

## The Egyptian Heracles of Gades

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### *Abstract*

Melqart, the tutelary god of the Phoenician city of Gades, is referred to by Greek and Latin authors of the Roman period as Heracles or Hercules. Although several of these authors recognise his Tyrian origin, Pomponius Mela and Philostratus refer to the god as “Egyptian”. Accordingly, the aim here is to investigate the reasons behind the “Egyptian” character of the Melqart/Heracles worshipped in Gades, a traditionally enigmatic question. One of the possible reasons for this attribution may be the Egyptianising character of the representations of Phoenician divinities, including Melqart. However, some authors, such as Silius Italicus and Philostratus himself, report the absence of cult images of the god in his sanctuary at Gades. This raises the possibility that the “Egyptian” character of the Heracles/Hercules of Gades in Roman times might have been more related to the connotations of the mythical deeds of the god in the confines of the *oecumene*, which included measuring the world to its limits, protecting the community from catastrophic floods and the use of cosmic magic, aspects that in Hellenistic and Roman times were related to Egyptian wisdom.

*Keywords:* Melqart, Egyptian Heracles, Gades, Magic.

### INTRODUCTION

The tutelary god of both the city of Gades<sup>1</sup> and its metropolis Tyre was Melqart. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the Tyrian Melqart seems to have been first identified with the Greek god Heracles in the sixth century BC. At least since the time of Herodotus, this identification had to do with the debate among the Greeks themselves on the existence of different Heracles, depending either on his human or divine nature or on his Greek, Egyptian or Tyrian origin, among other aspects<sup>2</sup>. There are instances of Greek and Latin authors referring to the Melqart of Gades as Heracles or Hercules. Some of these sources specify that the Heracles of Gades was Tyrian, whereas others, including Pomponius Mela and Philostratus, also call him “Egyptian”. Accordingly, the aim here is to enquire into the explanation behind this “Egyptian” character of the Melqart/Heracles of Gades.

One conceivable reason behind this designation is the Egyptianising character of the representations of the Phoenician gods – including Melqart – from their very advent. However, some sources note the absence of cult images of the god in his sanctuary at Gades. This suggests that, in the case at hand, the “Egyptian” character of the Heracles/Hercules of Gades in the Roman age might have pertained more to the implications of the mythical narratives associated with the god, relating to aspects such as the measurement of the world, the protection of the community against sea floods and the use of cosmic magic, which in the Roman period was directly linked to the Egyptian world.

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<sup>1</sup> Gadir (‘*Gdr*’) in Phoenician; Gadeira in Greek, and Gades in Latin; modern Cadiz.

<sup>2</sup> DANIELS 2021; LÓPEZ-RUIZ 2024.

## THE TYRIAN MELQART AND THE EGYPTIAN HERACLES

Melqart – a name whose literal meaning is “king of the city” – was *Baal Sur*, the “Lord of Tyre”. His personality, as with that of other gods appearing in the Levant at the beginning of the first millennium BC, included elements of the Ugaritic Baal of the Bronze Age, as the champion of cosmic order versus the forces of Chaos<sup>3</sup>. His personality traits in Tyre included his close relationship with the monarchy, his role as the legendary founder of the city – linked to his oracular character –, promoter of the first mythical voyages and, by extension, protector of trade and navigation. In turn, Melqart was the god around whom the religious and identity-related network of the Tyrian colonial diaspora revolved. He was the god *archegetes*, he “who watched over the settlers” (*para tois apoikois*; Diod. 20.14.1), while also playing an important role in the foundational traditions of cities like Carthage and Gadir<sup>4</sup>.

The Melqart of Tyre began to be identified with the Greek Heracles early on in the context of the discussion among the Greeks on the existence of different Heracles, one a god and the other a hero who had been subsequently deified, and on that of different gods called Heracles<sup>5</sup>. It was in this complex process of associations that the “Egyptian Heracles” became the subject of debate<sup>6</sup>. As López-Ruiz<sup>7</sup> has rightly pointed out, Herodotus’ enquiry into the identity and origin of the different Heracles, taking him from Egypt to Tyre, highlights the link that, to his mind, existed between the Egyptian Heracles and his Tyrian counterpart. The passage is also interesting because it contains a description of the sanctuary of Melqart at Tyre, which in many aspects must have served as a model for that at Gades:

“... Heracles is a very ancient god in Egypt; as the Egyptians themselves say, the change of the eight gods to the twelve, of whom they deem Heracles one, was made seventeen thousand years before the reign of Amasis.

Moreover, wishing to get clear knowledge of this matter whence it was possible so to do, I took ship to Tyre in Phoenice, where I heard that there was a very holy temple of Heracles. There I saw it, richly equipped with many other offerings, besides that in it there were two pillars, one of refined gold, one of emerald, a great pillar that shone in the night-time; and in converse with the priests I asked how long it was since their temple was built. I found that neither did their account tally with the belief of the Greeks; for they said that the temple of the god was founded when Tyre first became a city, and that was two thousand three hundred years since... Therefore, what I have discovered by inquiry plainly shows that Heracles is an ancient god. And further: those Greeks, I think, are most in the right, who have established and practise two worships of Heracles, sacrificing to one Heracles as to an immortal, and calling him the Olympian, but to the other bringing offerings as to a dead hero.” (Hdt. 2.43-44; transl. Godley).

López Ruiz has also raised the possibility that the representations of Melqart between the eighth and seventh centuries BC had an Egyptian appearance, an aspect characterising Canaanite and Phoenician plastic arts since the end of the Bronze Age and during the first half of the first millennium BC, and that this would have influenced the perception of the god as

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<sup>3</sup> On the Melqart of Tyre see BONNET 1988; RIBICHINI 1999; XELLA 2004; NITSCHKE 2013.

<sup>4</sup> On the role of Melqart in the context of the Tyrian colonial diaspora see AUBET 2001; BONNET 2005, 2009; MARÍN CEBALLOS 2011; GARBATI 2012, 2015, 2021; ÁLVAREZ-MARTÍ-AGUILAR 2018

<sup>5</sup> On the identification of Melqart with Heracles see JOURDAIN-ANNEQUIN, BONNET 2001; DANIELS 2021.

<sup>6</sup> MARÍN CEBALLOS 2001; JOURDAIN-ANNEQUIN 2002; LÓPEZ-RUIZ 2024.

<sup>7</sup> LÓPEZ-RUIZ 2024.

“Egyptian”<sup>8</sup>. However, there is only one representation of Melqart, marked as such epigraphically, in the stela dedicated by Bir-Hadad (from Bredj, Aleppo, ca. 800 BC), although it has some Egyptian elements. Be that as it may, the Tyrian origin of the god was compatible with an Egyptian appearance of his representation. This argument is supported by Pausanias’ account of the “absolutely Egyptian” appearance of the image of Heracles from his sanctuary at Erythrae, which, however, came from Tyre:

“You would be delighted too with the sanctuary of Heracles at Erythrae and with the temple of Athena at Priene, the latter because of its image and the former on account of its age. The image is like neither the Aeginetan, as they are called, nor yet the most ancient Attic images; it is absolutely Egyptian, if ever there was such. There was a wooden raft, on which the god set out from Tyre in Phoenicia. The reason for this we are not told even by the Erythraeans themselves” (Paus. 7.5.5; transl. W.H.S. Jones and H.A. Ormerod).

In the Tyrian colony of Gades, Melqart was also regarded as the tutelary god of the city who played a leading role in its foundational account (Str. 3.5.5)<sup>9</sup>. There are many sources that mention his extra-urban sanctuary, located several miles to the south of the city, in a place that, following the indications of authors like Pomponius Mela (3.46) and Strabo (3.5.3), is usually established in the vicinity of the islet of Sancti Petri, some 18 miles south of the modern-day city of Cadiz<sup>10</sup>. This sanctuary, which was very famous in the ancient world, was visited by soldiers and politicians – Hannibal, Scipio Africanus and Caesar, to name but a few – and intellectuals and philosophers – Posidonius of Apamea and Apollonius of Tyana, among others. The waterfront location of the sanctuary made it an ideal place for observing the phenomenon of ocean tides, an object of study for intellectuals in the Hellenistic period. The defining features of the sanctuary included the existence of relics of the god himself, altars, precious votive offerings and elements resembling those of the original sanctuary at Tyre, such as pairs of stelae (more on which below).

In the Roman period, there was apparently the belief that the tutelary god of Gades was, as with the founders of the city, Phoenician and, specifically, Tyrian. In his *Anabasis of Alexander*, Arrian of Nicomedia (c. 86–c. 160 AD), despite mistaking the name of Gadir for that of Tartessus – as was commonplace in Roman times – observes,

“There is, you must know, at Tyre the most ancient temple of Heracles of which there is any record; not the Argive Heracles, son of Alcmena; for Heracles was honoured at Tyre many generations before Cadmus sailed from Phoenicia, occupied Thebes, and had a daughter Semele, mother of Dionysus son of Zeus. [...] The Egyptians worship another Heracles, different from the Heracles of Tyre and Greece; Herodotus says that the Egyptians reckon him one of the Twelve Deities [...]. So also I think that the Heracles honoured at Tartessus by the Iberians—where are the ‘Pillars’ called ‘of Heracles’—is the Tyrian Heracles, since Tartessus is a Phoenician possession, and the temple to the Heracles there has been built in the Phoenician style and the sacrifices are offered in Phoenician ritual ...” (*Anab.* 2.16.4; transl. E. Iloff Robson).

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<sup>8</sup> LÓPEZ-RUIZ 2024.

<sup>9</sup> On the Melqart of Gadir/Gades, see BONNET 1988, pp. 203-230; MARÍN CEBALLOS 2011; GARBATI 2021; ÁLVAREZ-MARTÍ-AGUILAR 2021.

<sup>10</sup> On the sanctuary, see GARCÍA Y BELLIDO 1963, BONNET 1988, pp. 203-230; MIERSE 2004; FEAR 2005; SÁEZ ROMERO 2009; MARÍN CEBALLOS 2016.

In the debate on the existence of different Heracles – Egyptian, Tyrian and Greek – Arrian identifies the Heracles of Tartessus (Gades) as being unmistakably Tyrian because of the Phoenician character of the city, the sanctuary and the ritual with which he was worshipped. Appian of Alexandria (c. 95–c. 165 AD) deploys similar arguments to identify the Heracles of Gades:

“I think also that the Phoenicians built the temple of Hercules which stands at the straits. The religious rites performed there are still of Phoenician type, and their god is the Tyrian, not the Theban, Hercules. But I will leave these matters to the antiquarians” (*Hisp.* 1.2; transl. Horace White).

At the beginning of the fourth century AD, Arnobius also drew a distinction between the Tyrian and Theban Hercules, the former consumed by flames on Oeta and the latter buried in remote Hispania (*Thebanus aut Tyrius Hercules, hic in finibus sepultus Hispaniae, flammis alter concrematus Oetaeis; Adv. Nat.* 1.36.5).

The conviction that the god worshipped at the sanctuary at Gades was of Tyrian origin and the insistence on the Phoenician character of the sanctuary and rites dedicated to him, coexisted smoothly with the identification of this god as the “Egyptian” Hercules by the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela (fl. c. 43 AD), the first of the two authors to record this designation. As he himself notes, he was born in Tingentera, close to Gades itself, for which reason it has been assumed that the information that Mela provides on the ancient Tyrian colony is totally reliable.

“Next to these shores, which we have traced from the angle of Baetica all the way here also lie many obscure islands that have no names. Of those islands not happily passed by, though, Gades is on the Strait. That island is separated from the continent by a narrow space, as if by a river, and has an almost straight bank where it lies nearer to the mainland. Where the island faces Ocean it reaches into the sea with two promontories, and the shoreline in between recedes. On one prong it supports a temple of Aegyptian Hercules famous for its founders, its cult, its age, and its wealth. The Tyrians founded the temple, and Hercules’ bones, buried there, show why the place is consecrated. The temple began its existence in the Trojan era, and time has fed its wealth” (*Chor.* 3.6.46-47; transl. Romer).

The other reference to the Heracles worshipped at Gades as “Egyptian” is found in several passages of the biography of Apollonius of Tyana written by the Athenian Philostratus (c. 170s–240s AD). In the fifth book of the work, the author describes the visit that this singular character and his retinue of disciples made to Gades after having been expelled from Rome by Nero. The reference to the Heracles of Egypt in Gades appears in the introduction to the section in question:

“Now the city of Gadeira is situated at the extreme end of Europe, and its inhabitants are excessively given to religion; so much so that they have set up an altar to old age, and unlike any other race they sing hymns in honour of death; and altars are found there set up to poverty, and to art, and to Heracles of Egypt, and there are others in honor of Heracles the Theban. For they say that the latter advanced against the neighboring town of Erythea, on which occasion he took captive Geryon and his cows; the other, they say, in his devotion to wisdom measured the whole earth up to its limits” (*VA* 5.4; transl. Conybeare, adapted).

This passage suggests that the sanctuary of Gades was given over to the worship of two of the Heracles identified in the Greek tradition, viz. the Egyptian and Greek Heracles, in addition to concepts like old age, poverty and art. The information that it contains on the existence of different mythological narratives of the exploits of both at the ends of the world is also exceedingly thought-provoking.

The feat attributed to the Theban Heracles reflects the adaptation of one of the 12 canonical labours of the Greek demigod to the landscape of Gades, namely, the stealing of the cattle of Geryon. The feat attributed to the Egyptian Heracles of Gades – measuring the whole earth up to its limits, in his devotion to wisdom – is the first clue for reconstructing the specific personality of this god and the way in which he was represented in the eyes of his worshippers. In a second instance, Philostratus refers to the Egyptian Heracles of Gades in relation to his Theban counterpart and to the altars of both in the sanctuary.

“Now the island on which the shrine is built is of exactly the same size as the temple, and there is not a rough stone to be found in it, for the whole of it has been given the form of a polished platform. In the shrine they say there is maintained a cult both of one and the other Hercules, though there are no images of them; altars however there are, namely, to the Egyptian Hercules two of bronze and perfectly plain, to the Theban, one of stone; on the latter they say are engraved in relief hydras and the mares of Diomedea and the twelve labours of Hercules” (*VA* 5.5; transl. Conybeare).

This reference to the absence of cult images of both the Egyptian and Theban Heracles in the sanctuary at Gades should be assessed together with that which Silius Italicus (c. 26–c. 101 AD) includes in his *Punica*, specifically in the section recounting Hannibal’s visit to the sanctuary in 219 BC, which is the most detailed extant description of the characteristics of the place and the cult.

“Thereafter he [Hannibal] worshipped at the altars of the god who bears the club, and loaded them with offerings lately snatched by the conqueror from the fire and smoke of the citadel of Saguntum. Men said—and it was no idle tale—that the timber, of which the temple was built at first, never decayed, and for ages never felt the handiwork of any others than the first builders. Hence men take pleasure in the belief that the god has taken up his abode there and defends his temple from decay. Further, those who are permitted and privileged to have access to the inner shrine forbid the approach of women, and are careful to keep bristly swine away from the threshold. The dress worn before the altars is the same for all: linen covers their limbs, and their foreheads are adorned with a head-band of Pelusian flax. It is their custom to offer incense with robes ungirt; and, following their fathers’ rule, they adorn the garment of sacrifice with a broad stripe. Their feet are bare and their heads shaven, and their bed admits no partner; the fires on the hearth-stones keep the altars alight perpetually. But no statues or familiar images of the gods filled the place with solemnity and sacred awe (*Pun.* 3.14-31; transl. Duff).

Silius’ and Philostratus’ matching accounts are one of the main arguments in the debate on the aniconism of the Phoenician religion and, specifically, on the aniconic character of the cult of Melqart in Gades<sup>11</sup>. The fact that, according to Philostratus, the altars of the Theban Heracles were decorated with reliefs and that, as Silius remarks, the doors of the sanctuary depicted the labours of Heracles (*Pun.* 3.32-44), shows that this aniconism was limited to the

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<sup>11</sup> BONNET 1988, pp. 213-219; METTINGER 1995, pp. 86-90; 2004; DOAK 2015, with bibliography.

absence of cult images of the god in the sanctuary at Gades<sup>12</sup>. At any rate, it is directly related to the matter at hand. The absence of cult images of Melqart in his sanctuary at Gades suggests that the characterisation of the god as “Egyptian” might not have depended, or at least not exclusively, on how he was physically represented, but rather on his personality traits, represented in mythical accounts.

The following two references to the Egyptian Heracles of Gades in Philostratus point in this direction. The god appears for the third time in the *Vita Apollonii* in relation to two enigmatic *stelai* which were exhibited among the sanctuary’s treasures, together with others like the belt of Teucus and the golden olive tree of Pygmalion.

“... the pillars in the temple were made of gold and silver smelted together so as to be of one colour, and they were over a cubit high, of square form, resembling anvils; and their capitals were inscribed with letters which were neither Egyptian nor Indian nor of any kind which he could decipher. But Apollonius, since the priests would tell him nothing, remarked: ‘Heracles of Egypt does not permit me not to tell all I know. These pillars are ties between earth and ocean, and they were inscribed by Heracles in the house of the Fates, to prevent any discord arising between the elements, and to save their mutual affection for one another from violation’” (*VA* 5.5; transl. Conybeare).

This passage offers a richly nuanced description of the personality of the Egyptian Heracles of Gades. The god is represented inscribing on the *stelai* a sort of pact of friendship and non-aggression, with an eye to being perpetual, between two cosmic entities, namely, the earth and the ocean. Elsewhere, I have shown how the terms employed to describe the balance between these two cosmic entities also appear in another part of the work (*VA* 4.34) describing the occurrence of an earthquake, followed by the threat of a destructive retreat of the sea – a tsunami? – during Apollonius’ visit to the sanctuary of Asclepius at Leben, in Crete<sup>13</sup>.

The fact that the geological history of the Gulf of Cadiz reveals the recurring impact of high-energy marine events – both storm surges and tsunamis – throughout the first millennium BC, has led me to interpret the passage in terms of apotropaic magic. It presents Egyptian Heracles as the protector of the community against the threat posed by the sea by preserving the balance between the earth and the ocean on the part of both cosmic entities. The role per se of the *stelai* as boundary markers of a truly cosmic nature was especially important for the preservation of that balance<sup>14</sup>.

A similar logic underlies Philostratus’ fourth reference to the Egyptian Heracles of Gades in a passage in which he describes the images in relief decorating the shield that he lost during his expedition to India, accompanied by Dionysius.

“It was on that occasion, they say, that Hercules lost his golden shield, and the sages dedicated it as an offering, partly out of respect for Hercules’ reputation, and partly because of the reliefs upon the shield. For in these Hercules is represented fixing the frontier of the world at Gadira, and turning the mountains into pillars, and confining the ocean within its bounds. Thence it is clear that it was not the Theban Hercules, but the Egyptian one, that came to Gadira, and fixed the limits of the world” (*VA* 2.33; transl. Conybeare).

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<sup>12</sup> According to TSIRKIN 1981, the doors of the sanctuary would have depicted Melqart's labours, death and resurrection.

<sup>13</sup> ÁLVAREZ-MARTÍ-AGUILAR 2017.

<sup>14</sup> ÁLVAREZ-MARTÍ-AGUILAR 2017.

The passage alludes to an act with ecumenical and euergetic connotations: establishing the boundaries between the world and the outer ocean, a cosmic feat that, according to Philostratus, was performed specifically in Gadir (Gades) by the Egyptian – not the Theban – Heracles. The link between this description to that of the singular *stelai* with talismanic properties (*VA* 5.5) lies in the importance that both had in the concept of limit – and at the same time link – between the earth and the ocean, in the role of Gades as the point at which that boundary was established and in that of the Egyptian Heracles as the god who did so and enforced it. Both passages can be related, in turn, to the one in which Strabo describes other unique *stelai* in the sanctuary at Gades:

“Other say that it is the bronze pillars of eight cubits in the temple of Heracles in Gades, whereon is inscribed the expense incurred in the construction of the temple, that are called the Pillars; and those people who have ended their voyage with visiting these pillars and sacrificing to Heracles have had it noisily spread abroad that this is the end of both land and sea” (Str. 3.5.5; transl. Jones).

The image of these *stelai* as “the end of both land and sea” is, to my mind, directly related to the scene depicted on the shield of Heracles in the *Vita Apollonii* (2.33). The narrative underlying the proclamations of the travellers reaching their journey’s end in Gades suggests that the pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Heracles in Roman times included a visit to the columns as boundary markers commemorating when Heracles – possibly the “Egyptian Heracles” of Mela and Philostratus – had established the limits of the world in his sanctuary at Gades, more specifically, the boundary between the earth and the ocean<sup>15</sup>.

#### THE EGYPTIANISING FIGURINES OF SANCTI PETRI (AND HUELVA)

In the context of this reflection on the nature of the Egyptian Heracles of Gades, a unique piece of archaeological evidence should also be assessed. These are eight Phoenician bronze figurines of an Egyptianising character, discovered underwater in the vicinity of the islet and channel of Sancti Petri – an area in which, as already mentioned, the sanctuary of Melqart-Heracles is usually established – in the final decades of the twentieth century<sup>16</sup>.

These eight figurines form part of a Mediterranean group of 17 exemplars with common characteristics: bronze figurines, about 30 cm high, representing male figures wearing Egyptian attire, namely, *shendyt* kilts and *atef* crowns, and striking ceremonial poses of blessing or smiting<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 1).

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<sup>15</sup> ÁLVAREZ-MARTÍ-AGUILAR 2021.

<sup>16</sup> On the circumstances of its discovery, see BLANCO FREIJEIRO 1985; CORZO SÁNCHEZ 2005; SÁEZ ROMERO *et alii* 2005.

<sup>17</sup> JIMÉNEZ ÁVILA 2018.



Fig. 1. Map of the Bay of Cadiz showing the approximate location of the site where the Phoenician bronze figurines were found in an underwater context around the Islet of Sancti Petri (after JIMÉNEZ ÁVILA 2018, fig. 1; Google Earth, text overlay by the author).

According to Falsone and Jiménez Ávila, this homogeneous group of Phoenician bronze figurines would have probably been made in Levantine Phoenician workshops, before being exported to the west, between the eighth and seventh century BC<sup>18</sup>. By Jiménez Ávila's reckoning, they were not presumably cult figures but deimorphic votive offerings<sup>19</sup>. There are differences of opinion on the identity of the divinity that these figurines represent because the smiting pose of some of them was used in the portrayals of both Hadad/Reshef and Baal.

The Egyptianising aesthetics of the figurines of Sancti Petri can be related to the matter at hand: the Egyptian character of the Heracles of Gades. Although it is impossible to determine whether they represent Melqart, the fact that they were found in the vicinity of the place where his sanctuary has been traditionally established, has naturally led to the suggestion that they represent the Tyrian god<sup>20</sup>. Their existence allows to posit that contemporary – eighth-seventh centuries BC – representations of Melqart in Gadir must have included Egyptian elements, for which reason it is plausible that the Egyptianising character of those representations of the god led him to be designated as “Egyptian” in Roman times.

Nevertheless, these figurines could be related, in another sense, to the personality of the Egyptian Heracles proposed here as a god who maintained the balance between the earth and the ocean. The eight figurines discovered in Sancti Petri and two found close to the city of Huelva, an important node in the Phoenician colonial network during the initial half of the first

<sup>18</sup> FALSONE 1988; JIMÉNEZ ÁVILA 2014.

<sup>19</sup> JIMÉNEZ ÁVILA 2002, p. 287.

<sup>20</sup> POVEDA NAVARRO 1999; GARBATI 2017.

millennium BC, accounting for most of the finds in Spain and a high proportion of those making up the group as a whole, were found underwater.

Some authors have interpreted the figurines of Sancti Petri and Huelva as votive offerings cast into the sea by Phoenician seafarers and traders on arrival at the ports of Gadir and Onuba<sup>21</sup>. But, as Garbati has posited, the meaning of the figurines of Sancti Petri could be related to the logic of preserving the harmony between the earth and the ocean, the two elements which, in permanent tension, dominated the landscape of Gadir/Gades<sup>22</sup>.

The dating of these figurines coincides with a horizon in which the impact of one or several high-energy marine events, possibly major storm surges or tsunamis, has been recorded on the seaboard of the Gulf of Cadiz<sup>23</sup>. This has led me to entertain the possibility that these figurines might have been deimorphic votive offerings originally exhibited in places of worship of Melqart, probably in his sanctuary at Gadir, before being cast into the waters in an attempt to appease them, after the occurrence of high-energy marine events<sup>24</sup>.

The theological/mythical argument underlying this hypothesis is that these figurines possibly representing Melqart or, at any rate, a god of a Baalic character, might have been cast into the sea to confront the divine incarnation of ocean chaos – Yam in the Canaanite tradition – so as to prevent the repetition of similar events or, perhaps, as a way of thanking the god for having protected the community against such a threat. Also in this case, the figurines would have been related to the role of the Egyptian Heracles of Gades as the protector of coastal communities against the encroachment of the sea.

#### EGYPT, WISDOM, MAGIC AND THE CONTROL OF THE SEA

Although it is possible that the Melqart of Gadir was first identified with the Egyptian Heracles as early as in the sixth century BC, it is convenient to explore the meaning of this in a time frame closer to that of the sources in which the god is mentioned explicitly in Roman times. There is a text that, in my view, provides key information that would allow to contextualise the “Egyptian” character of the Heracles represented in the passages of Philostratus. It is the *Alexander Romance*, a fictitious account of the life and deeds of Alexander the Great – mistakenly attributed to Callisthenes of Olynthus – originally written in Greek some time at the beginning of the fourth century AD, before being translated into many languages in diverse versions<sup>25</sup>.

The work begins with an account of the Egyptians’ command of magic, offering as an example the magical arts of King Nectanebo, who “through reason [...] subjugated all the cosmic elements”. This argument and the words with which the romance begins, in both the Greek and Syriac versions, refer directly to Philostratus’ Egyptian Heracles:

“The very wise Egyptians, descendants of the gods, measured the earth, calmed the waves of the sea, marked out the course of the river Nile, determined the places of the constellations in the sky, then handed over to the inhabited earth the power, the might of reason, the discovery of the art of magic” (Greek version; transl. Haight).

The parallels that can be drawn between the “very wise Egyptians” who “measure the earth” and the Egyptian Heracles of Philostratus who “in his devotion to wisdom measured the whole earth up to its limits” (*VA* 5.4) are, in my view, highly noteworthy. The relationship

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<sup>21</sup> SÁEZ ROMERO et alii 2005; POVEDA NAVARRO 1999.

<sup>22</sup> GARBATI 2017.

<sup>23</sup> ÁLVAREZ-MARTÍ-AGUILAR 2023a.

<sup>24</sup> ÁLVAREZ-MARTÍ-AGUILAR 2023b.

<sup>25</sup> NAWOTKA 2017.

between the actions of the Egyptian sages aimed at calming the “waves of the sea” and their discovery of magic is also clear in the passage from the *Vita Apollonii* (5.5) in which the Egyptian Heracles of Gadir is depicted inscribing inscriptions on the *stelai* of the sanctuary, referring to talismanic and cosmological magic, for the purpose of preventing sea floods in the Heracleion at Gadir.

To support these arguments, it should be recalled that the deeds that Diodorus of Sicily attributes to Heracles, “by birth an Egyptian”, include stopping the floodwaters of the Nile at their breach – “The river in the earliest period bore the name Oceanê, which in Greek is Oceanus ...” – and turning the river back to its former course.

“... the Nile, they say, at the time of the rising of Sirius, which is the season when the river is usually at flood, breaking out of its banks inundated a large section of Egypt (...) but Heracles, being ever intent upon great enterprises and eager for the reputation of a manly spirit, speedily stopped the flood at its breach and turned the river back into its former course” (Diod. 1.19.1-2; transl. Oldfather).

#### IN SUMMARY

The fact that the Melqart of Gades, whose Tyrian origin was beyond doubt, was called “Egyptian”, is certainly enigmatic<sup>26</sup>. It is conceivable that this designation was associated with the Egyptianising aesthetics of the sculptural representations of the god that might have existed in the sanctuary at Gades, of which no structural remains have survived. The bronze figurines discovered in Sancti Petri, dating to between the eighth and seventh centuries BC, which have Egyptian aesthetics and poses, are the most solid evidence bearing out this hypothesis.

Be that as it may, it seems convenient to frame the matter of the Egyptian character of (the Tyrian and Phoenician) Hercules/Heracles of Gades in the historical context of the two sources mentioning him, namely, Pomponius Mela and Philostratus, and in that of the characteristics that the latter attributes to the god. As Mela was born in the vicinity of Gades, it can be assumed that his account is a faithful reflection of the attribution of an Egyptian character to the Hercules of Gades (aka. Melqart) during the early Empire. The information that he provides evinces how the epithet of “Egyptian” was fully compatible with the Tyrian and Phoenician origin of the god, while also stressing how enigmatic this association is.

Philostratus’ account reflects, many years later and thus indirectly, the religious landscape of Gades in the time of Nero. However, thanks to the four passages in which the god is mentioned it is possible to reconstruct the personality of the Egyptian Heracles of Gades in greater detail, even though only as a literary character appearing in the biography of Apollonius of Tyana. First and foremost, it is important to underscore the similarities to the information that Silius Italicus provides on the absence of statues of the god in his sanctuary at Gades. Obviously, this calls into question that the Egyptian character of the god of Gades was related to how he was physically represented, although this possibility cannot be ruled out.

On the other hand, Philostratus describes the Egyptian Heracles measuring the earth, establishing its boundaries in Gades and inscribing a pact of friendship and non-aggression between the earth and the ocean, for apotropaic purposes, on *stelai* with magical and talismanic connotations. I believe that the coincidence between these elements and those aspects described at the beginning of the *Alexander Romance*, in relation to the virtues of the Egyptians, including their command of magic, measuring the earth, the taming of the sea waves and the ability of King Nectanebo to control the “cosmic elements”, is very telling.

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<sup>26</sup> GARCÍA Y BELLIDO 1963, pp. 133-134; MARÍN CEBALLOS 2001, pp. 320-321.

This has led me to believe that the “Egyptian” character of Philostratus’ Heracles might not be, at least not exclusively, related to how he was represented. In point of fact, the representation of the god on coins from Gadir in the late Punic age possesses a Hellenistic and non-Egyptianising aesthetics which, on the contrary, Moreno Pulido does indeed identify on the coinage of other Phoenician cities like Malaca, Tamuda, Shemesh and Lixus<sup>27</sup>. On the coins struck by Trajan and Hadrian – the latter with the legend *HERC GADIT* – in the first third of the second century AD, the representation of Heracles<sup>28</sup> is clearly classical and lacks Egyptianising elements. The bronze figure found around the islet of Sancti Petri, in the same area as the Phoenician figurines mentioned above, bearing the inscription *H(erculis) G(aditani)* is also fully classical<sup>29</sup>.

In light of this, I am inclined to believe that this “Egyptian” character of Heracles/Hercules which, in the Roman age, represented the ancient Melqart, is related to the deeds that were attributed to the tutelary god of the sanctuary and which, because they can be framed in the context of cosmic magic and flood control, referred to Egypt, the country of magic par excellence in the Hellenistic and Roman Mediterranean.

The Egyptian character of the Melqart of Gades in the Roman age might have been related to the evolution of the personality of the divine figure in a very unique place, located on the symbolic boundary between the *oecumene* and the outer ocean and in a landscape marked by the constant threat posed by the sea<sup>30</sup>. As a response to the daily dynamics of ocean tides and as a reaction to the occurrence of episodes of extreme flooding throughout the first millennium BC, Melqart’s personality might have gradually incorporated aspects such as the measurement of the earth and the establishment of its limits, the control of the ocean and, specifically, the protection of the community against catastrophic floods. In this last role, magic, traditionally associated with Egypt, would have played an important role<sup>31</sup>. In the eyes of his worshippers, the god would have therefore assumed an “Egyptian” character, as a supplementary personality trait combined with his Tyrian and Phoenician origin.

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<sup>27</sup> MORENO PULIDO 2016.

<sup>28</sup> In the case of the coins of Trajan, GARCÍA Y BELLIDO 1963, pp. 112-13, suggested that the image could reproduce a statue of the god in the Heracleion. See also CORZO SÁNCHEZ 2004.

<sup>29</sup> CORZO SÁNCHEZ 2004, pp. 41-46.

<sup>30</sup> GARBATI 2017.

<sup>31</sup> ÁLVAREZ-MARTÍ-AGUILAR 2017, 2021.

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