

Eternal Mistress of Carthage, Punic Cult of the City Goddess

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A long time ago I read somewhere that if Carthage had been successful in its contest with Rome, civilization would have received a serious setback. Since then I have always been interested in trying to determine whether or not that judgment seemed to be prejudiced.

What we know about the Carthaginians is based on what others have said about them; we have almost nothing written by the people themselves. In this paper I would to stress an issue of Carthaginian supreme goddess Tanit, who was a prominent figure in Punic pantheon, a protector goddess of eternal Carthage.

It is a commonly accepted axiom that ethnically and religiously motley regions, such as the ancient Mediterranean, were formed by different cultures. Different cultural units were coexisting and developing independently throughout many centuries. This phenomenon is diffused everywhere in the Mediterranean world, but I limit my research to the historical evolution of the North Africa and the Near East, from the collapse of the Late Bronze age states until late Antiquity.¹ Several migration processes affected the western

¹E. Avaliani. *For a Conceptual Interpretation of Culture and Civilization*, "Logos" Tbilisi State University Press, 1997, pp.1-2.

Mediterranean region from the late Bronze Age, throughout the I mill. B.C.²

The Near Eastern and Eastern Mediterranean cultures gave the strongest impulse for the migration processes. As it is commonly known, the Near Eastern cultures and especially the Phoenician civilization, reached high level in its social, technical - economical, political and cultural development. These communities, City-States for greater self-determination, needed new spheres of influence because the possibilities of greater progress had already been exhausted on their native land.³ In this case, these cultures had to “find” a new way of self-regeneration and transformation in “space and time.”⁴ Matured “mother civilizations” started “to plant,” in a mushroom-like, or “sporadic way,”⁵ new “embryonic communities” which in this case are in new areas.⁶ At the same time, they started to transform themselves in their new “space and time.”⁷

These processes began by Phoenician colonists founding their emporiums for trade, then their colony proper. This brought also their civilized customs, religious beliefs and their own style of everyday life. In the area of their new inhabitation these communities reached high levels of development and slowly became independent cultural models. Some of their traditions were readily adopted by the indigenous populations of these historic-geographical areas, but they were also in turn influenced by these native cultures.⁸

The Punic and Etruscan cultures, which blossomed and evolved in the Western Mediterranean near classical cultures, offer good examples of the historical processes of the type described above. The origins of these “daughter-cultures” were rooted in the traditions of the ancient Phoenician and

² G. Daniel, Litt and J.D. Evans. *The Western Mediterranean*, Vol.2. Cambridge, 1967.

³ E. Avaliani, 1997, pp. 2-3.

⁴ E. Avaliani. 1997. p.12.

⁵ E. Avaliani, 1997. pp. 12-13.

⁶ Ibid., p.13.

⁷ Ibid., p.15.

⁸ Ibid., p.18; J. Boardman. *The Greeks Overseas: their early Colonies and Trade*. London, 1980; S. Moscati. *The Phoenicians*, Venice, 1988.

Anatolian-Lyidian cultures.⁹ The main aspects of their cultural identity (in our opinion)¹⁰ one can find in their religion, language and mental systems which distinguished them from other cultures of the ancient world, and especially from the classic Greek-Roman world.¹¹

At first Carthage was merely one of the many out-posts that dotted the coasts of the great in-land sea. Early in the sixth century some powerful Phoenician families had come to Carthage because they had been driven out of Tyre by Assyrian invaders.¹² At about this time Carthage began to close African and Spanish waters to Greek traders, since the decline of the Phoenician and Athenian navies had left her practically without a maritime rival; the western Mediterranean became almost a Carthaginian lake.

The cult of Tanit, the Carthaginian Goddess, can illustrate well the process epitomized above because it allows the possibility to understand better the Punic cultural model of North Africa, which includes Phoenician, Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek and lately, Roman cultural elements as well. Her cult arose in the Punic world but was closely connected with the Near Eastern and Semitic religious beliefs. I would like to support the opinion that Tanit, through the above mentioned migration processes, was the Great Mother goddess of the Western Phoenician world and she was great mistress of Carthage. The main focus of my interest is a cult of Tanit in the context of the Punic cultural model of North Africa. That is why it is the subject of this research.

⁹ E. Avaliani, 1997, p.18. I am aware that the problem of the coming of the Etruscans from Lydia is very controversial. However, I think that the language, the religion, and the mental systems of Etruscans confirm the ancient traditions: D. Briquel, *L'origine Lydienne des Etrusques*, Rome, 1991.

¹⁰ J. MacIntoch Turfa. *Evidence for Etruscan-Punic Relations*. American Journal of Archaeology, Vol. 81, No. 3 (Summer, 1977), pp. 368-374.

¹¹ E. Avaliani. *For a Conceptual Interpretation of Culture and Civilization*, Tbilisi, 1997. p. 5.

¹² T. Frank, *Economic History of Rome*, New York, 1927, p. 28.

The Punic cultural model of North Africa suggests an unusual civilization patterns for the classic world, showing the diversity of religious aspects, artistic forms and specific cultural developments of the society as a whole.

Concerning the Punic cultural model in the Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods, there are some basic problems about cultural layers. These layers are: 1) Mediterranean (East, West) substrate; 2) Indigenous; 3) Classic (Hellenic-Roman). The ascendant cultural element must be the Eastern Mediterranean one, as I shall discuss below.

The first layer of the Punic-Carthaginian culture was enriched first by the Eastern, and later by Western, Mediterranean elements, unlike their contemporary Greek and Roman models of antiquity. In drawing differences, contrasts or analogies between these cultural models (Western and Eastern Mediterranean) I use the following methodological tools: 1) analysis of the religious subjects of Punic fine arts; 2) explanations of the analogies and differences of these subjects with analogous examples of Punic art in Eastern and Western Mediterranean.

In the fine arts I am about to pay particular attention to the connection between the creative forms and their religious context. This is made easy due to the fact that Ancient Near Eastern cultures created their art for practical, rather than aesthetic, purposes, distinguishing their art from their classical counterparts.

The examples of Punic art which attracted my attention are outstanding not only because of their artistic features, but because also of their religious beliefs, motifs and rituals. Punic art uses sacramental 'languages' consisting of symbols which are very difficult 'to read,' giving thus space for interpretations.

Punic state art, portraits, and votive art patterns usually have religious messages. For the Carthaginians, perhaps more than for the other people of the classical world around whom Carthage evolved (especially the Etruscans), systematical reference to their universal religions constitute the principle

binding force of unity.¹³ Also if the Carthaginians were cosmopolitan and urbanized people, yet their religion and cultic practices were very conservative and not understandable to their non-Punic contemporaries.

A large number of Punic art objects which have survived come from these particular funerary areas in sanctuaries and cemeteries, which were called "tophets".¹⁴ Punic religion was rooted in the religious beliefs of the ancient near Eastern and Semitic worlds. In these cultural models the religious aspect was the most important as the irrational mythopoetical comprehension was dominant over the secular mentality.¹⁵ As stated earlier, the appearance of religious themes in Phoenician art preeminently served a practical purpose and only a minor aesthetic one.

The cult of Tanit, though evidence for it outside of Carthage is sparse, was of great importance to the "new city." Perhaps the legend of Dido, the Phoenician queen, drove the city to choose a female goddess as its symbol, borrowing from other Eastern societies their own protective female goddesses.¹⁶ In Carthage, the cult of Tanit spread from the beginning of the V c. B.C..

For example, the little monument of Thinissut was discovered in the ruins of a sanctuary dedicated to Tanit. In the dedication of the neo-Punic temple of Bir-bou-Rekba, which is noteworthy because of its antiquity, the name Tanit is followed by the name of the god Baal, the male supreme deity of the Carthaginians, suggesting, perhaps, a holy connection between the two¹⁷. In the ex-votos in Carthage's tophet, thousands of dedicated texts were found dated over two or

¹³ S. Brown. *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in their Mediterranean Context*, Sheffield, 1991.

¹⁴ D. B. Harden. Punic Urns from the Precinct of Tanit at Carthage. *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1927), pp. 297-310.

¹⁵ see E.R. Dodds . *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley, 1951, and S. Morris, *Daidalus and the Origins of Greek Art*, Princeton, 1992.

¹⁶ See E. Simon. "Dido": *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiæ Classicae* (LIMC), vol. 8, 559 p., Zurich and Düsseldorf, 1997.

¹⁷ S. Lancel. *Carthage: A History*, Oxford, 1995 p.199.

three centuries. The sanctuary at Sarepta dedicated to Tanit-Ashtart (Astarte)¹⁸, a precinct on Malta contains engraved ceramic fragments dedicated to the goddesses Tanit and to Astarte¹⁹. Incredibly, the name of Tanit appeared in Minoan text as Ti-ni-ta, in recording offerings to various gods.²⁰

In Carthage, in the IV c. B.C., Tanit was mentioned either alone or before Ba'al Hammon in the sacrificial dedications which show her prominence. She was depicted as a robed human figure. The symbol is shown on cippi as well as stele from Carthage and on sacrificial monuments from southern Italian sites. She was also a common figure in other iconographical themes, so much so that she is generally regarded as a symbol of the city of Carthage itself.²¹

Tanit, because of her prominence, was a great mother goddess of this state, who gave to it a living force and protected its population. Parallels can be easily found in the emblems of the mythopoetical interpretation of reality of the Western and Eastern Semitic worlds. In these cultural models, an irrational mythopoetical understanding was dominant over a more secular one.²² That comprehension is why divine forces determined and ruled the everyday lives of these communities. For example, Gatumdag was the 'Mother of Lagas,' Ninsina, the 'Lady of Isin,' Ninmah, the 'Lady of Kes.' Ninhusagen, the 'Magnae Matres,' Arurua, Nintu, the 'Mothers of Land,' were the ladies who both gave birth and protected those states.²³ In the ancient traditions of these areas, these 'Mothers' were also associated with kingships.²⁴

¹⁸ J.B. Pritchard. "The Tanit Inscription from Sarepta," *Phoenizier in West*, ed. by H.G. Niemeyer, Berlin, 1982. pp. 83-92.

¹⁹ Moscati. 1968 p. 65.

²⁰ C.H. Gordon. *Ugarit and Minoan Crete*, New York, 1967. p.36; see *Hagia Triada* 27: a:1.

²¹ G.C. Picard and C. Picard. *The Life and Death of Carthage*, London, 1967. p. 87.

²² see Morris. 1992.

²³ J. Black and A. Green. *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, Texas University Press. 1995. pp. 86-132.

²⁴ E. Neumann. *The Great Mother*, Princeton, 1974. p. 99; Black and Green. 1995; M. J. Vermaseren, *Cybele and Attis, the Myth and the Cult*, London, 1977.

The goddess Asherat was a main supreme deity of Tyre, the state from which the migration processes started in Northern Africa. She protected this town and was the 'great lady of the sea.' Punic Tanit, as Egyptian Isis, seemed to have been a 'sea goddess' too; boats were offered to her as ex-votos.

Elath was worshipped in Sidon as the 'great Mother of Sidon,' in the same way as Astarte-Baalat, 'the great goddess of Byblos.' They were both 'Magnae Matres'.²⁵ In this case, Tanit could be associated with the great mother of Carthage; the theonyme 'TNT' was derived from the Phoenician 'itn' which means 'donor' and 'to give,' which we can interpret as the 'lady who gives the living force.'²⁶ Tanit seems to be a syncretic goddess.

Since very ancient times (IV-III mill. B.C.), the archetype of the Oriental primordial mother goddess was the matrilineal supreme deity associated with various aspects of worship. She was the goddess of fertility, reproduction, nature and animals as well as of mortuary rituals. Later, during the II mill. B.C., the goddesses of the 'younger generations' adopted these aspects of worship. It often happens in the history of pantheons, that younger gods whose cults evolved during the historical times, eclipse the older ones as referents of adoration. In these cases, Tanit was one of the goddesses of the 'younger generation.'

An inscription from a shrine at Sarepta, which consists of a dedication and statue to Tanit-Ashtart, is the first clear example of her name in an eastern context.²⁷ The absence of eastern evidence for Tanit is remarkable. A stele from the II c. B.C. was found above a tomb shaft on the hill of St. Monique at Carthage, which was erected in honor of Astarte and Tanit Libanon.²⁸ 'Tanit Libanon' means 'the white mountain.' The epithet reveals that she was the great mother of Oriental

²⁵ E. James. *Myth and Ritual in Ancient Near East*, London, 1958, p.1-5.

²⁶ M. H. H. Fanter. "Tanit", *LIMC*, vol. 8, pp.1183-1184.

²⁷ Pritchard. 1982. p.82.

²⁸ Picard .1968. p.20.

origin, whose cult was associated with the mountains, the pillars and the stones.²⁹

As stated earlier, TNT was connected with the root ITN, which means 'to give.' The text number 347 of the Proto-Canaanite inscriptions of Sinai, used the name TNT as an epithet to qualify Asherat, 'the lady of the sea monster of dragon.' From this, one could conclude that Asherat (Astarte) became the supreme deity of Carthage with the name Tanit, in other words, she became the Lady of Carthage.³⁰

In my opinion, from the evidence above, the Phoenician colonists, in their new founded emporium, began to worship with a special cult, the mother goddess who was one of the goddesses of the 'younger generation' arising from the Eastern primordial great mother.

3. The Symbols

The Lady of Carthage was closely related to funerary and fertility deities. In the votive steles from plot-Toffets dedicated to Tanit there are different symbols connected with her cult. The cult's sculptures and emblems of the goddess Tanit were made according to Punic plastic norms. In these vaguely anthropomorphic representations, Tanit's motif was composite, unifying symbols from the Near East and Mesopotamia into a new motif or emblem, that becomes sacred in Carthage. The symbols which I will discuss as emblematic of Tanit are: the raised-arm figure, the triangle, the circle, the breast-motif, the united crescent and disk, and, finally, the hand motif.

The most common symbol of the goddess Tanit, spreading in North Africa and the Western Mediterranean, was a figure with its arms raised in blessing.³¹ The origin and parallels to this gesture one can find in ancient Near Eastern and

²⁹ Parallels can be found in Etruscan religion. See A. J. Pfiffig. *Einführung in die Etruscologie*, Darmstadt, 1972, p.11; also, L. Farnell. *Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. 3, Oxford, 1907. p.299; W. Von Soden. *The Ancient Orient; An Introduction to the Study of Ancient East*, Darmstadt, 1985, p.87; R.C. Levy. *The Gate of Horn*, London, 1946, p.223.

³⁰ Picard. 1968. p.152.

³¹ see: M. Raphael. *Prehistoric Pottery and Civilization in Egypt*, New York, 1947, p.140.

Mesopotamian art, where goddesses were represented with their arms raised in blessing. Interesting parallels to our findings can be found in representations of goddess' symbols from the island of Mochlos (Crete, late Minoan I). There, a schematic figure of a female appears, whose arms are raised in blessing and whose wings are in the shape of a double ax.³²

The 'sign of Tanit' is the name of this symbol found on thousands of stelae. Her symbols are simple geometric designs of the triangle, circle, schematic representations of the breast-motif, and crescents and horns.³³ These female figures appear also on the stelae cippi, holding their breasts. We cannot be certain, but it seems likely, since the holding of the breasts was a common symbol of the mother goddess from the 'older generation,' that this gesture was adopted by Tanit as a goddess of fertility in the 'newer generation' in the Punic world, which is how one could conclude that these are also images of Tanit. A terra cotta plaque from Carthage showing a woman with a disk could also be a representation of Tanit.³⁴

The symbol of the triangle takes its origin from the Neolithic times. We find triangles in Ubaid (IV mill. B.C.), which are schematic representations of the uterus. We connect these examples too with the fertility cult of the Great mother. In Egypt, the symbol of the triangle connects to the cult of the Great Mother Goddess.³⁵ The triangle also appears in as a symbol of female fertility in Cyprus in the eneolithic times as well as in sculptures from Phoenicia.³⁶

Another symbol of Tanit is the sign of the bottle, which could be the symbolic representation of a child to whom she gives birth. The birth motif connects the goddess with the natural cycle of birth, death and rebirth which relates not only

³² M. Gimbutas. *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*, London ,1974, fig. 187.

³³ See: Musée Nationale de Carthage Bardo. The stele with sign Tanit and other symbols from Carthage.

³⁴ See: Musée national Carthage. Musée national Bardo. S. Moscati. *The World of the Phoenicians*, London, 1965, fig. 64-65.

³⁵ James 1958, p.53.

³⁶ Terracotta from Phoenicia, c. 2500 B.C.: see Neumann 1974, fig.14.

to the cyclical seasons but also to the ancient belief in an afterlife. As evidence of this strong belief in Punic society there existed the ritual sacrifice of the first born to Tanit so as to insure the success of future children and generations. This one ritual alone neatly relates her to the archetype of the great mother goddess. She gives life to her children and take them back as victims into her womb.

In addition of the plastic symbol of the bottle, which connects Tanit to the cycle of life, the etymology of the words to describe this bottle also show this connection. In Semitic language and Old Hebrew, R-H-M, which is phonetically connected to Ugaritic R-h-b, means 'the wide vessel for liquid,' such as the bottle motif described above. In Hebrew, R-H-M meant 'pity, compassion and womb' as well, thus unifying the themes of the bottle and the womb.³⁷

The crescent and disk were early motifs in tophet iconography. I identified the crescent as the moon, symbolizing Tanit and the disk as the sun symbolizing Baal Hamaan.³⁸ In the 'lunar religions', the cult of the mother goddess was associated with the moon.³⁹ The belief in the generative power of the great mother was thus extended to embrace the seasonal movement of the stars and the cycles of death and rebirth of the moon, an important aspect of both agriculture and ritual. The numerous goddess figurines found in Crete with raised arms, imitating the form of the horns of

³⁷ For the stelae and their symbols, see: P.Barteloni. *Le "stèle" arcaiche del Tofet di Cartagine*. Rome, 1976. Body > vessel > world > woman as body; body-vessel is the natural expression of the human experience of woman bearing the child "within" her: Neumann 1974. p. 42. Also a significant symbolic feature of the primitive "woman jars" is common for the primordial Goddess. See the examples from Troy, Austria, Cyprus, Italy...etc. in M. Hoernes. *Urgeschichte der Bildenden Kunst in Europe*, Vienna, 1925, pp. 198, 361, 451 and 497.

³⁸ R. Dussoud. *Notes de Mythologie Syrienne*, Revue Archéologique, (4 série), Paris, 1903.

pp.124-48

³⁹ Moon > Horns > Uterus. On one of the stèle bearing the sign of Tanit, the goddess figure is represented with horns. See: *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, 3. I. XXXI:14. see: S. Lunais. *Recherches sur la Lune*, Leiden, 1979.

consecration, were no doubt a representation of the gesture used at sacred ceremonies.⁴⁰

The hand motif has been particularly difficult to interpret. It may be viewed as a sign of the goddess' benediction, or of her ownership of the sacred land.⁴¹ This gesture is a Near Eastern one for which there are parallels from Levant and Mesopotamia. The gesture of raising the arms, especially the angle at which the arms are held and the clear emphasis of the palm of the hands, are common in the Eastern and Western Phoenician world.

In addition to the surviving motifs of Tanit, there exist cult sculptures of her made according to Punic plastic norms, even during Hellenic and Late Antiquity periods. These sculptures were made either in relief or as freestanding figures. However, unlike their contemporary Hellenic-Roman sculptures, these were non-graceful in their graphic style and the free standing figures were not meant to be viewed in the round. Tanit's sculptural figures varied. Some of them recall the mother goddess from the Near East, 'Dea Nutrix' Tanit, who appears nursing a child with her milk. This theme of the nursing mother was common in Mesopotamian, Near Eastern, Syrian, Egyptian, and later in Etruscan art. For example, the Etruscan cinerary stature from Chiusi of a seated mother holding her child, the mother Matuta, is very similar to the Punic mother goddess figure, as are the votive statuettes of mothers holding their children from Veii.

The image of the Near Eastern and Western Mediterranean Kourotrophos, the figure of a goddess holding a baby, rooted in much more ancient religious cult beliefs and rituals, is frequent in Punic and Etruscan art. In one sculpture, the great mother goddess Tanit is represented seated on a throne. It is not an accident that the greatest mother goddess of the early cults was named Isis, meaning 'the seat' or 'throne.' The throne becomes the sacred symbol of the Great Mother, who has receded into the background and it is on this throne

⁴⁰ D.O. Cameron. *Symbols of Birth and Death in the Neolithic Era*, London, 1981, p.9.

⁴¹ R. Nouget, *Prehistoric Art*. Turin, 1983.

that the king sits.⁴² The mother goddess, by sitting on a throne, 'takes her possession' of the earth⁴³. In early times the throne was associated with the mountain as a symbol of power.⁴⁴ Tanit, as a great mother, had her own throne, decorated with a sphinx motif, underlying Tanit's magic power over nature and humans. I propose that Tanit, through her motherhood, was the prototype of the woman who gave a living force to her stock.

In Mesopotamian and Egyptian art, the mother goddess protected kings, who took their power from her. Images of the goddess feeding the 'king infante' with her milk represent symbolically the goddess' power. In still another sculpture, Tanit was represented as a gloomy woman with the face of a lion holding a disk in her hands. Perhaps this represents her warrior aspect. Both the image of the lion and the warrior appear on other goddess images. The Phoenician Astarte would sometimes appear as a warrior.⁴⁵ The lion image surfaced in the Egyptian goddess Sekhet who was generally depicted in the form of a woman with the head of a lioness.⁴⁶ In the representations of Sekhet-Bast-Ra, she appears with the head of a lioness and wings.⁴⁷

Carthaginian funerary sculptures are the result of this tradition. The tradition of sarcophagi decorated with figures survived in the Punic capital through the Hellenistic era and older ones were preserved by the depths of underground tombs. In the cemetery known as Sainte Monique north of the town, two marble sarcophagi were discovered which reveal the modifications that had been made to the oriental mode. One of them is a very deep relief of a woman whose figure shows a singular syncretism of Egyptian and Hellenistic features. Egyptian elements of Isis are superimposed on

⁴² see: Neumann 1974.

⁴³ A. Hocart. *Kingship*. London, 1927, p.97.

⁴⁴ Neumann. 1974. p. 98.

⁴⁵ See the Statue at Nabeul, Museum, inv. No. 1238 from Thinissut. A. Merlin."BullArchCIH., 1909, 11-73.

⁴⁶ This image was surmounted by a solar disk encircled by an uraeus.

⁴⁷ See W. Budge. *Gods of Ancient Egyptians*, London, 1904. pp.516-9.

representations of Egyptian style, but the treatment of the face is in the Hellenistic manner. The falcon and the crossed wings are peculiar to the iconography of Isis. She becomes a winged goddess version of Tanit.⁴⁸

4. A Few Words in Conclusion

In North Africa, Romanization was a slow process. At the end of this period Tanit has been associated with Hera for the Greeks and with Juno Caelestin for the Latins.⁴⁹ She was also identified with Athena, Demeter and Artemis.⁵⁰ Some parallels can also be found with Egyptian Sekhet, Neith and Isis.

Tanit, the lady of Carthage, was an international goddess spread over the whole Western Mediterranean (Malta, Sardinia, Sicily and North Africa). With her spouse, Baal Hamman, they were young gods of the younger generation who outshined the older Phoenician Baal and Anath in the mythopoetical comprehension of Punic religious beliefs. The Phoenician colonists, in their new founded emporiums, started to worship their own special gods who were associated with their power. Tanit was the bearer of the traits of the primordial ancient mothers, but in the new lands of Northern Africa, she became the syncretical goddess -- the 'goddess of many names.'

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1⁴⁸ Lancel. 1995, p.325. Fig. 194. From the cemetery known as Sainte-Monique, Musee Nationale de Carthage, p.325.

2⁴⁹ LIMC, vol. VIII (1997), p.1183-1184.

3⁵⁰ Ibid.

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