Phoenician Religion in the Homeland: New Insights from Recent Archaeological Discoveries

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ABSTRACT

The article argues that there is one Phoenician religion and one Phoenician pantheon in spite of the fact that there was no such thing as a Phoenician "state" or "nation." It also argues that in the absence of Phoenician religious texts the archaeological evidence can partly fill the gap left by this absence. As a case study for the contribution of archaeological discoveries to the understanding of Phoenician religion, the article presents the cult sites with standing stones that were recently exposed at the site of Tell el-Burak, south of Sidon. This aspect of Phoenician religion is not attested in the contemporary written record and was discovered for the first time at this archaeological site. The article discusses its origin and transmission, and suggests that it may have reached Phoenicia through trade and may have been associated with local industries.

KEYWORDS: Phoenician religion, standing-stone cult, Tell el-Burak

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Phoenician religion refers to the religion of the Iron Age inhabitants of the four Phoenician kingdoms: Arwad, Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre (Fig. 1). Corinne Bonnet (Bonnet and Niehr 2014: 55–56) with other scholars questioned the existence of one Phoenician religion, since there was, in their opinion, no Phoenician "nation" and no Phoenician "pantheon." Both Bonnet and Lipínski (1995) opted for the existence of individual pantheons and ascribed a specific "pantheon" to each Phoenician city. However, a closer look at the evidence indicates that the inhabitants of all Phoenician-speaking kingdoms shared common religious beliefs and practices and honored the same gods. Indeed, they all had at the head of their pantheon a divine couple in which the female goddess is always Astarte, often called Baalat and known under various names and manifestations, and the young male god is the young city god (Bonnet and Niehr 2014: 63). The fact that also the latter appears under different names and with varying functions in every kingdom does not speak against the idea that we are dealing with the same divine male figure: the Baal, or lord of the city. This couple is present in the pantheon of all the Phoenician kingdoms, and despite the different names given to the male god, the divine couple represents the same religious concept and embodies the most important divine figures of the pantheon. The archaeological record attests to the popularity of the female goddess in all the Phoenician kingdoms, where she is represented with the same features expressing her

FIG. 1
Map showing the main cities of the Phoenician coast and the location of the sites referred to in the text. (Map by M. Soubra; data source: Google Earth.)

fertility and her sexuality. This indicates that her essence was understood and her powers venerated in the same way by all the inhabitants of the four kingdoms.

Furthermore, in spite of the rarity of written sources, there is enough evidence, in my opinion, to prove that the inhabitants of all four kingdoms worshipped the same gods. To name but a few examples: in Amrith, there is both epigraphic and iconographic evidence for the worship of Melqart and Eshmun (Dunand and Salibi 1985), who were worshipped also in Tyre and Sidon respectively, the two southernmost Phoenician kingdoms. In the latter kingdoms these two gods are mentioned earlier than the Persian period, while such early evidence is absent from the kingdom of Arwad. For example, Eshmun appears already in the seventh-century BC treaty between Esarhaddon and Baal I of Tyre (SAA II 5), but the bulk of the evidence comes from the Persian period. As for Melqart, he appears in the written records as early as the eighth century BC, in the Aramaic inscription of Brēğ (*KAI* 201), and in the treaty between Matiʿ-ilu, king of Arpad, and Aššurnērārī V, king of Assyria

(SAA II 2). His name is also mentioned in the seventh-century BC treaty between Esarhaddon and Baal I of Tyre. The scarcity of texts from the kingdom of Arwad as well as regarding Phoenician religion in general does not allow us to draw more specific conclusions about a date for the introduction of these cults. The god Baalshamem was worshipped in Byblos as early as the ninth century BC, as evidenced by the Yeḥimilk inscription (*KAI* 4), and also in Tyre, where he appears in the list of divinities mentioned in the seventh-century BC treaty between Esarhaddon and Baal I of Tyre. The god Shadrapa was worshipped in Arwad, as attested by the famous stela of Amrith (Xella 2007: 52), today in the Louvre Museum, and in Sarepta, where a short inscription dated to the fifth century BC (Pritchard 1975: 100) mentions his name (Pritchard 1988: fig. 1, inscription no. 5). The available evidence from the Phoenician kingdoms thus clearly suggests that not only did the latter have at the head of their pantheon the same divine couple but that their main gods were worshipped in their various cities. None was exclusive to a city or kingdom, and they may have been present and worshipped in all parts of Phoenicia.

There is really no serious reason to assign individual pantheons to each polity. Nothing in the texts or in the archaeological record suggests differences in religious beliefs and practices. For instance, all the inhabitants of the Phoenician coast represented their gods anthropomorphically and with the same specific traits that made them easily identifiable by all worshippers. The evidence for the cult of the same gods: their identical anthropomorphic representation, the same cultic installations (see Edrey 2018: 34), the same type of ritual sacrifices and personal offerings, and the same language used for all the attested votive inscriptions and dedications, all combine to suggest that the inhabitants of all the Phoenician kingdoms shared the same religion with only regional differences, indicated by the choice of a preeminent figure that was probably imposed by the physical context and the natural environment where the cult developed. Hence, for example, water played a very important role in Amrith, given the abundance of its natural springs, and in Sidon because of the presence of the Awwali River. This situation led to an emphasis on the powers of purification, cleansing, and healing of the main god Eshmun. Some religious features can be explained by the proximity, and hence easier and more frequent contacts, to neighboring cultures: north Syrian influence on northern and Egyptian influence on southern Phoenicia exemplify such regional differences. The presence or absence of evidence for the worship of a god in any kingdom is due to the haphazard nature of archaeological discoveries and to the absence of Phoenician religious texts, namely lists of gods. Furthermore, regional preferences for specific divine figures or aspects of a divine figure are common to all religions, even the monotheistic ones.

Several recent studies (Lipiński 1995; Bonnet 2014; and more recently Xella, Zamora, and Niehr 2022, to name but the most detailed ones) have discussed Phoenician religion, its gods (Bonnet 1988, 1996; Niehr 2003; Doak 2015), and its cults, but many of its aspects remain in the dark. One has to admit that the absence of Phoenician religious texts makes a clear understanding of Phoenician religion a difficult task and throws a shadow of doubt over each one of its aspects. This absence may explain the discrepancies between the kingdoms that we observe with regard to which deities were venerated. This is a major handicap that cannot be easily overcome. It is indeed impossible on the basis of the current evidence to sketch the development of Phoenician religious beliefs and rituals in the whole of Phoenicia. The only solid and contemporary written evidence we have about the Phoenician pantheon from the homeland comes from the royal inscriptions of Byblos and Sidon and from Phoenician personal names containing theophoric elements, which indicate not only the divine names but also how the worshippers viewed their gods and what they expected from them (Abou-Abdallah 2018 for the latest update on Byblos; Mathys 2005 on Sidon; Benz 1972 on names) (Figs. 2 and 3).

The written record being what it is, it becomes obvious that without the archaeological evidence little would be known about Phoenician religion in general and specific local religious features in particular. New evidence relating to Phoenician religion is regularly exposed in the homeland, and in recent years new sacred monuments and new cultic sites and artifacts have been discovered in both northern and southern Phoenicia (Sader 2019: 188–248). Here, I intend to show how the archaeological record contributed to enhancing our understanding of some aspects of Phoenician religion, which would have remained completely in the dark otherwise. Because of space limitations, I shall restrict my discussion to the most recent discovery of a hitherto unknown religious practice involving aniconic standing

FIG. 2
Ahiram sarcophagus with inscription on the cover mentioning the gods of Byblos. (Photo by O. Mustafin, public domain.)

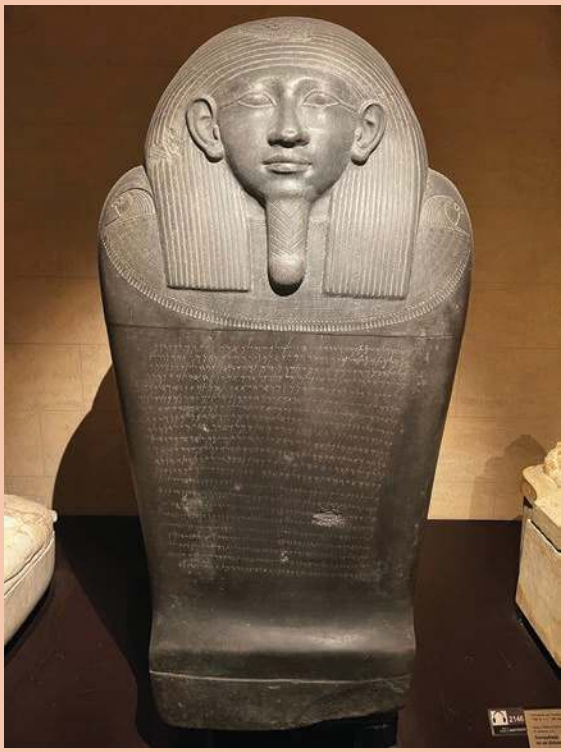

FIG. 3
The sarcophagus of Eshmunazar II. The long royal inscription mentions the main gods of Sidon, mainly Eshmun und Astarte. (Photo by Onceinawhile, CC BY-SA 4.0 [https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>].)

stones that has shed new light on Phoenician religion as a whole and on its cultural and economic contexts.

The Archaeological Evidence

Tell el-Burak is the first settlement in the Phoenician homeland to have yielded two cult sites characterized by the presence of a standing stone, commonly known as a baetyl. Tell el-Burak is located on the Lebanese coast between Sidon and Sarepta (Figs. 4, 5, and 6). The first cult site (Fig. 7), which was exposed completely in 2015, consisted of a small circular enclosure made of a row of fieldstones at the western edge of which a stone stela with a rounded top stood against a wall (Kamlah, Sader, and Schmitt 2016). The stone is natural and does not show any trace of being cut with tools. Next to it stood a hewn stone, which may have served as a small altar, as suggested by some traces of fire on its upper part (Fig. 8). This cultic installation was erected directly on the Middle Bronze Age glacis when the Iron Age site was founded, toward the end of the eighth century BC, and it remained in use for almost two centuries. Its stone enclosure underwent several rebuildings and was enlarged, but the stone stela was not moved. When the cultic installation came out of use, it was not dismantled but rather covered up, leaving the stone stela standing, which indicates the reverence and awe that the installation inspired in generations of settlers.

In 2018 another only partly preserved cultic installation was exposed west of the previously described one (Sader, Schmitt, and Kamlah 2021) (Fig. 9). In this sector of Area 3, the archaeological remains were severely disturbed by a large pit dug during the later occupation of the site. However, fragments of several successive floors were preserved. On one of them was a feature composed of three set stone slabs in front of which was a fallen stela. The latter is a natural stone with a rounded top, similar but not identical to the one in the other cult site. East of the fallen stone, on the same floor, was a stone vessel *in situ*, most probably belonging to the same installation. The floor on which the basalt stone mortar, the collapsed stela, and the flat stone slabs were found is dated to the seventh century BC.

On a partly preserved earlier floor south of the fallen stela stood a neatly cut, rectangular sandstone ashlar in situ (Fig. 10). This hewn stone was left standing when the floor on which it stood was covered by the new one leaving the upper part of the ashlar protruding. During the 2022 season a broken square stone was found on which this stone was probably standing (Fig. 11).

FIG. 4
Aerial view of Tell el-Burak showing its location directly on the shore in the midst of an agricultural area. View from the southwest. (Courtesy of J. Yasmine, Conseil du Développement et de la Reconstruction [CDR].)

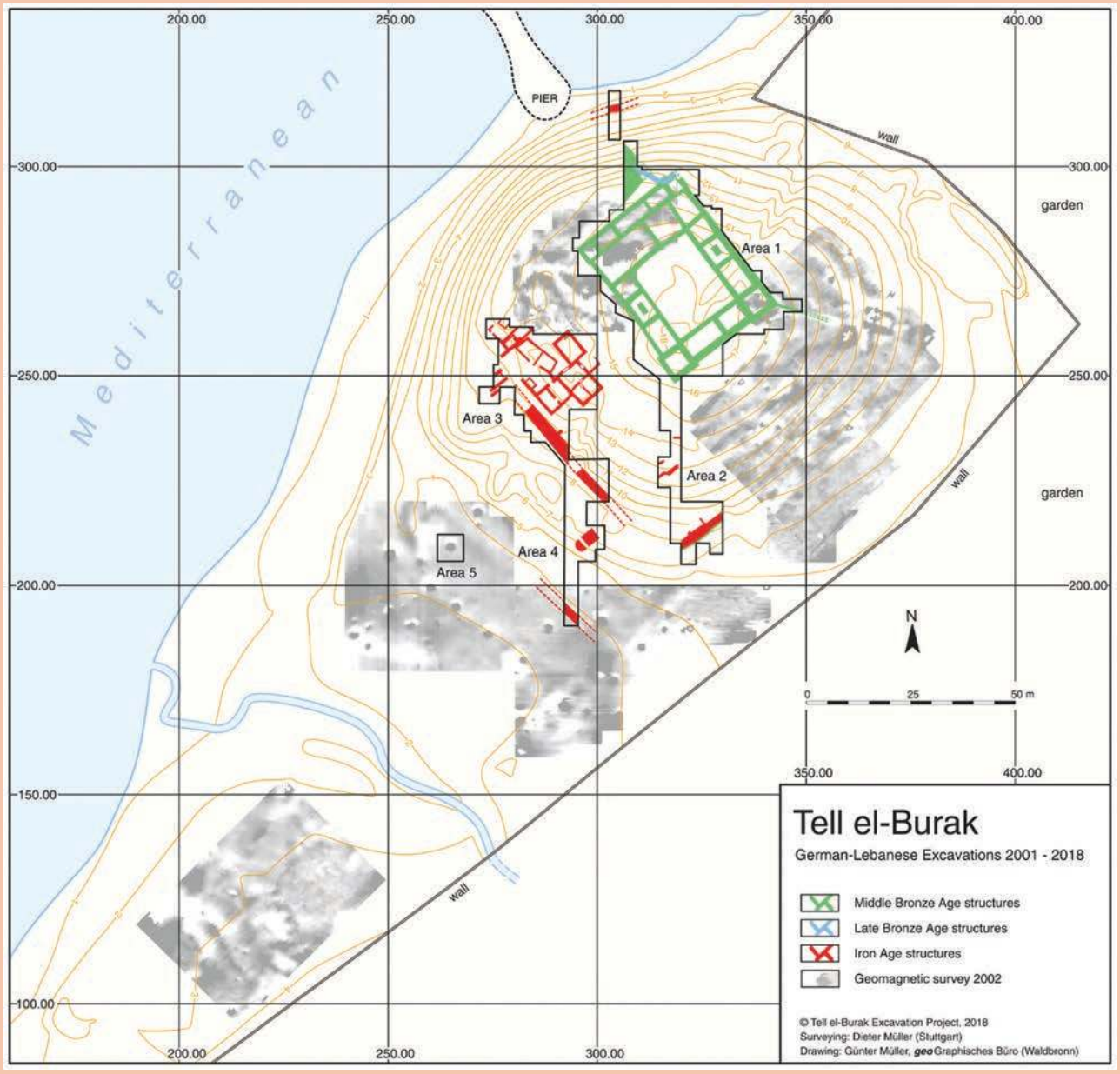

FIG. 5

Tell el-Burak site plan showing in green the Middle Bronze Age palace and in red the Iron Age settlement. (Courtesy of the Tell el-Burak Archaeological Project.)

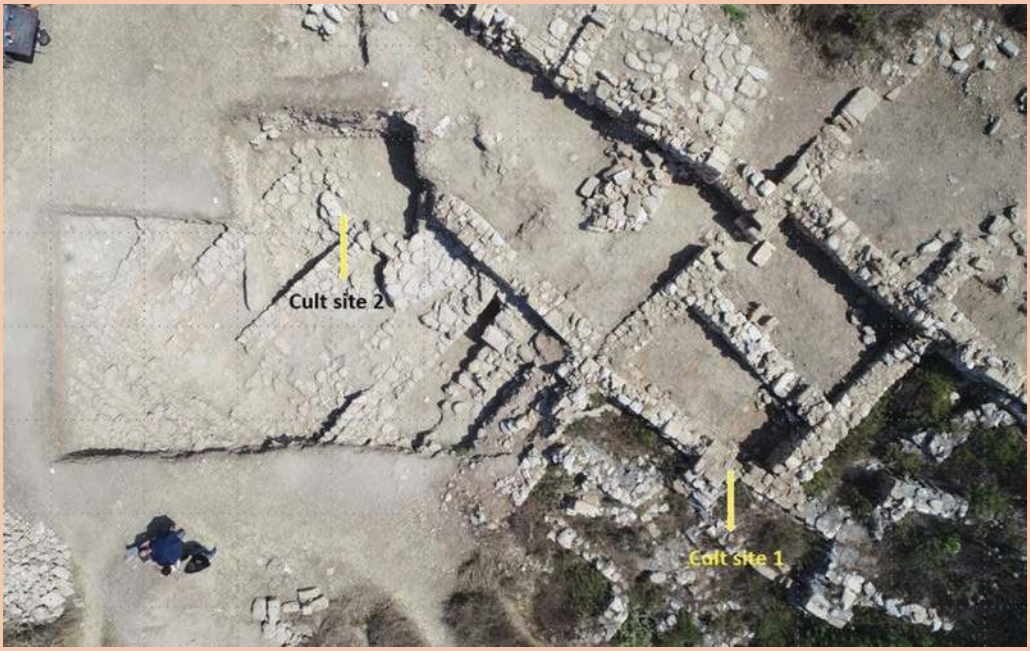

FIG. 6
Aerial view of Tell el-Burak taken in the summer of 2022 with arrows indicating the location of the two cult sites. View from the south. (Courtesy of the Tell el-Burak Archaeological Project.)

FIG. 7
The first cult site was found south of House 3 and of the second enclosure wall surrounding the settlement. (Courtesy of the Tell el-Burak Archaeological Project.)

FIG. 8
The sacred area of the first cult site is surrounded by a circular enclosure of fieldstones. A natural stone stela and a small ashlar slab form the cultic elements of this installation. (Courtesy of the Tell el-Burak Archaeological Project.)

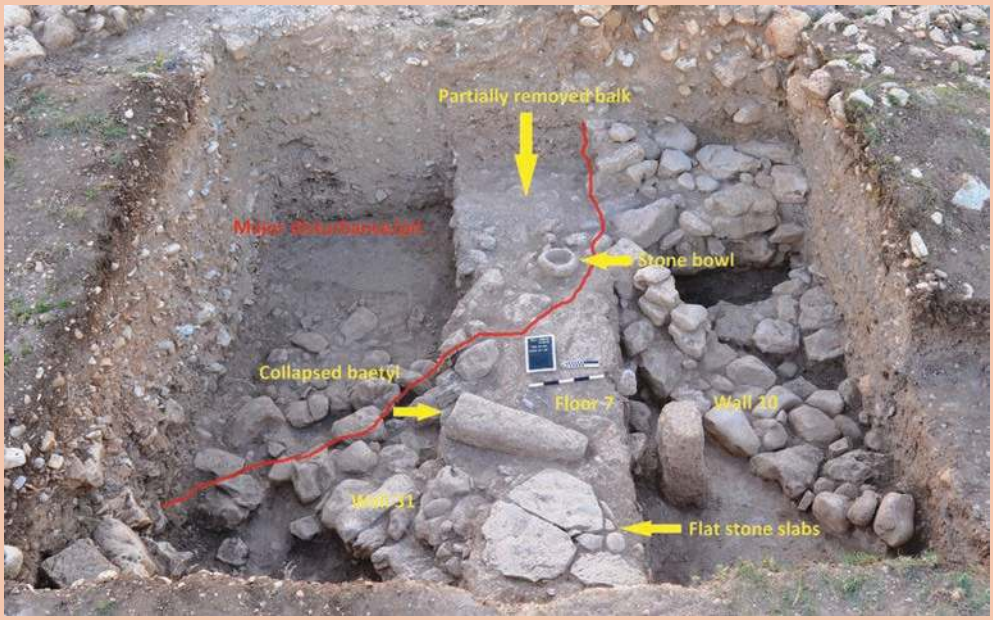

FIG. 9
The second cult site is dated to the seventh century BC. It has several occupation phases. On the most recent floor was a fallen baetyl next to three stone slabs and a basalt mortar still in situ. (Courtesy of the Tell el-Burak Archaeological Project.)

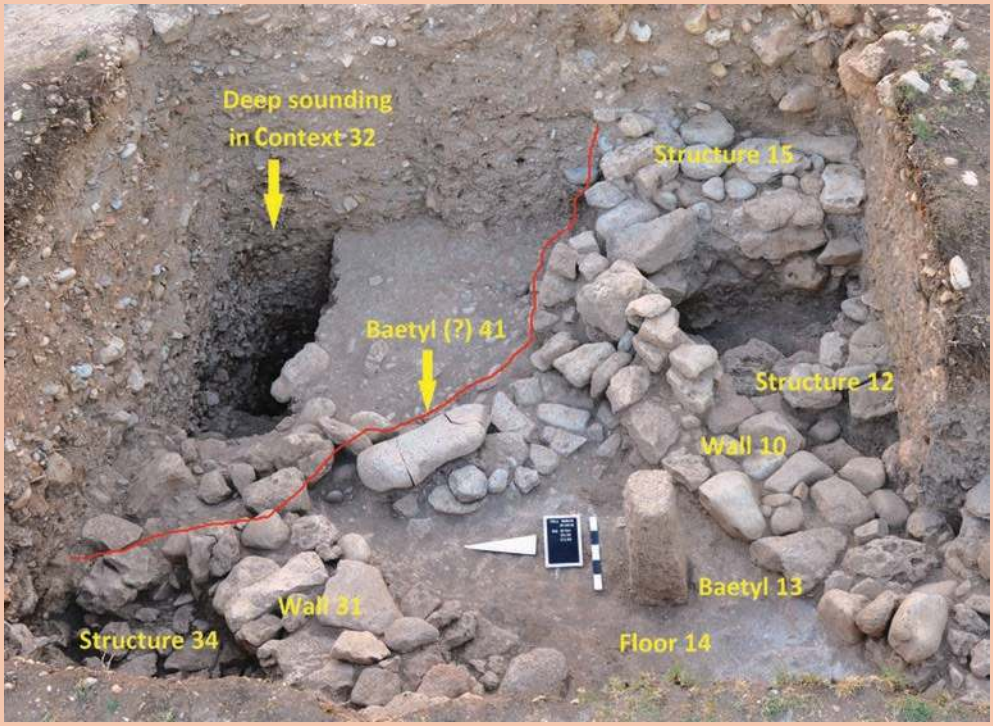

FIG. 10
A preserved, still in situ stone baetyl consisting of a neatly cut ashlar was found on an earlier floor. Another broken baetyl similar to the one in Fig. 8 was also found. (Courtesy of the Tell el-Burak Archaeological Project.)

FIG. 11
Square stone on which the ashlar baetyl probably stood. (Courtesy of the Tell el-Burak Archaeological Project.)

The Tell el-Burak installations revealed the existence of a new type of religious structure in Phoenicia, one which hitherto had been known only from the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I southern Levant. They indicate that the cult of aniconic stones was well established in southern Phoenicia in the eighth century BC. The whole setup so far is unique and has no direct parallels in any other Phoenician settlement. Standing-stone cult sites become more common during the late Iron Age. One such installation, dated to the late seventh to early sixth century BC, was recently discovered at Tel Akko (Killebrew, this issue). The same type of cult focused on the presence of a standing stone is attested in Beirut, in the Persian-period building U16 (Elayi and Sayegh 2000: 153–55). This building is the largest one exposed in the residential and merchant area built around the ancient harbor of the city during the late Iron Age. The sacred character of this building is suggested by the presence of a favissa containing terracotta figurines with extended arms, a pit full of jar fragments and masks, and by the presence of a standing stone in situ next to two lustration basins and a water channel. In this context, one should perhaps also mention the eighth- to seventh-century BC Sarepta shrine. There, a square hole was found in front of an altar (Pritchard 1975: 14 and fig. 2) (Fig. 12). The excavators suggested that this was the socket where the cultic object, a stone baetyl or an incense altar, stood (Pritchard 1975: 18).

To summarize, in all the above-mentioned Phoenician cult sites the focal point of the installation clearly is the stela. There can be no serious doubt that the stela represented the sacred feature. The installations of Tell el-Burak, Tel Akko, Beirut, Kition (Karageorghis 1976: 100), Tell Abu Hawam (Balensi, Herrera, and Artzi 1993: 10–11), and maybe also Sarepta, are clear evidence for the existence of aniconic-stone cults in the Phoenician motherland and Cyprus that preceded the appearance of empty sphinx thrones, thrones and naoi with baetyls, and spherical objects of an aniconic nature, which are of late Iron Age and Hellenistic date. They precede what K. Butcher called the "*baetylmania*" of the Roman period (Butcher 2016). This type of standing-stone cult continued to be practiced in Phoenicia in the Persian and later Hellenistic periods as attested by several monuments such as the Burj esh-Shemali funerary naos (Briquel-Chatonnet 1998: 106) (Fig. 13) and the so-called Astarte

FIG. 12
The Sarepta shrine. In front of the altar is a square hole where a baetyl probably stood. (After Pritchard 1975: fig. 2.)

FIG. 13
Naos from the late Persian period found at Burj esh-Shemali near Tyre. Inside the naos are two rectangular baetyls represented. (Courtesy of the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities.)

FIG. 14
Coin from Byblos of Roman Emperor Macrinus showing a baetyl inside the temple courtyard. (Münzkabinett Berlin, public domain.)

FIG. 15
Sidonian coin showing a round baetyl inside a shrine driven in a chariot. (Fritz Rudolf Künker GmbH & Co. KG.)

FIG. 16
Tyrian coin showing the two Ambrosian rocks represented as baetyls. (Roma Numismatics Limited.)

thrones on which baetyls are represented (Sartre 1998: 164). The "baetylmania" was revived in the later Roman period at Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre. A bronze coin of Byblos dated to the reign of Roman Emperor Macrinus (AD 217–218) represents a conical baetyl in the courtyard of a temple (Jidéjian 1977: fig. 219) (Fig. 14). Coins of Sidon struck during the reign of Hadrian (AD 117–138) and Elagabalus (AD 218–222) represent ovoid or round stones in a cart referred to as Astarte's Chariot (Fig. 15). Finally, on Tyrian coins minted between the reigns of Elagabalus and Gallienus (AD 253–268), the Ambrosian rocks are represented as standing conical baetyls, sometimes separated by an olive tree (Doumet 1998: 87) and sometimes held by Hercules/Melqart on the palm of his hand (Fig. 16). While Butcher seems inclined to interpret this late revival of the standing-stone cult as western in origin, I think that his assumption may be questioned in the light of the new evidence. Standing-stone worship

in Phoenicia was deeply rooted in the religious practice of the local population. Whether it was revived by the Greek tradition relating to Apollo's omphalos at Delphi, as argued by Butcher, or by a local popular religious movement reviving an old local Semitic cult will remain open to discussion.

Origin, Nature, and Transmission of the Cult

This new discovery raises the issue of the origin, nature, and transmission of this cult, which, as the present state of the evidence suggests, does not seem to be native to Phoenicia. Indeed, Iron Age installations with similar aniconic natural stelae, which can be compared to the Tell el-Burak examples, are attested widely in the southern Levant during the Iron Age I, long before they become widespread in Phoenicia. In most sites where installations with standing stones were exposed, the latter were found either inside or in front of one of the city gates (Haettner Blomquist 1999). All the southern Levantine cultic installations were dated to the early Iron Age in a period ranging between the eleventh and the ninth/eighth centuries BC, with an extended use sometimes into the seventh century BC. The Tell el-Burak installations, which are the oldest so far in Phoenicia, are dated to the second half of the eighth and early seventh century BC, while all the other attested examples are later. They are hence more recent than the southern examples, and they appear at a time when this type of cultic installation is disappearing or has already disappeared in the southern Levant.

The recently published Iron Age I temple exposed in Sidon's College Site (Doumet-Serhal 2021–2022) brought evidence that a similar standing-stone cult may have existed in Phoenicia also in the early Iron Age. Indeed, a miniature standing stone was found next to an antler bone in Room 5 of the temple during Phase A, the earliest phase of the building (Doumet-Serhal 2021–2022, figs. 12 and 13). The miniature stone can be compared to those found at Hazor next to the *massebah* (Ben Ami 2013: 101 and fig. 58). Their function there is most probably cultic, but the evidence is not decisive. The presence of miniature stones next to a large *massebah* still needs to be clarified, as well as the role of the miniature stela and the antler found in the Sidonian temple. According to Doumet-Serhal (2021–2022: 19–20), "The stone together with the antler bone (fig. 12, 14), were most probably part of the ritual which took place in this room." In a recent study about the use of antlers in cultic contexts, the excavators of Abil el Qameh, identified with biblical Abel Beth Maacah, an Aramaean chiefdom of the early Iron Age, suggested based on their archaeological evidence that antlers may have been used in the preparation of medico-magical products. The miniature stela and complete antler in the Sidonian temple is so far the only Iron Age I example of a possible standing-stone cult in Phoenicia. Notwithstanding the fact that the role of miniature stelae is not yet clear, it seems that the Sidonian evidence, like the southern Levantine one, continues a well-established Late Bronze Age tradition: "Standing stones are a well-known phenomenon in Bronze Age Canaanite cultic contexts and are also well attested in Sidon in the Late Bronze Age" (Doumet-Serhal 2021–2022: 19–20). This cultic feature of the Sidonian temple disappears in the following phases of the building to reappear in the eighth century BC at Tell el-Burak in a different archaeological and cultural context.

Indeed, when the cult of standing stones faded away in the southern Levant, it emerged on the Phoenician coast, where it seems to have acquired a different meaning and a different purpose. The similarity between the Iron Age I southern Levantine and the Phoenician standing-stone cult sites seems restricted to the presence of aniconic stelae as cult objects, but the archaeological context in which these cultic features were found appears to be different. All the examples identified so far in the Phoenician homeland are not found close to or associated with the city gates, but they are clearly found in independent structures with cultic features inside the settlement. Furthermore, Tell el-Burak, Beirut, Tel Akko, and maybe also Sarepta (if the assumption that the socket was for a baetyl is accepted) have an interesting common denominator, which is not shared by either the earlier south Levantine cult sites or the Sidonian temple: the Phoenician examples are all found in industrial or commercial contexts where farmers, artisans, and merchants

were active. The Tell el-Burak cult sites are associated with wine and olive oil industrial production. The Sarepta shrine is located in an industrial quarter where potters, metalworkers, and purple dyers were active. The Tel Akko cult site was found in an area dedicated to metalwork (see Killebrew in this issue). Finally, the Beirut shrine is located amid an area occupied by merchants and artisans, as attested by the exposed storage areas and workshops attached to or next to the private residences (Elayi and Sayegh 2000).

In summary, the above evidence in its present state seems to suggest that this type of cult may have been borrowed or developed under the influence of southern Levantine religious practices where Late Bronze Age cultic traditions continued to prevail. However, as already mentioned, those cultic traditions were traced in different contexts and their meaning probably varied. The archaeological evidence from Abel Beth Maacah seems to suggest that it is in the area of this site where the contact between southern Levantine and Phoenician traditions occurred. Indeed, the cult sites exposed at Abil el Qameh present the closest parallel to both the Sidonian temple and the later Phoenician cult sites. Abel is located very close to today's south Lebanese and south Syrian borders, and it was most probably at the confluence of Aramaean, Israelite, and Phoenician cultures as indicated by the biblical text and the recent archaeological evidence (Younger 2016: 213–19; Mullins et al. 2019, fig. 4). Thirty kilometers south of Abel, the site of Hazor also presents features similar to those of Tell el-Burak. Like the second cult place of Tell el-Burak, Hazor has a structure consisting "of a basalt standing stone (*maṣṣebah*) with its lower part sunk into the ground and with flat stone slabs at its base" (Ben-Ami 2013: 101 and fig. 58).

The Evidence from Abel Beth Maacah

Archaeologists have exposed at Abel a succession of cultic structures spanning some three hundred years and involving standing stones (Yahalom-Mack, Panitz-Cohen, and Mullins 2018; Mullins, Yahalom-Mack, and Panitz-Cohen 2019). In Area A of the tell, two shrines dating to the Iron Age I present striking similarities with the Tell el-Burak cult sites. In Stratum 4 a two-room shrine was found with a feature consisting of a curving stone enclosure facing a stela that stands against a wall. This structure is very similar to the first cult site at Tell el-Burak. In Stratum 2 of the same area the excavations exposed a courtyard with cultic installations and finds that was part of a large industrial, storage, and administrative building. The uncovered site consisted of a plastered installation equipped with two basins and demarcated by a low wall, two fallen stone stelae, two stone mortars, and stacked circular stones of an altar or offering table.

We observe in both Tell el-Burak and Abil el-Qameh a continuity in cultic practices focused around standing stones. While the rituals performed at Tell el-Burak still await explanation, the excavators of Abel Beth Maacah suggest that one of the functions of the cult place there may have been dedicated to divination oracles, as supported by a hoard of astragali found nearby. Even the Sidonian example may have to be considered in the cultural and religious orbit of Abel Beth Maacah and Hazor during the early Iron Age, as suggested by the miniature stela, the presence of the antler bone, and the astragali found scattered in the temple's rooms.

The similarity between the Tell el-Burak and the Abel Beth Maacah cult sites raises interesting questions relating to this religious practice, its origin, and the circumstances that led to its dissemination in the southern Phoenician kingdoms three centuries after its emergence in the southern Levant. There it seems to have been inherited from Late Bronze Age practices, as is the case also of the Iron Age I Sidonian temple. Does this chronological antecedence indicate that the cult was borrowed by the Phoenicians from their Israelite or Aramaean neighbors, since according to the present state of the evidence it was not attested in Phoenicia before the eighth century BC? However, one cannot dismiss the possibility that its absence before the eighth century in Phoenicia may be due simply to the haphazard nature of archaeological discovery, although this seems less likely.

Furthermore, what sort of religious or political development has led to the adoption of such a cult in

Phoenicia? That southern Levantine cities in general, and Abel Beth Maacah in particular, had close connections with southern Phoenicia, mainly with the city of Tyre, is attested by both textual and archaeological evidence. At the above-mentioned sites, these connections are affirmed mainly by the presence of imported Tyrian pottery as well as other artifacts of Phoenician manufacture. Another observation worthy of note is the fact that, in the southern Levant, only the shrine of Stratum 2 at Abel is located in a building dedicated to administrative and industrial activities, in other words, the same type of context in which such sites were found in Phoenicia. This feature is common to all Phoenician cult sites with a standing stone and, to my knowledge (but I may stand corrected), is found so far only at Abel Beth Maacah in the southern Levant.

Conclusion

The evidence presented above leads me to two conclusions: The first is that in Phoenicia this type of cult place with a standing stone was specific to sites involved with industrial and agricultural activities, signaling that divine powers oversaw such activities. The identity of these divine powers remains to be determined. Furthermore, cult places with standing stones and their apparent connection to industrial, agricultural, or commercial activities call to mind another cultic artifact with a related function. I refer to stone altars that came from noncultic contexts such as those found at the site of Ekron. Stern observed that "[i]n terms of context, unlike the Israelite altars, none of the Ekron altars were found in a locus that was part of a temple, shrine, or cult room, and none came from a locus containing assemblages of cultic indicators such as figurines, votive vessels, cult stands, chalices, or burnt animal bones" (Stern 2001: 123). They were found in "almost every house of the 7th century BCE stratum, both in dwellings and in the industrial quarters." Their presence in the industrial quarters of Ekron where olive oil was produced led Gitin (1989: 60) to assume "a special role for incense altars in connection with the olive oil industry" and to suggest that "altars were used in the administration of the industry, perhaps by the local priestly class on behalf of the royal authority." The important information gathered from the Ekron evidence is that cultic objects such as stone altars may have been connected to an industrial activity, as is the case of the Phoenician cult sites with standing stones. The same function may be ascribed to two similar altars that were found at Tell el-Burak (Sader 2016) (Fig. 17).

The archaeological findings add new insight into the popular religion of the Phoenicians as one that gave special care to industrial and agricultural activities that secured the prosperity of the people, placing them under the protection of divine powers and perhaps also under the supervision of religious personnel connected to the royal palace.

FIG. 17
Incense altar found at the site of Tell el-Burak. (Courtesy of the Tell el-Burak Archaeological Project.)

The second conclusion is that standing-stone cults reached Phoenicia through trade contacts between the kingdom of Tyre and the Palestinian sites located on the trade route linking Tyre to Palestine and Damascus. According to René Dussaud (1927: 22), Abel was located on the road directly linking Tyre to the Upper Jordan Valley and Damascus: "La route directe qui reliait Tyr à la haute vallée du Jourdain et, de là, à Damas passait probablement par Yanouḥ, ʻAbrikha, Rabb Thelatin, Abil, Djisr Ghajar sur lequel on passe Nahr el-Hasbani et, de là à Banyas." So, the area of contact may be sought in the settlements crossed by this trade route and would explain also the similarity between the cult sites of Tell el-Burak and those of Abel Beth Maacah. According to the excavators, "the plethora of Phoenician Bichrome pottery and figurines clearly demonstrate[s] close relations with the Phoenician coast" (Yahalom-Mack, Panitz-Cohen, and Mullins 2018: 155). These are, of course, tentative explanations and more research and more archaeological evidence are needed to clear the issue of the transmission of this cultic tradition and the transformations it underwent moving from an Israelite to an Aramaean, and, finally, to a Phoenician milieu.

The cult sites with aniconic standing stones are certainly not the only aspect of Phoenician religion revealed by archaeological research. Among other religious practices one should mention those that have become characteristic traits of Phoenician religion such as the funerary practice of incineration and the widespread use of Egyptian amulets. The former with its characteristic funerary assemblage typical of the kingdom of Tyre, as represented by the al-Baṣṣ (Aubet et al. 2004 and 2014) and Achziv (Prausnitz 1982; Mazar 2009) cemeteries, has become a marker of Phoenician settlements in the west. The latter, which is attested by the large number of Egyptian amulets found in the excavations—such as those representing Ptah, Osiris, Anubis, Bes, and the Horus eye—give us a good insight into the popular aspects of Phoenician religion because they betray the beliefs that affected people's daily life and the means they used to protect themselves and their children from evil. All this information would have remained hidden from us had it not been revealed by archaeological discoveries.

Abbreviations

KAI Donner, H., and W. Röllig. 1966–1969. *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*. 3 vols. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

SAA II Parpola, S., and K. Watanabe. 1988. *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*. State Archives of Assyria 2. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

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