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Autor: Jenni, Hanna
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Pliny's *eusebes* in the Temple of the Phoenician City of Tyre

In his *Naturalis historia*, Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) writes in book 37,161:

Eusebes ex eo lapide est, quo traditur Tyro Herculis templo facta sedes, ex qua pii facile surgebant.

«Eusebes», or «reverent stone», is the kind of stone of which a seat in the temple of Hercules at Tyre is said to have been made, this seat being the one from which only the pious could rise without difficulty.»¹

The main deity of Phoenician Tyre was Melqart (from *mlk qrt*, «king of the city»), equated with Herakles in the *interpretatio graeca*. The text cited is part of a passage about different precious stones. *Eusebes*, here, is considered as the name of a stone, although, in Greek, εὐσεβής means «pious, god-fearing», hence glossed as «reverent stone» in the translation given above. Pliny conveys the tradition, according to which a seat made of this stone was in the temple of Melqart. In the last clause of the text, it is said that from this seat (only) the pious could rise (again easily), as we have to understand it. The allusion of *pius* to *eusebes* being overt, one has to think of a kind of test of piousness of the people participating in the cult: Whoever could rise easily again from this seat, was considered pious. This seat of stone seems to have been a somewhat magic seat. We can only speculate for what reasons someone might have been unable to get up again: Drunk from too much wine? Was a so-called marzeah (*mrzh*), a common cultic meal, held? We do not know.

¹ Gaius Plinius Secundus, *Natural History*, with an English translation, 10 vols., London/Cambridge (Mass.) 1938-1984, vol. 10, 1971, transl. by D.E. Eichholz, 294-295. – I thank Mitchell Bornstein for correcting the English.

Obviously, the role of seats or thrones of gods was something that was known about the Phoenician religious world. A special category is a throne with armrests in the form of sphinxes. Many of these thrones omit the deity that we have to imagine seated on them.² The interpretation of these empty thrones is not yet clear, and there might be different or overlapping cases. In theory, an empty throne could be a) constantly empty – especially if it is inclined, so that nothing could be put on it (on the assumption that the object is not unfinished) – as a sign of the virtual presence of the deity; b) occupied permanently by the figure or by a symbol of the deity, in the event that the figure and the seat were not worked from one piece; c) occupied by a figure or symbol only in certain moments of cultic practices; d) the hypostasis of a deity; or e) be occupied at specific times by a living human being (perhaps the king in his role as priest) who has taken on the role of the deity.

Of course, in Pliny's statement, there is no explicit mention of a god's seat, but obviously the idea of an empty and therefore usable seat with some ritual function in the temple of Tyre existed. The passage cannot, it seems, be elucidated further and must be considered a curious legend.

However, the connection between «seat» and «eusebes» may have come about through the Phoenician verbal root *yšb* meaning «to sit, to stay» with its noun *yšb* meaning «seat», the latter attested in a Neopunic inscription.³ In this

² M. Metzger: Königsthron und Gottesthron. Thronformen und Throndarstellungen in Ägypten und im Vorderen Orient im dritten und zweiten Jahrtausend vor Christus und deren Bedeutung für das Verständnis von Aussagen über den Thron im Alten Testament, Kevelaer/Neukirchen-Vluyn 1985, 259-279; É. Gubel: Phoenician Furniture. A Typology based on Iron Age Representations with Reference to the Iconographical Context, (Studia Phoenicia 7), Leuven 1987, 37-75; A. Nunn: Die Phönizier und ihre südlichen Nachbarn in der achämenidischen und frühhellenistischen Zeit: Ein Bildervergleich, in: M. Witte/J.F. Diehl (Hg.): Israeliten und Phönizier. Ihre Beziehungen im Spiegel der Archäologie und der Literatur des Alten Testaments und seiner Umwelt (OBO 235), Fribourg/Göttingen 2008, 95-123 (113-115); J. Kamlah: Die Bedeutung der phönizischen Tempel von Umm el-Amed für die Religionsgeschichte der Levante in vorhellenistischer Zeit, in: *ibid.*, 125-164 (135-138).

³ C.R. Krahmalkov: Phoenician-Punic Dictionary, (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 90. Studia Phoenicia 15), Leuven 2000, 216f., s.v. *yšb* I, and p. 217, s.v. *yšb* III: «cf. NHeb. *yššūb*, «dwelling place, settlement». Cf. Neopunic KAI 130 (H. Donner/W. Röllig: Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften, 3 vols., Wiesbaden, 1971-1976; vol. 1 : 5., erweiterte und überarbeitete Auflage 2002) = K. Jongeling: Handbook of Neopunic Inscriptions, Tübingen 2008, 18f., Labdah N 9, inscribed on benches of limestone, mentioning in lines 1 and 5 «six seats».

case, *yšb* might have been misunderstood and reinterpreted in Greco-Roman times as εὐσεβής through a phonetic analogy, since Semitic /š/ was usually rendered by Greek /s/, while /y/ denoted a semi-vowel, cf. the shift from *ya^aqōb* to Ιακωβ or from *y^eša'yāhū* to Ησαίας.

Abstract

L'adjectif grec *eusebes*, «pieux», est utilisé par Pline l'Ancien comme nom d'une pierre dont était fabriqué, selon la tradition, un siège dans le temple d'Héraclès à Tyr. La légende associe ce siège avec une sorte de test de piété. Il est proposé que la relation entre *eusebes* et «siège» est à attribuer à un rattachement au niveau phonétique du phénicien *yšb*, «s'asseoir, rester, siège», au grec *eusebes*.

Das griechische Adjektiv *eusebes*, «fromm», wird von Plinius dem Älteren als Bezeichnung für einen Stein verwendet, aus dem ein Sitz im Tempel des Herakles von Tyros gearbeitet gewesen sein soll. In der Legende wird dieser Sitz mit einer Art Frömmigkeitstest verbunden. Es wird vorgeschlagen, dass der Bezug zwischen *eusebes* und «Sitz» auf die lautliche Ähnlichkeit von phönizischem *yšb*, «sich setzen, bleiben, Sitz», und griechischem *eusebes* zurückzuführen ist.

Hanna Jenni, Basel