

# Ancient Art and Artemis: Toward Explaining the Polymastic Nature of the Figurine

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A satisfactory explanation for the exact nature and purpose of the numerous rows of breast-like nodules on the statues of Artemis of Ephesus has long evaded Classical scholarship. Consequently, as Machteld J. Mellink has observed, a rather entertaining series of hypothetical interpretations of these bulbous objects on the torso of the Artemis figurines have been proposed over the years.<sup>1</sup> A catalog of these various opinions and theories include identifying the "multiple-breasts" as bee or ostrich eggs, grapes, nuts or acorns, bull testicles, some type of jewelry, articles of clothing, or stylized human breasts.<sup>2</sup> Despite this wide array of scholarly supposition, the majority of those writing on the subject do concede that the polymastic feature of the icon is best associated with fertility and perhaps even astrological motifs.<sup>3</sup>

Sometime ago, Robert Fleischer suggested that the "multiple-breasts" of Artemis find their origin in some kind of pseudo-polymastic garment, the primary form or sense of which is now lost to us.<sup>4</sup> Granted, a truly convincing solution to the problem may never emerge in light of existing archaeological, historical, and iconographic evidence. However, this brief article seeks to support Fleischer's explanation for the breast-like objects peculiar to the goddess Artemis by offering a possible source for the original form and sense of this pseudo-polymastic garment.

Before discussing the proposed source for the pseudo-polymastic garment behind the Artemis figure, it is necessary to outline the several assumptions that have shaped this analysis. First, the goddess Artemis of Ephesus has more in common with the Great Mother cult of Anatolia, than the Artemis of Greek and Roman mythology. The Greek Artemis was daughter of Zeus and Leto, and sister of Apollo. She was the moon goddess, as well as the virgin goddess of hunting. The Roman Diana was the goddess of the forests and groves. Artemis of Ephesus was a fecundity figure and a fertility goddess, a manifestation of the Great Mother-Goddess of the ancient Near East. (Of course, the argument that some common

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1. Machteld J. Mellink, Review of *Artemis von Ephesos und Verwandte Kultstatuen aus Anatolien und Syrien* by Robert Fleischer, *AJA* 79 (1975), 107-8.

2. E.g., Robert Fleischer, *Artemis von Ephesos und Verwandte Kultstatuen aus Anatolien and Syrien* (Leiden, 1973), 73-85; cf. Edwin Yamauchi, *The Archaeology of New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* (Grand Rapids, 1980), 106-7.

3. E.g., E. Heinzel, "Zum Kult der Artemis von Ephesos," *Hauptblatt* 50 (1972-1973), 243-51.

4. Fleischer, *Artemis*, 87-88.

proto-type of the goddess gave rise to all three of these portrayals of Artemis remains a possibility).<sup>5</sup>

Second, I concur with those who trace the Great Mother cult to the Anatolian goddess of nature and fertility, Cybele. In turn, the religious ideas and practices associated with the Great Mother cult in Asia Minor can be traced to the cults of Athtart or Astarte in West Semitic religion, and Ishtar in Mesopotamian religion. Ashtoreth was the Phoenician goddess of love and fruitfulness, while Ishtar was the equivalent for the Babylonians and Assyrians.<sup>6</sup>

And third, Greek legend connects the origin of the Artemis cult of Ephesus to the Amazons, a tribe of fierce female warriors who settled in Cappadocia and were ruled by a mighty Queen. These Amazons are credited with the founding of many cities in the region, including Ephesus. At some point, Artemis of Ephesus was adopted by the Greeks who colonized Ephesus around 1100 B.C. All this suggests that at least early on, the Artemis cult of Ephesus was associated with military motifs, in addition to, if not apart from, fertility motifs.<sup>7</sup>

Given these assumptions, I propose that the source for the original form and sense of the pseudo-polymastic garment suggested by Fleischer is some type of scale armor commonly worn by warriors in Egypt and Mesopotamia from the late Middle Bronze and early Late Bronze periods on. The coat of mail in the ancient Near East was made of either interlocking rings of bronze or small elongated scales of bronze tied together with leather thongs in overlapped rows. Mesopotamian art, including sculptured objects, mural paintings and reliefs, and seal impressions represent both human warriors and kings, as well as the gods and goddesses of the divine realm, wearing types of scale armor.<sup>8</sup>

The goddess Ishtar, or the Sumerian Inanna, seems the logical source for the Artemis icon because she embodied both fecundity and military motifs. For the Sumerians and Babylonians, she was the daughter of Anu, the sky god, and functioned as the Great Mother, the goddess of fertility, and the queen of heaven. For the Assyrians Ishtar was the daughter of Sin, the moon god, and functioned as the goddess of hunting and war. Ishtar appeared in several local forms in Mesopotamia—for example, Ishtar of Nineveh and Ishtar of Arbela were the “Lady of Bat-

5. So William Sanford LaSor, “Artemis,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Revised* (Grand Rapids, 1979), 1:306–8.

6. E.g., Helmer Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. J. Sturdy (Philadelphia, 1973), 59–62, 141. On the pervasive influence of the Ishtar cult on the Hittite and Hurrian pantheons of Anatolia, see Hans G. Güterbock, “Hittite Religion,” in Vergilius Ferm, ed., *Ancient Religions* (New York, 1965), 91–94.

7. See Pierre Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, trans. A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop (Oxford, 1986), 36.

8. E.g., André Parrot, *The Arts of Assyria*, trans. S. Gilbert and J. Emmons (New York, 1961), figs. 57, 85, 115–17, 127–28, 203. This type of scale armor was apparently donned as defensive armament by warriors in Syro-Palestine as well (cf. *širyôn qašqaššim*, “scale armor” or “plated cuirass” in 1 Sam. 17:5). According to E. A. Speiser, “On Some Articles of Armor and Their Names,” *JAOS* 70 (1950), 47–49, the term is of non-Semitic origin [perhaps Hurrian?]; and Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands* (London, 1963), 1:196–97, has noted this armor is a well-known Egyptian and especially Asiatic style—but not Mediterranean. For examples of ancient Egyptian and Assyrian scale armor, see Yadin, 1:196–97, 2:354, 400–1, 418–19.

ties," while Ishtar of Erech was the Great Mother, the goddess of love and fertility. She also enjoyed high honor among the Hurrians and the Hittites of Asia Minor.

Elsewhere, the Code of Hammurapi named Ishtar "the Mistress of Battle and War" and the avenger of those who neglect royal law, whereas in Sumerian Uruk her epithets included "the mistress of joy," "the queen of love," and "she who loves pleasure and joy." Further, the myth of Ishtar's descent into the underworld describes how all reproduction on earth ceased while she was away.<sup>9</sup>

H. W. F. Saggs has observed a connecting link between the two seemingly irreconcilable characteristics of war and fertility associated with Ishtar. It is the idea that both when life is cut off in battle and when life is created in the sexual act, there Ishtar is manifest.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the description of Ishtar's disrobing as she descends into the nether-world proves instructive when comparing the Ishtar and Artemis figures. The accompanying chart shows the correspondence between the items of apparel and ornamentation left by Ishtar with each gatekeeper during her journey into the world of the dead and the features of the Artemis figure:<sup>11</sup>

<i>Ishtar</i>	<i>Artemis of Ephesus</i>
crown	crown
halo/inset with stars	aura-halo/inset with stags
ear pendants	ear pendants
chains or necklaces	acorn necklace/flower garlands
pectoral ornaments (= scale armor?)	pectoral ornaments (including zodiac signs and egg-shaped objects) = leg coverings in part?
girdle with gemstones on hips	?
bracelets on hands-feet	?
"robe of splendor"	?

It is worth noting, too, that the symbols associated with Ishtar included the lion, a cup, a shield, an eight-point star, the sun and moon, and a spear head. The symbols for the Amazon Artemis included the ax, spear, bow and shield, and crescent moon. Symbols for Artemis of Ephesus show some continuity with both Ishtar and the Amazon Artemis in that in addition to her symbols of the stag, wolf, bear, and zodiac signs, Artemis of Ephesus was sometimes flanked by lions, occasionally appears holding a cup, and often was adorned with lunar discs.<sup>12</sup>

Of particular significance are the chains or necklaces and the pectoral ornaments worn by Ishtar. The *erimmatu* or chains were necklaces of egg-shaped beads.<sup>13</sup> The *dudittu* are described as pectoral ornaments worn exclusively by women and

9. Ringgren, *Religions*, 60. For an English translation of the text of the Sumerian "Descent of Inanna," see Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* (London, 1984), 51-90.

10. H. W. F. Saggs, *The Greatness That Was Babylon* (New York, 1962), 333.

11. Cf. E. A. Speiser, "Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World," in J. B. Pritchard, ed., *ANET*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, 1969), 106-9.

12. F. Guirand, ed., *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, trans. R. Aldington and D. Ames (New York, 1968), 120-23; cf. E. Douglas Van Buren, *Symbols of the Gods in Mesopotamian Art. An. Or.* 23 (Rome, 1965).

13. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, 4:294.

goddesses.<sup>14</sup> They were made of metals, including bronze, gold, silver, or some combination thereof, and were fairly lightweight (between 5 and 15 shekels on the average). Some were highly ornate, decorated with gold discs or beads, inset with precious stones, and engraved with symbols of animals, zodiac signs, and the like.

The suggestion here is that the *dudittu* or pectoral ornaments of Ishtar were probably fashioned after a type of scale armor. This coat of mail usually consisted of a series of rounded metal plates secured in layers with leather thongs.<sup>15</sup> It seems the scale armor *dudittu* or pectoral ornaments of the proto-type Ishtar figurines were accidentally, or more likely deliberately, fused or blended artistically with the *erimmatu* (necklaces of egg-shaped beads) in the icon as exaggerated human breasts. This feature may have developed gradually as the veneration of the Artemis image in Anatolia shifted from a military to a fertility emphasis. This explains why the pectoral ornaments of the Artemis figure are both oblong and arranged in overlapping rows. The bulbous nature of the feature is no doubt an imitation of human breasts.

Admittedly, the unusual polymastic feature of the Artemis figure defies exact interpretation as to its original nature and purpose. However, Fleischer's proposal identifying the rows of breast-like nodules of Artemis with a pseudo-polymastic garment remains the most viable theory. Perhaps this contribution to the entertaining series of hypothetical interpretations of the bulbous objects on the torso of the Artemis figure moves us closer to a satisfactory explanation and understanding of the feature. At the very least, it seems as plausible as the ostrich egg and bull gonad theories!

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14. *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, 3:168–79.

15. Note the translation of the Sumerian *tu.di.da.* (= Akkadian *dudittu*), "breastplate," in Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, 53, 58.