

1995

Maria Lactans and some visual predecessors in Egypt, the ancient Near East and Greece

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Recommended Citation

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U n i v e r s i t y O f N o r t h e r n I o w a

M a r i a L a c t a n s
a n d s o m e V i s u a l
P r e d e c e s s o r s
i n E g y p t , t h e
A n c i e n t N e a r
E a s t a n d G r e e c e

P r e s i d e n t i a l S c h o l a r S e n i o r T h e s i s

b y M . C . E w a l d

Several semesters ago I participated in a class on the art and archaeology of ancient Egypt. As an art history course it, focused on the images now available from that magnificent civilization. These images conveyed not only the incredible pomp and splendor afforded state religion and ceremony, but also whispered of the sweet joy abundant in private life as well. Flipping through my textbook early on in the semester, my attention was captured by an extraordinary example encompassing both "types" of images. The subject of my fascinated gaze was a statue of a child-pharaoh, Pepy II, seated on his mother's lap (Fig. 1).

The diminutive work adheres strictly to the unbending stylistic conventions common to Egypt at the time of the statue's creation. Instead of appearing rigidly formal or coldly indoctrinated, however, this small alabaster conveys a sense of warmth and intimacy, of particular subjects with their own particular presence. This feeling is without a doubt as much the product of the skill and ethos of its artisan as it is the soft, translucent glow inherent in its material. Gorgeous as it is, the statue's beauty alone was not what captured me; indeed, many of the other objects presented by Smith were equally wondrous.¹ No, it was actually the object's beauty combined with its *familiarity* that ensnared me. I knew I had seen it before... but the where and

when of it escaped me.

After a bit of consideration, the reason for the familiarity of the subject finally dawned. I had dealt with it only the semester before. Strangely, however, I had seen it during a course on *medieval* art history, and the particular subject of the image had not been Pepy II and his mother, but Christ and the Virgin Mary. Fascinated by this "discovery,"² I decided to explore if, and/or how the image of *Maria Lactans* was related to that of *Isis Lactans*, after which Pepy II had been modeled.

During the course of my studies I have learned that *Isis Lactans* is not the only image to have influenced *Maria Lactans*. Almost every icon-creating culture in the world has at some point in time produced representations of a mother, often immortal, breast-feeding her infant or child. Indeed, untangling every visual historical thread that is tied to the latter image is practically impossible. Because of this difficulty I have focused on images of limited provenance and formal organization. The strands I will attempt to tie together were twisted in ancient Egypt, Greece and the Near East. With only a few exceptions, the examples below are of a seated female figure nursing or offering her breast to a child seated across her lap. In most cases the females are deities, and the child is their son/consort.

The starting point of this paper is certainly not in "the beginning," for the very earliest human beings, so far as is known,

had neither the skills nor the immediate desire to create artifacts. The beginning is therefore rather late in human existence, or in prehistory, and is marked by the appearance of the small stone figures commonly known as "Venuses."

The earliest known Venus figures are dated at around twenty-five to thirty *millennia* before the common era. These diminutive statues, thought to be cultic fertility icons, have been found throughout Europe and the Middle East.

Although an astonishing amount of variety is exhibited in the rendering of their tiny frames, certain elements are consistently similar. In almost every case the portions of the anatomy directly related to fertility and childbearing are emphasized, often to the point of gross exaggeration. Breasts, stomach, buttocks, pubic triangle and/or vulva protrude or dangle pendulously. Many figurines portray hugely pregnant women. Very little effort is spent on the rendering of the heads or limbs of the figures. Facial features are undeveloped or crudely, stereotypically drawn (Fig. 2). The figure here complies admirably to the conventional restraints; bulbous and fleshy, hand on breasts, she has neither eyes nor mouth--the only part of the head developed are a stubby nose, small ears, and a head-dress/hair arrangement.

How did these small, smooth, effortfully rendered statuettes relate to the image of *Maria Lactans*? According to Berger, they indicate the presence of an early, ubiquitous cult of the Great Mother, focused on the power and reproductive power of

women, and the fertility of the earth, to which they were closely associated.³ Some authors offer the theory that these societies were sexually egalitarian, with women's "earthiness" respected and even revered.⁴ O'Brien, on the other hand, indicates that while a Mother-God cult did exist throughout Europe and the Near East, it is likely that the political power still belonged to men who considered themselves to be "protégés" of the mother-god, as was often the case in later eras.⁵

In the middle of the fourth millennium B.C.E. the Great Mother god began to splinter, with different aspects of her nature becoming more closely tied to specific localities.⁶ In the ancient Near East, including western Anatolia, Syria, Persia, Babylon, and the Levant, the original Mother-God became Atageris, Anat, Ishtar-Inanna, Kybele, and Asherah.

Atatgaris was identified with the fish (one of the symbols of the old Mother cult) and had major shrines at Aschalon and Nineveh. Anat, another local mother-god, was specifically referred to in Ugaritic tablets c. 1400 B.C.E. She was worshiped primarily by the Hyksos,⁷ who bestowed upon her titles including *Virgin yet Progenitor of the People*, *She Who Kills and Makes Alive Again*, and *Queen of Heaven*.

Ishtar-Inanna, who began as two separate gods that were later syncretized, is of Sumerian, Anatolian, or Semitic origin (Fig. 3). She too had *Queen of Heaven* among her titles, as well as *Mother of Deities*, and *She who Begets All*. Identified with the cow, her

son, lover and consort, Tammuz-Dumuzi, was associated with the bull.

One of the most important myths associated with Ishtar-Inanna tells of her relationship with Tammuz-Dumuzi. According to Gadon, Ishtar-Inanna, passionately in love with her son married him, whereupon they had a joyous physical union. Soon after this consummation, however, Tammuz-Dumuzi became pre-occupied with deciding matters of state--the authority over which she herself bestowed upon him--and ignored his new bride.

Despondent, Ishtar-Inanna descended to the underworld, about which she knew little, on a personal quest. There, through an elaborate series of events, she became trapped, and in order to get back to the earth again she had to find someone to replace her in the underworld. Still piqued with her new mate, she chose Tammuz-Dumuzi to take her place. Tammuz-Dumuzi, forced to descend, had a sister who grieved for his loss, as did all the inhabitants of the earth, for he was the god of vegetation, and without his presence nothing would grow. His sister, Geshtianna, ransomed him by exchanging places with him for half of every year. His descent and ascent mark the change of the seasons, his presence representing the fertility of spring, his absence the cruel harshness of winter.

In figure three, the cylinder seal showing Inanna-Ishtar, her consort is completely absent. Ishtar is seated on a throne, an important symbol of status and power, and a worshipper is peti-

tioning her. The organization of the scene is typical of the time and the area in which it was found. Three profile figures whose height fill the register approach the god, who, also in profile, is seated as if in judgement. If she were to stand, Inanna would completely tower over her devotees. Both ends of the register are filled with a column of text, standing out against an undifferentiated background. The subject matter, that of Inanna actually sitting in judgement herself as she receives petitioners, indicates that probably either the particular event depicted took place before her marriage to Tammuz, or that the seal was made in response to an earlier order in the pantheon, when Inanna had considerably more power and consequence than the late-comer, Tammuz.

Ishtar-Inanna was not alone in having a son/consort. Kybele (Cybele), of Cretan or Anatolian origin, also had a son who was her official lover. Her cult dispersed as far as northern Europe, accounting for the material traces of it found there (Fig. 4). Known as the *Magna Mater*, she was identified with bees, and often depicted with a turreted crown of city walls. In her cult men and women had equal status as priests.⁸ This equality might have been due to the androgyny of both genders implied by the virginity priests were sworn to maintain. In the case of these priests, this abstinence may have been made easier by their lack of sex organs--Kybele's male priests were all voluntarily self-castrated.

This ritual castration related directly to the most important

myth in her cult, that of the death of her son/consort, Attis. Kybele, like Ishtar-Inanna, loved her son, a herder, fervently.

Unfortunately, he was unfaithful to her; shortly following his act of adultery, Attis castrated himself and died from the loss of blood, either 1) as an act of repentance, or 2) because Kybele, in revenge, had driven him insane. In remembrance of their god's beloved consort, every spring Kybele's faithful would hang an effigy of Attis on a tree, then place it in a tomb. Following a formula familiar to most Westerners, this was a week-long festival that included 3 days of celebration followed by three days of lamentation; on the seventh day the effigy is removed from the tomb.

Kybele's cult arrived in Rome in 205 B.C.E., when the Cumean sybil prophesied that only her (Kybele's) presence could ensure Hannibal's offensive would fail. The fact that Rome did, indeed, withstand this great general's armies no doubt inspired interest in the newly arrived cult. Her cult enjoyed a steady following for several hundred years; Jordan suggests that her cult was most influential on the early development of the Christian Mary.

While Kybele's cult may have been relatively new to Romans in the second century C.E., cults of other gods related to the Great Mother were not, for a number of them were inherited from the Greeks. For the Greeks the nursing aspect of the Great Mother tradition was especially strong and direct. In fact, one of the appellations often attached to any number of appropriate

gods was *kourotrophos*. According to Liddel and Scott, the term means "nursing mother", and was most often used as an epithet for Ge, Hellas, Ithaca, and other gods. The god-aspect was most often identified by the epithet, which was also attached to names such as Demeter, Athena, and Zeus. The *kourotrophos* had its origin both in pre-Hellenic Cyprus and Crete and in the Indo-European cult of Ge Meter (mother earth).⁹

Like the other "descendants" of the Great Mother, most *kourotrophos* had a chthonic aspect. This can be attributed to the common early belief that human beings are generated from the earth, and return to it after death. Although the role of these earth-connected gods was to suckle children, most *kourotrophoi* were both physical virgins and mothers; some, like Hera, had children without the aid of a male god, while others, like Athena, actually bore a child without compromising their maidenhead.

A number of feasts were celebrated for the above *kourotrophoi* including the Kory-thalleia for Artemis in Laconia, the Koriàsia for Athena, and the Lecherna for Hera at Argos.¹⁰ According to Price, most shrines for this aspect of female gods were both humble and rural, although there were a few notable exceptions, such as the shrine at Gela.

Three gods had exceptional "nursing mother" aspects. Gaia, the Greek "Great Mother," was actually the deified earth, and identified with Demeter as the bountiful earth.

Ge Meter was also seen as the mother earth, and closely iden-

tified with Demeter, known as the god of prosperous harvests.

As will be explained below, the Greeks adopted a number of formal elements from Egypt and the Near East when depicting and developing the nature of their *kourotrophos*. Two of the most important of these elements are the aforementioned son-consort of the mother-god and what Price calls the "Attic suckling type" (fig. 14 and fig. 1). Although the hairstyle and the attire of the two gods is radically different, their posture is almost identical, from the exact, profile poses of both mother and child, to the stiff, awkwardly affectionate hands each mother rests on her child. Although the mother of the Egyptian king was probably only considered a demi-god, she was certainly rendered here with all of the dignity and elegance, and according all of the conventions, of a full god. The only major difference was the lack of a foot rest for the child in the picture with Demeter, a slight barely even felt, for the figure of the child is just small enough that her feet do not dangle over the side of her mother's lap.

The Near East and Greece were not alone in their development of the many facets of the god in the form of local deities. Egypt too had her share, who would gain special prominence later in antiquity. The major female Egyptian gods associated with motherhood there were Neith, Nut, Hathor, and Isis.

Neith, like the Near Eastern Atagaris, was associated with the primordial depths once encompassed by the Mother-God. Neith

too was symbolized by the fish (Fig.5). She was later closely identified with Isis who later basically absorbed Neith's roles. The fish helped to reify Neith's original independence, for Isis herself was said not to be fond of fish, for it was a fish who swallowed her husband's penis shortly after his mutilation by his brother Seth.

Nut, like Neith, was a primordial god; her realm, however, was the sky rather than the earth. She both gave birth to and was married to Re; She was the mother of Isis and Hathor as well.

Hathor, associated for obvious reasons with Nut, was linked with Neith and Isis as well as Hathor. Hathor was the wife of Re, the mother of Horus the Elder, and the nurse of Horus-Harpokrates (Fig. 6). As a mother-god par excellence, she was as a protectress of children, midwives, and wet nurses. Her name, meaning "house of Horus", indicated the especially close relationship enjoyed by nurse and infant in Egyptian society.¹¹

Less ancient than Hathor, the most commonly known female god in the Egyptian pantheon was Isis. Early in her career, she was equated with both the Magna Mater and with female Egyptian gods. The throne on which Horus' legitimacy is based, a symbol frequently related with her is the curule throne. Later in her career she was combined with many other Egyptian mother-gods, including Hathor, Neith, and Nut: thus, she is often depicted wearing a sun disk and horns upon her head. During the Hellenistic period the Isis cult was a major international religion, enjoying a great deal of popularity in the few centuries

immediately before and after the introduction of Christianity in Egypt.

Like other Near-Eastern mother-gods, Isis also had a son-consort who played a role in her major myth. In this tale, Isis's husband Osiris is trapped by his brother Seth into a trunk which was then thrown into a river. Lamenting, Isis searches for her lost mate, having a few adventures in the course of her journey. When she finally finds him, Seth cuts Osiris into fourteen pieces and scatters them across the land. Isis finds all but one, the phallus, which was eaten by a fish. After re-assembly, Osiris, adding on a phallus she herself fashioned, mates with her dead husband, and bears a son, Horus-Harpokrates, who avenges his father. Through an incestuous mortal alliance with Harpokrates, Isis maintains a spiritual marriage with the deceased Osiris.

Therefore, like most mother-gods, Isis had a son-consort; thus, she was easily and often identified and associated with Astarte, Inanna, Asherah, Rhea, Kybele, Magna Mater, Hera, Aphrodite, Demeter, Athena, and Artemis.¹²

Unlike Isis, most mother-gods did not prosper late in their careers. In fact, one of the most easily discernable indicators of their languishing demise was the fact that other gods impertuned on the mother-gods' usual domain. This decline began c. 1200 B.C.E. and continued until the gradual disappearance of most mother-god cults in the early centuries of the common era.

In the Near East the demotion was evidenced by the assump-

tion by male gods of roles formerly filled by a female mother-god. For example, most Akkadian gods from the Old Babylonian Period filled only the stereotypical roles of mother, advisor, and/or temptress. Seldom did female gods have any substantive power of their own, and rarely would they act without the approval or assistance of a male deity. The actions of most male gods were not similarly bound.

In the Near Eastern pantheon alone, the number of significant shifts of power is rather startling. Gula yielded her power of healing to her son, Damu. Disabe yielded the field of wisdom and learning to Enki-Ea. Similarly, the roles of both Ningirim and Nammu (incantations, and primeval creator respectively), were delegated to Enki-Ea. Ki, the earth god, yielded the the role of primordial creator to the god of the heavens, An.¹³

In Egypt the story was a bit different. As mentioned before, as many of the mother-gods' roles declined, their realms and attributes were acquired by and incorporated into the Isis cult. Because of this tendency, in some instances one is able to distinguish Isis from Hathor and Neith only by their attributes : fish, horn-sundisk, and throne (Fig. 5, 6, 7, and 9). Again, this probably occurred because the Isis cult did not depict female gods with political power, or even power outside of purely stereotypically feminine roles, except when granted to them by male gods.

In Greece, as in the Near East and Egypt, female gods who formerly ruled independently now acquired a consort to whom they relinquished the realm and attributes in which and with

which the female god formerly operated. This happened to even the greatest of Greek mother-gods, Demeter (fig. 8). Although a number of stylistic changes occurred in the scant years intervening between fig. 14 and fig. 8, resulting in a more natural pose and softer features for the god, the overall organization of the form remains constant. The only notable difference in this particular context was the way Demeter's arm crosses her body, enabling her to actually offer her nipple to the child. This feature was replicated in innumerable examples of Isis nursing figurines.

In the *Rape of Persephone*, the best-known myth of Demeter, the diminishing of the role of Demeter is readily apparent: a change in status not reflected by the number and frequency of her cult objects. In this myth, which tells of the rape of Demeter's daughter Persephone, Persephone takes the place traditionally held by the mother-god's son-consort in the Near East. It is Persephone's loss the mother-god Demeter mourns, and it is on Persephone's presence or absence that the fertility of the land depends. In the oldest versions of the myth, Persephone's descent into the underworld is of her own free will, while later versions depict her unwilling abduction by Hades. He is now seen depicted as the king of the underworld, with Persephone in the role of queen-consort, instead of her former position as full queen. Hades's accomplice was none other than Zeus Pater, who patronized, and is then forced to bargain with, the once-powerful Demeter.

A number of explanations for this decline in the role of female gods has been proposed. According to Bachofen, a 19th century author, the sudden rise in a patriarchal system was a revolutionary response to millennia of matriarchal rule.¹⁴ O'Brien gives an expanded explanation of this "Myth of Matriarchy", identifying it in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, commenting that according to the myth, the women were such terrible rulers that they were necessarily and rightfully stripped of their power and subordinated to their husbands.¹⁵

Several other explanatory theories for the decline of the mother-god are offered. One is that upon realizing that men were as necessary as women to the creation of new human life (formerly considered to be a purely female thing), reverence for the reproductive abilities of women, as signified by the female gods, declined. Eisler disputes this "Big Discovery" theory, citing the fact that the mother cult prospered in agrarian cultures' with extensive knowledge of animal husbandry; hence, no "Big Discovery."¹⁶

Eisler does offer an alternative theory, which also has support from Berger. According to them, the disruption of the female pantheon began much earlier than 1200 B.C.E., with the invasion of the ancient Near East by war-loving nomads from the steppes. These conquerors, in Eisler's estimation, brutally overran the idyllically peaceful mother-loving agrarians indigenous to the Near East. These herders brought with them their own male-dominated pantheon, which they incorporated into that of

those whom they conquered. A reflection of this invasion can be seen in many of the major myths, for in the Near East especially it was common for the son-consort of a mother-god to be a herder. Berger suggested that this incorporation is documented in some of the earliest written myths from Babylon c. 3000 B.C.E.

Fryner, on the other hand, disagrees with this theory, suggesting that the decline in the power and authority of mother-gods was most likely precipitated by complex religious, social, and economic changes that accompanied the transition of the city-state to the nation-state, and not easily attributed to any one factor.

A number of different theories were also offered on the ancient status of women in these areas, a status which supposedly took a turn for the worse when the mother-god declined. Again, Eisler posited that an idyllic, sexually egalitarian society, a stranger to warfare, existed before the invasion of the first wave of nomads, the Kurgans. She cites the importance of a number of extraordinary female queens, especially in Kish c. 3000 B.C.E., as evidence. In the same vein, using the same evidence, O'Brien suggests that the status of women was likely not very high. According to her, the few Kish exceptions neither prove nor disprove the rule. She states that "the earliest written evidence from Mesopotamia suggests that political power belonged to men who considered themselves protégés of the mother goddess."¹⁷

Catalysts for the demolition of mother-gods aside, there is considerable agreement on the factuality of a ubiquitous Great Mother god who was fragmented into a number of national-local deities, which in turn gradually declined, stripped of association with any sort of political power, and confined to the realm of stereotypical femininity. After this fall, a rather curious turn of events occurred: the Mother God, for a number of centuries, began to increase in popularity, as witnessed by the rise of both the Ishtar and the Isis cults.

Ishtar's cult actually grew during the Sargonic age (c. 2300-2150 B.C.E.). This may have been because political power had never been incorporated into her nature. Therefore, as the only mother-god who did not threaten male status and power, with realms including feminine sexuality, wrath and nurturing, she was allowed to expand.¹⁸

The cult of Isis experienced growth similar in kind, if not magnitude, for it far outstripped the popularity of any known mother-god of that time. It eventually partially absorbed the cult of Ishtar-Inanna. This rise was possible because, like Ishtar, she also had been "disarmed" at an earlier date. This gentler idea of Isis is well demonstrated by figure 10. Once again shown giving suck to the infant horus, the god is shown in a much more humble position, much like one that a female human being assume. More casual than its chronological predecessors (and indeed, than some of its antecedents), Isis, as mentioned above,

was known by many names, a result of her absorption of the other gods. Apuleius declares in *The Golden Ass*, "all other goddesses are merely Isis by another name," a fairly credible statement, considering the extent to which she was tied to, outright absorbed, or incorporated other female gods into herself.¹⁹ Isis had cult centers in many major cities, including Ghizah, Philae, Malta, Sardinia, Phoenicia, Rome, Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Ostia.²⁰

Isis was able to incorporate so many different gods into her own cult through a process known as syncretization, which is "the tendency to identify the deities of various peoples and combine their cults." It was deliberately practiced by the Greeks in their program of Hellenization. Some of the actions promoted by this program were mixed marriages in foreign conquered lands, and oftentimes the adaptation of local dress and customs. Egypt is an exemplary case of Hellenic Greek syncretization.

In her long history, Egypt had been overrun by many peoples, including Libyans, Kushites, and Assyrians. Through all of this, however, the Egyptians managed to retain most of their native religious and visual traditions. This changed with the advent of the Greeks and the Romans.

The last "Egyptian" dynasty was in fact founded by Greeks in 304 B.C.E.; the first Ptolemy was actually a Macedonian general of Alexander The Great. The Greeks, following their usual procedure, gradually inveigled their way into Egyptian society.

When the Romans later conquered Egypt, they took advantage of the Greek toehold, expanded it greatly, and forced the Egyptians to conform to new norms. The Romans required that Egyptians adopt the foreign culture in order to gain the advantages derived by association with power, prestige, and wealth. Harsh penalties were assigned to those who chose not to comply with the new "domestic" policy and society. The most notorious of these were, of course, spectacularly gory programs of religious persecution. It is perhaps because such dire consequences existed for disregard of the new norms that purely Egyptian elements in the arts (which were primarily religious) and elsewhere became less obvious, and the Roman style ever so gradually adopted.

Exported images of Isis subtly changed to suit Graeco-Roman sensibility (fig. 11-13). In these figures, indigenous to Egypt, one can observe the profound impact that Hellenization had on the art of Egypt. Although the main conventions have been maintained by the artists—a woman seated in a chair, looking forward, offering her right breast to her child, the extraneous stylistic elements are Greco-Roman, from the torsion of the body to the very garments worn by the god. Because of these changes, the image of Isis was palatable to Greeks and Romans, and its export greatly facilitated. The Isis that was familiar to most of the world outside of Egypt was therefore carefully attired in Hellenized garb.

The combination of her visual appeal and continuity with her

mother-god attributes (familiar because they were similar to the ones of the Mediterranean gods) of course aided then dissemination of her cult. These attributes included: a chthonic nature, her titles (Queen of Heaven, etc.), and her son-consort. This Hellenized Isis was equated with Demeter, Persephone, and other gods, whereupon "she began to lose her earlier Egyptian features, though her priests continued to be clad in Egyptian vestments."²¹

This material is intended to demonstrate a continuity between the original Great Mother, her "offspring", including Isis, and the mother of Christ, Mary. When attempting to make these connections, however, it was necessary to remember that Mary stems primarily from Jewish tradition, and that the Jews were neither Egyptian nor Greek, but a Semitic people. One was therefore forced to inquire if, within the Semitic tradition, the worship of a mother-god, also a "daughter" of the Great Mother, existed.

The answer to this question is an emphatic "yes." As very briefly mentioned above, one of the major mother-gods in the ancient Near East was Asherah, a Canaanite derivation of the Great Mother. Known as the wife of El, who was absorbed by Yaweh in Judaic tradition, she had a number of different aspects, including that of a wet nurse, fertility god, and mother of all gods. Like many mother-gods, she had a son, Baal, who died but was restored to life.

The cult of Asherah is referred to over 40 times in the Old Testament, an indication of the difficulty supposedly monotheistic Jews had in exterminating the practice of this cult from its own people. In the Bible, the word *asherah* refers both to the god and to large pole-like wooden statues dedicated to her. In addition to these rough statues, none of which are extant due to climate and material, hundreds of small clay figurines of Asherah have been found (fig. 15).

The cult of this god was so prevalent that she was worshiped by some of the kings of Israel. Sporadically, between monotheistic iconoclastic purges, a statue to her resided even in the Temple, in the Holy of Holies, between 1100 B.C.E. and 600 B.C.E.²² According to Holladay, this situation existed because in Israel, like in Greece, there was both a state religion and local religions. Only the state religion was monotheistic; therefore, according to the local religious cult, to which the common Israelite was more closely tied, the worship of multiple gods was accepted. Additionally, while the cult of Yaweh was for the most part aniconic (a restriction which became more marked later in history), the local religions were not. Therefore, Israelites continued to produce cult objects, similar to the ones found in Old Europe, the rest of the Near East, and Crete.²³

Worship of Asherah was practiced in Israel until the Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C.E., when almost all idolatry (worship of gods other than Yaweh) sharply declined, then disappeared. This, however, was not the last contact that Israel had

with the feminine divine, for as the worship of Asherah declined, the role of Shekhina grew.

Shekhina is a word never seen in the Bible; it does, however, occur fairly frequently in the Talmud. In Hebrew the word *Yaweh* had a masculine gender; the word that signifies his presence, similar to the idea of the Holy Spirit, was *Shekhina*, which was a feminine word. The Shekhina was the way that God makes himself sensually known to man. Early in the Talmud the term Shekhina was used interchangeably with Yaweh.²⁴ As of c. 300 B.C.E. the Shekhina was endowed with a number of characteristics that marked her as a more separate facet of Yaweh; she helped the sick and the needy, was greater than the angels, and interceded with God for the benefit of Israel.

The synagogue found at Dura Europos was instrumental in shattering the popular notion that all early Jews did indeed follow the prohibition against making images of any sort. The walls of the temple, a converted house, contain a visual program of the most significant Old Testament stories. One of the scenes is of the collection of the infant Moses from the Nile (fig. 16). Patai suggests that Shekhina is in this rendering, as the unclothed female figure that is shown actually pulling Moses from the basket.

While, as stated before, there is no Biblical precedent for this scene, the close connection of Moses and Shekhina was mentioned in the Midrash. There, Shekhina was described as his companion, lover, and nurturer; she was also the one who flew

Moses four miles to his unknown grave.²⁵

Patai uses a number of elements to identify the figure of Shekhina, an identification which differs from that given by the Dura expert, Goodenough. Shekhina's close tie to Moses is only one of the reasons Patai gives. Another of the factors was the figure's proximity to the bulrush basket, oddly enough shaped like the Jewish temples in which she was said to reside. This figure was also the only one shown without clothes, most likely a "god" convention borrowed by the Jews from one of the many other flourishing cults at Dura, a cosmopolitan city on one of the major trade routes between the Far East and the Mediterranean. The other possible source for the deity's nudity would be the figure of Asherah, known to the Jews, and typically depicted unclothed.

Shekhina's appearance at Dura was not an isolated incident, and her presence in Jewish culture did not fade into nothingness. Although the wall painting was an exceptional example when compared to extant Jewish art of the same period, it is a harbinger of later developments. The Kabbalistic movement, centuries later, produced a Shekhina even more physically independent of Yaweh, and connected to Israel herself.

In order to find a common connector between *Maria Lactans* and *Isis Lactans*, precedents for both have been examined above. The earliest artifacts thought to be of religious significance have been briefly examined. These "Venus" figures,

believed to indicate an ubiquitous cult of the Great Mother, are found scattered throughout Europe and the Near East from c. 30,000 B.C.E.. Later, cults with mother-gods based on the Great Mother gained prominence in Greece, Egypt, and the Near East. The largest cults are to various *kourotrophos*, Isis, and Ishtar-Inanna.

The mother-gods gradually declined in popularity; the only ones who did not suffer this fate were those who were stripped of all real political power within their pantheon. These gods, like Ishtar-Inanna and Isis, filled the "stereotypical" female roles of temptress and nurturing mother. Aspects of discipline, administration, and power were ceded to their mates, whose elevated status was relatively new in their respective pantheons.

The popularity and dispersion of some cults was facilitated by syncretism. This process, particularly in the case of the Isis, meant the cult became both more eclectic, through the adaptation of attributes and realms associated with the most popular local gods, and more palatable. The "tastier" god usually had "softened" liturgy and increasingly accessible cult images, which co-opted the artistic style, if not the formal organization, of the affected population.

After briefly discussing the rapid, wide dissemination of the cult of Isis, a sketch of the Semitic cult of Asherah and of the Shekhina has been made, establishing the fact that the idea of a mother-god had been imbedded in the Jewish tradition long before the introduction of the cult of Christ.

The information thus far gathered indicates that an environment making possible the development of a Christian equivalent of the mother-god did exist. The next issue that must now be examined is if this situation was actually resolved by the creation of such an entity, in the form of the Virgin Mary.

Jordan lists a number of qualities common to mother-gods. They 1) had positions of precedence, if not power, in the pantheon, 2) acted as intercessors between humans and the most powerful of the gods, 3) often had an incestuous marriage with a "semi-divine son who suffers death," 4) had a number of significant titles, including the *Queen of Heaven* and *Mother of the Gods*, 5) have cult images with supposedly magical power.²⁶

Price cites a number of other things usually associated with a mother-god. Her list includes 1) a chthonic nature, 2) a naturally close connection to fertility, birth, nursing, and childcare, 3) virginity.²⁷

Mary's qualifications for the role of a mother-god, when compared to the above criteria, were somewhat equivocal. Mary did, certainly, have a place of precedence; in some Christian prayers she was actually mentioned before Christ or God the Father. This is because one of her major roles is as an intercessor between God and humanity. She was even known to be present during judgements, inspiring mercy in God for the fallen.²⁸

Mary's relationship with Christ was, admittedly, somewhat irregular. Although she was never depicted as having sexual

congress with her son, as did Ishtar and Asherah, she was known as the spiritual bride of Christ. Her relationship with God is also a bit odd; she conceives without the exchange of seminal fluid, as did Isis, although unlike Isis she was supposedly a physically and spiritually intact virgin.

The Virgin, again like Isis, had a number of epithets assigned to her, among the most important being *Queen of Heaven* and *Theotokos*. While theologians will argue that the decision of the Council at Ephesus in 431 C.E. to officially acknowledge that she was a “god bearer” was made to clarify the nature of Christ and not of Mary, the consequences of the declaration remain the same; the seed for the Cult of Mary, which would flourish in the middle ages, were planted. The average early devotee of Christ possessed very little formal theological training; indeed, most were wholly illiterate.²⁹

This same illiteracy contributed to the vital role images played in early Christianity; most “read” the word of God through the images on church murals and doors, in the mosaics delineating holy scenes and persons. The great attachment early Christians had to their icons was therefore unsurprising. Many miracles have been attributed to images of the Virgin, including spontaneous healing and the granting of holy visions.³⁰

Unlike most earlier mother-gods, however, Mary required no sacrifices; no doves need be slaughtered, no cakes of bread offered. Visions were most likely to come to those who were most like her, including children, especially pubescent girls.

Such visions were considered rare and wonderful communications from God. Only a select few received such communication; the rest had to depend on prayer. Through prayer one could speak to God directly; in prayer is revealed the chthonic side of Mary. The Hail Mary ends with "Holy Mother, Mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of our death," a clear reference to the care most expect from her at that time. Additionally, in some of the most significant stories in the New Testament, those describing the death as well as the birth of Christ, Mary is heavily featured, especially in some of the ex-canonical texts formerly familiar to every Christian.³¹ However, unlike the afterlife expected by members of other cults, Christians expected their experiences after death to be purely spiritual, with the habitation of the earth in which they were buried a distasteful temporary condition, later replaced by a heavenly experience. In fact, unlike most of the other cults of the time, the "underworld" was associated with excruciating pain of both the body and spirit.

In keeping with the other side of Mary's chthonic nature, her relationship with the beginning of life extended to the the care of pregnant mothers, children, and fertility. Barren women would travel hundreds of miles to one of her shrines and pray for intercession by Mary on their behalf. This association is perhaps somewhat odd, in the light of her own complete virginity.

The virginity of Mary, declared in 469 C.E. by Pope Martin II to exist before, during, and after the birth of Christ was not terribly strange when comparing her to other major female cult fig-

ures. Her dual traits of virginity and maternity due to "immaculate" conception and birth are not uncommon; remember, Isis also conceived without physical copulation.

One of the most curious things about the emphasis placed on Mary's virginity is, according to Gadon, the fact that it was due to a translational error. The Hebrew word *almah*, denoting the social and legal status of an unmarried girl, was read as the Greek word *parthenos*, which refers to a physiological and psychological state.³² Additionally, according to Gadon, formerly "virginity" referred to the fact that a god had independence, strength, and ability to choose lovers; in the case of Mary, however, it meant that she was the chosen one, not the chooser.³³ Another feature which distinguishes Mary's virginity from that of mother-gods past is that "the interpretation of the virgin birth was a moral sanction of the goodness of sexual chastity. . . a distinctive contribution of the Christian religion to the ancient mythological formula."³⁴ Completely untouched by original sin, Mary was the perfect symbol of God's new creation.

It is apparent that while one finds many surface similarities between Mary and the mother-gods of the past, there are many differences as well. These dissimilarities exist because early Christianity was a frankly different system of belief than its predecessors, centuries after the decline of the mother-god had already begun in Greece, the ancient Near East, and Egypt. Although the early "cult" of Mary shared many surface commonalities with the

mystery religions so popular at the time of its genesis, Nash warns that one must beware of linking them too closely due to wholesale oversimplification of sophisticated systems of belief. Such misidentification is easily made, especially when one considers the similarities glaringly apparent in the major myths of these cults and, consequently, in the images used to represent them.

As misleading as they might be, however, the similarities were not arbitrary: they existed due to very real, shared history and conditions. The similarities also had their useful aspects, which were recognized even at the height of these religions. As late as 600 B.C.E. Pope Gregory advised Augustine to not destroy pagan temples, but to adapt them to Christian use.³⁵ According to Nash, "cultic practice is inevitably more lasting than belief, the latter being a culture's speculative or mythological articulation of its relation to the divine."³⁶

The tenacity of certain types of cult objects and images certainly testifies to the veracity of the above remark. The image of a woman nursing her divine son/consort simply does not leave Egypt significantly changed. Although the basic conventions of the image are changed slightly by the gentle ebb and flow of time, its soul remains the same. When comparing a fairly early image of *Maria Lactans* to a late one of *Isis Lactans* the only real clues informing one that the two images were in fact of different people were the crosses placed in the upper corners of the former piece (fig. 17 and fig. 12). The chairs the two mothers are seated on are somewhat different, as was the posture of the legs; otherwise, from head-dress to hairstyle to

the attitude of the holy child on his mother's lap, the images are incredibly alike, especially when considering that nearly two centuries separate them.

Examples of *Maria Lactans* before the fifth century are rare indeed. There are a number of possible explanations for this. One is that, for various reasons, it took Christianity a while to get off the ground, so to speak. Purely Christian images from the first few centuries of the common era are in relatively short supply. Between the state programs of religious persecution and having to elbow possible converts away from other, better-established mystery religions, finding the time, the funds, and the display area for religious images is usually not a terribly high priority. Additionally, Christianity, especially in its earliest stages, tended to appeal to the poor and the disenfranchised, persons who often simply did not have the wherewithal to purchase scads of religious art.

Financial and political barriers were not the only ones that stood in the way of the creation of certain images. Even with the grudging sanction of the Roman Empire, followed by the later (forced) conversion of thousands of Gentiles, the creation of such images was not possible without the sanction of the leaders of the church. It is necessary that one remember that Christianity grew out of Judaism, which was traditionally (as least ideally) aniconic. Ironing out the details of exactly what could and could not be portrayed took time; this fact is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the nature of the Virgin herself had barely been ironed out by the time the second figure was created, and various controversies, including iconoclastic movements, would fray the edges of the cloak of Christian unity,

eventually rending gaping holes in it, every few centuries.

Later examples of *Maria Lactans* (fig. 18, 19, & 20) demonstrate the profound tenacity of the images, for several centuries after worship of the cult of Isis has practically died out, the visual conventions surrounding her image live on... and on, and on, and on.

When considering the almost exact similarities between images of different gods, it is entirely probable that some of the early Christian churches were simply “baptized” pagan temples, using both the same architectural elements and cult figures, with the only visually apparent difference being the gods’ names re-carved into the statue bases. Differences in religious doctrine were not, as mentioned before, necessarily reflected in cult practice, rituals, or cult images. Comparison of images of *Isis Lactans*, *Demeter Lactans*, and *Maria Lactans* makes this point almost painfully clear. In most of the instances included, the nursing mothers face forward, with little torsion of the body evident. She usually is seated on a massive throne or chair, a symbol of status and power, in societies where chairs were uncommon. Grandly garbed, often bedecked with attributes, she has the venerable countenance usually granted queens (fig. 1). The child, seated across her lap, likewise stares ahead or at the viewer. Usually also garbed in raiment defining status, stiff-postured and formal, heavy gestures replace sweet snuggling. The infant-child takes the divine nourishment offered a god, not the simple, sweet milk offered a mortal child, even though the bared breast is similarly offered in both cases. This glimpse of flesh, common in “pagan” antiquity, is rare in images of the pure virgin. It is, no doubt, a remnant of those earlier images and gods.

The retention of the mother-god, even in this diminished Christianized form, is not accidental. It can be attributed to the common need people, whether in the Near East, Greece, or Egypt, continued to have for her. This need is based on inescapable elements of the human condition, including birth, nursing, mating, and death. To the question "is the image of *Maria Lactans* related to that of *Isis Lactans*?" one must answer "yes." To the question "is their relationship as truly close as it appears to be?", one must reply "yes. . . but not really."

NOTES

¹William Stevenson Smith, *Interconnections in the Ancient Near East: A Study of the Relationships Between the Arts of Egypt, the Aegean, and Western Asia* (London: Yale University Press, 1965).

² Much to my rue, I soon learned that others--hundreds of others--had made the same connection again, and again, and again centuries before.

³ Pamela Berger, *The Goddess Obscured: Transformation of the Grain Protectress from Goddess to Saint* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 10.

⁴ Susan Heine, *Matriarchies, Goddesses, and Images of God: A Critique of a Feminist Theology* (Augsburg: S.C.M. Press, 1988), 101.

⁵ Joan V. O'Brien, *In the Beginning: Creation Myths from Ancient Mesopotamia, Israel, and Greece* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982) 176.

⁶ Pamela Berger, *The Goddess Obscured: Transformation of the Grain Protectress from Goddess to Saint* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 20.

⁷ Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol for Our Time* (London: Harper and Row, 1989), 139.

⁸ Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and the Christian Roots of Mariology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 69.

⁹Theodora Price, *Kourotrophos: Cults and Representations of the Greek Nursing Deities*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 199.

¹⁰Ibid., 206.

¹¹Valerie Fildes. *Wet Nursing* (Oxford: Basil Blackwood Ltd., 1988), 23. In ancient Egypt, being a nurse to a royal personage was an exalted honor. The royal wet nurses were chosen from the harems of high-status senior palace officials. Having multiple wet-nurses for a single child was common; in fact, the position of many nurses were completely symbolic. The names of wet nurses

appeared on the guest-lists of funeral feasts, and children of wet nurses claimed royalty as "milk" siblings.

¹²Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and the Christian Roots of Mariology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 87.

¹³Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddess: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 71.

¹⁴Joan V. O'Brien, *In The Beginning: Creation Myths from Ancient Mesopotamia, Israel, and Greece* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), 175.

¹⁵Ibid., 182.

¹⁶Riane Eisler, "Our Lost Heritage: New Facts on How God Became a Man." *The Humanist* 45 (May/June 1985) : 26-28+.

¹⁷Joan V. O'Brien, *In the Beginning: Creation Myths from Ancient Mesopotamia, Israel, and Greece* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), 185.

¹⁸Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddess: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 102.

¹⁹Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol for Our Time* (London:Harper and Row, 1989), 195.

²⁰E. O. James. *The Ancient Gods: The History and Diffusion of Religion in the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1960), 300.

²¹Ibid., 297.

²²Susan Heine, *Matriarchies, Goddesses, and Images of God: A Critique of a Feminist Theology* (Augsburg: S.C.M. Press, 1988), 42.

²³Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol for Our Time* (London: Harper and Row, 1989), 180.

²⁴Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 99.

²⁵Ibid., 105.

²⁶Michael Jordan, *Gods of the Earth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 373.

²⁷Theodora Price, *Kourotrophos: Cults and Representations of the Greek Nursing Deities* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 200.

²⁸Michael Jordan, *Gods of the Earth* (London: Thames and

Hudson, 1980), 382.

²⁹Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian roots of Mariology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), 216.

³⁰Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol for Our Times* (London: Harper and Row, 1989), 200.

Michael Jordan, *Gods of the Earth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 284.

³¹Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian roots of Mariology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), 200.

³²Elinor W. Gadon, *The Once and Future Goddess: A Symbol for Our Times* (London: Harper and Row, 1989), 200.

³³ *Ibid.*, 191.

³⁴Marina Warner, *Alone of all Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Random House, 1976), 191.

³⁵Ronald Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 50.

³⁶*Ibid.*

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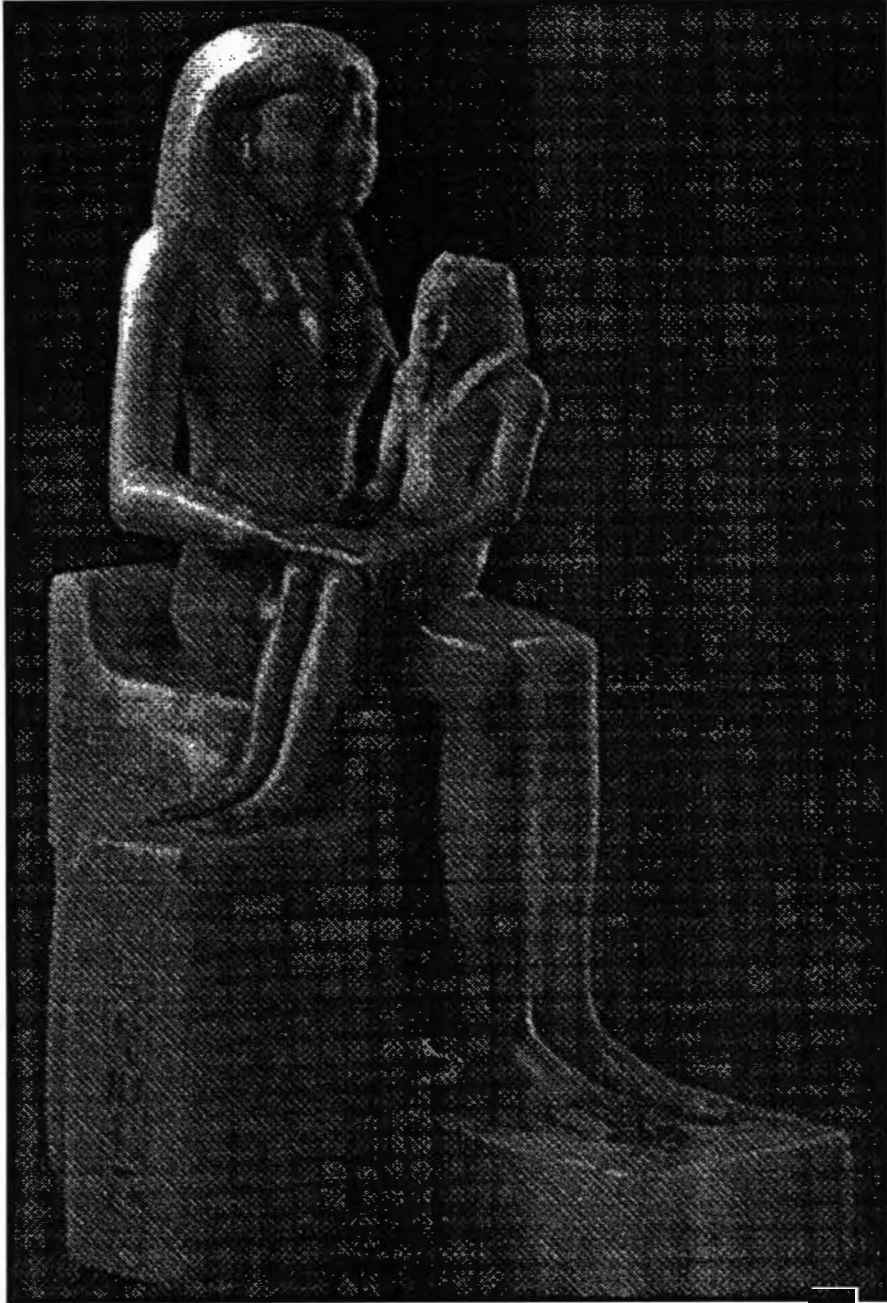
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1. Statue of Pepy II and his mother. c. 2500 BCE (Smith 140).



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2. The Mother, with full maternal body in squatting birth posture characteristic of the Neolithic, pressing hands to bosom. Terracotta. Catal Huyuk. seventh millenium BCE. (Gadon 23)



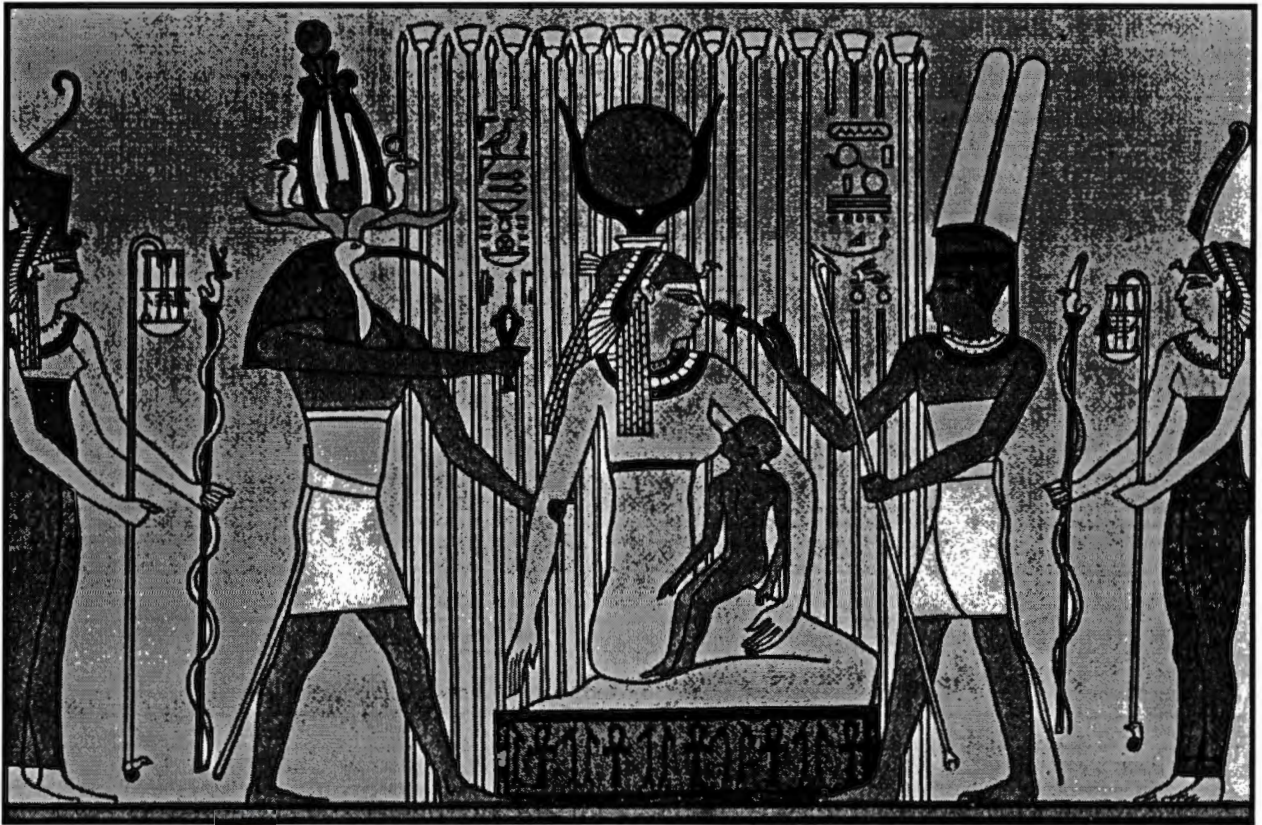
3. Worshipper petitioning Inanna-Ishtar. Cylinder seal, Lapis lazuli. Sumeria. ca. 2250 BCE. (Gadon 80)



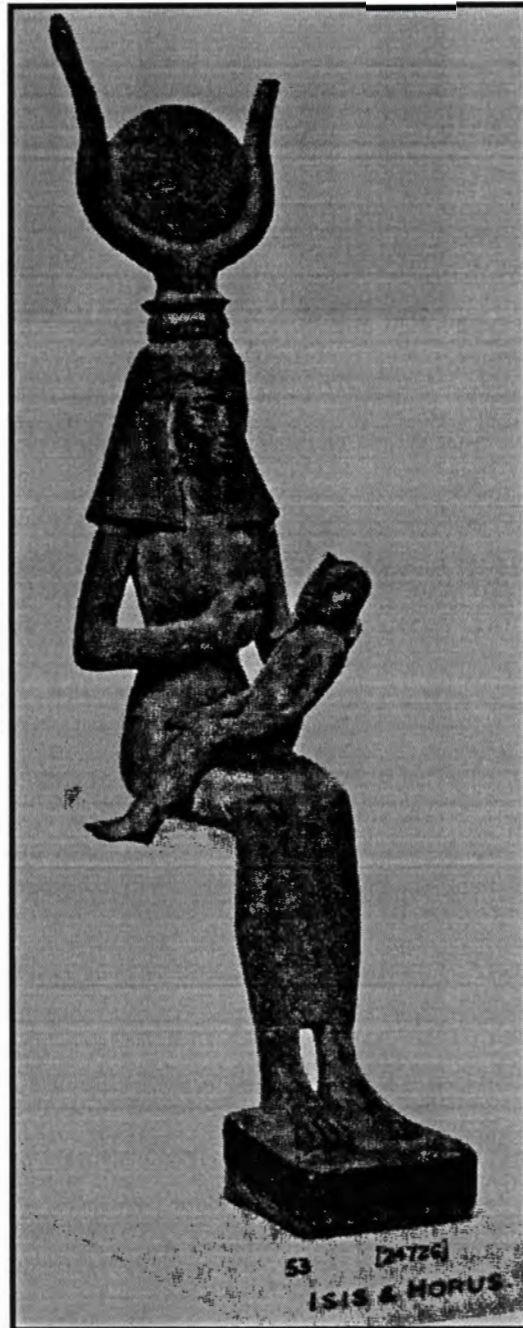
4. Relief of Cybele. holding a small lion and a bunch of grain stalks. Provenance unknown, possibly Rhenish (Berger 14).



5. Neith-Isis and Harpocrates. Egypt.
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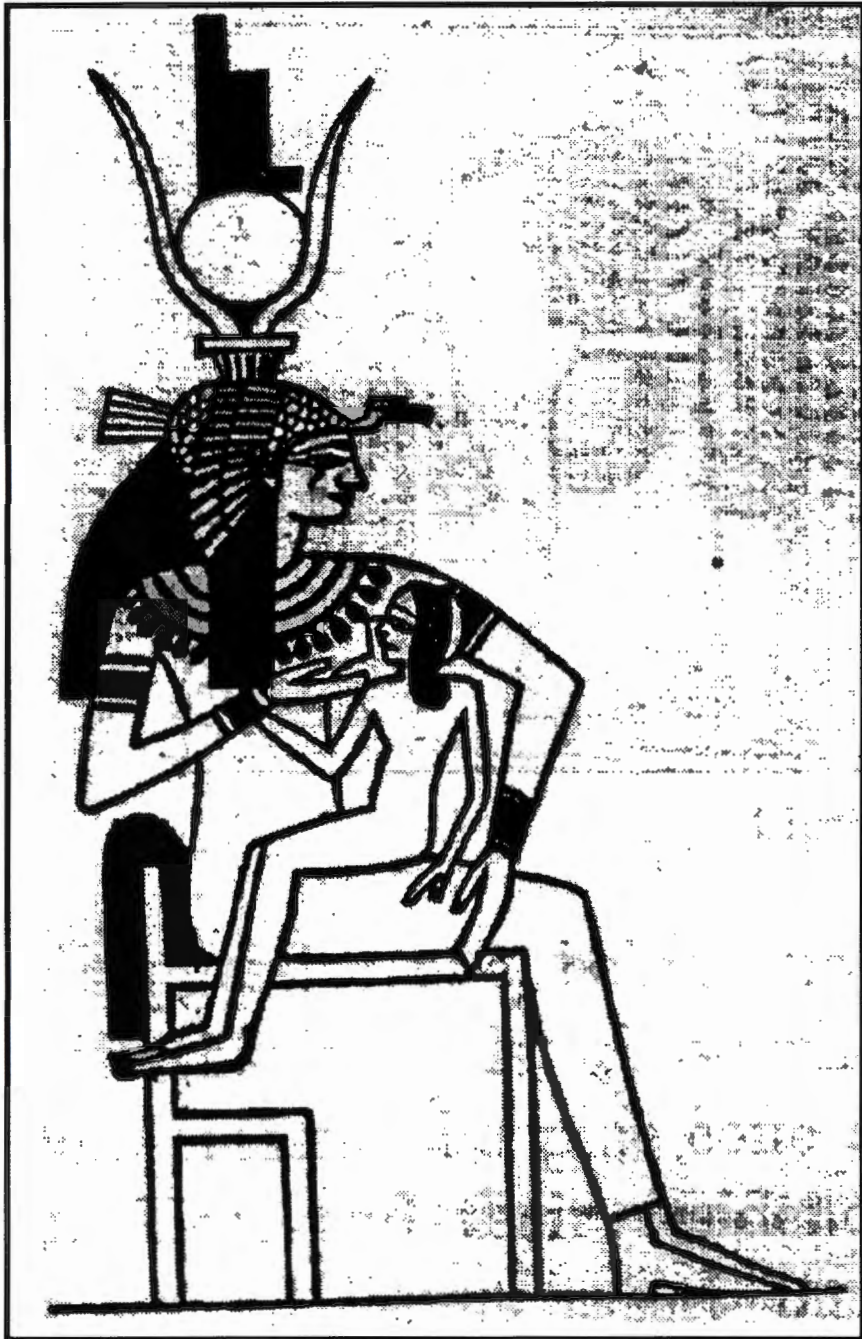
6. Wall painting of Hathor-Isis in the Papyrus swamps suckling Horus. Egypt.
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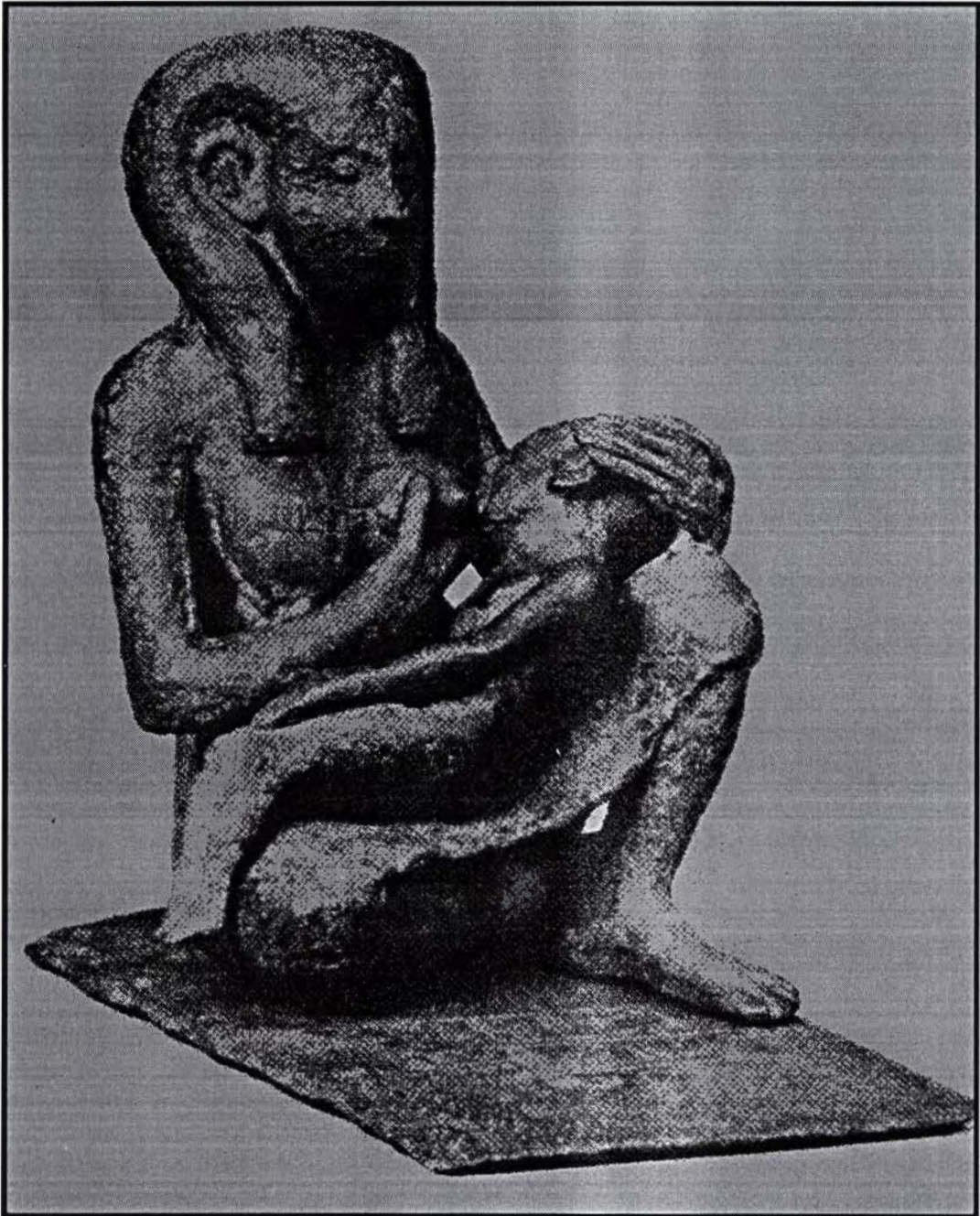
7. Isis nursing Horus. Egypt, Saite-Ptolemaic period, 500-200 BCE. (James pl. 56).



8. Demeter nursing Persephone. Taras. c. 350 BCE. (Price 24).



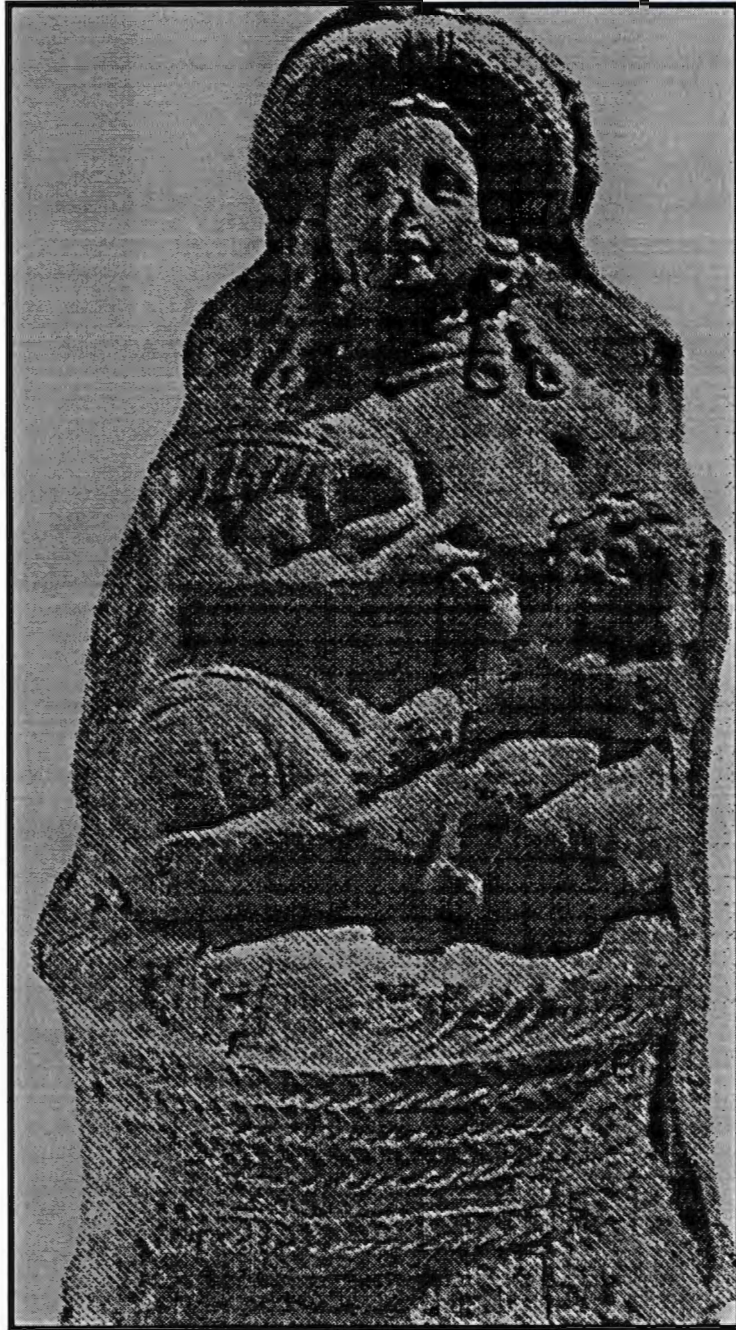
9. Isis suckling Harpocrates, Egypt. (Inman fig. 9)



10. Isis nursing Horus. Copper. Egypt. c. 2040-1700 BCE. (Gadon fig. 104).



11. Lamp handle with Isis and Harpocrates, probably from the Fayum. (Friedman, pl. 93)



12. Statue of Isis nursing Harpocrates. terracotta. Fayum, C.E. II-III (Friedman pl. 92).



13. Mural representing Isis suckling Harpocrates. Karanis, House B. C.E. II-III (Badawy 4.2)



14. Demeter and Persephone. Olynthos. Late Archaic-early Classical Greece (Price 18).



15. Asherah figurine, height 7 1/8 in., Tell Duweir, Palestine. Hebrew monarchy (Patai pl.1).



16. Wall painting of Shekhina with infant Moses. Dura Europos synagogue, C.E. 245 (Patai pl. 34)



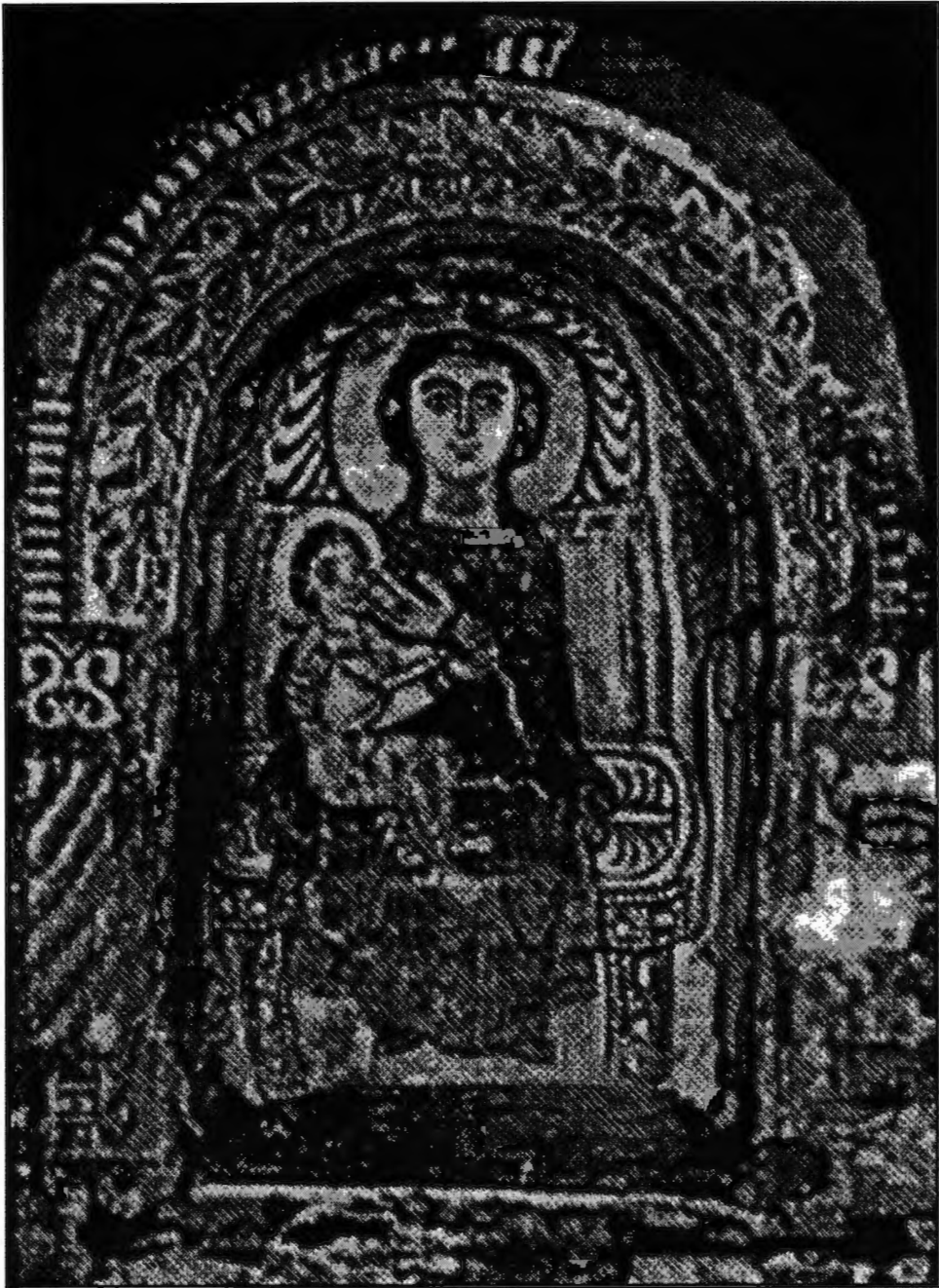
17. Stela depicting Maria Lactans. Fayum. C.E. V (Dadawy 3.74).



18. Wall painting of Mary nursing her child. Saqqara. C.E. VII-VIII (Wessel II).



19. Manuscript on vellum depicting Maria Lactans. Hamouli. C.E.839.
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20. Mural portraying the Madonna Lactans. Saqqara, Chapel A. C.E. VII-VIII (Badawy 4.38).