THE PHOENICIAN INFLUENCE

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A glance at the modern map of the Mediterranean will show the continuing influence of the Phoenicians, for Beirut preserves in its name the regular feminine plural ending of Phoenician in -ūt, which develops from the primitive Semitic -āt (which survives in Arabic), through -ōt (which is the Hebrew form), to the extreme result of narrowing in Phoenician -ūt. It is perhaps not surprising to find this ancient Phoenician name still very much alive in the Phoenician homeland, but towards the limit of the Western adventuring of the Phoenicians stands Cádiz, which in Latin was Gades, but the Greek form of the name τὰ Γάδειρα is closer to the original Semitic 𐤀𐤇𐤃 (gādeīr) which in Hebrew and Phoenician means ‘a walled place’, an etymology already known to Ephoros (cf. FGrH 70 F 129). A more tenuous survival of a Phoenician name is Skikda in Algeria, which is the classical Rusiccade,¹ in which rūs, the cognate of Arabic ra’s (> colloquial rās), and Hebrew rōš, is the word for ‘head’, and then ‘headland, cape’. The Arabic form is familiar enough in the Eastern Mediterranean in this sense.

Another geographical name is well enough known in its modern Arabic form as Al-Mīnā,² but in the ancient world the various coastal sites or offshore islands with the name Minoa, or the like, dating back to the Greek period, are clearly the mark of Phoenician traders.³ Their mark is much clearer in a classical atlas, where island-names beginning with I- or Ae- can be referred to the Hebrew and Phoenician word 𐤀𐤍 (‘y) = ‘island’.⁴ Islands were the preferred site for Phoenician trading-posts since they were readily accessible to a sea power, but easily defended against others.

While their language shows such an enduring quality in place-names, we still do not know them by their own name for themselves. Φοῖνιξ, their Greek name, describes them as traders in the purple cloth dyed with the dye for which their coast was famous, and the old Latin Poenicus is the same stem, and almost the same pronunciation, except that Old Latin spelling did not distinguish aspirated and unaspirated stops: it is our pronunciation that makes ‘Phoenician’ and ‘Punic’ seem very different.

In their inscriptions the Phoenicians normally described themselves as citizens of a particular city-state, as ‘Sidonian’ or ‘Tyrian’ and so on. To

1. For names of the classical period in Rus- or Rhys-, see the Index Geographicorum Nominum to J. Desanges’ edition of Pliny v. 1–46 in the Budé series and the editor’s full notes.
2. For several see the Index, p. 129a to The Times Atlas of the World (with some inevitable variations in spelling).
4. Such island-names are listed by the editors in their note to CIS 139.
describe the coast that we know as Phoenicia, the only term available to them was Canaan. In Hebrew this is יָם (K'na'an), and so too in Phoenician (but vowels are not written in the Phoenician script). The etymology of this name is obscure, but recent studies suggest, on the basis of cuneiform and Egyptian evidence, that it is a collective = 'the tradesmen' and in the Nuzi texts Құазі = 'purple wool', therefore (май) Құазі = 'the land of the purple wool'. (Koehler/Baumgartner, Lexicon, s.v.). The term accordingly does not describe a Semitic race, but those engaged in the production of purple wool and the coastal strip where they did it. This product was their principal export, and took them to all parts of the Mediterranean and beyond. Their ships returned with the products of the lands they visited, where they set up trading posts, whenever possible, on islands. They were not at first concerned to build up a territorial empire. The development of Carthage went beyond what was strictly Phoenician.

Sea power made their success possible, and their influence is to be seen throughout the Mediterranean. On land another Semitic Language spread widely under the protection of the Persian Empire. From a date before the conquest by Alexander comes the tri-lingual inscription in Lycian, Greek and Aramaic from Lydia, and in the century after Alexander, Asoka, the Buddhist emperor of India, set up in what is now Afghanistan a bi-lingual inscription in Greek and Aramaic. These are sufficiently striking examples of the vitality of Aramaic, which is found from Egypt to Central Asia and from the Aegean to India and China.

Geographical names are, however, only a small part of the linguistic contribution of Phoenician to Greek and Latin. Since the Semitic languages remain much closer in form to each other than the Indo-European languages, it is not always possible to be certain from which Semitic language a loan-word comes, but in the case of early borrowings, through geographical factors and the establishment of contact by sea, it seems inevitable that the loan-words came from Phoenician.

It is well known that the names of the Greek letters are distorted forms of Semitic words which describe the things of which the original letter forms were drawings: so the Phoenician ख represents an ox-head ('Ip = ‘ox’ in Phoenician, but not in Hebrew), ध is the plan of a nomad’s tent (byt generally in Semitic) and so on.⁵

Phoenician traders naturally passed on commercial terms, such as μνα, which appears in Daniel v.25 as MENE, but would appear to be much older and ultimately to be derived from Sumerian MA.NA ‘a date-stone’, which would have been used to weigh precious metals.

Lewy, in the book cited at n.3 devotes over 250 pages to explaining and

justifying the Semitic loan-words that he sees in Greek. Not all of them carry conviction, but the number clearly coming from, or through, Semitic is impressive. Of these the early ones are likely to come from Phoenician. So the name of the camel, which may not be Semitic in origin, would seem to have reached the Greeks from Semitic. λίβανος ‘frankincense’ has a clear etymology in Semitic from the root LBN = ‘white’, and the name would normally come with the product from the Semitic world. Χρυσός is certainly the Phoenician ḫrš, the only Phoenician word for ‘gold’. παλακίς shows a misunderstanding of a non-Indo-European institution: in Hebrew πήλιγος (pileges) = ‘wife’ (in the older kind of marriage in which the wife stays in her father’s house). This is not a Semitic institution, but Samson’s first ill-fated marriage was of this type, and in Arabic tradition Bilqīs (Arabic has no p) is the name of the Queen of Sheba. It was an honourable term reduced to the meaning ‘concubine’ in societies that did not understand it.

σίκερα ‘an intoxicating drink’ is certainly Semitic in origin: at a much later date the root appears in colloquial Australian as ‘shickered’, this time borrowed from Yiddish.

χιτών and Latin tunica both come from the root that appears in Phoenician as ktn, and is well known in Hebrew and Arabic also. This early borrowing is undoubtedly one of the results of the purple trade.

Hesychius writes Σαλαμβώ η ‘Αφροδίτη παρά Βαβυλωνίοις, and Aelius Lampridius states Salambonem omni planctu et iactatione Syriaci cultus exhibuit. The divine title may ultimately go back to the Sumerian SAL = ‘woman’, but the Greeks would normally get it through Phoenicia. Aristophanes’ Σαλαβακχώ would seem to be related. So the title Salammbo was well chosen for Flaubert’s novel about ancient Carthage.

σίγλος attributed by Xenophon to the Persians is ultimately the well known shekel, in Phoenician șql = ‘weight’.

Hesychius has ἄρραγίδες – δτήμονες, κρόκας. For this too the purple trade seems responsible, cf. Phoen. ‘rg = ‘weaver’.

Strabo comments on the great destruction caused by rabbits in Spain. The country may owe its name to this pest, c.f. Hebrew ḥew now identified as the rock badger, ‘the coney’ of the Authorised Version. But Jewish tradition identified it with the rabbit and said the Phoenicians gave ‘Spain’ its name from its rabbits. Since the rabbit was unknown in Syria until imported in later times, the Phoenicians would have been obliged to transfer

6. Vit. Heliog. 7.3
a Semitic name of another small animal.

Phoen. ps (from a root pss) = ‘level surface, tablet’ would explain the entry in Hesychius: πέσσον· δρος. χωπίον, Κύπριοι. πεδίον, Αιολεῖς. τινές ὁμαλόν.

The Phoenician origin of the musical instrument νάβλας and its name is not disputed: cf. Hebrew הָבֶל nēbel = ‘harp’.

The Hesychius gloss συκίνη· μάχαιρα points to the well-known Semitic word for ‘knife’: cf. Aram. ʿṣakkîn, Hebr. ṣakkin, Arab. sikkîn.

In the field of religion Adonis is certainly Semitic in origin: cf. Phoen. 'dn = ‘lord’, Hebr. יָּהָע, and βαίτυλος is best explained as בֵּית ‘el ‘house of god’.

The examples given above are only a small sample of certain or highly probable borrowings. Lewy has collected many more, but not all his arguments are convincing. It is clear, however, that the Phoenician or at least Semitic influence has been pervasive in many different human activities.

In view of this great cultural influence, it is unfortunate that no Phoenician literature has survived. How great this loss has been is shown by the Ugaritic texts discovered in this century. They reveal Baal as seen by his worshippers and correct the bigoted view of Elijah and the Hebrew prophets. They provided also legends and historical documents. No doubt there was once a Phoenician version of this Canaanite culture, but it has been lost completely. There is a trace of Phoenician scientific literature in the Greek version of Hanno’s report on his circumnavigation of Africa, and Columella refers repeatedly to Mago’s work on agriculture, which the Romans considered sufficiently important to deserve a translation.

However, the language lived on and is known from inscriptions and isolated references in Greek and Latin authors to Phoenician or Punic words and expressions. Since no vowels are written in the original scripts, the Greek and Latin transliterations which must represent the vowels and the comparative evidence of the other Semitic languages provide the best basis for reconstructing the language.

The survival of Punic, in spite of the crushing defeat of Carthage and the Romanisation of Africa which led to the flourishing African period of Latin literature, is surprising. But it did survive until the time of St. Augustine at least. Although he did not speak Punic himself, he had to provide for Punic-speaking congregations and in spite of his pride in his grasp of Aristotelian logic advances the dubious theological argument that since Punic ṣṭē = 3 (pronounced ṣaliṣ) is clearly the same as Latin salūs, it follows
that the Trinity is concerned with salvation.\textsuperscript{11}

The wide-ranging voyages of the Phoenicians naturally brought them to Italy in the early period, but Rome’s relative insignificance at the time led to sceptical treatment of Roman traditions of early diplomatic relations with Carthage. Such scepticism could not survive the discovery of the Punic inscription on a gold sheet found at Pyrgi in 1944\textsuperscript{12}

Although \textit{CIS} contains over 6000 Phoenician and Punic inscriptions, there has not yet been published a complete collection of all that have been discovered. They tend to be short, and in purpose building, votive or funerary. They can generally be dated only in the most general way, and the names that occur while interesting for students of nomenclature cannot be referred to historically known persons.

One group of inscriptions gives lists of victims to be sacrificed at temples with the fees due to the priests. Although there is archaeological proof that the Carthaginians did resort to human sacrifice,\textsuperscript{13} it is not surprising that there is no reference to this in these lists, since it was a special measure for times of crisis. How effective it might be is shown by the experience of King Mesha of Moab (11 Kings iii.26–7).

Our knowledge of the vocalisation of the language is helped by inscriptions written in Greek or Roman letters. The most remarkable text of this sort is the short scene with Punic in the \textit{Poenulus} of Plautus (verses 930–9, 995, 998, 1006, 1010). In spite of the hazards of the MS transmission, this has survived as intelligible Punic. It says something for the allegedly inattentive Roman audience that Plautus, who needed to hold their attention to make his living, thought such a scene, however short the Punic part of the dialogue, a theatrical possibility. There is nothing quite like it elsewhere in ancient literature. Over a thousand years later, however, Theodosius Diaconus wrote a poem in Greek trimeters celebrating the recapture of Chandax in Crete from the Muslims in 961 A.D. Two of his verses (349–50) are believed to be in Arabic, but they are reduced to gibberish in the MS. tradition, without sense or metre. It is not even clear whether the author intended to represent the enemy in this way, or whether the text originally was an intelligible sentence or series of phrases linked by καί, which might however itself represent an Arabic suffix misread as a Greek abbreviation.

At least Plautus intended his text to be understood, and the fact that he could write it and his audience enjoy it implies a degree of knowledge of the enemy’s language among the men who served in the armies of the Punic War.

\textsuperscript{11} Cf. P. Brown, \textit{Christianity and Local Culture in Late Roman Africa. JRS} lviii 1968, 85–95 (esp. 87–8 for Augustine’s 21 references to the \textit{lingua Punica}); F. Millar, \textit{Local Cultures in the Roman Empire: Libyan, Punic and Latin in Roman Africa. JRS} lvi 1968, 126–34.


\textsuperscript{13} Cf. P. H. J. Lloyd-Jones, \textit{Artemis and Iphigeneia. JHS} ci 1983, 87–102 (at p. 89).
Comparatively little is known of the work of interpreters and translators in the ancient world. We know that Themistocles proposed to learn Persian before approaching the Great King, and Ctesias probably needed such knowledge before treating him. It is possible to trade without a common language as the Papuans once did in the Gulf of Papua, but the number and nature of loan-words from Semitic implies a more intimate knowledge of the trading partner than this, and Semitic did not merely lend words, its loan-words from East and West are also numerous.

There clearly were translators able to cope with Punic technical literature on geography and agriculture. There were interpreters to facilitate trade and diplomacy, and a more extensive bi-lingualism than appears from our sources, which suggest only that an educated Latin-speaker would also know Greek.

It was also possible to learn by observation and the Romans were always ready to learn from their enemies in military matters. In field engineering, the fossa was normally fastigata, that is V-shaped, but they also knew a fossa Punica in which one face was perpendicular. The fossa Punica was obviously a more effective obstacle, but without revetting only possible in especially favourable ground.

For 2000 years the Phoenician influence was active in the Mediterranean, and then gave way to another Semitic language as Islam made its triumphant progress both to the Phoenician coast and in North Africa.

APPENDIX

Act V in the Poenulus opens with a speech by Hanno in Punic. The Punic version is given twice in the MSS, 930–9 and 940–9. They are accompanied by a Latin version of later date. G. Maurach in his edition of the play (Heidelberg, 1975, Carl Winter), prints these texts on pp. 98–9. He adds a Hebrew version by J. J. Glück on p.99, and in his commentary, on p.315 he has a French version by M. Sznycer and a German by J. J. Glück.

Hanno in the following scene makes brief replies in Punic. The Punic is included among the selected Texts by S. Segert, A Grammar of Phoenician and Punic, (Beck, München, 1976) at 81.5.

The following English version owes much to these authorities.

930 The gods and goddesses, who are of this place, on whom I have called

15. Columella I i 10, names Dionysius of Utica as translator of Mago.
that I may accomplish our task, and I beseech them that they bless my
venture . . .
O that I might here find my daughters and at the same time my
brother's son
under the protection of the gods and their righteousness.
In days gone by behold here lived Antidamas, a guest-friend,
of whom people say that he did everything that had to be done.
His son, whom I mentioned here with us, is Agorastocles.
My credentials are this ticket of hospitality, this I have brought
to show me at once that these are the boundaries of his dwelling.
While I am here on watch I shall question those coming out from
there.
Greetings!
Hanno, son of Matanbaal, a Carthaginian am I.
Greetings! . . . sir!
Greetings, sir!
There is no doctor here.
What is the sense of it? . . . . Who will answer the visitor?