The Phoenicians in Their Homeland

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The Phoenician expansion westward for three thousand miles across the Mediterranean and beyond to the shores of the Atlantic was a response to pressure. In the thirteenth and twelfth centuries B.C., the Canaanites of Palestine-Syria found themselves hard-pressed by the arrival of new and hostile peoples in what had long been their fertile homeland. Hebrews infiltrated Palestine, Philistines and other Sea Peoples took the rich coastal plains, and the Aramean states came to dominate the hinterland of Syria. As a result of these incursions of new groups into the Levant, the indigenous Canaanites were forced into a narrow coastal strip on which they located cities with good harbors. Arvad, Byblus, Beirut, Sidon and Tyre. Shut out from the rich agricultural lands to the east—it is estimated that the Canaanites had lost nine-tenths of their grain land—they found that the only door open to them was the sea. As the Phoenician city states took this route to survival they came to play a major role in the world's history as colonizers, traders in metalwork, dyed textiles and carved ivories, and in pursuing their maritime commerce they transmitted to the West a system of writing called the alphabet.

The method by which Canaanite culture was diffused proved to be different from that used by such powers as Babylonia, Assyria and Egypt. While the latter had depended upon military power for their conquests, the Phoenician expansion was based entirely upon trade. New markets made possible by the skill of Canaanite sailors and the acumen of the merchants who accompanied them or settled down at trading posts and colonies. Phoenicians carried on their peaceful development of the markets of the Mediterranean world for six centuries; when Tyre fell in the sixth century B.C., the culture of the homeland continued to make itself felt in the West as Tyre's colonies, principally Carthage, became autonomous participants in the traffic of the Mediterranean.

The story of Phoenicia and the role it played in the history of civilization has long been known from written sources, such as the Greek classics and the Bible, supplemented by hundreds of Phoenician and Punic inscriptions which have turned up from time to time in Phoenician proper, Spain, North Africa, Cyprus and other islands of the Mediterranean. Scientific archaeology at many sites around the rim of the Mediterranean and on its islands has produced evidence for culture that has been called Phoenician. Yet in the homeland itself the remains of the major Phoenician cities are too deeply buried below the remains of subsequent settlers on the site to be readily available for comparisons. Phoenician remains from the Iron Age at such cities as Beirut, Tyre and Sidon probably lie below the thriving cities which even today maintain themselves by commerce and trade by sea. Apart from tombs, particularly those at Byblos, Khade, and in the region of Sidon, the record of how the Phoenicians lived in their homeland has been scanty indeed.
To fill out the gap in the documentation of an important people, the University Museum mounted an expedition to Lebanon in 1969. Its major objective was the discovery of a well-stratified urban settlement on the coast that had been inhabited during the heyday of Phoenician expansion. After surveying the possibilities during the summer of 1968 we picked an area adjacent to the harbor of the village of Sarafand, eight miles south of Sidon on the road to Tyre. Scholars had long guessed that the name of the ancient city of Sarepta was preserved in the consonants of Sarafand, and fragments of pottery strew along the coast and over the adjacent fields attested ancient occupation. And although no sherd earlier than the third century B.C. could be found, one hoped that Phoenician remains might be sealed below the level of cultivation. Fortunately the site was unencumbered by modern building; the highest part of it was covered by nothing more permanent than a crop of wheat owned by a reasonable and enlightened villager, Mohammed Kawtarani, the local postmaster.

The ancient Sarepta had a long and varied history that can be sketched from more than fifty references to it in documents written over a span of more than three millennia. Its name appears in the Ugaritic texts of the fourteenth century B.C.; it is mentioned in an Egyptian papyrus of the thirteenth century along with Byblos, Beirut, Sidon and Tyre as one of the principal cities of the coast. The Bible tells of the visit of the Prophet Elijah to Sarepta (there written Zarephath) in a time of drought and of how he worked miracles for the widow who gave him hospitality. Both Seeseacher and El Haran claim to have taken the city. Its fame for fine wine is sung by Latin poets. And the memory of Elijah’s sojourn there was remembered by pilgrims and crusaders who looked upon it as a holy place and who were sometimes shown the very room where the Prophet lived and raised the widow’s son from the dead. If one could depend upon these scattered references to the life of the city, the mound should, we thought, provide us with material evidence for life on the coast of Phoenicia over a long span of time.

We began our search for the Phoenician Sarepta at Sarafand in the summer of 1969, but it was not until April of the following year that we reached the levels of occupation. During the remainder of the 1970 season we recorded the plans of nine different sites, each built upon the remains of its predecessor, extending over a span of more than a thousand years. Each level produced a wealth of documentation for everyday life: pots, dishes, containers for oil and wine, mills for grinding grain, ovens for baking, a kiln for pottery, weapons and tools, figurines of the goddess, and in fact a full complement of the articles of daily life which were made of materials that did not decay or corrode completely. But most valuable was the pottery. More than a hundred thousand pieces were recorded by the levels in which they appeared, to form a scale for measuring the passing of time by the changes in style of fabrication, decoration and form of pottery vessels.

When we finished the 1970 season at Sarepta it was apparent that we had found the civilization of the Phoenicians who had lived on the Lebanese coast during the important period of their maritime expansion. Luckily it was better stratified and more extensive than any documentation for the period that had hitherto come from the homeland of the Phoenicians. Connections did exist, it was apparent, between our artifacts and those found in Palestine and Syria. But how did this newly discovered material relate to that found in the West at such sites as Carthage, and those excavated in Sicily, Sardinia, Ibiza, Spain and Morocco?

While the picture of Sarepta and its cultures was fresh in mind we decided to visit some twenty sites and museums in the Western Mediterranean area. To be sure, much of the material found in the West has been published, but we wished to examine at first hand the more subtle details which could best be appraised by sight and touch.

We had throughout this, our first visit to Phoenician sites in the Western Mediterranean, the strange feeling of having been there before. Everywhere there were shapes, forms, technique of fabrication, designs that were reminiscent of those we had recently excavated. Yet at the same time there was the unfamiliar. One had the feeling of being at home, as it were, but disturbed by objects that did not really belong to his environment.

So it was on entering the National Museum at Cagliari in Sardinia, filled with objects from Siculo, Nora, Tharros and Monte Sirai. The Phoenician alphabetic script could just as well have been in the National Museum in Beirut. There were clay lamps with two spouts, the red-slipped mushroom-lip jug, the graceful wine decanters with a trifoli mouth—all of forms which we had handled a few months before at Sarepta. But mixed with these artifacts in the glass cases and along the walls were such things as funerary steles, clay masks, statuary and a
variety of other objects not paralleled in the East. Similarly we were struck by this mixture of continuity and difference at the Barrio Museum in Tunis, the National Museum in Carthage, the Whitaker Museum in Malta, the two museums at Ibiza, and elsewhere. Let us take some specific examples of the most obvious lines between homeland and colonies.

**Location of Cities**

It has long been observed that the principal Phoenician cities on the coast of Lebanon and Syria enjoyed the advantage of two harbors. This is true of Byblos, Tyre, Sidon, and Sarepta. Certainly this choice of location provided flexibility for sailors to make the best use of the available wind. An island like Arvad just off shore also provided the same advantage.

When one looks at a map of the Phoenician and Punic settlements in the Western Mediterranean he is impressed by the locations of the sites. The major sites of Nora, Byblos, Sidon, Tharros have been established on promontories that jut out to sea, providing a choice of anchorage. Islands like Mota in Sicily and Mogador in Morocco offered a similar advantage to merchant sailors. The topographic feature of a site with two harbors readily available seems to have been a major consideration in the establishment of Phoenician colonies and trading posts. Taking precedence even over such important features as good communications with the hinterland.

**Lamps**

The form of common, every-day clay lamp in Palestine-Syria has undergone a series of marked changes over the three millennia of its use. Beginning in the Early Bronze Age as a simple bowl for containing olive oil and a flat wick that hung over the rim, it was in time modified into a more specialized vessel, a true lamp, by pinching a segment of the rim to provide a trough for the wick and possibly for pouring out the oil when the flame was extinguished. For a relatively short period of several centuries, the Middle Bronze I Age, four spouts or indentations in the rim served to increase the amount of light available from a single bowl of oil. But ultimately the earliest tradition of a single wick prevailed; the four-wick lamp was completely abandoned.

Only briefly in the Iron Age was the age-old tradition of one wick to a saucer broken by the use of the seven-spool lamp. In Palestine-Syria there has appeared no general deviation from this pattern of one, four, seven spouts on the thousands of lamps that have been found from the beginning of the Early Bronze Age, about 3000 B.C., to Hellenistic times, when the open saucer gave way to a form consisting of a closed bowl with a true spout for the wick.

Accustomed to this rigidity of form, this strict canon of morphology for the common lamp, it surprised us to find among the Iron Age pottery at Sarepta a lamp with two pinched spouts. From a visit to the museums in the Western Mediterranean where Phoenician-Punic material is exhibited, one can see that in that region the two-spout lamp is dominant, although the less
smaller stones between, which belonged to the age of the Phoenician colony there. Obviously it was the continuation of a building tradition from the homeland that had been maintained faithfully at this new site. A similar pattern can be seen in the walls of the Punic period that appear in the excavations beside the Cathedral of St. Louis at Carthage. Some walls of this type were also found at Nora, the Sardinian site long famous for the Nora stone with its ninth century B.C. Phoenician inscription.

The Mushroom-Lip Jug

The most persistent feature among the wide variety of ceramic forms found in the Phoenician and Punic sites in the Western Mediterranean is a small jug with a high neck and a small handle that is attached to the body and the lower part of the neck. The rim of this jug sometimes extends outward so as to appear as a disk and frequently droops downward suggesting the shape of a mushroom. Consequently the name of “mushroom lip jug” has been widely accepted for the distinctive shape of this vessel and applied to those forms in which the lip is extended into a disk rather than pendant. What this jug was designed to contain is difficult to guess. Surely the wide, drooping lip of its rounded mouth did not facilitate the pouring of a liquid such as oil, wine or water; the pinched-lip jug was more functional for this purpose.

The jug is best represented at Phoenician and Punic sites in the West and comes principally from tombs. Examples appear at Carthage, where they have been dated from the eighth to the beginning of the sixth century. In the National Museum at Cagliari there are to be found mushroom-lip jugs from the Sardinian sites of Nora, Sulcis, Monte Sisani, Tharros. Numerous examples in the Whitaker Museum on the island of Motya testify to the popularity of this form among the Phoenician-Punic colonies in Sicily.

1 A ribbed wall from an Iron Age city at Sarepta constructed by filling the interstices between columns with smaller stones.
2 Mushroom-lip jug in the Carthage Museum.
3 Mushroom-lip jug with damaged rim found in a Phoenician level at Sarepta in 1970.
4 Neck of decorated mushroom-lip jug from Sarepta.

The diffusion of this style of jug reached beyond the islands of the central Mediterranean region to the coasts of Southern Spain. In 1953 a necropolis was discovered near Almuñécar in which there were six graves that contained burial deposits either of the two-nozzle lamp or the mushroom-lip jug. In three of these graves the mushroom-lip jug was accompanied by a trefoil-mouth jug, which has also appeared at Sarepta and elsewhere on the Lebanese coast.

The most distant example of the mushroom-lip jug thus far discovered has been found at Mogadob, a site on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. Here five jugs with red slip, burnished vertically on the neck (as are the Sarepta examples) were found with 300 fragmentary examples of the lamp with two spouts and an inscription in Phoenician script.

The connection with Sarepta is now clear. In 1970 we found in a stratified context three almost complete examples of this type of jug as well as fragments of necks from other jugs. The neck exhibited the groove or rift so often found on the Western Mediterranean analogues and bands of red and black paint. There can now be little doubt that the Lebanese coast was the point of diffusion of this extremely widespread feature of Phoenician culture. When the stratified deposits of ceramic material in which these examples were found can be analyzed and dated it should be possible to fix within narrower limits than have been possible before the spread of this distinctive form to such distant points as Spain and Mogadob in Morocco.

Child Sacrifice

It has long been recognized that one of the characteristic institutions of Phoenician and Punic culture is the tophet. The tophet is a burial ground in which are to be found urns containing the bones of children or of animals, surrounded by stelae engraved with sample designs and a dedication to the deity Tanit and frequently to Baal Hammon as well. Although these Relics of child sacrifice have been found at Carthage, Sousse, Motya, Sulcis, Monte Sirai, Nora and elsewhere in the Central and Western Mediterranean, none has been found as yet in the homeland of the Phoenicians. Only a hint in Jeremiah and in Kings (II Kings 23:10) that the cult of child sacrifice was practiced in Jerusalem has so far been noticed in the East.

Many stelae of Carthage, Sicily and Sardinia have upon them a figure consisting of a triangle or trapezoid, surmounted at the apex by a horizontal bar, frequently with the ends turned upward, and a disk. Because of this symbol's association with the dedication to Tanit it has long been known as the Sign of Tanit. The interpretations of the sign are many and widely varied. It is a modification of the Egyptian ankh sign, a human figure with upraised arms worshipping the deity, a bevy mounted on a horned altar, the stylized figure of the goddess herself, an apotropaic figure used to ward off ill fortune, and so on. Only the fact of its frequent association with the goddess Tanit is certain, and it was widely used in Western Phoenician and Punic sites.