The study of Classical motifs that made their way into rabbinic literature has been going apace for a century and a half now, but much remains to be done in this important and difficult field. The present paper will focus on two items only, namely, the brazen bull inside which the Sicilian tyrant Phalaris is said to have burned his enemies alive, and the grisly ritual by which the Carthaginians were said to sacrifice their own children. The two themes may be intimately connected, as it has often been suggested that the original Bull of Phalaris was some Sicilian adaptation of what went on in the Carthaginian Tophets. There might also be a connection between them within the rabbis' world as well, as it was for setting up such a Tophet in Jerusalem (among other actions which the Deuteronomistic historians found abominable) that Manasseh was said to have been punished by God in the instrument of torture whose appearance shall be examined below. Both connections, however, make little difference for the present study, for the two motifs did not enter the rabbis' world together, and their analysis poses quite different problems. We may therefore focus on each item separately.

I. The Bull of Phalaris

In 2 Chr 33:11, the chronicler recounts how God punished the wicked king Manasseh by sending against him the Assyrians, "who captured Manasseh in chains (מָסָרָה) and bound him in bronze fetters (מָסָרָה), and brought him to Babylon." The identity of the מָסָרָה and the מָסָרָה in which Manasseh was placed seems to have aroused much speculation among the story's ancient readers. Some took both implements as...
some kind of fetters, an interpretation which is supported by the other occurrences of both words in the Hebrew Bible and accepted by most modern commentators. Other readers, however, made much more of the רענול in which the king was imprisoned, as can be seen from the following discussion of Manasseh’s fate, in Midrash ha-Gadol to Gen 4:13 (pp. 121-2 Margulies):

When the army commanders of the king of Assyria caught him, “and they captured Manasseh יְנֶר and they imprisoned him רָעָנֹל.” R. Levi bar Haita said, “They made for him something like a bronze pan, and they made it perforated רַכְבּוֹן, and they put him inside it and lit a fire underneath.” Abba Shaul said, “They made for him a statue מִשְׁכַּב which looked like a bull, and they placed him inside it and they lit a fire underneath... [Manasseh invoked all the idols in the world, but to no avail; he then invoked God, who forgave him and decided to save him]... and Gabriel came and went inside the statue, and the bull sneezed and he (Manasseh) came out of its nostrils and Gabriel placed him in יֵשָׁבָא. And that is (what is written, in 2 Chr 33:13) “and God returned him to Jerusalem, to his kingship.”

The two instruments of torture mentioned here are well known from other late-antique sources. The first interpretation, that of R. Levi bar Haita (3rd cent. CE), identifies Manasseh’s רענול with a τήγανον, a well known instrument of torture in late antiquity. The second inter-