# Reduced to Her Bare Essentials
## Bronze Age Piriform Pendants in the Levant

Map of Eastern Mediterranean, with sites referenced in the text. Courtesy of Paul C. Butler.

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*At the dawn of the Late Bronze Age, a new style of gold pendant appeared in the Levantine repertoire (fig. 1). This new piriform or "pear-shaped" pendant displays a highly schematic rendering of the female sex: A feminine head, usually Hathoric in style (fig. 2); breasts; a navel; and carefully delineated female genitalia with vulva. A secondary characteristic that adorns many, but not all, of the pendants is a branch extending vertically above the navel. Of the 20 examples catalogued by Ora Negbi in her study of Canaanite divine iconography in metals, 18 were made of sheet gold, one of electrum, and one of sheet silver (Negbi 1976: 95–97). As such, one might also argue that gold was a secondary defining attribute of these pendants.*

In spite of the high status medium, the techniques used to make the pendants were rather simple. In all cases, the gold (or electrum or silver) foil was rudely cut and decorated with repoussé and some chasing, with the top of the material rolled simply into a loop for suspension. The edges are not finished, and the suspension loop may even be lopsided (Benzel 2013: 260–61). Considering the admittedly mediocre craftsmanship that went into making the pendants, it appears that these were items of general, rather than exclusively elite, use (Benzel 2013: 261).

As is typical with depictions of females in ancient Near Eastern iconography, and especially those which make display of sexuality or erotic characteristics, these items were identified as either specific Levantine "mother/fertility" goddesses and/or pertaining to an abstract concept of fertility or femininity. In 1951, R.D. Barnett identified these images as "the 'mother goddess,' probably Ashtart" (Barnett 1951: 77) (NB: Ashtart is neither a mother nor a "mother goddess"). In her masterly study *Canaanite Gods in Metal*, Negbi suggested that "[f]urther evidence for the cult of the fertility goddess in southern Israel is provided by a series of gold figurine-pendants..." (Negbi 1976: 140). For Othmar Keel and Christophe Uehlinger, these pendants were an evolved form of the Middle Bronze Age "Branch Goddess" scarabs, and both were associated with vegetal fertility (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 28 and 54). By contrast, in her 2013 publication "Ornaments of Interaction: Jewelry in the Late Bronze Age," Kim Benzel suggested that the schematic piriform pendants, and with them the larger corpus of gold foil Qudšu pendants (see below), were not fertility goddesses, but rather the expression of sexual allure, thus recognizing that fertility and eroticism are separate categories (and that the latter pertains to women more so than the former) (Benzel 2013: 265; on engendering fertility in the ancient Near East, see Budin 2014).



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The baseline assumption, then, is that face + breasts + vulva combine to create a construct of femininity identified exclusively with fertility and/or eroticism. Sometimes this construct is identified as a Levantine goddess (e.g. Ashtart), sometimes it is symbolic and theoretical. An alternate possibility, explored here, is that this combination of attributes in the context of the Late Bronze Age Levant may instead have referred to the Egyptian goddess Hathor, and that the attributes of face, breasts, and vulva are metonymic references to the powers and attributes of the goddess.

## THE DATA SET

Twenty examples of this schematic piriform pendant, designated the "Representational Group" by Negbi, have come to light from the Levant. The earliest examples come from Tell el-ʿAjjul, where four examples were found in two hoards—277 and 1299 (Negbi 1970: 15)—dating from the mid-16th–15th centuries B.C.E. Both hoards were located within the town, 277 in a room of Town II and 1299 in an empty space apart from any structures (Negbi 1970: 12). As such, the pendants were *not* found in the region of the palace, supporting the hypothesis that they were of common, personal use rather than exclusively elite or aspects of state-level cult. The dating of the hoards can only provide a *terminus ante quem* for the objects. Nevertheless, these specimens from Tell el-ʿAjjul are the oldest of the schematic piriform pendants recorded by Negbi.

Dating to the mid-15th–14th centuries B.C.E. are: a single example from

**Figure 1**. Gold piriform pendant from Tell el-Ajjul. Ashmolean Museum AN1949.305.
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**Figure 2**. Hathor amulet from reign of Hatshepsut, 18th Dynasty. © Brooklyn Museum 61.192.

Lachish, nine examples from *Niveau* 1 at Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit), two from Minet el-Beida (the port of Ugarit) found in *Dépôt* 213 *bis*, and one from Megiddo. An additional pendant from Megiddo dates to the 13th–12th centuries B.C.E. and is the latest of the known examples, while a third example from Megiddo and one from Enkomi on Cyprus are of unknown context and date. The schematic piriform pendant, then, first appears in Tell el-ʿAjjul, makes its way northwards through Palestine to Syria where it becomes popular in the ancient city of Ugarit, and makes at least one journey west to Cyprus (Negbi 1976: 95–96).

## COMPARANDA

The schematic piriform pendants that first came to light at Tell el-ʿAjjul appeared with an iconographically similar style of pendant (all with loops indicating their use as jewelry) dubbed by Negbi the "Semi-representational Group" (Negbi 1976: 95–96). Unlike the piriform pendants, these are roughly dagger-shaped and even more schematic. In spite of their simplicity, each depicts a female face, breasts, and pubic triangle, as well as a necklace beneath the face. None of the faces are Hathoric. Three examples exist: two of gold foil, one of silver. Two come from Tell el-ʿAjjul, of which one is nude (fig. 3) while the other is partially clothed. These came from Hoards 1312 and 1299, which are, once again, from the town and not the palace context. The third example, which is also nude, comes from Ras Shamra, *Niveau* 1. The semi-clothed specimen from Tell el-ʿAjjul dates to the opening of the Late Bronze Age, and thus appears to be the oldest of the group.

A second style of gold foil pendant iconographically related to our schematic pendants belongs to what Negbi called the "Syrian-Representational Group" (fig. 4). These pendants have roughly pear-shaped bodies topped with heads, creating more of an asymmetrical hour-glass silhouette. They have non-Hathoric, schematic faces, necklaces, breasts, pubic triangles, and, like the schematic piriform pendants, often have a branch above the navel. There are five examples from Ras Shamra dating to the mid-15th–late 14th centuries B.C.E.; one example comes from the *Niveau syro-hittite* at Tell Nebi-Mend, dating to the 14th–13th centuries B.C.E. Unlike the two previous categories, they are wholly a northern phenomenon.

A third style of piriform pendant frequently drawn into discussions of our schematic images are the so-called "Qudšu pendants," which are gold foil pendants (fig. 5) with cognates in terracotta that show a fully frontal nude female, often with a Hathoric face and jewelry. In contrast to our schematic pendants, though, Qudšu pendants display the full body of the female depicted. With this detail come additional attributes, such as arms consistently in a V-pose, hands holding either goats (in the northern examples) or flowers (in the southern examples), and, often, a lion beneath the feet, indicating that the female in question is a goddess. One unique example from Ugarit shows serpents behind the goddess's hips. This portrayal of the "Nude Goddess" derives from northern prototypes,



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having made its way down to Palestine from Anatolia by way of Syria. The image does not reach Egypt until the 13th century B.C.E., where it is adopted as the iconography of the Levanto-Egyptian goddess Qedešet during the reign of Ramesses II in the 19th Dynasty (Budin 2015: 12). Their later date, non-schematic, fully detailed renderings, and their northern origins all suggest that these Qudšu pendants were not cognates of our schematic pendants. As such, they will not be considered in this analysis.

The oldest schematic renderings of a female as a gold foil pendant with emphases on face, breasts, navel, and pubic triangle come from Tell el-ʿAjjul, both for the slightly older semi-representational style and the schematic piriform style under discussion here. It is here, then, right on the *via maris* between

**Figure 3** (left). Middle Bronze Age electrum pendant from Tell el-Ajju. IAA 1935-3841. Collection of Israel Antiquities Authority. Photograph by Avraham Hay, © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.
**Figure 4** (right). Gold female pendant from Ugarit. Louvre AO 19133. Photograph by Franck Raux. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource.



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Palestine and Egypt, the gateway between cultures, that the origins and meanings of our pendants should be sought.

## ICONOGRAPHIES

The image of the fully frontal Nude Female dates back into the mid-third millennium B.C.E. in Mesopotamia, where jar handles discovered in Cemetery A of ancient Kish, right by the temple of Inana, were decorated with the most rudimentary form of the image (fig. 6) (Moorey 2003: 26). The icon spread westward, through Syria and then Anatolia in the third and second millennia B.C.E., eventually reaching Egypt in the 13th century B.C.E. What does not appear over the course of this migration, though, is the schematic form seen on our piriform examples. After the jar handles of Kish, it is inevitably a full, nude body that is displayed, as on Figure 5 from Ugarit. The schematic form—face, breasts, pubis—is previously unknown in Mesopotamia and the Levant.

This schematic form is also unknown in Egypt, where an alternative nude female iconography had been prevalent since the Middle Kingdom and endured into the Late Bronze Age. In Egypt, so-called potency figurines portrayed an *en face* nude female, occasionally holding an infant. But these images were usually in mundane fabrics such as terracotta or, more elaborately, faience, and nothing about their iconography suggests divinity (e.g. no headdresses, symbols of power such as the *was*-scepter, or zoomorphic iconography).

By contrast, the individual Hathor head did appear in the iconography, in media ranging from architectural capitals to amulets. But this image was not associated with a nude female body, either in its entirety or merely those portions most commonly associated with sexuality; the goddess appeared either dressed or in bovine form.

**Figure 5**. Gold pendant from Minet el-Beida. Louvre AO 14714. Drawing by Paul C. Butler.

It thus appears that it was in Tell el-ʿAjjul, the border between the Egyptian south and the Canaanite north, where the iconographies of these two cultures met, mixed, and led to the creation of the schematic piriform pendant. Specifically, it appears that the Canaanite population of Tell el-ʿAjjul adapted their pre-existing "Semi-representational" style (see above) to create a schematic portrayal of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, the native Egyptian deity most closely associated with foreigners, including Canaanites.

## HATHOR

### Face (fig. 2)

The constituent elements of face, breasts, vulva, and branch all have strong correlations with Hathor. To begin, there is the use of the distinct Hathor face on the majority of the pendants. Although this face also appears on the goddess Qedešet, her iconography does not appear in Egypt before the 13th century B.C.E., and thus too late to influence pendants rendered as early as the 16th century B.C.E. The faces must be identified as Hathoric. Some of the earliest schematic pendants do not use the standard Hathoric face, as on Figure 7 (which is nonetheless distinctively Egyptian). However, of the 20 examples catalogued by Negbi, 75% do maintain this feature, and it appears that once the image came to be associated with Hathor, the iconography remained standard.

### Breasts

The consistent use of breasts also serves as a reference to Hathor, who was notable for her role as divine wet nurse. In the Middle Kingdom, King Nebhepetre Mentuhotep had himself portrayed in his funerary chapel at Dendera as suckling from the breast of Hathor, the goddess who, in bovine form, also nursed the child god Horus in the Cheminis marsh. Above the goddess's head is written:



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**Figure 6**. "Goddess" jar handle from Kish. Ashmolean Museum AN1925.230. Drawing by Paul C. Butler.

"Utterance of Hathor, Mistress of Dendera: 'I protect you, my arms unite you with life. I rejuvenate you with milk so that your enemies may fall under you" (Habachi 1967: 27, adapted). This is the first appearance of Hathor in the Divine Wet Nurse motif (Budin 2011: 56). In the New Kingdom, Pharaoh Hatshepsut records that she was sired by the deity Amun-Re, and nursed by the Seven Hathors. In the Hathor chapel at Deir el-Bahri she has Hathor proclaim, "I fill your majesty with life and happiness as I have done to my Horus in the nest of Khebt. I have suckled your majesty with my breasts" (Lesko 1999: 106–07). In the 19th Dynasty, Pharaoh Seti I has himself portrayed suckling at the breasts of Hathor no fewer than four times in the first Hypostyle Hall of his temple at Abydos (Budin 2011: 78). The first Hathor is entitled "Lady of Dendera" and says, "You have suckled my milk, you having appeared as King of Upper and Lower Egypt." The second Hathor, "Lady of the Mansion of Sekhmet," claims "I cause my arms to embrace your beauty; it is I who nurse you" (David 1981: 23). Hathor, then, is one of the primary Egyptian goddesses associated with nursing, and thus iconographic references to breasts may call to mind this aspect of her role in Egyptian religion.

## Vulva

Far more prominent in the lives of commoners (who generally did *not* get to suckle at the breasts of Hathor) was the goddess's role in sexuality, manifest especially in the notion of the vulva. Votive vulvae (and, far more often, phalloi) were dedicated to



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the goddess at her sanctuaries (Pinch 1993: 235–45). The goddess herself bore the title *Nebet Hetepet*—Mistress of the Vulva (Capel and Markoe (eds.) 1996: 72; Pinch 1993: 154). This no doubt was in part due to Hathor's role in both sexuality and childbirth, but it may also refer to one of the goddess's more (in)famous roles in Egyptian mythology. In *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* it is told that once:

> The great god [Re] spent a day lying on his back in his pavilion, his heart very sore and he was alone. After a long while, Hathor, Lady of the southern sycamore, came and stood before her father, the All-Lord. She uncovered her nakedness before him; thereupon the great god laughed at her. He got up and sat with the great Ennead … (Lichtheim 2006: Volume 2, 216).

Humorous, yes, but the tale does reveal that Hathor's display of her vulva resets the cosmic order, bringing the head of the pantheon back into functionality and good spirits. As such, Hathor's sexuality, manifest in her genitalia, is a source of her divine power.

**Figure 7**. Gold piriform pendant from Tell el-Ajjul. Rockefeller Archaeological Museum, Jerusalem. Drawing by Paul C. Butler.

## Branch

Hathor's epithet in the above text is "Lady of the (Southern) Sycamore." This epithet first appears on an early 4th-Dynasty monument to one of Hathor's own priestesses, where the goddess is called "Mistress of the Sycamore" (Lesko 1999: 83). Two additional Old Kingdom priestesses, one buried at Saqqara and one at Dahshur, also claimed to be attendants to "Hathor, Mistress of the Sycamore in All Her Places" (Lesko 1999: 84). In the New Kingdom Book of the Dead, Spell 82 claims, "You shall sit under the branches of the tree of Hathor, who is preeminent in the wide solar disk" (Lesko 1999: 87). A contemporary



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town north of Memphis bears a reference to "Hathor, Mistress of the Date Palm" (Lesko 1999), while the goddess was also worshipped in the northern city of Byblos, famous in Egypt (and elsewhere) for its cedar. Of all the Egyptian goddesses, Hathor was the deity most likely to be associated with trees and foliage, possibly accounting for the use of the branch iconography.

## Gold

It is possible that the medium of the plaques recalled Hathor, as another of her epithets is "The Gold" or "The Golden One." This epithet appears in New Kingdom love poetry:

I praise the Golden Goddess
I exalt Her Majesty
I raise high the Lady of Heaven
I make praise for Hathor… (Lesko 1999: 116).

As Negbi noted in her study of the full corpus of jewelry from Tell el-ʿAjjul, the magnificent goldwork, some of the finest in Palestine, is a *unique* combination of Canaanite and Egyptian styles (Negbi 1970: 30 and 37). It is not surprising, then, that a unique motif first appears there, combining Palestinian and Egyptian concepts and motifs. The schematic piriform pendants show the full frontal divine nudity, prevalent since the third millennium, combined with the specifically Ajjulian schematism first apparent in the semi-representational pendants. From Egypt come the aspects of the Egyptian goddess most closely associated with the Levant—Golden Hathor, the Suckling Goddess, Mistress of the Vulva, the Lady of the Sycamore. The constituent parts of the pendants need not refer *generically* to concepts of fertility or eroticism, but recall the attributes and aspects of power of a specific Egyptian goddess. From ʿAjjul the motif spread northwards, with schematic piriform pendants appearing as far north as Ugarit and Cyprus, while a derivative style—the Syrian representational group—adapted the motif to a more northern clientele.

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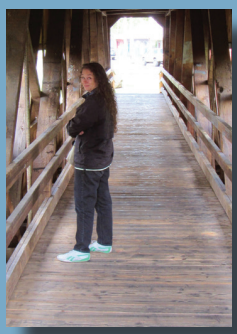


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