Pázmány Péter Catholic University

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Doctoral School of History

Intellectual History Doctoral Programme

Supervisor: Dr. Ida Fröhlich DSc.

Erika Roboz

Motifs of Smiting in the Syro-Palestinian Iconography: Proofs of Intercultural Exchange between Egypt and the Levantine Region (A Comparative Study)

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Supervisor:

Dr. habil. András Bácskay

Associate Professor

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I. Theme and aims of the research

The recent thesis the examination of the types of adaptation customs of the Egyptian originated smiting motif in the visual imagery of Syria-Palestine in the Bronze Age.

The research is intended to illustrate the cosmogonic aspect of the smiting motif, rooted in the ruler symbolism of ancient Egyptian art and transferred into the symbol system of the divine world of neighbouring cultures through the adaptation process, which in this context is combined with the abandonment of the representation of the image of the human enemy. In addition to the iconographic analysis, through the presentation of intercultural, political, economic and military relations, the effects shaping the face of the examined regions in the different periods of the Bronze Age are outlined, which may served as factors in the adaptation process of the motif.

In examining the smiting motif, I wished to avoid analysing the broader interpretation of the concept of triumph and its visual forms of representation in ancient Near Eastern cultures, focusing instead on the original meaning (triumph) expressed by the motif, which depends on its context.

Through the iconographic analysis of motif-bearing archaeological objects from the Bronze Age Egypt and Syria-Palestine and the comparison of the original and new contexts of the motif, the main aim of the research is to support a cosmic interpretation of the smiting, which could be a possible intellectual base to for deities and other supernatural beings depicted in this position in the religious

iconography of the Syro-Palestinian and surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures.

The possibilities of interpreting the iconography of the Egyptian smiting scene have previously been studied by several well-known researchers (cf. Silvia Schoske (1982), Emma Swan-Hall (1986), Alan Schulman (1988), Othmar Keel (1997), the analysis of which is well documented in Egyptian art history. The reconstruction of the iconographic symbol system of the Bronze and Iron Age Syria-Palestine with the help of the pictorial evidence of the surrounding cultures was elaborated by the researchers of the Friborg School (cf. Othmar Keel, Silvia Schroer 2005; 2008; 2011; 2018). A comparative classification of the general iconography of Late Bronze Age Syro-Palestinian deities was processed by Izak Cornelius (1994; 2004).

The comparative new approach of the recent research, starting from the interpretation of some elements of the original Egyptian scene, through a deep analysis of the related archaeological material by object types would like to point out how changes caused by the adaptation process can affect the interpretation of the motif in its new context.

II. Methodology of the research

The applied methodological skills required for the iconographic analysis within the complex system of visual interpretation elaborated by Othmar Keel with the contribution of Christoph Uehlinger (cf. *Methoden-Schemata,* in *Das Recht der Bilder Gesehen zu Werden:*

Drei Fallstudien zur Methode der Interpretation altorientalischer Bilder, 1992) built on two core schemas, based on Erwin Panofsky's pioneer works on the topic of iconography and iconology: firstly, the structure of the interpretation process, and secondly, the aspects pertaining to the interpretation of the image.

In the process of interpretation, starting from the applied methodology and continuing the analysis with the iconographical approach, it is important first to identify the individual image elements (e.g. main figures, symbols, motifs) and separate them from the decorative elements (e.g. elements out of context) and from the subject or key elements of the image as a whole (e.g. scene). In order to decipher the visual message of the image, we need to look for connections between the iconographic elements of the image (e.g. context and constellation of the elements) that will help us to formulate one or more possible interpretations of the image in its context.

Epigraphical and archaeological sources are indispensable in supporting the process of interpretation, for helping to determine the background of the depicted themes and scenes.

The present research seeks to fit into the iconographic approach as a link, by examining the visual culture of the Syro-Palestinian region focusing on a single iconographic element, with special regard to the variants of the motif that arose in its new visual contexts, it aims to present a complete picture of the motif using a comparative approach. By exploring the additional elements of the motif, investigating the original context in detail, and reviewing the development of the motif in the light of its ideological background, the present research may

serve to identify certain characteristics which could provide the basis for how the motif was adapted to the visual imagery of other cultures. Physical description of the smiting motif: the smiting motif in the form of a characteristic dynamic act articulated as an offensive gesture.

The most important component in the act of movement is the raised arm (with or without a held weapon), which may be enough to identify the motif. The second important component is the position of the legs, two subcategories of which are distinguished:

> 1. Dynamic: one leg steps forward in a striding position,
>
> 2. Static: legs are parallel to each other in a standing or sitting position.

Geographical horizon of the analysis: two main geographical viewpoints are possible with regard to the geographical distribution of the objects included in the related object catalogue of the study. The first takes a stricter geographical approach, and is limited to the provenance of Syria-Palestine (modern Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria). The second viewpoint takes a cross-cultural approach and includes ancient Near Eastern objects found outside the Syro-Palestinian region but connected to or originating from there (e.g. objects with Egyptian provenance depicting Syro-Palestinian deities). Based on this approach, highlands of Anatolia and the Hittite cultural sphere with Neo-Hittite examples were excluded from the focus of the analysis, as were those with provenance from Aegean, Mediterranean and European sites.

Time horizon of the analysis: the timeframe of the examination stretches from the Middle Bronze Age IA to the beginning of the Early

Iron Age I (ca. 20–13th century B.C.). These time limits fit to the appearance of the smiting motif outside Egypt dating back to the 19th–18th centuries B.C. with the possible first appearance at the glyptic of Kültepe II and Sippar, supporting considerable examples from Mari, Ebla and Alalakh. The motif reached its zenith in the Late Bronze Age and disappeared relatively quickly from the Syro-Palestinian iconography after the Ramesside Period (13–10th century B.C.), as Silvia Schroer (2018) pointed out. This idea is also supported by defining the timeframes of the cited archaeological objects so as to include pieces from the Late Bronze Age, when the largest abundance of objects appeared bearing the smiting motif.

General restrictions for object images: smiting act performed in the original Egyptian context, defeating act performed against animals (e.g. hunting scenes, *Tierkampf*, *Chaoskampf* etc.).

The following general questions arose during the examination, which are also reflected in the heading of the columns in the tables containing data on the examined objects:

- Who is the smiting figure (deity/human)?
- Is a visible enemy depicted in the scene?
- What type of scene the smiting motif appears in?
- What is the context of the scene?
- Can the figure be identified solely by the smiting motif?
- Can there be a correlation between the inclusion of the motif in the visual representation of the figure and the general role of the figure?

According to the methodological guidelines, the motif-bearing object material was examined in chronological order by object type discussed in separate chapters in each periods of the Bronze Age by using iconographical criteria during the analysis. The iconographic examination firstly focuses on the identification of the figure itself (deity or human), and also gives the typological classification (type) and the function (role) of the smiting figure.

Several excellent object catalogues have been published in the past about the general iconography of Syro-Palestinian deities, including objects bearing the smiting motif as a subcategory. Because of this, in this study I wanted to avoid unnecessary repetition of the general data of the cited objects. Therefore only the inventory number and the reference for the image of the actual object (Fig.) are included in the main text, while the related bibliographical reference is provided in a footnote. The object catalogue presents the images of the discussed objects as an appendix of the doctoral thesis (Appendix II).

III. New results and theses of the research

The "smiting posture" is one of the most specific iconographic elements of Ancient Near Eastern art. The classical form of the position, depicting the raised arm of the figure holding a weapon, together with one leg placed forward, can be interpreted as a dynamic movement that defines aggressive behaviour, which thus illustrates the smiting person's power over his enemy.

The smiting motif a core iconographic element of the complex scene called the „Pharaoh smites the Enemy" in the royal Egyptian art. If we examine the evolution of the smiting motif in Egypt, we can decode the visual message of the scene showing the paused moment of an execution: the figure of the pharaoh surrounded by his personal attributes smiting the enemy in the presence of gods and divine symbols, indicate the transcendental presence. The transmitted message of this final act means TRIUMPH and VICTORY in the language of the Egyptian royal iconography, and it can clearly be interpreted as a pure visual propaganda.

The interpretation of this iconym of Egyptian cultural heritage was commonly articulated emphasizing the defensive role of the institution of the kingship to recall the former act of the „Unification of the Two Lands" with subjugating the enemy in order to establish and defend the realm (secular level). Besides, showing the offensive face of kingship simultaneously had transcendental significance, namely to prove the charismatic ability of the pharaoh (king) to maintain the balance of world order (*ma'at*) against chaos (*isfet*) with the assistance of the gods (cosmic level).

Due to the trading, diplomatic, economic and intercultural connections, Egypt had a growing cultural impact on ancient Near Eastern region during the period of the Middle Bronze Age, from the first half of the 2nd millennium to the 1st millennium onwards. It is observed, that the art and craftsmanship of Egypt highly stimulated local artistic practices and visuality. Egyptian or Egyptianizing motifs (e.g. religious symbols, ornamental motifs, representations of

Egyptian deities), which featured on the import objects flowing through the commercial and cultural network, were adopted mostly as decorative elements in the local art and copied without their original (religious, royal etc.) contexts. As a result of this increasing Egyptian visual influence, the smiting motif infiltrated in the the religious iconography of the ancient Near Eastern cultures during the first half of the 2nd millenium BC and became one of the adopted iconographic elements principally of the miniature (glyptic) and sporadically of the monumental art (stelae). The role of the glyptics should be highlighted among the motif-bearing objects, because the cylinder seals and stamp seals generally played a major importance in trading system and diplomacy and used by their ancient owners ratificated their commercial or political acts with invoking supernatural powers.

The (probably) earliest appearance of the smiting motif in the Ancient Near Eastern iconography outside the borders of *kmt* can be detected on a glyptic from Anatolia, featuring the smiting storm god and the bull in a cultic context, in the Anatolian group of Kültepe II seal impressions from the Old Assyrian merchant colony of karum Kanesh (ca. 1974 BC–1836 BC), which is characterized as an alloy imagery from the local Anatolian and Mesopotamian (Old Babylonian) artistic elements during the Old Assyrian colony period in the region.

Parallel pictorial evidence datable to the mid-19th century BC from the Old Babylonian period has been identified from Sippar (a cylinder seal workshop) in Mesopotamia, where the motif may have arrived through the mediation of Old Syrian and Anatolian glyptics, rather than directly via the Egyptian influences (Beatrice Teissier). The

occurrence in Mesopotamian art of divine entities, such as the smiting god (cf. storm god, or the deified ruler represented as a storm god) and the lion-demon, also illustrates the prevalence of intercultural exchange. The typical representations of the storm god and the ruler (who may be the Egyptian pharaoh, or the local ruler) adopting the smiting posture in the object group of the classical Old Syrian cylinder seals (ca. 1920 BC–1500 BC) demonstrate a vast repertoire of visual elements, that incorporated a mix of artistic influences from Egypt, Syria, Anatolia and Mesopotamia.

The Late Bronze Age (ca. 16–13th century BC) is clearly regarded as the zenith of the smiting motif, both in Egypt and in Syria-Palestine, and the motif seems to take on new characteristics in the art of the surrounding cultures outside Egypt. Due to increasing Egyptian influence, a large number of Syro-Palestinian gods (Ba'al, Reshef) and firstly goddesses (Anat, Astarte) appeared in large number in the related archaeological evidence being shown in the smiting position, which emphasizes the martial aspect of their divine character.

The smiting scene is interpreted as serving a propagandistic function in the Egyptian royal art, which can be understood as a visual representation of the role of the Egyptian pharaoh, as the core pictorial element in portray of the perfect ruler at both secular and cosmic levels, symbolizing his offensive and defensive nature of his power.

The application of the power of the Egyptian pharaoh is bidirectional: he appears as both an offensive warrior, and a defensive protector fulfilling his duties for the sake of his realm. This dual nature of divine power in the role of the smiting Syro-Palestinian deities is mainly

reflected in the surviving related textual sources from Ugaritic mythology and in the Egyptian versions of the myths associated with them, which were preserved even after their incorporation into the pantheon of the Egyptian New Kingdom, namely their associations with war, or protection, apotropaism, healing, and prosperity.

The divine role of the storm gods in Ancient Near Eastern pantheons can similarly be defined as the guarantor of cosmic balance, ensuring the prosperity of the land by regulating the meteorological phenomena (storms and rainfalls), and keeping chaos away from the organized cosmos of the human world by supporting the processes of vegetation and fertility. If cosmic equilibrium were upset, the ensuing unpredictable consequences would disrupt the cycle of the world. Losing control over meteorological phenomena could trigger a chain reaction and cause damage that could have a major impact on human populations.

The female deities who assume this position (Anat, Astarte) are not actually storm gods, but they are both associated with warfare. In addition, they are mythologically connected to the storm god through various relationships and they take part in the cosmogonic battle. Their simultaneously warlike and protective nature is reflected when they are shown adopting the smiting motif, as a visual symbol of triumph and power in their martial iconography.

Based on his function as a god of epidemics, the Syro-Palestinian god Reshef originally exercised control over plagues and diseases, but thus he also had the power to destroy the organized cosmos of the human world. His dual ability may be reflected in his Egyptian image of a

smiting god before the offering table, equipped not only with an offensive hand weapon, but also with a shield for protection, associated with prosperity and healing.

The reduction of each original elements, such as the disappearance of the visible enemy from smiting scenes may also indicate the process by which the symbolism of the raised arm or fist itself assumed apotropaic connotations. This makes the motif a more complex symbol of power, in the iconography of Syro-Palestinian deities. The visible enemy in the smiting scene may help to identify the smiting person as a ruler, while the omission of the enemy is typical of deities. Interpreting the smiting motif in the light of a comparison of its original and new context (motif): the Egyptian smiting motif is the essential element in the visual expression of the political ideology of rulership with a transcendental aspect. The gods also take part in the scene, but they are not the ones who fight; rather the king acts with the power bestowed by them to restore order in his realm at both secular and cosmic levels. The gods only assist in the act, but through their assistance they provide the strength, the weapon, the protection and the support to the king during the act of overcomimg the forces of chaos.

Outside Egypt it can be observed, that some essential changes occur in the context of the smiting scene, which, after leaving certain original canonical elements out of the composition (deities, symbols, enemy, occassionally weapon), is distilled to the smiting gesture itself, as the symbol encapsulating the entire meaning of the original scene.

Interpreting the smiting motif in the light of a comparison of its original and new context (smiting actor): outside Egypt, the central figure of the scene is no longer primarily the ruler, who uses the smiting motif to express power visually and fights to restore the secular and cosmic order, but one of the warrior deities (e.g., Anat, Astarte, Baal, Reshef), who have a cosmogonic role based on their mythology. Compared to the Egyptian pharaoh, in order to prove their power and ability to perform this duty, there is no need to display a visual enemy or even a weapon in the scene, but paradoxically the protective and supportive presence of the transcendent sphere is represented by the smiting deity itself. A probable explanation for the general appearance of the smiting motif in the divine iconography may be intertwined with the omission of the human enemy and the weapon from the scene.

Compared to the original context we can see that the adaptation of the motif has an apolitical dimension: the smiting figures related to the divine sphere, so it can be concluded that ancient Near Eastern rulers did not really welcome the classical smiting gesture in their victorious iconography. Accordingly, in representations of the final act of defeating or killing the enemy, the ruler is rarely depicted with a weapon held with his upraised arm in the smiting position, but more frequently stabbing with a lance or dagger in scenes with a similar themes.

The textual imprint of the ideological background and the concept related to the visual representation of smiting are clearly reflected in the Bible as well. The smiting motif was linked to the divine sphere in

the Old Testament, especially in connection with the warrior image of YHWH defeating his enemies. The elements referred to in the description of the act in the Book of Psalms (Ps 110:5, 6a; Ps 68:21; Ps 21:8) – such as the hair-grasping, the right hand serving as the common limb performing the smiting movement, the shattering of the head with a mace (as a related tool, a significant royal weapon involved in the early phases in the evolution of the Egyptian scene), the smiting act as divine judgement in the form of the final execution performed by the god – correlate with the elements and context of the canonical Egyptian smiting scene.

The further development of the smiting motif did not stop with the end of the Bronze Age civilization and can be observed in the divine iconography of the neighbouring cultures, which survived or were revived in the First Millenium and afterwards in ancient Classical and Early Christian art. It can be detected in Neo-Hittite art, which is a result of the amalgamation of the Anatolian and Northern Syrian iconographic traditions, supplemented with Assyrian artistic elements, especially in the iconography of the storm god: the storm god Ḫalab (Aleppo), and the different manifestations of the Luwian storm god, Tarḫunzas ("Storm god standing on the bull", "Storm god of the Vineyard"). The smiting storm god standing on the bull survived in the image of the local storm god in Urartian (Teisheba) and Hellenistic-Roman art (Jupiter Dolichenus).

In conclusion, I think that the smiting motif may become an universal iconographical device because of its highlighted transcendental aspect, and seemed to be adapted apolitically into the iconographic

repertoire of the surrounding cultures. Despite its original context of meaning, the smiting motif never became a standard royal iconographic device in the art of the ancient Near East. As a symbol of cosmogonic stability smiting is primarily identified in the divine iconography, emphasized by its metaphysical interpretation, which might be the reason, that it gained more significance in the divine imagery of the Syro-Palestine, and the neighbouring cultures of Anatolia, and Mesopotamia.

IV. Papers published on the topic of the research

Relevant publications related to the topic

Cornelius I. (1994), *The Iconography of the Canaanite God Reshef and Ba'al: Late Bronze and Iron Age I Periods (c 1500–1000 BCE)* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 140), University Press Fribourg, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen.

Cornelius, I. (2008), *The Many Faces of the Goddess: The Iconography of the Syro-Palestinian Goddesses Anat, Astarte, Qedeshet, and Asherah c. 1500–1000 BCE* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 204), Academic Press Fribourg, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen, Second Enlarged Edition (First published, 2004).

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Schoske, S. (1982), *Das Erschlagen der Feinde*: *Ikonographie und Stilistik der Feindvernichtung im alten Ägypten* (unpublished Ph.D dissertation), Heidelberg.

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Schroer, S. (2008), *IPIAO: Die Ikonographie Palästinas/Israels und der Alte Orient: Eine Religionsgeschichte in Bildern: Band 2: Die Mittelbronzezeit*, Zusammenarbeit mit dem Projekt

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Teissier, B. (1996), *Egyptian Iconography on Syro-Palestinian Cylinder Seals of the Middle Bronze Age* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis Series Archaeologica 11), University Press Fribourg Switzerland Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen.

Personal publications related to the topic

Roboz, E. (2019), „The iconography of the 'Storm God of the Vineyard' in the Neo-Hittite Art" (A „Szőlőskert viharistenének" ikonográfiája az újhettita művészetben), *Kaleidoscope: Publisher of History of Culture, Science and Medicine* 10.18, 1–13. (In Hungarian)

Roboz, E. (2019), „Bika hátán álló viharisten bronzszobrocskája Kelet-Anatóliából - Egy ikonográfiai kompozíció fejlődéstörténete", Szépművészeti Múzeum Közleményei 124, 17–35. (in Hungarian)

Roboz, E. (2019), "Bronze Statuette of a Storm god Standing on a Bull in the Egyptian Collection: Tracking the Evolution of an Iconographic Composition", *Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts* 124, 15–34.