

# Carthage: the Punic Project

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This was the last season of major excavations in our five-year campaign in the Commercial Port and in the Tophet (precinct of child sacrifice) of Carthage. Six Ph.D. candidates in Near Eastern archeology from the Oriental Institute formed the core of the field staff. Most of these graduate students began their field careers at Carthage and in a few short seasons have advanced from neophytes to superb stratigraphers.

*Chicago crew. (Standing l. to r.) Joe Greene, Sam Wolff, Larry Stager, Doug Esse. (Seated l. to r.) Liz Bloch, Ray Johnson (artist-draftsman), John Currid.*



*Commercial  
Harbor*

Just ten meters behind the Punic quay wall was the ideal testing ground for the archeologist as detective. Elizabeth Bloch was assigned the case. In the conquest of Carthage in 146 B.C. a Roman demolition squad left few clues for reconstructing Punic buildings on the harbor front: a robber trench backfilled with mottled soils and a layer of destruction debris half a meter thick.

The robber trench, about two meters wide and twenty meters long, was set at right angles to the Punic quay wall. From ca. 300 B.C., when the Commercial Harbor was first built, this wall established the base line for quayside alignments. When the bottom of the robber trench was finally reached, we found the bases of five piers or columns, made of large ashlar blocks, spaced at meter-and-a-half intervals, and sunk into a water channel that had dried up by 350 B.C. (This channel served as a navigable waterway before the Commercial Harbor was built.) These bases had once held tall piers or columns; however, it is doubtful that such a colonnade was ever free-standing. The robber trench was a continuous one, which suggests that the piers were incorporated into a heavy wall known as *opus Africanum*, i.e., sturdy piers or monoliths with the spaces between filled with rubble, all of which was then plastered with a thick coat of stucco. This is typical Phoenician construction, used as early as the tenth century B.C. at Solomon's Megiddo.

Although few features remained intact, it was clear that the interior of the building had stood north of the *opus Africanum* wall: there the destruction debris was thickest and included various architectural fragments that were absent south of the wall.

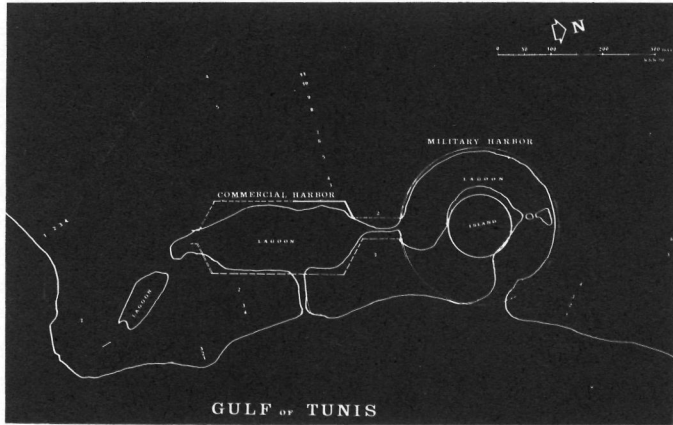
The most conspicuous of these were large chunks of heavy-duty cement pavement, more common in courtyards or workshops than in fine Punic villas. This flooring would have been ideal for port facilities.

A cache of copper nails bent at right angles ten cm. below their heads was found amid remnants of charred wood. The nails probably held together wooden doors that marked the entrance to the building. Red clay tiles lay in the destruction debris, having fallen from the roof. Tiles provide good evidence for reconstructing a gabled roof. Probably wooden crossbeams to support the frame for the gable ran from the top of each pier in

the *opus Africanum* wall across the width of the building. Parallel to the wall was a line of four postholes which once held the wooden frame for a rack or shelves.

From these clues we can piece together the first example of a Phoenician-Punic warehouse ever discovered. It was a building some twenty-one meters long with its entrance toward the harbor (its width is known

*General plan of the Commercial and Military Harbors. Solid line on west side of Commercial Harbor indicates actual line of Punic quay wall; dashed line, projected shape of port.*



*Northwest corner of Commercial Harbor in late Punic period. Earlier north-south quay wall to the left of meter stick; later angle wall to right.*





*L-shaped sandstone cippus with seventh century B.C. urn of Tanit I type beneath. This urn contained only the charred bones of a young sheep.*

for only four meters because of the limits of excavation).

The Roman historian Appian mentions buildings along the Commercial Harbor that were used for “storing all manner of ships’ tackle.” I would reconstruct an almost continuous series of gabled warehouses just west of the quay wall that held not only ships’ tackle but also items of import, export, and transshipment. Perhaps these Punic warehouses were the forerunners of the *horrea* later so common at Ostia and at other Roman emporia.

Among the more spectacular finds of the season was the northwest corner of the Punic Commercial Harbor. From known segments of the quay wall, we projected where we thought the intersection of these wall lines should be. From past experience it seemed likely that

the uppermost course of the quay wall would be buried beneath more than two meters of modern debris. There was neither manpower nor time enough to waste on such a project; yet we needed some empirical data for determining the shape of the “Rectangular” Harbor (Appian’s *tetragon*). I made an agonizing decision to bring in a mechanical excavator to remove the overburden and hopefully reveal the upper courses of the corner. In order to preserve the stratigraphy critical for dating the use of the quay wall, the machine had to come down on the side of the wall that faced the water. Within a few minutes the huge claws clanked against solid rock. We proceeded by hand to uncover what seemed to be a 120-degree joint in the stone. Later John Currid and his crew properly excavated the outer face of the wall down another four courses until they reached the bottom of the harbor at two and a half meters below sea level. The Punic Commercial Harbor more nearly resembled a hexagon than a rectangle. But there was some strange-looking mortar attached to the angle wall that we had not seen before on other parts of the Punic quay wall running north-south.

Henry Hurst, the Director of the British team excavating the Military (Circular) Harbor, recently concluded that the stone shipsheds for housing and repairing naval vessels might not have been built before the second century B.C., probably between the Second and Third Punic Wars. Such a date seems too late for the Commercial Harbor. Perhaps the angle wall was a later addition built in the second century to facilitate entrance to the newly established naval port to the north. Whatever its explanation, the final days of excavation behind the quay wall corner revealed the continuation to the north of the north-south wall. The angle wall was a later addition. The precise location of the northwest corner and the shape of the Commercial Harbor in its earliest phase still remain a mystery.

### *Tophet*

After four seasons of excavations in the Tophet we have completed and drawn the first section ever made through such a precinct, recognized at least nine phases of urn burials ranging from 700 B.C. to 146 B.C. (earlier

excavators recorded three to four “strata”), and recovered more than four hundred urn burials. Douglas Esse, Joseph Greene, and Samuel Wolff deserve most of the credit for these achievements in the field. By recognizing the various ground levels from which the urn pits were dug, this team provided the essential stratigraphic information for unraveling the incredibly complicated sequences of burial phases in the Tophet. They personally excavated most of the urn burials. No local labor was used because of the delicacy of the operations. During seven months of field work in Area I, for example, Doug removed thirty cubic meters of soil and recorded about two hundred urns.

In the Tophet rites some Carthaginians were apparently allowed, or chose, to sacrifice animals, such as sheep or goats, as an acceptable substitute for children. During all periods some of the urns contained *only* the calcined remains of young sheep or goat. When sex could be determined, the lambs and kids were males. In one case an L-shaped sandstone cippus marked an urn burial containing only charred sheep bones.

The Table shows that in the seventh century B.C. the percentage of sheep-goat victims was much higher than in the fourth century. This figure may surprise other investigators who concluded that there was a steady in-

	Human	Animal	Human + Animal	No. of Urns
Group A				
7th Century				
B.C.	62.5% (50)	30% (24)	7.5% (6)	80
Group B				
4th Century				
B.C.	88% (44)	10% (5)	2% (1)	50

*Comparison of human : animal remains from an early (Group A) and a late (Group B) sample of urns from the Carthage Precinct. Number of urns for each category is indicated in parentheses. Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz, staff osteologist and anthropologist from the University of Pittsburgh, analyzed the calcined bone remains contained in the urns.*

crease in animal substitution and thus an attenuation of child sacrifice with the passage of time.

The *human only* category of Group A urns was also different from that of Group B. Human sacrifices of the seventh century were usually very young—premature or newborn infants. The fourth century victims included newborns but an even greater number of children one year and older.

Several Phoenician colonies in the Western Mediterranean have precincts of child sacrifice that date to the early periods of the founding settlement (e.g. Motya, Sicily; Tharros and Sulcis, Sardinia; and Carthage). Why such an institution, with potentially dire consequences for a fledgling colony, should have been established at such an early date has intrigued but puzzled me for years. Even under the most favorable conditions, it would not have been an easy task to keep a young colony going and growing if child sacrifice were widespread and frequent. Such religious ideology would have soon thwarted other attempts toward growth. Self-extinction was not the purpose or the consequence of child sacrifice at Carthage, where the practice continued for more than five centuries. I now believe that one of the primary reasons the rite did not result in such a predicament was due to the flexibility provided by the option of animal substitution.

Sacrificing an animal in place of a child was an acceptable custom from the earliest days of the West Phoenician colonies. A seventh-century B.C. inscription from Malta mentions the *mulk ʾimmōr* (Tophet sacrifice of a sheep or goat). At Carthage there is inscriptional evidence for this type of sacrifice in the third century. We have also found sheep depicted on some of the limestone stelae found in fourth-to-second-century contexts. The Latin transcription *molchomor* for the Phoenician technical term *mulk ʾimmōr* is attested in the Ngaous stelae (Algeria) in the second and third centuries A.D. There the meaning is made clear by the telling phrase *animo agnum pro vika(rio)*. Animal substitution provided the optional means by which an otherwise rigid sacrificial system could adapt to, in fact even reinforce, the changing demographic situations of the colony. In the early days of Carthage animal substitution was widely

accepted as an appropriate response to the sacrificial imperative. Later on, in the fourth and third centuries, when New Carthage was being developed along the shorelines of the Gulf of Tunis and the metropolitan area might have exceeded a quarter of a million people, animal substitution was not a common practice in Tophet rites. At that time children, not animals, were by far the most common sacrificial victims. In this way the elite could control their numbers in a rather systematic way while still receiving the blessings of the gods.

From the preliminary analysis of archeological data from the Tophet, I have difficulty accepting the evolutionary scheme proposed by many historians of religion who maintain that the "barbaric" practice of human sacrifice was gradually replaced by the more "civilized" practice of animal substitution. (The paradigm of Abraham substituting the "ram-in-the-thicket" for his son Isaac is usually cited.) For it is precisely in the fourth and third centuries B.C., when Carthage attained the heights of urbanity, that child sacrifice flourished as never before.