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THE SOCIETY OF ROMAN CARTHAGE. AN EPIGRAPHIC STUDY*

by

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ABSTRACT: This article is a summary of a doctoral dissertation that provides a comprehensive study of the social structure of Roman Carthage, based on epigraphic material. It explores the city's multicultural character, the endurance of Punic traditions alongside Roman influences, and the social and cultural dynamics of Carthage from its foundation under Caesar to the Vandal conquest in 429 CE.

KEYWORDS: Carthage, Roman Africa, epigraphy, society

The history of Carthage has long captivated scholars and history enthusiasts. A substantial body of literature focuses on the Punic era, examining the metropolis' political organisation and its role as a Mediterranean power that once challenged Rome's hegemony.[1] The recent syntheses of the history of the city by S. Aounallah and A. Mastino,[2] covering the Punic to Byzantine periods, also address Carthage under Roman rule. However, such broad surveys tend to be general; even when they address social or urban issues, they often offer only cursory overviews. Auguste Audollent produced a comprehensive study of the colony's administrative organisation, economic role, and aspects of daily life during the imperial period.[3] Published at the beginning of the twentieth century, this monumental work remains relevant and is still the only comprehensive account of the

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1 E.g.: Picard 1951; Warmington 1960; Lancel 1995; Fantar 1997.

2 Aounallah, Mastino 2018; Aounallah 2020.

3 Audollent 1901.

city under Roman rule. However, many of Audollent's observations require revision in light of extensive twentieth-century archaeological excavations. In many respects, Roman North African society is now fairly well understood. The long-standing tendency to study ancient civilisations through urban life has been complemented by detailed studies that consider local specificities – for example, Cyrta[4] and cities of Tripolitania[5]. Despite its regional and imperial significance, Carthage has not yet been the subject of a systematic analysis of its social structure. Existing studies that address social issues have relied mainly on material from the city's best-documented area – the so-called necropolises of officials.[6] This narrow focus, however, yields an unrepresentative view of the urban population. The main goal of the doctoral dissertation was to address existing gaps in knowledge concerning the social structure of Carthage, a city of indisputable importance in the Mediterranean world. This was achieved through a comprehensive analysis of the city's epigraphic material, which allowed for the study of Carthaginian epigraphic culture and provided insight into multiple aspects of urban life, enabling as holistic a reconstruction as possible of the social structure of Roman Carthage and the factors shaping its distinctive features.

To present Roman Carthage's social structure comprehensively and account for influencing factors, this study draws on a wide range of epigraphic material. Through detailed inscriptional analysis, it was possible to investigate demographic aspects of the epigraphically attested population – such as life expectancy, gender distribution, and the variation of these factors across different social groups. Equally important were interrelationships within the community, which shed light on family ties. The peculiarities of Carthage as both a port and an important centre of imperial administration had a significant impact on the lives of those who inhabited the African metropolis. This is reflected in its occupational structure, which the dissertation reconstructs. Carthage was characterised by its multiculturalism, which was a defining feature of the city. Indigenous Libyan influences, the enduring Punic legacy, and Roman culture – with oriental elements typical of port cities – combined to shape the colony's cultural profile. Although tracing cultural transmission is difficult, the study identifies areas of daily life where traditions were most visible, the community's openness to Romanisation, and relations between traditional practitioners and Christians. This research also addresses the pivotal question of Carthage's condition between its decline and the foundation of the Roman colony. In particular, the analyses tackle the oft-repeated claim that, uniquely in antiquity, the remains

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[4] Bouchareb 2009.

[5] Mattingly 1994.

[6] Étienne, Fabre 1970: demographic research; Nichols 1985: the professional structure of the representatives of the Carthaginian *familia Caesaris*; Carlsen 2020a; 2020b; 2020c: a recent study based on an analysis of epitaphs.

of Kart-Hadasht were razed and ritually cursed, leaving a sociological void into which a new Roman city was founded. This claim, however, is contradicted above all by the evidence – presented in this dissertation – of the city's topography and the survival of Punic traditions in the religious sphere. The study's chronological framework spans from the foundation of *Colonia Iulia Carthago* under Caesar to the Vandal conquest in 429 CE, which marks the end of the Roman era for the city. This diachronic approach allowed the tracing of social processes visible in the city over nearly five centuries.

The source base comprises epigraphic material from Carthage – more than three thousand inscriptions in total. Each inscription was assigned to one of five categories: votive, honorific, funerary, other, and unknown. Given the material's condition and lack of access to monuments, independent palaeographic dating was not possible. Building on the work of scholars such as Jean-Marie Lassère[7] and on internal textual references that allow dating, this dissertation provides a comprehensive account of the chronological distribution of the epigraphic material and relates it to historical events and social processes in the city. This enables a detailed and nuanced understanding of Carthage's epigraphic culture. In the existing literature concerning a range of social issues, the topic of Christian civilisation is often treated as a discrete area of study. Thus, an important innovation was the incorporation of Christian inscriptions into the corpus – over 400 survive from Carthage. Beyond chronology, the principal objective was a comprehensive textual analysis of the inscriptions, including data on commemorated individuals and the dedicators. On this basis, the 1,121 individuals making up the epigraphic population of the city were identified. To reconstruct the community in detail, methods from demography and anthroponymy were employed.

It was not the intention of this doctoral dissertation to present a comprehensive study encompassing every archaeological monument in Carthage. Nevertheless, evidence on the urban layout and its vestiges – mosaic and sculpture fragments documented in literature and reports – made it possible to situate the study spatially. Drawing on the concept of "written space" as defined by G. Sears, P. Keegan, and R. Laurence,[8] which explores the relationship between inscriptions and the urban environments they occupy, as well as their social and political functions, the city was described and mapped, facilitating more precise answers to who commissioned or created inscriptions and where they were located in the metropolis.

Literary sources provided the backdrop for analyses focused on epigraphic material. Particular attention was paid to African authors who frequently referred to Carthage – such as Apuleius, Tertullian, and Saint Augustine. The writings of African authors were especially important for questions of provincial

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[7] Lassère 1973.

[8] Further in on the concept of "written space": Sears, Keegan, Laurence 2013.

cultural identity, since inscriptions rarely record explicit expressions of social identification.

Epigraphic material from the officials' necropolises has shaped the local epigraphic record, thereby limiting the scope of research and the resulting picture of Carthaginian society.

In particular, the material is dominated by individuals associated with the *familia Caesaris*, including a significant number of imperial slaves. The highest stratum of the capital's society is virtually absent from sepulchral epigraphy, which distinguishes Carthage from other regional cities. Moreover, members of this stratum rarely appear in honorific inscriptions. Most honorific inscriptions were commissioned by high-ranking imperial officials, who likely resided in the city only temporarily. The particularity of the epigraphic material leads to the opinion that there was a very wealthy and influential group of inhabitants in Carthage, forming the so-called "super stratum",[9] This group consisted of landowners, resident in coastal properties of the metropolis, for whom inscriptions were not a primary medium of self-representation. Inscriptions alone reveal little about the social composition of early Christian communities. In most cases inscriptions provide only the name of the deceased as known at baptism. It is therefore likely that Christians in Carthage, as elsewhere in the Roman Empire, were not a homogeneous group.

Anthroponymy served as a principal tool for classifying individuals appearing in inscriptions by social group. It also allowed some reconstruction of the community's ethnic composition over time. Traces of other cultural backgrounds appear vestigially – often in non-Latin *cognomina* – within an onomastic record dominated by Roman names. Examples of Libyan names are known, along with a relatively numerous amount of attested names described as "African" which, although linguistically Roman, were strongly associated with Punic traditions. In Carthage, a Greek *cognomen* may indicate the bearer's ethnicity rather than merely signalling slave status.

In contrast, although Carthage's religious sphere initially appears characteristically Roman, it reveals numerous references to diverse traditions, including Eastern cults such as Serapis and the Magna Mater. Punic rituals are particularly evident, though transformed and adapted to the Roman provincial context. The dominant role of deities such as Saturn and Caelestis in the Carthaginian pantheon provides compelling evidence of the continuity with the religion of the Phoenician colonisers. A limited number of Neo-Punic votive inscriptions have proven particularly significant for assessing the Punic cultural substrate. These inscriptions are notable for their unique emphasis on the role of Tanit, which effectively elevates her to a position of parity with Baal. Tanit was especially venerated by Punic inhabitants; in the Roman period her primacy is not apparent

[9] Hellström 2020, 26.

in regional epigraphic cultures outside Carthage. Punic traditions likely persisted for an extended period and manifested across various aspects of urban life. As archaeologists have observed, the Roman urban layout strikingly resembles the topography of Punic Carthage. If the accounts of the colony's razing are accurate, this resemblance would be a remarkable (though possibly coincidental) fact.

Carthage's epigraphic culture does not reflect the city's importance commensurately with its status as the provincial capital of Africa Proconsularis. Compared with other provincial cities, it is particularly deficient in both preservation and representativeness of the material. Carthage's prosperity under the Antonines is reflected in an increased number of honorific and building inscriptions associated with numerous public constructions. The category of epitaphs is determined by two major factors: the presence of necropolises of members of the *familia Caesaris* and the development of Christianity. The latter has been identified as the factor that fixes the peak of sepulchral epigraphy to the fourth century. This is evidenced by a significant rise in Christian stone inscriptions during this period, even as texts associated with Roman traditions continued to appear in the urban space.

Analyses drawing on Éric Rebillard's concept of "everyday Christianity"[10] demonstrate that, beyond documented instances of persecution, Carthaginians generally coexisted in relative harmony regardless of religious affiliation. Early Christians probably did not frequently display their beliefs openly in public spaces. Moreover, Christian identity did not preclude participation in most events and activities of urban life, as attested by ancient authors such as Tertullian and Saint Augustine.

It is evident that the events occurring within the social context of the city were not reflected in the epigraphic material. However, the phenomena observed in the inscriptions, such as the presence of visitors from outside the province associated with the city's important role as a prominent administrative centre and port in the African region, the coexistence of diverse religious cults, particularly evident in the votive texts, and the notable participation of Christian believers in the local community, not only shaped the epigraphic culture but also influenced the daily lives of the inhabitants of the capital of Africa Proconsularis over centuries. It is therefore evident that Carthage exhibited numerous characteristics of a prominent cosmopolitan centre during its Roman period while simultaneously retaining an African identity rooted in the robust foundations of the Punic tradition.

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[10] Rebillard 2016, 2017.

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