

WHO WERE THE PHOENICIANS? OR THE IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE 21ST CENTURY ACADEMY



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Abstract: The Phoenicians live a revival: exhibitions, congresses and publications of major compilations in English have fueled interest in this mysterious people. In this article we address an issue that has been hotly debated over the past ten years, the very Phoenician essence. Did they exist or are they a historiographical invention?

Key-words: Phoenicia; Phoenicians; historiography; Archaeology.

Resumo: Os fenícios vivem um *revival*: exposições, congressos e publicações de grandes compilações em língua inglesa têm alimentado o interesse por esse povo misterioso. Neste artigo abordamos uma questão que voltou a ser bastante debatida nos últimos dez anos, a própria essência fenícia. Eles existiram ou são uma invenção historiográfica?

Palavras-chave: Fenícia; fenícios; historiografia; Arqueologia.

Resumen: Los fenicios están reviviendo: exposiciones, congresos y publicaciones de importantes recopilaciones en idioma inglés han despertado el interés en estas personas misteriosas. En este artículo abordamos un tema que ha sido objeto de acalorados debates en los últimos diez años, la esencia fenicia. ¿Existieron o son una invención historiográfica?

Palabras-clave: Fenicia; Fenicios; historiografía; Arqueología.

Dossiê

INTRODUCTION

The most recent major academic work on the Phoenicians, *The Oxford Handbook of the Phoenician and Punic Mediterranean* (2019), brings in its flap a very thought-provoking synthesis about its object of study, written by its editors, C. López-Ruiz and B. R. Doak:

The Phoenicians created the Mediterranean as we know it and yet they are typically marginalized in a story written as one of Greek and

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Roman success. It is no exaggeration to say that the ancient Mediterranean world, and to some extent the world we live in today, would have been very different had the Phoenicians not existed. The ancient Greeks and Romans may not have started using alphabetic writing when they did, hence literacy and even the development of genres such as history or philosophy might have been delayed, even for centuries. Moreover, the Phoenician commercial and colonial expansion starting in the late ninth century BCE laid out pan-Mediterranean networks and models on which Greece's own colonial expansion thrived. And, were it not for Carthage's grip on the central and western Mediterranean after 500 BCE, Rome might not have engaged in the Punic Wars, which proved to be the foundation of its empire outside Italy.

Our view of the ancient world is clearly built on the European culture that develops and dominates the West from the modern period. The collapse of the medieval world, which, even though it was not the desert for the production and dissemination of knowledge preached by common sense, was a period of brake on the development of sciences, which were boiling in Antiquity, will allow the "resurgence" and the incorporation of themes such as philosophy, mathematics, history, philology, geography, among others, in the social and political reorganization that has been taking over Europe since the 13th century². The birth of Archeology as a scientific discipline fits this context. The resumption of classical studies occurs, primarily and essentially, through the bias of ancient texts, maintained and recovered in medieval monasteries and abbeys, and in this initial process the materiality, objects and constructions of the ancients, had to fit into the primacy of these written texts. It turns out that these are texts from the "successful" Greeks and Romans, as Lópes-Ruiz and Doak well point out in the excerpt transcribed above. Peoples who did not leave us literary, historical, philosophical, mathematical works, among others, whether for their own historical reasons or for the sake of conservation, found themselves thrown into the background, regardless of the real importance they had in the history of Antiquity. This, of course, is the case with the Phoenicians and their descendants throughout the Mediterranean, Carthaginians, Gaditans, Motyans, and so many others. The relevance and prevalence given to Greeks and Latins occurs not only because of medieval

² If we take into account the scholastic period. It should also be remembered that between the 8th and 9th centuries, during the Carolingian Empire, there was a "micro renaissance" with the restoration and inauguration of new schools (linked to monasteries, bishoprics and courts) and the organization of programs for the resumption of classical studies, through dialectics, grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. These schools would be, some of them, the bases for scholasticism and for the first medieval universities between the 12th and 13th centuries (on the subject, see TRIGGER, 1993, p.31-36).



and Renaissance historical events, but because they inhabited and dominated European lands, where the western world as we know it today was formed, because they left significant material marks - with their temples and monumental constructions, their orthogonal cities, their art - in these territories and for having been the chosen ascendants of the bourgeois elite, the new aristocracy, the modern ecclesiastical orders, and, ultimately, the Nation States that are formed throughout 19th century³.

The rupture with the eastern world, built in the medieval world, is then maintained and nourished, for the most part, it is important to stress, due to very complex historical developments that have taken over this vast region since the end of the Byzantine Empire and the rise of the Ottoman Empire. Rome is rediscovered in the first place also because the future modern Greek lands were subject to the Sublime Porte⁴, and, in this context, the seminal oriental civilizations also suffered in this selective process of what should be raised as a great object of study.

The Phoenicians, as we will see in detail below, are Eastern, and were not immune to all the process of subordination to the West suffered by these pre-biblical peoples⁵, but, and this is an important but, they sailed and settled throughout the Mediterranean, leaving their homeland in a process of contact (commercial, colonial, expansionist) that begins in the late Bronze Age (c. 1100 BC) (KORMIKIARI, 1993).

In this way, its material remains (which include this double document, material and textual, the epigraphy) are spread over the lands that bathe the entire Mediterranean basin (Syrian-Palestinian coast; Aegean islands; Cyprus; North Africa; Iberian Peninsula; Balearic Islands; Sardinia; Sicily; Pantelleria and Malta). In other words, it is impossible to escape from their legacy.

However, although we know that they had a rich and diversified written production, unfortunately only fragments of them in Greek and Latin texts

³ On this vast and complex topic and its relationship with the Human Sciences, see Momigliano (2019); Trigger (1993). For an in-depth study of the roots of nationalism, see Anderson (2003).

⁴ The Sublime or High Porte was the name given to the Ottoman government between the beginning of the 18th century and the first quarter of the 20th century. The territory that will shape the modern country Greece came under Ottoman rule between the 14th and 19th centuries. The Greek War of Independence lasted from 1821 to 1832. The Ottoman Empire stretches across a vast area of the eastern Mediterranean, from the Balkans to the border with Egypt.

⁵ Edward Said (1978) was one of the first intellectuals to work systematically on the question of the denial of value given to the Orient in general. Its analysis refers to contemporary issues, but we can retain it as a paradigm for previous periods.



have reached us, so that Archeology and the study of material culture are our main, if not the only, source of documentation about them. And that is where the studies of the last 150 years have turned.

The lack of more abundant textual documentation makes it difficult for us to analyze internal discourses about their identity and historical perceptions and discussions about this issue have been gaining strength in recent years among American and European academics. It even went so far as to proclaim their non-existence (cf. CRAWLEY QUINN, 2018)!⁶ It is clear that such an apocalyptic deconstruction is not seriously considered, but the identity discussion is necessary, as well as a critical analysis of foreign sources and modern and contemporary historical construction about these excellent carpenters and navigators of Antiquity.

THE FIRST STEPS IN THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF THE PHOENICIANS - 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES

Three scholars were the pioneers of the so-called Phoenician-Punic studies between the 18th and 19th centuries (cf. DUPONT-SOMMER, 1983):

The first was Jean-Baptiste Barthélemy (1716-1795). Born in Provence, south of France, he studied philosophy and theology among the Jesuits and, as a seminarian, specialized in ancient languages: Greek; Hebrew; Syriac and Arabic.

He will become known as Abbé Barthélemy, that is, as Father Barthélemy, even though he left the seminary and returned to the city where he grew up, Aubagne. Like so many antique classicists of his time, Barthélemy will be inspired by the wealth of material traces visible in his region, not yet touched by the Industrial Revolution that was forming further north in Europe. Thus, in addition to languages, which he will continue to study, he also dedicates himself to archaeological, epigraphic, numismatic studies and ancient history.

At the age of 28 he moves to Paris where he connects to the King's Medals Office and, there, becomes an expert in monetary classification⁷, becoming

⁶ However, J. Crawley Quinn does a thorough job of reconstructing the process of adoption of the terms Phoenician and Phoenicia in modern times. The author argues strongly for the lack of an ethnic identity among the so-called Phoenicians (CRAWLEY QUINN, 2018, p. 25-43).

⁷ The antiquarian spirit of the time favored coinage as the ideal document, since it has image and legend (mostly), thus being a textual source not suspected of manipulation, as would be the Classical texts, produced by an elite (MOMIGLIANO, 2019).



a member of the Academy of Inscriptions and Letters (Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres) and, as such, starts to publish a series of works ('memories'). The most famous of them, "Essai de Paléographie Numismatique", is considered the first scientific attempt to establish modern numismatics.

At the age of 38, in 1754, he presented the text "Réflexions sur l'alphabet et sur la langue dont on se servait autrefois à Palmyre" to the Academy, opening the way for deciphering the alphabet of Palmira, a Semitic city of the Bronze Age, located in the central region of Syria, incorporated into the Roman Empire in the 1st century AD. A year earlier Barthélemy had become the new 'garde' of the King's Medals Office and, in this prestigious condition, embarked on his only trip abroad, to Rome, with the mission of increasing the collection of the Cabinet.

Barthélemy arrived in Rome on January 1, 1755 and stayed there for 18 months, during which time he visited a number of archaeological sites, in particular: Herculaneum and Paestum - where he visited the famous and monumental Greek temples.

Upon his return to France, he published a series of articles in the *Journal de Savants*⁸: "Explication de la mosaïque de Palestrine"; "Les antiquités d'Herculanum"; "Les ruines de Palmyre" and "Les ruines de Balbec".

In 1758, as a continuation of the deciphering of the language of Palmira, he presented at the Academy the important study "Réflexions sur quelques monuments phéniciens et sur les alphabets qui en résultent"⁹.

The starting point of this study is a bilingual inscription from Malta, in Phoenician and Greek, engraved on two marble bases where each supported a column crowned with acanthus leaves.

Barthélemy was then responsible for the final deciphering of the Phoenician alphabet, since Malta's inscription had been studied for over twenty years, but without conclusive results. This success will allow you to start reading some of the Phoenician inscriptions then known: coins of Tire and Sidon; funerary inscriptions from Cyprus (CIS I, 46 and 64).

In addition to being an epigraphist, numismatist and orientalist, Barthélemy also studied Greece later in his career. In 1788 he published *Voyage du*

8 Volumes from the 20th century are available at <https://www.persee.fr/collection/jds>. The *Journal des Savants* is the oldest literary newspaper in Europe, having been founded in 1665 by Denis de Sallo, advisor to the Paris Parliament. Dissolved in 1792, it was restored and reorganized in 1816, and until 1900 its costs were paid by the State. But already in the years 1901 and 1902 these expenses were borne by the Institut de France, and then it started to be sheltered by the Academy of Inscriptions and Letters, where it is still today (cf <https://www.aibl.fr/publications/periodiques/journal-des-savants/?lang=fr>).

9 Published at the *Mémoires de l'Académie*, XXX, p.405-27.



jeune Anacharsis en Grèce, a book he took 30 years to write and was a huge success at the time. Thus, Abbé Barthélemy, while responsible for deciphering the Phoenician alphabet in the 18th century, represents an iconic figure for the first Phoenician scientific studies.

The second precursor and great scholar was the German Wilhelm Gesenius (1786-1842). He is the great professor who started the academic study of Hebrew, but he also studied the Phoenicians and Punic and published, in Leipzig, in 1837, "Scripturae linguaeque phoeniciae monumenta quotquot supersunt" ("Monuments, existing, of writing and the Phoenician language"). This immense work was divided into four books: of Phoenician paleography; Phoenician inscriptions from Malta, Athens, Kition, Sardinia, Sicily, and other places; Phoenician coins; Phoenician language (characteristics and history). He also searched for traces of the Phoenician-Punic language in Latin and Greek writings. For example, quotations in Plauto, proper names, deities, grammatical elements, among others.

Finally, the third great scholar was the famous Ernest Renan (1823-1892), born in Brittany, France. Renan is educated at the Collège de France in Paris and, in 1862, he succeeds his former teacher, Étienne Quatremère, in the Hebrew chair. The method of comparative grammar, learned in his studies of Sanskrit with Eugène Burnouf, is used by Renan in his analyses of Semitic languages. Therefore, he wins the maximum prize in the Volney contest of the Academy of Inscriptions and Letters (Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres) and presents his comparative grammar of the Semitic languages (Hebrew; Phoenician; Aramean; Palmireu; Nabataean; Arabic) where he searched for the common characteristics of all those languages¹⁰.

In 1857, he published the memory of the *Histoire phénicienne de Sanchaniaton*, a Phoenician priest from the 10th century BC who wrote a history of the Phoenician religion and whose text was partially preserved in a Greek summary of Philo of Byblos, from the 3rd century AD. Renan defended the authenticity and the historicity of this work, which was later confirmed by the information contained in the tablets of Ras Shamra (former Ugarit), from Syria.

He was the first westerner to conduct an archaeological excavation mission in Phoenicia between 1860 and 1861, where he explored four regions: Tortose (Ruad and Amrit), Byblos, Sidon and Tire (from north to south, along the coast).

In September 1861, he and his sister contracted malaria fever. His sister dies and Renan, having survived, returned to France in October of the same

¹⁰ Although dated, the principles of this work are still valid.



year. The results of the excavations are published in the *Mission Phénicie*, still today one of the essential books of Phoenician archeology¹¹. In 1855, the sarcophagus of Eshmounazar (king of Sidon) is found by chance. On loan to France, today it is in the Louvre. In 1861, Renan collected numerous inscriptions in situ and published them the following year. And in 1867, under his 'sponsorship', the Academy decided to publish a vast volume of all Semitic inscriptions known to date. The first part is dedicated to Phoenician and Punic inscriptions¹². This is how *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* (CIS) is born¹³.

The 18th century marks the first uses of the term "Phoenician" and the term "Punic" in Western academia, which were consolidated throughout the 19th. We are at a very complex historical moment, which involves the formation of nation states, the development of universities and modern sciences, as we saw above.

The two terms are not modernly invented terms, but neither are they terms that came from Phoenician and / or Punic textual sources. However, they were adopted in this modern moment of systematization of knowledge from the ancient world.

BUT WHO WERE THE PHOENICIANS?

Dossier

Sabatino Moscati, whom we can consider as the father of Phoenician-Punic Archeology in the important Italian academic school, in the presentation of the opening catalog of the exhibition *I Fenici*¹⁴ (2001a), presents us with the main object of this exhibition as Semites from the Canaanite branch - not indigenous to the region that will later mark their existence, the Syro-Palestinian coast.

11 When France took over Lebanese territory in 1919, in the so-called modern colonial period, French archaeologists worked from the bases founded by Renan.

12 The first volume of the CIS, *Pars prima. Inscriptiones phoenicias continens* is published in 1881. Three more issues followed, published every two years, and in 1891, shortly before his death, the first issue of volume two with Carthage's inscriptions was published.

13 The first half of the 20th century and the first decades that follow are periods marked by seminal philological studies and publications of Semitic inscriptions - Phoenician in particular. For a detailed compilation see Röllig (1995).

14 This exhibition marked history in Italy, so dominated by the memory of the Roman Empire, by bringing to the general public, in Palazzo Grassi in Venice, a little about the Phoenicians and their descendants, such as the Carthaginians. The gigantic catalog, with more than 800 pages and beautiful images that accompanied the exhibition, brings articles from the most renowned researchers in the area. In 1992, Moscati resumed the subject in a book entirely dedicated to the subject, called *Chi furano i fenici*.



In fact, the idea of a Phoenician non-autochthony was strongly conveyed to us by classical tradition. According to Herodotus (I, 1; VII, 89), Strabo (I, 2, 35; XVI, 4, 27), Pliny the Elder (Nat. Hist. IV, 36) and Justin (XVIII, 3, 2-4) would have come from southern and eastern lands, in reference to their final position on the Mediterranean coast (cf. RÖLLIG, 1983, p. 80)¹⁵. Recently, A. E. Killebrew (2019, p. 42), following important scholars like Maria Eugenia Aubet (1997, p. 10-12) and Glenn Markoe (2000, p.12), defended the Phoenician autochthony based on a strong cultural continuity (derived from archaeological documentation) in relation to the Late Bronze Age (c. 1500-1200 BC)¹⁶.

Here we find one of the conceptual aspects that most problematize the Phoenician question and it is of a chronological order. When can we talk about Phoenicians and Phoenicia? This doubt arises because the cities that will come to be identified as Phoenician have, for the most part, a previous history, sometimes quite long. This is the case of Byblos, which will be presented in detail below.

Sabatino Moscati postulated that from the beginning of the Iron Age (c.1200 / 1100 B.C.) they were called Canaanites or Sidonians¹⁷ (1992, p.17-18), that is, when historiographically the “rise” of the Phoenicians is established (cf. also AUBET, 1997, p. 10; KILLEBREW 2019; ACQUARO, 1987, p.11). These terms are found in both Phoenician, Assyrian, archaeological and textual documentation in the Old Testament and in Homer (cf. KORMIKIARI, 2018, p.175). The first contacts with the Aegean date from the Mycenaean period, at the end of the 2nd millennium, when it is believed that they shared maritime routes and exchanges with the Western Mediterranean (Sicily, Sardinia and Iberian Peninsula) (cf. KORMIKIARI, 1993, p. 264)¹⁸. The Egyptian documentation of Tell el-Amarna, from the 15th century BC,

15 Only Philo of Byblos claims that they are indigenous. Herodotus places them, initially, in the Sea of Eritrea, that is to say, in the Red Sea; Strabo says that in the Persian Gulf there would be temples and cities similar to those of the Phoenicians, which is confirmed by Pliny; Justin narrates that having to leave their lands due to an earthquake, the Phoenicians first settled on Lake Siro (Dead Sea?) and then on the Mediterranean coast (cf. MOSCATI, 1992, p. 3).

16 In this sense, scholars like Donald Harden (1962, p. 21-22) even proposed extending the use of the term Phoenician to the 3rd millennium (apud KILLEBREW, 2019, p. 42).

17 The term Sidonians appears in Homer, in the opinion of M. E. Aubet (1997, p.8), as anachronistic since in the Homeric period the Phoenician city with more power was Tyre. On the other hand, she recalls that the king of Tyre is also called “king of the Sidonians”, which would be quite significant for the period between the 10th and 8th centuries BC (idem, p. 9).

18 Although controversial, there are those who perceive in the Mycenaean term *po-ni-ki-jo* / *po-ni-ki* the pre-Hellenic existence of the term Phoenician (MOSCATI, 1995). In his etymological dictionary of Greek, Beekes (2009, p. 1583) states that the suffix “ik’” (*phoinikes*), in Greek, is not Indo-European, and therefore, would be pre-Greek. M. E. Aubet (1997, p. 8) understands that the term, which appears in texts in linear B from Knossos and Pylos, refers to an aromatic herb from the East, perhaps the ‘phoenicia herb’ of Pliny the Elder, and so it would not be related to an ethnicity.

is also an important source of information (cf. MARKOE, 2000, p. 14-16; KILLEBREW, 2019, p. 44)¹⁹.



The term Canaan as a designation for a specific location appears in the middle of the 3rd millennium, a data taken from the findings of Ebla, in Syria (AUBET, 1997, p. 9). From the 15th century BC onwards, the term appears widespread, as a specification of a place, in Levantine and Egyptian texts and in inscriptions (*ibidem*).

Enrico Acquaro reminds us that in Genesis (10, 15-20) the list of peoples presented contains eleven names plus that of the founder of the genealogy, Canaan, thus making twelve. Among the eleven peoples mentioned (the so-called “Canaanite families”), the Sidonians are the first (ACQUARO, 1987, p.10).

The absence of a comprehensive nomenclature is explained by the recurring idea, among several scholars, of autonomy of the Phoenician city-states instead of an eventual unified identity (MOSCATI 2001 a, 2001 b, 1992, 1995; AUBET, 1997; XELLA, 2014; KILLEBREW, 2019). In this sense, the use, in different ancient documentary sources of terms such as Sidonians or Tyrians in a sense that reflects the idea of a larger grouping of populations, is explained as a reflection of specific city hegemonies (for example, ACQUARO, 1987, p.16).

A certain academic consensus about these early “Phoenicians” of the late Bronze Age claims that:

Much like the second millennium Bronze Age inhabitants of the Levant who appear as “Canaanites” in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and biblical sources, the early Phoenicians, who may have referred to themselves as Canaanites, can be best understood as a confederation of merchant communities of predominantly indigenous populations residing along the central and northern Levantine littoral, with a similar material culture and language, who likely self-identified in terms of their cities and family lineage (KILLEBREW, 2019, p. 42).

Killebrew’s article is recent, from 2019, and seems to want to put an end to the historiographical question of an identity order, which has recently gained momentum (PASTOR BORGONON, 1988-1990; MOSCATI, 1993; RÖLLIG, 1983, 1995; PRAG, 2006; XELLA, 2014; EDREY, 2016;

¹⁹ The so-called El Amarna’s letters indicate a specific, common, diplomatic and trade language established by the great powers of the 2nd millennium in the Eastern Mediterranean, demonstrating a sharing of values.



CRAWLEY QUINN, 2018). It fed and feeds on the fact that the terms by which the Phoenicians, and their descendants, encompassed in the term Punic, became known in the Greek and Roman Mediterranean world are not emic, but ethical.

We have *phoinikes* for the people and *Phoiniké* for the region in words used by the Greeks, already in Homer (*Odyssey*, VIII, 159-164; XV, 415-482; among other passages) and the connection with the Greek word for purple, red is obvious: *phoinix*. This color refers to the typical Phoenician industry of purple coloring of fabrics. What we do not know is which one came before. Moscati (1992, p.17) argued that, analogously to the term *Canaan*, from which the term red in Akkadian would be derived, the term *phoinix* in Greek could have been derived from an emic ethnic, transliterated into Greek as *phoinikes* and *Phoiniké* (cf also, AUBET, 1997, p. 9-10).

We will return to this question later in our article. But

HOW DID THE PHOENICIANS CALL THEMSELVES?

Moscati argued, as seen, that a conscience of national unity was weak among them, as we did not find distinctive words to express that conscience (1988, 1992, 1995). In an analogous way, Paolo Xella resumes this theme in a more recent article (2014), where he argues that, even not abandoning the terms *Phoenician* and *Phoenicia* for their heuristic value, we should visualize the Phoenician identity much more from the city point of view, that is, from each city-state, due to the lack of documentation that indicates any idea of national unity.

G. Markoe went further and noted: “Tyre, Sidon, Byblos, and Arwad were all fiercely independent, rival cities who rarely worked in concert with one another, except under common threat” (2000, p. 10).

In the 2nd millennium, the name *Canaanite* was used for the people and *Canaan* for the region, as mentioned above. But the term, in fact, designated, however, the entire Syro-Palestinian area (KORMIKIARI, 2018, p. 175-176). Modernly, a very well remembered fact about the term and its relation with the Phoenicians is the information provided by Saint Augustine, at the end of the 4th century AD, when he reports that the African people, in his

time, still called themselves Chanani, that is Canaanites²⁰. Despite this, the Canaanite name cannot be considered a unique designation for the Phoenicians. They are, however, included in it²¹.



IS THERE A WAY TO DEFEND THE PHOENICIAN UNITY?

Identity construction processes have been the subject of much research and discussion throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Moscati understood that a people was an aggregate of people who could diversify by race and origin, but who assumed a homogeneous character because they had in common a geographical area, a language, a historical and cultural process (1995; 2001a).

Most historians understand that, in relation to the Phoenicians, these requirements only occur around 1200/1100 BC, since before that, the Syro-Palestinian history does not provide a clear distinction between the centers of the coast - which would later be those of Phoenicia - and those from the interior (MOSCATI 1992, 1995, 2001a²² ACQUARO 1987, p.11; AUBET, 1997, p. 10; contra MARKOE, 2000, p. 22-25)²³.

However, caution, already pointed out in 1966 by W. Culican, is still part of our fragmented understanding of this phenomenon:

The origin of both these cities (i.e. Tyre and Sidon), and indeed the origin of the Phoenician civilization generally, is lost, for neither excavations nor written documents throw much light on the eleventh and tenth centuries B.C. It is indeed possible that the birth of 'Phoenicia' was brought about by the formation of a new population group composed mainly of sea-raider settlers and coastal Canaanites (CULICAN, 1966, p. 72 apud RÖLLIG, 1983, p. 80)

Historical data from the region show that the organizational system was based on city-states. In a previous moment, these coastal city-states - which

²⁰ "For when our country folk, asked what they are, respond in Punic, Chanani— what else do they state, obviously with one letter lost, just as is usual in such cases, than Chananaei?" (St. Augustine, Ep. In Rom. Inchoat., 13). There are those who defend, however, that this transcription is not correct and that it was taken out of context (CRAWLEY QUINN et alii, 2014).

²¹ Edrey (2016, p. 46) presents studies that reaffirm the Phoenician ethnic identification as Canaanite.

²² It should be noted that throughout his texts, Sabatino Moscati has always affirmed the independence of the Phoenician city-states, stressing the inexistence of a Phoenician "nation".

²³ For a summary both the opposing and favorable positions towards the Phoenician turn of the late Bronze Age, which have lost strength over the past few decades, see Röllig (1983, p. 79-81).

already existed then before Phoenicia - are not very different from those in the interior - which will not form Phoenicia.



In the introduction of the chapter on religion on the *Manuel de recherche*, edited by Véronique Krings, two of the most important names in the field, Corine Bonnet and Paolo Xella (1995, p. 316-317), remind us that it is difficult to work with the idea of a historical reality behind the expressions “Phoenician religion” and “Punic religion” because Phoenicia was never a unified and circumscribed political entity and the Punic world encompasses a constellation of well-differentiated historical and cultural situations. The Phoenician city-states were constituted as geopolitical entities often jealous of their autonomy and the cults played an important role in cultural differentiation.

We take as an example Byblos, the oldest of the documented Phoenician cities. In Moscati's words we would have here a clear example of continuity and innovation:

I Fenici, fu detto, si presentano sostanzialmente come i continuatori della civiltà siro-palestinese dell'età del Bronzo, di fronte alla frattura che le altre genti determinano tutt'intorno. Continuatori, s'intende, non senza sviluppi e innovazioni, dove più e dove meno notevoli; ma pur sempre esponenti di uno sviluppo ininterrotto, come ininterrotto è l'elemento etnico che lo esprime, e in ciò differenziati e autonomi rispetto al mondo circconvicino.

Emblematico, al riguardo, può dirsi il caso di Biblo: una città fiorente già nella tarda preistoria e che nel corso del III e del II millennio sviluppa una propria autonoma vicenda, con manifestazioni di cultura nelle quali si anticipano le caratteristiche delle future città fenicie almeno nell'ambito del Vicino Oriente (manca, infatti, l'espansione mediterranea). (MOSCATI, 1992, p. 23)²⁴

Excavated initially by Ernest Renan from 1860 onwards, later by the Egyptologist Pierre Montet, between 1920 and 1924, and finally, under the responsibility of the Lebanese government, the entire internal site to the walls, built upon a promontory, was discovered, and beyond these, the excavations continue to this day (DUNAND, 1973).

²⁴ In a detailed article Tatiana Pedrazzi (2012) takes up the question again, agreeing with the idea of marking the Phoenicians as those Semites who will guard their culture in the face of innovations that will spread throughout the Middle East between the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age.



Prehistory and history prior to 1200 BC are part of a picture that covers all of Syria and Palestine. Byblos represents the oldest archaeological testimonies of the Phoenician area: since the end of the 6th millennium, at sea level, the presence of an important settlement is attested - it is considered the largest in the Mediterranean area for this time (BONDÌ, 2001)²⁵.

Its first inhabitants are dedicated to agriculture, grazing, and fishing; that is, the vital relationship with the sea already exists. At the same time, there is also the production of fabrics and yarns that will remain until the historical time of Byblos - and that will be a strong feature of later Phoenician production.

Still in the Neolithic period, throughout the 4th millennium, material evidence points to deep relations between the Syrian-Palestinian coast and Mesopotamia (Ur), with similarities between the artisanal relations of the two regions. From this period the oldest work in ivory was found, which will also be characteristic of later Phoenician production (*idem*).

The site is occupied without interruption and in 3000 BC more systematic and massive urban structures are identified (dwellings, workshops and temples) (DUNAND, 1973, p. 20). These structures are grouped into blocks, communicating through narrow streets with plumbing for the evacuation of water. The temples, which have been in existence for some centuries, retain the layout of a room surrounded by a corridor. This plant will remain for centuries. The material culture related to that moment reveals the close links maintained between the inhabitants of the city with Egypt, in its first dynasty, and Mesopotamia. The mound is completely occupied by facilities and narrow streets, the walls cover a space of 5 ha.

From 2800 BC, the urban characteristics of the previous period become more precise and expanded. It is believed that exchanges with Egypt, dynasties II and III, are the basis for the increase of the site (*idem*, p. 21).

Sandro Filippo Bondi (2001) defines this moment as “evolution of the 3rd millennium on the Syro-Palestinian coast”, when an “urban revolution” arrives in this coastal area, in which, for the first time, a complex of sanctuaries, housing, public buildings, among others; that is, a city, can be seen.

In this view, Byblos would be the great stage of this new experience. This is due to the fact that it is geographically very well located. It is the natural point of support along the routes that link Syrian-Palestine to Egypt. For

²⁵ The oldest dating of the site dates back to the Neolithic - period, which in Byblos goes from c. 5250 to 3800 BC. The first systematic installation on the site occurs in the western part of the mound, close to the maritime cliff.



almost seven centuries, the city grows and become richer, the nerve center of an important network of exchanges between Mesopotamia, Anatolia and the Nile valley.

Byblos becomes a well-developed urban settlement (cf. BONDÌ, 2001): it has two ports; the city is protected by a wall, inside which there is a block of dwellings; two large shrines - "Building L" and "Temple of de Lady of Byblos" - are the main places of worship.

Dedicated to Baalat-Gebal, "The Lady of Byblos", the city's tutelary deity, this temple marks the wealth and power of monarchs. It is usually dated to c. 2800 BC and the numerous Egyptian inscriptions and offerings found there point to political interests in diplomacy with the royal house of Byblos (AUBET, 1997, p. 18).

Egyptian inscriptions of c. 2600 BC mention the ships of Byblos transporting wood (cedar) and oil, as well as the acquisition of boats by the Egyptian authorities (ibidem).

The increase in international trade with Egypt has an influence on the culture of Byblos and conditions its economy. At the end of the 2nd Egyptian dynasty - beginning of the 3rd millennium - merchants from the Delta were supplied with firewood, metals and prestigious goods. The importance of Byblos for Egypt can be seen in the myth of Osiris: it is there that Isis goes looking for her husband's body (BONDÌ, 2001). In addition to Egypt, texts by Ebla show how Byblos traded by importing raw metals, upholstery, perfumes, animals and food products; and exporting manufactured products of linen and worked metals.

Indeed, Ebla's archaeological discoveries show that between 2500 and 2300 BC the future Phoenician cities in general became the main intermediaries of trade between the Syrian kingdoms and the Nile Valley. In the Ebla archives, several Canaanite cities are mentioned. In highlight, we have Arwad, Sarepta, Akhziv, Beirut, Tyre and Sidon. However, it is good to emphasize that Gebal, that is, Byblos, is the one that is always mentioned as the main commercial center and described as the capital of a powerful kingdom (AUBET, 1997, p. 18).

But in the midst of this prosperity, there was concern, as archaeological excavations identified a constant strengthening of the walls. In c. 2150 BC, countless destruction and a partial fire devastate the city (DUNAND, 1973, p. 22-23).

The end of the third millennium is marked by an internal crisis that prevents Egypt from pursuing its policy of expanding towards the east. Relations with Byblos are cut short. This is a period of great "turmoil" across the Near

East, tumultuous by territorial changes / ethnic transfers, which also affect the coastal area of Syro-Palestine (BONDÌ, 2001).



In Byblos we have what is identified as a foreign occupation (between the end of the 3rd millennium and the first quarter of the 2nd millennium BC) marked by architectural changes, despite the maintenance of sacred spaces, temples, with the same ritual functions. One of the signs most connected to this change is related to ceramics, transformed and brought from further afield in the East. A population from the ends of the Syrian desert is believed to occupy the region. They are the ones who destroy the Sumerians in Mesopotamia and threaten Egypt: they are the Amorrites. The arrival of this new population is attested in Syria, on the Syrian-Palestinian coast and in the most inland lands of Canaan (DUNAND, 1973, p.23).

The period between c. 2300 and 1900 BC is characterized by an interruption of maritime traffic to Egypt as a result of this invasion. It is necessary to remember that the Amorrites are considered nomadic Semitic groups, which looted and burned several Canaanite centers on the coast, such as Byblos, but also Tyre. Then, they go in more inland, in Aleppo and Mari (cf. AUBET, 1997, p. 19).

This phase in Byblos is marked by violent ruptures but also by the appearance of innovations, mainly linguistic. These demonstrate more clearly the cultural configuration of the Syrian-Palestinian area and its internal unity. With the Pharaoh of the Middle Kingdom, Egypt is reborn and between the 19th and 18th centuries relations with the Syrian-Palestinian coastal area are resumed (BONDÌ, 2001).

In this period the kings of Byblos are the only ones among Asians who are called by Egyptian sources "princes". The wealth and the Egyptian influence are attested by the tombs of some sovereigns who have furniture with objects of Egyptian type: medallions, crowns, gold scepters, precious stones, among others (ibidem).

New layers of destruction, more violent, are dated to the period between 2000 and 1725 BC. But after this, an immediate reconstruction is confirmed, followed by the reorganization of the walls. It is from this period that the famous Temple of the Obelisks dates²⁶. Tombs built at the bottom of wells, with a very rich funerary apparatus are associated with royalty. Names like

26 A large square enclosure with several spans, chandelier basins and a large number of betyls in the shape of pilasters, aniconic symbols of the divinity. The objects found in the sanctuary are part of some of the most typical types of Byblos production: statues covered with gold that represent male characters, with Egyptian clothing and conical tiara; naked bust and arms along the body (sometimes raised and flexed). Egyptian models also appear in glass-paste figures used as ex-votos, representing, for example, the god Bes with a lion's forehead, sphinx and dog's head. Other objects, such as gold and ivory daggers will be characteristic of the 1st millennium (BONDÌ, 2001).



Abi-shemou and Ip-shemou-abi, are related to princes of the first Babylonian dynasty, of Amorrite origin (BONDÌ, 2001.).

The discovered metal objects associated with these burials reveal a network of contacts with metallurgical centers in the Caucasus and Armenia region. At the same time, both Mesopotamian and Egyptian influence are maintained. Cretan pottery, kamares, is also attested. The habitants of Byblos use a hieroglyphic writing, in a first moment, and, in a second, a pseudo-hieroglyphic writing (DUNAND, 1973, p. 27).

Between 1900 and 1550 BC, the Egyptians are conquering parts of Syro-Palestine, but at the end of the 18th century BC, both the Hittite domain in the north and the arrival of the Hyksos put a brake on this domain. In the region of Byblos, there is a great increase in the development of the rural area, related to population density, and the burials now bring weapons as funerary furniture. Weapons are also offered at temples. The walls are renewed (cf. *ibidem*, p. 28).

Among the later Phoenician cities, Acco, Byblos and Tyre appear, in the Egyptian texts, as autonomous states, although Byblos is mentioned as the bridge of the Egyptian domain in the Levant (AUBET, 1997, p. 19).

Egyptian hegemony, therefore, does not prevent these centers from trading widely with Syria and Mesopotamia: the texts in the archives of Mari, for example, document for the 18th century a series of exchanges between this city and Byblos, based both on fabrics and clothes as in embassies and women, exchanged between sovereigns. In fact, coastal centers maintain prerogatives of institutional autonomy and are sites of cultural manifestations, such as the search for more agile and functional graphic methods than those of Egypt and Mesopotamia; and which are spread, like relative languages, in the Syro-Palestinian area (BONDÌ, 2001).

Egyptian domination is resumed between 1550 and 1200 BC. Also from a political point of view the area of the Syrian-Palestinian coast is in the Egyptian orbit - like much of the interior of Syria and Palestine (cf. BONDÌ, 2001). However, it is already possible to notice the fractionation of the area in states formed by cities (which will be a constant until the Hellenistic period).

To the south, with the action of Pharaoh Tutmoses I (1525-1515) and his successors, Egypt resumes hegemony. To the north are formed two large state nuclei: the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia and the Mitani kingdom, between upper Syria and northern Mesopotamia.



The events on the Syrian-Palestinian coast will be increasingly linked to the history of these powers, which will confront each other in the Syrian region. Overall, Egypt will retain power over the entire coastal area - including the area of "Phoenician" cities - up to Ugarit. The situation will be fluid during the 16th and 14th centuries BC and our greatest source of documents is the international correspondence of the Egyptian archives of Tell el-Amarna. Egypt will experience moments of expansion and periods of retreat as the alliances change and renew, involving the Syrian cities each time one of these, depending on the power of the moment, connects to a specific kingdom.

About Byblos, the existing documentation speaks of the local king Rib-Adda. In his correspondence with Pharaoh Amenophis IV, he reports the difficulties of maintaining the allegiance of loyalty to Egypt due to the activities of Abdi-asirta and Aziru (sovereigns of Amurru), which incite their subjects to rebellion (cf. BONDÌ, 2001). The important center of Ugarit, on the other hand, presents several aspects that are documented here for the 2nd millennium and that will appear in the Phoenicia of the 1st millennium. It therefore provides the Syrian foundations on which Phoenician culture will articulate. Examples: gold and silver cups; votive steles; ivory work. Also with respect to religious life, Ugarit reveals in ritual texts figures that will later be venerated in Phoenicia: the gods El, Baal and Reshet and the goddesses Anat and Astarte. With regard to long-distance trade, Ugarit, Byblos and Tyre will be included in the great Mediterranean network of exchanges, maintaining relations with Cyprus, Aegean, Syria-Palestine, Egypt and Mesopotamia (AUBET, 1997, p.20).

Centers that will later be defined as Phoenicians therefore reveal aspects that were already characteristic in the 14th - 13th - 12th century BC, and even earlier, as we have seen. These will appear again in the Phoenicia of the 1st millennium. For example, in Byblos and Sidon we have high quality work with ivory.

The so-called Invasion of the Peoples of the Sea puts an end to the political framework of the period of the Final Bronze and with the end of it, "Phoenicia" begins. Here, some of the cultural characteristics of the previous period will remain: the political system of the city-state in the hands of the monarchy; some forms of artisanal production; non-secondary aspects of religious thought; some and important linguistic characteristics (BONDÌ, 2001, p.). As M. E. Aubet (1997, p. 21) summarizes:

The Bronze Age in Canaan ends with generalized symptoms of violence, destruction or social-political decline. The destruction and final



abandonment of Ugarit around 1200 forms part of the succession of events in Canaan in the end of the Bronze Age, especially the Israelite invasion around 1230 BC and the general instability produced by the so-called 'Sea Peoples'. These latter, outstanding among them the Philistines of obscure origin, after laying waste the Hittite empire and destroying numerous Canaanite cities, took possession of the Southern coastal territory of Canaan around 1180 BC. To these Philistines, who gave their name to that part of the country – Philistia – Palestine – is attributed the introduction of iron metallurgy into the Levant. All these events had as a consequence a cultural and political power vacuum, which ultimately facilitated the incursion of the Aramaic tribes who occupied the interior of the territory – the modern Syria – towards the 11th century BC. The crisis of the end of the Bronze Age in Canaan culminated in a general reorganization of the old land of Canaan, which was reduced to what will become Phoiniké or Phoenicia proper.

Before the differentiation that will result in Phoenicia, there is therefore a homogeneous picture of a "Syrian" or "Syrian-Palestinian" civilization. Around 1200 BC the Phoenician cities emerge autonomously.

So, HOW DO WE STAND?

The Greek, the other, will perceive this new unit, formed from 1200 BC on. Phoenician civilization is the result of new facts that change the situation around it, and therefore, however paradoxical it may seem, it results much more from continuation than from innovation, which occurs, on the contrary, around it.

At this juncture, an aspect that draws attention is the nature of the Phoenician urban settlements, whose model will be carried by the Phoenicians to the entire Mediterranean: cities founded on rocky promontories, which could alternatively have two ports; one to the north and one to the south, depending on the situation of the winds and the seasons. As an alternative to promontories, small islands in front of the coast were used, where the defense and construction of fortifications was even easier and the variety of quays continued.

The geographical situation of Phoenicia implies a greater or lesser separation from the interior, depending on historical circumstances. Until 1200 BC, the circumstances did not lead to a more pronounced separation, although the cities on the coast developed autonomously, as we have seen.

The fact that Phoenician cities, after 1200 BC, became more closed made it difficult to trade by land (with the interior), which was an essential

component of Phoenician economic activity. In this way, marine activity is fully developed (MOSCATI, 2001b).



As we saw above, this activity has always been linked to the position of the Phoenician cities and was organized mainly within the scope of the Eastern Mediterranean, in particular with Egypt, which has always had privileged relations with the Syro-Palestinian coast.

Two facts increase the Phoenician marine activity at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC according to Sabatino Moscati (2001b):

1. Consolidation of internal states, especially that of Israel, which severely restricts the control of trade linked to it.
2. Resumption of Egyptian expansion, and also mainly Assyria, which constrain commercial activity, and thus compel the Phoenicians to seek out different ports²⁷.

These factors determine the Phoenician maritime projection, which will establish colonies in the West with the same characteristics as the eastern cities: on promontories or on islets close to the coast, spaced regularly to allow stops during navigations. For example, Carthage and Nora are founded on headlands. Motya, Sant'Antioco, Gades, Mogador are founded on islets.

ABOUT THE PHOENICIAN IDENTITY

E. Röllig (1995, p. 211-3) believes that a greater understanding of the origin of the Phoenicians can only be achieved from a better understanding of the lexical terms and literary structures of inscriptions. Even pointing out the existence of the debate about the definition of our research object, these 'Phoenicians', this eminent researcher well states:

Nevertheless, in the recent years a minimal consensus has been achieved insofar as the beginning of the so called «Phoenician» history coincides (archaeological speaking) with the Iron I-Period. But... the cultural tradition from the Bronze-Age is unbroken. Garbini adduces a text with a list of «families» from (in Akkadian) *āl Alas'ia* which contains besides Hurrian, Anatolian and other names some Semitic names of the particular Phoenician type. The central question with reference to this document is, how far it can be interpreted as evidence of a type of «Phoenician» population group at Cyprus or in the Mediterranean, or if it demonstrates a specific type of personal

²⁷ Nicolas Carayon (2008) did an extremely detailed study of Phoenician and Punic ports.



names in Ugaritic. This list nowhere refers to «Phoenicians» or to inhabitants of one of the well known Phoenician cities. But the evidence collected by P. Xella is much stronger with respect to the interconnections between Ugarit and the cities at the seashore and the continuation of not only the onomastic but the cultural heritage at all during the «dark ages». This poses further problems insofar, as the specific cultural modifications which led to the formation of the «Phoenician» culture, registered as a special entity by foreign peoples as the Greeks, should have had specific reasons not yet explained.

In this respect, the investigation of a surprisingly increased incidence of early arrow heads by B. Sass is of special interest. It gives hints to an increasing influence of a younger Semitic superstratum especially in the field of onomastics. Though the onomasticon of the early pieces, well defined by their special kind of early alphabetic script, bears a suspicious resemblance to the onomasticon of the Late Bronze Age tradition as represented by the texts from Ugarit and the Amarna correspondence, the younger texts - judged by their script - show a more common Phoenician (and to an extent Hebrew) onomasticon. If it is proven now that no cultural and political change took place in the cities of the Phoenician mother-land and its hinterland, but that archaeological and linguistical continuation is stated, than it should be explained why alternations in customs took place which gradually led to this typical formation of a culture as the Phoenician of the First Millennium has been. If the roots of this culture are in the Second Millennium, also - for example - in such a sensitive domain as the religion, we should evaluate the principles which defined the specific culture which came in contact to the Israelite Monarchy on the one side, the Assyrians on the other, - and which spread with such a surprising success in the Mediterranean. (bold are ours)

We would like to conclude our investigation by embracing the point presented above, that is, the key to a better understanding of the 'birth' of the Phoenicians lies in a deepening of epigraphic, linguistic and archaeological research in relation to the periods of the turn of the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, in the East, and in relation to the first centuries of the Iron Age, in this case, not only in the East, in the Phoenician 'mother cities', but also in the Mediterranean West, an area of the diaspora and expansion of those cities.

Identity constructions are dynamic and tied to historical contexts, we cannot have the illusion that the documentation so far amalgamated can shed detailed light on the identity constructions on the Syrian-Palestinian coast from the 2nd and the beginning of the 1st millennia, but we can and must try, returning to the already accumulated documentation, with this new and critical look.



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