Albahri, entre Oriente y Occidente.
Revista independiente de estudios históricos
ISSN 2444-0515

Url: http://revistaalbahri.com
Fecha de la publicación: 02/03/2017
Edición: Instituto de Estudios de Ronda y la Serranía (IERS). C/ Virgen de la Paz, 15.
CP: 29400. Ronda (Málaga).
Portada: Plato con un barco del siglos XIV-XV producido en Túnez (Túnez) y conservado en el Museo Sidi Qasim al-Jalizi. Túnez.

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WAS THERE A SPORTING CULTURE IN THE PHOENICIAN AND PUNIC WORLD?

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Fecha de recepción: 29/06/2016
Fecha de aceptación: 19/10/2016

ABSTRACT

There is reasonable presumption that the Carthaginian society of the Hellenistic period took an interest in sporting competitions and, more broadly, in the Greek model of athletic training as pointed by the archaeological record integrated with textual sources. On the contrary, less easily identifiable is the evidence for the practice of competitive sports and gymnastics in the Phoenician region and in the most ancient phases of the colonial experience, compared with the rich manifestations of this phenomenon in other cultures of the ancient Near East.

Although the documentation examined in this paper does not provide enough evidence to allow any final certainty about the existence of sport contests in the Phoenician and Punic world, it cannot be excluded that the current picture may be incomplete due to a lack of research in the Phoenician homeland and in the regions of colonial expansion.

Key words: Phoenicians, Phoenician and Punic society, sport, athletics, strigils.

RIASSUNTO

L’interesse per le competizioni sportive e, più in generale, per la formazione atletica di modello greco, sembra oggi validamente presumibile per la società cartaginese d’età ellenistica sulla base di perspicui riscontri nella cultura materiale e delle suggestioni indotte dal dato letterario antico. Molto più complessa, invece, l’individuazione di tracce di attività ginniche e sportive nella regione fenicia e nelle fasi più antiche dell’esperienza coloniale, a fronte delle diverse manifestazioni del fenomeno nelle altre culture del Vicino Oriente antico.

Sebbene la documentazione esaminata in questo contributo non permetta di sostenere con certezza l’esistenza di un agonismo sportivo nel mondo fenicio e punico, non si esclude che il quadro attualmente disponibile possa in gran parte dipendere da una carenza di ricerche nella regione fenicia e nelle aree di irradiazione coloniale.

Parole chiave: Fenici, società fenicia e punica, sport, atletismo, strigili.
More than thirty years have passed since Labib Boutros published his monograph *Phoenician Sport*. Ever since, there has been a lack of scholarly research on this subject, showing a significant delay in comparison with achievements of classical studies. It might indeed be said that the above-mentioned volume, with all its limitations, still constitutes the only attempt to raise a “sport question” about the oriental milieu of Phoenician civilization. If on the grounds of our current knowledge there is at least reasonable presumption that physical training and athletic competitions were practiced in the Punic society of the Hellenistic age, much still awaits to be discovered about the early stages of the Iron Age in the Phoenician homeland and in the Mediterranean regions of its colonial expansion, up to the earliest centuries of Carthaginian hegemony.

Undeniably, a survey that aims to fill these gaps must grapple with several problems like the well-known absence of written sources, as well as the lack of extensive archaeological research in the eastern and western Phoenician settlements and the semantic ambiguity of some of iconographic evidence, due to the close connection between sport and warfare training or specific ritual events. Nevertheless, such an analysis is more necessary than ever to fully reconstruct the historical dynamics in the ancient Mediterranean. For this reason, it may be useful to carry out a preliminary examination of the documents, in order to assess the feasibility of this line of research.

Among the available data on the Levantine area, we must first review the scarce literary evidence. Sports competitions are frequently mentioned in Mesopotamian texts as early as the third millennium BC, and the theme recurs often even in the Ugaritic mythology, where the description of the fight between Baal and Mot seems to reflect

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1 Boutros, 1981.
2 On sports in the Greek and Roman world see, among others, Dozio, Fallani, Soldini, 2009, with extensive bibliography.
4 Secci, 2012.
5 See below.
6 For a critical synthesis of current knowledge about sports in the ancient Mediterranean civilizations, see Scanlon, 2010.
7 In this respect, the Royal Hymns of Shulgi are emblematic: Vermaak, 1993. On the textual and iconographic sources for the study of Ancient Near Eastern sports see, in general, Rollinger, 2011.
a precise knowledge of wrestling techniques. The subject resurfaces later in the Old Testament’s passages related to probable racing contests held in the kingdom of Judah, between the seventh and the sixth century BC. If the outline provided by literary sources points to a certain diffusion of competitive sports in the Levant from the Late Bronze Age well into the Iron Age, there seems to be little chance for identifying the practice of sport in archaeological evidence, especially before the phases displaying strong Greek influences.

Aside from metal bowls decorated with hunting scenes that hint at an exclusively royal sport, it is the renowned suburban temple of Eshmun at Sidon that provides some clues with its nude heroic statues of youths in the Greek style of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, interpreted by Maurice Dunand as victorious athletes in Hellenic contests and recently dated to the third quarter of the fourth century (Fig. 1). The statues were retrieved from the fill of the so-called “Pool of Astarte’s throne”, built in the third century BC at the base of the truncated pyramidal podium of the temple from the Persian period and close to a flight of stairs before which ritual shows in the open air presumably took place. Although challenged by Rolf Stucky—who was inclined to attribute

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8 See lastly Good, 1994 on KTU 1.6 VI.16-21, which reads as follows: They eyed one another like lion whelps. / Mot was strong, Baal was strong. / They gored like wild bulls. / Mot was strong, Baal was strong. / They bit like snakes. / Mot was strong, Baal was strong. / They kicked like gazelles. / Mot fell, Baal fell upon him (trans. Good, 1994: 152). According to Boutros, 1981: 44-45, the struggle between Baal and the other Ugaritic gods for domination of the universe would remember that between Zeus and Cronus in Paus., Per. 5.7.10 and 8.2.2, after which Zeus would have founded the Olympic Games. For a different opinion see López-Ruiz, 2014: especially 3-4, according to which the battle between Baal and Mot would be been part of a set of myths which would inspire the cosmogonic system reflected in the Iliad: in the latter, the divine triad constituted by Zeus, Poseidon and Hades (Hom., Il. 15.187-193) would be equivalent to the Ugaritic one composed by Baal, Yam and Mot.

9 Particularly significant is Jer., 12.5: If you race with the foot-runners and they exhaust you, how then can you compete with horses? (trans. Jewish Publication Society, New Translation 1978). On this biblical passage as evidence of racing contest see Malamat, 1994.

10 Markoe, 1985: Cy7, E2.


15 Lastly Oggiano, Xella, 2009: 78, with references.

to these artefacts the same function of so-called temple boys—\(^{17}\) the above mentioned interpretation by Dunand may be supported by Panathenaic amphorae of the second half of the fourth century BC found in the same sacred area\(^ {18}\), probably offered to the titular deity of the temple, according to a custom well attested in the Greek world\(^ {19}\). In light of similar findings from the temple of Astarte in Kition\(^ {20}\) –dating to the fifth century BC and interpreted by Marguerite Yon as evidence of the participation of Cypriot athletes in Athenian sports competitions\(^ {21}\)– we cannot rule out the possibility that the mentioned Sidonian materials may refer to early, pre-Hellenistic sporting competitions, already oriented towards Greek models by an urban elite inclined to new cultural influences\(^ {22}\). In this perspective, Alexander the Great’s decision to celebrate gymnastic contests in Tyre in honour of Heracles/Melqart, both immediately after the conquest of the city in 332 BC, and a year later, on his return from Egypt\(^ {23}\), would appear far less revolutionary.

\[\text{Fig. 1. Nude heroic statues of youths from the Eshmun Temple in Sidon (from Stucky, 1993: tafs. 38-39, nn. 165, 167)}\]

\(^{17}\) Stucky, 1993: 39. It must be stressed, however, that the scholar based his opinion on an argumentum ex silentio, that is the lack of evidence for gymnasia in Phoenicia during the Persian period.


\(^{19}\) See, e.g., Nicolas, Vanhulle, 2010: 28.

\(^{20}\) Bentz, 1998: 164, 181, nn. 5.333, 4.139.


\(^{22}\) On the gradual penetration of Hellenizing elements in Phoenician art, see lastly Nitschke, 2011. About the historical context Elayi, 2013: especially 278-282.

Turning now our attention to the regions of the Mediterranean diaspora, we can first mention an ivory statuette of a female “swimmer” from Tharros, published by Giovanni Spano and usually included among the importations of the orientalizing period\textsuperscript{24} (Fig. 2). The figure, nude and with arms outstretched before her holding a sort of bowl, was found without its head, originally joined to the body through rectangular socket hole\textsuperscript{25}. It belongs to a class of cosmetic spoons of Egyptian origin, diffused in the Near-East and Cyprus between the second and first millennia BC\textsuperscript{26} and considered by some scholars as evidence of swimming contests\textsuperscript{27}, while other believe that they testify to non-competitive swimming practiced by the upper classes of Nilotic society\textsuperscript{28}. On the other hand, we cannot exclude that these figures might allude to fertility by exalting feminine beauty, a theme already attested in ancient Mesopotamian myths\textsuperscript{29} and long associated with the prerogatives of the Phoenician Astarte and the Greek Aphrodite\textsuperscript{30}.

The image on a jasper scarab from the sanctuary of Gorham’s Cave, near Gibraltar\textsuperscript{31}, points instead to a more recent chronology, the early decades of the fifth century BC. The scarab belongs to a group of twenty-nine similar seals uncovered by J. Wae-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Spano, 1859: tav. F, 1-3; Hölbl, 1986: 400-402, fig. 76; Vagnetti, 1993.
\item Hölbl, 1986: 400-402, fig. 76; Vagnetti, 1993.
\item Fischer, 2007: 277-339.
\item See, e.g., Fallani, 2009: 28.
\item Decker, Thuillier, 2004: 55-56.
\item See, e.g., the sumerian Enlil and Ninlil, 22-34: The river is holy; the woman bathed in the holy river. As Ninlil walked along the bank of the Id-nunbir-tum, his eye was bright, the lord’s eye was bright, he looked at her. The Great Mountain, Father Enlil – his eye was bright, he looked at her. The shepherd who decides all destinies – his eye was bright, he looked at her. The king said to her, “I want to have sex with you!”, but he could not make her let him (trans. http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr121.htm, accessed on June 2016), as commented by Budin, 2011: 21-22.
\item Breitenberger, 2007: especially 7-12.
\item Gutiérrez López et al., 2012; Zamora López et al., 2013.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
chters (excavations 1948-1954) in the upper archaeological layer together with Punic ware, figural terracotta and small glass paste vases. Carved into the oval base is a nude athlete, shown in profile with an arýballos hanging from his right wrist and leaning forward with a strigil as if scraping ointments from his left leg (Fig. 3). The subject, well attested in the Late Archaic Greek glyptic, extended successively to the Etruscan period, with some variations in the frontal posture of the figure, represented with a torso slightly bent to the left. Despite the uncertain cultural matrix of the seal, this motif is of interest, not least because testifies to an early circulation of themes related to the Greek paideia in a colonial context under the influence of Carthage.

More conspicuous is the evidence for the spread of competitive sports in the Punic world provided by a crotula of the late fifth-early fourth century BC, found in the Carthaginian archive of the presumed Temple of Apollo. It shows a nude, beardless man with one leg drawn back, arms bent at the elbow and raised, as he lifts an object of circular shape; to the left of the figure is a crescent moon with horns turned rightward and enclosing a disc (Fig. 4). If muscular frame and heroic nudity point to the representation of an athlete, less convincing is the hypothesis of an athlete throwing a ball, since in

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32 López de la Orden, 1995; Gutiérrez López et al., 2012: 351-352.
33 On athletic nudity in the Greek and Roman world see lastly Van Nijf, 2012.
37 See the references above, note 31.
the ancient world ball games were generally excluded from competitive programs. On the other hand, the figure’s equipment can be more likely identified as one bronze sphere similar to those seen by St. Jerome on the Acropolis of Athens, used to measure the strength of contenders prior to contests. Besides possible interpretations of the athletic gesture, it is worth noting the seal’s relevance to the Punic culture, as attested by the presence of astral symbolism whose peculiar composition finds a parallel, for example, in the famous razor with a representation of Hercules of same Carthaginian origin. A number of Punic seals dated within the fifth century BC showing warriors with shield and spear engaged in a foot race may hint at the Olympic game with runners in armour called hoplitodromia (Figg. 5-6). Since these images may be easily referred to an iconographic tradition based on themes drawn from Attic pottery, one can wonder whether a possible Carthaginian owner was aware, and to what extent, of the values informing athletic competitions in the Greek world; in other words, whether in the context in which they were received the images had been selected to express a phenomenon that might have conveyed different ideological values in the near-eastern environment of origin but that was alike in some external manifestations. Actually, in Punic glyptics further links to the ephetic ideology can be traced both in several representations of dances in armour (or “pyrrhic” dance), and in the choice of subjects drawn from Dionysian imagery like...
the initiation of the adolescents into hunt and the *komos* dancers\(^{48}\); to the latter subject, in particular, have been recently ascribed the running figures on two scarabs from Ker-kouane\(^{49}\) (Figg. 7-8), that are highly suggestive considering the issues dealt with so far.

An increasing openness to Greek iconographic themes connected with athletics and body culture is further attested by a bronze *oinochoe* from the Carthaginian necropolis of Sainte-Monique, dated between the fourth and the third century BC (Fig. 9). The separately forged handle of the vase portrays a bearded nude male standing on a Silenus mask in a backward bend and looking as if grasping the head of another figure; the latter is beardless and crouching while squeezing the neck of the vase between his arms and legs\(^{50}\). As has long been noted, the main figure is likely to be an acrobat about to make a backward somersault\(^{51}\), according to a scheme already attested by an ivory statue from Kamid el-Loz\(^{52}\) and characteristic of various Mediterranean cultures\(^{53}\). Given the peculiar association with the Silenus mask, which hints at Dionysian symbolism coherent with the acrobatics of initiation dances\(^{54}\), it cannot be excluded that this artefact, likely imported from Etruria or Magna Graecia, may reflect the ideology shared by the most well-off of the Carthaginian elite, fascinated with the Dionysian cult and its complex

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\(^{48}\) Acquaro, 2011: 14-16.


\(^{50}\) Delattre, 1901: 590-592, fig. 7; Morpurgo, 2006: 136-137, fig. 9.

\(^{51}\) Deonna, 2005: 70, 72.

\(^{52}\) See, e.g., Hachmann, 1983: 82-83, 114. In the Ancient Near East, the acrobats often performed with runners, wrestlers and musicians during religious ceremonies, as in the Old Babylonian ritual of Ishtar from Mari: lastly Ziegler, 2007: 59, 61, 62, 261-276.


\(^{54}\) Deonna, 2005: 118.
rites. A decisive contribution to our understanding of the phenomenon comes again from grave goods of the same period indicating that the strigil becomes increasingly widespread from the fourth century BC onward (Fig. 10).

Generally linked to members of a Punic elite whose ultimate model is the Carthaginian culture, it characterises the necropilises of North Africa (as, for instance, Carthage and Kelibia), Sicily (Palermo and Lilibeo), Sardinia (for example Cagliari, Nora, Tharros, Villamar, Senorbi and Olbia) and the Iberian Peninsula (Ibiza and Villaricos), first as a sign of absorbed Greek influences and successively, after the Roman conquest of overseas Carthaginian possessions, embodying and re-affirming Punic identity towards the new dominant culture. In comparison with previous interpretation arguing that the strigil might have been a surrogate for bronze razor replacing it in the rituals of body preparation, this new interpretation seems to suit better recent outcomes of archaeological research that highlight different symbolic functions for the two artefacts. On the other hand, the available evidence points to a Hellenistic symbolism adopted and associated to other typical sporting equipment such as bronze strigil-rings and iron *ampullae*. This is consistent with some fleeting references in classical literary sources such as the account of a legendary racing contest waged by the Philaeni brothers in the territorial dispute between Carthage and Cyrene, or that of Julian the Apostate about the substantial similarities between the Carthaginian and Spartan systems of education.

Moreover, interesting information related to Sardinia is provided by Diodorus

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55 On Dionysiac cults in the Punic world, see lastly De Vita, 2009, with bibliography.
56 Secci, 2009.
57 Secci, 2009.
59 Jul., Or. 1 14b-15d; 10.6-55. For a re-evaluation of this passage in the study of the Carthaginian society see Secci, 2012.
about the construction of gymnasiums by Iolaus\textsuperscript{60}: its plausible attribution to a reworking of the myth in the fourth century BC, possibly in the Siceliot area, is suggestive evidence that the ideals of the \textit{paideia} and the \textit{polis} were adopted in the Punic island centres during the Hellenistic period\textsuperscript{61}. Of certain interest in this context are a public building at Soluntum, interpreted as a gymnasium, and some inscriptions mentioning the gymnasiarchy retrieved at Soluntum and perhaps Lilybaeum\textsuperscript{62}.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{ironBronzeStrigils.png}
\caption{Iron and bronze strigils from Olbia (Sardinia) (from Tore, 1989: fig. 9; photo courtesy of Raimondo Santucci)}
\end{figure}

In conclusion, although the evidence here examined cannot be said with certainty to indicate that in the Phoenicians and Punic world sport contests were held, yet it cannot be excluded that the present picture may be largely due both to the well-known absence of primary written sources in the East and the West, and a lack of archaeological research in the Phoenician homeland and in the regions of colonial expansion: actually, it is possible that the limited knowledge of urban settlements and, most of all, continuous human use of most of the Phoenician and Punic urban sites has prevented us from identifying traces of structures built for athletes or to practise competitive sports. On the other hand, the undeniable importance that sport activities had in the Near Eastern world and in Greece as well, even as a claim of social status, suggests that the lack of evidence in the Phoenician and Punic context might be due to a research gap.

\textsuperscript{60} D.S., \textit{Bibl. hist.} 4.30.1-2: τότε δ’ ὁ Ἱόλαος (...) ὕκοιδήσει δὲ καὶ γυμνάσια μεγάλα τε καὶ πολυτέλη, καὶ δικαστήρια κατέστησε καὶ τάλλα τά πρὸς τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν συντείνοντα. ὠνόμασε δὲ καὶ τοὺς λαοὺς Ἰολαέιονς.

\textsuperscript{61} Chiai, 2001: 44, 48-52. At the institutional level, see also the similarities between the Spartan and Carthaginian constitution described by Arist., \textit{Pol.} 2.1272b-1273b: lastly Barceló, 2009.

\textsuperscript{62} Secci, 2009: 157, with bibliography.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Mr. Raimondo Santucci for supplying the photograph of the strigils from Olbia (Sardinia), the German Archaeological Institute of Rome for having kindly provided the photograph of the cretula from Carthage and the anonymous reviewers of this paper.
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