

PUNIC MYTHOLOGY AND MEDICINE

CHARLES SAVONA-VENTURA researches the Punic culture in Malta about which little is known

The Phoenicians or Canaanites were an ancient Semitic people who from the fourth or beginning of the third millennium BC inhabited the eastern shores of the Mediterranean to the north of Mount Carmel, between Palestine and Syria. Throughout the history of the Phoenicians (including the western colony of Carthage), there is no literary evidence of Phoenician origin still extant, and hence our knowledge is derived from either archaeology or the writings of those who were their conquerors or their enemies. Unlike most ancient people, the Phoenicians were not primarily farmers, but already, from the beginning of their known history, some time after 2,900 BC, city dwellers and sailors. Phoenician ships carried their trade westwards to the



Ptah-Patecus "protector against noxious animals"

Mediterranean coasts and islands, sometimes substituting slave-raiding or piracy for trading, according to which yielded the best profit.

Situated in the central Mediterranean, the Maltese archipelago served as an important outpost for Phoenician seafarers. The earliest archaeological documentation for the Phoenician colonisation of Malta dates to the late 8th to early 7th century BC. The Phoenician seafarers initially limited themselves to the utilisation of the Islands as a port of call, but later gradually colonised the Islands. The most important of the North African colonies was Carthage, founded according to tradition in 814 BC as a result of a civil war that forced the population of Phoenicia to flee from Tyre. While the ties of the Phoenician colonies in the western Mediterranean with the mother country grew increasingly weaker, Carthage dominated the western Mediterranean until the city was finally destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC.

Thus the Phoenician influence on the Islands was continued under the Carthaginians (circa 550 BC) who followed the steady decline of Phoenicia under the Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires circa 574 BC. The archaeological record of this latter phase remains Punic in type, though a number of Hellenistic importations from Sicily and Southern Italy are increasingly noticeable. There is in addition archaeological evidence of an indirect Egyptian cultural connection. The Islands remained under Carthaginian rule until they were included under Roman dominion in 218 BC, though, in line with the generally tolerant policy towards the cultures of the subjected states, no pressure was made by the new rulers to undermine the Punic culture of the Maltese inhabitants and for a couple of centuries the Punic substratum can be detected in the archaeological record.

We know little about the distinguishing characteristics of the Punic civilisation, few traces of which remain. The Greeks credited the Phoenicians with the invention of the alphabet system of writing, and it seems likely that in the North Semitic languages, of which Phoenician and Hebrew were variants, lay the origin of the alphabets adapted by all Indo-European and Semitic languages. Phoenician literature certainly existed but has all disappeared like the language itself which seems to have persisted in some form up to the 3rd century AD. The Phoenician language was deciphered by Abbe' Barthelemy on the basis of inscriptions cut into two marble cippi found in Malta and preserved in the National Archaeological Museum of Malta and in the Louvre in Paris, the latter having been donated to Louis XIV by Grandmaster De Rohan.

Very little is known about the medical practices of the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, but it is recorded that one of the books of the Egyptian medical papyrus, the Ebers - written between 1550-1547 BC - was the work of an oculist from Babylos in Phoenicia. Though only partially deciphered, what we know of the book permits us to con-

jecture much more important knowledge than has been heretofore suspected in this Semitic race. They, and likewise the Carthaginians, believed that the daily hazards of existence were caused by a multitude of malevolent spirits who permeated the universe and intervened in natural processes. These spirits were thus responsible for the onset of disease. They were imagined as hideous grimacing beings that could be exorcised by the magical powers of amulets or by incantations written on small strips of papyrus. Ill-health was very closely related to religion. The supreme deities of the ancient Phoenician pantheon were the two gods El and Baal, and the two goddesses Anat and Astarte. There is definite evidence that the Maltese Punic population venerated at least two of these deities.

Ba`al (literally "lord") was an active god who bestowed fertility on the crops and controlled the weather. He was also considered to be the god of medicine since he was in eternal conflict with Muth - the god of death or infertility. Both Ba`al and Muth were sons of El (literally "god") - the supreme deity, god of wisdom - and his consort Asherat-of-the-sea. Ba`al did not appear in Phoenician mythology before the arrival of the Phoenicians on the Mediterranean coast. His worship was widely diffused amongst the Semitic people and was given several appellations. Ba`al Hammon or Melkart was the chief deity of Carthage, where he was depicted as a dignified old man with a beard, his head embellished with ram's horns. He was the sky-god and god of fertility. His cult spread into the islands of Malta, Sicily and Sardinia. An inscribed cippus, measuring 8x3x3 inches found near St. Dominic's Convent in Rabat, Malta dated to the 6th century BC, reads: "*stela of melk (a technical term of sacrificial holocaust of a child) to Ba`al set up by Nahun to the Lord Ba`al Hammon*". The twin cippi, which enabled the decipherment of the Phoenician alphabet, were a dedication to Melkart, the chief deity of Tyre, Phoenicia and Carthage. The inscription reads "*A vow from Abdosir, and his brother Osirxamar, sons of Oxirxamar, son of Abdosir, to my Lord Melkart, Lord of Tyre, that he may hear their words and bless them*". Claudius Ptolemeus (Ptolemy), the 2nd AD writer, mentions a temple in the southern region of Malta dedicated to Melkart (Hercules). Thought to have been situated at the Tas-Silg or Borg in-Nadur area, archaeological excavations have shown that these sites had different functions, and the locality of the Melkart's temple remains unknown.

Child sacrifice at specialised sacrificial centres known as 'tophets' was a practice well established by the Carthaginians in order to appease the Punic gods Ba`al Hammon and Astarte (Tanit). It was also practised by later cultures, such as the Romans and the Greeks. Sites of sacrificial centres have been unearthed through excavation in all the major ex-Phoenician colonial sites of the Western Mediterranean. Most of the sites surrounding the Maltese archipelago, including Sicily, Sardinia and Tunisia, have tophets. The inscription from Rabat suggests that Malta



Horus "god of life"

similarly had a sacrificial centre and that the Phoenician elements in the Maltese Islands did indulge in child sacrifice in times of crisis. In a similar situation, Diodorus Siculus, a Sicilian-Greek historian writing about 45 BC, gave an account of the sacrifice of 500 children in 310 BC when the city of Carthage was under attack by the Sicilian Greeks. Excavations at the shrine of Tanit at Salamambo (near Carthage) have revealed cinerary urns containing the cremated remains of young children. These child sacrificial rites served to appease the deities whose domain over fertility ensured survival of the community by ensuring adequate agricultural production thus preventing drought and famine. Appeasement of these powerful deities also ensured that adverse situations, including disease, did not affect the individuals or community.

Ptolemy also described a sanctuary dedicated to the female divinity Astarte, known also as Ashtar, Ishtar (to the Babylonians), Ashtoreth (to the Hebrews), Tanit (to the Carthaginians) and Juno (to the Romans). This sanctuary is also mentioned by Cicero. The locality of this sanctuary has now been established at Tas-Silg at Marsaxlokk, Malta where excavations carried out by the Italian Archaeological Mission from the University of Rome in the 1960's revealed several scores of inscriptions invoking the goddess. Astarte was the goddess of fertility



Bes 'protector of expectant women'

of the Semitic races. Her domain embraced all nature, vegetable and animal as well as human. Afterwards she became the goddess of love in its noblest aspect as well as in its most degraded.

The Punic culture in Malta showed evidence of cultural links to Egyptian mythology. Thus Egyptian fertility-related deities are known to have been venerated by the Punic Maltese. Talismans in the form of faience amulet figurines representing Bes and Toueris have been excavated from tombs in Malta and Gozo. Bes, an African deity by origin, was a popular god known also in Egypt and western Asia. He was a frightening dwarf with bow-legs, a prominent belly, and an animal-like face with bulging eyes. He was frequently clothed with a panther skin with claws, had a wild head-dress, and wore a metal disc around his neck. This made him a veritable collection of apotropaic implements, and he was better equipped than anybody else to frighten away and chase off evil spirits and neutralise the evil eye. People therefore had him

around whenever they felt particularly exposed to the spirits, and the parturient woman was considered to be at particular risk of falling prey to evil spirits because of her weakness and preoccupation. Bes thus presided over childbearing and was considered as a protector of expectant mothers. He was also a marriage-god and presided over the toilet of women.

Toueris was another popular protective Egyptian goddess of childbirth, and symbolised maternity and suckling. She herself had given birth to the world. Toueris was represented as a female hippopotamus with pendant mammae standing upright on her back legs and holding the hieroglyphic sign of protection in one paw and the sign of life in the other.

Besides the faience amulets depicting Bes and Toueris found at Tal-Horob, Xewkija, Gozo, other amulets depicting the Ugiat, Ptah-Patecus and Amon-Ra - king of the gods, creator of the universe - were excavated. The deity



Ouaz "symbol of rebirth"



Djed "symbol of stability"

Ptah-Patecus is here depicted in his alternative form as a deformed dwarf with twisted legs, hands on hips and a huge head shaved except for the childish lock. Thus represented, Ptah plays the role of protector against noxious animals and against all kinds of evil.

The Punic Maltese were concerned not only with birth and fertility, but also with death. In Phoenician mythology, Death was conceived as a supernatural power called Muth. This was however never worshipped because it played no part in any Phoenician religious cult. The Phoenicians believed in an afterlife and in the long sea-voyage that led the deceased to the world of the dead. These beliefs are evidenced by the care given to their tombs containing grave-goods and the Egyptian-style talismans associated with death. A sixth century BC bronze amulet sheath containing a small rolled-up piece of papyrus bearing a Phoenician inscription with a representation to Isis was found in a tomb at Tal-Virtu, limits of Rabat, Malta. The sheath with a cover in the form of a falcon's head representing Horus - the Egyptian solar divinity - belongs to a distinct class manufactured in rigid imitation of Egyptian prototypes and widely diffused in Phoenicia and its colonies. The inscription has been translated to read "*laugh at your enemy O valiant ones, scorn, assail and crush your adversaryd disdain (him), trample (him) on the waters;moreover prostate (him)on*

the sea, bind (him), hang (him)". These are the words of Isis - the sorrowing wife and eternal mother, protectress of the dead - addressed to the deceased which ensured her assistance for an unflinching victory over a mythical adversary barring the way to the afterlife. Isis is in the papyrus represented bearing a throne upon her head, the ideogram of her name. In the various Egyptian medical texts, Isis is shown to have held an important place in the pantheon of healing dieties. Her legend is full of episodes of magic cures, and repeatedly she appears as the great magician whose counsel is the breath of life, whose sayings drive out sickness, and whose word gives life to him whose breath is failing. Isis was adopted by the Romans when she was considered a healing goddess, discoverer of drugs, versed in the art of curing people who flocked to her temples, lying down in the halls, expecting to be delivered of their ailments by the goddess in their sleep.

Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, was the falcon-headed sky god. The mythical story of his fight with Seth, established Horus as the god of the sun and god of life and of all good. During his battle against Seth, Horus has his eye gouged out. This was later restored by the deity Thoth. The eye of Horus (the Ugiat) remained a magical talisman for health throughout Egyptian history. The British Museum Medical Papyrus written at the end of the XVI-IIth Dynasty (circa 14th century BC) records how the



Horus “god of life” and Anubis “god of embalming”

Ugiat was invoked while applying a remedy to diseased eyes with the following charm recited four times. *“This Eye of Horus created by the spirits of Heliopolis, which Thoth has brought from Hermopolis – from the great hall in Heliopolis, - in Pe, - in Dep, sayest thou to it: ‘Welcome, thou splendid Eye of Horus, - thou content of the Eye of Horus – brought to drive out evil of the god, the evil of goddess, the demon, male and female, the dead, male and female, the enemy, male and female, who have insinuated themselves into the eyes of the sick under my fingers. – Protection, behind me protection, come protection!’”* Horus had also been stung by a deadly scorpion and was saved by the powerful spells of the gods. He thus was considered to have himself acquired special facilities to cure people bitten by venomous animals.

There have been several amulets depicting the Ugiat excavated from various sites in Malta and Gozo (eg. the faience amulets excavated from Tal-Horob, Xewkija, Gozo in 1951 dated c.5th-4th century BC). A gold amulet excavated from Ghajn Klieb, west of Rabat, Malta depicts the figure of falcon-headed Horus and jackal-headed Anubis. The two figures were in antiquity soldered together at

the base and the top. In spite of their strikingly Egyptian appearance, the figures are considered to be very probably of eastern Phoenician manufacture. Anubis was the Egyptian deity who presided over the embalming of the dead. The name signifies watcher and guardian of the dogs. He presided over the abode of the dead, led the deceased to the judgement hall and supervised the weighing of the heart. Amulets depicting ibis-headed or dog-headed ape Thoth have also been found in Maltese tombs. In the introduction to the Ebers Papyrus, it is stated that *“I (Re, the sun god) will save him from his enemies, and Thoth shall be his guide, he who lets writing speak and has composed books; he gives to the skilful, to the physicians who accompany him, skill to cure.”* Thoth was considered a great physician and magician acting as physician to the god Horus. He was regarded as the god of magic, and was the arbiter between the gods and had the knowledge needed by the dead to pass safely through the underworld.

Related to the cult of the afterlife were faience amulets depicting the Djed and Ouaz pillars dated to the 7th-6th

century BC excavated from Bingemma near Rabat, Malta. The Djed pillar, symbol of stability, seemingly originated from the form of a column of bound papyrus was a simple fetish representing Osiris - god of the dead. Osiris gave his devotees the hope of an eternally happy life in another world ruled over by a just and good king. The Ouaz pillar derived from the form of the lotus flower was the symbol of rebirth.

The medical practices and outlook of the Punic Maltese were based on magico-superstitious concepts. Internal disease was considered to be the result of a malevolent influence exercised by a supernatural being or human enemy. This belief that internal disease and death were brought on by malevolent spirits accounts for the use of amulets aimed at warding off disease and appeasing the gods. The use of amulets in Malta had been in vogue since prehistoric times, but their format took on a more religious oriented one with the advent of the Punic Semitic culture. It was only the philosophical rational movement initiated by the Greek philosophers that led to the development of more empirico-rational medical concepts based on theory that health depended upon a perfect harmony of the body humours. This philosophical-type medical practice was to reach dogmatic acceptance by the Christian Church, an attitude that was to postpone medical research for several centuries until the Renaissance.

Charles Savona-Ventura is a Consultant Obstetrician-Gynaecologist with a special interest in diabetic pregnancies. He has written extensively on Medical History, archaeology and the natural sciences.

Indigo Bookstore

for the latest

Melitensia

titles on the market



71, Misrah Il-Barrieri, Msida
Tel: 21239356, 21239359. Fax: 21239349

e-mail: indigo@vol.net.mt