... ZAOULI N°10, Vol. 8, Août 2025, pp. 768-795 ISSN : 2788-9343

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation : 23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

The Influence of Carthaginian Religion on the Formation of Numidian Beliefs and Rituals

GUEFFAF Bachir
University of Ibn Khaldoun – Tiaret
Laboratory of Philosophical Studies of Human and Community Issues in Algeria
bachir.gueffaf@univ-tiaret.dz
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8080-0492

Abstract
This study examines the influence of Carthaginian religion on the evolution of religious beliefs and rituals among the Numidians, seeking to understand the mechanisms of cultural and religious interaction and how these exchanges contributed to shaping a distinctive Numidian religious identity in antiquity. Through an analytical and comparative approach between Carthaginian heritage and local Berber beliefs in ancient Numidia, the study concludes that Numidian religious identity was not a purely indigenous creation but rather the result of broad cultural and spiritual interactions within the Punic world.

Keywords: *Carthage, Numidia, Religion, Rituals, Baal Hammon, Tanith, Cultural Interaction, Punic Influence*

Résumé
Cette étude examine l'influence de la religion carthaginoise sur l'évolution des croyances et des rituels religieux chez les Numides, cherchant à comprendre les mécanismes de l'interaction culturelle et religieuse et comment ces échanges ont contribué à façonner une identité religieuse numide distinctive dans l'Antiquité. À travers une approche analytique et comparative entre l'héritage carthaginois et les croyances berbères locales dans la Numidie antique, l'étude conclut que l'identité religieuse numide n'était pas une création purement indigène mais plutôt le résultat de larges interactions culturelles et spirituelles au sein du monde punique.

Mots-clés *: Carthage, Numidie, Religion, Rituels, Baal Hammon, Tanit, Interaction culturelle, Influence punique*

Introduction

Religion represents one of the most essential components of the cultural identity of ancient peoples, as it constituted the foundation upon which their worldview, social and political systems, and even their relationships with cosmic forces were built. In this regard, the Carthaginian civilization stands out as one of the most influential in the western Mediterranean basin due to its complex religious system, which combined the Phoenician heritage originating from the Levant with local elements of the ancient Maghreb.

Since its founding in the ninth century BCE, Carthage became a radiating center of commerce, culture, and spirituality whose influence extended across North Africa. As its commercial and military networks expanded, the Carthaginian religion—with its deities, rituals, and beliefs—gradually penetrated the social fabric of neighboring peoples, particularly the Numidian tribes, who represented one of the most significant Berber components of the region.

This religious interaction between the Carthaginians and the Numidians raises essential questions about the nature and scope of that influence:

Was it limited to the adoption of certain symbols and deities, or did it extend to the reformation of the entire Numidian system of beliefs and rituals?

And was this influence the product of peaceful coexistence and cultural exchange, or the result of Carthage's political and economic dominance in the region?

Studying the influence of Carthaginian religion on the formation of Numidian beliefs and rituals thus represents an attempt to understand the mechanisms of cultural and religious interaction between two ancient North African

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

civilizations and to examine how this interaction contributed to shaping a distinctive Numidian religious identity in antiquity.

When the Phoenicians migrated from the Canaanite coast to the ancient Maghreb and founded Carthage, they brought with them their customs, traditions, and religious practices, which had a clear impact on the local Numidian faith. This influence manifested through the emergence of new divine names, the adoption of Punic religious ceremonies, and modifications in modes of worship. The effect took several forms: sometimes new deities appeared; sometimes the foreign religion fused with the local one; and in some cases, pre-existing cults evolved to adapt to the new cultural and political context (Lahcen, 2007, p. 41).

1. Internal Religious Influences on the Numidians

The Berbers possessed their own religion, which did not significantly differ from other pagan faiths except in the details of worship and the depictions of their deities—elements that often reflected linguistic and regional variation. When the Phoenicians arrived on the Berber coasts and established trading posts at the end of the second millennium BCE, they encountered no significant resistance from the local population. The foundation of Carthage in 814 BCE further confirmed the long-standing peaceful relations between the two peoples (Milī, 2007, p. 210).

Through close coexistence, the Numidians gradually absorbed Carthaginian religious concepts, imitating many of their worship practices and modifying some ancestral traditions. This cultural exchange produced notable

transformations in religious architecture, funerary customs, and theological imagery (Lahcen, 2007, p. 43).

By the late third century BCE, three major Berber kingdoms had emerged—Carthage, Numidia (divided into the Massyli and Masaesyli branches), and Mauretania—marking a new era of political and religious complexity in the western Mediterranean. The arrival of the Phoenicians in North Africa represented a turning point in Libyan (Berber) spirituality: their beliefs evolved under the influence of Canaanite-Phoenician religion, leading to a deep fusion of foreign and indigenous traditions.

Thus, the Carthaginian civilization, despite its eastern origins, gradually became localized. By the third and second centuries BCE, it had transformed into a synthesis of eastern and Berber elements. The cult of *Baal Hammon*, for instance—one of the most revered deities—reflects this fusion, as the Carthaginian *Baal* merged with the indigenous *Hammon*, forming a distinct North African divine archetype. Consequently, Numidia developed a truly Carthaginian-Berber civilization that continued to thrive long after the fall of Carthage (Lahcen, 2007, p. 41).

The Carthaginian religion was deeply embedded in the daily life of its followers, shaping their behavior, worldviews, and moral codes. Its prominence among the Numidians can be linked to their pre-existing inclination toward sky worship and celestial symbolism—a trait already evident in pre-Punic Libyan spirituality. This theological compatibility facilitated the peaceful diffusion of Punic religious beliefs into Numidian society, even in regions beyond Carthaginian political control.

The Numidians, therefore, assimilated Punic religious elements, adapting them to their own cosmological ideas

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

and integrating them into ancestral traditions. This Carthaginian influence persisted for over a millennium—more than twice the period of Roman hegemony in the region.

The depth of this impact becomes evident through the adoption of Carthaginian deities, rituals, and funerary customs by the Numidians. Old Punic religious traditions continued to survive, particularly in the interior regions less affected by Romanization. This endurance was largely due to the experience of Numidian soldiers who had served in the Carthaginian army and brought back Punic religious practices to their homeland.

In this way, Numidian society became a composite of several cultural layers—Phoenician-Carthaginian, Libyan-Berber, and to some extent Greek—producing a dynamic civilization that transitioned from relative isolation to active participation in the historical and religious development of the Mediterranean world.

2. Carthaginian Deities in Numidia

The Numidians adopted the worship of the Carthaginian god **Baal Hammon**, whose cult spread during and after the reign of **Massinissa**. Scholars have long debated his origins: some consider him to be of **African** descent, while others claim a **Carthaginian** origin (Lahcene, 2007, p. 41). The Numidians also embraced the worship of the goddess **Tanit**, who became one of their most significant deities. Numidian kings showed a keen interest in the Carthaginian religious beliefs related to **agriculture**, as Tanit was regarded as a Carthaginian goddess likely born from the fusion of the Phoenician goddesses *Elat* and *Astarte*. She possessed

celestial characteristics and was revered as the **protector of agricultural crops** (Millet, 1998, p. 210).

One of the most evident signs of **Eastern religious influence** in Numidia is the use of **theophoric names**—personal names derived from divine appellations—such as *Mastanbaal*, *Azarbaal*, and *Bodmelqart*. Moreover, numerous **temples** were constructed in Numidia dedicated to Baal Hammon and Tanit, similar to those established at the gates of major Punic cities. For instance, a temple of Baal Hammon was built beside the royal palace in **Cirta (modern Constantine)**, a city where several **Punic archaeological remains** have been discovered, including the famous **"Temple of the Pit"** (*Maqam al-Hafra*) (Rabah, 2007, p. 43).

Regarding **royal tombs**, the architecture of the **Medracen** monument represents a synthesis of **Carthaginian**, **Greek**, **Egyptian**, and **Berber** traditions (Millet, 1998, p. 211). As for the **Tomb of the Christian Woman (Qabr ar-Rūmiyya)**, scholar **Goudas** argued that the expression used by Arabs after the Islamic conquest of North Africa is of **Phoenician origin**, meaning "royal tomb" (Le Clay, 1972, p. 56).

The **tower-shaped tombs** or **tower-like mausoleums** constructed during the **3rd and 2nd centuries BCE** appear foreign to the older local funerary traditions. Several indicators suggest that this architectural type has **Eastern origins**, as their exterior form and architectural elements closely resemble those of mausoleums spread across the Mediterranean basin, particularly in **Phoenicia** and **Syria**, such as the **Tomb of Saint** (Rabah, 2007, p. 44).

This **Eastern influence** became visible during the Carthaginian presence around the Mediterranean and intensified during the **Berber kingdoms** of the **3rd and 2nd**

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

centuries BCE, continuing well into the **Roman period** (Lahcene, 2007, p. 45).

In addition to the **El-Khroub mausoleum**, some researchers believe it was inspired by **Carthaginian architectural influence**, which is visible in the design of its façades resembling those used by the Carthaginians during their later period, as well as in the **recessed moldings** and the **Egyptian-style cornices** common in late Punic architecture (Lahcene, 2007, p. 46).

Similarly, the **lamp discovered at Sousse**, which featured numerous votive monuments, can be dated to the **time of Massinissa**. In subsequent periods, **Numidia** saw the construction of numerous temples dedicated to **Baal Hammon** and **Tanit**. Archaeological remains found in various parts of **Numidia, Tunisia, and Algeria** reveal Punic-style temple façades and **depictions of Punic deities** on **Numidian coins** (Millet, 1998, p. 211).

Excavations at temples such as **Hadrametum** and the **"Temple of the Pit"** (*Maqam al-Hafra*) at **Cirta**—dating from the reigns of **Massinissa** and **Micipsa**—revealed cultic tools similar to those used in Carthage. In addition, **inscriptions** found throughout Numidia attest to **votive offerings, prayers, and dedications** made to the Carthaginian gods, especially **Baal Hammon** and **Tanit** (Rabah, 2007, p. 47).

The worship of these two deities continued well into the **Roman period**. According to **Le Clay (1972, p. 56)**, most temples later dedicated to the Roman god **Saturn** were originally shrines of **Baal Hammon**; the two major deities eventually adopted new names: **Saturn** and **Caelestis**. Symbols associated with Baal Hammon and Tanit remained widespread in **Numidian cities** such as **Ksar Lemta** and

Constantine, demonstrating that the Numidians deeply believed in and venerated them. Numerous archaeological artifacts—**inscriptions and symbols**—bear witness to their worship, including stelae inscribed with dedications such as: *"To the Lord Baal and to the Lady Tanit, the Face of Baal"* (Lahcene, 2007, p. 48).

3. Carthaginian Religious and Funerary Rituals in Numidia

3.1. Carthaginian Religious Rituals in Numidia

One of the most significant religious practices that persisted during the Berber kingdoms was the **ritual of human sacrifice**, a tradition maintained in **Cirta** during the reign of **Masinissa**, following the **Carthaginian model** (Rabah, 2007, p. 49). Inscriptions discovered in and around Cirta confirm that the **Numidians** sacrificed their children to the deity **Molochmor**, a practice also documented in **Carthage**, where sacrifices were offered to **Baal Hammon**. Archaeological evidence, including **skeletal remains of children** and **Punic inscriptions**, attest to these rituals. Punic texts also refer to **child sacrifices** performed in honor of **King Baal Hammon** and the goddess **Tanit** (Mili, 1999, p. 212).

These sacrifices were typically conducted **at night in open air**, attended by large crowds who gathered around the **idol of the god**, awaiting the ritual. The ceremony was accompanied by **music and dancing**, and a **priest** would approach the altar carrying the victim, who was then **sacrificed** and placed in the hands of the idol to **slide into the sacred flames**. Archaeological evidence does not provide a fully detailed depiction of the chants and prayers accompanying these rites, leaving historians to reconstruct

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

them based on limited findings—reconstructions that often aimed to highlight the **"cruelty" of Punic civilization** (Lahcen, 2007, p. 51).

Although the **Romans** generally did not interfere with the local customs and religious traditions of **North Africa**, they explicitly **prohibited human sacrifice**; other religious systems, however, remained unchanged (Le Clay, 1972, p. 59). The **Carthaginian influence** on Numidian rituals is evident from discoveries such as the **two stelae found at the "Maqam al-Hafra" site**, depicting a **deformed child offered as a sacrifice** to the god **Moloch** during the **second half of the second century BCE**. This demonstrates that such traditions were introduced into **Numidia through Carthage**, a practice with ancient roots among the **Canaanites and Eastern Semitic peoples** (Rabah, 2007, p. 53).

Over time, **child sacrifices were replaced by animal offerings**, both in **Carthage** (by the end of the first century BCE) and in **Dougga** (by the second century BCE). A similar transformation occurred in **Numidia**, where animals were substituted for human victims in sacrificial rituals (Mili, 1999, p. 214). Archaeologists have uncovered **offering tables** and **remains of burnt animal sacrifices** related to the **Molchomor rite**, which continued into the **Roman period** (Lahcen, 2007, p. 55).

Despite the **high economic and emotional cost** of these Punic religious practices, particularly human sacrifices, they found strong acceptance among local populations, who maintained them with great devotion. The **Numidian adoption of Carthaginian religious beliefs** blurred the distinction between **Carthaginian and Numidian territories**, as both shared similar deities and rituals. This led to a

fusion between Carthaginian and Libyan religion, with the **sacred ram** of the Berbers merging symbolically with the **Phoenician-Carthaginian Baal**. The people continued to **offer human sacrifices** to **Baal Hammon** and **Tanit**, despite the **Roman Senate's prohibition** of human sacrifices—only **animal sacrifices** remained permitted. Nonetheless, **human offerings persisted until the end of the first century CE** (Le Clay, 1972, p. 61).

In conclusion, the intermarriage between the **Carthaginians** and the **Berbers**, the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa, resulted in a refined and distinctive civilization. This hybrid society managed to preserve many aspects of Carthaginian culture even after the destruction of the capital city in 146 BCE. The **Carthaginian-Berber synthesis** paved the way for the later spread of **Islam** and the **Arabic language** across North Africa, which already shared a linguistic background influenced by **Semitic languages** (Rabah, 2007, p. 60; Mili, 1999, p. 219).

3.2. Carthaginian Funerary Rituals in Numidia

Archaeological evidence uncovered from various sites across **Algeria** indicates that the **Numidians** were influenced by **Carthaginian burial practices**, although some differences existed in the **depth of tomb shafts** and the **positioning of bodies** (Lahcen, 2007, p. 63). It is worth noting that these funerary rituals were not unique to the local population but were also practiced by other ancient peoples. Furthermore, the **interaction between Berbers and Phoenicians**, especially during the Carthaginian period, facilitated the **adoption of certain funerary customs** from the Mediterranean world (Mili, 1999, p. 221).

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

Excavations have revealed numerous **Carthaginian-style graves**, most of which date from the later phases of **Carthaginian history**, while others belong to the **Roman era of Carthage**, such as those discovered in **Bona (Annaba)** and **Cirta (Constantine)** (Rabah, 2007, p. 66). Generally, these tombs were shaped as **pits, shafts, or catacombs**, where the pit tended to widen at the level of the **head and shoulders**, giving the body an anatomically conforming shape—similar to **Carthaginian burial models**.

Among the **Numidians**, however, the **burial shafts** were typically **wider but shallower** than those of Carthage, with an average depth not exceeding **three meters**, such as the graves found in **Bir Gouraya**, west of Algiers. These shafts were equipped with **stairs leading downward**, and due to their shallowness, **multi-level burials**—common in Carthage—were not possible. Yet, **side niches** occasionally contained additional burials (Lahcen, 2007, p. 68).

The **catacombs** were not carved in the same fashion as those of Carthage. In **Sousse**, for example, the **circular form** of some burial chambers suggests that the **body was placed in a sitting or flexed position**, whereas **rectangular burial rooms** were more typical elsewhere. Entrances were often covered with **stone slabs**, and in some cases, the **tombs were surrounded by stones**, resembling the **"tumuli" (timilos)** of ancient Libyan tradition. Numidian tombs were often topped with **stone stelae**, just like those of the Carthaginians (Mili, 1999, p. 224).

The deceased was typically **laid on the back with arms folded across the chest**, with the **head positioned inward** and the **feet toward the entrance**. The orientation varied, but the presence of **metal pins near the neck or shoulders**

suggests that the body was **wrapped in cloth**, which has since disintegrated, leaving only the **metal fasteners** that resisted decay (Rabah, 2007, p. 70).

Some **Numidian graves** display a **mixed Carthaginian and Libyan character**, such as **circular tombs** where the deceased's **legs were bent** and the **body was painted red**—a practice of ancient Libyan origin. The **custom of cremation** also appeared among **Eastern Numidians** at a later stage, introduced by the **Carthaginian aristocracy**. However, archaeological findings in **Western Maghreb** suggest that cremation was already known among **Western Numidians and Mauri**, and it was likely practiced in **Eastern Numidia** as early as the **fourth century BCE**, influenced by Western Maghrebian traditions (Le Clay, 1972, p. 74).

Ashes of the dead were placed in funerary monuments such as the **Kharroub Mausoleum** and possibly in **Siga**, showing the persistence of this ritual into later periods (Lahcen, 2007, p. 75).

After the **third century BCE**, the number of **tombs containing cremated bones** increased significantly. The deceased were often provided with **funerary furnishings**, contrary to the **Carthaginian custom**, where cremated individuals were usually buried **without any grave goods** (Lahcen, 2007, p. 78).

Some scholars believe that the use of **red pigment**—resembling **terracotta paint**—was an **Eastern tradition** employed for painting **skulls** and occasionally **wooden coffins**. This red coloring was widely used in the **Tunisian coastal cemeteries**, regardless of whether the tombs were of **Punic** or **Libyan design** (Mili, 1999, p. 226).

It is worth noting that the **Kharroub Mausoleum**, unlike other funerary monuments, contained a **large and diverse**

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

array of grave goods. Excavations conducted between **1915 and 1916** uncovered both well-preserved and damaged objects, including **offensive and defensive weapons**, **ornamental jewelry**, **silverware**, and **ceramic vessels** (Rabah, 2007, p. 81).

Near the deceased were found various **funerary objects**, some of which were **personal belongings** such as **rings**, while others were **manufactured specifically for burial**, intended to assist the deceased in the **afterlife**. These grave goods consisted of **pottery, vases, and pitchers**, as well as **ceramic materials**, **glass lamps and jars**, **metal artifacts** like **mirrors, pins, and gold items**, and **ivory objects** such as **combs**. Numerous **miniature statues** of **deities and human figures** were also discovered, in addition to **animal bones** and **plant remains** such as **fruit** (Mili, 1999, p. 228).

The presence of these materials reflects the **Numidian belief in an afterlife**, where the deceased was provided with all that might be needed in the next world. It is believed that **funeral ceremonies** were conducted in an atmosphere of **reverence and prayer**, led by **priests**, although written and archaeological sources do not provide sufficient detail to fully describe these rituals (Rabah, 2007, p. 82).

Archaeological evidence from various regions of **Numidia** further confirms that the Numidians were influenced by the **Carthaginian model** in constructing **large funerary monuments** known as **"mausolea"**, built at the **entrances of their cities**, such as the **Royal Mausoleum of Dougga** and the **Medracen** (Mili, 1999, p. 230).

The **architectural remains**—particularly the **stone structures surrounding the sanctuaries**—reveal a **Numidian style** infused with **Punic and Greek influences**, notably the

Greek entablature combined with **Phoenician decorative motifs** (Lahcen, 2007, p. 84).

The **Soumaa du Khroub Mausoleum** in **Constantine** exemplifies this **Punic-Greek synthesis**, and historians believe it was built by **Carthaginian architects** (Rabah, 2007, p. 85). Others, however, argue that these mausolea represent the **evolution of indigenous Berber "bazina" tombs**, and that the **Phoenicians** merely transmitted this architectural type from their homeland to **Carthage**, from where it spread through **Carthaginian aristocracy** to **Numidian kings**. Architecturally, these tombs typically feature a **square base surmounted by a pyramid** (Le Glay, 1972, p. 90).

The **Mausoleum of Dougga** (Mausolée de Dougga) contains **inscriptions in both Libyan and Punic scripts**, including an **epigraphic reference** to **Zilas**, the **grandfather of King Masinissa**, who is designated by the title **"šbt" (subat)**—meaning *chief* rather than *king*. This linguistic detail highlights the **extent of Carthaginian political and cultural influence** over **Numidian rulers** during this early historical period. Moreover, the **Libyan inscription** also includes the title **"Ekleid"**, meaning **military governor**, confirming the **Helleno-Punic administrative imprint** on Numidian leadership (Rabah, 2007, p. 88).

The **Royal Mausoleum of Mauretania**, known as the **"Tomb of the Christian Woman" (Tombeau de la Chrétienne)**, represents a remarkable **fusion of Greek and Carthaginian architectural elements**. The **Carthaginian influence** is particularly visible in the **columns** that bear **double inscriptions**, referred to as **"Attic bases"**, which are also found in **Phoenician stelae** dating to the **third and second centuries BCE** (Lahcen, 2007, p. 90).

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

It is noteworthy that many **inscriptions discovered at Cirta** were written in **Neo-Punic** and bore the names **"Boulomqart"** and **"Hanno"**, who appear to have been local **chiefs or noble families**. All these archaeological findings, characterized by a strong **Punic imprint**, provide clear evidence of the **profound Carthaginian influence** on **Numidian civilization** (Mili, 1999, p. 234).

In summary, the **Numidian kingdoms**, through their **close contact with the Carthaginians** and other Mediterranean peoples, achieved a significant level of **cultural interaction and exchange**. Archaeological evidence consistently demonstrates the **fusion between indigenous Numidian systems and Punic-Phoenician influences**, which contributed to the emergence of a **highly developed and syncretic society**. Despite this ongoing **cultural and religious exchange**, the Numidians **retained essential elements of their local heritage** (Rabah, 2007, p. 92).

Of particular interest is the **widespread worship of the Carthaginian deities** among the Numidians—especially **Baal Hammon** and **Tanit Pe-Baal**. The **cult of Baal Hammon** found fertile ground for its development in Numidia. Supporting evidence includes the **"Pit Temple" (Temple de la Fosse)**, where inscriptions associate **Tanit** with **Baal Hammon**, along with other deities such as **Baal Idir** and **Melqart**. The **stelae uncovered at Cirta** thus provide crucial documentation for understanding the **Punic-Numidian religion**, which reached its height only after merging with **local Numidian traditions** (Le Glay, 1972, p. 94).

The **Carthaginian legacy** is clearly visible among the **Numidian people**, particularly in the **interior regions**. The

Medracen (Le Medhcen) serves as powerful testimony to the **influence of Punic architecture** on Numidian funerary monuments. Further archaeological evidence from **Koudiat Zarour**, east of **Salasa (Salahsa)**, confirms this influence—excavations revealed a **small sacrificial area** and **votive sculptures** devoid of inscriptions, attesting to the persistence of **Carthaginian religious traditions** within **Numidian religious life** (Rabah, 2007, p. 96).

4. Origins of Berber Religious Thought

The **Berbers** maintained a profound connection with the **forces of nature** and its manifestations of grandeur, such as **celestial bodies and stars**. Certain animals—**the bull, the ram, the goat, and the serpent**—served as **sacred symbols**, while **caves and grottos** held a revered status in their belief system (Mili, 1999, p. 52).

Living primarily as **farmers and herders**, the Berbers' religion was fundamentally that of **an agrarian and pastoral society**. Consequently, **labor and agricultural activity** formed the **first nucleus** of **religious thought** in ancient North Africa, particularly among the Berbers, who were the **indigenous inhabitants** of the region (Rabah, 2007, p. 38).

The origins of Berber religious beliefs can thus be understood through **four interrelated elements—local and external influences**—with the **local component** predominating. These include:

1. **Indigenous Berber beliefs**,
2. **Egyptian influences**,
3. **Semitic (Canaanite-Libyan) syncretism** during the **Punic period**, and
4. **Greek and Roman religious influences** (Le Glay, 1972, p. 41).

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

Archaeological and historical studies indicate that the **earliest forms of Berber religion** date back to the **Neolithic period**. Excavations at **El-Gattar**, near **Gafsa in eastern Tunisia**, uncovered **chipped stone spheres**, which may have been used in **ritual practices** or as **offerings to deities** (Rabah, 2007, p. 39).

These findings suggest that the **ancient inhabitants of North Africa** displayed an early concern for **spiritual and metaphysical dimensions**. They believed that the **world around them was filled with spirits**, and thus sought to **appease natural forces** to protect themselves from harm and ensure a secure future. To achieve this, they performed **ritual dances**, wore **masks**, and disguised themselves as **animals**, reenacting **magical ceremonies** symbolizing their relationship with the unseen world (Mili, 1999, p. 54).

3.2.1. Indigenous Worship in Ancient North Africa

A.1. The Cult of Water

Water held a **sacred status** in **ancient North Africa**, primarily due to the **nature of agricultural and pastoral activities** and the **recurring droughts** typical of the region's **semi-arid climate**. This ecological reality imbued **springs, wells, and sources** with a **divine and spiritual significance**, transforming them into **holy sanctuaries** (Rabah, 2007, p. 52).

Ancient North Africans expressed this **sacrality of water** through various **rain-invocation rituals** and practices intended to ensure fertility and abundance. These traditions **persisted into the Roman period**, as evidenced by the discovery made by **Picard** at the **Roman fort of Castellum Dimmidi** (modern-day **Mes'ad**, Algeria). Excavations

revealed a **votive figurine** representing the "Master of the Spoon" (*le maître de la cuillère*), associated with a **local legend** about **rainmaking ceremonies** practiced in the regions of **Laghouat and Djelfa** (Picard, 1954, p. 118).

At the bottom of a **well**, archaeologists found a **small sanctuary** designed for worship, including a **niche-altar** accessed through a **narrow passage**. An inscription discovered there mentioned **dedications to several deities**, among them **Esculape (Asclepius)**—the **healer god** often associated with **sacred water** and **ritual purification** (Le Glay, 1972, p. 44).

A.2. The Cult of the Sun and the Moon

The **worship of the Sun and Moon** was widespread throughout **ancient North Africa**. The Greek historian **Herodotus** observed that, with the exception of a few tribes such as the **Samunians** who lived near **Lake Tritonis** (the Gulf of Gabes) and the **Austrones**, most **Libyan peoples** revered the **Sun** and offered it **animal sacrifices** (Herodotus, *Histories*, IV.188).

These offerings were made to **ward off evil spirits**, **bless livestock**, and **celebrate the life-giving power** of the solar deity, which symbolized **warmth, fertility, and renewal**—forces intimately tied to **agricultural cycles** (Mili, 1999, p. 59). The **Sun**, seen as the **giver of life**, became a central symbol of **vital energy and divine order**.

Other classical writers, including **Pliny the Elder** and **Diodorus Siculus**, also attested to the persistence of **solar worship** among the **Libyan-Berber tribes**. Even as late as the **14th century CE**, **Ibn Khaldun** noted that **solar cults** survived among certain Berber groups, coexisting alongside

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

monotheistic religions such as **Christianity and Islam** (Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 1377/1967).

As for **lunar worship**, the Christian author **Tertullian** (3rd century CE) referred to **three lunar deities**, one of which—**Varsutina**—was venerated by **Mauretanian (North-African) communities** (Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, XXIV). The **Moon** held an important place in **magical and fertility rites**, especially those linked to **women's cycles** and **agricultural timing**, and these practices persisted well into the late antiquity period (Rabah, 2007, p. 56).

The **solar cult**, in particular, endured among North Africans for centuries. Egyptian iconography influenced its local expression, as seen in the **ram or bull's head surmounted by the solar disk**, a representation of the **god Amun-Ra**—the **supreme deity** associated with **light and creation** (Le Glay, 1972, p. 47).

Herodotus (5th century BCE) reported that the region remained **open to external religious influences**, and that the **Sun** was the **chief divinity** of most peoples in North Africa (*Histories*, IV.189). The **god Amun** thus became the **highest deity** among ancient North Africans, particularly the Berbers. Archaeological findings and **rock engravings** across the **Saharan Atlas**, **Hoggar**, and **Tassili n'Ajjer** regions confirm this (Mercier, 1955, p. 72).

The scholar **Henri Basset** (1952) supported this interpretation, asserting that **Amun** was not merely a **symbolic or imported deity**, but rather the **central figure** of the **indigenous Berber pantheon**—a divine synthesis embodying **African, Egyptian, and Semitic traits**. It remains difficult, however, to determine whether the **cult of Amun** originated in **Egypt** and spread westward, or vice versa.

Some researchers propose that **Berber populations**, driven by **climatic desiccation in the Sahara**, may have **migrated eastward toward the Nile Valley**, carrying with them **religious concepts** later integrated into **Egyptian cosmology**—the so-called "Ethiopians" of Greek ethnography (Rabah, 2007, p. 58).

Archaeological discoveries dating back to the **Predynastic period (ca. 3500–3200 BCE)** depict **Egyptians importing fire, rams, and olive branches from Libyan lands**, which demonstrates early **cultural and religious exchange** between Egypt and North Africa (Rabah, 2007, p. 61). According to **Morel**, **Maghrebi influences** appeared in Egypt at an early stage: the **second Egyptian nome** was under **Libyan rule**, while the **third nome** was known as the **"Libyan nome."** In both the **fourth** and **fifth nomes**, the goddess **Neit (Neith)**—called "the Libyan goddess"—was venerated. At **Thebes**, Egyptians also worshipped a **ram-headed deity**, believed to be associated with the **god of the Libyan western oases** (Morel, 1955, p. 90).

Many historians have relied on **archaeological findings**—including **votive and dedicatory stelae**, **funerary coffins**, and **engraved solar and lunar discs**—as tangible evidence of **solar worship** in ancient North Africa (Basset, 1952, p. 102). Despite the **limited and fragmentary evidence**, these practices reflect strong **external influences**. However, **J. Camps** (1960) cautioned against assuming that the Berbers held only primitive beliefs, emphasizing instead the **existence of structured spiritual systems** rooted in **local cosmology** (Camps, 1960, p. 213).

It is therefore plausible that **ancient North Africans** practiced **sun and moon worship independently** of external influences. Their **daily observation of the celestial cycles**, as

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

in other early civilizations, naturally fostered **cosmic reverence**. **Herodotus** recorded that the **Libyans** referred to the **sun** with exalted titles such as *"the Supreme," "the King," "the Sky," "the Spirit of the Sun,"* and *"the Strongest,"* suggesting a form of **solar monotheism** (*Histories*, IV.189). This worldview may have paralleled **Egyptian solar theology**, particularly during the **Amarna period** under **Akhenaten**, who promoted the cult of **Aten-Ra**, the universal sun deity (Rabah, 2007, p. 63).

A.3. The Cult of Caves

The **ancient inhabitants of North Africa** regarded **caves and grottoes** as **sacred places of dwelling for divine or ancestral spirits**. Many caves contained **animal and human depictions** engraved or painted on their walls, serving as **ritual spaces** maintained by priests or guardians (Basset, 1952, p. 114).

According to **S. Gsell** and **Henri Basset**, the very name **"Africa"**—applied to the whole continent during the Roman period—may derive from the **local Berber deity "Ifri,"** the **god of caves and the underworld** (Gsell & Basset, 1925, p. 71).

Caves also served as **funerary chambers**, as **Herodotus** observed that the **ancient Libyans** customarily **slept upon the graves** of persons of high status—tribal chiefs or priests—to maintain contact with their spirits (*Histories*, IV.190).

The later **construction of monumental tombs and royal mausoleums**, such as the **Royal Mausoleum of Mauretania (Tipasa)**, the **Medracen (Batna)**, and the **Tomb of the Christian Lady**, appears to have **evolved from this cave-**

based sacred tradition (Le Glay, 1972, p. 53). Saint **Augustine** later noted that North Africans believed **the deeper one descended into the earth, the closer one came to God**, further emphasizing the **spiritual symbolism of subterranean sanctuaries** (*De Civitate Dei*, VIII.22).

A.4. The Cult of Kings

Several **Berber monarchs** achieved **semi-divine status** through their **funerary monuments** and **dedicatory inscriptions**. The earliest textual evidence of **royal veneration** among the **ancient North Africans** dates to the **3rd century BCE**, discovered near **the royal tomb at Dougga (Thugga)**. The bilingual **Punic-Libyan inscription** reads:

"The citizens of Dougga built this temple for King Masinissa, son of King Gaia, in the tenth year of King Micipsa's reign."

Both **Picard** and **Gsell** interpreted this as evidence of **Masinissa's deification**. In contrast, **Mohamed-Saghir Ghanem** and **Mohamed Fantar** argue that the inscription merely **honors Masinissa as 'King' (MLKT)**, not as a divine being. The term **(TMQDŠ)** signifies a **"sacred place" or "sanctuary"**, not necessarily a **temple of divine kingship** (Fantar, 1990, p. 187).

Nevertheless, **Gsell** suggested that **Masinissa** himself may have **initiated this practice**, presenting himself as **a ruler with divine authority** to strengthen **his political and symbolic power** (Gsell, 1927, p. 206).

A.5. The Cult of the Dead

The **cult of the dead** occupied a **central role** in the **spiritual life of ancient North Africa**. The deceased—especially **ancestors, just men, and tribal leaders**—were

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

believed to possess **sacred power (numen)** capable of **protecting or punishing the living** (Rabah, 2007, p. 70).

Herodotus noted that the **Libyans** swore oaths upon the graves of the most **just and virtuous men**, touching their tombs in ritual acts of veneration (*Histories*, IV.191). Archaeological evidence from **Fezzan (Libya) to Mauretania** reveals **prehistoric funerary sites** that combined **tombs and small temples**, such as those at **Ghallala and Ghazal**, functioning both as **burial grounds and sanctuaries** (Mili, 1999, p. 74).

Similarly, **tumulus-type graves (timulus)**—often **conical or stepped**—served as **centers for prophetic and visionary rituals**, suggesting a **close link between ancestor worship, sacred architecture, and divination** (Le Glay, 1972, p. 54).

B. Funerary Rituals

Funerary rituals represent one of the **main sources for studying the religious dimension** of **ancient North Africa**, due to the **lack of written records** from prehistoric and protohistoric periods (Rabah, 2007, p. 75). However, exclusive reliance on **material evidence** can lead to **misinterpretations** of ancient beliefs, as burial practices often combine **ritual symbolism** with **practical customs**.

The term **"funerary ritual"** encompasses all actions related to **the treatment of the dead**—from **burial orientation and posture** to **grave goods and offerings**. These practices, traceable to the **Neolithic period**, demonstrate that **ancient North Africans** employed **diverse burial forms**: **natural and artificial caves**, **tumulus-type graves**, **bazinas**, and **shusha-type** tombs dating back to

early prehistory, likely evolving from **proto-Libyan funerary models** (Mili, 1999, p. 78).

Additionally, the **dolmen tombs** and **rock-cut chambers (hypogea)** indicate **foreign contact and cultural exchange** with **Mediterranean civilizations**.

In several Algerian burial sites—such as **Lalla Maghnia near Mouilah in western Algeria**—the **bodies were oriented westward**, laid on the **right side** with **legs bent**, covered by **stone slabs protecting the head and chest**. The **fetal-like position** of the deceased suggests **symbolic rebirth**, reflecting a **belief in cyclical life** and **spiritual renewal** (Basset, 1952, p. 117).

B-1. Burial Positions

Archaeological excavations in caves and tombs have revealed various types of human remains, including both individual and collective burials, as well as diverse burial positions—extended, flexed, seated, and even mixed or secondary burials. The orientation of the deceased was often toward the east, as observed in the graves of *Erkina* near Guelma.

In the 5th century BCE, Herodotus reported that the *Nasamones* were careful to place the dying in a seated position, preventing them from dying while lying on their backs, so that they could remain seated when buried.

Conversely, some researchers have discovered tombs where bones were mixed and scattered. According to *Picard* and *Charles-André Julien*, this practice stemmed from the living's fear that spirits might return to harm them; thus, scattering the bones ensured that the soul could not reunite with the body.

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

Family collective burials, on the other hand, reflected a belief in the continuity of social and familial bonds beyond death—maintaining the connection between the living and their ancestors in the afterlife.

One of the most common funerary practices among the ancient Maghreb populations was the painting of corpses in red pigment—a ritual that dates back to prehistoric times and, as Herodotus notes, continued through the Punic and Roman periods.

According to *Camps*, the red color symbolized the ongoing flow of blood, serving as a substitute for real blood and thus restoring vitality to the deceased. Meanwhile, *S. Gsell* interpreted it as a kind of sustenance left by the living for the dead. Many scholars also view it as a symbolic act of reverence by the living toward their ancestors, and possibly as an expression of belief in a form of eternal life. Regardless of interpretation, the persistence of such rituals underscores their indigenous origin.

Conclusion

This research has revealed the profound religious and cultural interaction between the Carthaginians and the Numidians in ancient North Africa—an interaction that was neither superficial nor transient, but one that permeated the intellectual and spiritual foundations of the region.

The Carthaginian religion—rooted in Phoenician oriental traditions yet imbued with local African elements—found fertile ground for its symbols, deities, and rituals in the

Numidian environment. The worship of *Baal Hammon* and *Tanit* became central pillars of Maghrebi religious life.

Through the analysis of inscriptions, archaeological symbols, and ritual practices, it becomes evident that Carthaginian influence did not result in mere imitation but in *adaptation and synthesis*. The Numidians reshaped Carthaginian symbols within their own cultural and linguistic framework, giving rise to a distinct, hybrid form of local religion.

Furthermore, this religious exchange was closely intertwined with political and commercial factors, as religion served as a channel for communication and rapprochement between the Numidian kingdoms and Carthage, even functioning as a diplomatic instrument within the wider Punic network across the western Mediterranean.

In conclusion, the Carthaginian religion played a decisive role in shaping the spiritual identity of the Numidians, helping to forge enduring religious traditions whose traces persisted into the Roman period. Thus, the study of this Carthaginian-Numidian interaction provides a vital key to understanding the genesis of religious and cultural identities in ancient North Africa.

References :

1. Lahcen, Rabeh. *The Tombs of Numidian and Moorish Kings: An Archaeological and Historical Comparative Study of the Most Important Royal Mausoleums from the 4th Century BC to the Eve of the Islamic Conquest in the 4th Century AD*. Algiers: Dar Houma, 2007

Soumission : **01/05/2025** **Acceptation** : **23/07/2025** **Publication** : **25/08/2025**

2. Boumakhl, El-Hajj Ahmed Moulay. *Previous Reference*, p. 121.
3. Bernian, André, Nouschi, André, & Lacoste, Yves. *Algeria Between Past and Present*. Translated by Rabeh Istanbuly & Moncef Achour. Algiers: University Publications Office, 1984
4. Cheniti, Mohamed El-Bashir. *Economic Transformations*, *Previous Reference*, pp. 259–260.
5. Al-Hijazi, Abdelaziz Abdel-Fattah. *Rome and Africa from the End of the Second Punic War to the Age of Emperor Augustus*. 1st ed. Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Library, 2007
6. Farhati, Fatiha. *Numidia: From the Reign of King Gaia to the Beginning of the Roman Occupation (213 BC – 46 BC)*. Algiers: Apyek Publications, 2007.
7. Lancel, Serge. *Ancient Algeria: From Massinissa to Saint Augustine*. Paris: Editions Menjès, 2003, p. 53.
8. Youlem, Denise. *African Civilizations*. Translated by Nassim Nasr. 2nd ed. Beirut & Paris: Awidat Publications, 1982
9. . El-Djellali, Abdelrahman. *General History of Algeria*, Vol. 1, 4th ed. Beirut: Dar Al-Thaqafa, 1980
10. Ghanem, Mohamed El-Saghir. *The Early Features of Pagan Religious Thought*. Al-Huda Press, Algeria, p. 11.
11. Enadhouri, Rachid. *The Greater Maghreb*, Vol. 1, National House, 1966, p. 104.
12. Fantar, M'Hamed. *Introduction to the Archaeological Discovery of Carthage*. *Archéologie Vivante*, Vol. 1–2.
13. Gsell, Stéphane. *Herodotus: Texts Related to the History of North Africa*. Algiers, 1919
14. Picard, G. C. *The Religions of Ancient Africa*. Paris: Librairie Plon, 1954

15. Decret, F., & Fantar, M'Hamed. *North Africa in Antiquity: From the Origins to the Fifth Century*. Paris, 1981
16. Hassan, Naeima. *Encyclopedia of Mythology and the Myths of Ancient Peoples: Dictionary of Ancient Deities*. Beirut: Dar Al-Fikr Al-Lubnani, 1994
17. Ibn Khaldun, Abd al-Rahman. *Book of Lessons and Record of the Beginning and History*. Vol. 6. Beirut: Dar Al-Kitab Al-Lubnani, 1968
18. Camps, Gabriel. *Berbers: At the Margins of History*. Editions des Hespérides, 1980, p. 2000.
19. Harash, Mohamed El-Hadi. *Studies and Texts on the History of Algeria and Maghreb Countries in Ancient Times*. Algiers: Dar Houma, 2001
20. Lenormant, François. *Ancient History of the Orient up to the Median Wars*. Paris: Alevy Edition, 1887
21. Camps, Gabriel. *Massinissa or the Goals of History*. *Libyca*, Vol. VIII, 1960
22. Camps, Gabriel. *Berbers at the Margins of History*
23. Ghanem, Mohamed El-Saghir. *Phoenician-Punic Presence in Algeria*. Algiers, 1981,
24. Julien, Charles-André. *History of North Africa*
25. Ballon, L. *Prehistoric Algeria*. Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques, 1958
26. Faidherbe, L. *Anthropological Research on the Tombs of Roknia*. *B.A.H.*, 1868
27. Camps, Gabriel. *Protohistoric Funerary Monuments and Sites*. Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques, 1961