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Robin Jensen

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On the left, in one of the earliest surviving depictions of Heracles, c. 620 B.C., he is shown slaying the evil Geryon and his guard dog. He wears the usual Greek hero's kilt with geometric patterns and bronze greaves like his opponent. Over them, he wears the impervious skin of the Nemean lion, his first labor. His knapsack is probably a bowcase.

On the right, a basalt bas-relief of Melkart, c. 800 B.C., was found at Breidj near Aleppo. He wears the distinctive Phoenecian kilt and carries a pierced bronze battle-ax. His conical headress links him to Assyrian depictions of the gods. The Aramaic inscription invokes Melkart, "Protector of the city."

Melquart and Heracles: A Study of Ancient Gods and Their Influence

Robin Jensen

Societies in general revere their heroes, holding them in high regard and giving them adulation—sometimes deserved, sometimes not. However as the following quote illustrates, societies need heroes and ancient societies were no different, they needed their heroes, men and women they could look up to and revere. This paper analyzes and compares the aspects of two such heroes, Melquart of Phoenicia and Heracles of Greece, attempting to prove that Melquart, though lesser known had just as much influence on the Phoenician society as Heracles had on the Greek

“Without heroes we're all plain people and don't know how far we can go.”

Bernard Malamud

Ancient Phoenicia is a culture that most people, including scholars, know comparatively little about. Excelling at commerce, exploration, and colonization, Phoenicia was a dominant power in the ancient Mediterranean world, but with the lack of writings and archeological finds, reconstructing their society, including their religion, is difficult. Even their most influential god Melquart must undergo a different sort of historical analysis: a comparative study with Heracles of Greece shows that, like Heracles with the Greeks, Melquart had a great amount of influence upon the people of ancient Phoenicia.

ROBIN JENSEN *plans to graduate in History in December 2002 and hopes to continue his education in nineteenth-century Western American and Greek history in graduate school.*

Heracles was a prominent figure in Greek legend. A son of Zeus and of a mortal woman named Alcmena, Heracles' most well known acts were the twelve labors imposed on him for murdering his wife and children—near-impossible tasks that would gain him undying fame. The stories of Heracles were creative and compelling enough to be transmitted throughout history. But much of the credit for the Heracles cycle surviving to our day should be given to his story-loving people. Stories of Heracles were told and passed down through the oral traditions until eventually they were recorded centuries later.

Though no one is certain of his origin, Heracles was a part of the Greek culture for quite some time. When Homer mentions Heracles in the *Odyssey*, it is not an explanatory passage; on the contrary, Homer assumes that the reader is already familiar with the story. "Son of Zeus that I was, my torments never ended . . . he saddled me with the worst heartbreaking labors,"¹ Heracles says to Odysseus. He talks about his labors as though Odysseus is already familiar with what he has done. These Heracleian stories must have started circulating before Homer and not only influenced the great minds of the time, but were also enjoyed by the common people.

As Greek culture progressed, many cults arose to worship Heracles. "[U]ltimately [Heracles] becomes the most popular object of cult in Greece and in Greek Italy and Sicily, as both a hero and a god."² Heracles caught the imagination of the ancient Greeks, showing that the Greek civilization needed to be inspired by a hero, just as many other civilizations around the world. Numerous poets wrote about Heracles; unfortunately, many of these writings have been lost. Even in the fourth century B.C., there had been so many poets who had devoted works to Heracles

¹ *Odyssey* 11.711–13

² Mark W. Padilla, *The Myth of Herakles in Ancient Greece: Survey and Profile* (New York: University Press of America, 1998), 3.

that Aristotle complained about the low quality of work then centered on the god.³

The ancient authors were voicing what the people felt. It is the imagination and acceptance of the people that makes a story survive for generations. Authors may write about many things, but if the subjects of the works do not grab the attention of the people, the story does not stick. Heracles was not made great by the authors, but by the people who wanted to hear about him. Only the inspired heart touched by a story of Heracles made him “the mightiest and most famous of Greek heroes.”⁴ His influence became enormous. Many temples were erected for him, and he played an “important iconographic [role] . . . on the temple of Zeus at Olympia.”⁵ It was said that he founded many cities and towns during his labors and sired the people to inhabit them. He was also credited with organizing the Olympic Games.⁶ In doing so, Heracles competed “successfully in various athletic contests . . . and is found . . . as a cultic presence in many Greek gymnasia.”⁷

Ancient Greek society did not rest on the back of the Heracleian myths; rather it received life and variety from them. Heracles’ influence gave the Greeks the popular Olympic Games, temples in which to worship, and stories to pass on to their posterity. And the Greeks, in contrast to the Phoenicians, left behind many writings and clues which modern scholars are able to analyze. Just as the Greeks honored their hero, the Phoenicians also revered their god Melquart by recounting, spreading, and enjoying stories about him.

³ See *Ibid.*, 8. See Arist., 1451A = *poet.* 8.1–3.

⁴ Catherine B. Avery, ed., *The New Century Classical Handbook* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), 540.

⁵ Padilla, 5.

⁶ Plutarch says Pythagoras calculated the height of Heracles from the difference between the Olympian stadium and the standard 600 ft. stadium. This gave rise to the Latin proverb *ex pede Herculeum*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

Though there are few clues left to give scholars a satisfactory understanding of the Phoenician civilization, what has survived paints a picture in which colonization, commerce, and religion are the most important aspects of Phoenician society. Reconstructing a complete history of the Phoenicians is impossible but the attempt is necessary to get a picture of what life was like for the Phoenicians. This partial reconstruction comes not only by examining the remnants of the Phoenicians themselves, but by analyzing their remains in other civilizations as well.

The Greeks were aware of the Phoenicians as far back as Homer: “[I was] Eight years out, wandering off as far as Cyprus, Phoenicia, even Egypt.”⁸ Other authors such as Herodotus⁹ and Josephus¹⁰ also speak of the Phoenicians, showing the profound influence the Phoenicians had in the ancient Mediterranean world. Though travel was difficult and dangerous, the different cultures of the ancient world were not completely isolated. In fact, they interacted and traded often with each other. These societies not only shared commerce, but many civilizations, like the Phoenicians, sent out colonies all over the Mediterranean world and beyond. This did much to increase their influence on surrounding cultures. As the Phoenicians colonized many areas, they carried with them their religion, a religion with Melqart at the center.

Modern understanding of Phoenician religion comes from three main literary sources: the Old Testament, the Greek authors, and the inscriptions made by the Phoenicians themselves. The outside sources, namely the Old Testament and Greeks, are biased and therefore not entirely reliable.¹¹ The Phoenician inscriptions offer very few hints about their religion—one does not often write

⁸ *Odyssey* 4.92–93

⁹ See 2.44.

¹⁰ See Moscati, 8.

¹¹ See for example *Isaiah* 23:1–4.

a detailed explanation of such things in inscriptions. Yet the existence of the god Melquart, most likely the highest god in Phoenician theology or at least the most commonly worshipped, is proved by these scant ancient literary sources and also by modern archeological finds.¹² These sources, however, give scholars very little historical contexts. Therefore, because so little Phoenician history has survived, scholars are forced to look elsewhere for evidence explaining the culture of the Phoenicians. By understanding Heracles and his position in Greek culture, the identity of Melquart becomes a more vivid figure to the modern scholar.

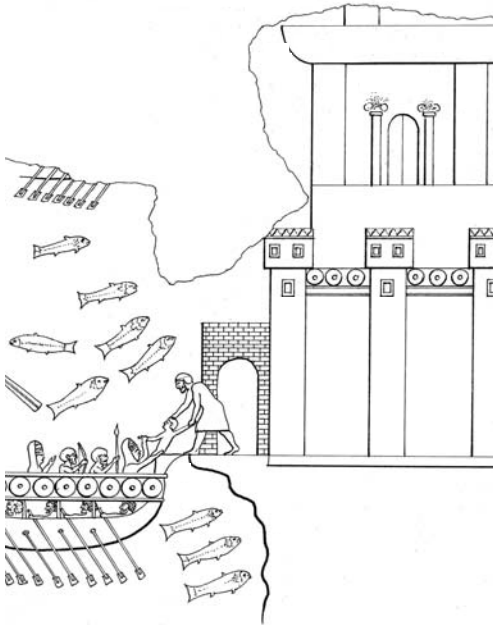
By looking at the influence Heracles had on the Greeks, and seeing that Heracles and Melquart were identified with each other in ancient Greek literature, it is possible to construct a probable idea of Melquart's influence on the Phoenicians. To see the influence of Heracles on Greece, one need only look at Greek legends, art, and religion; the influence of Melquart upon the Phoenicians can also be seen, though not as obviously in their surviving artifacts. In spite of the scarcity of remains, it is certain that Melquart was vital to Phoenician stories and culture. The Phoenicians were no different than many other cultures in history: they needed a god whom they could proudly idolize. Melquart fulfilled this need in several roles. He was known as a mighty hunter and played the central role in the Phoenician spring festival during which he died and was resurrected.¹³ He was also worshipped for his power over the sea.¹⁴

Heracles and Melquart were similar enough to be classified by the ancient commentators as coming from the same primitive source, or at least they were influenced by each other. "But to

¹² See Maria-Eugenia Aubet, *The Phoenicians and the West: Politics, Colonies, and Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 127–8

¹³ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*



In 1846, Henry Layard excavated the early 7th century Assyrian palace of Sennacherib at Ninevah. Using the *camera obscura*, an assisted drawing device, he made meticulous drawings of the many large bas-reliefs he uncovered. This was fortunate, since many of the slabs were lost when their rafts sank in the Tigris. This scene records the Assyrian conquest of Tyre and shows its king, Luli, handing one of his children to a queen. He flees from the city, which has a large structure rising above the crenelated walls and their shields. This building may represent the famous temple of Melkart with its two pillars of gold and emerald as described by Herodotus.

Demarous was born Melicarthus, who is also called Heracles,¹⁵ Sanchoniatho wrote in his *Theology of the Phoenicians*.¹⁶ In mentioning other contemporary societies, ancient writers often replaced the names of foreign gods with names of gods to whom they could relate. For example, Herodotus, in speaking of his visit to the Phoenician city of Tyre, stated that he “made a voyage to Tyre in Phoenicia [and found] a temple of Heracles.”¹⁷ In his visit

¹⁵ Isaac Preston Cory, *Ancient Fragments of the Phoenician, Chaldean, Egyptian, Tyrain, Carthaginian, Indian, Persian, and Other Writers*, 2nd ed. Secret Doctrine Reference Series (Minneapolis: Wizards Bookshelf, 1975), 11.

¹⁶ Philo of Byblos, who lived in the first century A.D., claimed to have translated this Phoenician historian who lived circa fourteenth or thirteenth century B.C. Sanchoniatho got his material from inscriptions on the Ammoneis, pillars or images of the Baal Ammon.

¹⁷ Herodotus 2.44.

to Tyre, Herodotus did not in actuality find a temple dedicated to a god named Heracles, but instead found a temple to the god Melquart. Because Herodotus was writing to the Greeks, and also because he saw much in Melquart that reminded him of Heracles, he saw fit to conflate the two. It also strengthened the pride of Greek cult by showing it to be so widespread.

Melquart seems not only to have been related to Heracles in attributes, but also in his number of followers; he was as widespread in Phoenicia, if not more so, as Heracles was in Greece. As with Heracles, Melquart founded cities and his followers formed cults and erected temples dedicated to him.

Many believe that the temple dedicated to Melquart at Tyre did not have a statue of Melquart, but instead only two pillars meant to represent him: "I visited the temple, and found it richly adorned with a number of offerings, among which were two pillars, one of pure gold, the other of emerald, shining with great brilliancy at night."¹⁸ Twin pillars, like these, were often seen where Phoenician colonies were founded. "Melkart . . . had a temple, close to the harbour, in all the Phoenician colonies."¹⁹ Lodge, who accepts the hypothesis that Heracles and Melquart were the same, theorizes that the pillars of Heracles at the Straits of Gibraltar, were in actuality dedicated to Melquart by the Phoenicians.²⁰ Other temples dedicated to Melquart were found at Malta, Carthage,²¹ and other locations around the Mediterranean, all of which paid homage to the god of the Phoenicians.

¹⁸ Ibid., c.f. the two pillars in front of the temple of Solomon (1 Kings 7:15–16) which Hiram of Tyre helped build.

¹⁹ Perrot, 75.

²⁰ Lodge, 128. The tradition of the two pillars may have had an influence on the two bronze pillars of Solomon's Temple, made by the Tyrian craftsman Hiram Abiff. Macrobius and Lucan say the pillars were erected by Sesostris, the Egyptian Hercules.

²¹ Moscati, 139 and 193.

The people of Carthage, in building a temple to their god, not only showed devotion to Melquart, but they revealed their desire to attribute to Melquart a central part of the founding of their city and the continuity of their culture with their parent city of Tyre. Their myth recounts that Ellisa, sister of the King of Tyre, and a priest of Melquart were sent from Tyre to colonize Carthage before the battle of Troy. "The Tyrian origin of Carthage is best confirmed by the annual embassies which the city sent through the ages to Tyre. These embassies constantly carried offerings to the temple of Hercules (Melquart)"²² Strong devotion to a common god was an important way to create a bond between two cities, which could be strengthened over the centuries. Such was the bond between Carthage and Tyre, a bond with Melquart in the center.

Many cultic followings of the god Melquart sprang up all over the ancient world. There were cults in Tyre and Carthage;²³ one dedication at Malta reads "To the Lord Melkart, Baal of Tyre."²⁴ Phoenicians were telling and re-telling the stories of their mythical figure to their children, their neighbors, and those with whom they came in contact through trade. Even a place as remote as Spain had a "cult of Reshef-Melquart,"²⁵ (an Asian war deity also worshipped in New Kingdom Egypt) showing that, like the Heracleian myths, the tales of Melquart spread into distinct cultures because of their popularity.

As Heracles inspired stories, temples, cities, and cults, so too did his ancient Phoenician counterpart: Melquart. Phoenician men, women, and children told and heard stories of their god who, with tales of honor and glory, captured the imagination of his followers. It is even probable that the stories gave the Phoenicians a god they could worship or even strive to emulate,

²² *Ibid.*, 116.

²³ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁴ Perrot, 67.

²⁵ Moscati, 241.

just as the Greeks did with Heracles. The similarities between the two gods show a bond between the two cultures which can be helpful to investigate what the largely unknown Phoenician culture was like. As is shown in literature and numerous artifacts, Greek culture was heavily influenced by the cult of Heracles. Phoenician culture can be shown to have been influenced by Melquart in a similar way. Human societies need heroes, and ancient cultures were no different. Phoenicians set aside a big part of their culture for the incubation, rearing, and worship of their god, and they reaped the benefits of his influence.