

Punic Domestic Architecture and Urban Planning: Some Preliminary Findings

Beginning by at least the eighth century BCE, Phoenician and Greek settlers were active in the western Mediterranean, establishing settlements from southern Italy to the Atlantic. Centuries later, one of these settlements, Carthage, rivaled Rome for supremacy in the west, and eventually succumbed to Rome's growing power. Despite this level of interaction with Greece and Rome, Phoenician and Punic studies have too often been ignored or sidelined by classical studies. When they are included in the historical narrative of the Mediterranean, it is often as the antagonists, rather than the protagonists. This paper presents some preliminary findings regarding domestic architecture and urban planning of Punic settlements in the western Mediterranean from the sixth to second centuries BCE.

Any study of Punic or Phoenician archaeology must begin by defining those terms. Rightly, scholars like Quinn (2018) have questioned the validity of the terms Phoenician and Punic, since the people they describe never used those terms themselves. Other scholars have acknowledged this conflict and instead use the terms as purely historical or archaeological in nature, describing material cultures rather than personal identities (Van Dommelen and Gomez Bellard 2008). The latter is the approach this dissertation follows, using the term Phoenician to refer to the material culture of the city states of the Near East, while Punic refers to the culture developed in the west by Phoenician settlers. Literature on Punic houses can essentially be divided into two categories: publications of sites, which contain Punic houses, and small studies on a particular aspect of the household. Missing from the current literature is a comprehensive study of all the available material. This paper presents the early findings of a dissertation in progress that aims to provide such a synthesis.

Despite comments from earlier scholars, it is apparent that there is indeed a distinct form of Punic domestic architecture. Other scholars have either dismissed this idea, claiming that there was little difference between Greek and Punic houses, or have attempted to boil down Punic domestic architecture to a few building techniques (Tsakirgis 1984; Markoe 2000). While Punic houses share some characteristics, which virtually all courtyard houses in the Mediterranean basin possess, there are some striking differences. One such difference, which would have been readily apparent to the ancient viewer, but is rarely discussed in modern literature, is the lack of a tiled roof. Instead, Punic houses had flat roofs, which were then covered in a waterproof coating (Fantar 1985). Likely due to the flat roof, drainage seems to have been a major consideration, as Punic houses often have a drain leading directly out of the entrance and into the street. These entranceways are also a feature that are extremely common in Punic domestic architecture. Rather than entering onto the courtyard directly, one must navigate a long and narrow entranceway, before entering onto a corner of the central courtyard. Around the courtyard were various rooms, including what some scholars denote as a “reception room” (Mezzolani 2000; Helas 2011). Altogether these elements and others represent a distinct style of Punic domestic architecture.

In addition to domestic architecture, Punic settlements in the west demonstrate a particular method of urban planning. These elements are so consistent, that they can be distilled into a type plan, which is found at multiple sites. Often the exterior walls of the settlement follow the contours of the location. Then a ring of houses is built against this wall, forming a ring road inside the settlement. Within this circle are more or less regular rectangular blocks of houses, which although not laid out in a grid, often create streets that meet at right angles. In place of a central forum or agora, there are multiple smaller open spaces distributed throughout the

settlements, usually created by the meeting of multiple streets. This kind of urban planning is evident at sites such as Byrsa Hill, Kerkouane, Monte Sirai, Selinus, and Motya. Both Punic urban planning and domestic architecture are woefully understudied, despite their development alongside Greek and Roman urbanism. This paper begins to address that discrepancy.

Bibliography

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