



The Phoenician stadium of Amrit

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Clarification of the existence of Phoenician sports prior to Greek sports is to be found in the stadium of Amrit. This stadium provides the most certain proof of our time that the Phoenicians celebrated religious games near the temples before they carried this tradition outside their own territory.

The forgotten stadium

In Amrit¹, on the north Phoenician coast, facing the island of Arwad, a neglected Phoenician stadium² was brought to my attention. Its nature had not been properly investigated by archeologists until then. They had believed it to be a hippodrome, referring to it as a "circus" which would imply the use of the stadium as a chariot race-track in Roman times³.

Describing this stadium in 1745, the British geographer Richard Pococke said:⁴

"This place might serve for some sports to divert the people of Aradus and Antaradus,

* See our No. 82-83.

or of the ancient Marathus, if that was near, and probably it was a circus."

When the French archaeologist, Ernest Renan, undertook the study of the ruins of Phoenicia in 1860, he mentioned the stadium, describing it in a way that confirmed Pococke's view. However, Renan declared at the end of his study that this athletic field must certainly have been Phoenician when he said:⁵

"La distribution et la coupe générale du monument qui nous occupe n'ont absolument rien de romain. C'est, à n'en pas douter, un stade phénicien."

It seems that Renan was sure that this athletic field belonged to the Phoenician epoch, but he believed it to be a hippodrome.

However, Pococke and Renan did not know the exact form of the sports stadium of Olympia when they visited Phoenicia, because the excavations in Olympia did not begin until 1875,⁶ and the specifications of

Phoenician temple of Amrit.





Entrance to the stadium of Olympia.

the Olympic stadium in Greece were not discovered entirely until the excavations of 1937.⁷

Thus, the Phoenician stadium at Amrit remained in obscurity, occupying only a few lines in two books, waiting for someone to define its identity and to uncover its importance in the history of the development of sport.

The fact that the importance of this stadium has not been recognised is shown by its name—the Quarry⁸, because blocks were cut to build the steps from the rocks surrounding the place. The farmers of the area, when asked about the nature of the stadium, answered: “*Here was the Quarry!*”

The history of the city

In order to investigate the history of the city⁹ and to explore its important stadium, we consulted classical historical documents. But unfortunately the texts narrating the history of the city and its athletic stadium are lost, as are most of the texts describing the Phoenician cities. However, we found that Amrit was mentioned in Egyptian texts among 14 other Phoenician cities.¹⁰ The story of the campaign of Thutmose III (1504-1450 B.C.) speaks of a place in North Phoenicia called

“*krt mrt*”, i.e. the city of “*Mrt*” or “*Amrat*”¹¹. Scholars see a significant similarity in the etymology of “*Mrt*”, Amrit and Amurru, especially since this district of Phoenicia was known as the land of Amurru in the period of the Egyptian Twelfth Dynasty (circa 1991-1786 B.C.)¹².

The present inhabitants of this region have several words for the name of this ancient city. Some tell you that it is called “*Mrit*” or “*Amrit*”; others say “*Amrid*”. However, the official name now posted at the ruins is: “*Amrit*”.

In the time of Alexander the Great, Amrit was known by a Greek name: Marathus. It was famous as a large, rich and beautiful Phoenician city within the Kingdom of Arwad.¹³ The buildings and markets for which there was no place on the island were constructed in the city. The flourishing of the city in the third and second centuries B.C. is verified by the issue of copper money.¹⁴

According to Diodorus (1st century B.C.), the Arwadians destroyed the city of Amrit during the reign of Alexander Bala I in the year of 150 or 148 B.C.¹⁵ When Strabo (58 B.C. - 25 A.D.) visited the city of Amrit, he found it “*an ancient city of the Phoenicians, now in ruins*”.¹⁶

It appears that Amrit retained its primitive Phoenician character. Renan noticed during his excavations that the city was devoid of any Greek or Roman inscriptions or texts. He mentioned:¹⁷

“L’absence d’inscriptions grecques et latines prouve, d’un autre côté, que la ville d’Amrit ne fut pas reconstruite sous l’empire; dans toutes les localités, en effet, qui refleurirent à l’époque romaine, on arrive à une proportion d’inscriptions grecques et latines en quelque sorte fixe.”

Today, Amrit is devoid of habitations with only the remains of the temple, stadium and tombs which have been excavated by Maurice Dunand and his assistants. Near the temple, pottery fragments and funeral articles which were buried with the corpse were uncovered. The date of these discoveries goes back to the First Middle Bronze Age (2100 - 1900 B.C.) and the Second Middle Bronze Age (1900 - 1750 B.C.).¹⁸ These facts prove that Amrit was inhabited by the Phoenicians from the third millennium B.C.

Scholars see a great resemblance in nomenclature between Marathus (in Phoenicia) and Marathon (in Greece), since there is no diffe-

rence between the words other than the last two letters, which is a grammatical suffix. They have found that Amrit gave its name to Marathon. In this respect, Brown agrees with Dunker's view in his statement. He said:¹⁹

"Marathon bears the same name as Marathus (Amrit) in Crete and on the Phoenician coast near Aradus; a fountain springing at Marathon is called Macaria, in honour of Heracles: i.e., it bears the name of Melkart which the Greeks modified into Melicertes and Makar."

At Marathon, the "Heracleian Games" were held in honour of Heracles-Melkart. The ceremonies were held in the month of Metageitnion (August-September) and silver cups were awarded to the winners.²⁰ These games were being held in the time of Pindar (fifth century B.C.).

Topography and specifications of the stadium

The importance of the Amrit stadium is concealed in its antiquity and in its conformity to the specifications of the ancient Greek stadia.²¹ It falls in a natural hollow between two hills and the form of its steps indicates that it was the beginning of the U-shaped curve such as appeared in the Delphi stadium (VI B.C.).

The length of the stadium is 220 metres, and its width is 30 metres (in Olympia 213.75 m x 29.60 m). It is surrounded by ten steps, each having a height of 60 metres. These steps were dug out of limestone along the north side, while half of the distance was dug in the stone to the south. The other section was completed with stone constructions whose traces are still visible today. On the east side, the steps turn from the two sides in the shape of a bow at whose end there is a rock cut out on both sides to form the two entrances to the arena, each of which is 3.50 metres wide. Another entrance designated for the athletes was dug under the steps of the south side. As for the west, or sea side, there are no steps. We estimate the capacity of the stadium stairs at 11,200 spectators (40 cm per person).

The present condition of the stadium, as it appears now, gives cause for concern due to lack of maintenance and the collapse of a part of the rocks and earth on the upper north side of the steps due to rain and floods. But the forms of the stairs are still clear and can be revealed completely if we remove the grass which covers a part of them. We were unable to reveal the stadium floor since trees



Entrance to Amrit stadium.

and weeds cover two thirds of it and raise it up about two metres. The remaining one third is planted with vegetables. The traces of adjoining ancient constructions²² near the stadium are visible on the south-east side. They were undoubtedly administrative rooms for the judges and athletes, and practice area later called "gymnasium" and "palaestra" by the Greeks. It is unreasonable to assume that this stadium would not have been supplied with a training ground.

Undoubtedly this stadium was for great sporting events, like running, jumping, throwing, wrestling... such as were famous in the Iliad (song XXIII). It was not at all a hippodrome as some scholars have contended. Hippodromes are much larger and wider and their dimensions are well known.

In Olympia, the length of the hippodrome equals four stadia,²³ and in Tyre the dimensions are 480 m x 160 m, while in Amrit the dimensions of the stadium are much less (220 x 30 m); chariots could not have raced in it because of its narrowness. This fact has been confirmed by the investigations of Dunand in 1954. While searching for the axis of the arena²⁴ (spina) which was usually built in the centre of the hippodrome for the chariots to encircle, the investigator found no

trace of the spina. In my discussions with Mr. Dunand (June 1971) he revised his belief and confirmed our stand, that the Amrit athletic field was in truth a *stadium* and not a hippodrome.

We differ with Dunand who in his investigation of 1954 put the date of the first usage of the Amrit stadium back to the third century A.D.,²⁵ without any justification of this proposition, as if he wanted to tell us that this stadium was built in the Roman era. However, we know that in this epoch large well-built amphitheatres and hippodromes were actively used. This has been made clear in the excavations at Leptis Magna in Libya²⁶ and also in Tyre.

It appears that the Amrit Games also included water sports. Renan observed (1860) a place prepared for other sports connected with water activities (swimming, rowing, diving...) on the sea shore, at the mouth of the Amrit River, 700 metres away from the stadium. The floor of this area which the French scholar also called "the circus" was nearly at sea level and it was surrounded by sand and hills piled over ancient constructions.²⁷ When we went to this "circus" (in May 1971) we saw transporters removing great amounts of sand from it. Its characteristics unfortunately had changed and we could investigate nothing in it.

The temple

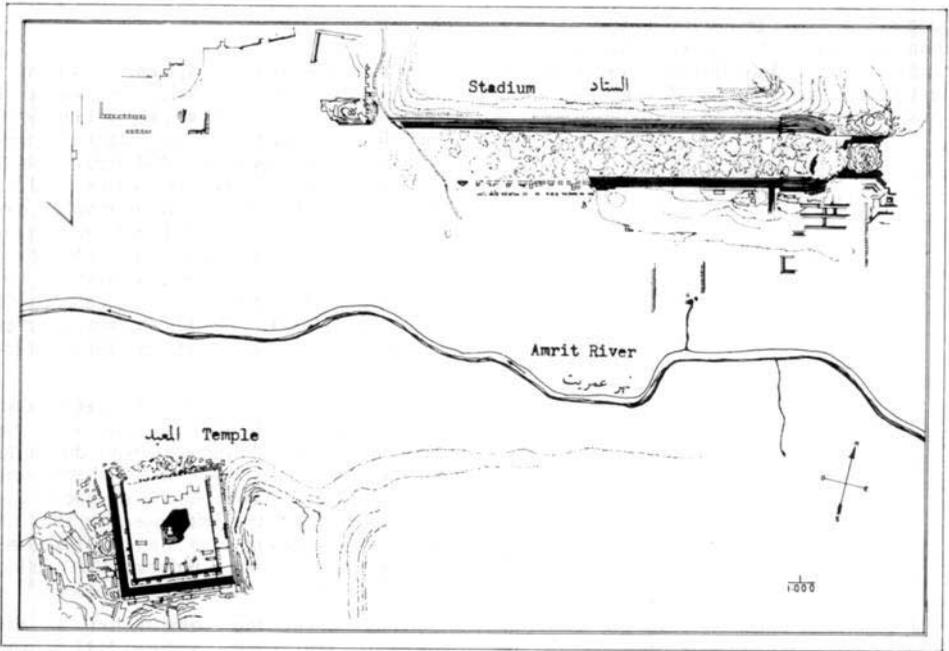
The Amrit stadium is adjacent to the city temple, with only a field, in which a stream—Amrit River—flows, separating them. The distance between the stadium and the temple is approximately 200 metres; such is the tradition followed in Greece²⁸. This temple is a model of the Semitic temples; archaeologists deny any Greek influence upon it.²⁹ Some of its parts, especially its "cella", show an Egyptian influence known in the region since 1500 B.C.³⁰ It is in conformity architecture-wise to the Phoenician temples in Byblos which date from the third millennium B.C.³¹

The temple consists of a court 55 metres long and 48 metres wide. Its entrance is in the direction of the stadium. It was dug into rocky ground to a depth of 5.5 metres. Its walls were cut into rock. In the middle of the court a stone cube was left measuring 5.5 x 5.5 metres with a height of 3 metres. This cube was used as a base for building the "cella" which was built out of large stone blocks.³²

Contentau traces the construction of the temple to the eighth century B.C.³³ and Dunand traces it to the seventh century B.C.³⁴ If this temple, in its final form, dates from the epoch suggested by these two scholars, then, in principle, it has existed since the

Stairs of Amrit stadium.





Amrit stadium and temple: Amrit River; the stadium; the temple.

construction of the city, before the fifteenth century B.C. at least. The founder of the city is its god, since tradition was and still is that people would be concerned whenever erecting a city with building a place for worshipping and sanctifying the god³⁵ who was the cause of their existence.

In 1881 the image of Baal of Amrit,³⁶ to whom the temple was dedicated, was discovered in the region of Amrit. The Baal's costume was that of the northern Phoenicians, and his position is known from before 1700 B.C.³⁷ An inscription of two or three lines in Phoenician letters was found on this image, but the name of the god cannot be read.³⁸ It is observed that it resembles the famous position of Melkart, when the god carries a club in his right hand and a lion cub in the left hand³⁹. Dunand believed that this image dated back to the fourth century B.C.⁴⁰ However, if we compare it with the image of the Baal of Ugarit discovered by Schaeffer in Ras Shamra (Ugarit), we find a great similarity between the images of the two Baals.

Schaeffer says that the archaeological level from which this image was taken dates back to the thirteenth or twelfth century B.C.⁴¹ It

is our belief that the great resemblance between the two images does not favour separating them by eight or nine centuries. Ugarit is no farther than 100 kilometres from Amrit, and in the light of the great progress that has been made in unearthing archeological discoveries in Ugarit (which are bringing us closer to the truth), we can place the date of the image of Amrit farther back than either Contenau or Dunand have done. The Italian scholar Moscati, who found that the image of Amrit must be from the ninth century B.C., is one of the contemporary scholars who supports this view.⁴²

Therefore, we can say that the Amrit which flourished in ancient times witnessed great religious celebrations in which the temple played a major role in the ritual celebrations headed by sports in honour of Baal. We may consider the construction of the city near the temple as being necessary for worship. Thus, the relation of sports to worship, which the existence of Greek records indicate in the Olympic, Isthman, Pythian and Nemean Games, was existing before in Phoenicia. Here, too, the concept and purpose of the Greek Games appear to have been derived from the Phoenician Games.

Era of the stadium

We have relied upon historical data, archaeological and architectural evidence in order to define the era of the construction and first use of the stadium.

In Phoenicia there was a tradition which indicated that temples were built along with the establishment of cities, like the temple of Melkart in Tyre (2750 B.C.).⁴³ This consideration enables us to ascertain the existence of the Amrit temple from the building of the city, i.e. around the fifteenth century B.C.

When we go back to the religious relationship which always connected the athletic field and the temple, due to worship rites intermingling with athletic contests in honour of Baal, we find that the building of the stadium was concurrent with the building of the temple. If this were not true, how can one explain the existence of this stadium next to the temple? The fact that the same method was used to quarry the stones of the temple wall and the stadium steps reinforces our view regarding the connection of the time of the construction of the stadium to the time of the construction of the temple. Therefore, we can date the construction of the Amrit stadium contemporaneously with the construction of the temple and the city, i.e. around the fifteenth century B.C.

However, if the Amrit stadium dates from the Hellenistic or Roman epoch, a hippodrome and great halls with decorated pillars would have been built next to it in accordance with the advanced architecture of the times. Yet the primitiveness of the construction in all of the ruins of Amrit does not point to a Hellenic or Roman influence. The athletes' entrance to the stadium (under the south steps) was dug in the rock in a primitive fashion. It was not constructed from stones in the shape of a dome or in any definite architectural form such as the entrance to the stadium of Olympia, which Kunze dated back to the second century B.C.⁴⁴ Upon comparing the form of the two entrances, it is altogether clear to us that the entrance to the Amrit stadium is old by many centuries.

The existence of the Amrit stadium devoted to sports in Phoenicia several centuries before the Olympic Games is not strange. The events of the Trojan War in the thirteenth century B.C.⁴⁵ allude to the stadium contests in the funeral rites connected with the burial of Patroclus.⁴⁶

Summary

Amrit was mentioned in Egyptian texts of the fifteenth century B.C. It is known that Amrit was in its time a rich and beautiful city, subject to the Kingdom of Arwad. Some investigators have found that Amrit, known in Greek times as "Marathus", gave its name to "Marathon" (in Greece) where the "Heracleian Games" were held in honour of Melkart-Heracles in the fifth century B.C. It appears that a dispute arose in the second century B.C. between the inhabitants of Amrit and those of the adjacent island of Arwad which caused the Arwadians to destroy the city and divide its territory. From that time Amrit was neglected and passed into oblivion.

In Amrit we have explored a Phoenician stadium, standing near the city temple, which scholars thought to be a hippodrome. The athletic festivals of Amrit were tied to worship rite in honour of Baal and took place in this stadium. Great effort and expense went to uncover the steps in the rocks. These contests held at Amrit were running, jumping, throwing, wrestling... etc.

Archaeological evidence has shown that this stadium was used before the coming of Hellenic civilisation to the Phoenician coast.⁴⁷ It has been used since the construction of the temple, which was a part of the city from its beginning. These facts have encouraged us to trace the construction of the stadium back to around the fifteenth century B.C.

The stadium and its connection to the temple complete the clarification of the relation between sports and worship rites of Melkart-Heracles which began in Phoenicia and then moved by way of the Phoenicians to Greece.

L. B.



References

- ¹ Amrit is 135 km from Beirut, called Marathus in classical times.
- ² The stadium was an arena designated for holding athletic contests in running, jumping, throwing and wrestling. It is also an ancient unit of measurement equalling 600 feet (= 192.27 m).
- ³ Pococke, Richard: A Description of the East and Some Other Countries, II, 1, p. 203; Renan, Ernest: Mission de Phénicie, p. 90, pl. 8; Dunand, Maurice; Saliby, Nessib; Kirichian, Agop: Les Fouilles d'Amrit en 1954, les Annales Archéologiques de Syrie IV - V, p. 203. "Circus" means hippodrome in the Roman world.
- ⁴ Pococke, p. 203, means Roman hippodrome by the word circus.
- ⁵ Renan, p. 90, used the expression "stade", but he merely meant an athletic field, since he said on the same page (note 1): "Pococke... et Gerhard (Mém. de l'Acad. de Berlin, 1846, p. 599, note) sont arrivés avec justesse à l'idée d'un cirque."
- ⁶ Fellmann, Berthold: Die Wiederentdeckung Olympia - 100 Jahre Deutsche Ausgrabung in Olympia, p. 34.
- ⁷ Kunze, Emil: Bericht über die Ausgrabungen in Olympia VIII (1967), p. 1.
- ⁸ Renan, p. 90.
- ⁹ Honigmann: Marathos. Pauly - Wissown, Real-Enz. XIV, p. 1431-1435.
- ¹⁰ Hitti, Philip: Lebanon in History, p. 68.
- ¹¹ Burchardt, Max: Die Altkananäischen Fremdwörter und Eigennamen im Ägyptischen II, p. 52, No 1023: "Kri mrt, Der Name ist ossemitisch und konnte Palmen-Stadt bedeuten." See also Gauthier, Henri: Dictionnaires des noms géographiques contenus dans les textes hiéroglyphiques V, p. 191: "Kart'amrouta (liste C, Thoutmôsis III à Karnak, No 222), ville de la Syrie du Nord." Perhaps Amrit has a connection with "Imerishu" near Damascus, which was mentioned in the annals of the King of the Assyrians Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.). See Pritchard, James: Ancient Near East Texts Relation to the Old Testament, p. 278.
- ¹² Ward, William: Egypt and the East Mediterranean in the Early Second Millenium B.C., Orientalia 30, p. 137-138.
- ¹³ Arrian: Anabasis Alexandri II, 13, 7; XIV, XV.
- ¹⁴ Babelon, Ernest: Catalogues des monnaies grecques (Les Perses Achéménides), introduction, p. 170-175, 208-214; Rouvier, Jules: L'ère de Marathos de Phénicie, Journal Asiatique, série 9, vol. 12 (1898), p. 362-402; Numismatique des villes de la Phénicie, Journal International d'Archéologie IV (1901), p. 133-139.
- ¹⁵ Diodorus XXXIII, 5; Polibius: The Histories V, 68; Babelon: Catalogue des monnaies grecques, introduction, p. 160, 171.
- ¹⁶ Strabo: The Geography of Strabo, XVI, 2, 12.
- ¹⁷ Renan, p. 98-99; Babelon: Catalogues des monnaies grecques, p. 171.
- ¹⁸ Dunand, Saliby, Kirichian: Les Fouilles d'Amrit en 1954. IV-V, p. 194-196.
- ¹⁹ Brown, p. 99-100; Dunker: The History of Antiquity II, p. 63; Pausanias, I, 32, 6-7.
- ²⁰ Pindar, OI.IX, 89-91; OI.XIII, 110; Pyth. VIII, 79; Hyde: Olympic Victor Monuments and Greek Athletic Art, p. 18.
- ²¹ In Epidaurus, Delphi, Messenia, Athens, Dorigny, Sorlin: Stadium, Dictionnaire des Antiquités grecques et romaines IV, 2, p. 1449-1456.
- ²² Renan, p. 90-91.
- ²³ Schöbel, p. 53. The hippodrome in Olympia is 770 m in length.
- ²⁴ Dunand, Saliby. Kirichian: Les Fouilles d'Amrit, p. 203-204.
- ²⁵ Dunand, Saliby, Kirichian: Les Fouilles d'Amrit, p. 204.
- ²⁶ Squarciapino, Maria Floriana: Leptis Magna, p. 14, 21, 39, 63, 129, Fig. 94, 96. See also Bandinelli, Ranuccio Bianchi: Leptis Magna, Fig. 217.
- ²⁷ Renan, p. 97.
- ²⁸ Dorigny: Stadium, p. 1452, note 1.
- ²⁹ Renan, p. 98, 100, 101; Laborde, Léon: Voyage de la Syrie, p. 28; Dunand, Saliby: Le Sanctuaire d'Amrit, Les Annales Archéologiques de Syrie, XI-XII, p. 9.
- ³⁰ Contenau, Georges: La Civilisation Phénicienne, p. 141.
- ³¹ Dunand and Saliby: Le Sanctuaire d'Amrit, p. 9.
- ³² Renan, p. 63-68; Dunand and Saliby, p. 3-11.
- ³³ Contenau, p. 141.
- ³⁴ Dunand, Maurice: Les Sculptures de la Favissa du Temple d'Amrit, B.M.B., VII, p. 101.
- ³⁵ Herodotus, II, 44, recognised that the construction of the temple of Melkart in Tyre was contemporary with the construction of the city.
- ³⁶ Clermont-Ganneau, Charles: Mission en Palestine et en Phénicie entreprise en 1881 - 5o rapport, p. 128-129, No 109, pl. 6 A; Perrot-Chipiez: Histoire de l'Art dans l'Antiquité, III (Phénicie, Chypre), p. 413, fig. 283; Clermont-Ganneau: La stèle phénicienne d'Amrit, Recueil d'archéologie orientale, IV, p. 325-327; the stele is made of limestone, height 1.80 m, width 35 cm, depth 20 cm; De Ridder: Collection de Clerq, II, p. 234, pl. 36.
- ³⁷ Compare with Baal of Ugarit.
- ³⁸ Clermont-Ganneau: La stèle phénicienne d'Amrit, p. 325; Dussaud, René: Melqart, Syria XXV (1946), p. 329.
- ³⁹ Clermont-Ganneau: La stèle phénicienne d'Amrit, p. 328-329.
- ⁴⁰ Dunand: Recherches Archéologiques dans la région de Marathus, Les Annales Archéologiques de Syrie, III (1953), p. 167.
- ⁴¹ Schaeffer, Claude: Les Fouilles de Minet-el-Beida et de Ras-Shamra, Syria XIV (1933), p. 122-123. Relying on the resources of various research projects, the publication of the Louvre Museum, Les Antiquités Orientales, by Pierre Amiet, p. 126, says that the stele is from XVIII-XVII century B.C.
- ⁴² Moscati, Sabatino: L'épopée des Phéniciens, p. 88.
- ⁴³ Herodotus, II, 44.
- ⁴⁴ Kunze: Das Stadion - 100 Jahre Deutsche Ausgrabung in Olympia, p. 52, Pl. 3, Fig. 2.
- ⁴⁵ Herodotus (II, 145) estimates that the Trojan War occurred in the middle of the thirteenth century B.C.; Hourani: Theories of the Phoenician Genesis and their influence on the Greek Civilisation, p. 29, note 11.
- ⁴⁶ Homer: Iliad, XXIII, 740-751. In these Funeral Games a silver cup made in Sidon (Phoenicia) was presented to the winner of the foot-race. This proves the flourishing of Phoenicia during that epoch.
- ⁴⁷ Hellenic rule in Lebanon and Syria was from 332 - 64 B.C. and the Roman rule between 64 B.C. - 395 A.D. According to the documents, Gaspar, Camille: Olympia, Dictionnaire des Antiquités grecques et romaines, IV, 1, p. 194-196, mentioned 34 cities in which athletic contests occurred during the Greek and Roman period, including Antioch, Éphesus, Izmir, Damascus, Tyre and Alexandria in the east. Amrit was not mentioned. Therefore we believe that the Amrit Games may have ceased in the second century B.C.