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In and Out What Archaeology Can Tell Us About the Role of Liminality in the Phoenician Rites

In this paper, I will analyse the archaeological information about Phoenician “sacred space” and in particular the concept of liminality and the way it was expressed in the archaeological documentation (e.g. the presence of a temenos, a door and images etc.) from a Phoenician context.

1 The Concept of Liminality

The concept of *liminality* was first developed in the early twentieth century by Arnold Van Gennep and later taken up by Victor Turner.¹ It is well known that over time the concept has been applied to different areas of investigation: anthropology, ethnography, history of religion, philosophy, psychology and architecture etc. etc.

In recent archaeological studies, attention has been devoted to several interpretative themes that draw heavily on the idea of rites of passage: states of being and personhood; passages to other worlds; boundaries, portals, thresholds, and transformations; and liminality and “sacred domains”.² In this paper the attention is obviously directed to the theme of boundaries, portals, thresholds, and transformations.

C. Renfrew, who remains a point of reference for the study of archaeology of cult and religion, quoting the conventional diagram of Leach, reminds us that This World and the Other World are conceived as topographical spaces separated by a liminal zone, which partakes of the qualities of both. The liminal zone is the focus of ritual activity (e.g. churches, graveyards, shrines etc.) and Leach’s diagram reminds us that the sacred area for the practice of rituals is likely to be a place apart, associated with prescribed observance and proscriptions, with special requirements of purity and the attendant risk of pollution.³

¹ Van Gennep 1960 (English version of the book *Les rites de passages* published in French in 1911); Turner 1967; 1969.

² Garwood 2011, 9.

³ Renfrew 1985, 17, fig. 1.1.

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Given that this paper focuses on the role of liminal spaces in archaeology, with particular reference to architecture, we simply must discuss the works of Parker Pearson and Richards. Exploring the theme of the archaeology of rites of passage, they underline the role of architecture in structuring the ritual action. They observed that

Walls, gateways and entrances serve to mark transitions between domains such as inside/outside, sacred/profane, male/female, public/private, enemy/friend, elite/commoner or initiate/uninitiated.⁴

Architectural forms thus reify conceptual divisions, define bounded contexts for the spatial articulation of cultural meanings, and guide the enactment of specific practices. Portals – especially – provide means of traversing classificatory boundaries and thus act as (liminal) thresholds between different conceptual domains and states of being.⁵

Visualizing the concept of liminality in a concrete form is not a difficult task. In fact, apart from the term chosen to describe the concept itself (from Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold), architectonic metaphors are frequently used to explain it. Mary Douglas, in her famous book “Purity and Danger”, underlines how Van Gennep saw society as “a house with rooms and corridors in which passage from one to another is dangerous”.⁶

On the other hand, if a *limen*, a threshold, is something fixed and stable “the act of going somewhere else to gain access to liminal, and to return, required movement”.⁷ This explains the choice of the title of this contribution. Focusing on the movement, we emphasise the conditional construct of liminality that “only makes sense with reference to what went before and what comes after”.⁸

In short, the primary focus of this paper is to investigate how the concept of liminality has been transported into physical space in the Phoenician cult place: the presence of architectural elements such as threshold, lintel and columns in sanctuaries, temples and shrines as testified in archaeological remains and the written sources. These places of passage can have a symbolic meaning and, at the same time, represent a physical place where specific rituals took place.⁹

⁴ Parker Pearson/Richards 1994, 24.

⁵ Garwood 2011, 13.

⁶ Douglas 1966, 66; Garwood 2011, 2.

⁷ Garwood 2011, 5.

⁸ Garwood 2011, 17: “The common tendency in archaeology to focus on just the liminal stage of the ritual process ignores how ‘liminality’ is a conditional construct that only makes sense with reference to what went before and what comes after”.

⁹ In Levantine archaeology the theme of the applicability of the concept of liminality to the archaeological analysis of cultic context, in particular in Middle and Late Bronze Age Southern Levant, is dealt by Susnow 2020.

2 Liminal Architecture

We'll start our study by identifying an indicator of liminality in a Phoenician cult place using archaeological remains and inscriptions as a source of information.¹⁰

2.1 The Gate / Door

Two of Van Gennep's statements are fundamental in this regard:

The door is the boundary between the foreign and domestic worlds in the case of a temple. Therefore, to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world. It is a unite oneself in the case of a temple. It is thus an important act in marriage, adoption, ordination and funeral ceremonies.¹¹

And we have to remember that

to understand rites pertaining to the threshold, one should always remember that the threshold is only a part of the door and that most of the rites should be understood as direct and physical rites of entrance, of waiting, and of departure – that is rite of passage.¹²

The gate is, ultimately, an element of connection and separation, with the role of establishing where the interior space begins and where the exterior space ends.

We know that, from the Middle Bronze Age, the city gate assumed a central role within the urban panorama of the Near East cities as a place of transit, trade and community assembly. Among the various activities that took place near the city gate, religious activity must have been important and linked to the symbolic meaning of the “passage” between the two worlds, the world inside and outside the city.¹³ In terms of the Southern Levant, we have different examples of these traditions: Megiddo VA,¹⁴ Tell el-‘Ureyme,¹⁵ Beer-Sheba V,¹⁶ the discussed evidence from the city of Tell el-Far’ah North.¹⁷ The best examples of the role of luminal space assumed by the gate are Tell Dan¹⁸ and Tell el-Bethsaida (et-Tell).¹⁹ In the Phoenician region, archaeological evidence of the liminal role of the gate (attested in epigraphy as *dl*, *dlt*, *pṯh*, *šʿr*)²⁰ in sacred architecture mainly dates from Hellenistic times. At Tas Silġ (Malta), an

¹⁰ Porzia 2017; Susnow 2020, 5–6.

¹¹ Van Gennep 1960, 20.

¹² Van Gennep 1960, 20.

¹³ See various contributions in Michel 2017.

¹⁴ Bernett/Keel 1998, 63.

¹⁵ Fritz 1990.

¹⁶ Bernett/Keel 1998, 61.

¹⁷ Chambon 1984; De Vaux 1951; Stager/Wolff 1981.

¹⁸ Biran 1994, 238–241.

¹⁹ Arav/Freund 1995; Bernett/Keel 1998.

²⁰ Porzia 2017, 361.

altar was discovered near the entrance to the temple, with three quadrangular cavities, covered with lead and arranged at regular intervals, where ashes and burnt bones were unearthed (Fig. 1). It is therefore evident that certain sacrifices took place at the very threshold of the sanctuary.²¹



Fig. 1: Tas Silġ (Malta), altar at the entrance to the temple with three quadrangular cavities (Ribichini 1975 Tav. XXI).

To all this, we must also add information deduced from the inscriptions: the double inscription of Kition (*CIS*, I, 86), which states the number of staff at the temple, speaks of “20 keepers of the lock and [of] men in charge of the door”; that of Piraeus (*KAI* 60) speaks of “door attendants”; another from Bostan esh-Sheikh mentions a certain ‘Abdmilk, “door attendant”. In addition to this, the stele on the gate of Umm el-‘Amed of a certain Baalshamar qualifies his father as “head of the gatekeepers”, revealing the existence of a category of religious personnel in charge of cults located at the gate (Fig. 2). The fact that he belongs to the priestly milieu is evidenced by the stole he wears on the engraved image.²²

Beyond the threshold, which does not seem to have had a particular shape (if compared with, for example the wonderful example of the ‘Ain Dara temple), was the space in front of the jambs and the lintels that were well characterized as *limen*.

²¹ Amadasi Guzzo/Cazzella 2004–2005; Ciasca 1993; Ribichini 1975.

²² Oggiano 2013; Porzia 2017.



Fig. 2: Umm el-'Amed. Funerary stele of Baalshamar (*Liban l'autre rive* 1988, fig. 161).

2.2 The Door Flanked by Statues or Columns

The cultic importance of the columns (*'md* in the epigraphs) as a framing element of the passage is testified in the literary sources. On the one hand, Herodotus (*Historie*, II, 44) documents the existence of two gold and emerald columns at the entrance to the temple of Melqart in Tyre. Here, you can see a representation of an Assyrian relief found in Khorsabad in which the escape of Luli of Sidon from Tyre is depicted. R.D. Barnett thought that the building with an arch-shaped entrance flanked by two columns visible at the right end of the relief might represent the temple of which Herodotus would later speak.²³

²³ Barnett 1956.

On the other hand, the Bible mentions two non-load-bearing columns – Yakin and Boaz – at the entrance to the temple in Jerusalem, built with the help of Tyrians, according to the Bible. Beyond the symbolic meanings envisaged by the authors, the location of these columns at the entrance to religious structures clearly underlines the role we have already imagined for the door.²⁴ Two non-load-bearing pillars were present at the entrance to the temple of Kition Kathari in Cyprus as markers of the passage to the more sacred space of the temple, the cella (Fig. 3).²⁵ And still in Kition, a double inscription seems to be associated with the cult of pillars themselves, with personnel in charge of these structures dedicated to the divinity Mikal.²⁶ In the Hellenistic period, the presence of two anthropomorphic statues placed next to the entrance is attested at Umm el-‘Amed, Kharayeb (Fig. 4) and, perhaps, Sarepta (the twin statue).²⁷

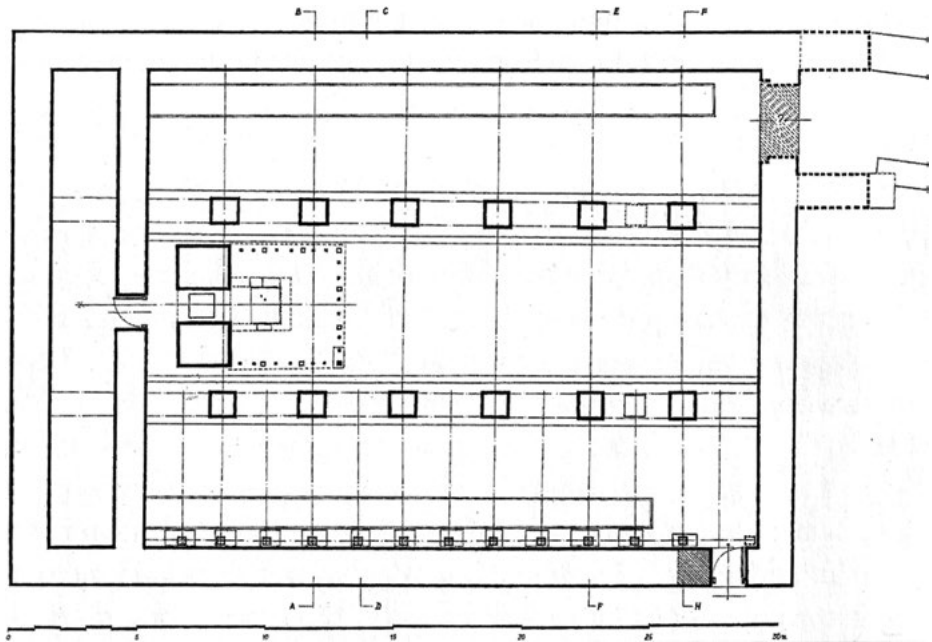


Fig. 3: Kition. The temple 1 of Kathari (800–600 BCE) (Yon 2006, fig. 48).

²⁴ Porzia 2017; Prokop 2020.

²⁵ Yon 2006, 86–87, fig. 48.

²⁶ Porzia 2017, 371. See also Amadasi Guzzo 2003, 49.

²⁷ Oggiano 2018 with previous bibliography.

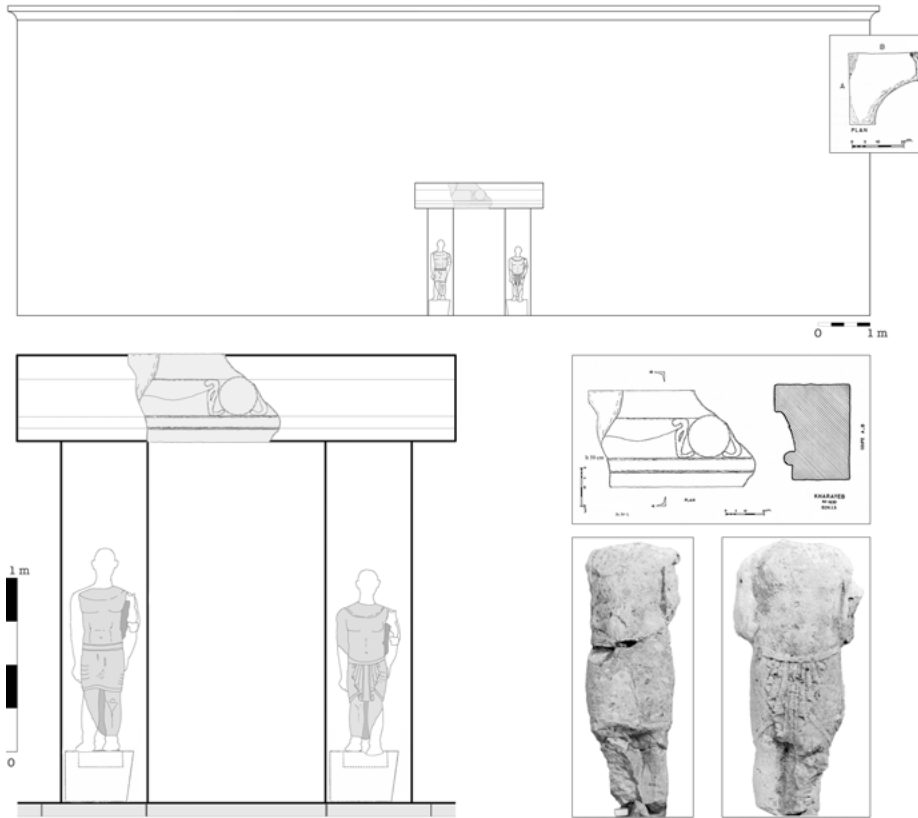


Fig. 4: Kharayeb. Entrance of the temple (Oggiano 2018, Fig. 6).

2.3 The Door / Entrance Shape

As for the constituent parts of the door, such as the jambs and the lintel, their precise conformations and decorations are clear markers of the liminal character of these architectonic elements.

One typical shape is the so-called “recessed opening”. The word *recess* derives from the Latin word “*recessus*”, a retreat, from *recedere* to recede. The recessed pattern is created by making the wall narrower around the opening in even stages, parallel to the opening sides, creating a stepped, interlocking frame, one inside the other. This very ancient motive, which has prevailed in modern times, was used in sacred architecture and funerary architecture, from Cyprus (e.g. the entrance of the tombs of Salamina

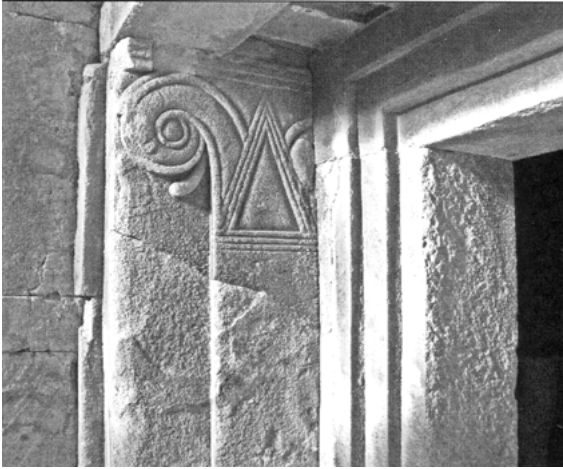


Fig. 5: Tamassos. Tomb 5 entrance (Mumcuoglu/Garfinkel 2018, fig. 159a).

and Tamassos; Fig. 5) to Phoenicia (the tombs of Umm el-‘Amed).²⁸ It is interesting that this kind of window frame was used in the group of ivories where it represented the so-called “woman at the window” motive: baluster and recessed openings are both typical markers of liminality and, in this case, also “gender liminality” (Fig. 6).²⁹

The lintel, often decorated with a winged solar disk, is a common element in Hellenistic Phoenicia, for example at Umm el-‘Amed and Kharayeb. The winged solar disc, sculpted repetitively in an eminent position on the lintel of the various entrances, with its “redundancy”, gives meaning to the door itself and its essence of “liminality”.

2.4 The Porch (*‘rph*)

Columns and porches are not only the natural solution to the common architectonic problem of providing a long, unenclosed and sheltered space. In architecture, balconies, porches, and windows are considered elements of vibrant communicative life.³⁰

While in modern and public architecture these “border zones” are considered opportunities for the communicative life of the public environment and home, in ancient, sacred architecture this transitional zone invited communication between

²⁸ For a synthesis on the topic of recessed opening in architecture of Ancient Near East see Mumcuoglu/Garfinkel 2018, 43–163.

²⁹ On the motif of the woman at the window Suter 1992; Winter 2016.

³⁰ Gehl 2011.

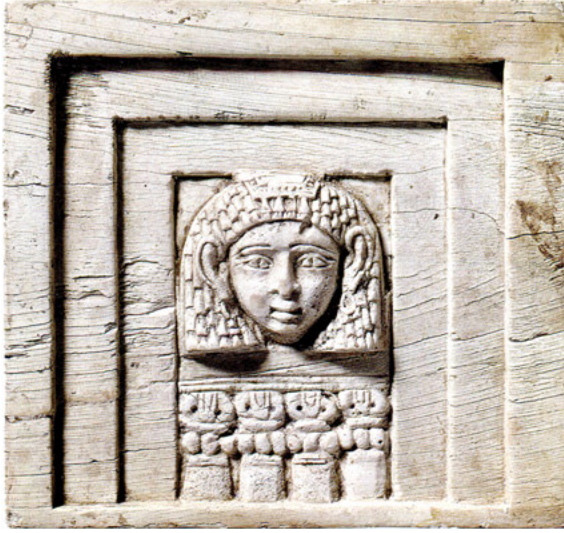


Fig. 6: Ivory from Arslan Tash with “woman at the window” motif (Aruz/Graff/Rafic 2014, p. 154, fig. 51b).

the human being and the divine world. Flexible boundaries in the form of transitional zones, that neither fully belonged to This World nor completely to the Other World, were often able to function as connecting links. They made it easier, both physically and psychologically, for the participant in the ritual to move back and forth between a human and divine dimension, between “in and out”. Liminal space provides a period of preparation for things to come. The porch of Amrit is a perfect example of the function of the porch as a resting area where worshippers could, possibly, sleep, waiting for the gods’ answer in the rite of incubation (Fig. 7).³¹

2.5 The Roof

It’s not only the porch that was considered a border-zone, the roof also had a particular role. In the epic of Gilgamesh, Queen Ninsun goes up onto the roof to offer incense to the god Shamash (Gilgamesh III ii 1–10); in an Ugaritic text, King Keret climbs onto the roof to perform sacrifices and pray there (Keret 73–80). Even in the Bible, King Josiah “tears down the altars that were on the terrace of the upper room of Akhaz” (2 Kings 23:12), while the prophet Jeremiah criticises the offerings on the roofs (using the verb *qtr*, often related to the burning of incense) “to all the host of heaven and . . . to other gods” (19:13), or to Ba’al (32:29).

³¹ Oggiano 2012.



Fig. 7: Amrit. Remains of the pool with porch in the background (© Ph. Oggiano).

Although there are no examples for the Phoenician area itself, the roof was the place where certain rites were performed even at domestic level. For example, in Ashkelon,³² an altar was found on the roof of an administrative building from the 7th century, while in Tel Jawa,³³ figurines and ceramics have been discovered, probably used for liquids and aromatic offerings, in a domestic context which can be dated to the 8th–7th centuries.

3 Iconography of Liminal Space: The Façade as Figurative Synecdoche

In this part of the study, I will try to identify the image of “liminal space” through its depictions on the various Phoenician and Punic categories of objects: from stone crafts to coroplastics, from glyptics to numismatics. Which images from sacred architecture did artists and craftsmen choose to represent the “sacred” space? As

³² Stager 1996, 66.

³³ Daviau 2001.

we'll see, it's the limen, the door, the passage that visually symbolises the focus of attention.

The most commonly reproduced form of cult place was the Egyptizing naos, more precisely its facade.³⁴ It inspired the creation of various objects: small stone monuments that accurately reproduced the naos (such as the well-known examples of Sidon) or part of it (the steles of Akziv and Burg esh-Shemali and the relief of Sidon with a seated divinity) and the terracotta models that only featured the facade (naiskoi by Ayaa and Helalieh).³⁵ Finally, the representation of the chapel on objects that were intended for palatine and elite environments such as ivories (those from Nimrud dating to the 8th century BCE, for example) and bowls (such as the one from Olympia).³⁶ These objects were used in the cultural context but in different ways, as suggested by the variety of dimensions and materials used in their production and their different chronological framework.

A lintel with a winged solar disk was often found on the top of the naos façade. The symbolic function of the winged solar disk motif, which we talked about with regard to Umm el-'Amed and Kharayeb,³⁷ is confirmed by its repetition on different categories of objects suggesting to the viewer that what takes place “below” the winged solar disk has a “cultic” character: from the king of Byblos sitting in front of the Lady of Byblos to commemorate the construction of a portico built in honour of Baalat Gebal, to the Preneste cup where the solar disc overlooks the altar where a prince sacrificed a deer he had hunted. The naos (or shrine or aedicule) becomes the predominant motif represented on the steles of the tophet. In this case, it is a synthetic rendering of the façade of a building, a sort of theatrical “*fronte scena*” within which the artisans positioned the religious scenes, divine images and/or worshippers or priests. This presentation is, however, too brief to cover the relationship between these representations and monuments existing within the tophet in detail. In any case, the stylistic variety of the steles and naiskoi throughout the different periods of use of the tophet is testimony to just how important it was to the stonemason.

Now for some final observations. First of all, between the realistic and the symbolic form of representation, the latter was certainly the one favoured by Phoenician and Punic artisans, according to a trend that has its roots in the coastal Levant of the first millennium. Among the favourite representative conventions, there was certainly that of “the part for the whole”, the *representative synecdoche*, which rather than being tied to the greater or lesser skills of the craftsman, was based

³⁴ For this part of the study see Oggiano 2008.

³⁵ For Akziv, Moscati 1965; for Sidon, Gubel *et al.* 2002, 84, n. 75; Gubel 2000, 190–192; on the terracotta *naoi* of Ayaa and Helalieh, Caubet 1999, 9–14.

³⁶ For the ivories see, e.g. Barnett 1975, pl. CXXXV, Suppl. 22; for metal bowl, Markoe 1985, 204–205, 316–319, n. G3.

³⁷ For Umm el-'Amed, Vella 2000; for Kharayeb, Oggiano 2018.

around an iconographic and artistic tradition of craftsmanship which also included productions of great value like ivories.

The façade of the temple, for which it is almost impossible to find a precise connection with known types of temples, is only the symbolic boundary of an action, which, thanks to this frame, is immediately qualified by the viewer as a cultic one. Reduced to an icon, a symbol, it can vary in style (Levantine, Egyptizing, Grecizing, Roman), but not in the meaning it has as a sign, not unlike what happened with the winged solar disc. It can be said that the placement of an object, a space and an action “under” or “inside” a symbol (“under” the winged sun and “inside” the “edicola”) provided the viewer with an immediate clue allowing them qualify objects, spaces and actions as pertinent to the sphere of the sacred (Figs. 8–9).



Fig. 8: Stele from the tophet of Monte Sirai (*I Fenici* 1988, p. 319).

In conclusion, the Phoenicians identified the liminal space as a “storage unit”³⁸ formed by a gate with columns, pillar and lintel that human beings had to cross in order to pass from the earthly to the divine, to pass “Dal terreno al divino”.³⁹

³⁸ Turner 1968, 1–2.

³⁹ Oggiano 2005.



Fig. 9: Stele from the tophet of Sulki (*I Fenici* 1988, p. 325).

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