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Temples and religious ties
in the network of the Phoenicians

Introduction

In the long and fascinating history of the Mediterranean world there have been many peoples that fundamentally changed the course of history. Of these peoples, there are little of which we know less than of the Phoenicians. Practically no written sources of this highly developed culture have survived. Scholars have relied mainly on archaeological records and the scarce and distorted written sources from other cultures like the Greeks and the Romans. Nevertheless, the Phoenicians have proven to be a fascinating subject, and due to their far-reaching influence on Mediterranean history and its many peoples and civilizations, they are well worth studying despite the lack of written sources. The main reason the Phoenicians were so influential in Mediterranean history is because they spread through most parts of the Mediterranean world, building the first overseas Mediterranean network and therefore interacting intensively with many other civilizations, spreading their rich culture, wealth, technology, art and religion. Introducing their alphabet in the Greek world is an important example. Besides that which the Phoenicians introduced to other societies through their network, the network itself which they created probably influenced Mediterranean history the most. After all, the Phoenician network gave rise to a Mediterranean empire which became the greatest rival the Romans ever had to overcome.

Understanding how this network came to be, how it functioned and what its influence was, should be of high priority when studying this civilization that thrived primarily by intensive interaction with other peoples and with their own dispersed communities. So far, the focus on Phoenician interaction across the Mediterranean has not led to a focus on the network itself. In the existing literature on the Phoenicians, it is often emphasized that commerce was virtually the only thing of interest to the...
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Phoenician voyagers and colonists. Thus, when the Phoenician dispersion across the Mediterranean is discussed, it is either almost exclusively with focus on commercial activity; or the focus is entirely on the material culture, its distribution across the Mediterranean and the connections between findings from different sites.\(^3\)

In my view, another productive focus in studies on the Phoenicians might be how the Phoenicians created a network structure which became a self-perpetuating and a ‘creative’ factor in the Mediterranean world, strongly influencing its history. Important studies on Mediterranean networks, using network theories, focus mostly on Greek and Roman history with only a few excursions to Phoenician networks.\(^4\) I think much can be gained by focusing on the Phoenician network, applying ‘network thinking’ as has been applied by several historians on Greek and Roman history. What this approach entails exactly will be explained in the next paragraph. When focusing on the Phoenician network, there is one aspect which deserves closer scrutiny, and which might shed new light on the way we perceive the Phoenicians and their colonies, namely Phoenician religion. It will be argued that the Phoenicians leaned heavily on religious ties to create and maintain an intensively interacting network with a strong sense of identity. The question I will try to answer is thus: “What was the role of religion in the creation of a Phoenician network, and how did this network in turn influence Phoenician religion and culture?” Especially when trying to answer the second part of this question, applying network thinking will be very useful. It will be

![Map of Phoenician settlements](https://kids.britannica.com/students/assembly/view/125790)
important to first explain how this will be done, and to examine what the
Phoenician network looked like and how it was structured, viewed from a
network perspective. Subsequently, I will focus on the role of Phoenician
religion and cults in the creation and maintenance of their network. To
conclude this brief exploration of the Phoenician web, I will discuss its
‘creative’ role, i.e. the way the network itself in turn influenced Phoenician
religion and culture.

Network Thinking and the Origins of the Phoenician Network

The application of network theory in the field of (especially ancient) history
is mostly problematic due to the obvious reason that data on ancient history
is always hopelessly incomplete. Given the high sensitivity of network
theory to missing data, this makes network analyses of ancient networks
highly speculative and it is often not possible to conduct network analysis
in a convincing way. Therefore the use of network thinking, as described by
Knappett, will be a more helpful approach. This term signifies “a heuristic
strategy that encourages us to think in terms of relationships between people
and things”, as opposed to network analysis, “which begins by actually
defining nodes and the ties that connect them and proceeds, ideally, to
quantitative analysis”.

Here I will apply the former, going only as far with
network analysis as defining the major nodes and ties. For this research I
will primarily rely on secondary literature. This should be no disadvantage;
since applying network thinking on Phoenician history is largely new, it
is useful to reinterpret the current state of knowledge on the Phoenicians
through a network perspective.

I now move to the Phoenicians and their network. Why and how did
a Phoenician overseas network emerge? From roughly the 11th and 10th
centuries onward, after the Bronze Age collapse left the smaller states of the
Middle East with room to grow, the development of the Phoenician city-
states and their distinctive culture and network seems to have accelerated.

It is good to realise that when the Phoenicians, and especially the Tyrians,
set out to build their overseas commercial and colonial web in the western
Mediterranean, their cities were already part of a network. Following
network thinking, it could be argued that it was largely this existing network
that put the Phoenicians in the position to drastically expand it, creating
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highly developed clusters over large distances and connecting them with the network of the Eastern Mediterranean. In other words, if a creative role could be ascribed to a network in itself, then the demands this eastern network generated might be part of the explanation as to why the Phoenicians created a whole new network in the Western Mediterranean (which initially served the demands the older network created) and why they functioned as the brokers between the East and the West. I will therefore sketch this eastern network and the position the Phoenician cities had in it.

From the 12th century onward the Phoenicians, especially the city of Sidon, gradually started to fill up the maritime and commercial gap the Mycenaean left behind after their decline. Sidon and a few other important Phoenician cities had strong ties with, among others, the Hittites and the Egyptians, which mostly constituted political and commercial exchanges, or "flows", along these ties. In the hinterland of Lebanon and Syria, the Assyrian Empire slowly expanded from the 11th century onward, and would prove to be very interested in the many resources and luxury goods the Phoenician cities imported from other lands. From the 10th century onward, Tyre rapidly grew more powerful and created a network of its own, forming political ties with Egypt and a close alliance with the Kingdom of Israel, creating strong ties through which commercial, political and cultural flows circulated. From the 9th century onward, the growing power of the Assyrians exercised a strong gravitational pull on the entire Middle Eastern network, dragging the cluster of the Phoenician cities in its orbit by creating great demands for resources. For the Phoenician course of history this was a very important shift in network structure. The Assyrian empire created "Push factors" for the Phoenician network cluster, by encroaching on Phoenician territory and sovereignty and by cutting off inland ties, for example to Israel, the Philistines and Damascus. The Assyrians also indirectly created "pull factors" in the West, by greatly increasing the demand for more land, freedom and resources, especially rare or precious metals like tin and silver. All of these things were relatively abundant in the West. Therefore the demands and limitations that were created by the network in the East at least partly explain the emergence of an overseas, Mediterranean network. That this network was created and maintained by the Phoenicians and in particular by Tyre, can in turn be explained by the Phoenician position in this Eastern network: with their extensive ties to other network clusters like those of Egypt and Assyria, in combination with
a monopoly on maritime trade, they were in the best position to expand this network to the West.

The growing power of Tyre can partly be explained by the fact that the Tyrians most elaborately and effectively reacted to shifts in network structure, actively building new ties and creating new nodes to expand their (mostly political and commercial) network. Viewed through the lens of network theory, the Tyrians were thus highly effective in maintaining their "hub" status in the network. From the 9th century onward, the Tyrians kept pushing the boundaries of their web further west, strengthening older ties from their "pre-colonial trade" by starting to actually found colonies, which really took off from the 8th century onward.

The Phoenician Network in the West and the Role of Religion

As the Phoenicians expanded their network westward, in time they started to search for a permanent foothold there to strengthen their commercial network and to build political ties and nodes. They also increasingly searched for more land to settle on and to sustain their communities. This paragraph explores what kind of network structure emerged from this colonisation process, and what the main nodes, ties and flows were.

As mentioned earlier, it was almost exclusively the Tyrians who founded permanent settlements in the West. The first of these Tyrian settlements mostly served a commercial purpose, but because of the importance of these commercial enterprises for the economic and political well-being of Tyre, in most cases strong political ties were maintained as well between the colonies and the metropolis. For this reason a relatively high degree of centralization around the political, economic and cultural hub of Tyre, the metropolis, was maintained throughout most of Phoenician colonial history – despite the large distance between Tyre and the new network clusters in the West. A mediating role seems to have been taken up by Carthage, which, from the 6th century onward, started to become a central hub in the West by providing political and cultural patronage to the other Phoenician colonies.

So where were the other western colonies placed in this network? What kind of nodes and clusters emerged? Clear evidence for colonisation in the West does not seem to predate the 8th century. Some evidence of early
Phoenician presence has been suggested to indicate earlier colonisation, especially on Sardinia (Nora) and North Africa (Utica, Carthage). From the 8th to the 6th century, many colonies had grown to become thriving cities which became local cultural, economic and political centres, forming well-connected nodes in a network that crystallised but never stopped evolving. The network that emerged had several clusters of colonies that were physically close to each other and also interacted intensively with one another. One can be identified on the western half of Sicily, one on Sardinia, one in North Africa around Carthage, and also an important one in Southern Spain and northern Morocco, gravitating around the city of Gadir. In the cluster on Sicily the most important Phoenician nodes were formed by the colonies of Panormo, Soluta and especially Motya. Greek contacts were also part of this network cluster, although these were not particularly friendly or productive ties for much of their history. On Sardinia, the Phoenicians encountered an already quite developed civilization when colonising the island, partly expelling and partly absorbing the native population while expanding their territory. The result of this process of colonisation between the 8th and the 6th century was a dense cluster of thriving Phoenician cities, of which Sulcis, Cagliari, Nora and Tharros are the most important examples, closely connected to the native population. Carthage and its less powerful Phoenician neighbour cities (like Utica) formed a network cluster that had the strongest ties with the other clusters, especially Sicily. The Carthaginians also seem to have had close ties to the native Libyan population, who provided manpower and resources.

Originating from the same people and culture, all these clusters within this web had close cultural ties to each other. With this shared origin also came a shared goal with which the first settlers were sent: to secure a constant flow of resources to the metropolis, which in turn served the demands of the Eastern network of which it was a part. This common commercial goal effectively tied practically all colonies to one node: Tyre. Besides these economic ties to the metropolis, the Tyrians made sure there were also political and cultural connections which assured cohesion throughout the network, so that origins would not be forgotten and ties and flows would continue to exist and fuel the network. As I will now explain, religion was the most important cultural and political binder of the Phoenician network.

Like many other religions in ancient societies, Phoenician religion was both of great importance and fundamentally interwoven in all aspects of
public and private life in society. The line between religion and politics was very thin; the kings of Tyre were seen as direct descendants of Melqart, the guardian deity of Tyre and also a god of the seas and sea travels. The temple of Melqart in Tyre thus not only represented divine power and authority, but also the political authority of Tyre and its kings. Likewise, the line between commerce and politics was also very thin in a city-state with a vast commercial empire on which it relied for its survival: commerce was therefore of great political importance. Because religion formed the base of legitimacy for the Tyrian kings and was thus strongly intertwined with politics, this meant in practice that religious ties in the Phoenician network were as effective in maintaining commercial ties as they were in maintaining political ties. How this worked exactly will become more clear as Phoenician religion is now discussed in further detail.

Religious ties between colonies and the metropolis were primarily maintained by three aspects of Phoenician religion. In the West, the founding of a colony was customarily accompanied by the foundation of a temple dedicated to Melqart. This meant that from the very foundation of a colony, its religious and political ties to the metropolis were set in stone, which in turn meant that all trade was also performed in name and service of the king of Tyre, as Aubet pointedly notes: “The presence of Melqart guaranteed or drew attention to the intervention of the monarchy in every distant commercial activity.” This point alone shows how religion was directly used to forge a strong and lasting network. In Carthage, the most important colony in the West, the temple of Melqart also represented Tyre in a very concrete economic way, besides its political and religious representation of Tyre. All Phoenician ships that sailed to the Western colonies to trade, were obliged to pass through the port of Carthage, where a tenth of all profits made was yielded and stored in the temple of Melqart at Carthage. These profits were then sent to Tyre annually, to be gifted to the temple of Melqart and consequently to the king of Tyre. This way, through religious nodes, both commercial flows in the form of taxes and political flows in the form of tribute as a sign of loyalty were established and maintained. The temples of Melqart in the other Western colonies also seem to have functioned as a node where commercial goods were stored to send as a tribute to Carthage. This also shows that Carthage clearly functioned as a broker and connector between Tyre and the other Western colonies.

Besides the temples of Melqart, other sanctuaries, namely the tophets,
Daniels might also have functioned as binders, maintaining cultural ties between different nodes and clusters in the Phoenician network. A tophet was a sanctuary where the Phoenicians of the West (no typical tophets have been found in the East) buried the dead who had not yet acquired full citizenship, and where they made animal and probably even child sacrifices to the gods. These tophets emerged around 700 at Carthage and also in the Phoenician urban colonies on Sardinia and Sicily. All these tophets seem to have been built and used in the same way, following the example of Carthage. This is interesting because the tophet was a public, sacred space that had everything to do with rites concerning official citizenship and community values. A common cultural, Phoenician style of using these tophets might have reinforced the idea of shared civic values and a common identity, which made them a useful tool of Carthage to take up a more central and controlling role in the Western Mediterranean network.

Ancient religions relied on priests to exercise the rites that were necessary to please the gods, to ask favours of them and to get access to their wisdom. Besides the high priests that operated the great temples in the cities, priests were needed everywhere where people sought help or protection from the gods; especially during long and perilous sea voyages. Thus, according to Mark Christian among others, there must have been lower level, "part-time" priests who accompanied sailors on their voyages to perform essential rites while travelling from colony to colony. Perhaps they also conducted rites and shared religious knowledge at smaller, rural sanctuaries in more remote colonies. It is quite plausible that in the strongly religious Phoenician society there existed such a class of low-level priests who travelled through the Phoenician network, and they might have been very important agents who created cultural cohesion throughout the network.

Religion and the Creative Role of the Phoenician Network

This paragraph will not only further explore the way religion shaped the Phoenician network, but also how it might have shaped Phoenician religion. The first way in which Phoenician religion clearly changed or at least diversified due to the expansion of the network, is that most colonies newly compiled their own Phoenician pantheon after their foundation. In this respect, the case of Carthage provides an interesting and relatively
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well-studied example. In the first centuries of Carthage’s history, Melqart and Astarte were the main deities of the Carthaginian pantheon. These gods were directly imported from Phoenicia, with Melqart representing the metropolis and Astarte the mother goddess whose traits and appearances were quite fluid. An important role of this mother deity was to watch over sailors during their voyages, which of course explains her importance for the Phoenicians.25 From the 5th century onward however, the Phoenician deity Tanit seems to have taken Astarte’s place, partly being identified with Astarte. Although the deity is known in Phoenicia itself, the central role that was given to Tanit in the western Phoenician pantheon from the 5th century onward is new and unique to the western Phoenician colonies.26 Moreover, the cult around Tanit originated from Carthage and then spread through the network to Malta, Sicily, Sardinia, and later also Spain and Ibiza.27 At that time, Carthage itself was becoming a central hub in the western Phoenician network.28 It is important to note that it was the evolving network that determined the flows which spread this kind of religious change. Clearly the agents instigating this spread of religious innovation followed the flows that were determined by the structure of the network: “The worship of Tanit spread from North Africa to Sicily thanks to maritime crews and soldiers.”29 These men went from North Africa to Sicily because at that time Carthage had assumed a dominant role in the network, which determined the direction of cultural flows from North Africa to Sicily. The distribution of the tophet as an important public sacred space also seems to have followed the same distribution pattern through the network as the cults of Tanit.

Another type of religious change that might be ascribed to the working of the Phoenician network is the amalgamation of Phoenician religion with native cultural and religious practices. The goddess Astarte and the rites associated with this deity for example, were in many cases influenced by native cultic traditions. For example, a temple dedicated to her on Malta was built upon a much older native megalithic sanctuary dedicated to a native deity that apparently became associated with Astarte. A similar example can be found at the native Elymian sanctuary at Mount Eryx on Sicily, where the worship of Tanit was also “the product of symbiosis with a native Sicilian deity.”30 Network contacts with Greek and Egyptian culture also left their marks on Phoenician religion, especially at Sardinia and Carthage. Most cultic rites and customs at Carthage had many similarities with the way the Egyptian goddess Isis was worshipped, and from the fourth century onward
the Greek goddesses Demeter and Kore were even worshipped by some Phoenician communities on Sicily and in Carthage. The most important Graeco-Phoenician religious fusion however, was the identification of Melqart with the Greek Heracles. During the centuries in which Greeks and Phoenicians both colonised the Western Mediterranean, the syncretisation of Melqart and Heracles helped produce a cultural narrative in which Greeks and Phoenicians could understand and tolerate each other better, although it did not prevent recurring conflict between the two peoples. The more lasting consequence of this syncretisation becomes clear when taking a diachronic glance through ancient history. The association of Melqart and its temples with the Greek Heracles made that the Phoenician temples of Melqart and its cults were famous and highly respected by both the Greeks and later also the Romans. This is why some temples in several eastern Phoenician cities and especially the one in Gadir were preserved, so that throughout ancient history the temple of Melqart and its cult remained in existence, only in later times in name of Heracles. The cult of Heracles in Gadir was even raised to the status of an imperial cult by several Hispanic-Roman emperors, who also struck coins with depictions of this god, which “undoubtedly increased its importance in the imagination of the classical writers.”

To conclude, there is one fundamental aspect of the cult of Melqart that must be emphasized when discussing its influence on the Phoenician network, namely that this cult is so closely linked to the idea of a network, that it might as well be called a networking cult. The cult of Melqart, after all, was associated with both sea voyages and was seen as the patron of colonisation and expansion. In other words: the cult was directly associated with the creation of ties and nodes, the building blocks of a network. As we have seen in the second paragraph, the foundation of a new colony was customarily accompanied by the erection of a temple dedicated to Melqart. On top of this the cult of Melqart contained a mechanism to maintain the connectivity of the network it built, and assured the continued flow of information and goods to the metropolis by the annual ceremonies at the temple of Melqart in Tyre to which all colonies sent envoys. In practice the spread of the cult of Melqart and the emergence of a new network meant the same thing: the spread of the cult of Melqart entailed the building of a network and, in the case of Tyrian society, the building of a network equally entailed the spread of the cult of Melqart.
Conclusion

This brief article explored the emergence, structure and functioning of the Phoenician network through the lens of network theory. Although no comprehensive network analysis has been attempted, it is argued that network thinking can provide a very interesting and useful perspective when examining Phoenician colonial and maritime history. We have first observed that the network in the East might have had a strong creative role, stimulating the Phoenicians to create a vast overseas network. Their unique and flexible position in this network enabled them to do so. Subsequently we have explored what network structure emerged from Tyrian colonisation and commercial enterprises. We have seen that religion played a very important role in creating and maintaining this network. Especially the cult of Melqart functioned as the religious and political glue which assured the continuity of the network, its structure and its flows of information and goods.

The question that was asked at the start of this essay can thus be answered. The role played by religion in the creation and maintenance of the Phoenician network was significant. The cult of Melqart, as was concluded in the last chapter, can be seen as a networking cult that was consciously employed by the Tyrian kings to create strong and lasting ties between the metropolis and the nodes that were created in the West. One may safely conclude that the cult of Melqart was highly successful in this design. The network in turn influenced Phoenician religion, particularly by exposing it to other cultures and religions. Consequently, the functions of certain deities changed, cults of different cultures were fused to form hybrid cults which were preserved in the Graeco-Roman culture which later dominated the Mediterranean and inherited the Phoenician network.

Notes

1. W. Culican, "Phoenicia and Phoenician Colonization", in The Cambridge Ancient History, eds. John Boardman, I. E. S. Edwards, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 461-463.
2. Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Greek alphabet”, Encyclopaedia Britannica, inc., 2019. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greek-alphabet (last accessed: November 03, 2019).
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3. Perhaps the most important work on the Phoenicians and their presence in the Western Mediterranean is Maria Aubets work titled *The Phoenicians and the West: Politics, Colonies and Trade*. Aubet is one of the few authors who apply a broader perspective in which she highlights and interprets the non-commercial facets of Phoenician colonisation and seafaring as well, although in Aubet's work the focus is not the functioning of a Phoenician network necessarily (For the core of her argument see Maria Eugenia Aubet, *The Phoenicians and the West: politics, colonies, and trade*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 347-355). William Culican, another important expert on Phoenician history, has a more ‘traditional’ approach and focuses (in most of his work) primarily on Phoenician material culture and Phoenician commerce (See for example his work: Culican, "Phoenicia and Phoenician Colonization", and W. Culican, "Aspects of Phoenician settlement in the West Mediterranean", in *Opera Selecta: From Tyre to Tartessos*, ed. Antonio G. Sagone (Göteborg: Paul Aströms Förlag, 1986), 644). Any historical debate surrounding Phoenicians and Phoenician colonisation mainly focuses on the nature of the Phoenician colonies, their relations to each other and the purpose for which they had been created, but there are no clear sides or focal points in this discussion.

4. See for example Irad Malkin, *A Small Greek World: Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Greeks Overseas, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), and R. Osborne en A. Wallace-Hadrill, "Cities of the Ancient Mediterranean", in *The Oxford Handbook of Cities in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Last visited 4-4, 2018, http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199589531.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199589531-e-3.

5. Carl Knappett, *An Archaeology of Interaction: Network Perspectives on Material Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 2011), 7-9.

6. Greg Woolf, "Only Connect? Networks and religious change in the ancient Roman world", in *Hêlade* 2 (2016), 50.

7. Josette Elayi, and Andrew Plummer, *The History of Phoenicia* (Lockwood Press, 2018), 117-125.

8. Barry J. Beitzel, “Was There a Joint Nautical Venture on the Mediterranean Sea by Tyrian Phoenicians and Early Israelites?”, in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, (no. 360, 2010), 51-52. See also: Elayi, 116-122; Aubet, 86.

9. Aubet, 90-93.

10. An example of this is that from the middle 9th century onward the Tyrians sought new ties to the north, south and west, when their eastern ties were cut off by the advancing warlike Assyrians. They allied themselves with the reviving kingdom of Egypt, they built ties with the growing ports of Cilicia, and also strengthened their ties with the port cities on Cyprus and with Israel in the south (see Glenn E. Markoe, *Peoples of the Past: Phoenicians* (London: British Museum Press, 2000), 37. See also: Culican, *Phoenicia and Phoenician colonization*, 467; Aubet, 87).

11. Elayi, 123-125.

12. See for example Aubet, 95-96, 145-147. See also Malkin, 33.

13. Culican, “Phoenicia and Phoenician colonization”, 487.

14. For Sardinia, the famous Nora Stone in particular is often put forward as evidence
for colonisation earlier than the 8th century. See for example Markoe, 177. See also
Nathan Pilkington, “A Note on Nora and the Nora Stone”, in Bulletin of the American
Schools of Oriental Research, no. 365, 2012, pp. 45.
15. Culican, “Phoenicia and Phoenician colonization”, 499-501.
16. See Aubet, The Phoenicians and the West, 236-238, 240-241; Culican, “Phoenicia and
Phoenician colonization”, 508-510.
17. Culican “Phoenicia and Phoenician colonization”, 497.
18. Aubet, 151-155.
19. Dimitri Baramki, Phoenicia and the Phoenicians (Beirut, Khayats, 1961), 54,55.
20. Aubet, 155.
21. Serge Lancel, Carthage: a history (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 36.
22. Richard J. Clifford, “Phoenician Religion”, in Bulletin of the American Schools of
Oriental Research, no. 279, (1990), 58. See also note below.
23. Aubet, 255-256: “The implanting of the Tophet in Sicily and Sardinia linked those
colonies of the central Mediterranean to the political interests of Carthage.”
24. See Mark A. Christian, “Phoenician Maritime Religion: Sailors, Goddess Worship,
and the Grotta Regina”, in Die Welt Des Orients, vol. 43, no. 2, 2013. Especially: pp.
179–181, 188-189.
25. Christian, 191, 202.
26. Markoe, 130.
27. Christian, 190-192.
28. Aubet, 343.
29. Christian, 203.
30. Markoe, 130-131.
31. Markoe,131.
32. Malkin, 125-133.
33. For examples other than the temple in Gadir see G. F. Hill, “Some Graeco-Phoenician
Shrines”, in The Journal of Hellenic Studies, vol. 31, 1911, pp. 56-64. See especially:
61.
34. Aubet, 273-274.