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What the people of Utica (Tunisia) ate at a banquet in the 9th century BCE. Zooarchaeology of a North African early Phoenician settlement

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ABSTRACT

In the paper are presented the results of a faunal set from the recent excavations at the Phoenician colony of Utica (Tunis). The set is composed by 536 fragments of bones found in an abandoned Phoenician water pit, filled intentionally with bones of consumed animals, drinking cups, plates, and bowls, as well as amphorae of Phoenician, Geometric Greek, Sardinian and Lybic productions. The hypothesis is that the well possibly was filled with the remains of a ritual banquet in which oxen, caprinae, pigs, horse and domestic dog were consumed. Another species such as turtle and African elephant complete this ancient faunal set. C14 dating samples from the deposit points to the last quarter of cal 10th century BCE to the middle of cal 9th century BCE, as the initial period of Phoenician presence in the Western and Central Mediterranean. So the faunal remains are for the moment the oldest in a Phoenician settlement in North Africa and Central Mediterranean area.

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1. Introduction

The archaeological site of Utica is 37°03′31 N and 10°03′47 E, on the North of Tunisia, perched on a promontory located at what used to be the mouth of the Bagradas river, which nowadays is completely filled in (Fig. 1) (Delile et al., 2015). Ancient Utica was one of the oldest Tyrian settlements in the Western Mediterranean reaching BC 1110 according to Phoenician traditions passed on by classical literature (Ps. Aristotle, *Mir Ausc* 134, Flavius Josephus *Against Apion* I, 18; Velleius Paterculus I, 2, 3, Plin. *Nat. His.* XVI, 216). Excavations in Utica during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century uncovered the Phoenician-Punic necropolis and the Roman city. New research in 2003 (Ben Jerbania and Redissi, 2014) and the Tunisian-Spanish project launched in 2010 (López Castro et al., 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016) have found remains from a very early Phoenician stage in Utica, testifying the existence of an early colonial horizon. The beginning of Western Phoenician colonization has been archaeologically dated to the first half of the 8th century BCE and extended from Phoenicia to the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, Sicily, Malta and Sardinia. Phoenicians founded colonies to obtain raw materials, to establish trade between western areas and the Levant and for the exploitation of local resources (Aubet, 2009; Bondí et al., 2009). Recent archaeological discoveries in the South of the Iberian Peninsula at Huelva (Gonzalez et al., 2004), La Rebanadilla (Sanchez et al., 2012) and at the sanctuary of El Carambolo have demonstrated the existence of an early colonial horizon from 9th century BCE which has provided C14 calibrated dates between the late 11th and late 9th centuries BCE, changing the chronology of the early Iron Age in the Western Mediterranean. The content of a closed hoard with an interesting collection of ceramic and faunal remains was documented in the 2012–2015 Utica excavations in a reused well, dated to the earliest colonial phase, recording the oldest Phoenician presence in North Africa and Central Mediterranean (López Castro et al., 2016).

1.1. The archaeological context

The excavation campaigns carried out in Utica in 2012–2015 uncovered a very ancient Phoenician architectural complex, still in the process of being excavated, made up of a building found in a very upper layer, tampered by old and modern plundering ditches, as well as foundations of other lost buildings. To the south of the building, a deep, almost round circular pit of about three meters in diameter opens up, excavated in the natural clay substrate. The pit reaches 3.94 m depth from the surface

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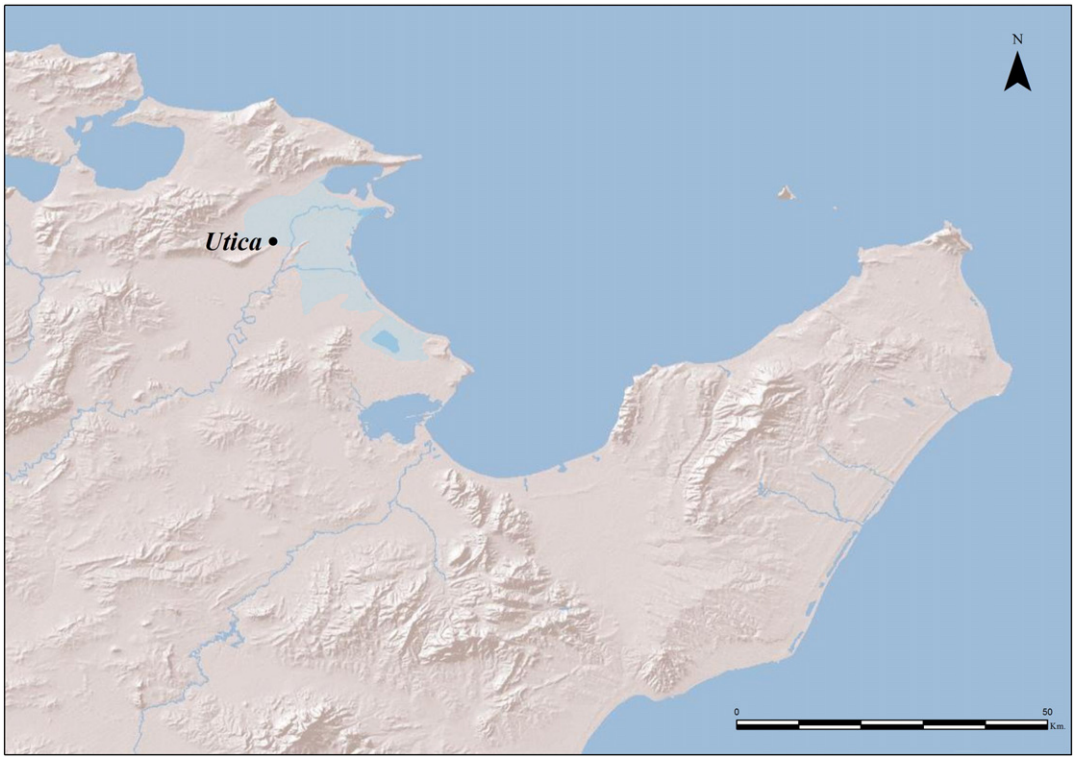

Fig. 1. Situation of Utica. (Ancient Bay of Utica is coloured in blue).

(1.18 m a.s.l.) (Fig. 2). A rich collection of anthropic remains was found inside: Phoenician, Sardinian, Greek geometric, Villanovian and local Libyan ceramics whose main functions were liquid storage, drinking cups and plates (Fig. 3) (López Castro et al., 2016). Also, abundant faunal and some construction remains like adobe and traces of lime, all compacted in ash- and coal-stained soil, were recovered. Finding these cup fragments deposited at different depths inside the pit and documented evidence of anatomically connected skeletal remains, as well as the chronological uniformity of the ceramic set, evidences that the pit was intentionally filled in a short time. The hypothesis that we admit is that it could possibly be a well given the nature of the geological substrate. Use of water was very important in Phoenician and Punic societies and wells and water pits used to be sacred places and were related to sanctuaries (Groenewoud, 2001: 146). For unknown reasons, perhaps salinization caused by a drought and by its proximity to the Bagradas estuary and the Utica bay, the pit was closed, possibly in a ritualistic way, like other water pits in Phoenician sanctuaries (Nigro, 2014; Spagnoli, 2014). The ritual could imply the celebration of a collective banquet, as the content of the Utica water pit suggests.

Fig. 2. Archaeological excavation at Utica in 2014 season: the pit well 20,017 besides the remains of a Phoenician building.

1.2. Radiocarbon dating of the faunal collection and the context

We have obtained a series of radiocarbon dates on grain seeds from the pit filling in UE 20017 cut 20. The series consists of three very homogeneous radiocarbon datings (Table 1).

Maximum oscillation is in 1013–828 cal BCE in *Intcal98* or 1025–832 cal BCE in *Intcal13* (Reimer et al., 2013): i.e., there is a 95% chance that the date is between the end of 11th. century cal BCE at the end of 9th century cal BCE in the average probability distribution, while the intercept points in the calibration curve point to the last quarter of 10th century cal BCE, 900–925 cal BCE.

This series is almost identical to the two dates from Phase IV of La Rebanadilla in Malaga (Sanchez et al., 2012: 69) (Table 1). The intercept points on the calibration curve are located between 935 and 900 cal BCE, contemporary to the filling of Utica's 20,017 pit. The Utica and La Rebanadilla dating series points to the last quarter of 10th century cal BCE, or perhaps even the middle of 9th century cal BCE, as the initial period of Phoenician presence in the Western and Central Mediterranean.

2. Material and methods

The set studied concerns the mammal remains that have been found till now. From a methodological approach, all dental and bone elements identifiable both at a generic and a specific level (genus and species) have been taken into account, exempting vertebrae and ribs (with exception of the cervical vertebrae, which features are more characteristic). The total Number of Identified Remains is 536 (NIR). The calculation of Minimal Number of Individuals (MNI) was also considered and quantified on the basis of the anatomic element more abundant for each species, although the NIR is in the limit of significance

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