Tanit of Carthage
by Johanna Stuckey

When I was in Malta with a group in 1992, I got permission from the archaeological museum to visit the excavations at Tas Sīlg,[1] a promontory overlooking the picturesque harbor of Marsaxlokk. Not far outside the gate to the excavations, we could see the small church of Our Lady of the Hail on part of the hill. The excavations were at that time overgrown, fragrant with herbs and full of small lizards, but the dark-red and grey mosaic floor under my feet gave witness to an earlier glory. I was standing on part of the huge sanctuary that had covered the hill. It had been dedicated, variously, to Phoenician Astarte, possibly to Carthaginian Tanit, to Greek Hera, and to Roman Juno Caelestis. I climbed over the exposed

---

Tanit, with a pill-box crown, the "polos." She is dressed in a robe in the Greek style. Her jewelry consists of a glass-paste necklace with graduated beads, and gold earrings. Her arms are in what was probably a "blessing" position, and they have some limited movement. A number of other figurines like this came from Ibiza. Terracotta. Half life-size. Fifth-fourth century BCE. Found in the Punic graveyard of Puig des Molins, Ibiza, Spain (The Phoenicians settled in Spain around 650 BCE.) Archaeological Museum, Barcelona.

Phoenician walls to where the remains of a megalithic temple were quite recognizable. When the archaeologists dug into that area, they found a damaged but splendid statue of one of the so-called “fat ladies” of Malta. So, from the megalithic temple of about 3000 BCE to the Virgin Mary chapel of today, Tas Šilg has continued to be sacred to goddesses.

The heyday of the great temple began when the Carthaginians gained control of the Maltese archipelago in the 6th century BCE. Over the next 300 years, the temple, now belonging to Astarte and Tanit, grew in grandeur and wealth until, in 218 BCE, the Carthaginians lost Malta to the Romans. As was their custom, the Romans identified the local goddess with their Juno Caelestis and expanded the sanctuary on a grand scale, with a monumental gateway and magnificent mosaic floors. This rich and flourishing temple complex was certainly the world-famous sanctuary to Juno that Roman orator Cicero accused Caius Verres of pillaging while governor of Sicily and Malta, between 73 and 71 BCE. Despite Verres’s depredations, the temple survived well into our era, still dedicated to Tanit’s Roman counterpart, Juno Caelestis.

The great Carthaginian goddess Tanit is definitely still a puzzle. We do know that she was the tutelary or protector goddess of the city of Carthage, originally a Phoenician colony in North Africa (Aubet 2001: 343). However, scholars are still undecided on the spelling and meaning of her name, her origins, her personality and powers, and, most of all, the question of her having been the prime recipient of child sacrifices at Carthage and elsewhere in the Punic (Carthaginian) and Phoenician world.\(^2\)

In the closely related Semitic dialects Phoenician and Punic,\(^3\) the goddess’s name was written \(\text{tnt}\) (Lipiński 1995: 199). Scholars have rendered it diversely as Tanit, Tannit, Tanit(h), Tennit, or Tinnit. However, its meaning is still disputed. One explanation is that it comes from the Semitic root “to lament” and so signifies “She Who Weeps,” perhaps for a disappearing (dying) god like Adonis (Lipiński 1995: 199; Lipiński in Lipiński 1992: 438). Yet other scholars translate Tanit as “Dragon or Serpent Lady.” This would be an example of an epithet “later
personified as a distinct goddess” (Meyers 1997: IV, 316). “Tanit,” according to this theory, derived from the same root as Tannin, the snaky, dragon-like sea monster of Canaanite myth and the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 51: 9; Ezekiel 29: 3-5) (Olyan 1988: 53-54 note 63). The first to make this suggestion was F. M. Cross, and he also argued that Tanit began as an epithet of the Canaanite goddess Asherah (1973:32-33; Olyan 1988: 58).

---

Head of goddess Tanit on coin from Carthage, her city. Such coins often had a war (?) horse on one side. Tanit's elaborate coiffure is held in place by a band of what looks like plaited grain. She wears earrings and two necklaces. Coin probably produced during the Second Punic War, 218-202 BCE, when Carthaginian general Hannibal crossed the Alps and invaded Italy. British Museum. Electrum. 14 mm in diameter, 2.76 g in weight. Drawing © S. Beaulieu, after a photograph at http://www.worldtimelines.org.uk/.

---

Not surprisingly, most scholars treat Tanit as having come from the Phoenician mainland — as a descendant of one or more of the great Canaanite goddesses. Many think she was a Punic version of Astarte (Hardin 1963:87-88), but in some temples the two were clearly separate deities, though related (Ahlström 1986: 312; Betlyon 1985: 53-54). Some argue that her name is a version of Anat (Hvidberg-Hansen 1986: 178; Albright 1968: 42ff.). A few others see her as either originating in North Africa or being a combination of an indigenous North African goddess with one or more of the Phoenician/Canaanite deities (Ben Khader and Soren 1987: 44-45). An older explanation connects Tanit with the Egyptian goddess Neith (Olyan 1988: 54 note 63).

---

Small figure of a Phoenician

The Greeks called her Tenneith or Tinnith and,
lady or priestess wearing long robe and cloak, part of which she holds in her left hand. Her jewelry consists of earrings, two necklaces, and what looks like a wrap-round snaky bracelet. Her ornate coiffure is held back by headbands, and she wears sandals. Likely an ornament or handle of a large cult vessel. From Golgoi, Cyprus. Seventh century BCE. Drawing © S. Beaulieu, after Harden 1963: Plate 71.

as mentioned above, identified her with Hera, while the Romans named her Juno Caelestis. The Syrian who became Roman emperor (203-222 CE) under the name Elegabalus, which means “God of the Mountain” (Baal Hamon “Lord of Mt. Amanus?”), identified his empress with Juno Caelestis. He took her statue to Rome, where he built a temple for her on the Capitoline Hill next to that of Juno Moneta (Benko 2004: 33). So, as Caelestis, Tanit was worshiped in Rome. (Benko 2004: 30-33). She was also identified with Artemis and Persephone (Lipiński 1995:205).

From the evidence of archaeology, there can be no doubt that Tanit was a very popular goddess in Phoenician settlements in the West. However, today there is evidence that Tanit was known and worshiped in Phoenician proper. A tantalizing Carthaginian inscription found in 1898 read “To the Lady [Chief] Ashtart and Tanit in lbnn [Lebanon?],” but scholars were unsure what lbnn meant[4](Bordreuil 1987; Cross 1973: 30). However, an ivory plaque solved the problem. The plaque, found in an 8th century BCE temple at Phoenician Sarepta, was dedicated to “Tanit and Astarte.” This constituted the first evidence that Tanit was worshiped in the Phoenician homeland, especially what is now Lebanon (Bordreuil 1987: 81). Before that find, Tanit was thought to be a strictly western and Carthaginian goddess (Aubet 2001: 68).

In 1971, a fisherman hauled in a group of figurines from the seabed off the coast of Israel. He had come upon a shipwreck dated to the 5th century BCE carrying, among other things, what turned out to be more than 400 mold-made terracotta figurines. From the “sign of Tanit” on the bases of some of them, scholars have identified them as representing Tanit. They were probably destined for one of the Phoenician temples, to be sold to worshipers as offerings or keepsakes (Meyers 1997: V, 17-18).

One of Astarte’s titles at ancient Ugarit in Syria and in Phoenicia was Shem Baal (shm b’l) “Name of Baal,” and it is interesting that Pane Baal (pn b’l) “Face [or Presence] of Baal” was a Tanit epithet in Punic inscriptions. It might have indicated that Tanit represented Baal (Hamon) in some way (Seow in Toorn et al. 1999: 322). In addition, in one 5th-century BCE inscription, Astarte was also called Pane Baal (Betlyon 1985: 54). However, Edward Lipiński, who thinks the epithet tnt signifies “She Who Weeps,” suggests that Tanit Pane Baal meant “Pleureuse en face de Baal” — “Weeper in the Presence of Baal” (1995: 2003). Undoubtedly, Tanit and Astarte were closely connected.
Tanit and Asherah may have been associated as well (Brody 1998: 30). A later title of Tanit, rabat “Chief,” usually translated “Lady,” was also one of Asherah’s epithets and indicated the supreme status of both goddesses (Ribichini in Toorn et al. 1999: 340).

In Carthage at the height of her power and elsewhere in the Punic world, Tanit’s consort was Baal Ham(m)on, “Lord of Mt. Amanus,” identified with...
Canaanite high god El and later with Zeus (Clifford 1990: 61-62; Olyan 1988: 5). The Romans, however, equated him with their god Saturnus (Brody 1998: 22).

Inscriptions before the 5th century BCE were usually dedicated to Baal Hamon alone. After the fifth century Tanit Pane Baal had joined him in the dedications and soon was being mentioned first. One example, from Carthage, reads: “To the Lady Tanit Face [Presence] of Baal and the Lord Baal Hammon, offering made by Bodashtart son of Hamilcar, son of Abdmelcart, son of Bodashtart, because he heard his prayer” (quoted from Harden 1963: 120). Not long into the 5th century BCE, Tanit seems to have supplanted Baal Hamon as main deity of Carthage, at least in the religion of ordinary folk.

The details of Tanit’s nature and powers are not really clear. Like Astarte, she had a complex personality (Markoe 2000:130). First and foremost, she was the mother deity of Carthage, protector of the city and provider of fertility. As such she seems to have been a deity of good fortune. Goddess of the heavens, she was often associated with the moon (Benko 2004: 23). Like Asherah, she had maritime connections and was a patron of sailors (Brody 1998: 32-33; Betlyon 1985: 54). There is also some indication that she had a warlike nature, as we would expect of the protector of a city (Ahlström 1986: 311).

On carvings, Tanit’s presence was often signaled by dolphins or other fish as befitted her patronage of sailors. Fertility symbols also abounded: pomegranates, palm trees, bunches of grapes, grain, leaves, and flowers. Indicators of her celestial connections were the crescent moon and sun. A caduceus entwined with what look like snakes might refer to Tanit as “She of the Snake” or, as one scholar has suggested, it might be a stylized version of Asherah’s sacred tree (Carter 1987: 378). Often, dove-like birds appear (Benko 2004: 24; Moscati 1999: 139). On some stelae an enigmatic open hand might suggest the delivery of a blessing (Azize 2007:196). In addition, Tanit was depicted in winged form in a cult cave on the Spanish island of Ibiza (Lipiński 1995:424-425; Ferrer 1970).

Many stelae feature the so-called “Sign of Tanit,” perhaps a stylized human body, formed by a triangle topped with a circle, the two shapes being separated by a horizontal line usually with upturned ends. Sometimes it also included a crescent (moon?). Since the circle occasionally had a human face sketched on it, the “Sign of Tanit” is generally accepted as representing the goddess, though some think the circle to be the disk of the full moon (Lipiński 1995: 206-215).
A huge sanctuary, a central feature of the city of Carthage, was probably dedicated to Tanit and her consort (Markoe 2000: 136). Its oldest level dated to the 8th century BCE. It was razed when the Romans finally defeated the Carthaginians in 146 BCE. In rebuilt Roman Carthage, the magnificent shrine to Juno Caelestis was “one of the greatest and most influential sanctuaries” in the Empire (Benko 2004: 23). Christian sources reported that the temple was the most public space in Carthage and
was still being used in the time of St. Augustine (353-430 CE), a native of the city (Benko 2004: 35-36). The temple was converted to a Christian church in 399 CE and was destroyed and turned into a Christian cemetery in 421 CE (Benko 2004: 41).[6]

Scholars still dispute the conditions under which fetuses, infants, or children were sacrificed to deities. As elsewhere, human sacrifice seems to have been practiced in the Phoenician world in times of crisis (Aubet 2001: 246ff.). However, according to a number of Greek and, later, Christian writers, the Carthaginians regularly sacrificed their children to Baal-Hamon. Later, Tanit also received the grisly offerings. Adding to the gruesome reputation of the Phoenicians, the Hebrew Bible forbade the Israelites from burning their sons and daughters “as an offering to Molech” (2 Kings 23: 10). Such sacrifices took place at sites called “tophets” (Jeremiah 7: 31). A deity named Malik or Malek, probably originally an epithet meaning “king,” existed in the ancient Near East, since the word occurs as a theophoric or “god-bearing” element in names at Ebla, Mari, Ugarit, Phoenicia, and elsewhere (Müller in van der Toorn et al. 1999: 538-542; Lipiński 1995: 227-229; Heider 1985: 401).

Stela from the "tophet" at Carthage. It shows a priest or worshiper wearing a tight outfit (or perhaps naked with bands wound round his body?) and with a pill-box hat on his head. His right arm is raised in a gesture of worship or blessing, and he carries a small child in his left arm. In the imagery above him there are two fishes (dolphins?) and a sun with crescent -- all seem to point to Tanit as the deity being honored. This stela has traditionally been interpreted as the ritual preliminary to child sacrifice, with the priest’s carrying a living
There is little or no evidence that Malik required human sacrifice. The “Molech” in the Hebrew Bible is likely the same name presented with the vowels of the Hebrew word *boshet* meaning “shame” (Weinfeld 1972: 149). On the other hand, archaeologists have unearthed sacred enclosures in a number of Carthaginian cities that were extensive cemeteries. They contained the burnt remains of extremely young humans and animals interred in urns and usually marked with stelae, sometimes ornate, sometimes with inscriptions. Many of the inscriptions described the deposit as a *molk*, now understood as a kind of offering (Weinfeld 1972: 135 ff.). The recipient of *molk* offerings was originally Baal-Hamon alone and, later, Tanit joined him. Archaeologists began calling the cemeteries “tophets” and interpreting the contents of the urns as burnt sacrifices (Brown 1991: 14; Stager and Wolff 1984: 2). Because so many inscriptions mentioned Tanit, the “tophet” at Carthage became regarded as the “precinct” of the goddess (Aubet 2001: 250). Tanit was then seen as demanding child sacrifice.
The cemetery at Carthage was in use from around 700 BCE to 146 BCE. It contained over 20,000 urns holding the cremated bones of young humans and animals, 80% of which were fetuses or neonates (Aubet 2001: 251-252; Schwartz 1993:49). The accepted scholarship agrees with the excavators that the bones are the result of thousands of sacrifices, especially since the inscriptions were mostly votive; that is, they indicated that the depositors owed the deities a return for a favor. An example of such an inscription is: “To our lady, to Tanit . . . and to our lord, to Ba’al Hammon, that which was vowed . . . ” (Stager and Wolff 1984). The interpretation that the vow entailed the infant in the urn may not be correct, but it is generally advanced.

The physical anthropologist Jeffrey Schwartz had a different idea about the meaning of the cemetery. He carried out extensive studies of the bones from Carthage’s “tophet.” He pointed out that burials of infants and young children were very rare at Carthage, except in the “tophet,” and that 95% of the burials outside the “tophet” consisted of older children, teenagers, and adults. He concluded that the site was a graveyard for the very young, aborted fetuses, stillborn babies, and newborns who had died of natural causes (1993: 53-56). This explanation makes sense, even in the interpretation of inscriptions. Carthaginian parents would probably have wanted to entrust their dead babies to protective deities, particularly a kindly, motherly goddess, whom they might ask for another child.
In summary, I tend to understand Tanit as originally an epithet of the Canaanite goddess Asherah. Over time, the title became the name of a goddess in her own right. She retained many of the characteristics of her predecessor and added others from the goddesses in the complex world she inhabited. Although, in times of crisis, Tanit and her consort might have received human sacrifices (normally, young adults), the motherly goddess, giver of fertility, would have been very unlikely to ask for the sacrifice of a baby. Rather, the grieving parents gave the baby back to the goddess for safekeeping, in hope of future progeny.

Notes

1. The Maltese word Šilg, pronounced “Silge,” as in English “bilge,” means “Hail.” The hill’s name came from the small, still functioning, Christian church on the south side of the hill. The Normans, who took Malta over in 1090, built the chapel and dedicated it to their favorite manifestation of the Virgin Mary, “Our Lady of the Snows.” Malta has no snow, frost, or ice, but it does sometimes experience hail, hence the name. Marsaxlokk is pronounced “Marsa-shlock.”

2. Punic comes from the Roman word Punicus meaning “Phoenician” (Lipiński 1995:22), but usually, in modern historical writing, it refers to Carthage, as in the “Punic Wars” between Rome and Carthage.

3. The Phoenician/Punic language is represented in over 6000 inscriptions, many dedicatory, almost all originating from elite sources (Clifford 1990: 55). So far no texts containing extended passages of Phoenician mythology have been found.

4. Hardin translates it “white mountain,” and points out that it does not necessarily
indicate “the Syrian Lebanon” (1963: 88).
5. Lipiński says that the dolphin represented “maternity” (2003: 303).
6. One of the best preserved temples to Juno Caelestis/Tanit in North Africa is at Dougga (Golvin and Khanoussi 2005).

**Bibliography**

Leuven, Belgium: Peeters
- Oyan, Saul M. 1988. Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel. Atlanta, GA: Scholars

Graphics Credits to be done
- All images © Stéphane Beaulieu. All rights reserved.

Copyright / Terms of Use: Contributors retain the copyright to their work; please do not take art or words without the author's or artist's permission. Other graphics and reference materials are used and attributed as per the Fair Use Provision of The Copyright Act and individual terms of use.

MatriFocus Cross-Quarterly is a seasonal web journal (zine) for Goddess Women and others interested in Goddess Lore and Scholarship, Goddess Religion (ancient and contemporary), Feminist Spirituality, Women's Mysteries, Paganism and Neopaganism, Earth-based Religions, Witchcraft, Dianic Wicca and other Wiccan Traditions, the Priestess Path, Goddess Art, Women's Culture, Women's Health, Natural Healing, Mythology, Female Shamanism, Consciousness, Community, Cosmology, and Women's Creativity.