IN SEARCH OF THE PHOENICIANS. 
ISBN 978-0691175270

In Search of the Phoenicians questions the commonly accepted designation of “Phoenician”, usually attributed in academia to the Iron Age (1200-333) BC population of the Levantine coast, between Arwad and Dor, and to its colonies in the Mediterranean, also called “Punic” starting in the 6th century BC. In this volume, Quinn argues that the people we refer to as Phoenicians did not necessarily have a group consciousness that went beyond family or regional identities, as the ancient Greeks had. Instead, her proposition is that the concept of the Phoenicians has been fabricated by external elements, from the classical authors to 19th century nationalisms. She uses evidence from literary sources as well as archaeology to demonstrate that Phoenician identity is malleable and can be shaped to suit a wide range of interests. Quinn proposes a model in which Phoenician identity as we currently define it did not exist in the Iron Age, but that the people at this time defined themselves in other ways and on other scales than the ones traditionally understood.

The book is divided into three parts, which correspond to the Miriam Balmuth Lectures in Ancient History and Archaeology Quinn gave at Tufts University in 2012. The first part is concerned with the ancient sources and what they can tell us about Phoenician identity, the second part moves on to material culture, and finally the last part takes the reader to the later constructions of Phoenician identity, from Late Antiquity to 16th century Ireland. In her introduction, Quinn discusses the fallouts of recent conceptions of identity, especially when associated with the idea of ethnicity, and argues that the question of identity is much more complex than it seems. She also explains that she will be relying heavily on arguments from silence, but justifies it by the fact that she is using those arguments to deconstruct the (mis)conceptions of an identity rather than utilizing a lack of evidence to label populations “in negative space”, as has often been the case for the Phoenicians. At the end of the introduction, she gives a brief summary of her chapters, and asserts that she will be following a reverse order, starting with post-colonial perceptions of the Phoenicians and working her way back.

Hence, Chapter One tackles the modern utilizations of Phoenician identity in Lebanon and Tunisia. She starts by an overview of the birth of Phoenicianism in Lebanon in the 1920s, a political movement initiated by young Christian businessmen who claimed descendence from the Phoenicians, highly encouraged by the French during the mandate period. A comparable but slightly different phenomenon happened in Tunisia, this time as a reaction to the colonization from France, which perceived itself as a renewed form of the Roman Empire. Its policy in Tunisia was much more aggressive than it was in Lebanon, and hence Tunisians started to identify with the Carthaginians as a form of resistance to this. Phoenicianism as a political stand faded in both these countries, but its impact is still felt in their popular culture.

Chapter Two turns to literary evidence. In this chapter, Quinn goes back to the term Phoenician and its use in textual and epigraphic sources. She finds that the evidence for people calling themselves “Phoenician” is very scarce, as is the evidence for people calling themselves “Canaanites”. She also argues that the two terms cannot be superposed as synonymous. Most of the Phoenician inscriptions show instead self-designation using ancestry and sometimes regional affiliations. Therefore, there is no evidence for consciousness of a
broad Phoenician identity among people who spoke this language. Rather, this designation has been imposed on them by the Greeks, in a process of generalization, as interactions with these people took place far from their home-cities.

In Chapter Three, Quinn argues that of all the ancient sources, only the Greek and Roman ones clearly define Phoenicia as a region, making it apparent that this is their own definition of it rather than a generally accepted one in Antiquity. She also shows that even in the Greek and Latin sources that mention the Phoenicians, their definitions of them are flimsy and variable, changing from one author to another, and even sometimes in the works of the same authors.

Chapter Four marks the transition to the second part of the book, in which Quinn addresses the material evidence. In this chapter, Quinn makes the claim that the material culture generally called Phoenician exhibits too many similarities with that of the Late Bronze Age to be distinguished, and that it is in fact a continuation of Late Bronze Age international style. She also argues that while the material culture found in “Phoenician” sites has many common characteristics, it also exhibits some common characteristics with other sites in the Mediterranean, and therefore the picture is not as black and white as it seems. Only Carthage in the 5th century starts to promote what could be interpreted as Phoenician identity, by representing a palm tree on coins it minted in its colonies.

Chapter Five tackles the case study of the tophets. In this chapter, Quinn demonstrates that the cult of the tophet is archaeologically restricted to a circle in the central Mediterranean, as it is not attested in the East, nor in the Iberian peninsula. She uses this evidence to argue that tophets can therefore not be used as a marker for Phoenician identity. Instead, her theory is that the tophet is a practice bringing smaller groups together, isolating them from other Phoenician speakers. After having used an example based on distinctiveness and fragmentation in Chapter Five, Quinn turns to the broader and more connective aspect of Phoenician identity in Chapter Six. In this chapter, she focuses on the cult of Melqart, which bound together the colonies of Tyre to their mother-city. However, the cult of Melqart went beyond the borders of traditional Phoenicia, as illustrated by its Greek assimilation with Herakles. Therefore, in this part, Quinn’s aim is to underline that the Mediterranean world in the Iron Age was much more complicated and cosmopolitan than what scholars have been led to believe so far; and that material culture, rituals, practices, and beliefs show that identities can be measured on varying scales; and that there was never truly a “Phoenician package” that could be easily defined.

Part Three follows naturally, explaining some of the processes by which “Phoenician” identity came to being, and giving examples of its constructions and manipulations. In Chapter Seven, Quinn argues that Phoenician identity is in part a product of Late Antiquity. She discusses the growing interest in the Phoenicians in Hellenistic and Roman times, while explaining that this never meant political unification, but rather an increase and fostering of the rivalries between the historic Phoenician cities. In fact, Phoenician identity was manipulated in the Roman Empire the same way the French fostered it almost two-thousand years later: to maintain fragmented identities in order to facilitate political domination over the region. The geographical shape of Phoenicia and its definition were stretched, reaching places as remote as Emesa (modern Homs).

In the following chapter (Eight), she moves away from the East to focus on North Africa during Roman times. Through the examples of the evolution and development of tophets, sufetes, and languages, she illustrates how identities in Roman North Africa shifted in their definition of “Phoenician”, a word which now denoted a certain heritage. This identification was used in reaction to the political circumstances at the time.

In Chapter Nine, the final one of the book, Quinn moves forward to 16th century Ireland and Britain. At a time where Phoenician was still hazily defined, both islands had reasons to claim connexions to the Phoenicians. In Ireland, it was done to contradict the barbaric image the Irish were often associated with. And while it started to fade in the 19th century, the links between Phoenicia and Ireland remained strong and this identification survived in many romantic minds. In England, the Phoenicians were viewed as role-models who had peacefully “civilized” the Mediterranean and established a commercial emporium. This perspective was particularly suitable to the colonial policy of the United Kingdom, and Quinn shows in this chapter how Phoenician identity gradually infiltrated British politics from the 16th to the 19th century.

Josephine Quinn is an ancient historian, and her background is in classics. The archaeologists reading In Search of the Phoenicians might therefore miss some more arguments based on material evidence. When she does speak of material culture, Quinn focuses on numismatics, which are very useful in discussions of identity and representations, but only appear rather late in the “Phoenician”
world. The other material remains she discusses are the tophets, which are still very much subject to debate. Finally, she also refers to the cult of Melqart but uses many literary sources for this idea as well. Overall, the part focusing on material feels a little lacking, especially that Quinn uses examples of cultic and religious natures, which are always subject to assumptions (She justifies this by the fact that religion and ritual practices often bring people together and can therefore be good indicators of group identities).

Many of Quinn’s claims are quite extreme, making In Search of the Phoenicians sometimes feel like the Phoenician equivalent of Black Athena. Having said that, Quinn provides a much needed refreshed perspective on a culture that has been taken for granted by the scholarly world for too long, and this book is actually an excellent starting point for archaeologists to start questioning their pre-existing conceptions of what “Phoenician” means and how this idea came to exist as we know it. Hopefully, it will be a trigger for more critical studies and a re-evaluation of some material that has been labelled “Phoenician” out of a lack of better alternatives. Therefore, although this is not an archaeological study purely speaking, it will hopefully inspire archaeological searches of the Phoenicians. Finally, In Search of the Phoenicians distinguishes itself from previous studies on the Phoenicians because rather than trying to group things all together to fit stereotypes inherited from Antiquity, it focuses on small world networks and peculiarities, taking a much less simplistic view. One of Quinn’s strengths is that she understands that the Mediterranean was a complex entity, and that one has to work with this complexity rather than label for the sake of labelling. The task of redefining Phoenicia is enormous, but Quinn has undoubtedly laid solid foundations for it.