In 1907 a trust fund was established by his daughter in memory of Mr Leopold Schweich of Paris. It was intended to further research into the archaeology, art, history, languages, and literature of Ancient Civilizations with reference to Biblical Study. A group of three lectures by a chosen lecturer is normally delivered at three year intervals.

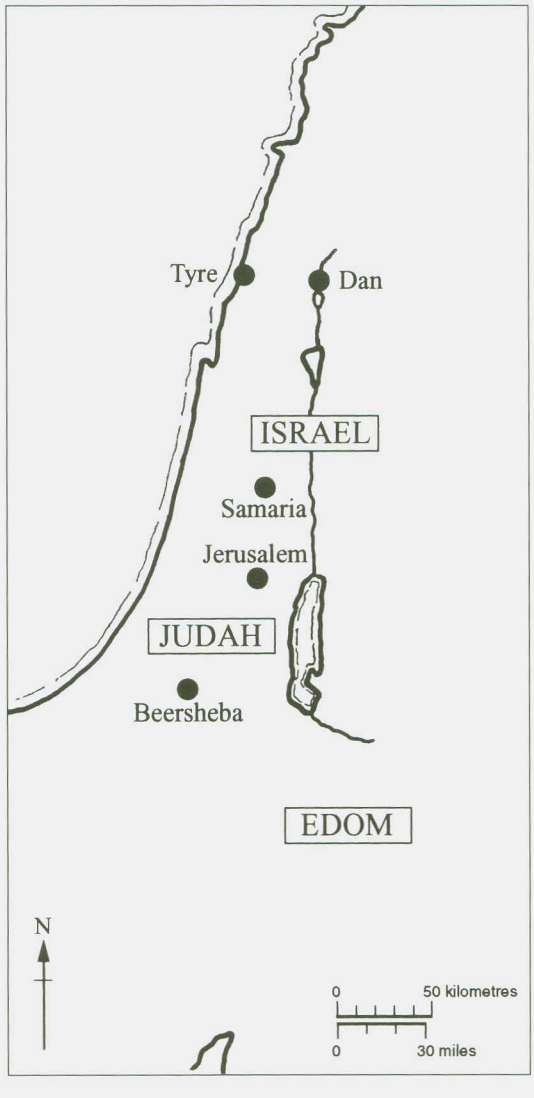
The inaugural lectures were given in 1908 by Professor S.R. Driver on *Modern Research as illustrating the Bible*.

Terracotta Female Figurines and Goddesses in Early Israelite Religion

Dr P.R.S. Moorey FBA, Keeper of Antiquities at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, delivered three Schweich Lectures on 30 November and 1 December at the Academy. His theme was the relevance of terracotta imagery to understanding the beliefs of ordinary people in Canaan, broadly the area covered by modern Israel and Palestine, from c.1650 to 1150 BC, and in the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the same region under the Divided Monarchy from c.925 to 586 BC. Particular attention was paid to representations of goddesses and women.

The Problems

The beliefs and rituals of the common people in the Near East before the Hellenistic Period remain one of the most important unknowns in a region where contemporary state-controlled religions are relatively well-known. Popular ideologies and magical practices generally fall outside the range of ancient written records even where they have survived in some quantity, as in Iraq. The Old Testament, except in isolated instances (cf. *Jeremiah* 44:19), is no exception. In the surviving material record the cultic activities of the population at large are almost exclusively represented by miniature baked clay images ('terracotta figurines') of anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and inanimate forms (buildings; furniture).



Sketch map locating Israel and Judah c. 924–586 BC. Canaan occupied broadly the same area c. 1650–1150 BC.

Amongst the various objects recovered by archaeologists that are routinely mentioned in Old Testament Studies as having cultic significance, anthropomorphic terracotta figurines are the most often cited. It has long been recognized that judging from the frequency of their appearance they were commonly the property of private houses rather than confined to places exclusively connected with cult. Indeed, they are conspicuous by their general absence from the major shrines of Canaan, Judah and Israel excavated to date. They are never explicitly referred to in the Old Testament. This absence has been taken to indicate that they represented popular concepts and practices not considered normative by its authors and editors.

What these might have been is not a question easily answered. Any attempt is compromised at the outset. They are most often recovered by excavators from contexts of disposal rather than of use which might have revealed their roles in daily life. Outside graves, in which they appear sporadically, they were evidently ephemeral objects. Some, at least, may have had magically endowed functions or identities that had to be annihilated to render them harmless after use. Although any objective distinctions between accidental and deliberate breakage are elusive in retrospect, the degrees of destruction in some major figurine assemblages are so great by comparison with routine rubbish deposits, as to indicate intent rather than chance.

'Yahweh (and) his asherah'

The discovery towards the end of the last century at Khirbet el-Qom and Kuntillet 'Ajrud in modern Israel of eighth century BC inscriptions

including the phrase 'Yahweh (and) his asherah' raised many questions. Exactly what had the ancient Israelites meant by this association of the God of the Old Testament with the major Goddess of the earlier Canaanite pantheon? Did *asherah* refer to the Goddess herself or to a cult object identified with her? If the latter, what did it look like? Old Testament references suggest a monumental object of wood, possibly an actual tree or a man-made object resembling one, which, if not burnt at the time, is not likely to have survived in the archaeological record.

Terracotta figurines and Yahweh's 'asherah'

Consequently, some scholars have sought images of this Goddess amongst the numerous hand-modelled free-standing female figurines of clay broadly contemporary with the key inscriptions. These are known to archaeologists as the 'Judean Pillar Figurines' after their form and primary area of distribution. Those in quest of popular images of Asherah have interpreted their lower body shape as an attempt to reproduce the stylized tree or trunk-like form of Asherah's symbol (cf. *Deut.* XVI:21; *I Kings* XIV:15; *II Chron.* XIX:3). In fact, when these small images are considered within a wider Near Eastern context, this shape is much more convincingly seen as representing an ankle-length garment like that traditionally worn by men and women. It had been commonly represented on free-standing statuary of all sizes for over a millennium, valued for the stability it lent to a figure.

Female images of clay in Canaan (c. 1650–1150 BC)

The popular female images current in Canaan were moulded in low relief on mass-produced, hand-held plaques. They were nude and youthful, represented *en face*, in two primary types. One, holding floral tributes, is Egyptianizing in style. The other, without them, has affinities with comparable somewhat earlier images in Babylonia, where they are never shown wearing the horned crown indicative of divinity. The latter type, in variant forms, survived outside Judah well into the first millennium BC. Who these females are remains an open question. They are no longer, however, unquestionably identified as major goddesses *per se* or as famous cult images of them. They have more recently been seen, as have their Babylonian counterparts, as beneficent or propitious spirits regarded as an intermediary between human suppliants and supernatural powers.

Such objects are plausibly identified as talismans or magical figurines believed to benefit their owners, rather than as icons themselves regarded as sacred. Manufactured in standard one-piece moulds by potters and circulated with domestic pottery, they would appear to illustrate canonical popular imagery. They represent an aspect of personal piety, individual rather than corporate, feminine rather than masculine, focused on one or other of the goddesses of the Canaanite pantheon. The use of comparable images on earrings and pendants made in precious materials for the *élite* may confirm an amuletic role for the clay plaques amongst the common people.

Judean Pillar Figurines in the eighth to seventh centuries BC

The consistent absence of the more recent of these plaques in Judah, when they are sporadically evident in Israel and relatively common elsewhere, looks like a positive rejection there both of this nude female image and her role in daily life. Certainly, the handmodelled free-standing female clay figurines, are very different both in form and technology. Their most striking physical feature, apart from the fact that they are dressed, is the

Figure 1. Canaanite Terracotta Plaque, baked clay. Acquired at Gezer in 1912. 13th century BC, 12 cm high (by courtesy of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

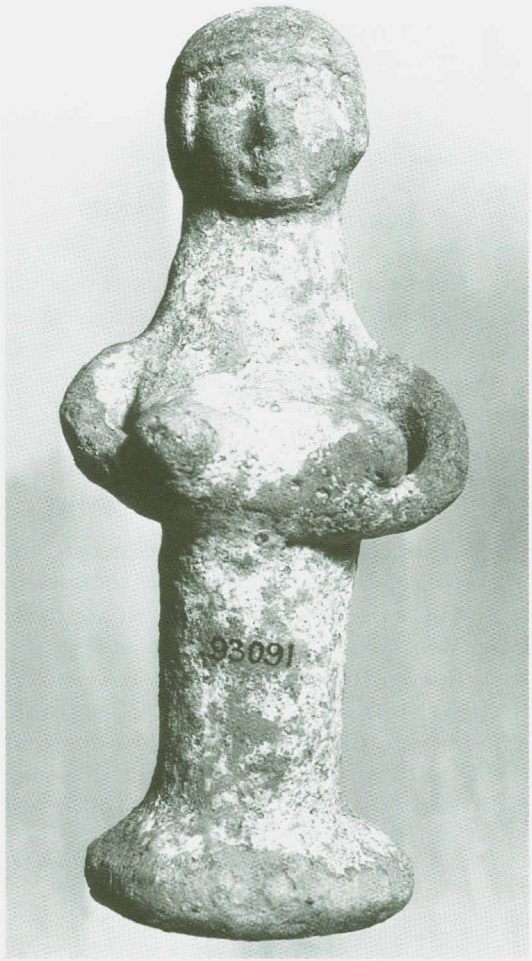


Figure 2. Judean Pillar Figurine, baked clay. Reported to be from a tomb at Bethlehem. 7th century BC, 17.5 cm high (by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).

exaggerated prominence of their breasts. As the original painted details, over a whitewashed surface, have usually long since disappeared, it is not certain that they were exposed, as some examples suggest. This feature has traditionally been taken to characterize these images, amongst those who regard them as deities, as indicative of a 'nurturing goddess' in contrast to the 'fertility goddess' of the Canaanite plaques, once commonly identified as the Canaanite goddesses Astarte or Qudshu of lesser rank than Asherah.

Outside Israel and Judah, notably in Syria and Cyprus, contemporary terracotta pillar-shaped female figurines deposited as votives in sanctuaries and other contexts are routinely assumed to represent human suppliants who, in themselves, do not indicate the particular deity to whom they were dedicated. In these contexts they are regularly accompanied by male figurines, many represented as horse-riders. Horsemen also appear in the Judean terracotta repertory, though not so frequently as the female figurines. They are commonly overlooked in discussions of the identity of the females. Male terracotta figurines of any kind were very rare in the ancient Near East before this. Earlier in Canaan male votives were made of metal. At the time of the Divided Monarchy, however, coincident with the first regular use of cavalry in armies, male riders in terracotta appear across the region as the appropriate form for a male votary and then endure for centuries. If this role were to be accepted for examples in Israel and Judah, it would painlessly resolve often tortured debates about whether the males represent Yahweh or a Canaanite god. They are not so exclusively concentrated in Judah as the females. Some of the horse's heads bear applied clay disks interpreted as solar symbols; but they are by no means a universal feature and, where they do occur, various in their shapes, perhaps indicating no more than routine equestrian mane-dressing.

These anthropomorphic images are an insecure basis for generalizations about popular worship of particular deities. In the absence of compelling local evidence that either the males or the females represented supernatural beings, and in the presence of strong comparative evidence from elsewhere that they may well be human suppliants, the matter is best left open. If they are to be identified as human votaries, then the identity and sex of the deity or deities honoured have to be demonstrated from other pertinent evidence, of which there is still very little in the archaeological record in Judah.

Dr Moorey has recently completed a catalogue of the ancient Near Eastern terracottas in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, to be published on the Museum's website in due course. The 2001 Schweich Lectures *Idols of the People: Miniature Images of Clay in the Ancient Near East* will be published by the British Academy.