

City of Caelestis: Encountering the Punic Past at the Tophet of Roman Carthage

Abstract

The sanctuary of Tinnit at Carthage was one of several open-air temples, known as “tophets,” established at communities of the Punic diaspora in the central Mediterranean. The sanctuary was a core institution of Punic Carthage’s cultic and civic life, but was decried by Greco-Roman and modern audiences alike as a site of infant sacrifice. By focusing primarily on these sacrificial rites, scholars have demarcated tophets as distinctly non-Roman spaces, relegated to the Punic past and with no place under imperial rule. Rather than disappear, these sanctuaries proliferated across Roman North Africa, becoming key sites for maintaining and reinventing Punic traditions in the face of a changing province.

At the center of this phenomenon was the old tophet sanctuary at Carthage which, after 300 years of abandonment, was rebuilt as a monumental temple complex. The restored sanctuary at Carthage looked on the surface like other contemporary Roman temples, but was dedicated to the joint worship of Saturn, Venus, and most of all Caelestis. As a Romano-African adaptation of Punic Tinnit, Caelestis became the principal deity of Roman Carthage and standard bearer of the booming metropolis. This chapter reconstructs the tophet at Carthage as a site of memory which served to connect the city’s residents to their perceived Punic antiquity. I argue that by reviving the cultic rites of Caelestis, Roman Carthaginians asserted a cultural identity situated between the reality of their Roman colonial present and Punic diasporic past.