

## “Tophet” An Overall Interpretation

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### Abstract

This study aims at offering a general interpretation of the tophet-phenomenon in the light of present knowledge. Direct as well as indirect sources are reexamined, and the hypothesis of the tophet as child-necropolis is excluded. On the contrary, it is analysed as a cult-place where newborn or very young children (and lambs and kids) were sacrificed to the gods as a consequence of a vow, made by a single, a family or a collectivity. To be sure, ritual infant killings were not the only ceremonies carried there, but archaeological evidence testifies that the very core of the rites was the child-sacrifice. As a consequence, an interpretive model is proposed, based on the vowing-dynamics: if a vow (*ndr*) was made, and the prayer was fulfilled by the gods, the promise must be kept at all costs. This interpretation matches with all our sources and can explain both the votive character of the inscriptions and the eventual (even if rare) presence of foetuses in the urns, i.e. children vowed to the gods already before the birth, and dead during the pregnancy, but carried to the tophet, sacrificed and burnt to the gods all the same.

### Keywords

Tophet, child-sacrifice, Phoenicians, Carthage, vows, Old Testament.

In the course of their history, during the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE, the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians left many traces of their cult-places. Both in the Levant and in the Mediterranean basin, the archaeological and epigraphic evidence, as well as the classical (Greek and Latin) sources, testify the existence of many temples and sanctuaries in the Mediterranean sites, consecrated to different divinities. In general, it deals with cult places peculiar to this culture, but not radically different from the general concept of “sacred space” which we find, e.g. in the classical world<sup>1</sup>. A few particular open-air cremation sanctuaries, exclusive of the Phoenician and Carthaginian tradition, represent the big exception, without any parallel in other ancient cultures. According to a long academic tradition, we use to call them “tophet”.

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<sup>1</sup> See generally RAVENTOS – RIBICHINI – VERGER 2008, and particularly for Phoenician cult-places, KAMLAH 2009 and 2012.

It is well known that the word tophet<sup>2</sup> is a biblical Hebrew term, conventionally used – even if not totally arbitrarily (see *infra*) – to denote Phoenician and Carthaginian cremation child sanctuaries spread throughout central Mediterranean (Carthage and a few other sites in North-Africa, Sardinia and Sicily) from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD<sup>3</sup>. As far as the most archaic period is concerned (as in the exemplary case of Carthage), they are a few Phoenician settlements, destined at the moment of their foundation to become important colonial centres. So far, archaeological evidence has not (yet?) been found in the Levant or in the Phoenician and Punic<sup>4</sup> "Far West" territories (Iberian Peninsula and Morocco). As far as Malta is concerned, even if we lack direct archaeological evidence, the existence of an early tophet at Rabat seems probable, in the light of the epigraphic (two stelae with typical votive inscriptions, to be dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE)<sup>5</sup> and osteological finds (60 urns with unidentified bones discovered two centuries ago and now lost)<sup>6</sup>. By far less probable is the case of Amathus, in Cyprus, where the evidence is unclear, so that it is necessary to wait for a complete and thoroughly publication of the data<sup>7</sup>. Finally, as for Achziv, in Israel, the presence of a tophet seems at present to be excluded<sup>8</sup>.

The tophets represent one of the most difficult and complicated historical-archaeological problems in the ancient Mediterranean. Since the discovery of the first sanctuaries (chronologically, Nora and Cagliari, but above all Salammbô-Carthage) more than one century ago, the functions of the tophet still remain open to debate.

The tophets preserve the cremated remains of children (generally, newly born or very young); nevertheless, they are not common necropolis<sup>9</sup>; in spite of the testimony

<sup>2</sup> The term is only attested in the Masoretic text and the rabbinic commentaries, and variously transliterated in the versions. Explicit mentions of it are in 2 Kings 23,10; Jer. 7,30-32; 19,3-6.11-14; Job 17,6; Isaiah 30,31-33. Nevertheless, other (more or less direct) allusions can be found elsewhere, e.g. where the Valley of Ben-Hinnom, the *bāmôt* (the so called "high places"), and the rite of "to let pass through/into fire" are mentioned (see *infra* and also other contributions in this volume, particularly by F. Stavrakopoulou).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the contributions published in this volume, see in general (without no claim to completeness): BONDÌ 1979; MOSCATI 1987; RIBICHINI 1987; ACQUARO 1990 and 1993; MOSCATI – RIBICHINI 1991; PICARD 1990; BROWN 1991; GROTTANELLI 1999; RIBICHINI 2000 and 2002; CIASCA 1992 and 2002; BERNARDINI 2002 e 2008; GONZÁLEZ WAGNER – RUIZ 2002; BÉNICHOU-SAFAR 2004; GUARNERI 2004; AMADASI GUZZO 2002 and 2007-2008; GARNAND 2002; BONNET 2010; MELCHIORRI 2010; QUINN 2011; XELLA 2010a and 2011; D'ANDREA – GIARDINO 2011; MACCARTY 2011; XELLA 2012; XELLA *et al.* 2013. For a synthesis of previous studies until 2005, see XELLA 2006.

<sup>4</sup> I am perfectly aware of the inadequacy of such terminology, which I use here only for the sake of brevity, see PRAG 2006 and the contribution by J. C. Quinn, in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> CIS I 123 (*KAI* 61A = *ICO* Malta 4) and 123 bis (*KAI* 61B = *ICO* Malta 5). In both cases, it is a *mlk*-sacrifice offered to Baal Hammon, called *mlk b 'l* in the first inscription and *mlk 'mr* in the second.

<sup>6</sup> See the recent assessment by VELLA 2013.

<sup>7</sup> In spite of preliminary news by KARAGEORGHIS 2000. See provisionally CHRISTOU 1998 and AGELARAKIS – KANTA – STAMPOLIDIS 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Some scholars (see e.g. PRAUSNITZ 1986) have claimed the presence of a tophet, and A. Mazar too uses this term for the northern cemetery, but the data furnished by MAZAR (2001) himself prove that no cremated child remains were found there.

<sup>9</sup> XELLA 2010.

of Greek and Latin writers and Biblical evidence (all clearly speaking of child-sacrifices), some scholars have still doubts about the very nature of the rituals. Besides this important aspect, the tophets pose a series of different problems concerning archaeology, epigraphy, history of religions, classical and Semitic philology, which cannot be tackled without taking into consideration the whole documentation, according to a strict methodology.

Usually, studies so far have been restricted by far too generalised an approach to the problem of the tophet, considered overall as a static entity. Instead, it is crucial to study in depth the particular features of each sanctuary in rigorous diachronic and contextual terms.

A list of the tophets founded in a chronological period, from the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the 4<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (the chronology is approximate and conventional), is as follows:

*Archaic ("first generation") sanctuaries:*

Carthage	800 BCE until the destruction of the city (146 BCE)
Sulci	750 BCE to 2 <sup>nd</sup> / 1 <sup>st</sup> cent. BCE
Mozia	end of the 8 <sup>th</sup> cent. to beginning of the 3 <sup>rd</sup> cent. BCE
Tharros	beginning of the 7 <sup>th</sup> cent. to 3 <sup>rd</sup> / 2 <sup>nd</sup> cent. BCE
Bitia (?)	end of the 8 <sup>th</sup> cent. to 6 <sup>th</sup> cent. BCE
Malta (?)	8 <sup>th</sup> / 7 <sup>th</sup> cent. BCE (?) ...

*Other sanctuaries:*

Sousse	7 <sup>th</sup> / 6 <sup>th</sup> cent. BCE to 1 <sup>st</sup> cent. AD
Nora	6 <sup>th</sup> cent. BCE to Hellenistic period
Cagliari	5 <sup>th</sup> / 4 <sup>th</sup> century BCE until –?
Monte Sirai	4 <sup>th</sup> cent. BCE (370/360) to 2 <sup>nd</sup> cent. BCE

There is a somewhat different phenomenon – nevertheless, also to be included in the phenomenology of the tophet even if with own cultural features and historical dynamics – for which there is evidence from the 4<sup>th</sup> / 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE in North Africa (Tunisia, Algeria, Libya). It is a series of cremation child sanctuaries that arose under (direct and indirect) Carthaginian influence and continued to be active even after the fall of the Punic metropolis (146 BCE). Their existence generally ceased about the 2<sup>nd</sup> or at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. After this period, generally they became (in various ways but not systematically)<sup>10</sup> cult-places dedicated to the god Saturnus and his bride Caelestis (Iuno Caelestis Africana), the Latin successors of the former Phoenician gods, Baal Hammon and Tinnit (Pene Baal).

Such later tophets reflect different – even if not radical – historical, religious and political realities, in many respects, unlike the most ancient sanctuaries (e.g. the rites often seem to have a collective and official character). For some of these cult-places there is direct archaeological evidence<sup>11</sup>; in other cases, the presence of a tophet is

<sup>10</sup> See the contribution by M. M. McCarty in this volume.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Thugga (Dougga), Henchir el-Hami, Makthar, Henchir Médeina/Althiburos, Henchir Ghayadha, Henchir Meded (Mididi), Sabratha.

supposed due to the recovered materials (votive stelae, with or without inscription, urns, altars, *unguentaria*, etc.), but it has hardly been demonstrated that *all* these cult-places are sanctuaries for child cremation<sup>12</sup>.

This very general dichotomy already shows the necessity of taking into account the "individual" history of each sanctuary and its peculiarities, both geographical-chronological and archaeological. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the tophets have basic common aspects, concerning their location and characteristic finds (chiefly urns, stelae and votive inscriptions).

The location of the tophet is always and everywhere related to the urban planning of the settlement. The sanctuary is liminal to the settlement (generally, but not always, on its north side); its area is permanent, i.e. never shifted elsewhere (even if it can be extended or partially restructured). As noted above, tophets have been found in settlements destined to become important urban centres and to act as "landmarks" for other minor centres and even whole regions.

The really characteristic findings of the tophets are, first of all, urns and stelae, even if other cult objects and structures have been recovered. The urns contain the cremated bones of (chiefly very young) human beings, of animals (mostly, lambs and kids, also very young) or both mixed together; they are the basic and most ancient elements in these sanctuaries. The cineraria, protected in various ways (by stone baskets or pits), cannot be repositioned. The stelae, whether inscribed or not, are chronologically later than the urns and can be repositioned or reutilised<sup>13</sup>. On the surface of the tophet there are also *sacella*, altars, small or large places for incineration, other service buildings and transit areas. In addition, we have evidence of internal topographical subdivisions of the areas, even though it is impossible to formulate any precise hypothesis.

In respect of the documentation on tophet-sanctuaries, a primary distinction must be made between direct and indirect sources.

<sup>12</sup> See (in alphabetic order) the following (provisional) list: for Tunisia, Aïn Barchouch, Aïn Tounga (Thignica), Bulla Regia, Jerba, El-Ghazaizya, El-Kef, El-Kenissia, El-Ksour, Ellès (Ululas), Henchir Bou Chebib, Henchir Drombi, Henchir el-Blida (Abitinae), Henchir Guergour (Masculula), Henchir Kasbat (Thuburbo Maius), Henchir Sidi Belkassam (Thuburnica), Kesra, Ksar Lemsa, Ksar Toual Zouamel (Vicus Maracitanus), Maghraoua, Mateur (?), Menzel Harb, Ras Boutria (Acholla), Sidi Ahmed el-Hachemi, Sidi el-Hani, Siliana, Teboursuk (Thubursicu[m] Bure), Thala, Thibar, Henchir Zian; for Algeria (see a first list in XELLA 2011), Aïn el-Kebch, Aïn Joussef, Aïn-Nechma (Thabarbusis), Arseu (Portus Magnus), Cherchel (Iol-Caesarea), El-Hofra/Constantine (Cirta Regia), Guelat Bou Sba, Gouraya/Gunugu, Guelma (Calama), Henchir Bou Atfan, Kef Bezioun (Zattara), Kef Smaar (Columnata), Khallik, Ksiba Mraou, Le Kheneg (Tiddis), Les Andalouses (Castrum Puerorum?), N'gaous (Nicivibus, near Sétif), Oujel (Uzelis), Qalaat Abi s-Siba, Dellys (Rusuccuru), Souk Arhas (Thagaste), Takembrit (Siga), Ténès, Tipasa of Mauretania, Tipasa of Numidia (Tiffech), Tirekbine; for Lybia, Labdah. In several cases, I am convinced that the evidence is insufficient to consider them as tophets, i.e. due to the lacking of cinerary urns. On the contrary, in according to the analysis of M. M. McCarty, in this volume, they are to be considered in the light of different local strategies relating to cult-and identity.

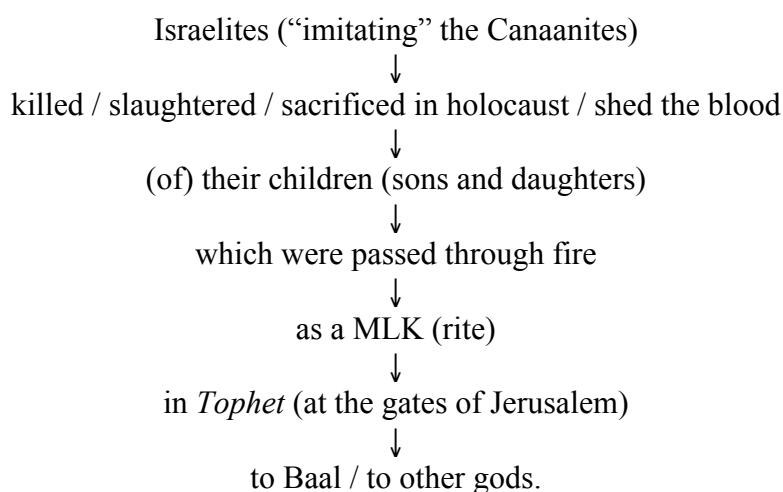
<sup>13</sup> All this demonstrates that the main object of the offerings is not the stela, as has been proposed, but the cinerary urn and its contents.

The direct sources are archaeological *lato sensu* (included the data of the osteological, archaeozoological and carpological analysis)<sup>14</sup> and epigraphic.

The indirect sources are information provided by Greek and Latin authors (about human sacrifices in the Phoenician and Punic world) and by biblical writers (on the tophet in Jerusalem and bloody rites in ancient Syria-Palestine).

Here I cannot tackle either the classical sources (which I have already collected, classified and discussed in a recent work, where I hope I have demonstrated their essential reliability)<sup>15</sup>, or the biblical evidence (which is analysed by other scholars in this volume)<sup>16</sup>.

Nevertheless, with regard to the Bible, if we collect all the relevant passages and analyse them thoroughly and synoptically, we will discover that no less than about 25 passages in the Old Testament testify more or less directly that Israelites and Canaanites (i.e. Phoenicians) sacrificed (and burned) their children (sons and daughters: the expression does not necessarily refer to firstborn) in Tophet, near Jerusalem, according to the following outline:



<sup>14</sup> For the fundamental importance of osteological analyses, see the contribution by V. Melchiorri in this volume.

<sup>15</sup> XELLA 2009. See also the contribution by B. Garnand in this volume.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. the contributions by F. Stavrakopoulou, P. Mosca and Garnand *et alii*. The problem of the relationship between the biblical tophet and the Phoenician and Punic cremation sanctuaries must be tackled much more systematically and thoroughly and, above all, on the basis of a complete and direct knowledge of the texts (which is often lacking in many studies). The most recent (and objective) monograph about this topic is STAVRAKOPOULOU 2004 (with previous literature). Some valuable contributions are found also in FINSTERBUSCH – LANGE – RÖMHELD 2007 (in particular, those by A. LANGE and M. BAUKS), and also BAUKS 2008.

Texts	Offerer(s)	Rite	Terminology	Victims	Place	Addressee(s)
Dt 12,31	Canaanites ( <i>hgwym</i> )	to burn in fire	*šrp b 'š	sons and daughters	not specified	"their gods"
Dt 18,10	Canaanites ( <i>hgwym</i> )	to make pass into fire	*'br b 'š	son or daughter	not specified	not specified
2K 16,3	Ahaz, king of Judah	to make pass into fire	*'br b 'š	son	(Ben Hinnom Valley: see 2Chron 28,3)	not specified
2Chron 28,3	Ahaz, king of Judah	to make pass into fire	*'br b 'š	sons	Ben Hinnom Valley	not specified
2K 17,17	Israelites	to make pass into fire	*'br b 'š	sons and daughters	not specified	(Baal ?)
2K 17,31	Sefarvaites	to burn in fire	*šrp b 'š	sons	<i>bāmôt?</i>	gods of the Sefarvaites Adrammelek and Anammelek
2K 21,6	Manasseh, king of Judah	to make pass into fire	*'br b 'š	son	(Ben Hinnom Valley: see 2Chron 33,6)	not specified
2Chron 33,6	Manasseh, king of Judah	to make pass into fire	*'br b 'š	sons	Ben Hinnom Valley	not specified
2K 23,10	Israelites (Josiah's reform)	to make pass into fire as a MLK-sacrifice	*'br b 'š lmlk	son and daughter	<i>tophet</i> , Ben Hinnom valley,	not specified
Lev 18,21	Israelites	to make pass (into fire) as a MLK-sacrifice	*'br lmlk	seed ( <i>zr'</i> )	not specified	not specified
Lev 20,2-5	Israelites, foreigners	to offer in MLK-sacrifice; to prostitute himself to MLK	*ntn lmlk *znh lmlk	someone of own seed ( <i>mzr'</i> )	sanctuary of Yhwh	not specified
Isa 30,33	not specified	<i>tophet</i> prepared for the MLK-sacrifice, with pyres	*'rwk tpt lmlk	not specified	<i>Tophet</i>	not specified
Isa 57,5-6	Israelites	to slaughter	*šht	children ( <i>yld</i> )	Valleys	not specified
Jer 2,23	Israelites	to contaminate	*tm'	not specified	(Ben-Hinnom) valley	Baals
Jer 3,24	Israelites	abomination	*bšt	son and daughters	not specified	not specified
Jer 7,31-32	Israelites	to burn in fire	*šrp b 'š	sons and daughters	Ben Hinnom Valley, <i>tophet</i> , <i>bāmôt</i>	not specified
Jer 19,4-6	Israelites	to burn in the fire, holocausts for Baal	*šrp b 'š 'lwt lb 'l	sons	Ben Hinnom valley, <i>tophet</i> , <i>bāmôt</i>	Baal
Jer 19,11-14	Israelites	<i>tophet</i> : its function will change to a burial place	*qbr btpt	not specified	<i>tophet</i> (Jerusalem)	not specified
Jer 32,35	Israelites	to make pass (into fire) in MLK-sacrifice	*'br lmlk	sons and daughters	<i>bāmôt</i> of Baal, Ben Hinnom Valley, <i>tophet</i> , sanctuary of Yhwh	(Baal)
Ez 16,20-21	Israelites	to sacrifice as food; to slaughter and to make them pass (into fire)	*zbh l 'kl *šht + *'br	sons and daughters	(Jerusalem)	idols
Ez 16,36	Israelites	to offer blood (to idols)	*ntn dm	sons	(Jerusalem)	idols
Ez 20,26	Israelites	to make pass (into fire)	*'br	firstborns ( <i>p̄tr r̄hm</i> )	(Jerusalem)	not specified
Ez 20,28-29	Israelites	to sacrifice	*zbh	not specified	<i>Bāmôt</i>	not specified
Ez 20,31	Israelites	to make pass into fire	*'br b 'š	sons	(Jerusalem)	idols
Ez 23,37-39	Israelites (metaphors for Samaria and Jerusalem)	to make pass into fire (as food for idols); to slaughter	*'br b 'š *šht	sons	(Ben-Hinnom Valley); sanctuary of Yhwh	idols
Psalms 106,34-39	Israelites	to sacrifice; to shed the blood (of)	*zbh *ngy dm	sons and daughters	-	idols
Job 17,6	Job	<i>tophet</i> : mockery before the people	whšgny lml 'mym / wtpt lpnym 'hyh	-	<i>Tophet</i>	-

Several biblical texts clearly speak – directly or indirectly – of infant killing in *Tophet*, and the picture resulting from all the information (on the basis of a rigorous textual critique) is coherent and totally indisputable. The reality of child sacrifices in the “Canaanite” and Israelite context is now accepted by most scholars; as far as the “fundamentalists” are concerned, the question to be argued is whether or not this kind of rite was related to the Yahwistic cult<sup>17</sup>.

Nevertheless, some scholars (above all, in the field of Punic studies) continue to claim that biblical texts do not speak explicitly of ritual infant killing<sup>18</sup>: this statement is simply wrong. It is necessary to consider *everything* what the Bible says about *tophet*, *mlk*, the rite of “passing through / into fire”, the Ben Hinnom valley, daughters and sons sacrificed, and the related terminology. An extremely attentive and complete reading of Biblical passages is needed, before venturing on inexact or unfounded assertions.

In fact, in the Old Testament we find the verb *šḥṭ* “to slaughter” (Isa. 30,31-33; Ez. 16, 20-21 and 23,36-39); the verb *zḥḥ* “to kill in sacrifice” or simply “to sacrifice” (Ez. 20,28-29; Ps. 106,34-39); the term “holocaust” (*wlh*) (Jer. 9,3-16), exactly the same term used for Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 22,1ff.), Mesha and his son (2Kings 3,26-27), and Jephthah and his daughter (Judg. 11,29ff.); the expression *nqy / ytn dm* “to shed / to offer the blood” (of children) (Ez. 16,36; Ps. 106,34-39), not to mention other allusions. In this case, ignorance is to blame; otherwise the alternative is intentional misunderstanding.

At any rate, if analysed comprehensively and without prejudice, both biblical and classical sources provide evidence for actual human sacrifices, where the victims are children killed and offered as a holocaust to the god Baal (Hammon), Greek Kronos, Latin Saturnus<sup>19</sup>.

Theoretically, this does not mean *a priori* that these sources could not be wrong, but it is almost paradoxical to suppose that *all* are wrong and dismiss them.

In any case, we can state that:

- a) it is impossible to interpret such evidence as not concerning ritual killings;
- b) it is incorrect to select arbitrarily and to “edulcorate” the documentation, emphasizing *ad usum delphini* some variants that are fully explicable on a historical basis<sup>20</sup>, without taking into account the data as a whole, especially the most explicit<sup>21</sup>;

<sup>17</sup> See note 9.

<sup>18</sup> In addition to the articles by M. Weinfeld in his *querelle* with M. Smith (WEINFELD 1972 and 1978; SMITH 1975) see, *inter alia*, S. Moscati, “Il sacrificio dei fanciulli”, in MOSCATI 1989: 99-113: “Dal libro dei Re a quelli profetici di Isaia e Geremia si ripete l'accusa per la costumanza, riprovata dal dio di Israele, di ‘passare per il fuoco’ (questa è l'espressione esatta) fanciulli e fanciulle. Ma di una previa uccisione degli stessi, nulla mai si dice” (here 111); see also BARTOLONI 2006, 70.

<sup>19</sup> On this god and his cult places see LEGLAY 1961-1996, 1988; XELLA 1991. Further documentation in CADOTTE 2007 and also in LANCELLOTTI 2010. All this is perfectly consistent with the information provided by direct epigraphic sources, which provide evidence of a *regular cult*: they are human sacrifices, and not *sporadic* ritual killings. On this aspect and the terminology used, see XELLA 2010b.

<sup>20</sup> An illustration. Some scholars draw attention to a presumed inconsistency in the inscriptions, because since 5<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE, the Carthaginian tophet provides evidence of a second addressee of sacrifices (in addition to Baal Hammon), i.e. the goddess Tinnit; but this is a purely local phenomenon, because Baal Hammon continues to be mentioned as the supreme power and the verbs expressing the divine favour in the inscriptions (*šm* “to hear” and *brk* “to bless”) are in the 3<sup>rd</sup> m. s. It is probably a change

c) it is by far more reasonable and "economical" to elaborate an interpretive theory according to *all* our sources, instead of ignoring, or even clashing with all (or most) of them. Some scholars try to "square the circle", systematically questioning almost every source, sometimes appealing to an *argumentum ex silentio* (in the case of an ancient writer), or forgetting (more or less intentionally) that biblical Canaanites are *tout court* Phoenicians (as proved many years ago by S. Moscati, G. Garbini, myself, and others)<sup>22</sup>.

At any rate, the *conditio sine qua non* for every scientific interpretation is a sound and comprehensive knowledge of the whole documentation, both direct and indirect. It is necessary to find *the simplest reading key*, as consistent and unitary as possible, which can satisfy most (if not all) of the questions: the principle of Occam's Razor, which is still valid: *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, i.e. the simplest explanation is the most plausible until evidence is presented to prove it false.

Regarding the most relevant questions, I propose (with no claim to completeness) the following:

- Why are the tophets so limited in number and exist only in some towns?
- Why cannot we find tophets everywhere, if they are related to a *general* funerary ideology?
- Why are the inscriptions votive, and not funerary?
- Why is the number of incinerated children relatively few, in comparison to the very high rate of infant mortality at that time?
- Since it is clear that a type of selection was involved, what were its criteria?
- Why do we find both newborn babies (quite rarely, foetuses) and also children (a little) older?
- Granted that some foetuses (if any) are found in the urns, can this (in any case, quite minoritarian) be explained by an overall sacrificial theory?
- Why are animal sacrifices also made at the same time?
- Why are both animal and human bones sometimes mixed in the same urn?
- How can we explain the fact that many rites were seasonal, i.e. they are all concentrated in a few days, as proved by the fact that newborn lambs were available only once (or, possibly, twice) a year<sup>23</sup>?
- Can we evaluate these animals as "accompanying victims" of the children, or do we have to presume some other analogies between them (e.g. both were very young, newborn in most of the cases)?

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in the devotional strategy, which does not deprive the male god of authority, but makes his bride a powerful mediator: the epithet of Tinnit, *pn b'l*, "Face of Baal", expresses inferior powers, but also a privilege, i.e. her capacity to intercede between the supreme god and the humans. See recently GARBATI 2013, and his contribution in this volume.

<sup>21</sup> An emblematic case is represented by the sacrificial formulae: see AMADASI GUZZO 2002, 2007-2008, and Amadasi Guzzo – Zamora in this volume.

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. MOSCATI 1956 and 1993 (in addition to other studies); GARBINI 1983; RÖLLIG 1983; XELLA 1995.

<sup>23</sup> See FEDELE – FOSTER 1988 for Tharros, but this situation is common to all tophets where the bones of newborn lambs have been recovered and identified.



- Finally, how can we explain that classical and biblical texts speak about ritual killings but *none* ever formulate the “funerary hypothesis” (i.e. the *tophet* as a necropolis for – prematurely dead – infants)?

Here I set myself a double objective. First of all, to discard all unfounded hypotheses and establish the fundamental aspects about the nature, function and activity of tophet-sanctuaries; second, moving from *an absolutely sure datum*, i.e. the votive character of the inscriptions and the sacrifices, to verify whether this is the key to help us answer our questions (at least, most of them) correctly.

At all events, it must be mentioned that the problem of tophet cannot be simply reduced to the question: were human beings ritually killed or did they die naturally? The typology of the rites was surely varied, many aspects will be perhaps explained, and others will remain always enigmatic. It is beyond doubt that any overall interpretation has to take into account a series of variables (chronological, geographical, historical and sociological)<sup>24</sup>. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that a precise definition about the type of sacrifices (human, animal, bloody or not) will make an enormous contribution to our knowledge of how a tophet functioned. Moreover, decisive progress can come from analytical studies of the burial contexts, of the incinerated remains<sup>25</sup>, and all cross-references that can be deduced from direct documentation.

The main points to be clarified are the following:

- 1) even if we have no possess of archaeological evidence for tophets in the Levant (see *supra*), this kind of sanctuary *must* go back to an initially Phoenician (origin and) ideology, disseminated by the first (generation(s) of) Phoenician (Tyrian?) settlers in the central Mediterranean;
- 2) for several reasons, the tophet cannot simply be an infant necropolis, reserved for prematurely and naturally dead children;
- 3) the tophet is a sacred place where one goes to fulfil a vow, either to ask the god(s) for a favour or because it has been granted.

As far as the first point is concerned, it must be remembered that the earliest tophets (i.e. Carthage, Sulci, Mozia and Tharros) were founded almost at the same time of the respective settlements (one or two generations after). As noted above, this can only mean that an ancestral ideology and a definite strategy exist, brought by the first settlers coming from Phoenicia.

As regards point two, I have examined this hypothesis in a recent study<sup>26</sup> and I found it untenable for several reasons, the details of which I cannot go into now, but can summarise as follows:

- a) Tophets are found only at some towns: if it were a general funerary ideology, we should have found such sanctuaries at practically every urban centre;

<sup>24</sup> See XELLA – QUINN – MELCHIORRI – VAN DOMMELEN 2013.

<sup>25</sup> On this subject, see the contribution by V. Melchiorri in this volume.

<sup>26</sup> XELLA 2010a.

b) The number of depositions in the tophet cannot correspond absolutely to the rate of ancient infant mortality. This means that there was some sort of selection, and only a minority of children were incinerated and buried in such a sanctuary. In other words, the logic of this selection must be explained. In addition, the inscriptions show that not all families performed this rite and, moreover, a family never went back to the tophet a second time for this purpose (this excludes a selection based on social status, etc.);

c) If we accept the "necropolis hypothesis", we should have found infant burials in the necropolis of any settlement lacking a tophet and not where tophets are installed. In fact, the rarity of infant burial is a very common feature not only in Phoenician and Punic world, but also everywhere in ancient cultures, Mediterranean and not<sup>27</sup>;

d) A tophet is not a common necropolis, but a specific sanctuary where people performed vows and sacrifices, using both human and animal victims. In particular, animal sacrifices are not compatible with the function of a necropolis (and examples of such installations for animals – i.e. animal necropolis – are unknown);

e) As far as animal victims are concerned, they were nearly always newborn lambs and kids, which happens only once or twice a year at fixed periods. It is unlikely that children died naturally only in those two limited periods of the year, so that the only possible explication is a peak of sacrifice exactly in those very periods (perhaps, during important sacred feasts and celebrations);

f) Last but not least, parallels for such an emphasis on infant death are lacking for every known society, both ancient and modern. The rites of the tophet were very expensive (funeral-pyre, animal victims, various offerings, stelae inscribed or blank, the intervention of cultic personnel, etc.) and they have never been documented in the case of newborn babies (or foetuses!) in the anthropological, ethnological and other kind of literature.

As regards point 3, *the votive character* of tophet rites is incontestable, as the inscriptions demonstrate: they are always – without exception – accompanied by vows, and not with funerary ceremonies. The root \*ndr is always used, a common Semitic root well known in the ancient Near East (and particularly, in the Old Testament, with many cases of vows, promised and fulfilled)<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, epigraphic and literary documentation provides a lot of important information about the circumstances and mechanism of such vows (individual/social crisis, famine, lack of healthy offspring, war, epidemics, etc.)<sup>29</sup>.

Before describing the "mechanism of the vow", it should be mentioned that the sacrificial rite of the *tophet* is sometimes called *mlk* (the form *mlkt* is simply a feminine variant, probably dialectal), i.e. as we have seen, the very same term used in the Old Testament for the rites performed by Canaanites and Israelites at a place called

<sup>27</sup> Several contributions are found in BARTOLONI – BENEDETTINI 2007-2008 (however, the literature on this subject is enormous; for a selection, see the bibliography quoted in XELLA 2010a).

<sup>28</sup> CARTLEDGE 1992.

<sup>29</sup> See the studies by M.G. Amadasi Guzzo, particularly AMADASI GUZZO 2007-2008, also for her socio-religious remarks on how the tophet was visited.

“Tophet”, at the gates of Jerusalem. The term comes from the root  $\sqrt{h/y}lk$ , “to go”, here a causal participle, with the original meaning “what is sent” (similarly to Latin *missum / missa*), to become a technical sacrificial term used only in the context of a tophet<sup>30</sup>.

When it occurs, *mlk* is often found in combination with three other words, *'mr*, *b'l* and *'dm*. *'mr* designates a lamb (generally, a sheep), either male (*'š*) or female (*'št*). In Phoenician, *'dm* means “human being” and *b'l* means “citizen”<sup>31</sup>. Since a lamb or a kid must necessarily be the object (victim) of the *mlk*-sacrifice, all three syntagms have to be interpreted as “*mlk*-sacrifice consisting of ...”: in other words, all the terms following *mlk* are the object of the sacrifice<sup>32</sup>. It is important to add that *b'l* and *'dm* never co-occur in the inscriptions of a particular *tophet*, which means that the two terms are interchangeable (perhaps, following local customs and traditions), both referring (*mutatis mutandis*) to human beings as the object of the “sending” (*mlk*) to the gods. Undoubtedly, the terms following *mlk* denote the victim, and this is precisely the case of *'zrm* (“male”, *'š*, or “female”, *'št*), which probably indicates a “premature” human in the largest meaning of the term<sup>33</sup>:

	animals:	<i>'mr 'š</i> (male) <i>'mr 'št</i> (female)
Sacrifice- <i>mlk</i> :		
Object sent to the gods:	humans:	<i>'dm</i> <i>b'l</i> <i>'zrm 'š</i> (male) <i>'zrm 'št</i> (female)

Now, we shall attempt to consider matters from the following point of view. As stated above, people go to the tophet to fulfil a vow promised to the gods, because the divine favour has been granted. This situation is described in the inscriptions by the phrase “(the god/gods) heard the voice (i.e. the prayer, of the suppliant), blessed (him)”

<sup>30</sup> The first to propose this etymology was VON SODEN 1936; at present, the scholarly consensus is almost unanimous, see FRIEDRICH – RÖLLIG – AMADASI 1999, 138, § 202b. For clear reassessment of the question see AMADASI GUZZO 2007-2008, 354ff.

<sup>31</sup> See AMADASI GUZZO 2007-2008. As for the lexica, see HOFTIJZER – JONGELING 1995, I, s.v. *'dm*<sub>1</sub>, *'mr*<sub>3</sub>, *b'l*<sub>2</sub> (respectively, 13-14, 79 and 182-185).

<sup>32</sup> It is difficult for me to follow the arguments set out by BARTOLONI 2006, 71ff., regarding the formulae *mlk 'dm* and *mlk 'mr*. According to him, if we translate *mlk* as “gift, offering”, rather than as “sacrifice”, the sacrificial interpretation should be excluded. If I understand him correctly, he proposes to translate *mlk 'mr* “gift of a lamb (as victim)”, and *mlk 'dm* “gift of (i.e. made by) a human being”. In the first case, we have the lamb as object of the gift (because one cannot of course accept that the lamb is the actor of the offering), whilst in the second case the human being is the subject of the action: but this breaks the homogeneity of the formulas, that need to be interpreted in the same grammatical / syntactical way. This interpretation seems to me both speculative and unfounded (see *infra*), also because the meaning of *mlk* is, as stated above, simply “what is sent (to the gods) -> sacrificial offering”, irrespective of what is actually sent.

<sup>33</sup> See XELLA 2007, about *'zrm* in the Eshmunazar’s royal inscription (*KAI* 14) and in Punic epigraphy, and the etymology of the term ( $\sqrt{zrm}$ ).

(\*šm' ql brk). In connection with this, epigraphic evidence can furnish new and interesting data about the percentage of divine favours received and, consequently, of fulfilled vows, in comparison with unconditional vows, fulfilled in advance, in expectation of the divine favour.

In the Carthage tophet – providing a very representative sample due to the high number of inscribed stelae (more than 6000) found there – the act of vowing is expressed (as always) by the root √ndr. This verb implies a sacred commitment that must be honoured at all costs, if and when the gods fulfil the prayer or – a much less often – in advance, as a requirement for obtaining the favour. The dedications show a percentage of 98,6% ca. in the first case, of 1,4 % ca. in the second case. The granted favour is expressed by the phrase "the god/gods heard the voice (i.e. the prayer) of the devotee", with the verb "to hear", šm', in the perfect tense. Otherwise, this verb is in the imperfect tense (unfinished action): "may the god/gods hear the voice". At the end of the formula, there is the verb brk, "to bless", which is either in the perfect ("he / they blessed") or in the imperfect ("may he / they bless"), but this does not affect the fact that the favour has been granted or has still to be granted. The verb "to hear" is decisive in this respect<sup>34</sup>.

Another important element must be taken into account. All the dedications in the tophet indicate a happy event, the granting of a request in crucial or dramatic occasions and the divine blessing given to the devotee. Moreover, Neo-Punic and late Latin inscriptions add that it was "a happy and blessed day" (ym n'm wbrk), an event when everyone must rejoice<sup>35</sup>. Now, even though modern sensitivity and ethics are not the same as in the Punic world, it is very difficult to admit that the Carthaginians could display such happiness for the death, intentional or otherwise, of a child/son. Instead, the grant of divine favour and blessing was stressed, as well as the resolution of the crisis, thanks to the intervention of Baal Hammon and Tinnit.

A possible scenario for the *tophet* rite is as follows:

a) a crisis occurs at the family or social level (many hypothesis are possible, see *infra*), so serious as to require desperate remedies: for this reason, it is necessary to go to the tophet (either close to or far from devotee's house);

b) the devotee(s) call(s) the gods for special help, he / they pray to them for an extraordinary favour (personal / family health, assistance in a journey, in war, famine, epidemic, problems of offspring: our sources give many possible reasons for this and others are theoretically likely); in change for the divine favour, he / she promises to offer the gods what is most precious to him / her: a son or a daughter<sup>36</sup>;

c) it may be an actual son or daughter (not necessarily the firstborn), but also with the next to be born, not yet conceived or still in the mother's womb; in any case, a predestined child, from now on vowed to Baal Hammon and Tinnit; it cannot be

<sup>34</sup> This datum must be accepted with caution, due to the cryptic character of some verbal forms; nevertheless, they are important clues, which must be taken into account.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. FERJAOUI 1994.

<sup>36</sup> In other cases, the vow could be fulfilled thanks to the sacrifice of animals (or other offerings), as the available documentation shows; nevertheless, the victim *kat'exochèn* was a child, the most precious of all.

excluded that also handicapped or sick children were comprised among the victims (potential or actual: see the cases of children which were not newborn);

d) if the favour is granted, once the child is born, he is carried to the tophet and sacrificed to the gods, as was promised; in this case, we have a ritual killing followed by the cremation of the corpse and various other offerings (including animals);

e) a special case must also be considered. Due to the high rate of infant mortality during pregnancy, but mostly at childbirth, and during the first period of extra-uterine life (between 60% and 70%), it may happen that the child vowed for sacrifice did not reach the tophet alive and, as a consequence, cannot be sacrificed. Even in this case, however, the vow must be fulfilled, and the dead child is offered to the gods all the same<sup>37</sup>. This is the case with a miscarriage, but also with an abortion, which the parents or the mothers may have chosen for many different reasons (e.g. it was very common in the ancient world, and much less dramatic than a ritual infant killing: we can imagine that this solution was preferred and an appropriate comment by the parents could be: the gods decided to take him away directly!). As stated above, object of the thanksgiving was not the death of the victim, but the fulfilment of the favour, obtained through the promise of his sacrifice. Since some (few) cases of foetuses seem to have been found in the urns, our interpretation has the advantage of explaining their presence without invoking strange or irrational hypotheses. In addition, the testimony of the Christian writer Minucius Felix must be mentioned, who speaks of abortion practised by Punic women in connection with religious rites. According to him, some Punic women aborted willingly, also for sacrificial purposes, and the best explication is that they preferred to offer the gods a son before the birth, instead of sacrificing him alive<sup>38</sup>.

To sum up, the promised child, alive or actually dead, must be sacrificed / offered to the gods as fulfilment of the vow. Of course, the celebration and the thanksgiving are not for the death of the victim, but for the divine favour granted, thanks to the propitiatory action of the child, “sent” (*mlk* !) to the gods and benevolently received by them. As to the conception of the thereafter and of the victim’s fate, only an hypothesis can be made, because the evidence we possess in this regard are really too meagre.

Stelae (when present) are the evidence for this process: the vow has been pronounced (*ndr*), the gods have granted their favour (*šm‘ ql brk*), and the promised

<sup>37</sup> It is a plausible (but undemonstrable) hypothesis, that the gods reserved a kind of beatific afterlife for the sacrificed children.

<sup>38</sup> Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, 30, 1-3: “Illum iam velim convenire, qui initiari nos dicit aut credit de caede infantis et sanguine. Putas posse fieri, ut tam molle, tam parvulum corpus fata vulnerum capiat? ut quisquam illum rudem sanguinem novelli et vixdum hominis caedat, fundat, exhauriat? Nemo hoc potest credere nisi qui possit audere. (2) Vos enim video procreatos filios nunc feris et avibus exponere, nunc adstrangulatos misero mortis genere elidere; sunt quae in ipsis visceribus medicaminibus e[t] potis originem futuri hominis exstinguant et parricidium faciant, antequam pariant. (3) Et haec utique de deorum vestrorum disciplina descendunt. Nam Saturnus filios suos non exposuit, sed voravit; merito et in nonnullis Africae partibus a parentibus infantes immolabantur, blanditiis et osculo comprimente vagitum, ne flebilis hostia immoletur”.

child has been "sent", either ritually killed (if alive) and then cremated, or only cremated in case of abortion or premature death<sup>39</sup>.

This reconstruction and overall interpretation of tophet rites is of course schematic and hypothetical, and is proposed to academic community with no pretensions to be a *more geometrico* proof (as would have been proposed by Galileo). Nevertheless, it seems to me that it has many evident advantages in comparison with the other hypotheses formulated.

First of all, it is coherent and founded on direct (archaeological and epigraphic) evidence, particularly, the votive nature of the inscriptions.

Second, it does not at all contradict the classical and biblical information (ignored or not fully accepted in other approaches)<sup>40</sup>.

Third, it does not force us to interpretative acrobatics, in order to explain the occasional presence of foetuses in the urns. As far as the latter are concerned (the "big proof", for the advocates of the thesis: tophet = infant necropolis, since it is obviously impossible to kill in sacrifice children already dead), their presence can be well explained by our interpretation: they are either predestined victims, naturally dead before the rite, or the results of a procured abortion, whose causes can be inferred, because they are in any case vowed to the gods, as in the emblematic case of Gala in Silius Italicus<sup>41</sup>.

Fourth, this interpretation can also explain the role of the lambs and kids as sacrificial victims themselves (in several cases, perhaps, as substitutes for the children) or as destined to "accompany" the little humans, also in virtue of the same very tender age.

Fifth, it accounts for the relatively slow rhythm of the sacrifices (e.g. at Mozia, one/two every two years; at Tharros, more or less one per year; at Sulci, even less frequently).

To sum up, the tophet was the sacred place chosen, where the devotees performed the rites related to the fulfilment of important vows, concerning serious personal, family or social crises. The babies or infants were not necessarily the firstborn. The sacrifices

<sup>39</sup> It goes without saying that the goal of sacrifice was not exclusively to obtain offspring, but – as our sources tell us – other critical causes must be taken into consideration.

<sup>40</sup> To sum up, the textual sources provide the following picture: *inscriptions*: votive in character, with a sacrificial terminology (without exception); *classical authors*: concise evidence for ritual killings (and no mention of funerary "pious ceremonies"); *Old Testament*: *mlk* as a bloody-rite in Tophet, including the killing (throat-cutting, etc.) of children and their subsequent cremation, as an offering to Baal or other gods. None of those sources can be adduced as proof of bloodless character of the rite. Therefore, anyone, who insists on considering the tophet as a special necropolis, must not only ignore the textual sources, but explicitly go against them.

<sup>41</sup> According to Silius Italicus (*Pun.* 15, 463-466), Gala, a soldier in Hasdrubal's army in Spain, was killed in the battle of Baecula in 208 BCE. Even if he was a product of the author's imagination, both the character and the episode are very meaningful in the literary documentation about human sacrifices in the Phoenician and Punic world. The destiny of Gala was to be sacrificed to the gods when still a child, but his mother substituted another child for him and saved his life. His death is considered as a kind of counterbalance of his destiny: the vow to the gods had not been fulfilled, so they took back what belonged to them (15, 466: *sed stant nulla diu deceptis gaudia divis*). GEUS 1994, 201; XELLA 2009, 79-80.

are relatively limited in number, if evaluated according to a long span of time, and cannot absolutely correspond to the infant mortality rate.

Finally, *the tophet was not theatre of numberless massacres*, but only of a certain number of sacred ceremonies felt as pious, and the bloody rite was the *extrema ratio* in critic situations (e.g. see the biblical cases). Moreover, it is assured that *a lot of different ceremonies were performed* in the tophet, included substitution rites (animal / human).

This overall interpretation is presented to the academic community, hoping that it will objectively evaluated and criticised by scholars interested not in defending preconceived theses, but in understanding the historical truth of a complex cultural phenomenon.

## Appendix. A rejoinder to some news objections

### 1. Number of burials and infant mortality rate

The aim of this study is to propose a comprehensive interpretation of the tophet and attempt to answer a range of questions systematically. The underlying theory can be proved or disproved (falsified, according to Popper's approach and terminology), without any claim of solving all the problems, also due to our ignorance of several aspects of this complex historical phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is an interpretive model which seems quite consistent and, in my opinion, far better than the infantine necropolis theory, in all its versions.

Now, as far as this theory is concerned, it seems useful to tackle here directly two objections against the "sacrificial" interpretation recently proposed by Piero Bartoloni (P. B.), who at present seems to be the most tenacious advocate of the tophet as an infantine necropolis<sup>42</sup>.

Following other scholars before him, P. B. maintains that the Phoenician tophet was an infantine necropolis, whose function was to preserve the burnt remains of naturally dead children (up to the age of two years, as he states explicitly)<sup>43</sup>, offered to the gods not as sacrificial victims, but as "tiny souls" to be received and protected by divine parents. It is irrelevant to rehearse here the fundamentals of this theory (*inter alia*: the sceptical attitude toward the witness of the classical authors, the interpretation *ad usum delphini* of biblical passages, not taking into adequate consideration the epigraphic evidence), but only to determine whether new arguments have been advanced to support it. In fact, P. B. formulates two relatively new objections against the sacrificial interpretation, concerning (1) the reliability of the statistical data for the rate of the infantine depositions in the tophet, and (2) the relationship between urns and stelae, which are not considered as concurrent.

As for point (1), i.e. the number of the burials not corresponding to the rate of ancient infant mortality, P. B. remarks that the calculations proposed for the number of incinerations are approximate and not reliable, because, first, they do not take into

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<sup>42</sup> BARTOLONI 2006 and 2012.

<sup>43</sup> BARTOLONI 2006: 73.

consideration the chronology of the urns, and, second, the tophets of Carthage and Mozia have not been excavated completely<sup>44</sup>.

Now, it is certainly true that the archaeological evidence is far from having been exploited to its full potentiality, whilst the limits and dangers of statistical methods are well known, but their indicative value cannot be totally denied.

As regards Mozia, P. B.'s objection has already been answered by the late Antonia Ciasca, who was perfectly aware that the excavation of that tophet was unfinished, and she proposed the following evaluation based on the hypothesis of an incomplete excavation of the area: "Mentre non si ritiene che la qualità dei dati disponibili sia tale da consentire la formulazione di ipotesi su base rigorosamente statistica, qualche semplice riflessione su base numerica può forse utilmente concretizzare le impressioni sulla dimensione del fenomeno. Le ricorrenze complessive di incinerati umani nel tofet di Mozia sono in tutto 203 (...). Considerando una durata di attività del santuario di circa quattro secoli, si avrebbero circa 50 ricorrenze di incinerati umani ogni secolo, cioè 1 ogni 2 anni. Una correzione va apportata alla cifra tenendo conto che la parte scavata del campo di urne è pari a circa 1/4 (o forse anche 1/3) del totale: la cifra massima che si raggiunge è di 2 incinerazioni umane all'anno (...)"<sup>45</sup>.

At any rate, it is absolutely evident that two burials per year cannot correspond to the rate of infant mortality in ancient Mozia during the lifetime of the local tophet. The same results can be obtained for other tophets where such calculations are possible<sup>46</sup>. Therefore, the answer to the first objection is a *fait accompli*.

## 2. Urns and stelae: are they simultaneous?

As for point (2), according to P. B., the rite was performed in two different – and chronologically separate – phases: "le azioni di arsione e di deposizione dei resti incinerati nelle urne non sono contemporanee, ma anteriori, all'erezione del monumento (eventualmente iscritto)"<sup>47</sup>.

Following his reconstruction, when an infantine (premature) death occurred<sup>48</sup>, parents went to the tophet, performed animal sacrifices, cremated human and animal corpses, and laid them in the cinerary urns. In this 'first' phase, no commemorative marker – inscribed or blank – was erected, but the parents waited for the divine favour (another child), and only at that moment they placed a monument near the urn. As a consequence, one must admit that it was necessary to wait not less than for nine months (the minimal time of a [new] pregnancy) for returning to the sanctuary and thanking the benevolent god(s) by erecting the memorial marker.

<sup>44</sup> In addition, Bartoloni remarks that we are far from having a complete knowledge of the archaeological evidence, due to the partial publication of the results of many excavations, which cannot be utilised in statistics evaluations.

<sup>45</sup> CIASCA *et al.* 1996, 319 footnote 6. Further data come from the osteological analysis, see V. Melchiorri in this volume.

<sup>46</sup> See for Carthage XELLA 2010, 268.

<sup>47</sup> BARTOLONI 2006 and 2012, *passim*.

<sup>48</sup> This statement clearly presupposes an ideologically conditioned interpretation of material data, which on the contrary must be analysed objectively.



This is an extreme hypothesis, which perhaps is not worth considering (no archaeologist before P. B. – even the most convinced advocates of the anti-sacrificial theory – has ever proposed it). Nevertheless, for the sake of completeness, it seems necessary to answer it.

The relevant question is the following: is it really possible to demonstrate whether or not the urns and the stelae were simultaneous?

Now, the simultaneity of the cremation-interment and the erection of a marker is sure beyond any doubt when it is demonstrated directly by the burial context. These cases really exist. As is well known, sometime the rock nature of the ground (e.g. the tophet of Sulci) does not allow us to determine any relationship between urns and markers, which were simply placed near each other. Moreover, particularly during the most ancient excavations, archaeologists failed to notice the details of the burial contexts, limiting themselves to remove the urns and markers separately. Nevertheless, where attention was / is paid to the context, it was / is possible to ascertain that the urns and the votive monuments were placed there at the same time.

Here, only few examples are mentioned. The most recent case is represented by the current excavations in the tophet of Althiburos (Médeina, Tunisia) by a Tunisian-Italian team: where the stelai (inscribed or not) are still *in situ*, they are often the constitutive and essential part of the *logettes* preserving the cinerary urn<sup>49</sup>. It is the definitive proof that the ritual act was concluded by the construction of the *logette* where the urn was placed, formed also by the stela. The sequence was unique. Yet Carthage<sup>50</sup>, as well as Mozia, where A. Ciasca found such cases<sup>51</sup>, can provide this type of evidence.

Another definite case of simultaneity of urns and markers is when we find in the inscriptions the formula written in the future tense: “may he / they hear the voice, may he / they bless”. This clearly means that the monument was placed first, in order to obtain the divine favour and, as a consequence, it is contemporary with the deposition of the urn.

Here I do not consider cases of collective burial, i.e. urns containing more than one individual, each of different aged – which, although in the minority are found in all tophets: (see V. Melchiorri in this volume). However, another powerful argument in favour of the simultaneity of urns and stelae is the mingling of human and animal remains in the same urn. This happens frequently, with peaks up to 50% of the cases

<sup>49</sup> Awaiting the final report of the excavations, see provisionally FABIANI 2007; KALLALA – RIBICHINI in press; XELLA – TAHAR a and b in press.

<sup>50</sup> According to BÉNICHOU-SAFAR 2004:2, regarding for the most ancient strata of the tophet, it was possible to verify that “... tous ses ex-voto surmontaient régulièrement des cendres infantines enfouies avec quelques offrandes au fond d’urnes de terre cuite...”.

<sup>51</sup> According to Antonia Ciasca, the interment of the burnt remains in the urn was the last phase of the rite. In addition, noticing that there is evidence for *cippi* and stelae at Mozia only from the stratum V, Ciasca remarks that “(...) singoli cinerari erano isolati e racchiusi all’interno di una sorta di piccola cista quadrangolare aperta su un lato, formata da tre lastre di pietra infisse ‘di coltello’ nel suolo; in alcune di queste ciste si vede l’urna era ancora accompagnata da un piccolo monumento in pietra, cippo o stele (...)” (CIASCA 1992: 124). On the stratigraphic homogeneity of many burial contexts (urns and votive markers) see *ibid.*: 125 and *passim*.

in Tharros and Mozia, which also have to be evaluated also in the light of the epigraphic evidence<sup>52</sup>.

As for epigraphic sources, when the term *mlk* is mentioned, and particularly if it is the *mlk* of a lamb (*mlk'mr*), the stela bearing this inscription is *surely contemporaneous* with the deposition of the burnt remains, since combustion occurred at the same time. But also in the other cases of a *mlk*-sacrifice, the conclusion is the same, because this offering cannot consist only of the stela, but also involved a more sophisticated offering sent to the god(s). An example is the expression *nšb mlk b'l*, "stela of a *mlk b'l*, that clearly demonstrates the simultaneous performance of the rite and the erection of the monument<sup>53</sup>.

It is worth noting that no case can be found that proves a two-stage division of the ritual action as proposed by P. B. And to conclude, it is not inappropriate to quote here the words of Sabatino Moscati, the most authoritative advocate of the tophet a special infant necropolis, quoted by P. B. himself at the end of his article: "(...) sull'ipotesi del sacrificio dell'animale come auspicio per un altro figlio sono da sollevare delle riserve. L'ipotesi potrebbe accettarsi a premessa della formula dedicatoria semplice "Questo è il dono che ha dedicato...". Ma la formula è spesso completata dall'espressione "poiché ha ascoltato la voce delle sue parole", il che ci pone dinanzi al ringraziamento per un fatto avvenuto; ed è difficilmente concepibile che si aspettasse, per seppellire un figlio morto, che ne venisse o se ne prevedesse un altro"<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> For the insurmountable argument against the necropolis theory consisting in the 1-2 time(s) yearly availability of lambs and kids, see discussion above.

<sup>53</sup> It is impossible to limit so drastically the casuistic of the rites, or to accept that inscriptions dated according to public "calendars" (e.g. the years of the reign of a king) and signed by many devotees could commemorate the simple fact of a birth. It is generally admitted that the rites of the tophet had both individual/familiar and collective/social relevance. It was an urban cult-place, whose activity was submitted to the community control.

<sup>54</sup> MOSCATI – RIBICHINI 1991: 8.

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