

MELKART



Statues from the Temple of Melqart in Cadiz otive

Melqart

Melgart (Greek disposed of the letter Q (Qoppa), replacing it with additional use of K (Kappa) and G (Gamma)), Akkadian Milqartu, was tutelary god of the Phoenician city of Tyre as Eshmun protected Sidon. Melqart was often titled Baʿl Šūr "Lord of Tyre", the ancestral king of the royal line. In Greek, by interpretatio graeca he was identified with Heracles and referred to as the Tyrian Herakles. Melqart was venerated in Phoenician and Punic cultures from Syria to Spain. The first occurrence of the name is in a ninth-century BCE stela inscription found in 1939 north of Aleppo in northern Syria, the "Ben-Hadad" inscription, erected by the son of the king of Arma, "for his lord Melqart, which he vowed to him and he heard his voice".

Cult: literary testimony

Melqart is likely to have been the particular Ba'al found in the Tanach,^[3] whose worship was prominently introduced into Israel by King Ahab and largely eradicated by King Jehu. In 1 Kings 18.27 it is possible there is a mocking reference to legendary Heracleian journeys made by the god and to the annual egersis ("awakening") of the god:

And it came to pass at noon that Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry out loud: for he is a god; either he is lost in thought, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened."

The Hellenistic novelist Heliodorus of Emesa in his *Aethiopica* refers to the dancing of Tyrian sailors in honor of the Tyrian Heracles: "Now they leap spiritedly into the air, now they bend their knees to the ground and revolve on them like persons possessed."

The historian Herodotus recorded (2.44):

In the wish to get the best information that I could on these matters, I made a voyage to Tyre in Phoenicia, hearing there was a temple of Heracles at that place, very highly venerated. I visited the temple, and found it richly adorned with a number of offerings, among which were two pillars, one of pure gold, the other of smaragdus, shining with great brilliancy at night. In a conversation which I held with the priests, I inquired how long their temple had been built, and found by their answer that they, too, differed from the Hellenes. They said that the temple was built at the same time that the city was founded, and that the foundation of the city took place 2,300 years ago. In Tyre I remarked another temple where the same god was worshipped as the Thasian Heracles. So I went on to Thasos, where I found a temple of Heracles which had been built by the Phoenicians who colonised that island when they sailed in search of Europa. Even this was five generations earlier than the time when Heracles, son of Amphitryon, was born in Hellas. These researches show plainly that there is an ancient god Heracles; and my own opinion is that those Hellenes act most wisely who build and maintain two temples of Heracles, in the one of which the Heracles worshipped is known by the name of Olympian, and has sacrifice offered to him as an immortal, while in the other the honours paid are such as are due to a hero.

Josephus records (*Antiquities* 8.5.3), following Menander the historian, concerning King Hiram I of Tyre (c. 965–935 BCE):

He also went and cut down materials of timber out of the mountain called Lebanon, for the roof of temples; and when he had pulled down the ancient

temples, he both built the temple of Heracles and that of `Ashtart; and he was the first to celebrate the awakening (egersis) of Heracles in the month Peritius. The Macedonian month of Peritius corresponds to our February, indicating this annual awakening was in no way a solstitial celebration. It would have coincided with the normal ending of the winter rains. The annual observation of the revival of Melqart's "awakening" may identify Melqart as a life-death-rebirth deity.

Archaeological evidence

Archaeological evidence for Melqart's cult is found earliest in Tyre and seems to have spread westward with the Phoenician colonies established by Tyre as well as eventually overshadowing the worship of Eshmun in Sidon. The name of Melqart was invoked in oaths sanctioning contracts, according to Dr. Aubet,^[5] thus it was customary to build a temple to Melqart, as protector of Tyrian traders, in each new Phoenician colony: at Cádiz, the temple to Melqart is as early as the earliest vestiges of Phoenician occupation. (The Greeks followed a parallel practice in respect to Heracles.) Carthage even sent a yearly tribute of 10% of the public treasury to the god in Tyre up until the Hellenistic period. In Tyre, the high priest of Melqart ranked second only to the king. Many names in Carthage reflected this importance of Melqart, for example, the names Hamilcar and Bomilcar; but Ba`l "Lord" as a name-element in Carthaginian names such as Hasdrubal and Hannibal almost certainly does not refer to Melqart but either to Ba`al Hammon, chief god of Carthage, a god identified by Greeks with Cronus and by Romans with Saturn, or is simply used as a title. Melqart protected the Punic areas of Sicily such as Ras Melqart 'Cape of Melqart', where his head, indistinguishable from a Heracles, appears on locally-minted coins of the fourth century BCE.

Temple sites

Temples to Melqart are found at least three Phoenician/Punic sites in Spain: Cádiz, Ibiza in the Balearic Islands and Cartagena. Near Gades/Gádeira (modern Cádiz) was the westernmost temple of Tyrian Heracles, near the eastern shore of the island (Strabo 3.5.2–3). Strabo notes (3.5.5–6) that the two bronze pillars within the temple, each 8 cubits high, were widely proclaimed to be the true Pillars of Heracles by many who had visited the place and had sacrificed to Heracles there. Strabo believes the account to be fraudulent, in part noting that the inscriptions on those pillars mentioned nothing about Heracles, speaking only of the expenses occurred by the Phoenicians in their making. Another temple to Melqart was at Ebyssus (Ibiza), in one of four Phoenician sites on the island's south coast. In 2004

a highway crew in the Avinguda Espanya, (one of the main routes into Ibiza), uncovered a further Punic temple in the excavated roadbed. Texts found mention Melqart among other Punic gods Eshmun, Astarte and Baʿl. Another Iberian temple to Melqart has been identified at Carthago Nova (Cartagena). The Tyrian god's protection extended to the sacred promontory (Cape Saint Vincent) of the Iberian peninsula, the westernmost point of the known world, ground so sacred it was forbidden even to spend the night.

Hannibal and Melqart

Hannibal was a faithful worshiper of Melqart: the Roman historian Livy records the legend^[6] that just before setting off on his march to Italy he made a pilgrimage to Gades, the most ancient seat of Phoenician worship in the west. Hannibal strengthened himself spiritually by prayer and sacrifice at the Altar of Melqart. He returned to New Carthage with his mind focused on the god and on the eve of departure to Italy he saw a strange vision which he believed was sent by Melqart.^[citation needed]

A youth of divine beauty appeared to Hannibal in the night. The youth told Hannibal he had been sent by supreme deity, Melqart, to guide the son of Hamilcar to Italy. "Follow me," said the ghostly visitor, "and see that that thou look not behind thee." Hannibal followed the instructions of the visitor. His curiosity, however, overcame him, and as he turned his head, Hannibal saw a serpent crashing through forest and thicket causing destruction everywhere. It moved as a black tempest with claps of thunder and flashes of lightning gathered behind the serpent. When Hannibal asked the meaning of the vision Melqart replied, "What thou beholdest is the desolation of Italy. Follow thy star and inquire no farther into the dark counsels of heaven."^[citation needed]

Mythology: Greek

It is generally suspected that the Greek Melicertes son of Ino was in origin a reflection of Melqart^[citation needed] though no classical source explicitly connects the two. Athenaeus (392d) summarizes a story by Eudoxus of Cnidus (c. 355 BCE) telling how Heracles the son of Zeus by Asteria (= 'Ashtart ?) was killed by Typhon in Libya. Heracles' companion Iolaus brought a quail to the dead god (presumably a roasted quail) and its delicious scent roused Heracles back to life. This purports to explain why the Phoenicians sacrifice quails to Heracles. It seems that Melqart had a companion similar to the Hellenic Iolaus. Sanchuniathon also makes Melqart

under the name Malcarthos or Melcathros the son of Hadad who is normally identified with Zeus. The Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions (10.24) speaks of the tombs of various gods including "that of Heracles at Tyre, where he was burnt with fire." The Hellenic Heracles also died on a pyre, but the event was located on Mount Oeta in Trachis. A similar tradition is recorded by Dio Chrysostom (Or. 33.47) who mentions the beautiful pyre which the Tarsians used to build for their Heracles, referring here to the Cilician god Sandan.

To be sure, in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* (40.366–580) the Tyrian Heracles is very much a sun god. However there is a tendency in the later Hellenistic and Roman periods for almost all gods to develop solar attributes and for almost all eastern gods to be identified with the sun. Nonnus gives the title *Astrochiton* 'Starclad' to Tyrian Heracles and has his Dionysus recite a hymn to this Heracles, saluting him as: the son of Time, he who causes the threefold image of the Moon, the all-shining Eye of the heavens. Rain is ascribed to the shaking from his head of the waters of the his bath in the eastern Ocean. His sun disk is praised as the cause of growth in plants. Then, in a climactic burst of syncretism, Dionysus identifies the Tyrian Heracles with Belus on the Euphrates, Ammon in Libya, Apis by the Nile, Arabian Cronus, Assyrian Zeus, Serapis, Zeus of Egypt, Cronus, Phaethon, Mithras, Delphic Apollo, Gamos 'Marriage', and Paeon 'Healer'.

The Tyrian Heracles answers by appearing to Dionysus. There is red light in the fiery eyes of this shining god who clothed in a robe embroidered like the sky (presumably with various constellations). He has yellow, sparkling cheeks and a starry beard. The god reveals how he taught the primeval, earthborn inhabitants of Phoenicia how to build the first boat and instructed them to sail out to a pair of floating, rocky islands. On one of the islands there grew an olive tree with a serpent at its foot, an eagle at its summit, and which glowed in the middle with fire that burned but did not consume. Following the god's instructions, these primeval humans sacrificed the eagle to Poseidon, Zeus, and the other gods. Thereupon the islands rooted themselves to the bottom of the sea. On these islands the city of Tyre was founded.

Gregory Nazianzen (*Oratio* 4.108) and Cassiodorus (*Variae* 1.2) relate how Tyrian Heracles and the nymph Tyrus were walking along the beach when Heracles' dog, who was accompanying them, devoured a murex snail and gained a beautiful purple color around its mouth. Tyrus told Heracles she would never accept him as her lover until he gave her a robe of that same colour. So Heracles gathered many murex shells, extracted the dye from them, and dyed the first garment of the colour later called Tyrian purple. The murex shell appears on the very earliest Tyrian coins and then reappears again on coins in Imperial Roman times.