

The Cult of Ba'al



Ba'al Hamon, the *Lord of the Incense Burner*

Evidence from Punic Civilization

Descendants of the Phoenicians, Worshipers of Ba'al



Phoenician Practices at Ugarit



Ruins of ancient Ugarit



Statuette of Ba'al
from Ugarit

- In 1928, the mound of Ras Shamra was discovered in Syria, which concealed the ancient Phoenician city of Ugarit
- Tablets were discovered from around 1700-1300 BC containing literary, religious, and lexical texts written in several languages
- Several texts are devoted to specific gods
- Most of what we know about Phoenician religious practices comes from those texts

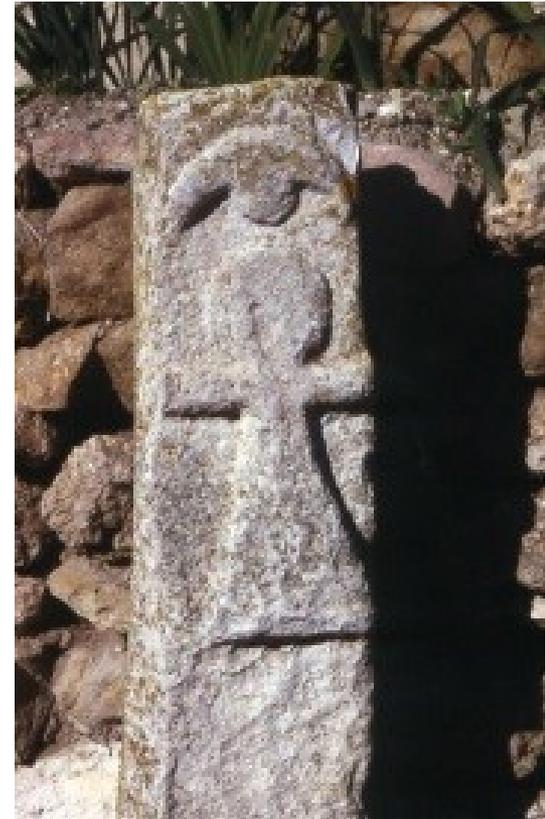
The Main God and Goddess of Phoenician Religion



Ba'al Hammon, Lord of the Incense Burner, 14th-12th century BC, from Ugarit



Image of Ba'al from Ugarit



Symbol of Lady Tanit, consort of Ba'al Hammon, from the Tophet of Carthage

Ugaritic Writings

- Phoenician mythology actually mentioned gods burning the children of their fellow gods:

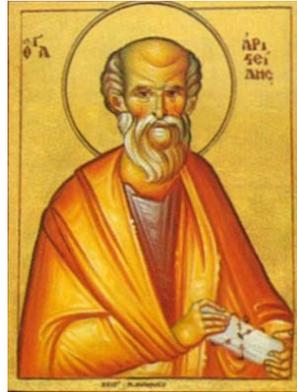
Like (the desire of) the heart of a heifer for her calf, like (that of) the heart of an ewe for her lamb, so (was the desire of) the heart of Anat (yearning) over Baal. She seized Mot son of El, ripped him open with a sword, winnowed him in a sieve, burnt him in the fire, ground him with two mill-stones, sowed him in a field; verily the birds ate the pieces of him, verily the sparrows made an end of the parts of him piece by piece.

Source: Canaanite Myths and Legends, by G. R. Driver (1956), p111

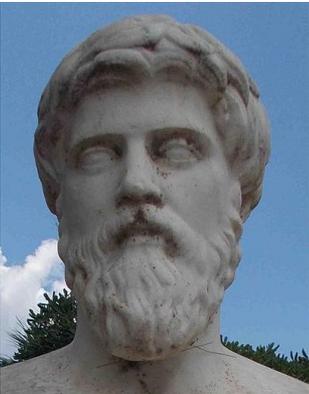
The Classical Sources



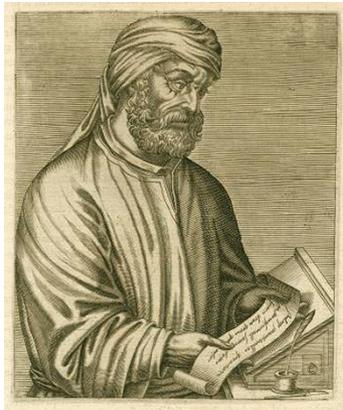
Diodorus Siculus
1st century BC
Wikimedia



Aristides
2nd century AD



Plutarch
46-120 AD
Wikimedia



Tertullian
c. 155 – c. 240 AD
Wikimedia

- There are ancient Greek and Roman sources about child sacrifice at Carthage
 - Cleitarchus (mid to late 4th century BC)
 - Diodorus Siculus (1st century BC)
 - Plutarch (46-120 AD)
- However, since Greece and Rome were historically enemies of Carthage, some scholars dismiss these sources as propaganda
- There are some post apostolic Christian sources
 - Aristides the philosopher (2nd century AD)
 - Tertullian (c. 155 – c. 240 AD)

Greco-Roman Sources

Diodorus (from his *Library of History*, book 20, chapter 14)

There was in their city a bronze image of Cronus, extending its hands, palms up and sloping toward the ground, so that each of the children when placed thereon rolled down and fell into a sort of gaping pit filled with fire.

Plutarch (from his treatise *On Superstition*)

Childless persons used to buy infants of the poor, and slaughter them like so many lambs or chickens; the mother stood by, without a tear, without a groan, for should she weep, should she utter a groan, she was deprived of her price, and the child was sacrificed all the same: and the whole place was filled with noise in front of the image, by people sounding pipes and beating timbrels, in order that the sound of any lamentations might not be audible.

Post Apostolic Christian Sources

Aristides (from the *Apology of Aristides*)

Before everything else the Greeks introduce as a god Kronos, which is interpreted Chiun; and the worshippers of this deity sacrifice to him their children: and some of them they burn while yet living.

- Note: Scholars equate the Greek Kronos with the Roman Saturn and the Phoenician Ba'al

Tertullian (from *Apology*, chapter 9)

Children were openly sacrificed in Africa to Saturn as lately as the proconsulship of Tiberius, who exposed to public gaze the priests suspended on the sacred trees overshadowing their temple--so many crosses on which the punishment which justice craved overtook their crimes, as the soldiers of our country still can testify who did that very work for that proconsul. And even now that sacred crime still continues to be done in secret.

Some Biblical Mentions of Topheth

2 Kings 23:10

He desecrated Topheth, which was in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, so no one could use it to sacrifice their son or daughter in the fire to Molek.

Jeremiah 7:31-32

They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire— something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. So beware, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room.

Tophets

1 of 2

- Archaeologists use the term tophet to refer to a type of open-air cremation sanctuary
- Many scholars agree that tophets were multipurpose sacred compounds where diverse rites were performed
- Tophet inscriptions define the tophet as a place of worship, a sanctuary where sacrifices were made to specific deities under specific rites
- Epigraphic evidence and archaeological discoveries show that infants and small animals were sacrificed at the tophets
- Only what was most perfect and precious was offered to the gods. The Phoenicians and Carthaginians had the tradition of giving the god whatever they themselves held most dear: *'their own flesh'*, as the inscriptions say.¹
- Tophets were usually located on the outskirts of settlements or outside, near an outcrop of bedrock or in an elevated place
 - Some had platforms and altars
 - Some had sculptures, terracotta figurines, and vessels for ritual use

Tophets

2 of 2

- Tophets have an open space where urns containing cremated remains of animals and/or children were deposited
- Tophets were discovered at ancient Phoenician sites throughout the Mediterranean
 - North Africa
 - Sicily
 - Malta (possibly)
 - Sardinia
- Archaeologists concluded tophets were in use from the 8th century BC through the 2nd century BC

1. The Epigraphy of the Tophet, by Maria Giulia Amadasi Guzzo and José Ángel Zamora López, *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici* 29-30, 2012-2013: 159-192

Discoveries of Large Tophets

- 1922 – The Tophet of Carthage
 - Has thousands of cremated remains of young children found in urns marked by stelae with religious inscriptions
 - Some urns had burned infants and small animals, usually sheep, interred together; other urns had separate infant and animal remains
- 1947 – The Tophet of Hadrumetum (excavations by P. Cinta at Sousse, in Tunisia)
 - Discovered a six-floor cemetery with urns containing the charred remains of children and animals, most of them sacrificed to Ba'al Hammon and Tanit. This is the largest known Tophet.
 - Concluded the sacrifices were going on for approximately 8 centuries without interruption
 - Discovered a cremation pit resembling the description by Diodorus. The contents of the pit were reduced by the heat to a mass of burned and calcinated matter.

Known Tophet Sites in the Mediterranean

Tharros ■

Monte Sirai ■

Cagliari ■

Sant'Antioco/Sulky ■

Nora ■

Bitia ■

Solunto** ■

Motya ■

Lilybaeum* ■

Carthage ■

Sousse/Hadrumentum ■

Rabat* ■



0 50 100 Km

elaboration by A. Orsingher

The Tophet of Carthage

1 of 5



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The Tophet of Carthage

2 of 5

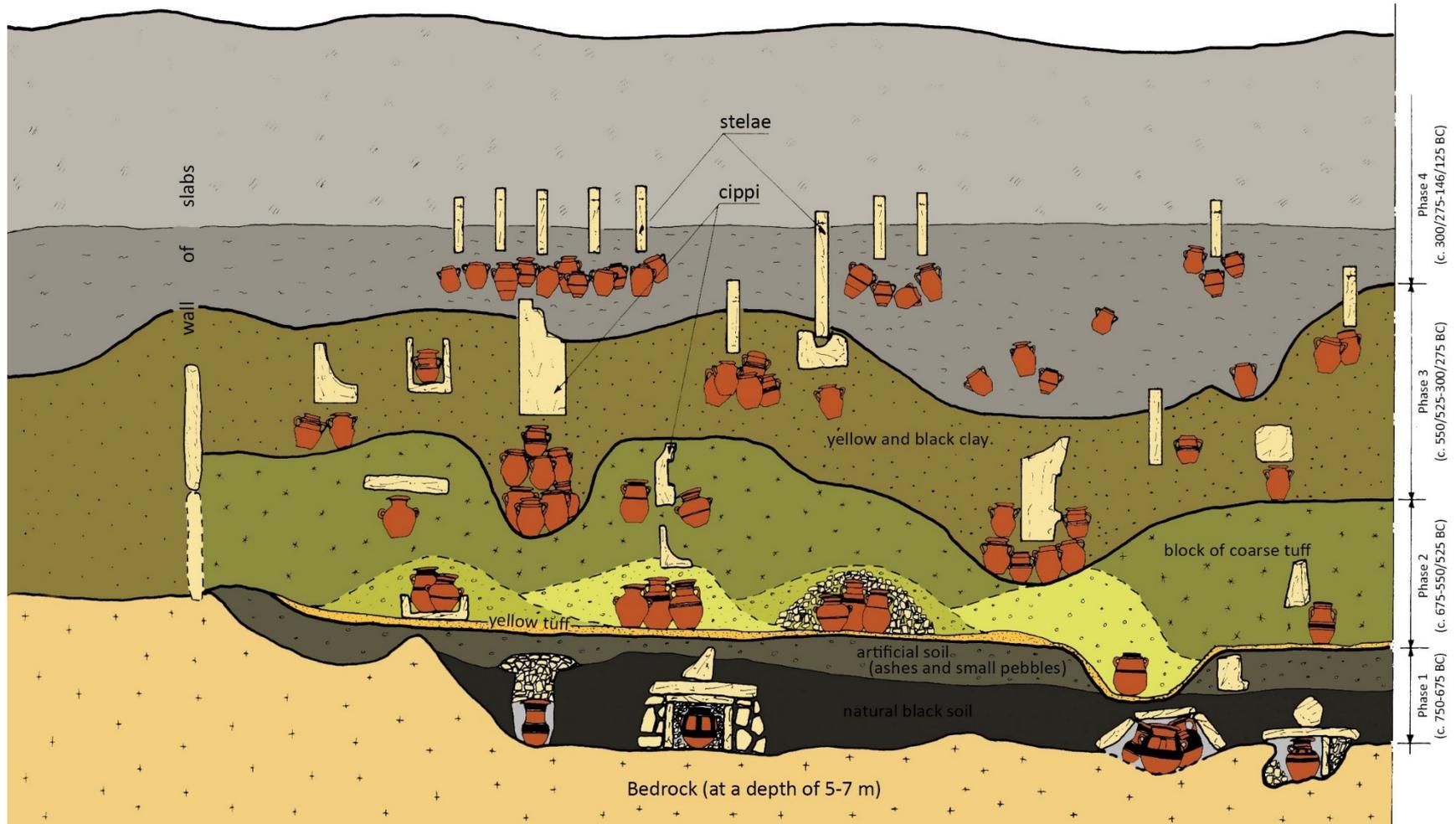


Stelae at the Tophet of Carthage

- In the 1970s, the Oriental Institute (OI) of the University of Chicago sent several archaeological teams to further explore the ruins of ancient Carthage
- They excavated the Tophet of Carthage in depth
- Many cremated remains were identified as children sacrificed to Ba'al Hammon and Tanit

The Tophet of Carthage

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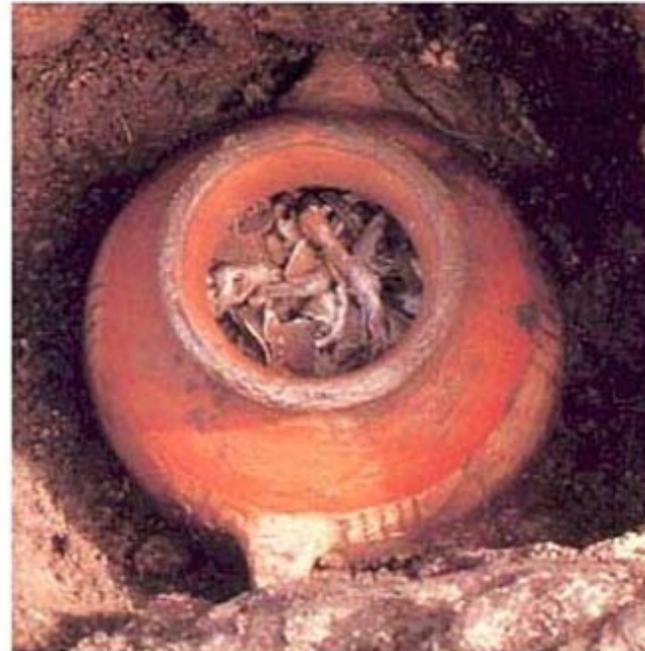
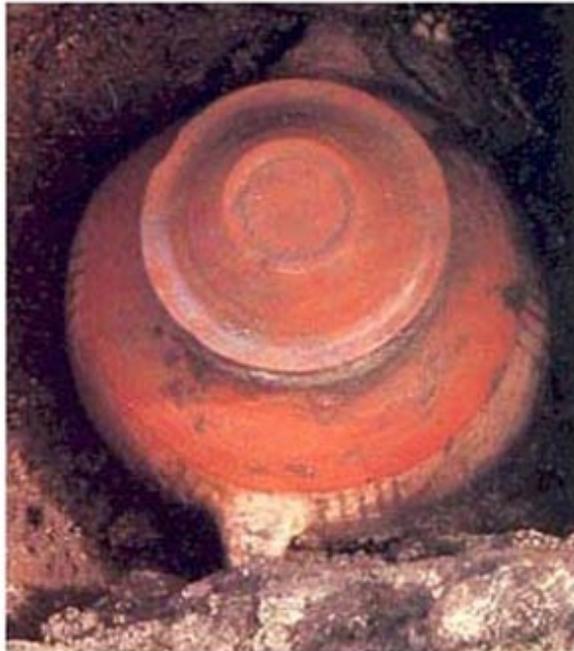


Strata of the Tophet of Carthage

Source: Understanding Tophets: A Short Introduction, by Adriano Orsingher, Friends of ASOR, Vol. VI. No. 2, February 2018

The Tophet of Carthage

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ASOR Punic Project/James Whitred

A seventh century B.C. burial urn (Tanit I) in its pit with lid in place (left) and with lid removed (right), showing the charred remains of an infant.

**The excavations at the Tophet were carried out by ASOR,
The American Schools of Oriental Research**

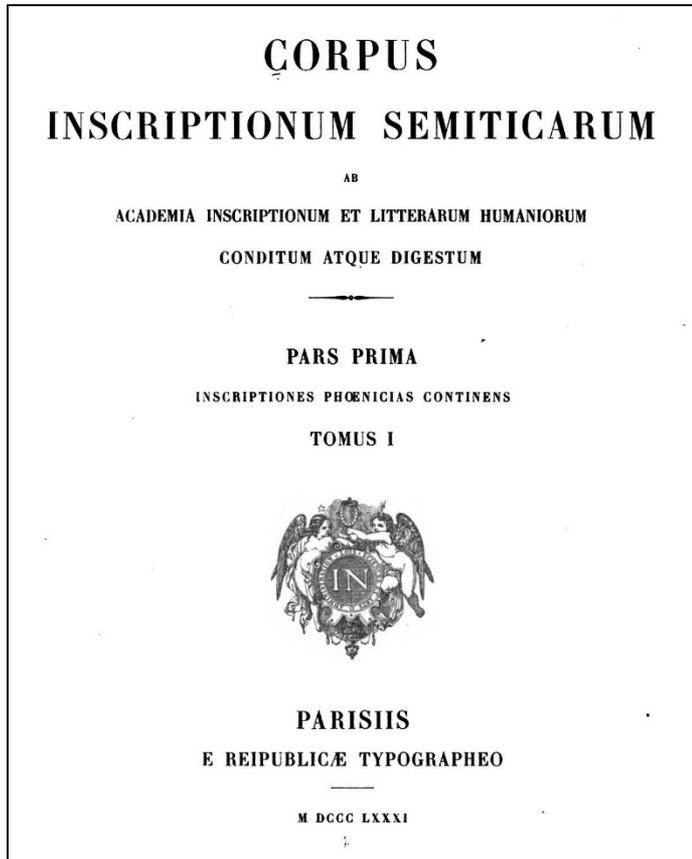
The Tophet of Carthage

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- The exact boundaries of the Tophet of Carthage are unknown due to construction of modern villas over part of the site
- Scholars estimate the size of the tophet during the 4th and probably the 3rd centuries BC to be between 54,000 and 64,000 square feet
- Based on the density of urns in the excavated area, scholars estimate that as many as 20,000 urns may have been deposited there between 400 and 200 BC
- The sheer number of urns with sacrificial victims shows the practice of child sacrifice was extensive

Source: Child Sacrifice at Carthage—Religious Rite or Population Control?, by Lawrence E. Stager and Samuel R. Wolff, Biblical Archaeology Review 10:1, January/February 1984

The Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum



- The Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum (CIS) is a collection of ancient inscriptions in Semitic languages, from the end of 2nd millennium BC until the rise of Islam
- Published from 1881-1962
- Part I contains Phoenician inscriptions from Phoenicia, Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Malta, Sicily, Sardinia, Gaul, Spain, and North Africa

Typical CIS Pages

120 **CORPUS INSCRIPTIONUM SEMITICARUM.**

Edidit graphidas omnes Deverianas, adjunctis apographis quae consuetu sollertia delineaverat Eting, **ZOTENBERG**, *Journ. asiat.*, 1868, l. p. 431-450, tab. I et II; post quem de uno aut altero singulatim egerunt **DEKERSBERG**, **SCHÖDNER**, **LEVY**, **HALÉVY**, **REMAN**, ut infra sub unoquoque numero indicabitur. Graphides Brugschianae quas non habet Deveria sunt ineditae.

99

Deveria, 1; Brugsch, 6 et 16.
(TAB. XVI et XVIII.)

De hoc titulo, post **Zotenberg**, peculiariter egerunt :

J. **DEKERSBERG**, *Notes épigraphiques*, II, in *Journ. asiat.*, 1869, l. p. 489 et seq.; — **SCHÖDNER**, *Die phön. Sprache*, p. 54, 143, 199 et not. 1; — **LEVY**, *Phönizische Studien*, fasc. IV, p. 16 et seq., tab., Breslau, 1870. Cf. **NEUBAUER**, *The Academy*, 15 febr. 1871, p. 147. — **REMAN**, in *Collagio Francim*, cum alumnis hunc titulum sicut et sequentes bis discussit.

Titulus duabus lineis continetur. Haec legere tibi videris :


אנך ערסאן בן רכבעל
בן הקרה ערסאן

Lin. 1. אנך = Ego. Sic proscynemata pleraque incipiunt. Confer n^o 100, 102 et seq. Nomen quod sequitur **Zotenberg** legit נרסכן; **Levy** ורסכן, collata inscriptione **Tuccensi**, lineis 4 et 5; ultimi quidem nominis quae apparent litteris כן parum respondent; sed tamen sic legimus, necessitate compulsi. Sakon nomen fuit dei in titulis pu-

niciis saepius usurpatum. Vide infra n^o 112 a. — Quod attinet רכבעל, confer בעלים, supra, n^o 88 et 90, atque etiam יתרים, apud Hebraeos.

Linem 2 in initio קרה nomen esse vox כן preposita indicat; quoniam autem modo pronuntiandum sit non dijudicamus. Finem lineae lege, si vis : [בן] ש[אן].

Sic ergo titulum restituimus et vertimus :

אנך [א]רסאן [בן] בן רכבעל
בן הקרה [בן] ש[אן]

100 a et b

Deveria, 2.
(TAB. XVI.)

Inscriptiones haec, quas separari noluit Deveria, ibidem repertae sunt. Vide supra, p. 119. Apographum Deverianum constat duabus inscriptionibus, quarum una priorem, altera posteriores duas lineas comprehendit. Non sunt apud Brugsch.

Vide **ZOTENBERG**, *Journ. asiat.*, avril-mai 1868, p. 438-440; — **SCHÖDNER**, *Die phön. Sprache*, p. 54 et 143; — **LEVY**, *Phönizische Studien*, fasc. IV, p. 17 et tab.



Inscriptions on Tophet Stones

Tophet of Carthage



0 10 20cm



Image on a stele from the Tophet of Carthage, believed to be of a priest or worshipper carrying a child to be sacrificed

- Funerary inscriptions simply identify the occupant of the tomb. Example:

Tomb of Himilkat, priest of Ba'al Samem, son of Asrubaal...

- Tophet stelae specifically say someone or something was given, dedicated, done, vowed, or offered to one or more gods
- The wording of the inscriptions often identifies the offering as human, including children

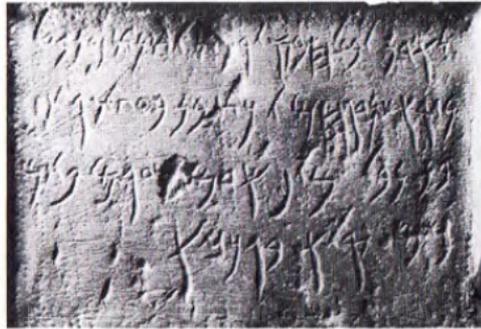
A Typical Inscription Found in the CIS 1

To Lady Tanit, face of Ba'al, and Lord Ba'al Hammon, (that) which offered Arish, son of Bodashtart, son of Baalshillem, maker of strigils, because he heard his voice

- There are thousands of inscriptions like this from Tophet sites, mainly from Carthage

An Inscription from Outside Carthage

3rd-2nd Century BC



*To the the Lord, to Ba'l
Hamon, and to the
Lady, to Tinnit, 'face of
Ba'l', vow that X, son of
X, son of X, vowed, a
mlk of a human being
as his own flesh.
Indeed, they heard his
voice. May they bless
him.*

Source: The Epigraphy of the Tophet, by Maria Giulia Amadasi Guzzo and José Ángel Zamora López, *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici* 29-30, 2012-2013: 159-192

OI Report 1977-1978

1 of 2

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 stelae or sandstone cippi and an even greater number of pottery urns containing the charred remains of humans and animals...

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.

... 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 Meaning of *MLK*

- MLK (or MULK and MOLK) appears frequently in inscriptions of sacrificed victims at Carthage, and is mentioned in religious texts from ancient Ugarit
- Scholars believe the original meaning of MLK was ‘kingdom, royalty,’ and that over time it took on the meaning of ‘solemn promise’
- Generally, MLK is believed to be the ‘kingly’ sacrifice of a human or animal to Ba’al Hammon and sometimes to Lady Tanit, or both
- If an inscription says MLKT (a “T” added at the end), it is believed to be the sacrifice of a female

OI Report 1977-1978

2 of 2

*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" (**Jeremiah 32:35; 2 Kings 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 'immor "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.*

The Work of Otto Eissfeldt

- In 1935, Otto Eissfeldt published his theory about Molek, based on his studies of diverse literary and epigraphic sources
- Proposed that the Phoenician MLK is the sacrifice of a human or animal performed specifically at the tophet
- Concluded that over time, animal sacrifices gradually replaced human sacrifices
- Concluded that there was no deity called Molek
 - There was the MLK ritual
 - Somehow, the name of the ritual was transformed into the name of a god, hence the name Molek flowed out of MLK
 - Concluded the Hebrew Bible was in error when it referred to a god called Molek
- Many scholars agreed with Eissfeldt, but others continued to believe Molek was indeed some Canaanite deity, although perhaps known by another name in Canaanite languages other than Hebrew

Note: The Bible clearly refers to Molek as an Ammonite god (**1 Kings 11:33, and 2 Kings 23:13**)

The Tophet of Hadrumetum

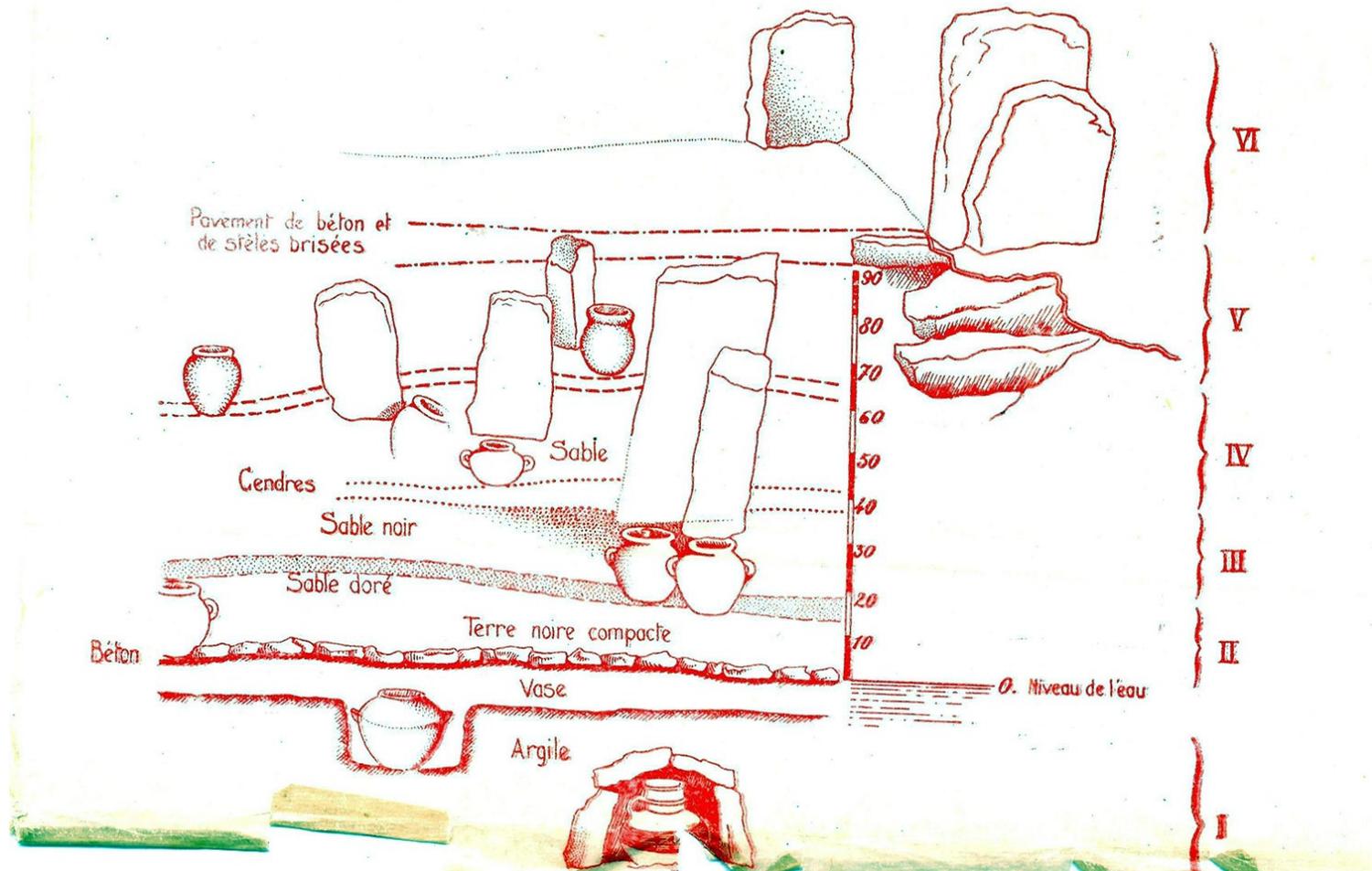


Diagram from the Museum of Sousse, Tunisia

Artifacts from the Tophet of Hadrumetum

On Display at the Museum of Sousse, Tunisia



Urn filled with remains of children and animals sacrificed to Ba'al-Hammon and Tanit



Stele and ceramics



Stele

The Tophet of Motya

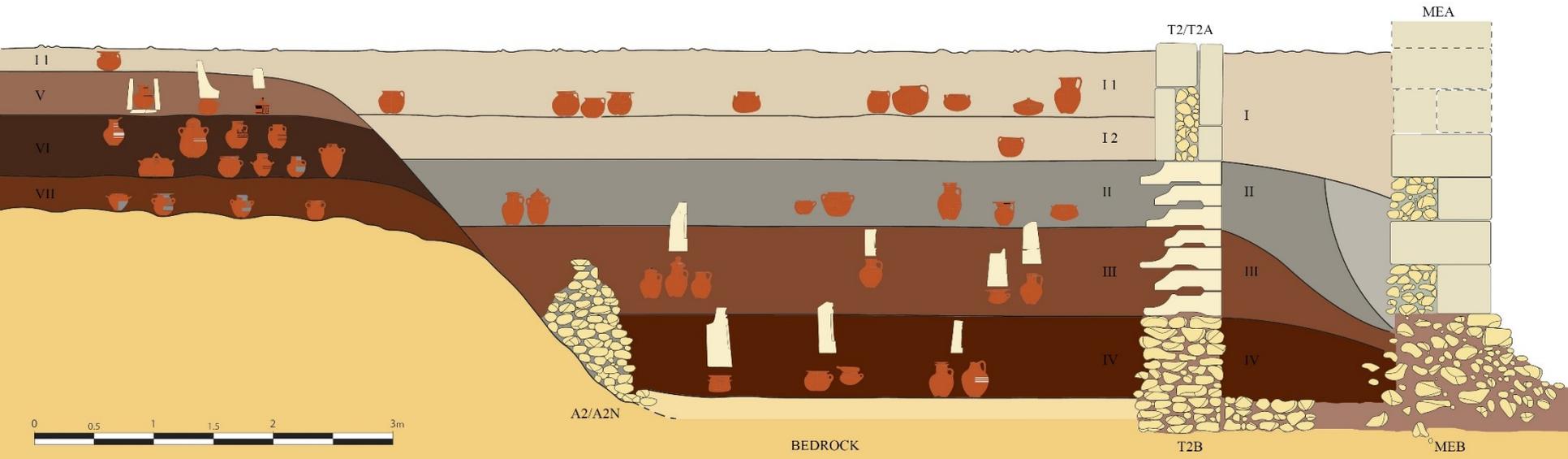
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Aerial view of the Tophet of Motya

The Tophet of Motya

2 of 3



- Excavated by a Palermo University team in 2013-2017
- This is a relatively small Tophet, probably because it was not used for long, since the Romans conquered Sicily and expelled the Phoenicians from Sicily

Source: Understanding Tophets: A Short Introduction, by Adriano Orsingher, Friends of ASOR, Vol. VI. No. 2, February 2018

The Tophet of Motya

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The urnfield (c. 625-550 BC) of the excavation of the Tophet of Motya. ASOR

Source: Understanding Tophets: A Short Introduction, by Adriano Orsingher, Friends of ASOR, Vol. VI. No. 2, February 2018

A Stela from Motya, Late 6th Century BC



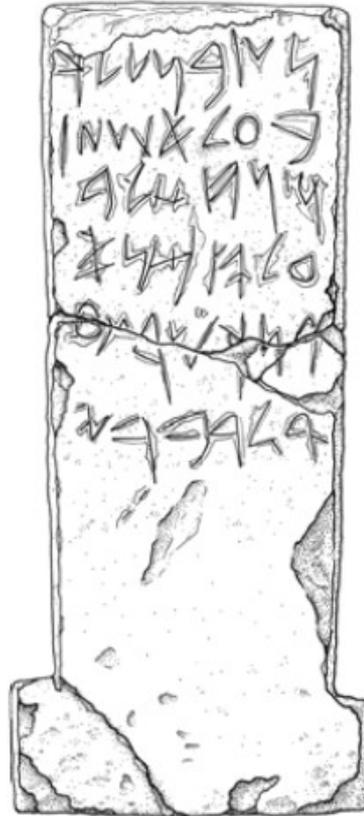
- The inscription specifically says a sacrifice was made to Ba'al Hammon:

*l'dn lb'l ḥmn mlkt b'l 'š ndr PN bn
PN*

*To the Lord, to Ba'al Hammon,
mlkt of a person that PN, son of
PN, vowed (Note: ndr = vow)*

- The “t” in mlkt identifies the sacrificial victim as female

A Stela from Malta



- Stela from Malta CIS I 123a, 7th c. BCE (original photo and drawing from VELLA 2013: fig. 2-3)
- Has an inscription from the oldest period presenting the term *nšb* and the expression *mlk b'l*

Stela of a mlk of a person that X set up for Ba'l Hamon, the Lord. Indeed he heard the voice of his words.

More Examples of Inscriptions on Stelas

To the Lord, to Ba'al Hammon, a vow which Adonbaal son of Abdeshmun vowed, an offering of a man, his own child, his son in perfect condition. He heard his voice, he blessed him.

To the lord, to Ba'al a gift. His gift was an offering in place of a child, which Azrubaal, son of Baalhanno, son of Baalyaton had vowed, who belongs to the people of 'ytnm.

Stele of the offering in place of a child, which Bodisi son of Melqartgad made to Ba'al Hammon the lord.

The Tophet of Sulcis in Sardinia



Skeptical Claims about the Tophets

1 of 3

- **Claim:** In 1987, Sabatino Moscati and Sergio Ribichini published books denying the systematic practice of child sacrifice, a conclusion that gained much traction among scholars
 - Moscati proposed that the tophet is a necropolis reserved for premature or very small and stillborn babies
 - A. Simonetti proposed that the killings of children described in the classical sources were done only during exceptional occasions, such as wars, sieges, and calamities, and therefore were not regular practices
- **Response:**
 - This theory ignores the epigraphical evidence, with inscriptions specifically identifying the children as sacrifices to Ba'al Hammon and Tanit
 - The many thousands of remains found in several tophets operating over many centuries over a wide geographical area refutes any claim that the practices were occasional

Skeptical Claims about the Tophets

2 of 3

- **Claim:** In 2010, researchers at the University of Pittsburg published findings that indicated the children in the urns were stillborn or aborted fetuses (i.e. prenatal), and hence not victims of sacrifices (i.e. they were already dead). The remains are cremated children, not sacrificial victims.
- **Response:**
 - The University of Pittsburg study was flawed in that it examined cranial bones, which shrink more than teeth when burned, leading to the incorrect conclusion that the bones were too small for a fully born infant
 - Examination of burned teeth by other scholars showed that the infants were fully born

The University of Pittsburg Study

- J. H. Schwartz (University of Pittsburg) and colleagues analyzed the remains of 540 cremated children from the Tophet of Carthage
- The team examined tooth formation, enamel histology, cranial and postcranial metrics, and the potential effects of heat-induced bone shrinkage
- Concluded that many of the children were prenatal
- Contended the number of prenatal children is consistent with infant mortality data, possibly stillbirth or spontaneous abortion (contributors to “reproductive wastage”)
- Concluded the Tophets were cemeteries for the remains of human prenates and infants who died from a variety of causes, were cremated, and interred in urns, while some may have been sacrificial victims

Source: Schwartz JH, Houghton F, Macchiarelli R, Bondioli L (2010) Skeletal Remains from Punic Carthage Do Not Support Systematic Sacrifice of Infants. PLoS ONE 5(2): e9177. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0009177

The Hebrew University Study

- P. Smith (The Hebrew University) and colleagues examined many of the same remains as Schwartz and colleagues
- Smith and colleagues estimated ages based on examination of teeth (dentition), which is believed to be more accurate than examination of other bones
- Schwartz and colleagues estimated ages based on examination of cranial bones
- According to Smith and colleagues, Schwartz and colleagues underestimated cranial bone shrinkage from heat
- As a result, the cranial bones appeared smaller than they should be for the age of the infant, leading to the erroneous conclusion that the infants were prenatal
- Dentition data support the conclusion that the children were born and died later, hence likely sacrificed
- Findings of most laboratory researchers support the explanation of child sacrifice (e.g. P. Xella and colleagues)

Findings from the Hebrew University Study

Smith and Colleagues

Our findings for the Carthage Tophet are similar to those reached by previous studies carried out primarily on the dentition (Gejvall 1949; Richard 1961). The one divergent opinion is that of Schwartz et al. (2010) who examined many of the same Carthage Tophet infants described in this study, but used cranial bones for age estimation. This may have caused them to err by underestimating the extent of shrinkage, especially in the youngest individuals with the most fragile bones, since they are less reliable for age estimation than teeth.

Source: Aging cremated infants: the problem of sacrifice at the Tophet of Carthage, by P. Smith, G. Avishai, J. A. Greene, and L. E. Stager, *Antiquity* 85 (2011): 859-874

Skeptical Claims about the Tophets

3 of 3



- **Claim:** The children were merely dedicated to the gods after they died of other causes, and hence were not deliberately slain as sacrifices to the gods
- **Response:**
 - This is contradicted by inscriptions that clearly identify thousands of children as sacrifices to Ba'al
 - The Phoenicians offered to their gods only what was most perfect and precious. It is unlikely they would have offered dead children to their gods.
 - Epigraphical evidence suggests the children were alive when they were handed over to the priest of Ba'al at the tophet