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HANS GEORG NIEMEYER

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THE PHOENICIANS AND THE BIRTH OF A MULTINATIONAL MEDITERRANEAN SOCIETY*

Hans Georg Niemeyer

As is generally accepted, a crisis commonly (even if perhaps not quite correctly) labeled the "sea-peoples-catastrophe" marks the end of the Bronze Age koiné in the Eastern Mediterranean, including Anatolia and the Levant. Effects are felt to the south even in Egypt. The resulting period of decline and impoverishment has been called since long the "Dark Ages". For the Near East, this period is presently being re-evaluated. The disruption is considered to have been less complete, and, at any rate, the Phoenician city-states in the Levant (see map fig. 1), i.e. the core region between Arwad and Tyre, seem to have been spared from severe destruction found elsewhere. This is the particular historical setting in the Eastern Mediterranean at the outset of the Phoenician expansion throughout the Mediterranean, which started at the end of the 2nd millennium and continued into the early centuries of the 1st millennium BC.[1]

This expansion into the Mediterranean was according to all evidence we have an enormous enlargement of the range of economic interaction and an expansion of an entirely mercantile and thus generally peaceful kind, and not one based upon power-politics or aimed at conquering territories (see map, fig. 2). Before assessing the impact of this great movement on the different Mediterranean civilizations affected by it, at least some of its characteristic features need to be outlined. The Phoenicians, setting out from a couple of small city-states on the Levantine coast, first and foremost aimed at ensuring the supply of metal-ores and other raw materials needed by the skilled artists and craftsmen these cities were famous for, thus providing for economic wealth at home. The second reason were the oppressive and ever growing tributes exacted by the great power of Assyria, the neighbour to the East. Tyre seems to have played a prominent part in this chapter of history, if we trust in the few written sources agreed upon by modern research. According to Velleius Paterculus (Hist. Rom. I 2, 1-3), it is the *Tyria classis, tum plurimum pollens mari*, which was responsible for the founding of Gadir, the oldest settlement abroad.

It has been argued that especially in the 11th/10th centuries an active expansion to the far West would not have been possible for Tyre, which allegedly was only a short time before refounded by the neighbouring city-state of Sidon. And that expansion and settlement in the Mediterranean should merely be understood

* This paper has been left more or less as it was read at Innsbruck, the references have been restricted, where possible, to the most recent bibliography at reach. Gunter Kopcke (New York) and Wolf Rudolph (Berlin) helped me with my English. To both I feel deeply obliged.

1 I have dealt repeatedly with the general outlines of Phoenician expansion in the Mediterranean and may be permitted to refer to four major recent articles for full bibliographical information: Niemeyer 1999; Niemeyer 2000; Niemeyer 2002a; Niemeyer 2003, forthcoming (revised version of Niemeyer 1995).

as a result of Assyrian oppression, initiated but to serve Assyria's ever growing demand of raw materials, luxury items and precious metals. Admittedly, there is no doubt about the sometimes considerable tributes to the Assyrian king. But these tributes over a long period were paid in a climate of economical and political symbiosis, which for the ones guaranteed a certain independence from the great military power of Mesopotamia, and for the others a more or less regular supply of luxury goods, vital raw material and noble metal. The Assyrians in their turn thus avoided the necessity to build up an own economic network of international range.[2] In other words, the agreement was of respective use, and it would be then out of well understood political egoism or determination to survive that the Phoenician city-states had developed into a kind of service society for Assyria.

But in spite of this Tyre did become at best only in part an indirect „instrument" of Assyrian imperialism and expansionism. Two main historic issues should be reminded here: First, the Phoenician expansion starts earlier than the Neo-Assyrian empire's oppression, and it starts mainly for reasons which root in the circumstances in the Phoenician city-states and in their changed economical situation. It is self-evident that for the flourishing arts and crafts, for business and trade – the basic features of wealth for the Phoenician city-states – a steady supply of raw materials was indispensable, so new resources had to be discovered and safe trade routes had to be opened up as soon as possible after the breakdown of the Bronze Age world. Second, it was not earlier than the 8th century, that it obviously became necessary for the Phoenicians to establish a greater number of permanent factories for protection of the trade routes through the Mediterranean. But the reason for this is again mainly to be looked for in the Mediterranean itself, not in the Near East: It is the beginning competition with Greek colonisation in the West, which by tradition starts with the foundation of Syracuse or Naxos in 734 BC.[3]

In presence of an audience of specialists in the field I may be allowed to skip the particular features of Phoenician settlement in the Mediterranean as I have treated them several times in recent years.[4] What matters in the present context is the specific Phoenician impact on the Mediterranean civilizations, and the specific Phoenician contribution to what Walter Burkert has called the "Orientalizing Revolution",[5] which in turn eventually became the foundations the new mediterranean koiné of Classical Antiquity was to be built upon.

In view of the lack of sufficient and reliable written sources on this problem we have to turn to the archaeological record. Among the steadily increasing evidence the numerous Oriental imports found i.a. at Eretria and Lefkandi have to be listed in the first place. These luxury objects come especially from richly furnished graves of the aristocracy, later from sanctuaries as well. As time proceeds,

2 See the contribution of K. Radner, this volume, pp. 152 -169.

3 In general see now Der Neue Pauly 6 (1999), 653-664 s.v. Kolonisation (W. Eder); the best survey of the period under consideration is Ridgway 1992.

4 Niemeyer 1984, 29-56; Niemeyer 1995, 260-63.

5 Burkert 1992.

intruding Oriental workshops (ivory carvers, cabinet makers, goldsmiths, metal artists, perfume cooks, etc.) apparently do establish themselves in the more important Greek communities like Eretria/Lefkandi, Knossos and other places in Crete, thus becoming *enoikismoi* in a foreign ambiance; the Phoenician sanctuary of Kommos on the Southern coast of Crete is an unmistakable sign for the rank as well as the endurance of such immigrant communities.[6] The high quality Oriental offerings from the Idaean Cave in Crete have to be seen in this context.[7]

Now, when it comes to art and art forms, one would on the other hand expect the material facies of the civilizations affected to show at least a certain tinge of the leading import forces' originality. Applied to the matter here concerned, one consequently would await particular Phoenician traits to show up on artefacts of the respective Mediterranean civilizations.

This obviously requires that we know what really is Phoenician art, and here we meet an almost crucial problem. Already Donald Harden in 1962 declared that »The Phoenicians are never more elusive than in their art«.[8] In the book on the Phoenician world by Gras, Rouillard and Teixidor there is no chapter on art at all,[9] and Claude Baurain in 1992 felt himself obliged to plead in detail why »il serait ... injustifié de refuser l'appellation d'œuvre d'art aux diverses productions phéniciennes«.[10] Glenn Markoe in his new monograph attests the Phoenicians to have specialized "in portable art".[11] Thus it is evident that there does exist at least a certain ambiguity of judgement in the scholarly world.

The delicately carved panels of ivory furniture and the equally famous metalwork, thymiateria, candelabra and vessels with appliqués or without, and above all the engraved, chiselled and embossed metal-bowls with ornamental or figural design, on the one hand are regarded as masterpieces of Phoenician craftsmanship, on the other hand they are declared the output but of either egyptianizing or syrianizing workshops, and admittedly in fact they are at least dependent from the respective art styles and iconographies.[12] And while Egyptian impact on arts and crafts in the Levant had a long tradition,[13] in fact from the 9th down to the 7th century BC there existed in the Late-Hittite world of Northern Syria powerful metalworking centres, to which certain classes of bronze vessels and reliefs of figural design can be ascribed, the main argument being stylistic comparisons.[14] Quite correctly they also have been held responsible for the syrianizing trend in Phoenician metal and ivory work. Among the minor groups of monuments, the pear-shaped metal jugs have been claimed to be of Cypriot fabric.[15]

6 For a short overview see Shaw 1998.
7 Sakellarakis 1992; Matthäus 2000.
8 Harden 1980, 171.
9 Gras et al. 1989.
10 Baurain and Bonnet 1992, 231-33.
11 Markoe 2000, 150; cp. Niemeyer 2001, 374.
12 Falsone 1995, 427-32; Markoe 2000, 147. 149.
13 Markoe 1985, 17-18, 30-33, 136-38, 150-51.
14 Rittig and Borell 1998, 3-62; Seidl 1999.
15 Falsone 1995, 433, against Grau-Zimmermann 1978.

In contrast to these classes of artefacts, which as known are not or only sporadically found in Phoenicia proper, presentational reliefs are scarce in genuine early Phoenician contexts, monumental sculpture in the round is almost deficient.[16] Eric Gubel in a recent paper succeded to collect a few stelae with images of Phoenician gods, but of a restricted, if not rather poor iconography.[17] The group of some 200 tombstones and -stelae which recently turned up in one of the cemeteries of Tyre clearly demonstrate a marked aversion from the anthropomorphic icon of man, which instead with preference is substituted by certain symbols as e.g. the betyl.[18]

As has been worked out in recent research, this obvious fact cannot be better explained than by an intrinsic and general trend of aniconism which inheres in Phoenician art and which has its parallel in the neighbouring Israelite civilization, witness being the taboo of iconolatry in the Ten Commandments (II. Mosis 20:4).[19]

Looking back with this in mind at the so-called minor arts of ivory carving and metal embossing, both being bent on nearly naturalistic pictorial scenes with human and animal figures, there seems to emerge a sharp antagonism of two entirely different attitudes towards pictorial art. How then are we going to reconcile them both as true and characteristic features of Phoenician civilization? One of the possible alternatives, to eliminate the output of one of the two artistic trends from the accepted corpus of Phoenician art, obviously is not a satisfying solution.

I need not enlarge on this particular topic. May it suffice to recall in addition the brilliant analysis of Phoenician and Syrian art written by Henri Frankfort in his "Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient", in particular based on the carved ivories and engraved metal bowls.[20] And if a personal remark is allowed here: the very amalgamation of art styles of different tradition - Syro-Mesopotamian and Egyptian - , combined with the well-known exquisite and gentle rendering of sometimes quasi naturalistic forms, be it anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, ornamental or phytogenic, to my opinion in fact is an own and genuine achievement of Phoenician craftsmanship.

Another alternative deserves at least to be discussed here, after taking a look on the distribution maps of Phoenician luxury objects in the Ancient world. If one tries to combine them in a more general map (see fig. 3), it turns out e.g. that from among the metal bowls none has been found in Phoenicia proper.[21] The same holds good for the less numerous pear-shaped jugs.[22] The two classes differ only when the distribution in the East is considered, where bowls abound in Nimrud in

16 I must renounce here to discuss the well-known anthropoid sarcophagi, because they constitute a problem of its own kind (Niemeyer, forthcoming). See meanwhile Frede 2003. Lembke 2001

17 Gubel 2000.

18 Seeden 1991; Sader 1991.

19 Moscati 1990, 172-7; Mettinger 1995; cp. Uehlinger 1996.

20 Frankfort 1970, 310-31.

21 See Markoe 1985, map; Falsone 1992.

22 Grau-Zimmermann 1978, 208 (map).

Mesopotamia and are present in Iran, while metal jugs up till now are entirely deficient in the Near East.

Even in a sketchy trial of analysis - which at most I can try here - we have to pay attention to the respective archaeological context, which is indispensable. Already such an overview reveals significant issues: in the Near East the overwhelming majority of these luxury objects - in particular the metal bowls and the prestigious ivory carvings also to be regarded - is found in the royal palaces and palace-temples, of the Assyrian king or of the North-Syrian, aramaic and Israelite princes and vassal-kings (Nimrud, Khorsabad, Sendçirli, Arslan Tash, Samaria etc.), be it as tribute or as war-booty. In the West they come from the tombs of an aristocratic élite if not right away of the local princes. In Greece quite a number turned up in sanctuaries. In all the differently classified cases they would have set up prestige to the owner or, speaking about votive-offerings, to the donor.

The specific employment of these luxurious goods puts to evidence that they served the local aristocracies to define themselves as an élite. We can assume that it made no difference if the Keimelia were displayed in the private treasure, or as forming part of the tomb furniture at the funeral or as an exhibit in a sanctuary-demonstrating pride and munificence of an aristocratic dedicant. It is manifest, that these Keimelia were of highest esteem and, consequently, in great demand. But notwithstanding that, they were not the subject-matter of trade proper, were not the reason for but the result of establishing good relations in a network of far-reaching interconnections. The hard-core merchandise always has been of a different, of a more substantial kind: agrarian products (cereals, wine), man-power (slaves, specialized craftsmen), industrial products (woollen and silk-tissues) and, above all, raw materials (precious ores and metals). And it was a huge amount of know-how of life sciences and techniques that came in the wake of it: i.a. writing in alphabetic script, measuring, weighing, processing of metals,[23] astronomically guided navigation (*stella Phoenicia*), not at least banqueting etc.[24] The Keimelia thus would constitute some sort of an extra, would be gifts to be exchanged between partners of trade and by which to corroborate friendly relations, to achieve better contracts and profitable deals, to provide continuity for established connections. This constituted their value within the society of the Phoenician city-states, an indirect value within a transmediterranean network of economic nature and design, within a globalized, multinational koiné of common life habits and paradigms.

Is n't it legitimate, then, that we imagine those Keimelia being produced purposely to meet the abovementioned demand and to match the specific predilections abroad? Produced in a small number of specialized workshops in the few Phoenician city-states, or acquired as merchandise from the Eastern neighbours or even carried by those themselves, in a joint-venture? And later on produced by itinerant Phoenician craftsmen and even workshops settled abroad? In other words: com-

23 Niemeyer 2002b.
24 Matthäus 1999/2000.

modities whose value within a multinational trade-network[25] was calculated along globalized criteria in a merging mediterranean world?

It is the particular permanence of corporate and cultural identity, an identity encompassing the experience of Late Bronze Age as well as of Early Iron Age, viz. the late second and the early first Millennium B.C., that enabled the Phoenician merchant venturers to develop the particular pattern of Phoenician expansion to the West so much distinguished from later Greek territorial colonisation, and shaped its bearing on European history. The eminent role played by the Phoenician city-states in the dissemination of urban civilization, in the propagation of technical innovations, in the distribution of new lifestyle paradigms and 'modern' economics – as is becoming manifest in the Mediterranean world after the turn from Bronze to Iron Age – can only be appreciated when taking this into account. It can hardly be overestimated.

25 Moore and Lewis 1999, 101-132; cp. Niemeyer, 2003a.


Karatepe
Karkemisch
Aleppo
Euphrat
Ebla
Al Mina
Orontes
Ugarit
Salamis
Hama
Sukas
Kition
Arvad
Limassol
Tell Kazel
Byblos
Beirut
Sidon
Damaskus
Tyros
Akziv
Akko
Tell Abu Hawam
Megiddo
Jordan
Samaria
Jaffa
Ekron
Jerusalem
Amman
Ashdod
Askalon
Gaza
Esion-Geber
0
100
200 km

Fig. 1

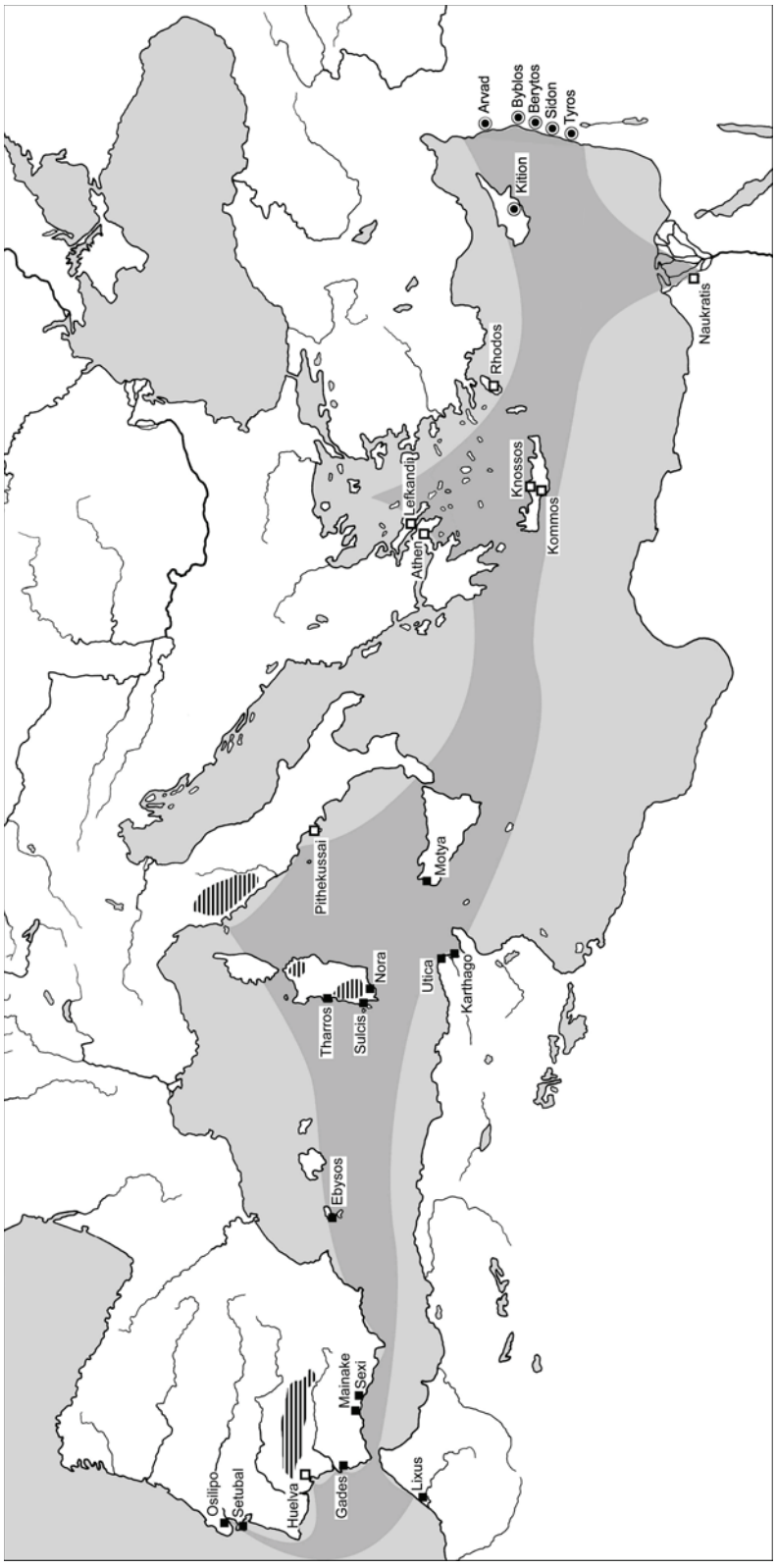
Arvad
Byblos
Berytos
Sidon
Tyros
Kition
Naukratis
Rhodos
Knossos
Kommos
Lefkandi
Athen
Pithekussai
Motya
Nora
Ulica
Karthago
Tharros
Sulcis
Ebysos
Mainake
Sexi
Lixus
Gades
Huelva
Setubal
Osilipo

Fig. 2

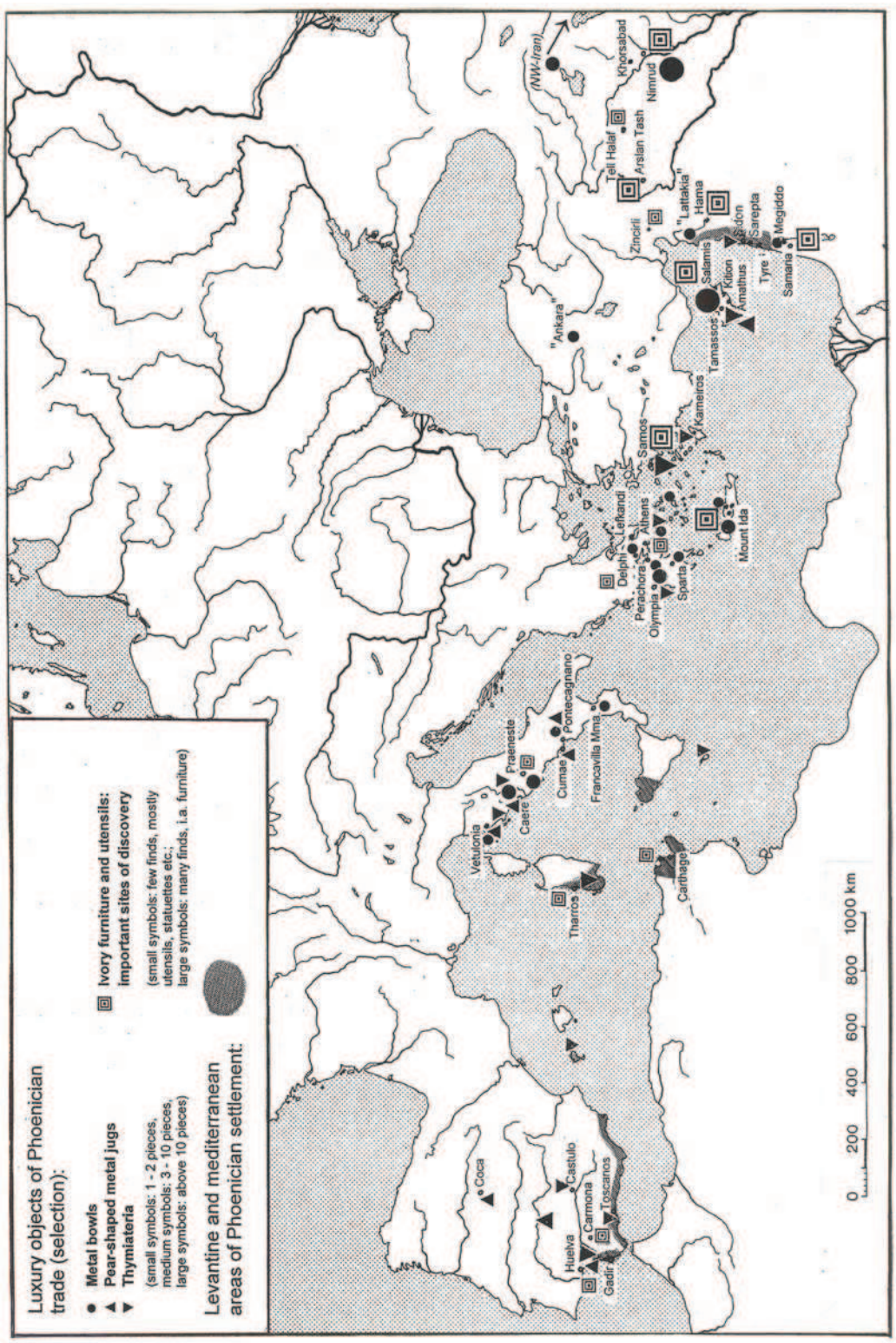
Luxury objects of Phoenician trade (selection):
Metal bowls
Pear-shaped metal jugs
Thymiateria
(small symbols: 1 - 2 pieces, medium symbols: 3 - 10 pieces, large symbols: above 10 pieces)
Ivory furniture and utensils: important sites of discovery
(small symbols: few finds, mostly utensils, statuettes etc.; large symbols: many finds, i.a. furniture)
Levantine and mediterranean areas of Phoenician settlement:
(NW-Iran)
Khorsabad
Nimrud
Tell Halaf
Arslan Tash
Zincirli
"Lattakia"
Hama
Sidon
Sarepta
Megiddo
Samaria
Tyre
Salamis
Kition
Amathus
Tamassos
"Ankara"
Kameiros
Samos
Delphi
Lefkandi
Athens
Perachora
Olympia
Sparta
Mount Ida
Pontecagnano
Cumae
Praeneste
Caere
Vetulonia
Francavilla Mma
Tharros
Carthage
Coca
Castulo
Carmona
Toscanos
Huelva
Gadir
0 200 400 600 800 1000 km

Fig. 3

Abbildungslegenden

Fig. 1: ⊙: Phoenician city-states and major towns in the Levant; - ●: Other important towns in the East.

Fig. 2: Phoenician expansion in the Mediterranean, 11th to 6th centuries BC. ⊙: Phoenician towns and city-states in the East; - ■: Selected early Phoenician settlements in the West, 8th/7th century BC; - □: Towns and other sites with Phoenician enclaves, 8th to 6th centuries BC (cf. Niemeyer 1999, 157). - Areas covered by horizontal hatching: Major mining districts in the West.

Fig. 3: Distribution of main 'Phoenician' luxury objects in the Ancient Near East and the Mediterranean (drawing by the author).

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