

Išhara: One Deity – Many Aspects?

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Abstract: The goddess Išhara is attested early in cuneiform sources, and her cult can be traced back in all regions of the Ancient Near East over a period of more than 2000 years. From this point of view, it is worthwhile to look at her integration into the Hittite pantheon and try to identify changes and continuities in her figure and present some ideas about the circumstances under which the process of integration took place.

1. The beginnings

As Archi noted in 2020, there are good reasons to suspect the origin of the goddess Išhara in the northern Syrian region. Archi was able to demonstrate that the main goddess of early Syrian Ebla was undoubtedly Išhara. In pre-Sargonic Ebla, she had her own temple and was also worshipped in the temple of the god Kura (Archi 2020, 2-5). Her great importance to the kingship can be seen in numerous offerings made to her by the royal family (Archi 2020, 9-11). Išhara is explicitly referred to as the king's Išhara (^DŠÁRA :iš EN) and has been revered as such for generations. The proximity to royalty then also prompted Matthiae (2010) to interpret the motif of a cylinder seal from Ebla as an early representation of Išhara. He argued that the figure of the god on a seal from Ebla facing forward and with two unattached horns on his head could be Išhara because of her symbol – the scorpion – and the depiction of the king and queen on the seal. However, since the doubtless identification of the scorpion with Išhara is possible only from the Late Bronze Age onward, this correlation must be a hypothesis.

Given the brilliant work already presented by Archi, it is not necessary to go into further detail here. It should only be mentioned that Išhara was also worshipped in an impressive number of other towns and villages in the Ebla region, of which *MÁ-NE^{K1}*, located on the upper Euphrates, may have been the most significant (Archi, 2020, 5-8).

The evidence for Ebla as the main cult site and possible origin of Išhara is strong. But the syllabic spelling of Išhara or Išhala in Ebla is limited to the genre of lexical lists where she is equated with ŠARA_s¹.

¹ ^DŠARA_s = *iš-ḫa-ra* / *iš-ḫa-la*, Pettinato 1982, 291; in addition also outside the lexical lists the variants ^DŠÁRA(:iš) as well as ^DSIG₇:AMA seem to refer to Išhara, see most recently Archi 2020, 1.

In Mesopotamia, the cult of Išhara acquires greater importance during the reign of Šulgi of Ur at the end of the 21st century BC². Even during the Akkad dynasty Išhara is mentioned in personal names and some documents. Of particular interest is a treaty between Narām-Sîn and an Elamite king, which contains a list of at least 32 deities, most of them Elamite, but also some Mesopotamian, such as Ilaba, Ninurta, Išhara, and Nin-karak, as well as Mazziat³. This evidence is difficult to explain. It is hardly probable that the cult of Išhara was adapted by the conquerors of the city shortly after the conquest of Ebla and used significantly to represent the Akkadian dynasty in matters of state.

Even in early Mesopotamia, a syllabic spelling of the name Išhara is rare. To this day, it is entirely uncertain whether the logogram GÁ/LAGAB×SIG₇, attested in various places, denotes the deity Šara or Išhara⁴. The logogram LAGAB×SIG₇ is attested more than 300 times in the ED period and probably means Šara in most cases. But in the case of Tell Agrab, the existence of a Šara cult belonging to Umma, would be surprising, and it is possible that Išhara was already meant here. As Sallaberger noted, the situation is somewhat clearer at Tell Beydar, where the logogram was used with the phonetic indicator eš₄. In Beydar, the divine name is also written LAGAB×IGI-gunû as in Tell Agrab. Thus, the reading /ešhara/ depends on the reading /šára/ of the same sign⁵. Despite the unclear situation in Mesopotamia at this early stage in history, the region closest to Anatolia with a significant Išhara cult was northern Syria during the 3rd millennium.

2. Towards Anatolia

2.1 Southern Mesopotamia

As noted above, clear evidence for Išhara in southern Mesopotamia is rare and became popular only toward the end of the 3rd millennium, when the rulers of the 3rd dynasty of Ur since Šulgi worshipped the goddess cultically. A climax in this development can be seen under the wife of Amar-Sîn, Queen Abi-Simti of Ur.⁶ In this case, we can explain infiltration as a personal matter. Juridical documents from the old Babylonian period show that Išhara had a temple of her own in Larsa and Sippar (Prechel 1996, 36; 38).

Scholars of the Old Babylonian period constructed Išhara as a hybrid of Ištar in ancient Babylonian classical literature. The Gilgameš version mentions a “bed of Išhara”, which obviously refers to Išhara as a goddess of love and the bed is the place where marriage is to be consummated:

For Išhara the bed
was laid out,
Gilgameš would meet
with the young woman
at night⁷

² Hilgert 1994, 32-36.

³ Hinz 1967, 91; 93.

⁴ I am very grateful to Walter Sommerfeld for sharing his collection of attestations on LAGAB×SIG₇ and GÁ×SIG₇, and discussing them with me.

⁵ Sallaberger 1996a, 45 note 45.

⁶ Weierhäuser 2008, 132-35.

⁷ Gilgameš P (OB II) 196-98, quoted from George 2003, 179.

IšĦara was an Ištar figure. The difference between the two figures is that IšĦara is portrayed as a bride and her sexuality is solely for procreation. This is formulated in the epic of Atra-Ħasis:

When, to institute marriage,
they heed Ištar in the house of [the father-in-law],
let there be rejoicing for nine days,
let them call Ištar IšĦara⁸

As we shall see later on, the literarily explicitly formulated function as a goddess of love with a focus on fertility coincides perfectly with her symbol, the scorpion. Personal names confirm the image of a goddess of matrimonial love and birth.

2.2 Northern Mesopotamia

The great number of personal names in the royal archives of Mari attests not only to the goddess's popularity in Upper Syria and Upper Mesopotamia. We can also see that personal names compounded with the name IšĦara refer to the same aspects as in Babylonia: the maternal and protective nature of the goddess⁹.

The popularity of the goddess as early as the beginning of the 2nd millennium in Central Anatolia deserves special attention. IšĦara possessed votive offerings (*ikribū*)¹⁰ and received silver and two bull figurines (together with Ištar)¹¹. The goddess had a temple in Kaneš which can be reached by going upwards (*elium*)¹². She also appears in some personal names, such as Šū-IšĦara “the one of IšĦara” or Ummī-IšĦara, “IšĦara is my mother”; but, she is not invoked as a personal deity according to the evidence so far¹³. New data from Kaneš was collected by Kuzuoğlu, who lists small payments on special occasions¹⁴. The statement in a court order *itamma Talhatium ina IšĦara* “the man of Talhat shall swear by IšĦara”¹⁵, departs from the maternal aspect and points to the function of an oath goddess.

The documentation from Kaneš shows that IšĦara was worshipped in a broader sense, but there were no invocations that indicate a personal goddess. It seems important to note that IšĦara was already known as an oath deity during the period of the Assyrian trading colonies in Anatolia; this is attested in the Treaty of Apûm with Assur. In the list of gods, she appears next to Ninkarrak by whom the city of Assur and the king of Apûm have to swear at the beginning of their treaty¹⁶.

In summary: during the first half of the 2nd millennium there was an active cult in Ebla, Mari, Assur, Kaneš, yet, the aspects are not always clear.

⁸ Atra-Ħasis II 301-04, quoted from Lambert, Millard 1969, 64-5.

⁹ A collection of names including the theophoric element IšĦara is given by Prechel 1996, 51-3.

¹⁰ Garelli 1965, 154 ll. 6-7.

¹¹ TC 3.106: 5-7.

¹² Attestations are collected by Kuzuoğlu 2016, 35.

¹³ Veenhof 2018, 75.

¹⁴ Kuzuoğlu 2016, 36-8.

¹⁵ n/k 391: 1-2, cited by Veenhof 2018, 75 note 130.

¹⁶ Eidem 2011, 417, I: 15; Veenhof 2018, 82 pays attention to the fact that it is not without doubt whether Ninkarrak and IšĦara are the gods of Apûm of Assur.

3. Infusion into the Hittite Pantheon

After the goddess Išḫara had been known and worshipped in Anatolia as a deity with a cult and a temple already in ancient Assyrian times, she appears very early in the Hittite Empire in the treaties with the Kaška-people.

“See, we have made an oath. All the gods, we have brought in assembly: The Sungod, the Stormgod, the Wargod, Tutelary Deity, M[oongod¹⁷], Iṣḫara, the Lord of the Oath, the gods of Heaven, the gods of the Earth, the primordial gods, the gods of the Ḫatti-land, the gods of the Kaškaland, the sky, the earth, the mountains, the rivers. They shall be witnesses to this oath!” (KBo 8.35 II 8’-10’)

This early evidence is important, because the wording of this treaty is extraordinary in many respects. Although, it cannot be ruled out that the reason for Išḫara’s choice was ignorance as to what the non-state treaty partners would accept, her pre-existing popularity in the role of oath-guarantor may have played a role. Whatever the case, Išḫara became very important as an oath deity. She is entitled as *MUNUS.LUGAL MA-MI-TI* or *NIŠ DINGIR-LIM* or *linkiyant*¹⁷. Išḫara was integrated into the state cult as early as the empire period, when Hurrian influences prevail. In lists of sacrifices, she received offerings in the circles of Ḫepat and Šawuška¹⁸, but Festivals on her own were located in Kizzuwatna where her cult seems to be very prominent¹⁹. As local avatars of Išḫara, in Hittite texts appeared to be those of Kummani, Aštata, Niriša and Ebla.

The memory of Išḫara as a great goddess of Ebla could have been known very early in Ḫattuša. One hint is given by “The Song of Release”²⁰. The main divine figures are introduced at the beginning of the poem about Ebla, i.e., Teššub, Allani, as goddess of the underworld, and Išḫara. The poem was originally composed in Hurrian, a dialect much older than that known to have been in use in the fifteenth to fourteenth centuries. The preparation of a bilingual edition may be explained by training Hittite scribes. Von Dassow (2013, 130) argued that the appreciation and thus the memory of the divine protagonists does not seem to have lasted long. For the tablets of the epic left in the cellar of temple 16, have hardly been used further, according to the present findings. Therefore, it is not clear how popular the local variant of the Išḫara of Ebla was among the Hittites.

In summary, Išḫara appears in various roles and functions in Hittite Anatolia:

- Oath Deity (treaties)
- Underworld deity (myth)
- Patron of the cities of Aštata, Ebla, Kumani, Niriša
- Disease (ritual)
- Fertility (ritual)

The question as to whether the scorpion was known as a symbol of the goddess in Hittite Anatolia remains open. As mentioned above, there is already evidence of the scorpion as a possible symbol from Ebla or the ancient Assyrian archives at Kaneš in the glyptic, suggesting a connection with the goddess²¹. Pictorial representations of

¹⁷ For attestations see Prechel 1996, 91-7.

¹⁸ For attestations see Prechel 1996, 105-16.

¹⁹ For attestations see Prechel 1996, 120-29.

²⁰ *Editio princeps* by Neu 1996. For a discussion of Išḫara’s role in the mythic-historical poem see de Martino 2019, 129-30.

²¹ For references see Kozonglu 2017.

the scorpion in the Hittite empire are not attested. In Hittite literature the scorpion does not play a significant role. However, in this context, attention should be paid to the fragment KBo 21.20. This is the translation of a ritual text from the Akkadian with a collection of Hittite healing recipes²². The ritual against witchcraft is performed before Scorpius. Schwemer (2013, 159) has pointed out that the extant text shares some similarities with a Neo-Babylonian prayer addressed to Išĥara, which had the same purpose and may represent an earlier version of the latter prayer. Regardless of the question about a direct predecessor to the Neo-Babylonian version, the text clearly indicates that the symbolic image of a deity represented as a scorpion reached Ḥattuša from Babylonia. This may also be illustrated by the fact that a Babylonian recitation with an invocation to Išĥara is preserved in KBo 32.206 relating to the Babilili rituals²³. As in the case of the originally Elamite Pinengir, who is the central deity in the Babilili rituals²⁴, Išĥara also seems to be considered as one of the various Ištar hypostases from Babylonia. This was also pointed out by Miller, who sees DINGIR.GE₆'s association with the moon god and the underworld as sharing a striking number of features with Išĥara, thus emphasizing a commonality between the goddesses DINGIR.GE₆ and Ištar and Pirinkir in Ḥattuša²⁵. It is true that the close association of Išĥara with the moon god is evident from the cursing and swearing formulas that often threaten the destruction of offspring, which may be due to the importance of both deities in connection with pregnancy and childbirth. In rituals of Hurrian origin, Išĥara is among the deities drawn from the earth.

In summary: at the end of the Hittite empire, Išĥara remained integrated into the central pantheon of the empire, as represented by the sacrificial series of festivals for Teššub and Ḥepat and by the selection of images in Yazılıkaya²⁶.

4. Late Bronze Age evidence outside Ḥatti

During the time of the Hittite Empire, the strongest evidence for an Išĥara cult came from northern Syria and Kizzuwatna. Since Archi has already explained the facts in several articles²⁷, I will limit myself here to a few words. In both Alalaḥ, Emar, and Ugarit, evidence can be found in many written documents of a cult in which great importance was attached to Išĥara, especially in Emar, as reflected in their epithets: Išĥara, mistress of the city, Išĥara of the king, Išĥara of the prophetesses. And without a doubt, Išĥara was an oath-guarantor *par excellence* in northern Syria of the Late Bronze Age.

While there is evidence for the worship of Išĥara in many places in Mesopotamia of the Old Babylonian period, the source material for Cassite Babylonia is limited. From the reign of Meli-šipak comes the first datable *kudurru*, on which, in addition to the symbols of the gods, there are inscriptions, including the scorpion with the addition ^p*iš-ĥa-ra*. It is important to that, for the first time, it is possible to assign the scorpion, which has been documented in representational art since prehistoric times, to a specific deity. The scorpion is portrayed on almost all “boundary stones”. Even where it is not (no longer) depicted, the great importance attributed to Išĥara, who is to be identified

²² For transliteration, translation and discussion see Schwemer 2013, 160-62.

²³ Beckman 2014, 58-9.

²⁴ Beckman 2014, 3-4.

²⁵ Miller 2004, 376-77.

²⁶ Prechel 1996, 105-16.

²⁷ See the bibliography in Archi 2020, 30.

with it now, as the guarantor of an oath is evident: a *kudurru* exists from the time of Marduk-apla-iddina I, whose inscription together with the scorpion have been erased²⁸.

In Late Bronze Age, the goddess had a sanctuary in the temple of Ištar of Assur and was offered sacrifices as part of the ritual of the reinstatement of the king. Therefore, we can safely assume that she continued to be part of the official pantheon, as the later surviving texts on the *tākultu* ritual make clear²⁹. From Elam only a few personal names with the theophoric element can be proved (Richter, forthcoming).

5. Conclusions

Schwemer (2008) has suggested three different ways in which a deity can take its place in the Hittite pantheon. First, the god or goddess is the victim of a godnapping. As Schwemer demonstrated, this type of integration is attested only for the Old Hittite period, so there is no need to consider this possibility in case of Išhara. Second, deities are incorporated into the pantheon through an *evocatio*. This can be noted for many deities with the exception of Išhara. Thus, only the third of the listed possibilities remains: Išhara found inclusion in the Hittite pantheon only through the expansion of the empire and the widening of the borders.

In general, regarding the relationship between textual sources and their meaningfulness for a reconstruction of the pantheon, it can be said that cult and ritual is attested by dedicatory inscriptions and sacrificial lists and ritual texts. From this aspect, Išhara appears in Anatolia as a lower deity in the circles of Hēpat and IŠTAR. We infer the role of the pantheon for the country from official inscriptions with their *curse formulae*. It is abundantly clear that, from this aspect, Išhara is a great deity for the land as the guardian of the oath. For the individual, we expect statements on “persönliche Frömmigkeit” from letters, seal inscriptions, and onomastics. In this regard, due to a lack of sources, no statements can be made for Hittite Anatolia. However, it can be assumed that her importance for the individual lay primarily in her function as mother goddess, as the personal names outside of Hatti show.

As an oath deity, Išhara became a member of the state cult, and her importance for the Hittites seems to be closely related to the use of state treaties as an instrument of power. This could be emphasized by the fact that Išhara was already an internationally known deity (Syrian, Assyrian, Babylonian) in this capacity when she was integrated into the Hittite pantheon. From this point of view, it does not matter whether the impulse came from the southeast or the southwest.

The great popularity that Išhara enjoyed in Kizzuwatna seems to favor a southwestern origin, since the cult of Išhara as an important goddess remained alive in the northern Syrian and Kizzuwatna regions during the 2nd millennium.

Nevertheless, I would like to leave open the question whether in Hittite Anatolia also a tradition was maintained which suggests a Mesopotamian origin of the goddess, as the few Akkadian incantation fragments may suggest. I also consider the assumption debatable that a deity would have spread from Ebla to Babylonia³⁰. With a migration of deities, one will have to assume socially influential individuals, as it became evident during the Ur III period.

²⁸ Seidl 1968, 94.

²⁹ Prechel 1996, 70-1.

³⁰ Archi 2020, 17: «Išhara reached Babylonia already at the end of the Old Akkadian period».

Even through an etymology of the name does not bring us closer to the origin of the goddess with certainty. In 2019, Bachvarova proposed an etymology based on the Hittite *išĥa-* “lord”³¹. She argued that all Hittite Mountain names are constructed masculinely and therefore ^{HUR.SAG}Išĥara in the Kizzuwatna ritual *CTH 641* should be understood accordingly. In contrast, as far as I can see, a Semitic origin is usually preferred, referring to the verbal root *šêru* “to rise early” (*šĥr)³². However, a definite clarification cannot be achieved at present.

Hittite scholars have left us no information about Išĥara’s origin and family. All the more interesting is a middle Assyrian list of the AN:Anum series, which presents us with both a consort and an otherwise unknown son, and overall shows a mixture of Northern Syrian and Mesopotamian religious imagination.

^D ME.ME	^D <i>iš-ĥa-ra</i>
^D <i>be-let bi-ri</i>	MIN
^D <i>e-ta-mi-tu</i>	MIN
^D <i>iš-ĥa-ra</i>	MIN
^D <i>taš-me-zi-ik-ru</i>	MUNUS.SUKKAL ^D <i>be-let bi-ri-ke₄</i>
^D SAG.†GAR ¹	DAM.BI
^D MIN ¹ HAR	MIN
^D <i>aš-ta-me-er</i>	DUMU- <i>a-ni</i> ³³

At present, there is nothing to suggest that Išĥara became popular as a follower of her spouses in Syria and Anatolia. Rather, the quality of a mother goddess as a complement to the type of Ištar could have been interesting for her position of various panthea.

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³¹ Bachvarova 2019, 85.

³² A collection on possible etymological reconstruction can be found in Prechel 1996, 166-69.

³³ Litke 1998, 166, ll. 276-285.

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