



## Missouri and Ancient Phoenicia Unexpected Connections

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

**A**ncient historians recorded a remarkable tale of a Phoenician princess who fled her tyrant brother and homeland, ultimately bringing her ship to the shores of North Africa, to what is now Tunisia. The woman begged refuge from the local king, requesting only a small parcel of land, as much as could be encompassed by an oxhide. The king agreed, but the woman cleverly shredded the hide into fine strips and encircled a beautiful hill overlooking the sea. Impressed by the woman's ingenuity, the king ceded the land to her. She founded a city on the hill, named it Qart Hadasht (Phoenician for "new city"), and became its queen. The wisdom and guidance of the queen transformed Qart Hadasht into one of the foremost cities of the ancient Mediterranean. Classical authors consistently lauded its beautiful buildings, lush farmland, and fabled wealth. The Romans would conquer it, raze it, and rebuild it, but its first queen and her extraordinary city lived on in memory. Latin speakers garbled Qart Hadasht into "Carthago," which passed into English as "Carthage." Its queen was Dido.

In January of 1841, the Missouri General Assembly established Jasper County, and a site on a rise overlooking the Spring River Valley was selected for the location of the new county seat. That "new city" was called Carthage in honor of the ancient city and its similar setting. Like Dido's city, the Carthage of Jasper County would be destroyed by warfare, burning during the Civil War, only to rise from the ashes like the proverbial phoenix and prosper again. The discovery of lead and zinc brought Carthage staggering wealth, and the town boasted a multitude of millionaires by the 1880s. The discovery of an additional, valuable natural resource invites yet another



David Ligare (American, b. 1945)  
*Dido in Resolve*, 1989  
Oil on canvas  
Gift of Student Capital Fee Improvement Committee (89.6)

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# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

comparison with ancient Carthage. Under the Romans, the region surrounding Carthage became known for a golden-yellow marble,\* extant today in the Pantheon in Rome and Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Missouri Carthaginians discovered that their dense, pearl-gray limestone could not only polish like marble but was also excellent for building. The prized “Carthage marble” was used in many local buildings, the Capitol of Jefferson City, and structures across the country. In the spring of 1953, Carthage was officially recognized as the sister city of ancient Carthage, and the Tunisian government presented the city with a group of antiquities from the ancient site.\*\* A few years later, a series of marble copies of coins from ancient Carthage were created for the newly built Bank of Carthage (now the Jasper County Sheriff’s Office). An electrum *stater* (coin type) with the goddess Tanit served as a model for one of the plaques in the bank’s project; a related bronze coin is in the Museum’s collection.



Jasper County Sheriff’s Office (formerly Bank of Carthage) with exterior marble coin plaques

Dido’s journey from refugee to queen became an enduring tale, the ultimate success story of a woman fleeing oppression to make a new life for herself. But scholars who regard Dido as an historical figure also find her portrayal in the *Aeneid* to be problematic. For those unfamiliar with Vergil’s epic poem, the lovesick queen takes her life after the hero Aeneas abandons her. Since Rome had conquered Carthage by the time Vergil penned his epic (ca. 27–20 BCE), it thus becomes apparent that the purpose of the propagandistic story was to exalt Rome while diminishing those it had conquered. Moreover, Romans cannot have failed to notice that Dido’s role in the *Aeneid* alluded to a recent historical event involving another North African queen: Cleopatra. Cleopatra’s entanglements with Roman men also led to her suicide and the conquest of her country. The publication of the *Aeneid* immediately followed her death in 30 BCE. Coincidence? Surely not. More importantly, modern excavations of Troy and Carthage reveal that a meeting between Aeneas and Dido would have been chronologically impossible. Evidence from ancient Carthage dates its foundation to the late ninth century



Detail of coin plaque above



**Coin with Head of Goddess Tanit**  
Carthaginian, early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE  
From Sardinia  
Bronze  
Museum purchase (72.190)

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# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

BCE. If Dido existed, and really was the city's founder, she would have lived around 815 BCE, whereas Aeneas, a Trojan War survivor, would have lived 400 years earlier, given that archaeology confirms Troy's overthrow to have occurred about 1200 BCE. Vergil would have had little knowledge of that chronology, and the pathetic end he gave to Dido forever overshadowed the rest of her story. When commissioned by the Museum to create a



Reconstructed central court and wall section with painted plaster from the Tel Anafa villa, Universities of Missouri and Michigan joint excavation

painting linking past to present, artist David Ligare chose Dido, a subject from antiquity, but a timeless one representing strength and survival. Ligare's *Dido in Resolve* greeted visitors in the stairwell of Pickard Hall from 1989 until 2013, when the building was closed, and the Museum relocated. The painting hangs today in the Grand Reading Room of Ellis Library on the University of Missouri campus.

A further connection to ancient Phoenicia occurred when University of Missouri archaeologists journeyed to the heart of Dido's homeland to begin excavations of Tel Anafa, an ancient site located on a hill overlooking the Jordan River Valley in northern Israel. Later joined by the University of Michigan, the excavation unearthed a splendid villa with a private bath. Coin evidence indicated the occupants were Phoenicians, while a wealth of imported goods identified them as merchants. In addition to the bath, the villa also featured an opulent, upper-floor room (of unknown function), the walls of which were clad in multicolored plaster molded to look like stone. Gold leaf further embellished some details of the plasterwork. The villa operated from about 125–80 BCE, before political unrest caused its abandonment. The Tel Anafa excavations resulted in a four-volume series on the finds. ■

\*Often called "Chemtou marble" today.

\*\*Currently on display in the City Hall of Carthage. The author thanks Dr. Ervin Dunham (Professor Emeritus, Arkansas State University), Michele Hansford (former director, Powers Museum), and Ben Young (Carthage Public Library) for generously sharing information about the antiquities and related history of Carthage.