Phoenician Religion on Malta

A critical re-examination of the "religious" material evidence from Malta & Gozo

J.L. van Sister

Front: Piece of papyrus from a Phoenician amulet sheath.

Source: Gouder 1978, 315

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Introduction

This piece will critically look at the way ancient religion is, and can be (or cannot be), reconstructed on the islands of Malta and Gozo during the Phoenician and Punic periods, by looking at the material evidence presented in the *Aegyptiaca*[1]. In doing so I will expand on earlier research done for my Bachelor thesis, and critically reflect on the new conclusions drawn and the methodology used. By reviewing a select amount of objects often closely associated with religion or ritual and critically deconstruct their interpretations, I hope to shed some light on the accuracy of the earlier interpretations. In doing so I hope to provide a good assessment on how hard it is to avoid the biases in studying ancient religions and how problematic it is to provide a fact-based correct full interpretation of an object.

Malta and Gozo provide a good case study for this, as their cultural history can be and has been largely reconstructed and described. Of course one needs to always remain critical of the way history (and pre-history) has been separated into specific time periods and regions, while often several phenomena exceed both fields, but for the sake of this research the established chronology and cultural stratigraphy will be followed. Due to the geographic location of the islands, Malta and Gozo enjoyed a high amount of connectivity, providing for many interesting phenomena, combining different cultural and religious aspects. Both of these contexts (chronology and geography) will briefly be discussed in chapter one.

When looking at the way religion can be reconstructed by looking at the material evidence, it is of importance to reflect on the historiography of the *Archaeology of Religions*, as one could call this "discipline", so one can gain a better understanding of the

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[1] The term *Aegyptiaca* is used to group objects into a more general category; in contrast, the description *Egyptian* would only refer to Egyptian culture or denote objects derived from Egypt proper. Equally misleading would be the use of the descriptive term *Egyptianizing*; this term is often used to refer to objects or written texts relating to Egyptian culture, language or its people, but would exclude objects deriving from Egypt proper. (Van Sister 2012, 5)

value of the material culture studied in this context. The historiography and problems related with the *Archaeology of Religions* will briefly be discussed in chapter two, and will be related to the objects in the latter part of this essay.

The *Aegyptiaca* studied possess an interesting position in cultural interactions in the Mediterranean, and have often been interpreted as having been status-objects or religious objects. As it is a specific group of objects, it is easily researchable as a body of objects, rather than a collection of individual objects. Looking at these objects individually might provide for new interesting insights, and viewing them outside the established frame of reference might help deconstructing his existing bias. In chapter three an attempt will be made to just this, by looking at the way the objects were viewed by earlier researchers and expand on the theory studied in chapter two.

The selection criteria for the specific objects used for this piece will also have to be explained carefully, as the selection of material to research religion already plays a large role in the interpretation of these objects: if you select an object to write about religion, you already assume it is related to religion. The objects selected here are those of the *Aegyptiaca* most likely related to religion or ritual, which I base on my earlier research into them. I realize I, by doing so, am guilty of the fault I just described, but hope to remain critical in my interpretation of the pieces, so as to not fall into this trap.

1. Historical & Geographical context

The Maltese Islands are found in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, a location which granted them an unique position in the cross-currents of major political and cultural developments taking place in the larger Mediterranean (van Sister 2012, 5). Due to the expansion of (city-)states (among which Rome, Tyre and Carthage) and their culture into several nearby regions, Malta displayed her connectivity in an interesting fashion. Malta's archaeology displays several cultural aspects that can be associated with the culture of the surrounding peoples. Malta of course is only one of the many interaction points between these cultures, and the cultures themselves were connected in several ways (such as trade and warfare), contributing to what one could call the Mediterranean *koinè*.

Malta's occupation can be traced back archaeologically to the Early Neolithic, starting approximately 7000-5000 BCE (Trump 2000, 19-20). The history of Malta started in the Phoenician period during the first millennium BCE, often dated to 900-700 BCE (Bonanno 2005, 6-9; Sagona 2002, 2; Trump 2000, 22). From the 7th century onwards rock-cut tombs appeared on the islands, confirming Phoenician influences. The exact cultural processes responsible for this cannot safely be reconstructed, but suggested is that the islands were used as a strategic post for merchants and military purposes, based on the absence of Phoenician settlements and the location of the tombs (van Sister 2012, 7-8).

The Phoenician phase in Maltese history is often ended around 500 BCE, when power in Phoenician colonies shifted from the East to the West, to Carthage. During this phase Malta's geographical position became more important, as constant tension between the South (Carthage) and the North (the Greeks) created unrest in the Mediterranean. Malta, located between these two forces, displayed close ties with the southwestern neighbors, the Punic world, which is used to name this phase. This phase can historically be continued until 218 BCE, when the Romans captured Malta during the Second Punic War. While a continuation of Punic traditions and new contact with other Punic settlements is clearly visible in the material, politically Malta was under Roman rule.[2]

[2] This phenomenon will not be discussed in this piece. See van Sister 2012 for more information.

2. The Archaeology of Religion

To adequately review the way objects are placed within a larger context and to classify them as religious object, it is necessary to look at the theories governing the discipline of the *Archaeology of Religions*. While scientists of different disciplines have been studying older civilizations for quite some time, the means of reconstructing a past society and the way information was handled varied greatly. Especially in the field of religion several disciplines tried to make sense of the past, following their own discourse's methodology. Religion, as a broader concept, is also of high relevance for the field of archaeology, "*for a 'spiritual' dimension would seem to have been important to humankind since at least the Upper Paleolithic*" (Insoll 2004, 5), and has played quite a large part in the way past societies behaved and evolved. The growing importance of the field of *Archaeology of Religion* is reflected in the attention given to it in recent years by scholars such as Woolf (2003 and Insoll (2004), but also in general Blackwell publications on Ancient subjects (Rüpke 2011).

It is in this light that the problems with the concept of religion within the archaeological framework will briefly be discussed in this chapter, starting with the most pressing issue: defining religion. The way religion was and is defined has a great impact on the way it is studied and interpreted. The first sub-chapter will discuss the definition of religion as has been given to it in the past and critically reflect on past theoretical discourses. The role of the archaeologist in the reconstruction of 'religion' will be the subject in the second part of this chapter, briefly discussing the visibility of religion in the material evidence and the amount of information that safely can be deduced from it. The way religion has been reconstructed as a uniform entity in the Ancient Mediterranean World during the first millennium BCE will be critically be reviewed in the final part of this chapter, as it is of importance for case study presented by this piece.

2.1 Defining Religion: a conceptual problem

Scientists of religion have struggled to present a definitive definition of religion that fits every situation and model. This conceptual problem is not only visible in the concept religion itself, but also in all the terminology associated with it, in words such as shrine, ritual and sanctuary. Past archaeologists used these labels to be able to classify aspects of past life, to render the elements associated with these labels more tangible and so to make

sense of them. By doing so a paradox is created, as religion, with all the concepts related to it, can largely be seen as being intangible. By defining religion a dichotomy is created, allowing objects or aspects to be classified as being religious or secular, while in many cases this constructed division is non-existent. Religion itself is indefinable, the concept possibly seen as a created discursive formation and includes the intangible, irrational and the indefinable (Insoll 2004, 6-7).

Religion, while often viewed as substratum of a larger system, might in fact be seen as a subsystem, or even the larger system, which encompasses not only the things normally associated with it (ritual, burial, prayer), but also the secular side of life, such as living, social interaction and economy (Insoll 2004, 22-23). The dichotomy created by classification is a construction of the contemporary situation, projected by scientists onto ancient situations. While contemporary individuals posses a conscious choice to participate in a religion, this form of religion is by no means transferable to a past situation, and must thus not be viewed as such. In past societies religion filled a completely different role in the social system, blurring lines between secular and not-secular elements. Contemporary ideology thus plays a great part in perception of the past, as is clearly visible when examining past theoretical approaches to studying religion.

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards evolution as a concept played a vital part in science, reflected in the interpretation of the past, as well as their religion (Insoll 2004, 42-46). Evolutionary paradigms, such as those of Frazer and Tylor, tried to explain the role of religion in the construction of the contemporary society and religion, but proved to be too simplistic.

The basis of the previously discussed dichotomy is already clearly visible in the work of sociologist Emilé Durkheim (1912), whose reductionist theories discarded the former theories of the distinction between the supernatural and the natural (as these were not always opposed in primitive societies), but instead created the dichotomy between the sacred, strange and forbidden elements associated with the society, and the profane, individual day-to-day elements. Recognizing the complexities of studying religion as a separate element from the rest of the society, Durkheim came one step closer to defining religion. The pivotal role played by religion in the society and other social elements was further recognized by Max Weber, underlining the importance of contextualizing religion (Pals 2007, 150).

Often ignored in studies of religion is the abstract numinous aspect of religion, the intangible, indefinable part of religion. Mircea Eliade, scholar of the history of religion and comparative religions, disagreed with the reductionist views of past scholars and stressed the autonomy of religion, as opposed to its placement into a social system (1956). While maintaining the dichotomy established by Durkheim, Eliade associated the sacred not with the society, but with what could be called the numinous. Religion, playing a crucial role in 'archaic' people's life, serves to create contact between the profane and the sacred. To adequately study such a religion, Eliade provided many analogies, arguing for the use of phenomenology to understand past societies. Phenomenology, as it is used in archaeological theory, was not part of the archaeologist at this time, and it, as well as the problems associated with it, will be properly discussed later this chapter.

Processual archaeology, as a theoretical discourse, promoted structural classification and included religion in the larger system, but ignored the role of the individual in this system. By classifying objects as 'ritual objects', describing and comparing them they hoped to gain an understanding of the true and objective past. In doing so, the numinous aspect of the material, a vital part of the religious system, was greatly ignored. For the sake of making a tangible story, religion was placed in a definable box (Insoll 2004, 97), resulting in narrow-minded pragmatic interpretations of objects, which might have had multiple meanings otherwise.

Recognition of the complexity of the past, the acknowledgement of individual agency and awareness of the bias of the interpreter can be found in post-processual approaches to archaeology. While stressing symbolic aspects of human actions (Insoll 2004, 77), religion as it should be studied is still largely neglected in the study. Religion is again used as a label for a group, to be applied to strange phenomena, which allowed no diversity within (Insoll 2004, 76-85). The numinous aspect of religion can be approached through the use of phenomenology, increasing the role of the individual as an agent of the past. Phenomenology is used mainly to reconstruct (sacred) landscapes, but is accompanied by a sum of issues. The use of the term 'sacred' landscape again indicates the construction of a dichotomy, between secular and sacred spaces. This division however, as shown earlier, cannot be taken for granted, and is the result of the contemporary ideology of the researcher. The aforementioned projection of the present onto the past (called by some the If-I-were-a-horse principle) remains problematic, as one cannot assume contemporary people perceive a landscape in the same way as past people

did. The experience of a person is dependent on his/her identity, which is linked to values and cultural patterns, hence different for each individual. As stated by Insoll, it is already difficult to view the contemporary landscape through eyes of the 'other' (2004, 87,), let alone view a past landscape through the eyes of someone from the past.

Similar problems can be found in the cognitive processualistic approach to archaeology, where the past is conceived as existing in the physical world, where agents interact in a similar fashion as we do today (Insoll 2004, 92-93). The false presumption that there is a 'sameness', which applies for the past and the present, structuring belief and action (Insoll 2004, 92) is in this case not projected to individuals, but to the collective body of people. While there might be continuity (of traditions, rituals or other aspects of life) through time, assuming Jungian archetypes seem unlikely. To adequately reconstruct and define religion in a past society, both the individual and the society need to be properly studied, as religion functions on multiple levels in the system of life, in their broader context.

It is clear that when defining religion, and studying past religions, simply looking at archaeology is insufficient. To step beyond the biases established in the past in this field and to gain a full understanding of the role of religion an interdisciplinary research is vital. One has to break the established dichotomies (sacred/profane, ritual/religion, religious/secular) to be able to properly contextualize objects and other elements of past men in the complete society. It is indeed difficult to provide a definitive definition of religion without compartmentalizing it for the sake of research. Yet, to study it in an archaeological way, a working definition of religion, but also for concepts such as shrine, ritual and sanctuary, has to be created, which may vary per distinct situation. When creating this definition one has to choose between the different paradigms available in the study of ancient religions, combining aspects of different discourses to form a better picture. It is as Woolf states: *" Evaluating the utility of Mediterranean paradigms for religious history has to mean evaluating their utility relative to the alternatives"* (2003, 129), there is no complete neutral paradigm, which can be used to completely cover each and every aspect and problem associated with religion. One of the definitions of a religion favored by the author of this piece is one defined by anthropologist Geertz.

"(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." (Geertz, 1973, 90)

This definition does not necessarily support the dichotomies mentioned earlier, and can properly be contextualized in a complete society. Already classified as a system, this system can be integrated with the rest of society when studying elements in this light.

2.2 Recognizing religion?

The question remains how one can recognize religion in the material remains (so as to study the Archaeology of Religions), and adequately interpret it, while keeping the above mentioned issues in mind. The extensively discussed dichotomy between religious aspects and profane aspects in societies may have contributed to the large focus placed on 'ritual' archaeology and funerary archaeology. As a result of the compartmentalization done by processual archaeologists, a picture was constructed of how religion is represented in the material evidence, mostly in funerary context or temples. Within the study of archaeology the concept of religion is often replaced with the concept of ritual, at the expense of talking about religion. When an archaeologist cannot place another label on something, often it is a 'ritualistic' object. It is as Ian Hodder stated: "*archaeologists use the term ritual for the two-closely connected reasons that was is observed is non-functional and not understood* " (Hodder in Insoll 2004, 11). By assigning it a label (ritual), archaeologists feel they adequately understand its role, but at closer examination the amount of neglected information becomes clearer. In fact, the direct correlation between religion and ritual itself is of course open to debate. Ritual, while automatically associated with religion, can also be secular, having nothing to do with religion (as traditionally defined). Ritual itself is defined by both physical actions and attributes, which indeed can be found during excavations, but also by mental activities, which are harder to reconstruct.

Another dichotomy relevant for this debate is that between sacred spaces and non-sacred spaces. While this distinction is often necessary to be able to adequately analyze excavations, it carries with it some methodological issues, some of which were discussed above. Some 'sacred' spaces were clearly defined already in ancient times (such as the *temenos*) by contemporary agents, while some are dubbed sacred by modern archaeologists or historians as belonging to one of the categories. There are natural sacred spaces (e.g. geographic locations such as caves or mountains), and the more obvious man-made sacred spaces, such as sanctuaries and altars. The distinction made between

sacred and secular spaces is however always man-made, and must thus critically be reviewed.

Another issue clearly demonstrated by Insoll in his book is the amount of information one can obtain from archaeological material found. If one for example discovers a shrine (and one has set his/her own definition for the concept shrine), and reconstructed ritualistic behavior properly, this may provide information for just that location in that time. And the experience of the actors in the ritual again varies per identity participating. Often information gained from one certain context is used to gain a broader picture, but one must keep in mind that the personal experience contains the time and the location of the ritual, and must thus properly be expressed so. One can then continue to place this element in the larger religious context to broaden interpretative horizons, but a direct analogy brings problems with it. When excavating the excavator must be careful not to fit his/her results to the predictions, and to refrain from starting an interpretation already biased.

A ritualistic site often shows traces of use throughout a larger time-period than a generation, possibly indicating continuity of use throughout time. One has to be careful to draw these kind of conclusions too fast, as several phenomena might have caused the same result, such as the appropriation of sacred sites by other religions, or the possibility that the site was discontinued in its ritual use, but a new group of people was drawn to it in another time (Woolf 2003, 134). These interpretations again are not mutually exclusive, so one has to be careful to not try and over-interpret a site or features of one.

2.3 Creating a Pan-Mediterranean religious koinè?

The title of this sub-chapter is the introduction to the methodological problem that will be discussed here, and was chosen for its debatable semantics. Often in the field of studying ancient religions in the Mediterranean during the first millennium BCE emphasis is placed on the similarities between regions and phenomena, studying elements with a pre-existing picture of a greater Mediterranean religious system, a paradigm dubbed 'Mediterraneanism' by Woolf (2003). The Mediterranean is often used as an analytical unit in research (e.g. in this piece), and has been viewed in an often synchronistic and quite uniform paradigm. The ideal view of the religious life in the Ancient Mediterranean is that one could travel far from home, yet participate in the ritualistic activities in another city-state. While not exactly being similar to the situation at that persons home situation

(e.g. different actions and different deities), the similarities recognized in the system would have allowed the person to still participate in the rituals. This system, albeit recognizing regional differences, allows phenomena to be interpreted in a broader religious context, as is known from the wider Mediterranean, and is used to fit elements into this pre-existing koinè (here defined not as the common Greek language, but as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary: a set of cultural or other attributes common to various groups).

While allowing for easier interpretation of the material, this methodology neglects the new insights in regional religious systems that could be deduced when studying them without the pre-existing biases, and displays some important methodological issues. The Mediterranean in this period was an area of cross-cultural exchange and interaction, where the growth of city-states greatly improved the connectivity and the spread of culture, smoothing over differences inside the wider region (Johnston 2004, 6). Johnston attributes the similarities in their 'religion' to their similar outlook on the world, their comparable ideals and lifestyles and their similar urban situation (2004, 6). Yet the amount of regional differences visible in the Mediterranean is large, and one should not overrate the homogeneity in the area during this period. The persistence of local languages, local deities and rituals shows that it is not a homogeneity of details, but one of broad outlines (Johnston 2004, 7).

Assumed in this paradigm is that the Mediterranean can be defined clearly as a specific geographic area for an amount of time. The Mediterranean could be defined as a broader area, fragmented into microregions, joined to one another by high levels of connectivity (Woolf 2003, 135). These microregions are in constant contact with one another, allowing for regional changes and developments. If defined like this, one could argue that the Mediterranean contains every region that has some sense of connectivity to one another, encompassing an area larger than is usually meant in study. Where then does the system end? Even when using the Mediterranean as a unit of analysis, it is not in isolation from other geographical units, there is always some connectivity present. One would have to define the Mediterranean by looking at the common elements between areas, based on the

amount of connectivity present[3], followed by classifying these elements as belonging to the Mediterranean. So these elements are defined as belonging to a system, which is defined on basis of those exact elements, which is a big methodological fault in the paradigm.

In this same perspective the importance of a diachronic perspective on the developments in (and of) the Mediterranean must be considered. Developments in specific regions had a great impact on broader developments, sometimes spreading beyond what is defined as the Mediterranean, or only partly spreading inside the area. Specific aspects of ancient religions must be viewed within their proper chronological framework, which does not necessarily have to fit the already existing Mediterranean 'system'. The impact of time on regional aspects and broader developments is large and must not be undervalued.

To describe elements and aspects as belonging to a pan-Mediterranean *koinè*, these elements and aspects are already assumed to be (1) widespread in the region defined as the Mediterranean, and (2) specifically identified with that region or at least more common in it than in other regions (Woolf 2003, 133). While the first condition is observable, the second condition is much harder to fulfill. Elements attributed to the 'Mediterranean religion' can often be found in areas outside the Mediterranean, and can thus not clearly be defined as phenomena related to the Mediterranean *koinè*, but rather as belonging to a broader phenomenon of religion. In short, as Woolf states, *"The Mediterranean is no more a natural unit of analysis than it is a natural unity or a natural geographical region."* (Woolf 2003, 127).

While interpreting local dedications (for example), one must try to view it in light of its own context, rather than first looking for an explanation offered in another part of the Mediterranean. In a similar fashion, one must be hesitant to try to apply insights gained from local examples onto the entire Mediterranean (as discussed in the previous sub-chapter). The key to understanding and reconstructing an ancient religion is to remain critical of both new and old insights gained, and to not try to generalize them.

[3] One must then continue to debate the way connectivity can be measured between regions.

3. Re-examining the material evidence

The *Aegyptiaca* selected for this piece are chosen for their possible relation and importance in reconstructing parts of a religion, based on my earlier research into them. While aware that above was argued for breaking the dichotomy of classifying objects as secular or sacred, the objects discussed here are already classified as religious objects by former researchers. As argued above, it is vital to include even those objects classified as "secular" in your reconstruction of a religion. This piece, however, will only focus on deconstructing pre-existing biases for objects, the *Aegyptiaca*, which according to earlier researchers obviously must have played a part in the religion of the people. The conclusions drawn from this process, in combination with examination of the entire body of material might be able to help draw a picture of the religious system as applied by past inhabitants of Malta.

Vital to the understanding of the role of these *Aegyptiaca* in the larger Maltese religious system is the contextual information of those *Aegyptiaca* as a group of objects. Objects from this group originate both from Egypt proper, as well as from other areas, following Egyptian style-patterns (and possibly ideology). The Phoenicians are known to have adopted Egyptian cultural heritage in their own cultural system, and spread the material associated with this throughout the Mediterranean. The possible role of these objects in the religion of the local people is questionable at best, and must thus not be taken for granted. Only a small amount of the uncovered Phoenician tombs yielded *Aegyptiaca*, which in itself is an interesting phenomenon. While able to partly attribute this to the fragmentary record of the material evidence, the relation between tombs and *Aegyptiaca* (668 tombs, only 54 of them containing *Aegyptiaca*) is very low, possibly indicating they were only possessed by a group of people. One must certainly not try to project conclusions drawn from this scarce amount of material onto the entire religious system of the Maltese population in this period.

3.1 Funerary rituals

Most of the *Aegyptiaca* studied were uncovered during research and excavations of the Phoenician and Punic rock-cut tombs present on the islands. These tombs are often used to reconstruct the religious activities of these periods. While this could be the result of the biases in archaeology as a field, it might also be the result of the scarcity of other sources

available for the periods (lack of definitive settlements plays a part in that). Viewed in the light of phenomenology, one can easily imagine the sacred landscape of the rock cut tombs on Malta being used as ancestral worship place, but one has to pay in mind that this is indeed just a construction of contemporary minds, as the reconstruction of the experience of past visitors is quite hard.

While one has to be careful not to overplay the importance of these objects in funerary context, these objects can be correlated to our definition of religion, and can thus be (critically) interpreted. Several of these objects will be discussed in this chapter, and will critically be re-examined to deconstruct the existing interpretation of those objects.

3.1.1 Sarcophagi

Several Egyptianizing sarcophagi have been uncovered (and subsequently lost) on the islands of Malta and Gozo. Already at the start of the 19th century these sarcophagi have been used to explain how Egyptian religion was spread throughout the Mediterranean (Münter 1806 in Hölbl 1989, 24). Sarcophagi can be used in our study of ancient religions, as they display a conscious choice of the contemporary people to use exactly this type of burial customs and iconography. The sarcophagi, as displayed in Appendix A (figures 1.1 and 1.2), contain many Egyptian iconographic elements, and are part of a broader phenomenon in the Phoenician and Punic Mediterranean. In several Phoenician colonies and cities these types of Egyptianizing sarcophagi have surfaced, so their presence on the islands of Malta and Gozo are not surprising.

While originally used in Egypt in extensive burial rites, one cannot claim the same is applicable in the case of Malta and Gozo. There is no further evidence for the 'death cult' of the Egyptians being practiced on the islands, so one cannot assume it was similar. Already in Phoenicia the use of these sarcophagi is difficult to interpret, and might display a conscious cultural choice (possibly correlated to status) rather than a religious one. The fact that only a few of them have been found contributes to this argument. These sarcophagi can thus not safely be used to reconstruct a larger religious system, neither on Malta, nor in the Mediterranean. The traditional view that those sarcophagi are an indication of Egyptian religion on Malta is a hasty reductionist deduction, ignoring the methodological problems discussed earlier. While one can argue the religious nature of these sarcophagi (as argued above, it is nearly impossible to classify objects as religious without making the same assumptions made by past researchers), their exact role in the

greater system cannot safely be reconstructed, apart from saying they played a role for a small amount of the society on Malta.

3.1.2 Golden double statuette

One of the most famous *Aegyptiaca* was uncovered from a chamber tomb: a golden double statuette (figure 1.3 in Appendix A), which has without exception been linked to funerary rituals and magico-ritualistic values (more on that in the next sub-chapter). The exact interpretation of the representations displayed, as well as the origins of the statuette are highly debatable (see van Sister 2012, 23-24), and both have a large role to play in the interpretation of the figurines. One of the interpretations identifies the deities as two of the sons of the Egyptian deity Horus, charged with guarding the intestines of a mummy, and argues that the statuettes derive from Egypt proper. Another argues for a Syro-Palestinian origin and argues for the identification of Anubis and Horus as the depicted deities. While the debate is of high importance to the exact interpretation of the role of these objects in the society, scholars with different interpretations still link these figurines to the protection of the deceased.

One needs to question these interpretations critically, as they display the traditional archaeological bias of trying to categorize ritual objects. While the object was indeed found in a tomb, indicating it must have played one role in the religious system, it is quite clear from the lack of further evidence on the islands that the role it played was a very limited role in possible larger system. While in an Egyptian context it might have been easy to interpret the statuette as part of the cultic activities, it is not possible to simply project this interpretation onto Malta. One interesting aspect of the statuette is that it appears to be soldered together from two separate elements at a later date, indicating repurposing of the objects. While it might have been a specific ritualistic object or an amulet in earlier times, one cannot assume the Maltese people adopted these customs fully. It might be a remnant of interaction with the Phoenicians, without containing the same ritualistic value it did before. It might simply be placed in the grave as part of the display of status of the deceased. It might indeed be connected to the belief system of the deceased, but one has to remain critical, especially when so many things about its provenance and interpretation are questionable. In this case the lack of a broader context to properly view the object in is a clear disadvantage when trying to reconstruct the

religious system it was a part of (along with the other problems associated with reconstructing a religion, as discussed in chapter two.

3.2 Reconstructing Magico-ritual values

One of the biggest biases in the study of the *Aegyptiaca* is their immediate association with Egyptian religion and magic. Günther Hölbl, Egyptologist and the first person who researched the Maltese *Aegyptiaca* as a gathered body of objects, argues that the influence of Egyptian cultural influences visible in the Phoenician culture is not only "*the most important and unifying criterion of the Phoenician culture"* (Hölbl 1986, 198), but that the most important element in these influences is the adoption of Egyptian fertility magic, as shown by amulets and scarabs. In his reasoning he ignores the diversity of the regions he is studying, mentioning Egypt, East-Phoenicia, Cyprus, Carthage, Mozia and Spain within one sentence (Hölbl 1986, 198). When boldly stating things as: "*far more dominant is the importance of the amuletic Aegyptiaca as evidence for fertility magic in the Mediterranean world*" (Hölbl 1986, 201), Hölbl makes some grave methodological mistakes in his reasoning, among which creating the pretense of a "Mediterranean world". Hölbl interprets a specific situation using parallels, and continues to project his result onto a broader Mediterranean system, while argued before was that this is a faulty methodology. This methodology greatly ignores the personal experiences and regional differences associated with the objects. While acknowledging the problems of the scanty material on Malta and Gozo, he stills beliefs "*there is no reason to doubt that the amuletic Aegyptiaca, i.e. the scarabs and faience figurines, of these islands belong also to the evidence of Egyptian fertility magic within Phoenician and Punic culture*" (Hölbl 1986, 202).

The most important issue with the study of magic through archaeology is again related to definitions, this time defining 'magic' and 'amulet'. Magic and religion have often been used to contrast one another, with magic seen as negative and religious as good. Magic, at closer examination, appears to be inseparable from religion, and sometimes indistinguishable from it as well. As Johnston states: "*Thus, magic was almost always a normative, rather than a straightforwardly descriptive, term, and looking at the ancient world from our vantage point, we can make no clean division between it and religion.*" (Johnston 2004, 141). 'Magical' objects are thus definitely part of the religious system.

This need not surprise us, as argued before was that it is hard to classify objects as not belonging to a religious system.

Most of the *Aegyptiaca* have traditionally been categorized as amulets (Gouder 1978, Hölbl 1989, van Sister 2012), based on their association with cultic activities and characteristics such as hanging loops. These amulets, according to scholarly beliefs, provided protection from malevolent spirits, responsible for all daily hazards (Gouder 1978, 311). The 'vast' amount of these *Aegyptiaca* found in tombs on Malta and throughout the Mediterranean has traditionally been used as a clear indicator of the importance of Egyptian religious beliefs throughout the Phoenician World (Moscati 1989, 394; Schmitz 2002, 819). So by classifying objects as being 'amulets', they automatically gain multiple labels, such as 'apotropaic', 'magical' and 'religious'. The word 'amulet' is thus applied to objects seemingly related to religion and seemingly worn on a personal body. While helping archaeologists to make sense of an assemblage, the categorization of these objects prevents the interpreter from looking at it as an individual object, neglecting personal experiences and the uniqueness of the objects. By trying to make sense of a phenomenon, the picture is instead more blurred. By classifying objects as amulets, one already decides the values the objects have to be associated with, often stopping the researcher from looking further.

Specifically in the case of Malta and Gozo there are some methodological issues at play when looking at the objects as amulets. The amount of *Aegyptiaca* is very limited, which can be interpreted in different ways. It seems the objects were not necessarily incorporated in the Maltese larger religious system. One could thus wonder whether the local inhabitants also assigned these objects the apotropaic values given to these kind of objects by the Egyptians, and if they were actively worn during daily life. One cannot simply assume that the owners of the objects associated the objects with their original (Egyptian or Phoenician) magico-ritual values. Brown already argued that Phoenician artists had more care for the aesthetic values of the objects than for their original significance (Brown 1992, 6-7). The Egyptian/Egyptianizing iconography of the *Aegyptiaca* is the result of a series of modifications and changes, both by Phoenician influences and by local adoptions. Undoubtedly this must have had its effect on the rituals and other religious purposes associated with the objects, if these were present, as the conveyed meaning of the objects has been changed and sometimes even lost in the processes of adaptation and change. Each object will have to be reviewed in its own

context to determine its worth as an 'amulet' and to examine the role it played in the religious system of Malta, while trying to avoid the larger Mediterranean interpretation we see so often.

3.2.1 Amulet containers

These problems are clearly reflected in the *papyrus holder* (Appendix A 2.1). The object has traditionally been categorized as an apotropaic amulet. It concerns a piece of bronze jewelry, possibly worn around the neck, containing a fragmented piece of papyrus. It is in this case not only the piece of jewelry that lead to it being classified as an amulet, but the combination with the content on the papyrus inside that provided a good case for such an interpretation. Argued was that the amulet sheath belonged to a type of imitations of Egyptian prototype amulets, diffused through Phoenician colonies and cities (Gouder 1978, 314). Both the amulet and the contents of the papyrus display Egyptian iconography, the latter combining Isis with a Phoenician inscription of an enemy destruction spell[4]. This combination of elements created difficulties when trying to interpret the amulet by only looking at the Egyptian scene depicted, for one cannot assume the exact original meaning of the iconography was transferred to the object for the Phoenician author. While a valid argument can be made for the classification of this object as an amulet, the exact interpretation is still difficult. The repurposed Egyptianizing iconography might or might not have played a role in the magico-ritual values of the object, while the Phoenician aspect (the destruction spell) clearly portrays an apotropaic function. As it is one of two *Aegyptiaca* found on Malta that combine Egyptianizing iconography with Phoenician text, one cannot draw to much conclusions on the use of these kind of amulets on the islands. A case can be made that the amulet was of religious importance for the owner, as is indicated by the papyrus, but no larger conclusions can be drawn from it.

The *amulet holder* (Appendix A; 2.2) displays similar characteristics. Again classified as an amulet, based on its contents rather than the holder itself, it is traditionally thought to have protected the wearer from sickness, dangerous animals or to improve fertility (Hölbl

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[4] For the translation see Appendix A, 2.1

1989, 104-105). While the *amulet holder* itself does not display any iconographic feats normally associated with religious activities and does not even display Egyptianizing content, inside the container a golden band with Phoenician inscriptions and depictions of figures was found. Resembling a good copy of an Egyptian decan list (Hölbl 1989, 112), the band contains a protection spell ("Protect and bless PDY, son of HSLB'L, son of B'LHN" (Hölbl 1989, 112-113)) written in Phoenician, a feat we see repeated on other Phoenician/Punic decan lists. The combination of Egyptianizing iconography with Phoenician text is again striking (as was the case with the *papyrus holder*), but in this case multiple parallels of the combination can be found, possibly indicating a greater role in a larger system. While arguments can be made for the intimate knowledge of the Egyptian theology necessary for the production of such an object, this cannot be extended to the amount of knowledge the owner of the object had. The associations the owner had with the amulet might have been different from those the owners of the parallels had, and it does not necessarily mean that decan lists played a vital part in the Maltese religion. One has to be careful not to over-interpret these kind of religious objects and to always remain critical.

4. Conclusion

This paper explored the problems within the *Archaeology of Religions*, both practical and methodological problems, and tried to apply those in a case study. Due to its geographic position and socio-political history the Maltese islands have enjoyed a high amount of connectivity, which is reflected in its material evidence, among which the *Aegyptiaca*. These objects have often been interpreted as being of religious nature, without questioning the extent to which they are religious or why they should be seen as religious. By contributing to the existing dichotomy by categorizing these objects as religious former researchers hoped to explain the function of these objects. While trying to make sense of the role these objects might have played in a past society is laudable, simply giving it a label does not clarify the complex roles these objects might have played in a broader context.

When trying to reconstruct a past religion one has to critically look at what a religion is. Argued is that religion is indefinable, yet when trying to reconstruct a past religion a working definition is needed. While examining material from the past it is necessary to try and break the established dichotomies and to try and not take the easy route when classifying objects, to continue researching even after the classification has been made. One has to break the existing archaeological bias on funerary and ritual archaeology, and properly contextualize material evidence in a diachronic perspective. When interpreting results one has to pay attention to the locality of the phenomena, and not try to examine it in a broader Mediterranean situation. Needless to say, one also has to be careful not to project the findings of a specific location into a broader religious framework.

In this fashion the presence of a few Egyptianizing sarcophagi on the islands of Malta cannot be used to describe a larger religious phenomenon surrounding the burial customs, but rather display a cultural choice of a select few on the islands. And while the *golden double statuette* might have been manufactured with religious values attached to it, it is unwise to project these values directly to the Maltese owner of the object. While its placement and content suggest a part in a religious system, the extent to which the statuette played a role in the Maltese religious system cannot safely be reconstructed, and one has to keep in mind that much is uncertain about its role. Objects traditionally classified as amulets have to be re-examined carefully, as the word amulet already creates problems for an objective interpretation. Projection of the magico-ritual values ascribed

to objects by other cultures onto the objects found allows for an easy interpretation, but largely neglects the role of the individual and the role of local communities. The two amulets uncovered from Maltese tombs containing Egyptianizing iconography and Phoenician spells cannot be used to describe magico-ritual behavior of the Maltese people because they are the only examples found, and it is at best uncertain they were worn with an apotropaic function by the people. While they might have played a role for the owners in their religious life, it does not seem to be a wide-spread phenomenon on the islands. Saying that it is part of the wide-spread phenomenon in the Mediterranean is possible, but the role of the objects in this specific situation does not become more clear from doing so.

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Appendix A: Catalogue of relevant objects

1.1 Anthropomorphic sarcophagus

Dimensions: Not measured

Material: Presumably terracotta

Origins: Ghar Barka

Context: Burial, Necropolis

Chronology: Not established

Form: Anthropomorphic, female

Attributes: The head and the feet of a human are depicted and formed. A late-Egyptian wig with parts falling on the breast is present.

Parallels: Over 80; Saqqara, Cyprus, Solunt at Palermo and Cádiz.

1.1 Image source: Hölbl 1989, 133

1.2 Anthropomorphic terracotta sarcophagus from the Valetta museum

Dimensions: > 1,5 m (l)

Material: Terracotta

Origins: Ghar Barka

Context: Burial, necropolis

Chronology: 5th century BCE

Form: Anthropomorphic, female

Attributes: The head and the feet of a human are depicted and formed.

Parallels: Over 80; Saqqara, Cyprus, Solunt at Palermo and Cádiz.

There are three more sarcophagi from Malta and Gozo, but there is not further information available.

1.2 Image: courtesy of Heritage Malta

1.3 Golden double statuette

Dimensions: 24,8 x 12,3; Bases together 10,8 x 5,4 (mm)

Material: Gold

Origin: Ghain Klieb

Context: Burial, chamber tomb

Chronology: Not established

Form: Anthropomorphic

Position: Two figures, standing back to back

Attributes: The two figures have been soldered together later. A falcon-headed figure and a jackal headed figure are standing back to back. Both have a flail and ankh in their hands and solar discs on their heads. Soldered together at the hanging loops.

2.6 Image source: Bonanno 2005, 64-65

2.1 Papyrus holder

Dimensions: 49,4 x 10,9 x 12,5 (mm)

Dimensions of papyrus: 70 x 48 (mm)

Material: Bronze

Origin: Tal Virtu

Context: Burial

Chronology: Not established

Form: Anthropomorphic

Position: Standing

Attributes: Hanging loop, Uraeus, solar disc, hawk's head, pieces of papyrus contained within it.

Papyrus:

The text on the papyrus is a Phoenician inscription of an enemy destruction spell accompanied by a representation of Isis. The goddess is facing the right and is wearing a long dress with a belt knotted around the waist. On her head is a three-parted wig and in her left hand a large scepter. Isis holds an ankh in her right hand.

2.1. Image: courtesy of Heritage Malta

2.1 Image source: Gouder 1978, 315

Translation:

"Laugh at your enemy O valiant ones.

scorn, assail and crush your adversary.

... disdain (him), trample (him) on the waters:

... moreover prostrate (him)

... on the sea, bind (him), hang (him)!"

(source Tancred Gouder, 1978)

2.2a Amulet holder

Dimensions: 40 mm (h)

Material: Gold

Origin: Ghar Barka

Context: Burial, chamber grave

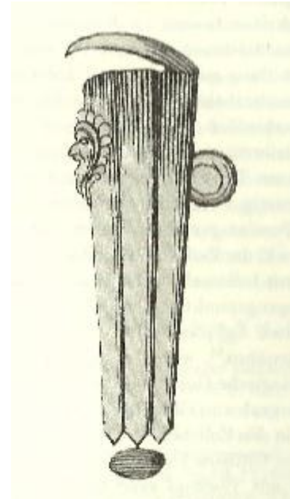
Accompanying finds: Gold amulet band

Chronology: 600-500 BCE

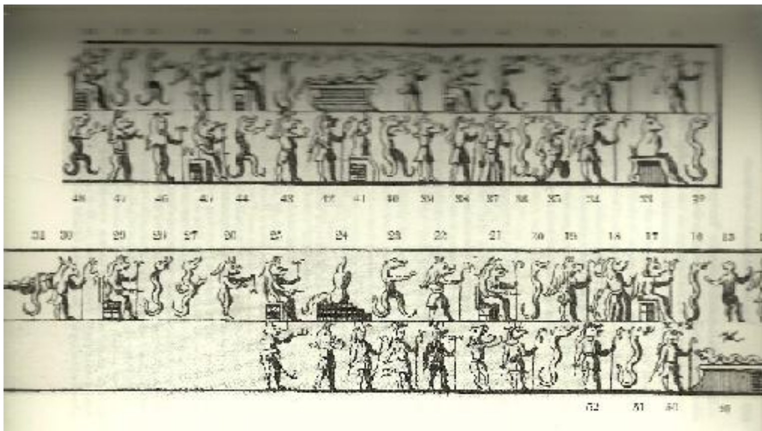
Form: Cylindrical

Attributes: Hanging loop, bearded man. This object is not in Egyptian style.

Parallels: None



2.2a Image source: Hölbl 1989, 106



2.2b Image Source: Hölbl 1989, 107

2.2b Gold amulet band

Dimensions: 245 mm (l)

Material: Gold

Origin: Ghar Barka

Context: Burial, chamber grave

Accompanying finds: Found inside the amulet holder

Chronology: 600-500 BCE

Form: Square

Attributes: Decan List, depicting many standing or seated figures, with altars, thrones and steps between and next to the figures. An inscription is visible on some panels: Protect and bless PDY, son of HLSB`L, son of B`LHN.

Parallels: Carthage, Sardinia and Tharros.