

The Ambrosial Rocks and the sacred precinct of Melqart in Tyre

A number of myths related to the foundation of the city of Tyre in Phoenicia, are represented on its Roman Colonial coins. The most popular one –without any doubt– is the legend about the Ambrosial Rocks, which is illustrated on several coin-types. The literary source for this myth is the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus from Panopolis (XL: 311-505), written in the fifth century CE, but, which reflects earlier sources from the second and third centuries CE, contemporary to our coins. Nonnus writes about an imaginary banquet between himself and Melqart, the patron god of Tyre (the syncretistic version of the Greek Heracles), during his visit to the city, where the god tells Nonnus how Tyre was founded.

According to the legend two wandering rocks floated over the sea; on one of them was a burning olive tree with an eagle perched on top of it, together with a bowl. A snake was entwined around the tree; both eagle and snake lived in harmony. Melqart ordered the native population to build a ship and follow after the wandering rocks. The god's oracle was to sacrifice the eagle so that the Ambrosial Rocks would stop wandering, indicating the place for the foundation of the city of Tyre.

The myth is symbolically described on one of the coin-types of the city, minted between the reigns of Elagabal (218-222 CE) and Gallienus (253-268 CE): two semi-circular objects, representing the rocks, flank an olive-tree. The rocks are identified by the Greek inscription: **AMBPOCIE ΠETPE** or **ΠETPAI** (Fig. 1).

A variant of this type adds in the lower field, the story of the purple colour as discovered by Melqart when his dog bit a murex-shell at the sea-side (Bonnet, 1988, 74-77) (Fig. 2).

The schematic composition motif of the Ambrosial Rocks gained so much popularity in Tyre that it became one of the “mintmarks” of the city, in addition to

the murex-shell and the palm tree. It appears as such on three different coin-types: Europa and the bull (Fig. 3), Melqart pouring a libation (Fig. 4), and Ocean reclining (Fig. 5).

The Ambrosial Rocks are actually a metaphoric allusion to the topography of Tyre. The city was originally founded over two islands, located close to each other and adjacent to the shore. These islands were joined by king Hiram I in the tenth century BCE. This insular city was later expanded by being attached to the Phoenician mainland by Alexander the Great (Rawlinson, 1889, 421; Katzenstein, 1973, 9-10).

A unique coin-type minted by Gordian III (238-244 CE), represents the Ambrosial Rocks in a completely different manner (Fig. 6): two *stelae* stand on a common base; to their right is an olive tree and to the left is a flaming altar or *thymiaterion*. In the left field is a star, and in the right field, a small crescent. Below is the inscription **AMBPOCIE ΠAITPE**, as well as a palm branch and a murex-shell, both mintmarks of Tyre. The inscription around is **COL TVRO METRO**. This new type was minted at the same time as the coin with the traditional depiction of the Ambrosial Rocks, suggesting that each type was intended to represent different scenes.

Moreover, several specimens of the first type struck under Gordianus III (and only by this emperor), depict elongated “*stelae*-like” Ambrosial Rocks (Fig. 7). It seems likely that some dies of the first type, were produced under the influence of the new type, which was intended to describe a different concept.

While the first type represents the *myth itself* –as described by Nonnus– in my opinion, the new type of Gordian III describes a *specific site in Tyre*: the sacred sanctuary built in honour to Melqart. The fact that this type was minted exclusively during Gordianus' reign, might suggest that it refers to a specific event

that took place in that shrine, such as repairs or a special celebration, that was subsequently commemorated with a new coin type.

Historians such as Lucian from Samosata, refer very generally to a sanctuary to Melqart in Tyre. Lucian writes:

“In Syria, too, there are sanctuaries almost as old as the Egyptian ones. Most of these I have seen, in particular the one of Heracles at Tyre. This is not the Heracles whom the Greeks celebrate in song. The one I mean is much older and is a Tyrian hero”. (*de Dea Syria*: 3).

Two ancient literary sources however, specifically refer to the shrine of Melqart in Tyre. The first is Herodotus (II: 44), who visited the city c.450 BCE and wrote about the temple of Melqart which, according to tradition, had been built 2300 years beforehand (c.2750 BCE):

“...I took a ship to Tyre in Phoenice, where I heard that there was a very *boly temple of Heracles*. There I saw it, richly equipped with many other offerings, besides that there were *two pillars, one of refined gold, one of emerald...*”

Herodotus wrote specifically the word *stelae*, which has been inaccurately translated to the English version as “pillars”. That is the reason many scholars identified these *stelae* as two free columns, in the tradition of “Yachin and Boaz” pillars in the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem (Barnett, 1969, 7).

The second literary source is the saga by Achilles Tattius *The Loves of Clitopbo and Leucippe* (2.14), written in the fourth century CE. This is a love story between a young aristocrat born in Tyre and his cousin. Sostratus, one of the characters, gives a topographic description of the city as a peninsula, where offerings to Hercules were paid. He also refers to a sacred precinct in honour of Heracles, where an eternal flame stands beside an olive-tree. The flames do not burn the branches, and the tree is nurtured by the ashes, reminding the symbiotic relation between the fire and the olive-tree we pointed out above about Nonnus’ *Dyonisiaca*:

“...the olive and the fire, which are found there in close proximity: for, in a sacred precinct surrounded by a wall, olive trees are seen to flourish, while fire issuing from their roots burns among the branches, and with its ashes benefits the tree...”

Our coin combines in fact both sources: the *stelae* from Herodotus, and the tree and flames from Achilles Tattius. Interestingly, there is no hint to a building on the coin. This suggests that the scenario might depict an open sanctuary.

There is however a coin-type which shows Tyche, the city-goddess, pointing towards a temple, with a club in its central entrance (Fig. 8) (e.g. Rouvier, 1904, 90, No. 2448). Even if there is no inscription identifying the building, the club, a clear symbol of Melqart, helps to attribute the temple to him. Actually, we may suggest that both coin-types might describe different views of the same sacred precinct, which includes a temple surrounded by an open sacred area.

Open sanctuaries are quite common in Punic-Phoenician tradition, whose sources are Semitic (Lipinski, 1995, 417-426). The location of a sanctuary is not made by humans, but by the gods who transmit their choice to mankind through natural forces or phenomena. Many of these sanctuaries are built on top of mountains, grottos, springs and forests. They constitute the dwelling of the god, who is oftenly represented by a sacred stone –a baetyl– or a statue. In contrast to the Greek and Roman temples, where the exterior of the building is so significant, Phoenician sanctuaries are characterized by open precincts, which include monuments related to the cult. These may be altars, statues and stone slabs, where ceremonies and sacrifices took place. The sacred precinct is also considered a refuge for the population of the city, as the titles themselves on the coins of Tyre explain: ΤΥΡΟΥ ΙΕΡΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΣΙΛΟΥ, “Holy and inviolate Tyre” (Hill, 1910, cxxxiii–cxxx).

Some of the features that characterize Nonnus story about the foundation of Tyre, appear on a limestone relief discovered in Tyre and re-published by Ernest Will (Will, 1952–53, 1–12). The scene shows on the left, a woman lying on a bed. To her right is a goat nursing a baby or small child. Over them is an eagle with open wings. To the right is a tree, with a serpent

entwined around its trunk. The branches of the tree are in flames, which spread all over the upper part of the relief. Scholars differ regarding the interpretation of this scene (Seyrig, 1963, 19-20; Jidejian, 1969, 99); for our purposes it is sufficient to say that it probably describes the birth of Melqart in Tyre. It includes however, some features we already know from the foundation myth of Tyre as told by Nonnus—the burning tree, the entwined serpent and the eagle—even if the scene itself is not directly related to this myth. Will suggested that all these elements help us to place the scene on the stone relief within the sacred sanctuary of Melqart (Will, 1952-53, 5 and 8). The relief is presumably contemporaneous in date to the Tyrian coins depicting the Ambrosial Rocks.

Based on this relief, together with the definition of open sanctuaries and the literary sources we cited before, I suggest that the shrine of Melqart in Tyre included an open sacred space where two *stelae* stood symbolizing the Ambrosial Rocks, together with an olive-tree and a flaming altar (or altars), as described in our coin. The *stelae* appear here not as personifications of the god (baetyls) but as a memorial to the foundation of the city by him.

The combination of sacred trees and altars is quite common in Roman coins. I cite two nearby examples: a coin of Trajan Decius (249-251 CE) from Caesarea, describing a horned altar with an olive and a palm tree (Kadman, 1956, 128-129, No. 155); and a coin of Philip Junior from Akko-Ptolemais, which depicts an olive tree with a serpent entwined to its trunk, flanked by two altars (Kadman, 1961, 136-137, No. 226).

The historical sources describe a Phoenician spring celebration that took place within the sacred sanctuary of Melqart, known as the *egersis*, or resurrection of the god (Bonnet, 1988, 105; Aubet, 1993, 128). This celebration is apparently depicted on a stone bowl dated to the fourth century BCE found in Sidon (Barnett, 1969, 9-10). During the ceremony, the image of the god was burned, which brought about its resurrection. These features remind us about the motif of the phoenix bird, but especially recall the burning olive tree from the stories of Nonnus and Achilles Tatius. Melqart's destiny is connected to the act of renovation by means of fire. Interestingly, one of Nonnus's names for the god is 'the Lord of fire' (Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*, XL: 369).

Each Tyrian colony certainly had a temple dedicated to Melqart, erected in order to reinforce the connection between Tyre and its colonies, such as Kition, Gades and Carthage (Katzenstein, 1973, 91). It seems most likely that the cult and ceremonies related to Melqart were also adopted in those colonies. Indeed, some historians, such as Pausanias (*Description of Greece* 9: 4, 6) and Silius Italicus (*Punica* 3: 22) report on the festival of the *egersis* at the Heracleon—Melqart's temple in Gades—or Cádiz, Spain.

Ancient Gades was the most important Tyrian colony in the western part of the Mediterranean, founded c.1100 BCE (Bonnet, 1988, 203 and 205; Aubet, 1993, 223). An oracle instructed the Tyrians to found a colony close to the Pillars of Heracles, namely, Gibraltar (Strabo, *Geography*, III, 5, 5). The city was built on a peninsula and a temple in honour of Melqart was erected, where sacrifices were held according to the Phoenician tradition (Diodorus 25: 10, 1). During the Hellenistic-Roman periods the place became an oracle, where the *berculi sacra*—the sacred remains of the god—were kept (Justinus *Hist. Philip.* XLIV: 5,2; Pomponius Mela, *Chorographia*: III, 46).

The similarities between Tyre and Gades are astonishing. Topographically, the location of Gades reminds Tyre: the colony was founded over three isles paralleled to the shore—facing the delta of the river Guadalete—which were ultimately linked to the continent.

Most of the evidence about Melqart from Gades or so-called *Hercules-Gaditano*, comes from the literary sources (García y Bellido, 1963, 100). However, none of them gives an architectural description of his shrine, with the exception of Strabo, who mentions the temple *within* the Heracleon (III, 5, 9). Silius Italicus and Porphyrius add that three burning altars stood *within the open area of the precinct*, where libations took place everyday (Silius Italicus, *Punica* 3: 29; Porphyrius, *de Abst.* I: 25).

Coins minted in Gades, reflect the Heracleian character of the city from the beginning. A coin of Augustus, minted between 8 and 4 BCE, shows a temple façade, that is believed to represent the Heracleon in Gades (Beltrán, 1953, 45-48).

Until the first century CE, there was no statue of the god within the temple. Strabo tells us about two bronze pillars of three meters-high, that stood in the

shrine (*Geography* III: 5, 5). People who completed a successful voyage visited the pillars and made sacrifices to Heracles. Philostratus records that the two pillars were made of gold and silver, and were inscribed by Heracles (*Vita Apol.* V, 5). Despite the differences between these two versions, it seems that both writers refer to the same objects, which clearly recall the *stelae* from Tyre.

Another legend told by Porphyrius (*De Abst.* I, 25), reinforces the similarities between Tyre and Gades. In 38 BCE, the Heracleon was under siege, and the pigeons used for sacrifice had run out. The main priest had a dream: he was standing between the pillars, facing the altar, when he saw a pigeon flying towards him. The pigeon stopped just above the altar and splattered some drops of blood. When the priest woke up his dream came true. There are two important items in this story that require our attention: first, the source establishes the placement of *an altar just facing the pillars*, similarly to the description on our Tyrian coin and as described by Nonnus and Aquilles Tatius; and second, the pigeon strikingly recalls the eagle who sacrifices itself over the olive tree and the Ambrosial Rocks in Nonnus' story.

The motif of the tree also appears in both Strabo and Philostratus' descriptions of the sacred precinct in Gades. One refers to a tree which bleeds milk and blood if its branches or roots are cut (*Geography* III: 5,

10); the other speaks about the golden olive-tree of Pygmalion, which grew at the shrine, and yielded emeralds instead of olives (*Vita Apol.*, V, 5). As referred above, according to Herodotus, gold and emerald were the minerals from which the Tyrian *stelae* were made. Unfortunately, neither the pillars/*stelae* nor the tree are depicted on the coins from Gades.

Emperors Trajan and Hadrian, both of Spanish origin, struck coins at Gades in honour of *Hercules Gaditano* (García y Bellido, 1963, 112-113, 141-145). On these coins, each placed a statue of the god within the temple. This probably suggests that by their reigns, a new Roman conception had evolved regarding cultic customs at the Heracleon.

To conclude, we have discussed several features that emphasize the similarities between the cult of Melqart in Tyre and Gades: 1) the topographic selection of the place for the foundation of the city; 2) the architectonic character of the sacred precinct of Melqart, which included an open sacred place and a temple, two *stelae* or pillars along with an altar, eternal flames and an olive tree; 3) the bird which is sacrificed on the altar; 4) the egersis festival. Therefore, by learning about Gades, the variety of its literary sources and numismatic evidence, we are able to reconstruct the special character of the sacred precinct to Melqart in Tyre, as I believe it is described in the coins of Gordianus III.

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

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