

“FINGERE L’IDENTITÀ” TEN YEARS ON: PHOENICIANS BEYOND IDENTITY

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Abstract: Ten years ago, on the occasion of the publication of the fortieth number of the *Rivista di Studi Fenici*, I had the opportunity to begin my line of research on the problem of Phoenician identity. The main purpose of my contribution published in that issue, which had the emblematic title “*Fingere l’identità fenicia*”, was to explore some of the problems that I considered fundamental to a renewed formulation of the question (which was first raised in 1963 by Sabatino Moscati). A decade on from that contribution, therefore, on the occasion of the fiftieth issue of the *Rivista di Studi Fenici*, I would like to revisit the main aspects of the problem, exploring some parts of it in more depth. Above all, I aim to reflect on the point we have now reached in relation to a theme that is central – as identity certainly is – to studies dedicated to Phoenician culture.

Keywords: Phoenicians; Identity; Similarities; Differences; Melqart; Astarte; Cult.

1. TEN YEARS ON

Exactly ten years ago, on the occasion of the publication of the fortieth number of the *Rivista di Studi Fenici*, I had the opportunity to begin my research on the problem of the Phoenicians’ identity.¹ The main purpose of my contribution published in that issue, which had the emblematic title “*Fingere l’identità fenicia*”, was to explore some of the problems that I considered fundamental to a renewed formulation of the question (which, as is well known, Sabatino Moscati had first addressed in 1963 in his *La questione fenicia*).² In doing so, I focused on the example of religion by examining in detail some forms assumed by the cult of Melqart across the East and West. The objects of my investigations were three epicleses attributed to the god, all united by the term *šr*, “rock”, “Tyre”, and attested in Phoenicia (in Tyre: *bšr*, “in *šr*”), in Malta (*b’l šr*; “Lord of *šr*”), in Sardinia (Cagliari, Antas, Tharros: *’l hšr*; “above *šr*”) and in Spain (Ibiza; again *’l hšr*).³ Through that work, I was able first of all to observe how the cult of the divinity, thanks to the constant reference to the motherland (*šr*/Tyre) – the place of memory and remembrance – was configured by the devotees as an instrument of strong claim to their ancient origins; such an instrument united distant and diverse contexts.

In the following pages, I would like to revisit the main aspects of the discussion, exploring some elements of it in greater depth, and aiming above all to reflect on the point we have now reached with regard to the theme of identity, which is central to studies dedicated to Phoenician culture.⁴ On the other hand, in recent years there have been several investigations into this topic, including some I have carried out my-

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1 Garbati 2014.

2 Moscati 1963.

3 On these data generally, see Amadasi Guzzo 2005a and 2005b; Garbati 2021a, pp. 95-102, with references.

4 This article should thus be conceived as a continuation of that of 2014 and at the same time as a new beginning in the approach to Phoenician identity.

self.⁵ On the occasion of the fiftieth issue of the *Rivista di Studi Fenici*, it may therefore be useful to try to understand where we now stand – marking out any fixed points of reference – and in which direction we can set off again so that new paths and research perspectives can be opened up.

2. IDENTITY AS AN OBJECT OF RESEARCH

The element that perhaps more than any other constituted a central component of the ideas developed in “*Fingere l’identità fenicia*” was the way in which identity itself was understood – a principle that I believed, and still believe, to be fundamental to the correct framing of the problem of identity. As I indicated in the opening pages of that article, I contend that the construction of identity should be understood as an element to be examined and described in its mechanisms – as an attitude and a human process, therefore, an invention, a fiction⁶ to be interpreted and explained by trying to observe a culture from the inside. In “*Fingere l’identità fenicia*”, then, following the teaching of illustrious anthropologists (first and foremost F. Remotti⁷), I pointed to the need to understand identity (both the term and the concept) as an object of research and not as an interpretative category – as something that needs to be explained rather than something that can or should be used to explain.⁸ In that article, this formulation was substantiated by the object chosen for discussion, namely the cult of “Melqart and the rock”. It is on this, then, that I must now focus in order to clarify and to further deepen my point of view, also widening the debate to Phoenician culture as a whole.

As I mentioned at the beginning, it is quite easy to recognize in the formulation and diffusion of the epicleses *bšr*, *b’lšr* and *’l hšr*, attributed to Melqart, a process of claiming identity through the god and, thanks to his mediation, through recall of the land of origin, *šr*, Tyre. Alongside this, however, we must consider the fact that a similar process in the various contexts – Phoenicia, Malta, Sardinia and the Iberian Peninsula – must have corresponded to the expression of particular local characteristics, beyond the common reference to the Tyrian deity. This is indicated not only by the different composition of the epicleses (*b + šr*; *b’l + šr* and *’l + h + šr*), which probably implied meanings for them that did not entirely coincide, but also by the different areas of recurrence of the same appellation. The case of Melqart “on the rock/Tyre” (*’l hšr*) attested, as mentioned above, in both Sardinia and Spain is exemplary in this respect. In the Sardinian temple of Antas, for instance, the cult paid to Melqart *’l hšr* was jointly devoted to Sid (*/Sardus Pater*, the deity to whom the building was dedicated), who in myth was the son of Melqart himself and who was worshipped as the ancestral father of the Sardinians.⁹ In the sacred place, therefore, the tradition that still looked to Tyre as the motherland was linked to local ideologies relating to the most ancient history of Sardinia. It goes without saying that this particular meaning must have been specific to the Italian island and therefore must not have concerned the extra-island contexts linked to *mqlrt ’l hšr*, as in the case of Ibiza. The latter, in turn, certainly had its own connotations: it may be useful to recall, from this point of view, that in the concluding section of the Spanish epigraph the devotee is said to belong “to the people of *tg’lbn*” (a place as yet

5 On the topic see the three volumes belonging to the series *Transformations and Crisis in the Mediterranean*, edited in 2015, 2016 and 2021 by Tatiana Pedrazzi and me (see Pedrazzi in this volume for the bibliographical references). Cfr. also Pedrazzi 2014; Quinn – Vella 2014; Porzia 2018; Quinn 2018; Garbati 2021b, with bibliography.

6 From Latin *ingere*, “to invent, to pretend”; “to construct”: Garbati 2014, p. 161 (inspired by Remotti 2010, p. 42).

7 Remotti 2003 and 2010.

8 As Moscati did when he recognized certain cultural elements – such as language and geographical area – as identitarian traits (Moscati 1963, pp. 24-25).

9 Garbati 2021c.

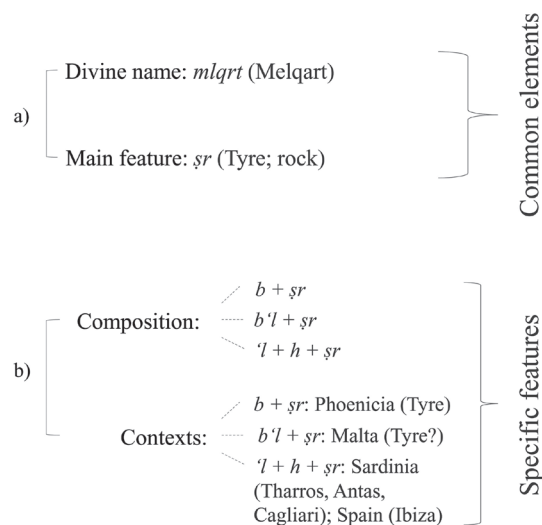
unidentified).¹⁰ Such a reference manifests the desire of the devotee himself to express his belonging to a certain community (probably of the Iberian area).

The process of claiming identity, through Melqart, Tyre and the reconstruction of the origins, therefore appears to be characterized by two elements that seem almost to be in opposition to each other: a) the adoption of the same tradition by different individuals and/or communities (*bšr*, *bʿl šr* and *ʿl hšr*: “Melqart and the rock”) and, at the same time, b) the local variation, if not the contextual remodulation, of that tradition (TAB. 1). When we compare this to the cultural phenomenon that forms its basis – the creation of identity – it would seem that we are faced with a kind of paradox: the component that was supposed to provide stability and coherence – the Tyrian god and *šr* – became an element subject to variations in the different contexts of adoption and in the various instances of worship. In other words, the impulse to construct something stable and constant actually resulted in the production of variability. When we descend to a more concrete level, again the example of the use of *ʿl hšr* for Melqart in Antas and in Ibiza

is explanatory: potentially, the Sardinian and the Iberian devotees could boast a sort of shared identity, recognizing each other because the cult of the god was formulated in a common, specific way (*ʿl hšr*); at the same time, as stressed above, they could claim different identities due to the fact that they pertain to different communities (and through the specific meanings assumed by the cult in the respective places). If we expand the picture to include the other two epiclases – *bšr* and *bʿl šr* – it will become clear that we are faced with the circulation, in various areas of the Mediterranean, of an imaginary used as a means of reconstructing history and origins, a harbinger of identity claims; however, it acquired different forms and characteristics in the various contexts of adoption. On these bases, the term “identity” certainly cannot be used as an instrument to define and interpret: indeed, in historical reality, the process that bears its name remains characterized by plurality, difference and variability. If it were used as an analytical category, the same term would therefore find itself describing something that is in fact opposed to it. Consequently, I cannot help but understand identity as a possible object of research rather than as an interpretative category.

An approach that looks at identity as something that needs to be investigated therefore has a much wider implication, which goes far beyond the example of “Melqart and the rock” (although including it). I refer here to the impossibility of admitting the existence of any identity that can be defined as “Phoenician”. Such an affirmation may appear rather too categorical. Nonetheless, we must reflect on the fact that if identity is to be seen as a phenomenon, as a human attitude (for example, the claim of belonging to a certain group in opposition to others), the term “identity” itself cannot be paired with the adjective “Phoenician”: it is well known that the communities that we define in this way today never defined themselves thus (“Phoenician” is a term of Greek invention).¹¹ In other words, no human group, large or small, found in any of

mlqrt
bšr, bʿl šr, ʿl hšr
Similarities and differences



TAB. 1. The epiclases *bšr*, *bʿl šr* and *ʿl hšr*. Similarities and differences (author’s elaboration).

10 Amadasi Guzzo 2006, p. 17.

11 Cfr. Ercolani 2015.

the locations scattered from the East to the Western Mediterranean, ever claimed identity by declaring itself “Phoenician”.¹²

In quite recent years, the extraneousness of the noun “Phoenicians” and the adjective “Phoenician” to the people so denominated has led to a questioning of the functionality of those same terms, almost to the point of undermining the existence of the Phoenicians as a historical object.¹³ I shall not dwell on this question here, as I have already addressed it elsewhere.¹⁴ However, I think it is right to point out that the absence of any Phoenician identity in no way implies the non-existence of the Phoenicians on a historical level (the common language, for example, represents a positive fact in this regard).¹⁵ Such an absence is rather due to the impossibility of attributing a specific historical process – the construction of a common identity – to those Levantine communities called, on the analytical level (i.e. on the level of historical analysis), “Phoenician”. From this point of view, the example of “Melqart and the rock” again appears significant: the one claimed in the texts is certainly not a Phoenician identity (if we really wanted to give it a name, we might describe it as “Tyrian”). Nevertheless, the cultural connections (above all, the linguistic and religious ones) that help to link the different epigraphs and contexts examined are undeniable, so as to make them, as a whole, an object of history. Conventionally, this object can be defined as “Phoenician”.

3. FROM IDENTITY TO SIMILARITIES

The case study of “Melqart and the rock” has highlighted the contradiction inherent in the phenomena of identity claim: they oscillate between constant and variable elements, encompassing something – i.e. variability – that theoretically identity should not (by definition) encompass. Thanks once again to cultural anthropology studies, the examination of such a contradiction has recently benefited from a renewed investigative approach, which is useful for analysing dynamics of sharing and differentiation at the same time.

In a book entitled *Somiglianze. Una via per la convivenza*, F. Remotti has proposed a new perspective aimed at moving beyond the identity viewpoint once and for all, in terms of analysis and scientific research, and adopting a more nuanced and progressive vision.¹⁶ I am referring to the possibility of setting up research that uses the perspective of similarities, which we can apply both to different communities pertaining to cultural groups that are classified as different (the Phoenicians and the Greeks, for example) and, as in the present case, to communities belonging to what is normally considered to be the same cultural group (the various Phoenician communities, for example). Obviously, it is not possible to summarize the objectives, arguments and complex development of Remotti’s work in this context. Following the scholar, however, it is worth remembering that similarities (unlike identity) always imply a certain degree of difference; they are never resolved and defined in a static way but remain partial, gradual and subject to change on the basis of the point of observation used (as Remotti rightly states, «ciò che in un primo momento, o sotto un certo aspetto appare diverso, può apparire simile in un secondo tempo, o sotto un altro aspetto»¹⁷).

12 This does not imply that a single individual, in late periods (well outside the traditional chronological boundaries of Phoenician history), could not describe himself/herself as of Phoenician origin. See, for instance, the case of “Haline the Phoenician”, known from a Greek funerary stele dated back to the end of the 2nd century BCE (cfr. Quinn 2018, pp. 27-28; Bonnet 2022, p. 13).

13 Cfr. in particular Quinn – Vella 2014.

14 Garbati 2021b. I then returned to the topic during the conference organized on the occasion of the International Congress “Il Mediterraneo antico e gli studi fenicio-punici. A cento anni dalla nascita di Sabatino Moscati”, held in Rome, at the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, on the 28th-29th November 2022.

15 See Oggiano 2019.

16 Remotti 2019.

17 Remotti 2019, p. 95.

On a more concrete level, if we again take the example of the cult of “Melqart and the rock”, the epicleses *bšr*, *bʿlšr* and *ʿlḥšr*, which are very close to each other but certainly not coinciding, are clear attestations of the dynamic relationship between similarities and differences when we are faced with cultural phenomena and processes (see again TAB. 1). However, there is another aspect, which is by no means secondary, that must be evaluated. As stated above, the relationship between similarities and differences is progressive and gradual; moreover, it can change on the basis of the observation criterion applied. Continuing to focus on the case study presented, we could therefore state, for example, that the epicleses *bšr* and *bʿlšr* are more similar to each other than both are to *ʿlḥšr*. The first two, defining Melqart as “in” Tyre and “Lord of” Tyre, seem to place themselves on the same level, that is, that of the protective functions of the divinity in relation to a specific urban area (Tyre); in the second, such a role is expressed forcefully thanks to the term *bʿl*, which indicates the power – the archetypal lordship – of the god over the city (it is no coincidence that in the Greek version of the Maltese text, Melqart/Heracles is called *archegetes*). The construction of *ʿlḥšr*, on the other hand, is completely different and, as I have tried to show in another work,¹⁸ it is possible that its formalization depends on the exaltation of Melqart’s cosmic qualities rather than his poliadic role.¹⁹ After all, this difference between the first two epicleses and the third is clearly observable in an element suggested by the texts from Malta: the dedication addressed to Melqart, “Lord of Tyre”, was recorded – as the Greek version of the epigraph tells us – by two brothers originally from the Levantine city; they therefore dedicated the offering to the god as the protective entity of their motherland. Conversely, the devotees who paid homage to Melqart *ʿlḥšr* (in Antas, Tharros, Cagliari and Ibiza) resided in different city contexts, belonging to the Phoenician oecumene of the West.

3.1. (Almost) Identical Names, Different Profiles

The case of “Melqart and the rock” is only one of the examples of deities that can be used as a symbol of the relationship between similarities and differences in studying a culture such as the Phoenician one. In the reality of religious processes, each divine name could in fact hide various personalities, similar and different at the same time, depending on the contexts of cult adoption, which could be geographically very distant from each other.²⁰ What could therefore be recognized as the same god, thanks primarily to the name becoming widespread across various places, was in reality called upon to respond above all to local needs, acquiring characteristics that sometimes made him a figure who was in part (and sometimes to a large degree) different. There are many examples of this phenomenon that can be cited: in addition to Melqart, perhaps the clearest case is that of Astarte.²¹ A number of epicleses connecting her to specific places illustrate her multiformity well:²² *kt* and *pp* in Cyprus, respectively “of Kition” and “of Paphos”; *nn*, “of Malta”, at Tas Silġ; *ʿrk* in North Africa and Sardinia (“of Erice”, with a specific reference to the Astarte cult in that Sicilian site and to its diffusion outside the island);²³ and *ḥr* in Spain (“Hourrite/Syrian” [?]; El Carambolo, Spain), probably relating

18 Garbati 2021a, pp. 100-102.

19 These qualities can be postulated first of all thanks to the account of the birth of Tyre by Nonnus of Panopolis (*Dionysiaca* XL 311-580). As is well known, (the oracle of) Melqart is the one who drives the foundation of the city through the stabilization of two wandering *rocks* in the sea, giving life to a habitable space as against a mobile one (to order as against chaos). In the West, then, *ʿlḥšr* would probably have promoted these order-creating functions more than the god’s link to a specific place (Tyre).

20 Brelich 2007; cfr. Xella 1986.

21 Bonnet 1996; 2010; 2021.

22 Amadasi Guzzo 2001-2002; Bloch-Smith 2014. All the epicleses of Astarte are collected in the online database (open access): <https://base-map-polytheisms.huma-num.fr>. It is part of the project MAP – “Mapping Ancient Polytheisms. Cult Epithets as an Interface between Religious Systems and Human Agency” directed by Corinne Bonnet (University of Toulouse – Jean Jaurès).

23 Lietz 2012.

certain manifestations of Astarte's presence in the "Far West" to an original and broad Levantine domain.²⁴ Bearing in mind her wide diffusion across space and time, and the number of cults instituted around her name, Astarte was thus a manifold figure – or perhaps it is more accurate to say that many figures existed under her name – with several functions that were promoted and emphasized differently according to the contexts. The available data present her, for instance, as a great warrior, as a protector of the family – particularly connected in the Levant to the royal house – and as a uranic, marine and fertility power, representing the spheres of love and the erotic. It was no accident, then, that she was variously identified by the different peoples with whom the Phoenicians came into contact (e.g. as Hathor, Isis, Aphrodite/Venus, Hera/Juno, Uni, etc.).²⁵ Like Melqart (and potentially like any other divine figure), Astarte, in substance, could be recognized and adopted by various groups of Phoenicians; however, she did not always have to be conceived as the same – "identical" – deity in the various places of attestation. Once again, therefore, "identity" does not function as an interpretative category: indeed, history opposes any attempt to apply it in that way.

This type of new approach has a very important consequence, which may appear obvious but which certainly is not. First, we must consider that the deities were a product of culture; more specifically, they were an expression of individual and social experiences, of ways of thinking, of values, of the reworking of reality, which is reinterpreted by being given a particular form (resulting in the construction, for example, of a community of gods, variously connected to each other).²⁶ Now, on the level of historical analysis, investigating a certain divine morphology in time and space – Melqart or Astarte, for example – necessarily means examining and recognizing how and why certain communities created – constructed – that divine morphology; it therefore means trying to get to know some of the cultural characteristics of those communities. It follows that research focused on a particular god and on the various contexts in which his/her cult was rooted – research that can be started through the adoption of the similarity/difference relationship – must inevitably be translated into the study of the various communities where the cult was based, into the reconstruction of their values and their models of behaviour (and possibly of their processes of claiming identity, including through the gods). These various communities, then, will share some aspects – the adoption of the cult of Melqart or Astarte in the cases described here – and differ in others – as in the case of the specific local characterizations of those same divinities, based on the contextual needs. They will therefore be "similar" ("Phoenician") and "different" at the same time. We are a long way here from the empty allure of the identity approach.

4. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

To summarize the main points of the reflections presented above, I believe there are three elements on which we should dwell and from which, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the *Rivista di Studi Fenici*, we can begin to approach any investigation aimed at studying identity processes in the Phoenician context (as exemplified by the case of "Melqart and the rock" or that of Astarte):

- a) The investigation into identity can only begin if we look at identity itself as one of the (possible) objects of research and try to observe ancient communities from the inside. What we must therefore avoid is the use of the concept as a research tool: it cannot define historical phenomena and processes, which present characteristics that are diametrically opposed to its meaning (since identity signifies unity, fixity and coherence).

24 Amadasi Guzzo 1993; Navarro Ortega 2021, pp. 144-150.

25 Ribichini 2005.

26 Cfr. Brelich 2007.

- b) Theorizing a Phoenician identity remains a goal that is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. Indeed, such an identity was never claimed by the communities we have defined, from the outside, as “Phoenician”.
- c) In initiating studies dedicated to identity (understood in the sense proposed in point a), it may be useful to turn to means and explanatory models that account for the movement, plurality and progressiveness of historical phenomena. One of these means can be represented by the relationship between similarities and differences, fully theorized recently by F. Remotti.

A major advantage of the approach summarized in these three points is the possibility of looking at Phoenicians as a culture made up of groups that are similar and different at the same time, as opposed to observing that same culture as represented by “identical” groups (i.e. having the same “Phoenician” identity), scattered throughout the Mediterranean, which of course would be completely ahistorical (and which in recent years has run the risk of obstructing the research or denying the functionality of the terms “Phoenicians” and “Phoenician”).

Such an approach allows us to advance step by step in our investigation since, as mentioned above, *what appears different at first, or in a certain respect, may appear similar later on, or in some other respect*. Last but not least, in this way it can respond to the current need to analyse and reconstruct historical phenomena and processes by integrating the overall vision with the contextual one, the general with the specific and, finally, the global with the local. That is, I believe, our new point of departure from which we can engage productively – if we want to deal with this object – with the identity question.

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