



Necropolis of Is Pirixeddus

Patrimonio culturale
SARDEGNA Virtual Archaeology



■ The children's necropolis: the *Tophet*

The *Sulky tophet* is the oldest sacred area found in Sardinia, as the town to which it belongs, according to current knowledge, is the oldest of the Phoenician urban settlements on the island. The sanctuary was found during the dig in 1956, carried out by G. Pesce.

The sacred area is concentrated around a group of trachyte rocks, on the top of which the oldest urns have been found. All the rocky fissures were found full of urns. When in 375 Carthage decided to fortify some Sardinian towns, *Sulky* was included in the project, and was surrounded by walls made of large ashlar blocks of red trachyte. As the *tophet* was a long way from the town centre, the town protected independently and the heart of the sanctuary was closed by a large fortified square that can still be seen today (figs. 1-2).



Fig. 1 - *Tophet* of *Sulky*, reconstruction of the placement of the urns (photo by Unicity S.p.A.).



Fig. 2 - Detail of large ashlar trachytic boulders, which enclosed the heart of the Tophet ([photo by Unicity S.p.A.](#)).

About fifty metres to the south-west of the walls of the sacred area, there are hollows in the rocks where traditionally it has been thought that the altar stood, that was used for the sacrifice of children (fig. 3): it is an area that has traces of burnt material, but actually not much is truly known about it and it is not at all certain that it was used in the Phoenician and Punic ages. However, it has been suggested that the place where the Tophet was built was already considered sacred by the local populations who previously occupied the land.



Fig. 3 - Plan of the Tophet of Sulky: the fortification which encloses the heart of the sanctuary is very evident

(From Bartoloni 2007, p. 51, fig. 32).

From the sanctuary area come a series of testimonials which lead back to the early days of the Phoenician colonisation: among them, we can mention some household containers used as funerary urns: pots belonging to the Nuragic tradition and a few single-spouted oil lamps, the latter perhaps arrived from the Phoenician motherland and brought directly by the first settlers who arrived in Sant'Antioco (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 - Nuragic traditional pottery and single-spouted lamp from the *Tophet* in *Sulky*, dating from the eighth century B.C. (photo by C. Olianas).

The vascular forms of Nuragic tradition used within the Tophet suggest a mixed population, where Phoenicians mingled with local people, living in peace.

Inside the urns there were the ashes of the children who, according to tradition, were sacrificed to an alleged god *Moloch*. The terme *MLK* is stated several times in the bible, where it is interpreted as the name of a god and often appears next to the term *Tophet* "in the valley of Ben Ennom", that seems to indicate a geographical location and not a place of worship. Also, the bible never mentions sacrifices where it names *Tophet*, but only speaks of passage through fire or combustion. *MLK (Molok)* is actually the name of a ritual: the word means "offer", "gift", but not with the meaning of sacrifice and the word *tofet*, which was originally a toponym, was changed to describe the sacred area that was used for religious rituals connected with the death of children (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 - Urns from the Tophet in Sulky at the time of the discovery (from Bartoloni 2007, p. 55, fig 34).

Around the mid 1980s, the first doubts about the sacrifice of children started to emerge. The first osteological exams were being carried out at the time on the remains of children found in Carthage and other sanctuaries. All these tests brought a basic result: the bones belonged to foetuses or newly born children who had died within the first two years, that were often accompanied by small animals such as birds and/or lambs. The bones of older children have rarely been found. Under this point of view, the *tophet* is simply a cemetery-sanctuary for children. The high rate of child mortality, with an average of 7 out of 10 babies dying in the first year of life, could not allow the Phoenicians then the Carthaginians to systematically sacrifice their own children, as it would have been counterproductive for society itself, as they would have risked excessively decreasing, if not extinguishing totally, the population. On the other hand, it is likely that both the Phoenicians and Carthaginians, as did many ancient populations, practiced human sacrifice in case of particular and extremely serious events; they were therefore a rarity, not a habit, and certainly it is not safe to say that these were child sacrifices.

Stone sculpture, stelae were placed next to the urns, as thanks for favours received (as the gods had granted the joy of a healthy son): these stelae appeared in Carthage from the end of the 7th century B.C., and offer a huge range of styles and iconographs, that indicate

the period of production. The earliest signs of this type of materials are given by simple rough stones, sometimes just roughly hewn. These objects were thereafter used by other centres of the Mediterranean, Sardinia and Sicily, where they appear not before the sixth century B.C. (figs 6-7).



Fig. 6-7 - Stelae from the *Tophet* in Sulky. Municipal Archaeological Museum "F. Barreca" (photo by C. Olianas).

Therefore, what took place in the tophet was a funeral ritual. Tophets are particular necropolises and at the same time open-air sanctuaries, as the divine presence had to be constant; they were dedicated to Baal Hammon and Tanit and were kept quite distinct from the actual necropolis because these very young children, who had not even been born in most cases, had a different status from that of adults. They did not belong to the community, as they died before they could join it through some initiation rite, such as baptism for Christians or circumcision for Muslims and Jews.

One interesting aspect that comes from studying the *tophets* is the fact that, once the decision had been made as to where the sanctuary was to be built, the location was never again changed, contrary to normal necropolises reserved for adults or anyone who had had the time to enter the community with full rights. *Tophets* were respected and reused in Roman times as well, as happened in Carthage, placing Saturn instead of the traditional Baal Hammon.



■ Credits

Deepening card edited by Dr. Cinzia Olianas

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Progetto cofinanziato dall'Unione Europea
Programma Operativo FESR 2007-2013

FESR - Fondo Europeo di Sviluppo Regionale - Asse I, Linea di Attività 1.2.3.a