Naming and Mapping the Gods in the Ancient Mediterranean

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Spaces, Mobilities, Imaginaries

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Romina Carboni

Between Astarte, Isis and Aphrodite/Venus. Cultural Dynamics in the Coastal Cities of Sardinia in the Roman Age: The Case Study of Nora

The transition period between Carthaginian and Roman rule in the western Mediterranean has always been a stimulating field of study, particularly regarding cultic dynamics. These emerge from the examination of the various processes of cultural interaction, evidenced both by changes and persistence within the sacred areas and by the votive offerings from them. In this paper, attention will be focused on some female divinities, connected with the agrarian-fertilistic sphere, as well as with navigation and trade, and on the relative places of worship, with particular attention to Sardinia, an island that in the course of time has played a crucial role in commercial exchanges on the western side of the Mediterranean.

The island has provided abundant evidence of the complex cultic dynamics that developed according to phenomena essentially of exchange between the Roman-Italic component, influences from North Africa and the Eastern world.

In this respect, the cultural stratification found in the island's coastal towns is of particular interest, as they are characterised by a commercial vocation that made them a meeting place for foreign peoples who contributed to the spread not only of material goods but also of religious beliefs.[1] An interesting example of this is the diffusion of certain Eastern cults linked to divinities of agrarian-fertilistic and navigational spheres, such as Aphrodite and Isis, which seem to overlap, with the same competences, with divine entities of Punic origin that are well documented in the territory.[2]

In Sardinia, as in many other Mediterranean centres, it is common practice to erect places of worship in coastal cities and harbours for deities such as Astarte, Isis and Aphrodite/Venus, who are often worshipped as patron goddesses of navigation and are therefore referred to as *Pelagia* ("of the sea"), *Euploia* ("protector of good navigation") or *Pharia* ("guide to entering the harbour").[3]

1 On the role of negotiatores and mercatores in the diffusion of religious beliefs in Sardinia, particularly through the Campania region, see Gavini 2008. More generally see Colavitti 1999.

2 On the modalities and characteristics of the diffusion of Isiac cults in Sardinia, see Gavini 2014 and, more generally for the Italic peninsula, Fontana 2010. Regarding the evidence of Aphrodite's cult on the island, see Carboni 2020a (with previous bibliography).

3 See, on these topics, the reflections in Bonnet 1996 (where there is also a focus on Sardinia, pp. 109–111); Pironti 2007; Ieranò 2019; Bricault 2019.

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It is no coincidence, for example, that lead anchor stocks, dating from the Republican to the early Imperial age, have been found in various parts of the Sardinian seabed, bearing inscriptions with theonyms referring to Isis alone (with the epithet *Soteira*) or in association with Ceres and probably Mercury.[4] While theonyms may often refer to the names of ships, in some cases they seem to refer to the requests for protection addressed to Isis by worshippers who relied on her protection during dangerous sea voyages.[5]

These devotional practices included the erection of places of worship in honour of the goddess at ports and trading posts. The discovery in Olbia, a coastal town in northern Sardinia, of votive clay figurines linked to the cult of Aphrodite and perhaps belonging to a coastal sacellum, is in line with this logic.[6] This link with Aphrodite emerges from the presence of some votive offerings such as a statuette with a dove, found together with a leaden miniature anchor with a V-shaped mark and a shell, also leaden. The interesting aspect is the link, testified to by the simultaneous finding of a statuette of Osiris, to a further connotation of the attested deity, which in this case refers to the Isiac sphere.[7]

A similar scenario can be found in two important sites on the southern side of Sardinia: Karales and Nora, both coastal city centres characterised by cultural and cultic multi-layering. The site of Nora in particular is a case study of considerable interest, since the excavations carried out in the centre starting in 2013 by the University of Cagliari have brought to light new and interesting data that allow us to expand our knowledge of the island's cultic landscape. Nora, an ancient centre built on the promontory of Capo di Pula (Fig. 1), was founded as a Phoenician commercial emporium and, after the arrival of the Carthaginians on the island, it took on the features of an urban centre, with structures and spaces for residential, sacred, and funerary purposes.[8] With the Roman domination, which can be placed in the second half of the 3rd century BC, and the constitution of the Provincia Sardinia et Corsica in 227 BC, Nora would be characterised by an exponential development of urban spaces, infrastructures, and places of worship.[9] Among the various forms of veneration attested in the centre, of particular interest, especially in the light of recent discoveries, are the testimonies relating to the cult of a goddess who can be traced by iconographic tradition to Aphrodite/Venus, linked to the Roman *interpretatio* of a female

4 Fenet 2016, 316–317, 570–573 (nos. I13, I22, I23) (with previous bibliography). More generally on the dedication of anchors, see also Gianfrotta 1975, Gianfrotta 1994 and Demetriou 2010.

5 On this topic, see Fenet 2016, 272ff. and Demetriou 2010.

6 D'Oriano 2004; D'Oriano/Pietra 2012, 182–183; Pietra 2013, 63.

7 D'Oriano 2004, 109, 115, fig. 7. In this regard, the discovery in Olbia of a bronze statuette of Isis-Fortuna from the 1st-2nd century AD, which is supposed to be related to a private lararium or temple, is also worth mentioning (Pietra 2013, 236, fig. 88; Gavini 2014, 27, fig. 10).

8 Finocchi 2013; Bonetto 2016; Bonetto 2021.

9 Bejor 1994a; Bejor 1994b; Bonetto *et alii* 2020.

Fig. 1: Nora, Former Military Area (edited from Google Earth).

divinity whose roots lie in the local Punic substratum and who finds points of contact with other oriental divinities, such as Isis.[10] Among the most interesting testimonies in this sense, we mention here the recent ones coming from a sector of the ancient city of Nora, unexplored until about a decade ago and known as a former military area, because it had been owned for a long time by the Italian Navy.[11]

In this area, a building complex with a residential-craft function was discovered, which also revealed the presence of a sacred context (Fig. 2).[12] To be precise, it is an agglomeration divided into two sectors by an *ambitus*, which separates the part located further uphill from the one that, following the slope, reaches the road below, which is one of the main roads of the city.[13] In a room (A) of this complex, a votive deposit in primary lying was found below the level of preparation of a beaten floor.[14] The deposit, which contained material dating from the end of the 1st and beginning of the 2nd century AD, was probably related to a foundation rite. This seems to be confirmed by the sealing of the context after the deposition, by the choice of selected types of votive clays and by the presence of widespread traces of combustion and burnt soil, signs of the action of an intense fire.

10 Carboni 2020a, 121ss.

11 See, for a general overview: Carboni/Cruccas 2018 (with previous bibliography) (University of Cagliari); Bonetto 2018 (with previous bibliography) (University of Padua).

12 Giuman/Carboni 2018a and Carboni 2020, 17–27.

13 Lanteri 2016; Carboni/Cruccas 2017, 10–12.

14 Carboni 2020a, 25–27.

Fig. 2: Nora, Former Military Area. Neighbourhood on Tanit Hill (UniCa Archive).

The interesting point here is that the terracottas from the deposit in question all point towards the same cultic direction, the aphrodisiac sphere. Among the figurative typologies that exemplify this, we mention first of all the one consisting of two figures side by side, one male and the other female (Fig. 3).[15] The female figure is a full-length standing figure, covered from the pelvis down, with the upper part of her body framed by a shell-shaped veil. The figure's arms are raised towards her head, from which her hair falls over her shoulders in long wavy locks. Next to her is a smaller, naked male figure, also with his arms raised: the right one is raised towards the head, while the left one disappears behind the female figure. In this iconographic typology, attested in a repeated manner by as many as 25 whole specimens plus several other fragmentary ones,[16] the features of the faces of the two figures are not always well defined. This is partly due to the poor state of preservation, partly due to the use of worn moulds that compromise the precise reading of the figurative details. In the case of the male character, however, it is possible to observe the presence of grotesque features and a beard, which, along with his reduced height, contribute to characterising him as a dwarf character.

In terms of interpretation, the inspirational pattern for the female character is clearly that of the *Anadyomene*, the goddess intent on wringing out her hair after a bath, sometimes accompanied, as in this case, by a *paredros*.[17] However, the

15 For a comprehensive discussion of the various exemplars, see Carboni 2020a, 30–49.

16 Carboni 2020a, 30ff.

17 Such representations are widespread, particularly between the late Hellenistic period and the 1st century AD (cf. Burr 1934, 33, pl. IV.9; Delivorrias 1984, 54–57 – naked goddess, 76–77 –

Fig. 3: Nora, Former Military Area. Clay statuette with two figures (UniCa Archive).

representation from Nora shows variations on the canonical model, denoting further influences, the result of a cultural and cultic tradition of assimilation between different divinities worshipped throughout the Mediterranean, including Sardinia.[18] In fact, the presence of different cultural matrices influencing artistic productions can be perceived in a period marked by a fundamental transitional phase for the island. This was a period in which the local element, strongly influenced by the Punic cultural background,

partially covered goddess, 68 – with Priapus; Jentel 1984, 157–158, nos. 68–69 – with Triton). At Tharros the subject is repeated on some leaden *aediculae*, where the goddess appears alone (Barnett/Mendleson 1987, 183, no. 15/27, pl. 103.15/27, Tomb. 15) or with a *paredros* (Baratta 2013).

18 See Bonnet/Motte 1999; Xella 2009.

came into contact with the allogenic Roman and Italic ones, where oriental cults, particularly the Isiac, exerted a decisive influence.[19] It is in this cultural climate that one finds, for example, the representations of Isis in the guise of (Aphrodite) *Anadyomene*, with her hands raised to her head in the act of wringing out her hair, partially covered and in the company of a *paredros*.[20]

Returning to the representations from Nora, it should be noted that the goddess is depicted in the act of bringing her hands to her head, but not in the act of wringing out her hair, and the same character who stands next to her is not one of the usual *paredroi* of Aphrodite in this form. This is probably because several inspirational models can be traced back to the basis of the depiction. The scheme of the goddess/heroine characterised by partial or total nudity, with a bulging veil at the shoulders, with or without a *paredros*, acquired over time a polysemic value that allowed it to be used in relation to various figures, as can be seen for example in the case of the Nymphs and Maenads.[21]

An interesting example for this discussion is given, among many others, by two pictorial representations from Pompeii, which show that there is clearly a cultural koine common to the different Mediterranean cultures. In this case we are dealing with two representations of the heroine Io who, after long travels, is welcomed by Isis in Canopus in the presence of the personification of the Nile.[22] The girl, identified by the small horns on her head, a clear reference to her past metamorphosis into a heifer, is none other than a personification of the goddess Isis. In the paintings the figure is rendered partially nude with a bulging veil behind her and associated with a male figure with a beard and grotesque features, i.e., the personification of the Nile. Without wishing to make a direct comparison, given the different context of reference and the differences in the type of support and in the articulation/complexity of the scenes, the affinity with the representation from Nora emerges, also due to the presence of a *paredros* with feral features, but in a subordinate position with respect to his companion.[23]

Returning to the context of Nora (room A, Former military area), the type of statuette with a bird (Fig. 4),[24] probably a dove, in the company of a character, whose leg

19 See Pilo 2012; Gavini 2014. As for the specific case of Nora, the so-called Hellenistic braziers found in the contexts of Nora under examination, with depictions of crocodiles, dogs, jackals, and hippopotamuses, also refer to the Nilotic area. For further information, see E. Cruccas in Carboni/Cruccas 2019, 289–292.

20 Tran tam Tinh 1990, 780, n°253.

21 See Rendić-Miočević 2015 and Pochmarski 2015.

22 MNN, inv. 9555 (Pompei VI, 9, 1). Cf. Yalouris 1990, 670, n. 66 (with previous bibliography); MNN, inv. 9558 (Pompei VIII, 7, 28). Cf. Yalouris 1990, 670, n. 65 (with previous bibliography); Sampaolo 1998, 836–837, fig. 206.

23 For a more detailed discussion on this topic, see Giuman/Carboni 2018b, 102 ff.

24 Carboni 2020a, 70–71, 4.4; 98–99. Another find of the same iconographic typology from Nora can be found in Magliani 2016, 130, 132, fig. 4.

Fig. 4: Nora, Former Military Area. Clay statuette with a bird (UniCa Archive).

can be seen, perhaps Aphrodite herself, according to a model that is also widespread in sculpture and reliefs, probably refers to the circle of Aphrodite.[25]

The interest in the aphrodisiac cultic sphere can also be seen in the statuettes from Nora (room A, Former military area), which reproduce an iconographic scheme inspired by that of Aphrodite fastening or removing her sandal to take a bath (Fig. 5).[26] Here the goddess, balanced on her right leg and with her left arm resting on a support, has her left leg raised and bent so that her foot is in contact with the hand on the opposite side. The prototype of this iconography is often found in large-scale statuary, from which numerous replicas have been drawn over time, widely attested also in the coroplast of the Hellenistic and Roman ages.[27] In representations of this typology, one sometimes finds a small Eros touching the footwear, which one might perhaps recognise as the element under the goddess' left foot.[28]

25 For example, see Schmidt 1997, 211, n. 193; 145, fig. 193.

26 Carboni 2020a, 49–51, 2.1–2.3; 94–95.

27 Among the many available comparisons in the Italic area, the Hellenistic statuettes found in Saturo (Bernardini 2018, 177–178, pl. VI) and those from Centuripe (Musumeci 2010), where the type with raised left leg is widespread, as in the case of Nora, are an example. In Sardinia, this iconographic typology, which is inspired by a statuary prototype, is rarely attested. An iconographic comparison is provided by an imported Parian marble specimen from the 3rd-2nd century BC found in the sea of Nora and now in a private collection (Angiolillo 2010).

28 To complete the picture of attestations of the goddess, it is also worth mentioning the discovery from a house in Norense, the so-called "Casa del Direttore Tronchetti", of a statuette of Aphrodite/

Fig. 5: Nora, Former Military Area. Aphrodite's statuette with sandal (UniCa Archive).

Examination of the finds from the excavations in the sector of the former military area of Nora, shows quite clearly that the site must have witnessed with some certainty a cult whose value was clearly linked to the sea, to maritime activities and therefore to worshippers who practised such activities. As we know, it was in fact merchants and sailors who addressed prayers and offerings to a deity, worshipped as *Pontia*, *Pelagia*, *Euploia*, to protect them from the dangers of the boundless sea.[29] It is no coincidence that in association with the clay votive offerings, a large shell of the *Charonia Lampas* type and the reproduction of an anchor engraved on a stone slab were also found in the context of Nora (room A, Former military area), in accordance with

Venus *pudica*, with the dedicatory inscription *VENER[I S]ACRUM* on the base, accompanied by a dolphin (Carboni/Cruccas 2021).

29 Demetriou 2010; Ieranò 2019, 15–30.

the consolidated practice of offerings reproducing boats or parts of them.[30] As we have already seen, the custom of dedicating votive offerings and epigraphs to the patron goddess of seafarers by individual devotees, but also by religious confraternities, as well as the erection of places of worship in her honour at ports and trading posts, is widely attested.[31] Nora is not an exception, as the existence of a form of veneration towards a goddess comparable to Aphrodite is demonstrated by the cultural evidence resulting from the recent archaeological investigations in the former military area, mentioned above. These cultural manifestations, as seems to be deduced from the available data, cannot, however, be linked to public ceremonies directly connected to a temple structure, but rather to cultural dynamics linked to a small group of devotees, evidently sharing common interests and cults.[32] If, on the other hand, it seems plausible to assume the presence of a temple in honour of the goddess in the centre of Nora, it is not so easy to establish the exact location of its hypothetical site, also because of the large portion of the ancient settlement still unexplored. In this regard, however, it is interesting to recall that in Nora places of worship have already been identified that are significantly related to the aspects illustrated in this contribution. It is worth mentioning, in fact, the presence of two open-air sanctuaries located on the two hills overlooking the sea, the promontory of Coltellazzo and the so-called hill of Tanit, probably connected with cults of protection of sailors.[33] A third significant place of worship is a sanctuary probably destined for Aesculapius,[34] who, as is well known, in the course of time and in different geographical contexts, is accompanied by Astarte/Aphrodite/Venus,[35] under the different names of Melqart, Bes, Eshmun and Adonis.[36] The association of these deities, even in the context of the probable

30 For the specimen from Nora, see Carboni 2020a, 130–131, fig. 78. More generally, see Gianfrotta 1975 and Demetriou 2010.

31 See, for example, for mainland and island Greece: Ieranò 2019, chapter III; for the Italic peninsula, e.g. Gravisca, Fiorini 2005, pp. 181–182; for Sardinia, e.g. Cagliari, Olbia, see above.

32 The discovery of a column base within the structure, possibly reused as a small altar, also points in this direction (Carboni/Cruccas 2017, 9–10; Carboni 2020a, 23–24).

33 Grottanelli 1981. For a more specific bibliography on the two places of worship see, among the numerous publications, Melchiorri 2012 (Area Sacra del Coltellazzo, with previous bibliography) and Tirabassi 2016 (so-called Alto Luogo di Tanit, with previous bibliography).

34 The discovery of a votive shrine that yielded four statuettes of offerers and two larger statuettes of sleepers reclining on their sides (Angiolillo 1985, 104–106), one of which was wrapped in the coils of a snake and traced back to the ritual of *incubatio* (Jouanna 2011, 229–231; von Ehrenheim 2015), refers to his cult.

35 The identification of the possible female deity with Astarte was proposed in Pesce 1972, 93. On the Roman interpretation of Astarte as Aphrodite/Venus, see Cadotte 2007, 201–252; the same scholar also mentions the association between Astarte and *Caelestis* (Cadotte 2007, 65–111). See also Pirenne-Delforge 1994, Bonnet/Pirenne-Delforge 1999, Lietz 2012.

36 Cf. for the connections between Eshmun and Asclepius / Aesculapius the example of North Africa (Benseddik 2010, 51–54). For the debated identification between Eshmun and Adonis, see the summary in Ribichini 1981.

duality of the cult within the temple, characterised by a bipartite *adyton*,[37] would be justified by their common nature as divine entities linked to the marine world, without forgetting their shared function as deities with curative powers. In this sense, it is significant that, as with Asclepius/Esculapius, Aphrodite is remembered for her ability to communicate with the worshippers in dreams and how her appearance as Pelagia was a good omen for seafarers.[38]

This evidence is also interesting in the light of the situation of the wider geographical and cultural context of the stretch of coast of southern Sardinia, which goes from Nora to Karales.

It is precisely in Cagliari, a few dozen kilometres from Nora, that we find, in addition to various scattered attestations, evidence of two places of worship in honour of the goddess. Starting from the well-known theatre-temple of via Malta, located in the town centre and probably a place of worship for Venus, perhaps in association with Adonis.[39] The temple, built between the middle of the 2nd and 1st centuries BC and now completely obliterated by the modern settlement, is one of the buildings of Italic tradition and reflects the links between Sardinia and the central Italian peninsula in the late Republican period.[40] A temple dedicated to Venus, perhaps the one in Via Malta, is also referred to on a coin from the 1st century BC, in which the obverse depicts the busts of two *sufetes*, one of whom wears a toga, and the reverse shows a tetrastyle temple accompanied by the inscription *Veneris Kar*, perhaps to be read as *Veneris Kar(ales)*.[41]

The second important piece of evidence relating to the cult of the goddess in Karales is linked to a promontory overlooking the sea, Capo Sant'Elia.[42] To be precise, it is an epigraph engraved on a block of trachyte stone belonging to a wall, attributed to a possible temple. The inscription, dating from the 3rd century BC, refers to Astarte, probably from Erice, and to the offering of a bronze altar in her honour.[43] The inscription constitutes a fundamental starting point for establishing a connection between the hill of Cagliari and its cultural destination. The presence of a temple of Astarte on the hill is in fact an ideal place as a reference point for those who landed in the Gulf of Cagliari. In the Punic period, this route corresponded to

37 For an accurate description of the structure, see Tomei 2008, 180–198.

38 Cf. Artem. 2, 37, 115–120.

39 Angiolillo 1986–1987; Ibba 2012 (with previous bibliography). A different point of view on the identification of the deity(ies) to be worshipped can be found in Tomei 2008, 79–99. For the identification of the deity, it is also interesting to mention the discovery of an 'isiac' statue in the area of the temple structure (Mingazzini 1949, 272–274; Angiolillo 1986–1987, 73).

40 See Carboni 2020b, 112–113 (with previous bibliography).

41 See Angiolillo 1986–1987, 66–67 (with previous bibliography) and Tomei 2008, 82–99.

42 Angiolillo/Sirigu 2009; Sanna/Sirigu 2012; Ibba *et alii* 2017.

43 See, among others, Zucca 1989, 774–779 and Bonnet 1996, 110–115.

numerous places of worship for the three Phoenician deities Astarte, Ba'al Shamin and Melqart, both at the landing points and along the shipping route.[44] This function of the hill has remained over time, as evidenced by the construction of a church, probably on the site of the former place of worship.[45]

The epigraphic evidence from the promontory of Capo Sant'Elia, referring to a goddess from the eastern world, can be set in the context of Punic culture, but given the period of reference linked to the transition to Roman rule on the island, it seems plausible to hypothesise a continuation of the cult of the goddess of Erice, now assimilated to Venus, even in Roman *Karales*.[46] This is not surprising, since it is well known that the Astarte of Erice is identified with the goddess of seafarers, Aphrodite/Venus Ericina.[47] In support of a hypothesis that sees the sanctuary still active in imperial times, it should be remembered, in fact, that at the time of the acquisition of the cult of the goddess of Erice by the Romans,[48] Karales, unlike the rest of the Sardinian territory, provided support for Roman expansion during the Ampsicora insurrection.[49]

In light of all this, the link between the contexts of Cagliari and Nora is evident: on the one hand, a place of worship for the goddess of good navigation located on a promontory overlooking the Gulf of Cagliari, and on the other hand, a form of worship linked to the figure of Aphrodite/Venus within the nearby trade centre of Nora, visible from the hill of Capo Sant'Elia and active from the Phoenician to the Roman period.

In this context, the data coming from the context of Nora, still being explored and therefore a harbinger of further elements, allow us to add a further piece to our knowledge of the cultural landscape of Sardinia in the Roman period and its interaction with the wider context of the Mediterranean basin, through which not only goods and products, but also ideas, knowledge and religious beliefs travelled.

44 See the considerations in Ibba *et alii* 2017, 357 (with further bibliography).

45 Ibba *et alii* 2017, 357.

46 Zucca 1989, 776; Angiolillo/Sirigu 2009, 193–195.

47 Lipiński 1995, 144–147 (with previous bibliography); Bonnet 1996, 147–150; Angiolillo/Sirigu 2009, 186 ff.; Acquaro/Filippi/Medas 2010.

48 On this topic, see Coarelli 2014, 174–189.

49 For S. Angiolillo it seems credible that a relationship could exist between the two situations and that the common cult to Venus Ericina was evidence of the close relationship between Karales and Rome (Angiolillo/Sirigu 2009, 195).

Abbreviations

LIMC	Boardman, John / Ackermann, Hans Christoph (eds.), *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, I-VIII, Suppl. and Indices, Zürich-München 1981–2009.
ThesCRA	*Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum*, I-VIII, Basel-Los Angeles 2004–2014.
UniCa Archive	University of Cagliari Archive.

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