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*

Area della Ricerca di Roma 1
Via Salaria km 29,300, Casella postale 10
00015 Monterotondo Stazione (Roma)
rst.fen@ispc.cnr.it
http://www.rstfen.cnr.it/

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MAKING GODS. DIVINE PLASTICITY AND THE AGENCY OF RITUAL PRACTICE. REFLECTIONS ON THE PHOENICIAN CONTEXT

Giuseppe Garbati*

Abstract: As part of the project "Mago. Making gods. The role of ritual practice in the construction of divinities" (CNR, Italy), this paper explores the processes through which gods and goddesses were constructed in ancient polytheistic societies, focusing in particular on the role of ritual practice. Rather than fixed and immutable beings, deities are approached as dynamic and relational entities whose profiles could be modulated according to specific historical, cultural, and devotional contexts. Within this framework, ritual emerges as a fundamental medium through which divine powers were activated, experienced, and defined, enabling interaction between human and superhuman spheres. Through selected examples from the Phoenician world, the study illustrates how rite actively contributed to the articulation and transformation of divine figures.

Keywords: Phoenician Religion; Mago; Making Gods; Plasticity of Deities; Ritual Practice.

1. Introduction

A research project entitled "Mago. Making gods. The role of ritual practice in the construction of divinities" was launched in August 2023 at the Institute of Heritage Science (ISPC) of the National Research Council (CNR, Italy), under my coordination.[1] The project was conceived with the aim of identifying and analysing some of the mechanisms that, in the ancient world, governed the making of gods and goddesses, particularly through the definition of their functions and attributes.[2] Driven by these objectives, the study was based on two methodological principles.

First, the deities of ancient polytheistic societies may be conceived as dynamic cultural products whose characterization, in myth and cult, was neither fixed nor consistently reproduced across different settings and periods.[3] Born of human experience, their features could be transformed and adapted according to the needs and devotional interests to which they were expected to respond on a case-by-case basis (and also according to the register, mythic or ritual, in which those features were depicted and invoked). Thus, despite the recurring presence of stable and sometimes highly distinctive traits – which contributed to making a deity recognizable and to establishing a sense of continuity connecting various places – the profiles of individual

* Institute of Heritage Science (CNR ISPC); giuseppe.garbati@cnr.it.

1 Members of the founding scientific committee are Francesco Massa (University of Turin), Silvia Romani (University of Milan), Irene Rossi (CNR ISPC), Carla Sfameni (CNR IPSC). https://www.ispc.cnr.it/it_it/eventienews/mago-making-gods-ciclo-di-seminari-su-rituali-e-denominazioni-nei-politeismi-antichi/.

2 Cfr. Belayche – Pirenne-Delforge 2015.

3 Brelich 2007 remains fundamental. It is not my intention to address the highly complex question of what a god is, which would go far beyond the scope of this contribution and, in any case, could not be reduced to a single answer (on the question see the recent Ribichini 2025, with references). My interest lies, rather, in identifying those characteristics which, in the conception of deities within the Phoenician context, constitute the premises on which the research presented here is based.

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superhuman figures could be shaped differently depending on the context.[4] Moreover, the characteristics and attributes that a god or goddess might assume were closely linked to the fact that each divinity – as expressed by the very concept and term "polytheism" – was part of a dense network of relationships, or, more precisely, to a complex configuration of relational networks,[5] involving analogous entities and operating on different levels (e.g., mythic, cultic, and functional).[6] In this way, the morphology of a specific divine being was necessarily connected to the morphologies of similar entities belonging to the same system.[7]

Second, deities constituted active components of reality – they were believed both to found reality itself and to operate within it in various ways (in favour of or against human beings). In this sense, they were perceived not only as highly performative (and formidable) "powers", but also as entities that could be activated by men and women in order to respond to their necessities.[8] In this process of "activation",[9] ritual undoubtedly played a fundamental role. Through the concreteness of practice – gestures, words, sounds, images, smells, tastes, and objects – it facilitated communication between the human sphere and the extra- and superhuman realm. Beyond honoring and exalting the deities, it enabled collective, familial, and personal requests to be addressed to divine interlocutors, ranging from the protection of the entire community to that of the individual. In this respect, as I will show, ritual practices were crucial in shaping and articulating divine functions and attributes.

On the basis of these premises, in the following pages I will present some examples of the ways in which gods and goddesses were constructed in the Phoenician context and how rituals actively participated in this process. I will first focus on the characterization of deities as plastic elements that could be modulated and re-modulated according to context – albeit within certain limits, as will be shown – and will then discuss the role of ritual practice (three case studies will serve as guides).[10]

2. The Plasticity of Divinities

2.1. *Names, Functions, Contexts*

Beginning with the plastic character of divinities and taking Phoenicia as a point of departure, the inscription of Eshmunazor II, king of Sidon (second half of the sixth century BCE), engraved on the royal sarcoph-

4 According to Robert Parker, for instance, «the "same" god, that is, one bearing the same name, may have developed in notably different ways in different localities in response to the differing needs of the local worshipping groups» (Parker 2011, p. 72).

5 On divine configurations in Greek religion see Pironti 2022.

6 For divine connections in the Phoenician context see Garbati 2023. As has recently been proposed, individual deities themselves constituted networks of elements – roles, qualities, attributes, relations, and so forth (= concepts, notions, needs etc.) – characterized by plasticity and polysemy (Porzia 2024, in particular p. 66).

7 By "morphology" I mean the form that could be given to the deities, based on their roles and functions (a form that is not only physical but also conceptual). I do not mean, therefore, something that constitutes the stable and defined core of one or more divinities, a fixed set of elements that repeats over time and space without change, as if it were an innate and immutable aspect (and applicable across different cases). Rather, I am referring to a form strictly dependent on the context in which the cult is attested. The usefulness of the term lies in its very meaning: deities are something that can be shaped, to which a form is given; the term thus implies the idea of construction, of the dynamics of "giving form".

8 See specifically Vernant 1965, p. 79. For a discussion on divinities as "powers" in contemporary studies, see Bonnet – Belayche – Albert-Llorca 2017.

9 By "activation" I do not mean, of course, the mere setting in motion of something inert, but rather a kind of stimulus aimed at prompting the deities to intervene on behalf of humans, often in response to specific requests.

10 Closely related to the themes addressed in the present contribution is the question of the processes involved in the figurative conceptualization of deities. As it is not possible to discuss this topic within the scope of this work, I refer the reader to some studies, that may be useful in highlighting some of the principal issues: Oggiano – Xella 2009; Garbati 2011 and 2012; Oggiano 2021; Orsingher 2021.

agus,[11] provides particularly significant evidence. As is well known, the epigraph mentions two male divine names: *ʾšmn* and *bʿl ṣdn* – Eshmun and "Lord of Sidon" – associated respectively with the sanctuary of Bostan esh-Sheikh, in the Sidonian hinterland (at the *ydll* spring), and with a temple in "Sidon, land of the sea", located in the metropolitan area. The text thus states:

> «For I, ʾEshmunʿazor, king of the Sidonians (…) and my mother, ʾUmmiʿashtart (…) we are the ones who built the houses of the gods: [the house of ʿAshtar]t in Sidon-Land-of-the-Sea (…); and we are the ones who built the house of ʾEshmun, the holy prince, at the spring of YDLL on the hill (…); and we are the ones who built houses for the gods of Sidon in Sidon-Land-of-the Sea, a house for Baʿ1 of Sidon and a house of ʿAshtart-Name-of-Baʿ1».[12]

I have argued elsewhere that, under the two divine denominations – *ʾšmn* and *bʿl ṣdn* – one should very probably recognise a single figure, Eshmun, whose distinct aspects the king's inscription appears to emphasise in relation to different cultic locations (Bostan esh-Sheikh and "Sidon, land of the sea").[13] In particular, the second sequence (*bʿl ṣdn*) seems to have functioned to highlight the god's poliadic qualities, that is, his "lordship" over the city (not by chance within the context of an urban temple). An indication of the possible identification of *ʾšmn* as *bʿl ṣdn* may be found in the mention of Astarte in the inscription as *šm bʿl*, "name of Baal", through an epiclesis intended to define the female entity's dependence upon the "lord": it is significant that the cult of the same goddess is well attested in the sanctuary of Bostan esh-Sheikh, alongside that of Eshmun. This first case thus seems to show how a single deity could assume multiple manifestations, shaped by the interests of social actors – in this particular instance, King Eshmunazor II. Moreover, such guises could find expression in specific onomastic sequences (*bʿl ṣdn*),[14] deliberately elaborated to foreground those characteristics that were meant to be emphasised.

An excellent example of the multiple profiles that could underlie a single theonym is instead provided by the Resheph – or Reshephs – of Cyprus.[15] On the island, the god bore several qualifiers – *ʾlyyt* ("of Helos"?), *ʾlhyts* ("of Cyprus"), *ḥṣ* ("of the arrow"), *mkl* ("of Amyclae")[16] – which were attributed to him within a relatively restricted area encompassing Kition, Idalion, and Tamassos. Specifically in Idalion, he was also referred to as "the one who is in Idalion", perhaps with an allusion to the poliadic role attributed to him in that city.[17] A similar fate, though projected onto a far broader geographical and cultural landscape, characterised the figure of Astarte, who acquired different qualifiers in the various places where her cult was adopted. These were mostly connected to local toponymy (for example, *kt* and *pp* in Cyprus, respectively "of Kition" and "of Paphos"; *ʾnn*, "of Malta", at Tas Silġ; *ʾrk*, "of Eryx", in North Africa and Sardinia, with specific reference to the cult of Astarte at that Sicilian site and to its diffusion beyond the island).[18] It is therefore evident that, within the Phoenician sphere, a single divine name could assume different forms across various

11 COS 2.57 (= KAI 14).

12 COS 2.57.

13 Garbati 2025. On Eshmun, see most recently Minunno 2025.

14 The expression "onomastic sequence" is taken from Bonnet *et al.* 2018 (see, in this regard, the results published in various works of the project "MAP – Mapping Ancient Polytheisms: Cult Epithets as an Interface between Religious System and Human Agency", directed by Corinne Bonnet between 2017 and 2023; https://map-polytheisms.huma-num.fr/).

15 On Reshef: Lipiński 2009; Münnich 2013; Niehr 2021.

16 The meaning of almost all the epicleses of Reshef in Cyprus is debated; see in this regard Münnich 2013, pp. 250-256 and Bianco 2025.

17 CIS I 90. The epicleses ascribed to Phoenician deities are collected in an open-access online database: https://base-map-polytheisms.huma-num.fr/login, which is part of the project MAP (cfr. note 14).

18 On the epithets of Astarte, together with the MAP project database, see: Amadasi Guzzo 2001-2002; Lietz 2012; Bloch-Smith 2014. Cfr., most recently, Bonnet 2021a.

locations, becoming part of onomastic sequences intended to convey the specific contextual connotations of the deity being worshipped.

Particularly distinctive is then the situation in which different onomastic sequences were elaborated around a common element – effectively fixed, a sort of formal and ideological pivot – through a dynamic relationship between stable and variable components. The most well-known case is certainly that of the Melqart described as *bṣr*, "in Tyre" (in texts from Phoenicia), *b'l ṣr*, "Lord of Tyre" (in two twin Greek-Phoenician inscriptions from Malta), and, finally, *'l ḥṣr*, "upon the rock/Tyre" (in three texts from Sardinia and in one from Ibiza).[19] These expressions, structured in different ways, must each have corresponded to the promotion of specific aspects of the deity; however, they revolved around a common denominator represented by the term *ṣr*, meaning "rock", "mountain", and being the proper name of Tyre. Probably, the exceptionally strong bond of Melqart with the Phoenician city – the primordial rock of which the god was regarded as founder and patron[20] – was preserved and reproduced in various contexts (even far removed from Phoenicia), assuming distinctive forms.[21] The "various Melqarts", in this way, acquired different nuances while at the same time maintaining an underlying coherence (I will return to this aspect later).

Finally (although the examples could certainly continue), the malleability of divine morphologies and the possibility of reconfiguring them across different contexts are clearly illustrated by two particularly cases, represented respectively by the god Sid of Antas, in Sardinia, and by the goddess Tinnit at the Cueva d'Es Culleram on Ibiza (Spain).[22] Although his name was certainly known in Phoenicia, Sid, first and foremost, achieved a prominent position only within the framework of the Italian island; scarcely attested elsewhere (with the exception of Carthage),[23] he was venerated in the region as the ancient "father" of the Sardinians, the regional deity *par excellence*. This is documented, first of all, by some inscriptions addressed to the god, found in the temple of Antas and dedicated by individuals originating from different parts of the insular territory (specifically from Cagliari and *Sulky*).[24] Secondly, Sid was identified, in the Roman period (circa mid-second century BCE), with Sardus Pater, the hero, son of Macerides/Heracles, who according to classical literary sources (e.g. Pausanias X.17.2) arrived from Libya in Sardinia (then still called *Ichnoussa*), colonised it, and gave it his own name: it is difficult to imagine a clearer demonstration of the centrality of context for the establishment of a cult.[25] For her part, Tinnit displayed at Ibiza characteristics different from those more widely ascribed to her in the *tophet* (not attested to date in the Iberian area), in which the goddess was consistently associated with the god Baal Hammon and the offering of cremated

19 For this documentation see the following references along with the corresponding bibliography: Amadasi Guzzo – Rossignani 2002; Amadasi Guzzo 2005a and 2005b; Garbati 2021b, pp. 95-102. On Melqart, Bonnet 1988 remains fundamental; cfr. also Bonnet 2021b and 2021c; Guillon 2021.

20 Bonnet 2009. According to Nonnus of Panopolis (*Dion*. XL 311-580), the founding of Tyre followed the instructions given by the oracle of Heracles (Melqart): according to the narrative, the oracle sent out to sea men who had spontaneously emerged from the land of continental Tyre, driving them toward two drifting rocks; these were cemented together and to the water, becoming a stable and habitable place (as indicated, the Phoenician name of Tyre, after all, is *ṣr*, "rock"); the phenomenon was made possible by the blood of an eagle sacrificed in a ritual offering (Grottanelli 1972).

21 It is possible that *bṣr* and *b'l ṣr* were linked to the polyadic aspects of Melqart, specifically associated with Tyre. With *'l ḥṣr*, instead, the intention may have been to emphasize the cosmic attributes of the god, as a "stabilizer" of rocks (= settlements) within a cosmic dimension that could be applied to multiple settlements (cfr. Garbati 2021b, pp. 95-102).

22 On Sid Garbati 2021a, 2021d and 2021e (on the temple of Antas: Zucca 2019); on Tinnit, Marín Ceballos 2021.

23 No inscriptions from the Near East currently attest to Sid as the recipient of a dedication. In turn, the Carthaginian evidence records the name of the god in five inscriptions (engraved on fourth-third century BCE votive stelae from the city's *tophet*), in which the theonym appears as part of the double divine names Sid-Melqart (CIS I 256) and Sid-Tinnit (CIS I 247-249, 5145).

24 Garbini 2019, inscriptions nos. 1, 2, 3, 28.

25 It is not excluded that Sid's connection with the Sardinian territory should also be recognized in the title *b'by*, which consistently accompanied his name, of uncertain meaning but perhaps linked to the indigenous substrate (Garbati 2021a).

children.[26] At the Cueva d'Es Culleram, beyond the more than obvious difference in setting compared to cremation sanctuaries, the cult of the goddess – the latter invoked as *rbt 'drt whgd*, "Lady, Powerful One, and the Fortune"[27] – acquired chthonic and fertility-related connotations possibly linked to the agricultural exploitation of north-eastern Ibiza (especially in the second century BCE, the period of most intense use of the cave); it was practised without any apparent connection, at least on the basis of the available evidence, with Tinnit's traditional divine consort.[28]

The few examples presented are therefore testimony – by no means surprisingly – to the fact that (Phoenician) gods and goddesses possessed mobile and multifaceted morphologies, closely dependent, in their specific characteristics, on the various contexts in which their cult was performed. Beyond the reasons that must have governed the morphological construction in each individual case, it is possible that the broad adaptability and plasticity of certain deities depended on – or was in some way linked to – a general distinctive cultural trait, already identified some years ago by Paolo Xella.[29] I am referring to the tendency, clearly observable in the cities of Phoenicia, to concentrate numerous qualities and functions in the figures of certain (few) deities, particularly those exhibiting poliadic features.[30] According to Xella, this tendency primarily reflects the pronounced particularism of the small city-states, which were closely centred on the royal institution – a particularism that allowed little space for coherent and lasting common political discourses. Religiously, this configuration led to the consolidation of cults of tutelary deities with royal attributes, which gradually came to centralize nearly all powers and functions within themselves. This type of conception is exemplified by the *b'l* + toponym sequence applied to certain male deities, such as Eshmun-Baal of Sidon and Melqart-Baal of Tyre. The "lordship" over a city attributed to these gods encouraged the perception of them as protective figures of the urban space as a whole – encompassing its institutions and territory, and safeguarding the interests and needs of the entire community.[31] The echo of such a phenomenon can perhaps be traced in a passage from a fundamental document for the understanding of Phoenician history, namely the treaty concluded between Esarhaddon of Assyria and Baal I of Tyre in the 670s BCE.[32] In a section of the pact in which various Phoenician deities are invoked as guarantors of the clauses, it is stated:

> «May Melqarth and Eshmun deliver your land to destruction and your people to deportation; may they [uproot] you from your land and take away the food from your mouth, the clothes from your body, and the oil for your anointing / May Astarte break your bow in the thick of battle and have you crouch at the feet of your enemy, may a foreign enemy divide your belongings».[33]

In the text, Melqart, Eshmun, and Astarte are called upon – together with other deities (Baal Shamem, Baal Malage, and Baal Saphon; cfr. below) – to intervene against King Baal I and his people in the event that the Phoenician ruler fails to comply with the agreement. The two male figures appear to possess extensive scope for intervention in the human existential sphere, to the point of potentially denying to humans all elements fundamental to survival: land, food, clothing, and health. Such breadth of authority seems to correspond precisely to the idea of "lordship" mentioned above.

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26 Garbati 2013a and 2013b. The bibliography on the *tophets* is by now extremely extensive; an excellent reference point remains Xella 2013.

27 Zamora López 2023, p. 112.

28 On the Cueva, see the very recent volumes: Marín Ceballos – Belén Deamos – Jiménez Flores 2022; Zamora López 2023.

29 Xella 1981.

30 On this topic, see Porzia 2024, p. 66 and Porzia in press (in which the author speaks of "small polytheisms" or "oligotheisms").

31 For the use of the term *b'l* in Phoenicia and Cyprus, see Garbati – Porzia 2024.

32 On the treaty, see, for example: Pettinato 1975; Parpola – Watanabe 1988, pp. 24-27; Na'aman 2005, pp. 193-199.

33 Parpola – Watanabe 1988, 5.14-19.

The tendency to attribute a plurality of functions and qualities to individual deities also came to characterize Phoenician communities after their westward diaspora. In the "colonial" regions, however, a largely different phenomenon can be observed, still marked by the presence of deities with very broad functions: the adoption of certain cults that, unlike those of the eastern cities, assumed a unifying role over extensive territories, in what can be conveniently defined as a supra-urban dimension. A central role in this regard can perhaps be attributed, to a large extent, to the hegemonic ambitions of Carthage. One may consider, for instance, the conception of Melqart offered by Diodorus Siculus: in a passage of his work (XX 14,1-2), the historian describes the god, in the guise of Heracles, as *para tois apoikois* – freely "overseer of the colonists", "protector of the colonists" – emphasising his trans-territorial connotations. It is possible that this Greek historian's perspective on Melqart was in fact inspired by the role assumed by the deity, at least in certain phases, as an emblem of a large portion of the "colonial" Phoenician world (and which may perhaps be traced in the consistent association, across different localities, between his figure and *ṣr*, "Tyre, the rock", as noted above).[34] Even more emblematic is the previously mentioned case of Sid, venerated as the regional god of Sardinia: his particular position, unprecedented in the Phoenician world (both east and west), must have required the composition of a morphology with exceptionally broad protective functions. Another interesting case, in terms of the concentration of multiple powers in a single figure – but for different reasons – is recorded in an inscription from Moraleda de Zafayona (Granada) dedicated to the god Eshmun: the text reads, «Protect and guard Eshmunyaton, son of Emmy, (oh) Eshmun, prince, by day and by night and at all time».[35] The inscription thus appears to attribute an exceptionally extensive protective role to the deity; here, this protection is expressed entirely on a personal level, concerning the defence of the individual.

2.2. *Logics and Mechanisms: The Limits of the Deities*

It is thus evident that Phoenician polytheism – like other comparable religious systems – was characterized by the adaptability of its constituent elements (gods and goddesses). However, while the plasticity of divinities, tied to the needs and interests underlying a given cult, is an established fact, it did not constitute an entirely "free" element within religious thought and ritual practice, nor was it unconstrained by norms or logic. Rather, as we are about to see, the polytheistic system itself – understood primarily as a relational and connective network among diverse elements (the deities, linked to one another through relationships of various kinds) – necessarily imposed certain limits on the characterization of divine morphologies. Indeed, it dictated the principles that, in some way, governed the connections of various gods and goddesses with specific spheres of existential life, the internal relationships within the divine community, the boundaries of competence and modes of action of each deity, as well as the possibilities for functional overlap or analogy.[36] Otherwise, the realm of the gods would have represented a disordered, even excessively fluid and elusive world: since it founded and represented human experience, it could not, as a whole or in its fundamentals, be entirely chaotic.

Certainly, this does not mean that, at least in the Phoenician context, it is possible – or indeed necessary – to identify fixed laws or rules. Nor does it imply viewing the religion of Levantine and western cities as a perfectly ordered system, in which every element was rigidly placed in a predetermined position and played a defined, immutable role – a view that would, moreover, contradict what has been described above. On this point, I fully agree with Radek Chlup, who observes: «It is vain to try to discover in religious phenomena strict logic in the sense we expect from a philosophical system, and it is more realistic to admit that some of

34 Álvarez Martí-Aguilar 2018.

35 *Nṣr [w]*šmr *ʾyt* šmnytn *bn ʾmy.* šmn *zbl lym wll wbkl ʿt* (Amadasi Guzzo 2007, p. 198: «Proteggi e custodisci Eshmunyaton, figlio di Emmy, (o) Eshmun, principe, di giorno e di notte e per tutto il tempo»).

36 In the Greek context, Vernant 1965 remains primary for these topics (cfr. the critical observations in Chlup 2018).

their attributes arise by random association rather than by systematic expansion of the god's characteristic mode of action».[37] This does not mean, however, that – at least at the local level (with more or less extensive reach) – a certain respect for the limits governing the process of deity construction cannot be recognized. This is precisely due to the configuration of polytheism as a complex network of relationships, which, by its very nature, entails distinctions – and therefore limits – among its components.

In the Phoenician context, the existence of such boundaries may be inferred from certain indications in the available evidence. While these do not allow a full reconstruction of the urban and territorial religious systems, they nonetheless offer valuable insights. The first aspect may appear self-evident; however, it warrants explicit emphasis. I am referring to the existence, in some cases, of traits that consistently characterised certain divine figures – albeit with different nuances across contexts – and that effectively functioned as "structural" components to be respected; they could, therefore, be expanded or contracted to a certain extent. It is clear that this does not imply absolute, substantial, coherence in the profiles of the gods, but rather the identification of those functions and attributes that constituted shared points across cults performed in different settings, thus tracing a line of continuity among those settings. Melqart, as I have already noted, is undoubtedly the best reference from this perspective. Although the god could certainly assume local guises, his figure, as stressed above, was often remembered and invoked due to his intimate connection with Tyre and, specifically, with the founding of the city. The formulation of the three epicleses mentioned previously (*bṣr*, *b'l ṣr*, *'l ḥṣr*) must, in fact, have oscillated between the necessity to modulate the deity's functions in different, and especially distant, locations, and the need to anchor that same deity to a specific, recurring, element: the "rock". This does not, of course, mean that Melqart was solely the god associated with *ṣr*, but that this connection was so characterising that it was invoked – albeit sometimes contracted or expanded – in different places.[38]

A similar situation can be observed with Eshmun, particularly regarding his therapeutic qualities, which are almost consistently repeated. It is possible, first of all, that such traits were already encoded in the god's very name: the theonym *'šmn*, as is well known, has been traced by Edward Lipiński to the Semitic root *šmn*, meaning "to be fat" > "to be beautiful", from which derive terms for animal and vegetable fat ("oil"). The sense of the theonym is thus active/performative, and its meaning would be "he who anoints" > "he who heals".[39] Moreover, already in the East, the deity was identified with Asclepius in Greek inscriptions[40] – a phenomenon that was repeated in the West. In particular, in the trilingual text (Greek-Latin-Punic) from Santu Jacci (San Nicolò Gerrei, Sardinia) the Phoenician deity, interpreted in Greek as Asclepius and in Latin as Aesculapius, is thanked for having healed the dedicator (which, it should be noted, is explicitly stated only in the Punic text).[41] Even in this case, however, we are dealing with a tendency toward conservation that was not immune to transformation or adaptation; rather, the deity assumed specific characteristics in response to the particular context. In the Sardinian inscription (in all three versions), he is called *merre* (*m'rḥ*

37 Chlup 2018, p. 106. The author then adds (p. 107, again on the Greek deities): «From this perspective, the gods may be studied both as a regular Panhellenic set of divinities whose general characteristics are shared by all the Greeks and as parts of unique and much more irregular systems of worship that are particular to each polis but that can only be intelligible when read as permutations of the same basic Panhellenic themes. It is true that the cultural system is to a large extent an abstraction artificially extracted by modern scholars from various locally and temporally disconnected data, but there is nothing illegitimate in making use of such constructs as long as we take them as such and are aware of their limitations».

38 Cfr. notes 19-20.

39 Lipiński 1973; Lipiński 1995, in particular p. 155.

40 See two inscriptions from Bostan esh-Sheikh in Greek (dating respectively to the first century BCE and the second century CE): Bonnet 2015, p. 228; cfr. Apicella 2006.

41 CIS I 143; ICO, Sardegna 9. For the inscription, see the commentary and bibliography in Ibba 2016, pp. 77-78, note 51.

in Phoenician),[42] an epiclesis of uncertain meaning that may be ascribed to the island's indigenous substrate, thus showing the probable incorporation into the cult of elements from the local tradition.

Another indication of the respect for certain limits in the characterization of deities can be found in a document I have already commented on: the treaty concluded between Esarhaddon and Baal I of Tyre. Beyond attributing extensive powers to Melqart and Eshmun, the document clearly conveys the idea of differentiations – and thus delimitations – among the gods that structured Tyre's seventh-century BCE religious system. Before mentioning the two figures already discussed above (together with Astarte), the text invokes Baal Shamem, Baal Malage, and Baal Saphon; to the three is entrusted the control of atmospheric phenomena and the sea. The following is thus the portion of the text that precedes the excerpt cited above:

> «May Baʿal-Šamem, Baʿal-Malage and Baʿal-Saphon raise an evil wind against your ships to undo their moorings and tear out their mooring pole, may a strong wave sink them in the sea and a violent tide [rise] against you».[43]

The treaty, by structuring two divine groups – one composed of the three Baalim and the other of Melqart, Eshmun, and Astarte –, conveys how certain Phoenician deities (or groups of deities) were functionally distinguished, reflecting both affinities among the gods (and/or the goddesses) and the elements of differentiation that imposed limits on their spheres of intervention. These limits, of course, are quite broad and, in the logic of the treaty, primarily rest on a general separation between the natural dimension (represented by the Baalim) and the human dimension (embodied by Melqart and Eshmun), which also encompasses the sphere of war (with Astarte). Nevertheless, despite their breadth, such distinctions suggest the existence of a locally shaped order within the Phoenician context in the "classification" of deities and in the consequent assignment of powers and function.

The possibility of identifying the ways in which the morphological limits of a deity were delineated is further supported by a particularly distinctive phenomenon, well attested in the Phoenician world (both in the "motherland" and in the "colonial" context). This is the phenomenon of the so-called "double deities", characterised by the formal association of two theonyms in cult practice.[44] Currently, based on the available documentation, the earliest attestation is the sequence *ʾšmnmlqrt*, Eshmun-Melqart, known from a dedication inscription discovered on Ibiza and datable to around the first half of the seventh century BCE (later also documented in Cyprus, in the temple of Batsalos at Kition, around the first half of the fourth century BCE).[45] Other instances of this solution can be added: for example, Tinnit-Astarte attested at Sarepta,[46] or Sid-Tinnit and Sid-Melqart in Carthage.[47] More or less recent studies have tended to interpret this particular mode of association as a reflection of a functional or mythic relationship between the deities in question. It has been proposed, for instance, to see in Sid-Melqart the formalisation of a parental relationship, "Sid son of Melqart";[48] such an interpretation finds support in classical literary traditions that make Sardus Pater (identified with Sid) the son, indeed, of Heracles/Macerides (interpreted as Melqart).[49] For other "pairs",

42 Garbati 2021c.

43 Parpola – Watanabe 1988, 5.10-13.

44 Xella 2021 (with bibliography). See also on the topic Ribichini 1976; Ribichini – Xella 1979; Xella 1990; Amadasi Guzzo 1991.

45 On the text from Ibiza: Amadasi Guzzo – Xella 2005; Garbati 2018, pp. 139-141 and 146-149 (with references). On the data from Cyprus: Guzzo Amadasi – Karageorghis 1977, A 3; A 5 (B); A10-A15; A 25 (?); D 10 (?).

46 Pritchard 1982.

47 In the above-mentioned inscriptions CIS I 256 (Sid-Melqart) and CIS I 247-249, 5145 (Sid-Tinnit).

48 On this issue, see the still relevant Grottanelli 1973.

49 Cfr. again Pausania X 17,2.

the association may instead reflect the possible joint veneration of the two connected deities. In particular, the oldest known relationship to date – that of Eshmun and Melqart, powerful poliadic gods – appears, according to recent suggestions, to have been motivated by equality of roles, political representation, and morphological affinity, grounded in analogous powers.[50]

Alongside these interpretations, however, an additional explanatory possibility must be considered, one rarely addressed in the Phoenician context.[51] Some "double deities" may have represented particular manifestations of one of the associated gods, or may have been formulated with the intention of highlighting, through one of the two entities – or rather, through its name – a quality absent in the other: one of the two theonyms in relation may have functioned as a "determinative".[52] An example will clarify the matter. On the island of Ibiza, the presence of the sequence *ʾšmnmlqrt* occurred within a context in which the cult of Melqart enjoyed considerable resonance; at least two other local inscriptions attest to this: a dedication to another double divine name – Resheph-Melqart (*ʾršpmlqrt*; fifth-fourth century BCE)[53] – and an offering addressed to Melqart *ʿl ḥṣr* ("upon the rock/Tyre"; third century BCE).[54] In various phases of the history of Ibiza, therefore, the god of Tyre experienced multiple forms, configuring over time as the common denominator of different cults (we are therefore confronted with yet another comparatively clear case, which serves to illustrate the range of forms that a divinity might assume). It is then plausible that the apposition of the names Eshmun and Resheph to Melqart was intended to promote or emphasise certain qualities of the latter, perhaps absent or not strongly marked in his morphology: *ʾšmn* and *ršp* may have represented two of the particular "vestments" in which *mlqrt* could manifest (the reasons and cultic context for these attributions or "vestments", of course, remain elusive). The possibility that, in double theonyms, one of the two entities functioned as a determinative highlights how the functional modelling of gods had to respect clearly defined limits: the attribution to a deity of a particular vestment or quality – perhaps absent in the deity's own morphology – could be accomplished only through established mechanisms, such as the construction of a divine relationship (with the deity that possessed that vestment or quality).

2.3. *Between Plasticity and Boundaries, Continuity and Discontinuity*

From the observations presented above, it is clear that the profiles of Phoenician deities (and not only Phoenician ones) could be variously composed and modulated according to context, leading the same deity – the same divine name – to assume different connotations across places and times. These profiles, however, were not constructed outside any underlying logic; rather, they had to adhere to sorts of rules, ranging from the repetition of constant divine elements across various places, which made a god/goddess recognizable (albeit locally adapted), to relationships with other divine entities – relationships that, even if fluid, established boundaries between one superhuman being and another. The mechanisms underpinning the morphological delineation of individual gods, as well as the network of divine connections, could operate at different levels (local, urban, territorial, regional, supra-regional), sometimes intersecting with one another. Melqart's association with *ṣr*, for example, constituted a repeated element of the cult across different, even distant, locations, assuming an almost pan-Phoenician character; yet, it simultaneously took on local forms, as reflected in the diverse epicleses constructed around the "rock". In other words, the organization of the religious

50 Amadasi – Xella 2005, p. 50.

51 For the Greek context, see instead: Parker 2017.

52 An initial approach in this direction was undertaken by Edward Lipiński, who has suggested that the Eshmun-Melqart of Cyprus represents a local deity, depicted as an "Eshmun-Heraclean" figure, whose attributes do not precisely match those of any Phoenician god (Lipiński 1995, p. 291).

53 Zamora López 2023, pp. 83-104.

54 On this issue, see Garbati 2018, pp. 146-149.

system and its protagonists in a given Phoenician settlement could resemble that of another center while simultaneously differing from it, reflecting a highly complex dynamic of similarities and differences[55] – and thus encompassing both continuity and discontinuity (not only in shaping a specific divine morphology, but also in organizing the network of connections among the various deities). Shared traditions and local configurations thus appear to coexist and belong to the same (Phoenician) cultural framework.

From this perspective, and concluding the first section of my reflections, it is useful to recall some considerations recently proposed by Fabio Porzia. He has stated: «local and regional belonging are two sides of the same coin, alternatively emphasized by scholars. For this reason, the most productive way to understand how these deities were conceived and constructed is to consider them glocal: shaped by regional and supra-regional continuities as well as by local particularities».[56] The study of the fabrication of gods and goddesses, therefore, must take into account the different dimensions in which cults were practiced and, consequently, the various solutions that could be locally adopted – solutions, however, that necessarily coexisted "within" and "alongside" a broad and shared panorama of traditions (e.g., in our case, "Phoenician").

3. The Constructive Efficacy of Ritual

Having thus established that the gods may be regarded as "plastic" products (within certain limits), I would now like to describe some of the ways in which these cultural products were constructed. At this point, the second foundational element of the "Mago" project comes into play, effectively defining the analytical perspective of the research: ritual practice.

Recent and less recent scholarship alike has clearly emphasized the highly performative character of ritual. Representative in this respect is the work of Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, devoted primarily to magical rites and rites of passage.[57] More recently, in her 2005 book, Adriana Destro summarized this dimension by asserting that «rites are performed actions that both express and evoke states of mind; they sustain existing notions while also enabling the creation of new ones».[58] She further specifies: «Never simply an act aimed at increasing knowledge useful or appropriate to humans, ritual is always a constructive and transformative action. It possesses the efficacy of an act that achieves the ends it sets out to accomplish».[59] In addition to responding to specific needs and interests, ritual also produces changes in the profiles and positions of its participants, for «it situates an individual or a group within the institutionalized life of the collective. Indeed, by bringing a subject together with others in a single procedure or performance, it highlights their relative –

55 Remotti 2019.

56 Porzia in press (I would like to thank the author for kindly allowing me to read their article prior to publication). In turn, Henk S. Versnel, with reference to the religion of Greek cities, commented on the possibility of alternatively viewing Hellenic polytheism as something compact, as an ordered system or, differently, as something chaotic. So he writes: «in sum, there is no unity, there are *unities*, creating at a different level a new diversity, even a new type of "potential chaos", that of the multiplicity of classifications, one challenging the other and unpleasantly disconcerting the modern observer. Is Greek polytheism kosmos or chaos? By now my answer will not come as a surprise. One conclusion that has become obvious is that the different local pantheons represent multiple frames of reference, contexts and perspectives, each of them serving to help create order in an otherwise confusing diversity. Endless ramification is just a reflex of the nature of polytheism» (Versnel 2011, p. 146).

57 Tambiah 1995. Durkheim 2020, pp. 486-497, remains a fundamental reference (cfr. Scarduelli 2007, pp. 13-14). For studies on the ritual, see also the recent works Bell 2009 and Blakely 2017.

58 Translated from the original Italian: «i riti sono azioni compiute che esplicitano stati d'animo ma anche li suscitano, mantengono in vita nozioni ma consentono di crearne di nuove» (Destro 2005, p. 79).

59 Translated from the original Italian: «mai semplicemente atto destinato ad accrescere i "saperi" utili o appropriati all'essere umano, il rituale è sempre un'azione costruttiva e trasformativa. Possiede l'efficacia dell'atto che raggiunge i fini che si propone» (Destro 2005, p. 79).

rather than autonomous – position within a network of similar or interconnected roles».[60] One may recall in this regard the capacity of ritual practices to demarcate transitions from one social status to another, to promote social order and structure, and to reinforce group cohesion.

The transformative and constructive action of ritual may also have another implication, specifically with regard to the divine dimension. In ancient polytheistic societies, all the elements composing the ritual – gestures, words, objects, spaces, images, sounds, tastes, scents, and so forth – entered into relationships with social actors and contributed to describing and presenting to them the supra-human protagonists, their functions, powers, and relationships. Thus, ritual displayed and articulated the figures and attributes of the deities, including their roles, their modes of intervention in human life (and in the broader world), and their positions within networks of divine relationships.[61] Angelo Brelich has clearly emphasized this point: «in polytheistic religions, the various forms of worship and their constituent elements can also serve to establish and define the characteristics of the deities (…)».[62] In this way, both individuals and groups could come to know – and to re-know – their supra-human referents, thereby establishing a relationship with them.[63] Such a dimension of ritual may be defined as "formative", insofar as it contributes to the cultural formation of both individuals and groups, and "participatory", insofar as it constitutes a collective performance.

But there is more. The creative function of ritual is expressed in another effect, one that goes beyond merely making the divine world known, visible, and intelligible: ritual could also contribute directly and actively, through its constituent components (actions, materials, words, spaces, etc.), to the construction of the profiles of divine figures. It is no coincidence that Angelo Brelich continues his reflection, mentioned above, as follows: «like a mythic narrative, a cultic action can also "express" and differentiate a divine figure».[64] In other words, ritual could help define divine traits, as well as the links between gods and goddesses or other extra-human beings; it could ultimately establish their capacities and specific modes of intervention in human life. As one can easily imagine, this function – which we may describe as "elaborative"– did not constitute an explicit aim of ritual practice; rather, it appears to have represented – at least in cases where it can be discerned – an implicit consequence of the actions and words performed, as well as of the relationships that individuals and collectives established with objects (such as cult images). There are several ways in which such a process could occur, all of which find their primary justification in the plastic nature of the gods and in the possibility of modulating them, as discussed above. Thus, in the following pages, I will briefly describe three cases that I have encountered and analyzed in recent years, which may serve as illustrative points of reference (obviously for the Phoenician context).

60 Translated from the original Italian: il rito «innesta un individuo o un gruppo nella vita istituzionalizzata di tutti. Anzi accomunando in una stessa procedura o performance un soggetto ad altri soggetti, evidenzia la sua posizione relativa e non autonoma, entro un insieme di posizioni simili o correlate (Destro 2005, p. 79). On the performativity of ritual see also Fabietti 1991, p. 23: ritual «rafforza nei partecipanti il senso di appartenenza al corpo sociale».

61 Cfr. Leach 1971, pp. 242-246.

62 Translated from the original Italian: «nelle religioni politeistiche le più varie forme di culto e i loro più vari elementi costitutivi possono avere anche la funzione di fissare e di precisare i caratteri delle divinità» (Brelich 2007, pp. 84-85).

63 I am referring, for example, to cult images or votive representations displayed in temples – statues, reliefs, paintings, etc. – which depicted a certain superhuman entity alone, fully engaged in its functions (consider, for example, depictions of the Smiting gods), or within the framework of possible mythological narratives, also highlighting, where relevant, its role in the ritual context. Or I also mean oral recitations performed during ceremonies, which made known or reiterated, analogous to the images but within the development of a narrative, the "story" of a particular deity (and of others associated with it). But the examples could be far more numerous.

64 Translated from the original Italian: «al pari di una vicenda mitica, anche un'azione cultuale può "esprimere" e differenziare una figura divina» (Brelich 2007, pp. 84-85).

3.1. *Making Gods. Three Case Studies*

One of the ways in which the "morphological construction of deities" effected through ritual may be most readily recognized is in those occasions when a specific function was attributed to a god – and affirmed through ritual practice – following a particular, novel event in the history of a given social group.

Turning to a concrete example, I recently had the opportunity to re-examine, from a religious perspective, a dedicatory inscription discovered in 1990 at Larnaca, Cyprus (ancient Kition).[65] The text, whose original context remains unknown, records the offering of a trophy – also of unknown nature – to a deity called *bʿl ʿz*, Baal Oz ("Lord of Strength"), by Milkyaton, king "of Kition and Idalion", and by all the people of Kition.[66] The offering was made in the first year of the king's reign (392/391 BCE) following a victory over certain enemies (not mentioned in the inscription).[67] More specifically, the text states that *bʿl ʿz*, "Lord of Strength", granted his protégés (the king and the people) strength – *ʿz*, precisely – to achieve victory. The ritual underlying this offering undoubtedly had a performative character (understood in the sense described earlier by Adriana Destro). Indeed, those who, together with the king, participated in the celebration and homage to the deity – that is, in the terms of the inscription, "all the people of Kition" – must have experienced, through the ritual (the deposition of the trophy and the inscription, together with the accompanying actions), a reinforcement of their belonging to a cohesive group, namely the victors, members of a community led by a specific king and protected (also) by a specific god.

Regarding, in particular, the construction of the deity through ritual practice, some indication is provided by the part of the inscription which state: «And he has given to me and to all the people of Kition // Baʿl of Strength strength and victory over all our enemies and their allies, the Paphians».[68] Without reproducing the entire analysis of the document, it is sufficient to note that this section allows us to interpret the onomastic sequence *bʿl ʿz* as an *ad hoc* coinage, attributed to a specific divine figure (Resheph according to some scholars),[69] following Milkyaton's victory and fixed (also) through its recording in an official offering. The connection between the definition of a god and what that same god granted to the community in a moment of crisis – both indicated by the term *ʿz*, "strength" – suggests that the expression *bʿl ʿz* was precisely the way in which the authorities of Kition wished to describe their divine protector, recognizing the concreteness and efficacy of his intervention in relation to the military event. Behind this formulation was likely a complex theological elaboration, developed by the cult specialists and plausibly by Milkyaton himself; the king, not coincidentally, established a particularly close relationship with Baal Oz, as evidenced by the expression "my lord" attributed by the sovereign to the god in the concluding part of the Cypriot text. The construction of a new onomastic sequence, therefore, was not merely a formal act based on what was already known about the deity.[70] It very likely also represented a "creative" act, as it produced a renewed definition of the entity, a new way of representing it, and thus of perceiving and conceiving it (at minimum, reinforcing the idea of the deity's reliability, given the positive resolution of the crisis). On this level, the ritual was tasked with formalizing, manifesting, and making this new definition known to the entire population, effectively putting it "into circulation" and rendering it operative, given the relationship the community could establish with

65 Garbati 2024.

66 Among the studies dedicated to the inscription, see: KAI 288; Yon – Sznycer 1991; Xella 1993; Yon 2004, n. 1144; Mosca 2006; 2009; Amadasi Guzzo 2015.

67 Mentioned, however, are the allies of the enemies, the Paphians.

68 The translation, based on Mosca 2006, is taken from Amadasi 2021, p. 156.

69 Resheph: Xella 1993; Ribichini 2018. In Baal Oz, according to Amadasi, one should instead recognize Baal of Kition, once again attested in the epigraphy (Amadasi Guzzo 2015).

70 It is not currently possible to assert whether this process was actually based on the pre-existence of certain functions, such as potential warlike qualities, in the deity's morphology.

it: their deity was now (also) *b'l 'z*. In this dynamic, one can perhaps recognize an example of what Angelo Brelich defined as «the human creative elaboration of the material provided by experience».[71]

The second example I wish to focus on is a curse inscribed on the sarcophagus of a Phoenician ruler. A section of King Tabnit's inscription, sovereign of the city of Sidon around the second half of the sixth century BCE, states:

> «Whoever you are, any man who comes upon this coffin, do not, do not open my cover and disturb me, for no silver is gathered with me (and) no gold is gathered with me or any kind of riches. I alone am lying in this coffin. Do not, do not open my cover and disturb me, for such a thing would be an abomination to 'Ashtart! And if you do open my cover and disturb me, may you have no offspring among the living under the sun or a resting place with the Repa'im».[72]

In the curse, therefore, a goddess – Astarte – is invoked as the protector of the royal sarcophagus, together with its contents, namely the body of the sovereign.[73] At first glance, the text does not appear to contain anything particularly unusual: the formula employed, implicitly requesting divine action (since any desecration would constitute an offense against the goddess), fits perfectly within the intimate relationship that linked Phoenician kings to the principal civic deities, as is clearly evidenced by numerous inscriptions, both funerary and non-funerary. The gods themselves, after all, were conceived as guarantors of monarchical authority.[74]

One specific element, however, merits closer attention, at least for the purposes of these notes.[75] The context in which the king-goddess relationship is situated in the case of the curse is fundamentally funerary: the sovereign, not coincidentally, speaks from the perspective of the dead. He does not intervene in the present moment of the inscription's composition; rather, he is the subject of a request for protection in his posthumous state. Within the logic of the inscription – «I alone am lying in this coffin» – Tabnit invokes divine guardianship from the afterlife. This projection of the king-goddess relationship into the otherworldly sphere cannot be regarded as entirely without consequences for the construction of the deity's morphology. While the inscription does not endow Astarte with "classical" underworld functions (such as those of a queen of the dead), it is undeniable that the particular cultic occasion – the curse – effectively created a kind of bridge for the goddess into the realm of the deceased, an element normally absent in her typical profile. Such an "oscillation toward the beyond" for Astarte must certainly be understood as the result of the bond linking the goddess to the king (who must be protected both in life and in death). Yet it must also be considered, from a historical-religious perspective, as a consequence of the capacity to extend or broaden divine functions and spheres of intervention according to specific interests – in this case, those of a sovereign who speaks and must be protected after death. While the instrument through which this dynamic was realized was, certainly, ritual – in particular, the elaboration of a request for protection via a curse – the underlying premise was the pronounced mobility and dynamism of Sidonian Astarte's divine profile.

The third case study is finally represented by a phenomenon I have addressed in the past, and which the development of my research has led me to observe under a new light, with potential future avenues within the framework of the "Mago" project.[76] From the end of the fifth-fourth centuries BCE, across nearly the entire Mediterranean, a particular religious practice achieved extensive diffusion: that which has repeatedly

71 «L'elaborazione creatrice umana del materiale fornito dall'esperienza» (Brelich 2007, p. 98).

72 COS 2.56. Cfr. TSSI III 27; KAI 13.

73 On curses in Phoenician context see Mazza 1975 and Abou Samra 2005.

74 Xella 2017.

75 See already for the following considerations: Garbati 2022, pp. 141-150.

76 Garbati 2008.

been defined as *religio votiva*, expressed, in this period, primarily through the offering of numerous terracotta objects in places of worship, mostly of modest dimensions (though with notable exceptions).[77] In the Phoenician context, this form of devotion became especially widespread between the fifth/fourth and second centuries BCE. In the Western Mediterranean, one of the most affected regions was undoubtedly Sardinia: to date, several votive deposits have been documented on the island, composed mainly of terracotta objects and distributed across nearly the entire territory, with higher concentrations in the central-western and southern areas. In some locations, the number of offerings reached hundreds, if not thousands, of items,[78] testifying to the considerable popularity of the phenomenon.

One of the most widespread types of votive offerings attested in Sardinia from the third century BCE is undoubtedly the anatomical ex-voto, introduced under the influence of central Italian culture. In the insular region, this class of votives – representing lower and upper limbs (hands, arms, feet, and legs) and, to a lesser extent, sexual organs and other body parts (for instance, eyes) – displayed a distribution that could be described as "transversal"; in other words, they appeared in many sanctuaries throughout the region, both in urban and rural contexts. It is plausible that the presence of such objects in various sacred spaces cannot be attributed to the veneration of a single, consistently recognizable deity. Similar to what has been observed in central Italy,[79] it is more likely that their presence reflects devotion directed toward different deities, each with its own specific characteristics. The anatomical votive, therefore, occupies a particularly interesting position for the reconstruction of the functional composition of divinities: the religion of the vow contributed to the attribution of similar qualities to distinct divine entities – qualities such as those connected to healing and medical intervention, which were often associated with anatomical offerings and which did not necessarily pre-exist within the conventional morphology of the gods/goddesses involved.

Naturally, such a dynamic – many aspects of which would merit further investigation, for instance regarding the possible management of the phenomenon by cultic specialists – should not be interpreted as implying a generalized flattening of the functional profiles of deities across different sites, nor as an "illogical" or "disorderly" expansion of divine morphologies. Each context, in fact, displayed its own peculiarities, evident from the material composition of the various votive deposits:[80] although these often consisted of similar types of offerings, each set of ex-votos was distinguished by a different internal arrangement from site to site, marked by variations in the typologies and in the relative proportions of the votive types themselves. Such differences likely corresponded to the presence, in the various sanctuaries, of divine profiles that were not identical, but potentially similar, at least with respect to certain characteristics.

The three case studies discussed above, therefore, provide clear examples of the role ritual could play – in the Phoenician contexts – in the construction of divine morphologies. As has been seen, this capacity rested on the ability to shape, modify, and adapt divine figures.

4. Concluding Remarks

To conclude these notes, it can be useful to synthesize the main aspects that have emerged and offer some general considerations.

Phoenician deities, like other gods and goddesses in polytheistic societies, constituted "products" that could be modelled. As noted at the outset and shown throughout this study, their profiles were never

77 See, for example, for the Italic context, Comella 1982-1983 and the recent Fabbri 2019.

78 See the case of Padria (Campus 1994).

79 De Cazanove 2015 and 2017.

80 Garbati 2008, in particular pp. 19-63.

rigidly and definitively delineated; rather, they could be adapted to different contexts and thereby assume local characterizations. In certain circumstances, this plasticity was likely linked to the concentration of multiple powers and functions in the hands of a few deities, as in the case of poliadic or "regional" entities capable of overseeing all aspects of human life. Such concentration may have allowed certain deities to be regarded as potential recipients of nearly all personal and communal needs and concerns. These conceptions were, however, counterbalanced by the possibility of delineating boundaries – also flexible – within which "interventions on the deities" had to be regulated. The nature of these limits – dictated first and foremost by the structure of polytheism itself, understood as networks of divine connections – was often shaped by the characteristics of particular contexts and by the experiences of individuals within them, and consequently by the organization of the corresponding divine community.

Generally, it has been possible to identify, through various indicators, some of the ways in which the modulation and remodulation of deities were regulated. First, there existed broad functional distinctions, which allowed for the identification of different types of divine beings; this is exemplified by the treaty concluded between Esarhaddon and Baal I of Tyre, which distinguishes figures associated with natural and atmospheric forces from those linked to the human (particularly civic) sphere. Furthermore, in at least some cases (though not universally), certain divine traits could constitute morphological constants, often maintained even when locally reinterpreted – for example, Melqart's connection to Tyre or Eshmun's medical attributes. Crucial in this regard was the dialectical relationship between general/continuous traits and specific/local features, which allowed for a balance between continuity and discontinuity. Finally, in the examples discussed, certain modes of formalizing divine associations – such as the use of double theonyms – appear to indicate the existence of points of contact and, consequently, differentiation between the associated deities.

Within the space between plasticity and delimitation, ritual operated as a mechanism capable of actualizing divine morphologies. It is useful to emphasize the different ways in which this process could manifest, as well as the various pathways and strategies it could follow. Revisiting the case studies presented, the first, centered on Baal Oz, was primarily linked to a concrete historical event: a military victory. This event became the subject of a cultural reworking that, through the medium of cult, produced a new way of describing, perceiving, and conceiving a particular deity. The process, which involved one of the principal deities of Kition – identified by a new name – assumed an official character, involving both the king and the entire civic community, and contributed to consolidating a relational network whose apices were occupied by the deity, the sovereign, and the people.

In contrast, the curse of Tabnit and the associated attribution of otherworldly traits to Astarte pertains to a wholly personal dimension, albeit within a social context. Here, the exceptionally close relationship between king and goddess – typical of Phoenician monarchies – enabled a form of morphological adaptation: the deity's functions were remodulated according to a specific request for protection within the realm of the dead. Unlike the case of Kition, the impact of such a dynamic on the community was necessarily limited, given both the personal nature of the curse ritual and its funerary setting; moreover, the inscription was soon removed from public view.

In the case of votive religion in Sardinia, with anatomical ex-votos at its center, the performative capacity of ritual must be sought elsewhere. The fact that anatomical offerings could be ascribed to multiple deities likely reflects the central importance – particularly for certain strata of the population – of safeguarding the existential dimension, composed of daily risks and dangers. Through what may have been a spontaneous, bottom-up process, these concerns contributed to shape divine forms and the configuration of cult practices. Once again, ritual initiated a process by which multiple powers and functions were concentrated in certain divine figures.

In conclusion, the case studies presented here exemplify the complex and multifaceted relationship between the plasticity of deities and the agency of ritual. Through them, I have sought to highlight some of the strategies employed by ancient social actors – whether consciously or not – to shape their divine inter-

locutors, who were active participants within a religious sphere that was both formative and participatory. It is precisely along this line of inquiry that the "Mago" project is situated, aiming to investigate, as repeatedly emphasized, the processes by which gods and goddesses were constructed in the ancient world.

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