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From the Levant to Sardinia, via North Africa and Cyprus. Some remarks on the stone thrones known as "stepped altars" from the Tophet of Tharros

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Introduction*

In Phoenician and Punic studies, the term "stepped altar" conventionally refers to a particular type of stone monument in the form of a piece of furniture composed of a stool and a footstool, interpreted as a throne[1] (Figs. 1-2). Such monuments have only been found in the Tophet of Tharros (Gulf of Oristano, Sardinia), representing an absolute *unicum* in the entire Western Mediterranean[2]. This paper discusses the function of these stone monuments through a review of the archaeological context and an in-depth iconographic examination.

The history of research on this subject is quickly exhausted. The term "stepped altars", which has now become customary, dates back to an initial interpretation by Sabatino Moscati

*I would like to express my gratitude to Alessandra Gilibert for reading the text and for her valuable advice on various aspects of the work.

[1] In this study, I will therefore refer to the category of monuments that are usually labeled as "stepped altars" using the term "thrones", which is more faithful to the morphology of the monuments. In particular, the word "stone throne" will be used to refer to every single monument as a whole. As will be seen in more detail below (infra, § 1), despite being made from a single piece of stone, every "stepped altar" is in fact conceptually composed of two distinct elements: a stool and a footstool.

[2] Ciasca (2002), 137. Excluding the stelae and cippi configured in the form of a throne, either empty or occupied by aniconic images made in the same block as the throne, the only Tophet to have yielded furnishings classifiable as a throne is the Tophet of Motya (Ciasca (1996)). However, the document from Motya is very different from the ones from Tharros in terms of typology and function. It is in fact a small throne – about 35 cm high according to the proposed reconstruction (Ciasca (1996), fig. 5) – with sphinxes on either side, dated between the late 6th and early 5th c. BC (Ciasca (1996), 636). Unlike the thrones from Tharros, found – when *in situ* – in the urnfield, the Motya document was found near the altar of a sacred structure, the so-called *Sacellum A* (Ciasca (1996), 635; for *Sacellum A* see most recently Nigro (2020), 122-131). The context of its discovery and the small size of the artefact leave no doubt that the throne of Motya was unusable by the cult personnel, and Antonia Ciasca has proposed that it was the support for a divine image perhaps made of a material other than stone (Ciasca (1996), 637).

and Maria Luisa Uberti[3]. Later on, Sabatino Moscati proposed recognizing these monuments as thrones of a type of Near Eastern origin, which probably reached Tharros via Carthage, on the basis of a very close iconographic comparison with some funerary monuments from Tell Halaf[4] (Figs. 16-18). The punctuality of the comparisons proposed by Sabatino Moscati leaves no doubt about the formal affiliation of these stone monuments from the Tophet of Tharros to the category of "thrones", which also seems appropriate to their context of discovery[5].

Initially, Sabatino Moscati advanced the idea that they were stepping stones to reach cultic images placed on higher grounds, maybe the idols placed on the "cippi-thrones", which in the Tophet of Tharros can reach a height of 1.8 m [6] (Fig. 6). Later on, Moscati recognized that the "stepped altars" reproduced thrones and re-interpreted them as supports for divine images or cultic objects[7]. Enrico Acquaro proposed that the stone thrones were left empty and used in the Tophet as part of rituals eccentric to the main one[8]. More recently, Anna Chiara Fariselli has argued that the stone thrones were functional to support simulacra made of perishable material perhaps associated with the cult of a female deity[9] and denied that they were directly connected with the urnfield[10]. Their differences notwithstanding, Acquaro and Fariselli tie the stone thrones to secondary rites performed in the sanctuary, eccentric or complementary to the main ritual, i.e., the votive offering to Baal Hammon and Tinnit and cremation of newborns and lambs, whose remains were collected into urns and deposited in the "urnfield" of the sanctuaries[11]. A different interpretation altoghether was given by Antonia Ciasca, who believed that the thrones were not altars but that they were actually used as seats during ceremonies specifically performed in the Tophet[12]. As we shall see, further possibilities may be supported by parallels from the Early Iron Age Levant.

Be as it may, if the specific use of these stone monuments remains a matter of debate, the fact that they are attested only in the Tophet of Tharros indicates that they were embedded into a local and autonomous ritual variant.

1. The stone thrones of the Tophet of Tharros: formal analysis and archaeological context

At least 26 stone thrones have been found in the sanctuary[13]. Although the dimensions are variable (height ranging from a maximum of 63 cm to a minimum of 22 cm; depth from a maximum of 92 cm to a minimum of 50.5 cm, including the "step")[14], from a typological

[3] Moscati, Uberti (1985) 31-34, cat. nos. 182-207.

[4] Moscati (1987), 71-74; Acquaro (1990), 14. For the models found in funerary settings in Carthage see below, note 57.

[5] The term "thrones" indicates not only furniture elements – seats that can vary in morphology (simple cubes, stools or chairs with or without backrest or armrests) and are often associated with footrests – but also symbols of reign and superiority of human beings and gods (see Berlejung 2022).

[6] Moscati (1980), 564.

[7] Moscati (1987), 73-74.

[8] Acquaro (1993), 99.

[9] Fariselli (2020), 1096-1097.

[10] Fariselli (2020), 1096, note 11.

[11] On the Tophets and their cult see, with references, Wagner, Ruiz Cabrero (2002); Xella (2013); Melchiorri (2016a); Melchiorri (2016b); D'Andrea (2018); Ribichini (2020); Xella (2020); Garnand (2022); Garbati (2022), 85-116. Specifically, on the Tophet of Tharros, see Floris (2022).

[12] Ciasca (2002), 137.

[13] Moscati, Uberti (1985), 129-133, cat. nos. 182-207.

[14] Moscati, Uberti (1985), 35; Moscati (1987), 71.

point of view these monuments are homogeneous (Figs. 1-2). Only two specimens[15] (Fig. 3, b-c) are the result of a contamination between the most common plinth "base-altar" with Egyptian gorge[16] (Fig. 3, a) and the stone thrones known as "stepped altar" (Figs. 1-2).

Although carved from a single block of sandstone, all the stone thrones juxtapose two elements, often separated by a more or less thick groove: a stool or seat in a parallelepiped shape with sharp edges, and a footstool, rendered as a kind of "step" protruding from one of its faces (Figs. 1-2).

The thrones vary only in specific details, such as the presence or absence of a dividing line between the stool and the footstool; the height at which the horizontal strut engages in the vertical feet of the stool; the rendering of the footstool with vertical feet or smooth walls.

The hypothesis of a derivation from wooden models seems plausible, particularly considering the presence of raised kerbs on the sides, generally decorated with red paint, bordering rectangular recesses[17]. These kerbs are representations of a wooden frame: the ribbings coincide with the upper horizontal edge and the vertical edges of the stool and footstool; there is also a horizontal strut in the stool.

During the last phase of the history of the Tophet (Phase A*i*: second half of the 3rd-2nd/1st c. BC), most of the stone monuments placed in the sanctuary – including cippi, stelae and altars – were reused as building materials for the southern and eastern extension works of a structure probably to be interpreted as a shrine[18] (Fig. 4; Fig. 7, A, A1, A2). Also most thrones were found in a secondary position. Some of them, however, have been found in the open area intended for the deposition of urns, the "urnfield"(Fig. 5; Fig. 7), close to some "stepped" altar-bases with Egyptian gorge (Fig. 3, b-c). The find context suggests that these thrones were still *in situ*[19]. If so, it appears likely that they were originally erected in the "urnfield" and also – but not necessarily only – used as part of the main ritual[20], contrary to what Acquaro and Fariselli suggest[21].

The historical development of the Tophet of Tharros[22] provides a background to understand how stone thrones came to be produced and used.

Following Moscati and Uberti[23], the stone thrones first appeard in the Tophet of Tharros towards the end of the 5th c. BC, i.e. during the late Phase B, and they were probably still produced during the following phase Phase A*ii*, i.e., 4th-first half of the 3rd c. BC. Phase B (end of the 6th-5th c. BC) coincides with the historical period of affirmation and consolidation of the Carthaginian hegemony in Sardinia and the central Mediterranean. This phase is characterized by a process of "monumentalisation" of the Tophet, that involved both

[15] Moscati, Uberti (1985), cat. nos. 177-178

[16] Moscati, Uberti (1985), 32-33, cat. nos. 167-181.

[17] Moscati, Uberti (1985), 34; Acquaro (1990), 14.

[18] For the architecture of the Tophet of Tharros, see Floris (2022), 223-259.

[19] This possibility is further indirectly supported by the circumstances of the discovery of specimens nos. 196-197, 204 and the one found in Square M 4 (Fig. 7) (Moscati, Uberti (1985), 54 and, more recently, Floris (2022), 136, 266, fig. 56). These specimens were covered by structures built in Late Antiquity. However, they were not re-used as building material, but rather simply covered by later walls (Fig. 8), suggesting that they were never removed by their original location and, together with a few selected others, remained visible until the last phase of the Tophet.

[20] Floris (2022), 236, 266, fig. 56.

[21] Acquaro (1993), 99; Fariselli (2020), 1096, note 11.

[22] Floris (2022).

[23] Moscati, Uberti (1985), 54-56. For a proposed dating to the 4th/3rd c. BC see Pompianu (2017), 423, cat. no. 423, where the artefacts are presented as "funerary altars".

the stone monuments – with the start of the production of the thrones and "monumental" cippi-thrones[24] (Fig. 6) – and the architecture (Fig. 5) of the sanctuary[25]. In this period, two Egyptianising aediculae (4.3 x 3.6 m and 3.5 x 2.6 m) were probably built in the south-eastern sector of the Tophet[26] (Fig. 5, B-C), while a shrine (8 x 4 m) was probably built in the north-eastern sector of the urnfield[27] (Fig. 5, A). Two small square bases were also built in the southern sector of the urnfield, west of the aediculae, and were probably used in the framework of the ritual practices related to the aediculae[28] (Fig. 5). All the structures described were also in use during the Phase A*ii*. A sudden emergency in the mid-3rd century BC prompted the city community to strengthen the fortification system[29] around the Tophet and elsewhere. This enterprise had important consequences for the sanctuary, marking the end of Phase A*ii*. The shrine and aediculae were partially dismantled and their masonry re-used within a massive defensive structure – probably a tower – as well as within a wall that closed the Tophet on the east side.[30] The emergency which prompted the community to reinforce the defensive system can hypothetically be traced back to the events of the First Punic War, when Rome shifted the clash to Sardinia through the expeditions of 259 and 258 BC, culminating, perhaps, in the temporary taking of Olbia[31].

Eventually, the developments of the "Truceless War" led Sardinia under the rule of Rome, with the Tophet of Tharros used continuously without any interruption. During Phase A*i*, between the end of the 3rd and the 1st century BC, the sanctuary underwent a second construction phase. Most of the stelae, cippi and other stone monuments previously erected in the urnfield were used for the creation of smaller bases, perhaps intended to support altars or tabernacles (Fig. 7). The biggest stone monuments – including the thrones, cippi-thrones, stone thrones and altars – were reused to construct the southern and eastern extension works of the basement belonging to the earlier, dismantled shrine (Fig. 7, A, A1, A2), which was probably rebuilt at this stage, as were perhaps the aediculae[32].

Although these circumstances make it impossible to assess what was the original location of most of the altars in Phases B and A*ii*, the analysis of the distribution map of the stone thrones, cippi-thrones and altars allows some observations to be made, as already partially anticipated above. Most of the stone monuments were used for the construction of the southern extension of the shrine and for the construction of a terrace that connected the shrine to the defensive wall built in the mid-3rd century BC, which also marked the eastern boundary of the sanctuary. A small number of these monuments were left – or repositioned – in the southern part of the sanctuary (Fig. 7). Their distribution is not random. Rather, they are aligned north-south, marking the path that leads from the aediculae – near which the entrance to the

[24] For the cippi-thrones in the Tophet of Tharros, see Tore (1971-1972), Moscati (1980), Moscati, Uberti (1985), 29-32; Moscati (1987), 65-70; Floris (2022), 199-201.

[25] Floris (2022), 277-283. The construction works documented for this period can be referred to the First Building Phase of the Tophet of Tharros (Floris (2022), 233-258, pls. XIX-XX).

[26] Floris (2022), 244-246, figs. 112, 119. More precisely the dating of the two buildings can be ascribed respectively to the beginning of the 5th c. BC and to the 6th-5th c. BC (Floris (2022), 245-246).

[27] Floris (2022), 246-248, figs. 120-123.

[28] Floris (2022), 253, note 1432, fig. 125.

[29] Floris (2022), 281-283, pl. XXVII.

[30] Floris (2022), 283, pl. XXVIII. For the metalworking and ceramic production area and the defensive structures see Floris (2022), 61-87, with references.

[31] Floris (2022), 283. For the problematic reconstruction of these events, see Debergh (2004); Meloni (2012), 44-48; Bondì (2019), 45.

[32] Floris (2022), 255-258, 284-286, pls. XXI-XXIII, XXIX.

Tophet is likely to have been located – to the shrine[33] (Fig. 7). Second, along this path, the selection of monuments left *in situ* follows a typological pattern. "Canonical" stone thrones (stool plus footstool) are arranged in greater proximity to the aediculae, while "hybrid" ones (plinth base-altar with Egyptian gorge equipped with a "step"/footstool), are located near the shrine (Fig. 7). This situation indicates that the stone monuments were left in the field of urns not because they were somehow "forgotten" (a hypothesis difficult to support given their monumentality) but as a result of a conscious selection likely operated in accordance with the evolution of the ritual practices conducted in the sanctuary in the Phase A*i*. In this phase there was a change in the cultic orientation of the sanctuary, which no longer required the massive use of the stone thrones – and the cippi-throne, which underwent a fate quite similar to that of the stone thrones, with only two specimens found *in situ*[34] – but that did not lead to the complete abandonment of the ritual practices performed around these monuments.

Another observation concerns the fate of the thrones reused as building materials for the extensions of the shrine. If a practical issue – since their size and conformation make them very similar to building blocks – appears undeniable, it may not exhaust the spectrum of meanings of such an operation on its own. It does not appear, in fact, a case that these thrones became a constitutive part of the base of the new shrine. The reconstruction of the shrine in this Phase A*i* is complex and the restitutive proposals are hypothetical. At this stage, the shrine may have been configured as a "distyle prostyle" shrine, similar to the sacellum of Thuburbo Maius and the contemporary "Tempietto K" of Tharros[35]. According to this hypothesis, the new altar was probably placed outside, on a platform realized with the re-placed stone monuments[36] (Fig. 7, A1). Among the reused monuments is also an altar – n. 179 – unique in shape and decoration (Fig. 3, d; Fig. 7), best identified as a piece of cult furniture originally placed in one of the sacred buildings of the previous building phase, the same shrine or one of the aediculae[37]. The choice of incorporating in the base of the new shrine the stone furnishings of the immediately previous religious tradition could be dense in meaning from a ritual point of view. In Sardinia, the practice of incorporating in the foundations the remains of the structures and furnishings of worship of the previous construction phase is documented in selected instances of Roman reconstruction of important sacred buildings of Punic tradition, for example in the Forum Temple in Nora[38], in the so-called "Monumental Temple" in Tharros[39] and in the Temple of *Sardus Pater*[40].

As a final, further consideration, it is interesting to note that the chronology of the stone thrones, their history of use and their decommissioning closely follows that of the so-called "cippi-thrones"(Figs. 5-7), supporting the hypothesis of a functional link between these two classes, as already proposed by Sabatino Moscati[41].

[33] The paths in Fig. 7 are hypothetically traced on the basis of the distribution of structures in use during the life of the Tophet and, above all, on the basis of the distribution of urn depositions (see Floris (2022), 138, 249, 253, notes 715 and 1432, pls. XIX, XXI).

[34] Tore (1971-1972); Floris (2022), 134-136, figs. 13, 55-56.

[35] Floris (2022), 256-257, pl. XXIII. A further possibility is that the sacellum was a building with a markedly elongated rectangular plan, divided inside into two longitudinally developed rooms, as documented for example in the case of the temple of Sidi Bou Saïd (Floris (2022), 256-257, pl. XXII).

[36] Floris (2022), 256-257, pl. XXIII.

[37] Floris (2022), 239-240.

[38] Bonetto (2009), 165.

[39] Floris (2014-2015).

[40] Barreca (1969), 29; Bernardini – Ibba (2015), 82-83; Zucca (2019), 45-47.

[41] See above, § Introduction. A connection between the stone thrones known as "stepped altars" and the

2. Typological framework

As already discussed above, the stone thrones of Tharros invariably combine a seat, or stool, and a footrest.

Both the seat and the footrest belong to well-documented furniture types in the Phoenician area, both in the homeland and in the colonies.

2.1. Stool

The seat falls within sub-type V-a of the typology of Phoenician furnitures developed by Éric Gubel, which includes simple stools with four vertical legs characterized by the presence of a horizontal strut that reinforces the structure[42].

The simplicity of this type of stool, whose seat was probably made of ropes, woven vegetables or leather, makes it a rather common piece of furniture in antiquity as well as in traditional furniture.

In addition to sparse archaeological finds[43] (Fig. 9, a-b), there are numerous figurative attestations in Mesopotamia, the Levant, Cyprus, and the Aegean. In Mesopotamia, such stools are documented by a number of representations – mainly glyptics[44] (Fig. 10, a) –, often as a seat used by musicians and craftsmen (Fig. 10, b), who may have played a role in the cult, and more rarely as a seat for deities[45].

In the Levant, this type of stool is reproduced on various types of iconographic documents covering a time span from the Old Babylonian Period to the Iron Age[46].

In Old Babylonian glyptics[47], this type of stool recurs almost exclusively in "drinking scenes", in which two figures sit facing each other and raise the cup[48]. Such a stool also occurs in relief[49], bronzework[50] and vase painting[51] (Fig. 11), generally in depictions of "banquet" or offering/worship ceremonies[52]. Also seated on such a stool are a number of round statues depicting gods, kings, and deceased ancestors[53] (Fig. 16).

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cippi-thrones could be also suggested by some cippi-thrones from the Tophet of Carthage (Bartoloni (1976), cat. nos. 135, 137). Two of them present, respectively along the walls of the plinth (Bartoloni (1976), cat. no. 135) and in the back side of the throne (Bartoloni (1976), cat. no. 137), rectangular recesses that closely resemble those of the stone thrones of the Tophet of Tharros. A third document (Bartoloni (1976), cat. no. 168) shows, inside the throne, a "bottle idol" with an element, doubtfully interpreted as a seat (Bartoloni (1976), 99) but also possibly readable as a footstool.

[42] Gubel (1987), 208-210.

[43] Wooden examples of this type of stool are known from Egypt (Fig. 9, a) (Baker (1966), 139, fig. 214) and more rarely from the Syro-Palestinian area (Fig. 9, b) (see e.g. the Middle Bronze Age specimen found in Baghouz (MBA I or IIA): Du Mesnil du Buisson (1949): pls. XLII, XLVI, XLVIII, LI, LV; Parr (1996), 46, fig. 2: 3, 5). Stone examples are known from the Minoan area (Kryszkowska (1996), 91, figs. 2.4-5).

[44] Metzger (1985), 129, cat. nos. 312-317, 316A, pl. 45; 140-141, cat. nos. 504-508, pl. 60; 174-175, cat. nos. 762, pl. 60, A; 204-205, cat. nos. 908, 910-912, pl. 94; 213, cat. nos. 947-953, pl. 96, A.

[45] Metzger (1985), 175; al Gailani Werr (1996), 30, pl 10, a, c-d; Baker (1966), fig. 268; Gubel (1987), 207).

[46] Metzger (1985), 240-243.

[47] Metzger (1985), 240, cat. nos. 1093-1114, 1120-1125, 1130.

[48] Metzger (1985), 240, cat. nos. 1098-1102, 1104.

[49] Metzger (1985), 241, cat. no. 1107.

[50] Metzger (1985), 241, cat. nos. 1111-1114.

[51] Metzger (1985), 241, cat. no. 114A, taf. 105; Caubet, Yon (1996), 67, fig. 2a; Yon (2006), fig. 2.6; Paradiso (2011).

[52] Metzger (1985), 241, cat. nos. 1111-1114.

[53] Metzger (1985), 240, cat. nos. 1109-1110.

A variant of the stool characterized by circular legs and decoration with grooves and circles, inspired by Egyptian models, is attested by finds from Jericho[54] and is represented, for example, in ivories from Megiddo with banquet scenes[55] and an ivory statuette of a deity from Kāmid el-Lōz[56].

In Phoenician and Punic contexts, one of the best comparisons are the stool models found in Carthage in a funerary context[57] (Fig. 12). They are ascribed to type V, sub-type V-a, of Éric Gubel's typology. Among the iconographic attestations of this sub-type, the Author mentions unpublished terracottas with an enthroned pregnant goddess dating from the 8th century BC and a Persian Period scarab from Byblos with a proceeding character offering a hunted quadruped to a deity of uncertain gender seated on a stool[58]. The stool on which sits a veiled female deity holding a "disc" depicted on a stela from the Tophet of Sousse[59] is instead attributed to the V-b variant[60] (Fig. 20, a). This stool, similar to the previous one but with slightly inclined legs, is considered to be of Egyptian origin[61] and it is also known from Syro-Palestinian glyptics[62].

An excellent further comparison is a votive stool model from the Cesnola Collection (Fig. 13). Found in the sanctuary of Golgoi-Ayios Photios – where votive plinth altars with Egyptian gorge are also attested[63] – and dubiously attributed to the Classical period (ca. 480-ca. 310 BC)[64], it has dimensions (24.1 x 30.5 x 29.2 cm) and a technique of fabrication fully comparable to the thrones from Tharros, and is characterized by a syllabic inscription probably mentioning the goddess of Paphos and by traces of burning on the upper face[65].

2.2. Footstool

As far as footstools are concerned, the stone thrones of Tharros offer two different variants.

The first of the two types of footstools attested at Tharros consists of a simple low stool with four upright feet without horizontal strut, which occurs in the same documentation cited above for the stool, in addition to which one can add a possible limestone model of a footstool found at Golgoi[66] (Fig. 14).

As for the second type, consisting of a parallelepiped with completely smooth faces, it could be a simplified or unfinished rendering of the first type or a representation of a further

[54] The specimens found in Jericho are attributable to the Middle Bronze Age (MBA II) (Kenyon (1960), 464-465, Stool no. 26, fig. 200, pl. XXVII: 5; Baker (1966), 217-224, figs. 354, 358; Gubel (1987), 207; Parr (1996), 43, fig. 1:1).

[55] Loud 1939, cat. nos. 160b, 162b; Metzger (1985), 243-244, cat. nos. 1138-1141.

[56] Metzger (1985), 243-244, cat. no. 1143; Gubel (1987), 13, 207, fig. III.

[57] For the miniature furniture found in the necropolis of Carthage, see Gauckler (1915), pl. CCVI, 2; Ben Younès (1982), 55, cat. no. 40; Gubel (1987), 208, fig. 31; Fantar (1993), 358; Ennabli (1995), 74-75; Slim (2001), 55; Hattler (2004), 270-271, cat no. 9.

[58] Gubel (1987), 207.

[59] Cintas (1947), 22-23, figs. 52-53; Bisi (1967), 96.

[60] Gubel (1987), 210.

[61] Gubel (1987), 208-209.

[62] Metzger (1985), 240, cat. nos. 1105, taf. 104; Frankfort (1965), pl. XLII, h.

[63] See, e.g., Hermary, Mertens (2015), 316, cat. no. 442.

[64] Hermary, Mertens (2015), 298. A dating to the 5th c. BC is doubtfully proposed in the online catalogue of the Met Museum (https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/241878).

[65] Hermary, Mertens (2015), 298, cat. no. 419, presented as a "Footstool (?)".

[66] The artefact is cat no. 286 in the Cesnola collection. No interpretation of the function of the artefact was presented when the inscription engraved on it was published (Hall (1872), 211, pl. IV, cat. no. 14), but is currently presented as "statue base" (https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/241855).

variant with smooth walls. Smooth-walled footstools are documented in a bronze statuette with a divine figure on a throne with a back from Enkomi attributed to the 12th-11th century BC[67] (Fig. 15) and in a cultic scene with an offering to a seated deity painted on a jug from Ugarit from the Late Bronze Age II[68] (Fig. 11).

3. Altar-statues, thrones, cult of the dead and deities with "disc": from Tell Halaf to Tharros, via North Africa and Cyprus

As seen above, a very close comparison for the thrones from the Tophet of Tharros – already identified by Sabatino Moscati – in terms of construction technique, dimensions, and type of furniture is offered by two funerary statues from Tell Halaf dated respectively to the mid-10th-early 9th century (Fig. 16, a) and the 9th century BC[69] (Fig. 16, b).

The two monuments are late attestations of an important class of statues in the Syrian tradition, dating back to the Middle Bronze Age and located in temple contexts or burial crypts, but also in public spaces. They are representations of seated figures, holding a cup in their right hand, which allows them to be connected to the performance of a specific ritual[70].

In particular, the statues from Tell Halaf belong to the group of the "Syro-Hittite" funerary monuments, a particular class of artwork – mostly represented by funerary stelae with the scene of a table with food offerings to the deceased – emerged in the early 1st millennium BC in the area of Luwian and Aramaean city-states[71]. These monuments actively marked the place in which the memory of the deceased was celebrated – not necessarily coinciding with the burial place – and at least in certain cases hosted the "soul" of the dead[72], thus connoting the cult place as «a place of interaction between the living and the dead»[73].

The statues from Tell Halaf, 1.92 and 1.42 m high, depict two female figures seated on a stool that, in type and rendering, closely resembles the monuments found in the Tophet of Tharros. The legs and horizontal struts have a square cross-section and are rendered as relief ribs, emerging from the backplanes representing the empty space. The figures are wrapped in long robes and the feet, left uncovered, rest on a footstool. The arms are folded and rest on the thighs. The left hand rests on the left knee, while the right hand holds a cup.

Although the statues were found incorporated secondarily into a mud-brick terrace, at the time of their discovery, they still maintained a connection with the cremation burials with which they were connected. The burial was accompanied by sacrificial rituals, the remains of which have been recognized thanks to the recovery, in the area of the burial pits, of layers of ash with the remains of bronze and gold objects and the discovery of artefacts among the

[67] Schaeffer (1952), 371-377, fig. 115, pls. LXX-LXXV; Metzger (1985), 208, cat. no. A, pl. 100; Theodossiadou (1996), 77.

[68] Paradiso (2011); Yon (2006), fig. 2, no. 6. In Ugarit, worship scenes to a figure seated on a stool with footstool date back to the beginning of the 2nd millennium (Amiet (1992), 5, 17, cat. no. 9, fig. 4).

[69] Moscati (1987), 72; for the statues see Bonatz (2000), cat. nos. B 4-B 5, pl. V, with bibliography.

[70] Pinnock (1994), 23; Novák-Pfälzner (2003), 161-162.

[71] See Bonatz (2016), with bibliography.

[72] See, in particular, the case of the Katumuwa Stele from Zincirli (Sam'al), dated to the 8th c. BC, in which the depiction of the deceased, holding a cup and seated in front of a table with food, is accompanied by a long inscription in which, at line 5, the dead itself says «[...], a ram for Kubaba, and a ram for my "soul" that will be in this stele» (translation by Pardee (2009), 54, 62–63). According to David Hawkins the term for "soul" (*nbš*) should be translated "likeness" (Hawkins (2015): 54-55). In any case, as stated by Dominik Bonatz, the "likeness" could be considered a metaphorical translation of the "soul" and «in the context of the Kutamuwa stele is treated as if it were the living substitute for the dead person or as his simulacrum» (Bonatz (2020), 88).

[73] See Bonatz (2016), 175-177 (quoted text at page 177).

cremated remains (Fig. 17). After the burial, the statues had been erected above the pits together with their own "statue chambers", where the cult of the dead took place[74]. Within this framework, the statues have been interpreted as a constant admonition to the performance of sacrifices for the afterlife of the deceased, to be consumed in the private sphere, inside the small, secluded chambers[75].

As noted by Dominic Bonatz, the structure of the statues itself also implies a permanent invitation to the performance of funeral offerings and sacrifices: the schematic rendering of the legs, folded and wrapped in the long robe, makes them represent a whole with the "cube" representing the stool, and their flat upper surface thus forms a veritable table for receiving offerings, just as the carved cup[76] (Fig. 18).

The analysis of the context thus offers the possibility of establishing a further element of connection between the statues of Tell Halaf and the monuments of the Tophet of Tharros, namely the connection with the performance of cult activities in connection with cremation depositions.

Also belonging to the funerary sphere is the second group of documents attesting to the association between stool and footstool. These are models of furniture of various shapes found in the necropolis of Carthage and generally dated to the 7th-6th century BC, among which are also some stools made of limestone with vertical supports and horizontal struts, that the small dimensions (approximately 10 cm in height) allow being sculpted in the round (Fig. 19). Found in tomb contexts of adults with rich grave goods, such artefacts are generally interpreted as propitiatory objects as they are linked to royal or priestly dignity[77]. It seems relevant to point out that, although characterized by formal variety, they can generally be brought under the category of thrones[78]. Exceptions to this are a footstool of the type "with voluted supports"[79] – that, anyway, can also be associated with the concept of a throne –, a vertically developed incense burner[80], and a plinth-shaped piece of furniture with listel decoration at the base and top, which can be interpreted as an altar[81], for which a comparison with a full-size specimen from the Tophet of Tharros could be proposed[82] (Fig. 3, d).

The precise repetition of the stool type of the furniture model, its association with models of footstool, altar and censer, as well as the private sphere of the chambers, accessible only to members of the family group, may connote the Carthaginian models as the outcome of a process of re-elaboration and readjustment into Punic belief system of the same conception of the funerary cult attested in the Levant in the Iron Age[83] and especially evident at Tell Halaf

[74] Oppenheim (1931), 195-196; Langenegger, Müller, Naumann (1950), 159-167; Bonatz (2000), 154; Martin (2010).

[75] Bonatz (2000), 154-155.

[76] Bonatz (2001), 159 and note 10. The direct connection of the statues with offerings and sacrifices as part of the cult of the dead is confirmed by the discoveries made in the Royal Tomb of the Palace of Qatna, in use from the Middle Bronze Age IIA until the Late Bronze Age IIA. In the antechamber, on either side of the entrance to the main burial chamber, two seated statues of royal ancestors sitting on a stool with footstool were found in association with vases (bowls and bottles) and bones (generally related to cattle and, especially, sheep), interpreted as the remains of offerings and sacrifices performed in connection with them (Novák-Pfälzner (2003), 145-146, 156-162; Pfälzner (2009); Pfälzner (2016), 256-257; Pfälzner (2019).

[77] Cintas (1946), 93.

[78] Cintas (1946), 93.

[79] Gubel (1987), 231-238, type VII-a.

[80] Ennabli (1995), 74-75.

[81] Hattler (2004), 270, cat. no. 9.

[82] Moscati, Uberti (1985), cat. no. 179.

[83] See, among others, Niehr (1994), Bonatz (2000), Bonatz (2001), Niehr (2006)a, Lewis (2014).

between the 10th and 9th century BC. If so, it is possible that the miniature furniture included in the Carthaginian tombs fulfilled a function not far removed from that of the funerary altar-statues of Tell Halaf. It is possible that the Carthaginian furniture models were intended as a symbolic allusion to the offerings presented to the deceased as a memorial rite[84].

Post mortem cults are attested in the Phoenician East in this chronological span, as indicated by the cases of Byblos, Tyre Al-Bass and Achziv. In Byblos, the performance of post mortem cults is indicated by the well-known sarcophagus from the royal Tomb V, probably produced in the Late Bronze Age and re-used for the burial of King Ahiram, as indicated by its funerary inscription (KAI 1), generally dated after 1000 BC[85]. As for the iconography, it shows, on its faces, a thematically unitary composition: its focus is the funerary repast of (the sculptural image of) the dead king, towards whom a procession of worshippers and lamentation scenes are directed[86]. Furthermore, libations in honour of the deceased were likely to be practiced in Byblos, as the closing of Ahiram's funerary inscription[87] and the presence of conduits in the shafts of Tomb III[88], Tomb IV[89] and Tomb V[90], may indicate. In the cemetery of Tyre Al-Bass (end of the 10th-end of the 7th c. BC) the performance of collective feasting in honor of the dead celebrated open air on the surface of the beach necropolis in the environs of some burials is attested by the recovery of charcoal concentrations, broken crockery and unburnt remains of adult bovines – sometimes with signs of removal of the flesh – and ovicaprid, although the time lapse between the interment and the communal eating rites can't be established[91]. Furthermore, the excavations carried out in Al-Bass show that the funerary stelae, in some cases found in association with remains of plates, served as a focus for commemorative rituals with communal eating and sacrifice[92]. In Achziv, in the southern and eastern necropolis (in use between the 11th and the 7th c. BC), some architectural features of the tombs – like the openings in the ceiling of chamber tombs[93] and the presence of altar-tables placed above the ceiling of the rock-cut shaft tombs[94] – suggest that practices of

[84] It is particularly striking that the categories of furniture attested by Carthaginian funerary models – throne, altar, censer – are attested by monumental items forming an ensemble in the framework of the royal cult of the dead and ancestors found in the annex room of the temple of Alalakh (layer IB) in which the seated statue of the King Idrimi was found (Mayer-Opificius (1981): 281; Niehr (2012): 566).

[85] Niehr (2012). For the sarchofagus, its inscription and its archaeological context see also, among others, Rehm (2004), Lehman (2005), Niehr (2006)b. The inscription has been variously dated between the 13th, 10th or 9th-7th c. BC and it is still an open question whether it was made ex novo for Hiram by his son or whether it is the result of the reuse of an older monument (for a summary of the various hypotheses see Gómez Peña, Carranza Peco (2021), 116-117, with bibliography).

[86] Niehr (2012). In a recent study, Álvaro Gómez Peña and Luis Miguel Carranza Peco proposed to interpret the scene as a representation of the Opening of the Mouth ritual (Gómez Peña, Carranza Peco (2021), 116-119, with bibliography).

[87] According to Reinhard G. Lehmann's interpretation, the final phrase of the epigraph alludes to a special ritual, apparently of Anatolian origin, involving the use of a "libation tube" (Lehmann (2005): 33-36; Lehmann (2008): 125-126).

[88] Montet (1928): 148, fig. 65.

[89] Montet (1928): 152, fig. 67.

[90] Montet (1928): 215; Niehr (2006)b, 237; Lehman (2008): 126, note 33. For the interpretation of the shaft of Tomb V as a place for the ancestor cult, see Niehr (2006)b, 238-239.

[91] Aubet (2014): 516.

[92] Aubet (2014): 520.

[93] See, e.g., Mazar (2001), 49 (T.C.2), 72 (T.C.1.), 75-76. The tombs belong to the Type I.C. of Eilat Mazar's classification, dated to the end of the 10th century BC (Mazar (2001), 157-159). See also Dayagi-Mendels (2002), 164.

[94] See, e.g., the offering table (65 x 55 x 28 cm) found between the slab closing the opening of the ceiling

commemoration of the deceased were regularly performed and must have included the laying of offerings and the pouring of libations[95]. The discovery of similar installations attests to the development of post mortem cults also in the Phoenician centers of the central and western Mediterranean, including Carthage[96] and Tharros[97].

From the 5th century BC onwards, the iconography of the throne composed of a stool and a footstool is found in stone monuments in Tophet sanctuaries in North Africa and Sardinia.

The aforementioned stela from the Tophet of Sousse – found *in situ* in the second level and thus datable to the first half of the 5th century BC[98] – depicts a enthroned goddess in profile, dressed in a capped long robe, holding a "disc" with her hands stretched forward. The throne is a stool with slightly inclined vertical feet and horizontal strut rendered as raised ribbings, combined with a footstool[99] (Fig. 20, a). In front of the figure is a foliate corolla *thymiaterion* surmounted by the solar disc and the lunar sickle, which contributes to the recognition of the divine nature of the female figure and betrays the derivation of the iconographic scheme from Near Eastern motives proper to glyptic repertoires[100]. The same scene is depicted on a stela that is quite similar but differs from the previous one in the rendering of the stool – which has splayed legs curved outwards and lacks horizontal struts and footstool –, and in the smaller size of the circular attribute that resembles a small globe and is held with the left hand only, thus leaving the right hand free to perform a gesture of greeting or blessing[101] (Fig. 20, b).

A stela from the Tophet of Sulci preserved in the Museum of Turin reproduces the type of the female figure dressed in a long robe and holding a "disc" to her breast (Fig. 21), which, in the standing version, represents the iconographic type most frequently attested in the Sulci sanctuary[102]. In the document under examination, a *unicum* in the Tophet of Sulci, the female figure is, with all probability, depicted seated, as convincingly proposed by Giovanna Pisano[103]. The shape of the footstool and the lack of a backrest suggest that the seat belongs,

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and the opening of the shaft of a chamber tomb with a built ceiling (Mazar (2001), 108, 144, T.A.14; see also Dayagi-Mendels (2002), 12-13, Tomb Z. III). The tomb belongs to Type II.C. of Eilat Mazar's classification, for which a date to the 9th c. BC has been proposed (Mazar (2001), 158-159). The bulk of the pottery found in the tomb has been attributed by Michal Dayagi-Mendels to the 8th-7th c. BC, while a minority to the 7th-6th c. BC (Dayagi-Mendels (2002), 13). The "plastered concave feature" found around the chamber's open ceiling of T.A.19 – also belonging to the Type II.C. – was also referred to cultic activities above the chamber tomb (Mazar (2001), 106-107, 144.

[95] See lastly Sader (2021), 52, with references.

[96] In Carthage, funerary altars were found (Bénichou-Safar (1982): 78) but no hydraulic installations related to libations (Bénichou-Safar (1982): 78). In general, for the evidence of a *post mortem* cult in Carthage see Bénichou-Safar (1982): 283-287.

[97] See, for example, the case of the necropolis of Cape San Marco. Here the execution in the archaic period of such cultic activities is attested by the discovery of shallow "channels" – in some cases found still in connection with archaic dipper juglets and presenting traces of burning – in connection with rock-cut chamber tombs and rock-cut pit graves (see Fariselli (2021), 306-307, with bibliography). The use of stone installations equipped with shallow "basins" located outside the graves – such as some "complex altars in composition with cippi" (for this type of monuments see Del Vais (2013), 101-116, *Tipo D.2*) and the monolithic tomb covers equipped with one or two altars (see Del Vais (2013), 116-132, *Varianti D.2/a* and *D.2/b*) – was also related to periodic ceremonies in honour of the dead (Del Vais (2013), 67-68; Fariselli (2021), 307).

[98] Cintas (1947), 18; Bisi (1980), 68; D'Andrea (2014), 83, 86.

[99] Gubel (1987), 206.

[100] Cintas (1947), 22-23, figs. 52-53; Bisi (1967), 96; Bisi (1980), 68-69; Gubel (1987), 206, cat. no. 156, pl. XL; D'Andrea, Giardino (2013), 11, fig. 6.5.

[101] Cintas (1947), 21-22, figs. 50-51; Bisi (1967), 96), Gubel (1987), 207, cat. no. 157, pl. XL.

[102] Moscati (1988), 37-40.

[103] This interpretation has been proposed by Giovanna Pisano on the basis of specific details of the rendering

in all likelihood, to the type independently documented in the round in the Tophet of Tharros[104].

As for the interpretation of the female figure with a "disc", they can be read as divine or profane depictions and the possible interpretations must take into account the context of their usage and the different iconographic variants. In the context of the Tophet, this iconography is generally interpreted as a hand-drum player performing within the framework of the cult practised in the Tophet, i.e. as a priestess or cultic operator[105]. The particular iconographic declination of the subject, seated on a throne with a footstool, however, makes it plausible to assume a divine or at least superhuman nature for the female character[106].

Remaining in Sardinia, between the 5th and early 4th century BC, the iconography of the throne composed of a stool and a footstool was selected in Tharros for the creation of a new type of monument – the stone thrones discussed in this paper – reproducing this type of furniture in stone and in actual or near actual size, destined to establish itself in that time span as one of the most widespread types of stone monuments in that Tophet (Figs. 1-2).

To these attestations can be added a further document also presenting an association between a female deity seated on a throne and the "disc"/drum (Fig. 22). This is a razor from the Carthaginian necropolis of Sainte Monique dated to the beginning of the 3rd century BC, which shows, on the side I, a drummer, standing in profile with a starry, transparent robe – which finds a close iconographic comparison in a razor from Ibiza[107] (Fig. 23, a) and in a stela from the Tophet of Tharros[108] (Fig. 23, b) – and, in the main figurative field of side II, a seated figure, wrapped in a long robe and with a veiled head holding some attributes interpreted as a spindle and a distaff[109] (Fig. 22). The depiction is incomplete but, from the available reproductions, Colette Picard's reading as a female figure ruling over the underworld, symbolized by the serpent depicted below the figure, is convincing[110].

4. Symbolic significance

The scant documentation from the central Mediterranean seems to indicate that the spread of thrones from the Levant to the West occurred in two distinct phases.

In the first phase, to which the models found in Carthaginian necropolises refer, thrones are found in funerary contexts, associated with models of incense burners and altars. In this

of the figure such as the disproportion of the upper part in relation to the lower part of the body, their realisation at two different degrees of relief (the upper part is rendered in high relief, the lower part almost in the round) marked by a step placed below the elbows, the disproportionately long feet leaning forward and resting on a footrest reminiscent of the stone thrones of the Tophet of Tharros (Pisano (1991), 1145; Pisano (2012), 551).

[104] The juxtaposition between the image reproduced in the stela of Sulci and the stone thrones of Tharros was also proposed by Giovanna Pisano: Pisano (1991), 1145; Pisano (2012), 551.

[105] See Moscati (1988), 38. See also Fariselli (2007), 26-34.

[106] Giovanna Pisano has demonstrated, however, that in Phoenician and Punic contexts and not only «il suppedaneo – espressione della comunicazione visiva, rappresentante il concetto, l'idea del divino, che può servire a congiungere il superiore e l'inferiore ovvero avere la funzione di distinguerli – in mancanza del trono, peraltro documentato da alcune stele, consente […] di attribuire una connotazione divina o di rango superiore alla figura seduta riprodotta all'interno dell'edicola» (Pisano (2012), 553).

[107] Acquaro (1971), 177-178, cat. no. Sp 71; see also below.

[108] Moscati, Uberti (1985), 48-49, 121, cat. no. 141, fig. 23, pl. LVI; see also below.

[109] Acquaro (1971), 45-46, 112-113, cat. no. Ca 52.

[110] Picard (1965-1966), 109. The Author proposes to recognise in the image one of the Fates, a heroised deceased or Athena Iliàs (Picard (1965-1966), 84, 109. See also Enrico Acquaro's proposal to recognise the iconographic model of the enthroned figure in Taranto numismatics (Acquaro (1971), 112-113) and, more recently, the identification with Zeus *Meilichios* proposed by Paola De Vita (De Vita (2015), 37-39).

phase, therefore, it seems that thrones are exclusively related to funerary practices and the cult of the dead in the narrow sense.

From the 5th century BC onwards, thrones appear in various forms (not only monumental as at Tharros) in Tophet – sacred contexts by their nature akin to cemeteries – where they are associated with a female deity with a "disc". Such an association, direct in the case of the stelae found in Sousse and Sant'Antioco, is only conceivable in the case of Tharros. Among the very rare anthropomorphic iconographies found in the Tophet of Tharros is in fact that of a female figure in profile, dressed in a transparent robe, holding a "disc" in her hands (Fig. 23, b). This image closely resembles, as noted by Sabatino Moscati and Maria Luisa Uberti, the depiction of razor no. Sp 71 in the catalogue of Enrico Acquaro, found in Ibiza but believed to be a Carthaginian import, dated between the 4th and 3rd century BC[111] (Fig. 23, a). On side II of this artefact is depicted, under a crescent moon, a female figure with a veiled head and "disc"/drum held on the left sideway at chest height. She wears a *klaft* wig and a *usekh* collar and her naked body and is wrapped in a transparent mantle characterized – like the veil – by a decoration of large dots[112], probably to be intended as stars[113]. As already observed by Anna Maria Bisi, the clothing, the nudity and roundness of the belly, as well as the emphasis on astral connotations, leave little doubt as to its interpretation as a deity linked to fertility and death, possibly to be identified with Tinnit[114]. On side I, the depiction of a falcon Horus and a crouching animal, probably a frog[115], Egyptian motifs still vital in the Punic world[116], may have recalled the same eschatological meanings associated with the serpent depicted in the lower register of side II of the already mentioned Carthaginian razor Ca 52 (Fig. 22), which features a drummer motif on side I that is entirely similar to that of the razor Sp 71.

It is precisely the latter Carthaginian document, dated as seen to the 3rd century BC, that would seem to indicate how the iconography of the stool throne still retained in Late Punic Period, in association with the goddess (and) with the "disc", a funerary value, undoubtedly expressed by the symbolism of side II of the razor and its context of discovery.

5. The ways of the images

Monumental stone thrones appear in the Tophet of Tharros in the 5th century BC, reproducing a set of wooden stools and footstools of simple and essential design. Within a century, the thrones became one of the most widespread stone monuments in the sanctuary. The type of furniture represented by these stone thrones is widely known in the Eastern Mediterranean. The stylistic and dimensional comparisons offered in particular by the funerary statues from Tell Halaf indicate that the model came to Tharros from the Levant, along with its association with the sphere of religious banquets and the private worship of the dead through the offering of liquid and solid gifts.

As far as the mode of transmission is concerned, the attestation of models in Carthaginian tombs from the 7th-6th century BC makes it possible that the arrival of the iconographic

[111] Acquaro (1971), 177-178, cat. no. Sp 71, with a date to the 3rd c. BC. For a dating to the 4th c. BC see Moscati, Uberti (1985), 48.

[112] Maybe a reflection of a trend in fashion attested in Egypt in the late New Kingdom (Garcia-Ventura, López-Bertran (2013), 104).

[113] Bisi (1980), 64.

[114] Bisi (1980), 64-66.

[115] Acquaro (1971), 178, 183-184; Pisano (2006), 52. The animal is interpreted as a canid or feline by Picard (1965-1966), 77 and as a cat by Miguel Azcárraga (2006), 284.

[116] Cf. Pisano (2006).

model in the West first took place in Carthage and that, subsequently, it spread from there to North Africa and the colonies beyond the sea.

The fact that the oldest attestations of the iconography of a female figure with a "disc" seated on a stool with a footstool come from the sanctuary of Sousse (Fig. 20, a), would seem to suggest that the introduction of the iconographic motif into the repertoire of the Tophet stone monuments occurred in North Africa and then spread to Sardinia.

From this point of view, it would be possible that the stela with enthroned goddess with a "disc" on her breast (Fig. 21), which is unique in the stone repertoire of Sulci, could be the result of experimentation by Sulci workshops. However, the overlapping of the iconography of the seated female figure in profile with a "disc" known from the Sousse stelae with that of the standing female figure with a "disc" on her breast – the most widespread in Sulci – could have been dictated by the influence of other classes, such as coroplastics[117].

In any case, the rendering of the front face of the footstool of the stela of the Sulci' Tophet seems to indicate, on the other hand, that the stone-cutter from Sulci had some knowledge of the Tharros thrones or their models.

It is therefore possible to propose that the stela from Sulci is later than both the Sousse stelae (generally dated to the first half of the 5th c. BC) and the stone thrones from the Tophet of Tharros (dated to the late 5th and early 4th c. BC).

If it is therefore plausible that the Sulci workshops had knowledge of the iconography attested in Sousse, perhaps due to the circulation of "cartons" or to the presence of North African craftsmen – a suggestive hypothesis considering that a thematic convergence of the stone repertoires of the two centres is well attested for later periods[118] –, it cannot be ruled out that the North African iconography also reached the workshops of Tharros. The proximity between the stone stelae production of the Tophet of Tharros and the Carthaginian one is, moreover, an acquired datum[119].

The high degree of standardization of the thrones from the Tophet of Tharros, however, makes it likely that the iconography was adopted on the basis of three-dimensional models, probably smaller than life-size, made of stone or perishable materials, wood or raw clay.

The funerary models from Carthage might strengthen the impression that the model reached Tharros through the mediation of the North African metropolis.

In any case, it is possible to advance an alternative hypothesis, according to which the models for the iconography attested in Tharros could have arrived in Sardinia via Cyprus. It is in fact in Cyprus that the closest comparisons for the Tharros throne monuments are to be found. This is the aforementioned limestone stool from the sanctuary of Golgoi-Ayios Photios (Fig. 13), similar to the specimens from Tharros in terms of type of monument (consisting of a stool throne unencumbered by anthropomorphic depictions), size (24.1 x 30.5 x

[117] Although far less common than the standing figures, female figures with "disc" sitting on a throne, often with footstool, are known in Phoenicia (see e.g. Pritchard (1975), fig. 42, 2: from Sarepta, Shrine I), in Cyprus (see e.g. Karageorghis, Merker, Mertens (2016), 120, 258-259, cat. nos. 201, 205: from Idalion, late 6th-early 5th c. BC) and in Phoenician and Punic contexts (see e.g. Ferron (1969), 11, fig. 9: from Carthage, Sainte Monique; Fantar (1986), 311, cat. no. 13; Chérif (1997), 57, cat. no. 143; Uberti (1997), 189-190: from Kerkouane, first half of the 3rd c. BC). For the osmosis phenomenon between different craft classes in relation to the iconography of the female figure with "disc", cf. Moscati (1988), 38-39.

[118] See the case of the stelae with the iconography of the "passing animal", whose production in Sulci is dated to the 3rd-1st c. BC and has been convincingly considered as the outcome of a North African mediation on the basis of the comparison offered by two stelae from the Tophet of Sousse (Moscati (1981); Moscati (1988), 49-52).

[119] See e.g. D'Andrea, Giardino (2013), 12.

29.2 cm) and chronology (being doubtfully dated to Classical period, and, more specifically to the 5th c. BC[120]) and of manufacturing technique, being the legs and the horizontal reinforcement square-sectioned and made by retracting the plane representing the empty spaces (according to a strategy adopted at Tell Halaf and Tharros). The monument must have had a votive function – since in the upper band is a syllabic inscription dubiously interpreted as a dedication to the goddess Paphia – and, at the same time, a practical function, since the upper surface shows traces of burning[121]. This artefact recalls a scene of adoration of a person prostrate in front of a throne-burner, framed by two lunar sickles arranged above and below the figurative field, engraved in a scarab from Salamis[122] (Fig. 24).

The only significant morphological difference between the Golgoi stool and the thrones from the Tophet of Tharros is the absence of a footstool. This difference may actually derive from the fact that this was not carved from the same block as the stool and it is entirely plausible that the Cypriot throne was also originally associated with a footstool. In fact, from the same Golgoi comes a limestone monument, also with a syllabic inscription and part of the Cesnola Collection, interpreted as a base for a statue, which has the features of a footstool and is dimensionally perfectly compatible with the footstool from Ayios Photios (7.9 x 29.8 x 6.4 cm)[123] (Fig. 14).

Lastly, the possibility of recognizing the goddess of Paphos as the recipient of the Cypriot offering appears highly suggestive if one considers that an inscription from the Tophet of Tharros dating to the 4th century BC – the reading of which is, however, highly uncertain – has been interpreted as evidence of a pilgrimage made by a citizen of Tharros to the goddess' sanctuary in Paphos[124].

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the stone monuments of the Tophet of Tharros known as "stepped altars" can be hypothetically interpreted as stone thrones linked to a goddess with prerogatives connected to the sphere of fertility and death who, from the 5th century BC at least, has the "disc" among her attributes and is, perhaps, in a certain way similar to the goddess of Paphos.

The name of this deity is not known, but given the context of the discovery of the thrones from Tharros and the stelae of Sousse and Sulci and the comparison offered by the Punic razors from Cartahge and Ibiza, a proposed identification with Tinnit, "face of Baal" Hammon and "Lady" of Tophet, whose link with the world of the dead and whose close relationship with the goddess Astarte are well documented[125], does not seem out of place.

Turning finally to the function of the monuments from the Tophet of Tharros, the Cypriot document with a possible dedication to the goddess of Paphos might suggest for them a votive function similar to that of the more common cippi and stelae erected in Tophets and, at the same time, a practical use as altars in the context of specific rituals performed in the urnfield of the sanctuary at the time of the deposition of urns, the erection of stelae or other

[120] https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/241878.

[121] Hermary, Mertens (2015), 298, cat. no. 419.

[122] Boardman (2003), cat. no. 17/59.

[123] See above.

[124] Garbini (1993), 225-229, cat. no. *Tharros 30*, figs. 3-4. According to a more recent hypothesis, the inscription would instead be the result of a devotional act performed during a "feast" celebrated in the Tophet of Tharros by a person of Eastern origin, devoted to Astarte (Fariselli (2019), 133).

[125] On the goddess Tinnit see lastly Marín Ceballos (2021), with bibliography.

occasions[126]. It is difficult to further connote these circumstances, but the comparison offered by the altar-statues of Tell Halaf and the Carthaginian furniture models may suggest that the stone thrones of the Tophet of Tharros were means of interaction between the living and the dead[127], probably through the mediation of the goddess[128], and functioned as altar-tables for the deposition of offerings.

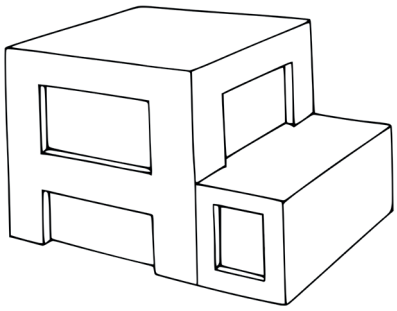

Fig. 1. Stone throne from the Tophet of Tharros, drawing re-elab. from (Acquaro (1976).

Fig. 2. Stone throne from the Tophet of Tharros, photos (from Moscati, Uberti (1985), cat. no. 187).

[126] Lastly on the rite of the performed in the Tophet of Tharros, Floris (2022), 259-270.

[127] In the present state of knowledge, it is not known what *status* the infants assumed once they were cremated and deposited in the Tophet (lastly Garbati (2022), 108-114, with references). However, it is very suggestive to note that Hélène Bénichou-Safar has proposed that divinatory practices centred on the dead newborns were regularly carried out in the Tophet of Carthage (Bénichou-Safar (2008)) and that an inscription from the Tophet of Tharros – the reading of which is, however, very doubtful and problematic – has been interpreted as evidence of the performance of such practices (Garbini (1994), 220-221, no. *Tharros 32*; Fariselli (2019), 134-138; Floris (2022), 215-216, 319-320).

[128] It might be worth noting that the throne had an important role in the royal funerary ritual in ancient Ugarit described in KTU 1.161 (Tsumura (1993), with bibliography; see also Hunziker-Rodewald (2015), 176-177), in which the solar goddess – maybe in a nocturnal form – played a central role as a psychopomp and infernal goddess (Tsumura (1993), 54-55). This is quite suggestive considering that a lion-headed clay statue wearing two sets of jewellery in gold and silver respectively, traditionally interpreted as a symbolical reference to the solar and lunar cycles (Barreca (1990), 125), was found in the area of the Tophet of Tharros (Acquaro (1984), 49-51). The statue – probably a cult statue in the last phase of Tophet's life – is usually dated no earlier than the 2nd century BC and is generally considered the representation of a male deity, Saturn Frugiferius (Acquaro (1984), 49-51; Barreca (1990), 125), but according to a recent proposal, it cannot be excluded that it depicts a female deity, maybe Tinnit (see lastly Floris (2022), 193, with references).

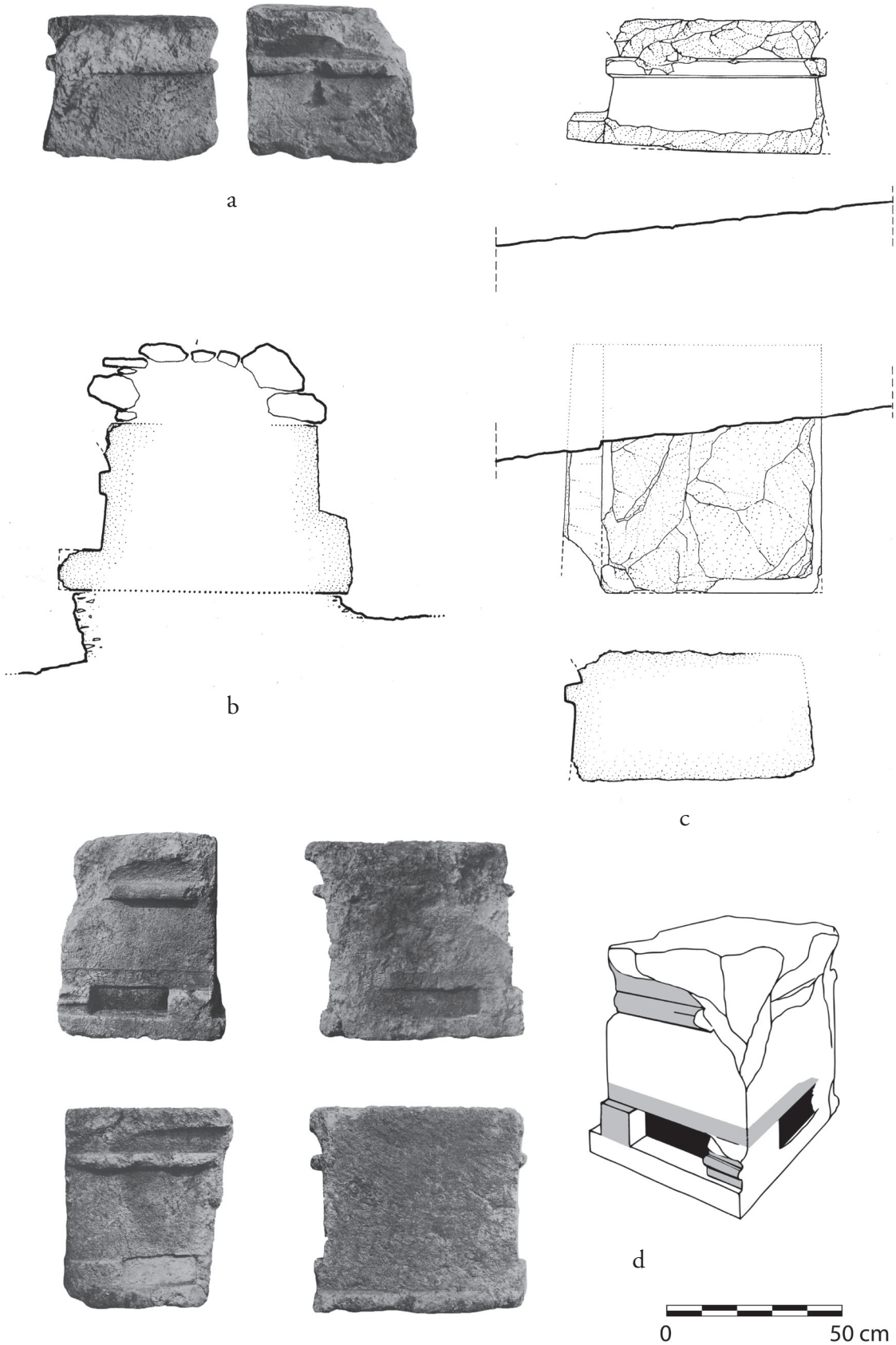

Fig. 3. Stone altars from the Tophet of Tharros: a) Base-altar with plinth and Egyptian gorge cat. no. 174; b-c) "Stepped" base-altar with plinth and Egyptian gorge cat nos. 178 and 177; d) Altar cat. no. 179 (from Moscati, Uberti (1985) and Acquaro (1976)).

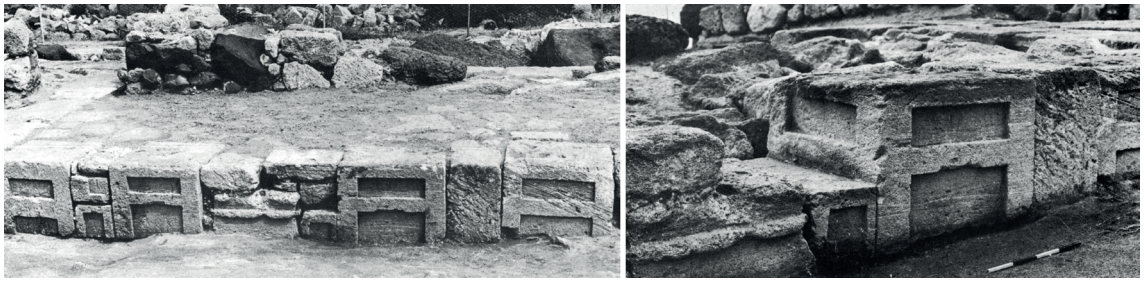

Fig. 4. Tharros, Tophet. Stone thrones reused in a building structure (from Moscati, Uberti (1985)).

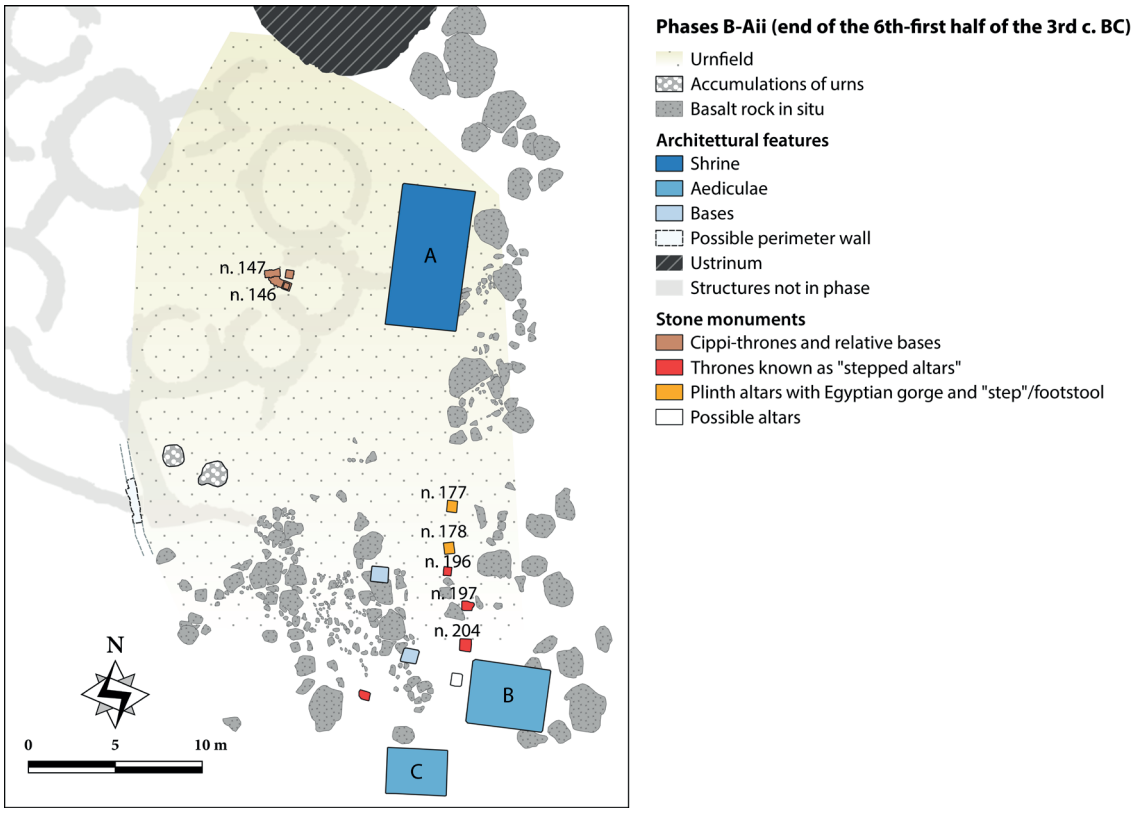

Fig. 5. Tharros, Tophet. The plan shows the main architectural and functional features of the Tophet during Phases B and A*ii* (end of the 6th-half of the 3rd c. BC; elab. of the Author).

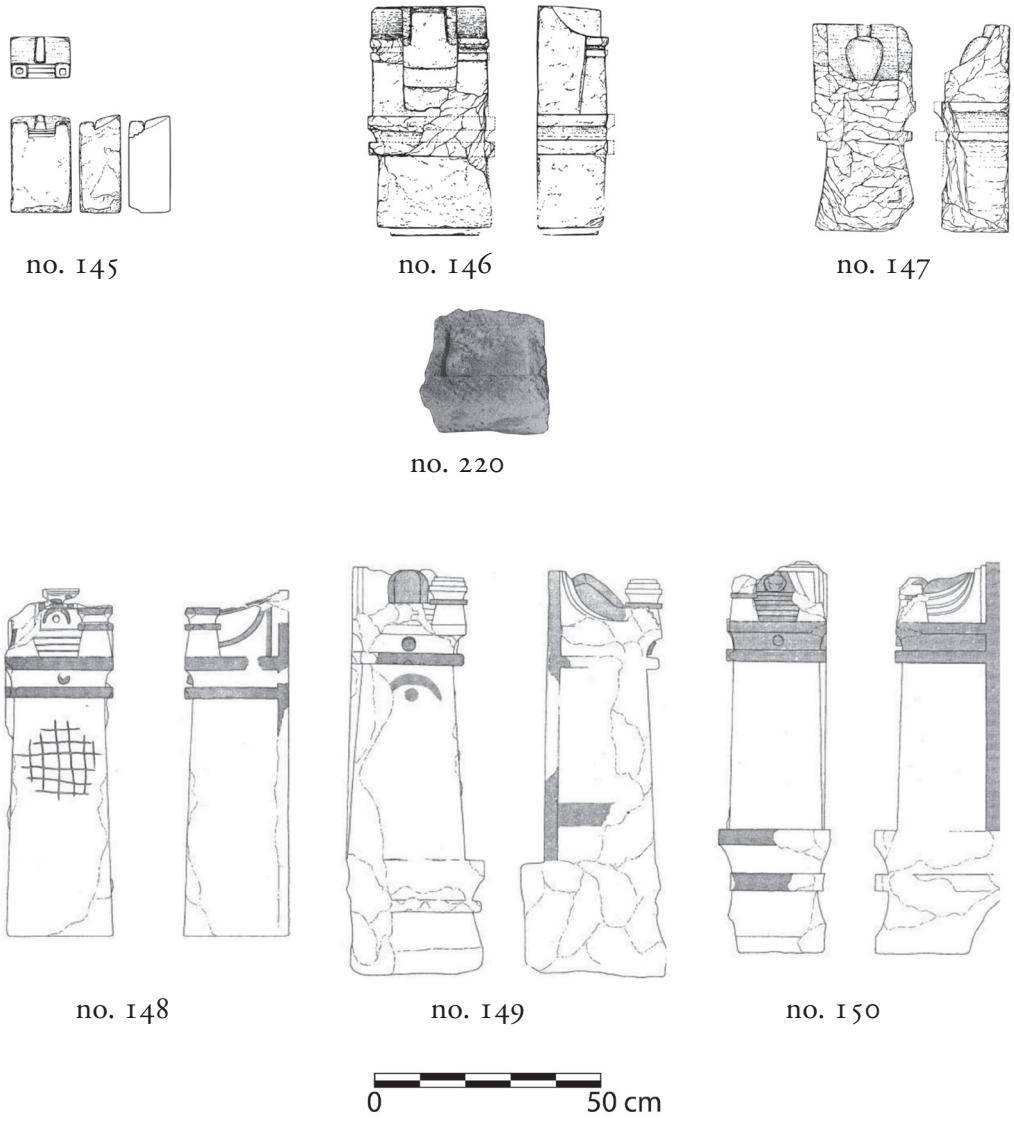

Fig. 6. Cippi-thrones from the Tophet of Tharros with relative bases (from Floris (2022)).

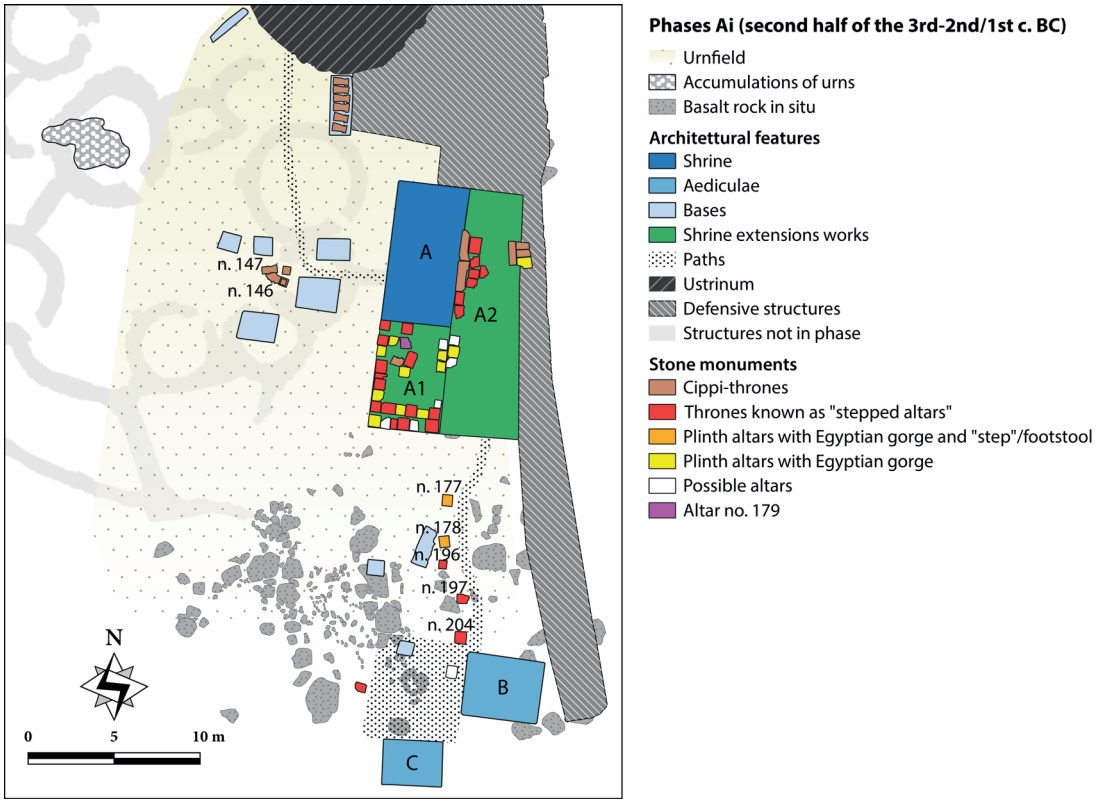

Fig. 7. Tharros, Tophet. The plan shows the main architectural and functional features of the Tophet during Phase A*i* (second half 3rd-2nd/1st c. BC). The red halo indicates the concentration map of the urns (elab. of the Author).

Fig. 8. Tharros, Tophet. Stone throne no. 176, *in situ* (from Moscati, Uberti (1985)).

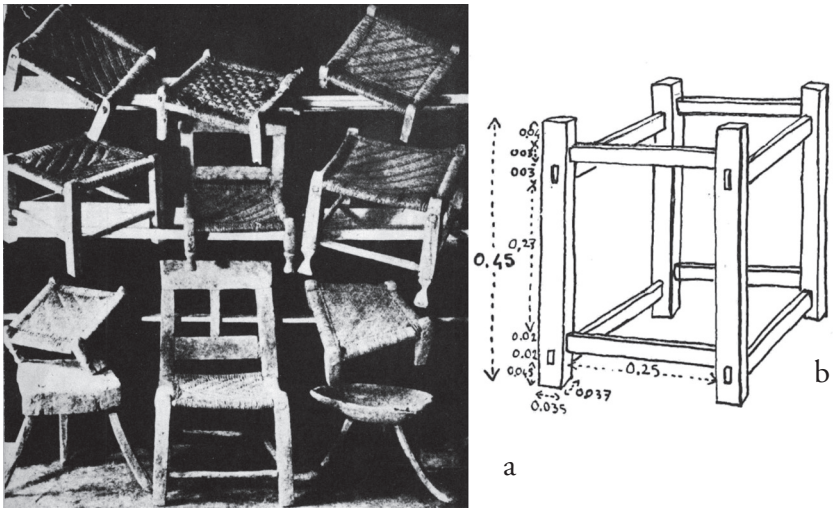

Fig. 9. Wooden stools: a) from Deir el-Medina (from Baker (1966)); b) from Baghouz (from Du Mesnil du Buisson (1949)).

Fig. 10. a) Akkadian seal with "drinking scene" (from Metzger (1985)); b) Old Babylonian plaques depicting a carpenter and a musician (from al Gailani Werr (1996)).

Fig. 11. Painted jug from Ugarit (from Yon (2006)).

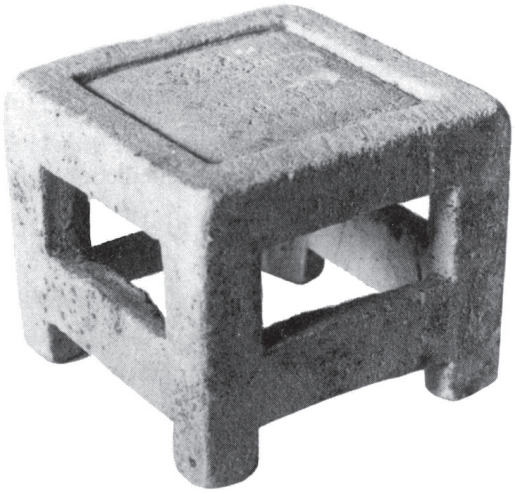

Fig. 12. Limestone stool model from Carthage (from Gubel (1987)).

Fig. 13. Stone stool model from Golgoi (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 74.51.2324, The Cesnola Collection, Purchased by subscription, 1874–76; Link: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/241878 (06.03.2023)).

Fig. 14. Stone model of footstool (?) from Golgoi (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 74.51.2301, The Cesnola Collection, Purchased by subscription, 1874–76; Link: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/241855 (06.03.2023)).

Fig. 15. Enthroned bronze figurine from Enkomi. Detail of the throne (from Schaeffer (1952)).

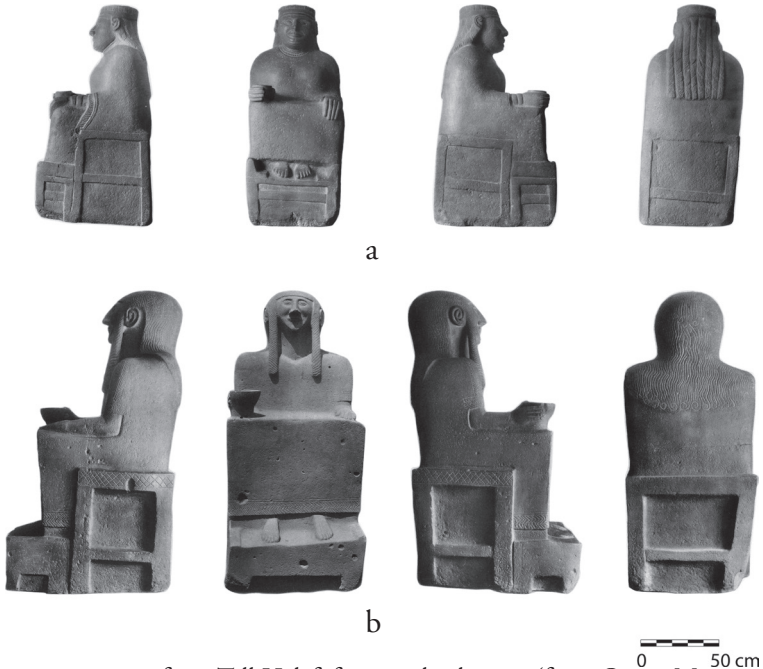

Fig. 16. Funerary statues from Tell Halaf, front and side view (from Opitz, Moortgat (1955)).

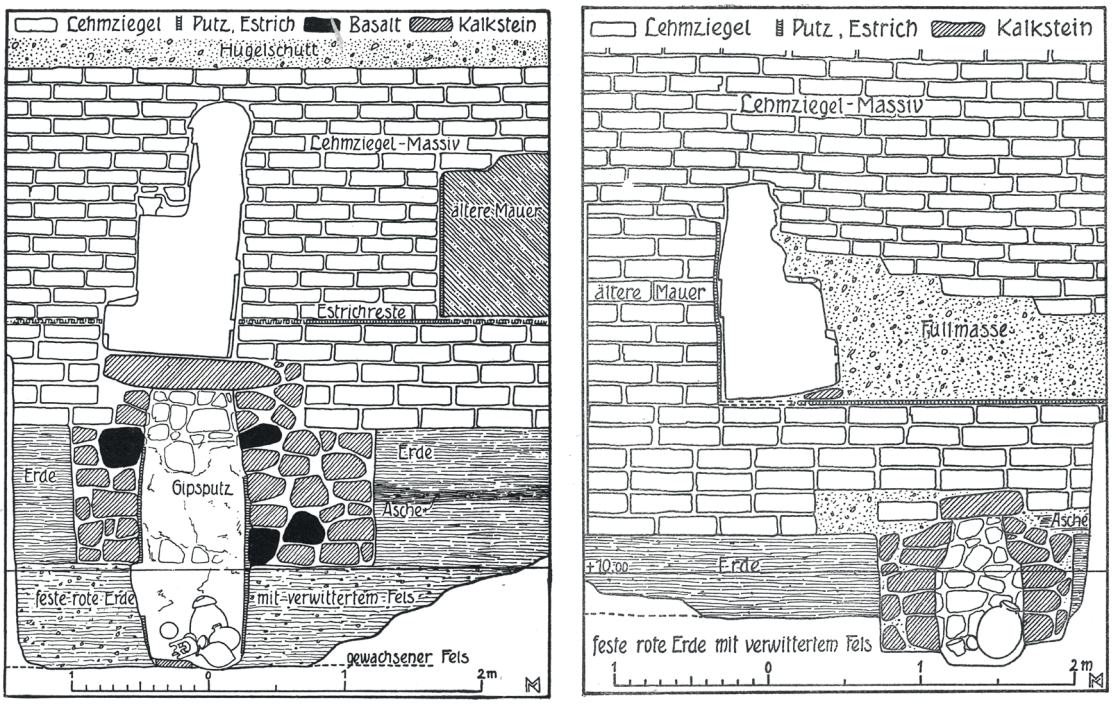

Fig. 17. The funerary statues from Tell Halaf in their context found on or beside shaft tombs (from Langenegger, Müller, Naumann (1950)).

Fig. 18. Funerary statues from Tell Halaf, detail (from Opitz, Moortgat (1955)).

Fig. 19. Miniature furniture from the necropolis of Carthage (from Hattler (2004)).

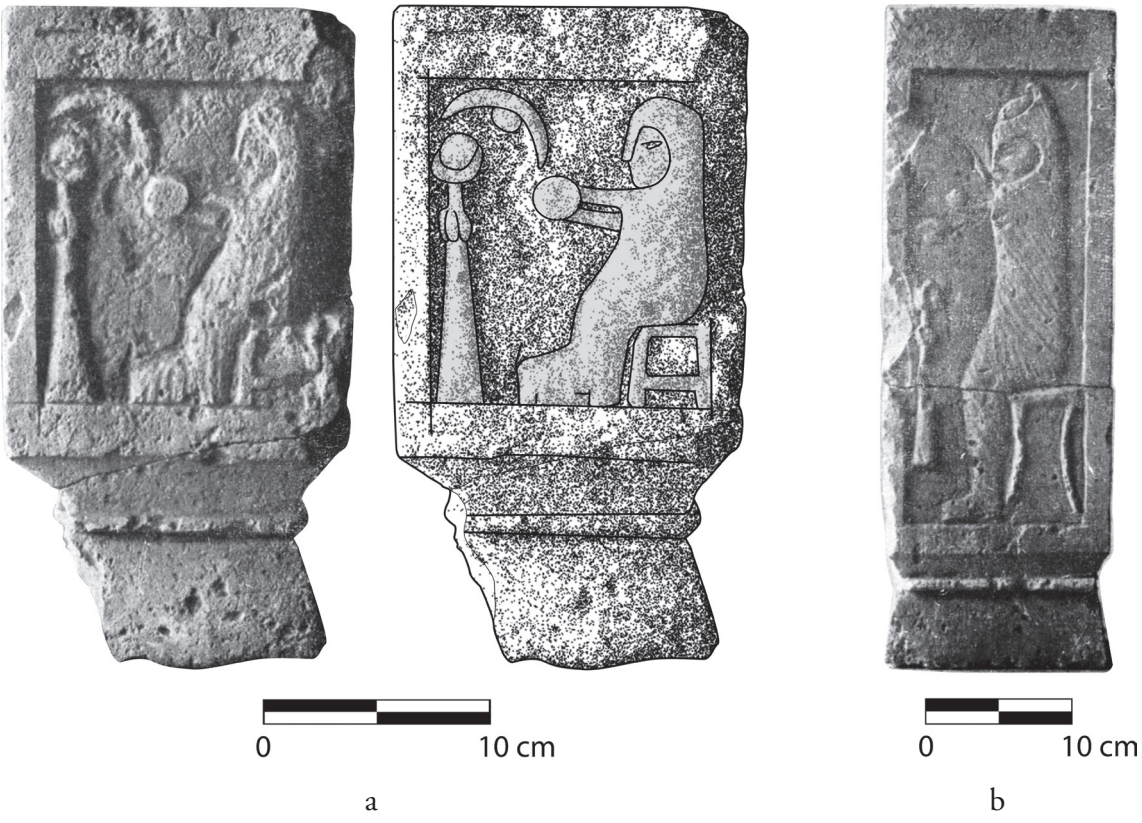

Fig. 20. Stelae from the Tophet of Sousse: a) Cb 1076 (photo, from Picard (1955); drawing, re-elab. from Picard (1955)); b) Cb 1077 (photo, from Picard (1955)).

Fig. 21. Stela from the Tophet of Sant'Antioco (re-elab. from Curto 1996)).

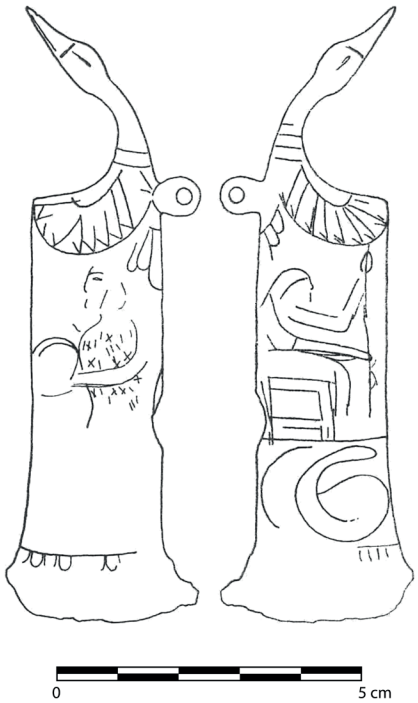

Fig. 22. Razor from Carthage, necropolis of Sainte Monique (re-elab. from Acquaro (1971)).

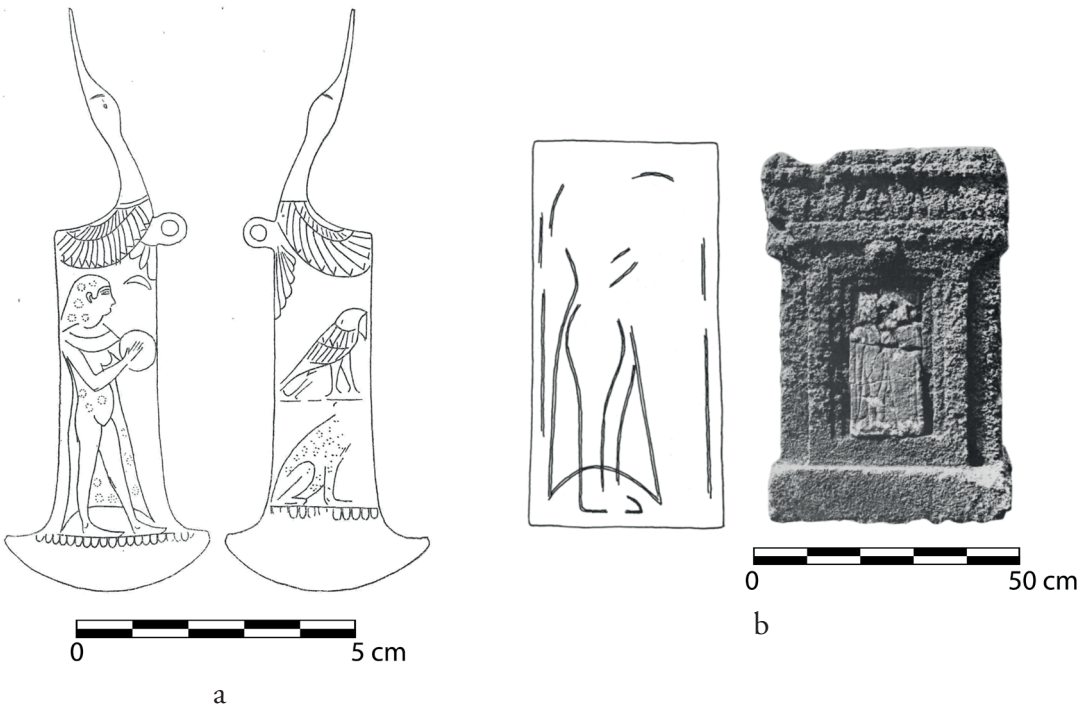

Fig. 23. a) Razor from Ibiza (re-elab. from Acquaro (1971)); b) Stela from the Tophet of Tharros no. 141 (from Moscati, Uberti (1985)).

Fig. 24. Scarab from Salamis (from Boardman (2003)).

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Riassunto /*Abstract*

Riassunto: Nel repertorio dei monumenti lapidei eretti nei santuari punici comunemente noti come "tofet", i cosiddetti "altari a gradino", rinvenuti solo a Tharros (Sardegna), rappresentano un *unicum* assoluto. Da un punto di vista morfologico, la proposta di una loro appartenenza alla categoria dei "troni" a suo tempo avanzata da Sabatino Moscati può essere considerata un dato acquisito. Tuttavia, il loro ruolo all'interno del rituale del tofet di Tharros rimane poco chiaro. Il presente lavoro discute la funzione di questi monumenti di pietra attraverso una revisione del loro contesto archeologico e un approfondito esame iconografico.

Abstract: Within the repertoire of the stone monuments erected in the Punic sanctuaries known as "Tophets", the so-called "stepped altars" represent an absolute *unicum* since they were found only at Tharros (Sardinia). From a morphological point of view, their affiliation to the category of "thrones" at the time proposed by Sabatino Moscati can be considered an established fact. Still, their role within the ritual of the Tophet of Tharros remains unclear. This paper discusses the function of these stone monuments through a review of their archaeological context and an in-depth iconographic examination.

Parole chiave: Tofet; Tharros; troni; monumenti lapidei; altari

Keywords: Tophet; Tharros; thrones; stone monuments; altars

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