

## Melqart

**I. Introduction.** *Phoenician/Punic god.* M., whose name means “king of the city” (*milk qart*), was the patron god of the Phoenician city of Tyre and one of the major gods of the Phoenician and Punic pantheons. He was also known as Baal Šur (“Lord of Tyre”) and identified with →Heracles since at least the 6th or even 8th cent., according to iconographic evidence from the Levantine coast and Cyprus. Because M. was originally conceived as a king and thus a mortal human being, he was probably a kind of “heroic figure” according to Greek categories, while Heracles was the paradigm of the Greek hero who passed through apotheosis after his death.

Different literary sources link M.’s origin with the foundation of Tyre (Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* I, 10, 27, 3; Nonnos, *Dionysiaca* XL, 311-580). Herodotus (*Historiae* 2.44) tells us that according to priestly traditions, M.’s Tyrian sanctuary was as old as the city itself. However, it is possible that M.’s cult derives from a long-standing religious tradition, the royal ancestors’ cult well documented in Syria since the 3rd mill.

In regard to the relevance of M. for the biblical tradition, →Baal’s cult – introduced in Israel during the 9th cent. by king Ahab and his wife Jezebel, a Tyrian princess (1 Kgs 16) – against which the prophet Elijah fought on Mt. Carmel (1 Kgs 18:20-40) could refer to M. The text, which narrates the challenge between Elijah and Baal’s prophets, alludes to a god who sleeps and travels just like M., the god of the *egersis* “resurrection” (see below) and the companion of the Tyrian expansion along the Mediterranean shores. In the 6th cent. Ezekiel’s oracle against Tyre (Ezek 28:1-19) probably refers to the cultural background of Tyrian kingship, when he attributes these words to the king: “I am a god, I sit on a divine throne, in the heart of the seas.” M. was thus probably well-known in Palestine/Israel.

**II. Typology.** The figurative documentation of M. is poor and problematic. One can distinguish two groups of images: The “truly” Phoenician ones belong to the first group, where M. is not (yet) contaminated by Heracleian iconography. Most of these images, none of which come from Palestine/Israel, are uncertain in regard to the identity of the represented god.

The second group relates to Graeco-Phoenician iconography derived from Heracleian models, and reflects the

Hellenization of the Phoenician religion and the strong assimilation between M. and →Heracles, an iconography which is attested to in Palestine/Israel and may, in some cases, refer to the Tyrian god. From the 6th-5th cent., and more intensively after Alexander’s conquest, Greek iconography was adopted in Phoenician art. The strong identification between M. and Heracles imposed a Greek iconographical language and completely concealed Phoenician customs. This situation is aggravated by the fact that excavations in Tyre have thus far only reached Hellenistic and Roman levels, but not the earlier Phoenician ones. On the religious level, the two cults and figures were fused together (best observed in Cyprus or Gades [Spain]) resulting in the Heracleian iconography alluding to both gods. That Heracleian iconography was so successfully used for a Semitic god may be due to the fact that some Oriental models had already contributed to the elaboration of Heracles’ image. This complex phenomenon of iconographical borrowing, from the Orient to Greece and from Greece to the Orient, also explains why it is so difficult to precisely identify the figure.

Since the second group is discussed in the entry on →Heracles, only non-Heracleian iconography of M. is discussed below, with references to depictions as late as the Persian period.

### II.1. Phenotypes

#### A. ANTHROPOMORPHIC

**1. STANDING WITH A FENESTRATED AXE ON THE SHOULDER.** This phenotype appears for the first time on the Bar-Hadad stela from Braidj, near Aleppo (1\*). An Aramaic votive royal inscription identifies the god represented as M. He is shown striding from right to left, with a naked torso and bare feet, bearded, with a loincloth and a dome-shaped hat, a fenestrated axe on his left shoulder (royal symbol; on this feature on an Late Bronze Age pottery mould from Tel Qarnayim and ivory from Megiddo cf. →Onuris § II.1.5.1) and what may be an *ankh* sign or a lotus flower in the right hand (symbol of immortality). This is clearly a composite image with Egyptian and Syro-Hittite affiliations. It is thus difficult to establish whether this is the canonical Phoenician iconography of M.

Most likely the standing (GUBEL 1980: 11, n. 76; BONNET 1988: 136) deity with the fenestrated axe on his shoulder on a scarab from Kition dating to the 6th/5th cent. (2\*) also represents M., an identification supported by the temple of M. at Kition. In this example he holds a staff with a leaf-shaped terminal. For the same type see also

a stamp seal in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (3). In the case of a green jasper scarab from Ibiza (4), the standing god with a fenestrated axe over his shoulder has raised one hand in adoration toward an altar. Although the iconography of the latter two items is clearly related to the Bar-Hadad stela, the identification with M. is not entirely firm due to the time gap and the lack of further contextual evidence.

## 2. POSSIBLE.

2.1. Two related phenotypes from different Mediterranean sites may represent M., but this cannot be confirmed. A seal purportedly from Sardinia shows an enthroned god holding in one hand a fenestrated axe resting on his shoulder, in the other the same type of staff mentioned above. This representation has been related to →Baalshamen (GUBEL 1980: 11, pl. 2:1-2) and Baal Hammon (BONNET 1997: 831). Another seated enthroned god with a fenestrated axe on his shoulder but without a staff appears in Punic terracotta figurines; these have been connected to →Baal Hammon (BISI 1975; CULICAN 1960-1961: 52; GUBEL 1980: pl. 2:5; BONNET 1997: comment to no. 5). However, in both cases M. cannot be excluded entirely.

2.2. The other type depicts a deity in a pose attacking a human or a lion, as shown on two scarabs from Tharros (CULICAN 1976: pls. 8:3; 9:3; for a bull-headed →smiting god with fenestrated axe cf. BONNET 1988: 239, fig. 16, left). On the Cypro-Phoenician silver bowls from Praeneste and Kourion (MARKOE 1985: 177, 254f; 191, 278f, 283), this figure attacks a big ape in a mythical context.

2.3. The iconography of the “dying and rising god” is only known from the Vase of Sidon (?) dating to the 4th cent. and now lost (BONNET 1988: 78-80, pl. 1:1). While one cannot be sure that it alludes to the *egersis* of M., this would be a credible hypothesis.

Hiram I, king of Tyre in the 10th cent. who built new temples for Heracles (= M.) and →Astarte, celebrated the *egersis* for the first time, i.e., the “resurrection” of M. During this annual ritual the god “died” (maybe in the fire?) and was “awakened” or “resuscitated,” probably with the help of Astarte. According to Cicero (*De natura deorum* III, 42) and Philo of Byblos (Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* I, 10, 27, 3) M. was the son of Zeus Demarous (from *Dmm*, the “Warrior,” an epithet of →Baal?) and Asteria (= Astarte), was killed by →Typhon in Libya, and brought back to life by the goddess by having him smell roasted quails (Eudoxus of Cnidos, fr. 284). These

elements seem to fit into the well-known Frazerian pattern of the “dying and rising god,” which has been critically challenged in recent years.

On the Vase of Sidon four scenes of a ritual represent the four seasons: the death of the god in the pyre, his burial, the mourning, and the return to “life” or his epiphany. The god’s image does not present any particularity. Different interpretations are possible for the inscription (*bʿl kr*) and the symbols placed below the images. This document is very interesting from a ritual standpoint, but also very uncertain as a source for M.

2.4. Tyrian (HILL 1910: 229f, nos. 11-24, pls. 28:16-17; 29:2-7) and Aradian (HILL 1910: 1f, nos. 1-4, pl. 1:1-3) coinage of the 4th (and 3rd) cent. displays a sea-god riding a winged hippocampus. Some have suggested this figure can be identified with M. However, although M. is related to the sea, the sailors, and the Phoenician expansion to the West, this seems highly improbable.

**B. ANICONIC: POSSIBLE.** Some cults of M., especially in Gades (Spain) and Tyre, seem to have involved aniconic features. →Baetyls, stelae, columns, or standing stones symbolized the god. This may reflect an older, more traditional form of his cult. Tyrian coinage refers to these objects as the most representative local religious symbols, probably related to the foundation of the Tyrian city (cf. Philo of Byblos, *Praeparatio Evangelica* I, 10, 10-11 and Nonnos, *Dionysiaca* XL, 465-500). However, it is clear that M. was not consistently worshiped in this aniconic form.

**III. Sources.** The chronological range of certain representations of M. extends from the Bar-Hadad stela (1\*), dated c. 800, down to the stamp seals of 6th/5th cent. (2\*-4), and seems to echo in the Punic iconography until at least the 3rd cent.

The only representation of M. that identifies him by name comes from Aleppo (1\*). With the Phoenician cultural expansion into the Mediterranean, depictions of M. spread to the west with reported finds on Cyprus and in Spain (2\*-4). Somewhat indeterminate representations of M. come from Phoenician sites in the Mediterranean, such as Carthage, Sardinia, Ibiza, Italy, and Spain. Those along the Phoenician coast stem from Tyre, Sidon, and Aradus.

Apart from the dedicatory stela 1\*, stamp seals (2\*-4) in particular carry images of M. Somewhat uncertain representations of M. appear on stamp seals and coins, in terracotta figurines, and also as aniconic cult

objects such as →baetyls, stelae, columns, or standing stones.

**IV. Conclusion.** M.'s name identifies him primarily as the city god of Tyre, but through his equally explicit function as a dynastic god he became the protector of the community of the living and the dead. Although we disregard most of the mythical discourse related to M., his cult clearly referred to the celebration of the life cycle, death, and a certain form of return to life. The known iconography, which often comes from funerary contexts, expresses through its scheme and specific attributes the fundamental prerogatives of the god in his functions related to the royal dynasty on the one hand and to individual welfare on the other. Pictorial sources do not stress M.'s role as Baal of Tyre, but instead depict him as a universal deity, powerful sovereign, lord of life and death.

These functions, however, are not limited exclusively to M., and hence it is often difficult to identify him with certainty. His pictorial image relies on iconographic schemes, which express power and majesty, but these apply to other deities of the "Baal" type as well, particularly to →Baal Hammon. The limited space of a seal or scarab did not allow the development of a sufficiently differentiated and explicit iconographic language for each deity. For this reason, identifications should be made cautiously, taking into account the relative polysemy of these images and the difficulty in distinguishing among divine representations.

Hopefully future research will clarify the iconographic criteria that will allow a more reliable and differentiated interpretation of divine iconographies from the Phoenico-Punic world. A study of postures, attributes, and clothing would aid in systematizing the Phoenico-Punic iconographic syntax. One could thus approach the specific logic of a pantheon: who does what on the basis of what status? One would then need to address the question of the adoption of the Greek iconographic language by Phoenicians and Punic, in this case the iconography of →Heracles. Is it possible to distinguish elements that belong to M. from those that belong to Heracles? In which contexts did Phoenicians and Punic turn to Greek iconographic language? These are the research questions opened by the observation of the iconography of M.

**V. Catalogue**

**1\*** Stela, basalt, 115 x 43 cm, Breidj, 800. Aleppo, Aleppo Museum, *inv. no.* \*BÖRKER-KLÄHN 1982: no. 300; BONNET 1988: 132-136, fig. 6; BONNET 1997: no. 1 **2\*** Scarab, lapis-

lazuli, Kition, 6th-5th cent. Nicosia, Cyprus Museum, *inv. no.* CLERC 1976: 53f, no. 505; GUBEL 1980: pl. 2:3-4; BONNET 1997: no. 3 **3** Stamp seal, green glass-paste/emerald, Cyprus, 6th-5th cent. FURTWÄGLER 1900: pl. 61:11; CULICAN 1976: pl. 9:2 **4** Scarab, jasper, Puig des Molins (Ibiza), 550-540. Fernández/Padró 1982: no. 42; BONNET 1997: no. 4

**VI. Selected Bibliography**

GUBEL 1980 • BONNET 1988 • HERMARY 1990 • JOURDAIN-ANNEQUIN 1992 • METTINGER 1995 • BONNET 1997 • RIBICHINI 1999 • BONNET- JOURDAIN-ANNEQUIN 2001 • METTINGER 2001

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