The Punic Mediterranean: Identities and Identification from Phoenician settlement to Roman Rule arises from a workshop held at the British School at Rome in 2008 and it is basically composed of the papers given at that meeting.

The aim of the book is very interesting, both concerning the topic (since very little scholarly literature about Phoenicians has been published in English) and the scientific approach. The main question of this book is, indeed, to examine what ‘Phoenician’ and ‘Punic’ actually mean, and how Punic or western Phoenician identity has been constructed by ancients and moderns: is it still possible to talk of the existence of a ‘Punic world’ or is it an a posteriori construction? The attempt to reconstruct, in spite of the undeniable difficulties, an intangible reality (the ‘identity’) through the material culture (combining the use of archaeological, numismatic, epigraphic and literary sources) is certainly admirable.

The book is made up of two sections: the first is about general topics and the second contains papers focusing on a particular theme or case study; in both, the authors adopt a postcolonial point of view, in accordance with the current theories about the construction of identities. The Leitmotiv shared by all the contributors is the idea that the adjective ‘Punic’ does not correspond with a uniform identity, but with a sort of cultural substratum which interacts with local influences in different ways.

The first chapter, by J.W.R. Prag, examines the problematic translation of the Latin term poenus, corresponding to the English ‘Punic’. In reality poenus is simply the transliteration of the Greek φοῖνιξ; in the modern languages, however, this term has caused a dichotomy, since it has been translated as ‘Phoenician’ (when the literary sources were Greek) or as ‘Punic’ (when they were Roman). The word ‘Punic’, therefore, does not indicate an identity transformation perceived as such in the ancient world and it is not even an ethnic label, since there are no elements to define any real difference between Punics and Phoenicians, or between eastern and western Phoenicians.

The following contributions by N. Vella (ch. 2), P. van Dommeelen (ch. 3) and S.F. Bondi (ch. 4), deal mainly with modern construction of the ‘Punic’ identity: in particular, Vella warns us of the dangers of identifying a culture by conventional artefacts (i.e., metal bowls in the Phoenician case); Van Dommeelen addresses the problem of modern perception of Punic identity and of the way in which is (re)defined; lastly, Bondi proposes to recognize a substantial internal unity (institution, language, common divinities, cultural elements), which does not correspond to a homogenous identity, but to different ‘punicities’, each one corresponding to a settlement.

The papers by C. Gómez Bellard (ch. 5) and S. Frey Copper (ch. 6) in a certain sense introduce the second part of the book, since they they analyze ‘identity’ through two specific filters while maintaining a wide perspective. In the first
case, the distinguishing factor is the funeral culture, while in the second it is coin-age. The authors agree that in the 6th century BC, the western colonies experienced a process of differentiation historically coinciding with the hegemony of Carthage, but on the other hand they clearly explain that this cultural homogeneity does not imply a political unity.


TELMINI, DOCTER, BECHTOLD, CHELB1 and VAN DE PUT (ch. 7) choose to examine the topic using archaeology and, in particular, ceramic and topographic data in order to see if there are any practical changes within this period.

H. and A. BEN YOUNÈS analyze the funerary world of the Numidian and Libyan areas: they notice that local cultures preserve characteristic traits, but that they borrowed freely from Punic world. J.C. QUINN (ch. 9) examines ‘Punicity’ through the myth of the Altars of Pihlaeni, reported by Sallust (Iug. 79). Her reading suggests that we could interpret this story as a Carthaginian wish to make use of a typical Greek model for defining themselves by a system of value opposed to the Greek one.

V. BRIDOUX (ch. 10) and E. PAPI (ch. 11) strengthen the idea of an in fieri identity, that is a local substratum which is affected by the contact with the new spheres of influence. The following papers, focused on the Iberian world (ch. 12 and ch. 13), underline the presence of hybridization phenomena which have to be interpreted in the light of Mediterranean patterns of trade, traffic and communication.

ANDREA ROPPA (ch. 14) offers a survey of the changes in settlement patterns and material culture in some case studies in Sardinia from the late sixth century until Roman times. His anthropological insight is particularly interesting and clarifies that social identity is created from the interaction of macro and micro-contexts, stressing its working at different scales and levels.

C. BONNET (ch. 15) takes us back to the oriental world, exploring how Alexander’s conquest affected the Phoenician cities and the relationship between the eastern and the western Mediterranean.

The last chapter is entrusted to A. WALLACE-HADRILL, who openly denounces the marginality of Phoenicians compared to Greek or Roman studies, although
they had an important role in the Mediterranean dynamics. Concerning identity, WALLACE-HADRILL affirms that Phoenicians thought of themselves as a people or culture united by common practices, even if they did not feel as belonging to as a single ethnos, but rather to various cities.

Although in general the aim to investigate a culture using external literary sources is definitively difficult to realize (since ‘creating arguments from silence is more difficult than creating arguments from literary sources’, as pointed out by J.W.R. PRAIG in the second chapter), the topic proposed by the authors is very stimulating. As scholars we frequently avoid discussions about scientific terminology. In this way we risk passively using words reflecting misunderstandings or inaccurate renditions of the literary sources. If it is true that we have to label phenomena, then it is necessary to choose suitable words, since the scientific integrity of our discipline is guaranteed by the selection of appropriate and accurate terms. So, is it possible to talk about ‘Punic identity’ without being sure that ‘Punic’ means really something or without a scholarly agreement about what ‘Punic’ is?

The real problem has to be located – in my opinion – in this second question. There are some lexical expressions which are conventionally employed in order to identify specific events of the past and do not reflect an historical reality: nonetheless, they have been adopted by a scientific community which agrees on their meanings.¹ In the case of ‘Punic’, as just pointed out, an agreement on its meaning does not exist and this could subsequently create misinterpretations, i.e. when the authors of a paper or book do not specify what they exactly intend. Is it therefore necessary to question the real utility of this term: is perhaps a fourth-century BC inhabitant of Carthage less ‘Phoenician’ then a Tyrian of the ninth century BC? Does he deserve to be labeled in a different way? And why, from the lexical point of view, is a fourth-century inhabitant of Syracuse as ‘Greek’ as a ninth-century Euboean?

The idea that emerges from the book is that cultural identity is not a static element, but changes according to space, time, purpose and social context. The Phoenicians established settlements across the Mediterranean, but probably never thought of themselves as a whole: they were conscious that their culture has some traits in common, but they never reached a political unity. Their identity changed when the Mediterranean scenario changed and this kind of transformation is not per se directly linked to the hegemony of Carthage, but rather to interactions with local realities.

The Punic Mediterranean raises many questions and opens several new possible paths in a branch of knowledge that is fundamentally recent. Wondering about our own tools and methods is a normal and necessary step in order to guarantee the growth and the improvement of the discipline. In this sense, the reflec-

¹ For example, the term ‘colonization’, which is normally used by scholars with the awareness that Phoenician and Greek cities of the ancient western Mediterranean were not ‘colonies’ at all, but rather ‘settlements founded far from the motherland’
tions offered by the different authors could encourage a stimulating debate: a new start is sometimes essential to shake up established patterns of thinking.

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II. MONOGRAPHIEN MIT ÜBERGREIFENDER THEMATIK


Le livre couvre la période qui sépare les débuts de la Ligue de Délos de celle qui suit Chéronée. Le plan est chronologique et énumère les étapes de l’hégémonie athénienne (intéressante réflexion initiale sur les notions de ligue, hégémonie, impérialisme et impérialisation) et souhaite renverser la perspective athéno-centrique de l’historiographie.

La tâche était ardue, tant est grand le poids des sources athéniennes, et l’auteur (désormais « A ») souhaite s’appuyer sur l’épigraphie (cycladique mais surtout athénienne, elle aussi) pour sustenter ses démonstrations.

La thèse générale soutenue par l’A. est que l’impérialisme athénien était certes implacable, mais que les Cycladiens l’ont finalement accepté parce que c’était leur intérêt. Du coup, il tend à minorer les révoltes et leur répression (Naxos, 127s., Délos, 194–197 et 260–264), Mélos (197–204), Thasos (215–216), Andros (217–219), Kéos (265–270 et 276–279) : l’existence d’un parti pro-lacédémonien à Délos est rejetée, le traitement infligé à Mélos « compréhensible » (ainsi l’A. souligne-t-il qu’un parti mélien avait ouvert la ville aux Athéniens (p. 204), et que le retour d’exilés implique que le massacre n’avait pas été total !). On touche parfois au paradoxe : « L’épisode thasien est lourd de sens. En effet, s’il constitue une révolte réprimée … il est aussi le reflet négatif de ce qui ne s’est précisément pas passé ailleurs … l’absence de réaction négative … peut être interprétée comme une forme d’adhésion positive aux choix athéniens » (p. 216). Tout ceci dans un chapitre qui analyse la participation d’insulaires à la conjuration de Pisandre !

Les pages consacrées à la fin de la guerre du Péloponnèse (« Les Cyclades d’un impérialisme à l’autre », p. 227–239) n’éclairent pas la complexité de la situation politique, mais on voit se faire jour, au fil des pages, une approche plus nuancée grâce à l’analyse d’inscriptions et de textes qui montrent les luttes de factions dans les cités insulaires, en particulier à l’époque de la seconde confédération (« La seconde ligue dans les Cyclades : entre résistance et acceptation », p. 239).