

THE NAME OF SIDON

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FRANÇOISE BRIQUEL-
CHATONNET

The name of the present city of Sidon – or Saïda in Arabic – is known from early antiquity, most particularly from Akkadian texts. In the el-Amarna archives it is written as *Ṣi-du-nu*, in which form it is later found in the annals of the Assyrian kings in relation to their military expeditions towards the Levantine coast. The Ugaritic epic of Kirta mentions the goddess of the Sidonians (ṢDYNM) ¹. In Egyptian the town is attested as *Ḍi-du-n3* in Papyrus Anastasi. Written ṢDN in Phoenician and צִדּוֹן in Hebrew, it is transcribed as Σιδὼν in Greek. The persistence of the form of the name is thus remarkable.

Although the etymology of the name of Tyre (Ṣûr, meaning ‘rock’) describes the situation of the original village – perched on a rock in the middle of the sea ² – well enough, the search for the origins of the name of Sidon – which also has attracted researchers passionate about etymology – has had rather deceptive results. The relations first proposed were with the semantic group ṢW/YD, which denotes “the chase” in the Semitic languages. But this is not really very convincing. Sidon would not appear to be located in an area particularly conducive to the chase. The “Semantic group” could of course be extended to include fishing ³, but although this reading might seem more logical as applied to a site located on the coast and in possession of natural harbours, it is hard to see what, in this respect, distinguishes Sidon from all the other cities along the coast. A letter used as a model for the instruction of scribes, most probably dated to the reign of Rameses II and preserved in *Papyrus Anastasi I*, in fact associates Tyre rather than Sidon with an abundance of fish ⁴.

A reference to the Phoenician god Ṣid ⁵ may be more pertinent. Although he has long been known only through the appearance of his name in the composition of Phoenician theophoric anthroponyms ⁶, his cult has now been attested at the excavations of Antas in Sardinia, where a sanctuary and a few dozen votive inscriptions dedicated to him have been found ⁷. This appears to have been an *interpretatio* of a very ancient local god, whom the Romans later called *Sardus Pater* ⁸. He is a beneficent figure, with the characteristics of a healing god ⁹. The mythical narratives that evolved around *Sardus Pater* appear to have made him into a son of Heracles-Milqart ¹⁰, and one inscription even mentions a double divinity: Ṣid-Milqart ¹¹ (*CIS I* 256, 1.3), which would if anything connect him to Tyre. His personal history thus does not particularly connect him to Sidon, where the role of protector and healer is assumed by Eshmun, and the list of occurrences of the name of the god includes only one that is Sidonian.

A term which should also be mentioned is ṢDN or ṢṢDN, which in Punic designates a person in a position of inferiority in relation to another, possibly an emancipated slave ¹². But, if a connection could be established between the two names, the one that designates a personal status – ₃ attested only in Punic and thus attributable to a relatively late period – is more likely to derive from the toponym than vice versa ¹³.

In fact, it emerges above all that this research is somewhat futile. Although the learned writers of antiquity made abundant use of such scholarly etymologies to reconstruct history, we are now more cautious. In most cases, place names appear to go back to the very earliest epochs, well before there were any texts from which to deduce the history of a region or to decipher the language used by its inhabitants.

speak of another city in the sea the name of which is Tyre-of-the Harbor. Water is taken over to it in scows, and it is richer in fish than in sand”.

versità di Roma e della Soprintendenza alle Antichità di Cagliari, Rome, (Studi Semitici 30), p. 95–104.

NOTES

1 M. Dietrich, O. Loretz and J. Sanmartín, 1995, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places*, Münster, Ugarit-Verlag, (Abhandlungen zur Literatur Alt-Syrien-Palästinas und Mesopotamiens 8), I.14, IV, 36 and 39.

2 The city, moreover, constructed an entire mythology about its origins based on its situation, crystallized in the myth of the rocks that floated on the sea, the ambrosian rocks Nonnos, *Dion*. XL, 465–500: also see E. Will, 1950–1951, “Au sanctuaire d’Héraclès à Tyr, l’olivier, les stèles et les roches ambrosiennes”, *Berytus*, 10, p. 1–12 and C. Bonnet, 1988, *Melqart. Cultes et mythes de l’Héraclès tyrien en Méditerranée*, Leuven/Namur, Peeters/Presses universitaires de Namur, (Studia Phoenicia 8), p. 31–32.

3 This is the connection proposed by W. Gesenius, 1835–1853, *Thesaurus philologicus criticus linguae hebraeae et chaldaeae veteris testamenti*, Leipzig, p. 1153, based on Justin 18, 3, 4, who explains that the Phoenician word for “fish” is “sidon”!

4 E. Wente, 1990, *Letters From Ancient Egypt*, Atlanta (Georgia), Scholars Press, (Society of Biblical Literature. Writings from the Ancient World 1), p. 107: “They

5 Proposed in PW II A.2, 1923, col. 2216 and by L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, 1953–1985, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, Leiden, Brill, p. 801.

6 F. L. Benz, 1972, *Personal Names in the Phoenician and Punic Inscriptions: A Catalogue, Grammatical Study and Glossary of Elements*, Rome, Biblical Institute Press, (Studia Pohl 8), p. 398. One might add BDṢD, mentioned in ostrakon D from Sidon, I. 4, not taken up in Benz (A. Vanel, 1967, “Six ‘ostraca’ phéniciens trouvés au temple d’Echmoun, près de Saïda”, *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth*, 20, p. 45–95). Another example in M.-F. Baslez and F. Briquel-Chatonnet, 1990, “L’inscription gréco-phénicienne de l’Asklépieion de Délos”, *Semitica*, XXXVIII (Hommages à Maurice Sznycer I), p. 27–37, pl. III. This man would be Tyrian.

7 M. H. Fantar, 1969, II. “Les Inscriptions”, in *Ricerche puniche ad Antas. Rapporto preliminare della Missione archeologica dell’Università di Roma e della Soprintendenza alle Antichità di Cagliari*, Rome, (Studi semitici 30), p. 47–93.

8 M.-G. Guzzo-Amadasi, 1969, “Note sul dio Sid”, in *Ricerche puniche ad Antas. Rapporto preliminare della Missione archeologica dell’Uni-*

9 M. Sznycer, 1969–1970, “Note sur le dieu Ṣid et le dieu Ḥoron d’après les nouvelles inscriptions puniques d’Antas (Sardaigne)”, *Karthago*, 15, p. 67–74.

10 C. Bonnet, 1988, *Melqart. Cultes et mythes de l’Héraclès tyrien en Méditerranée*, p. 250–253.

11 P. Xella, 1990, “‘Divinités doubles’ dans le monde phénico-punique”, *Semitica*, XXXIX (Hommages à Maurice Sznycer II), p. 167–175.

12 J.-G. Février, 1951, “Vir Sidonius”, *Semitica*, 4, p. 13–18.

13 J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling, 1995, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, Leiden - New York - Köln, Brill, (Handbuch der Orientalistik I. 21), p. 960–961.