Retracting the divisions?

Fresh perspectives on Phoenician settlement in Iberia from Tavira, Portugal

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Near Eastern groups of people, referred to as the Phoenicians, established settlements in the central and western Mediterranean and the Atlantic between the ninth and the seventh century BC, continuing a process that had begun earlier in the East, for example in Cyprus. In particular, the Phoenician coastal settlements in the Iberian Peninsula (see fig. 1) and in north-west Africa were interpreted as small, commercial outposts, which were part of a loose socio-economic network and which maintained political ties with Tyre and other Levantine city-states. In time, they developed into sizeable settlements.

From the ninth century BC onwards, these coastal Phoenician settlements were active in production and trade with indigenous communities, other Mediterranean centres and the Neo-Assyrian Empire. This process was so intense that according to conventional interpretations the intercultural dialogue resulted in deep transformations in the social and economic sphere of the indigenous populations, leading to the development of a culture known as 'Tartessian' or 'Orientalising'. This hypothesis built on the rich evidence for settlements and necropoleis with Near Eastern elements in inland southern Spain. The Atlantic coast in Portugal was seen as the frontier of the Phoenician commercial expansion, where merchants set up a few trading posts (Abul, Santa Olaia) or enclaves in indigenous towns (Quinta do Almaraz) to trade with local polities (Castro Marim, Alcácer do Sal, Lisbon), but did not actually found any colonies *sensu stricto* (see fig. 2).

An increasing body of evidence challenges basic tenets of this view, as it is becoming increasingly clear that methodological problems resulted in the dichotomy of the 'inland equals Tartessian/Orientalising' and 'coastal equals Phoenician' approach. This principle is hard to maintain on present evidence. With the birth of Phoenician/Orientalising archaeology in Iberia at the turn of the 19th/20th century, inland sites with 'Oriental' material culture tended to be

Fig. 1. Map showing sites mentioned in text (produced using Collins Bartholomew Ltd digital map data ©).

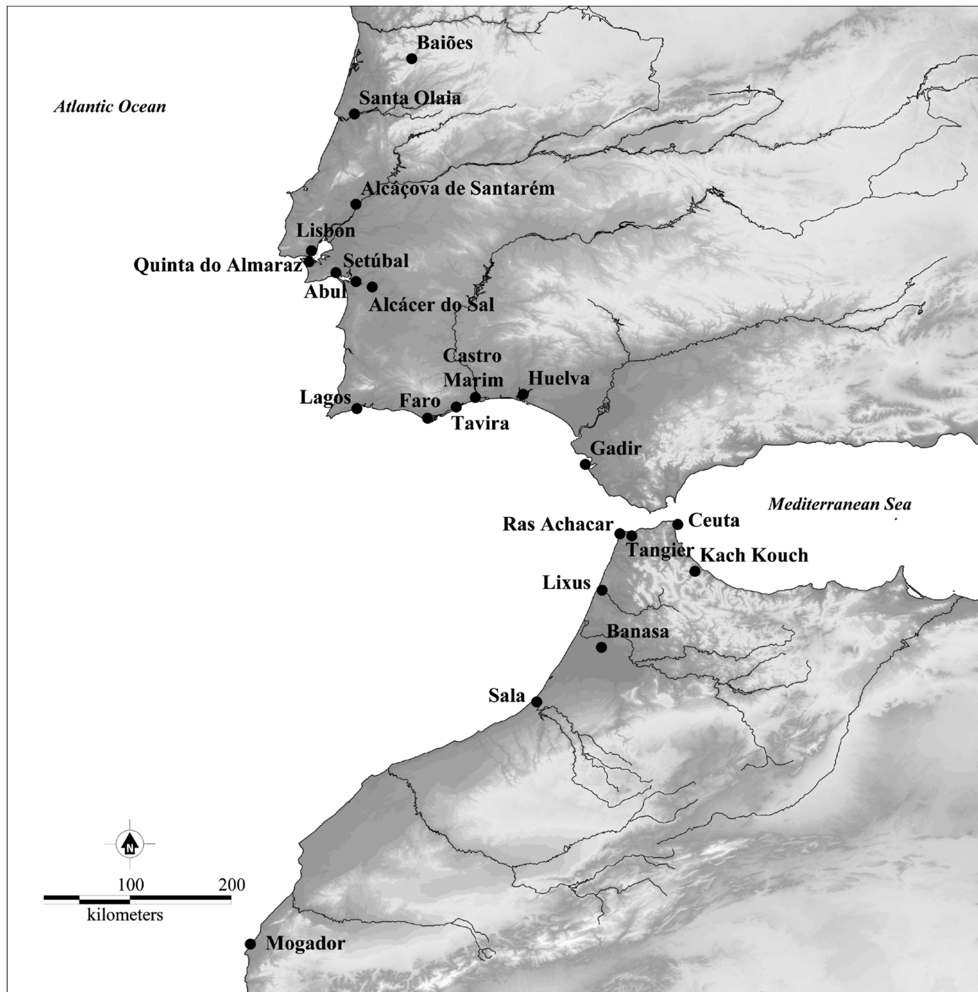

Figure 2. Phoenician/Orientalising sites on the Atlantic coast (author).

commonly interpreted as 'Tartessian' on the assumption that coastal and inland settlements corresponded to Phoenician traders and indigenous populations respectively. Given the scarcity of information on pre-Phoenician burial rites in Iberia, the distinction of what constituted 'Phoenician' vs. 'indigenous' was not immediately clear. Thus, the working assumption was that burial grounds located inland served indigenous communities, while the Phoenician presence was predominantly or exclusively based on trade and was thus limited to the coast.

Employing a tautological methodology then, the modern-day location of a site (inland or coastal) determined the interpretation of associated archaeological assemblages; these differences were in turn used to substantiate the aforementioned division into 'Phoenician' and 'Tartessian'.[1] In its simplified form, this approach is methodologically unsound: the Phoenicians were expected to be solely interested in commerce, therefore only coastal sites with Phoenician material were interpreted as Phoenician foundations.

This fallacy continued to be ignored even when sites with near-identical material culture were given different cultural affiliations, solely based on their geographical location. Yet thanks to geophysical projects carried out across Iberia aiming at the palaeo-topographical reconstruction, it is now clear that regions that are presently at a long distance from the coast were estuarine or marine environments during the first half of the first millennium BC.[2] Thus, during the Phoenician period, many of these putative Tartessian sites, interpreted as such given their inland position, were in fact littoral, thus conforming to the well-attested Phoenician predilection for coastal environments. Effectively, the question then is whether they can all then maintain their existing cultural designation.

The conventional methodological approach has serious repercussions for our views on the nature and impact of Phoenician colonisation in Iberia, which continues to be viewed as a primarily trading enterprise, with small pockets of merchant communities inhabiting the coast on the one hand, and with sizeable inland groups absorbing Phoenician goods, customs and ideas on the other. The lack of public edifices or sanctuaries at the excavated Phoenician settlements enhanced the interpretation of these colonies as mere trading posts. To this was added the alleged 'slimness' of the Phoenician population despite the multitude of their settlements, based on the near-absence of large cemeteries prior to the sixth century BC, a period for which only small elite burial grounds in south-eastern Spain were known, and on the general lack of intra-city sanctuaries. These two parameters reinforced the image of small Phoenician settlements that specialized in trade.

Figure 3. Hill of Santa Maria in Tavira, showing the location of the sanctuary, the necropolis and the casemate wall (author).

This picture is gradually changing, however, due to the recent excavation of an intra-city sanctuary at the inland Phoenician settlement of Malaka in Malaga (Spain) dated to the eighth century,[3] and similar evidence from Tavira, located on the inner edge of the Gilão estuary in Algarve (Portugal). These two sanctuaries are the first intra-city religious spaces to be found at the Phoenician settlements in Iberia, apart from the literary-attested sanctuaries of Gadir. The oxhide altar of the rectangular sanctuary in Malaka replicates the shape of altars known from sanctuaries elsewhere in Iberia during the following period. This shape is known from bronze oxhide ingots, which circulated in the eastern and central Mediterranean up to the eighth century BC and from contemporary bronze figurines in Cyprus, where they appear as bases on which Phoenician deities stand.

Tavira contributes to this debate by furnishing evidence not only for a sanctuary, but also a necropolis in a fortified settlement with a Near Eastern character. Specifically, the case of Tavira undermines the persisting image of the Phoenicians on the Portuguese Atlantic coast as organised into satellite trading centres on the periphery of dominant indigenous polities. Concurrently, the particularities of the burial customs at its necropolis highlight the discrepancies involved in viewing coastal sites as 'Phoenician' and inland ones as 'Tartessian'.

The Phoenician sanctuary in Tavira

In the city of Tavira, there is evidence for a Phoenician nucleus, workshops, a fortification/enclosure wall, graffiti, a necropolis and a sanctuary, superimposed on strata of indigenous habitation, as at the Phoenician sites of the Mediterranean coastline (see fig. 3). The evidence for the residential area is inconclusive due to the urban setting of the excavations.[4] The ancient site is located on the hill of Santa Maria. Much of the surrounding lowland area would have been covered by the estuary waters during the Phoenician period. In the eighth century BC, a large wall with internal compartments was built on the lower slopes of the hill. During its second phase, it reached a thickness of 9.5 m (see figs. 4 and 5). This type of fortification, known as *casemate* is known from other Phoenician settlements (e.g. Carthage). The sanctuary consists of ritual *bothroi* (votive pits) now located underneath the medieval building of Palace Galeria (see fig. 4).[5] Three such pits (3-4m in diameter) led to subterranean vaults dug out in the bedrock. The recovered material included mostly Red Slip plates and mushroom-lip jugs, as well as incense burners, a silver pendant associated with the cult of Astarte, a small ivory *betyl* (a tapering religious column) and animal bones. The particularly fragmented condition of the vases, the ritual objects and the animal bones in these vaults indicate that they were part of religious ceremonies involving the consumption of food, libations and the throwing of vessels.

In the Roman period, the settlement was known as *Balsa*, etymologically reconstructed as the original Phoenician theophoric toponym *B'l'ṣ'*, a synthetic word of the Semitic *Ba'al* and *Sur*, i.e. 'Tyre'.[6] Ba'al was a prominent Semitic deity, venerated mainly in the Near East, but also in areas

Figure 4. View of the location of the Phoenician wall section in Tavira, housed under a temporary construction (Rua da Liberdade/Rua da Galeria), with the Gilão River in the background. Taken from the northwest, at the location of the Phoenician sanctuary (photo author).

with populations of a Levantine origin. The veneration in Tavira of Ba'al Haddad or Ba'al Saphon entailed the artificial interconnecting *bothroi* (pits or crypts), which were part of the ritual re-enactment of the myth of the descent of Ba'al into the underworld, his encounter with the god of death Mot and his eventual rescue and revival by the goddess Anat, as known through Ugaritic myths.[7] Indeed, the basis of all the Canaanite eschatology and its related cult of the dead is to be found in the myth of cyclical death and revival of Ba'al, a characteristic which was replicated in the divine persona of Melkart, the Ba'al of Tyre.[8] Avienus, writing in the fourth century AD, narrated that cults in Iberia were centred around crypts, where the inhabitants of the Phoenician colony of Gadir, just east of Tavira, were said to worship Venus (Roman Astarte).[9] Her cult and sanctuary were allegedly located at a *penetrale cavum* (a 'deep cave'). Archaeologically, this is strengthened by the discovery of presently underwater underground vaults at the presumed sanctuary of Melkart in Cádiz, the ancient Phoenician colony of Gadir, where sanctuaries on sacred 'islands' were dedicated to Melkart, Ba'al and Astarte. From the presumed area of the sanctuary in Gadir only dispersed finds are known, including Near Eastern bronze figurines of deities and a Proto-Aeolian capital.[10]

Evidence from Byblos and Ebla in the Levant of the middle and late second millennium BC confirms the existence of 'open' cults, where religious ceremonies took place in the open air, with ceremonial vessels, figurines and other objects thrown into pits. The custom seems to be widespread in the Canaanite region and especially Sidon, where Late Bronze Age ritual ceremonies of a funerary character involved throwing objects into a channel.[11] Thus, the colony at Tavira, established on a pre-existing site, near the estuary edge, attained a sanctuary following Near Eastern religious traditions. Perhaps, as in Sidon, the rituals also had a funerary connection, hinted at by the presence of a necropolis excavated on the same hill, less than 200 m north-east.

The necropolis: Phoenician or Tartessian?

The burial ground identified in Tavira is the first known necropolis in Portugal that can be associated with a Phoenician settlement. Discovered during the renovation of a monastery (Convento da Graça), it was possible to investigate only a small part, which yielded four seventh century BC burials. These belonged to a cremation necropolis, near the remains of mudbrick and adobe structures, the plan and function of which could not be determined.

Urns containing the ashes of cremated individuals were placed in simple, circular pits cut into the rock. In at least one case (nr. 3), the ashes were contained in a receptacle made of perishable material (e.g. basket) or perhaps they were wrapped in a cloth and deposited in a small pit cut into the centre of a rectangular fossa. Ceramic fragments, bronze and iron objects and small animal bones were associated with the burials. The ash urns belonged to the *Cruz del Negro* type, a type of amphora with a globular or ovoid body, a short, cylindrical neck and germinate handles resting on the shoulders, with flat or slightly concave bases. The decoration consists invariably of polychrome, parallel bands and lines.[12] This type of vessel originated in the East, possibly evolving out of the necked-ridge jar. The Phoenician cemetery of Tyre Al-Bass (Lebanon) offers a close parallel, where urns of a very close typology were found in small pit burials containing pottery and/or animal remains.[13]

Despite the close parallels in vessel types, tomb typology and burial customs with Tyre Al-Bass, the identification of

Figure 5. View of the Phoenician wall segment with internal compartments juxtaposed with medieval wall remains in Rua da Liberdade/Rua da Galeria, Tavira (photo author).

the necropolis in Tavira as Phoenician poses certain difficulties. The presence of a burial ground inside the urban nucleus is an unattested feature among the Phoenician colonies in Iberia, where the cemeteries were generally separated from the residential nucleus by a body of water (river, estuary lagoon), e.g. the Andalousian necropoleis of Cerro del Mar (Toscanos), Trayamar (Morro de Mezquitilla), Lagos (Chorreras) and Cerro de San Cristóbal (Almuñécar). Yet, recent excavations in Chorreras brought to light a rock-cut double cremation burial (perhaps one of many) near the houses of the colony and far from the excavated necropolis,[14] suggesting deviations from this rule were possible.

Another problematic aspect of the identification of the Tavira necropolis as 'Phoenician' is that the Cruz del Negro urn has been associated with indigenous necropoleis that were first discovered in the homonymous necropolis in Carmona (Seville) in 1897. There, the ash urns (Cruz del Negro or *à chardon* vessels) were placed in a pit dug inside the cremation fossa or near it, with the offerings, i.e. Red Slip plates and lamps and other objects of a Near Eastern origin or pedigree (belt buckles, double-spring fibulae, scarabs), placed sometimes outside the fossa and directly onto the ground. This so-called indigenous necropolis presents burial customs very similar to those traditionally interpreted as Phoenician, e.g. Rashgoun off the coast of Algeria and Puig de Mollins on Ibiza.

On Rachgoun, 114 burials were identified at a necropolis where cremation and inhumation were both practiced. Cremations in urns (Cruz del Negro or à chardon vessels or amphorae known as R-1) were placed in pits or the ashes were deposited in crevices into the rocks or alternatively, onto the ground. Red Slip pottery, scarabs and modest metal artefacts (jewellery, iron knives) accompanied the burials. At the multi-period necropolis of Puig de Mollins on Ibiza, the Phoenician-period cremations again consisted in Cruz del Negro ash urns placed in pits dug into the ground or the rock or alternatively, the cremated remains were placed directly onto the surface. Red Slip pottery was also found and occasionally unburnt jewellery was placed inside the urns.[15] Both these necropoleis, given their geographical location on small islands were identified as 'Phoenician'. Paradoxically, in other burial grounds the Cruz del Negro urn functions as a cultural marker, denoting an indigenous horizon (e.g. Alcácer do Sal in Baixo Alentejo, north of Portugal). Further evidence to undermine this assumed correspondence of these urns with the indigenous inhabitants of Iberia was provided by a recent revision of older material, which clearly demonstrated that they were also in use in the Phoenician necropoleis in Andalousia. Revising this assumption is an initial step in bridging a gaping hole in the current methodology employed, which has huge repercussions for the understanding of the phenomenon of the Phoenician presence in Iberia.

Repercussions

Given the range of evidence from Tavira, including the introduction of Near Eastern cults in the eighth or the seventh century BC, the graffiti and the casemate wall, it seems reasonable to identify at least part of its population as originating among Phoenician communities. In this context, does it make sense to suggest a Tartessian affiliation for the cemetery, even though it is not separated from the urban nucleus by a river and even though it yielded cremations in Cruz del Negro urns? And if so, what does that imply about the cultural assignation of sites with similar characteristics, such as the Cruz del Negro in Carmona? Parallels be-

tween the 'elite' necropoleis of the so-called 'Orientalising' horizon (e.g. La Joya, Huelva and Setefilla, Carmona, Seville) and Near Eastern and Cypriot cemeteries regarding funeral customs (banquets and sacrifices), as well as offerings (chariots, Near Eastern bronze tripods and bronze vessels), also erode the cultural affiliation of those cemeteries as predominantly indigenous.

In parallel, the sanctuaries of Malaka and Tavira are the first (and so far only) archaeological attestations of religious spaces within Phoenician settlements in Iberia. Both are dated to the first phases of occupation and are superimposed on strata of indigenous habitation. Yet further inland in Andalousia, a growing number of tentatively Phoenician sanctuaries is emerging. In the first half of the first millennium BC, they were located on the coastal edge of the Guadalquivir estuary, thus conforming to the Phoenician preference for coastal environments. A hoard of 'Phoenicianising' objects from the hill of El Carambolo, 3 km north of the city of Seville, was initially identified as evidence for a Tartessian site, based on its inland location. This is a hypothesis now overturned by the data on the ancient topography of the locality. Dotting the coastline of this former estuary were other putative sanctuaries, including the buildings of Cerro de San Juan in Coria del Río (ancient *Caura*) and Carmona, both of which followed Near Eastern architectural plans and building methods. The latter is located near the Cruz del Negro necropolis, further underlying the incongruity of the present cultural designations of a Tartessian necropolis and a Phoenician sanctuary in the same locality.[16] Another inland sanctuary is situated further north in Castulo (Jaén province) and yielded Phoenician architecture and oxhide-shaped votive offerings.[17]

Thus, interpretations of these inland cult and funerary sites as 'Phoenician' on the basis of elements of Phoenician pedigree effectively call into question previous cultural assignations of other sites with Phoenician material as 'indigenous'. Yet a wholesale reduction of the inland Tartessian sites to a Phoenician 'status' implies that very few settlements, if any, can be attributed to local populations. An extreme viewpoint argues that all settlements and cemeteries that are normally referred to as 'Orientalising' should be attributed to the Phoenicians, who maintained an antagonistic relationship with the archaeologically-elusive 'local' people.[18] A more balanced approach would be to interpret each burial ground within its larger context, rather than on the basis of the presence or absence of certain types of vessels and the location of the cemetery. At least for the period of initial contacts (ninth-eighth century BC), the term 'Phoenician' is a meaningful cultural/ethnic category by which to identify newly-settled population groups from people previously inhabiting the same areas. Such a distinction should be based on a correlation of factors, such as burial rites, settlement architecture, language/script, pottery types and its uses. Similarities in burial rites or tomb structures between seventh century BC indigenous and Phoenician necropoleis could result from extensive contacts between the different communities or signal population mobility and mixing, while trade may account for similar pottery assemblages at culturally distinct sites. In the current context, location should not function as a factor determining cultural assignation. This will lift the severely absolute screen that has been placed on the interpretation of inland sites with Oriental material in Iberia as Orientalising, allowing for a more accurate picture to emerge and perhaps one that need not reflect strict demarcations of the Phoenician/indigenous type.

Conclusions

In Phoenician-period Iberia, inland sites with elements of Oriental material culture were initially deemed 'Orientalising' on the basis of geographical criteria. A conflicting aspect of this methodology is that coastal sites identified as 'Phoenician' presented a material culture very similar to the one found inland. Many of the latter can now actually be shown to have been littoral in antiquity, which necessitates a radical overhaul of the methodology adopted to categorise them. The excavations in Tavira contribute to the cumulative evidence for an underlying discrepancy in the cultural assignation of 'Orientalising' or 'Tartessian' sites, which has far-ranging implications for our understanding of the extent and nature of Phoenician presence in Iberia.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was carried out within the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) Veni Project *'Merging Boundaries. Phoenician communities in the western Mediterranean and the Atlantic: cultural consumption and adaptation strategies circa 750-550 BC'*. I am grateful to the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin for the permission to use its library resources, to IGESPAR and to the National Museum of Archaeology in Lisbon for access to its collections and digital archives.

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Endnotes

1 Escacena Carrasco 2004.

2 Wachsmann *et al.* 2009.

3 Arancibía Román *et al.* 2011: 132-134.

4 Maia 2000.

5 Maia & Silva 2004: 186-193.

6 Maia & Silva 2004: 176.

7 Escacena Carrasco 2011; Maia & Silva 2004: 178-179.

8 Olmo Lete 1996: 77-80.

9 *Ora Maritima*: 314-317.

10 Bonnet 1988: 27-33, 209, 226.

11 Doumet-Serhal 2008.

12 Arruda *et al.* 2008.

13 Aubet 2004.

14 Martin Cordoba *et al.* 2008.

15 Fernández Cantos & Amores Carredano 2000.

16 Belén *et al.* 2001.

17 Blázquez 2011: 11-12.

18 Escacena Carrasco 2004.