

## WHO WERE THE PHOENICIANS?

It is universally accepted today that the Phoenicians were a nation which had settled on the Mediterranean coast, along a narrow strip of land bordered by Aradus to the north, Mount Lebanon to the east, and Mount Carmel to the south. The city of Jaffa is sometimes mentioned as the southern border, and the Eleutherus river (Nehar el-Kebir) as the northern one. Pliny<sup>1</sup> mentions Jaffa as "Jaffa the Phoenician" though he designates the city of Dor as the border between Phoenicia and Judea. Raymond Weill, relying on various sources, infers that the term Phoenicia implied at first a vast section of the Aegeo-Asiatic world, and that only in the course of centuries it became restricted to the above-mentioned narrow coastal strip. For Weill this puzzling fact remains inexplicable<sup>2</sup>. According to Herodotus (II, 84) "these Phoenicians dwelt in old time, as they themselves say, by the Red Sea"<sup>3</sup> This quotation from Herodotus was taken by many scholars to mean they came from the region surrounding the Persian Gulf<sup>4</sup> while others thought they were from the Erythrean region<sup>5</sup>. Strabo (I, II, 35; XVI, 27) refers with astonishment to the claim of the inhabitants of the Persian Gulf that two cities in their region are named Tyros and Aradus, whereas Pliny<sup>6</sup> states that the name is not Tyros but Tylos.

With respect to political and geographical relations, Phoenicia held a foremost position in the history of the ancient world. The Phoenicians were known as brave and courageous merchants and seafarers. They were the first to venture great distances from shore and to navigate the open seas aided by the north star as guide. In their travels they gained the Atlantic Ocean, and were the first to reach the British Isles. Herodotus states (IV, 42) that Phoenician seafarers were the first to circumnavigate the African continent. Through their constant travelling, the Phoenicians expanded their commercial

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1 (v-14, 17).

2 Weill, *Phoenicia and Western Asia etc.*, pp. 15-17. see also; Rawlinson, *Phoenicia*, pp. 1-2.

3 Trans. A. D. Godley, *Loeb Classical Library* (London. 1946); see also I, 1.

4 Harden, *The Phoenicians*, ch. i, n. 1.

Whitaker, *Motya - a Phoenician Colony in Sicily*, p. 5.

Barnette, *Phoenicia*, E. B. (1968), p. 886.

Perrot - Chipiez, *History of Art in Phoenicia etc.*, pp. 11; 25.

5 e. g.: Moscati, *The World of the Phoenicians*, p. 4.

Montgomery - Harris, *The Ras Shamra Mythological Texts*, p. 5.

6 *Natural History*, VI, 32.

ties with many countries and served as link between east and west. Another consequence of their travels was the founding of many settlements, especially in the Mediterranean Basin. The army of one of these – Carthage – nearly vanquished Rome.

The Phoenicians had an enormous influence on the ancient world, particularly upon the Greeks, in architecture, religion, language, and other spheres. Pliny<sup>7</sup> ascribes to the Phoenicians the invention of the glass industry. Whether this statement is accurate or not, there is no doubt that they raised the art of glass-making to a high degree of perfection. He also ascribes to them the invention of astronomy, navigation and military strategy. From the Phoenicians the Greeks received their system of weights and measures<sup>8</sup>. However, the most important invention attributed to them<sup>9</sup> is that of phonetic writing which was and still is, the main basis and cause for the development and advancement of the human race.

The term "Phoenicians" appears in later centuries – first and foremost in early Greek literature. Homer, the ancient Greek poet (c. 1000 B.C.) is the earliest source mentioning "Phoenicians (Phoinikes – Phoiniké) from Tyre and Sidon" and telling of "Sidon which is in Phoenicia". Nevertheless, in epigraphic inscriptions from that part of the world where Phoenicia is supposed to have existed, no such name appears. The Bible refers to the inhabitants of this area as Tyrians and Sidonians, whereas in the Amarna letters we read of Sidon or Canaan, although the latter is used to denote a general term for the whole area. In Egyptian inscriptions, the names "Kharu" or "Retenu" are employed to designate the region of Phoenicia and Israel<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that in certain Egyptian texts from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium B. C., the name "Pnhu" appears which Seth finds similar to the Greek "Phoinikes", and he identifies it with the Phoenicians.

It should be emphasised that in ancient Greek literature, including Homer, despite the use of the term Phoenicians, the term Sidonians is more generally employed. The interpretation of "Phoenicia" as identical with Canaan appears only in later periods (Stephen of Byzantium, Sanchoniathon) to be followed accordingly by the Church Fathers who identified Canaan with Phoenicia. Hecateus<sup>11</sup> tells us that "Phoenicia was formerly called Chna" (Canaan), However Philo Byblius<sup>12</sup> mentions in his Mythology "Chna who was afterwards called Phoinix". This informs us that the name Canaan was changed to Phoenicia. Yet today it is customary to see the terms Phoenicians, Sidonians, and Canaanites as a single identity, and therefore interchangeable;

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7 Pliny, Natural History, v – xiii.

8 Whitaker, *ibid.* p. 13.

9 Pliny, *ibid.* V – XIII, Herodotus, V – 58

10 For example: Dunand, *Byblia Grammata*, p. 21.

11 *Fr. Hist. Grec.* I – 17.

12 *Fr. Hist. Grec.* III – 569

which has produced the tendency to designate as "Phoenicians" the inhabitants of the region even in periods prior to the appearance of this name in history<sup>13</sup>. To cite Albright<sup>14</sup>, "The word 'Canaanite' is historically, geographically, and culturally synonymous with 'Phoenicia'".

Who, therefore, were these people which settled in the region of Tyre and Sidon?

The Bible classifies the inhabitants of the world into three ethnic groups: Shem, Ham and Japhet,<sup>15</sup> a division which is still in use with the modification that instead of the Japhet group we speak of the Indo-European group. Since the Bible associates the Sidonians with Canaan the son of Ham, they are still linked nowadays with the Canaanite race. However, the linguistic and cultural characteristics of the nation that inhabited the region of Sidon, as revealed by archaeological findings, are those of a Semitic people. This evidence induced scholars to accept the biblical division only in part: namely, that the Phoenicians were Canaanites by race, yet were not of Hamitic, but rather of Semitic origin. This paradoxical explanation is the general belief today. In support, the analogy is made with today's Afro-American descendants, with their English language culture. Interestingly, Autran claims their origin to have been entirely different, calling them Aegeo-Asiatics<sup>16</sup>. Perrot,<sup>17</sup> while trying to classify the Phoenicians, states: "...relying upon the genealogical table in the tenth chapter of Genesis some have supposed them to belong to the stem of Cush so they would be cousins of the Egyptians, like the Canaanites who according to the same genealogy were also sons of Ham. But, on the other hand, since the Phoenician inscriptions have been deciphered it has been recognised that the Phoenician and Hebrew languages resembled each other very narrowly – so narrowly – that they might almost be called two dialects of one tongue. If this be so, ought we not rather to connect the Phoenicians with the great Semitic race of which the Hebrews are the most illustrious representation. We cannot say how close the relationship may have been, but in any case the Phoenicians must have been much more nearly connected with the Hebrews than with the Egyptians and other nations whom we know as Cushites and Hamites".

The principal object of this book is to try, in the light of sources known

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- 13 For example: Perrot – Chipiez, *ibid.* p. 30.  
Moscati, *ibid.* pp. 31; 34. ; p. 24 . in article "Who Were The Phoenicians" in *The Phoenicians Edit.*  
Bompiani 1988.  
Renan, *Histoire du peuple d'Israel*, Tome I. p. 10  
Mazar, *The Philistines and The Rise of Israel And Tyre* p. 3.
- 14 Albright, *The Bible and The Ancient Near East*, p. 328. see also: Muhly, *Homer and The Phoenicians*, Berytus, 19, 1970, p. 27.
- 15 Gen. 10.
- 16 Autran, "Pheniciens".
- 17 Perrot – Chipiez, *ibid.* p. 12.

to us, to trace the course of events in the area of Sidon, (known to be in Phoenicia), from the remotest periods in time, and by so doing to provide an answer to the question: Who were the people that dwelt in that region? In other words, who were the people whom the Greeks called "Phoenicians"?

The sources from which historical investigators derived their knowledge of Phoenician history can roughly be divided into two: epigraphic and archaeological. In the main we will discuss the epigraphic sources, and then go to examine how far the archaeological findings are in conformity with the conclusions deriving from these sources.

Until the discovery of the Tell el-Amarna and Ras Shamra tablets our main source for the knowledge about the Phoenicians were the Latin and Greek literatures. But these are not to be considered a primary source, since they originated in later periods: Homer, c. 1000 B. C.; Herodotus between c. 480–425 B. C.; Strabo, 50 B. C.; Josephus and Diodorus Siculus in the first decade A. C. etc.

The most ancient epigraphic sources in our possession today are the Ras-Shamra tablets, el-Amarna tablets, and the Bible. Of these, only the last two refer to political events, therefore we shall try to extract information from these two sources about the region of Sidon.