Qart Hadasht, ‘the New City' of Carthage, was built by Phoenician colonists from Tyre on the ridge rising along the coast from La Goulette, the seaport of Tunis, up to the top of Sidi Bou Said around 800BC. Destroyed by the Romans in 148BC, the city was rebuilt as the capital of Roman North Africa, and finally abandoned after its capture by the Arabs in AD698.

Today the site is a garden suburb, served by a little train across the lagoon from Tunis, which runs along the shore before climbing over the ridge to the resort of La Marsa. Meanwhile the cathedral of St Louis, that symbol of French supremacy on the central hill of the old city, has been transformed into a museum at the centre of a growing web of excavation. The pattern of the past is superimposed onto the lifestyle of the present.

This could not have happened if the city so intentionally destroyed in 146BC had not become a city of legend. The legend is that of the great enemy of Rome, which takes two forms. On the one hand is the heroism of Hannibal crossing the Alps, on the other the atrocious tale of infant sacrifice at the heart of Gustave Flaubert's nineteenth-century novel Salammbo. The combination is difficult to explain, since no Carthaginian version of events has survived. Carthaginian history is known only from Greek and Latin literature; the Carthaginian way of life has been revealed by archaeological excavations; while Biblical studies of the Near East provide some clues as to the beliefs and customs of Carthaginian religion. The problem is piecing together the information from all three sources.

Carthage was a city state, ruled by elected magistrates called suffetes, the Biblical shophetim or ‘judges'. After its foundation by the legendary queen Elissa, or Dido, about the beginning of the eighth century BC, its history went through three periods. In the seventh and sixth centuries BC, the city became the overlord of all the Phoenician colonies established in the west, from Tripoli in Libya, to the Atlantic coasts of Spain and Morocco. Founded to fetch the silver, iron, lead and tin from Spain, and to manufacture the purple dye from the murex shellfish which gave the Phoenicians their name (phoinix is Greek for ‘purple’), these colonies came into conflict with the Greeks in southern Italy and Sicily, and may have turned to Carthage for protection.

In the fifth and fourth centuries BC, following defeat by the Greeks at Himera in Sicily in 480,
the Carthaginians built up their empire in North Africa, Spain, Sardinia and western Sicily, but largely ceased trading with the Greeks and the eastern Mediterranean. This trade resumed after the conquests of Alexander the Great, 334-323 BC but in the third and second centuries BC the city came into conflict with the rising power of Rome. In the First Punic (or 'Phoenician') War of 264-241 BC, Carthage lost Sicily. In the Second Punic War of 219-201 BC, Hannibal was defeated and the Carthaginian empire dismantled. In the Third Punic War of 149-146 BC, the city of Carthage itself was taken and destroyed.

Evidence of the Carthaginian way of life is most readily seen at Kerkouane at the extremity of the Cap Bon peninsula. The site is that of a small Punic city, founded in the sixth century, and finally destroyed by the Romans in the First Punic War. The sea has washed part of it away. The remainder, however, has been excavated to reveal the bulk of the town, the walls of its houses standing in places to a height of three or four feet. Between the older inner and more recent outer wall is a heap of murex shells -- the remains of a smelly boiling of the crustaceans to produce the pungent, but highly-prized purple dye. Upon such manufacture was built what was evidently a clean and comfortable way of life.

In the middle of the town stood the marketplace. Now on the edge of the low cliff above the sea, the larger houses had columned courts; others were built behind shops. In these, a long passage runs back from the street to bend round into a small courtyard, whose entrance was thus concealed. Down the side of the passage runs a gutter from the foot of the drainpipe from the roof, while rainwater was collected in a cistern lined with white cement. A pink cement, set with white marble chips, served in the bathroom to waterproof the modern-looking bath, shaped like a chair, as well as the handbasin, itself fed by a lead pipe. Stairs led up from the courtyard to a first-floor room and/or flat roof.

Downstairs the same pink cement dotted with marble has been used to cover the floors; as in the bathroom, it has also been used to cover the solid benches round three sides of the sitting or reception room. Between two rooms a hollow wall contained a built-in cupboard. In the angles of the benches in the sitting room, the white marble chips have been set in the pink cement to form a lotus like a fleur-de-lys; on the threshold between the two rooms, they compose the sign of Tanit.

At Kerkouane, the so-called sign of Tanit' takes the form of a pyramid with a crossbar just below the point, which has been thickened into a neck to support a circle filled with black chips; the effect is that of a doll with outstretched arms. Elsewhere the ends of these arms may be turned up to give the impression of uplifted hands; and with the addition of eyes and mouth, the anthropomorphism is complete. The original, however, was more abstract: a truncated pyramid with a bar across the top, normally with a separate circle above it. This sign, without a name, and of obscure significance, is now known to have been present in Syria, prior to its popularity at Carthage from the fifth century onwards; so too is the divine name of Tanit. Only at Carthage, however, did the sign and the name become associated and central to the faith.

Biblical studies and archaeology show the Phoenicians to be Canaanites, speaking a Semitic language and writing an alphabet closely related to Hebrew. There were three principal deities: a male god of the sun, the sky and the city; a female goddess of the moon, the earth and fertility; and a dying god of vegetation. The first was El, 'God'; Baal, 'Lord'; or Melqart, 'King of the City'. The second was Astarte, or Baalat, 'Lady'; and the third is best known under the Greek name of Adonis, from the Semitic Adonai, 'My Master'. From these sprang a multiplicity of gods and goddesses associated with particular functions, peoples and places. Thus at Carthage, the Lord became Baal Hammon, and the Lady, Tanit Pene Baal, 'Tanit the Face of the Lord'. Baal Hammon was distinct from Baal Shamem, 'Lord of the Skies', and from Melqart, the god of Tyre, while Tanit was worshipped separately from Astarte. All nevertheless found their equivalents in the deities of Greece and Rome, while from Egypt they were joined by Isis and
Osiris. The Egyptian myth of the dead god restored to life in the form of his son by the devotion of his sister wife, corresponded to that of Anat and Baal Aliyan at Ugarit, south of Aleppo.

At Carthage, Baal Hammon is an example of such syncretism. In his recently edited Dictionnaire de la civilisation phenicienne et punique, Lipinski identifies him as the corn-god, Dagon, father of the dying god Baal Aliyan, and the equivalent of the Greek Kronos and Latin Saturn. In North Africa, however, he was associated with the ram, a pastoral creature divinised by the Berbers of Libya. Upon the twin-peaked mountain known today as Djebel Bou Kornein, 'the two-horned hill' which rises across the Bay of Tunis from Carthage, he was worshipped at an open-air sanctuary under the name of Baal Qarnaim or Lord of the Two Horns.'

Tanit is equally ambiguous. Lipinski's translation of her name and title, Tanit Pene Baal, as 'Weeping in the Face of the Lord,' would identify her with Anat and Isis, the sorrowing earth goddesses of death and resurrection in Syria and Egypt; it might explain the shrouded, almost mummmified little figure of the goddess on the stele from Sousse on the coast to the south of Carthage and Cap Bon; and it would make sense of the life-size Isis effigy on a sarcophagus from Carthage, enveloped from the waist down in the wings with which the goddess fanned the mummy of her husband brother. But the effigy is late, from the third century, BC, when its Hellenistic naturalism strikingly illustrates the renewed contact between Carthage and the eastern Mediterranean in the wake of Alexander's conquests. It is a world away from the Sign of Tanit. even at a time when this was turning into a female figure. During the previous two centuries of Carthaginian isolation, when Tanit herself first came to the fore, the sign was associated with the crescent moon, inverted over the circle and the crossbar of the pyramid.

Readers of Robert Graves' The White Goddess will find no problem with a moon goddess of the sky and the earth. The sign is another matter. The circle that provided it with a head or face combined just as easily with the larger crescent to form a sign of its own, with the crescent frequently lying on its back.

This might represent the sun and the moon, or possibly the phases of the moon. Circle and crescent together, meanwhile, appeared above a different shape in the form of a bottle, one which might equally well stand on its own as the so-called bottle idol. As with the pyramid of the sign, the circle might then descend, attaching itself to the bottle neck to give the appearance of a head. Such enigmatic symbols are far away from the superb human figure of Isis on the sarcophagus, and equally distant from the animal form of the ram.

The world to which they belong is found at Kerkouane, in the rectangular enclosure of the temple. The entrance from the street into the first and larger courtyard was through a corridor-like room across the width of the building, where it seems likely that the worshipper could buy the offering of an earthenware statuette. Down the right-hand side of the court a row of workshops for the production of such votive objects had been built, so that the large square altar on the main axis of the court stands now to one side. At the far end, two open-fronted shrines stood side by side on solid podiums. Beyond these was a second, square court, where animal sacrifices were performed: a text from a temple at Carthage specifies ten pieces of silver to the priests for the sacrifice of an ox, whether 'a sin offering, a peace offering, or a burnt offering'.

The floor was found covered with ashes and bones; more strangely, one corner was filled with large round stones, one or two feet across. These are betyls, bait-ili or 'homes of the god', present here in the sacrificial court as votive offerings. Elsewhere, most famously at Byblos (where the stone was conical), they served as cult objects in place of statues: and may have accompanied the statues in the shrines at Kerkouane. Whether as votive offering or as cult object, the betyl or sacred stone was central to what Robertson Smith has called the religion of the Semites' in his book of that name.
The betyl as an object of veneration has survived from the days of paganism in Arabia to become the Black Stone in the Kaaba at Mecca. In Judaism and in Christianity, the stone itself has disappeared, but its designation as the home of the god has been preserved in the form of Bethel, `God's house'. On waking from his dream of the ladder, Jacob took the stone on which he had slept, consecrated it. then dedicated it as a votive offering:

And Jacob rose up early in the
morning, and took the stone that he had put
for his pillow, and set it up for a pillar,
and poured oil upon the top of it. And
he called the name of that place Bethel
... And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If
God will be with me, and will keep me
in this way that I go, and will give me
bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So
that I come again to my father's house
in peace: then shall the LORD be my
God: And this stone, which I have set
for a pillar, shall be God's house: and
of all that thou shalt give me I will
surely give the tenth unto thee.

(Genesis 28: 18-22)

The element of living sacrifice, so prominent at Kerkouane, is absent from the Jacob story, but is present in the altars built by Abraham most famously for the sacrifice of his son Isaac (Genesis 12:7-8; 22:1-14). Such sacrifice, in the opinion of Robertson Smith in The Religion of the Semites, was of the essence of the sacred stone: the stone or heap of stones in which the deity dwelt, marked the place of sacrifice, and in origin served as the altar itself. Only later do `the idol and the altar stand side by side, and the original functions of the sacred stone are divided between them; the idol represents the presence of the god, and the altar serves to receive the gifts of the worshipper', `bloody and bloodless' alike. At Carthage, all three elements were present in the cult of the betyl: the object of veneration, the votive offering, and the living sacrifice. The place where they were notoriously bound up was not the temple but the Tophet, the sanctuary where the burnt bones of infants were buried in pots beneath commemorative stones.

The most dramatic remains of old Carthage are those of the houses on the sides of the Byrsa, the central hill of the old city. In layout like those of Kerkouane, but originally much taller, they were buried by the Romans who levelled the top of the hill and built up the sides with pillars and rubble to create a platform for their own magnificent city centre. The Tophet, on the other hand, lies inconspicuously at the foot of the hill, in gardens close to the Punic ports -- the circular naval marina and the rectangular commercial harbour which are the most visible relic of the
original city. Beside these quiet pools, so small for so legendary a sea power, the "Sanctuary of Tanit" is an enclosure of trees, grass and stones. Towards the back is the overgrown pit of the original excavation, containing the eerie tunnel dug by the archaeologists, its walls and roof made of pots full of little burnt bones, all jutting from the earth in which they were set.

Other such precincts have been found in North Africa, Sicily and Sardinia. The sinister name of Tophet, however, comes from the Bible: "the high places of Tophet" which the children of Judah built in the valley of the sons of Hinnom at Jerusalem, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire as sacrificial offerings to Baal (Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5-6). Despite this Biblical reference to a practice which would have flourished in Jerusalem in the seventh century BC, no such places have come to light in the eastern Mediterranean world.

The sanctuary of Tanit, at Carthage, on the other hand, spanned the entire life of the city, from the eighth century, down to its destruction in 146 BC. In its earliest phase, down perhaps to the end of the seventh century, the pots of cremated bones were placed on the bedrock under little cairns. Subsequently, layers of earth were spread for many thousands of pots to be buried beneath monumental stones in an area approaching 100 yards by 100 yards.

If we leave aside the early cairns corresponding to Robertson Smith's original piles of rocks, the stone monuments recovered are of two kinds: the cippus, an architectural term for a short, rectangular, sculptured column, and the stele. The cippi date mainly from the first half of the middle period, down to the beginning of the fifth century, and are of three main types: the throne; the altar; and the shrine. In each of these, the rectangular column has been sculpted to represent the natural stone forming the original betyl or 'home of the god', which now becomes an image in the shape of a square pillar, for example, cut in high relief out of the back of a carved throne. On the altar cippus, this image is typically rounded, carved out of the back of what is still a chair whose arms end in incense burners. In the shrine or naos, the process of representation is taken still further, the betyl is carved into the face of the cippus, often within a carved frame, as if within a shrine. Its form varies: one, two, usually three square pillars; the bottle shape; or a lozenge. But however it is formed and presented, the betyl that houses the deity is also the votive offering dedicated by the worshipper to its divine inhabitant. The dedication which, like Jacob's vow, makes the agreement between man and god, is in its earliest form a very simple inscription: 'a stone (memorial) of the sacrifice made by X to Baal Hammon'.

From the beginning of the fifth century BC, these cippi are largely superseded by stelae or standing slabs with triangular tops. Their fronts are incised with line drawings as well as the inscription, or are carved in relief. Among the symbols, the sign of Tanit becomes ubiquitous, while Tanit herself comes before Baal Hammon in the dedication. One celebrated stele is in fact in the form of the sign, cut out all in one piece from the flat stone like a gingerbread man, with the bottle shape, topped by the circle, incised on the 'face'. The square pillar becomes rare, but the symbols themselves increase in number; a staff topped by a circle and a crescent pointing upward; hands like the Hand of Fatima; and date palms.

By the fourth century these symbols have been joined by columns and lintels, animals and people. By the third, the imagery is in higher and more naturalistic relief, in tiers of architectural detail which give the stele the impression of a facade. From the Tophet at Sousse comes the occasional image of the deity in human form a shrouded female before an incense-burner, and a god confronted by a worshipper. In this way the sculptural elements of the cippus have been transferred to the stele as pictures, which have overlaid if not entirely taken over the sacred stone itself.

The stelae nevertheless retained their votive character, as a typical inscription demonstrates: 'To the Lady Tanit Pene Baal and the Lord Baal Hammon, that which X son of Y has vowed, because he has heard his voice and blessed him'. As to what has been vowed, the variety of the
imagery should not distract attention from the infant deaths which these stelae commemorate. The burnt bones in the pots lend credence, on the one hand, to the Biblical story and, on the other, to the lurid tales of infant sacrifices told by the classical writers.

From contemporaries of the Punic Wars down to Pliny in the first, and Plutarch in the second century AD, we are told of the slaughter and incineration of the innocents, either annually as a matter of course, or occasionally, in gratitude for favours received, or at moments of danger to the city. Music drowned the wailing of the women; children were bought for the purpose from poor parents; the victims fell into the fire from the hands of a bronze idol, as their mouths were twisted by the heat into a ghastly grin. From such tales comes Flaubert's Salammbo, in which children are fed alive by the score into the fire in the belly of the idol Moloch, scooped in by its moveable arms and hands.

Moloch, or Molech, is certainly a name in the Bible, but it is not the name of a god. It is the word MLK, vocalised as molk, meaning sacrifice. From this comes the term MLKMR, 'molchomor', which in Roman times meant the sacrifice of a lamb. The archaeology of the Tophet at Carthage, and elsewhere in the Carthaginian world, has indeed revealed the bones of lambs as well as children, amounting to 40 per cent of the total in Sardinia. At Carthage itself, they formed 33 per cent in the sixth century BC. By the fourth, however, they had fallen to only 10 per cent.

As for the children, in the earlier period they were usually newborn, or stillborn, while later they were often between one and three years of age. One pot might contain the bones of several such infants, together with the animal bones. No bronze statue has been found, and only in Sardinia has a place in the Tophet been uncovered where the bodies, already dead, were burnt, apparently at the end of summer. It has therefore been suggested that the Tophet at Carthage was in reality no more than a cemetery for children, with the element of sacrifice much reduced or non-existent. But the presence of animal bones; the consensus of the classical sources; and the dedications on the cippi and the stelae, all point firmly in the opposite direction.

The suggestion has been made that, if the children were indeed killed, then the practice was a form of birth control. But the legends of Carthage, and the Bible, provide other explanations. The legends begin with Elissa, alias Dido, throwing herself into the flames; from Herodotus comes the story that the Carthaginian commander, Hamilcar, did the same at the battle of Himera, sacrificing himself in a desperate attempt to save the day.

Behind the Biblical figure of Abraham, directed to offer his only son, but allowed to sacrifice the ram instead, stands one of the many commandments to Moses after the canonical Ten: 'Thou shalt not delay to offer the first of thy ripe fruits, and of thy liquors: the firstborn of thy sons thou shalt give unto me': (Exodus 23:29). Behind the figure of Jephthah stands the vow which obliged him to sacrifice his only daughter when she emerged to greet his return in triumph:

If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands.

Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering
The common theme of these stories is that of the holocaust, the entirely burnt offering; but the purposes are different. Hamilcar, according to Herodotus, sacrificed himself for his people. Abraham was set to offer the first fruits, in this case of the womb. Jephthah was bound to fulfil his vow, that is, to keep the bargain he, like Jacob, had made with God. These differences are echoed in the Greek and Latin literature, on the one hand by the story that the sacrifices were annual, on the other by the statement that they were habitually performed in fulfilment of a vow, and finally by the allegation that they were carried out in times of great danger. Two at least of these varieties are corroborated by archaeology and epigraphy.

The botanical evidence from Sardinia, that the sacrifices were carried out at the end of summer, suggests an annual sacrifice of the first fruits. Such an offering of first fruits would agree with the findings from Carthage that in the sixth century, the bones were those of newborn or very young children, commemorated by a simple statement of the sacrifice made to Baal Hammon -- the corn god, Dagon. The high, but not major, proportion of lamb bones and those of other animals would point to widespread, but not predominant, substitution. The discovery of bones of older children in the pots from the fifth century onwards, however, as well as the reduction in the number of animal bones, seems to mark a change. The appearance in the inscription of the common phrase: 'Because (the divinity has heard his voice and blessed him)', suggests a vast extension of the practice of the vow, to include children of an age to know. The famous image is that from the stele of the fourth century depicting a tall man in transparent tunic carrying a naked infant, almost certainly the priest bearing his victim. The crucial expression is 'molchomor', which according to Lipinski, originally meant 'the sacrifice of what he has promised,' in other words, not necessarily of a lamb.

Meanwhile the replacement of the cippi by the stelae corresponded to a growing popular participation in the rite, with many of the dedications made by people who stated their craft or occupation, or drew the tools of their trade on the stone. In the centuries of Carthaginian isolation after the battle of Himera, when imports from the Grecian world declined, and Tanit Pene Baal took precedence over Baal Hammon, it might appear that a practice which elsewhere was failing into disuse took on a new lease of life, and that child sacrifice in fulfilment of a vow became strangely normal.

If that is so, two questions remain to which archaeology, as yet, has no answer. What, in the course of time, happened to the sacrifice of first fruits; and what truth may there be in the story that the Carthaginians indulged in child sacrifice at moments of grave peril? The two may be linked, for in the most celebrated of such tales, we are told that the Carthaginians attributed their misfortunes to their neglect of ancient custom, and sought to make amends. The story in question comes from the end of the fourth century, when Carthage was unexpectedly attacked by Agathocles of Syracuse in 310BC. Five hundred children of the noblest families were then collected for sacrifice, to atone for the previous substitution of slave children, and rolled from the hands of the statue into the fire. This is the origin of the sacrifice to the bronze idol in Salammbo, transferred by Flaubert to the so-called Mercenaries, War which followed the ending of the First Punic War in 240-237BC.

As a purple passage, Flaubert's tale has no equal. Only Jeremiah, prophesying that the place called Tophet would become the place of slaughter, where the people of Jerusalem would be buried till there was no more room for them, approaches its power in a different vein. Both employ child sacrifice for effect, the one perhaps meretricious, the other highly moral. Both feed the fascination for the Carthaginian site: the visitor to the Tophet gets off the train at Salammbo, the station of the naked priestess caressed by a snake. We cannot and do not wish to escape from such toils. What may be more shocking is to find ourselves unexpectedly at home among the stones of the Tophet and the temple at Kerkouane. The familiar words of Philip Doddridge's (Judges II, 30-1).
hymn are very close, not only to Genesis but to the world of the Carthaginians:

O God of Bethel! by whose hand Thy

people still are fed.

FOR FURTHER READING:


Michael Brett is Senior Lecturer in North African History at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the University, of London, and co-author of The Berbers (Blackwell, 1996).

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