

Commemorating Dido

The voice of the Carthaginians, including their city's founder Dido in the 9th century BCE, has been almost completely silenced. They were colonists from the city of Tyre in Lebanon. They called themselves Canaanites, but are known as Phoenicians, the name the Greeks gave them. It means 'Purple people', associating them with one of their most valuable exports, the costly indigo dye made from shells.

Dido founded a dazzling civilisation at Carthage. From the Bronze Age until 146 BCE, the Phoenicians shared power in the Mediterranean with the Greeks and subsequently the Romans. For centuries they were the dominant power in the Levant, North Africa, Spain, and the western islands. They were incomparable seafarers, traversing major sea-routes in their cedar-wood ships, their sterns shaped like the heads of birds or horses. They designed exquisite ceramics. They constructed lofty temples and sculpted exotic beasts and palm trees. They were highly literate, invented the phonetic alphabet (the ancestor of their own), and wrote hymns to their gods, Tanit, Astarte and Baal. Their poems related the deeds of their hero, Melqart (the Romans' Hercules). They wrote handbooks on the arts of civilisation, navigation and gardening. Saint Augustine, himself a North African, later said that there had been 'great wisdom' in the Phoenicians' missing books.

The descendants of Dido's brother, the Barca family, were brilliant military strategists. In 218 BCE, Hannibal invaded Italy with his elephants and nearly vanquished the Romans altogether. It was in revenge for their terror that the Romans decided to annihilate Carthage. Scipio led the siege. The magnificent Carthaginian fleet was fired in their historic harbour. Every building was destroyed. The images of the gods were looted, the people murdered or enslaved. Even the fields were said to have been poisoned with salt. The Carthaginian library, containing centuries of literature, and the truth about Dido, were wiped from the face of history.

When Marlowe came to write his tragedy of Dido in the late 16th century, Elizabeth I, another enterprising queen of a nation of mariners, was on the English throne. Marlowe used the version of Dido's story he found in the epic *Aeneid*, composed by Virgil. Dido falls in love with the Trojan refugee Aeneas when he arrives in Carthage. He loves her and leaves her, because he is destined to found Rome far away in Italy. She curses his descendants for all time (thus explaining the wars Rome fought with Carthage later).

But Marlowe emphasises Dido's full glory as monarch of a great mercantile kingdom, its towers fast rising to the African skies. He calls the play not *Dido and Aeneas*, but *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. An excellent classical scholar, he also draws on other sources, including the bitter letter which she sends her faithless lover in Ovid's *Heroides*, and Greek epic in his characterisation of the infighting immortals.

Marlowe signals the source of his story to more educated spectators by giving resonant Latin lines from the *Aeneid* to the warring couple in their final showdown. The interchange crystallises Aeneas' insensitivity. 'If ever I deserved well of you, or was in any way pleasing to you, pity this ruined household. If there is any room left for my prayers, change your mind!' pleads Dido. 'Stop inflaming us both with your complaints. I'm not aiming for Italy voluntarily', he retorts. The other occasion when Marlowe uses the Latin is even more significant. As Dido prays that a conqueror will arise from her ashes to avenge her, she curses Rome: 'Let seashore oppose seashore, breaker oppose wave, arms oppose arms; let our descendants be at war!'

But Virgil, and Marlowe, are doing Dido an injustice. The Carthaginians' own version of the life of Dido, whom they called Elissa, is different. Elissa existed a lifetime earlier than the fall of Troy, long before Rome was even thought of, and never met Aeneas. As a young widow, she led Phoenician nobles to Tunisia from treachery in Tyre, and with courage and intelligence

built up Carthage from scratch. She was heroically loyal to her people, and fought tenaciously in order to secure their independence and magnificent future when the king of a neighbouring realm put pressure on her to marry and submit her subjects to him.

Virgil changed the story in order to portray Dido as the prototype of Cleopatra, whose Egyptian kingdom, and hopes of running the entire Roman Empire from Alexandria, had in 31 BCE been destroyed by Augustus. The *Aeneid* was commissioned to celebrate Augustus' achievements. So Dido was framed by Roman imperialism. But there is a way in which Marlowe's tragedy, despite dramatizing Virgil's version, allows us to remember Elissa and her dream of a great North African civilisation, even though the truth of this quest heroine's leadership has been obscured in the cultural record. She owns the stage. She delivers some of the greatest verse in the English language. Marlowe's eloquent Dido ensures that even if she has been misrepresented, she will never be entirely forgotten.