

Phoenicia

Practices

Phoenicia was an ancient Semitic civilization situated on the western, coastal part of the Fertile Crescent and centered on the coastline of modern Lebanon. One of the most important contributions of this sea faring peoples was the invention of syllabic writing. The Phoenicians were polytheistic and the pantheon of gods was presided over by the father of the gods. However, the goddess was the principal figure in the pantheon. Additionally, Phoenicia was separated into independent city-states, each often with its own set of deities.

Funeral rites were one of the major religious activities of the Phoenicians. Burial of an intact body was the preferred method for dealing with the dead. The wealthiest Phoenicians and members of royal families received elaborately decorated stone sarcophagi which were placed in tombs cut directly out of rock.¹

There is also evidence that at least in some burials, the bodies were burned, most likely on a funeral pyre, before being buried in a tomb. Additionally, in the tombs found in Mount Sirai, two superposed bodies were often found buried together.²

Another form of funeral practice was cremation. Large jars have been found with the bones of the dead. Alongside these jars have been found smaller empty jars, which are thought to have been created to contain the souls of the departed.³

Few burial goods were found alongside the deceased. Those found included tools, jewelry, ritual items (such as razors, masks, and painted ostrich eggs), and the adoption of symbols such as the ankh and the lotus. In one tomb a set of two owl claws was found, while we do not know the exact significance of these, most likely they represented night or death. Scenes on tombs also show survivors sniffing a lotus. It is assumed that this has a similar meaning for the same rite followed by Egyptians, to ensure the rebirth of the soul into the afterlife.⁴

Scenes on the Ahiaram sarcophagus show females performing ceremonial acts of lamentation, such as wearing of sackcloth, tearing of hair and the beating of breast. Other funerary activities seemed to include a ritual meal, pouring a libation, and/or burning incense.⁵

The preparations of the body varied according to social class but included ritual washing, dousing with oil and wrapping in cloth. Members of the royalty were often buried with gold death masks. Tombs were sometimes sealed by the smashing of plates.

Deities and Important Concepts

- Baal⁶
Functional head of the Phoenician pantheon. Storm god.
- Melqart (King of the City)⁷
Chief male deity at Tyre, associated with death and rebirth. Melqart, was said to have been resurrected

¹ "Funeral Rites & Burial Among the Ancient Phoenicians." About.com Agnosticism / Atheism. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Aug. 2013. <http://atheism.about.com/od/ancientmythologyreligion/jq/Lebanon-Phoenician-Photos/Sarcophagus-Ahiaram-Byblos.htm>

² Piga, G., M. Guirguis, P. Bartonlin, A. Malgosa, and S. Enzo. "A Funerary Rite Study of the Phoenician-Punic Necropolis of Mount Sirai (Sardinia, Italy) | Michele Guirguis - Academia.edu." N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Aug. 2013. http://www.academia.edu/585743/A_funerary_rite_study_of_the_Phoenician_Punic_necropolis_of_Mount_Sirai_Sardinia_Italy

³ "3,000 Year Old Phoenician Burial Jars Unearthed." N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Aug. 2013. <http://www.sliceofscifi.com/2008/11/12/3000-year-old-phoenician-burial-jars-unearthed/>

⁴ Markoe, Glenn E. "Phoenicians." Google Books. p 138, n.d. Web. 15 Aug. 2013. <http://tinyurl.com/lmaymbh>

⁵ Ibid. p 138

⁶ Markoe, Glenn E. "Phoenicians." Google Books. p 118, n.d. Web. 15 Aug. 2013. <http://tinyurl.com/lmaymbh>

⁷ Ibid. p. 118

after his cremation. Dynastic deity of Tyre. His divine characteristics also encompassed agriculture, maritime, civic and the underworld.

- Astarte⁸
Queen of heaven. Chief goddess. She is said to have helped in the resurrection of Melqart. She also had an aggressive warrior aspect.
- Rephaim⁹
The dead were called this. It refers to a divine ancestor.
- Môt or Muth¹⁰
The personification of death. He tried to kill Ball and was in his turned killed only to return.

Modern Adaptations

- Pass around a lotus and have everyone smell it while envisioning the deceased moving on to the afterlife.
- Bury a representation of two owl claws with the person. To represent death as being a restful place in the night.
- Light a fire made of herbaceous and woody plants, also olive, lime and pine.¹¹
- Break a small ceramic jug with oil in it to mark the close of the funeral.¹²

Sample Readings

Burial epitaph of King Tabnit of Sibon¹³

Whosoever thou be, each man who finds this coffin, open not the lid and disturb me not, because with me there is no money, no gold, nor anything worth plundering, except myself who lie in this coffin. Open not my lid and disturb me not, because is an abuse of Astarte. And if thou dost open my lid and disturb me, there will be no descendants for thee in thy life under the sun, nor rest with the dead.

From The Inscription on the Sarcophagus of the Phoenician King Eshmunazar

I am carried away, the time of my non-existence has come, my spirit has disappeared, like the day, from whence I am silent, since which I became mute.

And I am lying in this coffin, and in this tomb, in the place which I have built.

...

For graced by the gods, I am carried away, the time of my non-existence has come, my spirit has disappeared, like the day, from whence I am silent, since which I became mute.¹⁴

Resources

- Phoenicians by Gleen E Markoe
<http://tinyurl.com/lmaymbh>
- History of Ibiza; Funerary Rites at the Puig des Molin Necropolis
http://www.liveibiza.com/ibiza_history/historical_information/funerary_rights.htm

⁸ Ibid. p. 118

⁹ Ibid. p. 137

¹⁰ "Mot (Semitic God)." Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, 08 July 2013. Web. 16 Aug. 2013.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mot_%28Semitic_god%29

¹¹ Ridgway, David, and Francesca Romana Serra Ridgway. "Across Frontiers – Etruscans, Greeks, Phoenicians & Cypriots." N.p., n.d p 45. Web. 16 Aug. 2013. http://www.upf.edu/larq/_pdf/AubtRidgw.pdf

¹² Ibid. p. 46

¹³ Ridgway, David, and Francesca Romana Serra Ridgway. "Across Frontiers – Etruscans, Greeks, Phoenicians & Cypriots." N.p., n.d p. 139. Web. 16 Aug. 2013. http://www.upf.edu/larq/_pdf/AubtRidgw.pdf

¹⁴ "The Inscription on the Sarcophagus of the Phoenician King Eshmunazar." N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Aug. 2013. http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Eshmun.html