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THE PUNIC-ROMAN SANCTUARY OF RAS IL-WARDIJA AT GOZO (MALTA): ARCHITECTURE, RITUALS, AND MEDITERRANEAN CONNECTIONS OF A MARITIME CULT-PLACE DEDICATED TO ASTARTE

FEDERICA SPAGNOLI*

Abstract: In a picturesque and natural setting at the north-western tip of the Island of Gozo, the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija in Gozo stands as one of the most scenic Punic-Roman sacred sites in the Maltese archipelago. Founded by the Carthaginians in the early 4th cent. BCE, it was used without any interruption during the Roman period and beyond, maintaining its religious significance until the Middle Ages. Sixty years after its discovery and excavation by the *Missione Italiana a Malta*, the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo has resumed work and research on the site, highlighting some aspects related to the cults and rituals performed at the sanctuary, which make it an important reference point for the cult of Astarte in the Maltese archipelago.

Keywords: Temple; Cave; Astarte; Malta; Religion; Punic; Hellenistic.

1. INTRODUCTION

On the north-western side of the island of Gozo, the second largest of the Maltese archipelago, in an elevated promontory overlooking the sea, rises the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija, a Punic-Roman sanctuary dedicated to the Phoenician goddess Astarte. The sanctuary dominates the seascape from the promontory where the Azure Window was opened, the Dwejra Bay, and the Fungus Rock to the north, and the cliffs and the harbour of Xlendi to the south. Its position offers an excellent view of the Maltese coastline from the cape of Ras ir-Raheb to the island of Filfla, an important trading outpost in Phoenician times, in front of the Prehistoric temples of Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra, in southwest Malta.¹

The Sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija was identified as a site of archaeological interest in 1963 by Michelangelo Cagiano de Azevedo,² Director of the *Missione Italiana a Malta*. The exploration of the site began the following year under the direction of Caterina Caprino, and was completed in 1967.³ The sacred complex has a scenic layout, laying on five terraces (V-I) sloping down to the cliff (Fig. 1), and consists in a cave complex, including the cave and the ancillary structures on the upper terrace (V), and in the temple of Astarte in the lower terrace (I) (Fig. 2). Architectures and materials suggest the sanctuary was founded in early 4th cent. BCE and used until the Roman Imperial period (2nd cent. CE), with a minor and occa-

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1 Due to its position, the sanctuary is of strategic importance as a landmark on the Mediterranean routes that lap the western coast of the Maltese archipelago (Spagnoli 2024a, p. 369-371). As affirmed by A. Bonanno, this sanctuary “occupies a unique and somewhat mysterious position both physically, at the very edge of a sheer cliff overlooking the sea away from all known ancient settlements of the island” (Bonanno 1990, p. 34). In ancient times the “urban” center of Gozo was situated in present Rabat (Gambin 2002-2003, p. 21, note no. 13).

2 Cagiano de Azevedo 1964, p. 21.

3 The annual reports of the excavation campaigns at Ras il-Wardija were published in the series *Missione Archeologica a Malta* 1964-1968.



Fig. 1. The Punic Roman sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija: the cave complex on the fifth terrace. In the background Dwejra Bay and Fungus Rock (photo by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo).

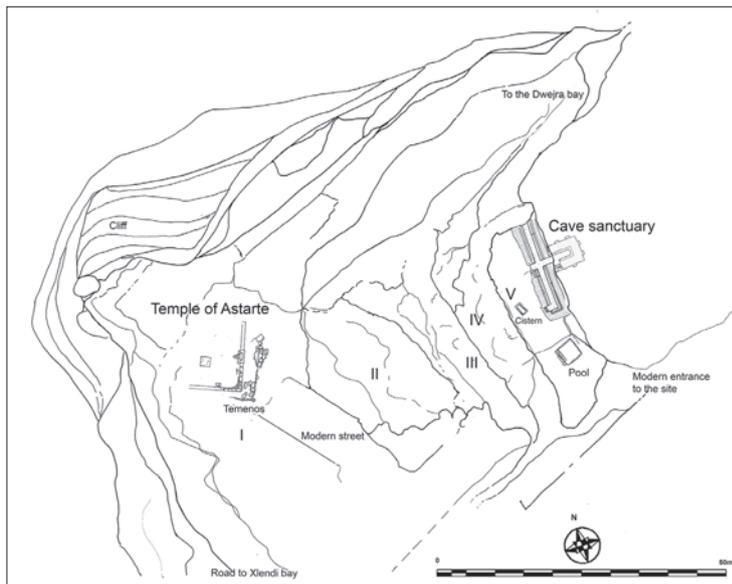


Fig. 2. General plan of the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija (drawing by the author).

sional frequentation in Late Antiquity and Middle Ages.⁴

2. THE CAVE COMPLEX

The cave complex consists of a rock-cut chamber and of ancillary structures outside the cave (Fig. 3). The chamber exploits a natural opening on the bank of Globigerina limestone, a very soft and dusty geological formation composed by micro-organisms and marine deposits.⁵

The chamber has an irregular rectangular shape,⁶ the inner walls are decorated by five niches surrounded by an architectural frame (Fig. 4). In the middle of the chamber a wide

4 Minganti 1965.

5 Spagnoli 2023a, p. 385.

6 The dimensions of the cave are: 4.69 × 5.25m to 5.80m, height 2.02 to 2.10m.

corridor 1 m high, carved into the rock, demarcates three wide benches running along the sides. The corridor continues outwards, where it intersects perpendicularly with another long transverse corridor, just over 14 m long, like the rock face into which the chamber opens; on both sides of the corridor, there are benches. At the southern extremity, the corridor bends at an angle of 90 degrees and ends with an installation consisting of a slab with two circular recesses (Fig. 5). The same installation can be found inside the cave, leaning against the southern wall⁷ (Fig. 6).

Outside the cave complex, there are two water-collecting installations: the bell-shaped cistern with a rectangular opening,



Fig. 3. The chamber cut in the Globigerina geological layer on the fifth terrace and ancillary structures; view from the south (photo by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo.)

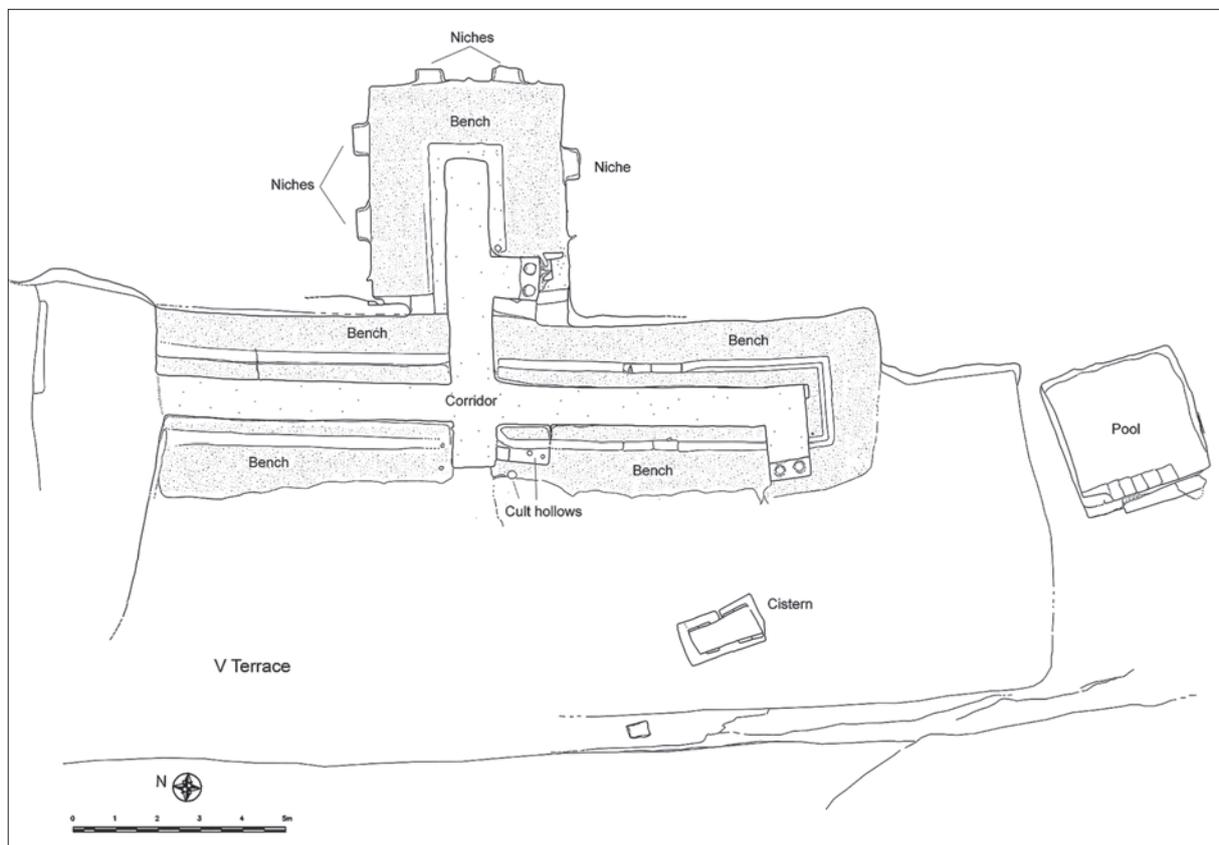


Fig. 4. Plan of the cave sanctuary. In front of the cave are corridors, the benches, and cult hollows. In front of them the cistern, and to the south the sacred pool (drawing by the author).

⁷ Spagnoli 2023b, p. 299, figs. 3-7.



Fig. 5. The outer corridor, with benches, and the bend-path with the possible entrance; view from the southeast (photo by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo).



Fig. 6. The interior of the cave, east and south sides. Against the south side is the structure with circular recesses (photo by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo).



Fig. 7. The sacred pool with access steps. In the background, on the left, the cistern; view from the south (photo by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo).

about 2.50 m deep, and the quadrangular pool,⁸ 2.82 m deep, accessed by a staircase on the western side. The pool may have served a ritual function, such as bathing and ritual ablutions⁹ (Fig. 7). The cistern provided a resource of fresh water for the ritual uses of the sanctuary, as there are no springs on the Wardija promontory.

Given the intense erosive action of the weathering elements, especially the wind, it is plausible that the current layout of the cave is very different from the original one. However, in the Globigerina wall where the chamber opens, despite the erosion, traces of the original plan of the cave sanctuary can still be seen. At both the north and south ends of the rock front, two overhangs bent at right angles towards the center of the fifth terrace, may have formed the side walls, or part of them,¹⁰ of an outer chamber which contained the corridor

8 The dimensions are: cistern 1.52 × 0.67m; pool 3.63 × 3.24 m.

9 Caprino 1967, p. 85.

10 The southern wall of this chamber could be hypothetically integrated by stone blocks due to the presence of the pool.

and the benches. In this hypothesis, the cave complex was originally formed of two chambers, an outer one that contained and covered the ancillary structures, now open to the air, and the smaller inner chamber decorated with niches, which is still preserved today. This more complex articulation of the plan, with two communicating chambers and ancillary structures within the cave, would be more consistent with other known Phoenician and Punic caves, such as the Cueva d'Es Cuyram in Ibiza, the Grotta Regina in Sicily,¹¹ the Afqa Cave in Lebanon,¹² and some Greek island sanctuaries,¹³ than its current appearance suggests.

3. THE TEMPLE OF ASTARTE

The temple of Astarte rises on the lower terrace. The building has a rectangular plan, with the entrance facing the cave (Fig. 8). Based on the size of the threshold, it must have been of a monumental size, therefore more extensive than the part preserved today.¹⁴ The temple was built using Globigerina blocks. The natural rocky ground was included in the pavement and regularized by a floor of limestone mixed with marble fragments.¹⁵ The numerous fragments of colored plasters detected in the temple area, outside and inside the building, suggest that the walls had a plaster revetment. The founding of frames and other architectural elements made of plaster suggest that the temple walls had a plastic decoration, in particular around the doorways.¹⁶ Inside the temple there is a square recess aligned to the threshold, which probably housed a pedestal or podium supporting the cult image of the deity. At the time of excavations, a part of the white plaster covering the podium was still visible in its original position that was attached to the floor. Based on the other fragments of the podium coating found nearby, it was possible

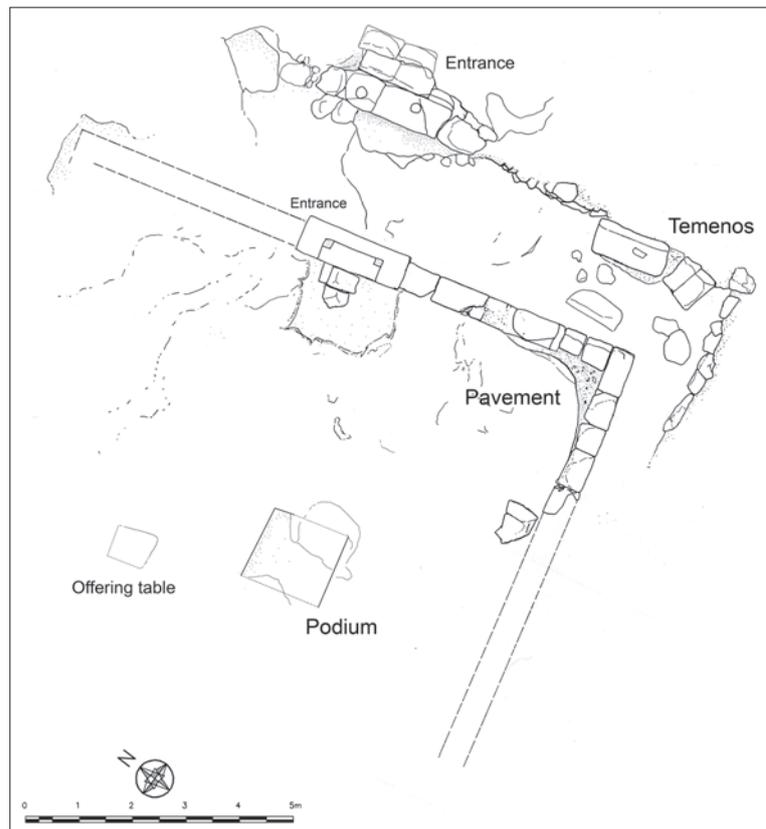


Fig. 8. Plan of the Temple of Astarte on the first terrace (drawing by the author).

11 Orsingher 2020, pp. 538-540, figs. 2-3.

12 Dixon 2021-2022, p. 147-148.

13 As for example the so-called "Cavernous Sanctuary" at Rhodes (see §4.1.).

14 Although only half of the eastern front wall (6.60m) and part of the southern wall (2.25 m) are preserved, it is possible to reconstruct the perimeter of the temple, which measured 11.2 × 8m (Caprino 1965, p. 173). The dimensions of the monumental threshold are 2.10 × 0.64 × 0.27m (Caprino 1965, p. 174).

15 Tamassia 1967, p. 94.

16 Tamassia 1966, pp. 149-150.



Fig. 9. The Temple of Astarte and the monumental entrance to the temenos; view from the northwest (photo by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo).

more probably related to the sacredness of thresholds, a concept rooted in the religious traditions of Maltese prehistory.²⁰

4. LAYOUT AND ARCHITECTURAL COMPARISONS

The sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija combines the presence of the cave with a built temple structure, set at opposite ends of the sacred area within a monumental layout, against a scenic backdrop. Its layout is inspired by a variety of architectural patterns traceable to several Mediterranean sanctuaries. The architectural references can be found both in the Phoenician-Punic and in the Hellenistic sacred architecture, especially that of the Greek islands. Like Ras il-Wardija, the Hellenistic sanctuaries of the Greek Islands are characterized by the connection of the sacred building to a rock-cut chamber or cave complex.²¹ The cave is either a rocky cavern or a regular structure cut into the rock, with one or more rooms, often decorated with architectural elements. As in the case of the cave, the temple also maintains the link with the rock, including the natural rock outcrops as structural elements. In both of them, the rock has a symbolic and religious function since, as we will see below, it represents the deity and is at the same time an object of worship and an element of the ritual.²²

As an example of a magistral scenic layout in the Greek islands in Hellenistic and Roman periods, the temple of Athena Lindia at Lyndos,²³ on the eastern coast of the island of Rhodes, can be considered. In order to improve its visibility from the sea, the temple was located not in the centre of the available space, but at the very edge of the plateau. This location took full advantage of the natural features of the acropolis, creating striking visual effects. The temple's arrangement on artificial terraces supported by strong retaining walls, was further emphasized by the use of the porticoes,²⁴ enhancing both its grandeur and its integration with the landscape.

17 Tamassia 1967, p. 98.

18 Tamassia 1967, p. 99.

19 Tamassia 1966, pp. 147-148.

20 Azzopardi 2017, pp. 40-41 (see §4.2.).

21 See below Rice 1995. The same features are in the sanctuaries of Demeter in Sicily, such as those of Agrigento and Enna (See §4.1.).

22 Marangou 2009, pp. 98-99; Rocco 2018, pp. 12-13.

23 Rocco 2018, p. 19, figs. 14a, 16.

24 The scenic layout of the temples and, more generally, of Hellenistic cities, which, unlike Classical cities, are adapted to and integrated into the natural landscape, is discussed in Patsiadas 2013, p. 47.

Due to its status of preservation, the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija does not show today the spectacular layout it had in the past. Regarding the hypothesis of the existence of a front chamber containing the corridor and external banquettes,²⁵ in the area in front of the cave and inside the pool, several architectural remains, such as a part of a limestone tortile column,²⁶ and stone plinths with a rounded cavity,²⁷ suitable for housing a wooden column,²⁸ were discovered. The latter suggest that the area between the cave and the temple, may have held porticoes with wooden columns covered with light, perishable materials such as reeds and branches or draperies. The architectural layout of Ras il-Wardija could therefore be analogous to that of contemporary Hellenistic sanctuaries.

4.1. *Cave Sanctuaries in the Mediterranean in the Hellenistic Period*

The cave of Ras il-Wardija was probably a natural cave that opened up on the Globigerina side of the promontory in the early period of its foundation, and was later regularized and monumentalized with niches and wall decorations after the Roman conquest of the island. In terms of architectural models, as already mentioned, the closest comparisons for the final layout of the cave are the rock sanctuaries of the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

In one of his orations against Verres, M. Tullius Cicero,²⁹ describing the places despoiled by the governor of Sicily and Malta, highlighted some of the peculiarities of sanctuary of Demeter (*fanum Cereris*) at Enna.³⁰ He praised this sanctuary was beautiful as the sanctuary in Rome (*pulcherrimus*), noting that its importance stemmed from its great antiquity (*tanta enim erat auctoritas et vetustas*). The devotees felt as if they were meeting Cerere herself (*ad ipsam Cerere proficisci viderentur*) rather than just visiting her temple. He noticed that the rocky outcrop there was revered as an aniconic symbol of the goddess and described the sanctuary, located in a prominent and massive rock at the top of a mountain, as a cave decorated with several niches carved into the rock.

Cave sanctuaries with these characteristics, usually dedicated to a female deity, are also known along the Levantine coast, in Byblos, Sidon and Tyre. In the *Mission de Phénicie*, Ernest Renan describes, and in some cases illustrates, large rock-cut halls decorated with niches and wall reliefs (Fig. 10).³¹ These sanctuaries were visited by both Phoenician and Greek peoples, as evidenced by the names engraved on the interior walls.³² The inscriptions and the graffiti found in one of these,³³ a large rock-cut chamber decorated with niches, discovered by Renan in the Tyre area, point to a cult sphere linked to Astarte.

As previously stated, the association of a rock-cut chamber with a temple building is attested in the Greek islands, as Miletus and Rhodes. At Humei Tepe at Miletus, the sanctuary of Demeter is associated to a cave complex,³⁴ rising on a peninsula, in an isolated and dominant position. The interior of the cave presents banquettes and seats, and the rocky outcrops are a constituent element of the architecture, certainly with

25 See §2.

26 Caprino 1966, p. 140, pl. 102; Azzopardi 2017, pp. 48-49. Such elements probably decorated the closing wall of the chamber now lost.

27 Caprino 1967, pp. 85-86, pl. 60

28 As proposed by P. Mingazzini (Mingazzini 1976, p. 163).

29 Cic. *In Verrem Actio 2*, IV: 108.

30 Giannitrapani – Nicoletti – Valbruzzi 2020, pp. 177-178.

31 Dixon 2021-2022, p. 136.

32 The possible function of these caves as places of worship where *hierodoulia* was practiced is expressed by P. Mingazzini in an interpretative essay on the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija (Mingazzini 1976, pp. 159-161).

33 In particular, a Greek graffito in which a worshipper thanks Aphrodite for answering his prayer (Renan 1864, pp. 647-653).

34 Karatas 2019, pp. 154-155, fig. 6.

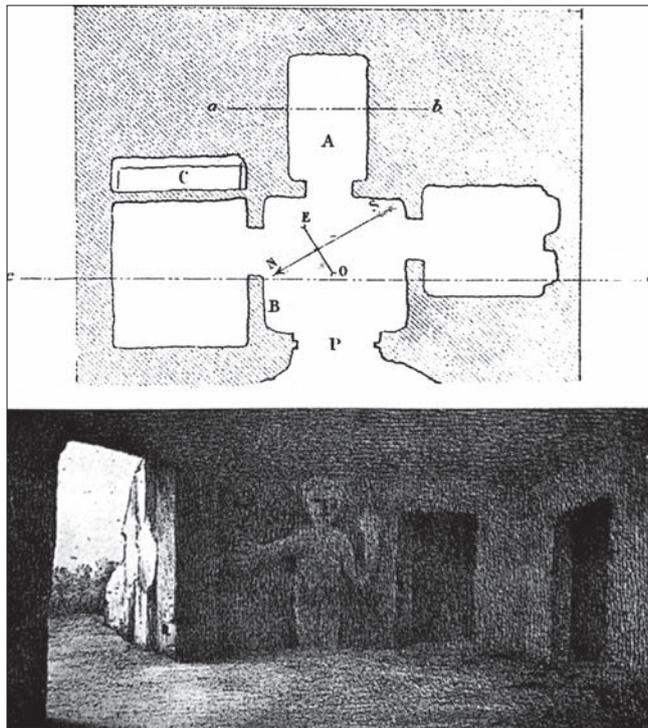


Fig. 10. Plan and drawing of one of the caves identified by Renan near Sidon (after Renan 1864, pl. LXV).

deep niches to the west have been carved into the northern rock face. (Fig. 11). The double chamber consists of two rectangular rooms connected by an internal door. The narrow sides of the first large chamber are decorated with two rectangular niches, while the ceiling of the inner and smaller chambers is slightly vaulted.³⁹ The façade of the first chamber had two Doric columns between pilasters and was surmounted by a Doric entablature, possibly set in a recess above the entrance. The façade was probably covered with a mortar plaster, which has been preserved inside the portico. A little to the west of the rock chamber, there is a wide, deep, and arched niche, with pillars flanking the entrance; inside, a rectangular niche opens in the back wall, probably containing a medium-sized statue. The two smaller rectangular niches, to the right and left of the arched niche, had a similar use. To the west is another rectangular room cut into the rock, with rectangular niches or recesses carved into the back and left walls.⁴⁰ As already mentioned, the deities worshipped in this late Hellenistic rock-sanctuary, according to the dating by I. Kondis, remain unknown. However, they must have had some connection with nature and vegetation. The same can be said for the other rock sanctuaries

symbolic significance, as described by Cicero for the sanctuary of Cerere at Enna.

Additionally, on the Acropolis of Rhodes on Mount Smith, there is a sacred complex that show many common features with the cave sanctuary of Wardija. As described by Diodorus,³⁵ the Acropolis was visible from a long distance from the sea, as it was built on the slopes of the highest hill overlooking the urban landscape. In this sumptuous conformation, the urban spaces were used as scenic backdrops for rituals and celebrations.³⁶ Among these was the complex of the temple of Apollo Pythios, on the western side of the Acropolis.³⁷ It arose on a shallow terrace and consisted in a temenos with the temple of Apollo, dated to the 4th cent. BCE, and the so-called “Cavernous Sanctuary”, located to the south of the Temple, which was likely dedicated to other deities, although their identities remain unknown. This rocky complex, only partially excavated by I. Kondis in 1954,³⁸ combines natural and artificial features. A double chamber and two

35 Diodorus of Sicily describes Rhodes as *θεατροειδής* because of this urban layout, scenic and impressive as the scene of a theatre: *Bibl. Hist.* XX 83,2 (*οὐσης τῆς πόλεως θεατροειδοῦς*).

36 Kondis 1958, pp. 6-8; Caliò 2005.

37 Rocco 2018, p. 23, figs. 22-23.

38 Kondis 1958.

39 Patsiadas 2013, p. 53, fig. 7-9.

40 The overall plan, like that of the rest of the rock façade further west, is unclear because the 1954 survey did not extend to these points, which are now covered by dense shrubbery. The site has also suffered damage and deterioration due to its use for military purposes during the Second World War (Patsiadas 2013, pp. 55-56).



Fig. 11. The so-called “Cavernous Sanctuary”, on the Acropolis of Rhodes: plan and section (after Patsiadas 2013, fig. 7), and façade (photo courtesy by L. Nigro).

of the Acropolis, conventionally called Nymphaea.⁴¹ Among these, a special mention deserves the so-called Grotto System I, a complex of grottoes/caves carved in the western slope of the Acropolis.⁴² Accessed by a staircase cut into the rock, this group of caves are connected by underground passages, and present an elaborate architectural arrangement, consisting in niches, semi-columns, and pillars. One of these chambers features a rectangular pool in the centre of one of these niches. This pool supplied water for rituals in the sanctuary, as the site is apparently missing a natural spring.⁴³

41 According to E. Rice (1995), the form and location of the grottoes in the Acropolis of Rhodes reflect a sacred function associated with the deities worshipped at the summit of the Acropolis, such as Athena and Zeus. These grottoes served for “private” religious practices within the community, representing a liminal space, a transition point between the human and divine worlds (Rice 1995, pp. 403-404).

42 Rice 1995, p. 390, fig. 4: D.

43 Caprino 1966, p. 142. The ritual use of water in the nymphaeum-type sanctuaries in Rice 1995, pp. 91-392, fig. 13.

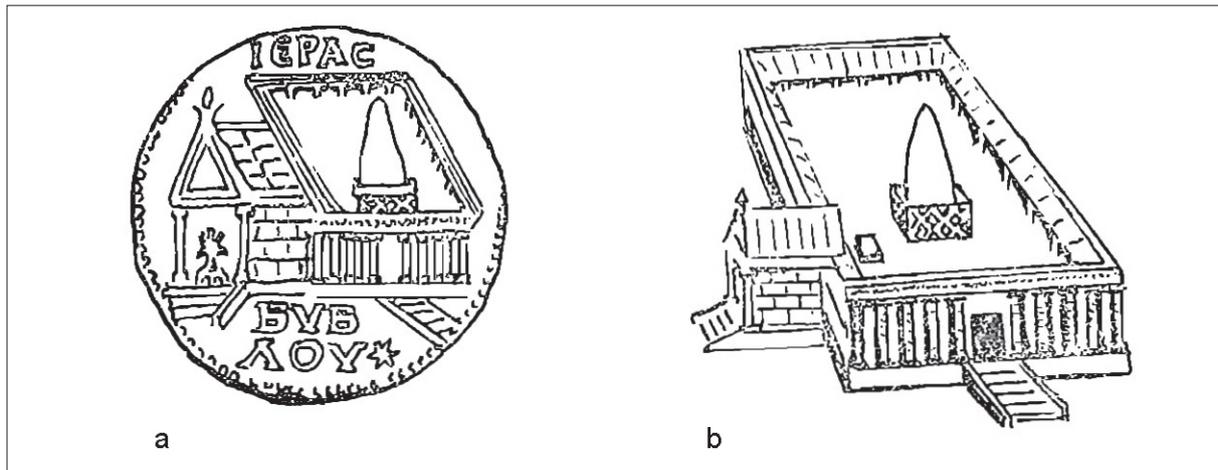


Fig. 12. The Temple of Baalat in Byblos represented on a coin by M. Opellio Macrinus (218 AD) (a) and axonometric reconstruction (b) according to R. Dussaud (after Stockton 1974-1975, fig. 1, a-b).

4.2. *The Temple of Astarte: Phoenician Models and local Peculiarities*

Originally defined *Edificio a blocchi* by its excavator,⁴⁴ the temple of Astarte on the first terrace can be reconstructed as an open-air sanctuary, with a porticoed enclosure and monumental entrance. Based on the preserved remains Cagiano the Azevedo⁴⁵ suggested a comparison with the Neo-Punic sanctuary of Menzel Harb in Tunisia, consisting in a porticoed temenos enclosing an open courtyard, albeit badly damaged.⁴⁶ The same layout is found in the temple of Baalat in Byblos, depicted on a coin by M. Opellius Macrinus (217-218 CE), i.e. a rectangular sacred enclosure with a monumental entrance on the long side and a podium supporting a baetyl in the centre.⁴⁷ The coin shows the temple of Baalat in its Roman remodeling, which may not have been very different from the original plan (Fig. 12). The temple of Astarte of Cyprus at Kouklia-*Palaepaphos* also followed the same planimetric and architectural model, according to the reconstruction by Maier and Karageorghis.⁴⁸

The temple of Astarte at Ras il-Wardija would therefore belong to a typology that was widespread in the Levant for shrines dedicated to the goddess,⁴⁹ like the temples at Byblos and Kouklia-*Palaepaphos*⁵⁰ above mentioned.

44 Caprino 1965, pp. 173-176.

45 Cagiano de Azevedo 1964, p. 124.

46 Foucher 1966, pp. 119-121.

47 According to the reconstruction of R. Dussaud (Dussaud 1927, pp. 119-120, figs. 1-2); Stockton 1974-1975, p. 7.

48 Several coinages show the cult statue represented by a baetyl, which was inside the sanctuary of Paphos, a tripartite building at the time. As an example, on a coin of Caracalla is represented a pylon-like shrine with aniconic cult monument (a baetyl), on either side the ends of a portico, each with a thymiaterion inside and a dove on the roof; above the shrine, a crescent and a star; in front, a semicircular courtyard with a gate (Schwarzer 2013, p. 30, pl. 11: 22). The baetyl depicted is probably the basalt one now kept in the museum on the site (Maier – Karageorghis 1984, p. 97-98, figs. 81-82; Bloch-Smith 2014, p. 188). According to Karageorghis and Maier, the entrance to the temenos consisted of a portico with pillars. The floor of this portico was probably at a higher level than that of the temenos (Karageorghis 2005, p. 28; Maier 2004, p. 43).

49 Spagnoli 2024b, p. 349. For the spread of the open-air sanctuaries dedicated to this goddess, worshipped as *Potnia* in the Minoan and Aegean area, see Kourou 2015, p. 186.

50 Finkbeiner 1981; Bietak 2019, pp. 175-179, fig. 5.

The entrance to the Temenos shows some peculiarities in respect to the genuine Phoenician architectural tradition. It consisted of three descending steps, the third and lowest of which was in the form of two slabs with circular recesses on the sides, a reference to the older Maltese temple tradition, as suggested by Catia Caprino⁵¹ (Fig. 13). Similar features are found in the Maltese megalithic temples, such as Skorba and Ġgantija.⁵² They emphasize the sacred character of doorways and thresholds, and they were most likely used for the ritual of the libation performed upon entering the sacred site.⁵³ The presence of such features at entrances or passages in the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardiġa could be a legacy of the oldest local sacred architecture. This may have been facilitated by the fact that megalithic structures from prehistoric temples remained in use for many centuries and, as in the case of Tas-Silġ, in south Malta, where they were included and reused in the Phoenician sanctuary of Astarte.⁵⁴ However, the sacredness of the passages is also attested in Phoenician religion, as evidenced by the mention of “doorkeepers/assistants/men in charge of the door” in several Phoenician inscriptions, although this feature is not always emphasized by the presence of sacred installations in or near Phoenician temples.⁵⁵



Fig. 13. Monumental entrance to the temenos. Last step consists of two slabs with hollows at the sides (photo by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo).

5. CULT OBJECTS AND POTTERY REPERTOIRE

The sanctuary of Ras il-Wardiġa has yielded numerous sacred installations and cult objects. Thanks to the study of baetyls, cippi and small stone basins, Caprino was able to identify Astarte as the deity worshipped in the sanctuary.⁵⁶ New research by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo on the site⁵⁷ along with the study of the ceramic materials found during the 1960s excavations, have provided new data to confirm this attribution.⁵⁸ The re-examination of the votive material revealed a fragmentary hand-made clay idol, probably part of a Cypriot-type statuette of the goddess with raised arms, a common object among offerings

51 Caprino 1968, pp. 88-89. See also §3, note no. 20.

52 Trump 2002, pp. 156-157.

53 Sagona 2015a, p. 85; Azzopardi 2017, pp. 40-41.

54 Bonanno – Frenzo 2000, pp. 67-71. In addition to the well-known case of the temple of Astarte at Tas-Silġ (Ciasca 1991, pp. 755-756), we also mention the reuse of megalithic temple structures in the Phoenician-Punic sanctuary of Ras ir-Raġeb (Buhagiar 1989, p. 70; Spagnoli – Bonanno 2024, pp. 570-571).

55 Oggiano 2022, pp. 459-460, fig. 1.

56 Caprino 1968, pp. 93-94

57 In accordance with the Agreement between Sapienza University, Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and Heritage Malta.

58 The material found by the Italian excavations of 1964-1967 was published in brief notes by Catia Caprino in the annual reports of 1965-1968. A comprehensive publication is currently being prepared in collaboration with the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and Heritage Malta.



Fig. 14. Handmade clay idol, possibly the lower part of a figure of the “deity with raised arms” type (photo by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo).

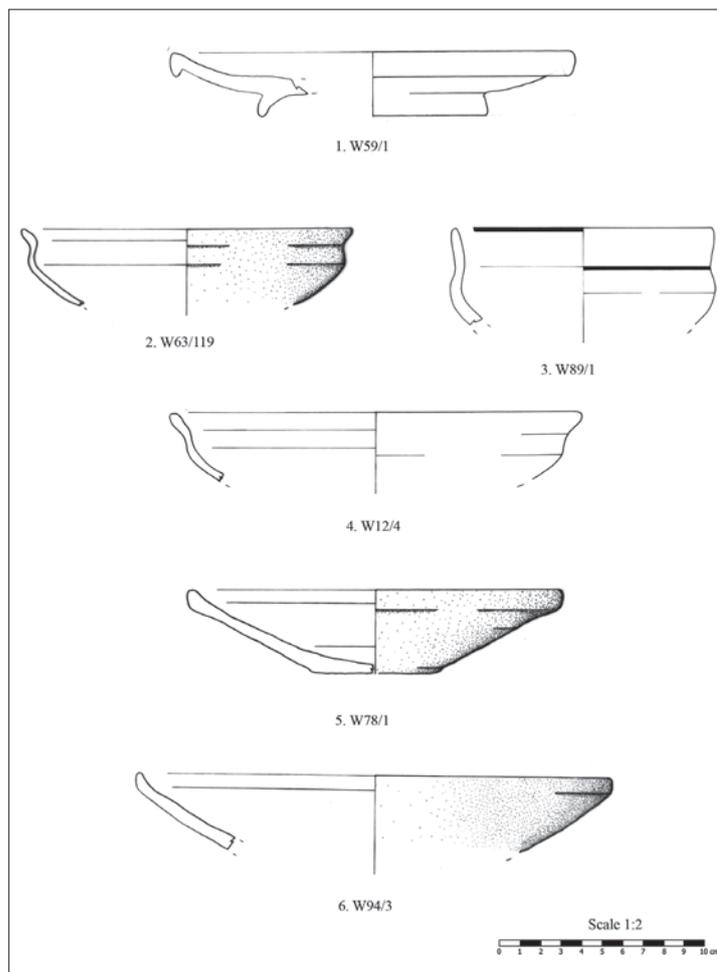


Fig. 15. Punic tableware (4th cent. BC). 1: fish plate; 2: bowl; 3: bowl with red-painted decoration and white lustrous slip; 4: bowl with white lustrous slip. Late Punic tableware (3rd-2nd cent. BC). 5-6: plain bowls with straight rim and flat base (drawings by D. Iorio).

to the goddess Astarte in Iron Age Phoenician sanctuaries (Fig. 14).⁵⁹ Although fragmentary, this is the only votive or deity statuette from the Ras il-Wardija cult known to date.⁶⁰

A preliminary analysis of the ceramic repertoire has provided useful information for reconstructing the nature of the rituals that took place in the sanctuary, and has highlighted the Mediterranean dimension of this sanctuary. The variety of types of commercial amphorae found at Ras il-Wardija attests to the involvement of the sanctuary in the dense trade and exchange network with Sicily, North Africa, Southern Italy, and

⁵⁹ Zeman-Wiśniewska 2016, pp. 153-154.

⁶⁰ Spagnoli 2023b, p. 307, fig. 15, 3. Comparisons in Maier – Karageorghis 1984, p. 150, fig. 138; Rizza 1960, p. 257, fig. 17; Nigro 2015, p. 239, fig. 15.

the Eastern Mediterranean,⁶¹ probably favored by the proximity of the port of Xlendi,⁶² while the pottery repertoire provides information on chronology and ritual practices. The preliminary study of the material indicates that the sanctuary was built at the beginning of the 4th cent. BCE,⁶³ as the oldest ceramic productions dates from this period: bowls, jugs and bottles painted with red lines on a shiny white glaze, belonging to a painted production originated from Carthage in the second half of the 5th cent. BCE and spread over the Punic territories in the 4th cent. BCE⁶⁴ (Fig. 15: 3-4). The most recent chronological limit is attested to by a group of materials similar in form and style to Carthaginian and North African productions of the 5th cent. CE, further indicating the use of the area in the Late Antique period.⁶⁵

The material includes a group of Punic pottery dating to the 4th-3rd cent. BCE and a group of Roman pottery dating from the 2nd cent. BCE to the 2nd cent. CE. Both are characterized by a great homogeneity in terms of the classes attested: the most abundant is the tableware, mainly plates (Fig. 15: 1), bowls (Fig. 15: 2, 5-6), jugs and basins/mortars, followed by cooking ware and storage pottery, the latter consisting of medium-sized ollae with a flat base,⁶⁶ There are also the typical furnishings of Punic and Roman sanctuaries, such as lamps (Fig. 16: 10-12), incense burners (Fig. 16: 13-17) and oil bottles⁶⁷ (Fig. 16: 7-9).

These vessels were used exclusively for ritual purposes, as evidenced by the high degree of standardization of types and the similarities in production and materials, which suggest that they were made in specialized workshops.⁶⁸ After use, the vessels were ritually broken and left at the site of the offering, according to a practice well documented in Phoenician religion⁶⁹ and in funerary contexts (Fig. 16: 6).⁷⁰ Miniature plates, bowls (Fig. 16: 1-5), and oil bottles⁷¹ underwent the same ritual: the open forms were broken in half or pierced in the centre, while the oil bottles were deliberately cut by separating the body from the neck.⁷²

The homogeneity and strong standardization of the ceramic repertoire, in terms of production, classes, types and sizes over the long life of the sanctuary, and the continuity of the de-functionalization of the vessels, point to the persistence of religious practices that remained unchanged during the Carthaginian and Roman periods⁷³.

61 A preliminary description is given in Spagnoli 2023b, pp. 309-310.

62 Gambin 2002-2003, pp. 22-23; Anastasi *et al.* 2021, pp. 166-172; Gambin – Sourisseau – Anastasi 2021.

63 Azzopardi 2017, p. 2.

64 Spagnoli 2023b, p. 307, figs. 16-17.

65 Baldoni 2015, pp. 2-3.

66 Ciasca 1985, pp. 22-23, fig. 3.

67 Spagnoli 2013, p. 159; Sagona 2015b, p. 43.

68 Comparisons with Tas-Silġ in Bonzano 2016, pp. 158-159. For the possible area of production see De Bonis 2018, pp. 431-432.

69 Spagnoli 2019, pp. 244-245; Doumet-Serhal – Chahoud 2013, p. 38.

70 Vecchio 2013, pp. 55-56; Aubet 2010, pp. 151-153.

71 At first sight, the fabric of the vessels from Ras il-Wardiġa are very similar, and in some cases identical, to those from the sanctuary of Astarte at Tas-Silġ in Malta. If petrographic analyses were to confirm this impression, it could be assumed that the two sanctuaries must have used the same pottery workshops, which M. Anastasi locates in the north-west of Malta. (De Bonis *et al.* 2019, p. 1635; Sagona 2015b, p. 58, fig. 49, 19.

72 In the sanctuary of Baal and in the temple of Astarte in the Sacred Area of Kothon at Motya, a Phoenician colony in Western Sicily, the votive vessels underwent the same process. The cut-out parts of the vessels, such as the tops, necks and rims, were reused in rituals as funnels for libations, the bottoms as saucers for offerings (Nigro 2009, pp. 704-705; Nigro – Spagnoli 2012, pp. 38-40).

73 Quercia 2011, pp. 445-447.

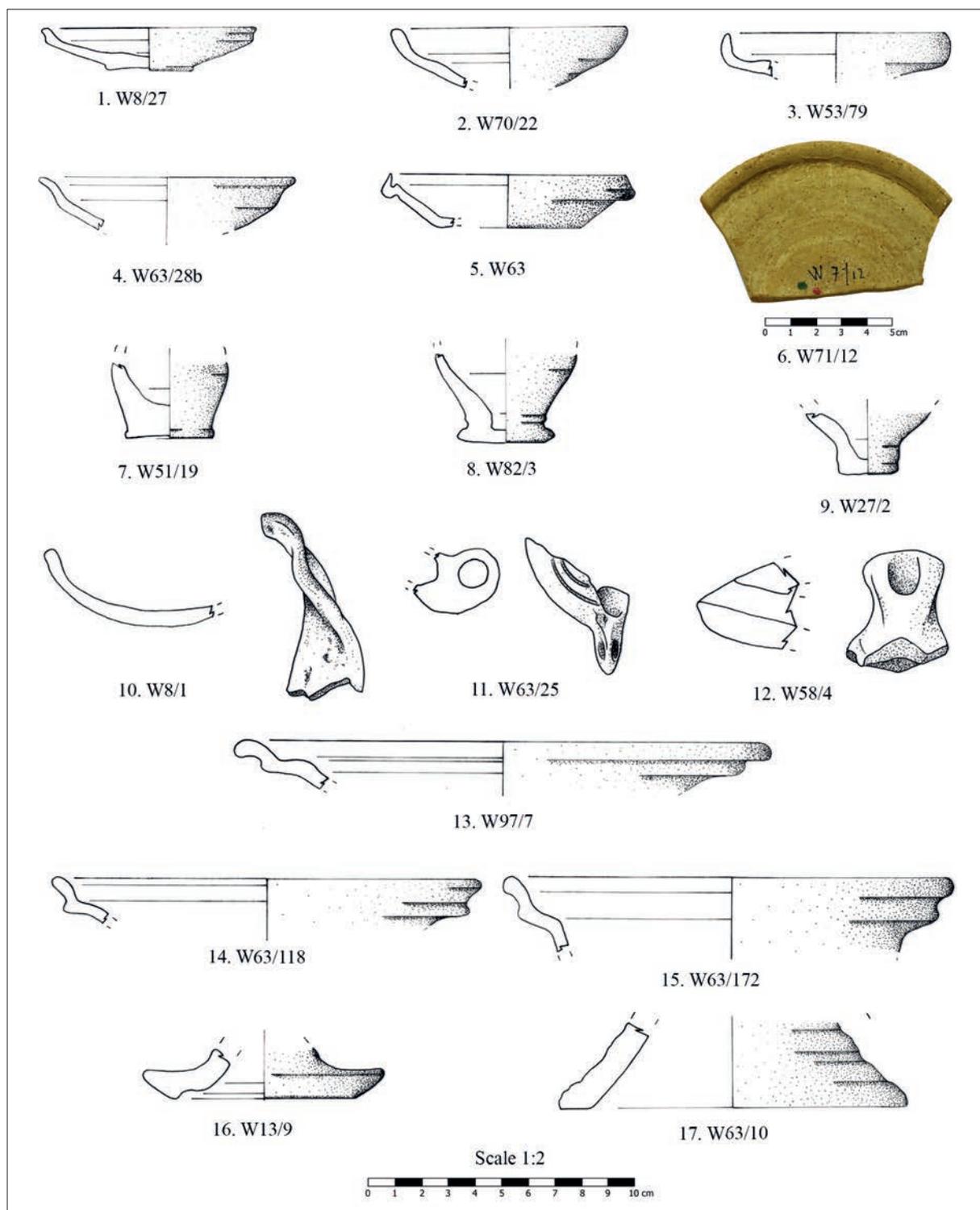


Fig. 16. Cult vessels. 1-5: miniature vessels; 6: miniature plate intentionally broken (3rd-2nd cent. BC); 7-9: oil bottles; 10-12: Punic, Greek and Roman lamps; 13-15: incense burners; 16-17 stands (photo of the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo; drawings by D. Iorio).

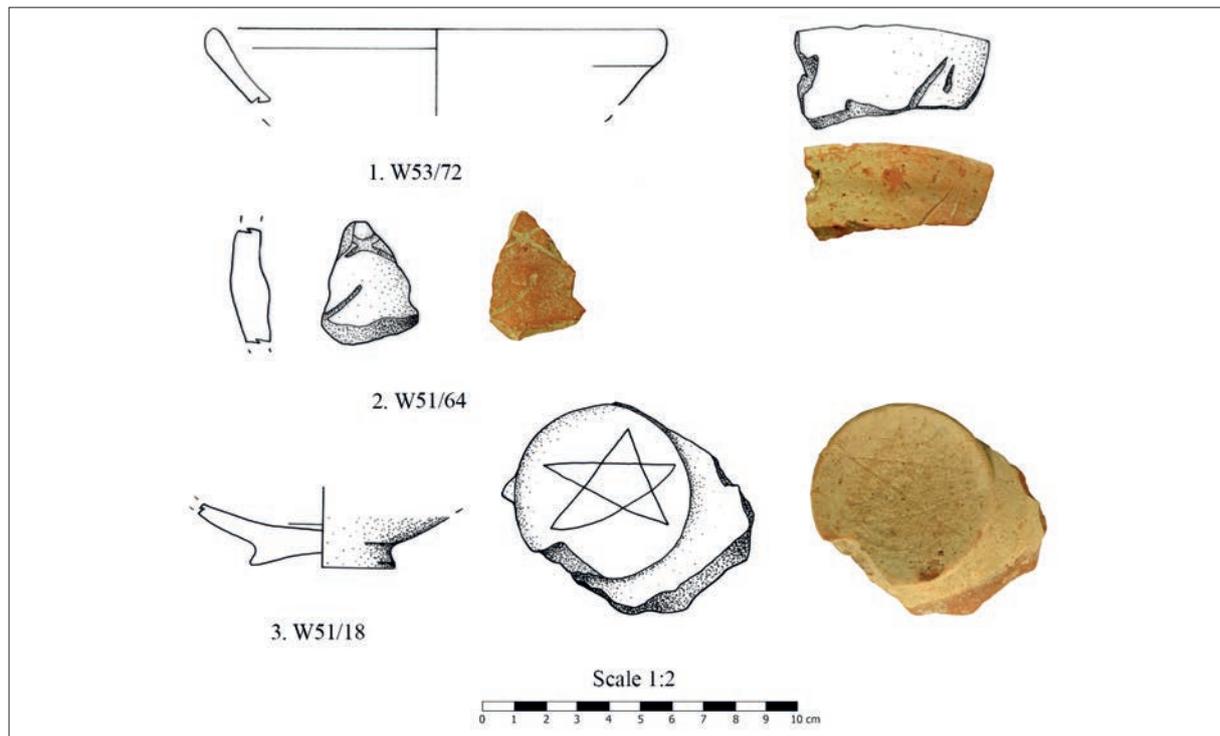


Fig. 17. Inscribed vessels: 1. Fragmentary bowl with *taw*; 2. Fragment of a Punic juglet engraved with *šin* and *taw*, probably part of the name of Astarte; 3. Astral symbol incised on the bottom of a Punic bowl (photo of the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo; drawings by D. Iorio).

6. EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

Some of the vessels found at Ras il-Wardija were engraved with ritual formulae and Punic letters before being fired, most of them consisting of one or two letter abbreviations.⁷⁴ Many of these inscriptions are very similar to those found at Tas-Silġ, which date from the 3rd to 2nd cent. BCE, as confirmed by the ceramic typologies.⁷⁵ As far as paleography is concerned, several fragments show the typical features of the Punic script used in the Maltese archipelago, such as the detachment of the lines in the letter *taw*, e.g. in the bowl W53/72 (Fig. 17: 1), and the execution of the letter *resh* as an oblique line⁷⁶ (Fig. 17: 2). Some of them show a symbol, as the base of the Punic bowl W51/18 (Fig. 17: 3).

A short inscription is engraved on the wall of a Punic jug (W51/4). The inscription is divided into two lines, the first of which reads *kaf*, *ayin*, *šin*, followed by a surface abrasion, and the second of which reads *resh*, *taw*. Due to its lower position, close to the base of the vessel, the inscription is divided into two lines (Fig. 18). The first letter *kaf* could be interpreted as an abbreviation of *khn*, “priest”. The resolution of

⁷⁴ Frendo 2000, pp. 97-99, fig. 13.2.

⁷⁵ De Bonis *et al.* 2019, pp. 1634-1635. Bonnet 1996, pp. 165-166. Within the vast repertoire of inscriptions containing dedicatory formulas to Astarte and abbreviations (cfr. Amadasi Guzzo 1981, p. 9, pl. I), we cite as an example the Phoenician inscription on the Laminae of Pyrgi for the full formula (Amadasi Guzzo – De Simone 2024, pp. 143-144) and a tortoise shell with the short formula, recently found in one of the deposits around the temple of Astarte in the Sacred Area of the Kothon at Motya (Nigro 2019, p. 117, fig. 22)

⁷⁶ Piacentini 2011, pp. 43-44; Piacentini 2019, p. 1064, fig. 1.

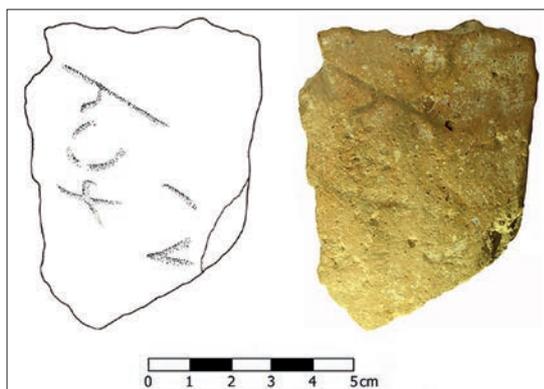


Fig. 18. The dedication *k[hm] š[rt]*, “priest of Astarte” incised on sherd W51/4 (photo of the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo; drawing by D. Iorio.)

Giovanni Garbini⁸¹ and Paolino Mingazzini, has been further confirmed by the recent discoveries made by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission in Gozo, which, although indirectly, lead back to the cultic sphere of the goddess. These include acronyms and inscriptions on vases, objects such as the pyramidion and the idol fragment, the planimetric and architectural model of the building and even its location on the promontory, in a dominant position and clearly visible from the sea.⁸² The cave sanctuary can be interpreted itself as another reference to Astarte as a chthonic deity, represented by the rock into which the cave opens. The presence of hydraulic structures can be linked to the relationship between the goddess and the natural elements, as Astarte is intended as a *potnia* deity.⁸³ Nevertheless, the sanctuary has two distinct places, the cave and the temple, and possibly different cult practices, those of the cave related to the pool. This could suggest that Astarte was not the sole deity venerated in the sanctuary, and that the focus was instead on the worship of a divine couple.⁸⁴ Indeed, the pool adjacent to the cave is indicative of the performance of rites of ablution and purification, thus evoking the domain of healing and specifically the deity Eshmun.⁸⁵ The presence of benches inside the cave would recall the ritual of *incubatio*, the religious practice of sleeping with the intention of experiencing healing or divine inspiration,⁸⁶ which, according to some sources, was also practiced

the formula could be *k[hm] š[rt]* “priest of Astarte”, as it appears in the inscription repertoire of Tas-Silġ.⁷⁷ At Tas-Silġ, the name of Astarte is followed by a reference to the geographic area of the cult: *š[rt] ‘nm*, “Astarte of Malta”.⁷⁸ This suggests that the cult of Astarte held a regional significance, as other cults of Astarte in the Mediterranean,⁷⁹ and it is probable that its influence extended to the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardiġa in Gozo.

7. WHICH CULT/CULTS AT RAS IL-WARDIĠA? SOME HYPOTHESIS OF ATTRIBUTION

The attribution of the ownership of the sanctuary to Astarte, already proposed by Michelangelo Cagiano de Azevedo,⁸⁰ and supported in subsequent studies by

77 De Bonis *et al.* 2019, p. 1626, fig. 3.

78 Amadasi Guzzo 2011, pp. 20-21, figs. 10, 12; Bonanno 2022, p. 37.

79 Amadasi Guzzo 2001-2002; Lietz 2016.

80 Cagiano de Azevedo 1966, pp. 166-168.

81 Garbini 1966, pp. 154-155.

82 Christian 2013; Esteban – Iborra Pellín 2016.

83 Kourou 2015, pp. 181-182.

84 George Azzopardi suggests that the cult practiced in the cave may have been dedicated to Dionysus, highlighting his relationship with the natural elements and the mysterious and initiatory rituals (Azzopardi 2017, p. 62). Archaeological evidence suggests that many Phoenician and Punic sanctuaries were dedicated to a divine couple. Significant examples are the Sanctuary of Eshmun at Bustan es-Sheikh, which contains the basin of the throne of Astarte, not by chance leaning against a rocky outcrop (Dixon 2021-2022); the Sacred Area of the Kothon of Motya, where in addition to the temple of Baal and the temple of Astarte there are minor cult-places dedicated to the divine couple (Nigro – Spagnoli 2012); the Sanctuary of Malophoros at Selinus, with the Temple of Demeter Malophoros and the sacred precinct of Zeus Meilichios (Stallsmith 2019).

85 Groenewoud 2001, pp. 144-145; Garbati – Pedrazzi 2019, pp. 217-218; Dixon 2021-2022, p. 148.

86 *Incubatio* refers to a religious and divinatory practice in which a devotee spends the night in a sacred sanctuary with a dual purpose: the practice could have a therapeutic function, facilitating healing through dream-induced guidance, or an oracular purpose,

as a ritual of passage.⁸⁷ Evidence for the ritual can be found in the sanctuaries dedicated to Eshmun from Phoenician to Roman times. An example of such a sanctuary is that of Eshmun/Aesculapius at the *Sa Punta 'e su Coloru* at Nora in Sardinia.⁸⁸

8. REGIONAL AND MEDITERRANEAN CONNECTIONS

The cult worshipped at Ras il-Wardiya was probably linked to the regional cult of the Maltese goddess Astarte, which had Tas-Silġ as its main sanctuary, as mentioned above. Other regional cults of the goddess are known in the Phoenician Mediterranean: the cult of Astarte of Eryx, for example, had a very wide area of diffusion, including not only southern Sardinia but also the coasts of North Africa.⁸⁹ During the Carthaginian hegemony on Sicily, Astarte of Eryx was involved in festivities called *Anagógia* and *Katagógia*, described by Athenaeus of Naucratis and Claudius Aelianus.⁹⁰ The ceremony involved transporting the goddess from the sanctuary at Eryx in western Sicily, to a coastal cult site in Libya, possibly at Sicca.⁹¹ Here she remained for nine days before being returned to her original sanctuary.⁹² *Anagógia* and *Katagógia* illustrate a strategic “religious policy” instituted by Carthage to assert control over and promote the integration of Mediterranean regions under Punic domination by exploiting the widespread popularity of the cult of Astarte. After the fall of Carthage, the Romans seem to have fully exploited the potential of the Astarte cult to consolidate their authority in the former Punic territories of the central Mediterranean. The potential involvement of the sanctuaries of Malta and Gozo in similar festivals and pilgrimages, with Tas-Silġ as the main religious pole, suggests that Ras il-Wardiya could be one of the sanctuaries interested in these celebrations, a possibility reinforced by the hitherto unknown link between the two cult sites, reflected in a common material culture and inscriptions.⁹³

9. THE CAVE AND THE TEMPLE: ACTIONS, SYMBOLISMS, RITUAL PATHS

In addition to the possible involvement of the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardiya in intra-regional pilgrimages and festivals, it is possible to identify internal ritual pathways within the sacred complex, that linked the cave and the temple.

providing prophetic insights by receiving divine revelations through dreams or visions. It may also have been associated with rites of passage. It was widespread throughout the ancient world, being practiced in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Greece and Rome. Before undergoing *incubatio*, devotees underwent preparatory rituals, often involving rites of purification and sacrifice, seemingly to prepare the individual spiritually for an encounter with the deity and to facilitate communication with the divine. Central to this practice was the ritual sleep within the temple during which the worshipper sought an epiphany of the deity – a personal revelation in which direct communication with the divine occurred. Upon receiving the desired vision or answer, the individual would then participate in rites of feasting as an expression of gratitude (Von Ehrenheim 2015, p. 111).

87 Minunno 2013, p. 558.

88 In particular, two figurines from the 2nd century B.C. depicting a sleeping man, one of whom is wrapped in the coils of a snake, clearly refer to the ritual practice of *incubatio* (Pesce 1956). An overall discussion on the plan and the architectures of the temple in Phoenician times in Oggiano 2005, p. 1034-1038. The connection between the cult of Eshmun and the practices of the *incubatio* and *sanatio* has been evidenced also in the *Maabed* of Amrit (Garbati – Pedrazzi 2019, pp. 215-216).

89 Angiolillo – Sirigu 2009; Ribichini 2004, p. 57.

90 Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 394f-395a; Claudius Aelianus, *Varia Historia* 1.15.

91 Ribichini 2004, p. 58.

92 Lietz 2012, p. 145.

93 As there are currently no other shrines dedicated to the goddess on Gozo, Ras il-Wardiya has all the necessary characteristics to be identified as the shrine of Astarte on the island of Gozo mentioned in the *Melitensia Quinta*, the Punic inscription dated found in Gozo (*CIS I*, 132, p. 160-163, end of 3rd-2nd cent. BCE) (Bonanno 2005, pp. 79-80).

The sanctuary was accessed from the lower terrace,⁹⁴ where the temple and the temenos were located. The temple was surrounded by a temenos with an opening on the eastern side, but it is thought to have had a second entrance, as was common in Phoenician and Punic temples.⁹⁵ The shortest route to the promontory, both from the port of Xlendi and from the modern capital of Gozo, Victoria – Rabat, is actually along the coast, which is currently used for the Xlendi – Dwejra Bay hiking trail. This route led directly to the lowest terrace, where the temple stood and where the entrance to the sacred complex was likely placed.

The ascent from the temple of Astarte through the terraces must have been a kind of ritual pathway⁹⁶ leading to the cave, which was intended to be the highest point of the complex. The route ended on the highest terrace, where ablutions in the pool and ointments with perfumed oils, contained in the numerous oil-bottles found in the sanctuary, were performed before entering the cave, which was said to consist of two chambers. To enter the first, one had to step down and go through the corridor following the path from the terrace to the entrance of the chamber. This originally had two flanks carved into the rock, making the opening smaller than it is today,⁹⁷ and was probably enclosed by movable elements such as curtains or animal skins.

As for the accesses to the corridor and to the benches along it, which must have been inside the first chamber of the cave, no longer visible today, we can assume that one of them was from the southern part (since the northern part is completely lost), through the step formed by the carved slab with the two recesses, forming an L-shaped path.⁹⁸ Next to the entrance to the cave, on the south side, there is another step with circular recesses, which could have been the step to access to the large benches inside that allowed to reach the niches and practice the rituals. In this interpretation, the passages leading to the cave reproduce, on a smaller scale, the entrance to the temenos, marked by two slabs with lateral recesses, in accordance with the Phoenician religious principle of the sanctity of the doorways to sacred places.

With regard to the ritual practices of the sanctuary, the ceramic repertoire indicates that another ritual action consisted of communal meals, probably eaten seating on the benches along the sides of the corridor.⁹⁹ Tableware ceramics include plates, bowls and jugs used for the meal, intentionally broken and left in the sanctuary at the end of the rite. The cooking wares, which comprise pots and pans, show signs of use, suggesting that they were not votive but service vessels belonging to the sanctuary. The diameters of the pots, which range from 18 to 27 cm, suggest that they must have contained enough food for larger groups of people. The same can be said of the large bowls which must have been used as serving vessels. On the other hand, there is no information about the food consumed, as no animal or other food remains have been found in the sanctuary.

The ceramic repertoire also includes miniature vessels, such as plates and cups, as well as oil bottles. Their use in rituals is indicated by the systematic de-functionalization, such as the removal of the neck and body or the detachment of the rim or base.¹⁰⁰ The abundance of miniature pottery reflects a massive participation in religious activities by devotees from a wide range of social groups.¹⁰¹

94 Caprino 1968, pp. 93-94.

95 As an example, the Temple of Astarte at Kition-*Kathari* (Edrey 2018, p. 196, fig. 14), and the Temple of Baal at Motya (Nigro 2015).

96 The ascent, or *anodos* in the Greek religious tradition, is the first part of the popular rite of *Thesmophoria*, dedicated to Demeter and Kore. On the first of the three days of celebration, women ascended to the sanctuary carrying the sacrificial animal, usually a young piglet (Bellia 2014, p. 11; Sfameni Gasparro 2003, pp. 195-211).

97 At the moment of its discovery, the cave had two rocky banks on either side of the entrance, which reduced its width and closed it off completely or partially (Caprino 1966, pp. 125-126, figs. 77, 84).

98 The bend-entrance is one of the principles of the Phoenician religious architecture (Edrey 2018, p. 185).

99 Azzopardi 2017, pp. 52, 60; Machause López – Skeates 2022, pp. 19-21.

100 Spagnoli 2023b, p. 209, fig. 21.

101 Gimatzidis 2011, pp. 86-87.

Lamps and incense burners were part of the furnishings of the sanctuary. Lamps illuminated the cave, which was mostly shaded even during the day, and other parts of the sanctuary during night rituals, which included the sprinkling of perfumed substances.¹⁰²

10. CONCLUSIONS

The ongoing excavations and research by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo at the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardiġa are aimed at clarifying the historical and archaeological significance of this site. Despite its status of preservation and the lack of a complete documentation of the excavation, especially regarding the non-ceramic finds, as like the paleo-faunal and archaeobotanical data, this sanctuary can still give many information, representing a significant site for understanding the religious practices in the Maltese archipelago during the Punic and Roman periods. The sanctuary with its long period of frequentation, exemplifies the continuity of the religious traditions over several centuries, highlighting the integration of the Phoenician traditions with both the Prehistoric background and the Hellenistic and Roman architectural elements.

The elevated location of the sanctuary, with its scenic layout and strategic position, emphasizes its function not only as a religious site but also as a landmark in maritime networks. The sanctuary of Ras il-Wardiġa is one of those coastal maritime sanctuaries that were not just geographical landmarks, but defined a specific “sacred geography” and a “sacred landscape”, becoming a symbol of the interaction between the challenges of maritime travels, religious beliefs, devotion and, in some cases, economic affairs.

In terms of architectural layout, the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardiġa blends Levantine architectural traditions¹⁰³ with wider Mediterranean influences. It shares most of its features with several sacred complexes in the Mediterranean, such as those of the Greek islands, and the cave sanctuaries of the Levantine coast. The temple of Astarte in the lower terrace shares architectural similarities with other Levantine cult places dedicated to the goddess, such as those at Byblos and Kouklia-*Palaepaphos*. The cave had probably an ante-chamber now disappeared, which remains visible in the angle formed in the southern part of the rock front. This ante-chamber covered the corridor and the ancillary structures, where communal meals were performed. The cave was possibly dedicated to a healing deity, and was hypothetically the place for rituals as *incubatio*, also suggested by the the presence of the pool.

The ceramic repertoire and other cult objects found at the site, including baetyls, bases and altars, also provide insights into the social dynamics between the religious community. The lack of differentiation in the ceramic repertoire and the difficulty to distinguish elements indicating the existence of an élite among the frequenters of the sanctuary is not unusual in the Phoenician and Punic religious tradition.¹⁰⁴ The extreme homogeneity of the repertoires does not represent a social homogeneity among the devotees, but rather the existence of a strict code of ritual and behavior to which all had to adhere, regardless of their census or social status.¹⁰⁵ This principle must have been so central to religious practice that it remained unchanged throughout the long period of use of the sanctuary. The continuity of ritual practices, such as communal meal and the intentional breaking of the vessels, reflects the strong codification of these rituals, persisting in both the Carthaginian and the Roman periods.

The epigraphic evidence helps to further define the religious context of the cult worshipped in the sanctuary. The short inscriptions and the formulae engraved on the vessels found parallels in Tas-Silġ. The

102 Bénichou-Safar 2004, p. 104.

103 Edrey 2018, pp. 198-199.

104 Núñez 2011, pp. 291-293; Aubet 2010, pp. 154-155.

105 Spagnoli 2023b, p. 315.

unprecedented link, remarked by the similarities in the pottery repertoire, highlights the regional and inter-regional dimension of the cult of Astarte in the Maltese archipelago. This suggests the possible involvement of Ras il-Wardija in regional pilgrimage circuits, as well as in a larger network of ceremonies, such as the *Anagógia* and *Katagógia* mentioned above, which promoted cultural and religious cohesion across the Mediterranean.

Future research will undoubtedly help to clarify these aspects to better understand the function and role of this hitherto almost unknown sanctuary in the Maltese and Mediterranean context.

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