

# religion, Phoenician and Punic FREE

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## Summary

The Phoenician and Punic religion was a polytheistic system, characterized by local specificities and some common features. It is attested in the whole Mediterranean basin throughout the first millennium BCE, with significant evolutions since the Archaic period, due to frequent contacts with many different cultures, such as Greece, Egypt, Etruria, etc. Each kingdom or city-state (Arwad, Beirut, Byblos, Sidon, Sarepta, Tyre, to mention the most important) shapes its own *pantheon*, which becomes a crucial expression of micro-identities. However, many gods are shared and present both in Phoenicia and in the Mediterranean diaspora, where they undergo transformations and integrate multicultural environments. The absence of Phoenician and Punic literature is a huge obstacle to a precise understanding of the religious dynamics. Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Assyrian, and Egyptian sources fortunately provide a consistent body of evidence on gods, rituals, myths, or narratives, but they need to be accurately deciphered. The Phoenician and Punic religion appears as particularly open to foreign influences and borrowings; it often employs composite images between anthropomorphism and aniconism. As in many other religions, sacrifices represent the core of the ritual system, a “middle ground,” where gods and men interact.

**Keywords:** tophet, aniconism, anthropomorphism, sacrifice, translatability, divine names, pantheon

**Subjects:** Roman Myth and Religion

## The Representation of the Divine

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Although Phoenician mythology is poorly known, because of the absence of any literature, some distant echoes, coming from Philo of Byblos, in his *Phoinikike Historia* (2nd century CE), confirm the fact that the gods are responsible for the cosmogonic and anthropogonic process.<sup>1</sup> Although Philo is a Roman-period author with clear Greek influence, he is a relatively reliable guide to long-standing Phoenician ideas and traditions because he precisely aims at rehabilitating ancestral traditions and finds some convincing echo in the Phoenician and even Ugaritic evidence. The lack of Phoenician mythological texts represents a heavy handicap, but indirect sources, mainly Greek and Latin, provide precious indications. They make use of cultural filters and distortions that can affect the accounts. However, when accurately detected, they provide supplementary information on the Phoenician representation of the divine in multicultural contexts.



**Figure 1.** Terracotta figure of a dedicator, 4th–3rd centuries BC, from the Ibiza necropolis of Puig de Molins.

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Conceived as a tribute to the gods, the cult consists in offerings, sacrifices, prayers, and all sorts of care comparable to the concept of *religio*, whose Phoenician equivalent is unfortunately unknown. In any case, a moral and vital bond existed between men and gods. Any negligence to the gods could provoke their wrath. In fact men ascribed to the gods feelings, emotions, thoughts, strategies, and agency. They were able to plan, calculate, avenge . . . although the superiority of their nature, the otherness of the divine is unanimously accepted. Accordingly, the divine body can seem similar to a human body, but it is radically different in its size, capacity, and impact.

A strong link existed between gods and specific territories, including the diasporic settlements. Melqart, for instance, the ancestral and dynastic god of Tyre, is deeply rooted in the Tyrian landscape and is directly concerned by the destiny of the kingdom, but he is also involved in the history of Carthage and other Tyrian settlements, like Gades in Spain. Since the gods contribute

towards the cohesiveness of the diasporic networks of Phoenician and Punic people through the whole Mediterranean space, it is unreasonable to study the Phoenician (i.e., Eastern) religion disjoined from the Punic one (i.e., Western). However, it is important to stress the fact that *Phoenician* and *Punic* religion is a generalizing concept that covers a variety of practices, beliefs, and representations in many different contexts, with some common features (like the Greek or Roman religions).

## Naming the Gods

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In the ritual interaction, naming properly the relevant god(s) is crucial. The choice to convoke one god or a group of gods depends on its/their expertise in a specific field. The divine names also deliver short theological statements on the identity and agency of the gods. Melqart, for example, the Baal of Tyre, bears a name that means “King of the City” (*mlk qrt*). Melqart is a dynastic god, the supreme protector of the city-state, its territory and people. He is also called *Baal Šur*, “Baal of Tyre,” but also literally “Baal of the Rock.” This qualification alludes to a foundation myth, according to which Tyre was originally a couple of wandering rocks in the sea, stabilized by the god. This Tyrian imaginary made of local traditions was transmitted to the diasporic settlements, where other “rocks” were protected by Melqart. The performative power of divine names reflects a theology of the name, well attested in Phoenicia, where a god *Shem*, “Name,” is used as a theophoric element in some anthroponyms. He embodies the most precious element inherited from the ancestors and destined to be transmitted to the descendants.

The Phoenician substantive *ʾl* (feminine *ʾlt*, plural *ʾlm* or *ʾlnm*, also used as a singular), which means “god”/“goddess,” can refer to El, a specific god. For Philo of Byblos, he is the ancestor and king of all gods, whose Greek equivalent is Kronos. Philo describes him as an old god, omniscient, provided with four eyes and four wings, as well as the emblems of kingship (Eus. *P.E.* I.10.36–37). El belongs to the most ancient divine generation, which created the *kosmos* and established the divine society. In the 2nd century CE, in Leptis Magna, Libya, a Neopunic inscription (KAI 129) mentions *ʾl qn ʾrs*, “El creator of the earth.” However, in Umm el-Amed, near Tyre, the local god, whose name is Milkashart, is called *ʾl ḥmn*, « the god of Hammon » (KAI 19). Other generic designations are used for the gods, such as *ʾdn*, (feminine *ʾdt*), “Master/Mistress,” or *bʾl* (feminine *bʾlt*), “Lord/Lady.” They are often combined with toponyms, like Baalat Gubal, the “Lady of Byblos,” or words that refer to a field of action, like Baal Shamem, the “Lord of the Skies.” The rich stock of onomastic attributes (names, epithets, nominal, or verbal sets of elements making a linguistic unit or syntagma), combined in different sequences, reflects the multiperspectiveness of each god in a polytheistic system. Astarte, for instance, who is a prominent figure all over the Phoenician and Punic cities, is at the same time a mighty goddess who protects the dynasty, a Mistress of the sea, who takes care of the sailors or the traveling people, and a powerful goddess of sexuality and fertility in the public and domestic spheres. In the different Phoenician kingdoms (or city states), she is systematically associated with a local Baal: Melqart at Tyre, Eshmun at Sidon, and Baal at Byblos. This intimate relationship is

expressed through the qualification of *Shem Baal*, “Name of Baal,” given to the goddess at Sidon and already at Ugarit. Similarly, the Punic goddess Tanit is called *Pene Baal*, “Face of Baal” in thousands of dedications in the Carthaginian tophet.

The Phoenician people often bear a name that refers to the gods, like Adonibaal, Baalyaton, Hannibaal, Bodashtart, Gadtanit. Each name displays the relationship between a god and a single person: “Baal is Lord,” “Baal has given,” “Baal’s Favour,” “In Astarte’s Hand,” “Tanit’s Fortune,” etc.

## Constructing the Gods Through the Ritual

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In the *First Book of the Kings* (1K 18), the prophet Elijah (9th century BCE) challenges the 450 prophets of Baal. The text describes an ordeal, won by Elijah. At that time, the Phoenician cult of Baal had been introduced in Samaria through Jezebel, a Tyrian princess who married Ahab, the king of Israel. The many prophets of Baal, whatever they do (dancing, shouting, jumping, etc.), are unable to make their god perform any miracle. Baal remains mute and powerless. On the contrary, Yahweh immediately answers to Elijah’s invocation. His ironical sentence on the Phoenician god—who may be “deep in thought,” or “stepped out for a moment,” or “in a trip”—denounces the foreign god’s inanity. By living everywhere, by doing plenty of different jobs, he is unhelpful. Diffused in many places, diluted in many contexts, the Phoenician Baal is much less powerful than the god of Israel, unique, ineffable, transcendental, and almighty. The picture is of course a polemic one, but it sheds an interesting light on the environment and impact of the Phoenician cults, since the text describes the way Phoenician priests behave and how much Phoenician cults are considered as a menace for the supporters of monotheism.

Among the different ritual performances, the sacrifice (*zbh*) is the most significant experience. In most cases it entails a sharing of the victim between men and gods, the sacrifice reflecting their different ontological status and the hierarchical organization of the cosmos. Sacrifices are performed in both domestic and public contexts, according to liturgical calendars, which are very poorly known for the Phoenician and Punic world. Two inscriptions, in Cyprus and Etruria, mention “the month of the sacrifice to the Sun” (IK A.27; KAI 277). Another month was called *krr* (KAI 159, 277; CIS I.92), probably because special dances were performed. This thin evidence reveals however that the relationship between men and gods contributed in structuring time and space.

Bloody and non-bloody sacrifices are common in the Phoenician and Punic sanctuaries. Animals, food, oil, wine, flowers, incense, statues, objects are offered to the gods. As far as animals are concerned, the offerings are killed and then partially or totally “cooked” by the fire, in order to be (or not) shared and consumed. So far the Phoenician soil has not provided any sacrificial tariff; they all come from the Punic area (KAI 69, 75, 76; CIS I.3915, 3916). The most famous one (KAI 69) comes from Carthage although discovered in Marseille. It is a fragmentary text, inscribed on a stele, originally erected in Baal Saphon’s sanctuary. The text specifies the different fees to be paid for every type of sacrifice and animal, the way of sharing the meat between the priests and the worshippers, under the control of a competent commission made of thirty magistrates and the

suffet (the highest political office in Carthage). The document reveals a rich typology of sacrifices, victims, beneficiaries (divine and human) and agents involved in the ritual, and presents interesting parallels with the Bible. The dedicant may be an individual, but also a family, or an association.

Three types of sacrifices are basically attested: the *kll* sacrifice (“complete”), which refers to a holocaust (after that the priests have received their part); the *šlm kll*, which also leads to a complete destruction of the victim through the fire, probably without any part for the priest, and the so called *sw’t* sacrifice, in which the offering is not burnt, but presented to the gods and slaughtered. Blood was probably poured as a libation, whereas the meat was divided between the priest and the worshipper.



**Figure 2.** View of the tophet at Carthage.

The possible existence of human sacrifices in the Punic area, more precisely in sacred places called *tophet* by modern scholars, according to a biblical word never attested in the Phoenician-Punic language, is a very debated issue. Different Greek and Roman sources do allude to human sacrifices on Carthage, but the archeological and epigraphic evidence remain unclear. The urns excavated in different Punic tophets (in North Africa, Sardinia, and Sicily) contain ashes of both very young children and small animals, but nobody know exactly how the rituals were performed

and if the children were burnt dead or alive. The inscribed stelae commemorate the offering of human beings to the gods, mainly Tanit and Baal Hammon, who probably welcome the deceased infants and concede a new offspring.



**Figure 3.** Terracotta statue of Baal Hammon seated on his throne from Thinissut, 1st century BC. Bardo National Museum, Tunis.

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The gods are also present in the funerary sphere. In the netherworld, dead people need divine help to escape from the most terrible sentence: oblivion. On earth, the family takes care of the grave, decorates it with familiar objects, makes offerings to the infernal gods, and tries to protect the tomb from plunderers. In the funeral inscription of the Sidonian king Tabnit I (KAI 13; first

half of the 5th century BCE) a long imprecation is addressed to the grave plunderers who could disturb the dead king and steal precious objects left in the grave. “This is an abomination for Astarte,” concludes the text.

Although no Phoenician word is known so far for the “magic” as a category of (debated) ritual, many apotropaic objects and some *defixiones* come from Phoenician and Punic contexts. Egyptian influence is very strong in that field, and plenty of Egyptian or Egyptianizing amulets or scarabs have been found all over the Mediterranean area. The *defixiones* show the compelling power of writing: through the act of writing down an injunction against a demon, an individual, eventually a priest or a wizard, tries to take control of a supernatural being and submit it to the human will. Two Phoenician inscribed amulets from Arslan Tash (KAI 27; the authenticity of these amulets is debated), in Northern Syria, show on one side a winged lion with a human head, standing over a she-wolf with a scorpion’s tail, devouring a male or female figure and on the other side, a marching god carrying an axe. The broken text consists of a spell against malefic evils able to penetrate the victim’s body and to invade his dreams. “Magical” texts reflect a rich shared imaginary and specific ritual expertise aiming at the protection of the society from pernicious supernatural powers.

## Anthropomorphism Versus Aniconism?

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In the second book of his *Histories*, Herodotus repeatedly expresses his admiration for the antiquity of Egyptian cults. While dealing with Herakles’ rituals in Egypt, he decides to visit Tyre and its very prestigious sanctuary of Herakles—that is, Melqart (Herodotus II.44). There he saw “many other offerings, besides two pillars, one of refined gold, one of emerald.” This mention of two pillars at the gate of the sanctuary drove some scholars to consider Melqart’s cult as aniconic. This deduction is based on a comparison with the famous Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem, built by Salomon according to the biblical tradition and characterized by the presence, at the entrance of the building, of two pillars named Yakin and Boaz (1K 7.13–22). Although this parallelism is probably significant (the Bible mentions the presence of Tyrian craftsmen in Jerusalem), the situation is far more complex, and the notion of aniconism, opposed to anthropomorphism, has recently been questioned.<sup>2</sup>

The Phoenician word *bt*, for “temple,” shows that the cult place was considered as the “house” or the “palace” of the god(s), where people could visit, feed, and honour them.<sup>3</sup> Inside, there was a protected area accessible only to the priests, where the divine presence was *embodied* by a powerful object, iconic or not, like a tabernacle, a statue, a throne. In other parts of the temple, small niches or votive deposits reveal that different gods were present in each cult place. So far the archaeological evidence concerning monumental cult statues is scant in the Phoenician and Punic areas. Some impressive marble statues, representing Astarte on a throne, as well as the famous “Tribune d’Eshmoun” from the sanctuary of Bostan esh-Sheikh, near Sidon, proof that Phoenicians never prohibited anthropomorphic divine images. Nor were the Phoenicians originally aniconic until *hellenization* brought anthropomorphism as a new cultural standard. The huge quantity of small terracotta votive offerings representing anthropomorphic gods and goddesses suggests the coexistence of different strategies for representing the divine. The

Phoenician gods are supposed to have a body. In Byblos, the local Lady (Baalat Gubal) is represented as a divine queen, seated on a throne, in front of the king, who implores her benediction. Specific attributes point to the singularity of divine anthropomorphism. Philo of Byblos, for instance, remarks that Kronos/El has four eyes and four wings, in order to see everything and to be present everywhere (Eus. *P.E.* 10.36–37). The god's hand is powerful since it blesses the worshipper who wears, as a souvenir of the divine protection, an amulet in the shape of a hand, or who is named “In the hand of Melqart” (Bodmelqart). The god's ears are also crucial because, thanks to them, he pays attention to human prayers. In fact, most of the Phoenician and Punic dedications end with a stereotyped formula: “May he (= the god)/she (the goddess) listen to my/our voice” or “Because he/she has listened to my/our voice.”



**Figure 4.** Marble thrones from different Phoenician sites at Beirut National Museum.

Source: Emma Mizouni, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>>.

Anthropomorphism was thus accepted and spread, while other symbolic languages could suggest the specificity of the divine. Aniconism is of these options. Empty thrones were offered to Astarte, in order to invite the goddess to become present in front of her devotee. In the central part of the empty throne, people could place an anthropomorphic image or an aniconic symbol, like a raw stone, or *baetyl*, literally a “divine house,” confirming the capacity of people to elaborate sophisticated messages with different expressive tools.



## The Polytheist Layout of the Divine World

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In the Phoenician and Punic area, every city-state, or kingdom, has its own institutions, habits, politics, commercial networks, and its own gods. The latter are part of the social identity of the group. An inscription from Byblos refers to the “assembly of the holy gods of Byblos” (KAI 4; see also KAI 10), whereas a Phoenician letter from Saqqara, Egypt (second half of the 6th century BCE), mentions “all the gods of Tahpanhes” in a blessing formula (KAI 50). These expressions, which are close to the modern notion of “pantheon,” indicate that, in each single place, the gods all together formed an assembly, headed by a divine authority, often embodied by a divine pair. The title Baal (“Lord”) or Baalat (“Lady”) are frequently associated with a toponym, whereas the name of Melqart, *mlk qrt*, the “King of the City,” also refers to the tutelary function of the god.

The epigraphic evidence from the different Phoenician cities reveals the existence of a couple of gods (male and female) at the head of the divine society. The triadic model, which has long been considered as typically Phoenician, is a modern projection of a Christian layout. The local Baal, who protects the territory and the people, is associated with a divine consort, who passes on the power to the king and takes care of him, his family, and his subjects. The divine couple guarantees peace, welfare, and prosperity, but also punishes anyone who threatens the good organization of the world.

According to places, times, circumstances, goals, etc., people choose to cope with specific gods, giving birth to many divine configurations. The treaty imposed by the Assyrian king Esarhaddon to the Tyrian king Baal, around 675 BCE, provides a long list of gods who must attend to the respect of the oath (SAA II.5). On the Tyrian side, one could expect to find on the first rank Melqart and Astarte. They appear, separated, in the second and third position after two other divine groups. First a cluster of three gods, Baal Shamem, Baal Malage, and Baal Saphon, who will destroy the Tyrian fleet in case of treason. Second, Melqart and Eshmun will punish the people if they betray their bonds. Finally, in the third rank, appears Astarte alone. This makes clear that the pantheon is never a rigid structure, but that we deal with contingent and pragmatic groups of gods assembled in order to reach specific aims in a given context.

## Translatability

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Polytheistic religions easily build bridges between gods belonging to different cultures, without, however, losing the specificity of each figure. The process of *interpretatio*, which consists in providing one or different foreign equivalent(s) for a god, can be based on a name, an attribute, a function, an image, and always implies an approximation or a conjecture. The translatability of divine names and figures did not imply fusion nor *syncretism*, an ambiguous notion that should definitely be discarded. For example, when Herodotus, as mentioned, visited the sanctuary devoted to the Tyrian Herakles, he does not specify his local name (as he sometimes does for Egyptian gods). To what extent did the Tyrians themselves, in the second half of the 5th century BCE, call their god Herakles? Herakles’ images were already largely spread outside Greece, in Cyprus, and on the Syro-Palestinian shore. They were probably adopted to represent local gods

and to express their performative strength. This does not mean, however, that all the gods depicted like Herakles were called Herakles. Herakles remains Herakles and Melqart remains Melqart, even though they are considered as related, similar, or comparable in a cross-cultural perspective. Eshmun, on the other hand, was similar (but not identic) to Asklepios, Melqart shared something (but not everything) with Herakles, Anat looked like Athena, Astarte like Aphrodite, but also like Hera, Isis, and even the Etruscan Uni. *Interpretatio* is a creative operation that does not refer to a fixed doctrine; it is all about empirical attempts to connect two different worlds and to understand one through the other.

Cult places, on the Mediterranean shores frequented by Phoenician and Punic people, were largely open to different people and cultures. In the island of Delos, for instance, which was a commercial hub in the 2nd century BCE, gods and people from Greece, Egypt, Phoenicia, Syria, Palestine, Anatolia, and Italy met and interacted. Each community endeavoured to build a proper sanctuary for its “national” divine protectors, with the approval of the Athenian authorities. These cult places were frequented by different individuals according to their expectations. Such a fluid religious landscape gave birth to hybrid ritual practices where translatability displayed its creative and pragmatic potential. In 150–140 BCE, for instance, in the Sarapieion C, Andromachos, who may originate from Syria, makes an offering for himself, his wife, and his sons, to different gods. His ex-voto is probably made in fulfilment of a vow, made before the family sailed to Delos. Three goddesses and three gods are named: “Isis Soteira Astarte Aphrodite Euploia Epekoos” and then “Eros Harpocrates Apollo” (ID 2132 = RICIS 202/0365). These gods are not confused, but called together in a joined offering, supposedly to be more efficient. In the Delian religious middle ground, complex and cross-cultural interactions are at work. Because they travelled frequently and welcomed many different people on their soil, the Phoenicians easily handled different names and images for their gods, which appear as particularly composite.

## Primary Texts

Herodotus II, 44. <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0125%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D44%3Asection%3D1>>, Perseus Digital Library, Tufts University.

Philo of Byblos (fragments in Eusebius, Praeparatio Evangelica) <<https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/cluster/Jacoby%20Online>>, Brill.

1 Kings 18 <<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Kings+18%26version=NIV>>, Bible Gateway.

## Links to Digital Materials

Iconography of Deities and Demons in the Ancient Near East <<http://www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/idd/>>.

An Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Phoenician Civilization <<http://www.decf-cnr.org/>>.

Mapping Ancient Polytheisms <<https://map-polytheisms.huma-num.fr/>>.

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## Notes

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1. See Albert Baumgarten, *The "Phoenician History" of Philo of Byblos. A Commentary* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1981).

2. See Astrid Nunn, “Iconisme et aniconisme dans le culte des religions phénicienne et israélite,” *Transeuphratène* 35 (2008): 165–190; Milete Gaifman, *Aniconism in Greek Antiquity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Corinne Bonnet, *Les Enfants de Cadmos: Le paysage religieux de la Phénicie hellénistique* (Paris, France: De Boccard, 2015).

3. See Corinne Bonnet, “Dove vivono gli dei ? Note sulla terminologia fenicio-punica dei luoghi di culto e sui modi di rappresentazione del mondo divino,” in Xavier Dupré Raventós, Sergio Ribichini, Stéphane Verger (edd.), *Saturnia tellus: definizioni dello spazio consacrato in ambiente etrusco, italico, fenicio-punico, iberico e celtico. Atti del Convegno internazionale svoltosi a Roma dal 10 al 12 novembre 2004* (Rome, Italy: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, 2008): 673-686.

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