"She Who Treads on Water": Sacred & Secular in Phoenician Art and Religion

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Scholars have written extensively on the relationship between colonization and the westward expansion of Phoenician religion. In particular, Brody has published an important monograph on the specialized religion of ancient Levantine seafarers, for whom the primary goddess was Asherah, taking into account textual evidence (such as her Ugaritic epithet), as well as the large number of shrines to Asherah that were set up in the western colonies. My proposed thesis will take this research one step further by considering a more nuanced, metaphysical connection between the cult of Asherah and the seafaring tradition of colonization in ancient Phoenicia. It will propose that Phoenician merchant ships were the embodiment of the goddess herself, who was known in Ugaritic texts as “she who treads on water.” This connection can be drawn from the trees themselves, which simultaneously provided material for ship construction while also occupying a central place in the sacred iconography and ritual practice of Asherah’s cult. In the process of colonizing the Mediterranean basin, the ships enabled the cult of Asherah to extend from the Levant as far west as the Iberian Peninsula (Figure 1).

The first chapter will discuss the historiography of Phoenician material culture with an introduction to the geographical setting of the Levantine coastal region occupied by the Phoenicians. Phoenician territory was situated between wooded mountains to the east and the open sea to the west. The Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountain ranges were covered with a variety of sturdy coniferous trees, including the famous Cedrus libani (Cedars of Lebanon) and Pinus nigra (black pine). Colonization was a direct product of this geographical setting, forcing the Phoenicians to settle westward, expanding across the Mediterranean Sea to islands such as Cyprus, Malta, Sardinia, Sicily, and Ibiza, as well as continental coastal areas such as Carthage in modern-day Tunisia, the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts of Morocco, and the south-eastern coast of Spain.

While there are very few Phoenician written records, secondary sources (e.g., Hebrew, Greek, and Latin texts) supply important information regarding Phoenician material goods and trade/exchange networks. In general, these sources reveal great appreciation for Phoenician exports, such as glassware, carved ivories, purple-dyed linens, in addition to a high regard for the Phoenician ships themselves. For example,

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5 Markus 2000, Aubet 1987. Assyrian occupation, as well as the two formidable mountain ranges, limited eastern expansion.
Phoenician purple-dyed linens are applauded in the *Iliad* and the Hebrew Bible. This specialized purple dye was made from the organisms inside the Murex shells, which are found along the Levantine coast. However, Hebrew, Greek, and Roman contemporaries put forth a very different view of Phoenician sacred art, such as Asherah poles (or *asherim*) and statues to Baal. These sculptures are described with extreme distaste, and when combined with the cultic activities surrounding the objects themselves, the texts expose xenophobic responses to Phoenician religious practice.

Significantly, at the advent of archaeology in the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, scholars continued to follow the same trend of developing a distinction between the sacred and secular in Phoenician material culture. Those objects classified as sacred are considered derivative if not vulgar, while those objects classified as secular are innovative and unique. This thesis will show that although that distinction has been drawn by historians for millennia, the sacred and secular become married when examining the Asherah cult and the ships that propagated her worship.

The second chapter will present a discussion of the cult of Asherah and its associated objects in Phoenicia during the Iron Age (ca. 1100 BC – 330 BC). The first

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7 Rawlinson 1889.
part of this chapter will focus on the cult in the homeland. This discussion will be based upon Hebrew and Ugaritic textual evidence, terracotta figurines, and other Asherah imagery from the archaeological record. On the one hand, Ugaritic texts, as mentioned previously, characterize Asherah as a seafarer, referring to the goddess as “she who treads on water” or “the lady who walks on water.” On the other hand, the Hebrew Bible mentions the goddess in association with wooded groves on mountainsides, or “high up places.” Therefore, the goddess was clearly connected with both trees and water. The second part of this chapter will explore the goddess’s cult in the Phoenician colonies of the western Mediterranean, where Asherah’s iconography and even her name were altered, but her rituals and sacred objects remained the same (Figure 2). This expansion is evidenced by the scores of stelae found all over the Mediterranean featuring simplified depictions of the goddess (Figure 2).

Chapter three will switch the focus to the secular side of Phoenician material culture, namely the merchant ships. As is commonly recognized, Phoenicians had a widely-held reputation for their maritime prowess. In the ancient world, Phoenician navigation and shipbuilding was highly regarded, as evidenced by Greek, Hebrew,

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8 Cornelius 2004.
9 For Asherah in the Hebrew Bible, see Reed 1949; 2 Kings 17:10; 2 Kings 23:13; Day 1986. For Asherah in Ugaritic, see Brody 1998; Perlman 1978: UT 51 (= CTA 4) col. I vs. 22, 28-31.
10 Vella 1998.
11 Ibid.

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Canaanite and Egyptian texts, as well as Assyrian relief panels (Figures 3 and 4).\textsuperscript{12} We know from these texts, in addition to excavated materials, that there were specific procedures for the construction of ships, including the precise kinds of wood that were used to enable quick and secure movement across the Mediterranean.\textsuperscript{13} Because of the materials that were readily available to them, Phoenicians tended to use cedar and pine for shipbuilding.\textsuperscript{14} The wood is strong but light, which was ideal for the construction of merchantmen, paving the way for westward expansion.\textsuperscript{15} As mentioned previously, these are the same trees that are associated with Asherah's "high-up places," growing in groves on the mountainsides.

Thus far the thesis will have provided a woven thread between the sacred and secular in ancient Phoenicia, despite the ancient (and modern) tradition of separating the two. As mentioned earlier, there was a demonstrable symbiotic relationship between cult and colonization; Phoenician forests, where outdoor sanctuaries to Asherah were located, were used to construct the ships that expanded the popularity of her worship beyond the Levantine coast. While the groves of trees housed the goddess cult in the homeland, they simultaneously allowed the expansion thereof into the colonies. A close

\textsuperscript{12} Herodotus; Porter 2002.
\textsuperscript{13} Ballard et al. 2002; Bass et al. 1989; Bass 2005.
\textsuperscript{14} Brown 1969. Both trees are hard woods that have a natural repellent from wood-boring torado worms in the sap.
\textsuperscript{15} Aubet 1987.
examination of the iconography also reveals this relationship. As is seen in Figure 2, the
goddess is shown with a crescent moon above her head. This same crescent moon was
found atop the masts of Phoenician merchantmen,\textsuperscript{16} not only referencing the
goddess, but embodying her. While the first part of this section will address the
enablement of the Asherah cult through colonization, the next section will discuss the
embodiment of the goddess herself. Ultimately, this thesis will provide evidence that the
merchant ships built by the Phoenicians were in fact the embodiment of the goddess.
The wooden vessels transported worshipers of Asherah across the Mediterranean via
her sacred trees, thus allowing the goddess to walk on water quite literally, holding true
to her epithet “she who treads on water.”

\textsuperscript{16} Brody 1998.
Bibliography


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Figure 1. Areas of the Mediterranean basin that were colonized by Phoenicians.
Figure 2. Symbol of Asherah/Tarit on a tophet stele with crescent above her head in Carthage, fourth century BC.
Figure 3. Detail of a relief panel featuring Phoenician boats hauling logs of *Cedrus libani* Palace of Sargon in Khorsabad, Eighth century BC (currently at the Louvre).
Figure 4. Detail of a relief panel featuring a Phoenician bireme fleeing Assyrian forces in Khorsabad, early seventh century BC.