While I had been brainstorming topics for my Honors Humanities Keystone Project since committing to the university, I was first struck with the idea for my paper on Asherah in class two years ago. I was sitting in Dr. Suriano's HIST219I: Religions of the Ancient Near East class and we were discussing other deities and polytheistic religious forms of expression at the dawn of Israelite monotheism. I was struck by the prevalence of the female goddess Asherah, especially considering she was one of the most common Ancient Israelite deities, after Ba'al and YHVH (who became the Jewish God) and the only goddess. In class, Dr. Suriano raised the extremely controversial hypothesis that Asherah was the wife of the Jewish God YHVH and I was hooked.

I went to Dr. Suriano's office hours and expressed my interest in the topic. He suggested, among more general guides to Ancient Israelite archaeology, that I start with William Dever's pop history book, *Did God Have a Wife*. While cautioning me of Dever's overt bias (that God did have a wife), Dr. Suriano noted that it was an easy read that would help me find more sources, through his bibliography, and hone my topic.

The summer following his class, I went to Mckeldin Library and typed "Asherah" into WorldCat. With that narrow search term, I easily found Dever's book as well as a stack of others. In addition to finding specific books on WorldCat, I also learned the value of going into the stacks and examining the surrounding books, which were often great resources that I may have otherwise overlooked. I spent the summer enjoying some of the book I chose. I devoured Dever's and quickly moved on to authors he referenced that I had checked out, being sure to mark important and interesting section with post-its. Depending on the author, there were times I had to reread the text aloud to fully understand the author's claims. After my fourth scholarly book on the topic and part of the way through my fifth, I decided I needed to narrow my project further. Although I never did so, I made a massive graphic organizer and wrote down all of my thoughts on Asherah. After a couple hours of staring at the sheet and adding thoughts, I finally found a unique and intriguing angle for my paper.

After deciding on my specific angle, challenging the conception of Asherah as a cult object, I moved mainly from books to articles. Following footnotes, I used the books I initially borrowed to find archaeological dig reports or initial analyses through Jstor and Project Muse. When searching on Google Scholar, I frequently ran into annoying pay walls, but I found Jstor and Project Muse extremely useful. I also found some important pieces of scholarship for free on Academia.edu that I otherwise would have had to pay for or obtain via inter library loans.

At this point, I was overwhelmed with sources and needed to figure out which were the most accurate and useful. I found that dates were a helpful way of prioritizing scholarship because earlier sources often predated major archaeological finds. For instance, Rafael Patai's *Hebrew Goddess* from 1969 was a groundbreaking work in its time, but his chapter on Asherah predates the most influential archaeological finds and is only rooted in the Hebrew Bible. I read and enjoyed the chapter, but ultimately did not cite it heavily. I also reached out to a friend and Jewish Studies graduate student and archaeologist by trade who helped me sift through some of the more and less influential authors and detailed books.

One of my biggest challenges with sources was reading past the biases of the authors, understandably pronounced in many books because the topic questions the nature of monotheism and early Judaism. After reading so much of the scholarship, I understood why Dr. Suriano had cautioned me before reading Dever's *Did God Have a Wife*. While it was crucial to peaking my interest and helping me form my thesis, I ultimately did not cite it much because of the strong bias. Interestingly, I cited more of Dever's journal articles and dig reports because they were less biased and better evidenced. I similarly did not rely heavily on sources that exclusively analyzed the Hebrew Bible without paying at least lip service to the archaeological evidence, a sure marker of bias on the other end of the spectrum.

Finishing at 44 pages double-spaced and with pictures, this paper was the longest and most difficult paper I have ever written. I had never been more frustrated or had as much fun with a paper and I definitely learned the value of an extended (year-long) period of research. Within this time, I had the ability to revisit and reread sources, allowing me to understand new information and allowing me to think about the topic from new perspectives. Before this paper, I was intrigued by academia, but after writing this paper, I set my goals on becoming a professor because I loved work with and gaining familiarity with both the primary and secondary sources. I loved explaining and presenting my project to my peers. I also learned to appreciate the value of primary sources and to trust in my (and not just scholars) analysis of them.

While I really enjoyed spending a lot of time reading books before focusing on a specific topic, in the future I will definitely streamline and speed up the research process by limiting my background research and deciding on a topic early on. I also would fight harder to obtain funds for some of the important articles that the university did not have access to because I regret not including those sources. I would have also spent time talking to a librarian to become more comfortable with Mckeldin, instead of trying to teach myself how to best do research in the building. To make Mckeldin a more welcoming space, I would suggest renovating the ground floor, especially Footnotes Café. In comparison to the second, third, and fourth floors, the first floor feels outdated and old. Enlivening it would encourage more people to enter and ultimately use the library as a resource.