

THE PUNIC PROJECT

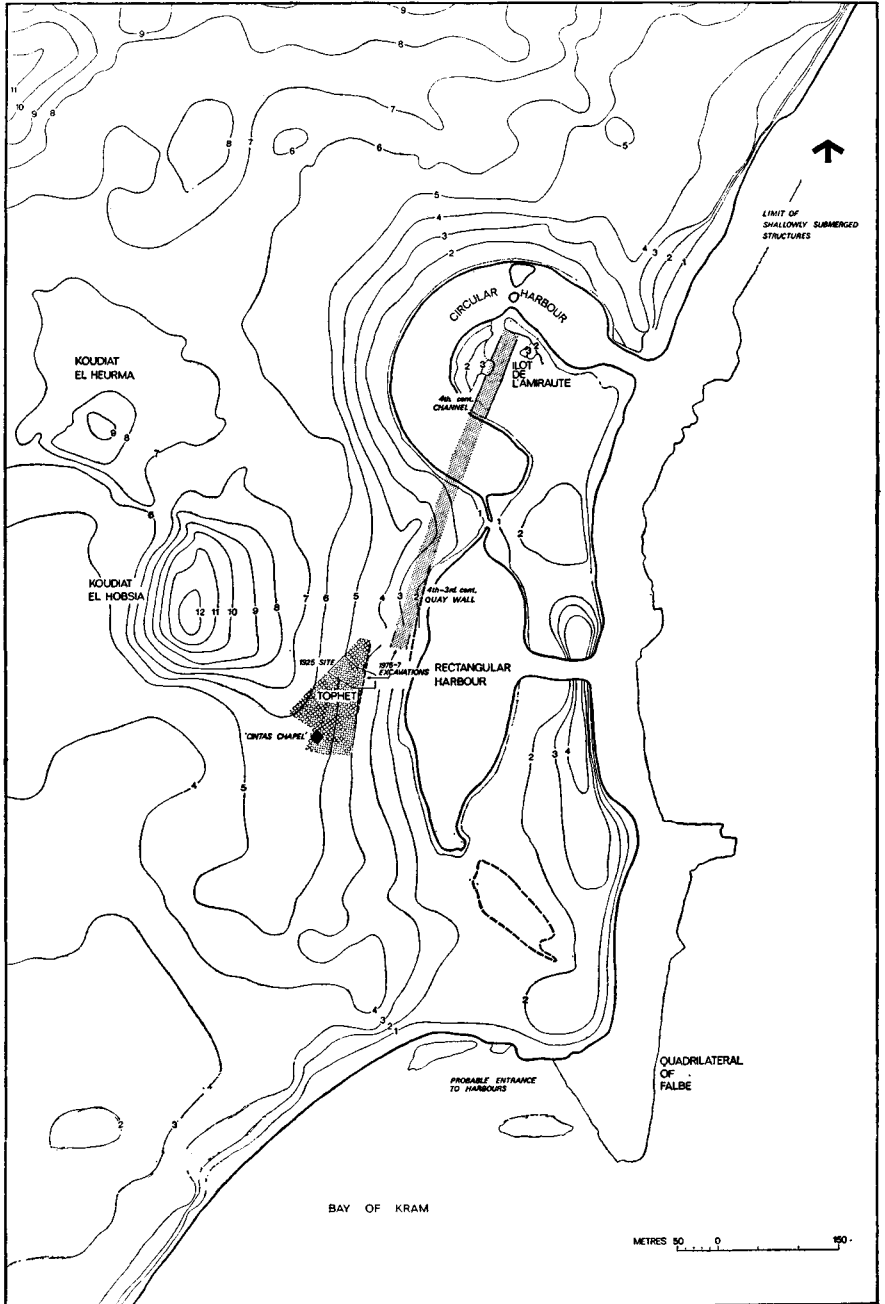
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FROM APRIL TO JUNE the Punic Project conducted its fourth season of excavations as part of the international effort to “Save Carthage.” As in previous campaigns our work focused on the west side of the Rectangular Harbor and in the nearby Tophet, the precinct of child sacrifice. The dig took on the character of a Chicago seminar-in-the-field as Sam Wolff, Doug Esse, Joe Greene, Carol Redmount, Dennis Collins, and Elizabeth Bloch—all Ph.D. candidates in Near Eastern archeology—supervised different areas of excavation.

COMMERCIAL (RECTANGULAR) HARBOR

PUNIC PERIOD. The Commercial Harbor described by Ap-pian (*Libyca*, 96) was built in the late 4th or early 3rd century B.C., prior to the First Punic War. Both the Commercial and Military (Circular) Harbors date several centuries later than most scholars had suspected. They assumed that the port facilities for Archaic Carthage lay in the vicinity of the modern lagoons near the Tophet where child sacrifice was being practiced as early as the 8th-7th centuries B.C. Except for urn burials in the Tophet and a 7th century B.C. necropolis near the Byrsa, archeological evidence for Archaic Carthage has eluded the several international teams excavating in various parts of the ancient city.

In 1976, at the south end of the harbor site, we discovered the quay wall of the Commercial Harbor. It lies just 20 meters west of the modern “rectangular” lagoon. The quay wall continues north in a straight line for at least 70 meters, where in 1977/78 a large wall built of the same type of ashlar



Carthage: the topography of the harbor area; contours in meters above sea level

sandstone blocks has been excavated. This season, in a *sondage* 80 meters farther north, an ashlar wall of similar construction appeared; however, it was located several meters east of the projected line of the quay wall. This must be the point at which the Commercial Harbor narrows to form the entrance to the naval port.

Originally the Punic quay wall was at least four courses high and made of large ashlar blocks taken from the sandstone quarries at Cap Bon (el-Houaria). The lowest course was set on yellow sand which formed the bottom of the harbor, ca. 2.30–2.50 meters below present sea level. On the landward side abutting the fourth course (from bottom to top) of the quay wall we found the Punic quayside. Although badly disturbed by the Roman destruction of 146 B.C., a few remnants of the quayside survived intact. The quayside consisted of two or three courses of flagstones covered with a thin layer of plaster. The white sandstone slabs of the quayside were laid on a spread of gravel and beach sand. The original height of the Punic quayside (–0.45 meter) and the weathered portions of the upper courses of the quay wall indicate that sea level in the 3rd–2nd centuries B.C. was nearly one meter lower than at present. Water in the basin of the commercial Harbor would have been 1.50 meters deep during that period. Two more courses were added to the top of the quay wall in Roman times and the quayside raised nearly 1.50 meters in order to cope with the rising sea.

To facilitate drainage the Punic and later quaysides sloped gently downward from west to east. The only clues to harborside constructions in the Punic period are a stone wall (partially exposed) and parallel to that a robber trench 1.50 meters wide that cut through the quayside at right angles to the quay wall. Perhaps the trench indicates the line of another wall or colonnade.

Massive expenditures of resources and effort went into the construction of the Commercial and Military Harbors. From the flat former marshland an estimated 120,000 cubic meters of earth had been excavated just to make the basin for the Rectangular Harbor—no small feat when we consider that most of this soil was dug from below the contemporary sea level.



The quay wall of the Commercial Harbor

The sudden burst of activity in the harbor area, the expansion of the Tophet, and villa construction along the coast farther north indicate major urban expansion of the metropolis in the late 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. Diodorus Siculus refers to an Old City and a New City at the time of Bomilcar's attempted coup in 308 B.C. Probably the ports mentioned by Appian were part of New Carthage.

Perhaps reclamation of the port area had begun even earlier in the 4th century. The earliest possible harbor work is a water channel some 15–20 meters wide and ca. 2 meters deep. Its final silting can be dated to ca. 350 B.C. It is clear that this channel did not relate to the harbor topography of the later Punic port. It extended north-south across the Îlot de l'Amirauté and southwards as far as the west side of the Rectangular Harbor. Sedimentary and molluscan evidence from the fills shows that the channel was linked with the open sea and may have led to harbor systems earlier than those described by Appian.

ROMAN. The stratigraphical sequence of the Commercial Harbor is clearly illustrated in the accompanying photograph. From top to bottom we see: A) The uppermost



Stratigraphic sequence of the Commercial Harbor

quayside which dates to the last quarter of the 4th century A.D. It is marked by an extensive flagstone pavement. B) A half meter below this open-air area is an earlier flagstone quayside (mostly robbed out) which was built in the 2nd century A.D. C) Another half meter below is the Roman cement quayside that marks the 1st century A.D. rebuilding of the Commercial Harbor. D) The cement seals more than a half meter of destruction debris from the Roman conquest of 146 B.C. E) Below the earliest Roman quayside and destruction debris lies the Punic quayside contemporary with the quay wall mentioned above.

TOPHET OR PRECINCT OF TANIT

Since the discovery of the Carthaginian Tophet in 1922, successive excavators have extracted from this precinct thousands of dedicatory monuments in the form of carved limestone stelas or sandstone cippi and an even greater number of pottery urns containing the charred remains of humans and animals. Until now no comprehensive reports documenting these earlier discoveries have appeared,

although preliminary studies suggest that the precinct was first used for the burial of sacrificed children in the 8th-7th centuries B.C. and continued to be used until the Romans destroyed Carthage in 146 B.C.

Our own excavations were begun with the aim of determining the size of the Tophet and its relationship with the Commercial Harbor, which lies a short distance to the east. In 1976/77 these excavations were limited to the eastern part of the urnfield, where the earliest urn burials were placed in pits dug into bedrock and are dated 5th-4th centuries B.C. Only fifteen meters to the west the excavators of 1925 (Kelsey and Harden) found bedrock burials which Harden dated 400 years earlier. Such a variance in date indicated that the eastern limit of the Tophet in its first major period of use ("Tanit 1") stopped short of our excavations, with the second major stratum of urn burials ("Tanit 2"), to which our earliest finds belonged, taking place in an expanded precinct; the extension of the Tophet perhaps coincided with the development of the man-made harbor facilities farther east.

This season we expanded our trench to the west in order to correlate our work with that of Kelsey and Harden. In so doing we found the general chronological outline proposed



Stelas and cippi in the Tophet



The earliest urn burial

by Harden to be correct. However, the stratigraphic sequence is much more complex than the strata designations “Tanit 1–3” suggest. We found at least two phases of “Tanit 1” type urns, i.e., jars with vertically painted line groups around their shoulders. We identified an intermediate phase that contained jars of “Tanit 1” and “Tanit 2” types; in one instance both types were found in the same pit. And at least two different levels of monuments were still standing from the stratum called “Tanit 2.” The earliest urn burial was not painted in the usual style of “Tanit 1”; it was covered with a red slip that was highly burnished.

Some scholars, skeptical of the notion that child sacrifice was practiced systematically among the Canaanites, Israelites, and Phoenicians, have argued that the Carthaginians sacrificed their children only “sporadically” and in a form of “non-institutionalized worship.” But the evidence—archeological, epigraphic, and historical—points to the contrary. The Carthage Tophet shares with other infant burial grounds in the western Mediterranean the characteristics of being an open-air enclosure surrounded by a wall which set it apart from other areas of the city. Our excavations have exposed a cut in bedrock over 2 meters wide indicating where the Tophet’s eastern wall had been standing before stone-

robbers dismantled it. In the third century B.C. this wall separated the Tophet from the quayside of the Commercial Harbor—the waterfront was just 45 meters to the east. Inside the wall we have recovered over two hundred urns filled with charred human and animal bones and set in pits dug into five superimposed strata dating from ca. 400–200 B.C. If the density of urn burials within the small area covered by the present excavations is extrapolated throughout the Tophet, we estimate that several thousand urns were deposited during the two centuries after 400 B.C. This evidence alone is enough to suggest that the deposits were not a casual or sporadic occurrence.

The Greek and Roman writers give a variety of occasions when the Carthaginians practiced the rite of human sacrifice. These can be summarized as: regularly on an annual basis; in times of great crisis; and whenever “great favors” were requested from the gods. Diodorus records that as many as 500 children were sacrificed in Carthage’s political crisis of 310 B.C. The city was then being threatened by Agathocles, the tyrant of Syracuse, who had landed on nearby Cap Bon with a large invasionary force. Diodorus records that such a mass sacrifice was expected to appease the gods and ward off the threat to Carthage.

The typical pattern we have found is the careful placement of one, two, or sometimes three urns in a single pit, with no evidence so far for mass burials. Apart from their main contents of the calcined bones of humans or animals, some of the urns had offerings of amulets and beads once strung as necklaces. Generally the urns were sealed with yellow clay and capped with inverted bowls or dish-shaped lids. Infants are composed of a high percentage of cartilage which is destroyed during cremation and so only the more completely ossified bones survive, such as the petrosals, cranial fragments, long bones, and phalanges. Teeth are the most heat-resistant and the stage of dental development provides the most important criteria for determining the approximate age of the sacrificial victim. Unfortunately the sex of such young individuals cannot be determined from the osteological remains. The skeletal evidence that has been preserved indicates that a conscious effort was made by parents and/or priests to collect

from the pyre or altar the particular remains of one or two individuals and deposit them in an urn. This again argues against mass sacrifice since such concern for the identity of individual victims would not have been possible in the situation described by Diodorus.

Dr. Paul Mosca, of the University of British Columbia and staff epigraphist at Carthage, has recently reassessed sacrificial terms that appear on inscribed stelae from Carthage and from other sites in the Mediterranean. He found that some of these terms, particularly those involving *mulk*-sacrifices, could definitely be related to Tophet rites. The word *mlk* (*mulk*) appears in the Bible in contexts that involved sacrificial rites on the “high places of Tophet” in a valley just outside Jerusalem. There “sons and daughters” were made to “pass through the fire to Molek” (Jer. 32:35; 2 Kgs. 23:10). Probably the word Molek should be revocalized and read as “*mulk*,” i.e., a particular kind of sacrifice. At Carthage only two types of *mulk*-sacrifice are attested in the stela inscriptions: **mulk* 'immōr “the sacrifice of a lamb” and **mulk* ba'al “the sacrifice of a ‘ba'al,’ ” i.e. the child of a wealthy mercantile or estate-owning family. Mosca contrasts the latter type with the **mulk* 'adam “the sacrifice of a commoner,” a term that appears at other sites, but never at Carthage, in the 2nd century B.C. These two terms may reflect a basic social stratification in Punic society between the upper class (estate-owners and merchants) and the proletariat (peasants, for example).

Thus it appears that mainly the elite were sacrificing their children in the Tophet rites at Carthage. A few were apparently allowed to offer animals, such as sheep or goats, as an acceptable substitute.

Although these child sacrifices were performed in a religious context and viewed by the Carthaginian elite from that perspective, the rite most probably also had practical benefits for these wealthy families. They could use this institution as a mechanism for regulating their growth and maintaining their socio-economic status. For example, partible inheritance such as the large estates in and around Carthage could be passed on for generations without being greatly subdivided, thus maintaining the wealth and power of the owners.

An interesting test of this hypothesis may come when the osteological remains for this season have been analyzed, particularly if it is found that the ratio of human to animal remains increases as we near the time of urban expansion at Carthage in the 4th century B.C.