

# *The* GODDESS *and the* WARRIOR

*The Naked Goddess and Mistress of Animals  
in Early Greek Religion*

NANNÓ MARINATOS



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Animals in early Greek religion

*Nannó Marinatos*



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FOR ANGELIKI LEBESSI

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## PREFACE

What prompted this study is the seeming paradox that female nudity in the Near East is not only an indication of fertility but also a sign of sexuality and danger. This conclusion was reached thanks to iconography which is the primary vehicle for interpreting religion in this book.

I gained a great deal of inspiration from Othmar Keel's work which eloquently stresses the autonomy of images *vis-à-vis* the texts. He also organized an entire series, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis*, which deals with Near Eastern religion and images.

I am grateful to Walter Burkert for opening up paths of inquiry which led to the relationship between myth and ritual in the Near East. He has taken the trouble to read the manuscript and suggested various improvements. I must also thank Mario Torelli for inspiring articles and discussions in the summers of 1997 and 1998 on liminality and rites of passage.

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The errors remain mine.

Nannó Marinatos

# ABBREVIATIONS

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| AJA             | <i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>   |
| AnnArchStorAnt  | <i>Annali di Archeologia e Storia Antica</i>   |
| AntKunst        | <i>Antike Kunst</i>  |
| ArchEphem       | <i>Archaeologische Ephemeris</i>   |
| ArchDelt        | <i>Archaiologikon Deltion</i>  |
| AsAtene         | <i>Annuario della Scuola Archeologica di Atene e delle Missioni Italiani in Oriente</i>  |
| BCH             | <i>Bulletin de correspondance hellénique</i>   |
| Bib. Helv. Rom. | <i>Biblioteka Helvetika Romana</i>   |
| BSA             | <i>Annual of the British School at Athens</i>  |
| CMS             | <i>Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel</i> , ed. F.Matz and I.Pini, Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz, 1964– |
| Evans, PM I–IV  | Evans, A.J., <i>The Palace of Minos at Knossos, I–IV</i> , London, 1921–36   |
| JHS             | <i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>   |
| JNES            | <i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>   |
| LBA             | Late Bronze Age  |
| LIMC            | <i>Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae</i> , Zurich and Munich, 1974–   |

# THE NAKED GODDESS AND MISTRESS OF ANIMALS IN THE NEAR EAST AND GREECE

## **The naked goddess and the goddess who lifts her skirt**

That the naked figures in Greece of the Orientalizing period are of Near Eastern derivation has been universally acknowledged.<sup>1</sup> What might be worth re-thinking is the meaning of their nudity. Does it always denote fertility, which is the most common assumption, or can their nudity also have another meaning? 'A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become nude', says A.Stewart.<sup>2</sup> Our female figures are nude in this sense because their nudity is charged with sexuality.

Examining the narrative context of the nude figures on Near Eastern seals may be rewarding. On cylinders or their imprints, the naked females do not stand alone but are associated with other figures, animals and symbols. We thus get a visual context which is missing when we study solitary clay or bronze figurines of similar appearance.

We shall consider the females on cylinder seals whose main characteristic is nudity. Some of the naked figures are inactive, others draw their dress to the side in order to reveal their pubic triangle. They appear most frequently in Syrian glyptic, although there are examples also from the Babylonian, Capadocian and Anatolian regions.<sup>3</sup> It must be admitted that regional and chronological variation affects the interpretation of glyptic scenes as does also context.<sup>4</sup> Further, not all naked females are unanimously accepted as goddesses, but good arguments have been made to the effect that they are.<sup>5</sup> Despite these limitations, the examples which will be discussed fall into a pattern in which sexuality is coupled with power.

One frequent assumption must be challenged. If the naked figures are goddesses, they are for the most part not major figures of the pantheon, Ishtar or Anat. On seals we often meet with a minor naked goddess, whose name we do not even know, but who seems to be linked with sorcery and magic, and who has the role of an intermediary.<sup>6</sup> She makes contact between the worshipper and his gods possible.

We shall start with an Old Babylonian seal dating to the second millennium BC (Figure 1.1), where the naked goddess appears together with a man of equal size, a ruler perhaps.<sup>7</sup> She has her hands folded on her chest, a gesture which may



Figure 1.1 Second millennium BC Old Babylonian cylinder seal

Source: Winter (1983) figure 102

suggest passivity. To the left is a guilloche pattern which divides the field in two registers. Above are kneeling men with spears (warriors), below two fierce winged griffin-demons and a suckling goat. The symbols juxtapose two worlds: on the one hand fecundity and motherhood, warriors and fierce demons on the other.<sup>8</sup> One might argue that the warrior symbols symbolize the male god, the suckling goat the naked goddess. As we shall see further on, however, the goddess can also be associated with motifs of danger. Another point worth considering is that men, rather than women, are associated with the nude goddess.

Another example, dating to the early second millennium BC (Figure 1.2), shows a naked, frontally depicted goddess of size equal to the god (or ruler) who touches her. To the left a monkey worships her which indicates her divine status. Further yet to the left are three figures who, to judge by their gestures, may be worshippers. The two principal figures are involved in an interaction of a clearly erotic nature.<sup>9</sup> Again the emphasis is on sexuality, rather than fertility.

On an Old Babylonian provincial cylinder of the same date as the previous example (Figure 1.3), another pattern is evident. The naked figure stands on a podium, her hands are below her breasts, as on figurines (see Figure 1.22). To her left are two contesting bull-men one of whom has an erect phallus, a clear reference to sexual arousal. To the right of the goddess, a male god stands on a bull. He may be a weather-god, her partner. The podium may well reflect the actual cult practice of statues or statuettes placed on bases.<sup>10</sup> Sexual union between the god and naked goddess is implied on this seal also; there is no evidence of fertility.

On one more second millennium BC Babylonian cylinder (Figure 1.4), the naked goddess stands on a podium worshipped by a monkey. One difference from the previous examples is that she is clearly subsidiary to two major figures, most likely gods, who are facing each other. An astral symbol features between the two gods. To the right is a stylized palm tree.<sup>11</sup> Because the naked goddess is not the focus of the scene, she is not herself involved in a sexual encounter. Rather she acts as a sign for sexuality; she is a magical image, a function which she also has when found on pendant amulets to be discussed on page 13. Despite her



Figure 1.2 Second millennium BC provincial

Babylonian cylinder seal

Source: Winter (1983) figure 81



Figure 1.3 Second millennium BC Old Babylonian cylinder seal

Source: Winter (1983) figure 85

marginality it cannot be doubted that the naked figure is a goddess because she stands on a podium. In addition, she is occasionally worshipped by monkeys (Figures 1.2, 1.4).<sup>12</sup> However it should be stressed that her small size reveals a low rank in the divine hierarchy.

On two more Old Syrian cylinders of the second millennium BC (Figures 1.5, 1.6), the naked goddess stands passively between two figures. On Figure 1.5, a deity with a tall hat stands next to a stylized palm and holds a cup as if to receive a libation; a monkey worships to the right. Next is the naked goddess facing the opposite direction. Her attitude is passive. Behind the naked goddess is a worshipper. Thus, the function of the naked figure here is that of an intermediary.<sup>13</sup> On Figure 1.6 the naked goddess appears twice. To the left she stands on top of a kneeling man flanked by lions while she herself is flanked by sphinxes. To the right she appears between two men with tall hats. Is the duplication due to



Figure 1.4 Second millennium BC Old Babylonian cylinder seal

Source: Winter (1983) figure 95

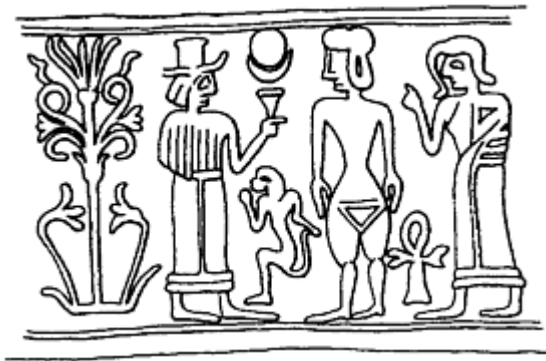


Figure 1.5 Second millennium BC Old Syrian cylinder seal

Source: Winter (1983) figure 130

symmetry, or is it magical reinforcement?<sup>14</sup> At any rate she is powerful, dominating and unambiguously associated with men.

A small naked goddess with folded arms appears on a Kassite seal of the second millennium (Figure. 1.7) where she mediates between a god and a suppliant (king?); below her are goat heads; above her is a griffin. The motifs are references to power (griffin) and nature (goats).<sup>15</sup>

In short, the main role of the nude figure has been established as that of a sexual female who is sometimes an intermediary between major gods and humans. In all cases that we have seen, she is associated with men, not women. Further, she has attributes which link her with nature which means that she cannot be completely detached from the concept of fertility/nature goddess. Goats, fish and birds designate the different realms of the natural world. We shall meet with similar features in the mythological persona of Greek Circe (Chapter Two).





Figure 1.6 Second millennium BC Old Syrian cylinder seal

Source: Winter (1983) figure 131



Figure 1.7 Second millennium BC Kassite cylinder seal

Source: Winter (1983) figure 139

A second iconographical type of a sexual female divinity will be examined next: the figure who reveals her genitals. She is not passive, and is never fully naked. This means that sexuality is even more pronounced since the goddess reveals her genitals by her own initiative.<sup>16</sup> An (often seated) male normally receives her attentions. He may be a ruler or a king; the distinction is not always easy to make and sometimes both a god and a ruler are present.<sup>17</sup> This type of representation is mostly found in Syria.<sup>18</sup>

In many cases the goddess who lifts her skirt stands on a bull, which shows her divine nature and which also may represent the attribute of her male divine partner (compare with Figure 1.3). The bull also indicates her own dominance over the animal world. On an Old Syrian seal (Figure 1.8), the partner is a young war god, and the goddess stands on his sacred animal. In her hands, the goddess holds



Figure 1.8 Second millennium BC Old Syrian cylinder seal

Source: Winter (1983) figure 269



Figure 1.9 Second millennium BC Old Syrian cylinder seal

Source: Winter (1983) figure 270

something like a rope which has been plausibly interpreted as an abbreviation of her skirt. The skirt is pulled open.<sup>19</sup> On his part, the god stands on two abbreviated mountains and holds insignia of power in each hand: a mace, an aggressive weapon, and a snake coupled with a plant. The plant is probably an erotic symbol, but the snake is an enemy overcome.<sup>20</sup> A hawk with the Egyptian crown to the right may be a symbol of power. Behind the bird is another figure (goddess with a long garment and a horn crown?) with raised hands. Two small figures with slightly bent heads above the guilloche are worshippers. A roaring lion at the right edge of the scene, a symbol of power is also worthy of note. This seal presents a whole array of images alluding to sexuality and power. There is no question here that the goddess who opens her skirt is the focus of the scene and that union with her partner is implied.

Two more Old Syrian cylinders (Figures 1.9, 1.10) show the goddess on a bull encountering the war god.<sup>21</sup> In Figure 1.9, the god again stands on the two abbreviated mountains in a attitude of aggressive display of the weapons which he holds in each of his hands. In Figure 1.10 the bearded god faces the naked female who opens her skirt. A sacred marriage is implied.



Figure 1.10 Second millennium BC Old Syrian cylinder seal

Source: Winter (1983) figure 271



Figure 1.11 Second millennium BC Old Syrian cylinder seal

Source: Winter (1983) figure 281

The role of the goddess in these scenes is to animate and sexually arouse the war god. Note that the human worshippers are men in both the above examples.

On other occasions, the goddess pulls her skirt aside for a seated man, as on an Old Syrian cylinder (Figure 1.11). The man has no divine attributes and can plausibly be interpreted as a ruler, perhaps a deified dead ruler; an exact interpretation is difficult. Another male follows the goddess, who is most likely the owner of the seal.<sup>22</sup> He is the worshipper on whose behalf the goddess intercedes by lifting her skirt. Thus, the goddess who reveals her genitals can also be an intermediary and a 'magical image'. It is as though her sexuality would mediate between the enthroned figure and the worshipper. The side motifs, a flying bird and a fish, symbolize the realms of air and sea respectively and add another dimension to the goddess, relating her to fecundity in nature.<sup>23</sup>