

## THE SANCTUARY OF ASTARTE AT RAS IL-WARDIJA IN GOZO BETWEEN CARTHAGE AND ROME

Cults, rituals and religious entanglement of a Mediterranean sanctuary (4th century BC - 2nd century AD)



Fig.1: Drone view of the Punic sanctuary on the promontory of Ras il-Wardija. In the background Dwejra Bay and Fungus Rock (Photo Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo).



Fig. 2: Plan of the cave sanctuary on the fifth terrace. In front of the cave are the outer structures (benches, altar, and cult hollows) and the cistern, and to the south the sacred pool (Photo Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo).

### Ras il-Wardija, a Punic-Roman Sanctuary dedicated to Astarte

The sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija (4th century BC - 2nd century AD) rises on a promontory overlooking the sea in the north-western coast of Gozo, and holds one of the most spectacular Punic-Roman sacred compounds of the Ancient Mediterranean (fig. 1). It was investigated between 1964 and 1967 by the Italian Mission in Malta, and after more than 50 years of oblivion, the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo resumed the archaeological research in the sanctuary and surrounding area in 2021, in partnership with the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and Heritage Malta, and the University of Malta.

The sanctuary extends over five terraces (V-I), which slope down toward the cliff that overhangs the sea. The sanctuary includes two main buildings with the same east-west orientation: the cave complex (fig. 2) on the upper terraces (V-IV) and the Temple of Astarte, a large, square block building with a monumental threshold surrounded by a temenos (fig. 3), on the lower terrace (I). In between, the III and II terraces housed the cult installations as the baetyls and stelae and the votive deposits.

### The cult of 'štrt n'n, Astarte of Malta

Some of the ceramics (plates, bowls, cooking pots and jugs) bear short Punic inscriptions or alphabetic signs, probably abbreviations, incised before firing, as they were produced for exclusive use in rituals. The inscriptions are similar in paleography and content to those found at Taş Silğ, a Mediterranean sanctuary in the south of Malta which houses the cult of "Astarte of Malta" ('štrt n'n) (fig. 4).

The fragment of a juglet (W51/4) presents the complete form of the typical dedication formula, l'š[tr]t, "to Astarte". The inscription is divided into two lines due to its lower position in the vessel, in the first line *lamed*, 'ayin, *shin*, in the second line *resh*, *taw*. In addition to Taş Silğ, this formula is well attested in the most important sites of the cult of Astarte, such as Motya and Eryx in Sicily and Paphos in Cyprus.

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### Cult and rituals: the material culture

The sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija was dedicated to the Phoenician goddess Astarte, Hera/Juno in the Roman period. The Goddess was worshipped as protectress of the seafarers in the treacherous waters of the Gozo canal. The cult of Astarte was widely spread in the Mediterranean, and her sanctuaries played a pivotal role in maritime dynamics, since they were proper land infrastructures for a safe navigation, as their presence signalled landing places or areas where navigation was particularly dangerous.

The cult of the Goddess is testified by stelae, baetyls, and clay idols of the type of the Goddess with raised arms. The ceramic repertoire is mainly composed by tableware, suggesting that one of the rituals celebrated at the site was feasts or communal meals for all devotees. Miniature pottery and a varied group of transport amphorae have also been found. They testify to the sanctuary's extensive trade connections throughout the Mediterranean.

### Ras il-Wardija and Taş Silğ: an example of Anagógia and Katagógia festivities

The discovery of such inscriptions opens an unedited relation between the two sanctuaries of Astarte, and highlights the importance of the cult of this deity in the Maltese archipelago. The sanctuaries were probably connected through a sort of Anagógia and Katagógia, a celebration that involved moving the Goddess from one sanctuary to another in the Mediterranean, e.g from Eryx in Sicily to Sicca in North Africa, according to Athanaeus of Nacuratis and Claudius Aelianus. These festivals in honor of Astarte were introduced by Carthage in the 4th century BC with the aim of hegemony in the central Mediterranean through the popular cult of Astarte, and the same strategy was used by the Romans in later centuries.

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Fig. 3: The Temple of Astarte and the temenos on the first terrace (Photo Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo).

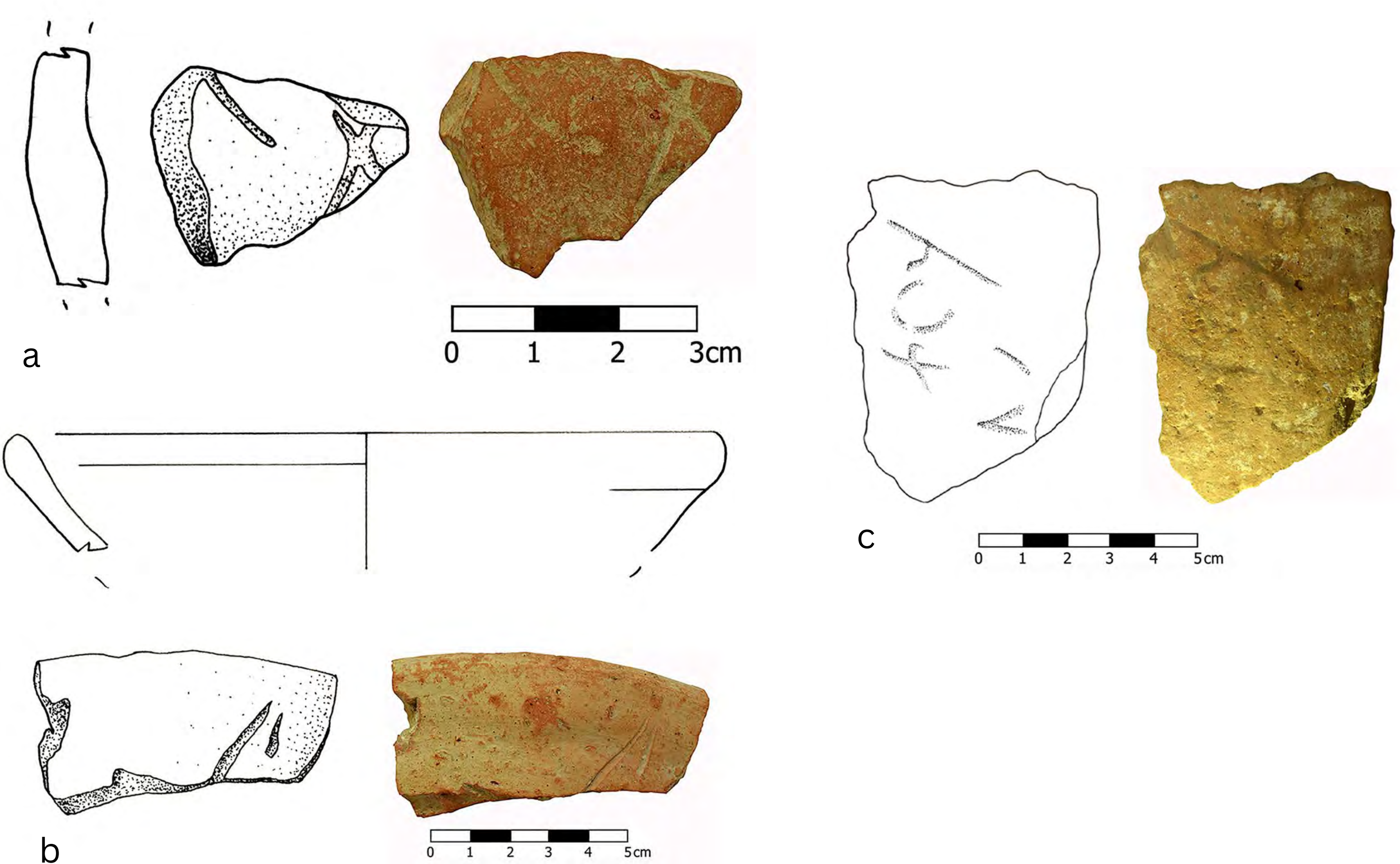


Fig. 4: Punic inscriptions on pottery:  
a: the bowl W51/64 with *shin* and *taw*, *lamed* and 'ayn: [l]š[tr]t to Astarte".  
b: the bowl W53/72 recording the Punic *taw* in the typical shape of the Maltese islands.  
c: The dedication l'š[tr]t, "to Astarte," on the juglet W51/4 (Photos Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo, drawings D. Iorio).

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