore suggest that the Kuntillet ʿAjrud cultic site, where food offerings were presented to the goddess, was located near a sacred tree, and that this would explain the absence of cultic vessels and signs of cultic activity in Building A. All the sancta of the goddess and all gifts and offerings brought by visitors to the sacred place were kept in the fortified building. Its function as a caravanserai for visiting worshippers was secondary to its primary function as a storehouse for the sancta and treasures of the goddess. This explains the relatively small number of cooking-pots discovered at the site, contrary to what we would expect at an inn, where the preparation and serving of food would have been a major activity (see Ayalon 1995: 155–156, 186–188).

As so little is known about the cult of the goddess Asherata/Asherah, the artefacts discovered at Kuntillet ʿAjrud may fill some gaps in our knowledge. About one hundred fragments of textile, mostly linen, and loom-weights, have been discovered at the site. The loom-weights indicate that weaving took place there. Some scholars interpreted the textiles as remains of garments worn by the local priests (Meshel 1992: 106; Sheffer and Tidhar 1991: 14; Boertien 2007: 65). But the suggestion that a group of priests lived at and served in this remote desert site is unlikely. We have seen that the custom of spreading coverings and tying rags on sacred trees is found all over the world, including many tree sites in Palestine in recent generations (Canaan 1927: 30–38, 69–73, 103–106; Benzinberg-Stein 1987; Dafni 2002; Lissovsky 2004a). The weaving of *bātîm* for the Asherah and storing them in a "dedicated treasures buildings" (*battê haqqodāšîm*) at the temple of Jerusalem is mentioned in 2 Kings 23:7. Also the sacred *erica* at Byblos was covered with a linen cloth. It seems that the many textiles discovered at Kuntillet ʿAjrud were used to cover the sacred tree and possibly the goddess' sacred pole, and also played a part in the rites that took place there. Some of the manufactured

textiles were probably sold to visitors for hanging on the tree. The coverings used in the rites might have been collected after the ceremonies and kept in the building. The textiles discovered at Kuntillet ʿAjrud are probably the key to the *hapax legomenon* biblical term *bātîm*, which must have meant the special linen coverings used to drape the sacred post/statue of the goddess in the temple of Jerusalem.

H. Weippert (1988: 625) conjectured that a statue of a god or his cult symbol might have stood in a side room in the Kuntillet ʿAjrud building, so that pilgrims could watch it through a window. If this was indeed the case, it might be that the sacred pole of the goddess, wrapped in linen cloth, was kept in one of the protruding rooms of the plastered entrance. In a preliminary report on the excavations, Meshel (1979: 28) noted that "at either end of the bench-room is a window-like opening into a small room. The sills of these windows are formed by the benches immediately adjacent; the windows are the only openings or entrances into the small rooms at the ends of the bench-room". A cult symbol of the goddess in the entrance side-room could explain the room's plastering, the nearby benches, the *favissae* and the unique objects found in the eastern side of the building.

Some other objects discovered at the site might have been brought by travellers moving on the Darb el-Ghazza. This includes the large stone basin, weighing about 200 kgs, bearing a dedicatory inscription: "[belonging] to ʿObadyau son of Adnah. Blessed be he to/by YHW" (Dobbs-Allsopp *et al.* 2005: 283–284). Most of the vessels discovered at Kuntillet ʿAjrud originated in Judah (mainly storage vessels), and a few vessels came from Israel (mainly small vessels), and other northern and western areas (Gunneweg, Perlman and Meshel 1985; Ayalon 1995: 192–199; Goren 1995; Singer-Avitz 2006). The vessels must have contained various kinds of offerings and gifts brought by worshippers to the sacred site. Beck (1982: 61–62) suggested that the pithoi drawings and the paintings on the walls were executed by itinerant craftsmen who chanced upon the site as a caravan stop on the Darb el-Ghazza, or came because of its religious significance. The richness of motifs and variegated styles makes the second alternative more plausible. Assuming that the building was maintained by a royal authority, the craftsmen must have come to it either at the invitation of this authority, or as pilgrims who visited the sacred place and expressed their devotion by leaving their work there. Similarly, expert scribes must have come there and left their literary works on the walls of the building.

'Asherata' may have been the North Israelite form of the goddess' name (for the pronunciation, see Hess 1996; Tropper 2001: 100–102), whereas late Judahite scribes dropped the feminine ending *-at* and called the goddess by the

name 'Asherah' and the sacred trees dedicated to her 'Asherim'.[9] The goddess was held to be the consort of YHWH, and may have acted as a divine intercessor between individuals and YHWH (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 236–240; Parker 2006). Asherata's prominent position at the sacred site of Kuntillet ʿAjrud explains her remarkable appearance in the inscriptions as a source of blessing, side by side with YHWH. Whereas the frequent mention of YHWH, the national god of Israel and Judah, in the inscriptions is self explanatory, Asherata's remarkable appearance as a source of blessing, side by side with YHWH, might be explained by her prominent position in the sacred site of Kuntillet ʿAjrud. It is well known that in certain historical circumstances, a god (or goddess) was glorified in royal inscriptions, literary works and hymns, presenting him or her as the supreme and unique deity. But the elevation of the said deity in such works does not indicate his or her historical role in the kingdom's religion and cult. Keeping in mind that Kuntillet ʿAjrud was probably dedicated to the goddess, and that her importance was deliberately emphasized in the inscriptions at the site, we should avoid far-reaching conclusions about Asherata's place in the Israelite and Judahite pantheon based on her presentation in these inscriptions.

In sum, it is suggested that a prominent sacred tree (or a grove) that grew nearby could explain the construction of the site of Kuntillet ʿAjrud. This conjecture solves many problems involved with the site, in particular the contrast between the unique artefacts, religious inscriptions and drawings discovered in Building A, and the absence of signs of cultic activity. The actual cultic activity took place outside the building, near the sacred tree and the altar, and the structure served as a storehouse for the sancta of the goddess and her dedications. The function of the building as a caravanserai was probably secondary, as it served to lodge the pilgrims travelling on the Darb el-Ghazza who came to visit the sacred place.

The reason for the desertion of Kuntillet ʿAjrud is unknown and various scenarios might be suggested. It is possible that something happened to the prominent tree/grove and that following its demise the site lost its attraction and was soon abandoned. However, other reasons might also be proposed and we avoid suggesting a definite answer for the circumstances in which the site was finally deserted.

Singer-Avitz (2006) suggested dating Kuntillet ʿAjrud to the late 8th century BCE

[9] Rollston (2007: 99) criticized the suggestion that the name of the goddess was Asherata, and suggested interpreting it as a case of a *tertia he* noun with pronominal suffix (*'ašerāh > 'ašerāt > 'ašerātō*). However, Rollston assumed that the biblical form of the name reflects the Judahite rendering, ignoring the fact that the inscriptions were written by North Israelite scribes. All ancient Near Eastern renderings of the goddess' name end with *-at*, and this must have been the practice in Israel, too. The form of the goddess' name in Khirbet el-Qôm may also reflect the old rendering of the name. The omission of the feminine ending *-at* is known only from the Bible and reflects an internal development within the kingdom of Judah. See Friedrich and Röllig 1970: 101 § 213.

and connecting it to the Assyrian operations in the Negev and northern Sinai. The problems involved with the dating of the site (^{14}C and pottery typology) are not our concern here (see Finkelstein and Piasetzky 2008; Freud 2008). The detailed comparison she makes between Kuntillet ʿAjrud's vessels and those of Lachish Level III and Tel Beersheba Stratum II demonstrate that the pottery of all three sites belongs to the Iron Age IIB stage. However, since the Iron Age IIB pottery covers about 150 years, from the late 9th/early 8th century to the mid-7th century, the similarity of the Kuntillet ʿAjrud pottery to that of Lachish III and Tel Beersheba II does not prove that the three strata are contemporaneous. Moreover, there is no justification for the assumption that the Assyrians were involved in any way in the construction and maintenance of Kuntillet ʿAjrud. First, it is located off the main desert-route and unsuited for supervising the passing caravans. Second, and more important, there is no example of an Assyrian initiative to construct buildings for religious purposes for their vassals; their interests in the Levant did not include fostering their subjects' religion and cult. It is better to assume that the initiative to construct the building, possibly by an Israelite king (Jeroboam II), antedated the arrival of the Assyrians in southern Palestine (see above, n. 1).[10] Unfortunately, very little is known about the 8th century history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah prior to the Assyrian conquest. The exact circumstances in which a (possibly Israelite) king constructed the building for the sancta and treasures of the goddess Asherata and her worshippers in this remote place are open to various scenarios, none of which can be verified with any degree of certainty.

APPENDIX: A SACRED GROVE OF TEREBINTHS IN NORTHERN SINAI?

The standard lexical separation of *ʾyl* and *ʾlh* as two different names for the terebinth was criticized by Williamson (2006: 149), who suggested that the plural form of *ēlāh* ('terebinth') is *ēlîm* (cf. *ʾāšērāh—ʾāšērîm*, etc.). The plural form appears in few biblical references (Isa. 1:29; 57:5; Ezek. 31:14[?]), and is also the name of a northern Sinai toponym (Exod. 15:27; 16:1; Num. 33:9–10). Elim ["(place of) terebinths"] is the second named encampment reached by the Israelites after they crossed *yam sûp* and wandered for three days in the wilderness of Shur (Exod. 15:22–27), or in the wilderness of Etham (Num. 33:8–9). We are further told that the oasis had 12 springs and 70 palms, clearly a combination of folkloristic elements of a desert area and typological numbers, and was located near the Wilderness of Sin (Exod. 16:1), or near *yam sûp* (Num. 33:11).

[10] The three military-commercial centres that Ashurnaṣirpal II, king of Assyria (883–859), established in places far from his kingdom (see Tadmor 1975: 37–38; Na'aman 1977–78: 231–232), may be compared with the construction of Kuntillet ʿAjrud by an Israelite king (possibly Jeroboam II), although the function of the latter building is entirely different from that of the Assyrian centres.

The insoluble problems involved with the identification of sites mentioned in the wandering traditions are well known and need not be discussed here. The biblical Red Sea (*yam sûp*) is identified with the Gulf of Aqabah, the Gulf of Suez and northwestern Sinai. The contrasting references reflect a 'mental map' in which these gulfs were conceived of as a single body of water. The three-day walk in the desert is a literary motif and its length could not be estimated. The descriptions of the wandering in the desert, too, are literary creations conceived by biblical author(s) who had never been there and who combined literary and folkloristic motifs with itineraries and some toponyms located in this vast area (see Davies 1979; Dozeman 2002, with earlier literature).

It goes without saying that the location of Elim cannot be established. What matters is that a group of prominent terebinth trees (*Pistacia atlantica*) did grow in northern Sinai and due to their fame were known to the biblical author(s), who wove them into his/their composition(s) of the Hebrews' wanderings in the desert (for terebinth trees [*Pistacia atlantica*] in northern Sinai and the Negev, see Fahn, Wachs and Ginzburg 1963; Liphschitz and Biger 1998: 84–86; Liphschitz 2007: 27–29, 68, 79–82, 98–99; for the "terrace of the terebinth" in a list of plots of lands dedicated to some deities, see Lemaire 2002: 149–156, Text 283; 2004: 270–273).

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