

**THE ABSENCE OF IMAGES:
THE PROBLEM OF THE ANICONIC CULT AT GADES
AND ITS RELIGIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

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1. The Aniconic Cult of Gades.

According to Greek and Roman writers, the cult at Gades was remarkable for its absence of images¹. Thus, Silius Italicus (first century C.E.) says: "But the fact that there were no statues or familiar images of the gods filled the place with solemnity and sacred awe." (*Punica* III 30-31)². Philostratus (third century C.E.) informs us that, "In the shrine they say there is maintained a cult both of one and the other Hercules [i.e., the Greek and Tyrian Hercules], though there are no images of them; altars however there are ..." (*Vita Apollon. Thyan.* V 5).

The references to aniconism at Gades, to a cult without images, have been judged quite differently by various scholars. Bonnet pointed out that imperial coins show Hercules Gaditanus represented by a statue in his temple and was not inclined to view the cult as a parallel of Israelite aniconism³. García y Bellido, on the other hand, surmised that there were two distinct cults at Gades and holds that, even if the Greek Heracles required an anthropomorphic representation, the Tyrian, the Phoenician Heracles-Melqart did not⁴. D. van Berchem also assumed an essentially aniconic cult and made an explicit reference to "la vieille interdiction sémitique, si abondamment illustrée par l'Ancien Testament"⁵. Rouillard assumed that a cultic image was only found at a late stage of the

¹ In a previous study I have discussed Israelite aniconism in its ancient Near Eastern context. For a number of items discussed in the present paper the reader will find extensive documentation in this monograph, Mettinger 1995a, where I deal with Gades on pp. 86-90. My ideas on West Semitic aniconism were first outlined in a lecture at a symposium in Bern 1993, published in Mettinger 1994.

² Instead of Duff's translation "but no statues ... filled ...", I adopt the interpretation of "nullus" suggested by Spaltenstein 1986, p. 180.

³ Bonnet 1988, p. 213, and on the coins, see also p. 230. On statuettes ("Smiting God") found at Gades, see Bonnet p. 229. A stone statuette representing Astarte (Cádiz) was published by M.C. Marín Ceballos and R. Corzo Sánchez 1991. C. Bonnet kindly called my attention to this study. She will deal with this statuette in her forthcoming study of Astarte [see now C. Bonnet, *Astarté* (CSF 37), Roma 1996, p. 132; on the well known bronze figurine of Astarte (Seville), see *ibid.*, pp. 127-132].

⁴ García y Bellido 1963, pp. 110-114, and 1967, pp. 158-159.

⁵ D. van Berchem 1967, p. 84.

cultic history of Gades⁶. Jourdain-Annequin also opted for aniconism at Gades⁷. As the present article will suggest, I find reasons to side with the scholars who assume the existence of an aniconic cult of Hercules Gaditanus.

Before we go on, we must define the term “aniconism”⁸. I am using it to refer to cults where there is no iconic representation of the deity (anthropomorphic or theriomorphic) serving as the dominant or central cultic symbol⁹. It goes without saying that this definition includes “empty-space aniconism” – attested in the case of the empty cherubim throne in the Solomonic temple and in the empty holy of holies in the postexilic temple. But we are not only concerned with sacred emptiness: Cults using material objects as aniconic symbols may also be considered to be instances of aniconism, that is, “material aniconism”.

There is, however, still another distinction that is highly important to us. We must maintain a distinction between the mere absence of images, on the one hand, and the programmatic demand for a cult without images, the repudiation of iconic objects, on the other. I shall call the first type *de facto* aniconism, the other programmatic aniconism. *De facto* aniconism probably tended to be tolerant, while programmatic aniconism, having been subjected to the rigours of theological reflection, was likely characterized by a conscious and programmatic attitude which may have led to outright iconoclasm. It should be noted that programmatic aniconism is a rare phenomenon (Israelite religion, Judaism, Islam).

2. The Problem and the Evidence.

The problem that interest us here is this: Where are we to look for the religio-historical background of the aniconism at Gades? To begin with, the cult at Gades shows obvious signs of its Phoenician ancestry and Bonnet aptly speaks of “l’omniprésence du modèle tyrien”¹⁰. In a classic study Ernest Will¹¹ compiles and compares information on the cults at Gades and Tyre, provided by various writers. For both sites he finds evidence of (a) a sacred olive tree, (b) a sacred fire and (c) stelae. Will’s conclusion as to the Phoenician background of the cult at Gades is confirmed by two features that are also typical of West

⁶ P. Rouillard in Lipinski and Rouillard 1992, p. 183b: “[I]l n’y avait pas de statue de culte avant le Ier s. ap. J.C.”.

⁷ Jourdain-Annequin 1989, p. 127.

⁸ For definitions and terminology, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 18-27.

⁹ Note that the overwhelming majority of votive figures (offerings) representing deities do not seem to have served as the central cultic image in the context where they were found, see Mettinger 1995a, p. 27. Nor can it be taken for granted that there is always a direct relation between figurines and a cultic image so that the former should have been inspired by the latter, see Mettinger 1995, p. 27 n. 55. Besides, a minimum requisite for an argument from the presence of figurines to the existence of an iconic cult of a certain deity is that the figurines represent precisely this deity. This seems difficult to prove in cases involving Melqart, YHWH and certain other deities.

¹⁰ Bonnet 1988, p. 219. The evidence for this statement are found in Bonnet, pp. 203-230 with ample references. Note also García y Bellido 1963 and 1967, pp. 152-166. For the most recent overall treatment, see Fierro Cubiella 1995, with comprehensive bibliography.

¹¹ E. Will 1950-51, esp. pp. 8-9.

Semitic cults: the role of blood as sacrificial matter and the taboo on pigs for sacrificial use¹². As for the identity of the deity, we have good reasons to believe that the cult at Gades was a cult dedicated to the Tyrian Heracles or Melqart¹³.

For Gades we find express statements about the absence of images *and* the presence of stelae. The stelae served as aniconic symbols of the divine¹⁴. What we have got at Gades is *de facto* aniconism. It is worth noting that the same combination of circumstances is attested in a Semitic cult on the Syrian mainland, namely in the cult of Emesa. In his history of the Roman Empire, Herodian of Syria describes the temple at Emesa (Homs) in Syria, which was erected at the beginning of the third century C.E. for the Semitic god Elagabalus and states that the cultic object of this sanctuary was,

no actual man-made statue of the god, the sort Greeks and Romans put up; but ... an enormous stone, rounded at the base and coming to a point on the top, conical in shape and black, ... sent from heaven [διοπετής, lit. 'fallen from Zeus']. (V 3, 4-5).

This object is also known from a coin from Emesa¹⁵. It was obviously what is sometimes referred to as a betyl (βαίτυλοι) by both ancient sources and modern scholars¹⁶. For this Semitic cult (possibly with Arabian roots)¹⁷ we thus note the absence of images *and* the presence of an aniconic object, "an enormous stone". Similarly, the god worshipped at Carmel in Palestine, had neither a statue nor a temple but only an open-air altar¹⁸.

These observations help us focus our question on the presence of material objects as aniconic symbols in the Semitic world. There is now a surprisingly comprehensive documentation for aniconic cults in the Semitic world¹⁹. I now turn to this material, which I discussed in my recent monograph *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (1995) where the reader will find detailed bibliographical information on every single item.

1. Tyre and the Phoenician world. – In the case of Tyre²⁰, it is true that there is an anthropomorphic iconography for Tyrian Melqart, either the late, Hellenized one (Heracles) or an earlier one, known from Bar Hadad's Melqart stele found in the vicinity of Aleppo. However, neither of these can be regarded as the canonical iconography of Melqart. In contrast to this, one may adduce an aniconic iconography, attested on Tyrian

¹² See Porphyry, *De abst.* I 25 (blood), and Silius Italicus, *Punica* III 23 (pork), and see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 192-193 esp. notes 223 and 224 with references.

¹³ Even if he was sometimes worshipped under the name Milkashtart, KAI 71. See Bonnet 1988, pp. 226-228.

¹⁴ As appears from Porphyry, *De abst.* I 25 (the altar between the pillars). These stelae close to the olive tree and the altar at Gades (cf. Tyre) are not to be confused with another pair of stelae that may have flanked the temple entrance, see Mettinger 1995a, p. 89.

¹⁵ See Mettinger 1995a, p. 85 fig. 5.3 and see also p. 86 n. 28.

¹⁶ On this term see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 130-132.

¹⁷ See Höfner 1983, p. 436.

¹⁸ See Mettinger 1995a, p. 86 with references.

¹⁹ My study, Mettinger 1995a, seems to be the first overall treatment.

²⁰ On Tyre, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 90-100.

coins from the third and fourth centuries C.E. (**Fig. 1**). The mintage on these coins clearly portrays two stelae or betyls, an olive tree and a flaming incense altar standing together. The stelae at Tyre are also mentioned by various ancient authors; the earliest allusions to them seem to appear in Ezekiel (xxvi 11; xxviii 14, 16). The role of stelae is well known from Byblos as well²¹. Besides, it is a traditional feature of Punic religion²².

Our intuition about *de facto* aniconism as a potentially important feature of Phoenician cults is supported by an observation from another angle. In the Phoenician world, notably in the area around Sidon, we find a type of aniconism related to thrones²³. In the first place some sixteen votive sphinx thrones, most of them of less than natural size, have been found in the vicinity of Sidon. These thrones are mostly empty, but a hole in the seat or an anathyrose seem to imply that the throne was occupied by some object. Of course, this could have been a seated deity, but some indications point in a different direction. One item, a throne from Khirbat et-Tayyiba, displays two stelae sculptured in low relief on the interior side of the back (**Fig. 2**). Soyez mentions a throne bearing a parallelepipedic betyl. Another remarkable item is the so called "trône Seyrig" (**Fig. 3**), the seat of which is occupied by a spherical object. Still another of this series is a throne from Sidon with the seat at such a steep incline that it is incapable of receiving any object (**Fig. 4**). This was obviously a case of an empty throne.

Certain coins from Sidon (see for instance **Fig. 5**) have an impression depicting a globular object, housed within a four-columned shrine on a two-wheeled vehicle, the "car of Astarte". The spherical object either rests on a podium or else it is supported by two figures which are probably stylized sphinxes. If the latter is true, the composition seems to depict a spherical object on a sphinx throne, just as in the case of the "trône Seyrig".

What we find at Sidon is thus a *configuration* consisting of a sphinx throne plus *either* an aniconic object (stela or globe) *or* just empty space. One is tempted, indeed, to draw the daring conclusion that "stelae equal empty space". If correct, this sheds light on the iconography of two Israelite Iron Age sanctuaries: one at Arad, where we find stelae²⁴, and the other in Solomonic Jerusalem, where we find an empty cherubim throne²⁵.

2. *The Nabateans*.²⁶ – The major representation at Petra of the Nabatean national god Dusares is described in some detail in Suidas' *Lexicon*, compiled in the tenth century C.E., but certainly based on earlier sources. We read in "Suidas" that Dusares' symbol was a black stone:

21 On the Bronze Age material, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 127-128, and on the depiction on the coin of Macrinus (218 C.E.), see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 107-109.

22 See Mettinger 1995a, pp. 110-112. Note Falsone 1993 on ovoid betyls.

23 On these thrones, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 100-106.

24 See Mettinger 1995a, pp. 143-149.

25 On the cherubim throne in Solomon's temple, see Mettinger 1982, pp. 19-37, and 1995b, both with ample references to previous literature.

26 On the Nabateans, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 57-68.

*The image [ἄγαλμα] is a black stone, square and unshapen, four feet high by two feet broad. It is set on a base of wrought gold. To this they offer sacrifice and for it they pour forth the victim's blood, that being their form of libation*²⁷.

The stone obviously represents the deity and appears as the recipient of libations of blood. Nabatean aniconism has been thoroughly treated in a groundbreaking monograph by Joseph Patrich (1990). The evidence comprises, among other things, a number of coins with aniconic representations of the deities (see, for instance, our Fig. 6).

3. *Pre-Islamic Arabia*. – Whether the Nabateans were Arabs – as their proper names seem to indicate – or of some other origin, it is worthy of note that the same type of cult is found in pre-Islamic Arabia²⁸. The open-air sanctuaries consisted of a *temenos*, properly marked off by stones. The central cult stone (*nusub*) was the recipient of sacrificial libations of blood which were shed into the pit (*gabgab*) in front of it. The circumambulation (*zawāf*) of the holy stone was an important part of the ritual. Already Wellhausen pointed out that the rare cases of anthropomorphic images should probably be attributed to foreign imports and are hardly characteristic of original Arabian religion²⁹.

4. *Israel and Iron Age Palestine*. – There are solid indications to the effect that, during Iron Age I and the major part of Iron Age II, Israel regarded the cult of stelae (*masseboth*) as a legitimate expression of religious worship³⁰. Both textual evidence (Genesis xxviii; Hos iii 4) and archaeological finds point in this direction. I shall here briefly enumerate the most important archaeological evidence without indulging in any detailed comments.

- Arad. There were one or several *masseboth* in the holy of holies. Date: Iron Age II (either Solomonic, the Aharoni-Herzog chronology, or seventh century, the Ussishkin revision).

- Lachish. Cult room 49 in Stratum V (Iron Age IIA) and the open high place excavated under the adyton of the *Hellenistic* temple, as well as a pit in a nearby street, provide good examples of *masseboth*.

- Beth-shemesh. A stratum that probably met its end in 701 B.C.E. contained an open-air high place with *masseboth* in function during Iron Age II.

- Tirzah. According to the reconstruction performed by de Vaux and Chambon a basin and a *massebah* stood at the centre of the open place just inside the city gate. Date: Iron Age II. The installation was in use from the 10th century onwards (probably even after 722 B.C.E.).

- Taanach. A basin and an arched slab seem to represent a similar arrangement to the one at Tirzah. Date: Iron Age IIA. Admittedly, Taanach and Tirza are controversial cases.

- Megiddo. The “Schumacher-Ussishkin sanctuary”, Locus 340 within building 338 in Area BB, seems to have been a cultic installation with *masseboth* forming the focal

²⁷ *Suidas' Lexicon*, ed. A. Adler, vol. 2, p. 713, translation from Patrich 1990, p. 51.

²⁸ On pre-Islamic Arabia, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 69-79.

²⁹ Wellhausen 1897, p. 102.

³⁰ For the following, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 135-197, esp. pp. 143-168. For a general presentation of Palestinian cult places from the Iron Age, note Zwickel 1994, pp. 201-284, who does not, however, discuss the problem of aniconism.

point of the cultic paraphernalia. Date: Iron Age IIA (Stratum VA-IVB). In Area AA, Locus 2081 contained a number of cultic items, among which were a massebah. Date: Iron Age IIA.

- Tel Dan. Quite recently four different masseboth shrines have been found in the gate square. Date: Iron Age II. Three of these shrines belong to the 9th – 8th centuries, while the other may be from the time around the Assyrian conquest.

5. *Bronze Age Syria and Palestine.* – When we turn to Bronze Age Syria³¹ we notice that there is now growing documentary evidence for the prominence of stelae in cults which may be regarded as West Semitic. This evidence includes texts from Mari and Emar which attest a term for stele, *sikkānu*, a derivative of the root s-k-n, “to dwell”, and related to Hebrew š-k-n. It also comprises archaeological finds of stelae, such as the one in Ninni-Zaza’s temple in Mari (date: Pre-Sargonic), or the two slabs in Temple N in Ebla or the two stelae in Temple D at the same site (date: Middle Bronze Age), or the cultic paraphernalia of the open cult place at Qatna (date: probably Middle Bronze Age).

Finds of Bronze Age stelae have been made at the following sites in Palestine³²:

- Hartuv. – This site near Beth-shemesh in the Shepelah revealed a hall which housed nine standing stones lining the inner face of the southern long wall. Date: Early Bronze Age I.

- Tel Kitan. – A cult place with a temple featured a row of 8 stelae standing in front of the temple, parallel to its façade. Date: Middle Bronze Age IIB.

- Tell el-Hayyat. – The new temple of phase 3, Middle Bronze Age IIB, had a similar installation of stelae in the court.

- Megiddo. – The holy precinct in Area BB, a place that holds cultic associations for centuries. The southwest corner of square N13, above altar 4017, was spotted with stelae. Date: Middle Bronze Age IIB (Stratum XII, 1750-1700 B.C.E. or somewhat earlier).

- Gezer. – A row of large monoliths. Date: Middle Bronze Age IIC (or perhaps Late Bronze Age).

- Shechem. – A striking find of a huge stele is connected with temple 2. It stood in the forecourt, to the east of the entrance, and close to the altar. Date: Late Bronze Age.

- Hazor. – Stelae have been found at various loci at Bronze Age Hazor. The stele sanctuary (Shrine 6136) in Area C in the lower city is the most renowned of these finds. Date: Late Bronze Age (Stratum 1b and 1a, 14th-13th centuries B.C.E.). One could also mention an open-air cult place in Area A on the mound, with a stele and a bowl. Date: Late Bronze Age (Stratum XIV and XIII, 14th-13th centuries B.C.E.)³³.

To this one should add a general reference to the host of material from Sinai and the Negev, where the cult of stelae is attested from the 11th millennium B.C.E. and continue

³¹ On Bronze Age Syria, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 115-134.

³² For details, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 175-191. See also Zwicker 1994, pp. 17-203, who gives a general presentation of Palestinian Bronze Age cult sites.

³³ As for a find at Beth-shan which I discussed in my monograph, Mettinger 1995a, pp. 189-190, see now Zwicker 1994, p. 174, who does not take this as a stele.

to play a crucial role in this region through the Nabatean period, as is clear from the important work of Uzi Avner³⁴.

3. Conclusions and Final Remarks

My analysis leads me to draw the following conclusions.

(1) There are compelling reasons to make two important distinctions: *First*, a distinction must be observed between *de facto* aniconism and the programmatic repudiation of images, the iconoclastic attitude. *Second*, we must make a distinction between “empty-space aniconism” and “material aniconism”.

(2) To an extent that has not hitherto been realized, *de facto* aniconism is a characteristic feature of a number of West Semitic cults. This does not mean that all West Semitic cults are aniconic, but aniconism is a typical feature of West Semitic open-air cultic sites (the “high places”). We here touch upon some of the most genuine features of West Semitic cults:³⁵ (a) The cult place is an open-air *temenos* with stelae as symbols of the divine. (b) The sacrificial procedure is ritual slaughter and a communal meal. (c) The sacrificial offering *par préférence* is blood. This positive requirement has a corollary in the taboo on pork as sacrificial matter.

(3) The fact that such characteristics are also attested for Gades³⁶ confirms the conclusion that there was an aniconic cult at Gades and that this cult had its roots in West Semitic standing-stones aniconism. The absence of images at Gades, the prohibition of idols in the Old Testament and the iconoclastic attitude of Islam are indeed more closely related than has hitherto been realized³⁷.

Postscript: In the discussion after my lecture at the Cádiz Conference on Phoenician-Punic studies, Prof. Joseph Patrich, Haifa, made a valuable remark about the distinction between empty space aniconism and material aniconism. He pointed out that Nabatean *mwtb* refers to the seat of the deity. Such an item or an empty throne should therefore not without further ado be taken to be a case of empty space aniconism. – It is clear to me that Professor Patrich here points to a problem that deserves further attention. It may be that my suggestion to understand empty thrones and stelae as cases of empty spaces aniconism and material aniconism respectively (Mettinger 1995a), needs further reflection. Note my discussion of the function of the stelae in the light of the etymology of the terms for stelae, which make it clear that stelae could – at least sometimes and in some contexts – be understood as the housing or abode of the deity (Mettinger 1995a, pp.

³⁴ See Avner 1993 and Mettinger 1995a, pp. 168-174, with references.

³⁵ See Mettinger 1995a, pp. 191-193 and cf. pp. 29-32. Note that we are here concerned with a set of contrasts between West Semitic and Mesopotamian religion. On the question of aniconism in Mesopotamia and Egypt, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 39-56.

³⁶ For bloody sacrifices at Gades, see Propyry, *De Abst.* I 25, and for the taboo on pork, see Silius Italicus, *Punica*, III 23.

³⁷ On aniconism in pre-Islamic Arabia and in Islam, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 69-79. On aniconism in ancient Israel, see Mettinger 1979, Dohmen 1985, Evans 1995 and Mettinger 1995a, pp. 135-197. I wish to thank Dr. Michael Cheney, Edmonton, who scrutinized and improved my English.

130-132). It must be pointed out, however, that the abovementioned cases known from Sidon where we find a stele or a betyl placed on the seat of a throne seem to indicate that here the stele comes very close to a representation of the deity (rather than being a repository for the deity). Here the stele does not correspond to the throne but to the empty space above the thrones that we are concerned with in other cases. Thus my suggestion to keep stelae and empty thrones apart as representing two different types of aniconism and thus my suggestion above that stelae equal empty space.

The present study was given as a lecture at the IV International Congress of Phoenician-Punic Studies at Cádiz (October 1995). It was submitted and accepted for the conference volume in ACP IV. However, the proofs got stray in the mail to Madrid and the contribution was never included in the publication. The article is now published as it was submitted in 1995. Nothing in the debate in the years that passed since has made me change my basic conclusions. On West Semitic aniconism, see also my forthcoming study to appear in ZAW autumn 2005.

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Fig. 1. Tyrian coin with stelae. Copper, 31 mm. Hill, *BMC Phoenicia*, pl. 33, no. 14. From Cook 1940, p. 980, fig. 785.

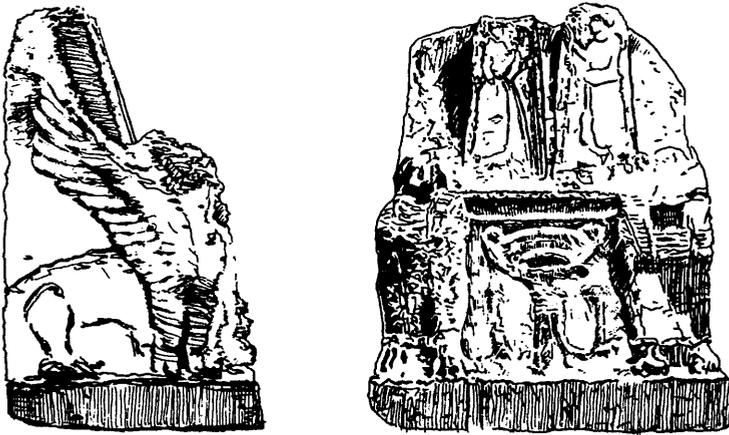


Fig. 2. Phoenician throne from Khirbat et-Tayyiba. Limestone. Height: 0,47m. date: 2nd century B.C.E. Drawing by Per Helin after Metzger 1985, no. 1200.



Fig. 3. Phoenician throne with a spherical object on the seat. Exact provenance unknown. Bronze. Height: 7 cm. Roman period. Drawing by Per Helin after Metzger 1985, no. 1202.

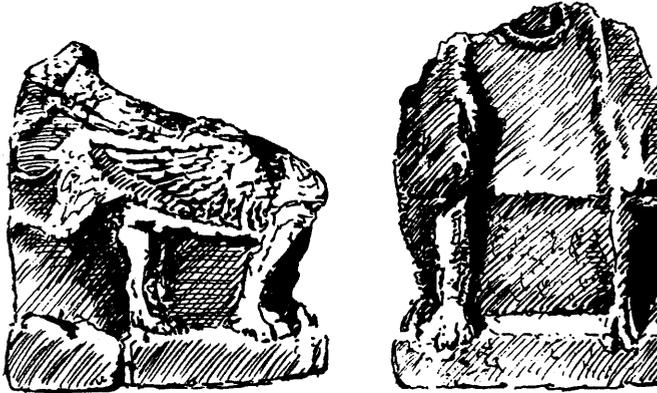


Fig. 4.
Phoenician throne from Sidon with seat so steeply inclined that it must have been empty.
Height: 0,45 m. date: 59-60 C.E. Drawing by Per Helin after Metzger 1985, no. 1201.



Fig. 5.
Coin from Sidon, depicting the "car of Astarte". Ae, 25 mm. Drawing by Per Helin after Hill, *BMC Phoenicia*, pl. 24, no. 8.



Fig. 6.
Coin of Nabatean Adraa with dome-shaped betyl. Ae, 27 mm. Drawing by Per Helin after Hill, *BMC Arabia*, pl. 3, n° 5.