

## Rites of Spring in the Carthaginian Tophet

By

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Between 1976 and 1979 the ASOR Punic Project to Carthage excavated 444 cinerary urns and several monuments associated with them, some of which were inscribed in Phoenician/Punic. All of the urns had traces of burnt remains, almost 90% of them, identifiable as infants, lambs, and a few birds, all partridges (genus *Perdix*).

In trying to understand the significance of the Tophet, I will use a broad multidisciplinary approach, making use first and foremost of the direct, or primary, evidence, both archaeological and epigraphic. From the many earlier excursions in the Carthaginian Tophet, more than 6000 stelae inscribed in Phoenician/Punic have come to light.

Since for centuries the significance of the contents of the cremation urns have been understudied or ignored, I will emphasize and demonstrate the importance of the osteology, both human and animal, found in the urns for deepening our interpretation and understanding of the Tophet. Recently we have received a new and superior analysis of the bones with great implications in themselves and with resonance with other indirect sources of classical and biblical literature.

I chose as the title of my lecture (with a nod to Stravinsky), "Rites of Spring in the Carthaginian Tophet," largely because of the co-occurrence of human and animal remains in the same jar, in at least 25% of the cremation urns. A closer look at those reveals that the lamb offerings were spring lambs, 1-3 months old, burnt on the same pyre as human infants of the same age.

As a conclusion I shall offer the proposal that there was a great spring festival in Phoenicia (Canaan) and Syria that, like Hebrew Passover, coincided with spring lambs and included them in the offerings of First Fruits, which celebrated the early shoots of barley in March-April. In the Bible this ancient Canaanite agricultural and fertility festival was adopted and historicized as the biblical Exodus Story and Passover.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD Roman Lucian, wrote in his treatise "On the Syrian Goddess," about the great new year's festival at Hierapolis in Syria, known as the Torch or Fire Festival, when live sheep, goats, and birds were tied to tree trunks in the courtyard of the temple and set ablaze as a great holocaust offering. During this celebration the children were also sacrificed during this season of first fruits.