Linguistic Evidence for a Phoenician Pillar Cult in Crete

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In a review article in this journal Gary A. Rendsburg, after a long and, at first sight, thorough discussion of the author's interpretation of Minoan (*y*)*a-sa-sa-ra-me* as "Oh Asherah",[1] gave the following verdict:

> In sum, Best's interpretation of *ya-sa-sa-ra-me/a-sa-sa-ra-me*, which is for him a most critical word, is a total failure. Instead, we should accept Gordon's analysis of *ya-sa-sa-ra-mV* as "votive offering" based on its parsing as a nominal form of the Š-stem of *šlm*, "render, deliver" (EML pars. 122, 160, 163). The variant form with *a-* would be another example of the interchange of *ya-* and *a-* in Minoan Linear A texts (EML par. 148).[2]

As a Semitist, Rendsburg had nearly convinced the author because he had given irrefutable proof with many good examples that even in the *status absolutus* the goddess' name should always be followed in Linear A by the singular feminine ending *-atu*.[3]

However, Rendsburg's statement "*ya-sa-sa-ra-me/a-sa-sa-ra-me, which is for him a most critical word*" (added italics) seemed rather strange to the author because for him the word, a mere interjection, never could be a most critical one in his interpretation of the text as a whole. Four years later, the author came across *The Paradise Papers* by Merlin Stone and read with great interest that the Phoenician goddess Asherah was worshipped as a pillar and designated in Hebrew with a singular noun *ʾašērāh*, which, on the basis of plural *ʾašērîm*, might be masculine; meaning "pillar," he(?) was the main opponent of Yahweh.[4] Perhaps Rendsburg had not considered this possibility of a masculine noun for *a-sa-sa-ra* because the form (*y*)*a-sa-sa-ra-¡me* is only for him a most critical word. The author's interpretation of the most repeated sentence in which (*y*)*a-sa-sa-ra-me* figures is completely accepted without a single exception by Rendsburg: (*y*)*a-ta-nū-tī*—"I have given"—*wa/u-ya*—"and"—(*y*)*a-di*—"my hand"—*ḥi-ṭe-te*—"has made an expiatory offering."[5] He tries to discredit the author's example of the unanimously accepted use of *-y* (= *-ya* in Linear A) to

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1. J. G. P. Best, "*YAŠŠARAM!*," *Talanta* 13, Supplementum Epigraphicum Mediterraneum (1982), 17–21.

2. Gary A. Rendsburg, "On Jan Best's 'Decipherment' of Minoan Linear A," *JANES* 14 (1982), 85.

3. Rendsburg, 83–84.

4. Merlin Stone, *The Paradise Papers* (London, 1976), passim. Hebrew *ʾašērāh* never occurs in the singular in the masculine form; it is only attested with a masculine plural suffix, while the feminine form appears in both the singular and plural. The Hebrew dictionary of E. Ben-Yehuda (1:433) cites a Phoenician goddess *Assera*. This does not solve the problem of the missing *t* in the feminine suffix, but it does help to resolve the problem of *s* for Hebrew *š* in Minoan.

5. Rendsburg, 82–83.

accentuate words of *all* categories in Ugaritic (*uky:* "*ignotum per ignotius*") because Cyrus Gordon does not mention it in his *Ugaritic Textbook* ("in truth its existence is not fully accepted in Ugaritological circles").[6] He would like some corroborating evidence that Semitic *ḫ* can appear in Linear A script as *k-*. Although it is not recognized by Gordon, the word *pu-ko* can be read with Linear A syllabic values as *pū-ḫu,* "exchange," in the heading of the Linear A tablet HT 31.[7] These are only minor points, and the sentence as such is accepted by Rendsburg.

When the author gave his interpretation of the formula, he had good reason to compare *all* Linear A terms with their Ugaritic counterparts. The Ugaritic texts (ca. 1400–ca. 1200 B.C.E.) are closest in time to the texts containing the religious Linear A formula in question (ca. 1600 B.C.E.).[8] Rendsburg would seem to have replaced all Ugaritic terms by *Hebrew* equivalents, with the only exception of *ḫi-ṭe-te,* for which the author had already adduced the Hebrew parallel *ḥaṭṭāt* as *his* only exception. By doing this he would corroborate the interpretation of the Linear A verbal form and Gordon's Hebrew parallels for Ugaritic *ytn/'tn* and Ugaritic *w* and *u* by their *Hebrew* equivalents ("if Best could control all of Semitic or even all of Northwest Semitic, *he certainly would have cited Hebrew*"; italics added), Ugaritic *yd* and **d* by their *Hebrew* equivalents ("Hebrew, perhaps, *affords a closer parallel with the regular form* yād *and the variant form* ʾād *in Ps. 68:19*; italics added).[9]

The reason that Rendsburg needed two pages out of eight to eliminate the author's interpretation of one single word, (*y*)*a-sa-sa-ra-me,* as "Oh Asherah" without considering the alternative in *Hebrew* for the interpretation of a *masculine* noun *a-sa-sa-ra* as "pillar, one may also learn from *The Paradise Papers*: a *Hebrew* translation of a religious Linear A formula is incompatible with a *Phoenician* pillar cult.

To avoid any misunderstandings, it should be explicitly stated that most members of the Semitist school of Cyrus H. Gordon in their Linear A contributions mention equivalents of Linear A terms from Ugaritic, Aramaic, Phoenician, Hebrew, Akkadian, etc.[10] By contrast Rendsburg completely replaces the Old Phoenician dedication-formula presented by the author for the first time with Hebrew terminology. In order to set the matter right, it has seemed necessary to the author to present all pictographic and Linear A inscriptions with the words *a-sa-sa-ra-me/ma* and (*y*)*a-sa-sa-ra-me* respectively to demonstrate that Gordon's interpretation of this word is simply impossible for epigraphical reasons and that for these same reasons any solution more in agreement with the factual evidence is to be preferred.

Rendsburg claims "that only in passing does the author refer to the derivation of Linear A and B from the earlier Minoan hieroglyphics. Best seems to lose sight of this."[11] This is not the case, and it does damage to Gordon's, and consequently

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6. Rendsburg, 83 with n. 26.

7. Rendsburg, 83; Jan Best, "The Language of Tablet HT 31," *UF* (forthcoming).

8. Best, "*YAŠŠARAM*," 23, 29.

9. Rendsburg, 82, 83, n. 27.
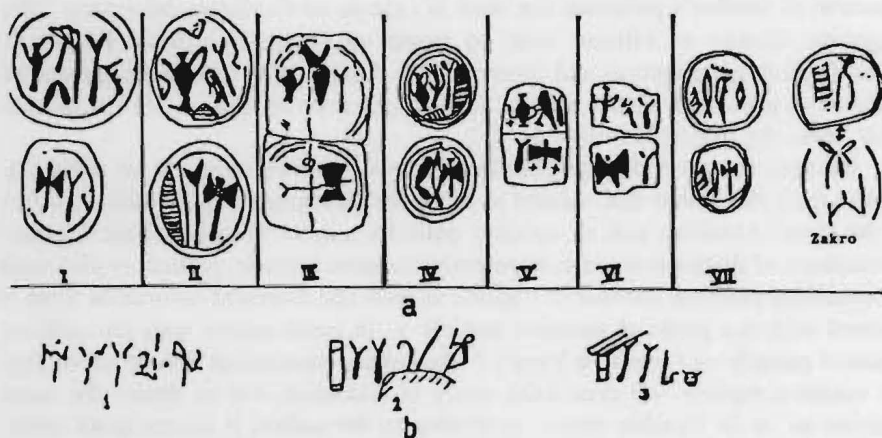
10. Best, "Language of Tablet HT 31," passim.

Figure 1. "Libation formula": a. Pictographic; b. Linear A.

Rendsburg's, interpretation of *ya-sa-sa-ra-mV* as a nominal form of the Š-stem of *šlm* "render, deliver." On the contrary, from the very start it had seemed very problematical to the author that whereas three ivory seals from EM III/MM Ia graves with the short pictographic formula ("Minoan hieroglyphics") *a-sa-sa-ra-me* showed no dividing signs underneath and between *a-sa-sa-ra* and *me*, three other ones certainly did. In one case the syllable *ma* had even been set apart on the third side of a seal where it followed upon the rhomboid dividing sign behind *-ra* on the second side (Fig. 1).[12] Nor had this same divergency been overlooked by the expert in Linear A epigraphy, Piero Meriggi, in those texts in which (*y*)*a-sa-sa-ra-me* does alternate with (*y*)*a-sa-sa-ra.me* (in the last case Meriggi writes *Asasara-me*).[13] One thing is clear: in the Pictographic and Linear A scripts *me* is sometimes suffixed to the stem *a-sa-sa-ra*; but it stands quite as often completely separated from it with the help of special dividing signs in the Pictographic and dividing points in the Linear A scripts. On one pictographically inscribed seal the attested *ma* shows its maximum independence from *a-sa-sa-ra* by standing on another side especially reserved for it.

A sophisticated interpretation based on the Semitic stem *šlm*, in which (*y*)*a-sa-/sa-la-mV* must be read for (*y*)*a-sa-/sa-ra-mV* (which is possible in Linear A) contradicts the facts. The epigraphical evidence proves that from the very origin of Cretan writing the pair *ma/me* forms no part of the stem *a-sa-sa-ra*, not to speak of the fantastic appropriation of *y*—which never occurs in the pictographic inscriptions—to the stem *a-sa-sa-ra*.

On pictographic seals found in graves one would at the outset expect a religious meaning of *a-sa-sa-ra-ma/me*. Yet, in another review article on the author's

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11. Rendsburg, 81.

12. Best, "*YAŠŠARAM*," 27–28.

13. Piero Meriggi, "Kleine Beiträge zum Minoischen—2. Minoische Widmungsformeln," *Kadmos* 13 (1974), 86, 88.

rejection of Gordon's proposed *šlm* stem in (*y*)*a-sa-sa-ra.ma/me*, he writes: "The linguistic identity of Minoan must be based on linguistic criteria. Historical, archeological, geographical and other factors, though often of interest, cannot be adduced as primary evidence for the Semitic character of Minoan."[14] Let us consider, then, the linguistic evidence.

Because the short pictographic inscriptions on ivory seals are so early (ca. 2000 B.C.E.), the author first wanted to relate the pictographic half-suffixes *ma/me* to the (rare) Akkadian pair of vocative particles *ma/me*. Happily in the Ugaritic invocations of deities this same, apparently common Semitic, particle is also used in word-final position and that in Ugaritic at least one extended invocation form is attested with the prefixed vocative particle *y-* in combination with the suffixed vocative particle *-m* (*yymm* "o Yam").[15] Rendsburg must admit *nolens volens* that the vocative particle *-me* does exist rarely in Akkadian, but he denies the same function to *-m* in Ugaritic where, according to the author, it occurs quite often. Rendsburg writes: "Some scholars have argued for its presence in Ugaritic, but the bulk of scholarship denies a vocative *-m* in Ugaritic. *Some Ugaritic nouns in the vocative may take enclitic* -m, *but the* -m *itself is not a sign of the vocative*" (italics added).[16] "The bulk of scholarship" appears to consist of Cyrus H. Gordon (Rendsburg: "There is no entry for vocative *-m* in *UT*"), D. A. Robertson (discussing early *Hebrew* poetry), his teacher M. H. Pope, and, presumably, Rendsburg himself.[17] In denying the Ugaritic vocative particle *-m* Rendsburg further writes: "Two of his (*i.e.*, A. D. Singer's) three sure examples have vocative *y-* prefixed to the noun and *-m* suffixed to it. *Since a double vocative would be quite extraordinary, this also should tell us that* -m *is merely enclitic and not vocative*" (italics added).[18]

One of the important linguistic consequences of the decipherment of Pictographic and Linear A is that *a-sa-sa-ra-ma/me* (ca. 2000) provides corroboration for a *primary* vocative particle *ma/me* in, in diachronic order, Akkadian, Pictographic, Linear A, and, as *-m*, in Ugaritic; and that *ya-sa-sa-ra-*ʲ*ma/me* (ca. 1600) attests to a *secondary* vocative particle *ya-* and *y-* in Linear A and Ugaritic, respectively. There is one Linear A inscription that can put an end to all doubts on Ugaritic *-m* and the combination of both vocative particles *y-* and *-m* at one and the same time: *ya-sa-sa-ra-ma-na*.[19] If Linear A *-ma* would have been merely an enclitic, its place would be after and not before *-na*. However, together with initial *y-*, taken as a vocative particle, it stands in its right place at the close of and in functional combination with the name of the deity invoked, followed by the first plural possessive pronoun suffixed to the whole combination: *ya-sa-sa-ra-ma-na*, "Oh our Pillar." Rendsburg says this of the vocative prefix *y-*: "While it is true

14. Cyrus H. Gordon, "Reflections on the Decipherment of Minoan," *Orientalia* 53 (1984), 453.

15. Kjell Aartun, *Die Partikeln des Ugaritischen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1974), 1:37–39.

16. Rendsburg, 84–85 with n. 39.

17. Rendsburg, 84, n. 39. D. A. Robertson, *Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry* (Missoula, 1972), 92; M. H. Pope, *JCS* 5 (1951), 123–28; Rendsburg, 84, n. 39.

18. Rendsburg, 84, n. 39.

19. W. C. Brice, *Inscriptions in the Minoan Linear Script of Class A* (*ILA*) (Oxford, 1961), plates XIXa/XIX, I 8a–b.

that Ugaritic does use this particle, since *a-sa-sa-ra-* cannot be "Asherah," the argument for a preceding vocative falls."[20] In my view, the sense "pillar" is highly plausible, and the presence of the vocative prefix confirms that view.

The only possible remaining stem from an epigraphical point of view, *a-sa-sa-ra*, is in another sense a most critical word indeed. In syllabic scripts like Linear A and B, based upon syllables of the consonant-vowel (CV) type, the scribe was always obliged to write superfluous vowels, which formed no part of the stem of the word he wanted to express in writing.[21] Now the first and the last syllables in *a-sa-sa-ra*, *a-* being an open initial vowel and *-ra* being an ending, can on the analogy of other examples in the Linear A and B scripts be ruled out from containing superfluous vowels. Superfluous vowels mostly occur with the same vocalic values as the functional vowels as in *ti-ri-po-da = tripoda* (Linear B) and in *ka-lu-pe* (= *ka-ru-pu*) = *karpu* (Linear A).[22] The author's understanding of this device led him to the reading *a-sa-sa-ra = assara*. It must be stressed that if the scribe wanted to write the double consonant *s* he had no other choice than to do so in the way just demonstrated. This refutes the position of Rendsburg that "for Best's interpretation to be correct, he would need to find an example in all of ancient Near Eastern writing where a single consonant is written doubly in a syllabic orthography (cuneiform, hieroglyphic, etc.), but one does not exist."[23]

Of course the author is conscious of the fact that in later Hebrew *ʾăšērāʰ* is written with a single sibilant, but that is not the point at all. The point is whether or not ca. 2000 B.C.E. a masculine noun could have been written with a double sibilant. Especially with an aleph at the beginning of a word the phenomenon of simultaneous double consonantism, where one would expect the regular singular consonant in pure Akkadian, is most strongly attested in the Akkadian texts from the Northwest Semitic area.[24] This is comparable to *a-sa-sa-ra = assara* in the Cretan pictographic script. For this reason, the author had adduced the parallel *aš-šur* also written as *a-šur*; Semitists might investigate whether the latter writing device, viewed in a diachronic perspective, was in fact not just a *later* development in Assyrian.

Rendsburg further states that "Asherah" is *presumably* (my italics—J.B.) related with the common noun *aširtu*, "sanctuary, offering."[25] The fact is that both religious names, Aššur and Ašerah, have unknown *linguistic* relations. The proposed connection of *ʾăšērāʰ/ʾašērīm*, "pillar(s)," with *aširtu* is highly uncertain. We may only maintain that Aššur and Ašerah are Semitic names of deities.

In the representational art of Crete a certain goddess who is worshipped is depicted either in the shape of a woman crowned by a double axe or in the shape of a pillar crowned by a double axe (Fig. 2). Nanny de Vries has shown sufficient

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20. Rendsburg, 85.
21. Best, "Language of Tablet HT 31."
22. Ibid.
23. Rendsburg, 84.
24. Cf. Guy Jucquois, *Phonétique comparée des dialectes moyen-babyloniens du nord et de l'ouest* (Louvain, 1966), 164.
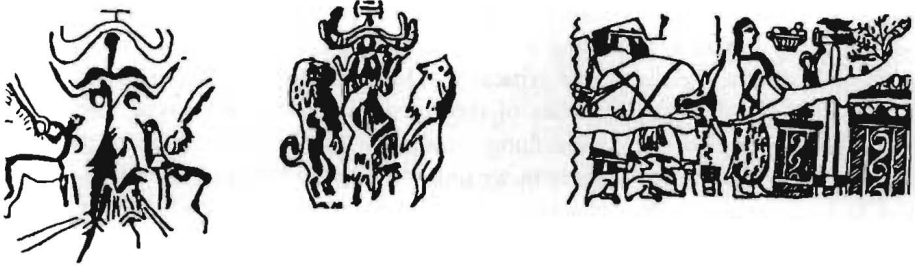25. Rendsburg, 84, n. 36. Cf. for double consonantism behind an aleph, as in *assara*, Jucquois, 164.
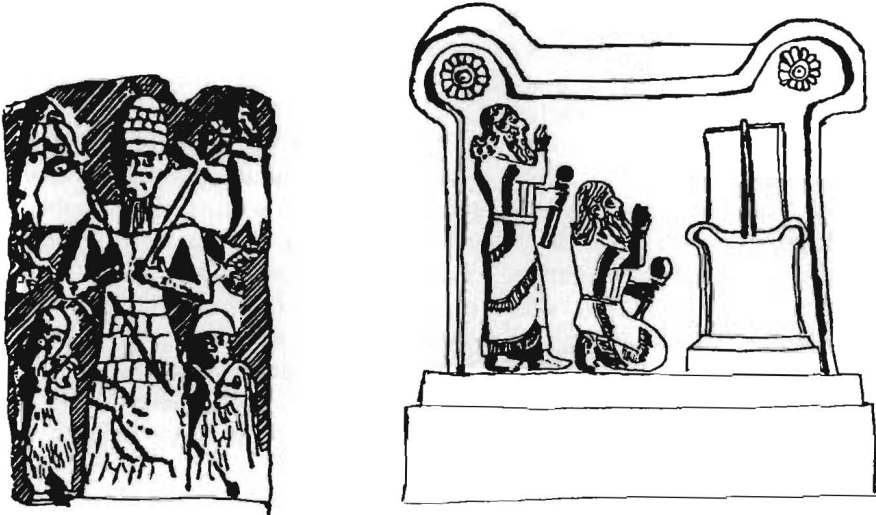
Figure 2. Goddess and pillar.

Figure 3. God and pillar.

illustrations of the close resemblances between the lay-outs of the temples with
their double axes, snake-vases, and offering-tables in Canaan and Crete to see with
one's own eyes the relations in religious matters between Canaan and Crete.[26] The
Cretan evidence furnishes invaluable information as to what a pillar of Ašerah in
Canaan would have looked like. In Crete the pillar crowned by the double axe is
the symbol *par excellence* of the goddess throughout the period during which the

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26. Nanny M. W. de Vries, in J. G. P. Best and N. M. W. de Vries, eds., "The Central Sanctuaries
at Mallia and Megiddo," *Interaction and Acculturation in the Mediterranean* I—*Proceedings of the
Second International Congress of Mediterranean Pre- and Protohistory* (Amsterdam, 1980), 125–34.

Pictographic and Linear A scripts were in use on the island (ca. 2000–ca. 1400 B.C.E.). There is also a relief from Assur on which the king worships his god in the shape of a pillar without a double axe (Fig. 3). In both cases the deity *is* the pillar. Two facts confirm the author's interpretation of the pillars and their inscriptions. 1. The double axe, which crowns all Cretan pillars, is functional in being the constant *pars pro toto* of both pillar and goddess (see Fig. 2). 2. On one seal with the pictographic inscription *a-sa-sa-ra-me* the initial double axe is set apart between two crosses to accentuate its religious importance (see Fig. 1, V).

Despite Rendsburg's dismissal of such evidence, others have found it compelling:

> Beachtenswert ist schliesslich die Herleitung des a-Zeichens aus der Doppelaxt als Symbol der Göttin "a-sa-sa-ra(-me)", die der durch das Säulenmal symbolisierten historischen Göttin Asherat entspricht. Freilich bleibt hier zu überlegen, ob der Lautwert -*a*- nicht in akrophoner Weise eher vom Appellativ des Symbols als dem der Gottheit abgeleitet sein könnte. Freilich ist zumindest theoretisch auch der umgekehrte Vorgang durchaus denkbar, nämlich der einer Wiedergabe des Götternamens durch das Attribut bzw. Kultsymbol der Gottheit.[27]

And in regard to the complete dedication-formula, this well-known specialist in the field of the Cretan pillar cult writes "Vom Semitischen her ist, wie mir ein kompetenter Fachkollege bestätigt, diese Lesung grammatikalisch korrekt."[28] As such, it forms *linguistic* evidence for a Phoenician pillar cult in Crete.

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27. Stefan Hiller, *AfO* 32 (1985), 126.
28. Loc. cit.