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Abstract: Richard Miles's *Carthage Must Be Destroyed* (2010) justifies a new look at Gustave Flaubert's controversial novel *Salammbô* (1862). An abridged version of this essay appeared as "Pacesetter," *London Review of Books* 32 (June 2010): 30-31.

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Sweating Truth in Ancient Carthage

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review of Richard Miles, *Carthage Must Be Destroyed: The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Civilization* (2010)
and a new appreciation of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Salammbô* (1862)

Those who discovered the phantasmagoric novel *Salammbô* (1862) at an impressionable age, prior to studying conventional histories of the Punic Wars, know how difficult is to shake Gustave Flaubert's intoxicating vision of the doomed Carthaginian empire. Brimming with visceral images of war and lust, vast riches and bizarre rituals, violence and tragedy verging on melodrama, Flaubert's bestseller about the North African power that rivaled Rome in the third century BC received mixed critical reviews. Unlike the bored, provincial Emma Bovary, Flaubert's new heroine Salammbô—a high priestess of strange Punic rites—inspired operas by Rachmaninoff and Mussorgsky. The femme fatale of Carthage was featured in voluptuous Art Nouveau and Symbolist paintings, Rodin's erotic sketches, and she even influenced Parisian fashions. In the illustrated 1927 edition that I pored over in the 1960s, Mahlon Blaine's diabolical Aubrey Beardsley-on-Ecstasy drawings rendered Flaubert's evocative tale even more eidetic.

Largely forgotten now, *Salammbô* still has the power to scandalize critics (and thrill certain audiences—consider the video game *Salammbô: Battle for Carthage* recently created by award-winning French graphic artist Philippe Druillet). Penned during French colonization of North Africa, Flaubert's Carthaginian chronicle has been criticized by modern scholars as an over-the-top imperialist fantasy that denigrates indigenous cultures. “A roller-coaster ride of sexual sadism, extreme cruelty and repugnant luxury [that] played to every western-European stereotype . . . about the decadent Orient,” says Richard Miles, author of an impressive new history of Carthage. Pointing out that Rome's triumph over Carthage “provided an attractive blueprint” and “metaphor” to justify French domination in North Africa, Miles dismisses *Salammbô* as “the most famous product of these colonial assumptions” (10-11).

No doubt. Yet Flaubert's achievement was deeper and more complex than that. His attempt to reconstruct Carthage is certainly outdated and shocking to contemporary sensibilities. But the author's endeavor to write from *inside* the lost empire, to bring an alien culture to life from the ruins and artifacts buried for millennia in the sands of Tunisia, to visualize the Carthaginian world on its own terms, *without* Hannibal, Rome, or the Punic Wars as his focus, was admirable—and resulted in a mesmerizing narrative. *Salammô* was an amazing feat of literary archaeology. What is rarely appreciated today is the depth of scholarship that informed Flaubert's masterpiece of romantic realism.

After reading Miles's dispassionate, fact-packed *Carthage Must Be Destroyed: The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Civilization*, I revisited Flaubert's *Salammô*. Expecting the novel's charms to have faded, instead I found myself swept into Flaubert's fever-dream of erudite "Orientalism." But this time, I could appreciate the novelist's grasp of the Greek and Latin sources on Carthage and his knowledge of French archaeological excavations of the city, begun by Charles Beulé in the 1850s. (Notably, as Miles's photographs make clear, even Mahlon Blaine's drawings of 1927—*Salammô*'s diaphanous gown and towering headdress, the horned helmet of the Punic god Melqart, the priests sacrificing a child to Baal—were influenced by ongoing French archaeology after Flaubert's death.)

Flaubert embarked on his new project in 1857, after the obscenity trial of *Madame Bovary*. Devoting five years to obsessive research, he studied the ancient accounts and artifacts emerging from Carthaginian sites. In his reckoning, Flaubert consulted more than 100 volumes, including modern monographs (scholarly knowledge of Carthage has advanced apace since then, of course: Miles lists four or five times that number). In his epic struggle to make his book "sweat truth," Flaubert—a notorious perfectionist in his realism—immersed himself in Tunisian botany and natural history, local traditions, geology, and geography. He surrounded himself with beads, amulets, arrowheads, copper objects, and other Punic relics. In 1858 he sailed to Tunis and visited the ruins to commune with the ghosts of Carthage.

Writing at the dawn of modern Carthaginian archaeology and scholarship, Flaubert could hardly avoid being influenced by the two millennia of sensational negative images of the powerful Phoenician trading empire. But nineteenth-century archaeology was often concerned with testing the truth of ancient sources (Flaubert's contemporary was Heinrich Schliemann, who discovered the site of Troy). Excavations at Carthage seemed to confirm ancient accounts. As Miles demonstrates, archaeology is continuing to illuminate—and complicate—the Greco-Roman literary evidence.

With the exception of Aristotle, who singled out Carthage for admiration in the *Politics* (“Many of the Carthaginian institutions are excellent. The superiority of their constitution is proved by the fact that the common people remain loyal to it”), most Greek and Latin writers portrayed Carthage as a decadent, ruthless, barbarian empire that deserved annihilation. Virgil's epic paean to Rome's foundation, the *Aeneid*, described the suicide of the Carthaginian Queen Dido after her lover Aeneas deserts her to fulfill Rome's glorious destiny. The historian Livy assured the Romans that as a little boy, Hannibal swore to destroy Rome. Early Christian fathers detailed horrifying accounts of children hurled into a pit of fire as offerings to the bloodthirsty Carthaginian god Baal. Hannibal's audacious trek over the Alps with war elephants, intent on enslaving all Italy, became an icon of danger preserved in Latin scare quotes: “Hannibal at the Gates!” and “Carthage Must Be Destroyed!”

Carthage taught the Romans fear, but Romans liked to believe they were predestined to triumph, finally crushing Hannibal at Zama (202 BC). After the bloody siege and sacking of Carthage in the Third Punic War (150-146 BC), Scipio Aemilianus burned the magnificent city to ashes and sold the 50,000 survivors into slavery (4). His intention was to obliterate the memory of Carthage, except as a parable of overweening power and debauchery that brings about its own destruction (sowing Carthage's fields with salt was a modern flourish, however, inspired by an incident in the Old Testament).

Remarkably, however, Flaubert decided to ignore these famous zero-sum duels between Carthage and Rome. Instead of setting his tale during the Punic Wars, he chose to set it during an obscure internal conflict in North Africa that occurred during Hannibal's boyhood. After losing the First Punic War,

Carthage was unable to pay its diverse army of Libyans, Numidians, nomads, and other warriors of the Maghrib. The Mercenary Revolt (241-238 BC) was led by Mâtho, a Libyan, and a former Greek slave named Spendius. Carthage's elite, including Hamilcar, Hanno, and powerful eunuch priests of Baal, retaliated. Treachery, torture, mayhem, cannibalism, and a plethora of violent passions ensued, described by Greek and Roman historians of Carthage, who had access to some Punic annals. Flaubert brought his heroine Salammbô to life from a brief mention of Hamilcar's unnamed daughter and he imagined Mâtho seized by mad love for her. Unforgettable scenes of excess in the novel include Salammbô's sensual interlude with a giant serpent and the frenzied mass sacrifice of Carthage's children to a colossal bronze idol of Moloch/Baal. Mâtho steals the forbidden veil of the goddess Tanit; he and Salammbô become secret lovers; and they suffer agonizing deaths amid barbarian splendor.

Livy and Polybius, friend of Scipio and eyewitness to Carthage's destruction, were Flaubert's chief sources, but he also relied on Herodotus, Xenophon, Cornelius Nepos, and Procopius. For geography and fortifications, Flaubert turned to Appian and Diodorus of Sicily, and to Aelian for military ruses and tactics. He mined Pliny, Theophrastus, and others for Carthaginian magical lore and religion. Athenaeus provided the description of Tanit's fabulous veil, while the indelible image of babies burned in Baal's fiery furnace was culled from Strabo, Cicero, Plutarch, St. Augustine, Eusebius, and Tertullian. (We might guess that Salammbô's pet python arose from Valerius Maximus's account, based on Livy, of a battle between a Roman legion and a monstrous snake in the First Punic War, as well as snake charming traditions in North Africa). To refute critics who questioned the historicity of his details, Flaubert released a public dossier of his bibliography. Flaubert's documentary sources are the same texts that Miles relies upon in his 18-page description of the Mercenary War.

Indeed, the labor the novelist had set for himself, to reconstruct a systematically demolished ancient culture from enigmatic remnants and history written by its worst enemies, is the same task that Miles takes on in *Carthage Must Be Destroyed*. Flaubert's lush novel was the first modern attempt to portray Carthage realistically in all its glory, while Miles's level-headed, sweeping scholarly study is the last word on the glory that was Carthage. Both the novelist and the historian seek to recover an independent Carthage, to

know the city outside of the “long shadow of Rome,” (8) each writer amassing every scrap of evidence available to him to place Carthage on center stage.

Miles holds up Greek and Roman (and Flaubert’s) emphases on Carthaginian cruelty as examples of casting the “Other” as savage and exotic. But Flaubert’s descriptions of gruesome violence were based on surviving historical accounts of the savage Mercenary War. In his own discussion of the appalling atrocities reported during the Revolt of the Mercenaries, Miles acknowledges the hair-raising violence of this “war without pity,” (205) marked by “infamous brutality,” “hideous” tortures, and “butchery,” (208), echoing the words of Polybius, that this war “far excelled all wars we know of in cruelty and defiance of principle.” (211) Why did Flaubert select such a vicious episode in Carthaginian history? It was a bold decision. Indeed, as Miles points out, French critics blasted Flaubert for writing about a trivial “duel between Tunis and Carthage” when everyone knew that the only significant event was the great war won by Rome (10). But Flaubert’s choice allowed him to present Carthage in a purely Carthaginian context, of interest in and of itself, with Rome and even Hannibal relegated to the background. Although his methods are very different, Miles, too, wants us to comprehend the importance of Carthage in its own right, without assimilating it to the victor, which would risk the flip side of Orientalism. Yet—unlike Flaubert who could chose his setting—Miles, as historian, cannot escape the need to constantly refer to Rome.

Aside from artifacts and enigmatic inscriptions, very little of Carthage’s own history survived Rome’s devastation. Miles, who has directed British archaeological excavations in Carthage, surveys our current state of knowledge, beginning with the city’s origins as a North African trading outpost (where the Phoenicians moved their center of gravity in response to pressure from the Assyrian empire). Material evidence recovered from Punic sites sheds light on the Carthaginian lifestyle. Sherds recovered from the ash layer, for example, tell us that South Italian pottery was in vogue when Scipio burned the city. Miles’s interpretation of the “stunning” Sabratha mausoleum reveals “an exciting fusion” of Egyptian, Greek, and unique Punic artistic styles. (20-21) To make his own study *sweat truth*, Miles interweaves modern archaeological discoveries with threads of ancient discussions, teasing out controversies embedded in Greek and Roman writers’ conversations about Carthage. By paying attention to “contradictions and

differences of opinion,” Miles uncovers realities hidden within their “heavily biased accounts.” (13-14)

Miles’s lavish color plates illustrate artifacts of the sort that enthralled Flaubert, when Punic treasures were first being shipped to France. Miles makes marvelous use of the great collection of steles now in the Louvre to reconstruct Carthaginian culture. But he neglects to reveal the amazing story of how these valuable artifacts came to be available to modern scholars. In 1878, the French flagship *Magenta* exploded in the port of Toulon, on the French Riviera. Its precious cargo of 2,080 steles and inscriptions from Carthage sank in the harbor. They remained submerged in the sea for 125 years. Only in 1994 did French divers and archaeologists finally locate the wreck and began bringing up inscribed tablets and statues.

Those “thousands of monuments recording votive offerings to Baal [and] Tanit” (17) are crucial to Miles’s analysis of one of the enduring questions about Carthage, the sacrifice of aristocratic children to the god Baal (or “Moloch,” from *mlk*, offerings of children). The Near Eastern practice of *mlk* is described in the Old Testament and many Greek and Latin writers accused Carthage of this cruel rite. Was this really routine Punic practice? Or was it only a desperate last resort in extraordinary situations? When Baal’s priests order the Carthaginians to burn their children alive to turn the tide of the Mercenary War, Flaubert suggested that young Hannibal (“Grace of Baal”) survived the holocaust because his father sent a poor boy in his place. Did elite families of Carthage actually substitute poor children for their own offspring, as Plutarch claimed?

In the 1920s, an electrifying French discovery in the ruins of Carthage was reported. The precinct of the *tophet* (cemetery/site of child sacrifice) had been found (other *tophets* exist in Punic colonies, eg Sardinia). Thousands of urns with burnt remains of young children, stone tablets carved with the letters MLK, Punic inscriptions dedicating sons to Baal, and a stele with the inscribed image of a priest holding an infant confirmed the identification. Centuries after child sacrifice had faded away in the Near East, notes Miles, Carthage’s elite continued the ritual, especially to avert calamity, not in secret but as a matter of civic pride and preservation. In view of the archaeological evidence, concludes Miles, the accusations of child sacrifice in the ancient sources can no longer “merely brushed aside as anti-Punic slander.” (72). Controversy

persists, however: since the publication of Miles's book, other scholars who examined *tophet* remains continue to dispute their meaning.

According to Livy, Hannibal's father held him over Baal's great furnace and compelled the boy to dedicate his life to fighting the Romans. Miles ignores this myth, but it supports his thesis, based on many other examples, that Carthage was essential to Rome's own development and self-image. According to legend, both great powers were founded in the same year, 753 BC. By insisting that evil Carthage inculcated its children with eternal hatred and vows to destroy Rome, Romans justified their own compulsion to crush Carthage as their most dangerous enemy. In fact, as Miles makes clear and as even some Romans recognized, Carthage was too important to Rome's destiny to forget: Carthage was truly "the whetstone on which Rome's greatness had been sharpened." (8)

Both Rome and Carthage understood the importance of mythology, demonstrated in Miles's analysis of the tug of war over possession of the mythic hero Hercules. Rome liked to claim the Greek champion Hercules as an ancestor; his famous travels and exploits around the ancient world, from the Caucasus and Scythia to Greece and Italy, across North Africa to the Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar), reflected their own imperial ambitions (curiously, Miles's map of "the Heraclean Way" omits the hero's route across North Africa, where he defeated the giant Antaeus). (98) The Roman Republic's imperialism was driven by military invasion, occupation, looting, slavery, and harsh taxation of defeated subjects. Exploration for its own sake was not valued (as it was in Carthage, whose peaceful voyages of discovery established mutually beneficial trade relationships). Notably, the Carthaginians assimilated the wandering Greek hero to their Punic god Melqart. Hannibal, master propagandist, turned the tables on Rome, by successfully appropriating Hercules as his own guardian-guide. To Rome's great consternation, Hannibal's conquests retraced Hercules' mythical sea and land routes, justifying Carthaginian dominance in North Africa, Spain, and Italy itself.

In recovering Carthaginian culture from artistic, architectural, archaeological, and literary evidence, Miles reveals a city of "extraordinary eclecticism and openness to new influences and ideas." (19) The seafaring Phoenicians had invented the alphabet and the dominant warships of classical antiquity. As early as the

eighth century BC, notes Miles, they established colonies in the western Mediterranean (Sicily, Sardinia) and North Africa, and sailed beyond the Pillars of Hercules into the Atlantic, establishing the trading city of Gades (Cadiz, Spain, where *garum*, Rome's notorious rotten fish sauce, originated). Carthage continued to be "the pacesetter in naval technological innovation" (177) and perfected the use of elephants in warfare. As sea adventurers, they had no equals.

One of the most fascinating sections of Miles's book discusses the ancient evidence for two fifth-century BC Carthaginian expeditions along the Atlantic coasts of Europe and West Africa. Himilco's voyage went north, making contact with peoples of what is now Spain, Portugal, France, Ireland, and Cornwall. Hanno's expedition, a "flotilla of sixty-five oared ships with 30,000 men and women" and supplies (84) traveled from Carthage to Morocco and Mauritania, establishing settlements. Continuing south past the Canary Islands, modern Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and Gabon, the explorers encountered remarkable sights, animals, and peoples. The purpose of Carthaginian Atlantic expeditions is debated, but it seems clear that trade was involved. Miles cites a striking passage in Herodotus (ca 450 BC), describing in detail the unique system of barter based on mutual trust and fair exchange developed by the Carthaginians to facilitate trade with various West African tribes. Upon reaching this land, "the Carthaginians unload their goods, arrange them in orderly fashion along the beach, and send a smoke signal." The natives, writes Herodotus, come to examine the goods, "place on the ground a certain quantity of gold in exchange," then retreat. The Carthaginians "come ashore and assess the gold. If it is a fair price for their wares, they collect it and depart. If the gold seems too paltry, they go back to their ships and wait for the natives to add more gold." The system is "perfectly honest," remarks Herodotus, "for the Carthaginians do not touch the gold until it equals the goods' value and the natives never touch the wares until the gold is taken." Miles raises questions about the regularity of such trade, but Herodotus's report of the bartering ritual suggests that the Carthaginians and Africans expected return visits.

At any rate, Miles's conclusion is convincing: Carthage's foreign relations with indigenous groups "stands in stark contrast to the power politics" of Rome's plunder and subjugation policies (95). Carthage created a "middle ground on which Phoenician, Greek and indigenous populations interacted and cooperated." (43)

The “antiquity and intensity of the hatred that historically existed between Carthage and Rome” (367) arose from profound cultural differences, amplified by bitter propaganda, combined with Rome’s intolerance of peaceful coexistence with a powerful rival and the Carthaginian response. The symbolism each assigned to fire offers may some insight into the cultural gulf dividing Rome and Carthage. For Romans, fire’s power was negative, destructive—hence the immolation of Carthage by Scipio. Ironically, in Phoenician belief, fire was restorative, purifying, necessary to generate rebirth. In his conclusion on the legacy of Carthage, Miles uncovers multiple ironies in all the ways that Rome itself maintained the memory of the city they torched, the great empire whose legend would continue to smoulder and flicker for more than 2,000 years. “As long as the Romans needed proof of their greatness, the memory of Carthage would never die.” (373). To draw readers close enough to Carthage to appreciate its radiance—that is what Flaubert, and now Miles, in very different ways and times, have accomplished.

To understand Carthage’s complex legend and elusive reality, readers can learn much from both the historian and the novelist. Thanks to Miles, fortified by his rigorous, alexipharmic scholarship, it is now safe to indulge in the guilty pleasure of rediscovering Flaubert’s long-reviled historical fiction. In *Salammô*’s pages, we can appreciate Flaubert’s bold embrace *and* evasion of Greco-Roman Orientalism, while catching a whiff of the fear and awe that we know Carthage evoked for Romans. Miles’s cool analysis neutralizes the noxious clouds that long obscured Rome’s rival, burnishing Carthage’s tarnished reputation at last. The only dilemma is deciding which book to read first--the poison, or the antidote?