

New evidence on the aniconic iconography of Astarte-Aphrodite in Cyprus

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Since the middle of the 19th century there has been extensive research taking place concerning the origin of the important cult of Astarte-Aphrodite on the island of Cyprus. Modern scholars have tried to investigate further the source of this popular Cypriot goddess, some of them being in favor of an Occidental origin and others of an Oriental one. Recently an attempt was made to trace an indigenous Cypriot origin (J. Karageorghis 2003: 353).

None of the scholars have tried hitherto to analyse the importance of the aniconic representations of this particular goddess. The iconography of the baetyl, which plays an important role in the cult of the goddess Astarte-Aphrodite in Cyprus, proves a strong oriental influence in the practice of her cult on the island.

It should be emphasized that the cultic practice of venerating stones believed to be representations of particular gods was carried out all over the ancient Levant in antiquity. This practice was very popular, both in Syria and in Phoenicia (Soyez 1972: 149–169). It seems that the veneration of stones in the ancient Levant points to a clearly Semitic origin of this aniconic cultic practice (Emessa/Homs, Byblos etc). The above-mentioned practice is primarily related to meteorites and the origin of divine stones falling from the sky.

It is not entirely clear whether the baetyls themselves were the objects of worship or if they were merely symbols or even maybe guarantees of divine presence. It is also interesting that this type of cult influenced the religious practices of the ancient Greeks. This derives, for example, from the well-known decorated stone shown in the Sanctuary of Apollo in Delphi, referred to as the “navel of the earth” (*omphalos*).

The cult of Astarte was evidently related primarily to baetyls. The Phoenician mythological background of this goddess is very eloquent with regard to this practice. Astarte was the daughter of the Sky and Earth and according to the myth, while she was wandering across the world, she touched a star that had fallen from the sky (a meteorite) and consecrated it at Tyre.

Until recently, the iconographic evidence of this particular cultic practice in Cyprus, related to the cult of Astarte-Aphrodite, was rather poor and limited. It was illustrated

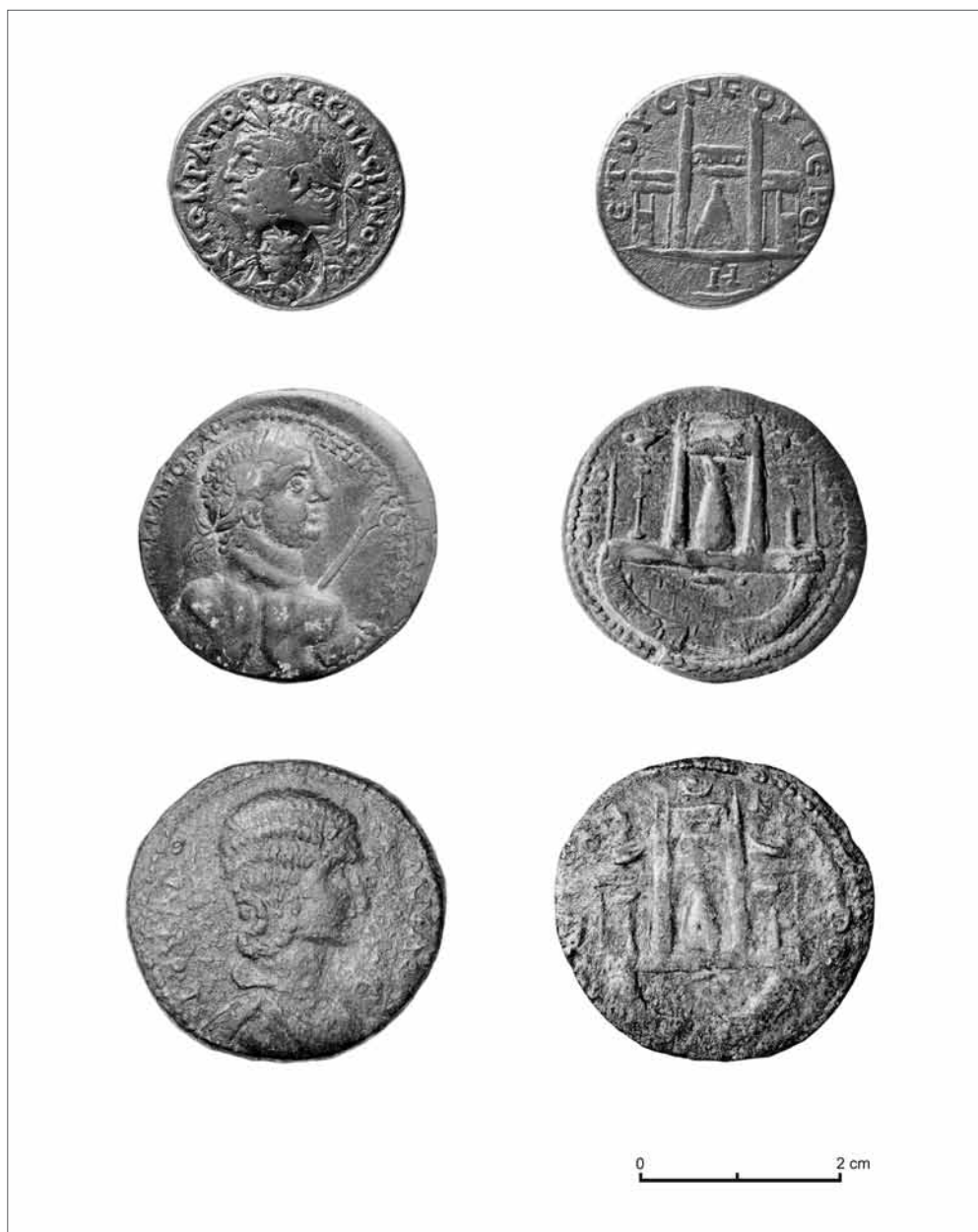


Fig. 1. Roman coins with the representation of the aniconic symbol of the goddess Astarte-Aphrodite from Palaiaphos on the reverse; on the obverse, from top to bottom, images of Vespasian, Caracalla and Julia Domna

on a number of Roman coins from the 1st–3rd century AD, representing monumentally on their reverse the aniconic symbol of the goddess Astarte-Aphrodite in the “Holy of Holies” in her temple in Palaipaphos. The coins bore the images of the emperors Vespasian [Fig. 1, top], Marcus Aurelius and Caracalla [Fig. 1, middle] and Julia Domna [Fig. 1, bottom] on the obverse. Moreover, similar representation can be found engraved on golden finger-rings from the Roman period (2nd century AD). The rings are without provenance, but were surely found in Cyprus; they are now part of the Old Collections of the Cyprus Museum (Pieridou 1972: 40, 41, Pl. XXVII:17–19).

New evidence concerning the aniconic cult of Astarte-Aphrodite has been brought to light recently during excavations carried out by the Department of Antiquities. This new assemblage, of chronological as well as iconographical importance, consists of, among others, a group of clay *naiskoi*. Two of them were recently found in the eastern necropolis of Amathous [Figs 2–3] and another one in a tomb in Pentakomo, a village lying a few kilometres eastwards of the ancient city of Amathous [Fig. 4]. The latter was published recently (Flourentzos 2006: Fig. 54) without its aniconic symbol, which was found afterwards in the debris of the said tomb. The two pieces from Amathous have not been published yet. The following is a brief description of all three objects:

1. Terracotta *naiskos* of Astarte-Aphrodite. It consists of a monumental vaulted entrance where an aniconic symbol of the goddess has been placed, painted red and black. The top of the aniconic symbol is covered with clay pellets probably representing stars. Another important feature is a belt which covers a considerable part of the body and which forms a kind of necklace around the upper part. Above the rounded entrance there is a metope painted with rectangular red panels and a fringe made of pieces of clay. The base is hollow; the rear plain. H. 15 cm. Inv. no. T. 862/12. Provenance: Amathous Eastern necropolis [Fig. 3].

2. Terracotta *naiskos* of Astarte-Aphrodite. It consists of a monumental rectangular entrance and a metope where a symbol is placed, almost aniconic despite a certain primitive anthropomorphism established by the addition of two arms on either side of the body with the fingers of the hands indicated with parallel black lines. The symbol is decorated with more pellets on the upper part of the body in a manner suggestive of a human figure. Above the entrance there is a metope decorated with a fringe of red triangles. A clay disc and the crescent symbol of Astarte are attached in the center. The baetyl is decorated with black and scale patterns, alternating with red vertical lines. H. 10 cm. Inv. no. T. 871/75. Provenance: Amathous Eastern Necropolis [Fig. 2a–c].

3. Terracotta *naiskos* of Astarte-Aphrodite. It consists of a vaulted entrance where the aniconic symbol of the goddess has been placed, decorated with pellets probably representing stars. A rectangular pedestal in front bears two cylindrical objects probably to represent offerings. Above the vaulted entrance there is a metope decorated with a fringe of red triangles; above it there is a clay fringe painted red. Symbols of Astarte, a clay disc-and-crescent, are attached in the middle of the metope. On either side of the entrance there are two incense burners. The rear side is decorated with two painted



Terracotta naiskos of Astarte-Aphrodite from Amathous (Inv. no. T. 871/35), front view; three-quarters and back view on facing page

Fig. 2.
⇒



Fig. 3. Terracotta naiskos of Astarte-Aphrodite from Amathous (Inv. no. T. 862/12), front and three-quarters view



↑



Fig. 4. Terracotta naiskos of Astarte-Aphrodite from Pentakomo near Amathous (Inv. no. T. 871/75), front and back view

lotus flowers, mostly worn, and a fringe of red triangles. H. 9.5 cm. Inv. no. T. 2/37. Provenance: Pentakomo [Fig. 4a–b].

Concerning the above mentioned naiskoi, it is important to comment on the belt around the aniconic symbol of one of the terracotta images from Amathous [see Fig. 3]. We may have in this case an example of the famous *kestos imantas* (embroidery belt) mentioned by Homer as embellishing Aphrodite. Interestingly, a similar belt is observed on a clay statuette representing Astarte, dated from the Late Bronze Age (Bucholtz 1991: Pl. I:b). This statuette wears the belt crossed across the body. The Homeric embroidery belt has other variations on female anthropomorphic bronze statuettes from Cyprus, featuring considerable similarity to a long necklace (Catling 1971: 15–32).

Another two objects, representing portable baetyls similar to those depicted on imperial Roman coins as originating from the Paphian sanctuary of the goddess, were found in ancient Kourion and surprisingly have not been published yet. Both are kept in the Local Museum of Episkopi (Limassol District). One is a stray surface find, found approximately 20 km to the northwest of the mosaic of Achilles at Kourion [Fig. 5], and the other one was discovered at the Apollo sanctuary during the excavations of the University of Pennsylvania (1934–1940) [Fig. 6]. Following is a description of these two objects.



Fig. 5. Portable baetyl of marble from Kourion (Inv. no. C.H.M. R.R. 721)

1. Almost conical aniconic symbol of Astarte-Aphrodite made of marble (lower part missing?). It is decorated in the upper part with four rows of regularly spaced raised discoid dots, as well as two knob-shaped projections at either side, below the dots. There is a *polos* on top, ending on a headdress(?) at the rear. The effort to intimate a human figure is obvious. H. 21.5 cm. Inv. no. C.H.M. R.R. 721. Provenance: Kourion City [Fig. 5a–b].

2. Conical aniconic symbol of Astarte-Aphrodite made of marble. The upper part is decorated with discoid projections in relief, probably suggesting stars. Around the neck there is a belt (*kestos imantas*) ending in two pendants on either side. A round hole pierced in the lower part may have served to mount the object on a wall. H. 20.5 cm. Inv. no. St.447. Provenance: Temple of Apollo Hylates [Fig. 6].



Fig. 6. Portable baetyl of marble from Kourion (Inv. no. St.447)

Both baetyls were made of marble, presumably in the Graeco-Roman period. Despite having been found far away from Paphos, these symbols curiously copy the monumental aniconic symbol from the Paphian sanctuary, illustrated on virtually contemporary Roman coins. Similar aniconic symbols are illustrated on Cypro-Archaic portable naiskoi excavated in Amathous. Therefore, the baetyl cult practice in Cyprus was not limited to the Paphos area; its roots evidently went back as early as the Cypro-Archaic I period.

In closing, it can be suggested that the aniconic iconography of the Phoenician goddess Astarte had a remarkable influence on the art and cult practices of Cyprus, not only during the Cypro-Archaic period, but evidently even later. During the Graeco-Roman age especially it was preferred practice in the cult of Astarte-Aphrodite, not only as a monumental symbol, but also in private and individual beliefs, sometimes connected with other deities (e.g. Apollo Hylates). Moreover, it can be suggested that during the Roman period there was a revival of the aniconic symbol of Astarte in the cult, following a general trend in the Roman Empire toward a growing popularity of cult customs with an Oriental origin.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	<i>Archäologischer Anzeiger</i> , Berlin
AAAS	<i>Annales archéologiques arabes de Syrie</i> , Damas
ABSA	<i>Annual of the British School of Athens</i> , London
AJA	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i> , New York
APF	<i>Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete</i> , Leipzig, Stuttgart
ASAE	<i>Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte</i> , Le Caire
BAAL	<i>Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises</i> , Beirut
BABesch	<i>Bulletin antieke Beschaving</i> , Louvain
BCH	<i>Bulletin de correspondance hellénique</i> , Paris
BdÉ	<i>Bibliothèque d'étude</i> , Le Caire
BEFAR	<i>Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome</i> , Rome, Paris
BIFAO	<i>Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale</i> , Le Caire
BSFE	<i>Bulletin de la Société française d'égyptologie</i> , Paris
CCE	<i>Cahiers de la céramique égyptienne</i> , Le Caire
CCEC	<i>Cahiers du Centre d'études chypriotes</i> , Nanterre
CdÉ	<i>Chronique d'Égypte</i> , Bruxelles
CRAI	<i>Comptes rendus de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres</i> , Paris
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> , Vienna
EtTrav	<i>Études et travaux</i> , Varsovie
GM	<i>Göttinger Miscellen</i> , Göttingen
GRBS	<i>Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies</i> , Durham, NC
IEJ	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i> , Jerusalem
JbAC	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
JEA	<i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i> , London
JGS	<i>Journal of Glass Studies</i> , New York
JHS	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i> , London
JJP	<i>Journal of Juristic Papyrology</i> , Warsaw
JRA	<i>Journal of Roman Archaeology</i> , Ann Arbor, MI
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i> , London
KHKM	<i>Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej</i> , Warszawa
LIMC	<i>Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae</i> , Zurich
MDAIA	<i>Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung</i> , Berlin
MDAIK	<i>Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo</i> , Wiesbaden
MEFRA	<i>Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'École française de Rome. Antiquité</i> , Paris
MIFAO	<i>Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale</i> , Le Caire
NC	<i>Numismatic Chronicle</i> , London
NumAntCl	<i>Numismatica e antichità classiche</i> , Logano
OLA	<i>Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta</i> , Louvain
PAM	<i>Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean</i> , Warsaw
RACrist	<i>Rivista di archeologia cristiana</i> , Cité du Vatican
RBK	<i>Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst</i> , Stuttgart

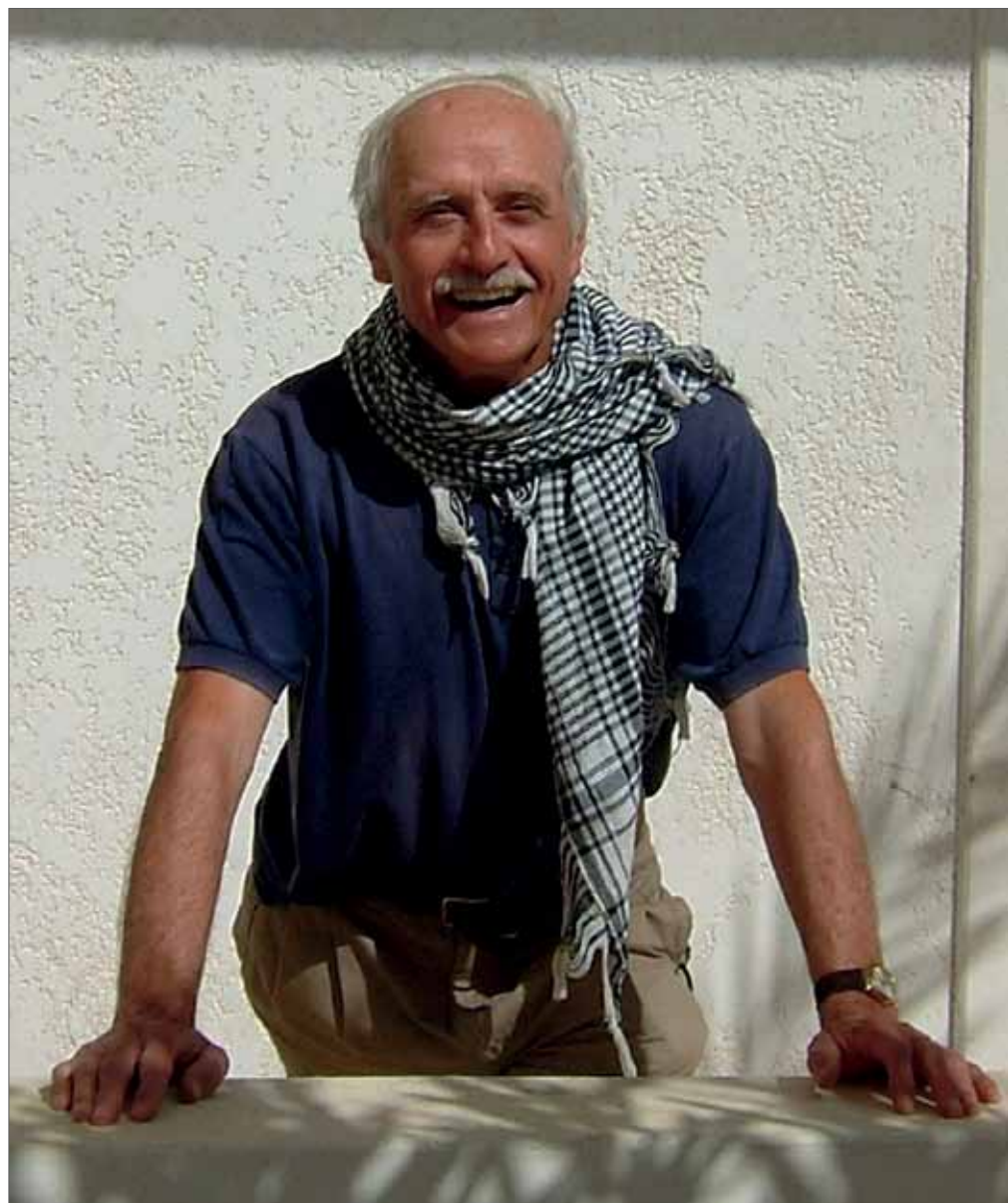
Abbreviations

<i>RDAC</i>	<i>Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus, Nicosia</i>
<i>RdÉ</i>	<i>Revue d'égyptologie, Paris, Louvain</i>
<i>REPPAL</i>	<i>Revue du centre d'études de la civilisation phénicienne-punique et des antiquités libyques</i>
<i>RMNW</i>	<i>Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie, Warszawa</i>
<i>RSO</i>	<i>Rivista degli studi orientali, Roma</i>
<i>RTAM</i>	<i>Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale, Gembloux</i>
<i>RTAM</i>	<i>Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale, Gembloux, Louvain</i>
<i>SAAC</i>	<i>Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization, Kraków</i>
<i>VetChr</i>	<i>Vetera christianorum, Bari</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik, Bonn</i>

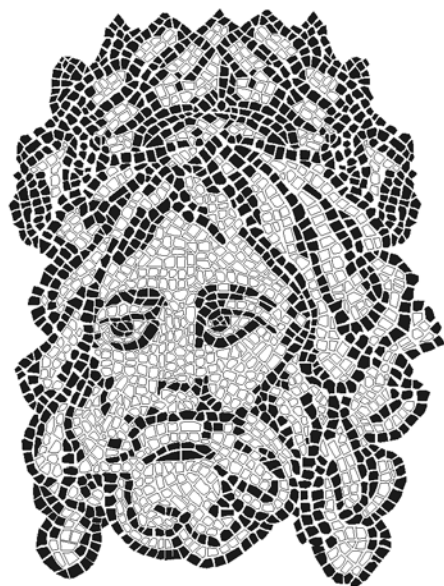
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<i>DACL</i>	F. Cabrol, H. Leclercq, <i>Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie</i> , Paris, 1907–1953
<i>LCI</i>	E. Kirschbaum, W. Braunfels (eds), <i>Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie</i> , Rom: Herder, 1968–1976
<i>RealEnc</i>	A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, W. Kroll, K. Mittelhaus, <i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> , Stuttgart–Münich, 1893–1980

CLASSICA ORIENTALIA



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Essays Presented to
Wiktor Andrzej Daszewski
on his 75th Birthday

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