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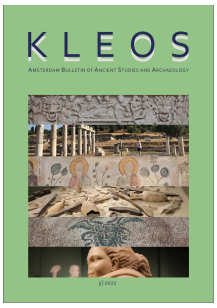

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Ethical Considerations in Narratives of Death: The Case of the Tophet

Sara Mura

Abstract

Ethics have become a hot topic in the field of mortuary archaeology. Yet, while a lot has been said on the excavation, processing and display of human remains, the narrative(s) based on implications of published studies for the deceased and their culture have been mostly neglected.[1]

This paper takes its cue from Pluciennik's (2015) ethical assumptions regarding the narrative means of archaeological communication by re-addressing them to the death-related narrative of the Phoenician-Punic tophet, an open-air sanctuary used for the deposition of infants.[2] In their role of writers, archaeologists have the power (i.e. agency) to use narratives for presenting their data and outlining their results. From an ethical perspective, their approach to narratives raises questions on the responsibilities and limitations in the way the story of the dead is told.

In the case of the tophet, the plot linked to the burial of infants, who were presumably sacrificed through fire to seek the protection of deities, has become the central act of a meta-narrative spread over thousands of years, from biblical passages to present-day archaeological research. The development of these associated narratives has eventually affected the perception of these historical cultures by both scholars and the general public, as the Phoenician-Punic belief system has often been considered 'despicable'.

By retracing the development of such narratives from the ancient sources to the present-day archaeological application, I aim to use the tophet as a case study to exceed the traditional materialistic approach to ethics in archaeology and refine the scholarly understanding of how we, as archaeologists, negotiate

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▶ *Profile page*

1 For examples of ethics in the excavation, processing and display of human remains see Sayer 2010.

2 See Pluciennik 2015.

and communicate a sensitive past through an analysis of narrative agency and dynamics among writer, character, and reader.

Introduction: The significance of narrative in understanding the past

The concept of narrative has been introduced to the study of archaeology during the 1960s-1970s, with the purpose of elaborating plots and characters in order to contextualise archaeological discoveries.[3] Since then, fictive stories, dialogues, visual performances, and multimedia contents have served as an instrument to better comprehend archaeological remains.[4] The recourse to these narratological tools has, however, pulled archaeology within a large debate on the ontological implications of humanities-based academics' role as 'writers of the past'.[5] The combination between narrative and empirical, source-based attested and verified data has irremediably raised questions on the necessity to draw a line between past and story, science and narration. In their role of authoritative voices, archaeologists' work too has become subject to the scrutiny for signs of subjectivisms, emotional and ethical implications.[6] Still, the discussion has not comprised all subfields of archaeology and this paper makes a niche for itself by focusing on the ethical ramifications of the use of narratives in mortuary archaeology.

Ethical considerations apply particularly to the mortuary archaeology field, where ethical concerns have mostly regarded the physical approach to human remains: the recovery, investigation, storage, and display of the dead. Such focus has led many scholars to debate on the political implications of archaeological activity and the necessity for the 'best practice' codes.[7] Yet, the ethical implications of the use of narratives to give the dead a voice by telling their stories, is still understudied.[8]

This paper is based on Pluciennik's research on the ethical implications of the use of narratives by archaeologists as means of communication by re-addressing them to the death-related narrative of the Phoenician-Punic tophet.[9] In their role as writers, archaeologists determine the way characters' behaviours are

3 In this paper, the term 'narrative' is used to indicate a story/plot involving one or more characters who act through a related series of events, that are systematically presented to explain and determine the ways in which the world is experienced. The analysis of the structure of the narrative is known as narratology (Pluciennik 1999, 654–655; Praetzellis 2014).

4 Praetzellis 2014.

5 Cf. White 1973; Munslow 2007.

6 Cf. Holtorf 2010; Williams 2019.

7 Cf. Zimmermam 1998; Sayer 2010; González-Ruibal 2018.

8 See footnote 5.

9 See Pluciennik 2015.

comprehended, negotiated, and divulged to readers. Thus, ethics are an essential topic to be included in the academic debate as a means to refine our understanding of the responsibilities and limitations in the way stories about the past are told.

What is the role of archaeologists when interpreting and expressing death-related topics through narrative? How can the discussion about the ethics of using narratives (in the dissemination of knowledge through written academic forms) refine our understanding of the dynamics between archaeology, the public, and the people of the past? This paper intends to explore these questions by examining the notions of the agency of archaeological narratives and the narratological dynamics involving the writer (i.e. the archaeological scholar), the character/narrative (i.e. the reconstruction of the past), and the reader (i.e. the wider public).

I present the case of the Phoenician-Punic tophet as an extreme example of how later narratives about a particular mortuary ritual linked to the practice of child sacrifice and burial has defined, over centuries, an entire culture. Used as a grand, long-lasting 'story' from biblical passages to present-day archaeological research, the plot linked to the open-air sanctuary has become part of a meta-narrative, which is difficult to elude.[10] Ethical considerations on the responsibilities and limitations in its use aid in illustrating these dynamics. In fact, they help us rethink archaeological practice and the current academic debate on ethics in mortuary archaeology.

After contextualising the case of the tophet by providing a historical and archaeological background, I will illustrate how its archaeological study has been intertwined with its history of previous historical, literary narratives. I will then proceed to discuss how ethical considerations represent a way to refine our understanding of the archaeological process in using and presenting data.

Reconstructing the 'story' of the tophet

Archaeological Evidence

The history of Phoenician and Punic heritage has not been passed to us by direct written sources, but through archaeological remains and indirect written sources. Originally from the region corresponding approximately to present-day Lebanon, Phoenicians colonised the Mediterranean between the second half of the 9th

10 A meta-narrative is a grand story that attempts to provide a comprehensive, universal account to various events expressed through narratives. In simple words, it can be described as a narrative about narratives (Pluciennik 1999, 656).

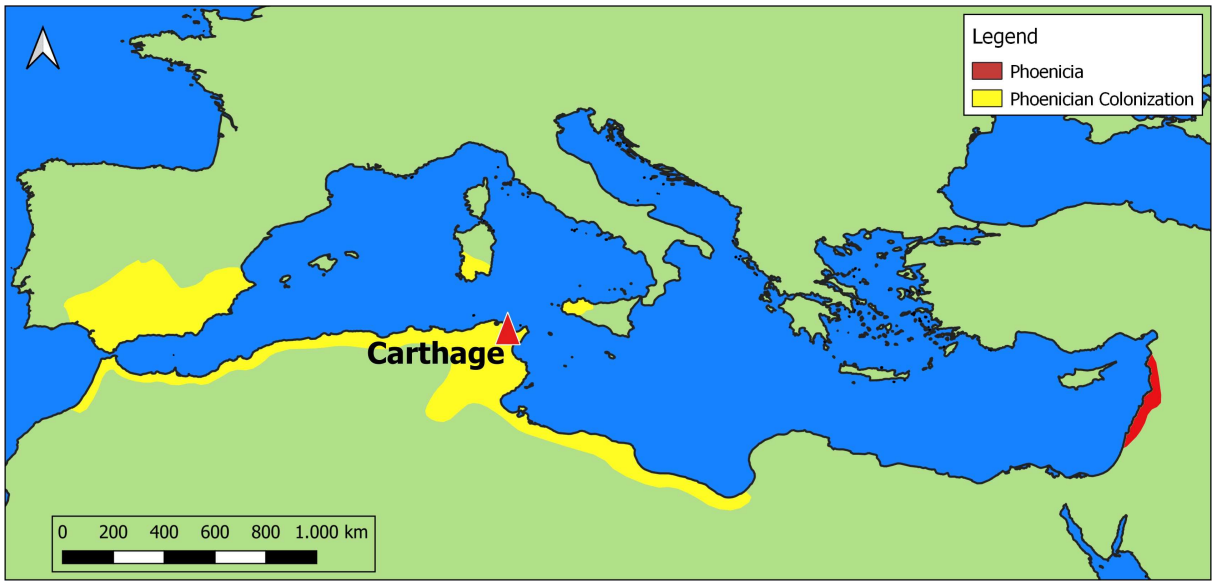

Figure 1.
Map of the Mediterranean showing the location of Phoenicia and the areas colonized by Phoenicians between 9th-6th century BCE (created by author; map courtesy of Natural Earth via QGIS).

and the mid-6th centuries BCE (figure 1).[11] It is towards the end of the 9th century BCE, that the foundation of Carthage is currently dated: a cosmopolitan colony on the modern Tunisian coast inhabited by Phoenicians and North Africans. This Punic metropolis developed into a naval and military power and colonised the western Mediterranean between the 6th and 2nd centuries BCE (figure 2).[12]

The spread of open-air sanctuaries dedicated to infant burials was simultaneous to the Punic colonisation throughout the central Mediterranean (figure 3).[13] Although areas of infant cremations had been identified since the 19th century, which lead archaeologists to presume the existence of tophets as mentioned in the literature, it is the excavation of the burials at Carthage in 1921 that turned the spotlight on the Phoenician-Punic heritage.[14] The finding of the well-preserved sanctuary triggered an academic debate on the cause of death of the children and the implication of the ritual

11 Cf. Aubet Semmler 2019; Killebrew 2019.

12 The chronology of Carthage's foundation is based on the radiocarbon dating of faunal remains discovered at the site (Docter et al. 2008, 382–384). In regards to the period of Punic colonisation, see Dridi 2019, 149–150. The map shows the extent of the Punic colonization around 270 BCE, before the First Punic War, when Corsica, Sardinia and Sicily were still under Carthage's control.

13 Nine sanctuaries are commonly recognized as proper Phoenician-Punic tophets: Tharros, Monte Sirai, Sulky, Bithia, Nora, Cagliari in Sardinia; Motya in Sicily; Carthage and Sousse/Hadrumentum in Tunisia (Xella 2013, 261). No tophet has been found in the Near East proper. Several tophet-type sanctuaries have been identified in North Africa, dating between the 3rd century BCE and 2nd century AD (D'Andrea 2014). However, as this paper focuses on the representation of Phoenician-Punic culture and they were in use after the end of Punic period, they have not been included in this paper.

14 Punic funerary markers were discovered since 1817 but scientific excavations started only in 1922 (Bénichou-Safar 2004, 1; D'Andrea 2018, 7–33, 61–62 and mentioned bibliography).

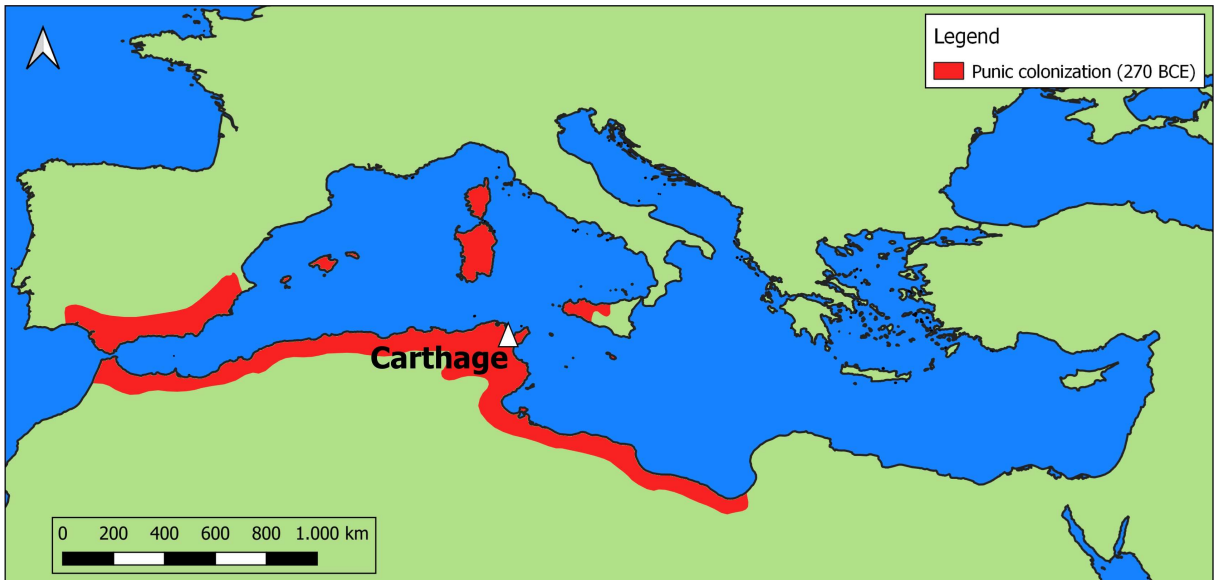

Figure 2.
Map of the Mediterranean showing Punic colonization around 270 BCE (created by author; map courtesy of Natural Earth via QGIS).

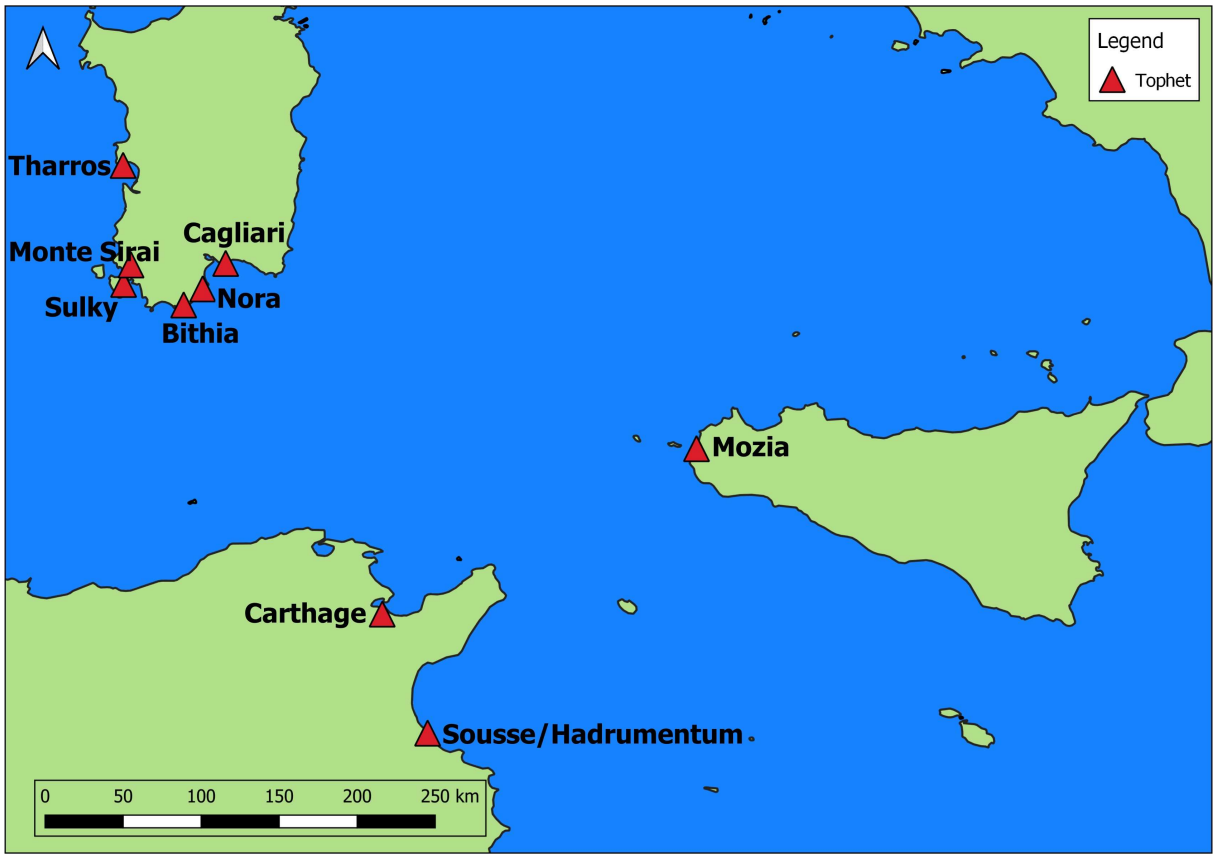

Figure 3.
Map of the central Mediterranean showing the location of the nine (officially) identified tophets (created by author; map courtesy of Natural Earth via QGIS).

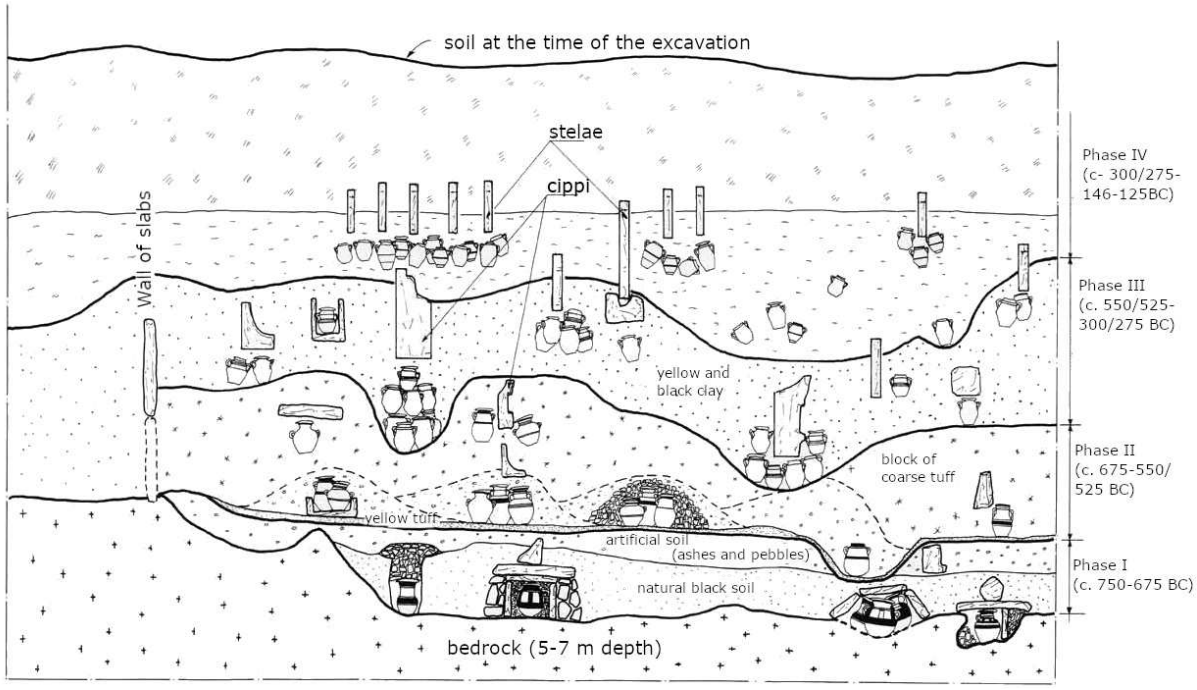

Figure 4.
Carthage, tophet: stratigraphic scheme (adapted from Bénichou-Safar 2004, plate XXV).

itself, and that is still ongoing.[15]

The Tunisian site presents features that recur at other Phoenician colonies such as Motya in Sicily and Tharros in Sardinia: located in an enclosed, peripheral area of the settlement, urns containing the cremated remains of infants and/or vegetal and animal remains were deposited into pits cut into the bedrock or inside 'small chests' made of stone slabs (figure 4).[16]

Occasionally, unburned personal items, such as jewellery and amulets, were deposited inside the urns. Covered with soil, the depositions were overlapped by stone elements of various forms (pillars, thrones, stelae) carved with iconographies and inscriptions in honour of the deity Baal Hammon and Tinnit (figure 5).[17] The

15 See D'Andrea 2018; McCarty 2019; Xella 2020 for a review on the debate.

16 Among the animal remains, it has been possible to identify the following species: mostly young ovicaprine, but also cow, pig, fish, bird and seldomly wild animals such as deer (D'Andrea 2018, 21–22). For a detailed description of Carthage's tophet and its excavations, see D'Andrea 2018, 61–62 and mentioned sources.

17 Regarding the markers at Carthage (including the study of the engraved decorations and inscriptions), as well as the matter on the disproportional number between markers and urns and their relationship, see Bénichou-Safar 1988; Docter et al. 2003; Quinn 2011; Stager 2014; McCarty 2019.

content of the inscriptions is highly debated.[18] Traditionally, it is interpreted as consisting of the name of the dedicant, a dedicatory formula, and the final invocation of a vow establishing a contract between the dedicant and the deities: once the demand of the worshipper had been granted, a sacrifice, i.e. the child, was offered in return. The term indicating the ritual (or offering), mlk, has been translated as 'sacrifice/offering', but whether this act consisted either of the killing of the infant, the deposition of the urn or the animal sacrifice, is still unclear.[19] The place of the ritual was indicated in the epigraphies as bt, which has been translated as temple, or sanctuary.[20] Apparently, the sacred area could not be moved and once the maximum capacity was reached, a layer of soil was deposited on top of the previous level and used for new burials.[21]

The evidence indicates, irrefutably, that the tophet was not a mere cemetery, but a sacred area linked to a religious cult. Yet, the interpretation of this cult – whether associated with child sacrifice – is still highly debated.[22] The aim of this paper, however, is not to establish whether the blood ritual took place or not, but to investigate the complexities of the associated narrative. The hypothesis of the infant sacrifice did not arise exclusively from the archaeological data but was the result of a literary tradition that can be traced back to ancient times.

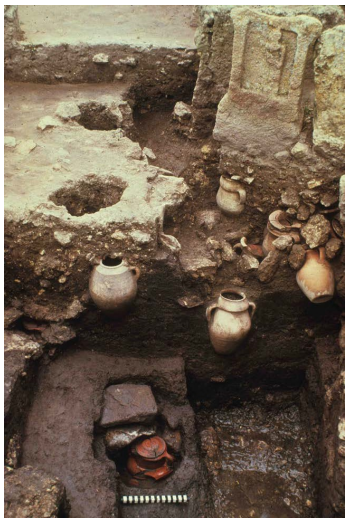

Figure 5.
Carthage, tophet: detail of stratigraphy (c. 800–300 BCE) during excavation (after Stager 2014, 23).

Back to the narrative

The term used by archaeologists to indicate the open-air sanctuary like the one found in Carthage comes from the vocalization of the consonants *tpt*, which are used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to an area in Jerusalem where a foreign ritual was performed involving sons (and daughters) 'burnt as offering' to seek the favour of deities.[23] Unfortunately, it remains unknown how Israelites at the time referred to this sacred place.[24]

18 Regarding the markers at Carthage (including the study of the engraved decorations and inscriptions), as well as the matter on the disproportional number between markers and urns and their relationship, see Bénichou-Safar 1988; Docter et al. 2003; Quinn 2011; Stager 2014; McCarty 2019.

19 Ruiz Cabrero 2008; Amadasi Guzzo/Zamora 2013.

20 Bonnet 2011, 374; Xella 2013, 263–264, 268–269.

21 See note 12.

22 McCarty 2019, 317.

23 The reference to the tophet can be found, among the others, in the following passages: *Deutoronomy* 12, 31 and 18, 9–14; *2 Kings* 23–10; *Jeremiah* 7, 31–2 and 19, 4–6; *2 Chronicles* 33, 6; *Isaiah* 30, 33 and 57, 5–6; *Leviticus* 18, 21 and 20, 2-+5; *Ezekiel* 16, 20–21. See also following footnote 25. For comments on the abovementioned passages, see Xella (2013, 263–265), D'Andrea (2018, 34–53) and mentioned bibliography.

24 Quinn 2011, 404, note 13; McCarty 2019, 313.

Regarding the identification of the deities, a few passages in the book of Jeremiah (19, 4–6; 32, 35) in the Old Testament specifically refers to Baal.[25] In other passages the word mlk is present.[26] As mentioned before, the same word is carved on the funerary markers, but its interpretation differs based on its context. In the Bible, it is commonly interpreted as 'deity' and, likely, 'offering'. With respect to the epigraphies, scholars now tendentially agree in interpreting the word as 'offering'.[27] However, from the Middle Ages (9th–10th century), when the authoritative version of the Hebrew bible was written (i.e. the Masoretic Text), until the 1930s and the new linguistic studies, the word was vocalized as 'Melek' (or 'Moloch') and translated as the name of a pagan god associated to the human sacrifice.[28]

Stories about similar rituals by the Carthaginians were also reported by Greek-Roman authors, who stated they performed them mostly in times of crisis, such as military defeats or plagues.[29] Diodorus (*Library of history*, 20, 6–7) describes the ritual in Baal's honour specifying that: "There was in the city a bronze image of Kronos [i.e., Baal Hammon], extending its hands, palms up and sloping towards the ground, so that each of the children when placed there on rolled down and fell into a sort of gaping pit filled with fire".[30]

A further step in the construction of the analysed narrative occurred in Medieval time with the commentaries to the Masoretic Text, which described Moloch as a humanoid figure with a bovine

25 *Jeremiah* 19, 4–6: "Because the people have forsaken me and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have filled this place with the blood of innocents, and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind – therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the LORD, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnm, but the Valley of Slaughter" (English Standard Version, www.biblia.com). *Jeremiah* 32, 35: "They built the high places of Baal in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin" (English Standard Version, www.biblia.com). For an analysis of these passages, see Xella 2013, 264.

26 *2 Kings* 17, 17; *Jeremiah* 2, 23; 19, 4–6; 32, 35. See Xella (2013) for a review of the biblical passages.

27 See D'Andrea 2018; McCarty 2019; Xella 2020 for a review on the debate.

28 Rabbis assumed that 'Molek' derived from "the Semitic root meaning 'king', that it referred to an idol god" (Heider 1985, 2). For a review of the debate on the term, Heider 1985; Day 1989.

29 Among the others: Cleitarchus, *Fragment* 137 (4th century BCE); Curtius Rufus, *Historiae* 4, 3, 23 (1st century AD); Tertullian, *Apology* 9, 2–4 (end of the 2nd century AD); Justin, *Epitome of The Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus* 18, 6, 9–12; 7, 1–2 (3rd century AD). For a review on the ancient sources: Xella 2009; D'Andrea 2018, 135–139.

30 Translation of Diodorus (1st century BCE) after Geer (1983): "[...] ἦν δὲ παρ' αὐτοῖς ἀνδριὰς Κρόνου χαλκοῦς, ἐκτετακὼς τὰς χεῖρας ὑπτίας ἐγκεκλιμένας ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, ὥστε τὸν ἐπιτεθέντα τῶν παίδων ἀποκυλίεσθαι καὶ πίπτειν εἴς τι χάσμα πλῆρες πυρός".

head.[31] This image became fundamental in the creation of the child sacrifice's narrative, as it affected the modern literature and the popular imagination. While many scholars widely discussed the theological implications of this figure and its association to sacrificial rituals before the archaeological discovery of the tophets, its name started spreading among the general public through literary works, such as John Milton's Paradise Lost (1667).[32] It is with the historical novel Salammbô (1862), by Gustave Flaubert, that the association between the cruel deity and the Phoenician-Punic culture was emphasized. The novel – named after the fictive character of Salammbô, the sister of the chief magistrate of Carthage – was set at the end of the First Punic War (second half 3rd century BCE) in the exotic Tunisian city. In the thirteenth chapter, the author describes how living babies were thrown in the flames in front of the esoteric Moloch's statue. The choice of Flaubert of mixing the biblical sources and the ancient authors appears to be a poetic license to create an epic story.[33] Nonetheless, it enhanced the previous narratives, particularly Diodorus', by using them as historical sources, despite the fact that no archaeological evidence supported the presence of the idol in the Western pantheon.[34] Subsequently, Flaubert's plot was reused by the Italian writer Gabriele D'Annunzio, who wrote the screenplay for one of the first Italian blockbusters, Cabiria ('born from the flame'), directed by G. Pastrone in 1914 (figure 6).[35] The link between the cruel Moloch and the blood sacrifice practiced by the Carthaginians was further emphasized on the big screen.

Figure 6.
Poster of Cabiria by N. Morgello, 1914 (adapted from Library of Congress, ▸ https://www.loc.gov).

These indirect sources show that the 'story' of the sacrifice originated in the Phoenician motherland and, subsequently, spread with the colonization of the Mediterranean. As Carthage became the new military power, the role of main character passed from the Phoenicians (indicated in the Bible as Canaanites) to the Carthaginians. As the story was told by authors of different cultures and times, the deity was identified with different names: from the biblical Baal or Moloch, to the Greek Kronos and the Latin Saturnus. The 'plot', however, kept including the human sacrifice. No archaeological evidence has attested the existence of the tophet in the Near East, and it has been argued that these stories about infant sacrifices were only derogative propaganda spread for either religious or political reasons. It has been argued that the

31 Moore 1897, 161.

32 Regarding the theological studies see for example: Münter 1821; Tiele 1881. About Milton's work: Milton 2000.

33 Dugan 1969, 194; D'Andrea 2018, 60.

34 Gutron 2008; Campus 2013, 172–174; D'Andrea 2018, 60.

35 See Alovisio/Barbera 2006 for more information on the Italian production.

'human sacrifice' was indeed a literary 'topos', a commonplace associated to other 'barbarian' ancient cultures, to which Cicero refers in his *De Republica* (3, 15).[36]

Moreover, this summary illustrates how, over two millennia before the archaeological excavations, the narrative of this historical ritual has become a narrative about narratives, legitimizing and reinforcing itself by following a main plot: from the biblical passages to the cinematographic adaptation, the story has developed throughout different genres, gaining fixed elements such as recurring characters and settings. As it will be further shown in the next section, with the discovery of the urnfield at Carthage, the literary narratives have been integrated within the archaeological research using them as a source to explain the archaeological evidence. Concurrently, the archaeological knowledge of this Phoenician-Punic ritual has reinforced the popular imagination. Characters and settings have become an integral part of the academic narrative as shown by the fact that the area in which the tophet of Carthage is located, is currently known as Salammbô.[37]

Archaeology-narrative relationship

From a narratological perspective, the archaeological research conducted from the 19th century until today can be linked to three key moments, which mark a shift in the approach to the pre-existing narratives.[38]

In the 1920s, the first scientific analyses of the urnfield seemed to support the story of the ancient sources – and thus, Flaubert's. Other scholars, instead, such as C. Saumagne, were open to the idea of sacrifice but exhorted for caution in associating it to Flaubert's work.[39] In this narrative, the work of O. Eissfledt in the 1930s represented an important change in the academic research. Although a connection between tophets and sacrificial rituals had already been hypothesized, he was the first to combine the data from the mentioned indirect literary sources and the uncovered epigraphies indicating the practice of some sort of ritual to corroborate the idea of child sacrifice. Moreover, by using the

36 "*Quam multi, ut Tuari, in Axino, ut rex Aegypti, Busiris, ut Galli, ut Poeni, homines immolare et pium et diis immortalibus gratissumum esse duxerunt!*". For the discussion on the reliability of indirect sources on the practice of human sacrifice by Punic people, see Stavrakopoulou 2004, 141–148; Campus 2013, 171; Xella 2013, 265.

37 One of the land in which part of the tophet was found known before 1921 as Regulus-Salammbô (Bénichou-Safar 2004, 2, note 7).

38 For a detailed chronological review of the archaeological research see D'Andrea 2018, 59–98.

39 Saumagne 1922; Gutron (2008) provides a clear overview of this moment in the history of archaeological research, emphasizing how the work of Flaubert greatly affected the worldwide perception of the Phoenician-Punic culture.

Punic epigraphies containing the term mlk, he reassessed the traditional interpretation of the biblical Molek/Moloch as 'offering' rather than 'deity'.[40] Archaeological research thus used the well-known narrative of the blood sacrifice to better understand the archaeological material while altering the narrative itself in terms of characters.

A second key moment corresponds to the phase of the 1980s: available sources were re-examined in more critical studies, redirecting scholarly attention to the credibility of the ancient sources about the infant killing.[41] This is the case with the studies conducted by H. Bénichou-Safar and S. Moscati, who suggested that the tophet was a cemetery for children and unborn babies.[42] In this way, the archaeological approach to the traditional narrative was marked by a significant change as the entire plot was re-evaluated.

To conclude, more in-depth studies particularly involving bioarchaeological analysis have further instigate the academic debate in the last two decades.[43] In these studies, scholars – amongst others, C. Gutron, C. Bonnet, J. C. Quinn, and A. Campus – have outlined a different narrative, showing the necessity for a change of perspective and the use of archaeological remains to reassess the previous narratives.[44] They have argued that the traditional focus on the human sacrifice – to either corroborate or refute the theory – has diverted attention from the past context of the site, limiting archaeological research. This new, nuanced narrative has reinterpreted the tophet as a place to communicate with the gods, altering the perception of the setting in which the ritual – whether it included a sacrifice or not – occurred.[45]

Despite the opposite positions assumed by archaeologists over the century old history of the tophet since its discovery, the narratological analysis presented above highlights how the various narratives on the tophet and the archaeological research on the site appear intertwined. Archaeological research has started by integrating the previous narrative and using it to explain the archaeological findings. Subsequently, archaeological material has been used to explain the narrative. Characters and settings have changed and new meanings have been investigated, leading to an alteration of the narrative itself. However, in this process, archaeological studies are ceaselessly interconnected to the

40 Eissfledt 1935 after Heider 1985, 34–39; D'Andrea 2018, 62.

41 See Bonnet (2011, 385, note 1) and Quinn (2011, 404, note 16) for a comprehensive bibliography that covers the period from the 1980s to 2000s.

42 Bénichou-Safar 1981; 1982; Moscati 1987.

43 For more literature on the research from 2000 to 2017, see D'Andrea (2018, 84–97).

44 Gutron 2008; Bonnet 2011; Quinn 2011; Campus 2013.

45 Bonnet 2011; Quinn 2011; Campus 2013.

historical, literary narrative, whether they follow the narrative or attempt to respond to it with a different approach. Throughout the various approaches and new studies, the story of human sacrifice has been difficult to escape from and it has affected scientific studies.

Discussing ethical implications

The narratological analysis of both the historical and archaeological narratives has outlined that, based on the way the plot and its characters are constructed, the writer conveys a specific story to the reader. Introducing ethics in this context means to dive into the relationship the writer creates between the characters and the readers of the narrative. An ethical approach allows to better understand the behaviour of archaeological scholars who, as writers, comprehend, negotiate and divulge the past (i.e. the actions of the characters) to the wider public (i.e. the readers). To better grasp the dynamics of this relationship, it is necessary firstly to examine the concept of agency with respect to the writer's role, then to analyse the approach writers have with the public.

AGENCY is the ability and condition to intentionally act and exercise power in the creation of objects, which are therefore embedded with a certain purpose.[46] When discussing narrative ethics and the question who has the prerogative to tell a story, agency is an important aspect to consider.[47] Overall, archaeology exercises a certain authority over narratives as it shapes the transmission of past events and knowledge through the production of narrative which are considered to be authoritative due to their scholarly nature. Though, the level of this power (as well as the responsibilities) tends to change according to the period and place in which the narrative has been developed, the state of the research and its socio-cultural context.

In the case of the tophet, the application of a holistic approach, which takes into account the development process of the tophet's narratives in its entirety, aids in re-evaluating the various associated narratives as a whole rather than separate sources (and interpretations), introducing the idea of a meta-narrative. Throughout time, each narrative has been developed by being linked to the previous one, creating a grand-story in which the main plot about the children sacrifice has legitimized itself by referring to and explaining the previous sources. In this process, the archaeological narrative is part of a wider meta-narrative. This concept highlights a system of politics and strategies in which

46 Hodder 2003, 32.

47 Pluciennik 2015.

archaeologists are situated. On the one side, this system varies according to the used narrative – whether this focalizes on the idea of sacrifice or its neglection – and the cultural and political implications it brings with regarding the Phoenician-Punic heritage. On the other side, consciously or not, archaeologists have an active role in the use of a narrative and the way this might be manipulated to fit the archaeological research. Introducing the concept of ethical implications allows to raise the matter of their role in the narrative and to question whether or not they are conscious of how narratives have been used before them, and how they now use them according to their own socio-cultural context. In this perspective, the role of archaeologists as writers varies based on their approach to the past: they can act either as author (creator of the narrative), medium (intermediate of narratives created by others) or as a more active participant to the debate (player in the narrative).[48]

Supported by their academic background, authors use narratives as authoritative scientific voices, which are simultaneously descriptive and explanatory.[49] This concept is applicable especially in regard to the first sixty years of studies after the excavation of Carthage's tophet, in which the literary plot of infanticide is used as the main source to contextualize the physical evidence and produce reliable representations of the past. In terms of ethical implications, in their role as academics, authors reinforce the grand narrative which they are part of by presenting it as evident truth.

With the revision of the narrative in the 1980s, a more post-processual attitude characterized academic studies, which has opened archaeological research up to multidisciplinary approaches and questioned the use of pre-existing narratives based on the material evidence.[50] This new approach shows that archaeologists have become, consciously or not, more aware of their agency in the narratives they create. Scholars start a more nuanced debate in which they assume the role of medium, in the sense of mediators rather than producer of the past. As writers, archaeologists act as 'anti-narrators', dismantling and re-evaluating the traditional narratives, by reconsidering characters not as passive personages but active parts of the story with their own voice. As medium, academics act as intermediaries between characters and readers.

Over time, archaeologists have consciously become active

48 The identification of these three roles is based on Pluciennik's (2015, 59–67) assumptions.

49 Pluciennik 2015, 59–61.

50 Moscati 1991; Fantar 2000; Stager/Greene 2000; Gutron 2008; Bonnet 2011; Quinn 2011; Campus 2013; Shaw 2016.

51 Pluciennik 2015, 61–67.

participants in the discussion on the narratives' modern political implications.[51] As scholars, they have spoken up in the name of their characters, whether attempting to normalize the idea of human sacrifice for a modern audience which does not share the same beliefs of ancient cultures, or to 'clean the name' of Phoenicians and Punics from this 'accusatory' narrative of child killings. In order to better understand these new roles, it is necessary to discuss the relationship scholars have established between Phoenician-Punic culture and the readers.

WRITER-CHARACTER-READER DYNAMICS are based on multi-layered relations in which archaeologists' intentions are crucial. Once we understand the role of the writer and its agency, it is necessary to contextualize it with respect to the subjects of the narrative and how they are presented to the readers.

For what concerns the subjects, in the analysis of the practical aspects of mortuary archaeology, the ethical concerns usually apply to either the deceased or the descendants.[52] In the case of the tophet, on the contrary, both ancient and modern writers have tended to focus on the individuals who performed the ritual, rather than the sacrificed infants. This attitude matches a tendency to objectify the cremated individuals, which is already detectable in the ancient epigraphies: the name of the worshipper was carved on the stelae, while the name of the children was left untold.[53] The narrativized characters are the Phoenicians and the Punic people in general, although the previous sections of this paper have shown particular attention directed to the Carthaginians.

Pluciennik suggests that, when acting as authors, writers do not make any 'concession' to the reader, in the sense that they present their data without taking into account the readers' necessity apart from the one for clarity.[54] I suggest this is true also for what concerns the characters: when referring to previous narratives to explain the physical evidence, archaeologists tend not to consider the ethical implications of the way Phoenicians and Punic people are presented to the readers. As it will be shown in the next paragraphs, this tendency determines a certain imagery that has affected the perception of the Phoenician-Punic heritage as primitive and barbaric. The idea of blood sacrifice has developed into a proper label due to an overgeneralization of all Phoenician-Punic people despite the fact that the practice has not been attested in all Phoenician/Punic colonies.[55]

52 For example: Zimmermam 1998; Sayer 2010.

53 Bonnet 2011, 383.

54 Pluciennik 2015, 61.

55 Gutron 2008; Quinn 2011, 389–391, 403; Quinn 2013, 29; Campus 2013, 174–190; Xella 2020.

In both their role of medium and more integral part of the debate, writers establish a relation between the characters and the readers in multiple ways, not only through academic studies but also newspapers addressed to a less specialized public. Sabatino Moscati, also known as the 'father' of the Phoenician and Punic studies, left a significant mark in this sense in the late 1980s. Phoenician culture had been broadly marginalized by classicism and orientalism. In this scenario, the stigma of the ritual infanticide had been used as a valid reason to sustain the barbaric, and thus, inferior status of the Phoenician civilization with respect to the Roman and Greek one.[56] As a response, Moscati directed a public campaign to rehabilitate its role in Mediterranean history and reach the academic autonomy of this field of studies; to do so, he actively worked to erase the stain of barbaric rituals.[57] The apex of his work was the largest exhibition ever dedicated to the Phoenicians at Palazzo Grassi (Venice) in 1988 and the publication of its catalogue in the same year.[58] Many international newspapers reported the results of this academic politics, celebrating the rediscovery of Phoenician culture.[59]

In more recent times, the spotlight has been reclaimed by the Tunisian archaeologist M.H. Fantar. The researcher has become an integral component of the narrative by presenting himself as a descendant of the Phoenician and Punic culture and publicly talking about the moral and cultural repercussion his own heritage has suffered due to the association to infant sacrifice. His direct relationship with the past characters was reported by A. Higgins for The Wall Street Journal in 2005, as part of a debate between Fantar and the archaeologist L. Stager.[60] Inspired by an academic dialogue between the two opposite scholars published in the Archaeology Odyssey journal, Higgins illustrates the role the opposite academics have played in the modern political implications of Carthage's past in an article titled 'Carthage Is Trying To Live Down Image As Site of Infanticide'.[61] Fantar is introduced not as a mere researcher but rather as heir of the Phoenician-Punic culture who "is campaigning to clear his forefathers of a nasty stigma: a reputation for infanticide".[62] L.

56 Garnard 2019, 704–705.

57 Among the others, Moscati 1987; Moscati/Ribichini 1991.

58 Moscati 1988.

59 The following articles are accessible online: Suro 1988, ► https://www.nytimes.com; Jenkins 1988,►https://www.washingtonpost.com; Bascetta 1988,►https://ilmanifesto.it.

60 The article is fully accessible online on the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's webpage, ►https://www.post-gazette.com/.

61 Fantar 2000; Stager/Greene 2000.

62 Higgins 2005.

Stager is, instead, presented as a traditionalist, who attempts to normalize the ritual by explaining that it was indeed a common practice among ancient populations. The article is cleverly constructed of captivating references and definitions which call for modern morality's disdain, as Carthage is described as a 'serial killer of children'.[63]

Lastly, in 2014 Maev Kennedy published in the Guardian an article with the title 'Carthaginians sacrificed own children, archaeologists say', taking its cue from the studies previously published in the Antiquity journal by J. C. Quinn.[64] The article presents the scholar in her role of supporter of the infanticide theory who tries to negotiate with a past which is often perceived by the public as unbearable, claiming: "This is something dismissed as negative propaganda because in modern times people just didn't want to believe it".[65]

Despite the different interpretations, in their roles of more active speakers, archaeologists are not only giving back a voice to the groups who had been previously confined to their role of narrativized subjects, but attempt to create a relation with modern readers who do not feel any particular connection with them.[66] The application of an ethical perspective with respect to the narrative of the tophet sheds new light on the dynamics at play among archaeologists in their role of writers, the represented characters and the public. Whereas archaeological authority is irrefutable, acknowledging archaeology's narrative as situated as well as the relations it helps create, refines our understanding of the way data is approached, elaborated and communicated.[67] A narrative is more than a story: it is a plot that creates assumptions and correlations affecting both characters' story and readers' perception. Nonetheless, as with all media communication, narratives have limitations: once communicated, the way the public perceives, reuses, and often politicizes the archaeological results based on modern conceptions, remains out of researchers' control.[68]

Conclusion: The responsibilities of writing the past

In this article I have tried to approach the mortuary archaeology field and its relation to data from an innovative perspective,

63 Ibid.

64 The article by Kennedy is fully accessible online on The Guardian's webpage, ▶ https://www.theguardian.com. About the academic article published in Antiquity, see Xella et al. 2013.

65 Kennedy 2014.

66 Holtorf 2010, 388–390.

67 Bernbeck 2015.

68 Williams 2019, 8.

emphasizing the role archaeologists play in shaping the modern perception of historical heritage. In doing so, I have attempted to answer the following questions.

What is the role of archaeologists when interpreting and expressing death-related topics through narrative?
The introduction of the concept of archaeology as a narratological act brings mortuary research into the mix of a larger debate on the role of archaeologists - in fact, of all academics involved with the study of historical events - as 'writers of the past'.[69] In particular, it involves the highly argued notion of the 'historical significance' of the archaeological narrative (i.e. the implications of the writer's choices in using a narrative to explain the past).[70]

When focusing on the content of the archaeological texts, rather than the form, the significance of the archaeological text in terms of historical reconstruction is believed to lie in the scientific data. This is true for Punic archaeologists – and all archaeologists in general – who have used their authoritative scientific voices to largely claim the truthfulness of their positions in regards to the tophets based on the presented solid data – whether sustaining or neglecting the sacrificial ritual.

Yet, when shifting attention to the form of the text, the essence of the historical reconstruction lies in the writer's ability to comprehend and construct a narrative-structure based upon the available evidence. In this regard, the agency and intentionality of the writer is inevitably re-evaluated. From a narratological perspective, the form of the text (the narrative) represents a structural fabric in which the scientific data – the value of which is not questioned here – are inserted. This fabric involves the personal choices the archaeologist-writer has made about, amongst others, their role in the narrative, presentation of the characters, the author's relationship with them, and focalisation. The authority and power of archaeologists influence the description and explanation of the events with respect to the characters. Moreover, they have the power to (re)create connections between the researched subject(s) and the modern communities in various ways. The created narrative frames the data and leads the readers to the writer's conclusion. In this respect, the positions of the Punic archaeologists assume new meanings: a change of their role becomes visible over the decades as they move from being creators of, to intermediates and active participants in the narrative. In light of this, an ethical discussion of archaeologists' role as writers is imperative.

69 Cf. Munslow 2011.

70 Munslow 2011, 84–85.

How can the discussion of the ethics of using narratives (in the dissemination of knowledge through written academic forms) refine our understanding of the dynamics between archaeology, the public, and the people in the past?

The case of the tophet shows the variety of intentional authorial decisions that were applied in the creation of its several archaeological narratives. This intentionality and its impact on the writer-character-reader dynamics call for an ethical approach and healthy self-criticism in the field of mortuary archaeology. The study of the dead is not limited to the excavation, treatment and display of human remains. It also involves the narration of their story in written forms. It is my view that just as the form of processing and presenting the physical remains is considered crucial, so is the form of the narrative involving mortuary studies. This is especially true when the narrative is assumed to be representational of the cultural identity of a past society, like in the case of the tophet and its related ritual performances.

By introducing the concept of ethics in this debate, new light is shed not only on the role of the archaeologist-writer but also on his/her responsibilities. This consideration, however, does not have to lead to the erroneous idea that, in this context, the ethical duty of the archaeologist is to narrate the truth.[71] The academic research per se relies on an empirical-analytical understanding of the past. The narrative, instead, is fabricated. However this does not mean it is not compatible with the truth. This is because the narrative is an 'epistemic-inspired' product of aesthetics and choices based upon authors' backgrounds (scientific and non-scientific).[72] This explains how the analysis of the same solid data can lead to opposite narratives, as often happens in archaeology. Were infants sacrificed within Phoenician-Punic communities? The remains of cremated infants, offerings and shrines are empirical evidence of the use of cremation for people of a specific age category within an area where religious rituals were practiced along with mortuary ones. On the contrary, the offered academic interpretations on the way these individuals died are the results of the authors' agency in creating a certain dynamic between narrative, data, characters and readers. From a narratological perspective, divergences must not automatically be labelled as untrue and dismissed.[73] The engaging angle of this tension between empirical data and created narratives is how the narrative iserfused with meaning as well as its impact on the story of an extinct culture. Furthermore, it is also true that 'scientific'

71 Scand 2010, 35.

72 Munslow 2011.

73 Scand 2010, 35.

methodologies and interpretations change over time as a result of scientific progression and new discoveries. Does this make the previous narratives untruthful? Or are they simply the product of the author's time?

The ethical responsibility of the archaeologists lies with their acknowledgement of how the narrative fabric is developed. I sustain that archaeologists would benefit by reviewing the priority of content over form and their role in authoring their research as 'past'. It is time to elaborate the debate on the level of clarity, openness and self-awareness we pursue both as archaeologists and writers. As Munslow suggests in regard to historical understanding, the "question is not always what did the agent do in the past, but what does the historian [in this case, the archaeologist] want his/her agent to do in his/her story?".[74] I would also add: Why does the author want his/her character to behave in that way? As the historian suggests, it is a matter of 'narrative explanation' rather than archaeological interpretation.[75]

The case of the tophets shows that academic research may be inextricably linked to the used narrative and its cultural and political 'baggage'. Even when writers attempt to step away from the traditional narrative, this is never entirely put aside but rather, transformed. The use of a narrative can, inadvertently, become embedded in the research, turning from a mediatory to an explanatory tool, ultimately affecting methodology and results. The form and origin of the story are as important as the story's content. These considerations illustrate how a narrative can evolve through time and genres, determining a broad spectrum of dynamics and meanings in which archaeologists' intentions can be crucial.

Moreover, this paper confirms how fragile the balance between archaeologists and readers can be, especially when treating such a sensitive matter as death. Acknowledging the network in which the research is developed, the implications of the used narrative and our role in it as writers represents a measure to enhance our understanding of the archaeological process in using and presenting data. The awareness of our responsibilities and limitations constitutes a step further in providing justice to the dead's heritage through our communicative tools, it also aids in moving beyond the constrictions of popular sensibilities and ideas.
This perspective does not entail neglecting empirical archaeology. But I do stress the necessity to critically reflect on the structure and function of narratives concerning mortuary archaeology. This approach provides the opportunity to further complement

74 Muslow 2011, 85.

75 Ibid.

archaeological practice and ethical research, shifting focus from the commonly discussed practical challenges to new theoretical ones.

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