ON CULTURAL AND MATERIAL BOUNDARIES:
"*FINGERE* L'IDENTITÀ" TEN YEARS LATER

Tatiana Pedrazzi*

Abstract: In the fortieth issue of the *Rivista di Studi Fenici*, ten years ago, I presented a discussion of the Phoenician identity and of the "borders" of a Phoenician region, primarily through the analysis of the material culture. Over the last decade, many contributions have been published; some new acquisitions, including on the theoretical level, have changed the interpretative framework. Therefore, in the light of recent studies, the question discussed here is whether it still makes sense to go in search of the borders of Phoenicia, following the *fil rouge* of material culture, used as a cultural marker.

Keywords: Phoenician Identity; Phoenicia; Cultural Borders; Material Culture; Phoenician Boundaries.

1. "*FINGERE* L'IDENTITÀ FENICIA" TEN YEARS LATER

The fortieth issue of the *Rivista di Studi Fenici*, published exactly ten years ago, contained two papers with the deliberately provoking title, "*Fingere* l'identità fenicia". This title was meant to play on sthe Latin verb *fingere*, swinging between different (and evocative) meanings: from the idea of "faking", of representing something misleading, a kind of fictitious reality (i.e., precisely, *fincta*) on the one hand, to the idea of "shaping", and "modelling", on the other hand.

The two different subtitles, which identified the complementary contributions, by, respectively, the writer and G. Garbati, led the discussion back to two spheres: in the first article, the central topic was the search for and definition of the "boundaries" of Phoenicia, through material culture; in the second paper, the concept of "identity" was discussed more broadly, starting from the analysis of a group of Phoenician inscriptions mentioning Melqart in relation to Tyre.[1] In this current issue, which sees the Journal of Phoenician Studies reaching its fiftieth birthday, we have thought of proposing a "ten years later" rethink, to assess whether (and in which way) this last decade of studies has had an impact on the themes of Phoenician identity and the delineation of the true boundaries of "Phoenicia", as intended in modern historiography.

Over the past decade, the topic of Phoenician identity has been addressed on several occasions,[2] also through the work of the "Phoenician and Punic Research Group" of the Institute of Heritage Science of the National Research Council (CNR-ISPC),[3] as shown, for instance, by the three volumes entitled *Transformations and Crisis in the Mediterranean*, edited by G. Garbati and myself: the books are dedicated to the study of identity and intercultural relations in the Phoenician Levant and Mediterranean, referring, respectively, to the 12th-8th centuries BCE (in the 2015 volume), to the 8th-5th centuries BCE (in the 2016 volume)

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1   Pedrazzi 2014; Garbati 2014.

2   Bondì 2014; Bonnet 2014b; Xella 2014; Porzia 2018; Quinn 2018; Oggiano 2019; Garbati 2021.

3   https://www.ispc.cnr.it/it_it/2021/01/26/phoenician-and-punic-research-group/

and to the 5th-2nd centuries BCE (in the volume published in 2021).[4] In a recent article (2021) G. Garbati discusses the issue of Phoenician identity in an exemplary and complete manner, concluding that we can use the term "Phoenicians" with some caution: he states that «the solution, in this case, is not to question – to the point of eliminating them – labels such as "Phoenician," but rather to avoid ascribing identitarian features to those labels».[5] The discussion on Phoenician identity, with specific reference to the definition of Phoenician cultural borders, was pursued by the writer also in a contribution published in 2021, entitled *In Search of Phoenician Borders. Debating the Existence of a True "Phoenician Region"*, in which the concept of "border" was revised, considering recent achievements in cultural anthropology.[6]

In 2019, a volume entitled *Les Phéniciens, les Puniques et les autres. Echanges et identités en Méditérranée ancienne* was edited following a meeting held in Paris in 2016.[7] The aim of the meeting (and of the volume) was to transcend a Hellenocentric (and Egyptocentric) idea of the Phoenicians and Phoenicia. The close relationship, highlighted in the title of this volume, between exchanges (commercial and cultural) and identities (in the plural) is significant: it is always through exchange, encounter, and the relational dynamics established between the many "us" and the many "others" that the identity-building processes are determined. As noted by C. Bonnet and P. Rouillard, in the introduction to the volume, «les identités culturelles ne répondent pas vraiment à une logique de frontières et d'affrontement irréductible, mais plutôt à des dynamiques, poreuses, faites de transactions, négociations, compromis et réseaux».[8] The keyword, here, seems, therefore, to be "compromise" rather than "border" or "frontier". In the logic of the "middle ground", i.e., of the space of negotiation, or common space, a logic applied by I. Malkin to the whole ancient Mediterranean world,[9] the exchanges, encounters, and us/others relations, take place through a continuous compromise.

J.C. Quinn's 2018 volume, *In Search of the Phoenicians*, starts precisely from an overtly de-constructivist premise: «my intention here is not simply to rescue the Phoenicians from their undeserved obscurity. Quite the opposite, in fact: I'm going to start by making the case that they did not in fact exist as a self-conscious collective or "people"».[10] In the section of the volume devoted to "Pots and Peoples", the author points out how some alleged "markers" of Phoenician presence (e.g. pottery),[11] in fact, spread all over the Levantine coast and Cyprus,[12] thus proving to be of little use in delimiting an authentically "Phoenician" region. F. Barth's relational approach, which emphasised (from the late 1960s) «the importance of marking boundaries between groups»,[13] is also considered unproductive, as «people simply do not seem to mark boundaries as "Phoenician"».[14]

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4   Garbati – Pedrazzi 2015; 2016; 2021.

5   Garbati 2021, p. 29.

6   Pedrazzi 2021.

7   Bonadies – Chirpanlieva – Guillon 2019.

8   Bonnet – Rouillard 2019, p. 11.

9   Malkin 2011.

10   Quinn 2018, pp. xv-xvii. Also, in van Dongen's previous work (2010), a de-constructivist paradigm was adopted, as the author concluded that «the concept of historical Phoenicia seems to be inappropriate» (van Dongen 2010, p. 479).

11   F. Nuñez, one the foremost experts on Phoenician ceramics, warned against using material culture to answer overly broad questions: «material culture is forced to answer questions that are many times impossible for it to meet. Expectations are sometimes too high» (Nuñez Calvo 2015, p. 111).

12   Quinn 2018, p. 71.

13   Quinn 2018, p. 72. Cfr. Barth 1969. And see also Pedrazzi 2014, p. 147.

14   Quinn 2018, p. 73.

In her 2019 monographic study, entitled *The History and Archaeology of Phoenicia*, H. Sader concludes that «finally, there is nowhere an equivalent in Phoenician or in other Near Eastern sources for the concept of Phoenicia or Phoenicians as coined by the Greeks»;[15] according to the scholar, in the absence of a clear "internal" designation of the region and the people, however, shared features in the material culture remain important.

Rather than rigidly delimiting cultural regions, the studies of the last decade have been devoted to sketching and illuminating, through material and epigraphic documentation, the different "cultural landscapes": this is a concept more nuanced but perhaps more pertinent to the ancient reality. C. Bonnet's 2014 book has a subtitle that reads *Le paysage religieux de la Phénicie hellénistique*:[16] the religious aspects also compose a complex and articulated landscape, difficult to define. Instead of a Phoenician *universe*, a Phoenician *multiverse* appears in the eyes of the contemporary scholar, in which complexity seems to prevent a clear and limpid reconstruction of the ancient context. M. Liverani, however, warns us against the risk of abusing complexity, as the latter is sometimes used as an *escamotage* useful for solving every problem:[17] complexity as a diriment factor, as the solution to every interpretative difficulty, complexity (paradoxically) as the easiest way to avoid the effort of a profound understanding of ancient cultural dynamics. Appealing to complexity, then, does not exempt us from trying to understand, interpret, reconstruct, and possibly highlight cultural boundaries, demarcations, delimitations. Compromise and negotiation are not always the primary modes of intercultural and social relations; there are also, in ancient societies as well as in the contemporary world, contrasts, cultural resistance, the accentuation of demarcations and separations, in short, the construction and maintenance of boundaries: the material and cultural, and the physical and mental ones.

In the following remarks, therefore, considering recent studies, the focus will be on the query whether it actually still makes sense to go in search of the borders of Phoenicia, following the fil rouge of material culture, used as a cultural marker.

2. True Borders of Phoenicia in the Current Debate

In the last decade, and particularly in 2014 and 2019, two major international editorial efforts have focused, respectively, on the archaeology of the Levant and the Phoenician and Punic Mediterranean.[18] In the first "Oxford Handbook", dedicated to the archaeology of the Levant, "Phoenicia" finds space, of course, starting with the chapters devoted to the Iron Age. In the words of Ann Killebrew, «the Iron I is characterised by cultural fragmentation and a variety of regionally defined settlement patterns and social, economic, and cultural boundaries».[19] According to the scholar, the very emergence of these "cultural boundaries" constitutes a new aspect of the Early Iron Age, «in contrast to the largely homogeneous material culture of the Levantine Late Bronze Age».[20]

However, moving deeper into the analysis of the transformations of the material culture of the Levantine region, difficulties emerge both in drawing a clear chronological demarcation line between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age[21] and in highlighting cultural boundaries based on material culture and in particularly

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15   Sader 2019, p. 313.

16   Bonnet 2014a.

17   Cfr. Liverani 2015.

18   Doak – López-Ruiz 2019.

19   Killebrew 2014, p. 596.

20   Killebrew 2014, p. 596.

21   For this reason, the label "Late Bronze III" is frequently used today for the first phase of the period that until recently was commonly referred to as "Early Iron Age".

ceramics. The emergence of "new material cultural traits" marks different sites in the Northern, Central and Southern Levant, in a very diverse and complex manner, albeit in a context of substantial continuity of local material culture;[22] for example, the occurrence of Aegean-style wares, as seen in many recent studies, must be interpreted differently for each micro-region and even for each individual site. R. Jung's study of Aegean-style pottery from Tell Kazel (Syria) is illustrative in this regard, as this pottery differs from contemporary Aegeanizing wares produced in Cyprus and other Aegean-style pottery assemblages attested in the Levant.[23] Thus, in the Iron I, no clear-cut boundary lines are identified, either North or South; it is difficult to ascribe a single centre to the emerging Phoenician region with any certainty, with the obvious exception of the coastal centres of present-day Lebanon, which are labelled "Phoenician" almost by acquired right. For this reason, the "Oxford Handbook", for the Iron Age I period, proposes distinct paragraphs for the "Northern Levant" and the "Southern Levant" (the latter subdivided into Cisjordan and Transjordan).[24] For the Iron Age II period, on the other hand, a scansion between "Aramean states" and "Phoenicia" is proposed (the latter primarily in reference to Tyre).[25]

In the most recent (2019) "Oxford Handbook", devoted specifically to the Phoenician and Punic Mediterranean, one of the introductory contributions (entitled, significantly, "Research Tools") presents a list of sites that, since the beginning of the Iron Age, can be called "Phoenician": Ras el-Bassit, Tell Sukas, Arwad, Tell Kazel (in modern Syria), Tripoli, Byblos, Beirut, Sidon, Tyre (in modern Lebanon), Achziv, Akko, Tell Keisan, Dor (in modern Israel).[26] Almost the entire coastal Levant, from Bassit to Dor, is therefore considered somewhat "Phoenician", surely *lato sensu*. In the same volume, A. Killebrew briefly describes the geography of Phoenicia and clarifies that the identification features of a Phoenician region lie in some specific "shared culture traits", a "distinct language" and an alphabetic script.[27] According to Killebrew, «modern scholarship identifies the cultural boundaries of Phoenicia as encompassing Arwad and the Akkar Plain in the north and continuing southward to Akko and its plain until the Mount Carmel headland»,[28] although these boundaries are fluid and change over time.

In these recent contributions, which attempt to define what is meant by Phoenicia, we basically go back to the origins, to S. Moscati's definition, which dated back to 1963, i.e. precisely sixty years ago; in Moscati's words, the Phoenician area becomes delimited as different populations come to mark its borders («l'area fenicia viene a delimitarsi in quanto diverse popolazioni vengono a segnarne i confini»);[29] the Phoenician region would thus be defined and delimited from the outside, almost in the negative, and in any

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22   Killebrew 2014, p. 597: «the majority of settlements in the northern (north Syria) and central (Phoenicia) coastal regions continue indigenous Late Bronze Age traditions». According to F. Nuñez, «the essence of the Phoenician ceramic repertoire remained untouched either in its morphological or its decorative features» (Nuñez Calvo 2015, p. 122).

23   Jung 2011, pp. 121-132.

24   See Steiner – Killebrew 2014: H. Sader deals with the Northern Levant, dividing the subject between Lebanon and Syria; A. Gilboa deals on the contrary with the Southern Levant (Cisjordan), distinguishing between Carmel coast and Akko plain, on the one hand, Southern Coastal Plain, on the other hand, with the rise of the Philistine centers, and the central hill country, with the villages traditionally connected to the settlement of the Israelite tribes: see, respectively, Sader 2014 and Gilboa 2014.

25   Aubet 2014, p. 706: «during the Iron Age II (900-600 BC) Phoenician history became aligned with the history of Tyre».

26   Schmitz 2019, p. 11.

27   Killebrew 2019, p. 40: «archaeologically, Iron Age Phoenicia is defined by its shared culture traits, distinctive to this area, which can be discerned already in the twelfth century (…), as well as a distinct language within the Nortwestern Semitic language group and an alphabetic script identified as Phoenician already in antiquity».

28   Killebrew 2019, p. 40.

29   Moscati 1963, p. 489.

case in a sort of dialectic (and fluid) relationship with the surrounding populations, to the north and south. The Phoenician people themselves were supposed to be identifiable and recognisable from the surrounding peoples, according to Moscati, because of language, geographical area, and a series of distinctive features ("caratteri distintivi").[30] It must be admitted that these distinctive features are no better defined today than sixty years ago; these are cultural characters shared within the Levant's "Phoenician segment", features added to language and alphabetical writing to describe and demarcate Phoenician culture (and the region in which this culture occurs and becomes materialised). As for these identity parameters or "parametri identitari" (which include the name of a people, its territory, language, institutions), P. Xella argues that they can create illusory perspectives, as, in other words, they too are likely to make us perceive human reality as discontinuous and fragmented.[31]

In 2019, N. Vella reintroduced and recapitulated the main points of the "Phoenician question"; among these are, first of all, the "when" and the "where" of Phoenician culture development, namely, chronologically, «in the Iron Age - that is, after 1200 BCE», and geographically, in «the area that roughly stretches from Arwad in the north to Acre in the south», with a somewhat more limited areal extension than seen above.[32]

The recent debate, therefore, with a few exceptions, has not substantially moved away from the "Phoenician question" that Moscati raised and attempted to resolve at least fifty years ago.[33] The uncertainty over the borders of Phoenicia remains, as does the difficulty in delimiting not only the geographical region, but Phoenician culture itself, within the Levantine landscape. At the same time, there is a renewed attempt, even in recent studies, to hold on to assumed or factual "shared features" that would distinguish the Phoenician people and culture of the East and define their regional boundaries. The problem, in the current scholarly debate, is that these "cultural features" tend to be quite "liquid": they hardly take a stable form. Although some distinguishing elements of "Phoenician-ness"[34] are to be found in material culture, hence in the objects and artefacts (which in fact are in a stable, corporeal, tangible form) it is nevertheless difficult to distinguish those peculiar typological, technological, and stylistic features that provide an unequivocal definition of the boundaries of Phoenician material culture. Craft traditions, in the coastal Levant, between North and South, are mixed, and often have fuzzy boundaries. Hybridization, mixing, and contamination of traditions seem to be the standard.

3. Cultural and Material Borders: A Few Thoughts

In the absence of any direct written sources, boundaries can be studied through material culture. Material culture, artefacts, primarily pottery, can be used to define the us/them relationship, and hence the maintenance or construction of cultural boundaries.[35] Choosing to produce and use a certain type of ceramics

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30   See Pedrazzi 2014, p. 140.

31   Xella 2014.

32   Vella 2019, p. 25.

33   An attempt at a clear answer to Moscati can be found in these words of J. Quinn: «My answer to the question Moscati posed in 1963 is that nothing did in fact unite the Phoenicians in their own eyes or those of their neighbors, and that his Phoenician people, or civilization, or nation, is not actually a real historical object, but rather a product of the scholarly and political ideologies» (Quinn 2018, p. 24).

34   "Phoenician-ness" is a term used here in a very general sense, different from "Phoenicianism", a concept used by J. Quinn (2018, p. xxiii).

35   M. Castiglione has provided an excellent account of the us/them dynamics (studying the Phoenicians/Greeks relationship); she highlighted «the permeability of different boundaries, related to geographical, political, economic, cultural and ideological aspects, all connected with the ideas of distinction, identification and sense of belonging» (Castiglione 2021, p. 45).

means, in many cases, drawing a line of demarcation: local tradition versus allogenic elements. I have already discussed this issue in a 2015 contribution, in which I proposed to adopt a «notional value-scale ranging from *fully local* to *fully non-local* objects, with the aim of positioning along this continuum the classes of objects selected as examples. The scale consists of five "degrees" of alterity, starting from a "zero" level corresponding to full maintenance of the local tradition, and finishing at the opposite end of the scale with totally "allogenic" components».[36] This "taxonomy of otherness", in the final analysis, shows quite well how hard it is to isolate both totally "allogenic" and authentically and completely "local" elements; there is, however, a certain degree of contamination, hybridisation, in the artefacts produced within a community, since the latter is obviously not closed, but is permeable and in constant relation with the external world.

Therefore, how can we understand what stands behind the setting up and preservation of borders? If material culture is only partially helpful, the most appropriate thing would be to turn to texts, to direct written sources. In order to remedy the scarcity of true Phoenician direct textual sources, in a contribution published in 2021,[37] I have attempted to apply to the Phoenician cultural phase, at least to the early phase, the very same ideological connotations of the concept of "boundary" that emerge from the Late Bronze Age textual documentation; this attempt to understand the ideology of the boundary and the conception of the territory of the Phoenician city-states through the textual documentation of the earlier phase is motivated by the socio-political and cultural continuity between the Bronze Age Syro-Palestinian cities and the Iron Age Phoenician cities.

Using the documentation of Late Bronze Age cuneiform texts as an example, one understands how, in certain cases, «two cities might become an administrative unit, with one centre gaining supremacy over the other; the two populations, in this case, would take on a joint collective identity, while maintaining their own distinctive characteristics, thus developing a plural identity embracing dimensions of both identification and otherness.»[38] This example, albeit derived from cases attested in a phase preceding the Phoenician age proper, shows how cultural (and political) boundaries must indeed have been very fluid, variable, perceptible on different levels. Even before emphasising the fluidity of the borders of the territory of Phoenicia, in a broader sense, then, it is necessary to stress, primarily, the fluidity of the borders of each city-state and, consequently, the continuous transformation of the perception of the collective identity of the communities: a transformation resulting from the different and varied political, economic and social circumstances.

Moreover, cultural anthropology has shown us that ethnic and cultural borders are «strategically produced through social and symbolic practices» rather than objectively and definitively given.[39] Therefore, the cultural borders we seek are variable, constantly fluctuating, precisely because they are "strategically produced".

The concrete historical reality of the Iron Age Levant, as evidenced by almost all recent studies reviewed here, is characterised by a high degree of "continuity" between one people and another, between one culture and another. As I. Oggiano pointed out in several contributions,[40] the Levant of this period is a «variegated landscape of peoples without fixed boundaries (political, geographical and cultural boundaries were mobile)».[41] The continuist perspective of the French anthropologist J.-L. Amselle seems to find, in this

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36   Pedrazzi 2015, p. 66.

37   Pedrazzi 2021, p. 370: «This continuity in how borders were understood in the Phoenician cities of the Iron Age with respect to the earlier Canaanite city-states allows us to take the abundant textual data from the Late Bronze Age as a primary – albeit indirect – documental source shedding light on the probable status of borders during the subsequent Phoenician era».

38   Pedrazzi 2021, p. 371.

39   Fabietti 2005, p. 181.

40   Cfr. Oggiano 2016; 2019.

41   Oggiano 2019, p. 586.

ancient coastal Levantine context, an excellent field of application: «l'analyse en termes de logiques métisses» permits to postulate, at the cultural level, «un mélange dont il est impossible de dissocier les parties».[42] However, the continuist approach, strictly applied, perhaps does not fully highlight the value and strategic significance of the border: created, shaped, marked, even "invented".

The resilience of the Phoenicians and the (historical) long-lasting survival of a region we call "Phoenicia" are evident in this brief review of the interpretative perspectives of recent years. Evidently, the continuist perspective, the (necessary) deconstruction of (ethnic and cultural) identities, constitute important guidelines, marking the path, indicating the direction to take, but are not adequate for invalidating demarcation lines (variable and in constant movement) between communities which, precisely because they are close, strictly interconnected, almost fused in an inextricable *mélange* are constrained to search for (and create) differentiation pathways and to highlight, mark (and even establish) their own distinct affiliations. The frontiers of Phoenicia, then, correspond to the totality of the borders of the different Phoenician cities, which are in relation to each other, and, at the same time, in relation to "the exterior", to the surrounding kingdoms and cities, North and South, East and even in the far West, across the sea. The borders are physical, political, economic, but they are also mental ones, invisible but persisting.

In the process of defining borders, recent studies have led us from the definite and almost irreversible dismissal of an "ethnic" perspective, which was based on a traditional approach to material culture (the "pots and peoples" perspective),[43] through an approach that took into account the complexity of the elements at play, seeing them as juxtaposed ("the Levantine mosaic"),[44] and (more recently) towards a continuist perspective, aware, however, of the strategic (and "constructed") value of borders and demarcations. The emphasis now increasingly turns to the concrete "agents" lying behind every historical dynamic (in all spheres: linguistic, economic, political, artistic and so on): the agents are not so much the various peoples,[45] in the ethnic or cultural sense, but rather the concrete inhabitants of a country area, of a region, or even of a single city.

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42   Amselle 1990, p. 248.

43   This perspective was still prevalent in studies dating back fifteen to twenty years ago. See, for example, Killebrew 2005.

44   See Porzia 2018.

45   F. Porzia recently highlighted that «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» (Porzia 2018, p. 21).

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