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Necropolis of Is Pirixeddus

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ Funerary ideology in the phoenician-punic world

The Phoenicians believed in the survival of the soul after death. Contrary to what the Egyptians did, however, who embalmed their dead, the bodies were cremated or buried. The cremation funeral ritual was typical of the early Phoenician communities in Sardinia (8th-6th centuries B.C.), and then became popular again at a later date (4th-3rd century B.C.), due to the Greek-Hellenistic cultural influence, without ever fully replacing the burial ritual (fig. 1).



Fig. 1 - View from above of part of the necropolis of Is Pirixeddus
(from <http://www.sardegna.digitallibrary.it/mmt/480/29043.jpg>)

In spite of this, however, at the basis of Phoenician and Punic eschatology was the belief that, after death, the soul went to the afterlife. The afterlife of the Phoenicians was imagined as a kind of city of the dead, which could be reached only after a long and difficult journey, partly carried out accompanied by some deity, to whom it was necessary to give a donation as a reward, the reason why the deceased was buried with a coin, usually located inside the mouth.

There was a widespread belief among Phoenicians according to which the trip did not begin at the time of death but later. Perhaps it is for this reason that the tomb contained everything that the deceased had used during his life: the everyday household furnishings, the objects for body care, toys (if the dead person was a child), in some cases, weapons, food and drink (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 - Grave goods from tomb 9 AR in Sulky (5th-4th century B.C.). Municipal Archaeological Museum "F. Barreca" (photo by M. Murgia).

For the journey, magical-religious items were placed next to the deceased: first of all, amulets, which were to protect the deceased from evil spirits (fig. 3); apotropaic masks, that were to chase away the evil spirits (fig. 4); gold or silver sheets with portrayals of the judgement of death, inspired by the Egyptian concept, inserted in a gold or silver amulet holder in the shape of an Egyptian god or a pillar (fig. 5); scarabs, partly amulets, partly seals, used in life and carried to the tomb (fig. 6).



Fig. 3 - Variously shaped amulets, from Sulky. Municipal Archaeological Museum "F. Barreca" (photo by M. Murgia).



Fig. 4 - Funerary mask of Silenus from *Sulky*. Municipal Archaeological Museum "F. Barreca"
 (from http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sulki#mediaviewer/File:Sileno_%28Sulcis%29.jpg).

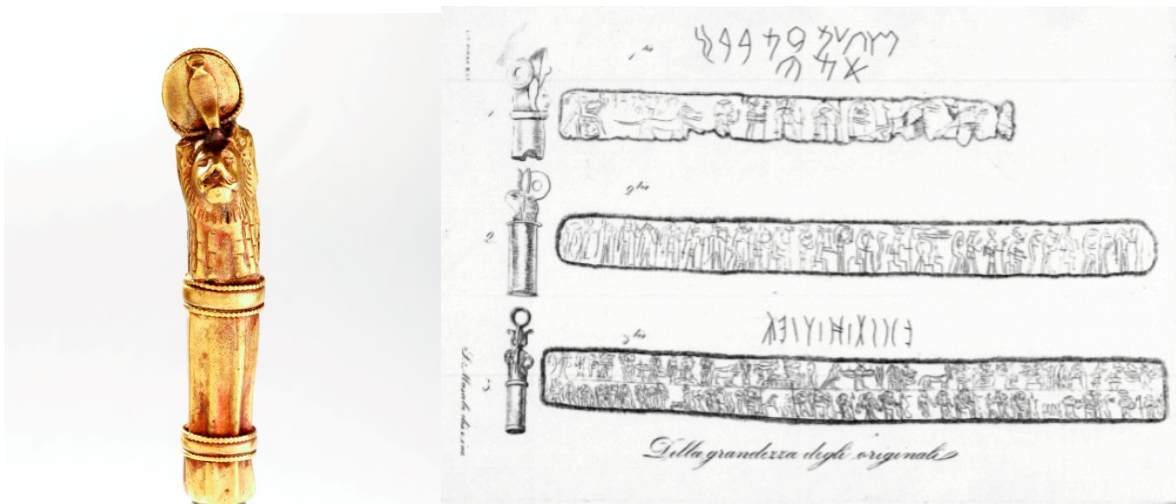


Fig. 5 - Amulet holder found at the necropolis of *Sulky* Municipal Archeological Museum "F. Barreca"
 (photo by Unicity S.p.A) and metal designs
 (from httpwww.beniculturali.it/mibacexportMiBACsito-MiBACMenu-UtilityImmagineindex.html_646054545.html).



Fig. 6 - Carnelian scarab from *Sulky*. Municipal Archaeological Museum "F. Barreca" (photo by Unicity S.p.A.)

The body lay among these items, whether buried or cremated, in hypogeum tombs, often dressed in various jewels and embellishments (fig. 7), and according to tradition, the buried body was covered in resins and perfumed ointments, with the intention of contrasting the bad odour of decomposition and perhaps trying to delay it.





Fig. 7 - Gold ring depicting Horus as a falcon with the insignia of Egyptian power.
Municipal Archaeological Museum "F. Barreca" (photo by Unicity S.p.A.)

According to Phoenician-Punic beliefs, the dead person's attitude to the living could be kind or threatening and to be feared, depending on how they had carried out their funeral duties on him/her.

The Phoenicians called their dead *Rephaim*. The term appears in funeral inscriptions of the Royal family of Sidone, one of the main Phoenician city-states, but has a long tradition behind it, being the term used for the deceased at Ugarit.



Fig. 8 - The Syrian-Palestine coast with the Phoenicians centres and the city of Ugarit (from <http://xmx.forumcommunity.net/?t=2123225>).

A tablet with the inscription, found in 1973 at Ras Shamra (current name of Ugarit) carries a poem entitled "*Book of funeral sacrifice*", that begins with the summons to the "*Rephaim of the earth*", also designated as ancient *Rephaim* ; it then goes on to invite people to lay the table with food for some of these spirits, including some ancient kings of the city. It is therefore an eastern version, Syrian in fact, of protective gods, who were worshipped during the 2nd century B.C. There were the eastern equivalent of the *Dei Mani* from the Roman world, and this analogy is also proven by a Libyan-neo-Punic inscription found in El-Amrouni, from the 1st century A.D., that translated the semitic *Rephaim* with *Dii Manes*. The worship of the *Rephaim* is also reminiscent of the worship of heroes: the glorious ancestors on which the future of a population is based. The term refers to illustrious dead people (monarchs, warriors, people of certain importance), raised to a special rank after death, among the shadows of death. The mythical basis of the worship dedicated to these people is conserved in the events of the god *Baal* who, as can be read on the Ugarit tables, was forced to face a battle with the terrible *Mot*, "death", and becomes the protagonist of disappearing into the underworld and then returning to life, a process

through which he obtains the rank of *Baal-Rpu* i.e. "*Baal saviour-healer*", head of *Re-phaim/Rapiuma* . This Egyptian-style person sculpted into the pillar of the hypogeum chamber tomb no. 7 in Sulky could be interpreted in this way, as a protective god, or as a worshipped ancestor, probably the one who would accompany the deceased on his journey to the afterlife (fig 9).



Fig. 9 - Egyptian-style character painted and carved on the pillar inside burial chamber no. 7 of *Sulky* (from Bernardini 2010, table I, 2).

Unfortunately, interpretations in this sense are rather weak as there is hardly any Phoenician documentation.

In any case, it is clear that the conceptions regarding *Baal* and *Rephaim* have influenced the religious history and the *pantheons* of Phoenician settlements, as can be seen in the example of *Melqart*, conceived as a mythical sovereign, and by that of *Baal*, the first king, the forefather of the Phoenician dynasties who then became their protective god after death.



■ Credits

Deepening card edited by Dr. Cinzia Olianas

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