"IMAGINE THERE'S NO PEOPLES". A CLAIM AGAINST THE IDENTITY APPROACH IN PHOENICIAN STUDIES THROUGH COMPARISON WITH THE ISRAELITE FIELD

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Abstract: At a time dominated by the rhetoric of identity and in a region, the Levant, where political and cultural borders seem insurmountable, this paper aims to create a parallelism between two study traditions: Phoenician and Israelite studies. The main point of contact between the two disciplines is that, in both of them, questions of identity emerge as pivotal issues in the interpretation of many kinds of sources (language, religion, material culture, etc.). This paper proposes a theoretical framework in which research focusing on the definition and localisation of ethnic identities gives way to research which is interested more in the Levant as a whole, and in communities rather than peoples. According to the anthropologist J.-L. Amselle, it is time to dismiss the "ethnographic reason", which creates or emphasises discontinuity, minimises continuity and, thus, multiplies ethnicities and academic disciplines. After all, if there is one vocation that is proper to Phoenician studies, it should be found in its inner urge to look beyond geographic, chronological and cultural borders.

Keywords: Levant; Phoenician Studies; Ancient Israel; Identity; Ethnicity.

At a time dominated by the rhetoric of identity and in a region, the Levant, where political and cultural borders seem clear and insurmountable, the perception of the limits of one unitary definition (and one discipline) for Phoenician Studies should be open for discussion. Researchers are fully aware that, on the one hand, the notions of "Phoenician" and "Punic" are functional and practical, albeit conventional, but, on the other hand, they increasingly insist on local specifics and on the creation of networks on smaller scales.

This article neither contains a detailed archaeological analysis nor an exhaustive examination of the historiography of our disciplines, nor a militant comparison between one current of studies and another. Instead, it is a reflection out loud, something that grew while I was drafting my PhD dissertation which focused on the way the Ancients and the Moderns constructed ancient Israel's identity,[1] and in the context of my current post-doctoral research about social and religious interactions in a Levantine and Mediterranean dimension.[2] The first time I raised the question: "Is it possible to imagine a Levant where there are no peoples?" was at the IX International Congress of Phoenician and Punic Studies, held in Merida (Spain) from the 22nd to the 26th of October, 2018. Like John Lennon's song, this contribution aims to be a sort of exercise in imagination and a tribute to the ongoing debate concerning our heuristic categories and trends in history research. The perspective adopted here, in fact, responds to purely historiographical concerns, as C.A. Barton and D. Boyarin recently did regarding the notion of "religion" in Antiquity in their book *Imagine no religion*. Echoing their conclusion, in particular, «What you find when you stop looking for what isn't there»,[3] may disclose to us the benefits of studying the ancient Levant without prioritising ethnic labels.

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1 "To Rule with the Book: A Certain Idea of Ancient Israel" (defended in December 2016).

2 ERC Advanced Grant (741182) "Mapping Ancient Polytheisms. Cult Epithets as an Interface between Religious Systems and Human Agency", directed by Corinne Bonnet and hosted at the University of Toulouse – Jean Jaurès. For a presentation of the project, see Bonnet 2017 and our site https://map-polytheisms.huma-num.fr (accessed January 27, 2019).

3 Barton – Boyarin 2016, p. 211.

1. The Levant as a Historical Problem and as a Meaningful Unity

As stated by M. Liverani, considering the Near East a historical problem is fairly recent as knowledge regarding the Near East has long been subject to the biblical narrative and its theological agenda.[4] In fact, well before the first archaeological enterprises of the nineteenth century, the Babylonians, Assyrians, Arameans, but also the Sidonians and Tyrians were known only through the eyes of the people of Israel and few classical authors. This phase in the historiography of the ancient Near East has finally given way to research aimed at the exploitation of the documentation directly produced by these peoples and increasingly liberated from theological prejudices. However, as the now classic critique of E. Said on Orientalism has shown and, more recently, the extensive examination of the notion of "Middle East" by U. Fabietti,[5] the re-appropriation and rediscovery of the peoples of the Near East was not entirely free of prejudice, and this is still the case today.

The Levant is particularly affected by these issues. For instance, in her recent book, J.C. Quinn demonstrated to what extent Phoenician Studies are not only indebted but also shaped by a long sedimentation of stereotypes, images and expression that we innocently reproduce.[6] Indeed, many publications have denounced the fact that it's time to modify the frames (the paradigms, as T.S. Kuhn would have said) of our research by giving preference to categories issued from postcolonial studies such as "intermixing", "hybridity", "third space", "*entre-deux*", and, more recently, "middle ground", instead of adopting the lexicon of identity and ethnicity.[7] Even the rigidity of the geopolitical borders of the contemporary Near East, such as the one that divides the district of Tyr and Galilee, overshadows, in actual fact, another border, this time of academic and disciplinary order. If, on the one hand, progression in research has criticised the a-historical character of the chronological and ethnic breakdown proposed notably by S. Moscati, on the other hand, connectivity, from which studies on insular spaces and on the Mediterranean space in general have greatly benefited,[8] is still far from being a fully operative category in historiography on the Levant.

Specifically, the Levantine region should finally be apprehended as a meaningful unity whereas, for now, as many authors have recently regretted, we assist to its "fragmentation"[9] or "balkanisation".[10] Therefore, literary production is scattered in a great mass of local or regional studies, where the larger horizon is consigned to introductions. Conceiving of the Levant as a meaningful unity does not exclude the necessity of multi-scale analysis, from a smaller to a larger level, and thus from particular sites, networks of sites to, for instance, a truly Mediterranean dimension. This being granted, it seems necessary to emphasise that the middle level – the regional one – needs to be strengthened, given the multiple and sometimes disparate disciplines working on it, including those connected to the so-called "Biblical world", which are exceptional in many regards and often seen as a foreign object in Near Eastern studies.

On a methodological level, assuming a true Levantine dimension above all means avoiding two opposing, yet coexisting, tendencies: on the one hand, ethnic segmentation and, on the other, regional generalisations. In terms of the first element, the taxonomic and classificatory approach which is at the source of ethnic segmentation is still, nowadays, the basis for the extremely common metaphor which considers the

4 Liverani 2014, pp. 3-16.

5 Fabietti 2016.

6 Quinn 2018.

7 Bonnet 2014, pp. 23-34; Xella 2014; Oggiano 2015; van Dommelen 2017.

8 Horden – Purcell 2000; van Dommelen – Knapp 2010; Malkin 2011; Knapp – van Dommelen 2014.

9 Routledge 2017.

10 Porter 2016.

Near East and, in particular, the Levant to be a "mosaic" of peoples and religions. On the contrary, literature on the subject is in agreement regarding the need to resist the "butterfly collector" approach,[11] producing lists of peoples and drawing borders on maps, not unlike the way in which the Hebrew Bible presents the peoples surrounding ancient Israel in the "table of nations" (Gn 10). As for the second element, one must call regional political history into question where, according to generally accepted reading, the fragmentation of the Phoenician cities constitutes a legacy of the political panorama of the Bronze Age, whereas, from the Iron Age onwards, the region was characterised by the replacement of territorial states with "national" or "ethnic" states, meaning the appearance of "new peoples" on the political identity scene, coming from over-seas and from the desert.[12] Influenced by the national and ethnic character of the Aramean, Israelite, Moabite, Ammonite and Edomite polities, the coastal cities became, in turn, Phoenician in this oversimplified understanding.

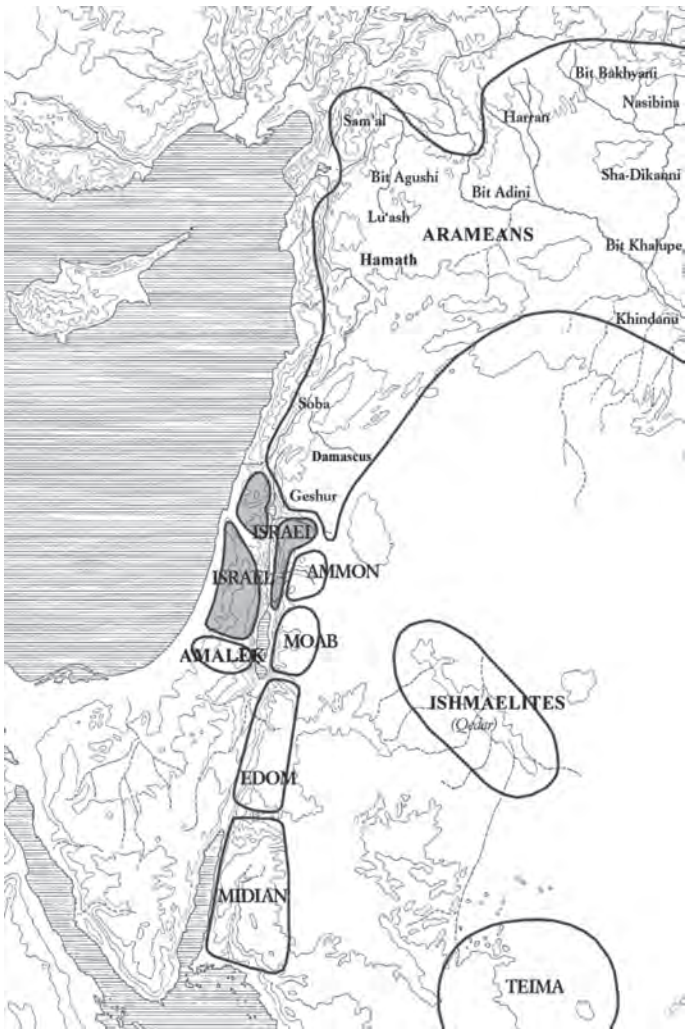

Fig. 1. The Levantine mosaic or «the distribution of "ethnic states"», according to Liverani 2005, p. 82, fig. 20.

Instead of a systematic organisation of peoples and their distribution within the space (Fig. 1), the exercise proposed here is to rethink the Levant more on a regional scale than on an ethnic scale, which is common practice. Obviously, this is not a question of denying the existence of any people whatsoever, be they fictional or real. It means, on the contrary, first, to resist giving in to the typical academy "ethnological reason"[13] which emphasises, even creates, differences and minimises continuities and, second, not to multiply the existence of ethnicities. In that regard, Phoenician Studies, at least at their very beginnings, while aiming to rediscover a civilisation which had almost been forgotten, "invented" such a culture and, with it, labelled an entire discipline.

11 Amselle 1998, p. 10.

12 Pfoh 2018a, p. 58.

13 This notion stems from Amselle 1998, pp. 5-24.

2. A Singular Disciplinary Comparison (or not)

For these reasons, singling out the, albeit brief, history of the discipline of Phoenician Studies, its two great seasons, may not be altogether useless. In its first phase, from the 1960s, to justify its existence, researchers exaggerated specific Phoenician characters which, up until then, had been overlooked by their colleagues who were more interested in other civilisations (such as the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Mesopotamians, the Israelites, etc.). The next phase, which defined current research, embraced new topics, new regions, new chronological intervals and, above all, new methodological approaches which made studying the history of the Mediterranean in the first millennium BCE, from the Phoenician perspective, far more current and interesting. Excavation, therefore, became intense and capillary throughout the Mediterranean, and not only at coastal sites, but also those inland. Furthermore, these were often excavations in conflict areas, notably in the Near East sector, but also resulting from research carried out with a scientific rigour which was incomparable to that of the first excavations, and often sensitive to the trends of *public archaeology*.

This second period is defined, particularly, by the reassessment of the "Phoenician identity". To express its porous and moving character, we often attribute a plastic or plural identity to these merchants, seafarers and founders of colonies. An identity, in other words, which renews itself constantly and which is a result of the heritage of Levantine traditions and encounters with other traditions. Eventually, we observe a shift in perspective from a global identity (the Phoenicians as a whole) to smaller identities.

These two phases can be represented by two titles, which are quite distant in time but which respond to the same urgent question: that is, defining Phoenician identity. The first is, of course, the programmatic article by S. Moscati, "La questione fenicia", that laid the foundations for the discipline in 1963. The second is the latest book by J.C. Quinn, *In Search of the Phoenicians*, published in 2018.

In terms of the fundamental text by S. Moscati,[14] there's no escaping the fact that this type of framework echoes the better known "Jewish question". In many publications, S. Moscati addressed the constitution of identities for many populations in the Mediterranean basin, but especially for Phoenicians and Israelites, evoking for the latter the eternal "problema ebraico", "the Jewish problem".[15] Interestingly, S. Moscati himself suffered the discrimination of racial laws in Italy at the end of the '30s due to his Jewish origins. One could say that when he formulated the expression "the Phoenician question", perhaps unconsciously, he was echoing the Jewish question.

Thus, the comparison of the two questions is inconveniently down to chance, especially seeing as both put identity at the heart of their reflection. Whereas the aim of the Jewish question which so troubled scholars, notably between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, was to define – and therefore better separate – the Jews from the rest of the European population, the Phoenician question was born as an attempt to isolate, for the first time, an ancient people which was otherwise mixed in indistinctly with others. The text by S. Moscati is, in many respects, the first to attach an optimistic and positivist tendency to the Phoenician identity. "Optimistic" as it confidently fixes diagnostic criteria, "positivist" because it actively puts forward these criteria and, by doing so, creates the very focus of its research.

In this regard, it is also interesting to note how S. Moscati paints a portrait of the beginnings of Phoenician history. He states that the Phoenician area was compressed by the emergence of other peoples during the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, such as the Arameans and the Israelites, and that Phoenician culture is the result of both continuity, in terms of the previous Canaanite culture, and transformation, resulting from opposition to the other neighbouring peoples. This kind of description fits in quite well with both the biblical portrait of ancient Israel and the interpretation of some Israeli archaeologists, who see some

14 But systematically resumed in the following, cfr. Moscati 1984, 1992.

15 Moscati 2000, p. 73.

characteristic features in Israelite material culture or general culture (such as their food taboos) in terms of them wanting to differentiate themselves from others.[16] Although many aspects of S. Moscati's reconstruction are today outdated, his way of establishing the discipline had long-lasting effects. From this article, the Phoenician identity, its definition and its adaptations over the centuries and in the different geographical contexts, has become the discipline's propelling centre.

Following on from S. Moscati, the eternal question of the Phoenician identity was addressed by J.C. Quinn in her publication: *In Search of Phoenicians*. The core argument is, ultimately, to reject any approach regarding ethnic identity in the Phoenician-Punic domain. J.C. Quinn, in fact, not only denies that the "Phoenicians" have a collective conscience, but also the consideration of the category of "ethnic identity" as a category which is, essentially, "natural", applicable both to the ancient and the modern following the same rules. Although the title "In Search of…" is quite fashionable and common, a scholar in the field of ancient Israel studies can't help but notice that, albeit without an explicit reference, the title replicates the masterpiece by P.R. Davies in 1992, *In Search of Ancient Israel*,[17] a piece of work which represents a true milestone in biblical studies. The major contribution of the latter lies in the distinction established between three meanings of the syntagma "ancient Israel": (a) the "historic" Israel of the Iron Age in the southern Levant; (b) the biblical Israel, and thus a creation, if not a true literary character; (c) ancient Israel, as addressed by modern historians from the first two layers of meaning. In this manner, the author notes that, on the one hand, the last two layers are but cultural constructions, situated, to a certain extent, outside of the historian's perspective; on the other hand, he suggests that the first meaning, which can certainly be theoretically restored and which is the only one to constitute a real referent, was irretrievably lost, however, because of the limitations imposed by nature on archaeological data.

The fortune of the title and the operation of the pioneering work by P. R. Davies is also verified by a third title, a collective volume published in 2016 entitled *In Search of Aram and Israel*.[18] The connection between these books doesn't limit itself to the title, but also embraces criticism of traditional nomenclature and theoretical frames of research. In particular, the three books question the study of the Levant through the category of identity. Without referring to the broader horizon and to the fact that such a topic is common to the whole region, the authors suggest that Israelites, Arameans and Phoenicians should not be considered as fixed groups with well-established borders. The major gain, on a speculative level, is that an approach to the study of the region through the category of identity (especially when declined as "ethnic identity") is inadequate. For this reason, the fact that the books' titles bear the expression "In Search of…" is nothing but a rhetorical device which allows their authors to introduce notions such as fluid identities, porous borders and mixed populations, against static and monolithic identities and peoples.

The two examples considered here, recapitulating the founder text of the discipline and one of its very latest contributions, echo problems which are well-known to the historian of ancient Israel. In other words, the specific bibliography, upstream and down, points the finger not so much at the historical interconnections between the two peoples[19] but, above all, at a disciplinary similarity. The point of comparison between the Israelite and Phoenician domain is, in actual fact, the presence of the identity question at the centre, amplified by the fact that they are, in both cases, populations which have experienced significant migratory phenomena (respectively, diaspora and colonisation). This connection, strange as it may seem, therefore in-

16 Bunimovitz – Faust 2001; Faust 2006, 2018. For a critical review of these positions, see Kletter 2014 and Pfoh 2018b with bibliography.

17 For an example, see Frendo 2018, pp. 74-75. By the way, the expression "In search of the Phoenicians" ("In cerca dei Fenici") had already been used by Bonnet 2004, pp. 72-73.

18 Sergi – Oeming – de Hulster 2016.

19 See, for example, Briquel-Chatonnet 1992.

dicates that both study traditions, the former certainly much longer than the latter, by conducting research in solipsism, have confined their disciplines to an impasse.

Is it possible to imagine a future convergence and collaboration between the two? The answer rests on the priority that scholars will agree to give to either ethnic-oriented research or a truly regional-oriented research. In other words, if the focus is taken away from drawing borders on maps, territories and the diffusion of material culture, new viewpoints on the whole region and new interdisciplinary collaborations may be disclosed.

3. The Advice of Anthropologists

It might seem that concepts such as "identity" or "ethnicity", understood as monolithic and essentialist, are quite outdated and have already been abandoned by much of scholarship. Indeed, in the days of the liquid modernity,[20] these notions became the object of a deep reassessment by scholars from different disciplines and different geographic and chronologic settings.[21] In their new liquid or at least fluid versions, these notions are well established and exploited in the academic literature of recent years.[22] In this regard, A.B. Knapp correctly observes that «by now, we are all aware that identities are created, negotiated, challenged, combined and invented or re-invented as the situation demands, and seldom does a month pass without the appearance of yet another new journal or monograph on the topic».[23]

For at least two decades now, adapted and updated versions of "identity" and "ethnicity" have been carefully placed into the "toolbox" of the Antiquity historian, often demanding more precise definitions and nuances punctually provided by the authors.[24] It is, however, necessary to listen more carefully to anthropologists who once disclosed that their fortune in the academic world is but a reflection of "identity inflation", of the "myth of identity" or even "identity obsession" which is typical of the contemporary world. In this context, as already stated by A. Grosser in 1994, «few words are overused as much as that of identity»[25] or, more recently, R. Brubaker, «social and human sciences have capitulated before the word "identity"»[26].

More than many other fields, Phoenician and Israelite studies put identity and ethnicity at the backbone of their respective discipline. Nevertheless, the pivotal questioning in terms of the identity or ethnicity of many aspects of Phoenician, Punic and Israelite fields overshadows a deeper concern. To formulate the problem on a more speculative level, these notions can be regarded as "gatekeeping concepts" of both fields of studies. According to the definition put forward by A. Appadurai, "gatekeeping concepts" are not simply categories through which scholars interrogate their sources, which would be legitimate and necessary. On the contrary, they are «a few simple theoretical handles [which] become metonyms and surrogates for the civilisation or society as a whole», and thus «limit anthropological theorising about the place in question, and define the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region».[27]

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20 Bauman 2000.

21 To quote just few titles, Hall 1997, 2002; Jones 1997; Malkin 2001; Casella – Fowler 2004; Knappet 2011; Pierce *et al.* 2016.

22 For having an idea of the proliferation of studies dealing directly with these notions – we pass here the indirect references or the detailed archaeological case-studies –, see on a general level McInerney 2014, and for Phoenician studies, Quinn – Vella 2014; Xella 2014; Garbati – Pedrazzi 2015, 2016; Quinn 2018. For a detailed review concerning Israelite studies, see Porzia 2017.

23 Knapp 2016, p. 241.

24 See, for instance, Bonnet 2014, pp. 327-328: «A consensus has emerged over the last decade or so to avoid using the term "Phoenico-Punic", an expression that only serves to mask the difficulty experienced by specialists trying to establish a line of demarcation between what may be "Phoenician" and what "Punic," whether in purely chronological or geographic terms, or in cultural and linguistic terms».

25 Grosser 1994 (author's translation).

26 Brubaker 2001, p. 66 (author's translation).

27 Appadurai 1986, p. 357.

Identity is a *passe-partout* word, which often implies ethnicity, referred to as "ethnic identity". In this regard, we must return to the *caveat* put forward by J.-L. Amselle, in which he states that the legacy of colonial experience, as well as systematic construction, in the domain of scientific research, of categories such as those regarding ethnicities, cultures and identities, lead to what he describes as the "sin of discontinuity". In other words, J.-L. Amselle's criticism is directed against scholars creating distinctions and fractures where there are but continuities and nuances. It especially has to do with questioning the essential elements that constitute, in its sense, "ethnological reason", notably, «the discontinuous process which consists in extracting, purifying and classifying in order to release types [...]. This theoretical perspective, where unity is evident, is one of the foundations of European domination on the rest of the planet: it's a kind of Ariadne's thread which runs through the history of Western thought».[28] What he proposes, in contrast, is the vision of "Mestizo logics" with their "continuist" approach which, in contrast, focusses on differentiation or native syncretism, and that is exactly what the provocative title – «Imagine there's no peoples» – intends to mean.

Although a part of Phoenician and Israelite studies which considers identity and ethnicity is still extremely fertile, the scientific world's allergy to this subject became increasingly obvious, both in historical and archaeological studies and in the domain of anthropology and social sciences.[29] All the more so, the notion of "people of Israel" is a creation which is essentially literary and highly deconstructed as many scholars argued, agreeing with P.R. Davies,[30] and "Phoenicians" is, in turn, problematic as it is external and Western, to say the least.[31] In terms of the peculiar traits of these groups, constantly moving through the Mediterranean space, the fact that it has been defined as multiple, fluid or plural is not enough to legitimate notions such as "identity" or "ethnicity".

Here we tackle a methodological issue, which is barely able to reach a consensus since it is a matter of nuances, priorities, perspectives and, in a word, sensibility. However, if words have etymologies and meanings, they should be considered seriously. Moreover, words exist as long as they are used, which means that their history should be considered as well, since usage and reception can modify their original meaning or add nuances or echoes over the years. Therefore, before adhering to a notion, one should balance both its original meaning and its heritage and the conceptual field that it evokes. To some extent, we are close to what exegetes call the *Sitz im Leben*, that is to say the "setting in life", the living context of a given text. Now, according to their Latin and Greek etymology, respectively, the principle meaning of words such as "identity" and "ethnicity" is something which is set, monolithic and stable.[32] Although the notion of "saliency" is particularly important in organising and prioritising the different facets of someone's identity, the very core of this notion cannot be erased nor be as liquid as scholars would like it to be.

Beyond its etymology, the current reception of the notion is also essentially static, especially in the Middle East, where the rhetoric of identity rages. Notwithstanding our liquid world, Z. Bauman already stated that it does not prevent internal fragmentations, tensions and struggles. Also J.-L. Amselle wrote that: «Ancient or exotic societies are (…) very plastic. To define the mode of identification for these societies, we could characterise them as fluid groups that, in contrast to the stereotype, leave much room for novelty and

28 Amselle 1998, pp. 35-36. The relevance of this approach was already put forth by Oggiano 2015, pp. 518-519.

29 See Halpern 2016, p. 13: «"Should we, thus, abandon identity, a term to which too much ideology would be attached and which we criticise for its lack of conceptual clarity?" There are many criticisms. To be fashionable, "trendy" … what could be worse for a concept, whatever it may be (...). Identity has always taken up too much room and, with it, a cloud of expressions such as "identity crisis", "identity recomposition", "plural identities" which are often used, ad nauseam» (author's translation). See also Remotti 1996, 2010.

30 See, for instance, Finkelstein – Silberman 2001; Sand 2009.

31 Moreover, it is now clear that the Greek name phoinikes has to do with a characterisation which, at least at its origins, has nothing ethnic about it, given that it describes people "with red skin" (see Ercolani 2015).

32 Descombes 2013.

invention. Such fluidity is far from characterising modern societies, which rigidify identity to such an extent that it no longer evolves».[33]

In spite of the general impression that contemporary societies are very fluid and globalised, it is true that nationalistic nostalgia is dramatically increasing. It seems, therefore, legitimate to ask ourselves whether our disciplines are taking into account this fluidity between the different groups that we study or if we, as scholars living in modern societies, rigidify ancient societies. To limit myself to just one example, instead of relying on documentation that refers to Tyrians or Samaritans, we should widen the problematic and take advantage of highlighting just how much the borders drawn by material, linguistic or ideological features are often found to be overlapping. Of course, cultural borders are larger or more flexible than the definition of "Phoenician", "Israelite" or "Aramean" and, because of this, the case of a site such as Abel Beth Maacah is a riddle from an ethnic point of view.[34] As a general rule, the so-called "Occam's razor" is always useful: *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* («entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity»). Instead of multiplying – beyond necessity or without evidence – the levels of occupation, the political affiliations, the exported and imported materials and the ethnic populations, adding fuzziness to monolithic borders and categories would be of great benefit to our disciplines, each of one running after its particular object of study.

Rather than continuing to focus on ethno-taxonomies and to fragment and balkanise the Levant, scholars should, instead, listen to those anthropologists who, since the '80s, warned of the dangers surrounding what they called alternately "territorialisation",[35] "zonation"[36] or "localising strategies".[37] All of these terms refer to a specific risk in the culture-historical model, dear to anthropologists but also to historians, which is the habit of rigidly identifying a people by a geographical space and vice versa. Needless to say, this is also the theoretical background of the "pots and peoples" debate, well-known by archaeologists. In listening to this advice, the future of Levantine studies could be aimed at rethinking the region, not in terms of ethnic patchwork but as concurrent polities, which slightly adapted many shared elements, ranging from language to religious aspects and material culture.

From a historiographic point of view, not only is the adoption of broader and multi-scale analysis necessary, but putting aside ethno-taxonomies, and thus identity, also seems promising. Now, it is no surprise that partisans who promote the utility of identity exist, as do detractors. It is true that its utility as well as its results is something which is clear to everybody. Nevertheless, after some decades spent praising the heuristic value of identity, it is maybe time to seriously consider what the attention payed to ethnic groups – be they large or small – left aside.

At the same time, a distinction should be made. Whereas this paper is written with scholars studying the Levant in mind, it must be acknowledged that colleagues coping with the Western "colonial" worlds use notions such as "identity" and "the Phoenicians"[38] in a much easier manner. Their perspective is understandable given that other dynamics are at stake in their fields. In particular, what from their perspective is clearly external is, in the Levant, just an aspect of the "original syncretism" which should be studied as a whole, to recall J.-L. Amselle's idea. How the two perspectives – the Levantine one and the Western one – can be articulated undoubtedly requires further reflection, and is beyond the purposes of the present paper.

33 Amselle 1998, p. 24.

34 See, for instance, Panitz-Cohen – Mullins 2016.

35 Appadurai 1986.

36 Abu-Lughod 1989.

37 Fardon 1990.

38 See, for instance, some important contributions by scholars studying the Iberian Peninsula such as Delgado – Ferrer 2007; Dietler – López-Ruiz 2009; Celestino – López-Ruiz 2016; Andreotti 2018.

Moreover, it is clear that what is questioned here is not identity as something claimed by an individual or a community (as long as duly documented in the case of ancient peoples), but identity as an interpretative tool for the historian.[39] In this sense, anthropologists have often criticised the reliance on identity on the part of historians, because identity is an anti-historical notion as it denies change, transformation or, at least, it opposes them.[40] Pairing the term "identity", as historians and archaeologists continue to do, with a profusion of adjectives in an aim to weaken its rigidity, to obtain diluted versions, such as identities which are multiple, plural, complex, mixed, diverse, fluid, liquid, porous, creates, in many ways, oxymorons. Each adjective added to the noun "identity" or each multiplied level of identity (such as ethnic, linguistic, cultural, material, religious, politic identities, etc.) highlights the limits and thus the failure of the notion of "identity" itself. Said operations are attempts to attenuate or inactivate identity like virulent microorganisms in vaccines or to domesticate it like a ferocious animal.

Addressing this issue openly, we should instead recognise that the heuristic value of identity is coming to an end and subsequently lay the foundations for a post-identity phase in our studies. In particular, when identity and ethnic or national states become "gatekeeping concepts", we should evacuate them. In sum, it is time to fully acknowledge that identity is a very tricky word, which can be (mis)understood and used in many ways. To use this world is neither necessary nor convenient since it highlights discontinuity instead of continuity, and the choice of what should be highlighted is nothing more than arbitrary. Having focussed on discontinuity for many years, it is maybe time to prioritise continuity and put identity and its cognate notions to one side. In other words, the use of the word "identity" is never neutral, and anybody who defends a neutral use of the word is underestimating it, misunderstanding it or, quite simply, lying. "Identity" is both a polluted and polluting word, a beast that can't be domesticated,[41] a misleading concept that is considered useful in the study of the socio-political rhetoric and which, only from this particular perspective, can find its place in the historical or archaeological fields. There is no identity *per se*, identity is always fictive and claimed by ancient authors or by modern scholars.[42]

4. No More Mosaics

The eastern Mediterranean area which is of interest to us belongs to a region which has been referred to in very different ways over time: Phoenicia, Palestine, Syria Palaestina, land of Canaan, even Holy Land. The absence of consensus regarding the terminology that should be used to define this region is determined by the fact that it is a «land which was mentally constructed by man» and therefore delineated differently depending on underscores of political, symbolic and religious frontiers or, more restrictedly, geographical or even cultural ones.[43] The term Levant, free of any colonialist connotations, is a good compromise for defining this area which expands over geographical, climatic, cultural and political maps.

The variety which so characterises the Levant and, more generally, the whole of the Near East, is often expressed by the metaphor of the mosaic. While, on the one hand, this metaphor conveys the complex and variegated nature of the region, on the other hand, the mosaic is at risk of becoming a trap, giving a static and rigid impression of the relationships between the fragments of which it is composed. Just as the fragments are juxtaposed against each other, so are the ethnicities, conceived as contiguous but limited by clear boundaries.

39 For this distinction, see especially Brubaker – Cooper 2000.

40 Laplantine 2010, pp. 69-73.

41 Maalouf 1998, pp. 186-197.

42 Fabietti 1998, pp. 59-63; Pedrazzi 2014.

43 Liverani 1987, pp. 9-12 (author's translation).

Reproducing, conveying the image of the Levant, ancient or contemporary, as a mosaic therefore backs up an unalterable and separatist vision of a region which, despite all of the Orientalist stereotypes, stands among the most dynamic in the history of humanity.[44]

The image of the mosaic therefore depends on a spatial approach of the study of the Levant, aimed at locating the participants rather than understanding their interactions. The mosaic constitutes, more than a poetic image, a paradigm, which allows this region to be viewed with the same consideration as the Gn 10 image of the "table of nations", that is, drawing out a map of ethnicities, cultures, societies and religions which, for Antiquity, is based on an identitarian interpretation of the material culture that archaeologists have often criticised or limited.[45]

In contrast, if we consider the study of material culture or the inscriptions and texts from the region, we quickly come to comprehend the limitations of the approach based strictly on identity, as the study of socio-political entities in the Levant cannot be implemented outside of a regional horizon. Well before the phenomenon of the Greek *koinè,* the Levantine region experienced several forms of *koinai* according to different periods. In actual fact, the very notion of Levant, a relative concept (Levant in relation to the so-called "Western" world) and geographically explicit (northern or southern Levant), is rather vague. Attaching fixed frontiers to it is a particularly delicate task, today just as it was in the Antiquity, as this territory is difficult to define as a natural region. On the one hand, it's part of a macro-region which also includes Syria, traditionally known as the hinge between the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Anatolian and, later on, Aegean worlds. On the other hand, it's made up of a number of different areas in terms of the morphology and climate. This character of both contiguity and fragmentation favours, therefore, the adoption of the concept of "niches".[46]

The history of this region is, in actual fact, defined by groups of populations which lived at the heart of "cultural niches", physically separated from each other, but adjacent and often incredibly similar, maintaining contacts and continuous exchanges. Such were these interactions that it is often hard to differentiate between the different fragments of the mosaic in the Iron Age: Arameans, Phoenicians, Philistines, Israelites, Judeans, Ammonites, Edomites and Moabites, etc.

During the periods of independence – at least relative – of the political entities in the region, the monarchic institution on several levels constituted one of the major continuity features between the different areas and the different periods, at least from the Bronze Age to the Hellenistic period.[47] We know that the courts of all of the eras formed part of one same elite network or, from a more socio-economic viewpoint, of one same market, which exchanged sought-after materials, luxury goods and, evidently, a whole range of symbols, rituals and, in a nutshell, a whole ideology linked to power. We can therefore talk of a "Near-Eastern system" which brings together the edges of Egypt and Mesopotamia and, to a lesser extent, a less pronounced expansionary polity, of Anatolia and Arab populations, with the Syro-Levantine region at the centre.

In spite of its fragmentation and complexity, it is quite remarkable that this region is defined, each period in its own way, by a high degree of uniformity which has favoured, in specialised literature, the elaboration of concepts such as "regional system"[48] or, from a diplomatic point of view, "internationalism",[49] from an economic point of view, "globalism",[50] indeed "world system network",[51] or even, from an artistic

44 Fabietti 2016, pp. 55-59.

45 For the understanding of Canaan as a mosaic of peoples, see especially Killebrew 2005, pp. 93-148.

46 Liverani 2014, p. 19.

47 Gianto – Dubowsky 2018.

48 Liverani 2014, pp. 278-282.

49 Liverani 1994.

50 LaBianca – Sham 2006.

51 Panitz-Cohen 2013, pp. 549-550.

perspective, "international style",[52] "elite emulation"[53] and, more recently, "community of style"[54] and "art of contact".[55] Whether we wish to call it "Peer Polity Interaction",[56] "ideological *koinè*",[57] or even "palatial network", it takes into consideration the intimate interconnection in which each element participates, to their own potential, as is the case during the whole period upon which this article is based.

For the reasons that I have just covered, if we wish to use an artistic image, that of the mosaic must be abandoned in order to seek, in more recent art forms, other possible candidates. One of these could be "action painting", an expression created by H. Rosenberg,[58] and for which the representative best known to the general public is J. Pollock. It is a way of painting and therefore this metaphor replaces fixed and rigid objects, such as fragments in a mosaic, with a vast series of materials, liquid or solid, which can be used in painting. Furthermore, this technique allows us to look beyond the final result – the image formed from the fragments of the mosaic – to the action itself – hence the name action painting – which not only leads to the result but is also an integral part of the artistic process. In a similar way, therefore, our research should endeavour to place the focus on the dynamics and network interconnections which are at work rather than on the identification and mapping of ethnic entities. As a last resort, it has to do with accepting the vision of "Mestizo logics" proposed by J.-L. Amselle in his "continuist" approach.

To dismiss the metaphor of the mosaic implies understanding the Levant as a meaningful unity, where unity does not mean uniformity. Currently, requests for a broader definition of the Levant from historians and archaeologists are surprisingly rare, signalling that scholars are reluctant to embrace the idea. However, one exception to the above is the Handbook edited by M. Steiner and A.E. Killebrew, issued in 2013, where the authors propose, in the introduction, the notion of "Levantinism" «as the most appropriate designation for this region's cultural hybridity, with all its local particularities».[59] Only future publications will show if the notion of "Levantinism" will be the object of a large consensus or will be put to one side.[60] An encouraging step in this direction is the recent proposal to consider the Levant as a "border zone"[61] and the shift from ethnic identities such as Israelites, Arameans, Moabites, Phoenicians etc. to «local communities and their interactions with other neighbouring communities vis-à-vis the centralised political powers».[62] In summary, the current trend is to shift our attention from an ethnic understanding to a political one, from peoples to communities or, more radically, from peoples to people.

52 Caubet 1998.

53 Higginbotham 2000.

54 Feldman 2014.

55 Martin 2017.

56 The "Peer Polity Interaction" has often been applied to near-eastern contexts for the Late Bronze Age (van de Mieroop 2005; 2007, pp. 230-234), for the Iron Age (Pfoh 2008, pp. 108-109) or even for the Hellenistic period (Ma 2003).

57 Liverani 2005, pp. 140-142.

58 Rosenberg 1952.

59 Killebrew – Steiner 2013, p. 3.

60 See M.H. Feldman: «By viewing social practices as building blocks of a continuously forming and shifting habitus, I propose that we can access the temporal process of becoming a community instead of attempting to recover a static bounded entity» (2014, p. 59); and C. Uehlinger, who highlights the need to «reconceptualise distinctiveness in terms of diversity without neglecting the equally obvious, and plausible, commonalities» (2015, p. 14).

61 Sergi – Oeming – de Hulster 2016, pp. 8-10.

62 Adapted from Sergi – Oeming – de Hulster 2016, pp. 10-11. A similar analysis has been proposed by Porter 2013, pp. 133-148, who emphasised the notion of "communities" on the ethno-taxonomies typical of Biblical archaeology and gave praise for focussing not only on a regional level but also on "small-scale societies".

5. Towards a Regional History: From Peoples to People

Linked to the localisation strategies that I just mentioned is the question of the rise of national or ethnic states in the Iron Age Levant.[63] Among these entities, those which are marked by a tribal imprint, like the Arameans, whose kingdoms are called in the extant documentation as "House of PN (eponym)", as well as the Transjordan and Cisjordan communities, are considered ethnic States. When an entire ethnical group groups together, as is the case with the Israelites, the Ammonites, the Moabites and the Edomites, it is common to refer to them as a national State. Beyond the anachronism that constitutes the use of the adjective "national" for these periods,[64] two problems come to light in this terminology: (a) on the one hand, an application of the evolutionist or non-evolutionist paradigm which analyses the development of societies in stages – with a quartet that has long been fashionable such as group-tribe-chiefdom-State; (b) on the other hand, the ethnic and national terminology essentially depends on the description in the Hebrew Bible. Given that the former has already generated several authoritative criticisms,[65] we can concentrate on the latter. M. Liverani is an epigone of the terminology of national or ethnic States:

> «The Early Iron Age therefore saw the shift from the administrative system, at the heart of the Bronze Age palace states, to the kinship system. The latter was at the heart of a new type of state formation that was developing in this period, eventually leading to the birth of the "nation" state. Admittedly, this reconstruction is largely based on Biblical evidence, which was compiled much later. However, the little evidence there is from this period seems to broadly confirm these developments. Members of a state identified themselves as such because they believed that they had descended from one eponymous ancestor. Therefore, the "charter" of this kinship state was genealogy. The latter was able to link the mythical patriarch with the current members of the tribe, using kinship and marital ties that had a precise meaning in this genealogical code. Primogeniture, adoptions, marriages and every other form of kinship thus signified various types and degrees of socio-political integration».[66]

As M. Liverani admits, the ethnic generalisation employed by recent historiography regarding Iron Age political Levantine entities is based on the description from the Hebrew Bible.[67] In contrast, the theoretical framework to which the most recent historical and archaeological reflection belongs prioritises other categories, such as community.

Contrary to this last notion, the value of lists of peoples, as we have seen from Egypt to Mesopotamia, passing through the Hebrew Bible, is problematic. They simply constitute an organisation criterion for the world within a period that precedes the development of mapping[68] and therefore reveal all of the limits of external, exogenous and purely pragmatic classifications. The ethnic or national State, in the sense that historians of the Near East use the notion, is the transposition, on a historiographical level, of the classification of ancient sources, Hebrew Bible *in primis*, which lists Israelites, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, etc., as defined and consistent groups, and therefore as fragments in the mosaic. When historiography and archaeology closely link material culture and names of peoples on these lists, they carry out an act of faith with regard to the latter.

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63 Herr 1997; Joffe 2002; Liverani 2014, pp. 396-400.

64 For a justification of the use of the concept "nation" and "nationalism" in Antiquity, see Goodblatt 2006.

65 For a discussion on the subject of different – modernist, primitivist, neo-evolutionist, continuist, etc. – models, both from a historical perspective and an archaeological and anthropological perspective, see respectively and to limit ourselves to a few fundamental titles: Yoffee 2004; Pfoh 2011; Routledge 2014.

66 Liverani 2014, p. 397.

67 See also Liverani 2002, p. 41.

68 Smith 2005.

Noting the emergence of ethnic or national States must, therefore, be welcomed with caution as it constitutes a reflection of the narrative in the Hebrew Bible, a deceptive generalisation on a regional scale and, eventually, a mirage of the historian. Indeed, the illusion of an ethnic homogeneity is completely overcome in many cases, starting from the Israelites to all the other groups, such as the Philistines, the Phoenicians and the Transjordan populations.[69] Moreover, it has been convincingly argued that Levantine kingdoms, which comprised a huge variety of manifestations under the same Semitic root *mlk*, included different forms of local organisation on a smaller and local level.[70]

Leaving aside the imagined turning point from territorial states to ethnic or national states, a change in perspective is necessary concerning the general approach to the societies on the Levantine coast at the beginning of the first millennium BCE. Consequently, the long-term objective is to write a history of the ancient Levant, and therefore also of its Mediterranean influence (or the so-called "Phoenician" colonisation with the "Greek" colonisation and the "Jewish" diaspora), which focusses on the human beings (people) and their interactions instead of ethnic categories (peoples). What's required, in a nutshell, is more anthropology (in the broad sense), as several researchers constantly remark.[71]

The lack of a truly regional perspective in the Levant is due to many reasons, and academic literature provides very plausible lists.[72] To tell the truth, among all the reasons, especially in the field of Phoenician and Israelite studies, the current impassable border between Lebanon and Syria on one side and Israel on the other affects the respective disciplines. The problem is not only the existence of «significant barriers to pan-regional communication and scholarship»[73] but also a social – and therefore also academic – bias, if not an openly stated boycott, based on personal political agendas, which are not easily put aside. Furthermore, the peculiar character of disciplines connected to the "Biblical world", such as biblical exegesis, theology or archaeology, did not help communications with cognate fields. Today, however, the renewal of the whole set of Biblical Studies as secular disciplines is deserving of a new credit of trust on the part of colleagues. Furthermore, it plays a proactive role in the constitution of a historical study of the region which is increasingly connected and inclusive.

In other words, the regional context is emphasised here not as a purpose *per se* – by the way it should always be integrated in detailed analysis and macro-regional and inter-regional analysis – but as a solution in order to pay less attention to ethno-taxonomies, more attention to interactions and, ultimately, to overcome disciplinary boundaries. In this regard, the preference for the notion of communities rather than for peoples aims to emphasise the situational, contextual and, to some extent, ephemeral character of these social formations. On the contrary, the notion of peoplehood is somewhat more resistant (as firstly shaped in the Bible and then in modern nations, and especially around the pairing of *Blut und Boden*, "blood and soil").

To conclude, the meaning of "Imagine no peoples" is simply an attempt to make room for a genuine historical frame which helps us to take a step back from our relative fields and see the bigger picture. This way, we may become fully aware of the limits and the weight of old-fashioned paradigms, the insidious character of some words and, finally, we will seek out new interdisciplinary collaborations. In this regard, in both Phoenician and Israelite studies there is an increasing need for broader historical frames, and not only for limited archaeological analysis or epigraphic or literary philological works.

Phoenician and Israelite studies, protagonists both in the East and in the West, attest, in their own documentation, the need for such a broader history to be written. In effect, if there's an inherent vocation

69 See, for instance, Finkelstein 2007; Porter 2013; Maeir – Hitchcock 2017.

70 See, for instance, Maeir – Shai 2016.

71 Pfoh 2010 with bibliography.

72 See especially Porter 2016 and Routledge 2017.

73 Routledge 2017, p. 52.

or, if one prefers, nature that belongs to these studies, it's the necessary opening of the Levantine region and, from the eighth century BCE, on a Mediterranean level. As Luther wanted for the church, Phoenician and Israelite studies can show that their discipline *semper reformanda est*. In many ways, they are domains which, by definition, force researchers to look beyond geographical, chronological and cultural borders and, especially for Phoenician studies, beyond ethnic categories themselves. They also oblige scholars to not be afraid of fuzzy pictures, because if «in academia fuzziness is anathema; in real life fuzziness is often a life-preserver in turbulent times and seemingly conflicting and perhaps even hostile ideas and ideologies can reside together in fuzzy harmony».[74] Only in this way can scholars escape the necessity of the imperative *aut-aut*, the coactive "either-or" and thus escape the burden of systematisation. By avoiding an identity or an ethnic affiliation, imagining for a moment a Levant without peoples, maybe as historians and archaeologists we will be able to show our contemporaries that, unlike our world which is dying as a result of too much identity, the study of the past can free us from our worst nightmares.

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74 Schwartz 2012, p. 59.

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