



## **THE LEGENDARY STORY OF THE FOUNDING OF CARTHAGE-BYRSA**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper deals with the origin of the toponym Byrsa rather known as the Byrsa hill, the centre of the Punic Carthage, a hilltop overlooking what is today known as the Gulf of Tunis and whose name is often associated with Carthage (Carthage-Byrsa). This area, a current elegant residential city, offers wonderful vestiges and relics of ancient civilizations.

Indeed, the toponym of Byrsa is closely linked to the story of the founding of the city of Carthage. According to various sources, this story is legendary as it recounts the shrewdness of the Princess Elissa from Tyre (in Lebanon) who came to these shores to set up a new city (Carthage).

Given the various cultures having succeeded (Phoenico-Punic, Roman, Paleochristian, Arabic) and besides the historical depth of Tunisia that they recall, these toponyms represent a part of the national cultural patrimony and serve as a witness to the enduring heritage that needs to be preserved by all means, especially through the standardization of geographical names. In present day Tunisia, they are still an important asset in the tourism development in the country and specifically in the Carthage area.

## THE HISTORY OF CARTHAGE

**Carthage**, in Arabic : قرطاج; in Latin : Carthage, Carthago or Karthago ; in Punic : Kart-Hadasht, is located in the northern suburb of the capital, situated 17km from Tunis with a population of about 21.000. Carthage has been classified a UNESCO world heritage site since 26 October 1979.

Founded in 814 BC by the phoeniciens (Elissa, princess of Tyre), Carthage - or in Punic, Kart- Hadasht, meaning new city or shiny city-, is an extensive archaeological site, located on a hill (Byrsa hill) dominating the Gulf of Tunis and the surrounding plain. Exceptional place of mixing, diffusion and blossoming of several cultures that succeeded one another (Phoenico-Punic, Roman, Paleochristian and Arab), this metropolis and its ports became a major maritime power in the Mediterranean basin, and accordingly a cause of rivalry to Rome which ended with its destruction in 146 BC. The same Romans rebuilt it a century later, and made it one of the largest cities of the Empire –The city of St. Augustin-, which disappeared in the VII century, with the arrival of the Arabs.

The metropolis comprises the vestiges of Punic, Roman, Vandal, Paleochristian and Arab presence. The major known components of the site of Carthage are the acropolis of Byrsa, the Punic ports, the Punic tophet, the Punic necropolises, the Carthage museum, the Roman Amphitheatre, the Antonin baths, the Malaga cisterns, the archeological reserve and the St.Louis Cathedral built by the French in the 1890s on the spot where the French King Louis IX died in 1270.

Other important sites in Carthage that need to be mentioned, are the presidential palace, the Al Abidine mosque built on 2003 in the center of the archeological site of Carthage and the American cemetery called « *North Africa American Cemetery and Memorial* », where rest 2,841 American military dead, who lost their lives in World War II in military activities ranging from North Africa to the Persian Gulf.

## THE LEGEND OF BYRSA

Byrsa was the walled citadel above the harbour in ancient Carthage. It was also the name of the hill it rested on.

According to some sources, the name is derived from the Phoenician word for *citadel* ; according to others it is a corruption of Barsat, which means *stronghold* in Phoenician (referring to the 55 meters hill' altitude), whereas in other sources it means *oxhide*.

The last interpretation (oxhide) for Byrsa could be related to the legend of Queen Elissa (Queen Dido in Roman; Deido in Greek and Didon in Latin) whose life details are sketchy and confusing: the beautiful Elissa and her brother Pygmalion were the children heirs of king Matten of Tyre. Fearing her brother who had murdered her husband in hopes of gaining his wealth, Elissa left Tyre with a group of followers including some senators.

The exiles, while passing through Cyprus, seized some other persons mainly women to increase their number.

In Virgil and Justin's accounts of Dido's founding of Carthage, when Dido and her followers arrived on the coast of North Africa, they encamped at Byrsa. The local Berber chieftain offered them as much land as could be covered with a single oxhide. Therefore, Dido cut an

oxhide into tiny strips and set them on the ground end to end until she had completely encircled Byrsa. This story is considered apocryphal, and was most likely invented because *Byrsa* sounds similar to the Greek word *βύρσα*, meaning *oxhide*. (This event is commemorated in modern mathematics: The "isoperimetric problem" of enclosing the maximum area within a fixed boundary is often called the "Dido Problem" in modern Calculus of variations. *It has to be noted that an international conference on the isoperimetric problem of Queen Dido and its mathematical ramifications was held in Tunis from 21 to 29 May 2010*).

Many of the locals joined the settlement and both, locals and envoys from the nearby Phoenician settlement of Utica, urged the building of the city of Carthage-Byrsa. While digging the foundations, an ox's head was found, indicating a promising fertile soil but doomed to perpetual slavery. So they carried the city to another location. There they found a horse's head, which meant that the people would be powerful. Then the city was put on this spot of favorable omen.

The creation of this legend ended sadly because Elyssa threw herself into the fire. In some accounts it was to protect her city and remain faithful to her husband, after the king Hiarbas asked her for marriage. In others, it was because she was unable to endure her abandonment by Aeneas, the famous Trojan hero, with whom she fell in love when he stopped on the shores of North Africa after a storm but who had to resume his journey to found a new city in Italy, Rome.

Many sites (residences, hotels, restaurants, streets...) are today named after Elissa, Didon and others, to pay homage to these heroes and their civilizations, which have made out of Carthage, a place that will always continue to nourish the universal imagination with its literary and historical renown.

### **THE REBIRTH OF BYRSA: THE BOY OF BYRSA**

An important historical event, that has brought the toponym of Byrsa to the fore, is the fortuitous discovery in 1994 of a sepulchre of a young man on the southern flank of the Byrsa hill, which is one of the most famous sites of antique Carthage. A joint Franco-Tunisian team moved in to excavate. An anthropological study of the skeleton showed that the man's bones were more than 2,500 years old, that he died sometime in the 6th century between the age of 19 and 24, had a pretty robust physique and was 1.7 meter tall, according to a description by Jean Paul Morel, director of the French archaeological team at Carthage Byrsa.

The man from Byrsa has been rebaptised *Ariche* -- meaning *the desired man* -- at the initiative of the Tunisian Culture Minister. Ariche has regained an almost living human appearance very close in physiognomy to a Carthaginian of the 6th century B.C after a dermoplastic reconstruction undertaken in Paris by Elisabeth Daynes, a sculptor specialising in hyper-realistic reconstructions.

Repatriated on September 24, Ariche will be on show in the Carthage museum at Byrsa until the end of March 2011 when he will travel to Lebanon, the land of the Phoenicians who founded Carthage, for an exhibition at the American University of Beirut.

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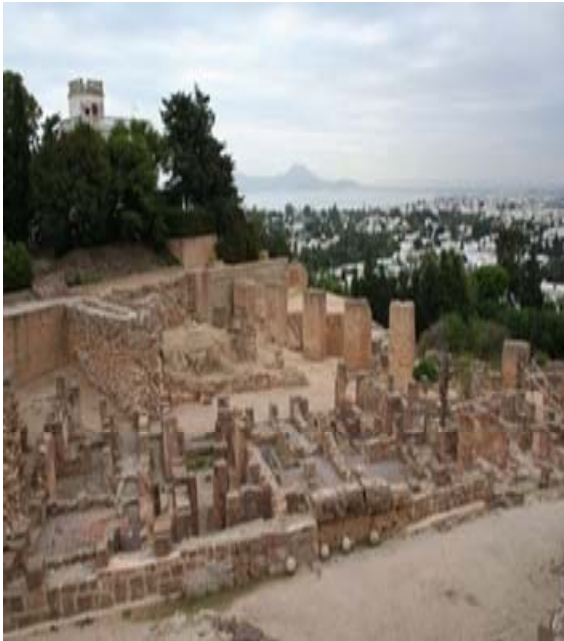
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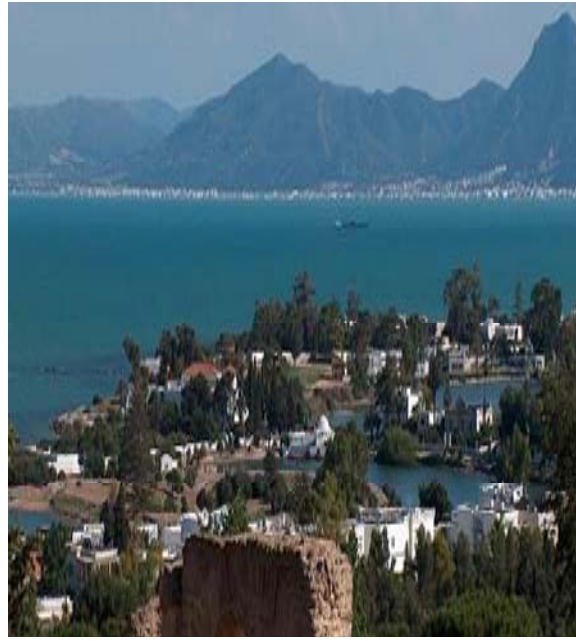
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## Photos of Carthage-Byrsa



The very best preserved part of Punic Quarter of ancient Carthage

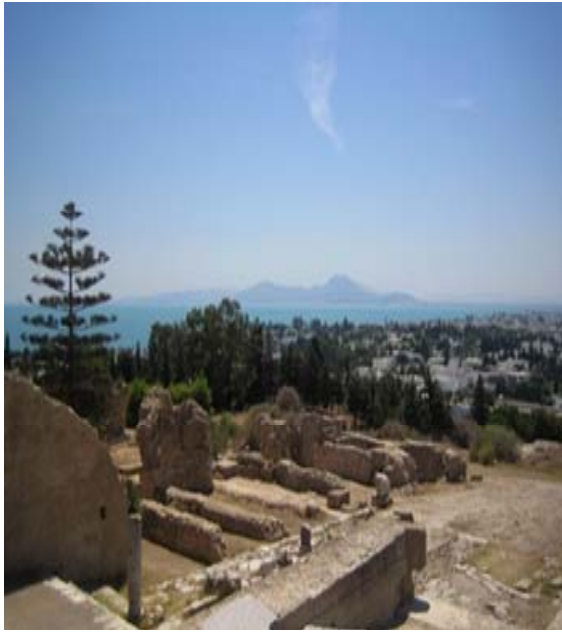


The Punic harbour seen from Byrsa hill



The Thermal Antonine Baths





The Roman necropolis at ancient Carthage



Tophet with child sacrifice



The Cathedral St Louis



The Al Abidine Mosque



The North Africa American cemetery and memorial



(Before )

The Boy of Byrsa



(After dermoplastic reconstruction)