

# MELQART-HERACLES AND THE EDGE OF THE WORLD: RELIGIOUS REACTIONS TO THE THREAT OF THE OCEAN AMONG THE PHOENICIANS OF IBERIA

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*Abstract:* Recent geoarchaeological research has revealed that the Gulf of Cadiz was struck at least once by a large tsunami during the Phoenician period, roughly between the 8th and 3rd centuries BCE. In this contribution, an attempt is made to reconstruct the religious reactions of the Phoenician communities of Iberia and, specifically, those of *Gadir*, in the wake of cataclysms of this type, revolving around the city's tutelary god Melqart. The Ugaritic tale of the conflict between Baal and Yam and the biblical tradition in the account of Yahweh's struggle against the sea reveal a way of representing the containment of the forces of ocean chaos through the establishment of a cosmic boundary. After the catastrophic events unfolding in the Gulf of Cadiz, the Baalic attributes of the Melqart of *Gadir* must surely have been emphasised in an account in which he is attributed with the victory over the forces of ocean chaos and, by his divine command, the establishment of a cosmic boundary of containment and perpetual protection against the threat posed by the sea. This account, which is apparently echoed in Pindar, Strabo and Philostratus, may be at the root of the ancient and medieval notion of *Gades* as the edge of the world.

*Keywords:* Tsunami; Melqart; Heracles; *Gadir*; Baal; Boundary.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On the morning of 1 November 1755, there was an earthquake with a magnitude of Mw 8.7-9.0 and an epicentre in an undetermined place some 400 km to the southwest of the Gulf of Cadiz. The event had a devastating impact on cities such as Lisbon, which was destroyed by the earthquake *per se*, ravaged by a fire and hit by a tsunami that swept through the lower parts of the city. In the communities of the Gulf of Cadiz, the effects of the tsunami were also calamitous and the religious reactions to the disaster soon followed. In cities such as Cadiz, this gave rise to a tradition attributing the miraculous detention of the floodwaters to the Virgin Mary, a miracle that is still commemorated on the anniversary of the tragedy.

The great tsunami of 1755 was not the only extreme marine event to have struck the Atlantic seaboard of the Iberian Peninsula over the centuries. The Azores-Gibraltar Transform Fault (AGFZ), responsible for seismic activity in the area of the Gulf of Cadiz, produced other earthquakes in previous historical ages, some of which provoked, in turn, tsunamis affecting the peninsula's coasts.

The research that has been conducted over the past few decades on the geological footprints of ancient "extreme wave events" on the seaboard of the Gulf of Cadiz, concentrated on the marshlands of Guadalquivir, Tinto-Odiel, and Guadalete estuaries (FIG. 1), has identified an event horizon in the 1st millennium BCE, documented in several places on the southwest coast of the peninsula, which suggests a huge tsunami resulting from a powerful earthquake.<sup>1</sup> It has been assumed that it

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would have had a magnitude of Mw 8.0 and the subsequent tsunami has been equated with that of 1755 in intensity, with the floodwaters reaching close to 1 km inland in low-lying areas and waves of up to 5 m high.<sup>2</sup>

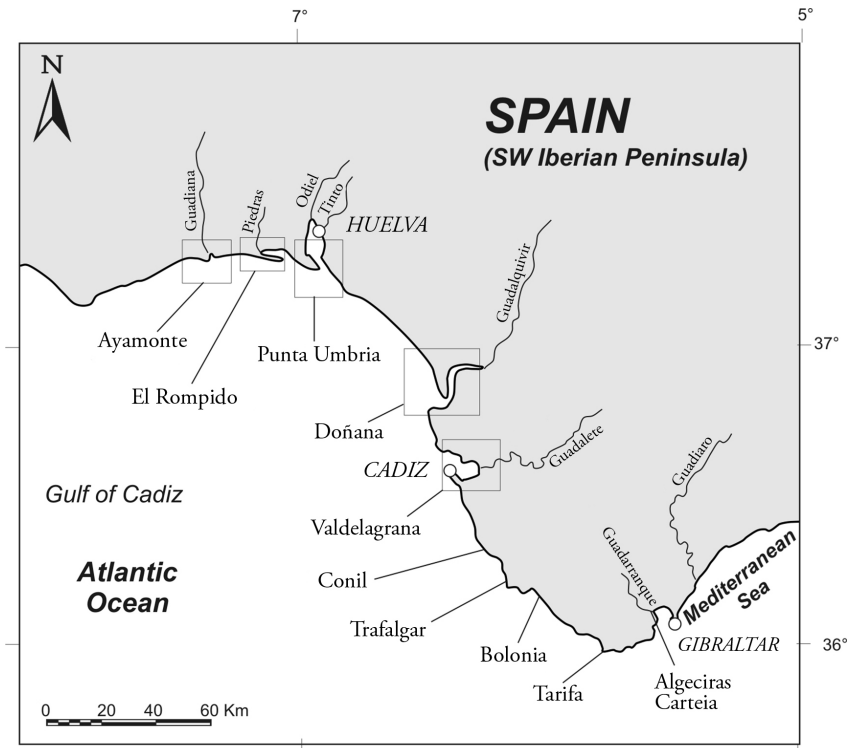


FIG. 1. Location of tsunami deposits in the Gulf of Cadiz (after Lario *et alii* 2010, p. 304).

A number of researchers have provided a very precise dating for this event: 218-209 BCE.<sup>3</sup> These dates have been retrieved from the reference seismic catalogues in Spain,<sup>4</sup> which in turn drew from the information provided by Florián de Ocampo, the chronicler of Emperor Charles I and the author of the *Crónica General de España*, published between 1543 and 1553. In his *Crónica*, Ocampo offers an account of several catastrophic episodes occurring in Cadiz, with earthquakes and flooding, in 241, 216 and 211 BCE (although, in the last two cases, the historical context points to 218 and 213 BCE).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lario *et alii* 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Lario *et alii* 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Rodríguez-Vidal *et alii* 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Galbis 1932.

<sup>5</sup> See Álvarez 2017a.

Ocampo's description of the episode occurring in 218 BCE is remarkably realistic and includes phenomena characteristic of a tsunami, with the prior withdrawal of the sea and the expulsion of marine creatures belonging to unknown species:

«The Island of Cadiz and all the sea shore of Andalusia suffered large earthquakes which destroyed buildings, killed people and caused terrible damage: the sea flooded many places which were first uncovered, throwing out a multitude of fish, some common and known other [sic] never seen before. In the air there were appearances of armed people without knowing its cause [...]».<sup>6</sup>

However, Ocampo gives no indication as to his source, the only ones that he indirectly mentions in relation to the event being spurious. In previous works, I have attempted to show that the chronicler's account of the Second Punic War in Iberia drew directly from Livy and that the quantity of *prodigia* occurring during the conflict with Carthage might have been behind the fact that he dates the earthquakes and tsunamis in Cadiz described in his work to around that time.<sup>7</sup>

It has been suggested that this event might be reflected in a passage in Silius Italicus' *Punica*, recounting how Hannibal, after conquering Saguntum in 219/218 BCE, visited the sanctuary of Hercules in *Gades* where he contemplated the spectacle of the ebb and flow of the ocean (*Pun.* III 45-61).<sup>8</sup> Going by the description, however, it sounds more like a strong ocean tide,<sup>9</sup> for which *Gades* was famous in Antiquity, than anything else.

In a recent study of extreme marine events in the geological record of the Bay of Cadiz, Alonso *et alii* (2015) identified the footprints of one or several of these probably tsunamigenic events in the area, with a chronology between 2700 and 2300 cal BP. These authors relate, in turn, this event horizon to a period between 2760 and 2560 BP, contending that an increase in atmospheric activity at mid-latitudes in the Atlantic, gave rise to violent sea storms – accompanied by high-energy waves concentrated in a relatively short period – bringing strong winds and heavy rain to Southern and Central Europe. On the other hand, they believe that it is indeed possible to distinguish a second extreme marine event horizon in the Bay of Cadiz, dating to between 2300 and 2200 BP.<sup>10</sup>

In the archaeological record, there is no conclusive evidence of the putative tsunami in the Gulf of Cadiz in the 3rd century BCE.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the only clear indication of such an event, in the 2700-2300 BP date range, corresponds to the 6th century BCE. In this connection, a sacred building, destroyed in around the first quarter of the 6th century BCE «por movimientos sísmicos asociados a convulsiones marinas o quizás, sencillamente, un maremoto»,<sup>12</sup> has been documented at the site on Calle Méndez Núñez in Huelva.

It can thus be concluded that the coast of the Gulf of Cadiz and its coastal communities were battered by at least one tsunami between the 8th and 3rd centuries BCE, with terrible consequences. This must have been the most catastrophic of all the extreme marine events to have occurred in the area, including heavy storm surges, which lashed these coastal areas in the 1st millennium

<sup>6</sup> Ocampo 1553, p. 262 v.; transl. Udías 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Álvarez 2017a; 2017b.

<sup>8</sup> Gómez *et alii* 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Manolaraki 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Alonso *et alii* 2015, p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> Gómez *et alii* 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Osuna *et alii* 2000, p. 179.

BCE. The combination of violent Atlantic storms and high tides provoked the flooding of the coasts of the Gulf of Cadiz, resulting in major erosion,<sup>13</sup> for which reason they were also relevant in the building of the image of the Atlantic in Antiquity as a threatening entity with a tendency to overstep its normal limits.

I will now attempt to reconstruct the way in which the Phoenician communities of the Gulf of Cadiz, in general, and the city of *Gadir*, in particular, perceived their relationship with the ocean, how they might have interpreted catastrophes like the tsunami of the 1st millennium BCE and the role of their tutelary god Melqart as the protector of the community against destruction coming from the sea.

## 2. MELQART AND THE SEA: CANAANITE AND HEBREW TRADITIONS

The Phoenicians established on the coasts of the Gulf of Cadiz since the 9th century BCE in places such as Huelva and Cadiz had to adapt their cosmological schemes and the characteristics of their gods of Levantine origins to a landscape qualitatively different from that of their homeland (FIG. 2). The coasts of the Gulf of Cadiz, especially those of Phoenician *Gadir*, were dominated by the transgressive nature of the ocean, which they experienced on a daily basis in the ebb and flow of the Atlantic's powerful tides – as evidenced by the testimony of Silius (*Pun.* III 45-61) – which, on occasion, as documented by Posidonius of Apamea (*apud* Strabo III 5,9), surged far up the ancient estuary of the Guadalquivir. On the coasts of the Gulf of Cadiz, extreme marine events, like storm surges and tsunamis, could drastically transform the coastal landscape, especially in the estuaries of the region's main rivers, such as the Guadalquivir and the Guadalete, and which sometimes even broke through coastal barriers and reshaped their mouths.<sup>14</sup>

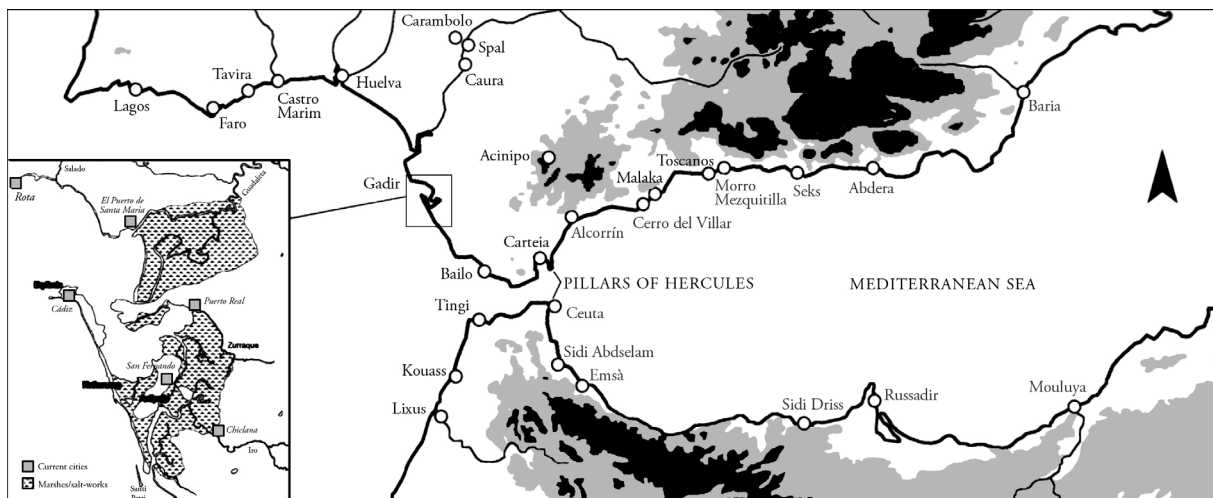


FIG. 2. The Phoenician-Punic settlement in the south of the Iberian Peninsula (after Zamora – Sáez 2014, p. 253).

In the case of *Gadir*, to this should be added its insular nature, as was the case with its metropolis. The foundational myth of the sacred island of Tyre reflects, in the episode of the

<sup>13</sup> Zamora – Sáez 2014; Higuera-Milena – Sáez 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Alonso *et alii* 2015.

wandering Ambrosial Rocks, anchored to the seabed by Heracles-Melqart (Nonn., *Dion.* XL 465 ff.), a symbolic element of latent instability that also affected the colony of *Gades*. Furthermore, there was the image of the Straits of Gibraltar in the ancient imaginary, the gateway to *Gadir* from the Mediterranean, a paradigmatic threshold associated with the dangers of sailing through straits and with the entrance to the unexplored ocean.<sup>15</sup>

In a recent work, G. Garbati summarises these aspects – sea erosion, powerful tides, insularity, etc. – that, as a whole, made the landscape of *Gadir*, and especially that in which the sanctuary of Melqart was in all likelihood located, close to the present-day islet of Sancti Petri (FIG. 3),

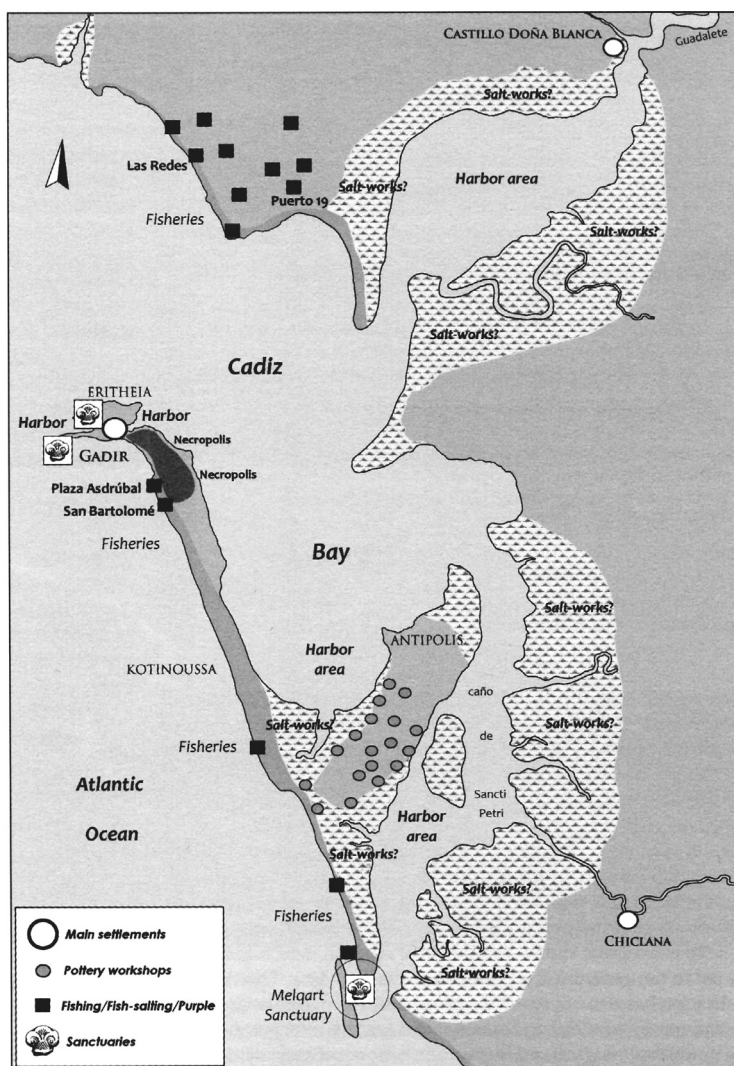


FIG. 3. Palaeogeographic scheme of the Bay of Cadiz between the late Archaic and Punic periods (after Zamora – Sáez 2014, p. 253).

«un paesaggio fluido, in continuo movimento e mutamento tra terra a mare».<sup>16</sup> As this author rightly notes, «all'interno di un simile panorama, le condizioni ambientali dovettero agire profondamente sulle mappe concettuali di chi, arrivato da Oriente, decise di stabilirsi nella zona». Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that the people of *Gadir* adapted their religious grammar and the morphology of their gods to a unique landscape marked by the omnipresence of the outer ocean, perceived as a source of inexhaustible fishing grounds and as an uncharted, indomitable and threatening place, alike. The people of *Gadir* would have certainly placed their trust in Melqart to protect them against the impending threat deriving from the character of the outer ocean and have requested that protection insistently in the wake of catastrophes provoked by extreme marine events, such as king tides and storms, and above all following earthquakes and tsunamis.

Accordingly, it is appropriate to take a closer look as the god's origins in Tyre, the metropolis.<sup>17</sup> First and foremost, Melqart was the “Lord of Tyre” – Baal Sur – his name

<sup>15</sup> Janni 1996, pp. 463–466.

<sup>16</sup> Garbati in press.

<sup>17</sup> Ribichini 1985; Bonnet 1988; Clifford 1990; Xella 2004.

literally meaning “king of the city”. Stress has been placed on his direct relationship with the Tyrian monarchy and his links to the Syro-Palestinian tradition of worship of the royal ancestors. Melqart was, in turn, the god *archegetes*, the protector of colonies and the founder of the city of Tyre, while also being regarded as the promoter of the first mythical sea journeys and, by and large, the protector of navigation.

It is generally held that Melqart, as with other gods emerging at the beginning of the 1st millennium BCE in the Levant, represented a sort of declination of the figure of Baal «comme maître des agents atmosphériques, comme champion de l’ordre cosmique, guérisseur et sauveur». <sup>18</sup> In the morphology of Melqart, his Baalic attributes, as a god associated with the land versus the chaotic waters, to all appearances must have been important since the very beginning. This duality between divinities, linked to the land and the sea, respectively, is reflected in the famous treaty between King Esarhaddon of Assyria and King Baal I of Tyre, drawn up in the 670s BCE.

The final section includes the time-honoured threats of divine punishment should the agreement be breached and, in this context, Baal Shamaim, Baal Malagê and Baal Saphon are invoked as the gods responsible for atmospheric and marine catastrophes:

«May Baal Shamaim, Baal Malagê and Baal Saphon raise an evil wind against your ships to undo their moorings and tear out their mooring pole, may a strong wave sink them in the sea and a violent tide [rise] against you». <sup>19</sup>

Together with this triad of gods associated with the sea, the treatise also refers to another comprising Melqart, Eshmun and Ashtart, as the “rulers on land”: <sup>20</sup>

«May Melqarth and Eshmun deliver your land to destruction and your people to deportation; may they [uproot] you from your land and take away the food from your mouth, the clothes from your body, and the oil for your anointing. May Astarte break your bow in the thick of battle and have you crouch at the feet of your enemy...». <sup>21</sup>

In the far West, and in the particular context of the archipelago of *Gadir*, facing the powerful presence of the outer ocean, the Baalic attributes of Melqart were presumably particularly suitable for guaranteeing the colony’s safety and integrity against the threatening waters since its beginnings. For which reason, it is likely that his role as Baal, the protector against the threat of ocean chaos, with the attributes of a storm god, was specifically developed in that Western context. So, it seems reasonable to contend that it was one of the god’s distinctive features throughout the city’s history, in addition to playing a fundamental role in the religious reactions of the people of *Gadir* to the marines cataclysm occurring in the Gulf of Cadiz in the 1st millennium BCE.

This has prompted me to search for the key aspects of the god’s action against sea floods in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle recounting the god’s struggle against Yam. <sup>22</sup> In this cycle, Baal is the god responsible for maintaining the cosmic order and protecting life on earth from the destructive

<sup>18</sup> Bonnet 1988, p. 431.

<sup>19</sup> Parpola – Watanabe 1988, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Katzenstein 1991, p. 376.

<sup>21</sup> Parpola – Watanabe 1988, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> Wakeman 1973; Xella 1982; 2004; Olmo 2001.

forces of chaos represented by Yam, the sea, and Mot, death.<sup>23</sup> Yam, the incarnation of the primeval waters, presents a permanent threat to the domains of Baal and both antithetic divinities are destined to confront each other in a struggle in which the latter only emerges victorious thanks to the intervention of Kothar on his behalf. But Yam has only been temporarily defeated and continues to menace the earth, Baal's realm. The account of Baal's clash with and victory over Yam is useful for reconstructing aspects of Melqart's morphology and, specifically, his role in protecting the community from the threats coming from the sea in Phoenician tradition.

The other way of gaining further insights into Melqart's role vis-à-vis the sea is to resort to the Hebrew Bible. It is assumed that they were common and transversal traditions that throughout the ancient Near East revolved around land gods confronting ocean chaos, of which Baal and Yahweh were outstanding examples. I will now analyse some of the passages pertaining to this biblical tradition in which the confrontation between Yahweh and Yam revolves around the concept of "boundary".<sup>24</sup>

This confrontation develops in the cosmogonic context described in Genesis 1:9-10, when on the third day of creation Yahweh gathers the waters together and lets the dry land appear. On the basis of this interpretation, the conflict between Yahweh and Yam is dominated by the idea of the divinity marking the limits between the land and the sea. In the account, the culminating point is reached when the primeval waters covering everything are made to retreat and a boundary is imposed on them. This dual process is paradigmatically described in Psalm 104:5-9:

«You set the earth on its foundations,  
so that it shall never be shaken.  
You cover it with the deep as with a garment;  
the waters stood above the mountains.  
At your rebuke they flee;  
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.  
*They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys  
the place that you appointed for them.*  
*You set a boundary that they may not pass,  
so that they might not again cover the earth»*  
(NRSV, emphasis added).

The same idea of subduing and containing the primeval waters with a boundary set by divine command is to be found in Jeremiah 5:22:

«Do you not fear me? says the Lord;  
Do you not tremble before me?  
*I placed the sand as a boundary for the sea,  
a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass;  
though the waves toss, they cannot prevail,  
though they roar, they cannot pass over it»*  
(NRSV, emphasis added).

<sup>23</sup> Olmo 2001, pp. 67-74.

<sup>24</sup> Wakeman 1973; Day 1985; Kloos 1986; Xella 1982; 2004.

As before, Yahweh imposes a fixed limit on the sea, which is portrayed as a permanent threat to the land and which strives to cross the perpetual boundary established by the divinity in an act with cosmogonic connotations. In Proverbs 8:27-29, this same idea crops up yet again in a passage in which the personification of wisdom explains its presence when Yahweh was creating the cosmos:

«When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the fountains of the deep,  
*when he assigned to the sea its limit,*  
*so that the waters might not transgress his command,*  
*when he marked out the foundations of the earth [...]*»  
(NRSV, emphasis added).

In the discourse of wisdom, the notion of the divinity assigning “to the sea its limit” in order to counter the threat that it poses appears once more in the cosmogonic context of establishing the world’s boundaries. The cosmic boundary assigned to the sea also appears in Job 26:10-13, linked to Yahweh’s victory over Rahab, one of the sea monsters inhabiting Yam’s realm:

«He has described a circle on the face of the waters,  
at the boundary between light and darkness.  
The pillars of heaven tremble,  
and are astounded at his rebuke.  
*By his power he stilled the Sea;*  
by his understanding he struck down Rahab.  
By his wind the heavens were made fair;  
his hand pierced the fleeing serpent»  
(NRSV, emphasis added).

However, the key passage of this tradition is to be found in Job 38. While interrogating Job, Yahweh first refers to the measurement of the earth as one of the acts of creation:

«Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?  
Tell me, if you have understanding.  
Who determined its measurements – surely you know!  
Or who stretched the line upon it?»  
(Job 38:4-5; NRSV).

This is followed a little further on by a passage describing the containment of the sea:

*«Or who shut in the sea with doors  
when it burst out from the womb? –  
when I made the clouds its garment,  
and thick darkness its swaddling band,  
and prescribed bounds for it,*

*and set bars and doors,  
and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther,  
and here shall your proud waves be stopped?"*  
(Job 38:8-11; NRSV, emphasis added).

As before, the account is framed in the cosmogonic context of the earth's creation and determining its measurements. The sea is represented as a chaotic force that bursts "out of the womb" – using the birth metaphor<sup>25</sup> – that must be "shut in [...] with doors" (דלת; *ostia*; πύλαι), a concept that is underscored – "bars and doors"; דלת... חירב; *vectes et ostia*; κλειθρα καὶ πύλας – by solemnly prohibiting it from crossing those "proscribed bounds".

Finally, this image is repeated in the apocryphal tradition in the initial verses of the Prayer of Manasseh, in which the divinity again contains and shackles the sea by word of his command, thus stressing its fearsome and menacing character:

«O Lord Almighty,  
God of our ancestors,  
of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob  
and of their righteous offspring;  
you who made heaven and earth  
with all their order;  
*who shackled the sea by your word of command,  
who confined the deep  
and sealed it with your terrible and glorious name»*  
(Odes 1-3).

From these passages, the divinity's actions can be deduced: on the one hand, subduing and containing the sea by means of "bars and doors"; and on the other, marking the limits of the land. There is also a reference to this in Psalm 74:13-17, in this case associated with Yahweh's victory over the sea creatures:

«You divided the sea by your might;  
you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.  
You crushed the heads of Leviathan;  
you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.  
You cut openings for springs and torrents;  
you dried up ever-flowing streams.  
Yours is the day, yours also the night;  
you established the luminaries and the sun.  
*You have fixed all the bounds of the earth;*  
you made summer and winter»  
(NRSV, emphasis added).

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<sup>25</sup> Cornell 2012, p. 8.

In a nutshell, these passages reveal that the sea is perceived as a chaotic, threatening and boundless element. In contrast, Yahweh is represented as the eternal protector of the community in the face of the threat posed by the sea by establishing boundaries and elements of containment and issuing a divine command prohibiting their encroachment.

### 3. THE MELQART OF *GADIR* AS A GOD OF PROTECTION

This narrative, in all likelihood shared by the Tyrian Melqart, forming part of his mythological tradition, would have been resorted to in situations in which the community felt threatened by the sea, in the aftermath of catastrophic events such as violent storms and, of course, tsunamis. As a result of a reinterpretation of the multifaceted personality of Melqart in the context of the Atlantic and *Gadir*, I believe that the god's Baalic dimension must have been emphasised, as a land god offering protection against ocean chaos, with nuances similar to those that can be perceived in the aforementioned biblical passages. In *Gadir*, this facet of Melqart's personality hinged, in my view, on two interrelated narratives: that of the struggle with and victory over the forces of ocean chaos, embodied by sea creatures and monsters; and that of imposing cosmic limits on the sea, established by boundary markers.

These elements specifically appear in the work of Pindar, who in several of his *Odes* refers to the *topos* of the *stelai* of Heracles, which he places in Gadeira, marking the furthest point that a human being can go and which should not be crossed. For example, in his third *Olympian*, he claims,

«But, even as water is most excellent, while gold is the most adorable of possessions, so now doth Thêrôn by his deeds of prowess come *unto the utmost verge, by his own true merit reaching even as far as the pillar of Heracles. All beyond that bourne cannot be approached* either by the wise or the unwise. I shall not pursue it; else may I be deemed a fool» (Pi., *O* 3,42-45; transl. Sandys; emphasis added).

The Pillars of Heracles were “the utmost verge”, “a bourne [that] cannot be approached”. The same idea appears in the fourth *Isthmian*:

«And by far reaching deeds of native valour, did they *touch the pillars of Heracles; and let none pursue prowess that passeth beyond that bound!*» (Pi., *I* 4,11-13; transl. Sandys).

The image of the Pillars of Heracles as the western limit of the earth that should not be overstepped is applied to Gadeira in the fourth *Nemea*:

«Beyond Gadeira toward the gloom *we must not pass*; turn back the sails of thy ship once more to the mainland of Europe, for it were impossible for me to tell in all its fulness the story of the sons of Aeacus» (Pi. *N* 4.69-72; transl. Sandys, Loeb, 1915).

The divine mandate prohibiting the ocean from crossing this limit, pervading the biblical narrative dealing with Yahweh's conflict with the sea, is repeated in Pindar's *Odes*, but in this case aimed at men, who should not penetrate its domains beyond Gadeira.

On the other hand, in the third *Nemean* there is a very direct reference to the conflict between the divinity and the ocean, linking the struggle against sea monsters to the establishment and signposting of the “limits of the land”:

«[...] no further is it easy for him to sail across the trackless sea beyond the pillars of Heracles, which that hero and god set up as far-famed witnesses of the farthest limit of voyaging. He quelled the monstrous beasts amid the seas, and tracked to the very end the streams of the shallows, there where he reached the bourne that sped him home again; and he made known the limits of the land» (*N.* 3, 19-26; transl. Sandy).

In this passage, there are elements similar to those present in the biblical story: the struggle against monstrous sea creatures, the establishment of a cosmic boundary and the idea of prohibition associated with boundary markers. The parallels between this and Pindar's account are shored up by the information provided by Strabo, who informs us that, for the poet, the Pillars of Heracles are to be found in Gadeira and are "gates":

«Some transfer the Planktai and Symplegades here, believing these to be the Pillars which Pindar calls the Gadeiran Gates, saying that they were the farthest point reached by Heracles» (*Str.* III 5,5; transl. Roller).

The similarities between these *pylai Gadeirides* and the *pylai* mentioned in Job 38, which have not gone unnoticed,<sup>26</sup> correspond to a timeworn idea in the ancient literary tradition, also mentioned in Nonnus of Panopolis' *Dionisiaca* (5th century AD):

«The stars had closed the Atlantean bar of the inviolable gates lest some stealthy troop should enter the heavens while the Blessed ones were away» (*Nonn.*, *Dion.* II 177-181; transl. Rouse).

To my mind, these Pindaric passages could refer, in a fragmentary fashion, to the episode in which the Heracles-Melqart of *Gadir* confronts the forces of ocean chaos and establishes at *Gadir* the boundary that should not be crossed. They would therefore be distant echoes of a mythical narrative coming from Gadeira, featuring Melqart and integrated into that of Heracles himself. This hypothesis would have to do with the complex processes of identification between Heracles and Melqart developing throughout the Mediterranean as from at least the 5th century BCE – with Herodotus' famous account of his visit to Tyre (*Hdt.* II 44) – and which are undoubtedly earlier, given the antiquity of the contacts between the Phoenicians and the Greeks in the colonial context.<sup>27</sup>

In her comprehensive analysis of this issue, C. Bonnet highlights the multifaceted nature of this accumulative and reciprocal assimilation process.<sup>28</sup> The elements favouring the assimilation of both divinities in the Mediterranean context include their common aspect of *archegetes*, viz. as founders of colonies. Moreover, in the far West both gods apparently shared cosmic attributes, as protectors of the community against the dangers inherent to the uncharted ocean, beyond the limits of the world of men.

The reference to Gadeira in Pindar, the first of its kind in Greek literature, and the unequivocal location of the Pillars of Heracles there – versus the subsequent Greek tradition that tended to locate them in the Straits of Gibraltar – has led me to believe that, in light of the many loans and mutual influences between Heracles and Melqart, in the aforementioned passages in Pindar it might reflect

<sup>26</sup> Brown 1968; Hutchison 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Bonnet 1988; 1992; Jourdain-Annequin – Bonnet 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Bonnet 1988, pp. 399-415.

certain defining traits of the Melqart of *Gadir* in his role as the terrestrial Baal confronting the forces of ocean chaos.

A second central issue in this interpretation of the Pindaric passages has to do with the warning illustratively mentioned in the fourth *Nemea*: «Beyond Gadeira toward the gloom we must not pass...» (Pi. *N* 4.69). In my opinion, this prohibition on passing beyond Gadeira is one of two parts of an essential dual message associated with a cosmic boundary separating the boundless and unfathomable outer ocean from the *oikoumene*, i.e. the civilised and orderly world of men. The fear of the ocean and the desire to prevent its destructive incursions led to the erection – attributed to the divinity – of a symbolic barrier that should not be passed either by the ocean or by men, in order to avoid altering the precarious cosmic balance. The message contained in Pindar's *Odes* would, in my view, reflect that part of it aimed at mankind and would imply the existence of a parallel message intended for the ocean, prohibiting it from crossing that limit. Further on, I will attempt to demonstrate how this dual prohibition affecting the ocean and mankind was deeply rooted in the Tyrian mentality.

The mythical representations in Pindar's *Odes* are also echoed in several passages of *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, written by Philostratus of Athens quite a time later in the 3rd century AD, recounting, as the title suggests, the endeavours of this singular 1st-century character. Notwithstanding the vast temporal distance involved, Philostratus' work might reflect religious narratives established in *Gades* since the Archaic period and which still prevailed in the Imperial Age, revolving around the characterisation of the city and its sanctuary of Melqart-Heracles as a liminal and cosmic boundary. In the work's fifth book, there is an account of the journey made by Apollonius and his entourage to Gadeira:

«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 honor 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» (Philostr. *VA* V 4; Conybeare).

This passage reveals the coexistence of two mythical tales associated with the Greek Heracles and the local god Melqart – identified by Philostratus as the Egyptian Heracles – respectively. The latter is accredited with measuring «the whole earth up to its limits», a feat that brings to mind Yahweh's accomplishments in Job 38:4-5, where there is an allusion to the measurement of the earth as one of the acts of creation, immediately before describing the sea's containment and the divine command prohibiting it from crossing the fixed limit: «Thus far shall you come, and no farther» (Job 38: 8-11).

The Egyptian Heracles next appears in Philostratus' account, specifically in the reference that it contains to certain enigmatic *stelai* in the sanctuary:

«But he says that 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”» (Philostr. *VA* V 5; transl. Conybeare).

In a recent work, I have held that the logic behind the Egyptian Heracles’ actions in this passage is directly related to a longstanding way of representing tsunamis in the ancient world, perceived as an assault of the sea on the land and the breaking of the cosmic harmony established by the divinity at the moment of creation.<sup>29</sup>

In the words of Apollonius, the *stelai* are attributed the role of preventing «any discord [...] between the elements». The same expression is used in an episode of *Vita Apollonii* revolving around an earthquake and the threat of violence on the part of the sea. During Apollonius’ visit to the sanctuary of Asklepios at Leben, in Crete, a few years before his trip to *Gades*, there was an earthquake, after which the sea receded, causing much concern among the visitors:

«Here Apollonius was haranguing on one occasion about midday, and was addressing quite a number of people who were worshipping at the shrine, when an earthquake shook the whole of Crete at once, and a roar of thunder was heard to issue not from the clouds but from the earth, and the sea receded about seven stadia. And most of them were afraid that the sea by receding in this way would drag the temple after it, so that they would be carried away. But Apollonius said: “Be of good courage, for the sea has given birth and brought forth land”. *And they thought that he was alluding to the harmony of the elements, and was urging that the sea would never wreak any violence upon the land* [...]» (Philostr. *VA* IV 34; transl. Conybeare, emphasis added).

Apollonius’ calming words are interpreted by those present in the sanctuary as referring to the imminent danger that was to be expected after the earthquake and the receding waters, viz. a terrible incursion of the sea into the land, and they link this threat to «the harmony of the elements». This same concept is employed by Ammianus Marcellinus in his description of the famous tsunami that razed Alexandria in 365 AD:

«[...] the roaring sea, resenting, as it were, this forced retreat, rose in its turn; and over the boiling shoals it dashed mightily upon islands and broad stretches of the mainland, and levelled innumerable buildings in the cities and wherever else they were found; so that amid the mad discord of the elements [*elementorum furens discordia*] the altered face of the earth revealed marvellous sights» (Amm. Marc. XXVI 10,17; transl. Rolfe).

Ammianus’ «mad discord of the elements» coincides with the Leben episode in Philostratus and both examples are a clear reflection of the way in which tsunamis were represented in the ancient world, based on the clash between the cosmic elements and the breaking of their harmony.

Returning to the *stelai* of the Heracleion in *Gades*, for Apollonius they serve as links – *syndesmoi* – between the land and the sea, whose role is to «prevent any *discord arising between the elements*» (emphasis added). The repetition of the central logic of the Leben episode in the case of *Gadir*, in relation to the threat of an onslaught of the sea and the breaking of «the harmony of the

<sup>29</sup> Álvarez 2017c.

elements», has led me to suggest that Apollonius gives the *Gadir stelai* an apotropaic and talismanic character, relating to the prevention of sea floods.<sup>30</sup>

The role assigned to the Egyptian Heracles in the *stelai*'s construction reveals a mythical tale based on the role of Melqart as guarantor of the balance and harmony between the earth and the ocean. A parallel can be drawn between this narrative and the biblical passages discussed above, in which Yahweh establishes an insurmountable barrier between the land and the sea. However, this idea is reproduced in a much clearer fashion in a passage of the biography of Apollonius, which includes a description of the images in relief decorating the shield that Heracles lost on his expedition with Dionysius to India:

«For in these [reliefs] 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» (Philostr. *VA* 2.33; transl. Conybeare).

The mythical feat attributed to the Egyptian Heracles is a very direct reproduction of the biblical passage paradoxically exemplified in Job 38:11, with two connected actions: the containment of the sea and the establishment of a cosmic limit.<sup>31</sup> The cosmogenic act of the Egyptian Heracles is explicitly performed in Gadira, where the divinity «fixed the limits of the world».

This narrative is echoed in a famous passage in Strabo, drawing from Posidonius of Apamea, dealing with certain *stelai* of the Heracleion in *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. III 5,5; transl. Jones).

The notion of the *stelai* of the Heracleion as «the end of both land and sea» is, in my view, directly related to the scene represented on the shield of Heracles (*VA* II 33), in which the god fixes the limits of the world in Gadeira. In both cases, this would be a reflection of the mythical tale in which Melqart checks and contains the ocean in *Gadir*, thus establishing the boundary of the *oikoumene* and marking this with the *stelai*.

From this perspective, the sacrifices offered by travellers after reaching the *stelai* of the Heracleion in *Gadir* would not only have been performed to thank the god for their safe journey, but also for protecting humanity as a whole by establishing in Gadeira the true cosmic boundary safeguarding the *oikoumene* from the primeval chaos embodied by the ocean. The fame of *Gadir*, its Heracleion and its *stelai* as the authentic cosmic boundary between the earth and the ocean, as the edge of the world, would have been the reason why many made the pilgrimage there<sup>32</sup> to offer sacrifices to the Egyptian Heracles.

<sup>30</sup> Álvarez 2017c.

<sup>31</sup> Hutchinson 2009, p. 169.

<sup>32</sup> Fear 2005.

In the Greek and Latin sources, the god of *Gadir* is referred to simply as Heracles or Hercules or, specifically, the “Tyrian Heracles”, thus distinguishing him from his Theban counterpart. However, authors such as Philostratus and Pomponius Mela (*Cor.* III 6,46), the latter hailing from the area, employ this designation of “Egyptian” for the Heracles of *Gades*.<sup>33</sup> It is impossible to resolve here the complex dilemma of the identity of the Egyptian Heracles of *Gadir*, pertaining to the issue of the multiple identities of Heracles in the ancient world. In his study of some of the aspects in this regard, C. Grottanelli<sup>34</sup> underscores the “Egyptian” component of the Tyrian Heracles in different ancient traditions. At any rate, it is worth mentioning a Greek text in which some of the central aspects of the passage in Philostratus on the reliefs decorating Heracles’ shield appear. At the beginning of the Greek version of Pseudo-Callisthenes’ *Alexander Romance*, it is claimed that,

«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» (transl. Haight).

The same elements can be found at the beginning of the Syriac version of this work:

«Now there used to be Egyptian sages, who were sprung from the families of the gods. They measured the earth, and stood thereon; they put in commotion the waves of the sea; and laid hold of the great Nile by its measure. They calculated the ordering of the stars of heaven. They delivered all these things to the world by the might of invincible words and by the powers of sorcery [...]» (transl. Budge).

The fact that the Egyptians were accredited with the measurement of the earth, the calming of the waves and the control of the Nile itself, refers to several aspects of the identity of the Egyptian Heracles of *Gadira* in Philostratus. All of which might contribute to explain why the god who triumphed over and contained the sea and established the limits of the world was attributed that Egyptian character.

#### 4. VICTORY AND BOUNDARIES: *NON PLUS ULTRA*

At some moment between the 8th and 3rd centuries BCE, an extreme wave event, in all likelihood a tsunami, struck the coast of the Gulf of Cadiz, supposedly affecting the city of *Gadir* and its sanctuary of Melqart. The cataclysm was apparently understood in a religious context marked by the liminal character of *Gades* and by the ability of its tutelary god Melqart to protect the community and the cosmos from the invasive threat of the ocean, a structural leitmotif in the city’s religious tradition, linked to the rhythm of “geological” time, of the Braudelian *longue durée*.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, the catastrophe would have led to diverse religious reactions aimed at allaying the intense collective anxiety that it had produced, including specific ritual practices.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Bonnet 1988; Jourdain-Annequin 2002; Marín 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Grottanelli 1972.

<sup>35</sup> Braudel 1958.

<sup>36</sup> Jennings 2008.

The Levantine traditions allow us to assume that, in cosmological terms, the Phoenicians of *Gadir* perceived the sea as a chaotic element that the divinity had forced to retreat by establishing a boundary and perpetually prohibiting its encroachment. Catastrophic phenomena like violent storms and, of course, tsunamis, were presumably perceived as a violation of that cosmic boundary fixed by the divinity to contain the sea and as an interruption of the cosmic harmony between the land and the sea established at the moment of creation.

As a result of this catastrophic extreme marine event, it may be inferred that the Phoenicians of Iberia, in general, and the people of *Gadir*, in particular, turned their eyes to Melqart, stressing his Baalic attributes, viz. the god's cosmological power to control ocean chaos. It was necessary to accredit the god with the restoration of the cosmic balance in the wake of the disaster, by means of three connected acts: confronting and defeating the forces of ocean chaos; containing the floodwaters; and establishing – or re-establishing – the cosmic boundary crossed by the sea and its monumentalisation with markers.

In the Phoenician communities on the coast of the Gulf of Cadiz and, above all, in the sanctuary of Melqart in *Gadir*, it would not be farfetched to assume that, following the catastrophe, cultural and ritual manifestations emerged, reinforcing the mythical accounts with which the population attempted to exorcise the fear of sea floods. The first of these tales, i.e. that of Melqart's victory over the ocean and its creatures, might be at the root of an enigmatic ritual documented by Pausanias, in relation to the visit that the otherwise unknown Cleon of Magnesia on the Hermus paid to the sanctuary in *Gadir*:

«He happened, he said, to be at Cadiz, and he, with the rest of the crowd, sailed forth from the island in accordance with the command of Heracles; on their return to Cadiz they found cast ashore a man of the sea (ἄνερ θαλάσσιου), who was about five roods in size, and burning away, because heaven had blasted him with a thunderbolt» (Paus. X 4,6; transl. Jones and Ormerod).

Notwithstanding the fact that this ritual has been associated with the *egersis* and death of Heracles on the pyre,<sup>37</sup> the passage describes the god slaying a hybrid sea creature of monstrous proportions, measuring five *plethora* (i.e. 150 m). Regardless of the account's paradoxographical nature, I believe that it might reflect a ritual commemorating Heracles' victories over creatures embodying the forces of ocean chaos.

With the logic that inspired this ritual, it is possible, in turn, to draw parallels between the group of bronze male figurines in Egyptianising style discovered underwater off the coast of the city of Huelva and in vicinity of the islet of Sancti Petri in Cadiz, the place where the sanctuary of Melqart-Heracles was probably located. These pieces have been dated to between the 8th and 7th centuries BCE and, according to J. Jiménez Ávila,<sup>38</sup> they were made in the East and imported to the Iberian Peninsula (FIG. 4).

<sup>37</sup> Fear 2005, p. 330.

<sup>38</sup> Jiménez Ávila 2002; 2015.

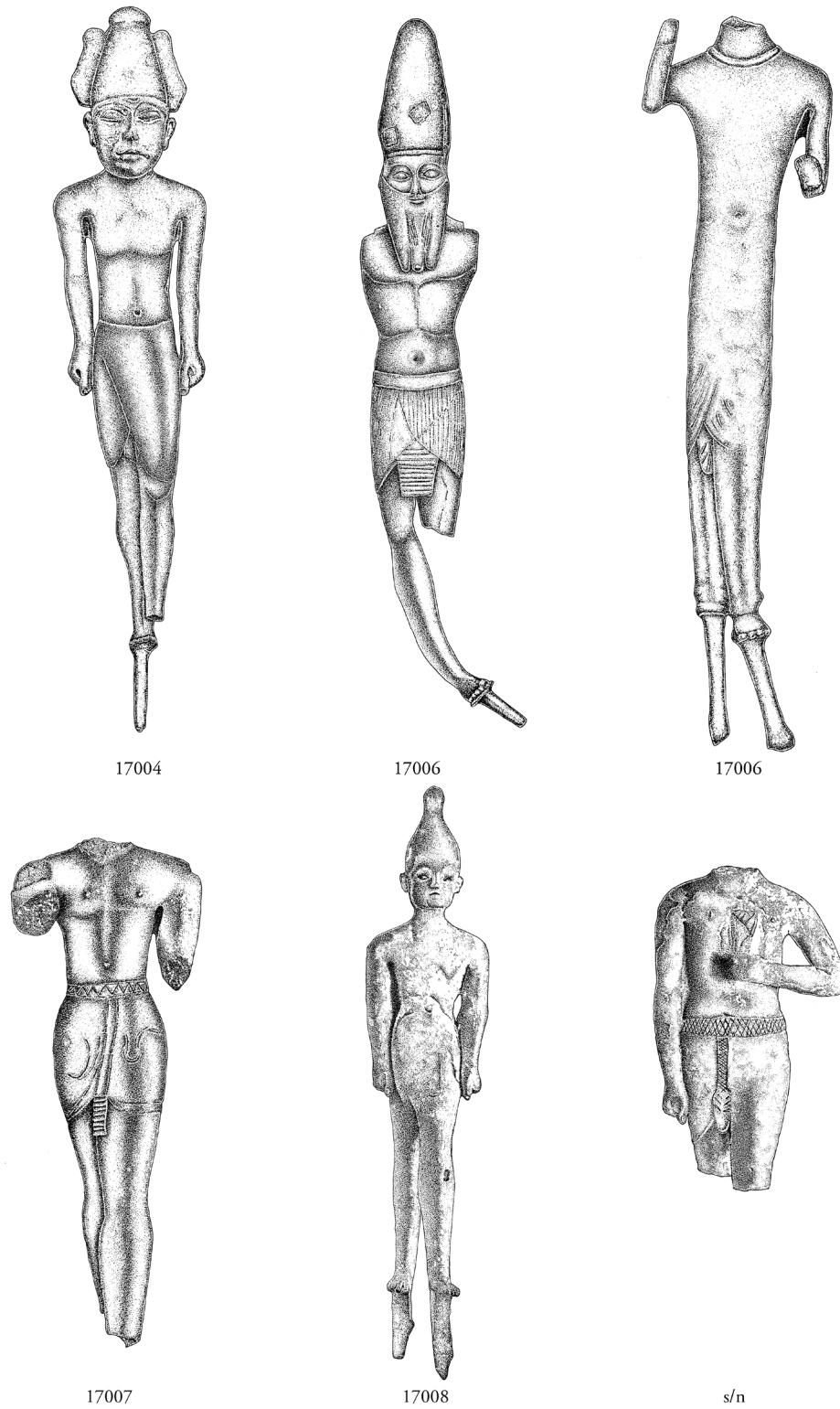


FIG. 4. Group of bronze Phoenician figurines discovered in Sancti Petri and now housed in the Museum of Cadiz (after Jiménez Ávila 2015, p. 207).

As Garbati has suggested,<sup>39</sup> the meaning of these figurines might be related to the logic of preserving the harmony between the land and the sea, i.e. the elements, in permanent tension, dominating the landscape of *Gadir*. Expanding on this idea, it is possible to link these figurines to the tale of Melqart's victory over the sea and its containment. The subaquatic discovery of these examples in places where the worship of Heracles-Melqart has been documented – Huelva – or was focused – *Gadir* – raises the possibility that these might have been votive offerings representing the divinity in his Baalic role, cast into the sea in the context of religious reactions to extreme marine events,<sup>40</sup> as apotropaic mechanisms for calming and containing the ocean.

As an expression of that permanent tension with the ocean and especially in response to extreme marine events of which the tsunami of the 1st millennium BCE appears to have been the most catastrophic, *Gadir* and, above all, its sanctuary of Melqart would then have been regarded as the place where the god had detained and contained the waters, establishing there an authentic cosmic boundary between the land and the sea, between the world of men and life and the realm of chaos and marine destruction. This idea contributed to explain the singularity of *Gades* and its sanctuary of Hercules in the Roman period, considered as the authentic edge of the world and, as such, a place of pilgrimage.<sup>41</sup>

Although it is possible that the temple was perceived, since its beginnings, as a frontier sanctuary,<sup>42</sup> the reworking of the tales about Melqart having protected and saved the community from marine catastrophes, such as a tsunami similar to that of 1755, would have given the place ecumenical connotations. The god establishing there the limits of the ocean converted it into the genuine edge of the world. Therefore, consideration should be given to the possibility that the very name of the city, GDR, i.e. “wall”, normally associated with its physical walls, might be related to the symbolic meaning that it and its sanctuary were conferred in the narrative, as the boundary protecting the *oikoumene* from the perpetual threat of the forces of ocean chaos. It is not improbable that its character as an authentic frontier of the world with ecumenical connotations became one of the defining traits of the civic identity of the people of *Gadir* and one of the useful aspects for incorporating that highly prestigious identity into the context of Roman domination. This appears to be the case in *Pro Balbo*, in which Cicero praises the people of *Gades*, noting:

«Their ambition, and our ancestors' wish, has been, that their walls, their temples, their lands, should be the boundaries of the Roman name and Roman empire, as Hercules wished them to be of his journeys and of his labours» (Cic. *Pro Balbo* 17; transl. Gardner.).

In the Hebrew Bible, Yam is checked by a divine command prohibiting the ocean from crossing the boundary established by Yahweh. This logic would have thoroughly permeated the tales about the steps taken by Melqart in *Gadir* after catastrophic marine events, prohibiting the sea from going beyond the established limits. But besides that unidirectional image of inviolability of the world's frontier, it is possible to contend that the logic of that prohibition relating to *Gadir* worked *in both directions*.

<sup>39</sup> Garbati in press.

<sup>40</sup> See Jiménez Ávila 2002, p. 287.

<sup>41</sup> Fear 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Marín 2011, p. 220.

The establishment, or re-establishment, of the cosmic boundary in *Gadir* ensured that the sea would never invade the territory of men again. But “the harmony of the elements”, the logic governing the relationship between the earth and the ocean, implied, in turn, that nor should men cross that limit.

It is a known fact that this type of symbolic representation of the frontier between the land and the sea had a place in the religious imagination of the Phoenicians thanks to the episode occurring during the Siege of Tyre by Alexander in 332 BCE, mentioned in Q. Curtius Rufus. The Macedonians began to build a causeway in order to connect the mainland with the impregnable island-city of Tyre. At a certain moment during the construction work, a sea monster surfaced next to the causeway, which both sides interpreted as a good omen:

«The appearance of the monster gave joy to both sides; the Macedonians interpreted it as showing the direction in which to go on building up the work; *the Tyrians thought that Neptune, as an avenger of the usurped sea [occupati maris vindicem], had brought the monster against the causeway, and that it would surely soon fall in ruins.* Rejoicing in the omen, the Tyrians turned aside to feasting and loaded themselves with wine, and still under its influence at sunrise, they embarked upon ships wreathed with flowers and garlands; so over-hasty were they to perceive, not only an omen of victory, but even an occasion for celebrating one» (Curt. IV 4,3-5; transl. Rolfe, emphasis added).

The building of the causeway by Alexander was perceived by the Tyrians as an unwarranted invasion of the sea, an essentially impious act violating the cosmic boundaries, destined to be punished by the sea divinity. This episode reveals that the logic of the inviolability of the boundary between the land and the sea worked in both ways in the religious mentality of the Tyrians.

If this logic is extrapolated to the reaction of the Phoenician communities of Iberia to catastrophic episodes of marine flooding, based on the establishment of an ocean limit at *Gadir*, it can be assumed that the prohibition affected both sides of that boundary: *Gadir* and the Pillars of Heracles became an uncrossable bourne in both directions.

The message of prohibition aimed at those intending to travel beyond Gadeira and the Pillars of Heracles in Pindar's *Odes* is, as I see it, the reflection of only part of a more comprehensive message meant, on the one hand, for the ocean and its creatures, and on the other, for the world of men. In order to safeguard the cosmic harmony on the edge of the world and to prevent any unwarranted aggression on the part of the sea, it was necessary to respect the inviolability of the frontier with the ocean. Those actions that might be interpreted as violations of that frontier would have been perceived as potentially dangerous and thus ritually managed.

That message, which would have been all-pervasive in *Gadir* following catastrophic marine flooding, before surviving in different monuments in the sanctuary of Melqart and the city *per se*, may be at the origin of medieval Christian and Arabic traditions that conveyed, with variations on the theme, the same message as regards Cadiz and the Pillars of Heracles: *no further* or, if you will, *non plus ultra*.<sup>43</sup>

The legend surrounding the tsunami that struck Cadiz on the morning of 1 November 1755, hinges on this powerful message. According to tradition, several priests managed to halt the waves invading the city thanks to the intercession of the Virgin of the Palm, thrusting the standard of the

<sup>43</sup> Hutchison 2009.

Virgin into the ground, brandishing a crucifix and, depending on the version, uttering a solemn plea to the Virgin – “Until this point, my Mother!” – or issuing a command to the sea – “You shall not cross this point!” In both versions, the legend of the miracle surely drew inspiration from the biblical story and, specifically, from the command that Yahweh issues to the sea in Job 38:11: «Thus far shall you come, and no farther». At any event, what is truly remarkable was the ability of the Canaanite account to allay people’s fear of the menacing sea over the centuries.

The dating of the Phoenician bronze figurines discovered in Huelva and Sancti Petri – between the 8th and the 6th centuries BCE – the evidence of an extreme marine event in the archaeological record of Huelva at around the beginning of the 6th century BCE and Pindar’s work, which offers us a *terminus ante quem* of the beginning of the following one, are all sound reasons to review the geological evidence pointing to an extreme marine event in the Gulf of Cadiz occurring in the first half of the 1st millennium BCE. To conclude, it is possible to claim that it was between the 7th and 5th centuries BCE when the tsunami occurred, thus prompting the religious reactions that emphasised the role of Melqart as the god who triumphed over the forces of ocean chaos and established in *Gadir* the protective boundary between the elements, the *non plus ultra*.

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