Rediscovering Phoenicians in their Homeland from the Perspective of Iron Age Coroplastics Art

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The Project

The collective imagery of the Phoenicians is well known both within and outside of the academic world in large part because of the representations of daily life in its coroplastic art. Yet, there still is no comprehensive study of this genre of their material culture. In this brief communication, a new research project is presented that concerns a regional survey of Iron Age clay figurines from Phoenician sites in the eastern Mediterranean. The sites included in this research range beyond the borders traditionally ascribed to the Phoenicians and cover the entire Syrian, Lebanese, and Israeli coasts. This research aims to illustrate the regional distribution of these figurines, including their production centers, as well as their types, uses, chronologies, and the meanings of this class of artifacts.¹

A Matter of Absence

Clay figurines have been considered one of the most characteristic of the artifacts of Phoenician culture.² The production of these figurines is particularly prolific at sites on the Levantine coast from the so-called “Dark Age” (12th–11th centuries B.C.E.) to the periods of the Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid occupations (7th–4th centuries B.C.E.).³ During this long period, figurines were produced using both hand-modeled and mould-made techniques, although specimens presenting mixed manufacture are not rare. Their widespread distribution increased with the growth of Phoenician commercial activities throughout the Mediterranean basin, especially after the 8th century B.C.E.⁴ The presence of these figurines within earlier phases of Punic settlements in north Africa, south-
eastern Iberia, Sardinia, and Sicily is a clear indicator of the expansion of Phoenician culture westward. Furthermore, some studies have documented the transmission of models and iconographies to the southern Levant, especially in the coroplastic tradition of the Transjordan area.

Although Punic figurines from the western Phoenician colonies have been widely studied, an in-depth analysis of those from the Phoenician homeland is still lacking. This largely is due to issues of typological classification, the chronological problems of retrieval contexts, and the individual studies that have focused too narrowly on the development of Phoenician figurines through time and space. Studies have been undertaken for a few specific classes, such as for human and animal masks, for the shrines, and for the ships. In other cases, clay figurines were discussed because of exceptional circumstances, such as underwater systematic and rescue excavations, or some specific retrieval contexts, such as the shrine excavated at Sarepta. Also well-known is the coroplastic corpus from the sanctuary of Kharayeb, or from the funerary assemblages of the cemeteries in Achziv. For the rest, clay figurines are generally treated among other small finds in the excavation reports.

Phoenicia Between Nationalism and Revolutions

The main reason for the absence of a comprehensive study lies in the contemporary political situation of the territory that was home to the Phoenicians. Ancient Phoenicia is divided today among different political entities often in conflict with one another. The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) and later the political disagreements between Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine prevented integrated archaeological research. Furthermore, the study of Phoenician culture in the state of Israel has been somewhat neglected due to the focus on the cultures and nations of greatest biblical interest (Israelites, Judahites, Philistines, etc.). Finally, exploration in some sites lying on the Syrian coast is temporarily blocked due to the Syrian Civil War (2011–present). Yet, in spite of this complicated scenario, archaeological research continues and has resulted in exciting developments.

Archaeological exploration at Phoenician sites is being pursued with renewed interest. In Lebanon, after the end of the Civil War, new archaeological teams have returned to significant sites. Thus, in the mid-1990s the American University of Beirut entered into a partnership with the University of Tübingen to begin exploration in different districts in Beirut; additionally, in 2001 this partnership extended to a new project at Tell el-Burak. In the summer of 1997 the Pompeu Fabra Univesity (UPF), began exploring the necropolis of Tyre Al-Bass in collaboration with the Lebanese Department of Antiquities. In the following year, the British Museum and the Lebanese Department of Antiquities launched a series of lengthy campaigns at ancient Sidon. In northern Israel, in less than ten years, four Phoenician sites received renewed attention: Tel Shikmona, from the summer of 2010 onwards, by the Zinman Institute of Archaeology; the Spanish-Israeli expedition at Tel Regev beginning in the summer of 2011; the French-Israeli expedition at Achziv that began in 2013; and the American-Israeli expedition at Tel Keisan that started in summer 2016.

In addition, increasing interest in Phoenician material culture is evident at both academic and non-academic institutions. In Lebanon, about twenty years after the reopening of the Beirut National Museum, coroplastic finds became the focus of new horizons in museum
display. The figurines at the Archaeological Museum of the American University of Beirut now can be studied at home through a 360° virtual tour of the galleries. In 2017 a futuristic project comprising floating figurines was presented to the Kharayeb Archaeological Museum (KAM). At the The Haifa Center for Mediterranean History (HCMH) in Israel an engaging annual program that focuses on Phoenician studies (The Haifa Phoenician Series) was inaugurated in November 2016. Finally, the Tel Akko Total Archaeology Project integrated archaeological research with public archaeology for a holistic approach to the appreciation of local heritage.

All these positive initiatives, however, clash with the reality of the facts. Every scholar of ancient near eastern culture knows that academic collaborations across contemporary national borders are extremely complicated and rare indeed. It also is a reality known to all that scholars sometimes tend to work in one country rather than another for political reasons. Often, and quite regrettably, relevant research is not even mentioned in particular studies for the reasons mentioned above. The proposal outlined in this report, which involves sites in modern-day Israel and Lebanon, will attempt to surmount these difficulties so that ancient Phoenician culture can be better understood at its core.

It is the role of the international scientific community to promote cultural relations between those countries opposed by political ideologies that have nothing to do with the history and the archaeological heritage they share. We must present a united front in support of cultural heritage every single day and not only under exceptional circumstances, such as the cultural and humanitarian poverty brought on by wars. We as intellectuals must understand that when we come together only after important world heritage monuments are destroyed by neglect or conflict this appears to the general public as an opportunistic and useless act.

Scope and Relevance of the Research

My research project aims at analyzing Phoenician coroplastic production during the Iron Age and early Achaemenid Persian periods in the territory spanning the Syrian coast, eastwards to the mountains of Lebanon, and southwards to the greater Mount Carmel region. As shown in the map (Fig.1), the sites that are considered in this research project cover both those at the center and those at the periphery of Phoenician-controlled lands. Even though many important sites are not considered in this research project because of the inconsistency of their material culture, other sites not properly labeled “Phoenician,” and often considered outliers, are included on the basis of important finds of figurines recovered during the course of excavations. One of the objectives of this research is to determine if there were any specialized production centers for a particular class of coroplastic artifact, perhaps linked to worship requirements. At the same time, it is hoped that the relationship between the urban and the rural presence of this class of artifacts will become evident. In the broader sense, the aim is to understand the material and ideological differences between the Phoenician sites of the north and the south, noting substantial variations within each class as already observed by Moorey. This project will also consider the wider socio-political climate as evidenced by these Phoenician figurines, and their relationship to those from the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian empires.

Fig. 1 SITES CONSIDERED IN THE RESEARCH.
This analysis will be completed with a semantic study of the figurines’ gestures, dress, and decoration by comparing them with the these aspects found in the overall artistic repertoire—metals, ivories, glyptic, golden and glass jewelry, official art—and ethnographic parallels, i.e. figurines in distant cultures and gender related studies. In my PhD research on the coroplastic tradition of the northern Levant, this kind of analysis demonstrated the continuation of traditions throughout centuries and empires. The ultimate goal of this current research is to show that figurines can be valuable sources for understanding cultural variations within local populations. This application of coroplastic studies moves far beyond earlier approaches that regarded clay figurines as simple artifacts of a folk art. In other words, clay figurines will be studied as “material culture in motion” to reconstruct an aspect of Phoenician history through an important part of its material culture. It is anticipated that the results of this project could serve as a basic manual for future research, because it will contain orderly, detailed, and clear descriptions of types, their retrieval contexts, and their chronologies. At the same time, a more accurate social and contextual explanation of these objects can be used as a starting point for an empathetic approach to their museum display, which currently is often in groups or isolated from their original context. An historical empathy was well expressed by Oggiano when she stated that “(...) le terrecotte, attraverso l’uso sapiente di luci e voci, dovrebbero parlare, raccontando la loro storia di partecipanti al rituale.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


ENDNOTES

1. This is a post-doctoral research project supported by the Golda Meir Fellowship Fund. The study is carried out in partnership with a research team directed by Tallay Ornan from the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, to whom goes all my gratitude.


5. For an updated overview on Phoenician origins of Punic settlements with related references see Crawley-Quinn, Vella 2014.


12. The most well-known context is probably that of Shavei Zion, see Linder 1973a, 1973b, 1993; Culican 1976b.

13. For a list of other contexts see Moorey 2005, 219-220.


16. Different political problematic and their effects on the historical background of the territory are well explained for Lebanon in Ciasca 1997b and Oggiano 2015b.

17. For the socio-political importance of this project see Oggiano 2015b.

18. Please note that in this short communication only the most recent activities are mentioned.

19. The author also hopes that Palestinian scholars, as well as the general public, will take part in the future in this cultural revolution in the arts and everyday life.

20. Aubet 1993, 14, fig.3; Yon 1995, 85-87, fig.1; Salles 1995, 554-555, 563-569; Lipinski 2004, Ch.8.


24. The most famous case is the stunning coroplastic corpus from the rural sanctuary of Ayia Irini. About 2000 figurines of varying size are displayed in a large case both at the Cyprus Museum in Nicosia and in the Medelhavsmuseet in Stockholm. These are exhibited without providing cognitive tools suitable for inexperienced visitors. In other words, it is not possible to perceive the importance of the single figurine, its manipulation and connection with the shrine and the worshippers who frequented it. The figurines turn out to be aseptic objects, physically and ideologically decontextualised.

ABSTRACTS

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