

# **Common Concerns, Assimilated Cults: an Assimilation of Tanit with Ceres in Early Roman Melite**

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## **Abstract**

The cult of Carthaginian Tanit enjoyed popularity on the island of Malta already before the latter was taken over by the Romans in ca. 218 BC. But two successive coin issues of Melite's early Roman occupation seem to indicate an assimilation of Carthaginian Tanit with Roman Ceres. This paper seeks to examine the process involved in this assimilation and to identify any possible driving forces or underlying motives.

## **Introduction**

Revealing a new reality brought about by socio-political changes, the choice of imagery, symbols, and legends (on coins) often link a local community to their new external ruling community. Such choices also shed light on how the local community sought to project itself – particularly, vis-à-vis their rulers – within the new socio-political scenario.<sup>1</sup>

With their imagery, symbols, and legends, coins were very apt for the diffusion of political messages and religious ideologies. At the same time, they provided a good medium for the expression of religious assimilations in response to new religious developments or changing political scenarios, often in combination with daily concerns. Religious assimilations, then, might have provided one of the best means to facilitate the co-existence of communities with different religious backgrounds.

Two particular coin issues from Melite in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC seem to betray a process of religious assimilation. Carthaginian Tanit, whose worship was long-established on the central Mediterranean island (fig. 1) was assimilated with Roman Ceres. The latter was associated with the new political establishment with whom the locals may have deemed it appropriate to maintain good relations and adjust their identity. It was also in the locals' interest, however, to secure the support of a divine protectress as long as she shared similar concerns.

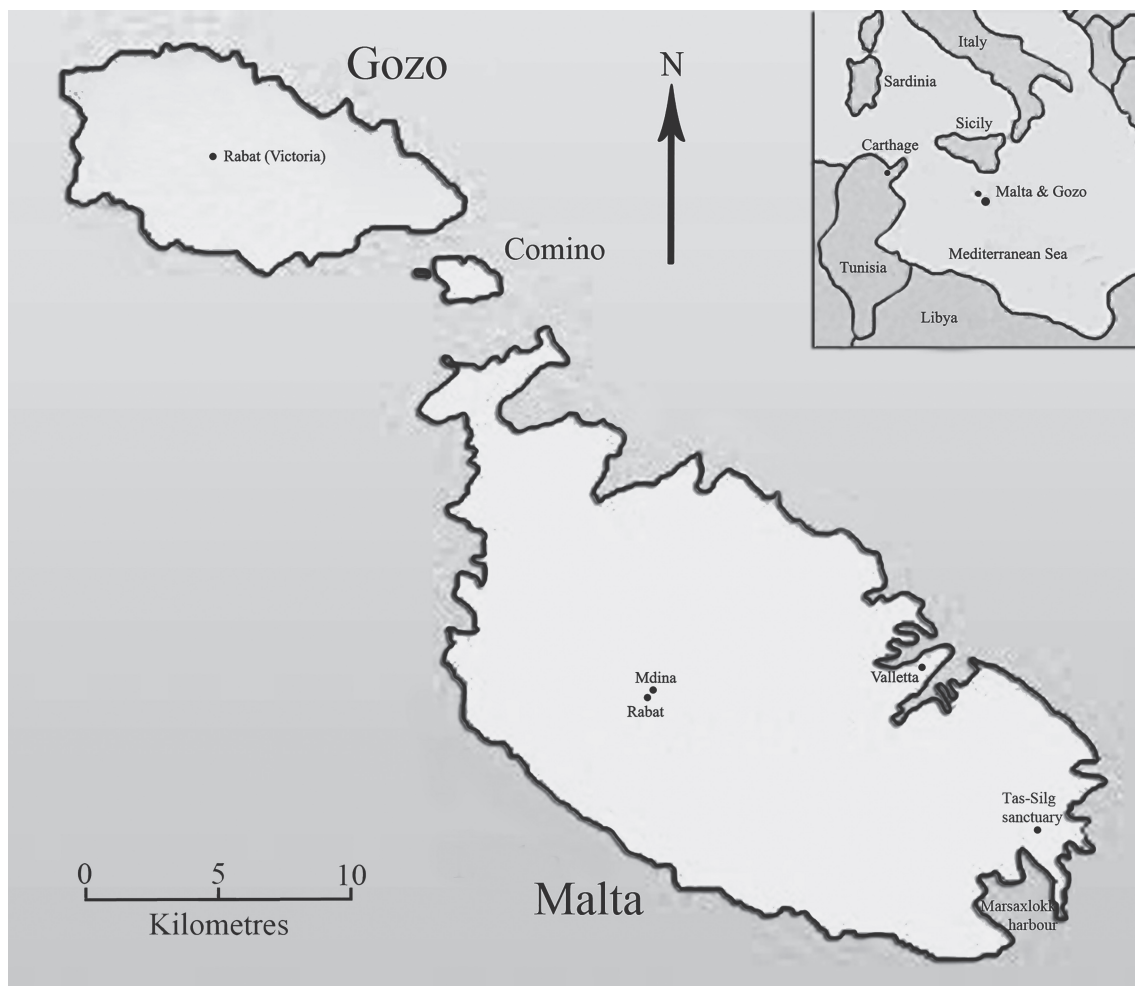


Fig. 1: Map showing the island of Malta (ancient Melite) and the adjacent island of Gozo (ancient Gaulos). The islands' location in the central Mediterranean is shown inset.

### Tanit and Ceres

Several human concerns endured beyond temporal and spatial boundaries. One such human concern was related to fertility, particularly agricultural fertility, which ensured the biological survival of human societies.

Like her Phoenician equivalent, Astarte, Carthaginian Tanit was a mother goddess who was mainly associated with fertility. Her universal symbol consists of a triangle – possibly a representation of a pyramidal or conical betyl – anthropomorphised with the addition of a head and spread arms.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Roman Ceres (along with her daughter Proserpina) was also worshipped mainly in association with fertility, particularly agricultural fertility. In particular, and as Augustine remarks in his *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos*, Ceres was identified

with the earth<sup>3</sup> from which crops spring forth. She was also identified with the grain and the bread produced from it.<sup>4</sup> Within her iconographic repertoire, wheat stalks are attributes related almost exclusively to Ceres (and to her Greek counterpart Demeter).

Since concerns of agricultural fertility fell within the domain of both Tanit and Ceres, the common concerns facilitated the accommodation of the related deities in response to the same concerns. As we shall see below, the two fertility deities enjoyed worship amongst the largely agricultural population of the Maltese islands, whose livelihood depended heavily on fertility: be it the fertility of land, of animals, or even human fertility.

### **The Cult of Tanit in Malta**

Following their submission to Roman rule around 218 BC and their annexation to the (Roman) province of Sicily, the Maltese islands were initially allowed to mint their own coinage – referred to, in fact, as ‘Romano-Maltese coinage’ – as were other provincial *civitates*. These particular coin issues appeared by the late 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. They circulated alongside Punic coins, which were still in circulation for a while after the Roman conquest of the islands and remained in circulation well into the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. The majority of these coins display strong Punic influence in their portrayal of Phoenician/Punic deities, mostly Astarte (the Phoenician equivalent of Carthaginian Tanit) or Astarte-Tanit, as well as Punic legends. The latter only gradually turn to Greek and finally to Greek transliterated into Roman/Latin script towards the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the evidence provided by some coin examples, the best evidence for the cult of Tanit in Malta comes from the multi-period sanctuary site at Tas-Silġ near the harbor of Marsaxlokk in the southern region of Malta. Dedications to Tanit (and to Hera) at Tas-Silġ always appear on pottery sherds. These Tanit dedications come from Areas 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 of the sanctuary complex.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Cult of Ceres in the Maltese Islands**

The cult of Ceres (as well as that of her daughter Proserpina) in the Maltese islands is clearly attested by epigraphic evidence. Ceres’ cult is evidenced in Gozo by means of a Roman inscription<sup>7</sup> of the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD (AD 14–29); it commemorates a dedication to Iulia Augusta (the third wife of Augustus and mother of the second emperor Tiberius) identified with the goddess Ceres. It was not unusual for this imperial lady to be assimilated with Demeter/Ceres, especially during the reign of her son Tiberius.<sup>8</sup>

The inscription is carved on a pedestal-like stone with a double-holed socket on its top surface to hold a statue. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Maltese historian Abela reports that this inscribed stone was in the foundations of a private house in Gozo.<sup>9</sup> The statue it held

evidently represented Iulia Augusta (identified with/deified as Ceres) and which, according to the inscription, was consecrated/dedicated by Lutatia, her priestess, together with her husband and children.

The statue might have been a surviving one presently kept in the Gozo Archaeology Museum along with the inscription. This statue bears evident stylistic and iconographic resemblances to surviving statues and statuettes of both Iulia Augusta/Livia herself,<sup>10</sup> of Demeter/Ceres,<sup>11</sup> as well as to representations of Iulia Augusta/Livia identified with Ceres.<sup>12</sup> On stylistic grounds, our statue is also dated to the same period as the inscription that carries the dedication to Iulia Augusta in her identification with Ceres and onto which it (i.e. our statue) would have proportionally fitted perfectly.

The statue's original provenance is unknown but, by the time of Abela's writing, it was to be found in a niche near the Citadel's main gate, placed on top of another inscribed stone to which it could not have belonged.<sup>13</sup> The statue seems to have been placed here in 1623 according to another inscription that commemorates the completion, in that year, of a new access road to the Citadel together with its embellishment with an ancient statue and ancient inscriptions.<sup>14</sup>

Such an identification of an imperial personage like Iulia Augusta with the goddess Ceres would seem to imply the exploitation of the popular worship that the cult of Ceres enjoyed amongst the largely agricultural population of the island of Gozo. As was often done, this exploitation must have been for political motives and propaganda of the imperial class, or for the personal benefits of the dedicator/s. Appealing to the sympathies of the people, the underlying religious ideology of this exercise must have left its impact on them precisely by exploiting the power exerted by the symbolism of Ceres on their daily life.<sup>15</sup>

### **Tanit and Ceres in Malta: an Assimilation Process**

As said above, the Maltese islands were allowed to mint their own coinage during their early period under Roman rule. Two particular coin issues (fig. 2) of this period were struck towards the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, although one issue (a *semis* of ca. 125 BC) is slightly later than the other (a *semis* of ca. 160 BC). The reverse side of these two coins depicts a four-winged figure of Osiris in a kneeling position with a scepter in his right hand and a whip in his left hand. The obverse side depicts a female head profile looking left and wearing a typically Egyptian head-dress with what appears to be a somewhat schematized lotus flower/'crown' or, more likely, a Hemhem crown/triple Atef crown on top. It also carries the Greek legend ΜΕΛΙΤΑΙΩΝ ('of the Maltese'). The obverse of the slightly earlier issue (of ca. 160 BC) carries a Tanit standard or symbol (as described above) evidently mounted on a pole<sup>16</sup> (as in fig. 3) located on the left side of the head profile. However, the obverse of the slightly later issue (of ca. 125 BC) carries a wheat stalk on the left side of the head profile.<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 2: The respective obverse sides of the two coin issues: that of a *semis* of ca. 160 BC on the left, and the other of a *semis* of ca. 125 BC on the right.

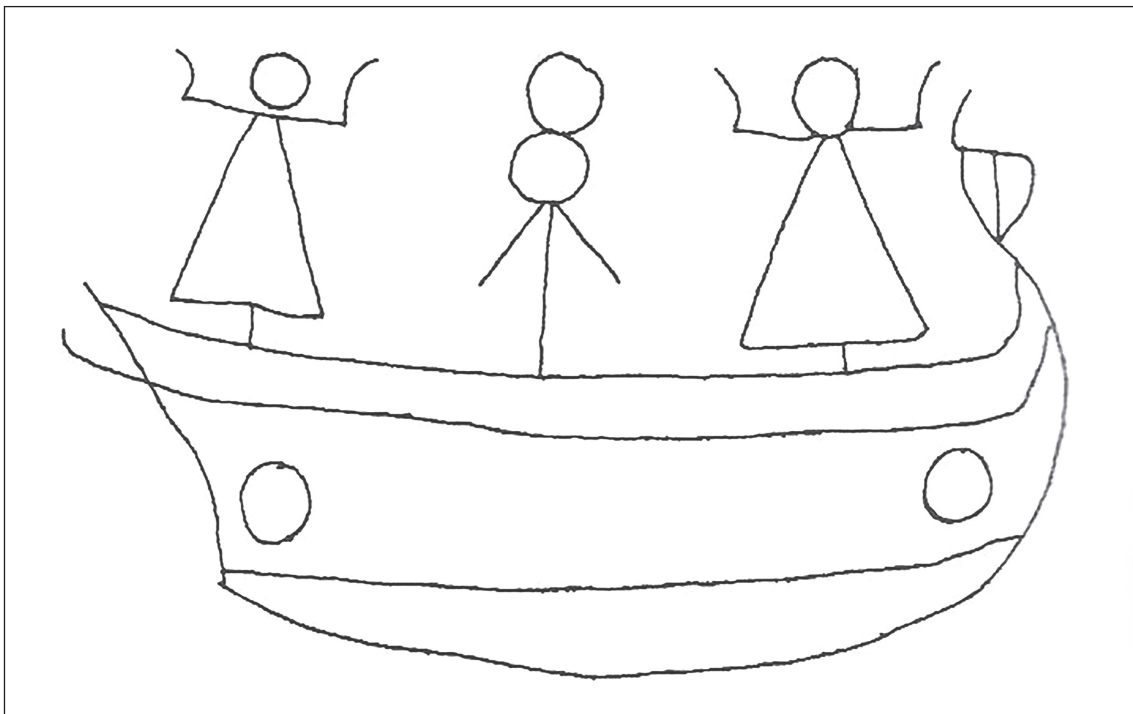


Fig. 3: Two standards/symbols of Tanit mounted on a pole and flanking a caduceus on a sea vessel as shown on a sacrificial stela from Carthage.

The Egyptianized head profile on the obverse of both coin issues seems to recall the goddess Isis, the female consort of Osiris, whose image appears on the reverse side. Isis' cult is also attested in Malta.<sup>18</sup> The head profile on our coin issues could have been inspired by Isis' iconography like that from a limestone relief depicting Isis-Thermouthis,<sup>19</sup> probably from Fayoum but now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Egypt (see fig. 4).<sup>20</sup> A similar iconography comes from a bronze statuette of Isis nursing her son Horus while carrying a pair of horns atop her Egyptian head-dress and lotus 'crown' or Hemhem 'crown'. This statuette (with one of its horns broken off) is in the Ägyptisches Museum Bonn, Germany (see fig. 5).

But the Tanit symbol on the left side of the head profile on the earlier issue would undoubtedly identify the deity as Tanit who, nonetheless, seems here to be assimilated with the Egyptian goddess Isis whose iconography she adopts. As already noted above, the later issue carries the same head profile on its obverse but now the Tanit sign is replaced by a wheat stalk, that also is placed on the left side of the head profile. The represented deity also seems to maintain an assimilation with Isis, whose same iconography she likewise adopts.



Fig. 4: A limestone relief depicting Isis-Thermouthis as half-woman and half-snake. She is also characterized by a typically Egyptian head-dress and what appears to be a lotus flower/Hemhem 'crown' on top. Probably from Fayoum, the relief is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.



Fig. 5: A bronze statuette of Isis nursing her son Horus. She carries a pair of horns (one of which is broken off) on top of a characteristically Egyptian head-dress and or Hemhem lotus 'crown'. This statuette is in the Ägyptisches Museum Bonn, Germany.

With the appearance of the second issue a few decades later, it is therefore evident that the accompanying symbol changed from one representing Tanit to one representing Ceres, despite keeping the same head profile. Thus, we seem to have a common but interchangeable image (i.e. the head profile) which, depending on the accompanying symbol, represents either Tanit (on the earlier issue), or Ceres (on the later issue). While retaining the same image, the change in representation from that of Tanit to that of Ceres is not expected to have been hindered by their respective assimilations with Isis. Demeter (the Greek counterpart of Ceres) and Isis were likewise also assimilated, particularly by the Greeks. However, like Tanit and Ceres, Isis was associated with fertility, particularly human fertility,<sup>21</sup> and her cult was also popular in the Roman world. Thus, her assimilation with both goddesses might have proved quite natural. Indeed, the proposed assimilation process between Tanit and Ceres could have been facilitated not only by their common concern with fertility, but also by their respective and common assimilation with Isis.

The same image could, therefore, be retained while changing only its representation by changing its accompanying symbol. Thus, by retaining the same image (in both instances, recalling/assimilated with Isis), these two coin issues may suggest that Tanit

was assimilated with Ceres within a matter of a few decades. This was done through an assimilation process that seems to have involved the interchangeability of an image which changed its representation depending on the accompanying symbol.

### Conclusion

This move may have reflected a refashioning or negotiation of Maltese identity to bring it into line with the new political reality, now that the Maltese were under Roman rule. It may have also been a 'political' move that involved shifting political allegiances now that Rome had defeated and destroyed Carthage in 146 BC, at the end of the Third Punic War.

From a religious point of view, such a move may have reflected a convenient reworking of Maltese religious affiliations within a compatible religious framework. This way, they still secured heavenly benefits of agricultural fertility from the divine protectress even if this happened under a different name. Thus, a cult connected to agricultural fertility could be maintained under a reworked religious form best suited to reflect both their concerns and the new political scenario.

### Acknowledgements

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gordon 2018, 26 f.

<sup>2</sup> Moscati 1973, 178–180; Warmington 1969, 145 f.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, 4. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Spaeth 1996, 16 f. 20 f. 24 f. 34–41.

<sup>5</sup> Azzopardi 1993, 37–44; Coleiro 1971, 67.

<sup>6</sup> MISSIONE 1963 (1964), 151.

<sup>7</sup> CIL X, 7501.

<sup>8</sup> Barrett 2002, 141 f. 145. 161. 209 f. 263. 277 f.; CIL XI, 3196. 281. figs. 22. 23; Spaeth 1994, 88 f. 92 f.; 1996, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Abela 1647, 215.

<sup>10</sup> See Bartman 1999, 48 fig. 45.

<sup>11</sup> See examples in LIMC IV/1, 851. 855. 898; IV/2, 566 no. 50. 570 no. 92. 602 nos. 73–75.

<sup>12</sup> See Barrett 2002, fig. 23; Bartman 1999, 107 fig. 85; Wood 1998, figs. 43. 44.



<sup>13</sup> Abela 1647, 216 f.

<sup>14</sup> Azzopardi 2008, 19 f.

<sup>15</sup> See Spaeth 1996, 47. 101. 103. 119–123.

<sup>16</sup> Sometimes, deities' standards/symbols (including that of Tanit) could be mounted on poles to receive worship, even aboard ships, like an example shown on a sacrificial stela from Carthage. See Brody 1998, 27. 31–33. 38. 70. 72. figs. 16. 18. 66.

<sup>17</sup> Azzopardi 1993, 39 f. Coleiro 1971, 68 f. 75 f. pl. 15 nos. 3. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Bonanno – Cilia 2005, 36 f. 62. 86. 122 f. 163. 216. 225.

<sup>19</sup> Isis-Thermouthis is a composite goddess on account of her association with Renenutet, the cobra goddess (linked also to fertility and harvest) (Shaw 2014, 154). In fact, she is represented on this relief as half-woman and half-snake.

<sup>20</sup> LIMC V/1, 779 no. 242b; V/2, 516 no. 242b.

<sup>21</sup> Eiland 2004, 24.

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Fig. 1: by the author. – Fig. 2: Photograph © Daniel Cilia. – Fig. 3: Source: Brody 1998, fig. 16. Reproduced with permission of the author. – Fig. 4: Source: LIMC V/2, 516 no. 242b. – Fig. 5: by the author.

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