PROJECTS

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THE TCM PROJECT
TRANSFORMATIONS AND CRISIS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: AIMS, APPROACHES AND PERSPECTIVES

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1. Introductory Note

The formation of a community and its self-definition – and representation – constitute complex cultural processes that are constantly in progress: they follow the continuous transformations of the structures, values and models created and adopted by social groups; they are marked, at the same time, by the attempt to preserve traditions, customs and ways of living in search of cohesion and consistency. Such phenomena seem to be particularly relevant (and more perceptible in the data) during periods of profound change, which are followed by the necessary definition of new cultural balances. In the realization of these processes, then, the relationship between conservation and innovation plays a primary role, leading to new cultural (local) products; nonetheless, as the latter represent something original – something new – one cannot read them simplistically as made by elements of tradition and aspects of novelty.

For a long time, historical investigations have employed the concept/expression "cultural identity" as a key category for the interpretation of such dynamics, often and generally using it as an instrument of definition and description.[1] Today, however, the application of such a notion is being widely and vigorously called into question, insomuch as its use swings between the opposites of a definitive acceptance of the term "identity" and a complete rejection of it as a research tool that is capable of designating and explaining ancient and modern processes.[2] Moreover, and not by chance, the concept of "ethnicity", in its specific meaning of "collective identity", has also been strongly criticized, especially when it is used to refer to objective and substantial features of a social group (and to argue about well-defined borders, from inside and outside, marking the difference between two or more communities).[3] In particular, renewed methodological approaches, especially those derived from anthropological studies, have clearly emphasized how the word "identity" is actually characterized by a deep ambiguity. Indeed, the term is distinguished by demands for unity, stability and coherence; in this way, it clearly contrasts with some of those central elements that mark a community's formation and self-definition, that is to say, pluralism, continuous processes of transformation and constant relations with the "other". It is no coincidence that several recent studies specifically devoted to the ancient Mediterranean prefer to adopt more nuanced visions, often finding in concepts such as "interculturality" and in the dynamics of interconnections some of the main interpretative categories with which they investigate past civilizations. Especially with respect to important periods of transformation, it is again no coincidence that new cultural products and the related dimension of "locality", born of exchanges and interactions, have become a key focus of study.[4]

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1 On this problem see, for instance, Xella 2008; Garbati 2014; Pedrazzi 2014; Quinn – Vella 2014; Xella 2014; Porzia 2018.

2 Brubaker – Cooper 2000; Remotti 2010.

3 Fabietti 1995 and 2005.

4 See, for instance, Garbati 2016 with references.

Now, all these complex themes – which can be synthesized in the forms of self-definition that a community chooses to construct during particular periods of change – represent the main topics that the TCM project, "Transformations and Crisis in the Mediterranean. 'Identity' and Interculturality in the Levant and Phoenician West", which we are pleased to present here, is intended to address.[5] The analysis of variations and alterations allows us to understand and evaluate the internal cohesion and solidity of a group, the strength of its links and social connections, as well as the modalities it uses to construct internal bonds and opposition to the outside, together with the strategies it employs to sustain those connections in order to preserve its own distinctiveness. Of primary importance, in this sense, is the unceasing contact (opposition, conflict, influence, encounter, interrelation, etc.) with the "other", which can manifest itself in various cultural aspects and phenomena, although the external contribution does not always represent a recognized and acknowledged factor or conscious choice for the group/community concerned. Specifically, the protagonists of our investigation are the peoples of the ancient Levant, a segment of which – the Phoenicians – settled also in the western Mediterranean at the dawn of the first millennium BCE. The chronological limits encompass the 12th to the 2nd centuries BCE: thus, a central element of the project is its *longue durée* perspective.

2. The TCM's lines of investigation

Turning now to the specifics of its forms and the developments that have characterized it over time, it must first be said that from the outset the project was divided into three "moments", each one dedicated to a particular historical phase and finally merged into an editorial product. The realization of the research has entailed the involvement of scholars from Italy and abroad, with the participation of numerous colleagues from CNR. All the specialists who were invited to collaborate, then, offered their contributions by presenting one or more case studies, from perspectives that range over various disciplines, from history and archaeology to philology and epigraphy, from the history of art to the history of religions. Each case study, moreover, was intended as an attempt to answer one or more questions on the TCM's agenda. Thus, for our part we have tried to guarantee adherence to the TCM's issues and methods of approach by asking participants to follow some guidelines, which have served as valuable points of reference and fostered respect for the research setting and pursuit of the objectives established (Tab. 1).

The first results of the TCM were presented during the International Congress that we organized at the CNR central site in Rome in May 2013. The meeting was a pivotal moment for the project: through examples that were approached from various perspectives, it proved to be a fundamental opportunity for debate and comparison – including from a methodological point of view – between specialists from different disciplinary and geographical areas. Unsurprisingly, some of the main modalities that we decided to adopt in order to develop the project have largely derived from that debate; and it is precisely the dialogue that has arisen, in a sense, that has constituted an essential source of inspiration. The conference was followed in 2015 by the publication of its Proceedings (TCM I, dedicated to the period from the 12th to the 8th century BCE).[6] About a year later, at the end of 2016, the second volume was published (TCM II, focusing on the

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5   The project was born in 2013. It might be described as the direct outcome of the progressive enlargement and confluence of two different lines of investigation, individually developed within the *Istituto di Studi sulle Civiltà Italiche e del Mediterraneo Antico* of CNR, which later became the *Istituto di Studi sul Mediterraneo Antico* (CNR, Rome), now belonging to the new ISPC – *Istituto di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale* (Institute of Heritage Science). These lines of investigation were: "Cult and identity construction of the western Phoenicians: Geographic, cultural and symbolic borders" (Giuseppe Garbati) and "Cultural identities and commercial dynamics in the Levant between the end of the Bronze Age and the first Iron Age (13th-9th century BCE)" (Tatiana Pedrazzi). On the project see also the recent Garbati – Pedrazzi 2019; Garbati 2020; Pedrazzi 2020.

6   Garbati – Pedrazzi 2015.

Data	Artefacts, images, inscriptions, literature, etc.: discussion of the possibility of recognizing forms of identity construction through the archaeological, epigraphic and literary record.
Action/reaction	Forms, levels and degrees of action, reaction, fight, acceptance, re-elaboration in the face of foreign, alien elements.
Belonging	Shared sense (and practices) of belonging: from the individual to the communitarian dimension, from the local to the regional and interregional context.
Repositioning identities	Territorial movement of sense of belonging; the transmission of cultural memory.
(Re)Inventing the past	Strategies of derivation and (re)construction of origins.
Borders	Geographical, social, political, mental, symbolic frontiers.
Degrees of consciousness	Conscious (or unconscious) choices in the preservation and/or reshaping of identity.
Encounter	Encounter (and "clash") with the "other": relations between different identities; forms of multi- and interculturality.
Innovation	Production of (new) local cultural products (born of interaction).
Homogeneity and variability	Cultural bonds and common features; contextual variability.

Tab. 1. Some of the guidelines proposed to the authors involved in the TCM project.

8th-5th centuries BCE).[7] The third and final volume, currently in press, is devoted to the phase between the 5th and 2nd centuries BCE (TCM III).[8]

As just mentioned, what constituted the main driving force of the project, in addition to the contribution offered by the individual case studies, were the comparisons provided by specialists from different disciplines. As a result, two factors in particular have become increasingly clear, gradually representing not only the principal fixed points of the project itself but also the basis on which, in recent times, new research perspectives have begun to emerge. The development of the project, first of all, entailed the need to clearly choose the ways in which the much-discussed word "identity" – now very widespread if not overused (sometimes uncritically) – would be employed. The studies collected in the TCM, strongly supported by the studies of cultural anthropology, have shown how the term/concept of identity poses numerous problems when it is used as an instrument of research. Representing a contradiction in terms – it claims stasis and consistency in contexts characterized by dynamism and multiplicity – it cannot have a truly operative role in the field of interpretation.[9] Its application, therefore, should perhaps be limited, at least from the perspective of the TCM, to defining an object of study – not as a tool – that could potentially be analysed. Identity, in fact, describes a human attitude, such as the demand for and sense of belonging (to a group, a community), the analysis of which can become the subject of investigation. It is not simply a matter of circumscribing and defining the scope, meaning and value of a term/concept, as commonly occurs in the terminological approach to a certain context of research. Rather, it is a question of deciding clearly on which side of the research to place that term/concept, namely 1) on the side of tools and operational categories or 2) on that of objects of study; for our part, we are now oriented towards opting for the second possibility. It is worth recalling, on this level, what Marco Bonechi suggested in his concluding speech at TCM I: «temo che in ultima analisi la parola identità appartenga a due soli lessici, quello psicologico e quello politico».[10]

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7   Garbati – Pedrazzi 2016.

8   Garbati – Pedrazzi in press.

9   Not surprisingly, whenever it is used in the context of historical studies to define and describe a process and a phenomenon, it is accompanied by adjectives that underline its ambiguity rather than delimit its meaning: for example, one can think of such widespread expressions as "multiple identities" and "fluid identities", which are implicitly self-contradictory as they bring together opposing concepts; they cannot therefore be called upon to define and delimit (cfr. Remotti 2010, pp. 216-217; Remotti 2019, pp. 28-29).

10   Bonechi 2015, p. 278 («I fear that ultimately the word identity belongs to only two lexicons, the psychological and the political»).

The second element that constitutes one of the now inescapable outcomes of the project is the need to look at our objects of study – in this specific case the formation processes, the methods of self-perception and the dynamics of encounter – while trying to grasp their complexity and avoiding oversimplifications. The result of these reflections, especially in the context of research dedicated to encounters between cultures, has been the development of what we might describe as a "taxonomy of alterity (otherness)". By this we mean the formulation and adoption of a scale of values serving to analyse the degree of "alterity" that a given cultural product, from an object to an idea, may have had in a certain historical context.[11] The TCM project has made it possible to clearly perceive how an investigation dedicated to contact between cultures, often observed through the study of objects extraneous to a given cultural context, should do more than offer a simple definition of those objects' extraneousness (for example an "oriental" product in a Greek context, a North Syrian object in a Phoenician context, a Phoenician god in an Aramaic context). Rather, what must be recognized is the precise degree to which something (or someone) can be perceived as foreign/different – how "strange" or exotic it is, how detached from the context in which it is placed – so as to try to understand its function and value in the environments in which it is attested, i.e. the cultural history of which it is the bearer and manifestation. This type of path can certainly contribute to a better understanding of concepts such as "interculturality" and "otherness", helping to offer an interpretation that overcomes the simplistic and rigid dichotomy between local and non-local objects and products, between internal (indigenous) and external (foreign) habits and ideas.[12]

In this respect, it is worth noting that in recent decades a new approach towards the study of material culture has been developed: it is supposed that humans both act and think through objects, through material culture; objects therefore reveal not only ways of doing but first and foremost ways of knowing and thinking (and interpreting themselves). As Carl Knappett stated, «the human and the non-human bring each other into being».[13] Therefore, in the TCM project, and particularly in the analysis of alterity/otherness, we have tried to overcome the dualism between "material and immaterial": a new approach (one that is not only theoretical but truly generative and productive) must move against this dualism.

3. The TCM's Perspectives

To conclude these notes, it remains for us to briefly describe the expectations and above all the perspectives of the project in the near future. On the basis of the path followed so far, we have chosen to develop two particular areas of investigation, each representing a sort of spin-off – or, better, a further extension – of the TCM. The first extension will be dedicated to the theme "Phoenicians abroad: investigation of the forms of otherness"; the study will be directed at examining the stable presence of Phoenician individuals or groups within foreign contexts (e.g. the Phoenicians in Kommos or Piraeus), beyond those territories that are traditionally understood as seats of the communities in question (such as Phoenicia itself or the so-called colonial

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11   As proposed by T. Pedrazzi, one could start at a level zero, corresponding to the full maintenance of tradition, with artefacts that are therefore totally local; this would be followed by levels 1 to 3, which would include, respectively, the cases where the isolated inferences of a non-local tradition appear in local objects (1), where the productions have external characteristics but with an origin to be recognized in the local tradition (2), and where the productions are truly external and planted in the local one (3); the scale would ultimately reach level 4, with totally "external" components, such as actual imports. Contrary to what one might suppose, it is precisely the two extremes of this scale – i.e. the cultural products that can be considered "pure", either totally local or totally foreign – that are the most difficult to identify (Garbati – Pedrazzi 2019, p. 48).

12   Previous studies have proposed new insights into the concept of "alterity"; Gruen, for example, has suggested that ancient historians and writers depicted "others" in descriptions that «far from exhibiting simplistic stereotypes, display subtle characterizations that resist reductive placement into negative (or, for that matter, positive) categories» (Gruen 2011, p. 4).

13   Knappett 2005, p. 170.

regions and settlements of the Mediterranean West). The second, which is to be wider in scope, will focus on the theme "From place to locality: strategies for cultural re-elaboration of the landscape". The aim is to reconstruct – always with reference to the Phoenicians, but also with a possible (indeed desirable) expansion to include other cultures – the dynamics with which a given territory was perceived and culturally reconstructed by those who lived there through strategies of control, transformation, redefinition and symbolic investiture. For both projects we will involve colleagues from various disciplines, operating above all in the field of anthropology of the ancient world, in order to create new research groups. At the moment, the co-ordinators of the aforementioned projects will include, besides ourselves, Anna Angelini from the University of Zurich's Faculty of Theology.

As in the previous stages of the project, the new perspectives of research will also embrace a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach in order to avoid a false dichotomy between "material" objects/products/artefacts and "immaterial" ideas/behaviours/attitudes, and in order to study the past from the point of view of its real (rather than magnified or underestimated) complexity.

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