

The Punic Mediterranean

Something happened in the eastern Mediterranean roughly around the year 1150 BCE that led to the collapse of the Hittite Empire in Anatolia and the Egyptian New Kingdom. (The so-called Mycenaean Greek world reflected in Homer's epics also collapsed, but that world was hardly the powerhouse that Hittites and Egyptians were at the time, so it earns only a parenthetical mention.) The resultant power vacuum in the eastern Mediterranean was filled by a relatively small Canaanite group in what is now Lebanon, called the Phoenicians. By the end of the 9th century BCE, they had built a powerful thalassocracy in the western Mediterranean, established colonies, including Qart Hadašt (Carthage), and taught Greeks how to write. In fact, the letters I am now typing ultimately come from the Phoenicians via Greeks, Etruscans, and then Romans.



This is a bad map, as most maps are, because it implies that the Phoenicians physically conquered everything represented in green, and that everything in green is homogeneously Phoenician. It is a good map, though, insofar as it identifies the main regions of Phoenician influence.

The Phoenician script is an abjad. Again, this means that graphemes ("letters") only represent consonants. You, the speaker, must supply the vowels as you read. To do so correctly requires that you already know the language. It is often said that the Phoenicians developed their script for commercial purposes, and thus an abjad was more efficient. The first claim is reasonable, though not necessarily true; the second claim is baseless.

Since we are primarily concerned with the Phoenicians in the western Mediterranean more so than those back east, on the next page is the Punic script (where "Punic" refers to western Phoenicians) with important regional variants. Note: we will look at inscriptions from Constantine and Guelma for those who might like to learn the script.

Neo-Punic Paleographic Chart

| Transcription | Punic | Constantine | Breviglieri | Guelma | H. Bright | Cherchel | Al-Qusbat | H. Maktar | Hebrew |
|---------------|-------|-------------|-------------|--------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|--------|
| a | ף | ף | ף | ף | ף | ף | ף | ף | ף |
| b | ג | ג | ג | ג | ג | ג | ג | ג | ג |
| ב | ב | ב | ב | ב | ב | ב | ב | ב | ב |
| d | א | א | א | א | א | א | א | א | א |
| ה | ח | ח | ח | ח | ח | ח | ח | ח | ח |
| w | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת |
| z | צ | צ | צ | צ | צ | צ | צ | צ | צ |
| h | ח | ח | ח | ח | ח | ח | ח | ח | ח |
| t | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת |
| l | ל | ל | ל | ל | ל | ל | ל | ל | ל |
| r | ר | ר | ר | ר | ר | ר | ר | ר | ר |
| o | ו | ו | ו | ו | ו | ו | ו | ו | ו |
| y | י | י | י | י | י | י | י | י | י |
| k | ך | ך | ך | ך | ך | ך | ך | ך | ך |
| l | ל | ל | ל | ל | ל | ל | ל | ל | ל |
| m | מ | מ | מ | מ | מ | מ | מ | מ | מ |
| n | נ | נ | נ | נ | נ | נ | נ | נ | נ |
| s | ש | ש | ש | ש | ש | ש | ש | ש | ש |
| c | כ | כ | כ | כ | כ | כ | כ | כ | כ |
| o | ו | ו | ו | ו | ו | ו | ו | ו | ו |
| p | פ | פ | פ | פ | פ | פ | פ | פ | פ |
| g | ג | ג | ג | ג | ג | ג | ג | ג | ג |
| q | ק | ק | ק | ק | ק | ק | ק | ק | ק |
| r | ר | ר | ר | ר | ר | ר | ר | ר | ר |
| z | צ | צ | צ | צ | צ | צ | צ | צ | צ |
| t | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת | ת |

And here is a correspondence between the Punic and Libyc scripts derived from the Thugga bilingual inscriptions:

| ORDRE ALPHABÉTIQUE ET SYSTÈME DE TRANSCRIPTION BASÉ SUR LES BILINGUES. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Punique | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ |
| Libyque | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ | ꝑ |
| Transcription. | H | B | G | D | H | U | ZZ | H | T | I | K | L | M | N | S | H | F |

When Greeks learned the Phoenician script, they found that several graphemes corresponded to phonemes they did not have in Greek, namely aleph, hē, and ‘ayin. So Greeks turned these into the vowels A, E, and O, respectively. Thus, Greeks did not invent their alphabet. Rather, they adapted the Phoenician script to include vowels. Euboean Greeks on the island of Pithekoussai, now called Ischia in the Bay of Naples, Italy, taught the alphabet to Etruscans, who in turn taught it to Romans.

To what degree can we read Phoenician? To a fair degree. Although texts in the language are limited to inscriptions, leaving us with a similar issue we face with Libyc, Phoenician is so closely related to Classical Hebrew that those who know Classical Hebrew can, with some extra training and a bit of guess work, generally also read Phoenician. Phoenician and Hebrew rely on a shared set of trilateral roots, and they have the same (or similar) morphemes. Restoring the Phoenician vowels, however, is a challenge. But again, y cn stll rd ths wrds no matter whether a Liverpudlian or Texan wrote them.

An apparent breakthrough in vocalizing Phoenician—or, rather, Punic—is found in Plautus’ *Poenulus* (“the Little Punic”), a Roman comedy written sometime between 195 and 189 BCE involving Carthaginian slaves. In it, one of the Carthaginians, Hanno, delivers some lines supposedly in Punic, repeats them in a different iteration, and then translates them into Latin. Here is Hanno’s first speech (930-939) in the Latin alphabet and including vowels:

Yth alonim ualonuth sicorathi symacom syth
 chy mlachthi in ythmum ysthyalm ych-ibarcu mysehi
 li pho caneth yth bynuthi uad edin byn ui
 bymarob syllohom alonim ubymysyrthohom
 byth limmoth ynnocho thuulech-antidamas chon
 ys sidobrim chi fel yth chyl is chon chen liful
 yth binim ys dybur ch-innocho-tnu agorastocles
 yth emanethi hy chirs aelichot sithi nasot
 bynu yid ch-illuch ily gubulim lasibithim
 bodi aly thera ynnynu yslym min cho-th iusim

There are newer and better editions of this text, but for reasons I will explain in just a moment I see no reason to waste time worrying about the “correct” text of this passage. But others have. For instance, Charles Krahmalkov produced his *A Phoenician-Punic Grammar* (Brill, 2001) relying heavily on this text. Seeing in it recognizable roots and morphemes, he used it to restore the lost

Phoenician-Punic vowel system. Like many before him, he justified his reliance on the text on the grounds that some in Rome around Plautus and in his audience will have known Punic. This is doubtless true as it's true, for instance, that Germans lived in the UK and USA during WWII and some Brits and Americans at that time knew German, too. But here are my objections.

First, even if Plautus produced fluent Punic for his play, it is unlikely that 2200 years of scribal transmission preserved it correctly. (Again, in the manuscripts the speech is rewritten right after, before the supposed Latin translation, but is written differently. It is unclear why the second version of the speech got there or what it's doing.)¹ Secondly, I operate on the assumption that, if a thing is intended to be funny, whether it's actually funny or not, we should approach it on the grounds that it was intended to be funny. In other words, a linguistically sound speech in a foreign language may not have been as funny to the audience as an exaggerated stereotype. Compare Italian accents on American TV to actual Italian. An ancient comparandum is the *Charition* mime from the 2nd century CE, which mocks an Indian language but doubtless does not record an actual Indian language (though plenty of scholars have approached it as if it does). Thirdly, similarities between a mock speech and the language mocked reflect aural familiarity with that language but do not require that the language mocked be faithfully pronounced (indeed, it often requires the opposite, again cf. Italian stereotypes on American TV). Take the second word, *alonim*. This is interpreted as the plural of “god,” as Hanno’s subsequent Latin speech suggests. Thus, the appearance of authentic Semitic morphemes, like *-im*, may simply mean that Latin speakers heard *-im* ending Punic words, as how English speakers know that Italian words end in vowels (and thus generalize so that all words end in /ə/, or “uh”), not that words in Plautus’ text that end in *-im* are actual plurals. In any case, returning to my first point, let’s assume that the *comedian* Plautus decided to mock Punic slaves by producing their language accurately, not facetiously, and was somehow able to fit it into Latin poetic meter, and then taught his actors Punic, thinking that Punic speakers in his audience would follow the speech, while politely translating it into Latin for the non-Punic speaking Romans in his audience. Still, I find it unlikely that over two millennia of scribes in Europe would preserve it correctly, even if they really tried to. After all, Latin speaking scribes often misspelled normal Latin words. But let me know what you think about my objections.

For more on Punic, the CREWS Project is a good place to start:

<https://crewsproject.wordpress.com/2018/08/24/writing-in-carthage-the-punic-script/>

For fun, “mystery” languages (i.e. those imperfectly deciphered or of unknown origin or existing in “exotic” places) tend to attract conspiracy theorists. In the case of Phoenician, an outdated Irish tradition, promulgated by James Joyce among others, argues on no grounds at all that Phoenician is proto-Irish.

In the western Mediterranean, the Phoenicians interacted heavily with the dominant culture in Italy at that time... the Etruscans. By the 4th century BCE, however, Rome—once nothing more than a group of villages on hills surrounding a malaria-infested swamp in central Italy—had brought most of the Italian peninsula under its *imperium* (“command”), and it found Phoenicians to be its first great overseas adversary. But more history later. Let’s first talk about terms.

¹ One argument is that the second speech reflects later Latin orthography that better allows for capturing Punic phonology. See A. S. Gratwick, “Hanno’s Punic Speech in the *Poenulus* of Plautus,” *Hermes* 99, 1971: 25-45.

In her award-winning book, *In Search of the Phoenicians* (Princeton, 2017), Josephine Quinn argues that “Phoenician” is an ethnic group invented by Lebanese locals and foreigners alike. Indeed, “Phoenician” comes from a Greek exonym, *Phoinix*, whose etymology is uncertain. Latin speakers distinguished eastern Phoenicians from western Phoenicians, rightly on the grounds that the western Phoenician colonies grew increasingly independent from their homeland in the east both politically and culturally. They used the Greek term for Phoenicians in the east but spelled it the Latin way: *Phoenix*. The term they used for Phoenicians in the west was either *Poenus* or *Punicus*. These were derogatory exonyms used insultingly, and it is from the latter—*Punicus*—that the English term “Punic” comes.

So what did the *Phoenices* and *Poeni* or *Punici* call themselves? We cannot really say, especially if Quinn is right that there was never really a distinct ethnic group such that there can be a single endonym for them. For those in the western Mediterranean, scholars who ask this question still look to a single piece of evidence: Augustine’s *Epistolae ad Romanos inchoata expositio* 13, from 394/395 BCE, roughly 1200 years after the founding of Carthage (!), in which he says that speakers of the language call it *Chanan<ae>i*, “Canaanite.”² But speakers of Hebrew, a sister language of Phoenician, called their Hebrew language this, as well (see for instance Isaiah 19:18).

“Canaan” refers to the region along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean often called the Levant (from French for “rising,” i.e. where the sun rises in the east). The region includes the modern countries of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Jordan. In modern parlance, “Canaanite” refers to the related Semitic languages, religion, and people of this region. Thus, we have a problem: if “Canaanite” were the proper endonym, it is too broad to be helpful, like the term “American.” We are left only with the Greek term “Phoenician” for those in the east and the Roman derogatory term “Punic” for those in the west. Note that we cannot call all those in the west “Carthaginian” except when they were actually from Carthage proper.

If speakers of Hebrew and Phoenician equally called themselves “Canaanite,” what is the difference between them, assuming there is one? The languages were sufficiently similar that one can read what little survives of Phoenician by treating it as if it were Hebrew. For our purposes, one thing stands out as particularly significant: Israelite monolatry, or the worship of one god above all others (see the 1st or 2nd Commandment, depending on tradition), which eventually became Jewish monotheism. For the Israelites, that god was YHWH, or Yahweh, and as a result all other Canaanite gods were condemned, including those that the Phoenicians favored. Those gods include, for our purposes in this course, Ba’al Hammon, Tinit (commonly but likely erroneously known as Tanit), Melqart, Molech or Moloch, and Aštar or Astarte. (Note that Ba’al simply means “lord,” so there were numerous Ba’als in addition to Hammon, and Tinit appears to be exclusive to Punic religion.)

The patron gods of Carthage were Tinit (Tanit) and Ba’al Hammon. The Romans identified them with Juno Caelestis (“Heavenly Juno”) and Saturn, respectively. In Greco-Roman mythology, Juno (Greek Hera) was the goddess of marriage and Saturn (Greek Cronus) ate his own children. Again,

² The text has Augustine saying “Chananaei,” which he thinks is the term that the people call themselves. Quinn et al. think the text is corrupt, and that Augustine instead wrote “Chanani” referring to the language. See J. C. Quinn, N. McLynn, R. M. Kerr, and D. Hadas, “Augustine’s Canaanites,” *Papers of the British School of Rome* 82, 2014: 175-197.

Tinit seems to be exclusive to the west, and maybe Carthage in particular. Melqart, the patron god of Tyre in what is now Lebanon, was associated with the Greek hero Heracles (Hercules in Latin), and the Barcid family (perhaps the most famous Carthaginian family that produced figures like Hannibal) had a special connection with him. Aštar is associated with sex and war. Lastly, the god Molech or Moloch deserves some immediate discussion.



The so-called Sign of Tinit (or Tanit) on a stele in the Archaeological Museum of Constantine, Algeria, from the Tophet of El-Hofra

The Carthaginians (and Phoenicians more broadly, or at least those in the western Mediterranean) are infamous for supposedly practicing child sacrifice. As the story goes, they threw babies into massive gold statues of Moloch, in which was a furnace that burned them alive, like this “replica” in Torino, Italy (see top image on the next page).



This particular statue comes from Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914), perhaps the first epic silent motion picture, about the Second Punic War (see image bottom left).



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The entire movie is on Youtube here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOWicOwtHa8>

For the relevant episode, start at 23:00 and watch for 5 or so minutes.

This representation of Carthage and child sacrifice there was inspired by previous European fiction, especially Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862), on fictitious events during the Mercenary War (241-238 BCE). Flaubert insisted that his fiction was historical and firmly based on Polybius, whom we will read later. Critics incorrectly agreed that *Salammbô* was faithfully historical. It is, however, not hard to see in *Salammbô* a standard European view of the MENA as almost erotically exotic (see the cover above of *Salammbô*, sometimes spelled *Salambo* in English). It may not be insignificant that Flaubert apparently spent time in Egyptian brothels researching the subject.

In the latter 20th century, the idea that infanticide occurred at Carthage was dismissed as racist on the grounds that surely these literary and cinematographic representations were inspired by European chauvinism, colonialist stereotypes, misogyny, and a twist on anti-Semitism. Namely, the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament) mentions child sacrifice by fire to a Canaanite god, Moloch, or Ba'al, in Gehenna, a valley in Jerusalem. And indeed these narratives were racist. However, it turns out that they were correct, incidentally, about Punic child sacrifice. Dozens of tophets (places for sacrifice) have been found in the Punic world—on Sicily, on Sardinia, on Malta, at Carthage, at Cirta (specifically at El-Hofra), and elsewhere. For a while bones—a mix of animal and human infant—found in these sites were explained away, e.g. as from premature births. But the reality is that, yes, there was such a thing as child sacrifice, at least in the Punic world. We cannot, however, leave it just at that.

First, some Roman historians mentioned child sacrifice, but they did not object to it as we do now. While Romans did not practice ritual human sacrifice (forget gladiatorial games, which involved human sacrifice for entertainment), infanticide did not quite qualify as homicide not least because they did not see infants as fully human yet. Personhood comes with speech, they thought, and in Latin *infans* literally means “unspeaking.” They also practiced exposure, a passive way to kill infants or donate them to the slave trade. So the Romans may have found the Punic practice unusual, or “exotic,” but it was not ethically problematic.

Secondly, returning to the specific reason for this important digression, what about the god Moloch? He is mentioned some odd times in the Hebrew Bible, but did he even exist? The answer is: likely no. MLK is a triliteral verb referring to human sacrifice, not a god to whom children were offered. Indeed, in Punic inscriptions MLK sacrifices are offered to Tinit, and sometimes also Ba'al Hammon, in which case Tinit is described as “the face of Ba'al.” MLK is the offering, and in no case is there an offering to MLK, as if MLK were a deity. In any case, it may therefore be no wonder why Romans associated Ba'al Hammon with their own god, Saturn, who ate his own children.