



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Recensie: Carthage Exhibition at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden

Hobson, Matthew

### Citation

Hobson, M. (2015). Recensie: Carthage Exhibition at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden. *Leidschrift : De Invloed Van Steppevolkeren. Mongools Juk Of Pax Mongolica?*, 30(januari), 123-128. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/73150>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)  
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)  
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/73150>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

*Carthage Exhibition at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (Leiden) 27 November 2014-10 May 2015; surcharge of € 2,50 in addition to regular admission rates; opening hours: Tuesdays to Sundays 10.00-17.00, also open on Thursday nights 17.00-21.00*

This November in Leiden a rare and truly splendid exhibition on ancient Carthage opened at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden. The exhibition, which continues to be open to the public until the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 2015, is being supported by a programme of lectures given by experts on related subjects. The North African coastal city of Carthage, today partially buried under modern Tunis in northern Tunisia, once maintained a considerable empire in the central and western Mediterranean before succumbing to Roman power at the end of the third century BC. The story of the city's struggle against Rome for supremacy in the region under the Punic general Hannibal, and its eventual destruction by the Roman Scipio Aemilianus in 146 BC a generation after the defeat of Hannibal on African soil at Zama, have continued to be well-known themes in the public imagination.

The scope of the exhibition is large, bringing the visitor into contact with physical objects from across the Mediterranean, from the early trading origins of the city, founded by the migrating Phoenician peoples of the east, to the acme of Carthage's territorial expansion in Spain, Sicily and Corsica. The destruction of the city and its re-founding as a Roman colony a century later by Julius Caesar, following his victory over Pompey's forces in North Africa at Thapsus in 46 BC, also forms a key element. Many artistic works which demonstrate the reception of the idea of Carthage in the later literature and art of the early modern period have been skilfully drawn together to aid in the explanation of some of the more famous historical events. The exhibition is comprised of just two rooms, first Punic Carthage (ninth – second century BC) and then, in the second room, Roman Carthage (first century BC – fifth century AD). One can ambulate through each of the two exhibition rooms in any manner one chooses, although proceeding in a broadly anti-clockwise direction allows one to absorb the various themed sections in broadly the correct chronological order. The labelling of the objects is in general excellent and informative, although the visitor interested in the precise provenance of the material will find that readiness of such information seems to have been left to the loaning museum. Objects from the Bardo National Museum in Tunis, for example, generally list their place of origin, whereas items from the British Museum simply display an inventory number, leaving an understanding of the exact provenance an extra step away.

Carthage was probably originally founded as a Phoenician trading colony during the ninth century BC, her population speaking a Semitic language known as Punic, in which the name Carthage simply means 'new town'. Punic was distinct from the Libyan languages of the indigenous population, modern descendants of which are probably the Berber languages (we possess inscriptions written in both ancient Punic and Libyan). The early sections of the Punic room deal with the myth that ancient Carthage was founded by a Phoenician princess Elyssa around the eighth century BC, and with the similarly dated archaeological reality. Elyssa, more commonly known by her Roman name, Dido, most famously recounted by Virgil in the Latin poem the *Aeneid* completed for the first Roman emperor Augustus in 19 BC, was from Tyre in modern-day Lebanon. The broader cultural milieu of the Mediterranean within which the city developed is demonstrated by objects from a series of contemporary Phoenician sites: small seventh and sixth century BC statues from Hamilton Lang's excavations on Cypress, finds from the city of Tharros on Sardinia (also founded by Phoenicians probably in the eighth century BC), a Phoenician dish found in an Etruscan tomb, and the large impressive *stelae* (an upright stone) from Amrit, a city just north of Tyre, depicting Melqart atop a lion. This last was the most important god of the Phoenician pantheon and can also be seen to have been important at Carthage.

In 266 BC Rome had completed the conquest of the Italian Peninsula, and only two years later embarked on a war with Carthage for the control of Sicily, the so-called First Punic War. The early treaties Rome held with Carthage from the sixth century BC down to this time give no indication that Rome was interested in Mediterranean maritime trade. Indeed, we learn from Polybius that at the beginning of the First Punic War Rome had little idea of how to conduct war on the open sea against a highly skilled naval fleet such as that possessed by Carthage.<sup>1</sup> A famous Polybian anecdote is that Rome profited by the chance capture of a Carthaginian ship, by copying its design and construction precisely in order to produce her own fleet and put it to sea.<sup>2</sup>

One of the highlights of the exhibition brings this period of history to life in splendid fashion. A large bronze ship's ram from a Punic vessel

---

<sup>1</sup> Polybius, *Histories* 3.22-3.28.

<sup>2</sup> Polybius, *Histories* 1.20.

was discovered submerged in Mediterranean waters in 2010, complete with an inscription stating in no uncertain terms for what the object was intended:

Let this be directed against the ship with the anger of Baal,  
who will bring about the achievement of this goal; let this go  
and hit the garnished shield right in the middle.

By the third century BC Carthage had become a thriving multicultural trading port, and the centre of a maritime empire which included the islands of Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, parts of southern Spain, and a significant portion of the North African coastline. At the end of the Punic room one can view Carthaginian coins minted in Sicily and on the Iberian Peninsula demonstrating the paying of mercenaries at the height of Carthaginian power. Such overseas minting of coin ceased altogether with the break-up of the Carthaginian Empire following decisive Roman victory in the Second Punic War.

While the historical narrative of the Punic wars inevitably provides a significant part of the framework for the presentation of the material, it rightly is not allowed to completely dominate. Ritual and everyday objects relating to areas of religion, burial right, and personal adornment help to add balance to the story. Funerary urns and a sarcophagus illustrate that both the right of inhumation and cremation were known in ancient Carthage. One learns that the centrepiece of the Punic room, a sarcophagus depicting a female holding an incense jar, in Greek marble, is the physical manifestation of an Etruscan custom, as many Etruscans lived in Carthage during this period. Other elements of its style display Egyptian influences. The grave goods buried with the dead tell us both about the social status of the deceased and of the belief systems of the living. In this section of the exhibition we learn that Carthaginians interred their dead with masks and bells to scare off evil spirits and tomb robbers. Inscribed razors inform us about their ideas concerning an afterlife and their gods. *Stelae* often bear inscriptions mentioning their chief god and goddess Baal Hammon and Tanit, whose imagery also appears on funerary sculpture and incense burners.

The reception of Carthage and its history in the art and literature of later times also finds a place in the exhibition. Since the majority of the relevant items are pictures, the reception studies element remains chiefly on the perimeter walls of each room hanging in frames, providing a

counterpoint to the sculptures, vessels and other objects arranged more centrally. In a number of etchings and engravings spanning the late sixteenth – eighteenth century, themes such as the laying out of the city boundary, the arrival of Aeneas at Carthage, the love and loss shared between Dido and Aeneas and the tears shed by Scipio Aemilianus reflecting on the destruction of the city, are addressed.

Literature is also included, notably in the form of Gustave Flaubert's *Salammô*, although one learns less from the exhibition about what the historians of this same period made of the subject. Barthold Niebuhr and Theodor Mommsen, for example, thought that following the Second Punic War Carthage had become a wild democracy, incapable of reforming her military practices or formulating an appropriate foreign policy, all this naturally precipitated her final destruction. Needless to say, the historians of the day believed there were salutary lessons to be learned from the reading of history. Thematically, however, these artistic pieces are linked rather nicely to the other sections of the exhibition by the figure of Jean-Émile Humbert (1771-1839), a Dutch military engineer with a keen archaeological interest, who had been employed constructing port structures and fortifications at Tunis in the early nineteenth century. Not only are several items on display in the Punic and Roman rooms original acquisitions made by Humbert, which still reside in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden's own collection, he was also a key figure in the early attempts to link the ancient literary descriptions of the topography of Carthage with the actual physical remains.

Much progress has been made on this front since Humbert's time, and a nice touch is the gradually shifting information screens, with adequate provided seating, highlighting the location and nature of key topographic features of the ancient city. These sets of slides, in each room, provide the visitor with contexts for where some of the items on display would have been found, or indeed originally used. On the Punic floor, for instance, the visitor is introduced to the location of the residential areas of the famous Byrsa hill, with houses of up to five stories, within which objects such as jewellery, oil lamps and baby bottles, and other glass or ceramic vessels may have originated. The location of the harbour site, described vividly by Appian and partly excavated under the auspices of the 'Save Carthage' campaign of the 1970s, is also pointed out. The possible imports and exports of the rectangular commercial port are listed, and the design of the ship sheds of the circular harbour, capable of housing somewhere in the region of 170 ships of the Carthaginian navy are highlighted. Was the

inscribed ship's ram already mentioned once stored away in one of these sheds when still attached to its ship? Other sites include the child cremation cemetery known as the Tophet, from which several actual funerary urns and *stelae* are on display elsewhere in the collection, and the defensive walls which were the site of the protracted siege during the Third Punic War.

In the Roman room similar screens demonstrate some of the dramatic transformations of the Roman period. After a century lying almost desolate the harbour structures were resurrected, with a temple added to the island at the centre of the circular harbour. The huge Antonine bath complex is illustrated with accompanying information on Roman bathing practices and the associated accoutrements. The 132-km long aqueduct is also briefly depicted. The waters originated on the mountain at Zaghouan, where a *nymphaeum* (a monument dedicated to local water *nymphs*) was constructed, while in Carthage itself the huge cisterns used for water storage are visible at La Malga. Other visible results of Roman hegemony are the newly established villas with their mosaics and courtyard gardens, positioned to make full use of the impressive views across the bay of Tunis, and the amphitheatre which could house as many as 30,000 spectators. On the Byrsa hill itself, where the final defenders against Rome were massacred in the Punic citadel, a new city centre was built upon the remains, with temples, basilica, and statues, and the largest forum in all of North Africa.

One begins the Roman room with the theme of Augustan Carthage, and with several statues from Carthage and Utica acquired by Humbert. The latter city was instrumental in Carthage's final destruction, going over to the Roman side and offering a safe harbour for the invasion fleet to land. The statue head of either Castor or Pollux from Utica is interesting, as coinage depicting the Dioscures has been assumed to be minted at Utica from the time of the Second Punic War. *La vie quotidienne* is again evoked by display cases of tableware, wine jugs, oil lamps featuring erotic scenes, cups, baby feeders, and bowls. A decorated ornamental border is one of the few architectural pieces. Some rather fantastic bronzes on loan from the Bardo National Museum feature a drunken, urinating Hercules, and a dwarf and satyr from the Mahdia shipwreck of the first century BC. Other sculptures here symbolized abundance. In a section on gods and goddesses two *stelae* representing the god Saturn are displayed, a couple of neo-Punic *stelae*, and one of the most visually arresting pieces the life-size statue of a goddess with lioness head, probably the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet. North Africa was also home to some early fathers of the Christian church. Tertullian and Cyprian writing in the late second and third century AD and Augustine in

the fifth century AD. The Roman room ends with some objects associated with Christianity, a jar with a symbol of a cross, some Christian tiles, mosaics from El Jem and Vandal jewellery, and a replica of the sixth century AD mosaic 'La dame de Carthage'.

In summary, the directors of the project have taken their time to present a well-balanced collection with an open and light atmosphere, which can be viewed briskly in an hour, or which can fill a pleasant afternoon if one wants to absorb more of the detail and information available. It should go without saying that the sheer logistical task of assembling such a fine collection of objects has required the successful communication and cooperation of many museums and funding bodies of different nationalities. Indeed, there are so many of these involved on this occasion that it is not possible to list them in this short review. One can, however, find this information contained in the high-quality colour-print catalogue, also impressively produced to deadline and available at a very reasonable price from the museum shop. Given the impressive scale of the undertaking, a pleasant aspect of the exhibition is that one is not over-faced with too many objects or with overly large sections of text. Often the experience of viewing even fascinating assemblages can be marred by unimaginative arrangement, lack of engagement with narrative, or by poor lighting and display. Happily none of this can be said about the current exhibition, which is a joy to behold.

Matthew Hobson