

Cultural Exchange between Egypt and the Ancient Near East

During the Pre- and Early-Dynastic Periods

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Early interactions between the pre-dynastic ancient Egyptians and their contemporary Near Eastern neighbors resulted in a wide range of cultural influences. This is not only documented in an excessive goods and products exchange program but it also reflected in the cultural development of the early societies of both sides. This paper aims to study and interpret two main channels of cultural interactions between Egypt and the Ancient Near East during the Pre- and Early Dynastic periods not only through the documented evidence of material culture transfer in form of shared regional objects but also through investigating possible further cultural interactions in an socio/economic context.

I- Shared Regional Objects

Reconsidering various evidence of material culture transfer between Egypt and the Ancient Near East during the Pre- and Early Dynastic periods such as pottery, palettes, maceheads, etc. representing shared regional objects of distinctive cultural significance might contribute to the reconstruction of the cultural interrelations between Egypt and the Ancient Near East.

A-Pottery

Pottery exchange between both grounds is documented since prehistoric times. The commercial links with Early Bronze Palestine during the early Naqqada II phase account for the presence of non-local pottery at Maadi¹ represented by distinctive footed ceramics, with a neck, mouth and handles decorated en mamelons, made from a calcareous clay fabric, that were assigned imported products such as oils wines and resins².

The late Naqqada II era witnesses the collapse of the Buto/Maadi culture and the gradual extension of the Upper Egyptian Naqqada culture into the Delta. A new and distinctive pottery appeared both in the Delta and Upper Egypt during that time. The primary source of this imported pottery on typological and petrographic grounds appears to have been the southern Levant³. At Abydos, the first sherds of Palestinian pottery appear in a Naqqada II grave, then in different burials of the Naqqada III phases. The largest quantity of imported ware comes from tomb U-j at the Umm el Qa'ab cemetery in Abydos⁴, a Naqqada III multi-room burial of a powerful late Predynastic individual dating to 3200 BC. It consisted of twelve rooms covering an overall area of 66.4 square meters. Although robbed, it contained a great deal of Egyptian pottery and almost 360 clay vessels imported from southern Palestine, which would strongly indicate a widespread regional trade pattern. The 150 small labels found in this tomb are inscribed with what appear to be the earliest known hieroglyphs. According to the excavator, Gunter Dreyer, traces of a wooden shrine in the burial chamber and an ivory model scepter demonstrate that this was a tomb of a ruler, possibly King Scorpion I from Dynasty 0.

Watrin⁵ provides further insight into the nature of pottery and other goods circulating between protohistoric Palestine and Egypt within a regional socio-political context. He regards the imported pottery as Palestinian 'tribute' brought to the leading elite ruling Abydos. It is worth noting that stylistic characteristics of the imported ceramics were sometimes imitated in the local production as the foreign practice of adding wavy-ledge handles adopted by Egyptian craftsmen.

Pottery from excavated strata at sites in northern Egypt and southern Palestine now make it possible to coordinate specific cultural periods in the two regions, and demonstrate continuing contact as the Maadi culture in the north was replaced by the Naqqada culture. While the Naqqada IIB phase corresponds to

the Early Bronze Age EBA Ia in Palestine, Naqada IIc-d and Naqada III/Dynasty 0 were evidently contemporaneous with the EBA Ib culture. Contact between northern Egypt and Palestine at that time was overland, as demonstrated by archaeological evidence from North Sinai revealing almost 250 early settlements located between Qantara and Raphah. The majority of excavated Egyptian pottery from these settlements suggests a commercial network established and controlled by the Egyptians as early as EBA Ia. This network was a major factor in the rise of the urban settlements found later in Palestine in EBA II. Technological studies⁶ of pottery from EBA sites in southern Palestine clearly indicate that in EBA Ib strata many of the pottery vessels used for food preparation were probably manufactured by Egyptian potters using Egyptian technology but from local Palestinian clays. In EBA Ib strata there are also many storage jars made from Nile silt and marl wares, which must have been imported from Egypt. This does not only indicate a technological transfer, but it also credits Pre- and Early Dynastic Egypt for establishing a highly organized network of settlements in the southern Levant where an Egyptian population was in residence.

The socio/political framework of early cultural contacts between Egypt and the Near East is documented by the occurrence of early Dynastic kings' names on pottery excavated at southern Levantine sites. A fragmentary clay pot bearing the partially preserved serekh of Ka, an early ruler dating to the period directly before Narmer, has recently been discovered at the site of Lod in the southern Levant. In Palestine, Narmer's name has been found at Tel Erani, Tel Gat, Tel Arad, Small Tel Malhata, Tel Halif terrace, Tel Lod, Gezer and other locations. The pottery on which the royal names have been found is of Egyptian workmanship and probably represents trade goods. There is evidence to suggest that Egyptian traders lived amongst the local Levantine population during Narmer's time. A sealing of Djet's has been also found at En Besor in Southern Palestine.

The importance of the Delta for Egyptian contact with south-west Asia is also suggested by enigmatic evidence from Buto. In strata of the Lower Egyptian Pre-dynastic culture at Buto, two unexpected types of ceramics were found by Thomas von der Way⁷: clay 'nails' and a so-called Grubenkopfnagel, a tapering cone with a concave burnished end that resembles artefacts used in Mesopotamian Uruk culture to decorate temple facades. Von der Way suggests that contact with the Uruk culture network may have taken place via northern Syria, as the earliest Pre-dynastic stratum at Buto was found to contain sherds decorated with whitish stripes characteristic of the Syrian aAmuq F ware. Excavations in Northern Syria, Sumer and Elam reveal pottery ware suggesting Egyptian identity⁸ and provide more data on early contacts between Egypt and the Near East in the fourth millennium BC.

The contents of the imported pottery reveal early remarkable interest in regional products. The existence of wine industry in Palestine exporting its produce to Egypt in the fourth millennium BC is suggested by the presence of Palestinian pottery that had been assigned for wine in Egypt, notably the wine was contained in 'bottles' i.e. handless jars⁹. Recent studies have revealed that wine was present in the Naqqada IIb-c period, as suggested by the remains of *viris vinifera* identified at Buto II¹⁰. The fact that wine was likewise locally produced in the Delta¹¹ indicates high awareness of competitive products within a regional context. Pottery jugs and vases of Syria-Palestinian origin found in Djer's¹², Djet's and Den's¹³ tombs attest to a high demand of wine, oil and resin from this region. In the tomb belonging to the last king of the 1st Dynasty, Qaaa, thirty inscribed labels describing the delivery of oil were found during re-excavation by the German Institute¹⁴. Most likely these oils were imported from Syria-Palestine, and may have been made from berries or resins of trees found there. The presence of huge quantities of aromatic oil saturating a ramp leading to Semerkhet's tomb certainly suggests very large-scale foreign trade controlled by the crown and indicates the importance of such luxury goods for royal burials.

b- Palettes & Maceheads

Palettes and maceheads can be regarded as part of a repertoire of shared regional objects and shapes¹⁵, perhaps belonging to an 'elite international style'. Greywacke cosmetic palettes constituted the item of choice for funerary equipment during the Amratian¹⁶. Their shapes became increasingly diverse, ranging from a simple oval shape, sometimes incised with figures of animals, to complete zoo-morphs. In the southern Levant, rectangular or square palettes emerged in the Chalcolithic. In function and shape they are close to Pre-dynastic Egyptian types. A nearly square palette from a fourth millennium context at Meser could be an Egyptian import. EB Levantine palettes may have been Egyptian antecedents indicating stone import and local manufacture or rather actual imports according to Egyptian parallels. In exceptional cases, unusual examples could be provided, such as the one of Tell Far'ah, which presents an unusual stone for a palette as no Egyptian travertine palettes are known. A small number of Egyptian siltstone palettes could be identified in the southern Levant owing to the combination of material, shape and technology¹⁷. Found mainly in EB Ib tombs, they probably arrived via the exchange networks developed between the two regions during the second half of the fourth millennium BC.

Maceheads have a long history in Egypt and the Near East, stretching back to Chalcolithic. In Egypt, the disc-shaped maceheads, usually carved from a hard stone characterizes the Naqada I phase as a symbol of power. The disc-shaped macehead of the Amratian period was replaced by the piriform (pear-shaped) type from late Naqada I, two examples of which had already appeared at an earlier date in the Neolithic settlement of Mermida Beni Salama¹⁸. Piriform mace-heads occur commonly in graves from late Naqada I onwards as a symbol of power¹⁹, not only in hard stones, but also in non-functional clay, probably indicating certain funerary significance. Egyptian maceheads ceased to have a practical use by Naqada IID²⁰, and later became 'symbols of power'.

Made of stone, ivory or copper the piriform macehead²¹ in particular had a wide distribution during the fourth millennium BC. Piriform mace-heads are quite characteristic not only of Egypt, but also of Byblos and Palestine. While they were originally used as weapons, maceheads gradually adopted a ceremonial/ ritual function²² on a regional level. In Palestine, the functional copper mace-heads of Nahal Mishmar and Safadi²³ were developed into functional highly ornate staff emblems which must have had purely ceremonial significance similar to the situation in Egypt. The concept of the mace may have been employed as a power-factor in the southern Levant during the EB II-III²⁴, the result of this object's elite associations in Egypt. In Byblos, elaborate ceremonial mace-heads²⁵, of polished haematite or ivory, with silver cappings, handle bands and pommels of silver characterize a number of burials during the 4th mill. BC. The ceremonial mace-heads of the Late Pre-Dynastic and Early Dynastic Period and the imagery stereotype of the Egyptian king striking his enemies with a mace stress local authenticity and point to further accumulative value added to the mace-head as a royal cult object and as a symbol of royal domination extended to interregional contexts..

C- Varia

There are many indications of Egypt's involvement in intercultural contacts and commerce with the Ancient Near East. The craft of ivory and bone carving in the southern Levant and high popularity of relevant produced figurines during the 4th millennium BC show close links with Egypt, from where they seemed to have their origin²⁶. Those artifacts found in funerary contexts represent female figurines with heavy pendant breasts, arms parallel to the body with hands resting at the hip, recalling parallel examples in Egypt and South Palestine. The occurrence of shells from the Nile at southern Levantine sites popular with such figurines suggests the probability of imported artifacts.

The presence of microlithic industries in the neighborhood of Helwan show similarities with the Levant²⁷, but the real significance of these industries cannot be determined because of the poor information available. Near Eastern influence is clearly discernible in the worked flint of the Maadian culture. In contrast to the local flint industry essentially employing pressure-flake technology, the Maadian assemblages also included large circular scrapers knapped from large nodules with smooth surfaces, which were well known throughout the Near East²⁸. Carefully edged blades with rectilinear ribbing, known as "Canaanite blades", also appear at Maadian sites; these were to develop into the later Egyptian 'razors' or double scrapers) that were elements of royal funerary equipment until the end of the Old Kingdom, sometimes polished and sometimes reproduced in copper and even gold. The bifacial pieces, few in number, included projectile points, daggers, and sickle blades. The latter were products of the local tradition of Fayum bifacial sickles and were gradually replaced by a Near Eastern style of sickle mounted on a blade.

Remarkable popularity of copper and silver objects in the fourth millennium BC burials in the north-east cemetery at Byblos attest to parallel metal applications in Egypt. Metallic objects seem to have been particularly common at Maadi. Not only are there simple pieces such as needles or harpoons, but also rods, spatulas, and axes. These forms of artefacts were made from stone in the Faiyum and Merimda cultures, but at Maadi they were made from metal. This situation is also paralleled in Palestine during the same period²⁹, where polished stone axes totally disappear and are replaced with metal versions, albeit using different techniques from those at Maadi. This substitution of metal for stone cannot be mere coincidence, but must be the result of process of technological progress that is an indication of the genuine symbiosis between the two regions.

II- Socio/economic Interactions

By the early EB Ib-Naqqada IIC/ D2, strong evidence of commodity exchange existed between Egypt and the Ancient Near East, based on a series of regional land-based trading networks to supply elites with exotic products not available in Egypt. At some point in the process of Egypt's unification and the consolidation of royal power a genuine core-periphery relationship with the southern Levant must have come into existence³⁰. In the late EB IB-Naqqada IIIB/CI, a more intense core/periphery association developed, with the emerging Egyptian state spreading its control from the eastern Delta to the Southern Levant (xAs), where it established a series of outposts. This shift involved the movement of Egyptians into the southern Levant at the behest of its nation-building leadership, creating strong administrative centers at Tell es-Sakan, En Besor and possibly also Tel Ma'ahaz and Lod³¹. This presence was at its strongest under Narmer, but continued under Horus Aha. The impact on the comparatively underdeveloped urban complexes of the Levant was profound, bringing with it political, social and economic organization, accelerating the development of complex society in the EB II.

Egyptian activity was the most intense in the Southern Levant as evidenced by impressive EB Ib presence along with assemblage of predominantly Egyptian artifacts. At Tell es-sakan in the Gaza region, impressive EB Ib fortifications along with an assemblage of predominantly Egyptian ceramics suggest that this was an Egyptian colony, acting as a forward base for Egyptian activity further north. En Besor and Tel Ma'ahaz, have likewise revealed evidence of activity consistent with a substantial Egyptian resident population³² supported by a state administrative apparatus. The evidence of the EB I Egyptian administrative presence embraces a number of artifact classes, including Egyptian serekhs incised onto ceramic vessels, clay bullae and seals, architecture with Egyptian elements, Egyptian ceramics and other objects.

During the EB Ib, the arrival of the administrative apparatus of the Egyptian state at Tell es-sakan, En Besor and possibly Tell Ma'ahaz may have had a profound impact on the existing elites. This 'asymmetrical culture contact' between the core (Egypt) and periphery (Southern Levant) involved the presence of a structured hierarchy to facilitate economic activity and the organized acquisition of

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commodities³³. Moreover, an increased level of economic and social organization was required³⁴ on the part of local communities to supply commodities in sufficient quantities.

The Egyptian involvement in the southern Levant in EBI³⁵ is strongly documented by the presence of an 'Egyptian' administrative apparatus at 'En Besor enclosing a variety of artifacts which show distinct 'family resemblance' to their Egyptian counterparts dating to the early phase of the I Dynasty. A considerable number of seal-impressions and bullae excavated at 'En Besor belong together with the local 'Egyptian' ceramic and flint industries, to a growing group of artifacts produced locally in southern Palestine in the Egyptian tradition and style. The sealing of the agricultural products, and their storage in the Egyptian administrative building at 'En Besor –using 'Egyptian' locally-manufactured objects –indicate Egyptian administrative practices recalled by the Egyptian population of 'En Besor in order to manage local consumption and control exchange programs. The more than 1000 Egyptian vessels –comprising more than 50 types belonging to nine families of Pre-Dynastic Egyptian pottery³⁶ together with more than 60 seal-impressions of Egyptian style discovered there testify to excessive administrative tools characterizing the Egyptian system of tax-collection, storage and distribution of the produce by administrative officials. The signs of the 'En Besor sealings mostly show direct relevance to the Egyptian corpus of seal impressions despite of their local manufacture. It is worth noting that one group sign has been analogously adapted to an early Dynastic officer's seal impression dating to the reign of Narmer, probably reads as wAD indicating a personal name³⁷. The inscriptions of 'En Besor seal impressions No. 14 and 15 referring to the god spd in another personal name ' qA spd' "Sopdu is high"³⁸ stress the socio/religious aspect of the Early Egyptian-Levantine cultural interaction.

A 1st Dynasty Egyptian building of Stratum III at 'en-Besor in southern Palestine represents an early example of an Egyptian administrative building acting as a stage-post strategically located on the road leading from North Sinai to the southern Levantine centers. It was apparently established by a small royal expedition sent to the southern Levant during the early phase of the 1st Dynasty entrusted to be in charge of carrying out royal commands and protecting royal benefits. According to recent excavations examining the plan, construction and function of the building, it was erected according to Egyptian architectural traditions, using sun-dried bricks of standard Egyptian size (8x12x23cm) applying Egyptian architectural methods. Its geographical scope suggests that it was mainly established to act as a control station regulating Egyptian-Levantine trade networks and to control the richest and most stable perennial water source in the entire southern Levantine Coastal Plain³⁹. The presence of an Egyptian building of this type and date in the southern Levant reflects the early phases of inter-regional expansionism and stresses Egypt's growing interests to regulate regional ecological and economic resources. Meanwhile, the introduction of an administrative apparatus may have significantly contributed to the remarkably increasing level of contemporary urbanization in the region and the development of small local sites into regionally-important production and trade centers⁴⁰.

The archaeological discoveries at Kfar Monash and Tel Erany provide important evidence supporting Egyptian Proto-Dynastic or Early Dynastic military interests in the Levant. The appearance of Narmer's name on potsherds from Tel 'Erani together with tools of probable Egyptian origin documented in the EB IB lithic assemblage of the site attest to Narmer's military campaign into Palestine and Transjordan⁴¹. Moreover, the EB hoard of metal objects found at Kfar Monash sheds further light on the military/administrative context of early Egyptian –Levantine relations. The variety of tools and weapons of Kfar Monash hoard –enclosing spear heads, daggers, different forms of knives, axes, adzes, chisels, one macehead in addition to 800 copper plates, etc. –seems to represent the administrative and military equipment of Egyptian officers commanding the unit. It is possible that these tools were imported from Egypt where a bladelet industry prevailed during the 4th millennium BC. It is worth noting that the contemporary bladelet tools appearing in the EB IA site H in the Nahal Besor have no local Levantine parallels and that the chronologically closest examples are found in Badarian Egypt⁴².

The EB II witnesses a change in settlement patterns and the emergence of large, fortified complexes in the southern Levant⁴³. The development of these towns followed intense interaction with the developing Egyptian state in the EB IB, which probably provided some of the impetus for growth, particularly in the south. The rise of EBII urban complexes may have also been affected by an increasing level of migration and nomadism⁴⁴. The emergence of complex society in EB II southern Levant and the withdrawal of Egyptian presence produced a shift in regional power structures. The relationship changed to one based on commodity exchange, product acquisition and diplomacy with local elites. This change in the status of each region is visible in the decline of the Egyptian presence in the southern Levant combined with the appearance of imported Egyptian fine stone vessels⁴⁵.

Egypt played a considerable role in the development of the complex society of the southern Levant. On the other hand a number of Near Eastern concepts contributed to the socio-economic development of Pre- and Early-Dynastic Egypt. The Maadian cultural complex of several archaeological sites during the Naqada Period has only recently been brought to light. The Predynastic remains of the excavated cemetery and settlement complex at Maadi show that there were three types of settlement remains, one of which is unique in an Egyptian context, strongly reminiscent of the settlements at Beersheba in southern Palestine⁴⁶. This foreign type in clear contrast to the two other domestic ones involves houses excavated from the living rock in the form of large ovals measuring 3x5m. in area and up to 3m. in depth, each of which was entered via an excavated passageway. The walls of one of these subterranean houses were faced with stone and dried Nile-silt mud bricks. The presence of hearths, half-buried jars, and domestic debris suggests that these were genuine permanent habitations.

The royal tombs of the I-Dynasty at Abydos –in which enormous baulks of timber were employed for floors and ceilings as in the tombs of Djet and Qaa –indicate a growing demand of timber around the Byblos region for developing architectural applications. Byblos emerges as the entrepot for the coastal coniferous timber trade. The Egyptian growing demand for coniferous resins may have been linked to emerging techniques of mummification, for which the aromatic and preservative qualities of coniferous resins were highly prized. The importation of cedar, seen in small quantities during Naqada III, begins on a significant scale under Horus-Aha, with large timber beams for construction transported via the maritime route from the northern Levant. The need for heavy coniferous timbers like cedar, required for the construction of royal monuments and shipping, transformed interregional exchange patterns. The large-scale acquisition of imports, especially timbers by sea, required significant resources and high levels of political organization and control⁴⁷. Analyses conducted on a small number of II- Dynasty wood samples reveal the continuation of coniferous timber imports, particularly on a large scale during the reign of Khasekhemwy⁴⁸. This indicates continuation of relations with the Byblos region.

Some of the sealings from Peribsen's tomb bear the inscription "tribute (or conquerer) of sTt Setjet", which usually refers to Syria-Palestine. An ivory gaming-rod from Qa'a's tomb at Abydos is engraved with a picture of a bound prisoner who is identified as coming from Syria-Palestine. The earliest known example of the title "Overseer of Foreign Land" occurring on two seal-impressions from Khasekhemwy's funerary enclosure at Abydos seems to point toward a good deal of activity outside Egypt's borders during this reign. The attestations of Khasekhemwy discovered in the Egyptian temple area at Byblos suggest the Levant as the foreign candidate.

The prosperous program of goods exchange and socio/economic interactions enabled a parallel ground for intellectual and spiritual interaction as well as mythological transfers. Remarkable evidence of contemporary Levantine cultural influences during the Naqada II Period created a solid ground for myth transfer.

Considerable similarities between the ancient Egyptian senet-game and parallel board games contemporary known in the Ancient Near East⁴⁹ during the Early Bronze Age attest to early intellectual harmony between both peoples. Whether it had originated in the southern Levant in EB II or in Egypt prior to the III-Dynasty remains an open question. A group of board games discovered in EB II strata at Arad

credits the southern Levant with earlier archaeological evidence yielding seven different game versions with variable numbers of fields⁵⁰. The senet game is documented in Egypt in texts and archaeological contexts from at least the III Dynasty until the end of the Roman period. However, the accumulated religious and funerary aspects of the senet game closely engaging it with the Egyptian hereafter throughout a long-time tradition speak for local originality despite its absence from pre-III Dynasty contexts, which may be justified by future discoveries.

Another example is to investigate the basis of the “eye”- myth associated with the struggle of Horus and Seth as a cultural transfer adapted from the Levant. The consequent phases of the Horus-eye myth being injured, stolen then revised or rather cured and its relative context to the reduction and the re-appearing of the moon natural phenomenon may suggest Near Eastern origin. The sky falcon Horus and the mythical desert animal Seth present the Egyptian candidates for the predatory cat and the wicked bull in the parallel struggle version associated with these moon-phenomenon in the prehistoric Near Eastern Mythology⁵¹. Remarkable evidence of contemporary Levantine cultural influences during the Naqqada II Period may have enabled this myth transfer. The ritual combat reflecting the conflict of Horus and Seth has been considered as a conspicuous element in a cultural and religious pattern common in the ancient Near East⁵². Junker⁵³ explains the Egyptian myth as a symbol of the strike between light and darkness, through the waxing and waning of the moon, since the left eye of the god Horus itself represents the moon. The position of Thoth in the myth is explained by his status as moon-god⁵⁴. Such an astronomical reference should have been fitting well with the Egyptian view regarding the transposition of the political conflict to the sky.

Conclusions

1-Cultural interactions between Egypt and the Ancient Near East during the Pre- and Early Dynastic periods are remarkably documented by a number of shared regional objects and products of distinctive cultural significance. Pottery, palettes and maceheads in particular stress a regional communal organization for major products and the concentration of wealth and prestige objects during the fourth millennium. Both Egypt and the Near East show increasing specialization of relevant crafts and technologies as well as remarkable awareness of competitive products within a regional context.

2-Investigating possible further cultural interactions between Egypt and the Ancient Near East in a socio/economic context reveals Egypt considerable role in the development of the complex society of the southern Levant during the fourth millennium BC.

3-The kind of socio-political complexity attested in Pre- and Early Dynastic Egypt obviously influenced the urban development of contemporary evolving Near Eastern sites. Southern Levantine sites which owned agro/economic profiles, but lacked the socio-political potential to support greater concentrations of population and sophisticated specializations such as craftsmen and government administrators, made particular benefit of Egypt's advanced experience in this regard. The Early Dynastic state that emerged in Egypt in the fourth millennium BC practicing the integration of rule over an extensive geographic region managed to transfer its cultural experience to contemporaneous polities in the Near East.

4-Archaeological evidences suggest that Egypt was in direct contact with a number of key sites, of which the Egyptian state was fully aware of their strategic and economic importance and therefore showed early interest to maintain official links through various methods.

5- The archaeological record from the Southern Levant suggests that the clusters of EB I-II sites involved Egyptian population that interacted symbiotically with local agriculturalist communities in the region.

6-Appling the Egyptian administrative system at a number of Levantine sites introduced the structure of hierarchical authorities and the establishment of an organizational administrative apparatus, which resulted in considerable advances towards regional urbanism .

7-A number of sites in both regions such as Maadi and En-Besor represented a kind of cultural crossroads playing key roles in transmitting various cultural influences. A number of archaeological evidences excavated at those sites indicate strong involvement in intercultural contacts and interregional exchanges.

8- The prosperous program of goods exchange and socio/economic interactions enabled a parallel ground for intellectual and spiritual interaction as well as mythological transfers such as the eye-myth and its association with the moon-phenomena in the prehistoric Near Eastern Mythology.

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