A PUNIC SCULPTURE FROM THE NEW EXCAVATIONS IN THE SOUTHERN NECROPOLIS OF THARROS-CAPO SAN MARCO

Anna Chiara Fariselli*

Abstract: During the 2018 excavation in the southern cemetery of Tharros – Capo San Marco a small sculpture made in the local stone was brought to light. The morphology of this artifact suggests some connection with other elements of the funerary and votive sphere in the Punic world. The statuette seems to have filled a role of protection and probably held a particular significance within the funerary eschatology.

Keywords: Sculpture; Tharros; Rebirth; Fertility; Funerary Archaeology; Punic Sardinia.

For some years now the University of Bologna, under the direction of the present writer, has been conducting a systematic archaeological investigation of the largest and most important Punic cemetery of Tharros.[1] The graveyard is situated on the promontory of Capo San Marco, at the southern end of the Sinis Peninsula and is characterised by shaft burials and subterranean chamber tombs cut into the natural sandstone bed. It is clear from the excavations carried out at the necropolis that the burial ground was used between the 7th century BCE and the 3rd-4th century AD and that the cemetery comprised cremation burials together with inhumations. During the Archaic period the prevailing burial custom was secondary cremation which apparently occurred in a communal *ustrinum*, while the ashes were later collected and deposited in burial pits or oval shallow trenches roughly cut into the bedrock. Giant parallelepiped pit-shaft graves, up to 2 metres deep, containing typical archaic pottery as grave goods and few cremated bone fragments buried in earthen fills, have considerably complicated interpretation. Likewise, some oblong trench graves of medium depth, covered with transverse stone slabs and found with intact archaic grave goods, have proven difficult to be classified. The large quantity of charcoal found inside along with burning traces on the inner sides of the graves suggest that cremation was carried out in the burial pit. This point to primary cremations, albeit burnt bones were recovered in very small numbers.[2] This interpretation, however, may not reflect the original number of oldest cremation burials. So far it has not been possible to identify areas devoted exclusively to one or another funerary practice, while different types of tombs associated with different burial customs have been excavated: Punic hypogea were often cut into earlier archaic cremation burials and the construction of the subterranean chamber tombs resulted in the disturbance of many of the older tombs. Only in some instances did these Punic burials spare earlier cremation burials.[3] This non-systematic respect is likely to be due to the need to preserve the memory of older *élite* groups by their descendants who owned some family plots in the necropolis.[4] A division into "lots" is suggested by clusters of burials which conformed to the same spacing and orientation pattern

* *Alma Mater Studiorum* – University of Bologna. Department of Cultural Heritage; annachiara.fariselli@unibo.it.

1 Fariselli 2014; Fariselli – Silani – Vandini 2017.

2 Fariselli 2006a, pp. 304-310.

3 Fariselli 2008, pp. 1708-1709.

4 Fariselli 2016-2017, pp. 121-123.

Fig. 1. The excavation area (relief by M. Marano).

within a burial ground where burials generally lack a fixed orientation and appear to have been laid out in every available space, without accurate planning.[5]

Recent excavations were carried out in a vast area of Capo San Marco. Digs were undertaken first along the western cliff, where the deepest subterranean tombs are located. These tombs were largely exposed to wind and tidal erosion and many of them were washed away soon after their construction and use, crumbling on the seashore. At the eastern side of Capo San Marco, on the Gulf of Oristano, subterranean

5 Fariselli 2006a, *passim*.

tombs were cut into the arenaceous rocks that within a distance of a few dozen metres face different texture and preservation issues. Excavations were undertaken here since 2015,[6] at a short distance from the Torre Vecchia, along the road which leads to the lighthouse of Capo San Marco, where some rock pinnacles stood out. Field researches have brought to light 45 shaft burials and chamber tombs, containing cremated or inhumed remains. As attested by other archaeological sampling in the necropolis the subterranean graves, both shaft and chamber tombs, were dug into rock-cut terraces that had been previously leveled for this purpose. Despite their poor state of preservation that in some instances led to a dramatic structural deterioration, these burials vary in shape and type. Most common are the deep shaft tombs with steep steps (Fig. 1).

Fig. 2. The context of the artifact (Photograph by A.C. Fariselli).

A number of small altars and cippi were exceptionally retrieved in 2016.[7] One cippus in the form of an obelisk with a cubic base[8] was still affixed at the top of the doorway to the chamber of a subterranean tomb with a stepped *dromos*, in a socket purposely carved for it. Its position suggests a function as a grave marker, but it may have held also a more complex symbolic significance.[9] Other, less imposing cippi, of the traditional truncated pyramidal small-column type with a bowl for burning aromatics or distinguished by a semi-cylindrical ridge on top were uncovered in earthen fills left by looters of the chamber tombs. The original position of these cippi is unknown and they can only be dated on stylistic grounds.[10]

During the 2018 excavation a heap of sandstone chips mixed with mortar and some ceramic sherds was uncovered in an area free of pit graves of approximately 2 x 2 metres, located before the entrance of tombs nn. B9 and B16. The pile of stone chips – that may have been stacked there to create a smooth surface – was almost sterile, containing only some sherds of Punic pottery. Most of them were undiagnostic except for a fragmentary dish that can be dated to the end of the 5th century BCE and two sherds of black painted pottery Campana A (2nd BCE-1st BCE).[11]

During the excavation of this layer of stacked stones an artifact of exceptional interest was brought to light. It is a small piece of stone sculpture set on an irregular and roughly carved semicircular base. The stone figurine was found facing down amidst the chips stack, emerging with the back side. It had been removed from its original position as a result of a loss of function (Fig. 2).

6 Secci 2014-2015.

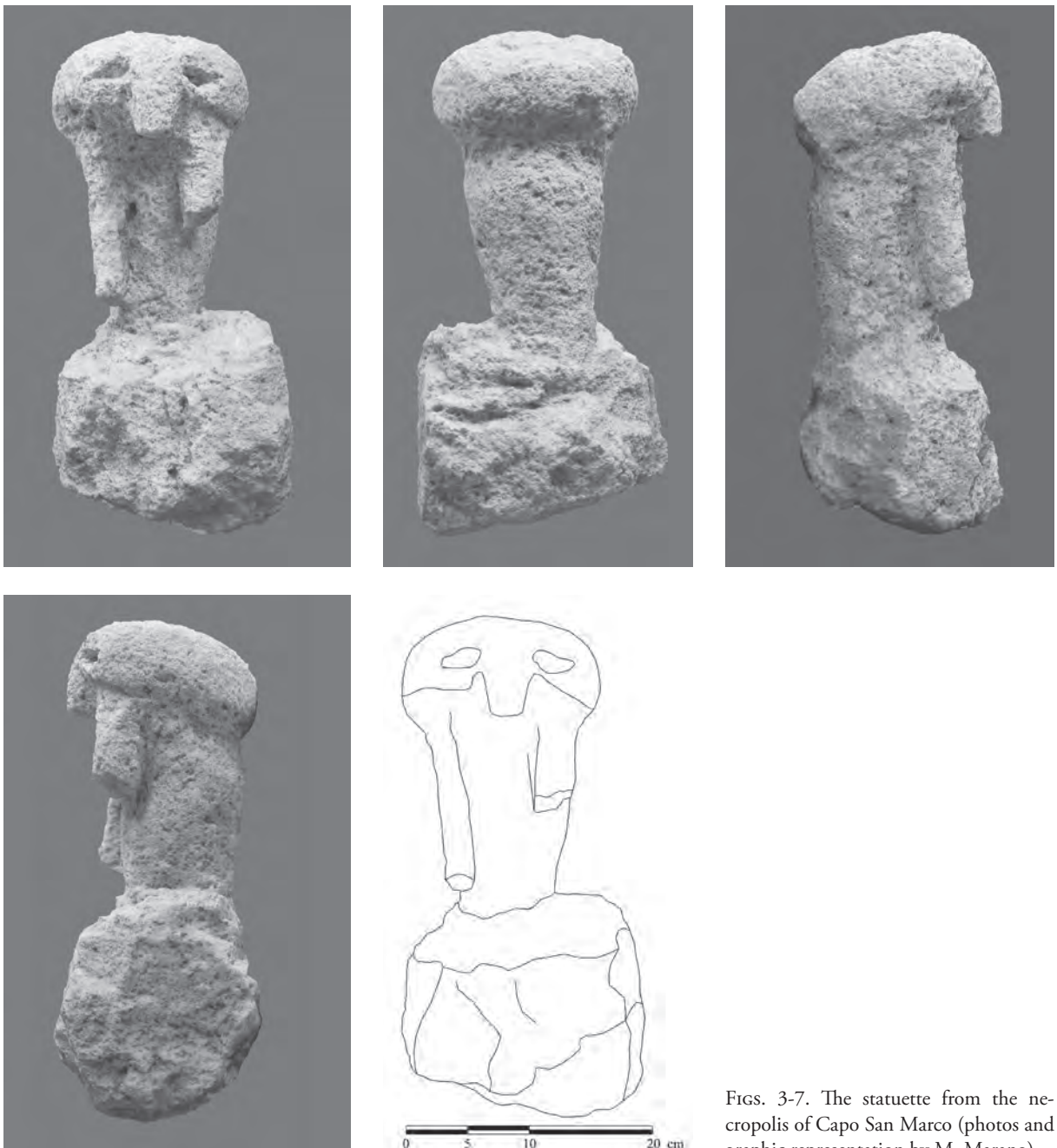
7 Cippi and stelae must have been placed above or inside the shaft. However, despite frequently uncovered, none of them was unearthed on site before the 2016 campaign. Stone furniture of the necropolis usually lack of provenance information.

8 The artifact, now in the "G. Marongiu" Museum in Cabras, has been studied by C. Del Vais who, in 2016, was invited by the present writer to undertake with her team the excavation of the northern part of the area under investigation: Fariselli *et al.* forthcoming.

9 The original significance of the obelisk-shaped cippus on a cubic base as a divine symbol of protection and regeneration can be inferred by close parallels in the Syro-Palestinian tradition of the Middle Bronze Age, as the well-known Temple of the Obelisks at Byblos: e.g. Xella 1994, pp. 197-198.

10 The cippi are currently being studied by the colleague C. Del Vais: Del Vais 2013.

11 I'm grateful to my dear friend and colleague Carla Del Vais for her expertise on the black-glazed pottery.



Figs. 3-7. The statuette from the necropolis of Capo San Marco (photos and graphic representation by M. Marano).

The small pedestal suggests that the figurine might have been placed above the door, at the entrance to the chamber of a *dromos* tomb. Above the subterranean tomb n. B11 a smoothed socket carved in the rock seems to have been designed to lodge some removable piece of furniture, not far from the location where the statuette was retrieved. The anthropomorphic artifact (Figs. 3-7) was carved in the local rather porous sandstone. Its surface was in good condition, although part of the arms is missing, and some areas at the

height of the lower part of the nose have flaked off.[12] The statuette is characterised by a highly schematic form: only the head holds some anthropomorphic connotations. Arms are in a synthetic cylindrical shape, partially attached to the mummy-shaped body;[13] hands are missing, and we don't know if originally they were present. The head, of elliptical form, features two almond-shaped eyes carved horizontally;[14] in the upper part of the figure a horizontal groove divides the head from the "body", at about 5 cm from the top, forming a sort of "cap"; the head's lower side is worked in relief forming a sort of "false chin", the outline of which is connected to the nose, which is rectangular in section, with two engraved nostrils and a curved profile. The back side of the schematic conoid torso gives to the figure an appearance vaguely allusive to a phallic symbol. No convincing sculptural parallels are known to the present author. Some similarity can be found with the "conical cippi", the phallic baetyls falling in the category of "round shaped baetyls without a shaft" recovered at Motya. Among the latter is an ovoidal cippus from the *tofet*, with blind holes that perhaps represented eyes, and a "sacred cone" found at the sanctuary of Cappidazzu and recently reconsidered by G. Falsone.[15] Coming without a known findspot, these artifacts have been dated by the editor to the 6th-5th century BCE. Instead, as regards the archaeological context of Tharros, neither the cemetery nor the *tofet* have provided evidence of this kind. However, the symbolic allusion to fertility suggested by the figure recalls at least two cippi, now in the collection of the National Archaeological Museum of Cagliari, discovered during 19th century excavations that, despite the lack of a recorded findspot, may come from the southern necropolis. One of the monuments here considered is the so-called cippus of "the ritual dance", distinguished by a cylindrical knobby body with a phallic top onto which female dancers modeled in relief revolve in an ecstatic dance around a figure with male and female sexual attributes and perhaps with a bull's head. The other one is a triangular cippus, with a phallic pinnacle, decorated with the image of an heroic figure (Melqart?) striking a fantastic creature resembling a griffin.[16]

It is therefore clear that at Tharros fertility, or more explicitly, renewal and life regeneration were dominant themes and played an important role in the funerary cult. On the other hand, a stylistic analysis of the statuette reveals some peculiarities such as the head, which is elliptical in section and slightly flattened, forming a sort of disc; the elongated almond-shaped eyes; the nose, slightly curved but with a lower horizontal outline, with nostrils that can be seen only lifting the statue, is rectangular like that of many schematic faces engraved on stone in the Phoenician and Punic funerary world.[17] The arms are highly schematic, of a thin cylindrical form and develop from the body just beneath the face. These features recall those of the terracotta wheel made figurines widely distributed in the Punic world[18] (Fig. 8), within the *tofet* context and also in necropoleis and healing sanctuaries, that share the emphasis on anatomical features indicative of nourishment and life as well as fertility, like the navel or male and female sexual attributes. The elliptical head is also comparable with that of a male connoted figure interpreted as a humanised *gorgoneion* engraved on a funerary razor from Punic Sardinia

12 Overall height 34 cm; width at the base 7 cm; head's diameter 14 cm; circumference 42 cm; height of the base 14 cm; width of the base 16 cm.

13 Diameter 2 cm; length 10 cm (right arm) and 6,5 cm (left arm).

14 Length of the right eye 3,2 cm; length of the left eye 4 cm, width approx. 1 cm.

15 Falsone 2013, pp. 128-129.

16 A detailed study of the two cippi appeared recently in a monograph by Del Vais 2013, pp. 80-83, TH 13; pp. 83-92, TH 14. An iconological analysis was undertaken by the present writer within a study on warlike divinities and with regard to the dance subject: Fariselli 2006b, pp. 87-90, and Fariselli 2007, pp. 37-38.

17 Some details, such as the shape of the eyes and the nose, recall the faces reproduced on stelae, baetyls and stone heads from the necropoleis of Tyre, Carthage and the same area of Tharros: cfr. Delattre 1897, p. 39, fig. 21; Sader 2005, pp. 134-136, fig. 116; Bernardini 2016, pp. 256-259.

18 Aubet 1969; Ferron − Aubet 1974; Bénichou-Safar 2012, pp. 266-268; Zucca 2018.

Fig. 8. Clay figurine from Ibiza (6th-5th BCE) (after Moscati 1990).

Fig. 9. Punic razor from Sardinia (3rd BCE) (after Acquaro 1984).

Fig. 10. Amulet Ptah from Carthage (6th-4th BCE) (after Acquaro – De Vita 2010).

(Fig. 9).[19] The statuette from Capo San Marco appears to have filled a role of protection and probably held a particular significance within the funerary eschatology of the Middle and Late Punic Tharros, as a powerful catalyst of fertility and rebirth. However, we are not able to define whether it was a generic symbol of life regeneration and renewal, an apotropaic iconography, or a precise cult figure. Under this point of view it should be noted that any analogy between this statuette and similar awkward and dwarf divine figures, like Ptah (Fig. 10), is rather disappointing, despite the similar treatment of the head and arms' position in some examples of the divine iconography. It must be stressed that the base/pedestal on which the statuette stood, although roughly worked, likely proclaims the figure's supernatural quality raising it at a distance from humans, a function that in Punic iconography is usually fulfilled by single pedestals and footstools associated with thrones.[20]

Our understanding of the role played by the statuette is limited due to the lack of information about the context where it was originally displayed: nevertheless, the few sherds found in the US layer above and under the figurine provide evidence for dating the phase of discard of the figurine and the heap of sandstone chips that were put there perhaps in order to build a surface for a passageway or simply to obliterate an area of the necropolis that was no longer in use. The study of the ceramic materials shows that this phase can be placed after the 2nd century BCE. It is interesting to note that on the rock plateau buried by the stone chips there were remains of secondary cremation burials placed in shallow pits. Further research on this layer is needed, in order to increase our understanding of the context of use of the sandstone plateau in a diachronic perspective.

19 Acquaro 1973, pp. 53-54.

20 As it is the case with divinities or prominent figures depicted on votive stelae: the base/pedestal is often identified as an altar: Moscati – Uberti 1985, p. 48; Pisano 2012.

Likewise, no archaeological evidence is consistent with the consideration of this highly schematic work as an expression of a "folk" artistic taste, as it is well known that in the Punic context of Tharros figures occur in aniconic or semi-anthropomorphic forms both in stone reliefs from the necropolis and in the category of the stelae from the *tofet*. Moreover, the apparent conceptual distance from the above mentioned figured cippi does not justify the assumption of an equal chronological gap, as this work may betray an artisan drawing on a different cultural background. On the other hand, although it is not necessary to think to a work commissioned to untrained artisans by non-*élite* patrons, given the widespread occurrence of similar terracotta subjects produced mainly between the 5th and the 3rd century BCE, it is possible to consider it as indicative of a particular religious perspective. We may think of such religious manifestations and artisanal approaches as less distinguished and standardised than objects like the silver plaques engraved with a head identified as Melqart or terracotta female heads believed to represent Astarte,[21] but which still are of uncertain historical and archaeological identification.

This extraordinary find points to the vitality of the Punic Tharros, whose multifaceted cultural community consisted of the most diverse gathering of immigrants from across the Mediterranean bringing fairly diversified cult practices or, more precisely, private cults which were not necessarily alternative to those of the Carthaginian rule.[22]

References

Acquaro 1973 = E. Acquaro, *Sull'iconografia di un rasoio punico di Sardegna*, in «RStFen» 1, 1973, pp. 53-57.

Acquaro 1984 = E. Acquaro, *Arte e cultura punica in Sardegna*, Sassari 1984 («Sardegna Archeologica. Studi e Monumenti», 2).

Acquaro – De Vita 2010 = E. Acquaro – P. De Vita, *I Fenici. Storia e tesori di un'antica civiltà*, Vercelli 2010.

Aubet 1969 = M.E. Aubet, *Los depósitos votivos púnicos de Isla Plana (Ibiza) y Bithia (Cerdeña)*, Santiago de Compostela 1969.

Bénichou-Safar 2012 = H. Bénichou-Safar, *Le statut de l'enfant punique et les objets funéraires*, in A. Hermary – C. Dubois (edd.), *L'enfant et la mort dans l'antiquité, III. Le matériel associé aux tombes d'enfants. Actes de la table ronde internationale organisée à la Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l'Homme (MMSH)* (Aix-en-Provence, 20-22 janvier 2011), Arles 2012 («Bibliothèque d'Archéologie Méditerranéenne et Africaine», 12), pp. 263-272.

Bernardini 2016 = P. Bernardini, *Maschere e teste tra Sulci e Monte Sirai*, in M. Botto – S. Finocchi – G. Garbati – I. Oggiano (edd.), *"Lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore". Studi in onore di Sandro Filippo Bondì* («RStFen» 44, 2016), pp. 253-262.

Delattre 1897 = A.L. Delattre, *La nécropole punique de Douïmès (à Carthage). Fouilles de 1895 et 1896*, Paris 1897.

Del Vais 2013 = C. Del Vais, *Stele, cippi e altarini funerari dalle necropoli puniche di Tharros*, Lugano 2013 («Biblioteca di Byrsa», 9).

Falsone 2013 = G. Falsone, *Sul culto dei betili a Mozia. A proposito di un cono sacro*, in O. Loretz – S. Ribichini – W.G.E. Watson – J.Á. Zamora (edd.), *Ritual, Religion and Reason. Studies in Ancient World in Honour of Paolo Xella*, Münster 2013 («AOAT», 404), pp. 125-136.

Fariselli 2006a = A.C. Fariselli, *Il "paesaggio" funerario: tipologia tombale e rituali*, in E. Acquaro – C. Del Vais – A.C. Fariselli (edd.), *Beni culturali e antichità puniche. La necropoli meridionale di Tharros. Tharrhica – I*, La Spezia 2006 («Biblioteca di Byrsa», 4), pp. 303-369.

Fariselli 2006b = A.C. Fariselli, *Problematiche iconografiche e iconologiche delle rappresentazioni di divinità guerriere nel mondo punico*, in G. Pisano (ed.), Varia iconographica ab Oriente ad Occidentem, Roma 2006 («Studia Punica», 14), pp. 75-102.

21 Fariselli *et al.* 2012-2013 and Fariselli in press.

22 On these topics: Fariselli in press.

Fariselli 2007 = A.C. Fariselli, *Musica e danza in contesto fenicio e punico*, in *Atti del Convegno Eventi sonori nei racconti di viaggio prima e dopo Colombo* (Genova, 11-12 ottobre 2006)(«Itineraria» 6, 2007), pp. 9-46.

Fariselli 2008 = A.C. Fariselli, *Tipologie tombali e rituali funerari a* Tharros*, tra Africa e Sardegna*, in J. González – P. Ruggeri – C. Vismara – R. Zucca (edd.), *L'Africa romana. Le ricchezze dell'Africa. Risorse, produzione e scambi. Atti del XVII convegno di studio* (Sevilla, 14-17 dicembre 2006), Roma 2008, pp. 1707-1718.

Fariselli 2014 = A.C. Fariselli, *Ricerche archeologiche e strategie di conservazione nella "necropoli meridionale" di Tharros – Capo San Marco: lo scavo del 2012*, in A.C. Fariselli (ed.), *Da Tharros a Bitia. Nuove prospettive della ricerca archeologica nella Sardegna fenicia e punica. Atti della Giornata di Studio* (Bologna, 25 marzo 2013), Bologna 2014 («DiSCI Archeologia», 3), pp. 19-30.

Fariselli 2016-2017 = A.C. Fariselli, *Dinamiche di popolamento a Tharros in età punica. La tomba A2 della necropoli meridionale di Capo San Marco: il contesto archeologico*, in «Byrsa. Scritti sull'antico Oriente mediterraneo», 29-30/31-32, 2016-2017, pp. 111-125.

Fariselli *et al.* 2012-2013 = A.C. Fariselli – M. Vandini – F. Caillaud – S. Zambruno – C. Caputo – M.P. Morigi – M. Bettuzzi – R. Brancaccio – E. Peccenini, *Una laminetta in argento con volto virile dalla necropoli meridionale di Tharros*. *Note iconografiche, archeometriche e conservative*, in *L'archeologia punica e gli dèi degli altri* («Byrsa» 21-22/23-24, 2012-2013), pp. 11-28.

Fariselli *et al.* forthcoming = A.C. Fariselli – R. Secci – C. Del Vais – F. Boschi – M. Silani, *La necropoli meridionale di Tharros punica sul Capo San Marco. Bilanci e prospettive*, forthcoming.

Fariselli in press = A.C. Fariselli, *Culti comunitari, devozione privata e pietas funeraria a Tharros Capo San Marco in età punica: dati dalla ricerca sul campo e nuove linee di intervento*, in *Actas del IX Congreso Internacional de Estudios Fenicios y Púnicos. Un viaje entre l'oriente y el occidente del Mediterráneo* (Mérida, 22-27 octubre 2018), in press.

Fariselli – Silani – Vandini 2017 = A.C. Fariselli – M. Silani – M. Vandini, *Ricerche a Capo San Marco (penisola del Sinis-OR). Nuove indagini dell'Università di Bologna nel quartiere funerario meridionale di Tharros fenicia e punica*, in M. Guirguis (ed.), *From the Mediterranean to the Atlantic: People, Goods and Ideas between East and West. 8th International Congress of Phoenician and Punic studies* (Italy, Sardinia, Carbonia, Sant'Antioco, 21th-26th October 2013) («Folia Phoenicia» 1, 2017), pp. 308-313.

Ferron – Aubet 1974 = J. Ferron – M.E. Aubet, *Orants de Carthage*, Paris 1974 («Collection Cahiers de Byrsa, Serie Monographies», 1).

Moscati 1990 = S. Moscati, *L'arte dei Fenici*, Milano 1990.

Moscati – Uberti 1985 = S. Moscati – M.L. Uberti, *Scavi al* tofet *di Tharros. I monumenti lapidei*, Roma 1985 («Collezione di Studi Fenici», 21).

Pisano 2012 = G. Pisano, *L'iconografia della figura seduta riprodotta sulle stele puniche*, in C. Del Vais (ed.), EPI OINOPA PONTON. *Studi sul Mediterraneo antico in ricordo di Giovanni Tore*, Oristano 2012, pp. 551-559.

Sader 2005 = H. Sader, *Iron Age Funerary Stelae from Lebanon*, Barcelona 2005 («CuadAMed», 11).

Secci 2015 = R. Secci, *Nuovi tipi tombali nella necropoli meridionale di Tharros (campagna di scavo 2015)*, in «Byrsa. Scritti sull'antico Oriente mediterraneo» 25-26/27-28, 2014-2015, pp. 185-202.

Xella 1994 = P. Xella, *Pantheon e culto a Biblo. Aspetti e problemi*, in E. Acquaro – F. Mazza – S. Ribichini – G. Scandone – P. Xella (edd.), *Biblo. Una città e la sua cultura. Atti del Colloquio Internazionale* (Roma, 5-7 dicembre 1990), Roma 1994 («Collezione di Studi Fenici», 34), pp. 195-214.

Zucca 2018 = R. Zucca, *27. Statuetta antropomorfa di sesso incerto*, in G. Pantò (ed.), *Carlo Alberto archeologo in Sardegna. Musei Reali Torino – Museo di Antichità, 22 marzo-4 novembre 2018*. Catalogo della Mostra, Torino 2018, p. 80.