The drawings that appear under the inscription seem to depict male and female figures with overlapping or interlocking arms (with a female playing a stringed instrument off to the side). The features of these figures have been commonly associated with the Egyptian deity Bes, but some scholars have pointed out that the imagery associated with Bes was frequently appropriated by other deities. In Egypt, that imagery was used to represent Aha, Hayet, Soped, Tettetenu, Amon, Horus, Baal, and Reshef (Zevit 2001, 388). Outside of Egypt, Bes iconography seems to have been adapted as a more flexible and generic symbol for deity that commonly served apotropaic functions (Thomas 2016, 146–52).

It has become quite common to see the final *he* of *'šrth* interpreted as the third masculine singular pronominal suffix "his." Because that pronoun cannot appear attached to personal names, the argument goes, the term must be understood to refer to a cultic object (e.g., Emerton 1999; Sommer 2009, 44–49; Aḥituv, Eshel, and Meshel 2012, 130–32; cf. Stein 2019). The interpretation that predominated through the end of the twentieth century CE held that the sacred tree would have lost associations with the inactive female deity and would have been appropriated as a Yahwistic cult symbol. The inscriptions would then represent extra-biblical witnesses to the cultic objects decried in the Hebrew Bible. This would be an attractive example of a cult object channeling divine agency, but the situation is not so cut and dry. As Richard Hess has demonstrated, the epigraphic corpus consistently shows final *he* for the spelling of the deity's name (Hess 1996; Thomas 2017). The Hebrew Bible's spelling without final *he* is absent from the inscriptions, suggesting it may not be as simple as a pronoun.

A more helpful explanation may be that of Josef Tropper (2017), who sought to reconstruct the development of the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, through Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid period onomastic data. He notes that the divine name consistently ended in *-a* when it occurred in the final position of a name, but with *-ú* when occurring medially. This final *-a* he ultimately interprets as an absolutive case ending that was indicated in Hebrew with *he* functioning as a *mater lectionis*. This accounts for the biblical YHWH, and when this case ending is applied to *'šrh*, the existing *he* converts to *taw*, resulting in *'šrth*. If Tropper's reconstruction is accurate, all three inscriptions could refer to the female deity, whose worship was retained at least into the eighth century BCE in Judah.

CONCLUSION

This brief interrogation shows that the theoretical framework of communicable divine agency productively situates the material remains of ancient Israel and Judah within the broader conceptual and practical matrix of divine presencing through cultic media. While reflective reasoning regarding the nature and function