

# Chthonic sanctuaries and religious narratives in ancient Cyrene

## Santuarios ctónicos y narrativas religiosas en la antigua Cirene

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A l'antic nord d'Àfrica, els contactes entre els nouvinguts colonitzadors i les poblacions anteriors sempre han proporcionat un marc cultural complex en el qual es poden analitzar les característiques religioses. Un examen comparatiu d'alguns santuaris rocosos situats a la zona de Cirene revela una clara interacció entre grecs, romans i antics libis. També mostra que l'expressió religiosa dels antics libis estava fortament lligada a la natura, seguint una tradició ininterrompuda des del Neolític fins a l'època romana. El caràcter religiós ctònic d'aquests santuaris també queda testimoniats per un tipus d'iconografia que il·lustra el procés d'hibridació entre les divinitats púniques, gregues i romanes.

### PARAULES CLAU

ÀFRICA ROMANA, ANTIGA LÍBIA, CIRENE, SANTUARIS ROCOSOS, ICONOGRAFIA, HIBRIDACIÓ

In ancient North Africa, contacts between colonising newcomers and previous populations have always provided a complex cultural frame within which religious characteristics can be analysed. A comparative examination of some rock sanctuaries located in the area of Cyrene reveals a clear interaction between Greeks, Romans, and ancient Libyans. It also shows that the religious expression of the ancient Libyans was strongly linked to nature, following an uninterrupted tradition from the Neolithic until Roman times. The chthonic religious character of these sanctuaries is also attested by a type of iconography that illustrates the process of hybridity between Punic, Greek, and Roman deities.

### KEYWORDS

ROMAN AFRICA, ANCIENT LIBYA, CYRENE, ROCK SANCTUARIES, ICONOGRAPHY, HYBRIDITY

En el antiguo norte de África, los contactos desarrollados entre colonizadores y poblaciones precedentes configuraron un complejo marco cultural en el que se pueden analizar diversas características religiosas. Un examen comparativo de varios santuarios rocosos situados en el área de Cirene revela una clara interacción entre griegos, romanos y antiguos libios. En ellos se desvela también la vinculación de la religiosidad líbica con la naturaleza, siguiendo una tradición ininterrumpida desde el Neolítico hasta época romana. Esta religiosidad ctónica se expresa también a través de una iconografía que pone de manifiesto el proceso de hibridación entre divinidades púnicas, griegas y romanas.

#### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

ÁFRICA ROMANA, LIBYA ANTIGUA, CIRENE, SANTUARIOS ROCOSOS, ICONOGRAFÍA, HIBRIDACIÓN

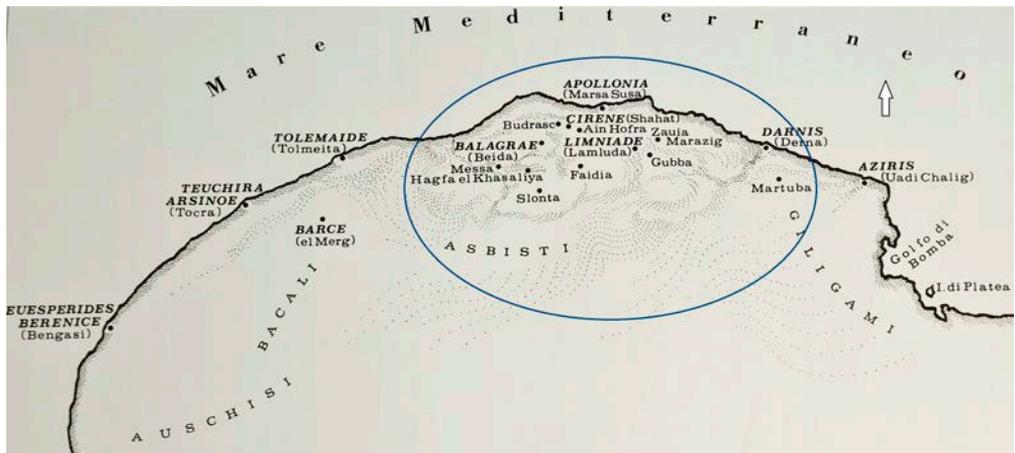
Contacts between colonising newcomers and previous populations, independently of the geographical or chronological contexts, have always provided a rich and complex frame in which to study cultures and mental constructions. In ancient North Africa, these contacts come about as a result of a wide variety of cultural agents (from Paleo-Libyan, Punic, Greek and Roman extractions) confronting one another on a regular basis, in every aspect of daily life. A nuclear subject in our research is the study of cultural transformations in all this area in a wide chronological frame, exactly to analyse the parameters of hybridity in various aspects of life (Salcedo *et al.*, 2018). One of the most important is the religious construction, which is used to design a transverse narrative that could be understood within the theoretical frame of ‘lived ancient religion’ (Gasparini *et al.*, 2020: 1–6). Our subject, in this article, is the approach to a comparative examination of some rock sanctuaries dating from diverse periods (7<sup>th</sup> century BC–3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), located in the area of Cyrene in present Libya, that show interaction and cultural contact between Greeks, Romans, and ancient Libyans. As is well known, the city of Cyrene was founded in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC by colonists from the island of Thera, whose contacts with local populations (ancient Libyans) must have begun almost immediately. After a history of monarchy, personalised in the dynasty of the Battiads and, later, of the Ptolemies, the territory, which was neighbour to Carthage to the west and to Egypt to the east, was donated to the Roman people, but did not become a proper province until 74 BC (Pesce *et al.*, 1959; Chamoux, 1953; Ottone, 2002). These historical circumstances, along with the geographical and physical features that made the capital Cyrene and its colonies important agrarian and commercial centres, can provide the keys of the cultural and social mosaic in which the processes presented in this study must be contextualised. The practise of creation and use of rock-cut religious spaces can be dated from Paleolithic to Roman times in all North Africa. As an example, we can recall the cave and rock forms of religiosity that were common in the Canary Islands (the insular sphere of North African cultures) at the arrival of the European colonists in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, which roots in the traditional customs of ancient indigenes (Cuenca *et al.*, 2008; Tejera Gaspar and Montesdeoca, 2006: 107–139). This wide temporal-cultural perspective can bring us the possibility to observe how an ancestral individual praxis may have become a shared one, as individual and familiar agencies come

into play (Rüpke and Degelmann, 2015; Fuchs and Rüpke, 2015; Fuchs *et al.*, 2020). This can be developed, either by the own social expansion of the community, or by effects of syncretism with other civic religions installed in the territory (Malkin, 1996), or even by both of the processes at the same time, turning, in this way, into a real lived element of transcultural cohesion, experienced by individuals and groups.

The rock sanctuaries treated here are all emplaced in present Libya. In this sense, we are aware of the difficulty—even impossibility—of conducting an on-site research in the country. Fortunately, there is good documentation—from the works of Italian and British teams on the region, which allows us to undertake our study of Libyan sites. Two important examples are the exhaustive UNESCO *Libyan Valleys Survey*, and the *Fazzan Project*, directed first by Charles Daniels (1958–1977) and later by David Mattingly (1997–2001), whose publications are essential in this regard (as Mattingly, 2011).

## 1. The Sanctuary of the *Chthonic Nymphs* in Cyrene and the Goddess Libya

The first item to analyse is a rock cult space situated in an area of great agricultural importance and notably marked by the mountain massif known as the Jebel al-Akhdar, whose actual meaning is ‘green mountains’, because of the small rivers around it. The territory contains several natural rock caves used by human groups at different moments in history. In fact, as shown in fig. 1, apart from that of the *Chthonic Nymphs*, there are



**Figure 1.** Map of the Cyrenaean area. Edited by the authors; encircled, the region of study of this contribution. Based on Bacchielli, 1978.

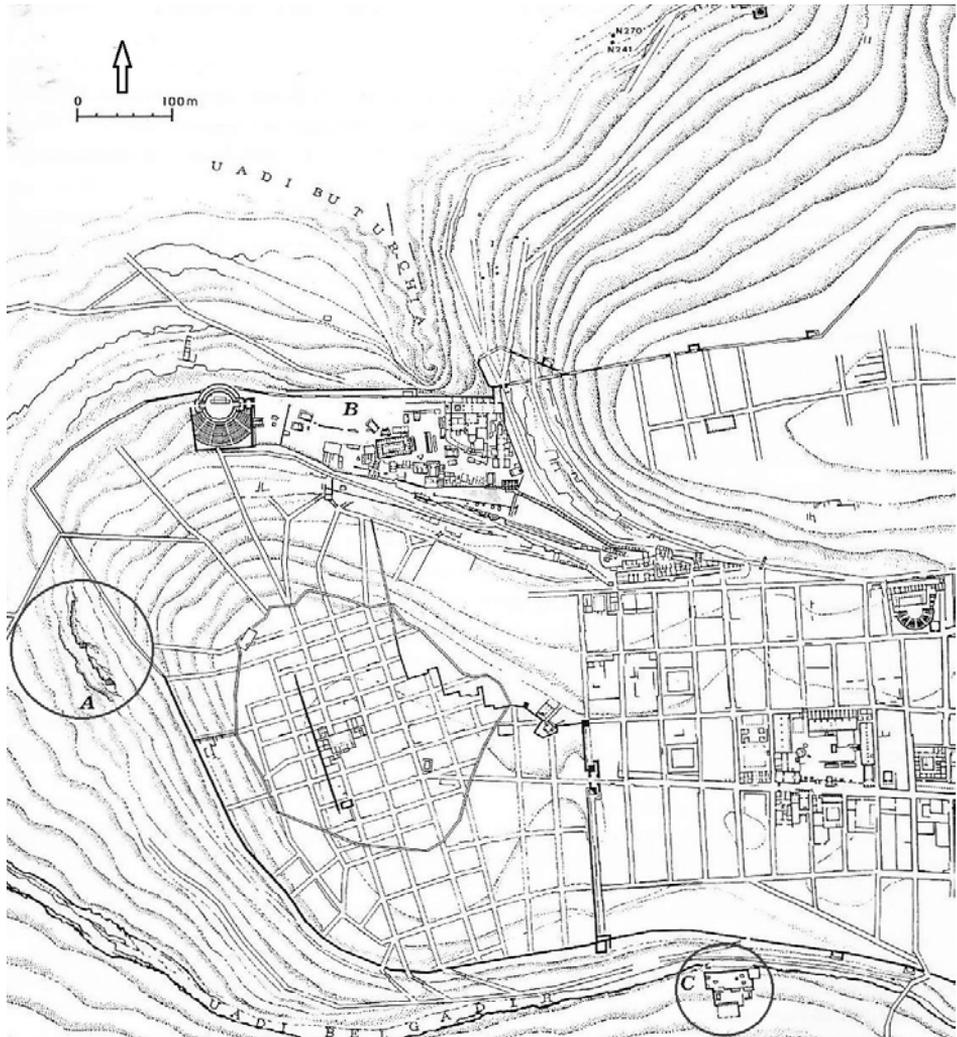
several sanctuaries generally located on the cliffs of the canyons of mountains around 600/800 m high. These sacred places are not far from water sources and streams, and commonly appear in connection with funerary extensions, which provide the cult spaces of the inland territory with a symbolic chthonian religious meaning. The inland territory stretches, broadly speaking, between the Greek cities of Cyrene and Barca, in the eastern-most region of North Africa. After Herodotus, the populations inhabiting this area were mainly the *Asbystae* (south of Cyrene), the *Auschisae* (west of Cyrene), and the *Bacales*, a smaller group living in the middle of the *Auschisae*'s land:

Γλιγαμέων δὲ ἔχονται τὸ πρὸς ἐσπέρης Ἀσβύσται. οὗτοι ὑπὲρ Κυρήνης οἰκέουσι. ἐπὶ θάλασσαν δὲ οὐ κατήκουσι Ἀσβύσται τὸ γὰρ παρὰ θάλασσαν Κυρηναῖοι νέμονται. τεθριπποβάται δὲ οὐκ ἦκιστα ἀλλὰ μάλιστα Λιβύων εἰσί, νόμους δὲ τοὺς πλεῦνας μιμέεσθαι ἐπιτηδεύουσι τοὺς Κυρηναίων. Ἀσβυστέων δὲ ἔχονται τὸ πρὸς ἐσπέρης Αὐσχίσαι: οὗτοι ὑπὲρ Βάρκης οἰκέουσι, κατήκοντες ἐπὶ θάλασσαν κατ' Εὐεσπερίδας. Αὐσχισέων δὲ κατὰ μέσον τῆς χώρης οἰκέουσι Βάκαλες, ὀλίγον ἔθνος, κατήκοντες ἐπὶ θάλασσαν κατὰ Ταύχειρα πόλιν τῆς Βαρκαίης: νόμοισι δὲ τοῖσι αὐτοῖσι χρέωνται τοῖσι καὶ οἱ ὑπὲρ Κυρήνης. (Hdt. IV, 170-171)

The next people westward of the *Giligamae* are the *Asbystae*, who dwell inland of Cyrene, not coming down to the sea-coast; for that is Cyrenaean territory. These are drivers of four-horse chariots not less but more than any other Libyans; it is their practice to imitate most of the Cyrenaean usages. Next westward of the *Asbystae* are the *Auschisae*, dwelling inland of Barce, and touching the sea-coast at *Euhesperidae*. About the middle of the land of the *Auschisae* dwells the little tribe of the *Bacales*, whose territory comes down to the sea at *Taucheira*, a town in the Barcaean country; their usages are the same as those of the dwellers inland of Cyrene. (Hdt. IV, 170-171)

Extra-urban sanctuaries have been, for decades, the object of study of quite a few researchers, who have attempted to explain their location outside an urban area (Greco, 1990; Leone, 1998). In many occasions, these complexes, as Olivia Menozzi (2015: 68) accurately summarises, have been seen as 'radiating centres' intended to 'hellenise' the territory and its pre-existing local populations, functioning also as boundary markers between the *polis* and its *chora*. Nevertheless, we align with Menozzi's opinion, seeing them more as testimonies of a bidirectional process of cultural transformation, where the Greco-Roman structures interchanged elements with the indigenous world in a varied range of interactions that often escape normativity and regularity.

The Sanctuary of the *Chthonic Nymphs* is located in the limits of the *chora*, outside the defensive walls—both the Archaic and the Hellenistic ramparts—in the north-western side of the acropolis, and at the same level but opposite to the great Sanctuary of Apollo, called also *Myrtousa*, situated on the north-eastern slope of the acropolis (fig. 2). We are dealing with a rustic sanctuary marked by a series of small, natural caves with irregular niches cut into the rock, probably destined for ex-votos and reliefs. It is remarkable to note that six anepigraphic altars were also discovered near these niches (Micheli and Santucci, 2000;



**Figure 2.** Plan of Cyrene. Edited by the authors; encircled, the Sanctuary of the *Chthonic Nymphs* (A), and the extra-urban Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore (C). Based on Stucchi, 1975: pl. 1; actualised by A. Panigni.

Napolitano and Venturini, 2015: 61). As it is well attested, these kinds of rock sanctuaries, especially in their dimension dedicated to nymphs, are very common in Greece (Stucchi, 1975: 259 ff.; Arias, 1941; Ossana *et al.*, 2008), but they also belong to the ancestral Libyan tradition of rock cult spaces, as we will see in other examples.

The name of the sanctuary actually comes from the identification as chthonic nymphs of most of nearly 4500 terracotta figurines found during Richard Norton's 1911 excava-



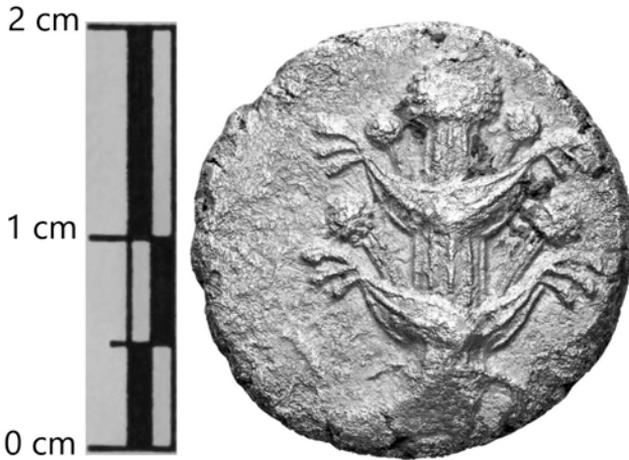
**Figure 3.** Cyrene, Sanctuary of *Nymphai Chthoniai*. Terracottas' findspot. Neg. Norton, 1911. From Micheli and Santucci, 2000: pl. III.

tions (Norton, 1911). These excavations were undertaken in the sanctuary under the patronage of the Archaeological Institute of America and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. After the discovery of the astonishing quantity of pieces, the place was referred to as the 'terracotta garden' (fig. 3). Unfortunately, during the Second World War in North Africa, most of these figurines were lost, and a small number of them are now conserved in several museums. In the late 1920s a photographic catalogue has been made, with information of over 1000 of these objects, and it has provided precious documentation for the typological range that was in use at the Sanctuary of the *Chthonic Nymphs* (this photographic catalogue, along with the figurines at Swansea, Boston, and Cyrene itself, became the focus of the exhaustive collective work *Il Santuario delle Nymphai Chthoniai a Cirene: Il sito e le terrecotte*: Micheli and Santucci, 2000). Their diverse dates testify to the active period of the sanctuary, which extends from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Although most of the pieces are dated between the late 5<sup>th</sup> and the late 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, the most tardive examples come from Hellenistic and Roman periods, more precisely from the Antonine period (Boston, MFA, inv. 12.130; Micheli and Santucci, 2000: 163, no. 434, pl. XXX).

The majority of these figurines (fig. 4) are standing female types (14-30 cm high), made in different local workshops, following the technique of 'derivate production' and belonging to a second-generation of the matrix (Micheli and Santucci, 2000: 31-33, 143-184;



**Figure 4.** Terracotta figurines from the Sanctuary of the *Chthonic Nymphs* in Cyrene: *a*) with silphium and crown. 5<sup>th</sup> cent. BC (14.8 cm h. Boston, MFA, inv. 14.469); *b*) with silphium, gazelle and cup. 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC (ca. 16 cm h. Museum of Cyrene, inv. 2995); *c*) enthroned with a young boy at her right flank and a cup. 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC (Museum of Cyrene, inv. 7692). From Micheli and Santucci, 2000: pl. XVI, 110; VI, 3; VIII, 2; *d*) with cup, silphium and a child at her back. 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC (12.5 cm h. Louvre Museum, inv. CA 423). © F. Salcedo and E. Benito (2019).



**Figure 5.** Head of a tetradrachm of Cyrene with the silphium plant, ca. 480-435 BC. BMC Cyr. 10, nos. 42-43 (pl. V, 16-17). From *Coin Archives*. Last access: March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Available at <<https://www.coinarchives.com/a/lotviewer.php?LotID=1608942&AuclD=3400&Lot=683&Val=1aa9fa8059f7091a3668105735ba18a8>>.

Nicholls, 1952; Muller and Laflí, 2015). They all are dressed with a *chiton* covered with a long cloak of goat skin settled on the upper chest and around the shoulders, also known as *aigeas*, exactly like Apollonius of Rhodes described some local deities: κλύτε, φίλοι· τρεῖς γάρ μοι ἀνιάζοντι θεάων, στέρφεσιν αἰγείοις ἐξωσμέναι ἐξ ὑπάτοιου αὐχένος ἀμφί τε νῶτα καὶ ἰξύας, ἦύτε κοῦραι, ἔσαν ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς μάλ' ἐπισχεδόν· [...] (1347-1350) 'Listen, my friends. As I lay grieving, three goddesses, dressed in goat skins from the tops of their necks around their backs and waists, just like girls, stood right above my head. [...]'. It is, as well, interesting the passage of Herodotus (IV, 189) where we read that Athena's aegis comes from the Libyan women. Most of them also wear a *polos* and their hair is worn in long corkscrew 'Libyan' curls that frame the face. One of their most frequent attributes is the silphium, an emblematic extinct plant of Cyrene used for cooking and, particularly, for medical purposes (Davesne, 1986; Parisi Presicce, 1994; Salcedo, 1996: 199; Ottone, 2002: 89-92; Segura Munguía and Torres Ripa, 2009) (fig. 5), as well as a small cup probably destined to contain silphium juice. The juice of silphium, also called *laser* or *laserpicium*, was mixed with flour for conservation, as it is noted by Theophrastus (*HP VI*, 3, 2) and Pliny (*NH XIX*, 44), and exported to the Mediterranean ports, becoming a true landmark of the economy of the Cyrenean region during Greek and Roman periods (Str. XVII, 3, 20; Chamoux, 1953).

In many cases, they wear a crown of cane (fig. 4a) (Micheli and Santucci, 2000: 147), and sometimes a small gazelle appears at their sides, as protector of animals (fig. 4b) (Fabricotti, 1987: 236, fig. 17; Micheli and Santucci, 2000: 69). Others presumably coming from the same sanctuary are seated in a throne (fig. 4c), and there is also one figurine who carries, in addition, a little child at her back (fig. 4d).

We consider these *chthonic nymphs* the assimilation of the Greek nymphs to a series of indigenous deities who protect land, livestock, fecundity, and healing, and that were worshipped—just as the nymphs—in caves or rocky shelters. This assimilation makes

possible their Greek iconographic and stylistic formulation, adding attributes which refer to their different dimensions: the goat skin, as a sign of their protection over cattle, especially ovine; the gazelle—an animal connected to Isis—as *potnia theron*; the *polos*, as agrarian deity; the silphium, for its healing facet; the child, as a goddess of fecundity. Through a semantic process, triggered by efficiency and opportunity in the transmission of religious ideas or messages, the same deity can be presented with diverse images alluding to the hypostasis of the attributes. But undifferentiated collective deities can also end up unified in one or several deities which reunite the totality of the dimensions. This is probably the way in which we must explain that some Paleo-Libyan female deities, maybe aniconic, worshipped in caves, reached singularity and iconism by means of their assimilation with Greek deities close to them, enabling their Classical iconographic formulation.

The proof of the evolution towards the determination of a religious identity, particularised and iconic, for these Paleo-Libyan deities, is found in a number of reliefs kept in the Museum of Cyrene, where we see a goddess Libya already integrated in the local Greek pantheon (figs. 6, 7 and 8). With a wide dating (from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), these panels were discovered in the periphery of Cyrene (Shahat), and many of them were attributed by Emanuela Fabbriotti (1987) to the neighbouring rock-cut Sanctuary of Budrasc (Budarag). Although the analysis of Fabbriotti points out very interesting questions, like the possibility of these images being a representation of Greek Mystery cults, we consider that their ultimate interpretation might result from a study which delves into the phenomenon of the acculturation as a key to understand the scenes that are depicted and which were interpreted as ‘the reflection of the hard daily life of the pastoral society’ of the inhabitants of the *chora* (Fabbriotti, 1997: 80–81) (figs. 6, 7). It should be pointed out that we use the term *acculturation* in a new multidimensional perspective consisting on a wide confluence of various cultural practices that interact with each other and not only as an influence acting in one direction (Salcedo, 1999: 90).

The proper typology of this sanctuary, situated 3 km from Cyrene, as we will see below, reinforces the idea of the existence of an indigenous preceding cult in the Sanctuary of the *Chthonic Nymphs* of Cyrene. In one of the panels (which remain mostly in the mag-



**Figure 6.** Relief with divine assembly. Museum of Cyrene (no inventory number). From Micheli and Santucci, 2000: pl. VII, 4.



Figure 7. Relief with divine assembly. Museum of Cyrene (inv. 15.015). From Micheli and Santucci, 2000: pl. VIII, 1.

azines of the Museum of Cyrene), following the iconographic formula of the assembly of gods, reunited into a very clearly-defined cave (fig. 6), Greek gods are shown standing, except for two goddesses seating at both of the corners of the cave. At the right side, we can recognise an enthroned goddess Libya, being worshipped by a standing assistant and a collectivity of animals disposed in two registers.

In another relief we observe in the foreground several enthroned female figures that can be interpreted as Libyan goddesses (Museum of Cyrene, inv. 15.015; Micheli and Santucci, 2000: pl. VIII, 1; Salcedo, 1996: 197) (fig. 7).

Other examples of the process of acquisition of a determined identity and the integration of goddess Libya in the Greek pantheon are shown in other reliefs, such as one guarded in the Museum of Cyrene (fig. 8a), and another kept in the British Museum, where the Nymph Cyrene is represented being crowned by Libya *stephanousa* (fig. 8b).

Maybe the main key to claiming that these Libyan goddesses, although formulated in a Classical language, represent ancient Libyan deities who have reached the property of singularity, can be revealed by a relief from the Punic Béja, in Tunisia. The relief from Béja (fig. 9) is very similar in composition to the one of Cyrene (fig. 7). Here we find one of the most evident cases of a hybridised society like the one of ancient North Africa, even in Roman times. The formal composition of the representation is Greek,



**Figure 8.** a) Relief with divine assembly. Museum of Cyrene (Col. G. Mermet). © *Livius.org* / J. Lendering; b) Relief from the Temple of Aphrodite, Cyrene. British Museum (inv. 1861,1127.30). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

similar to the precedent reliefs of Cyrene, but here the assembly of deities is composed by gods and goddesses who are Libyan-Punic, and whose names are expressed in Latin characters (Calvo, 2018).

The Sanctuary of the *Chthonic Nymphs* reflects the apparent or purposeful will of Greek Cyrene to interact with the local population. The very typology of the rock shrine itself, in both of these cultures, signifies an integration with the indigenous dimension. This can be supported by comparing the Sanctuary of the *Chthonic Nymphs* with the neighbouring Greek Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone, in Cyrene (White, 1984; Schaus, 1985; Lowenstam *et al.*, 1987) (fig. 2), and its own terracottas (Uhlenbrock, 2010). Most of them depict an enthroned Demeter; no chthonian nymphs can be seen and the silphium plant hardly appears. Considering their formal language and artistic expression, we can distinguish a certain contrast between the figures from the Demeter sanctuary (based on models from Miletus, Athens and Corinth dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC), and the terracottas from the shrine of the *Chthonic Nymphs*, which we can presume, as we have remarked, come from several workshops; *i. e.* some follow a naturalistic classical



**Figure 9.** Relief of the seven Libyan-Punic deities from Béja (Tunisia), 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. National Bardo Museum (Tunis). Encircled, the two female characters in the assembly. © F. Salcedo and E. Benito (2017).

formal language, while others are made by local hands. This evidence leads us to assert that in the Sanctuary of the *Chthonic Nymphs* there is an intention of creating links to indigenous people. But the question persists: why not in the Sanctuary of Demeter itself, located nearby? In our opinion, the reason appears clear. Even if there has not been found—until now—any structure or object suggestive of a previous local cult, the location of the sanctuary in the *chora* evidences that it must have been visited by autochthonous settlers in a very distant past. This happens in many other sacred areas, such as Hagfa El Khasaliya and Ain Hofra which will be mentioned later. In all of them, there must have been a certain local cult dedicated to deities of earth, nature, and health, exactly as Apollonius of Rhodes suggests (II, 502–505): αὐτὰρ Ἀπόλλων τήν γ' ἀνερειψάμενος ποταμῷ ἔπι ποιμαίνουσαν τηλόθεν Αἰμόνης χθονίης παρακάτθετο νύμφαις, αἱ Λιβύην ἐνέμοντο παρὰ Μυρτώσιον αἶπος. ‘But while she was tending her sheep by the river, Apollo snatched her far away from Haemonia and placed her among the indigenous nymphs who inhabited Libya near the hill of Myrtles’.

In another passage this author transmits the nymphs’ own testimony, when they say: οἰοπόλοι δ' εἰμὲν χθόνιαι θεαὶ ἀδῆεσσαι, ἡρώσσαι Λιβύης τιμήροισι ἤδὲ θυγατρές. (IV, 1322–1323) ‘We are the solitary goddesses of this land, heroines endowed with human voices, Libya’s guardians and daughters’.

Also in one of the *Orphic Hymns* we read: Νύμφαι, θυγατέρες μεγαλήτορος Ὠκεανοῖο, ὑγροπόροις γαίης ὑπὸ κεῦθεισιν οἰκί' ἔχουσαι [...] (51, 2–3) 'Nymphs, who from Ocean's stream derive your birth, Who dwell in liquid caverns of the earth [...]'. And in the *Palatine Anthology*:

ΝΙΚΑΙΝΕΤΟΥ. Ἡρώσσαι Λιβύων, ὄρος ἄκριτον αἶτε νέμεσθε, αἰγίδι καὶ στρεπτοῖς ζωσάμεναι θυσάνοις, τέκνα θεῶν, δέξασθε Φιλήτιδος ἱερὰ ταῦτα δράγματα καὶ χλωροὺς ἐκ καλάμης στεφάνους, ἄσς' ἀπὸ λικμητοῦ δεκατεύεται· ἀλλὰ καὶ οὕτως Ἡήρώσσαι Λιβύων χαίρετε δεσπότιδες. (VI, 225)

Nicaenetus. Heroines of the Libyans, girt with tufted goat-skins, who haunt this mountain chain, daughters of the gods, accept from Philetis these consecrated sheaves and fresh garlands of straw, the full tithe of his threshing; but even so, all hail to ye, Heroines, sovereign ladies of the Libyans. (VI, 225)

In this way, focusing on the sanctuary of Cyrene, we could state that the chthonian nymphs are the Greek interpretation of indigenous deities linked with earth, nature, and health. These categories—familiar to the new colonists—led them to comprehend and identify this religious register as their own, in their category of goddesses of nature, so as to get into a process of syncretism with the indigenous deities of nature (as happened in locations like Drakospilia, in Cephalonia, where there was a cult ongoing from Neolithic times (Muller and Lafli, 2015: 470). But, in addition, as in the cases of the rock-cut sanctuaries mentioned above, they took the place as an opportunity to make connections to the pre-existing population using their own symbolic world.

As part of the process of religious syncretism, the colonists created a mythical itinerary that linked the local deities with their own nymphs who, according to the story, helped Aristaeus, son of Cyrene and Apollo, to discover the silphium, an element of health. After a process of religious integration in the Greek-Libyan pantheon, these local deities will appear as Libyan goddesses with an individual and relevant representation, as we have seen in the aforementioned votive reliefs. As such, they will attract a certain cult that probably included men, as is shown by many figurines of beardless youths and older bearded men, with *himation*, the majority standing, other seated. These offerings, however, could be also understood as *daimones enghenetai* (local deities) (Bacchielli, 1994: 56), as members of the Greco-Libyan pantheon, or as a chorus for the chthonian nymphs or Libyan goddesses (Micheli and Santucci, 2000: 113–114).

At the end of the semantic process, we find a syncretic image of goddess Libya containing all elements of religious local traditions and Greek iconography. This icon will be fixed, as other Classical personifications, to allude to the Greek territory of Cyrene and afterwards the Roman province, as we see on Hadrianic coins and reliefs, where goddess Libya frequently appears with silphium and gazelles (Mattingly, 1976: pl. CLXXIII, CLXXX; Toynbee, 1934: 121 ff.; Salcedo, 1996: 199–200; Catani, 1987; Zagdoun, 1992).

## 2. Religious syncretism in other rock sanctuaries in the *chora* of Cyrene

Continuing the narrative of syncretism in sanctuaries cut in rock, the case of Budrasc (Budarag), to which the reliefs mentioned above belong (Ferri, 1922a; Menozzi, 2015), is remarkable. It represents a sanctuary where we can see an integration of Libyan and Hellenic traditions. Situated on the eastern side of the Baggara hill (Wadi Bu Nabeh), 3.5 km west from Cyrene, it consists of two main chambers (fig. 10); one trapezoidal, dedicated to ‘the goddesses’ (ΤΑΙΣ ΘΕΑΙΣ), dated between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC; and the other one quadrangular, dedicated to ‘the (male) gods’ (ΤΟΙΣ ΘΕΟΙΣ), dating from between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (Marini, 2012: 32; Napolitano and Venturini, 2015: 64). The site counts on an impressive rupestrian architecture composed by rock-cut structures such as narrow passages and long staircases connecting the terraces, which highlight the chthonian character of the ensemble, forcing visitors to follow a descending path to the entrance of the shrines (Menozzi, 2015: 59–60). This sacred space is also situated near a stream of flowing water, and is associated with a number of rectangular niches, probably intended for votive objects and/or the aforementioned reliefs with representations of Greco-Libyan divine assemblies, as well as several inscriptions, in both of the chambers, but showing more projection in the case of the male space, with dedications even to Apollo and Dionysus in the latest examples (Marini, 2012: 33). The sanctuary was transformed into a mithraeum (Ferri, 1922b) in Roman times, maybe in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, and functioned also as a funerary area, but,

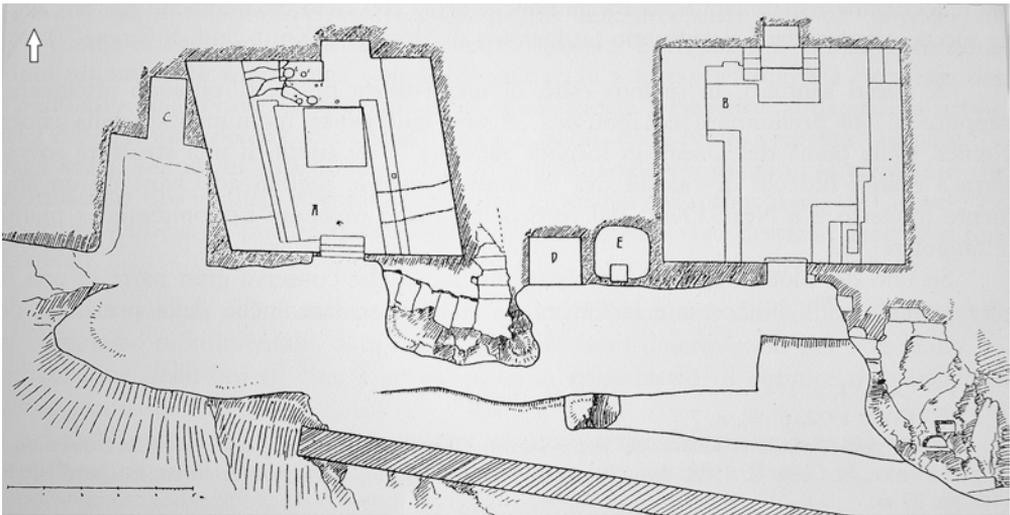


Figure 10. Plan of the Sanctuary of Budrasc with the two chambers. From Ferri, 1922a.

for reasons of respect, the tombs are well-distanced from the place destined for the cult itself (Menozzi, 2015: 60-61).

The same area of Baggara contains several other sanctuaries, of which it is particularly important to mention the one of Caf Atjur ('the cave of the birds') in Wadi Zaza, near the ancient Greek city of *Taucheira* (Tocra). This rocky cult space has attracted the interest of researchers mainly for the exceptional particularity of the content of its walls, where we can find Prehistoric engravings of birds—most likely partridges, of Capsian type—as well as numerous Greek inscriptions (Abdussalem *et al.*, 1998). These graffiti consist essentially of Greek names, interpreted to be those of the peregrines visiting the cave. In various occasions the letter-group *Gobba* appears, combined with *theos* in one of the examples, attributable probably to the cult of a Libyan deity with this name. Very little is known about the deity's personality (Reynolds, 1987: 383; Abdussalem *et al.*, 1998: 49; Alfayé, 2010: 189; Marini, 2012: 36). The space represents an extraordinary example of continuous frequentation of sacred places, extending into Roman times.

The Sanctuary of Hagfa El Khasaliya (Purcaro, 1974–1975: 287-294) is found in a relevant agricultural area dedicated to olive cultivation, and consists of a cult space of Libyan background notably remodelled in Greek style in Hellenistic times. It also has a number of Greek inscriptions (Abdussalem *et al.*, 1998: 49), and was frequented into the Roman era. The cave changed its religious function for a habitational one with the arrival of Christianity, and has proved to be in use until recent dates (Marini, 2012: 35). It has a trapezoidal plant, with two caves: the smaller of them preceding the bigger one. Its similarities with the shrine of Budrasc are notable, and it has engravings of ploughs, interpretable as symbols of abundancy and fertility of the soil (Marini, 2012: 36), for which the site is also known as the *Sanctuary of the Ploughs* (Hodos, 2006).

We can also mention the recently published so-called 'Sanctuary of the *Rocky Dionysus*' (Fabbricotti, 2007; Menozzi, 2011: 323–324; 2015; 2016), which possibly was an open-air shrine, situated on the eastern side of Baggara between Alek Ain Bueda and Wadi Bel Gadir, close to a significant water stream, and also in association with some rock-cut altar-niches. The cult space takes its name from a landmark find effectuated at the site (a *unicum* for Cyrene): a standing male relief sculpture of 1.7 m evidencing a form of Archaic cult of Dionysus, based on his ancient agrarian and chthonian dimensions. The figure has been approached, by means of the study of its iconographic and technical features, to *Dionysus Orthos*, or *Dionysus Perikionios* of Thebes (Paus. IX, 12, 4), and to ceremonies involving a herm or pole that would represent the god, specially prepared for processions and for its ritual crowning with vegetal elements, as the shape of the head and neck of this statue seems to suggest, including a hole probably intended for attaching the decorations. Close to the sculpture, the sanctuary has another representation; a silphium plant in low-relief, which links this sacred area with the surrounding territory via one of its most celebrated natural resources (Menozzi, 2015: 60–62, figs. 2–4).

Also in the vicinity of Cyrene, but to the east, we note the case of the Sanctuary of Ain Hofra, object of detailed studies from the decade of the 2000s (Fabbricotti,

2007). As some recent analyses using GIS (Geographic Information System) mapping technologies (Menozzi, 2015: 62-64 and fig. 6) have revealed, its sacred area actually consists of an ensemble of funerary and votive remains, separated, as in the case of Budrasc, but interconnected by staircases and passages cut into the rock. The cult spaces present caves, as well as altar- niches and *naiskoi*, with dedications to the Heroes, the Eumenides, and Zeus *Melichios*, which seem to attest a form of elitist worship with roots in ancient Libyan deities of chthonian nature; in this way we could speak of syncretism. Chronologically, this sanctuary was frequented between the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and the Roman age, although some of the chambers have also shown a Prehistoric use. The sanctuary has been renewed and has changed the distribution of its areas, and the types of its cults, many times through the centuries (Menozzi, 2015: 62-67; Napolitano and Venturini, 2015: 62-63). One of the most interesting examples of these transitions is the cavity known as the *Ammon shrine*. The *Ammon shrine* was in origin a funerary architecture and was provided with *klinai*, apparently for its use as a kind of *nekromanteion* (Menozzi, 2015: 67) in connection with the ancestors of an aristocratic family or lineage (the Heroes).

Another site located in the pre-desertic area, 50 km south of Cyrene, is the rock Sanctuary of Slonta, which represents the clearest example of survival of Libyan religion in Roman times. The complex consisted of a big, covered space (of nearly rectangular shape, measuring approximately 7 x 4 m) with several subsidiary small caves. In the centre of the main room—a sort of central courtyard—there used to be a tall column, but today only the base remains. The huge number of figures cut in the rock justifies its Arab name El Tesuira ('picture gallery') (fig. 11). There are human representations, both male and female, and also many different animals like snakes and pigs. The main evidence that brought Luni (1987) to identify Slonta as a *nekromanteion* was the presence of *cut heads* (*têtes coupées*), interpreted by him as deceased. However, if we consider a *nekromanteion* as a temple dedicated to infernal deities, where it was usual to practice divination through the consultation of the dead, what we see in Slonta is something else. Of course, it could also have had this function, but there are more relevant references to Nature: animals, serpents, sacrifices of pigs, and the gazelle. What seems clear to have been practiced in this sacred space were ceremonies of initiation which included ritual ecstatic dances. All of this would be performed as a propitiation of fertility and renovation associated with the power transmitted by the souls of the deceased, evoked through their schematic figures carved on rocks, and symbolically reinforced by the long snake that seems to envelope and protect them.

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To conclude, we can state that from West to East, the narrative religiosity of ancient Libyans (or Paleo-Berbers), although heterogeneous and diverse, is settled in nature. The fact that we know or do not know the names of their gods does not represent a central



Figure 11. General view of the Sanctuary of Slonta. © A. Alvar (2005).

question. Maybe they did not have precise names for some of them. The religion of ancient Libyans is considered to be, to an extent, ‘invisible’ (Ramos Martín, 2014), as their worship is in nature and in rocks, following a kind of uninterrupted tradition from the Neolithic (with examples in Tassili, Tazina...) until Roman times. In words of Jules Toutain (1920: 52–57): ‘Les hauts-lieux, les cavernes, les excavations et les parois rocheuses représentent les formes de sanctuaires les plus simples, les plus grossières [et] (...) se rattachent, en Afrique, à des traditions rituelles beaucoup plus anciennes que la conquête romaine’. Rocks are the earth itself and thus, have the power and influence of the earth in fertility, wealth, life, and after-life. This chthonic religiosity in sites such as the so-called Sanctuary of the *Chthonic Nymphs* in Cyrene, and those of the area of Baggara is also attested to by iconography in reliefs associated to rock shrines, where we see a Libyan goddess or goddesses whose attributes are those of the earth. Their iconographic formula—as it happens with other Libyan deities—is also a product of the adoption of mythical narratives, as a result of the process of hybridity and syncretism with Punic, Greek, and Roman deities. All this religious phenomenon was lived and experienced in North Africa both by individuals and collectives during more than a millennium, and we can still recognise it in some traditions of ‘emotional communities’ (Chaniotis, 2013a, 2013b) of the territory nowadays named Tamazgha.

## Note

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