

‘Female’ in Phoenician: Between Heaven and Earth

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Abstract

An increasing series of recent studies has reconsidered the social position of women in the Phoenician and Punic world. Thanks to data coming mainly from material culture, it has been possible to propose new scenarios, which partly modify the traditional evaluation. Here the ideology that can prudently be deduced from written sources, both direct and indirect, is taken into consideration. A look at epigraphic data concerning in particular the goddesses of the pantheon and the onomastic data, helps to shed new light on the ‘female’ at the symbolic level, characterised by specific values, different but apparently no less relevant than those attributed to the male universe.

Keywords

Women, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Goddesses, Pantheon, Onomastics.

1. If we look superficially at the available documentation¹ – archaeological, epigraphic, and literary – it does not seem that the condition of the Phoenician woman, both in the Levant and in the Western Mediterranean², differed significantly from the image reflected from other Near Eastern societies during the Iron Age³: they are unmistakably ‘patriarchal’ worlds or, to put it in more modern terms, sexist worlds⁴. The lives of millions of other women in the ancient Mediterranean, similar to that of the Phoenician and Carthaginian women, seem to have taken place predominantly, though not exclusively, within the family and inside the household.

The traditional evaluation retains its own validity, but a series of recent studies has contributed to refine it and modify some basic assumptions.

It must be pointed out that we have currently new and abundant data on the role and status of Phoenician women, that allow remarkable insights and provide us with new scenarios and levels to work on: historical, social, domestic, and also symbolic levels. E.g. as far as craft production and gender are concerned, the limits between the domes-

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¹ The present text faithfully reproduces – with the addition of a succinct bibliographical apparatus – the text read on the occasion of the Workshop “Women in Phoenician Society” (held at the University of Tübingen, Institut für Klassische Archäologie, on February, 23rd 2017).

² See among others: FANTAR 1991; YAZIDI ZEGHAL 1995; FERJAOUI 1999; LANCELLOTTI 2003.

³ Cf. e.g. STOL 1995; PARPOLA – WHITING 2002; MARSMAN 2003; STOL 2016; various studies in BUDIN – MACINTOSH TURFA 2016.

⁴ See JOYCE 2004; BOLGER (ed.) 2008; BUDIN 2015a and b; MASTERSON – SORKIN RABINOWITZ – ROBSON 2015.

tic sphere – traditionally considered as 'feminine' par excellence – and the productive sphere, proved to be fluid, with a series of important consequences at different interpretative levels⁵.

The present study aims to address specifically the symbolic level, i.e. the ideology that can be tentatively deduced from the written sources. In addition to a quick reflection on two female characters 'between history and myth', I will propose two 'surveys' in the epigraphic material, concerning respectively the goddesses of the Phoenician and Punic pantheon, and feminine personal names.

It is a task that conceals various difficulties and dangers. While direct sources – essentially epigraphic – we can say, the *emic level* – provide reliable information (although scant and not easy to interpret), indirect sources – such as the Old Testament or classical writers – frequently present female characters which appear as kinds of 'icons', i.e. products packaged in retrospect, as result of re-readings (ideologically oriented) of characters which are both non-existent or, at best, no longer attainable from a historical point of view. This does not mean that it is not useful material for the purpose of this study, but it is important to carefully differentiate the various levels of investigation. Of course, preconceptions are the norm and not worth mentioning here (ethnocentrism on various scales, unavoidable at the *etic level*, both ancient and modern). All this can lead to misunderstandings and, as a consequence, one must not trust generalizations. The historicity of the characters should be carefully considered, and it is not easy to deduce valid information from the cultural point of view.

A good example of such difficulties is provided by the ancient traditions concerning the history of Carthage, which, according to certain sources, seems to be marked by two intrepid and fierce women. As is well known, a popular theory claims that we have two women who characterize the beginning and the end of the great Punic metropolis. As a consequence, one is tempted to believe that the Punic imaginary had exceptionally exalted the female figure, to the extent that it became an essential reference point of this culture; or, at a different interpretative level, that these 'gigantic' figures could reflect an unusual important role of women in Phoenician or Carthaginian society.

But let us look at it more closely. How much is really to be ascribed to the Phoenician culture and society in the sources at our disposal? It is an old question which scholars ask themselves, which currently regains relevance thanks to new developments in studies.

On the one hand, we have a Tyrian princess, Elissa (Dido), who founds the 'new city' and offers her life to preserve its structure according to certain sacred values (essentially, political independence and the refusal of exogamy, which implies however isolation)⁶; on the other hand, we have a courageous anonymous aristocratic Carthagin-

⁵ See A. Delgado, "Working at Home. Gender and Craft Production in the Western Phoenician World", in this volume, 159-180; DELGADO – FERRER 2012, and, more in general, SPENCER-WOOD 2013.

⁶ The bibliography in this regard is enormous. See BUNNENS 1979: 369ff.; LA PENNA 1985; GEUS 1994: 207ff.; ERCOLANI, forthcoming. An analysis of the main classical sources in BONNET 2011, who emphasizes the Punic 'anti-values' that are underscored, the *fides punica*, and also the endogamy which would have marked Carthage from the beginning of its existence ("... les sources classiques ont construit, autour de la naissance de Carthage, une tradition antithétique à celle de Rome."). I am well aware of the complexity of this tradition from the point of view of cultural transmission, but what matters in this case is the 'mythème' (in the Lévy-Straussian sense) as a whole.

ian woman, the wife of Hasdrubal – her name has not been handed down – who falls heroically in front of the Romans during the final siege of Carthage, in the name of more or less the same ideals⁷.

Interestingly, both women voluntarily die in fire, another element that seems to favour the comparison between the two characters: the juxtaposition between the two women and their deaths is already found in ancient authors: *imitata reginam quae Carthaginem condidit*, is the comment by Florus⁸ (with various modern speculations about possible sacrificial implications)⁹.

As far as Elissa is concerned, although there are no certain elements to exclude that she was originally a historical figure, the version of Justinus (XVIII 4,3-6,8), closely dependent on Timaeus (*FGrHist* 566 F 82)¹⁰, that of Virgil (*Aen.* 1,338ff. and *passim*), and all the others (starting with Silius Italicus, in various books of his poem), have the characteristic of a mythical story.

In the case of Hasdrubal's wife, her heroic behaviour is described as antithetical to that of her husband, begging the victor Scipio for mercy¹¹. On the contrary, she decides to sacrifice herself and her two children in order not to accept the surrender. It is not difficult to see here – *inter alia* – an implicit Roman-centric moral: a Carthaginian man can take lessons of courage even from a woman (*en passant*, on closer inspection, it sounds regrettable for the man, but certainly does not reflect a flattering opinion of women, either Punic or in general).

As noted before, for her part, Elissa is a pseudo-historical, or even, a purely mythical character. But this is not exactly the case of the wife of Hasdrubal: the related episode – though it may be anecdotal to a certain extent – is narrated, *inter alia*, by a historian like Polybius (XXXVIII 20,7-11) in addition to other testimonies such as Livius (*perioch.* LI; *fr. oxyrh.* LI), Appianus (*Lib.* 130-131), Diodorus (XXXII 23), Valerius Maximus (III 2, ext. 8), Strabo (XVII 3, 14), Zonaras (IX 30, p. 460, b-c), Florus (*epit.* I 31,17) and Orosius (*hist.* IV 23,4).

As a consequence – although it would also be attractive to our eyes – the two characters cannot be put on the same level, as regards the reliability of the sources. In addition, if we go beyond the rhetorical testimony of some classical authors, the *image d'Épinal* of Hasdrubal's wife is transformed into that of a female character perhaps less heroic and surely more pragmatic.

Interestingly, in the summary of Book LI of Titus Livius, we learn that a few days before surrendering to Scipio, Hasdrubal rejected his wife's prayer: she wanted them to

⁷ See HUSS 1985: 443ff., esp. 456; GEUS 1994: 153-156 (mainly on the historical events regarding Hasdrubal).

⁸ Flor. *epit.* I 31,17; see also Oros. *hist.* IV 23,4.

⁹ See e.g. GROTTANELLI 1972.

¹⁰ See HAEGEMANS 2000.

¹¹ It is worth recalling the description of Hasdrubal's wife made by GSELL 1920: 401: "Parée comme en un jour de fête, la femme d'Asdrubal se dressa avec ses fils devant Publius et devant son mari. Elle appela le misérable. Comme il se taisait, les yeux fixés à terre, elle invoqua les dieux, remercia Scipion de lui avoir promis la vie, ainsi qu'à ses enfants; puis, après un court silence, elle s'adressa à Asdrubal et lui reprocha sa lâcheté et sa trahison. Lorsqu'elle eut fini de parler, elle jeta les deux enfants dans le brasier et s'y précipita elle-même". The relative historicity of the story is supported by the negative opinion of Polybius (XXXVIII 7,1) on Hasdrubal's character and his military capabilities as well.

seek refuge together in the Roman encampment, with the winners. And according to Zonaras (IX 30), *she had personally taken the initiative to contact Scipio* and beg him to save her children¹², but Hasdrubal had stopped his wife by locking her in the citadel.

However that may be, the tradition is not unanimous and this female character must be scaled back: rather than a heroine devoted to sacrifice (as in the case of Elissa), we have a brave but reasonable woman, willing to compromise for filial love (exactly what you would expect from a good mother of a family).

Examples of such mythical-historical figures, so difficult to decipher, could easily be multiplied: consider, among others, Sofonisba¹³, or, radically changing documentation, Tyrian Jezebel in the Old Testament¹⁴. The difficulty of distinguishing the genuinely historical level from the legendary or mythical, shows that we do not possess – not surprisingly! – a reliable criterion to evaluate the different traditions, which, in turn, have cultural 'classification' parameters different from ours.

2. If we now turn to direct sources, we lose descriptive richness and psychological insights, due to the laconic character of epigraphic evidence, but we gain a more solid ground on which to put our feet.

Also in this case, however, the documentation is not all at the same level. We have to face data (relatively objective) regarding social, political and family aspects (we would say: 'real' life), but, at the same time, we must take into account the variety and complexity of other investigation levels, especially those concerning the symbolic sphere, reflected by cult and religious beliefs.

This is precisely the level – the world of female deities – at which I wish to consider matters briefly, leaving some remarks on feminine onomastics for the final part of this contribution.

As in any polytheistic system, also in Phoenician and Punic religion the "female" (not to be intended as an archetype outside history) plays a major role, not so much through the *number* of goddesses in the pantheon, but rather for the *extent of the powers* that are concentrated in some of them. How many goddesses are included in the Phoenician pantheon, both in the East and in the West?

In a census made in preparation for the publication of a collective work¹⁵, about twenty female – divine or mythical – figures were identified, more or less directly related to Phoenician tradition. From this list, however, we must exclude the Egyptian goddesses¹⁶; then it is the turn of goddesses or mythical characters mentioned by Philo of Byblos¹⁷ and other classical sources¹⁸. According to current evidence, and barring er-

¹² *Ultimo urbis excidio cum se Hasdrubal Scipioni dedisset, uxor eius, quae paucis ante diebus de marito impetrare non potuerat ut ad victorem transfugerent, in medium se flagrantis urbis incendium cum duobus liberis ex arce praecipitavit.*

¹³ Cf. e.g. BRIAND-PONSART 2005; a collection of sources in ERCOLANI – XELLA 2018.

¹⁴ Cf. XELLA 2018a.

¹⁵ It is the 2nd volume of the *EDPC* dedicated to "Deities and Mythical Characters".

¹⁶ Isis, Bastet, etc.

¹⁷ Anobret, Baaltis (or Dione, the daughter of Uranos), Biblis, Epeis, Ge, etc. On Philo of Byblos, see EBACH 1979; ATTRIDGE – ODEN 1981; BAUMGARTEN 1981; KALDELLIS – LÓPEZ-RUIZ 2009.

¹⁸ E.g. Asteria and Astronoe (both Ashtart/Astarte), Athena, Demeter & Core, etc.

rors or omissions, the names (directly attested) which remain are very few: Anat (*'nt*)¹⁹, Ashtart (*'štrt*) – characterized by several epithets or linked to specific place-names, such as Astarte of Eryx (see *infra*), Baalat (also in this case, an *Erscheinungsform* of Astarte: the Mistress of Byblos, *b 'lt gbl*), perhaps Gad (but the gender is not certain), and Tinnit (*tnt [pn b 'l]*)²⁰.

As one can see, we have a very limited number of female theonyms. Nonetheless, this scarcity does not seem to reflect an imbalance of power in the divine world to the detriment of the goddesses. E.g. the literary sources show that it is often a female figure who acts as the eponym of a city: Beruth of Beirut, Biblis (wife of Elioun-Hypsistos) of Byblos and Side of Sidon. In fact, the whole Phoenicia is governed by Astarte (Ashtart) by the will of Kronos himself, together with a subordinate (!) Zeus Demarous (= the polyadic Baal). As stated by Philo of Byblos, Astarte put on her head the sign of the bull (symbol of royalty) and, travelling round the world, she found a star fallen from the sky and consecrated it in Tyre. Byblos, Sidon, and also Tyre, the three great Phoenician cities, were under the sign of a goddess!

In particular, we are struck by the omnipresence of this divine character in its various manifestations, which are marked locally, or characterized by different functions²¹:

- 'štrt hr* – “Syrian Ashtart” (Seville-statuettes inscription: see *infra*)
- 'štrt 'nn* – “Ashtart of Malta” (Tas Silġ inscriptions)
- 'štrt pp* – “Ashtart of Paphos” (Paphos inscription)
- 'štrt lpš* – “Ashtart of Lapethos” (Lapethos inscription)
- 'štrt 'rk* – “Ashtart of Eryx” (Cagliari inscription)
- 'št 'rt' bšdn* – “Ashtart of/at Sidon” (Ammonite seal)
- 'štrt blbnn* – “Ashtart of/in Lebanon” (Carthage inscription, together with Tinnit)
- 'štrt šm b 'l* – “Ashtart Name of Ba 'al” (Sidonian inscription)
- mlkt qdš* – “(Ashtart) the Holy Queen” (Kition-Bamboula inscription)
- 'štrt rbt gbl* – “Ashtart Lady of Byblos” (scarab of unknown origin)
- b 'lt gbl* – “(Ashtart) Mistress of Byblos” = ΑΣΤΑΡΤΗ ΘΕΑ ΜΕΓΙΣΤΗ (Byblos inscriptions)
- ΑΦΡΟΔΙΤΗ ΒΥΒΛΙΗ (Ps. Lucian, *de dea Syria*)
- ΑΦΡΟΔΙΤΗ ΟΥΡΑΝΙΑ (Beirut inscription).

Whether it is a name-label under which different divine characters are concealed, or is in fact a single ‘great goddess’ with many names worshipped in all corners of the Phoenician Mediterranean, is an old problem, which cannot be solved in these terms. Similarly to the cult of the Virgin Mary, we can perhaps see a single dominant character

¹⁹ Her role seems to be very limited. She was assimilated to Athena certainly based on the warrior character shared by the two goddesses. Epigraphic evidence is provided by inscriptions from Idalion, where possibly she was associated with Baal (*RÉS* 1210; see also *RÉS* 1209A) while another inscription in Lapethos describes her as “force” or “refuge/stronghold” of the living (*m 'z hym: CIS I 95 = KAI 42*). Anat also occurs as theophoric element in some North African personal names.

²⁰ To these theonyms, another divine character which recurs as theophoric element in the personal name *'bdšgr*, could be added (but the sex is not well defined), i.e. Sheger (*'šgr*), an obscure entity linked to fertility (in particular, in connection with the offspring of cattle) in the Syro-Palestinian world: cf. BENZ 1972: 163. 413-414; VAN DER TOORN 1999².

²¹ Full references can be found in BONNET 1996 and AMADASI GUZZO 2000.

in filigree, but at the same time, we can verify that the cult of the various Madonnas has special features which differentiate them locally, both in ideology and in ritual.

As for Ashtart's personality, it is a very complex divine character with manifold functions, as also shown by her rich iconography (armed, winged, enthroned, hunting, associated with lion[ess] and horse]): she is the holder of sexual and warlike power, defender of kingship and, therefore, a special interlocutor of the king, but also a guarantor of fertility and, in some cases, also protectress of sailors and military enterprises.

To get an idea of the extraordinary spread of Ashtart, from early colonial adventures until the Roman period, between the two shores of the Mediterranean and all its islands, consider that there is virtually no Phoenician or Punic site of any importance where there is no evidence of her cult (which does not happen to any male god).

Originally a Syrian goddess (see e.g. Ashtart Hurri [*hr*] in the Seville-statuettes inscription²²) Ashtart occurs for the first time in an inscribed funerary amphora from Sidon (8th-7th cent. BCE)²³, is venerated throughout the Levantine area (included Egypt, Palestine and Transjordan), and her worship is attested by an unbroken chain of evidence from East to West.

As for the homeland, at Byblos, the Baalat Gubal, the great "Lady" of the city is called Ἀστάρτη θεά μεγίστη in a bilingual (Phoenician and Greek) inscription²⁴ – and is indisputably in first place in the devotion of local kings. It is not only a preference related to this or that dynasty, because as early as in the Amarna period the kings of Byblos invoke the goddess in first place in their letters to the Pharaoh's chancellery.

At Tyre and Sidon, Ashtart is *prima inter pares* beside, respectively, Milqart und Eshmun, and the Sidonian sovereigns are proud to put the title "priest(ess) of Ashtart" before that of king.

Very popular on Cyprus in interaction with Aphrodite (Kition-Bamboula, Idalion, Paphos, Amathus, Lapethos), Ashtart had several shrines in the Aegean (Cos, Delos)²⁵; she is absolutely dominant in Malta, where she has the epithet of "Ashtart of Malta" (*štrt 'nn*)²⁶; her sanctuary at Eryx, Sicily, was famous throughout the Mediterranean²⁷ and her mention in the Pyrgi (Santa Severa) inscription, in Etruscan territory²⁸, testifies to an unmatched prestige in international relationships.

In the Western Mediterranean, the history and the figure of Ashtart differ depending on the history of foundations and the substrates with which she comes in contact. In several cases, the goddess overlaps with indigenous deities and assimilates their characteristics, also leading to her identification with various divine figures of the classical world (most of all, Hera/Iuno and Aphrodite/Venus).

Attested at Carthage as early as the 8th cent. BCE (gold medaillon of Yadamilk)²⁹, Ashtart continues to be venerated and to have her own places of worship at Carthage

²² Among other studies, see AMADASI GUZZO 1993a.

²³ *Editio princeps*: PUECH 1994. See also BONNET – XELLA 1996.

²⁴ See text A 10 in BONNET 1996: 156-157 and *passim*.

²⁵ BONNET 1996: 69ff.

²⁶ AMADASI GUZZO 1993.

²⁷ LIETZ 2012.

²⁸ See in general BELLELLI – XELLA 2016.

²⁹ XELLA 2018b.

itself and North Africa (Mididi, etc.), even if it concerns another great divine personality, Tinnit, with whom she shares sometimes a cult-place (at Sarepta, and subsequently at Carthage, see *KAI* 81: “To the Lady/Ladies Ashtart and Tinnit in/from Lebanon”).

Finally, an important aspect of Ashtart’s functions must be strongly emphasized, related to a specific ideology that united the mythological traditions of the Levant from the Bronze until the Iron Age. A particular mythical motif centred on the vicissitudes of a young and powerful god, was typical of this area (the paradigmatic model of which was the Ugaritic Baal, who dies and rises again with the help of a goddess, here Anat)³⁰. Similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, Milqart at Tyre, Eshmun at Sidon, and “Adonis” at Byblos (i.e. the local Baal), experience death, but also a subsequent return to life thanks to the intervention of a goddess who is Ashtart in every case. This myth – celebrated in worship through a grand ceremony known in Greek as the *egersis* of the god³¹, with the participation of the king – clearly testifies to the immense power of the goddess, able to defeat the death of her divine partner and transmit to the king the vital energy essential for performing his royal function.

The other great goddess of the Phoenician and, most of all, Carthaginian pantheon must be mentioned, Tinnit³², who could well be defined as “the great mediator” between heaven and earth.

Tinnit and Baal Hammon – her divine consort in the inscriptions from the *tophet*³³ – have their roots in the Levant, but enjoyed increasing popularity in the central-western Mediterranean world. This divine couple undoubtedly symbolizes the ancestral progenitors to which the faithful turn in the most important and critical moments of their lives. Both deities are invoked in thousands of dedications, mostly together and in this same sequence. However, from the 5th cent. BC onwards, Tinnit is found in first place in invocations, even though her divine husband continued to be considered as the lord of the sanctuary. The ‘rise’ of the goddess was probably motivated by the increasing importance of her role as tutelary *numen* of Carthage, of divine mother and mediator between her divine partner (as *pene Baal*, i.e. “Face of Baal”), and mankind³⁴.

This fact should make us reflect on the difference between supremacy at the abstract theological level and effective role in worship.

What one expects from a god is not always the same, at the level of personal and family devotion, or at the level of collective and public worship. In the second case, the request is to protect the king (or the chief) and the community, as well as to ensure defence from external enemies, and protection from natural disasters. In this framework, individual needs are secondary to the problems of the community. Therefore, it was natural that the individual worshipper chose particular forms of devotion, hoping to be heard by the gods. In the less formal sphere of private worship, the gods were felt to be closer and more willing to accept requests concerning the health of the individual, his offspring, his material wellbeing, and his daily misadventures. This type of popular

³⁰ XELLA 2001.

³¹ ZAMORA 2017.

³² MARÍN, forthcoming.

³³ XELLA 1991.

³⁴ See GARBATI 2012 and 2013.

devotion can satisfactorily explain the rise of Tinnit in popular devotion. In this case, the female face of the divine largely triumphs over the male, perceived as theoretically more powerful, but too far away and austere to be the most favourite interlocutor.

These brief remarks already show the extraordinary impact of the divine female on human imagery in Phoenician culture. All this is consistent with the most ancient traditions of Syria and Palestine, and one can well understand how Jewish monotheism has greatly struggled to conceal this dimension in its holy book. Included is the presence, historically proven, of the goddess Asherah beside Yahweh, on whom more or less surreptitiously female functions have been conferred³⁵.

If we look at this phenomenon from the point of view of the history of religions, we find the widespread tendency to emphasise the female figure on a symbolic level, while it is more marginal in terms of effective powers in real life.

However, there are relevant differences between monotheistic and polytheistic religions. In the first case, the role of women in ecclesiastical and priestly structures is unquestionably secondary to that of men, and with absolute limits (at least, so far); in polytheistic contexts, on the contrary, women are often the equals of men in the priesthood, also occupying the highest positions in the various cults.

As far as the Phoenician world is concerned, priestesses are attested in Levantine royal families, but we also know of a Sidonian high priestess without royal title. In Punic contexts – where kingship probably never existed – female cult-operators are well attested in prominent roles and they belong to high-ranking and powerful families³⁶.

As is well known, the standard term for “priest” in Phoenician – as in other Semitic languages – is *khn*, to be vocalized *kohin*, but also the feminine *khnt* is well attested. In particular, similarly to the male clergy – which was under the guidance of male *rb khnm*, “high priests” – also the female clergy had *rbt khnt*, “high priestesses”, in leading roles. At Carthage one such priestess, very authoritative, was the daughter of a *rab* and her husband, grandfather and great-grandfather were all Suffetes in the highest aristocracy of the Punic metropolis³⁷.

But we also possess evidence of a more structured priestly hierarchy. At a surely lower level, some cult operators were called “slave” or “servant” (of the deity) – both male (*bd*) and female (*bdt* and *mt*) – almost always attached to a particular sanctuary or shrine. In addition, we know that other personnel – apparently with no distinctly sacrificial functions – were active in the sphere of the temple economy, and female staff was certainly included at different levels³⁸.

In this respect, mention must be made of people who practised prostitution, chiefly female (but also male) in temple contexts. Although not all scholars agree³⁹, available evidence makes it likely to have existed at least in sanctuaries such as Afka, Byblos and Baalbek in the East, and Kition, Le Kef (Sicca Veneria) and Erix in the West. These are shrines related to specific cults, most of all of Ashtart: here she reappears!

³⁵ A connection of Asherah mentioned at Kuntillet 'Ajrud with the Phoenician pantheon seems difficult, in spite of the use of the Phoenician script in some inscriptions, see MERLO, forthcoming.

³⁶ AMADASI 2003; JIMÉNEZ FLORES 2006 and 2016.

³⁷ CIS I 5950 = KAI 93 (*spnb 'l*).

³⁸ For other evidence on the ritual role of women, see e.g. DELGADO – FERRER 2007; GARCIA VENTURA – LÓPEZ-BELTRÁN 2012.

³⁹ BUDIN 2008; SCHEER – LINDNER 2009. See also LIETZ 2012, *passim*.

Generally, we tend to distinguish two types of sacred prostitution: the one practised systematically by specialists of the temple, the other consisting of a kind of vow that ordinary women would have to perform at least once in their lifetime (maybe, before marriage). Beyond other theoretical and practical aspects, it can be said that (female) sacred prostitution was a ritual that put the faithful in contact with the goddess, represented by the prostitute; it evoked perhaps the ancient ceremony of the *hieros gamos*, sacred marriage, where the king himself coupled with the high priestess, who represented the deity at the highest level.

Finally, let us now briefly look at feminine personal names in Phoenician and Punic, which can reveal some details of women's devotional preferences (even though their names were probably chosen by men).

From a grammatical point of view, personal names that are not feminine but exclusively adopted by women are rare, such as *'spt*, *hld*, *tršt*, *špnb 'l*. Otherwise, as in the case of masculine anthroponyms, there are several feminine personal names which incorporate divine names. However, gods or goddesses who are part of feminine anthroponyms are relatively few in number: Ashtart (directly, or represented by epithets such as "Lioness"), and Milqart are the most frequent; also attested are Baal, Eshmun, Tinnit, Gad, Pumay and the Egyptian deities Isis and Osiris. In particular, women say they are "daughter" (*bt*), "sister" ([*']ht*), "servant" (*'mt*) or "the desired" (*'ršt*), of a deity, who, in turn (Ashtart, Eshmun), can be a mother for the baby girl who bears her/his name (a characteristic exclusive of feminine names)⁴⁰.

Many other aspects would have to be treated on this fascinating and complex topic, included one of the most important aspects, that is, the role of women in the tophet, the open air cremation infant sanctuaries spread over the central Mediterranean from the 8th cent. BCE to the 2nd cent. CE. I refrain here from discussing the general problem of the rites practised in these cult-places, except to point out that the tophet was not a necropolis and that the various ceremonies carried out there were mostly sacrificial in character⁴¹. What is indisputable, however, is that the rites also concerned problems related to human fertility and fecundity: as can be easily deduced, it is a sphere that must certainly see women in the foreground. As a consequence, there is the problem of the visibility of the female element (in addition to the children): a specific and systematic investigation of the iconographic motifs on the votive stelae will certainly provide new results.

Here I wish only to draw attention to a datum inferred from the inscriptions of the Carthaginian tophet, which concerns the number of women authors of the dedications.

In a world – that of written documents – in which men have the absolute prevalence, the presence of women was surprisingly high in this special sanctuary. More than 10% of dedications is made by women and, contrary to the norm, their name is almost never accompanied by her husband, but possibly from that of her father and ancestors, and there are also cases of women who mention their mothers (which means putting female ancestry in the foreground). The impression one gets is that women had a key role in the ritual dynamics, much more important than demonstrated by the percentage attested in the dedications (already very significant in itself). These are the results of an experi-

⁴⁰ In other cases we have *hn* "grace", *mtn* "gift", *n 'm(t)* "beauty", *kbd* "glory", *'z* "strength". See BENZ 1972, *passim*.

⁴¹ See, among others, XELLA (ed.) 2013 and XELLA 2017 (with previous bibliography).

mental investigation carried out years ago by M.G. Amadasi Guzzo and continued here⁴². The data are very significant and make us reflect on our evaluation criteria concerning female visibility in the written sources.

There is no doubt that the available documentation, epigraphic and iconographic, no less than material culture, has still much to say on this topic, if properly investigated.

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