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Estratto

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FONDATA DA SABATINO MOSCATI

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# INCENSE, ABSTRACTED SPACE, AND THE VISUALISATION OF PHOENICIAN DEITIES

BÄRBEL MORSTADT\*

*Abstract:* This article argues that incense-burning functioned as a key mechanism for materialising divine presence in Phoenician ritual performance. Archaeological evidence points to aniconic cult media – betyls and sacred stone installations – while glyptic art, terracotta figurines, and stelae imagery repeatedly visualises anthropomorphic deities. Rather than treating this as a contradiction, the study proposes “abstracted space” (such as provided by an empty throne) as a ritual locus that could be conceptually occupied. Iconographic patterns show incense burners placed consistently between worshipper and deity, suggesting that smoke marked the moment of epiphany and encounter. The images of deities are therefore read not as portraits of cult statues but as formulas for staging divine presence. In short, Phoenician gods were made visible through ritual performance – above all through incense, staged space, and shared visual conventions.

*Keywords:* Phoenician Religion; Incense; Incense Burner; Aniconism; Scarab Seals.

## 1. INCENSE

“Incense” refers to any aromatic substance that releases scented smoke when burned – such as wood, resin, or dried herbs.<sup>1</sup> Literary and epigraphic sources, including the Hebrew Bible as well as Greek and Roman authors, indicate that a wide range of aromatics were used as incense in antiquity: myrrh, cedar, galbanum, storax, and above all frankincense.<sup>2</sup> One of the most important ancient witnesses for the exploitation of these aromata is the fifth-century BCE Greek historian Herodotus.<sup>3</sup>

Frankincense is an aromatic resin obtained from trees of the genus *Boswellia* (Burseraceae), especially *Boswellia sacra*. These trees grow naturally only on the Arabian Peninsula and in parts of northeastern Africa, particularly Somalia. In the ancient world, frankincense was in very high demand; it was therefore highly prized and correspondingly expensive, making it one of the most valuable trade commodities. Its transport relied on an established system of land and sea routes connecting the Mediterranean to the southern and eastern regions where frankincense was produced – the so-called frankincense trade route.<sup>4</sup> Alongside frankincense, these routes likely carried other luxury goods such as spices, gemstones, pearls, ebony, silk, fine textiles, exotic woods, feathers, animal skins, gold, and possibly also copper.<sup>5</sup>

The Phoenicians – renowned throughout antiquity as maritime traders – may have played a role in the circulation of frankincense, particularly in its distribution across the Mediterranean. Their involvement

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1 Pfister 1914.

2 Morstadt 2008, pp. 245-258.

3 Hdt. II 8; III 107; III 110-113.

4 Müller 1978, pp. 701-734; Groom 1981.

5 Jasmin 2005.

in the trade, however, and especially their own use of frankincense in particular or incense in general, cannot be demonstrated directly. It can only be inferred from broader considerations and from two epigraphic texts: First, an inscription on a sarcophagus from Byblos (KAI 280; late sixth-early fifth century BCE) describes the deceased as «prepared in myrrh and bdellium». Yet, this likely refers to the treatment of the body as part of funerary ritual and does not necessarily imply that incense was burned.<sup>6</sup> Second, a Punic sacrificial tariff from Carthage (KAI 76; fourth-third century BCE), now unfortunately lost, mentions incense and frankincense among offerings such as bread, figs, and honey. Even here, however, it remains uncertain whether frankincense was intended to be burned as an independent offering, whether it accompanied other sacrifices as an additional element,<sup>7</sup> or whether it was simply presented without burning.<sup>8</sup> Further evidence comes from Numidia: an inscription on the tomb of Micipsa, son of Massinissa (KAI 161; second century BCE), refers to frankincense and myrrh. In this case, the mention of “flames” strongly suggests that these substances were actually burned. Despite these uncertainties, the Carthaginian tariff and the inscription from Numidia indicate that frankincense was available in the central Mediterranean, likely facilitated by Phoenician commercial networks.<sup>9</sup>

Fragrances in general played a pivotal role in the ancient world of the Near East and the Mediterranean, serving as a crucial medium that bridged the gap between the human and divine realms. It was understood as a medium that was both “physical and de-physical”. Smoke had the unique ability to rise from the earth to the heavens and establishing a direct connection. It transcended physical boundaries and created a unity between the perceiver and the perceived, described as a “being taken over by the other” or a shared atmosphere. In large public ceremonies, these fragrances made the ritual universally accessible to all participants, regardless of their position or line of sight. In burial sites, fragrances evoked both the mortal and divine worlds, thereby aiding the deceased’s transition to eternal rest. In Northwest Semitic languages (such as Phoenician and Hebrew), the concept of “fragrance” (the Hebrew hollow root R-Ḥ) might be closely related to the terms for “breath” or even “soul” (*ruah*), as smelling requires the movement of air.<sup>10</sup>

This aligns with the prominent role of incense-burning in Phoenician glyptic art imagery and the well-attested presence of incense-burners in the archaeological record which indicate that it formed an important – though by no means exclusive – part of Phoenician ritual practice. Its precise meaning, however, remains elusive. The burning of incense may have served as an offering in its own right, as sustenance and care for the gods, as a means of animating objects, for purification, or as a way of summoning divine presence in preparation for further rites. In the end, the evidence does not seem to support a single, definitive interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

In the following, an attempt will be made to develop an interpretation through image analysis, incorporating media theory. Consciously, a broad chronological and geographical framework is applied: rather than assuming an unchanging cult system, this study employs this long-term perspective to identify recurring visual and ritual strategies, while acknowledging that practices could shift significantly across regions and over time.

6 Röllig 1974, pp. 1-15, fig. 1; Dixon 2022, pp. 434-437.

7 Cfr. OT, Lev 24:7.

8 KAI II, p. 94.

9 KAI II, p. 152.

10 Dixon 2022, p. 432.

11 Morstadt 2008, pp. 256-258.

## 2. INCENSE BURNERS

No particular implement is needed to burn incense – not even a bowl. In practice, any heat-resistant container or support can serve the purpose. Identifying an object as an incense burner therefore depends less on its shape than on evidence of use and context: charcoal residue, burn marks, or depictions showing smoke rising from the vessel. Other clues may also help, such as size – incense was typically burned in small bowls, unlike the larger vessels used for libations – or the presence of perforated lids designed to let the fragrance escape. At the same time, many regions and periods did develop distinctive types of incense burners, shaped by local traditions and specific settings of use. Once such forms are securely identified, they can be followed across space and time – mapped in their distribution, traced through connections, and studied in terms of variation, development, adaptation, and appropriation.<sup>12</sup> Small cubical burners, for instance, were used on the Arabian Peninsula, the region of frankincense production; closely related, only slightly modified versions also appear in southern Mesopotamia and in Israel. In Israel, also incense cups were especially common. In Egypt, by contrast, incense was typically burned in arm-shaped censers, with a small bowl fixed to the outstretched “hand”. This type, among others, was later adopted within the Persian Empire. Wall brackets, finally, are particularly well attested in the Levant and on Cyprus during the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages.

Phoenician incense burners of the Iron Age typically consist of a conical, trumpet-like stand topped by a bowl and framed by one or more rows of drooping petal leaves. They were produced in a range of materials, including terracotta, limestone, and bronze. A thickened band or cord-like moulding near the top of the stand suggests that many examples were assembled from at least two separate parts. Most measure roughly 20–40 cm in height. A defining feature is the one to three rows of drooping petals.<sup>13</sup> The same motif also appears in Phoenician sacred architecture, prompting several scholars to interpret columns with drooping-petal capitals as monumental – whether functional or symbolic – versions of incense burners (Fig. 1).<sup>14</sup>

That these objects were in fact used for burning incense is supported by direct traces of use. Charcoal residue, for instance, was found in the bowl of a bronze burner from Tomb 4 in the necropolis of Tamassos on Cyprus (early seventh century BCE), as well as in two limestone examples from the palace at Amathous, dated no later than the end of the fifth century BCE. The identification is further reinforced by numerous pictorial representations (see below).<sup>15</sup>

A variant of the above-described incense burners are the so-called *candelabra*. These objects feature three upward-curving volutes rising from a small disc and joined by a narrow ring. The volute group is set onto a slender shaft, usually decorated with three rows of drooping petals. Almost all known examples are made of bronze. The shaft was designed to be inserted into a stand, while

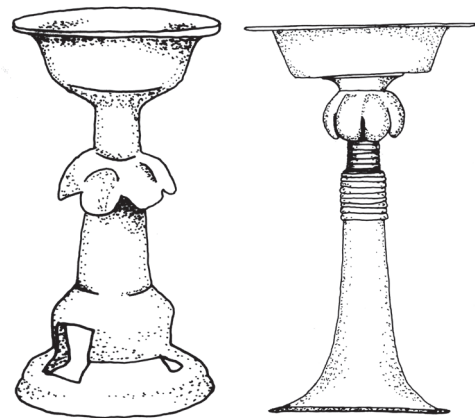


Fig. 1. Incense burners with a row of drooping petals (left: from Tell es-Safi, drawing by B. Morstadt after Ornan 1986, pp. 104-105, n. 51; right: from Las Fraguas, drawing by B. Morstadt after Jiménez Ávila 2002, pl. 29.67).

12 Morstadt 2008, pp. 269-294.

13 Jiménez Ávila 2002, pp. 183-212; Morstadt 2008, pp. 119-167.

14 Jiménez Ávila 2002, pp. 181-182; Morstadt 2008, pp. 240-244.

15 Morstadt 2008, pp. 19-118.

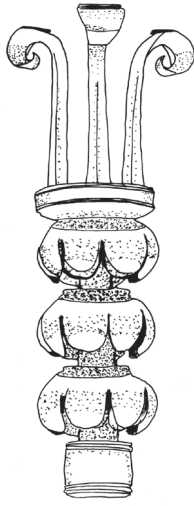


Fig. 2. “Candelabrum” with three rows of drooping petals from tomb 10 in Tamassos (drawing by B. Morstadt after Brehme *et al.* 2002, p. 173, n. 186).

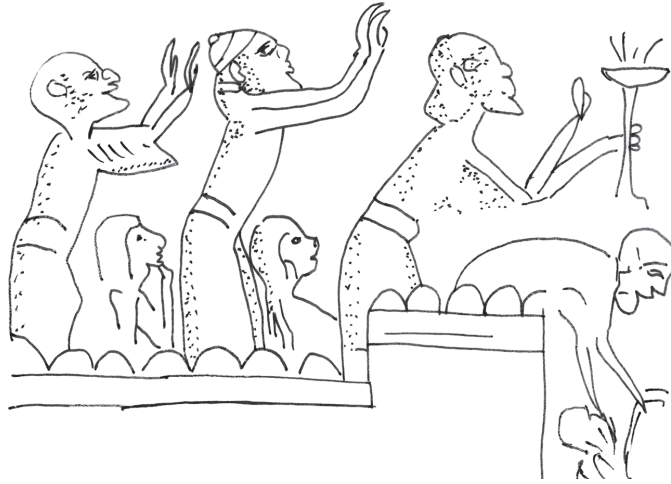


Fig. 3. Relief in Karnak (drawing by B. Morstadt after Müller-Karpe 1980, pl. 57, 4).

the ring formed by the volutes likely served as a support for a removable bowl rather than a fixed attachment. In most cases, both stand and bowl are now missing. Even so, reconstructing the object with a bowl is the most plausible option: torches would not sit securely, and candles are not attested before the first century BCE. The bowl was probably small, which makes either lighting or incense-burning the most likely functions. Reconstructed heights range between roughly 70 and 120 cm. More than 120 such candelabra are known from excavations. Their distribution is even more striking than that of the smaller burners, appearing in Phoenician-associated contexts across the Mediterranean – from the Levant to Cyprus, the Aegean, Etruria, and the Iberian Peninsula – between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE. In local settings, they clearly functioned as prestige objects. Although the author considers the interpretation that these are incense burners to be the most plausible, it cannot be proven beyond doubt (Fig. 2).<sup>16</sup>

Earlier versions of incense burners are already attested in bronze finds from the Late Bronze Age Levant and Cyprus, where the conical or trumpet-like stand may also take the form of a tripod. Their function is also confirmed by Egyptian pictorial evidence depicting Canaanites: several stone reliefs from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE show inhabitants of Canaanite cities such as Ashkelon performing an incense rite while the Egyptian pharaoh assaults the settlement. A wall painting in

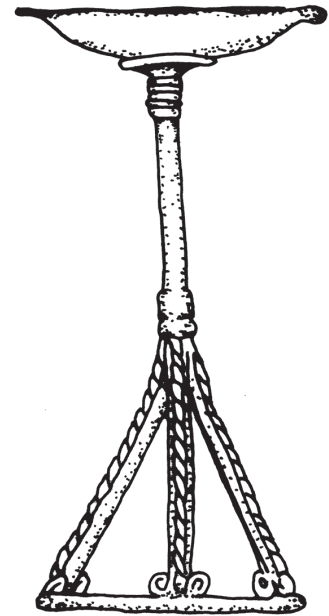


Fig. 4. Bronze incense burner from Tel Jatt (drawing by B. Morstadt after Artzy 2006, p. 48, fig. 2.14).

16 Jiménez Ávila 2002, pp. 165-181; Morstadt 2008, pp. 168-193.

a Theban tomb from the late fifteenth century BCE likewise portrays a captain carrying out an incense ritual on board his ship. In both cases, the figures can be identified as Canaanites by their distinctive headdresses and dress. The shape of the burner is clearly recognizable, and the rising smoke leaves little doubt that incense is being burned.<sup>17</sup> (Figs. 3-4).

These trumpet-like stands with drooping petal leaves and a bowl are identified as Phoenician on the basis of several factors, above all their distribution across the Mediterranean and the ancient Near East. In this sense, they are “Phoenician” not simply because of where they may have been made, but because they connect a wide range of contexts through patterns of circulation and use. Strikingly, many of these incense burners have been found not in Phoenician settings, but in the material culture of local contact regions – suggesting that Phoenicians acted as key intermediaries in their movement. In some cases, local production can be inferred from stylistic adjustments that reflect regional taste. On the southern Iberian Peninsula, for example, incense burners sometimes feature added animal figurines on the rims of bowls or on lids – an embellishment closely paralleled by animal attachments on Phoenician bronze jugs from the same area. Phoenician incense burners were also taken up and reworked in Greek, Etruscan, and Achaemenid contexts.<sup>18</sup>

It can be concluded that “incense burner” is a functional category, not a formal one. Because incense can be burned in almost any heat-resistant container, shape alone is rarely enough to identify an object securely. Use traces, find context, and iconography are far more decisive. Distinct burner types matter precisely because burning incense is technically simple. If specialised and recognisable forms develop anyway, they are unlikely to be accidental. They reflect ritual habits, aesthetic preferences, and the social value attached to incense-burning. Phoenician incense burners are best understood as circulating objects. Their distribution links distant regions and shows how specific forms travelled through exchange networks and were embedded in new settings. Their wide spread points to Phoenician mediation, but not necessarily to Phoenician ritual practice everywhere. Many finds come from non-Phoenician contexts, suggesting Phoenicians as agents of transfer – while local users may have adopted the objects and reinterpreted them within their own traditions. Variation shows adaptation rather than simple export. Regional modifications (such as Iberian animal additions) and later reworkings in Greek, Etruscan, and Achaemenid contexts underline processes of appropriation and changing meaning. Incense burners are primarily found in grave contexts, where they served either as ritual implements or as votive offerings and burial goods.

### 3. IMAGES OF INCENSE BURNERS

Phoenician incense burners appear frequently in visual sources, especially on the intaglio of Phoenician-Punic scarab seals from the sixth to the fourth century BCE.<sup>19</sup> They also show up – more occasionally – on reliefs and votive stelae, ivory plaques, coins, and other objects. In most cases, they are easy to recognize: the conical stand, the drooping petal leaves, and the bowl are distinctive, and the rising smoke or flames makes the identification unmistakable.<sup>20</sup> They are typically shown alongside a seated or standing deity. At the same time, these images do not reproduce the archaeological objects with complete accuracy. The burners depicted in seal imagery are often far larger than the excavated examples: instead of measuring around 20-40 cm, they can reach up to the chest of an enthroned god (Figs. 5-6). They also tend to show three rows of petals, whereas the surviving burners usually have only one. Conversely, the images rarely include the three vo-

17 Morstadt 2008, pp. 207-220.

18 Greek: Zaccagnino 1998; Etruscan: Ambrosini 2002; Achaemenid: Morstadt 2008, pp. 279-283.

19 Morstadt 2008, pp. 20-69. For these scarab seals in general cfr. Boardman 2003.

20 Morstadt 2008, pp. 70-115.



Fig. 5. Phoenician scarab-seal from tomb 10 in Marion/Polis Chrysochous (drawing by B. Morstadt after Reyes 2001, p. 79, fig. 134).



Fig. 6. Phoenician scarab-seal from the necropolis of Puig des Molins (drawing by B. Morstadt after Gubel 1987, pl. 32,95).

lutes characteristic of the so-called candelabra. Rather than literal snapshots of real objects, these depictions should be understood as visual shorthand. They emphasize the features that mattered most for recognition and meaning – the stand, the bowl, the petal motif, and above all the smoke – while simplifying details and ignoring realistic proportions.

Although the majority of the excavated objects, as well as the artefacts that depict incense burners come from tomb contexts, the imagery shows that these objects belonged to a broader ritual repertoire and were not confined to funerary use. In the pictorial evidence, incense-burning is linked to a remarkably wide range of deities: male and female figures, animal-headed gods, seated and standing forms, and even divinities shown standing on animals. Most commonly (sixty-nine examples), the burner appears before a bearded or animal-headed god or goddess seated on a stool or a sphinx throne (Fig. 5). The second most frequent motif (fifty examples) shows the burner in front of a mother figure – seated or standing – nursing a child (Fig. 6). Other scenes include incense burners placed before a seated Harpocrates, Harpocrates on a lotus flower, a sphinx and a hawk, a standing male figure, a falcon-headed deity, a winged goddess, and, in a few cases, two standing figures flanking the burner.<sup>21</sup>

The highly standardized image of the enthroned god has led some scholars to argue that these images represent real cult statues.<sup>22</sup> This makes it necessary to address – briefly – the question of whether Phoenician cult statues actually existed and could have served as models for such images. Clarifying this point also helps to assess how reliably glyptic art and relief scenes showing a deity and an incense burner reflect ritual practice, and it provides the basis for discussing incense-burning as a possible means of communication with the divine.

21 Morstadt 2008, pp. 44-62.

22 E.g. Culican 1960-1961, p. 45; Caubet 1979, pp. 17-18.

## 4. INCENSE, ICONISM, AND ANICONISM

As noted above, some scholars have argued that the enthroned god shown in Phoenician glyptic, art, terracotta figurines, and stelae imagery reflects an actual cult statue. Many others, however, have stressed the opposite: that Phoenician worship may often have been aniconic, meaning that gods were not represented by statues. The latter is frequently supported with later literary evidence. The first-century CE Latin poet Silius Italicus, describing the sanctuary of Melqart at Cádiz (Phoenician Gadir, Roman Gades), states that no recognizable statue filled the temple with divine presence and sacred awe.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the second-third century CE Greek author Philostratus, in his account of Apollonius of Tyana, reports that two forms of Heracles were worshipped there through simple bronze altars, but that no statues existed.<sup>24</sup> On this basis – and in light of the aniconic traditions often associated with the neighboring Israelites, and sometimes with Semitic religion more broadly – Phoenician cult practice has likewise been interpreted as fundamentally aniconic.<sup>25</sup>

In its broadest sense, “aniconic” simply describes the absence of material images representing the natural or supernatural world. But on closer inspection, the concept is far less straightforward. Does aniconism mean avoiding all forms of visual representation, rejecting only anthropomorphic imagery, or restricting depictions of deities in particular?<sup>26</sup> It also matters whether we are dealing with a simple lack of images – what is often called *factual* or *tolerant* aniconism – or with a deliberate ban, that is, *programmatic* aniconism, which can involve active repudiation of images, iconophobia, or even iconoclasm.<sup>27</sup> Another crucial question is scope: does aniconism apply to all divine imagery, or only to representations that functioned as central cult objects? And how did worshippers engage with symbols in place of images – what roles did they play, and what meanings did they carry? These issues have been widely debated, yet no clear consensus has emerged for Phoenician religion.<sup>28</sup>

Archaeologically, no anthropomorphic cult statues of deities have been definitively identified in the Phoenician world. There are indeed representations of deities in various forms, including both round sculptures and reliefs, ranging in scale from small to large, life-sized, and even larger-than-life or monumental, and crafted from a variety of materials such as clay, bronze, and stone.<sup>29</sup> One might think of the colossal statues from Byblos (Achaemenid-early Hellenistic),<sup>30</sup> the numerous up to life-size sculptures from the *favis-sa* near the Maabed of Amrith (seventh to fourth century BCE),<sup>31</sup> the Torso from Sarepta (seventh century BCE),<sup>32</sup> the Stelae of Amrith (ninth to eighth century BCE),<sup>33</sup> the marble larger than life-size so-called Youth of Mozia (fifth century BCE),<sup>34</sup> the sculpture of a deity sitting on a sphinx throne from Soluntum (sixth century BCE),<sup>35</sup> or the various Late Bronze and Early Iron Age small bronze figurines from across the

23 Sil. III 30-31: «*sed nulla effigies simulacrae nota deorum maiestate locum et sacro implevere timore*».

24 Phil. *VA V* 5: ἀγάλματα δὲ αὐτοῖν οὐκ εἶναι.

25 There are manifold interpretations regarding the concrete understanding of these written sources, their significance, and the nuances of aniconism in the Phoenician cults, cfr. Mettinger 2004.

26 Wyatt 2017.

27 Cfr. Mettinger 1995, p. 18.

28 Mettinger 2004; Doak 2015, pp. 21-40.

29 An overview is given in: Tore 1995.

30 Dunand 1939b, pp. 66-67, pl. 26.

31 Lembke 2004.

32 Gubel 2002, pp. 114.

33 Gubel 2002, pp. 51-53.

34 Falsone 1987.

35 Chiarenza 2016.

Mediterranean.<sup>36</sup> Some statues may have played a role in cult practices, such as the so-called Master of the Lion-statues from the Maabed of Amrith, and some underwater finds of bronze figurines may have had a significance related to seafaring. The seated deity from Soluntum has been in fact interpreted as a simulacrum. Yet if dated to the sixth century BCE, its original context of installation and use in Archaic Soluntum would remain unknown and may have been modified in its secondary use in the Hellenistic city. Nicola Chiarenza therefore proposes a later dating, namely the second half of the fourth to the first half of the third century BCE, and suggests that the statue was installed and employed as a simulacrum in Hellenistic Soluntum. This would, however, potentially reflect changes in ritual practice. The interpretation of the Youth of Mozia is disputed: rather than representing a deity, the figure has been understood as a charioteer or a priest. Ultimately, none of these sculptures have been definitively proven to have served as statues that received worship. Instead, most of them likely functioned as votive offerings (*ex-votos*) presented in sanctuaries.

Instead, the evidence points strongly toward sacred stone installations, often arranged in tripartite groups. Levantine examples are known from Middle Bronze Age Byblos (the Temple of the Obelisks), from Achaemenid Beirut, from a small temple at Sarepta (eighth to fourth century BCE),<sup>37</sup> and from the sanctuary at Kommos (c. 760-600 BCE).<sup>38</sup> Comparable installations are also attested beyond the Levant – in Prinias on Crete,<sup>39</sup> in the central and western Mediterranean (for example at Selinunte),<sup>40</sup> at the sanctuary of Tas Silġ on Malta,<sup>41</sup> and on Mogador in present-day Morocco,<sup>42</sup> to name only a few. These stone markers also appear in visual form. Relief depictions of such installations can be identified on votive stelae from the fifth to third centuries BCE, from sites including Tyre, Nora in Sardinia, and Carthage and Sousse in Tunisia,<sup>43</sup> and they even continue on coins into the Roman period.<sup>44</sup> The stones are commonly referred to as *betyls*, from the Semitic *bet el* (“house of the god”), a term already mentioned by the first-century CE writer Philo of Byblos in his translation of Sanchuniathon’s Phoenician history.<sup>45</sup> Tryggve Nils Daniel Mettinger has described this practice as «material aniconism»:<sup>46</sup> rather than representing the deity in human form, worship was mediated through a tangible substitute. Yet not all symbols fit neatly into the idea of a “house of the god”. Some, such as the so-called Bottle Idol, seem to function less as a marker of divine presence and more as a stand-in for the deity itself.

Does this mean we must assume that anthropomorphic divine images did not exist in the Phoenician world at all? Not necessarily. There is at least some evidence that points in the opposite direction: A number of texts, for example, describe a deity as being “installed” in a temple, or as entering and dwelling in a sanctuary. The sarcophagus inscription of Eshmunazar II (early fifth century BCE) states: «We are the ones who built the houses of the gods – the house of Astarte in Sidon, Land-by-the-sea, and we established Astarte in Lofty-Heavens; and we who built in the mountain a home for Eshmun, the prince of the sanctuary of the *ydl*-spring, and we established him in Lofty-Heavens» (KAI 14, 16-17).<sup>47</sup> A later inscription from Thinissut

36 Jiménez Ávila 2002, pp. 268-301; Jiménez Ávila 2015.

37 Nunn 2010, p. 142-143.

38 Shaw 1998. Skeptical about Shaw’s interpretation and favoring a local impact is Pappalardo 2002.

39 Palermo 2008.

40 Chiarenza 2007.

41 Rossignani 2009.

42 López Pardo – Mederos Martín 2008, pp. 182-186, 357-361.

43 Orsingher 2018-2019; Doak 2015, pp. 78-101.

44 Mettinger 1995, pp. 81-113; Mettinger 2004.

45 Baumgarten 1981, p. 16 (Greek), p. 182 (English translation), pp. 202-203 (commentary); Ribichini 1995.

46 Mettinger 2004, p. 90.

47 English translation from Dixon 2013, p. 184.

(first century CE) likewise declares: «These gods went into these holy places» (KAI 137, 4-5).<sup>48</sup> Herbert Niehr<sup>49</sup> has argued that such wording is strong evidence for the presence of divine statues. Yet this interpretation is not inevitable. As will become clear, divine presence in a temple does not necessarily depend on a permanently visible, physical image.

Deities could also be provided with special seats in their sanctuaries: the so-called sphinx thrones, often referred to as “Astarte thrones.” This type of throne is widely regarded as a Phoenician innovation and is attested across the Phoenician Mediterranean – from the Ahiram sarcophagus at Byblos (thirteenth century BCE) to a terracotta figurine from first-century CE Thinissut (modern Tunisia).<sup>50</sup> The best-known example comes from the sanctuary of Bostan esh-Sheikh near Sidon, where a sphinx throne large enough for a human-sized figure stands above a pool. Yet there is no clear evidence that a cult statue was ever permanently installed there. The throne may therefore have served for temporary installations, or it may have been intended as a deliberately empty seat. Small votive sphinx thrones from the Levant, especially from the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods, strongly support the idea of “empty” thrones. Some are decorated with relief imagery on the backrest, while others are so steeply inclined that no figure could realistically have been placed on them. Mettinger has described this practice as «empty-space iconism»,<sup>51</sup> while Brian Doak prefers the expression «abstracted space»,<sup>52</sup> emphasizing that this is not simply the absence of representation, but a meaningful visual strategy. At the same time, terracotta figurines showing deities seated on sphinx thrones are also common across the Mediterranean.<sup>53</sup> These figures provide a close parallel to the enthroned deities depicted on scarab seals.

As noted above, the pictorial images of deities – especially the highly standardized enthroned god on scarab seals – have sometimes been taken to reflect real cult statues. (Needless to say, objects such as scarab seals are not cult objects themselves). Yet a depiction of a god does not automatically require a specific statue as its model.

A closer look at the seated deity on scarab seals shows considerable variation in detail: the figure may be male or female, anthropomorphic or theriomorphic; the seat may be a sphinx throne or a folding chair; and attributes such as sceptres differ as well. The same applies to the *kourotrophos* motif of a woman feeding a child and/or sheltering it with her wings – an image that would be difficult to translate into a freestanding cult statue in any straightforward way. Rather than pointing to individual cult statues, the repetition of these motifs suggests a limited visual repertoire: gods could be shown seated, standing, or in combat, but not as uniquely recognizable “portraits”. This also explains why it is so difficult to assign the images securely to specific deities. If the enthroned god on a sphinx throne is Baal Hammon, for example, who is the animal-headed enthroned figure? If the standing figure with the fenestrated axe is Melqart (as on the so-called Aleppo Stelae, c. 800 BCE),<sup>54</sup> why does the same figure also appear in lion-fight scenes? And what, in purely iconographic terms, would distinguish Eshmun, Baal Shamem, or Baal Saphon? The ambiguity is even greater for female figures. Motifs such as the *kourotrophos*, the enthroned goddess, or the goddess standing on an animal could refer – depending on context – to Ashtart, Tanit, Anat, Isis, or, in a Carthaginian setting, even Demeter and Persephone.

48 Jongeling – Kerr 2005, p. 29.

49 Niehr 1997, p. 78.

50 Morstadt 2012, pp. 496-297; Nunn 2010, pp. 143-145.

51 Mettinger 2004, p. 90.

52 Doak 2015, p. 35.

53 Doak 2015, pp. 59-61.

54 Dunand 1939a, pl. 13.

In other words, Phoenician deities seem to have been depicted less as distinct individuals and more through roles and functions: the lion-slayer, the nurturing mother, the enthroned ruler, and similar conceptual types. This made Phoenician divine imagery highly flexible and open to borrowing. Melqart could adopt elements associated with Greek Heracles,<sup>55</sup> such as the lion skin, while Ashtart or Baalat Gubal could take on features reminiscent of Egyptian Isis or Hathor. Unlike Greek and Roman cult statues, which often aimed at a stable and individualized divine “persona”, Phoenician representations tend to present the deity as a motif – a theme embodied in a recognizable visual formula. Phoenician gods were not static beings, but flexible cultural products whose functions and attributes shifted depending on local contexts and social needs. A single divine name could take on entirely different roles in different regions. Rituals, in this view, functioned as an active tool for shaping and stabilizing these divine “morphologies,” or for expanding them by adding new characteristics. Ultimately, the study presents Phoenician religion as a dynamic network in which the identities of gods were continually renegotiated through human action.<sup>56</sup>

The seal imagery is therefore better understood as a conventional visual language for divine presence than as documentary evidence for specific cult statues. If these scenes were meant to reproduce particular cult images, one would expect greater consistency in attributes and clearer divine identification. Instead, the motifs are flexible, interchangeable, and often ambiguous, suggesting that they visualize roles rather than individual gods. In other words, the enthroned deity functions as an iconographic type. It signals “the god present” without committing to a specific, locally fixed statue as its referent. What the seals preserve is not a portrait of a cult statue, but a portable and repeatable formula for staging divine presence.

So how should we account for the striking gap between the many images of deities and the lack of securely attested cult statues? Several explanations have been suggested. The discrepancy might reflect chronological or regional differences, or a division between public religion (where statues would have stood in sanctuaries) and private imagery (such as scarab seals). It may also parallel Mesopotamia, where texts and images clearly presuppose anthropomorphic cult statues even though almost none have survived archaeologically.

As Astrid Nunn has argued, one straightforward reason may simply be survival: cult statues were among the most valuable objects in a sanctuary – materially, politically, and symbolically – and therefore prime targets for removal, destruction, or melting down.<sup>57</sup> This could well have applied in the Phoenician world too. However, the archaeological and iconographic evidence also allows for a different interpretation, which will be proposed below.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that Phoenician religion cannot be described in simple terms as either iconic or aniconic. While anthropomorphic divine imagery is clearly present in glyptic and relief art, the archaeological record points strongly to non-figural cult media – especially betyls and sacred stone installations – as central and long-lived ways of materializing divine presence across the Phoenician Mediterranean. This is best understood not as an absence of representation, but as a distinctive form of “material aniconism”, in which the divine was mediated through tangible substitutes rather than permanent cult statues. Texts that speak of gods being “installed” in sanctuaries may hint at cult images, but they do not require them, since divine presence could also be established ritually without a permanently visible anthropomorphic form. The same applies to sphinx thrones: both monumental examples and votive versions often imply a meaningful empty seat, suggesting that divine presence could be staged through place and symbol rather

55 E.g. Morstadt 2015; in general cfr. Nunn 2000b. Nunn 2000b, p. 370: «Attribute im Sinne eines nur mit einer Person verbundenen Gegenstandes oder Tieres gibt es im untersuchten Material nicht. Vielmehr gibt es “Attribute”, die man eher als Charakteristika bezeichnen würde, weil sie mehrere Personen kennzeichnen [...]. Diese Beispiele beweisen, daß Erscheinungsbilder von Göttern verschmelzen konnten, daß also ein Erscheinungsbild mehrere Götternamen tragen kann. Erscheinungsbilder wurden möglicherweise sogar austauschbar».

56 Garbati *et al.* 2025. See also the contribution of Giuseppe Garbati in this volume.

57 Nunn 2010, p. 135.

than through a statue. At the same time, the iconography of scarab seals is too varied and too ambiguous to function as evidence for specific cult statues; instead, it relies on a limited repertoire of motifs that depict deities primarily through roles and functions, which also explains the flexibility and borrowing of iconographic elements from neighboring cultures. The apparent contradiction between abundant images of gods and the lack of excavated statues therefore seems less like a simple problem of preservation and more like a structural feature of Phoenician religious practice, in which visualizing the divine and embodying divine presence in cult did not necessarily depend on the same material forms.

### 5. INCENSE BURNERS AND THE DIVINE PRESENCE

Looking at images that combine deities and incense burners, a few patterns stand out: Gods can be shown either with an incense burner placed before them or without one. Humans, by contrast, are sometimes depicted actively performing incense-related rites – for example on stelae from *Lilybaeum* in Sicily (fourth or early third century BCE; Fig. 7).<sup>58</sup> In the Punic-Hellenistic period, these human figures are especially diverse, while the upper zones of the stelae often rely on a more standardized set of symbols used to signal divine presence. The two pointed-hat figures flanking an incense burner on several scarab seals<sup>59</sup> may also be read as worshippers engaged in ritual action. Finally, whenever humans are shown facing a deity (around fifteen examples; here Fig. 8), an incense burner is almost always positioned between them.

As far as I am aware, only four clear exceptions to this pattern can be identified. The first two are the stela of Yehawmilk (Fig. 9) and a closely related terracotta plaque from Byblos (mid-fifth century BCE).<sup>60</sup> In both, the king – shown in Achaemenid dress – faces the Lady of Byblos, who appears in Egyptian Hathor-style attire, holding an offering bowl. It is tempting though to ask whether this bowl may have contained incense, in line with Egyptian practice, where bowls attached to arm-shaped censers served precisely this purpose. If so, incense would still be positioned – conceptually, if not formally – between the worshipper and the deity.

The third exception is a stela from Sousse/Hadrumetum in Tunisia (fourth–third century BCE; Fig. 10).<sup>61</sup> Only four stelae with figurative scenes are known from this site, and all are rather crudely exe-



Fig. 7. Stelae from *Lilybaeum*, fourth-first half of the third century BCE (drawing by B. Morstadt after *Hannibal ad portas*, p. 190, left).



Fig. 8. Phoenician scarab-seal (amethyst, from the necropolis of Magharat Tabloun, Sidon; drawing by B. Morstadt after *Liban*, p. 148, above).

58 Morstadt 2008, pp. 86-89.

59 Morstadt 2008, pp. 58-59.

60 Nunn 2000a, pp. 13-14.

61 Foucher 1964, p. 40, fig. 2.



Fig. 9. The stela of Yehawmilk from Byblos, fifth century BCE (drawing by B. Morstadt after *La Méditerranée des Phéniciens*, p. 48).



Fig. 10. Stela from Hadrumetum, fourth-third century BCE (drawing by B. Morstadt after Foucher 1968-1969, fig. 364).

cuted. On the stela in question, the human figure appears unusually close to the enthroned god within the *naiskos*. This raises the possibility that the composition may not reflect the intended scheme – or that the space was originally meant for a different element, perhaps an incense burner, rather than a human figure.

The final example is a scarab seal of unknown provenance, now in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen.<sup>62</sup> It shows a figure wearing a pointed cap and holding an ankh, facing a *kourotrophos*. Here, too, the identification is uncertain: the pointed cap and ankh may suggest that the figure is not an ordinary human worshipper. In fact, scarab imagery often places supernatural beings directly before a deity, such as the falcon-headed figure on a seal in the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* in Paris.<sup>63</sup>

A few points emerge very clearly from the imagery: incense burners are almost always shown in connection with an enthroned, seated, or standing deity. They do not belong to the iconography of fighting gods – neither the smiting deity nor the lion-slayer.<sup>64</sup> In scenes that include a worshipper, the burner is placed consistently between the human figure and the deity, not behind them, to the side, or elsewhere. It is also drawn in a highly recognizable way, with its key elements emphasized: the tall stand, drooping petals, the bowl, and – crucially – smoke or flames. Incense burners are rarely depicted on their own. The main exception are the *tophet* stelae from Carthage (third and early second century BCE), which belong to a very specific visual program with a strong symbolic focus.<sup>65</sup> Another striking pattern is that empty sphinx thrones never appear in glyptic or stela imagery: whenever a sphinx throne is shown, it is occupied by a deity. This is particularly interesting in light of the sanctuary at Bostan esh-Sheikh near Sidon, where the throne has a platform in front of it that may

62 Boardman 2003, pl. 51, 11/X34.

63 Boardman 2003, pl. 51, 11/X31.

64 E.g., Boardman 2003, pl. 54, 18/X4 or 19/X2.

65 Morstadt 2008, pp. 91-93.

have been intended as the place for an incense burner. The sphinx throne therefore needs not be taken as indirect proof of a permanent cult statue. Instead, it may have served as a ritual locus of presence: a seat prepared for the deity, which could remain materially empty while being conceptually occupied during performance. The fact that empty thrones are archaeologically attested, whereas pictorial representations consistently show the throne as filled, fits this logic. The images may thus record the moment of epiphany – what worshippers were meant to envision – rather than the physical arrangement of the sanctuary at all times. This model has the advantage of accounting for both the prominence of aniconic cult media and the persistence of anthropomorphic divine imagery, without requiring the widespread existence of permanent cult statues.

Finally, these images rarely depict the types of offerings described in sacrificial tariffs (KAI 74-76) – such as animal slaughtering, presentation of pastries, and libations – with only three known exceptions to me. The first is a scarab seal from Tharros, illustrating the slaughter of a quadruped over an altar before a seated figure (Fig. 11).<sup>66</sup> In this scene, the seated deity appears to oversee the sacrifice, though the sacrificer and the deity do not face each other. The second and third examples are stelae from Carthage. One depicts a sacrificer standing before an altar, holding a bowl of unknown content – possibly liquid for a libation or even incense – in his hand (Cat. 579). Something seems to have been placed on the altar, but this area is damaged, making it impossible to determine what it was. It is indeed conceivable that it could have been a figure or a depicted statue of a deity. The other shows a figure standing before an altar adorned with a bovine head and a miniature architectural structure of the *naiskos* type (Cat. 1343).<sup>67</sup>

This suggests a meaningful distinction: while texts such as KAI 76 mention frankincense among offerings – perhaps even as something presented rather than burned – the visual record overwhelmingly focuses on incense in general, with frankincense as a presumable prestige case as an act of burning. In other words, what is being staged in these images is not “offering” in general, but the specific ritual moment of incense smoke rising between worshipper and god. This does not mean that offerings were absent. Rather, the imagery consistently privileges incense-burning as the key ritual moment, instead of presenting it simply as one offering among others. In these scenes, incense is not treated as one offering among others, but as the mechanism that activates divine presence: the smoke rising in the space between worshipper and god marks the moment of encounter.

These scenes should not be read as literal snapshots of ritual reality. Yet their highly consistent composition is unlikely to be accidental. The incense burner is not treated as a minor accessory, but as a stable visual hinge between worshipper and deity. This strongly suggests that incense-burning was understood as a key ritual mechanism – though not necessarily the only one – through which divine presence could be approached and made intelligible.



Fig. 11. Phoenician scarab seal from Tharros (green jasper; after Boardman 2003, pl. 17, 17/43).

66 Boardman 2003, pl. 17, 17/43.

67 Le Meaux – Bernardin 2020, pp. 260-261, 442-443.

Taken together, these patterns strongly suggest that incense-burning was understood as a privileged ritual act. While the images do not allow a single, definitive reading, they consistently frame incense as a key mediator between worshipper and deity.

Because the incense burner is not a decorative detail but a stable compositional element – regularly placed between human and god – it is likely to mark a ritual mechanism rather than a neutral object in the scene.

This material suggests that incense-burning – and the way it is staged in images – carried a ritual meaning that goes beyond the depiction of a “realistic” scene. As media studies has long emphasized,<sup>68</sup> images do not simply mirror reality: they structure it, highlight certain elements, and communicate meaning. Viewers are expected to recognize this meaning, interpret it, and in some cases even reproduce it. For that to work, images rely on shared viewing habits and on clear visual cues. In Phoenician glyptic, such cues are highly consistent: the presence of a deity and the act of burning incense performed by a worshipper.

Building on Nunn’s conclusions (following Hartenstein’s work on the “face of YHWH”),<sup>69</sup> the concept of a deity can exist independently of any fixed image. A depiction is not necessarily based on a concrete archetype, and therefore an anthropomorphic statue and an aniconic stone can function as equivalent representations of the divine body. What matters is a “mental iconography”: an imagined divine form that can accommodate both pictorial representation and the deliberate absence of images. In this framework, cult objects only become meaningful through ritual action. Without cult practice, a statue, stone, or throne remains materially present but religiously inert.

While Nunn mainly understands sacred stones as places where divine presence is localized, the evidence discussed here suggests that Phoenician religion may also have relied on what can be called “abstracted space”. This tension between aniconic cult media and anthropomorphic divine imagery is best explained if divine presence was conceived as performative rather than permanent. In that case, the sphinx throne functioned less as the base for a fixed statue than as a prepared locus of presence – materially empty, yet conceptually occupied during ritual. The images would then record not the sanctuary’s everyday arrangement, but the moment of epiphany that ritual was meant to produce. In that case, the deity would not have embodied itself in a human-shaped statue, but in a deliberately prepared empty space. The recurring images of enthroned gods on scarab seals, reliefs, and terracotta figurines could then be understood as visual memorials of such ritual epiphanies: the throne provided the locus, incense the activating medium, and the images memorialized the moment of conceptual occupation.

## 6. INCENSE MAKES DIVINE PRESENCE MATERIALLY PERCEPTIBLE

Incense-burning in Phoenician ritual should not primarily be understood as an offering in its own right, but as a preparatory act: it created the conditions for a deity’s epiphany, enabled communication, and made divine presence imaginable. Rather than being permanently embodied in a cult statue, the god was conceived as temporarily present – revealed through betyls or through an “abstracted space”, such as an empty sphinx throne – when incense was burned as part of ritual performance. In this setting, worshippers could envision the deity in anthropomorphic form, guided by shared viewing habits and by the clear visual marker of the incense burner. Pictorial representations, especially on scarab seals (which also functioned as amulets), may have served to preserve and recall this moment of divine contact. The imagery does not prove that incense caused epiphany, but it consistently frames incense as the decisive moment in which presence becomes imaginable.

68 E.g. Schelske 1997 and Pietraß 2003.

69 Nunn 2010, pp. 147-148.

Specific aromata may have been chosen to draw a deity's attention. Rare and costly substances such as frankincense likely carried greater weight than more common materials, and their sensory qualities may have further shaped the experience of ritual. Furthermore, frankincense, for instance, was sometimes believed to alter perception and may have contributed to an intensified, even liminal atmosphere. Yet the specific psychoactive and psychophysiological effects of different aromata remain a matter of further research.

The written, archaeological, and especially iconographic evidence suggests that incense functioned as a sensory medium that linked humans and gods and made communication between them possible. Incense is the medium that makes an otherwise aniconic cult visually imaginable.

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