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Women in Phoenician Society
A Short Note on the Present Unsatisfactory State of Research*

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Abstract

Our knowledge of women in Phoenician society is extremely limited. This is largely due to the sources and the research history based on: Phoenicians = seafarers and traders = male. However, some interesting references about Phoenician women can be found in the literary, epigraphic, archaeological and iconographic evidence, as will be briefly presented in the following. A complex picture is emerging that contains considerable research potential.

Keywords

Phoenicians, woman/women, masculinity, seafarer and trader, research history, social structure.

The stereotype

As noted in the Old Testament, in Egyptian and cuneiform sources as well as by ancient Greek and Roman authors, the Phoenicians were famous seafarers and traders: During the first half of the first millennium BCE, starting from their hometowns like Arwad, Byblos, Sidon, Tyre in modern Syria, Lebanon and Israel, the Phoenicians

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* I decided to address this particular topic when I was granted a professorship within the TEAching Equality Programme (TEA) at the Institute of Classical Archaeology of the University of Tübingen by the Office for Equal Opportunities for the winter term 2016/17. In cooperating with the Institute of Classical Archaeology and the Center for Gender and Diversity Research I brought scholars of diverse disciplines and backgrounds together for a scientific exchange (February, 23rd 2017, Tübingen). I was always aware that this little workshop could not fill the gap in research – in/by evaluating this specific topic among Phoenician researchers in preparing to the invitations, the most common reply was "Wow, this is an exotic topic, I wouldn't know what to contribute" or "This topic is far too complex due to the lack of basic research" – but my intention was rather to raise this topic, to sound out its potential, as well as to provide the opportunity to build up a network and a more than suitable background for further research. And thanks to a few positive, even enthusiastic replies and acceptances, we were able to hold this little workshop, to enjoy lively debates and to inspire each other.
I am indebted to many people and institutions for this opportunity, for their support and hospitality while realizing this workshop: First of all the Office for Equal Opportunities and the Institute for Classical Archaeology, my dear colleagues and students, especially my student assistant Anna Galeano-Araque, and the Center for Gender and Diversity Research, especially Ingrid Hotz-Davies, Gero Bauer and Maira Schobert.
Therefore, I was more than happy to learn that, also thanks to this workshop, the editors of this journal decided to dedicate a section to the topic of women in Phoenician society and asked me for a short contribution.

travelled around the Mediterranean and settled along the most frequented routes, from Cyprus and Egypt to modern Morocco and Portugal. Some of their settlements became important seaports and/or political powers like Carthage in the second half of the first millennium BCE. It is known that the Phoenicians also explored far distant, unknown regions and they may even have circumnavigated Africa. Numerous conflicts have been reported between Phoenicians and Greeks in Sicily from the 5th to the 3rd centuries BCE, as well as the so-called Punic wars between Rome and Carthage in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE concerning supremacy in the Mediterranean.

According to the information provided by ancient literary sources, modern historical research also strongly focused on the Phoenicians as seafarers and merchants. They were mostly perceived as operating with an aggressive attitude, seeking to protect their marketing area, often by military action. Archaeology, on the other hand, often concerned itself with excavations in settlements, necropoleis and sanctuaries in the Phoenician Mediterranean as well as the study of finds from those excavations, debating on problems of dating and evaluating aspects of production and distribution, with an increasing interest in contact spheres. Epigraphers notably sought to contribute to the corpus of Phoenician inscriptions with new or alternative readings. Yet, the stereotype of the Phoenicians as seafarers and traders always and inevitably resonates with them both in academic and non-academic publications, from the first steps of modern historical research until today[1]. As a matter of fact, many publications deal explicitly with the problem of the term and its meaning as well as the definition, imagery or identity/identities of the Phoenicians, very often even in the perspective of the history of research and its respective Zeitgeist: They clearly state that the term 'Phoenician' is an exonym for a group of people, race, culture, identity – depending on the Zeitgeist – that actually did not exist. Or rather: 'Phoenician's' alleged members did not fully relate their self-attribution to it, at least not exclusively in its original meaning, only possibly in parts and with a potential of its self-fulfilling prophecy. 'Phoenician' is a stereotype that existed already in antiquity and flourished throughout centuries and was always shaped and used in many different ways[2], instead of being a definable entity.

Therefore, faced with this stereotype of Phoenicians as seafarers and traders, one is always inclined to forget daily life and social structures in Phoenician communities including members of administration and scribes, craftsmen of all sorts like builders, potters, basket makers, dressmakers, and blacksmiths, as well as farmers, gardeners, livestock and stable owners. One may add unspecified workers, salesmen of groceries in

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[1] Samuel Bochard's *Geographia sacra* is the most famous example of early modern research on the Phoenicians, and it focused on ancient migration movements, cf. SHALEV 2011. For an overview of the Phoenicians in general cf. the often-quoted book by AUBET 2001. For a discussion of the Phoenician merchant Ekonomikrisis in the comic series Asterix and the stereotype of the Phoenician seafarer and trader cf. MORSTADT 2015: 34-38.

[2] Probably one of the most influential publications in recent decades on a definition was MOSCATI 1992. For an excellent overview of various attempts at defining the Phoenicians cf. PASTOR BORGOÑON, 1988-90. On the question of identity cf. the two volumes edited by GARBATI – PEDRAZZI 2014, 2016, *inter alia* debating Moscati's work and recently also QUINN 2017. In fact, this stereotype met – and still meets – the demands of modern national identities and political ambitions and neither questions nor reflects real ancient life within the various settlements in the 'Phoenician' world. In his endorsement of Quinn's book, Irad Malkin even calls the 'Phoenicians' "victims of the distorting categories of modern nationalism": https://press.princeton.edu/titles/ 11132.html (05.10.2017).

local markets, etc., as well as their familial, social, religious and domestic political organization[3]. All in all, the internal organization of the Phoenician societies and communities, their identity/identities and differences, their points of social reference and social structures, especially against the background of regional diversification and chronological transformation, are difficult to comprehend, at least in the present state of research. We tend to generalize even though we are well aware that we should take more seriously the obvious evidence as well as the little hints of differences between the various settlements and the possibility of sub-structures in terms of self-designation[4], language and writing, religion and cults, materialities, iconographies etc. The situation of evidence is certainly difficult on the one hand, but one has to admit that, on the other hand, it is only rarely seriously questioned.

Furthermore, seafarers and merchants are usually conceived as being male, in ancient as well as in modern times, and also in their modern appropriation. Generally speaking, based on ancient, mostly written sources and through research history, the term 'Phoenician' became a synonym for commerce and utilitarianism, domination and progress – concepts that are associated with masculinity in the modern world[5].

Womanscape

All Phoenician communities, in metropoleis and smaller settlements, have to be considered as complex social structures with multiple facets in familial, professional, religious, administrative issues, domestic politics etc. Certainly, women had a part in it. We come across women in the archaeological and iconographic as well as literary and epigraphic evidence. However, Phoenician women, their role, status, visibility, habitus, etc. have never played an independent, comprehensive role in modern research, quite contrary to the general trends in prehistory, history, classical archaeology, Biblical studies, and so on. Only recently have gender topics become of increasing interest in research: Ida Oggiano excavates and studies the sanctuary in Kherayeb (Lebanon) with its interesting repertoire of terracotta figurines of women and children[6]; Helen Dixon gave a talk about the social role of Levantine Phoenician women at the Annual Meeting of the American School of Oriental Research in San Diego in 2014; Ana Delgado Hervàs and Meritxell Ferrer studied gender roles connected to power relations and domestic space as well as in burial customs[7]; José Ángel Zamora has explored the construct of masculinity in respect of the myth of Anath and Aqhat[8].

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[3] One of the few exceptions is the volume by ZAMORA 2003, with contributions on scribes, soldiers, farmers, children, slaves, etc. and on women (by LANCELLOTTI 2003: 187-197). One of the few contributions regarding the domestic political situation in Sidon was by BONDÌ 1974: He provided a good elaboration that, at least in Persian times, the king was apparently opposed by a strong but unorganized will of the people. Our knowledge is far better, yet not satisfying, for the domestic political structures of Carthage, e.g. due to descriptions such as the one by Aristotle Pol. 2.1272bff. Cf. JAHN 2004.

[4] Self-designation as a citizen of Sidon, Tyre, Kition, etc., according to the numerous inscriptions of various dating, cf. *KAI*, e.g. nos 53-57, 59-60.

[5] DELGADO 2016, esp. 48.

[6] Cf. footnote 26.

[7] E.g. cf. footnote 4; DELGADO 2016; DELGADO – FERRER 2012.

[8] ZAMORA 2016.

Literary evidence

Otherwise, singular data about Phoenician women were either used in combination with or subordinated to other topics like trade goods, handicrafts, dating, burial customs, religion. Very often, the evidence was even decontextualized, isolated, distorted and intermingled with ancient biblical, Greek and Roman evidence, and consequently modern 'othering' or Orientalism[9] as in the cases of Jezebel, Elissa and Sophonisba: The notorious Jezebel, daughter of king Ithobaal I of Tyre and wife of king Ahab of Israel, reportedly incited her husband to abandon the worship of Yahweh and encouraged worship of the deities Baal and Asherah instead (1 Kgs 16, 29-34; 18-19; 21; 2 Kgs 9, 30-37). Therefore, she became associated with false prophets and with 'painted women' (a synonym for prostitutes) and represented in her female appearance the metaphoric evil[10]. Indeed, Phoenician women were often linked to prostitution in ancient sources, and it is a well-established and only rarely questioned hypothesis that the Phoenicians practised temple prostitution[11]. The 'woman at the window'-motif on early 1st mill. BCE Near Eastern ivory plaques was even interpreted in modern research as representing these sacred prostitutes[12]. Elissa/Dido, princess of Tyre and the mythical foundress of Carthage, was described as torn between sovereignty and devoted faith (elaborately narrated by Justin 18, 4-6). She represents the prototype of an oriental, 'exotic' woman, who was shackled to the fate of unfortunate love[13]. Therefore, she incorporates the *fides punica*, endogamy, segregation and isolation, thus fulfilling the fate of the Carthaginian empire in the eyes of ancient Greek and Roman authors and their modern audience[14]. Sophonisba, daughter of Hasdrubal and wife of the Numidian kings Syphax and Massinissa, who was dreaded by Scipio and therefore forced to commit suicide (Liv. 30, 12, 10-17)[15], as well as the wife of Hasdrubal, who preferred to commit suicide rather than seeing her husband submit to Scipio (App. Lib. 131), share the same sisterhood of defamation. Therefore, it is difficult to crystallize information regarding the position of Phoenician females in their own community since we have to rely on sources that were generated from an external perspective.

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9 LANCELLOTTI 2003, esp. 188: "Le fonti vetero-testamentarie, da un lato, e quelle letterarie in lingua greca e latina, dall'altro, sono accomunate dalla circostanza di guardare *dall'esterno* i soggetti su cui riferiscono e di darne una visione tendenzialmente negativa in virtù di preconcetti culturali (e politici) tipicamente etnocentrici: essi sono visti infatti come esponenti-simbolo di un universo culturale sentito come alieno, negativo, sorpassato e talora addirittura antitetico ai propri valori".

10 Cf. Jezebel: SCHMIDT 2003, esp. 171: "Sie ist endgültig zur Frau als Metapher für das Böse geworden und wird in den Texten dafür verurteilt und bestraft"; PRUIN 2006; MCKAY 1999; VANDER STICHELE, 1999.

11 Cf. e.g. Herodotus (1,99) for Cyprus, Strabo (6,272) and Diodorus Siculus (4,83,6) for Eryx, Sicilia: FAUTH 1988. With reservations concerning sacred prostitution in ancient times: SCHEER – LINDNER 2009.

12 Rejecting this hypothesis: REHM 2003.

13 THEISOHN 2008.

14 BONNET 2011.

15 GÜNTHER 2013.

Epigraphic evidence

On the other hand, Phoenician epigraphy provides only very little and hardly enlightening information: Women are visible as members of the royal family as well as priestesses. For example, Batnoam, mother of the king of Byblos, and her relatives are mentioned in the inscription on her sarcophagus (*KAI* 11)[16]; Umm-Ashtart, mother of the king of Sidon and priestess of Ashtart, was honoured in the inscription on the sarcophagus of her son Eshmunazar II (*KAI* 14, 12-16)[17]; Geratmilk, priestess of Ashtart in Sidon, is named on a Phoenician crater[18]. These women seem to have held positions of authority in religious and presumably also political matters, as possibly Umm-Ashtart was even entrusted with the duties of her son, then a minor.

Regarding the recognition of female individuals, their function, status and social visibility, the corpus of funerary inscriptions from Carthage (late 5th – mid-2nd cent. BCE) is our best source. According to A. Ferjaoui around 767 examples mentioning female names are known, which represent ca. 13% of all votive inscriptions and epitaphs[19]. In these, Punic as well as Libyan and Greek names are to be found, named in the stereotypic formula of Punic inscriptions with their genealogy. The genealogy refers almost always to the father, and only in a few cases is a matriarchal filiation given instead of the paternal filiation (a similar situation can be noted for males, by the way): the research hypothesis leaves the father unknown for children of prostitutes or for children born extramaritally. Yet it has to be emphasized that these inscriptions follow specific habits and intentions that are often difficult to interpret, e.g. in view of the difference between epitaphs and votive inscriptions. Whereas in the epitaphs the names of both the father and husband are given, the indication of the father predominates in votive inscriptions. One may argue that the specific character of the votive inscriptions requires a stronger focus on ancestry than the epitaphs. The women mentioned in the funerary inscriptions can be of various status, such as daughters of slaves, cooks, physicians, carpenters, dignitaries (*sufet*s), some of them in the position of slaves or priestesses[20] or even – in inscription CIS I 5948 – a tradeswoman. Furthermore, Carthaginian women are reported to have contributed to the financing of the war by providing their jewellery (Diod. 32,9) or helping to carve out the harbour, with female slaves supplying their own hair to make ropes for ships and catapults (Strab. 17,3,15; App. Lib. 121)[21].

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16 Rough translation by the author: "In this coffin I lie, Batnoam, mother of King Azbaal, king of Byblos, son of Paltibaal, priest of the Lady, in a robe and with a tiara on my head and a gold bridle on my mouth, as was the custom with the royal women who were before me" (5th century BCE).

17 Rough translation by the author: "(…) I was snatched away before my time, the son of a limited number of days; a smitten one, an orphan, the son of a widow was I. But I, Eshmunazar, king of the Sidonians, son of king Tabnit, king of the Sidonians, grandson of Eshmunazar, king of the Sidonians, and my mother Amotashtart, priestess of Astarte, our lady the queen, daughter of king Eshmunazar, king of the Sidonians, we are (the ones) who built the houses of the gods (…)" (6th century BCE).

18 For Geratmilk cf. PUECH 1994. See in general: JIMÉNEZ FLORES 2002.

19 FERJAOUI 1999. Cf. also AMADASI GUZZO 1988.

20 Cf. footnotes 16-18.

21 YAZIDI ZEGHAL 1995.

Archaeological evidence

Grave inventories in Carthage and elsewhere in the Phoenician world, from the 6th cent. BCE onwards, display the whole spectrum of the female sphere with jewellery, toiletries, etc.[22]. Women – like males – were equally part of the funerary community, possibly present in tombs for married couples and/or families. An interesting insight into the complexity of Phoenician communities is provided by the excavation in the al-Bass-Necropolis of Tyre (Lebanon), with burials from the late 10th until the early 6th cent. BCE[23]: Children were not buried (at least not in the same burial grounds), whereas men and women were ritually buried and mourned equally. It seems that male burials are only slightly predominant. The tombs and grave inventories discovered in this particular area are surprisingly standardized and differ only slightly in some individual aspects; even age or gender are not recognizable on the basis of grave inventories. Therefore, the excavators concluded that the quality and monotonous nature of the funerary equipment does not really reflect the social structure of the community, but rather points to a clear hierarchy, supported by a conservative citizenship. Furthermore, the grave goods were selected in accordance with the funeral rites of a particular community within Tyrian society. The same homogenous burial spectrum can be detected in other Phoenician burials, e.g. in the five early Western Phoenician tombs recently excavated in Ayamonte (Spain) dating to the 8th and 7th cent. BCE. The tombs contained the cremated remains of three women (two women together in one tomb and a woman and a child in another tomb) as well as of three men[24]. This example also confirms the conservative habits of Phoenician communities (with the exception of the burial of the child). Yet, on the other hand, it should provoke reflection on the social status and roles of these women in Phoenician colonies in the Mediterranean especially in connection with questions about ethnic groups and their migrations: should we assume that Phoenician women took an active part in that expansion (of a community that allegedly practised endogamy, as reported for Elissa/Dido, see above) or should we assume that native women were incorporated completely, beyond recognition, into the Phoenician community, leaving only local cooking pots as a reference to their origin?

Iconographic evidence

Pictorial representations of Phoenician women are to be found mainly in glyptic and plastic art, like terracotta and bronze figurines as well as terracotta masks and protomes. We see them in very different scenes, contexts, styles and dress: enthroned, armed, mourning, worshipping and being worshipped, pregnant, nursing, nude, holding their breasts, richly adorned with clothing, jewellery, hairstyles, etc., in Egyptian, Persian, Greek fashions. Yet they all follow the few stereotypes of a representation of a nude woman with hanging or outstretched arms, or holding their breasts in the I millennium BCE; from the Persian era on, they are elaborately dressed and adorned with jewellery. Others represent a Dea gravida (pregnant goddess) or Kourotrophos (a woman nourishing her child)[25]. However, it has to be emphasized that Phoenician pictorial representations

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[22] Ibid.

[23] AUBET 2014: 7-54, 508.

[24] GARCÍA TEYSSANDIER – MARZOLI 2013; 2018.

[25] OGGIANO 2012; 2015a; 2015b.

focus more on concepts than on an individual, unique and distinguishable iconography[26], and, therefore, the repertoire of female stereotypes comes as no surprise. These women are usually interpreted as representations of goddesses (such as Ashtart and/or Tanit, sometimes identified as Isis[27] or Demeter and Kore[28]), or their priestesses or acolytes, whereas presumably a proper identification and denomination was not intended. At the same time however, women are also represented as enthroned, fighting and standing on a lion, equivalent to male iconographies, and thus as part of the same concept.

Religion and cult

Asthart (or her alias Baalat Gubla in Byblos) held a very important position in the pantheon of Phoenician cities in the whole Mediterranean. In her character, sexuality and warfare are equally combined and she has to be considered as being strongly connected to royalty and the royal dynasties[29]. The goddess Tinit, on the other hand, was of essential significance for Carthage: numerous tophet stelae are addressed to her and presumably she was worshipped as a mediator between mankind and the god Baal (Hamon). She was the beneficiary of the sacrifice of children in the tophet, and she has to be understood as the protector of ancestry, family and community[30].

Concluding Assumptions

Thus, one may draw the preliminary and tentative conclusion that Asthart and Tinit can be considered as the most illustrative figures regarding the role of Phoenician women, incorporating all the literary, epigraphic, iconographic and archaeological evidence from Phoenician as well as external sources: Phoenician women apparently held a very strong position in cult and family tradition, protecting and nourishing children, fulfilling their duty in wartime as well as in politics, in order to guarantee the consistent continuity of very conservative Phoenician communities. They were not explicitly made visible, but we have no evidence that they were intentionally made invisible; they were not necessarily limited to a private and non-public area and were not placed in a separate space. Rather, their influence could have been perceived as threatening to foreigners, to others or to outsiders.

It is clear, however, that this short contribution of evidence-survey is by no means sufficient to shed light on the subject, either in material or theoretical issues. Rather, I would be pleased if this would provide an impetus for further research, perhaps by deepening the study of the evidence, applying gender theory and presumably with considering social and family structures in general.

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[26] NUNN 2000.

[27] The Kourotrophos is usually represented in the iconography of the Egyptian goddess Isis. The cult of Isis in Carthage is attested by a sarcophagus representing the statue of an elaborately dressed priestess of Isis on the lid and bearing the inscription "tomb of Arishatbaal, priestess, wife of Melqarthilles" (*CIS* I 5941).

[28] The implementation of the cult of Demeter and Kore in the year 396 BCE is reported by Diod. 14,63. 70. 77. They share with Tinnit the aspects of fertility and the cultivation of grain. These aspects became increasingly important in the cult (and representation?) of Tinnit, leading to the *interpretatio* as Dea Caelestis in Roman times.

[29] BONNET 1996.

[30] BONNET 2010.

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