Phoenician bones of contention

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Introduction

Even if the foundation, rise and eventual demise of Carthage and its overseas territories in the West Mediterranean occurred in much the same space and time as the glory days of Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic Greece and Rome, there is no doubt that the Phoenicians and their Punic successors (to use the conventional terms) have rarely been regarded as fully signed-up members of the ancient world. Reduced to walk-on cameos as skilled silversmiths, agricultural experts, shrewd traders or military strategists, Phoenician and Punic representations tend to be rather stereotypical (Prag 2010, with earlier bibliography), which perhaps should not come as a surprise, as nearly all these portraits have been sketched by outsiders; they certainly do not add up to a coherent ethnographic or political description.

The peripheral and ambiguous status of Phoenician and Punic history in the wider 'ancient world' is matched by the institutional marginalisation of the field, as the Phoenician and Punic worlds are rarely taught and researched as part of classical archaeology, let alone ancient history. Instead, its practitioners are more likely to be found in departments of Near Eastern archaeology, biblical studies or indeed prehistoric archaeology, depending on the academic traditions of the countries involved. As a result, Phoenician and Punic culture tends to remain poorly known beyond specialist circles (Vella 1996), even if research efforts have substantially increased in the past three decades. The poor institutionalisation of the field is underscored by the fact that it has just one successful dedicated journal, the *Rivista di Studi Fenici*, which is about to publish its fortieth volume.

Nowhere is the ambiguous and often contested nature of the field more obvious than in the debate over the tophets found on the outskirts of at least nine Phoenician settlements in the central Mediterranean before the fall of Carthage. (In this essay we leave aside later sanctuaries of a similar type.) These open-air sacred enclosures hold the remains of cremated infants and animals buried in urns, sometimes beneath stone markers, as well as various altars, shrines and other cultic installations (Figures 1 & 2). Since the 1920s these have been identified as the sites of the bloody rituals of Phoenician child sacrifice described by Greek and Roman authors that had more recently captured the European artistic and popular imagination, as best demonstrated by Gustave Flaubert's novel *Salammbô* (1862). This identification has since been challenged, not least on the basis of the potential bias of the classical authors who accuse the Phoenicians, and especially Carthaginians, of child sacrifice; revisionist scholars have also appealed to the rarity of infant burials in 'normal'

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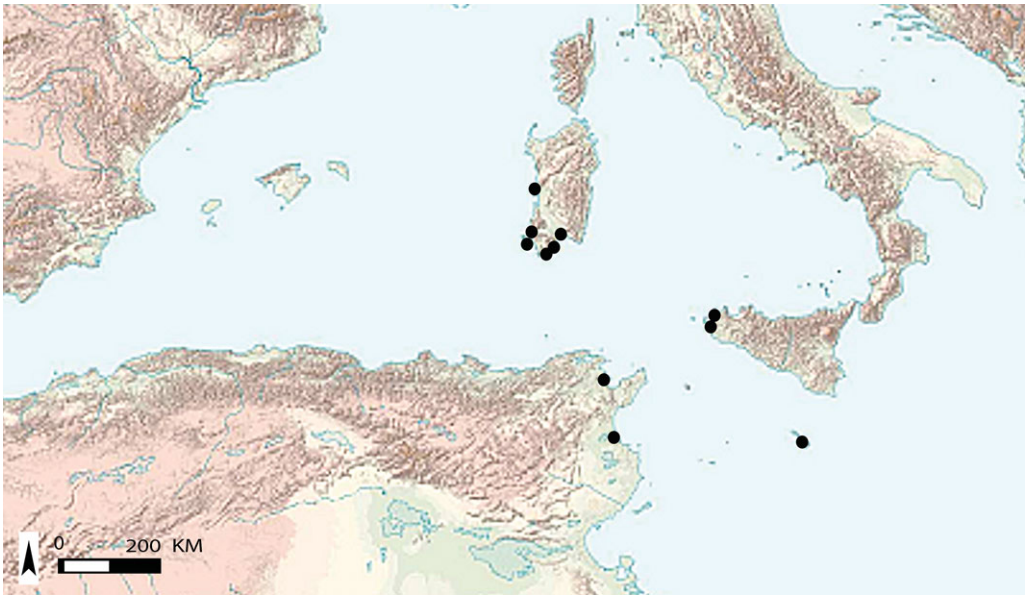

Figure 1. Map of the western and central Mediterranean, showing the distribution of 11 known tophets of Phoenician-Punic date, including those at Malta and Lilybaeum, where the evidence is less clear-cut (base map courtesy of Ancient World Mapping Center).

Punic cemeteries as evidence that the tophets were dedicated cemeteries or sanctuaries for children who died of natural causes (Bénichou-Safar 1981, 1982; Moscati 1987; Ribichini 1987; for an account of the debate in historical perspective, see Amadasi Guzzo 2007–2008: 347–51).

Debating Tophets

The latest round in the tophet debate was triggered in 2010 by Schwarz *et al.*'s online publication of their osteological analysis of the contents of 348 urns excavated from the Carthaginian Tophet by the American mission that worked there between 1976 and 1979 (Stager 1980, 1982). Reporting that "most of the sample fell within the range of 2 to 12 postnatal months, clustering between 2 and 5 months", Schwartz *et al.* conclude that at least 20 per cent of the depositions were prenatal at death (2010: 9). Arguing that the Tophet depositions were thus consistent with standard modern rates of child mortality, they conclude that whether or not child sacrifice was ever practiced by Phoenicians, the tophets were "cemeteries for those who died shortly before or after birth, regardless of the cause" (Schwartz *et al.* 2010: 1). Their findings were challenged by Smith *et al.*, who took the debate to *Antiquity* in 2011 to argue that their own osteological analyses suggested that the Tophet was in fact a ritual site for infant sacrifice. Testing the contents of 325 urns, and taking into account the shrinkage that bones undergo during cremation, they classified only three of the individuals as foetal (8–8.49 gestational months), and argued that the overall age profile of the cremated children in the Tophet "peaked between 1 and 1.49 months, and differed from that found for infant burials in other archaeological sites or that reported for

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Figure 2. View of the excavated Tophet of Sulcis on the outskirts of modern Sant'Antioco in southern Sardinia (photo: V. Melchiorri).

census data for populations without access to modern medical care" (Smith *et al.* 2011: 860). A year later, Schwartz *et al.* (2012) restated their case in *Antiquity*, with some additional discussion of Smith *et al.*'s argument and methodology.

We do not intend to discuss the conflicting interpretations of the osteological analyses (for a reassessment, see Melchiorri in press), though we would note that neither team makes reference to the results of the osteological work carried out by Ciasca *et al.* (1996) on the cremated remains from the Tophet at Mozia (Sicily), the more limited study undertaken by Docter *et al.* (2003) on the contents of some urns from Carthage, or the new data from Sulcis (Melchiorri 2010). Although Schwartz *et al.* do refer in passing to the study of the Tharros Tophet by Fedele & Foster (1988), they ignore their well-grounded hypothesis about the seasonality of the ovine cremations, which points to a regular seasonal ritual, and arbitrarily insert Fedele & Foster among the defenders of the infant cemetery theory (Schwartz *et al.* 2010: 1, 2012: 739), when they in fact support the sacrificial interpretation.

It is instead our intention to broaden the conceptual confines of the debate and to demonstrate the breadth of evidence that can and, in our view, should be brought to bear on our understanding of the tophet phenomenon. We argue here that the range of sources currently available to researchers beyond the disputed osteology strongly suggests that the

tophet was first and foremost a ritual site or sanctuary and that the cremated depositions of infants and animals were sacrificial offerings.

Material contexts

Given their scientific focus, it is perhaps not surprising that the three recent articles by Schwartz *et al.* and Smith *et al.* do not cite much of the relevant historical, archaeological and anthropological bibliography on the tophet—by no means the province of "biblical scholars" alone, as suggested by Schwartz *et al.* (2010: 1). It is nevertheless still disappointing that Schwartz *et al.* in particular demonstrate a lack of historical familiarity with the topic: whether or not the "age distribution is consistent with modern-day data on perinatal mortality" (2012: 740), for instance, the rates at which the infants are buried certainly are not: at Mozia, extrapolating the number of cremations excavated over the whole site and dividing the resulting number by the approximately four centuries of the sanctuary's use results in a figure of just one or two depositions a year (Ciasca *et al.* 1996: 319, footnote no. 6). Nor do they acknowledge that "the absence of infants and young children in the centrally located, cross-generationally representative cemeteries in which remains were not cremated" (Schwartz *et al.* 2012: 739) is a common phenomenon across the ancient Mediterranean, not just at Phoenician and Punic sites—where infant burials are, furthermore, consistently rare, regardless of whether or not a site has a tophet (Xella 2010: 265–72).

The material evidence lends further support to the sacrificial sanctuary hypothesis in that children and animals are cremated and buried together, as Smith *et al.* duly note (2011: 871). Schwartz *et al.*'s suggestion that while animal sacrifices were made, this happened in the basic context of cemeteries for dead infants and prenates (2010: 10) meets a problem in the evidence from the Roman period that at some tophets, animals alone were cremated and buried (as at *Hadrumetum*: Cintas 1947: 78). It seems that by then at least the core of the ritual consisted of a sacrifice, whether of humans or animals. The fact that animals are sometimes found buried in urns without children in the earlier period points towards the same conclusion.

The literary evidence

Among the Greco-Roman sources on child sacrifice Schwartz *et al.* 2010 mention only Kleitarchos (*Scholia* to Plato's *Republica* 337A; Allen *et al.* 1938) and Diodorus (20.14; Geer 1962); Smith *et al.* 2011 add Plutarch (*Moralia* 171C–D; Pearson & Sandbach 1960) and Tertullian (*Apologia* 9.2–4; Glover 1931), but many other authors who mention the topic are excluded from these discussions (for a collection and commentary see Xella 2009: 63–88). Not a single one of these sources supports the thesis that the children died of natural causes. We agree with Schwartz *et al.* that the evidence of the Greek and Latin sources on Carthaginian child sacrifice should not be accepted uncritically: the dangers of ignorance as well as anti-Carthaginian bias are clear. But neither do we think that this evidence should be dismissed out of hand simply because it was not written by participants in the rituals discussed: this, it seems to us, is equally uncritical. There is no *prima facie* reason to doubt the universal verdict of Greek and Roman authors on the matter, selective infanticide being

unremarkable in the ancient Mediterranean or elsewhere (Lancy 2008: 41–44) and human sacrifice by no means unknown (Davies 1981; Stavrakopoulou 2004; Finsterbusch *et al.* 2006; Dodds Pennock 2008).

It is also the case that various aspects of the passages concerned suggest that they are not simply indulging in negative propaganda, 'othering' an enemy state. In fact, while the sources contemporary with the period of operation of the Carthage Tophet present the practice as unusual, they are not overtly judgemental. When a character in the fourth or third century BC pseudo-Platonic dialogue *Minos* notes that some of the Carthaginians "sacrifice even their own sons to Kronos" (315 C), it is in the service of the wider philosophical point that peoples vary a great deal in their concepts of what is legal and religiously acceptable. In the early third century Kleitarchos notes without further comment that "out of reverence for Kronos, the Phoenicians, and especially the Carthaginians, whenever they seek to obtain some great favour, vow one of their children, burning it as a sacrifice to the deity if they are especially eager to gain success". Around 200 BC Ennius tells us simply that "the *Poeni* sacrificed their children to the gods" (221 V).

In addition to the Greco-Roman sources, there are also more than 25 references in the Old Testament to infant sacrifice in the Iron Age Levant (Xella in press), with only one of these (Exodus 20: 25–26) supporting the claim that this was a practice relating to firstborn males (Schwartz *et al.* 2010); in all the others it is one that involved sons and daughters. Along with other references in Near Eastern texts (Stavrakopoulou 2004), these biblical passages provide a clear Levantine context and origin for a practice that the presence of the sanctuaries in the West suggests was further ritualised in the colonial context (Bonnet 2011; Quinn 2011).

Inscriptions and stelai

The inscriptions from the tophets themselves provide perhaps the strongest support for the sacrifice hypothesis. These are particularly precious as direct, primary evidence and it is surprising that the three articles that prompted this discussion do not cite any of the detailed studies of the inscriptions (see in particular Amadasi Guzzo 2002; 2007–2008). There are thousands of published Punic inscriptions from tophet sites (the vast majority from Carthage itself) and they are all of a votive and not funerary character. Funerary inscriptions from Carthage's necropolis tend to state simply that they are someone's tomb (*qbr*): for instance, *qbr ḥmlkt khn bʿlšmm bn ʿzrbʿl hšnʾ bn ʿšmnʿms / hšnʾ bn mhrbʿl rb hkhnm bn ʿbdmlkt rb hkhnm* (*CIS* I 1881–1962: 5955: "tomb of Himilkat, priest of Baal Šamem, son of Azrubaal the *šn*ʾ, son of Eshmunamas the *šn*ʾ, son of Maharbaal chief of the priests, son of Abdmilkat chief of the priests"). Tophet stelai have a very different formula, specifying that something has been given, dedicated, done, vowed or offered, usually to the god Baal Hamon (sometimes with the goddess Tanit): for instance, *lrbt ltnt pn bʿl wlʾ dn / lbʿl ḥmn ʾš ndr ʾrš bn / bdʿštrt bn bʿlšlm pʿl / hmgrdm kšmʿ qlʾ* (*CIS* I 1881–1962: 338: "To Lady Tanit, face of Baal, and Lord Baal Hamon, (that) which offered Arish, son of Bodashtart, son of Baalshillem, maker of strigils, because he heard his voice").

For the most part the precise nature of the offering is not made explicit, either passed over in the relative clause 'the thing which', or described as a 'gift' (*mtnt*) or an 'offering'

Figure 3. Stele from the Tophet of Sulcis, Sardinia (no. 279; Bartoloni 1986: pl. XLIX) (photo: P. Xella).

(*ndr*) or 'something sent (to the gods)' (*mlk*). In some cases, however, the inscriptions make explicit reference to human victims, with expressions such as *ʾzrm ʾš(t)*, (a person who has not yet reached maturity) and *mlk bʿl* (an offering of a citizen); in the Hellenistic period the phrase *mlk ʾdm* (human offering) is found. An interpretation of these construct phrases as 'offering by a citizen/human' rather than 'offering of a citizen/human' must be ruled out by the fact that the phrase *mlk ʾmr* is also found at both Cirta and Carthage: 'offering of a sheep' (Amadasi Guzzo 2007–2008: 350).

In addition, the formulae used on the stelai in the tophets are basically standard, and repeat constantly through time and across different sanctuaries the claim that the offering has been made 'because he heard his voice and blessed him' (*kšmʿql brkʾ*), or 'because he heard the voice of his words' (*kšmʿql dbry*). That is to say, the offering is in response to an answered prayer, request or vow (*ndr*), a scenario which is difficult to reconcile with the ritualised offering and burial of children who happened to die young. It is hard to interpret the death of a baby as an answer to a (common) prayer or as an event which regularly coincided with other, happier, events in life for which the dead child could conveniently be offered in thanksgiving. It seems much more likely that this was a deal that was set up in advance: the dedicant asked the god for a favour and vowed in return his/her next child. If the deal could not be fulfilled in a reasonable amount of time, sheep and goats perhaps made acceptable alternatives.

Finally, it is worth taking another glance at the famous Carthaginian stele often interpreted as depicting a priest carrying an infant in his arms. Mentioned in passing by Smith *et al.*

Figure 4. Stele from the Tophet of Tharros, Sardinia (no. 142; Moscati & Uberti 1985: fig. 23 and pl. LVI). The stone ranges in height between 31.5 and 28.8cm and between 20.7 and 14.7cm in width.

(2011: 860, fig. 1d), this stele receives much more attention from Schwartz *et al.*, who suggest that the child in question is already dead (2012: 743–44). In our opinion, the child's attitude suggests that he or she is still alive, but both our reading and Schwartz's could be compatible with both a natural death and a sacrifice hypothesis: the stele is far from decisive evidence in the sacrifice debate. We do wish to call attention, however, to several other representations of ritual activities involving infants on stelai from the tophets (e.g. Figures 3–4) that could be taken into consideration alongside the so-called 'priest stele'; such images are unlikely to resolve the circumstances of death of the infants but further attention to them could shed light on other aspects of the ritual, and therefore on the phenomenon as a whole. It should not be forgotten that while understanding the true nature of the rituals performed in the tophets is a fundamental starting point, we are dealing here with polyfunctional sanctuaries, and all aspects of the tophet phenomenon merit attention.

Conclusions

We are, first of all, delighted to see the renewed interest in the Phoenician and Punic world and discussion of the tophets in a wider forum. We also welcome the scientific analysis of the material remains of these sites and have no doubt that similar endeavours will continue to make major contributions to the debate. At the same time, however, we are concerned

that the archaeological and historical contexts of these materials risk being relegated to the background. As the relationships between scientific practice and social, archaeological and historical interpretations continue to be debated in the discipline at large (McGovern 1995; Jones 2001; Knapp 2002), it should perhaps not come as a surprise that we insist that it is critical that all types or 'genres' of evidence be taken into account in relation to the Tophets as both a historical phenomenon and a series of archaeological contexts. We all have to work within the limits of our own expertise, whether as scientists, archaeologists, philologists or epigraphers, but we should also strive in the humanities as much as in the sciences to apply the highest standards of academic rigour, without preconceptions, in order to formulate falsifiable hypotheses and interpretations that take into account the full range of available sources—however strange we may find the results (Jones 2001). Given the limited space available, we have not even begun to do justice to the richness of archaeological, historical and especially epigraphic evidence (Xella in press provides a much fuller treatment), but we hope that we have brought out the abundance, variability and complexity of the information available to investigate the Phoenician and Punic tophets of the central Mediterranean.

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