

IMAGES & SYMBOLS: ON PUNIC STELAE FROM THE TOPHET AT CARTHAGE

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One of the more important sources of knowledge about the religion of the ordinary Phoenician has been the discovery of thousands of decorated and inscribed stelae from the tophet at Carthage. These stelae are the expression of what, for want of a better word, we can call the "folk" religion of the Phoenicians, as opposed to other monuments, also decorated and inscribed, which show us the "official" side of Phoenician religion.

Many stelae were found during excavations in the 19th century at different sites around Carthage, having been dug up and reused by the Romans. At the time they were found and the inscriptions translated the existence of a tophet was not even thought of. The emphasis in these early publications was on the inscriptions rather than on the images because until that time the corpus of inscriptions in the Phoenician language was small and there was uncertainty as to the form of some letters. Since then of course the tophet has been discovered¹ with many thousands of stelae and our understanding of the Phoenician language and of the images on the stelae has increased though it is still not complete. The stelae discussed in this article are part of the collection of almost 200 stelae in the Department of the Ancient Near East of the British Museum. They were found in

the 1840's by the Reverend Nathan Davis during the course of his excavations on the site of ancient Carthage.

The tophet was a sacred open-air precinct in which were placed the bones of cremated infants & children interred in jars. Even before its discovery and excavation at Carthage the existence of such a place was known from the Old Testament². It was not a cemetery and the burials were not funerary. The jars and their contents were dedicated to named deities, usually to the goddess Tanit, "face of Baal" and Baal Hammon together or just to Baal Hammon³. Whether these children were sacrificed or placed there after death by other causes is a subject to which we still do not know the answer.

The earliest burials did not have any permanent above-ground markers⁴ but as time went on and the tophet grew larger and more established worked stelae were placed in the ground above the urns. The first votive monuments in the tophet, (c. 7th-6th century BC), are not stelae but uninscribed decorated *cippi*, some carved with pilasters, baetyls and columns or shaped like thrones, with a baetyl or pilaster carved into the back. A few depict a figure in a niche holding a disc. Some are plain but may once have had painted images. The thrones are similar to the thrones and other stelae found at various sacred sites in Lebanon⁵. This

1 The tophet was not discovered until 1921.

2 Jeremiah 7:30-32, 35, 2 Kings 17 & 23, of the tophet just outside Jerusalem.

3 At Carthage the inscriptions always refer to both deities but at other sites where there are inscriptions only Baal Hammon is mentioned.

4 It is possible that the sites were marked but with perishable material such as wood.

5 Cf. "L'autre rive", p.106, illus. A shrine from Burj al-chémali near Tyre, enclosing two baetyls on a pedestal with a winged sundisk and uraei above is typical of imagery on early stelae in the West.

type of monument has been found at Phoenician sites, not only at Carthage, but also in Sardinia and Sicily and at other sites in North Africa. The empty thrones, the baetyls and the pilasters/columns are symbols of the deity or deities the

Phoenicians worshipped and are all the more powerful in their imagery for not depicting the deity him or herself⁶.

As Punic society became more literate many stelae were engraved with an inscription of dedication naming the deity or deities and giving the name of the person who had made the dedication, in fulfilment of a vow. Above and below the inscriptions were religious symbols, images which were understood by everyone who saw them even if they could not read the inscription. These images had the same function as the inscription - acting as a language for people who were probably illiterate. The ability to read and write would have been reserved for a privileged few from the upper echelons of society - scribes, certainly, possibly priests and perhaps also some members of the governing classes.

The use of symbols instead of the actual depiction of an object such as a deity is a deep-rooted facet of many religions even to this day. There can be many reasons for this, not only illiteracy - a fear of portraying the holy object - a way of speaking only to the followers of a particular religious belief - simple shorthand are just a few. It is also a way of retaining an element of mystery necessary to inspire a sense of awe.

The stelae, the bulk of which date from between the 4th-2nd century BC, vary in style, their shapes showing Classical influence, coming to a point at the apex or with the pointed apex flanked by acroteria. Most stelae appear to have been "mass-produced" in workshops and were not made to order. The inscription and any individual detail would have been added at the time of purchase.

The repertoire of images is large, some of them occurring only a few times. There is a core group of symbols, however, one or more of which is found on almost all the stelae. These are the symbols which appear to represent deities. Of these, some were brought to the west from the Phoenician homeland though of the few that were

used most frequently two, a raised hand and a crescent & disc together originated in the Levant, one, the caduceus seems to be of Greek origin and another, the so-called "Tanit" symbol is of unknown origin.

Another symbol, not occurring as frequently as these is a standard. This is included here because it appears to be linked to both the caduceus and the Tanit symbol. Though infrequent in the Punic period it is often shown on stelae in the neo-Punic period.

We link these symbols to particular deities and cults by a complicated system of comparison with other cultures and educated guesswork. Our reasoning is based on the knowledge that many ancient religions were mainly attempts to explain the forces of nature, the seasons, rain and sun, the



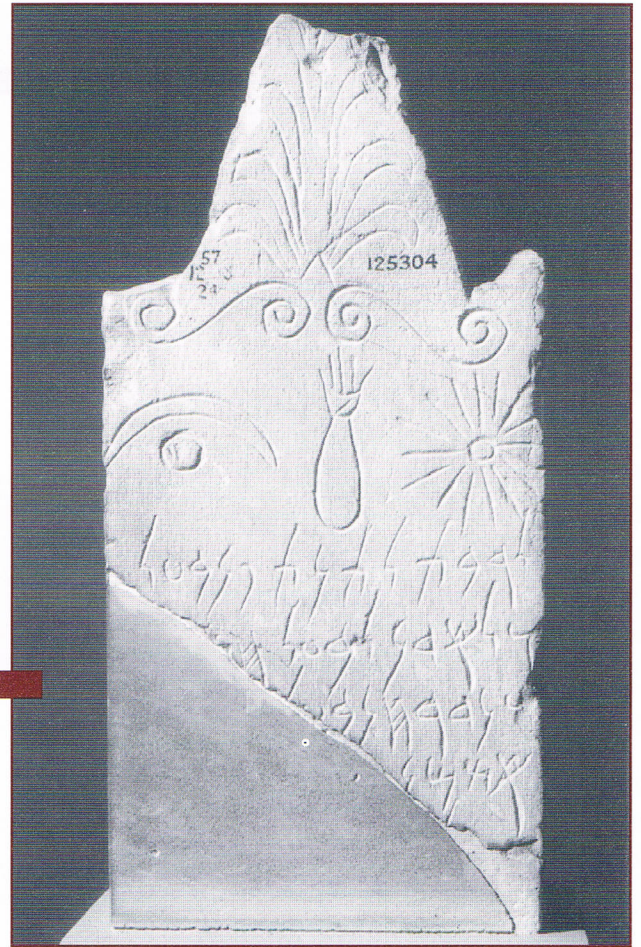
moon and the stars and life, fertility, birth and death.

HAND (FIG. 1). A hand or hand and arm is a common symbol and is often depicted in the apex of the stelae. It is invariably shown as a right hand, palm outward, raised either in blessing or prayer. It is tempting to see in this the hand of the deity raised in benediction especially as the inscription usually uses the phrase "because he blessed me" or

"I was blessed".

The raised hand is also found on tomb markers from cemeteries around Carthage which show a figure standing in a niche holding a libation cup in the left hand and with the right hand raised, sometimes disproportionately large to emphasize its importance. Hands were used as amulets, not only by the Phoenicians; hand-amulets can be traced back to the Early Dynastic Period in Mesopotamia, and are found on seals of the Old Babylonian period. Closer to the Phoenicians, it is seen on Canaanite stelae found in Late Bronze Age temples. The symbol of the hand disappears completely by the neo-Punic period, perhaps because it was associated with a deity whose worship died out under Roman influence.

CRESCENT AND DISC (fig. 2, 6). The crescent and disc [as a single symbol] is usually found in the apex of a stela or in the acroteria. It also seems to have originated in Mesopotamia and was used there as early as the end of the 3rd millennium BC as a symbol of the moon god Sin. It is common both there and in Syria and the Levant from the 2nd millennium BC on, where along with a rosette or star symbol, it is usually associated with Astarte, the Canaanite-Phoenician incarnation of Ishtar. The crescent ends usually point down and encom-



passes the disc; the two together probably symbolize the new and full moon. That this is not the moon and sun is shown by the appearance of the crescent and disc together with a sun with rays on a stela (fig. 2).

6 The rarity of the depiction of the human figure on tophet stelae seems to apply only to Carthage. Stelae from other sites, such as Sousse, are different and not only show the human figure but continue using the earlier imagery of baetyls, pilasters and columns; there may be a connection with the fact that they are also uninscribed; in addition these sites were provincial and not as influenced by Hellenistic and Roman culture.

1. Stela fragment with hand and the apex.
2. Crescent & disc with hand and sun.

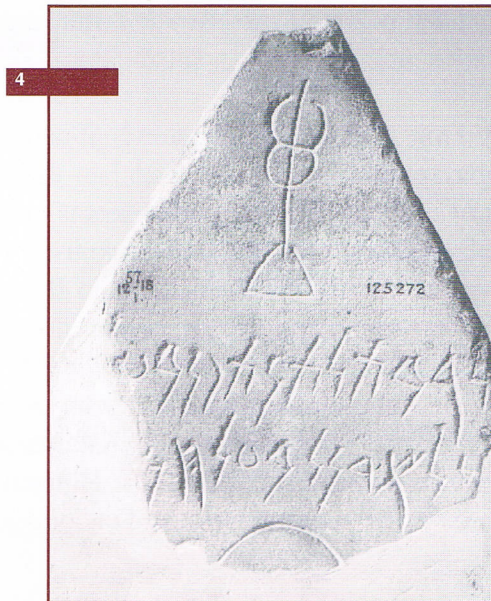


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A combined crescent and disc rarely appears in the later neo-Punic period but it is sometimes replaced by a wreathed or rayed sun face or rosette, above a crescent which usually has upward pointing ends. The combined crescent & disc is much more common on the stelae than the crescent alone and the appearance of the disc alone with or without rays is rare in the Punic period. Clearly the new moon and the full moon were important features of the calendar.

STANDARD (fig. 3). Standards are usually shown in pairs, either supporting a Tanit symbol or on their own, flanking another symbol. The meaning of the standard is uncertain. Its use as a support for the Tanit symbol suggests a link between them. It

is usually distinct from a caduceus and the two occasionally appear together. At some point during the later stages of the Punic period, probably during the 2nd century BC, a fusion seems to have taken place and it may be that to



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3 & 4. Combined standard/Tanit & standard/caduceus.

the Punic mind the two symbols became interchangeable. This is even more apparent in the neo-Punic period when the caduceus rarely appears but a standard with caduceus characteristics is often depicted.

CADUCEUS (fig. 4, 5 & 6). A caduceus consists of three basic elements, a shaft with two circles for the finial, the lower one closed, the upper one almost always open. There are many variations: it may have a base or streamers, be shown in a double or single outline, the shaft may be straight or may taper. It is also shown combined with other motifs especially the "Tanit" symbol and with the standard.

Probably derived from the symbol of the Greek god Hermes, albeit usually without the wings and snakes, the caduceus is common on the tophet stelae of the 4th-2nd century BC but dies out in the neo-Punic period. For the Greeks and Etruscans the caduceus was associated with Hermes as guide of the dead to the underworld and at first sight would appear to be appropriate for its depiction on the stelae. However the tophet burials were not funerary but rather connected to the fulfilment of a vow when a prayer was answered; it is therefore more likely to have been associated with healing, not death, in the Punic mind. It is possible that the caduceus was associated with the Phoenician god of healing, Eshmun, who played an important role in Phoenician religion.



TANIT (fig. 5 & 6). The Tanit symbol is probably the most defining symbol of Punic iconography and is not known in any other culture. In its most basic form it consists of a triangle, a circle and a horizontal line but there are many variations and it often appears in conjunction with another symbol. The significance of the "Tanit" or "Tinnit" symbol has been exhaustively discussed and there are many theories as to its meaning and origins. Until now it has been found mainly in the western Mediterranean and some think it originated in North Africa. However, there is increasing evidence for its earlier appearance in the Phoenician homeland⁷. It is generally considered to be the symbol of the mysterious goddess Tanit about whom very little is known except that the inscribed stelae from the Carthage tophet are all dedicated with the formulaic "to Tanit, face of Baal

⁷ The "Tanit" symbol was found in a mosaic floor and on a glass disc at Sarepta and, more recently, on stelae from a ? 9th-8th century BC cemetery or tophet at Tyre. All the occurrences in the Levant predate the stelae from Carthage.

5. Caduceus & hand flanking a Tanit symbol with caduceus characteristics.

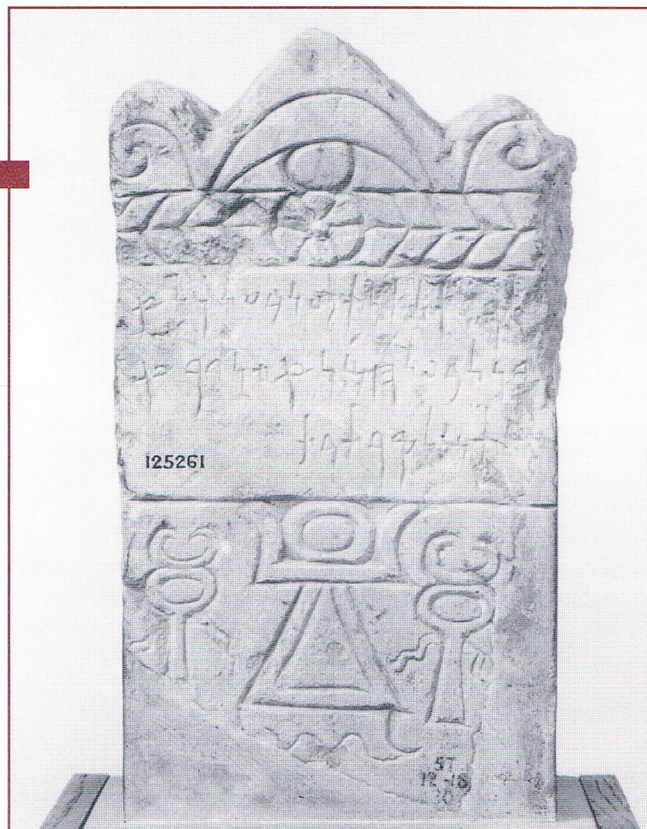
and to Baal Hammon". The name does not occur on its own. The triangle, circle and line which comprises the image (no doubt each with its own meaning) gradually evolved into a human female figure shown on stelae of the neo-Punic period where she is a figure of fertility and abundance and probably amalgamated with the Roman goddess Juno/Caelestis. Though this symbol is normally associated with the goddess Tanit, it occurs on stelae from other sites where there is no mention of the goddess in the inscription and some scholars argue that the connection is not proven. Its appearance on a few stelae with the letter "taw" within the symbol may go some way to confirming its association with the goddess. Though Tanit was known in the Lebanon and the "Tanit symbol" has now been found there, the goddess did not have the pre-eminence there that she acquired in the later stages of an independent Carthage and some of its colonies.

Early Tanit symbols closely resemble the Egyptian *ankh*, a symbol of life. A number of baked clay female figures of the 5th-4th century BC found in the sea off the Phoenician coast show a pregnant goddess or a goddess and child with an *ankh* or a Tanit symbol ⁸.

In a culture in which literacy is not universal imagery and symbols are very important and take the place of writing. Much of Phoenician religious practice, especially its development in the Carthaginian sphere is still a mystery to us and our interpretation of the multitude of symbols on the stelae is to some extent a matter of guesswork. Of all the images and symbols on the stelae from the tophet at Carthage, many of which are thought to represent a deity, the only one commonly associated with a specific deity is the "Tanit" symbol. It is ironic that this is the single deity about whose origins we know little and of whose place in the Phoenician pantheon we know even less.

Additional note

This article is based on the chapter on Iconography in the forthcoming Catalogue of *Punic and Neo-Punic stelae in the collections of the British Museum* to be published by the British Museum. All illustrations are by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.



8 Unpublished figurines seen by the author in the early 1970's. Around that time these figures began appearing on the market with varying provenances, some said to be from off the coast of Tyre and some from off the coast of northern Israel. Before being cleaned they were covered with the accretions normally associated with objects found in the sea. Some of the figurines found in a 5th century BC shipwreck in northern Israel were published in *Archaeology* 26, 1973, pp.182-87.

6. Tanit symbol flanked by caducei with crescent & disc in the apex.