

**Customs, Rites and sanctuaries
associated with the birth and death of
children: ethnographic
and archaeological evidence**

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At all times mothers' difficulties in childbirth or with infants too weak to survive have been great. As a result, women developed and trusted in customs and rites, vows and votive objects to be deposited in special sacred places or sanctuaries dedicated to the divine power responsible for fertility and health. Evidence of such beliefs and practices continues to survive to this day but is in the process of disappearing due to modern developments. In 1991, new archaeological evidence, dated to the Phoenician Iron Age, has been discovered in Tyre and Cyprus which may complement the important finds of child cemeteries and sanctuaries discovered in Phoenician sites in the Western Mediterranean. This new evidence from Lebanon, originating from clandestine excavations, needs to be checked by regular scientific excavation and analysis. The archaeological material now at hand, together with present day remnant fertility practices, deserves to be recorded and investigated.

This study is divided into two major parts, the first presents ethnographic evidence for surviving ancient and contemporary beliefs and customs associated with birth and health of children. This includes information about functioning sanctuaries where vows continue to be made to divine powers believed to influence the fate of infants from their birth onward. The second part covers the archaeological evidence, presenting several examples of children's burial grounds or *tophets* found in the Mediterranean, like those in Italy, North Africa and possibly Tyre and Cyprus *Tophets* were places where infants, who had not had the chance to grow old enough to integrate into their community's life, were buried. They were, therefore, buried apart from the older members of the society, in specific places reserved for those who rejoined the world of the dead without having had a proper chance to join that of the living.

Some answers to the many questions concerning this subject will be attempted: Where and how did these child protection practices begin? Who believes in such traditions? Do these people belong to one or several religious groups? How could these beliefs survive so persistently, and why are they now disappearing so rapidly? What is the evidence for the success or failure of such prayers or rites?

This thesis then investigates the ethnographic record of child sanctuaries and associated customs surviving to this day, and presents archaeological evidence which is related to the subject. Pertinent information will reveal whether those who practiced and still practice infant protection rites and visit associated sanctuaries or shrines, belong to specific groups and geographical areas or whether these beliefs were - and are - shared by all.