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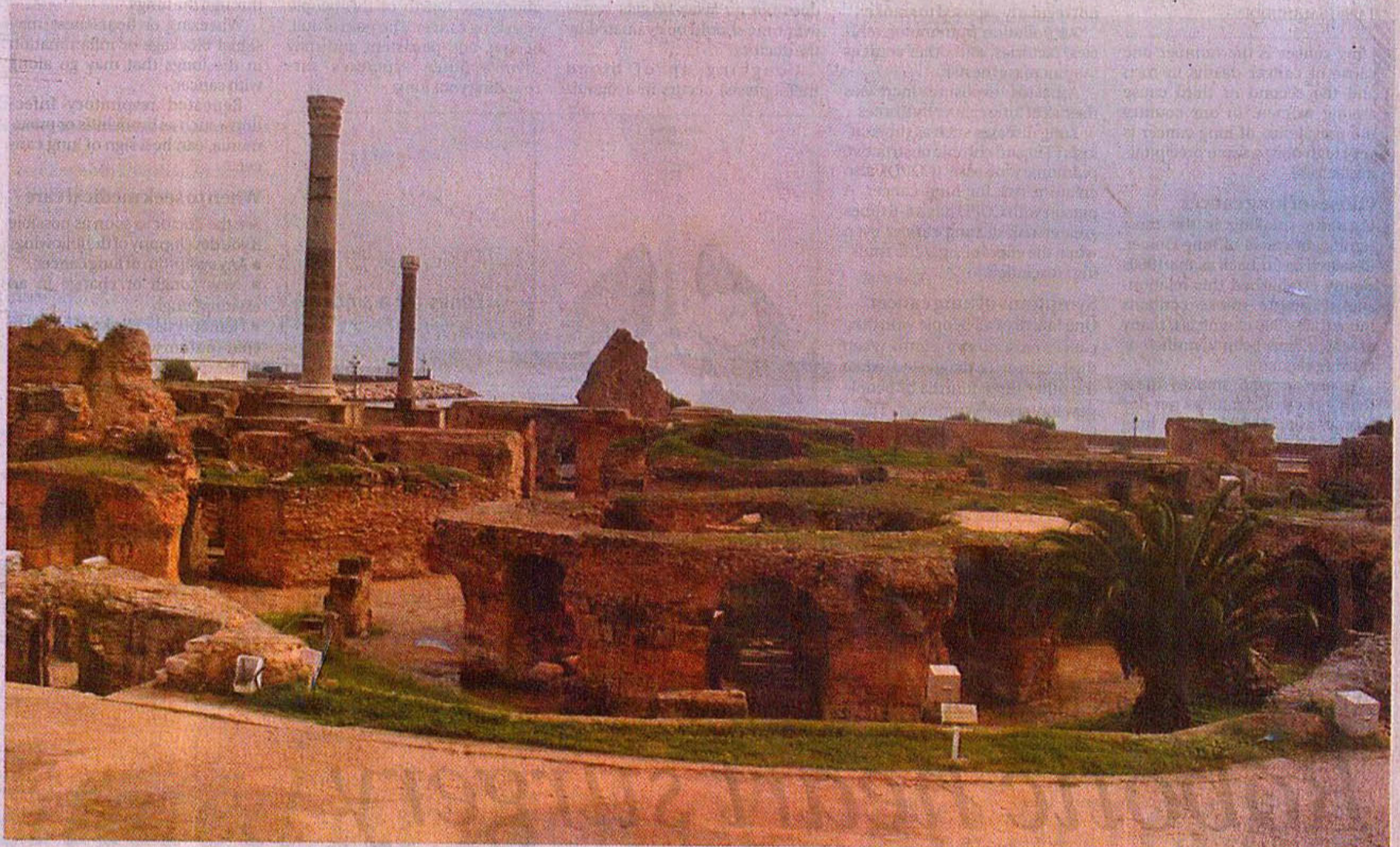
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Roman grandeur

I step out of the train, as if in a trance, to an immaculately clean town Carthage Hannibal. Outside the rail station, horse-driven carts are waiting, all decked up, ready to pull the shiny black carriages fringed with golden brass borders and a red velvet carpet. I have no idea rides in them. The sight of them took me back to the fairy tale "Cinderella" who rode such a carriage to the ball that was to change her life to live happily every after.

As I walk up the main street, I pause, and after a while, hesitantly ask an old lady of European origin by looks, where the Roman village is. In a mixture of words, mostly in French, the woman gives me directions and even paces up a few hundred yards to show me the road leading to the village.

I walk through the residential quarter of the town. Sprawling beautiful houses with lines of weeping willow lining the boundaries -- many of them belonging to heads of foreign missions. Then suddenly I caught sight of the signboard -- "Roman Village". This is where the Romans first set up their town when they invaded Carthage, not forgetting to leave behind a deep Roman scar. The history of this town of Carthage is rather diverse.

Historical tales say that in the 8th century BC, the legendary Princess Elissa-Dido, (according to the mythical tradition, Elissa (Elishat) took a group of Tyrians first to Cyprus and then to the north coast of Africa opposite Sicily after her brother slew her husband. Because of the tales of all her wanderings, she received the name "Dido" (Deido)--the wanderer) founded Carthage. From the 8th century till the 3rd



century BC, Carthage powerfully dominated the western half of the Mediterranean.

For a thousand years, Phoenicians were masters of the Mediterranean town and over 200 war ships and innumerable merchant vessels were sheltered in the nearby port of Salammbou. At its center the Admirals Island still exists and archeologists are reconstituting the pavilion with its shrine and docks. Next to the ports the ancient sanctuary of the goddess Tanit (Tophet) a quiet, shady square of hundreds of funeral steles.

Carthage had two first-class harbours, -- an advantage with the most efficient means of communications of those days --

the sea. The Carthaginians soon developed high skills in the building of ships and used this to dominate the seas for centuries. The most important merchandise was silver, lead, ivory and gold, beds and bedding, simple, cheap pottery, jewellery, glassware, wild animals from Africa, fruit and nuts.

Then came the Romans, invaded Carthage and built on its ruins a new Carthage resplendent with great buildings, theaters, villas and baths.

The wars against Rome called the Punic Wars involved three periods of wartime from 264 to 146 BC. Each one of these wars ended bringing defeat to the Carthaginians. The third war was

the worst of all as the vindictive Romans wrecked Carthage forever. How strange that this breathtakingly beautiful site should have been the theater of such violence, as a Roman historian wrote of the fall of Carthage "the city was then razed and burnt to the ground and the accursed land covered with salt to ensure its barrenness."

Although the Romans are no more here, they did not fail to stamp on Carthage traces of their civilisation remain.

I see the Thermal baths, one of the largest built under the Roman empire with the "cool room" an amazing 47 meters long and 15 meters high. I walk through column after column,

room after room. Then I come across the barracks of Roman soldiers. Statues of an eagle and another of a warrior standing guard at the entrance are structures that cannot be missed. Parts of ruins of columns lie on the ground, defeated by time and neglect. But one huge column still stands tall by the Mediterranean, as if to announce the greatness of the Romans even after all this time.

Nearby, I climb the stairs of the Roman theatre (which is still used today for the summer festival of Carthage). Nostalgically I sit there pondering and staring at the stage, now empty, but was in the yesteryears vibrant with actors -- male and female, protagonists and antagonists.

The museum of Carthage is another place where you can marvel at the Roman civilisation and achievements. Standing on the square of the museum, you can stretch your glance across the city of Tunis. It is a wonderful sight. Far below from where you stand are the adobes, white and clean, looking like snowflakes on a plateau. Peaceful and quiet!

Inside the museum you are met by a gigantic statue of a charioteer and his wife,

sculptured in marble, flawless in exactness. The wife's clothes fly out mingling with the rhythm of the gently blowing winds as the charioteer's muscles bulge out strained in tension. The enormous ten-foot head of Alexander the Great draws much attention. The artifacts are no less interesting. The fine finishing touch of the Roman artisan would enthrall you, make you bow to the memory and your mind heavy with respect for those people who loved fineness of life and yet were so ruthless in their quest and thirst for new lands.

But today as I sit here alone, a breeze ruffles the tufts of grass and I ponder over the passage of time and events that shaped the history of the world. A shiver of awe runs down my spine as I still feel the Romans doing their daily bits, repairing ships, practicing sword fights, tinkering with stones to build and repair houses, changing guards.

But then you feel that without power and supremacy, fine qualities of life never flourish. History has proven it all.

Story & Photo: INAM AHMED

