

The most defining aspect of this city was that it was built on Byrsa Hill, well back from the shore. This broke with the long-established Phoenician tradition of building each city on an island if it was available or, if not, then on a promontory that extended into the sea. This tradition, of course, reflected their deeply held orientation to the sea. It placed the highest importance on closeness to the harbor and to their escape route across the sea in case of attack. The people of Carthage began with a clear statement that they were choosing a high ground from which they could defend their surrounding lands.

Nor was this the only way their settlement differed from the other colonies. This was not a modest handful of traders with a few ships. They had no intention of creating a crude port that would require several hundred years to grow into a significant city. Instead, they put shipload after shipload of colonists ashore at Carthage on the first day. And the colonists were outrageously rich. Together they brought a significant portion of the whole wealth of Tyre, the greatest Phoenician city of that time. This new community on the coast of North Africa burst into prominence immediately after it was founded, and quickly eclipsed neighboring Utica up the coast. That older city remained significant but definitely secondary to this powerful young player in the western Mediterranean.

The magnificent beginning of this legendary city was artfully captured by J. M. W. Turner in his acclaimed painting with the rambling title, "Dido [Elissa] Building Carthage; or, the Rise of the Carthaginian Empire," which now resides at the National Gallery in London.

It is only natural, of course, that legends sprang up around the founding of this great city and the empire that it would soon lead. As always, these legends mixed some facts with some mythology, and became entertaining stories that only grew more dramatic as time went on. These legends revolved around Elissa—who was also called Dido ("the wanderer") because of her indirect voyage from Tyre to Carthage. The earliest known account of her adventures was written by Timaeus of Sicily between 356-200 BC; and though it has since been lost, it was used and referenced by others. He dated the founding of Carthage to 814 BC, which has come to be the commonly accepted date.

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For many years, the people of Carthage had settlements all around the nearby island of Sicily. Then the Greeks arrived in 734 BC and took over the eastern part of Sicily by force. The next page picks up the course of events at this point.

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The most immediate result of this Greek entry into the Phoenician-held middle of the Mediterranean was a new emphasis on permanent Phoenician colonies at every place where their interests were involved. Efforts were redoubled to develop colonies across the southern coast of Europe, which reportedly included a settlement made as a joint venture with the Gauls in France that would become the city of Marseilles. The Phoenicians also quickly embedded additional settlements along the north coast of Africa. But the most visible and closest point of prolific expansion was on the neighboring island of Sardinia.

The long-standing Phoenician outposts at Nora and Cagliari near the southern tip of the island—and the harbor on the isle of Sulci just off the southwestern coast—were now reinforced. They were also joined by a plethora of new settlements across the whole southern half of the island. Over the next hundred years, this colonization spread not just along the shores but also deep into the interior. The Phoenicians left no room for easy incursions onto this key island which lay between Sicily and Spain—not by the Greeks or anyone else.

This strong focus on acquiring land was not the only way in which the people of Carthage began to modify the long-standing Phoenician practices. Since the earliest days, each member of the Phoenician society had a say in the governing of his or her city and in the trade that it conducted. This was traditionally carried out through the council members they selected, the king who was chosen to lead the city, and large meetings of all the people when appropriate and necessary. Carthage kept alive this principle of equality and government by the people, but added its own variations.

This Phoenician approach to governing, which allowed people to manage their own affairs, was highly unusual in the ancient world. This was especially true during the centuries before Greece and Rome rose to prominence—a time when lands were usually taken by force and thereafter ruled by kings having absolute power. It was so unusual that the Greek philosopher Aristotle held up the constitution of Carthage as a model of good governance. In the course of doing so, he gave us a wonderfully detailed look inside this part of Phoenician society and the Phoenician way of life, as we see here: