

RBL 11/2002

**Merlo, Paolo**

***La dea Ašratum - Atīratu - Ašera: Un contributo alla storia della religione semitica del Nord***

Rome: Pontificia Università Lateranense, 1998. Pp. 285, Paperback, Lire 25,000, ISBN 8846500318.

Tawny L. Holm  
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
Indiana, PA 15705

This volume addresses the much-discussed goddess Asherah, this time with the intended goal of developing a diachronical typology of the deity by doing a comprehensive survey of the second- and first-millennium B.C.E. Near Eastern sources. After a brief introduction the volume comprises four chapters, each covering a distinct period and region under investigation: chapter 1 treats attestations of the goddess in second-millennium B.C.E. Mesopotamia; chapter 2 surveys attestations of the same period from Ugarit and Ras Ibn Hani in four categories of texts: divine lists, ritual and religious texts, mythological texts, and personal names; chapter 3 deals with the scarce Mesopotamian attestations in the first millennium; and finally, chapter 4 discusses Palestinian attestations of the first millennium, that is, those from the Bible, Qumran, and epigraphic texts. Finally, after a short conclusion there is an appendix discussing the problem of Asherah and iconography, followed by a bibliography and a succinct but helpful table reviewing the forms of the goddess' name in the various texts discussed.

Merlo's work thus differs from previous studies by investigating some material previously not connected to the discussion (the Ugaritic personal names and Qumran texts); by keeping distinct the historical and geographical contexts of the sources; and by not privileging the Ugaritic literary sources which have often been the focus. Still, this book is similar in compass to that of S. A. Wiggins (*A Reassessment of 'Asherah': A Study According to the Textual Sources of the First Two Millennia B.C.E.* [AOAT 235; Neukirchen: Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1993]), with the exception that Merlo does not include any South Arabian sources. In turn, both Merlo's and Wiggins' studies have a much wider scope with respect to the number of texts considered than a few others on the same subject published recently: Tilde Binger's *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel and the Old Testament* (JSOT Sup 232; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Judith Hadley's *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Christian Frevel's *Aschera und der Ausschliesslichkeitsanspruch YHWHs*, I-II (BBB 94; Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum, 1995).

Merlo's first chapter deals with the sources from second-millennium Mesopotamia, primarily in the Akkadian language, but also includes one Sumerian dedicatory inscription (RIME 4.3.6.2001) and the Hittite myth of Elkunirsa. Merlo's findings for Ašratum in the Old Babylonian texts is that she was a marginal goddess without a distinct personality but known as the consort of Amurru, the eponymous deity of Amurru. In the Late Bronze texts she is again the consort of the principal deity, and was perhaps also an ethnic or national goddess, since her name appears as a theophoric element in the name of the Amurru chief, Abdi-Ashirta.

When Merlo moves on to the Ugaritic and Ras Ibn Hani texts in ch. 2, he notes that past studies have tended to utilize mostly those texts with a literary character, especially myths and epics. Merlo, however, considers four categories of texts. In the divine lists, the goddess is the consort of the principal god, Ilu/El. In the ritual and religious texts, the same is true, and in addition 'Aṭīratu is also associated with the royal palace and king, receiving daily offerings along with other gods of royal character, and is said to be the mother of the gods (but not mother goddess, with the associated connotations of fertility; in this Merlo agrees with Wiggins p. 71). In the mythological texts, she is the consort of Ilu in the Ba`lu cycle, is the creatrix of the gods, and has a maternal character limited to two specific fields: to be mother of the gods, and to nourish with her milk the heir to the throne. Merlo also finds here some vague associations with the domestic role of women in general and some indications that she is an adversary of humankind. Finally, Merlo considers the appearance of the goddess' name as a theophoric element in the personal name "Abid-Ashirta" in two texts at Ugarit (RS 16.1555 and RS 17.61). Merlo suggests that while this does not tell us much about the character of the deity, it may indicate that she was perhaps venerated in the popular religion of Ugarit. As Dennis Pardee has noted in his review of Merlo's book, however, so few appearances in what amounts to thousands of names from Ugarit may actually mean something to the contrary (*JNES* 61 [2002]:117-123).

In chapter 3, Merlo considers the first-millennium Mesopotamian sources (mostly either undated or else quite late) that mention a temple to Ašratum in Babylon. Once again, she is associated with the god Amurru, and was also probably a minor goddess or the object of a cult in the city of Babylon (pp. 120-121).

In chapter 4, Merlo discusses the Palestinian attestations of Asherah in the first millennium B.C.E., including epigraphic sources, the Bible and, for the first time, the Qumran texts which mention 'šrh (the Temple Scroll and a Cave 4 fragment of *Jubilees*).

While one might disagree with how Merlo classifies the relevant biblical texts (only four are determined pre-deuteronomistic: Dt 16:21; 1 Kgs 15:13a; 2 Kgs 21:7a; and 2 Kgs 23:6), his findings are similar to other recent scholars: the Bible gives little information in reference to Asherah or her cult. What little emerges is that her cult seems to have had a certain role in the court of Judah in the ninth-seventh centuries, and was practiced in the temple of Jerusalem in connection with the cult of Yhwh. After this point the term "asherah" was used perjoratively until the end of the second century B.C.E., as the Hebrew fragments at Qumran testify; at Qumran the expression "to make asherah" is stereotypical language to mean idolatrous worship.

As for the epigraphic attestations, Merlo stands with those who take the disputed references to 'šrth at Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom to indicate "his Asherah," rather than "his asherah (the cultic symbol)," based on the same usage of personal names plus pronominal suffix in Ugaritic and Eblaitic sources which indicate a divine couple (pp. 195-197).

To Merlo's list of first millennium texts mentioning Asherah (pp. 195-217), one might add Papyrus Amherst 63 - a collection of Aramaic texts written in Demotic script from either the fourth or second century B.C.E., and perhaps originally from southern Lebanon - which according to I. Kottsieper makes a reference to El and Asherah as a divine couple ("El - ferner oder naher Gott?," pp.25-74 in *Religion und Gesellschaft: Studien zu ihrer Wechsel-beziehung in den Kulturen des Antiken Vorderen Orients*, ed. by R. Albertz, [AOAT 248; Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 1997]). On the other hand, the seventh-century Tel Mique inscription with 'šrt is deemed by Merlo to be not a reference to the goddess, but the Phoenician word for shrine (p. 215), and one assumes he would think the same for the Ma'sub and Akko texts with that term (*pace* M. Dijkstra, "I Have Blessed You by YHWH of Samaria and His Asherah," pp. 40ff. in *Only One God?: Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah* by Bob Becking et al. [London: Sheffield, 2001]).

In the appendix (pp. 225-238), Merlo deals with the iconography that has been interpreted as belonging to Asherah, namely five different kinds of plaques and figurines. Unlike Judith Hadley's optimistic overview of these, Merlo concludes pessimistically that they have often been erroneously interpreted and that a specific iconography of Asherah still eludes us (p. 238).