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Author(s): Samara Rehman

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Carthage as Model Empire in Early-Nineteenth Century Britain: A Critical Analysis of J.M.W. Turner's Carthaginian Paintings

Samara Rehman, PhD Scholar, Department of English, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

This paper explores one of the most prominent British Romantic painters J.M.W. Turner's (1775-1851) engagement with the ancient maritime empire of Carthage as a lens through which early nineteenth-century Britain negotiated its own imperial identity. The imagery of rise and fall of empires carried great symbolic import for a nation which had newly become the globally dominant empire post the Battle of Waterloo (1815) after defeating Napoleonic France. Drawing parallels between the British empire and the great historic empires was an established tradition during Turner's time, inspired as it was with the search for an exemplary past which could instruct Britain's present hegemony and future aspirations for longevity. The paper argues that such a search for historical continuities influenced Turner, whose paintings of the erstwhile thalassocracy of Carthage participated in the cultural discourse of his time. Principally considering the two paired paintings *Dido building Carthage; or the Rise of the Carthaginian Empire* (1815) and *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* (1817), it posits that Turner uses Carthage both as an inspirational model and an exemplary tale cautioning against imperial decadence. Within the larger British intellectual imagination, Carthage was also invoked by women poets like Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825) and Letitia Elizabeth Landon better known as L.E.L. (1802-1838) to reflect upon ideas of moral decline, imperial ambition, and the costs of war. By situating Turner within the broader geopolitical, social, and cultural context, this paper highlights how Carthage became a loaded metaphor replete with ambivalence and shifting significance. Turner's distinctive attention to the maritime nature of Carthage serves as a meditation on his own country's ocean-bound imperial trajectory, raising the question of whether maritime supremacy and imperialist expansion contain within them the seeds of their own destruction.

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Introduction

During the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, Britain was embroiled in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815) against France and was rapidly transforming into an urban-industrial society. The British overseas empire concentrated in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, was expanding rapidly, bolstered by the Royal Navy, which was strategically empowered to maintain Britain's imperial hegemony. The advent of steam technology, including locomotives, ushered in the Railway Age, which connected the farthest corners of Britain like never before. This era marked Britain's largely unchallenged domination of global trade and diplomacy. These prodigious changes encouraged the search for an exemplary past that could instruct Britain's imperial ambition and naval identity. Ancient empires such as Carthage and Rome were often invoked in the period; Turner and other Romantic artists engaged in a dialogue with these empires in order to establish historical continuities and respond to the social, cultural, and political questions of their day. Significantly, Turner's own representations of these ancient states, especially Carthage, were maritime rather than terrestrial. Informed by London's position as one of the busiest port cities in the world and the imperial capital of Britain, Turner turned to the port of Carthage to depict the confluence of sea, commerce, and power that had historically transformed that ancient state into a grand empire.

Since ancient times, ports have served as strategic nodes from which people, commerce, and empires proliferated. Borrowing Mary Louise Pratt's idea of the "contact zone" — "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (7) harbours and

ports may be seen as informal contact zones enabling transcontinental communication, migration, subjugation, and trade, along with the transmission of disease and epidemic (Lee 150). Historian Bruno Marnot's claim that "the history of European global expansion (in the early modern period) inevitably passes through its ports" (1) holds true for the ancient empire of Carthage as well. Ports are inherently sites of multiple histories, projecting themselves not only towards the oceans and distant lands, but also back to their hinterlands (Polónia 18). Turner exploited the dichotomies of land and sea, nature and culture, the eternal and the ephemeral, and the ancient and the modern through his Carthaginian port compositions. These sites, blending multiple and transitional identities, memories, histories, and encounters, allowed him to tell complex visual stories of power and hubris across national and temporal boundaries.

Turner's apprehension about continuous expansionist policies, like that of his contemporary Romantics, extended beyond Britain to include France as well. Marked by a pervasive anxiety about decline and over-expansion, "catastrophic models" (Sachs 31) such as that of Carthage and other ancient empires that had completed their cycles of rise, advancement, expansion, and fall were significant during this period not only as admonitions against inordinate ambition but also as cautionary examples meant to prevent the historical parallel from repeating itself. This chapter draws on Jonathan Sach's argument about the centrality of the idea of decline during the Romantic period— not as debilitating but, paradoxically, as productive and even celebratory— in shaping British literature and culture's self-conception as the new classical. Within this framework, Turner's paintings of Carthage can be understood as visual meditations on the empire's rise and fall. This chapter situates

Turner's port paintings within the cultural imaginary of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an era that repeatedly mobilised the metaphor of imperial rise decline across political and artistic discourses. When considered alongside his contemporaries and other Romantic artists, Turner's depictions of the former maritime empire emerge as testaments to a developing imperial consciousness, one that imagined Britain as the modern inheritor of historically great thalassocracies like Carthage.

Carthage and the Idea of Empire

Established around the ninth century BCE, the North African city-state of Carthage and its maritime empire in the Mediterranean reached its peak during the fourth century and thrived until 146 BCE, when imperial Rome burned it to the ground at the end of the Third Punic War. The history of the city and its annihilation was recorded by Greek and Roman writers and later circulated in translation as part of the developing "English-language history of the ancient world," a genre whose growth, as historian Caroline Winterer notes, accompanied the expansion of modern empires (8). Carthage appeared in the British cultural imagination as early as seventeenth century, but it gained particular prominence throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when France emerged as Britain's primary continental rival. Politicians, playwrights, poets, artists, and journalists frequently invoked this Punic civilization, often in tandem with ancient Rome, to comment upon the social and political events of their time.

During the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), Britain and France exchanged rhetorical invectives that drew upon classical imagery. France was cast as the "rapacious" Romans,

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while Britain assumed the mantle of the commercial Carthaginians (Winterer 16). Edward Wortley Montagu's *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of the Ancient Republicks: Adapted to the Present State of Great Britain*, published in 1759 in the midst of the war, declared that:

> Of all the free states whose memory is preserved to us in history, Carthage bears the nearest resemblance to Britain, both in her commerce, opulence, sovereignty of the sea, and her method of carrying on her land- wars by foreign mercenaries. If to these we add the vicinity of the Carthaginians to the Romans, the most formidable and most rapacious people at that time in Europe, and the specific difference, as I may term it, of the respective military force of each nation, the situation of Carthage with respect to Rome, seems greatly analogous to that of Britain with respect to France, at least for this last century (144).

As Josephine Quinn underscores in *In Search of the Phoenicians*, parallels between Britain and Carthage were desirable because both empires expanded through commerce and maritime networks. Following the Treaty of Paris of 1763, Britain had newly acquired France's North American colonies, increasing the extent of its dominion, shifting its focus more decisively towards overseas trade. The Royal Navy's instrumental role in protecting that trade reinforced the comparison with Carthage's powerful fleets in the Mediterranean.

Yet Carthage was not simply an exemplary maritime empire. In its total destruction by Rome, it also became, as Rachel Bryant Davies observes, "a potent site for proleptic ruination" (22) — a figure through which cities, empires, and civilization itself could be

imagined as facing inevitable destruction. Especially in the aftermath of the French Revolution and during the Napoleonic Wars, Carthage came to embody both the spectacle of imperial rise and the warning of decline. The symbol carried shifting meanings: in some contexts, its destruction served to critique France's imperial ambitions; in others, it operated as a cautionary tale for Britain, reflecting anxieties about its own eventual fall.

An example of the former is Turner's first Carthaginian subject, *Snow Storm: Hannibal Crossing the Alps* exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1812, which explores a distinct aspect of Carthaginian history. Hannibal was closely associated with Napoleon Bonaparte in the popular imagination. Napoleon's own official portraits, such Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* of 1801, presented him as a heroic figure of historical destiny. Turner's rendering instead diminishes Hannibal into an almost indistinguishable figure, presumably riding an elephant in the distant background. Rather than celebrating the Carthaginian general's strategic brilliance in crossing the Alps to outflank Roman naval power, Turner makes him insignificant before the elemental violence of the storm, emphasising the immensity of nature and the precarity of human ambition. Turner scholar Eric Shanes reads the painting as a critique of imperial expansionism and of the futility of "territorial aggrandisement" (114).

Carthage in the Romantic Imagination: Turner's *Dido Building Carthage*

Returning to the broader cultural dialogue between Carthage and Britain, while the tradition of invoking the fall of ancient cities as a moral lesson was evident in the eighteenth century, it was in the nineteenth-century Romantic imagination that the motif of the rise and

fall of empires was most strikingly assimilated into art. Romantic writers and artists used this motif to reflect on Britain's potential decline and to articulate the paradoxical comfort of imagining the present as "the antiquity of the future" in the event of its ruination (Sachs 3). As Jonathan Sachs suggests, a notable example of power and territorial loss being compensated for by cultural achievement appears in Anna Laetitia Barbauld's satirical poem *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* of 1812. The poem critiques Britain's decision to engage in the Napoleonic Wars and warns that "'tis thy fate / To rank amongst the names that once were great" (lines 71–72). Barbauld prophesies that the island nation commanding the "golden tide of Commerce" (line 62) and serving as "the seat of arts" (line 123) would eventually share the ruinous legacy of "fallen Carthage" (line 250). At the same time, she affirms the enduring value of English arts and literature, which will, she suggests, set the classical standard for future empires in the Americas and elsewhere. The poem's intricate blend of pessimism and optimism was overlooked by many of her contemporaries, who focused instead on her perceived disloyalty to Britain's cause. The hostility of these reviews, especially when compared to those received by her male contemporaries, prompted Barbauld's withdrawal from publishing later in life (Keach 571).

The Romantic fascination with the fall of empires continued to engage poets, travellers, and artists. Lord Byron explored it extensively in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* which was published between 1812–1818, while the antiquarian John Chetwode Eustace, in his widely read *A Classical Tour through Italy* of 1813 meditated on the cyclicity of history and the transience of power, remarking that "[t]he days of England's glory have their number, and the period of her decline will at length arrive" (qtd. in Davies 271). From the

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second decade of the nineteenth century, J.M.W. Turner repeatedly addressed the ephemerality of empires, especially maritime ones. His two most famous Carthaginian port compositions, *Dido Building Carthage; or The Rise of the Carthaginian Empire* and The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire, drawn principally from Virgil's Aeneid, participate in a broader Romantic engagement with the interplay between between past, present, and future, while reflecting on Britain's own imperial condition.[1]

Dido Building Carthage; or The Rise of the Carthaginian Empire (Plate 1) presents the viewer with a harbour scene at morning, with Queen Dido directing the construction activity around her. Despite the Claudian light that suffuses the composition in calm serenity,

Plate 1. J.M.W. Turner, *Dido building Carthage; or, the Rise of the Carthaginian Empire*, 1815. Oil on canvas, 155.5 x 230 cm. The National Gallery, London. Licensed for non-commercial use under a Creative Commons agreement.

the seaport is a hive of maritime activity as multiple ships ply the shores, marble facades are being built, and children play with toy boats in the water. John Ruskin astutely observed that the figures of toy-boat sailing children embodied the promise of Carthage's future (Finley 67). The painting's atmosphere of buoyant optimism and renewal seemed to echo Britain's triumph over Napoleonic France at the Battle of Waterloo in the same year. The ancient city can be read as a locus of historical self-consciousness in Turner's vision as Britain achieved the nadir of naval and military competence and became the chief sea power state and maritime empire of Europe. Yet the luminous seaport, though suffused with harmony, conceals the violence inherent in the imperial project of Carthage, and by interpretative extension, of Britain. The rising sun symbolically signals not only Carthage's ascendance but also the beginnings of the cycle of power and decline that Turner's companion work would later complete.

The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire and Britain's Post-War Disquiet

While *The Rise* is unmarked by the extremes of violence or luxury, *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* alludes to both through its intricate interplay between the verbal and the visual. The staggering full title reads: *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire — Rome being determined on the overthrow of her hated rival, demanded from her such terms as might either force her into war or ruin her by compliance; the enervated Carthaginians, in their anxiety for Peace, consented to give up their arms and their children* (Plate 2). Turner appended to the catalogue a passage from his unfinished poem Fallacies of Hope:

At Hope's delusive smile,

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The chieftain's safety and the mother's pride,

Were to th'insidious conqu'ror's grasp resign'd;

While o'er the western wave th'ensanguined sun,

In gathering haze a stormy signal spread,

And set portentous (Butlin and Joll).

Plate 2. J.M.W. Turner, *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire*, 1817. Oil on canvas, 170 x 238.8 cm. Tate Britain, London. Public domain. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Unlike many of his contemporaries who depicted the desolate ruins of Carthage after its ruin— either in painting or verse, Turner focusses on the moment before the catastrophe: a

"portentous" interval of stillness and false calm before the Roman assault. The burnished hue of the setting sun anachronistically foreshadows the burning of the city. Ruskin later noted that the painting's reddish tone was originally much brighter than it appears today, making the association with bloodshed and destruction unmistakeable (Shanes 128). Scattered across the marble pavement lie the detritus of luxury and indulgence, children cling to their parents in languid postures, and monumental colonnades dominate the scene, while arboreal motifs of nature have all but receded to the background. The statue of Mercury, the Roman god of commerce and travel, on the far left becomes a poignant emblem of Carthage's former maritime might (Finley 68).

Turner frames the decline of this grand imperial city as a cyclical inevitability. Yet *The Decline* also opens itself to contemporary resonances. The defeat of France at Waterloo in 1815, for instance, may have provided one historical parallel, but the painting's symbolism extends beyond that moment. Carthage becomes a metaphor for imperial hubris, political instability, and the anxiety of decline that shadowed post-Napoleonic Britain. As K. Dian Kriz has argued, Turner's imagery mobilises tropes of slavery and feminization to depict the overthrow of Carthage, thus participating obliquely in the early nineteenth century debates around abolition while also naturalizing a gendered and racial hierarchy between Britain (and the West more broadly) and the North African or "Eastern" other (125-126). Such readings remind us that Turner's historical allegories are not neutral; they engage, however indirectly, with the ideological tensions of empire and its moral contradictions.

At the same time, Turner's attention appears drawn to domestic unease. The jubilation following Waterloo was quickly overtaken by the difficulties of peace. Britain faced

enormous fiscal strain, a glut of demobilized soldiers and sailors, and widespread unemployment. Food shortages and rising prices fuelled social unrest, leading to suspensions of civil liberties such as Habeas Corpus in 1817 and culminating in the Peterloo Massacre of 1819— a bitter inversion of Waterloo's triumph (Quinn 190). Read in this light, *The Decline* may be seen to register Britain's own post-war malaise: the tension between imperial victory abroad and social fragility at home.

Retrospectively, in the face of these events, Barbauld's 1812 poem condemning the manifold evils of war acquires renewed immediacy:

Man calls to Famine, nor invokes in vain,

Disease and Rapine follow in her train;

The tramp of marching hosts disturbs the plough,

The sword, not sickle, reaps the harvest now,

And where the Soldier gleans the scant supply,

The helpless Peasant but retires to die;

No laws his hut from licensed outrage shield,

And war's least horror is the ensanguined field (lines 15–22).

This vision of devastation corresponds both to Carthage's fate in Turner's *Decline* and to the latent anxieties of contemporary post-war Britain. Between *The Rise* and *The Decline*, as

Quinn observes, "the sun rises and sets on a great [ancient] state" (190), fuelling unease about the possible ruin of another. The Carthaginian theme continued to haunt the early nineteenth century imagination, its symbolic flexibility ensuring its persistence as a site of reflection on empire, decay, and the cyclical nature of history.

Oceanic Destiny: Regulus and Maritime Britain

Turner revisited the Carthaginian subject in 1828 with *Regulus* (Plate 3), a work that recalls the story of the Roman general captured during the First Punic War. General Marcus Atilius Regulus, taken prisoner by the Carthaginians, was later released to urge the Roman Senate to agree to peace. Instead, he implored the Senate to reject Carthage's terms, fully aware that doing so meant certain and torturous death upon his return. Ancient accounts describe his torture and death; his eyelids were cut off, his eyes were fixed towards the blinding sun, and finally his body sealed in a spiked barrel rolled downhill (Seidenstein 127). The story endured through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an exemplar of stoic endurance and patriotic sacrifice.

Yet Turner's *Regulus*, like *Hannibal Crossing the Alps*, subverts this tradition. The titular general himself is not the painting's focus; indeed, he is almost absent. Instead, Turner displaces attention from heroic action to elemental forces— the blinding sun, the turbulent sea, and the clustered ships at harbour. The radiant sunlight dominates the composition, transforming the scene of disembarkation into a meditation on exposure, vulnerability, and imperial consequence. By refusing to centre the martial hero, Turner transforms the maritime setting from passive backdrop to active historical agent upon which the fortunes of the

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maritime empire depended. The sea, in his vision, becomes more than a stage for imperial exploits, it embodies the instability and uncertainty upon which imperial futures (Carthaginian and, by inference, British) depended.

Plate 3. J.M.W. Turner, Regulus, 1828. Oil on canvas, 895 x 1238 mm. Tate Britain, London. Public domain. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

A similar attention to the maritime character of Carthage reappears, though more rarely, in the literary and visual imagination of the period. One such instance is Laetitia Elizabeth Landon's (L.E.L.) elegiac poem "Marius at the Ruins of Carthage" of 1833, frequently published alongside an engraving after John Martin's painting of the same subject:

The place of pleasant festival,

The calm and quiet home,

The senate, with its pillar'd hall,

The palace with its dome,—

All things in which men boast and trust

Lay prone in the unconscious dust.

Yet this the city which once stood

A queen beside the sea,

Who said she ruled the ocean flood

Wherever there might be

Path for bold oar or daring prow:—

Where are her thousand galleys now? (lines 13–24).

Landon's meditation on the ruins of Carthage reprises the same tension that animates Turner's canvases- the contrast between maritime glory and irreversible decay. Her Carthage, once "a queen beside the sea," (line 20) mirrors the precarious grandeur of Britain's own oceanic supremacy. Both poet and painter contemplate the ironies of an empire defined by the sea that sustains and threatens it alike.

As art-historian Geoff Quilley observes, identification with the sea, expressed across

poetry, painting, and print culture, was central to Britain's self-construction from the mid-eighteenth century onward, and increasingly so during the 1790s and early decades of the nineteenth century as imperial expansion accelerated (28). Turner's sustained engagement with maritime imagery, and his seemingly apparent parallels between Carthage and Britain attest to this cultural understanding that the nation's destiny was inseparable from the ocean. By the 1820's and 1830's, this oceanic consciousness had deepened further, shaped by the new rationalities of science and the harnessing of steam power to ships and locomotives.[2] The sea, for Turner, remained not merely a stage for imperial triumph but a living element through which Britain's modern identity and its anxieties were continually refracted.

Between Turner's *Rise* and *Decline* paintings, as well as later works like *Regulus*, the ancient seaport of Carthage becomes a visual allegory through which Britain's own imperial condition could be contemplated, though never conclusively stated. The analogy remains interpretive rather than declarative, Turner does not prescribe a direct equivalence but invites reflection on the cyclical nature of maritime power, moral endurance, and decline. The endurance of Carthage as a recurring image in Romantic and post-Romantic art and literature, as in Landon's elegy, reveals how deeply the idea of a sea empire haunted Britain's imagination at a moment of post-war fragility and technological transformation.

Conclusion

However, even as these ideas about maritime empires and their eventual ruination circulated across the Atlantic, especially in Britain and France, the sympathetic reception and representation of Carthage's sea empire remained largely endemic to Britain. Other European

powers, especially France, preferred to fashion themselves in the image of Rome's terrestrial dominions. In 1798, Paul Gauran, a politician from Gers in France, called his countrymen to arms against Britain with the rallying cry "Que Carthage soit détruite" - "Carthage must be destroyed" (qtd. in Quinn 189). From the early 1800s onwards, the Napoleonic government commissioned paintings of Roman generals such as Scipio Africanus the Younger, who razed Carthage, and Caius Marius, depicted at its ruins. France thus adopted the Carthage-Britain analogy derisively, positioning Britain as a defeated or decadent maritime rival. These symbolic oppositions, Carthage for Britain and Rome for France, played a central role in shaping contemporary politics and the national mythologies of both nations.

Caroline Winterer observes that Carthage functioned as an "Atlanticizing" conversation that "helped to define the Atlantic and the western hemisphere as the principal stages for new sea empires in the tradition of the ancient Mediterranean ones" (10). This dialogue with the historical time and city of Carthage "helped to knit antiquity and modernity, the Mediterranean world and the Atlantic world, into new, progressive, national genealogies of maritime commerce, colonialism, and stable prosperity" (10). The ambivalences surrounding Punic grandeur and destruction, as well as the recurrent reimagining of Carthaginian episodes, find their most eloquent and elegiac expression in Turner's paired Carthage paintings.

In Turner's late works, these preoccupations return with renewed intensity. In 1850, just a year before his death, he exhibited four oil paintings on the Dido-Aeneas theme: visual meditations on love, loss, and empire that revisit the moral and historical questions first articulated in *Dido Building Carthage* and *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire*. Despite

their mournful tone and implicit anxieties about Britain's own moral and imperial decline, these paintings also cling to a quiet hope that the contemplation of past civilizations might illuminate the path to national renewal. By tracing the interpretive elasticity of the Carthage-Britain analogy across Turner's oeuvre, this paper has sought to reposition his paired Carthaginian paintings not as fixed allegories of imperial destiny but as visual meditations on the instability of empire itself. In doing so, it expands the understanding of Turner's depiction of the ancient empire beyond patriotic symbolism toward a more self-reflexive engagement with maritime-imperial temporality. This interpretive lens, attentive to both the painter's historical imagination and Britain's oceanic identity, constitutes the central contribution of this study. Turner's Carthage, suspended between ruin and reflection, becomes not a mirror of Britain's fall but a meditation on history's cyclical power; on how empires, like tides, rise, break, and recede, yet leave enduring traces of artistic and moral vision.

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Endnotes

[1] Walter Thornbury, for instance, commented upon the typological association between Carthage and Britain in Turner's painting. Gerald Finley in Angel in the Sun: Turner's Vision of History quotes Thornbury as purporting that the composition

> show[s] the rise of a maritime empire which [Turner] considered typical of England; France and Rome also no doubt being analogous in his mind ... Turner seems to have considered the fate of Carthage as a moral example to England; ascribable as it was to the decline of agriculture, the increase of luxury, and besotted blindness, too prolonged, to the insatiable ambition of Rome (64).

[2] Being an island nation, the British culture and society were formed and sustained in all its aspects by its dependency on the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea, and the capillary network of rivers across it. Movement of ideas, goods, and people, naval victories, and the expansion of its empire was enabled by its maritime ability. Therefore, by oceanic consciousness, I mean the inherent awareness of the proximity and importance of oceans and seas for island nations and coastal cities which results in maritime topics becoming the subject of multiple representations in art and literature and informing political and judicial matters.

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