

# Master of Animals

## Some Early Ones

Let's start with Wikipedia:

"The Master of (the) Animals (MoA) or Lord of the Animals is a motif in ancient art showing a human between and grasping two confronted animals. **It is very widespread** in the art of the Ancient Near East and Egypt.

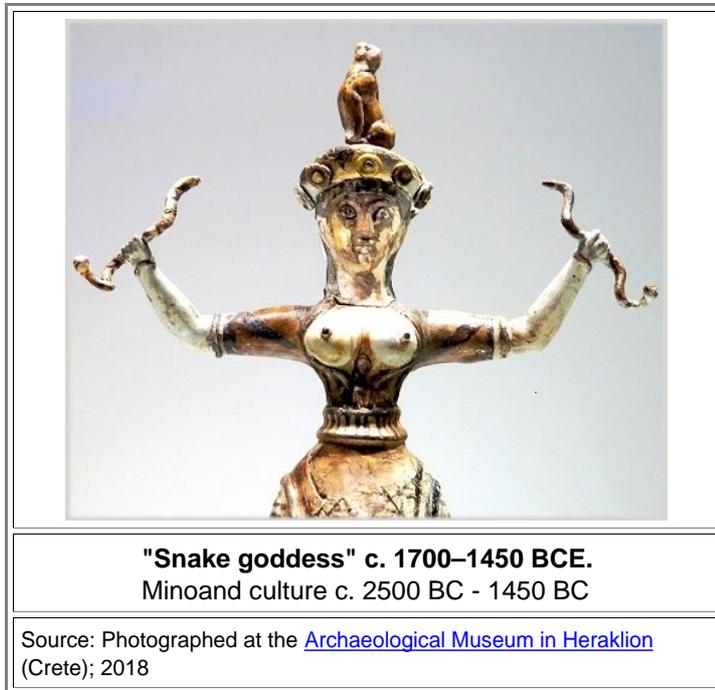
The figure is normally male, but not always, the animals may be realistic or fantastical, and the figure may have animal elements such as horns, or an animal upper body. Unless he is shown with specific divine attributes, he is typically described as a hero, although what the motif represented to the cultures, which created the works probably varies greatly.

The motif is so widespread and visually effective that **many** depictions were probably conceived as decoration with only a **vague meaning** attached to them."

There is widespread literature about the MoA, even a whole book (Proceedings of a conference) <sup>1</sup>. I did not find that particularly helpful, however.

- Well - it is "widespread" but compared to what comes from Luristan (use [this link](#) for examples) there aren't all that many depictions of animal masters or mistresses elsewhere. In what follows I give you my collection, which includes most of the Wiki collection.

I will start with a very [famous mistress](#) of animals. The animals in here case are small snakes, neither very threatening nor as prominent as other features. Nevertheless, we have a mistress of animals without any doubt.



- Now that I got your attention. let's look at another one from the Minoan culture:



**Minoan, 1500 - 1700 BC, with a clear Egyptian influence**

Source: Internet at large / Wikipedia. Now in the British Museum

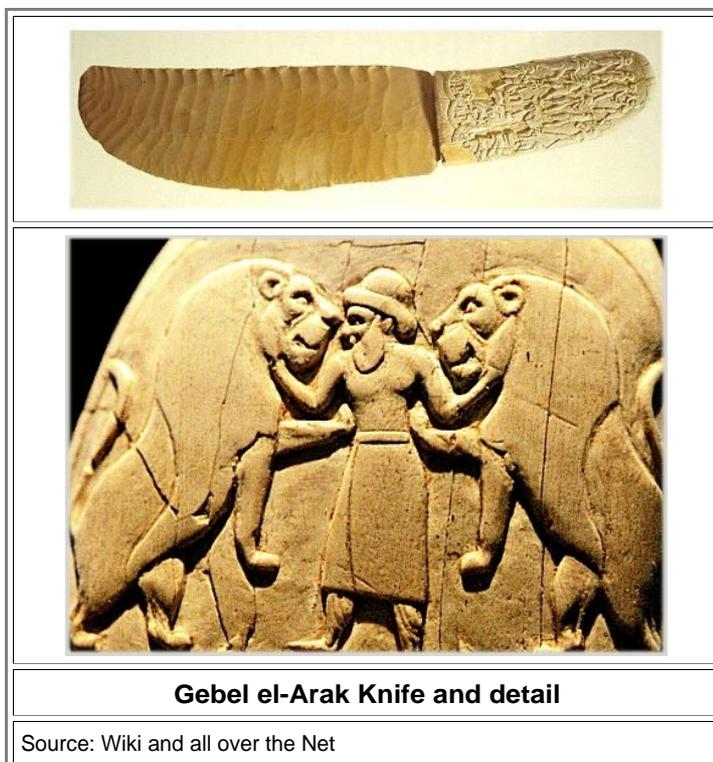
The possibly oldest master is from Ur, the mother of all cities if not culture and civilization. The city dates to c. 3800 BC and when it was excavated a harp or lyre was found with this inlaid picture on it:



**Very old master from Ur**

Source: Internet at large / Wikipedia

Another very old object with a MoA on it was claimed to be found in Gebel el-Arak in Egypt. Modern research, however, believes that it comes from Abydos and dates to c. 3450 BC. It is a flint knife with a carved ivory handle that contains the Master of animals shown below. There seems to be some Mesopotamian influence.



**Gebel el-Arak Knife and detail**

Source: Wiki and all over the Net

### Master of Animals from the Jiroft Culture

The so-called **Jiroft culture** (German: "Dschiroft") merits its own paragraph because it has amusing parallels to the Luristan culture. The Jiroft culture was "discovered" rather recently in a way reminiscent of the discovery of Luristan culture. Some serious flooding in 2001 or so (no precise date seems to be known) unearthed ancient graves and the locals happily started digging for artifacts. Objects made from intricately cut chlorite (or "soap-stone"), and unlike anything seen before, appeared on the market. Eventually the Iranian government got involved, confiscated many objects and started some serious digging.

The map below shows the location of the Jiroft culture (around the town of Konar Sandal). The culture flourished essentially from 3000 BC to 2000 BC and thus predates the Luristan culture. It is even claimed that it was the oldest "high-culture" on earth but that seems to be exaggerated. The objects shown here go back to roughly 2500 BC. As in Luristan, rather unique objects came to light, unlike anything seen before. And once more, like in Luristan, these objects quite often showed a *master of animals*.

The story of "discovering" the Jiroft culture is splendidly recounted by our old acquaintance **Osca Muscarella**; you can access it [here](#). Muscarella also thinks that there are quite a few forgeries around. The objects shown here are not on his list of possible forgeries, however.



**The area of the Jiroft culture**

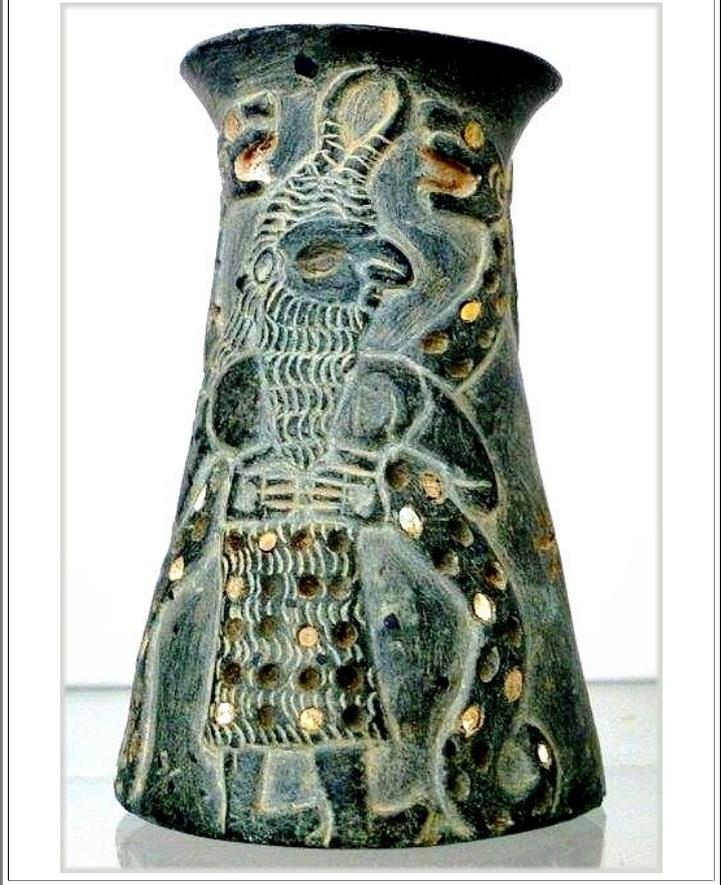
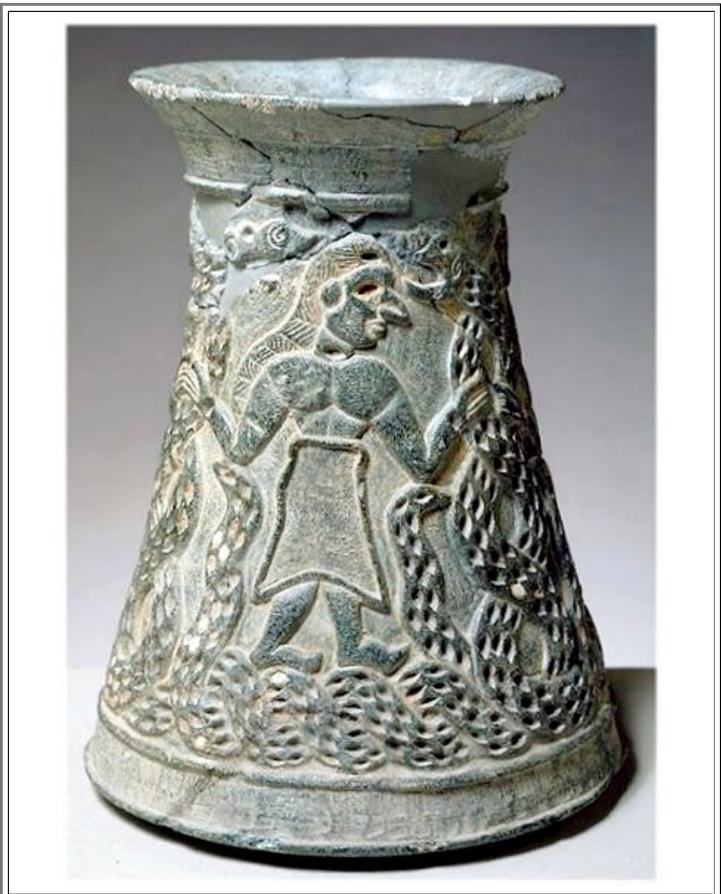
First look at one of many object known as "hand-bag" (purpose uncertain). It shows a very nice master with what looks like leopards.  
Next we have a bowl with a snake master.

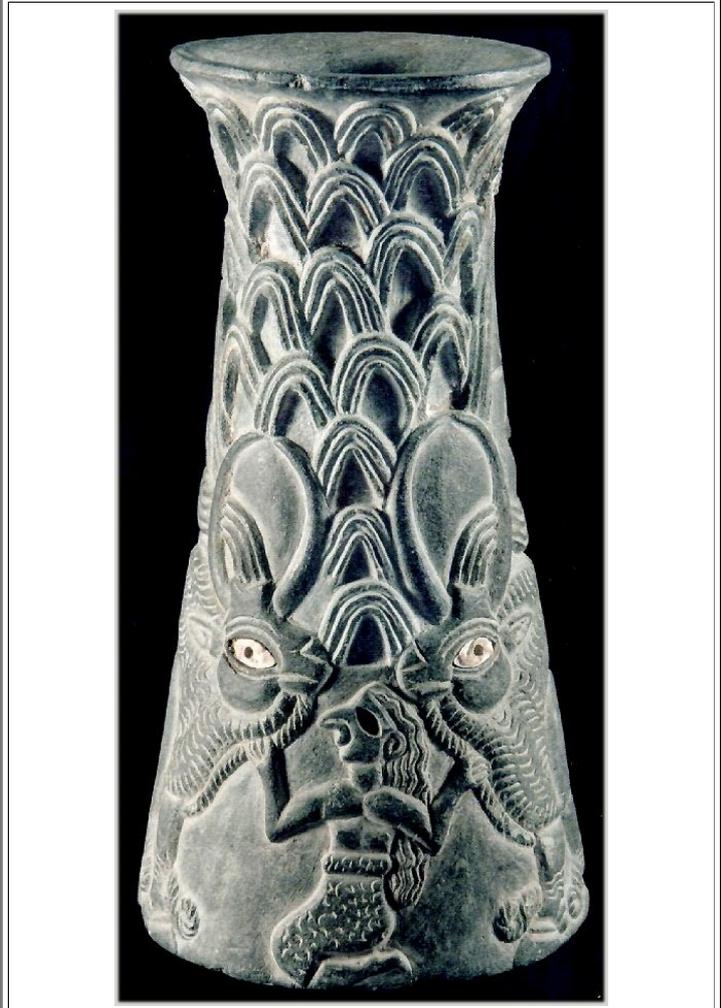
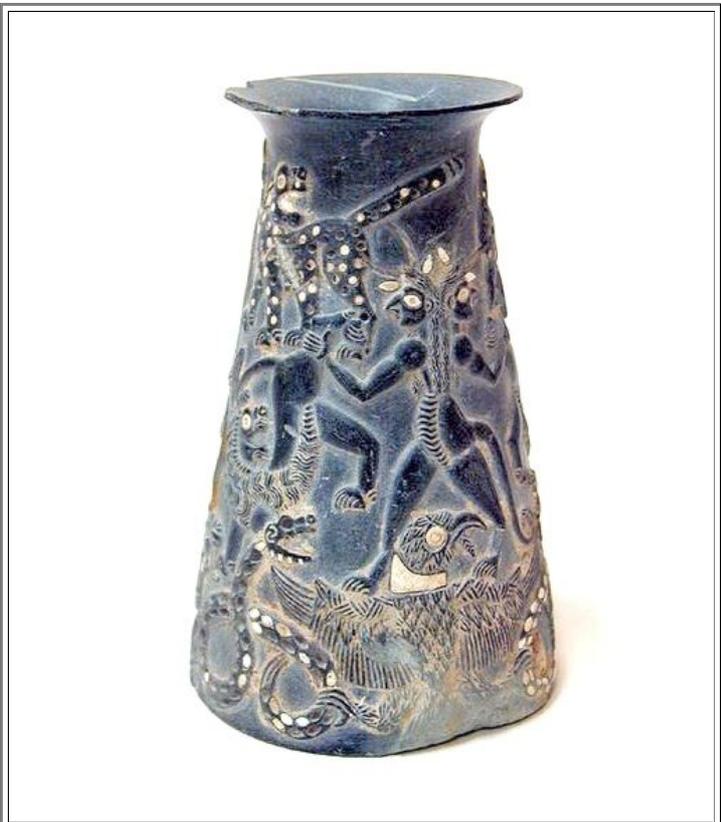


**MoA from the Jiroft culture**

Source: Internet at large (Pinterest etc.)

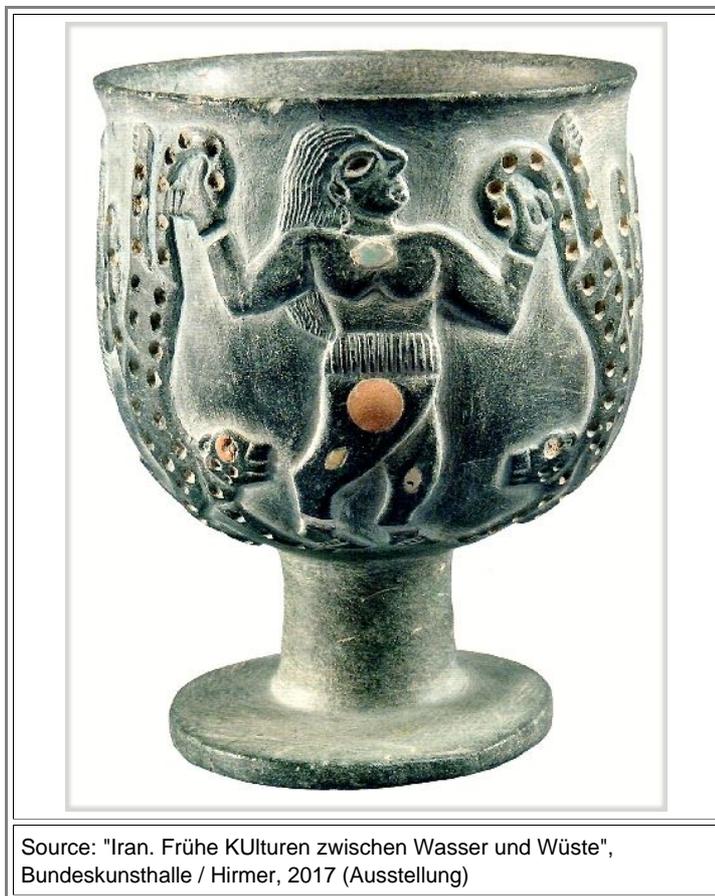
- Next we have carved chlorite vessels of characteristic shape. I'll show you 4 of them but there are probably many more like that.





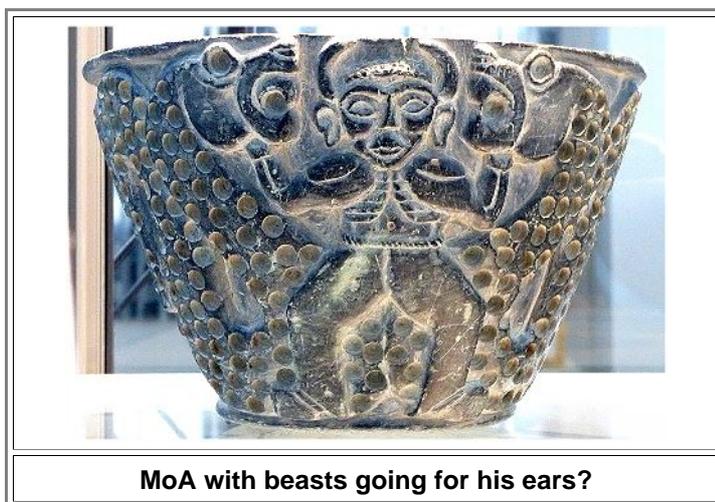
Source: Internet at large (Pinterest etc.) for the first three; "Iran. Frühe Kulturen zwischen Wasser und Wüste", Bundeskunsthalle / Hirmer, 2017 (Ausstellung) for the last one

● Next a beaker, also of characteristic shape



Source: "Iran. Frühe Kulturen zwischen Wasser und Wüste", Bundeskunsthalle / Hirmer, 2017 (Ausstellung)

● Finally a bowl with a MoA that bears some resemblance to the [Luristan ones](#)



**MoA with beasts going for his ears?**

▣ The Jiroft MoA's predate the Luristani ones by a 1000 years or so. It would be unreasonable to assume some connection. But Greek sculptures predate [baroque ones](#) by 2000 years and there is connection. Time might tell.

### **Masters From Here and There**

▣ There are probably many cylinder seals with a MoA on it. Below are three. The first one is Minoan from the 14th century BC. The middle one shows a Persian king from the [Achaemenide empire](#) subduing two Mesopotamian "lamassu", some deity with an animal body. The last one is from the [Neo-Assyrian empire](#); around 9th - 7th century BC.



**MoA's on cylinder seals**

Source: Wikipedia; auctions house



**cylinder seal form the neo-Babylonian empire**

Source: Auction house; Timeline

● Here is a somewhat unusual one on a "rock" seal:



**Western Asiatic Stamp Seal with Calf-Headed Man;  
3rd - 2nd millennium BC**

"A domed limestone stamp seal with engraved motif of a facing calf-headed man, grasping two large birds by their necks; pierced through the top"

Source: Timeline auctions may 2019

▶ The next two ones are seals from the Indus valley civilization (2500-1500 BC).





**Seals from the Indus valley civilization**

Source: Wikipedia

Here we have Ur-Nanshe from Sumer (2500 BC) who was half-man and half-demon and obviously a MoA:



**Old Sumerian MoA demon**

Source: Internet at large; Wikipedia

The Celts are next. They produced several known Master of Animals; below you can see a few. First two belt buckles:



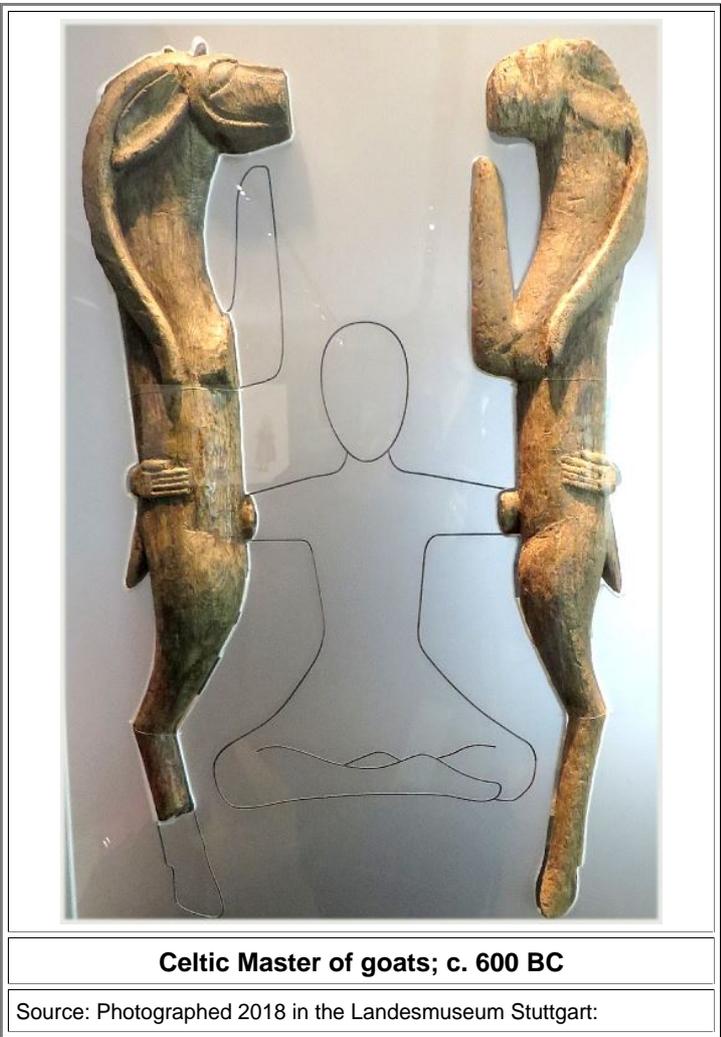
**Celtic belt clasp**

No further explanation was given in the Museum

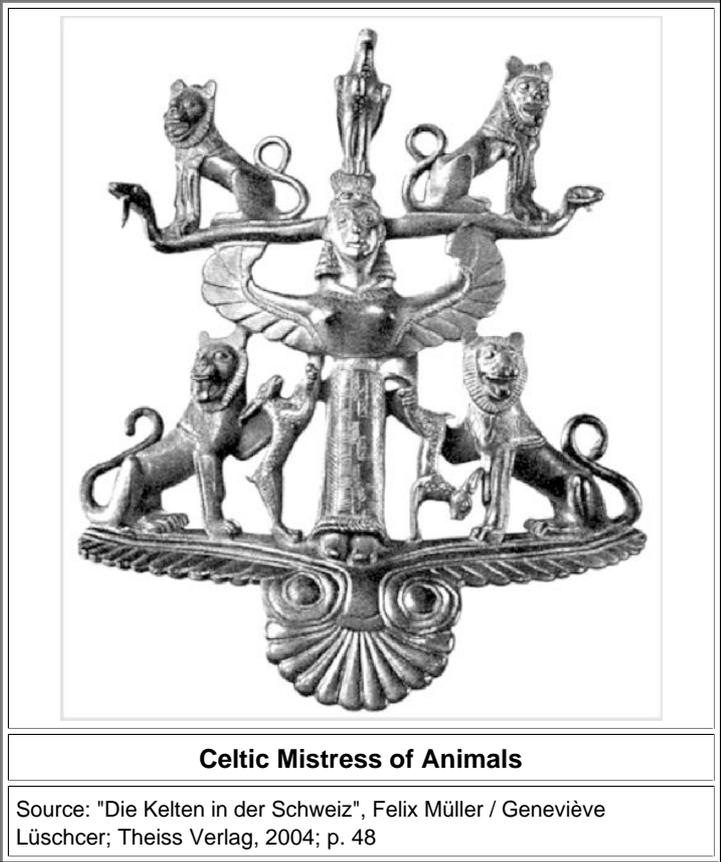
Source: Photographed 2018 in [Florence](#), National Museum of Bargello



▀ The we have the remains of a rather nice MoA of Celtic origin:



Below we have the handle attachment of a bronze "Hydria" (large pitcher) from the 6 century BC that was found in Bern, Switzerland.



Now we move ahead a 1000 years or so and find this:



**MoA in merry old England; Belt clasp**

Source: Sutton Hoo burial; British Museum; early 7th century AD

### **Mistress of Animals - The Potnia Theron**

Besides the Masters, we have quite a few mistresses of animals. They were also known as **Potnia Theron**, Greek for Mistress of Animals. The term was first used by Homer in his Iliad (21 / 470). "Potnia" is an important female deity in the Mycenaean culture and elsewhere and somehow symbolizes a relationship with all of nature or so.



**Mistress of Animals from Ugarit; 1300 - 1400 BC**

Today this piece is found in the Louvre Museum, Paris, France. Here is a large-size picture

Source: All over the Internet.

This Potnia was carved in a piece of (elephant) ivory that served as the cover for a cylindrical container, a "pyxis" (the German Büchse). Ugarit was an ancient port city in northern Syria, in the outskirts of modern Latakia that flourished from c. 1450 BC until its destruction in c. 1200 BC. Its destruction was possibly caused by the mysterious [Sea People](#).

The term "Potnia Theron" was often used to describe female divinities associated with animals. If you think of ancient divinities somehow associated with animals, you will quickly come up with Artemis / Diana. Indeed, there are quite a few depictions of Artemis as Mistress of Animals / Potnia Theron around. Here are a few:



**Artemis as Potnia Theron, Rhodos, 700 BC**  
From a piece of jewelry

Source: Internet at large



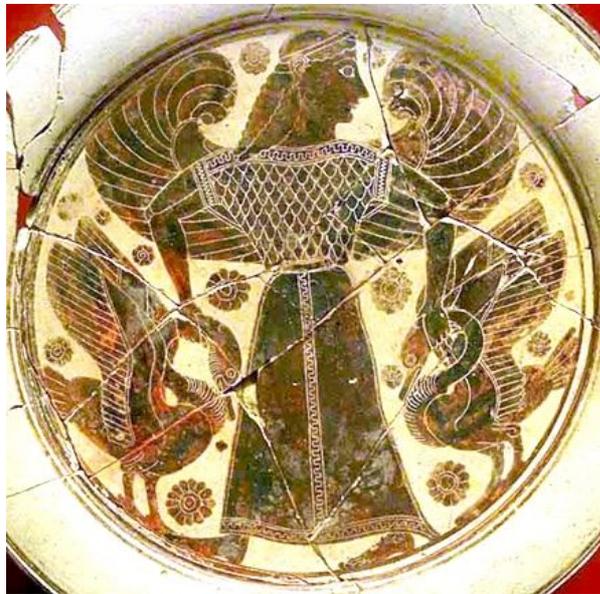
**Artemis as MoA on the handle of Greek vases. From around 570 BC**

Source: Internet at large. At last one is in the Etruscan Museum in Florence



**Artemis as Potnia Theron**

Source: Internet at large. Can be found in the Myconos Museum



**Artemis as Potnia Theron, Corinth, c. 590 BC**

Source: Internet at large.

Other female deities could also be a Potnia Theron or MoA:



**Potnia Theron with a Gorgon head**

Source: Internet at large. British museum

Here we have Ishtar (or Astarte) on a gold seal from somewhere in Turkmenistan, c. 2000 BC:



**Ishtar with lions**

Source: Internet at large, Foto von julianna.lees von Flickr; the seal is in the Schaffhausen Museum; Switzerland

Finally, a "pithios" from Theben (Greece; Böotien) from c. 680 BC with a Potnia Thereon:



Photo by Eirini Tsotsou

**Another Potnia; from the Theben area.**

Source: Exhibited in Moscow 2016, and photographed by E. Tsotou.

● Of course you may claim that this is just an innocent angel and not a MoA at all. Well, maybe you are right.

### **Christian Masters?**

▀ Masters or mistresses of animals are of course heathen things and not to be found in enlightened Christianity. Well - look at the pictures below



**Capitel in the church S. Michele in Pavia, around 1100  
AD**

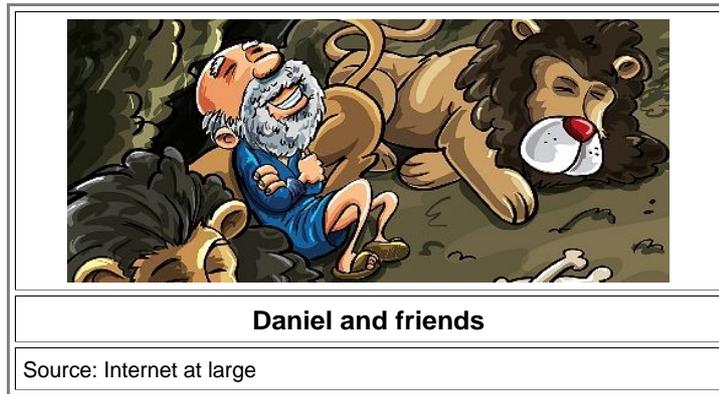
Source: "Die Stauer und Italien", Book to a large exhibition; Germany, 2010, Curt-Engelhorn-Stiftung; Essys; p 157



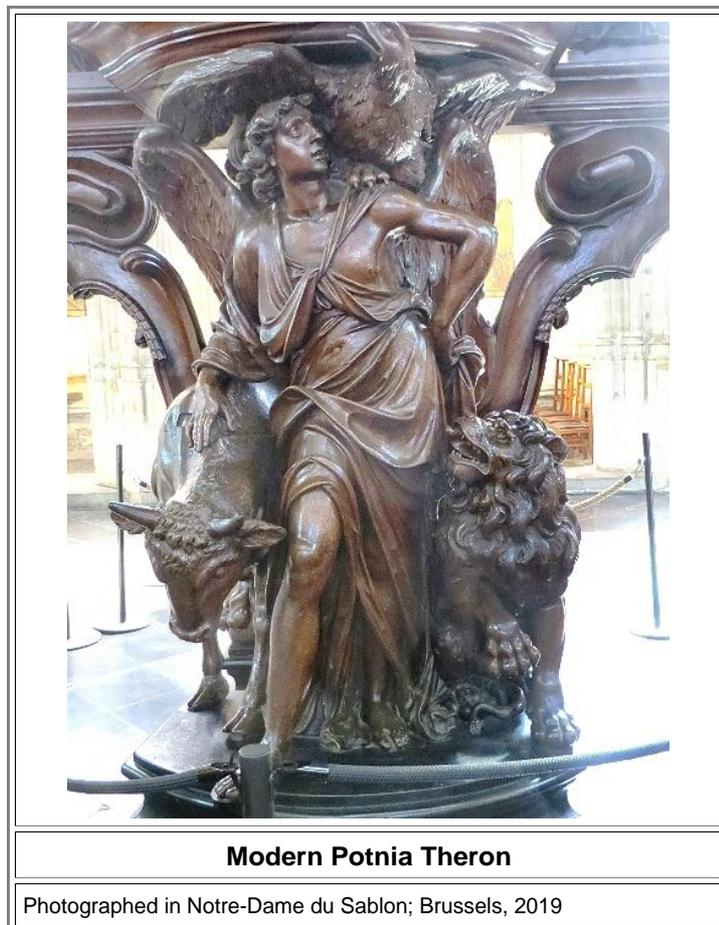
**Capitel from the church S. Giovanni, Borgo, Pavia  
(now in a museum)  
From around 1100 AD**

Source: "Die Stauer und Italien", Book to a large exhibition; Germany, 2010, Curt-Engelhorn-Stiftung; Essys; p 158

- Those sculptures do not show a master (or victim) of animals, of course, but good old Daniel in the lion pit, as recounted in the bible. Why the artists chose to depict him the classical MoA posture remains their secret. Actually, it wasn't Daniel himself who kept the lions at bay but an angel send by God. There are innumerable pictures of Daniel and the lions and they are almost always show a scene like this (very modern) one:



- Makes you wonder if the old stone masons worked under the (subconscious ?)influence of old traditions.
- ▶ Finally a rather modern Mistress of Animals. I found here in a church in Brussels, Belgium. She is winged and supports the pulpit.



- Of course you may claim that this is just an innocent angel and not a MoA at all. Well, maybe you are right.

1) "The Master of Animals in Old World Iconography" Edited by DEREK B. COUNTS and BETTINA ARNOLD  
A whole book without a single word to the MoA's from Luristan.