

# Reflecting on archaeology and the understanding of Song of Songs

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The question of archaeology corroborating any 'historical information' is excluded from the outset by the poetic genre of Song of Songs. This contribution therefore focusses on archaeology's more modest purpose as far as its relationship with texts is concerned, namely whether it can facilitate the understanding of the text by investigating the material culture that features in Song of Songs. Archaeology is therefore understood in terms of its more extended definition, including artefacts, (cultural) objects functioning as metaphors, and historical geography. Attention amongst others will be paid to cities mentioned (Heshbon, Jerusalem, Tirzah), the (not founded) David's Tower, Pharaoh's palanquin, fauna and flora, as well as pottery.

**Contribution:** Although archaeology cannot inform everything in the text, the continuous archaeological endeavour has the hermeneutical function to transpose the reader into the ancient life (love) world (pun intended), preventing him or her of anachronistic projection of the present-day readers own world into the text, but also appreciating the (possible) common human condition which the present-day reader shares with the world of the text.

**Keywords:** archaeology; historical geography; Song of Songs; biblical interpretation; iconography; ancient sexuality; present-day sexuality.

...hulle my drie drifte:  
die aardse, die vrou en die Groot-Groot-Gees  
oor die kraal tussen kiepersol en klip.  
(D J Opperman, Uit: Heilige Beeste 1947)

## Introduction: What can archaeology do for Song of Songs?

When the biblical archaeological movement started in the 19th century (Scheepers 2000:1–10) it was mainly a treasure hunt, as the important and grotesque objects in important museums in the Western world testify, for example the Rosetta stone, Hammurabi Code and Ishtar gate in the British Museum, Louvre in Paris and Pergamon museum in Berlin, respectively (discussed in Scheffler 2000a). When archaeology developed more and more to become a science employing sound methods, the aim was to investigate the historicity of the biblical events, for instance founding the walls of Jericho (Scheffler 2013:1–8) or the Solomonic gates or horse stables in Megiddo, Hazor and Gezer (Scheffler 2000a:15–18, 59–61). Under Israeli domination the endeavour was to prove the early occupation of Canaan which would 'justify' the present Israeli state after the Second World War (e.g. the excavations at Beersheba, cf. Scheffler 2000b:306–337).

Today biblical or Palestinian archaeology (to my mind one could live with the term 'Biblical Archaeology' if the archaeology of the lands of the Bible is meant) has come of age; and most earlier vested interests have made room for a science which can be defined very broadly to include any information that can highlight the history, geography, material culture and background of any culture of the ancient past that relates to the Bible and specific texts of the Bible (cf. Fritz 1987:7–14), even the Song of Songs (henceforth SOS).

The question of archaeology corroborating 'historical information' is excluded from the outset by the poetic genre<sup>1</sup> of SOS. There is no historical event or major architectonic marker described in the Songs that can be discovered in order to prove that it occurred or existed. The SOS probably

1. Even if Fischer (2010:13–18, 211–229) is correct regarding SOS as being 'zwischen Poesie und Erzählung', the text remains poetry and the narrative is not a historical narrative.

**Note:** Special Collection: Septuagint and Textual Studies, sub-edited by Johann Cook (Stellenbosch University).

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reflects what Karl Marx had in mind at the time with his view regarding the 'end of history' where people just exist and enjoy life without major political conflict or events.<sup>2</sup> My contribution therefore focusses on archaeology's (apparently) more modest purpose as far as its relationship with texts is concerned, namely whether it can facilitate the understanding of the text by investigating the material culture that features in SOS including artefacts, (cultural) objects functioning as metaphors, and historical geography.

Surprisingly, there is much information that highlights the text and varied material and cultural objects (including fauna and flora) mentioned in the text that are calling for interpretation in its ancient context. It is therefore impossible to give due attention to them all within the scope of this contribution. In his outstanding and widely illustrated commentary on the Song, Othmar Keel ([1986] 1994) lists and discuss no less than 158 artefacts (mostly iconographical) from the ancient world that according to him illuminate SOS. Keel's approach is maximalist in the sense that his examples can be dated in a wide time range (from about 2500 BCE to 300 BCE). They should therefore be critically scrutinised, but nevertheless present us about what was possible in the ancient world. In what follows, I will only be able to discuss selected appealing examples which may contribute to the solution of some exegetical problems, and I will not confine myself to Keel's examples.

I hope to show and advocate the purpose of the archaeological enterprise per se, namely, to transpose the modern reader's mind into the ancient life (or *love*) world (pun intended) as far as possible to counter an anachronistic projection of modern ideas<sup>3</sup> and concepts into the text, allowing the text a fair chance to speak. Of course this is not totally possible, as archaeological excavation and interpretation demands a conscious decision of the reader to undercut notions of the modern life world and empathetically understand the ancient world.

On the other hand, this does not imply a total estrangement or historicisation or contextualisation of the text that does not allow for any *Horizontverschmelzung* or 'confusing of horizons' (to use Gadamer's term) between the ancient word and today. The aim therefore is also to probe the common ground between the word of the text and our own world, appreciating the (possible) common human condition which the present-day reader shares with the world of the text. To put it bluntly, the ancients fell in love and had sex, and so do we. They ate and we must eat. The question is to what extent we do it differently.

2. The reference to the Tower of David (of which we have an informative description in the Song and to which the girl's neck is compared, SOS 4:4) could have been one important material object implying military history, but it has never been unearthed. Its existence is likely in view of the reference in Nehemiah 3:26 'to the tower that pointed out from the king's palace' (although in the latter text, David is not mentioned). The tower was probably an impressive and well-known landmark and comparing it with a woman's neck (with its jewellery), it signifies its beauty, glory and formidability (cf. Alter 2020:38; Pope 1977:465–466).

3. Although the allegorical exegesis of SOS may not be modern (see Scheffler 2018:737–758; Schwienhorst-Schönenberger 2015), it is mitigated against by an archaeological interpretation of the text which takes the original context seriously above all else.

Since Keel is indeed a pioneer in this field, I would like to conclude my introductory remarks by referring to his observation (Keel [1986] 1994:11) that since Hengstenbergs allegorical commentary of 1853, allegorical interpretations (which were all diverse) continued for a century in the Catholic Church until 'in 1943 Pius XII'S encyclical *Divino afflante spiritu* not only allowed but even *required* attention to literary forms.' Keel ([1986] 1994) remarked appropriately:

Thus ended the Song's captivity under the capricious rule of a spiritualistic Babylon; all major churches now accept its return to the modest surroundings of home. (p. 11)

It is this 'home' in its most literal and broader sense that archaeology can illuminate, contributing to highlighting the implausibility of even sophisticated spiritual interpretations, as well as suggesting solutions to some exegetical *crux interpretata* (cf. Holman 1997).

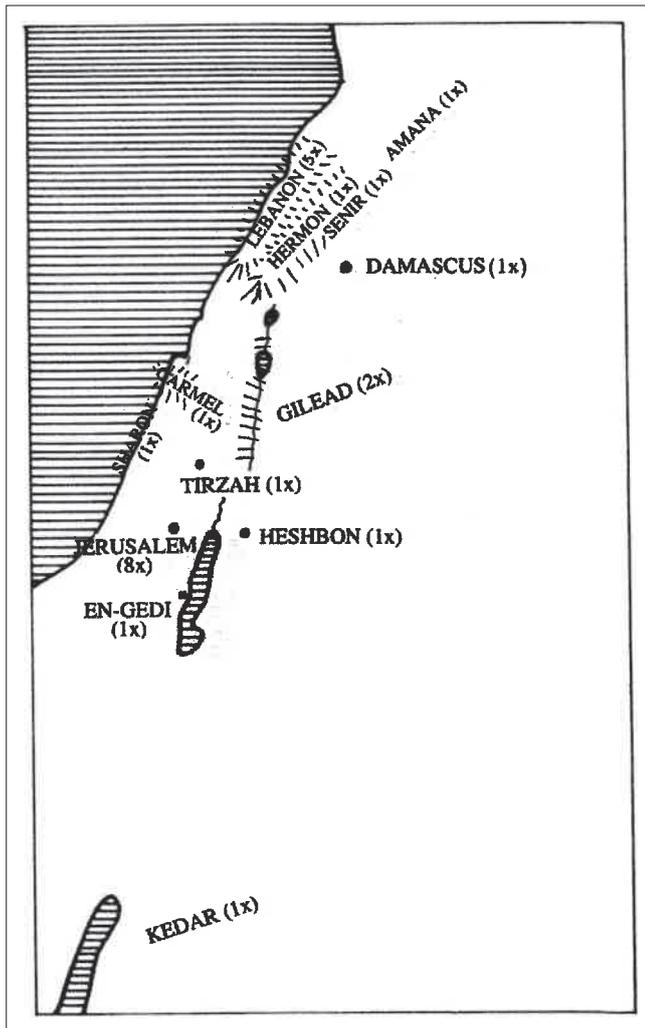
## Remarks on the historical geography of Song of Songs

The geography of a country or specific location can be regarded as a macro-artefact that today's world shares with the ancient world. This is indeed so, but the term 'historical' reminds us that over time changes could have occurred (even climatic!), and these changes should be accounted for. Nevertheless, the broad material context of SOS almost calls us to look firstly at the historical geography, since many place names are explicitly mentioned in the Song and their presence in the Song appears to be significant. Moreover, some of these sights (e.g. Tirzah, Heshbon and Jerusalem, En-Gedi) have been extensively excavated in the 20th century. Keel's commentary ([1986] 1994:36) contained a handy map that summarises the information (cf. Figure 1).

Having perused the statistical information on the place names that occur in SOS, the following interpretative remarks can be made:

It is quite conspicuous that the place names do not represent Israel (or Judah) of the Iron Age in which the book suggests to have been composed or written (narrated time). The geography covered is far *more* than that reflected by the biblical designation 'from Dan to Beersheba' (Scheffler 2000b). To my mind it was probably written in the South in the 3rd century, but the most names are from the north and even wider. Kedar near the Red Sea (where the girl who would quickly be in contact with the daughters of Jerusalem, SOS 1:5) indicates, that although real places are mentioned, the map exists freely in the author of SOS's mind.

*Thirteen* towns, mountains and regions are mentioned. The *towns* or cities are En-Gedi (mentioned once), Jerusalem (most prominent by being mentioned 8 times), Heshbon (1x), Tirzah (1x), Damascus (1x); *mountains* mentioned are Lebanon (5x), Hermon (1x), Senir (1x) and Amana (1x) and *regions* Kedar (1x), Sharon (1x) and Gilead (2x).



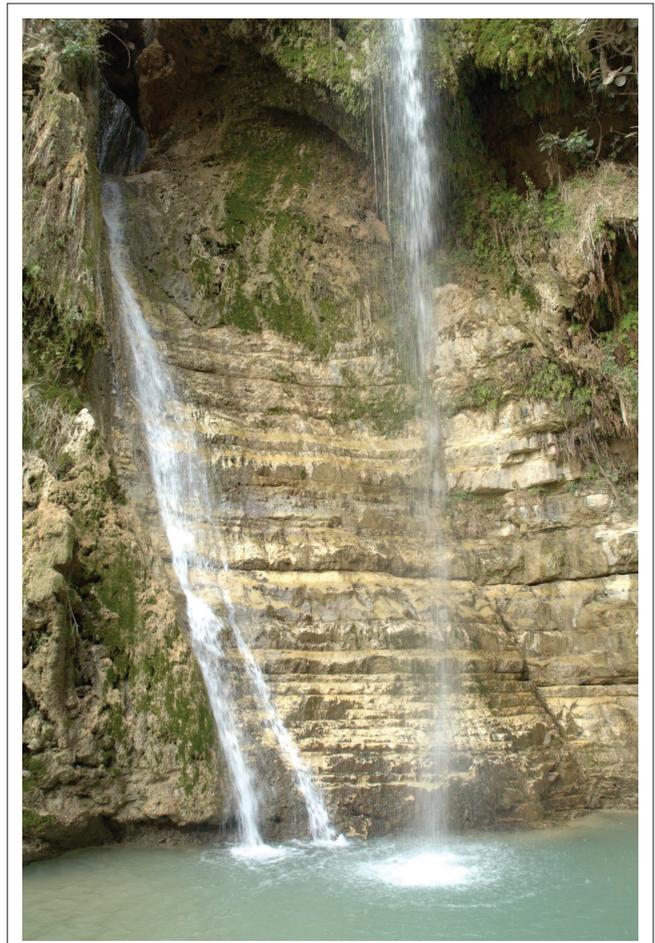
Source: Keel, O., [1986] 1994, *The Song of Songs: A continental commentary*, p. 36, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

**FIGURE 1:** Map of Palestine indicating the place names that occur in Song of Songs.

Besides Kedar, of the southern kingdom, only Jerusalem and En-Gedi are mentioned, but Jerusalem features eight times. En-Gedi is known to be particularly beautiful and fruitful, corroborated by the reference to the henna-blossoms in its vineyards (SOS 1:14, see Figure 2).

That *Jerusalem* is mentioned in SOS 6:4 as comely (תְּיָרָה), should be understood in terms of how the city looked like probably early in the 1st millennium BCE, and not after the exile or even today with its increased population. The mentioning of the city eight times should also be viewed in terms of the combined expression 'daughters of Jerusalem', the focus being more on the daughters than the city. Significant is the fact (which should be kept in mind by 'nature lovers' today) that although nature is positively viewed in SOS, it is not contrasted with the cities which could also be beautiful.

The remaining places in SOS are also from the North and further, but the capital Samaria is conspicuously absent. However, *Tirzah* is mentioned, the capital of the North for a short period before Omri removed it to Samaria. Tirzah is



Source: Wikipedia, n.d., *Ein Gedi*, viewed 13 November 2021, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ein\\_Gedi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ein_Gedi)

**FIGURE 2:** Waterfall at En-Gedi which reflects the fertility of the region.

praised for its beauty, but a modern photo (Figure 3) illustrates that although it was an attractive hilly area (Eybers 1988:87), history has taken its toll. Tirzah is archaeologically identified by De Vaux with Tell el-Farah, but there seems to be nothing in the modern excavations that can facilitate a better understanding of the Song (Reed 1990:633).

Another prominent city in the text is *Heshbon* in Trans-Jordan. In SOS 7:5 the girl's eyes are compared to the 'pools in Heshbon by the gate of Bath-rabbim'. The latter (meaning 'daughter of many') is probably a place within the city where the pools were. In 1995, I visited Heshbon with my good (archaeological) friend Coenie Scheepers. We especially looked for the pools, but they were absent.<sup>4</sup> Neither is there any indication in the result of the archaeological excavations that there were such prominent pools. However, this does not imply that there were no pools in ancient times. They were probably beautiful, and the metaphor is easily understandable.

The breaking or crossing of boundaries presented by these place names can be explained if the poems originally existed independently representing different authors. However, we

<sup>4</sup> Eybers (1988:125) referred to remains of a large dam in a wadi near the town, but it is doubtful whether SOS 7:4 is implicated.



Source: Wikipedia, n.d., *Tirza*, viewed 13 November 2021, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tirzah\\_\(ancient\\_city\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tirzah_(ancient_city))

**FIGURE 3:** The region identified as Tirzah where the capital of the Northern Kingdom was until Omri removed it to Samaria. The beauty may refer to the region and not to the city (Tel el-Farah) in particular.

all know that if we regard the book in this way, the similarities and common themes and motifs appear everywhere and haunt us. We can however accept that there was a redactor (if not an author) who had no problems or even relished in the crossing of geographical boundaries. This correlates with the contents of the Song where no standard set by traditional covenantal theology is honoured, and Israel's national survival is for once not the focus of the text, to such an extent that even God or YHWH is (most probably purposefully) barely mentioned (see, however, Matthys on 8:8, 2019:132–138).

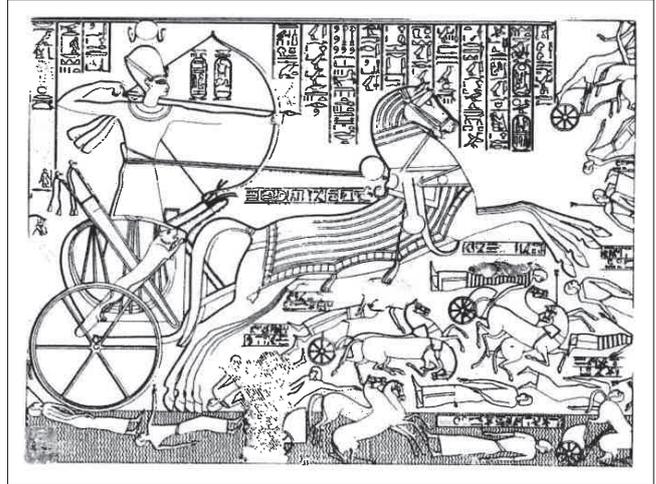
As far as geography is concerned it is conspicuous that the poet compares his love for his girlfriend, particularly her body, with the physical land which he seems to love passionately. This feature is also present in other cultures (cf. Hugo (2007:223–228), and also Scheffler's (2014:885–909) comparison of the poetry of the Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach with that of SOS).

### The mare in Pharaoh's chariot (SOS 1:9)

Stallions are usually used to draw the king's chariots. However, if a mare is put amongst them she puts all in confusion and all turn to see her. Figure 4 illustrates how the beauty of the mare, whose bridles in the rest of the poem is compared to the women's jewellery, have a powerful and proud effect on the stallions, and so the women on men.

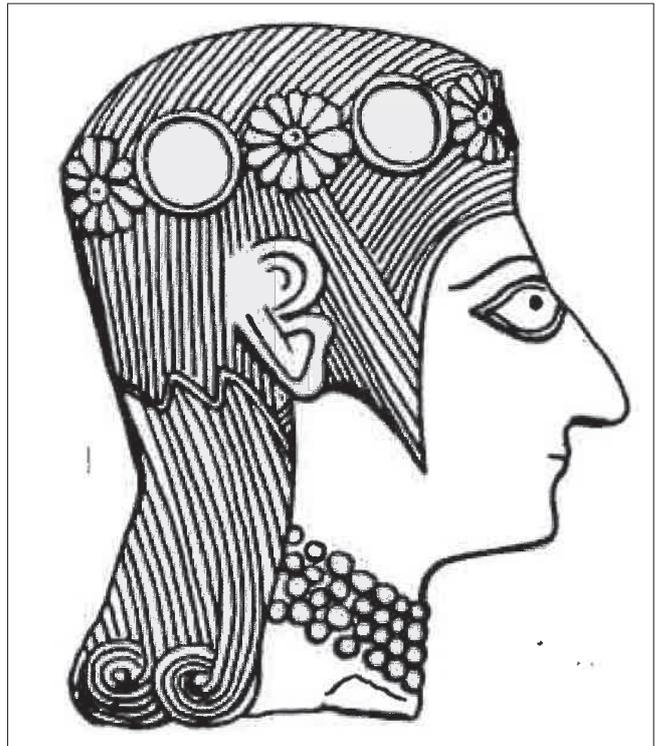
### Beauty enhanced by jewellery (SOS 1:10–11; 4:9)

As indicated above, the woman is compared to a mare and her ornaments decorate her cheeks and neck. As Figure 5 illustrates, it is done quite excessively: various ornaments are involved. The ornaments and strings obviously enhance the women's sensuality for the man. In SOS 4:9, the motif recurs: not only the glance of her eyes but 'one jewel of her necklace' ravishes the boyfriend's heart. The neck as the outstanding tower of David (4:4, cf. above) can also be interpreted likewise. From a modern perspective, this is important. Bible readers might think that making themselves beautiful is a modern thing and that the ancients were more modest. But the opposite seems more likely.



Source: Keel, O., [1986] 1994, *The Song of Songs: A continental commentary*, p. 57, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

**FIGURE 4:** Probably a prominent mare: The portrayal is of the Battle of Kadesh at the mortuary temple of Ramses II in West Thebes (ca. 1250 BCE).



Source: Keel, O., [1986] 1994, *The Song of Songs: A continental commentary*, p. 60, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

**FIGURE 5:** A North Syrian ivory carving dated in the 9th century BCE and found in Calah (modern Nimrud). Note the jeweled headdress and the necklace consisting of various rows.

### The girl yearning for the man at night (3:1–5; 5:2–8)

Twice in SOS it is reported that the girl yearns for her lover during the night while she is on her bed. In both cases, she looks for him in the streets and both poems express her sexual yearning. It can be in a dream but also a conscious experience since sexuality occurs in both, and poetry causes it to occur in both. As far as 3:1–4 is concerned, she finds him and brings him to her mother's house with the implication that they will consummate their love there (as in 8:1–2).

A difference with today's world is that the parental home is not a superego factor: if love is consummated, the parents (especially the mother) are fully informed, in fact ideally it happens under her roof.

According to The CTS New Catholic Bible (2007:1117) SOS 5:2–8 is 'possibly a dream-sequence' and 'the imagery of v. 4–5 (the thrusting of his hand in the opening and her hands dripping with liquid myrrh) is sexually unmistakable' (so also Garrett 1993:411), whereas the 'watchmen may symbolize the custodians of propriety'. The daughters of Jerusalem (probably potential superego figures should know that she is 'faint with love' [5:8]). The sexual yearning of the woman is clearly expressed in Figure 6.

### The Palanquin of Solomon (SOS 3:9)

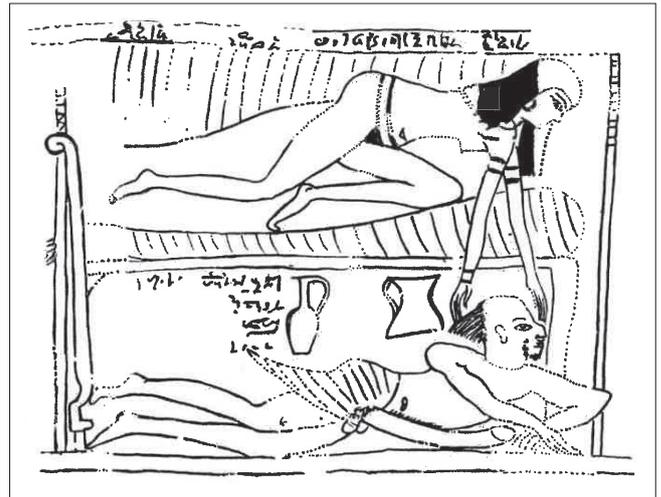
The palanquin or litter is a portable bed and expresses wealth and royalty. Its posts are of silver, its back of gold, and the seat of purple. Especially the fourth stiche of 3:9 is important. Different than from Figure 7, the portable bed (see Figure 8) is enclosed and its 'interior is inlaid with love' (תוכו רצונה אהבה). The physical features of the portable bed is not described anymore, but lovemaking is suggested to occur inside. Rightly so because reference is made to the day of Solomon's wedding, aptly expressed by the German term *Hochzeit*.

### Eyes compared to doves (SOS 1:15; 4:1; 5:12)

In SOS, the eyes of both the woman (4:1) and the man (5:12) are compared to doves. Without our knowledge of iconography, one could have thought it in terms of the oval nature of a dove's body. Although the latter cannot be ruled out, Figure 9 provides another possibility. Two doves or implied, and an eye seen of each from the side are then used to describe the eyes of the woman and man.

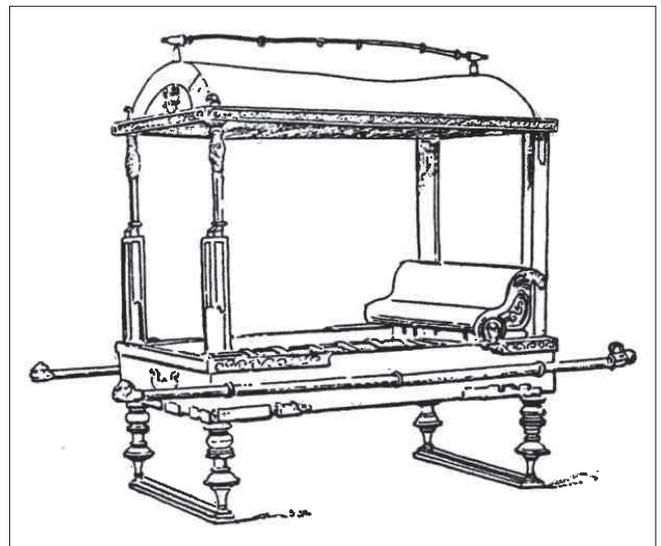
### Open juicy pomegranates (SOS 4:3b,13)

The Hebrew word (רמון) indicates a pomegranate (*pinica granatum*) which may refer to the pomegranate tree, its fruit or artistic ornaments in the shape of pomegranates (e.g. 1 Ki 7:18). The beautiful tree is about 4 metres high with pear-shaped leaves and scarlet, yellow and white flowers. The fruit is about a size of an orange with a hard red or yellow rind (United Bible Societies 1972:168). It is first mentioned in the description song (4:1–7) describing the woman (head, neck and breasts) where in SOS 4:3b her cheeks are compared to the halves of a pomegranate (see Figure 10). The pomegranate can only be fully appreciated when broken open, revealing its delicious pulp containing numerous red seeds. The pulp is very refreshing because of its copious juice (UBS 1972:168). No wonder the soft (red) cheeks of the woman (imagined to be kissed by the lover) are compared to it. This total delicacy is quite explicitly mentioned again in 4:13, where reference is made to the woman's 'channel' which is typified as a paradise of pomegranates (שְׁלֵסֵיךְ פְּרָדֵס רְמוֹנִים). More explicit (reminding one of *cunnilingus*) can SOS hardly be. This reference also



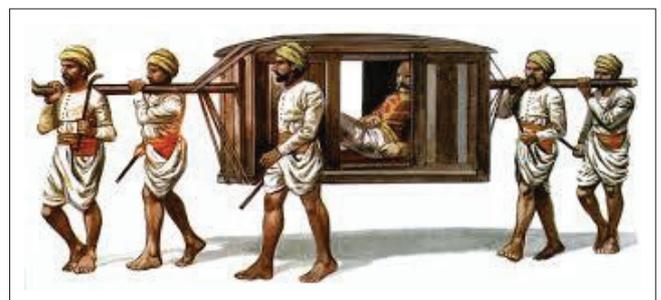
Source: Keel, O., [1986] 1994, *The Song of Songs: A continental commentary*, p. 123, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

**FIGURE 6:** Papyrus from the 12th century depicting the women on the bed desiring the man under the bed with his 'overly large penis'.



Source: Keel, O., [1986] 1994, *The Song of Songs: A continental commentary*, p. 132, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

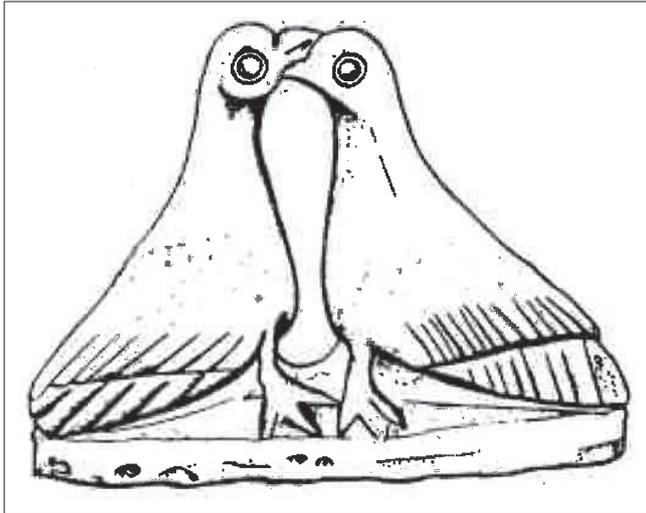
**FIGURE 7:** A litter with canopy reconstructed from fragments found at the Esquiline hill, Rome.



Source: Chathoth Vallam Kulam Family, n.d., viewed 13 November 2021, from <https://chathothvallamkulamfamily.com>

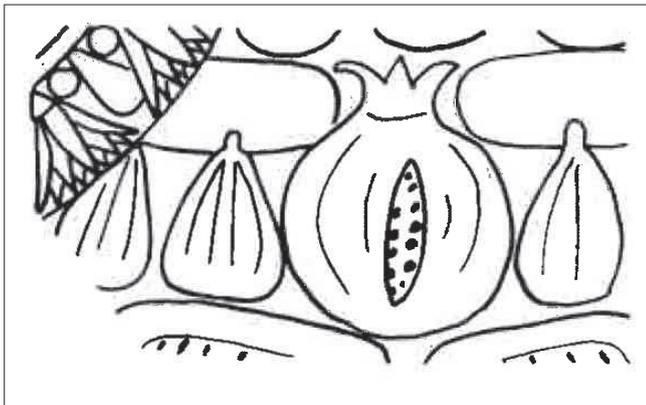
**FIGURE 8:** Sketch of a palanquin which probably more resembles what is meant in Song of Songs 3:9–10.

corrolates with 7:12, where the girl promises her love to her lover amidst of the blooming of the promgranate (trees), and above all to SOS 8:2 where she fantasises to give to her man the juice of her pomegranate.



Source: Keel, O., [1986] 1994, *The Song of Songs: A continental commentary*, p. 70, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

**FIGURE 9:** A limestone sculpture dating from the 4th to 3rd century BCE (from Cyprus) depicts a pair of cooing doves.



Source: Keel, O., [1986] 1994, *The Song of Songs: A continental commentary*, p. 144, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

**FIGURE 10:** Pomegranates with an open slit which shows it to be ripe, just as open halves do. From a painted relief in the mortuary temple of Seti I in Abydos, ca. 1280 BCE.

### Navel or vulva? (SOS 7:3)

In SOS 7:3 we read the following:

שָׁרְרָה אֶגְוֹן הַסֵּהָר אֵלֶי-יִחְסֹר הַמִּזְגָּה

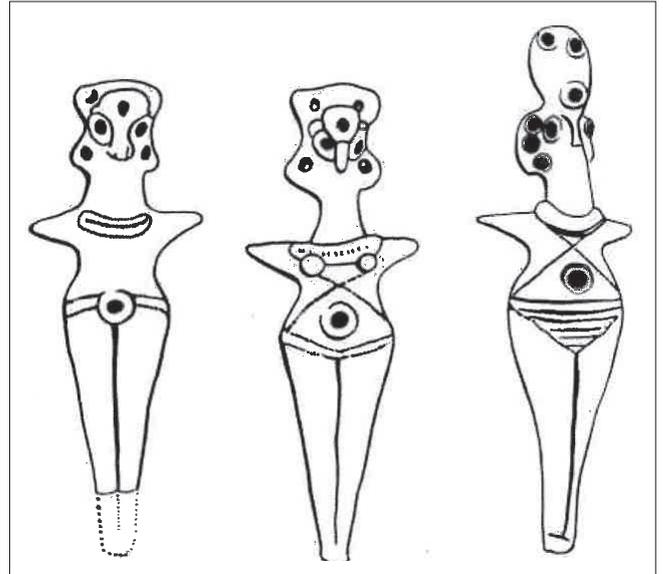
בְּטֶנְהָ עֶרְמַת חֲטָיִם סוּגָה בְּשׁוֹשָׁנִים

Usually the text is translated as:

Your *navel* is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine.

Your *belly* is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies.

Loader (2001) remarked that verse 3 contains the only synonymous parallelism in the poem, thereby emphasising this body part. The woman's genitals are vividly depicted, but is usually 'translated right out of the text'. The term *shrr* refers to the female genitals as in the Arabic *sirr*. Moreover, it stands in parallel to *beten* in verse 3b which means womb and not belly. Although according to Ezekiel 16:4, *shrr* refers to the navel-cord that was not



Source: Keel, O., [1986] 1994, *The Song of Songs: A continental commentary*, p. 232, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

**FIGURE 11:** Three terra-cotta images (first two from Hamath, third unknown, from the 13th century to 12th century) of a Syrian goddess, representing either the navel (right) or vulva (left).

cut,<sup>5</sup> Loader is most probably correct that the metaphor of the 'rounded (or goblet) bowl' (so Rudolph 1962:167–169) demands *shrr* to be interpreted as the woman's vulva since the mixed wine that should not be absent from the bowl refers to 'the physiological processes of love-making so clear that it is obvious that the euphemistic translation "navel" is untenable'. One may further ask the question how a very small navel can be interpreted as a metaphor for a bowl or goblet from which one can drink wine, not to say to mix the wine therein? Loader to my mind clinches his argument by his exegesis of verse 3b where 'the genitals are called a heap of wheat fenced in by a growth of lilies'. This refers to the 'structure of the genitals around which the pubic hair grows like lilies (Rudolph 1962:172; cf. Landy 2011).

Although Loader's arguments should be accepted as attested, from the iconographic record it should be conceded that *navel* and *vulva* can both be a reference for the term *shrr*. This is illustrated by Figure 11.

One can therefore conclude that there is a profound subtlety in the way the text is communicating. One should read it in context to be absolutely sure to what the term *shrr* signify in a specific text.

### A mere rounded bowl or krater (mixing bowl)?

One can take the interpretation of SOS 7:3 even further by asking<sup>6</sup> to precisely what the term אֶגְוֹן הַסֵּהָר [rounded bowl] refers to. Archaeology as well the LXX can be of help here. Figures 12 and 13 show two types of rounded bowls. The first (Hebrew *saph*) was most commonly used for eating and

5.The only other place in the Hebrew Bible where the term *shrr* occurs.

6.Not done by Loader (2001).



Source: Scheffler, E., 2000a, *Fascinating discoveries from the biblical world*, p. 11, Biblia, Pretoria  
**FIGURE 12:** An ordinary bowl used for eating and storage of fruit.



Source: Scheffler, E., 2000a, *Fascinating discoveries from the biblical world*, p. 11, Biblia, Pretoria  
**FIGURE 13:** Photo of a *krater* or mixing bowl.

holding liquids, fruit and salt. The second (Figure 13) is referred to in Greek as a *krater*, and the latter is still the archaeological term for this type of bowl. It is larger and deeper than an ordinary bowl and is used to mix liquids (eg. wine with water and various types of food).<sup>7</sup> The Hebrew term is 'aggan' and should be translated as a 'mixing bowl' or *krater* as does the LXX (κρατήρ τορευτός, Vulgate *crater*). This meaning correlates with the expression 'that never lack mixed wine'. The love for the woman (your love is better than wine) has here a full-blown physical dimension. The man desires to lick her vulva (*krater*) and swallow her wet juices like mixed wine. He desires to do that because he loves her. The SOS communicates this concrete activity in a unique, tasteful and profound way.

### Captive in her tresses (SOS 7:6bc)

The description song of SOS 7:2–6 describes the woman from the feet to the head. Actually one should be more

7. On the various types of pottery and their uses, see Scheffler (2000a:10–14), where other types of rounded bowls (e.g. a cooking pot, chalice or goblet) are also discussed.



Source: Keel, O., [1986] 1994, *The Song of Songs: A continental commentary*, p. 140, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

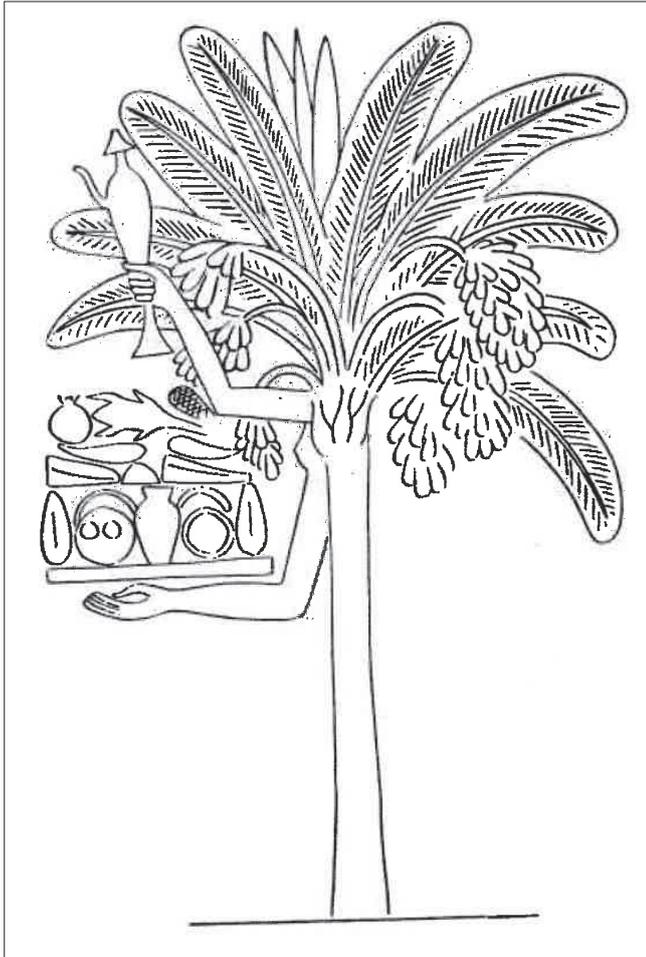
**FIGURE 14:** The acrobatic dancer with captivating tresses on a shard from Deir el-Medina.

precise: lastly the hair on the head is mentioned, with an emphasis on the appeal of the long hair (tresses). The Hebrew of verse 6b (וְדֹלֵת רֵאשֶׁהָ כְּאַרְגָּמָן מְלֶכֶת אֶסְוִיר בְּרֶהֱטִים) is translated by Keel ([1986] 1994:230) as 'Your flowing locks are like purple, a king is held captive in the tresses'. A modern reader might appropriately ask why there is this emphasis on hair. However, from ancient times the long hair of women was sexually attractive. Even a king (with all his power) is held captive by a woman's long locks. In Egyptian and Arab love songs, the motif is present (Keel [1986] 1994:238). That ancient men experience it like that is vividly illustrated by a painting on a limestone shard from Deir el-Medina (see Figure 14). It depicts a half-naked acrobatic dancer with luxuriant wig. According to Loader (2001:109) this power of the woman performed by her hair points to the equality between female and male which the anthology of Canticles advocates.

### Climbing the palm tree (7:7–9)

After the admiration song of 7:2–6, there is a progression in the collection of poems in SOS. The woman is typified as delectable love (אֶהְבֶּהּ בְּתַעֲנוּגִים), and the man is provoked to action. He imagines the woman as a palm tree laden with fruits which he wants to climb on to enjoy the fruits. Her breasts, scent and kisses are explicitly referred to and in 7:12 the love is eventually consummated. ('There I will give you my love'.)

A modern reader might ask if comparing a woman to a palm tree is not a bit awkward, even bizarre. Not so for the ancients. From iconographical sketches we have it that a woman could be seen as a palm tree with fruits and that men could climb to lay hold of the fruit (see Figures 15 and 16).



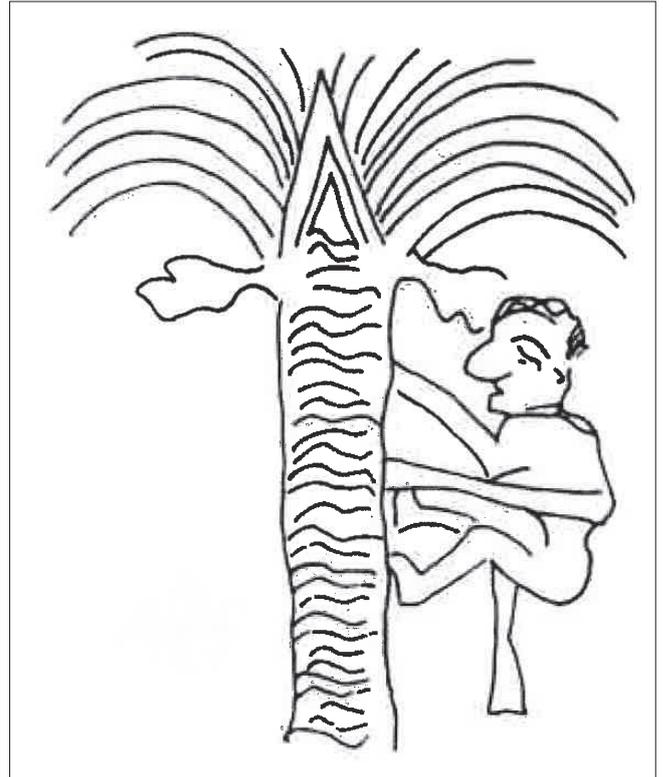
Source: Keel, O., [1986] 1994, *The Song of Songs: A continental commentary*, p. 248, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

**FIGURE 15:** The Egyptian tree-goddess providing food, pictured as a date palm. A relief from Abisur, 13th century.

## Conclusion

After this 'archaeological' look at SOS, we can conclude the following:

- A look at the sketches and depictions as provided by archaeology and iconography helps to clarify difficulties in the text and promotes the understanding of the text in its ancient *context*.
- The geography in the Song indicates that the love for the woman and the *physical land* (not in a nationalistic sense) are closely linked, with natural regions and cities functioning as metaphors to express the love for the partner.
- Linked to this is the *mundane* character of the song. Emphasis is on the here and now. The motif of paradise functions, but in this life, this side of the grave.
- The materiality of the artifacts and their interpretation provides a challenge to the *neo-allegorical* interpretation of the Song. In fact, the concreteness enhances a literal and erotic interpretation of the Song.
- The Song is explicitly erotic, not pornographic but tasteful. This is achieved through the subtlety and sophistication of its use of metaphors.
- Being sexual beings, present-day readers have much in common with the text. However, archaeology forbids us



Source: Keel, O., [1986] 1994, *The Song of Songs: A continental commentary*, p. 249, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN

**FIGURE 16:** The relief (depicting a man climbing a date palm to harvest fruit) is from a Punic grave stele, 4th to 2nd centuries BCE.

to read our notions of love and sex into the Song. Ironically, this is to our benefit since reading the text in context as facilitated by archaeology opens our insight into motifs in the text that enriches our own understanding of love.

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