A Phoenician way to be Roman

Francisco Machuca Prieto
Universidad de Málaga

This paper offers a synthesis on my dissertation, titled *The Phoenician communities of the Iberian Peninsula and their integration in the Roman world: an identity perspective*.

The period under discussion extends from the end of the Second Punic War in 206 BCE to the Flavian era in the last quarter of the century CE. About all, my work focuses on the cultural and ethnic dimensions of the process of integration.

Thus, the investigation that I'm presenting in this workshop, built on an examination of the extent literary, archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic evidence, has at its primary goal the explanation of the mechanisms of construction of collective identity (as well as their forms of expression) which must have come about in the midst of these commnunities along the road to becoming established as Roman *ciuitates*.

Secondly, my dissertation also attempts to improve upon the one-dimensional classical perspectives concerning the poorly-named process of «Romanization». This, in turn, lead me to think in the existence of ethnic workings and re-workings by means of falsely or actually ancient components with the goal of legitimation within the dynamic Roman world.

Finally, the theorical construct which I take as starting poins rests on two pillars: 1) the new identitarian perspectives, based on the idea of the social world is a construction; and 2) the postcolonial theories.

The main hypothesis of our thesis is none other that the consideration of an early and intense political movement of the Phoenician peninsular communities toward the orbit and interests of Rome, along with a parallel adaptation of their political elites into Roman power structures. I defend that, from the end of the Second Punic War on, and especially in the early Imperial period, the communities of Phoenician origin and tradition in the West may have carried on amongst themselves a new ethnic discourse full of Phoenician content, at the same time that the gradually integrated into the political structures of the Roman world.

The Phoenician communities inhabiting the south of the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the III century BCE, dit not disappear with the advent of the romans.

News such as those by Strabo, according to whom the Turdetani had forgotten their own language, and were living utterly in the roman style by the turn of the Era (Str. 3.2.15), requiere a deeper interpretation. Moreover the geographer of Amasia, in other part of his work, declares that most of the Turdetani cities and adjacent areas remained inhabited by Phoenicians (Str. 3.2.13). Therefore, according to him or his sources, such as Posidonius, Asclepiades and Artemidorus, who knew first hand of the political situation in the Peninsula at the end of the Republic, existed certain peoples with distinctive cultural traits –language, written documents, traditions, religion, etc.– which would allow a foreign observator to speak of «Phoenicians» still living in Turdetania.

Certainly, the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula by the Romans brought with it great changes. However, in the case of the Phoenician communites, testimonies like those already mentioned and also archaeological data (as can be seen in this slide)

reveal an apparent cultural continuity, with considerable changes not taking place until toward the end of the Republican period.

The main conclusion that we can take from this is that the Phoenicians, although they began to integrate themselves quite early into Roman power structures due to the necessity of the elites to consolidate their positions of power at the heart of their own communities, did so with the intention of maintaining their own idiosyncrasy and of not losing their unique cultural traits.

At the same time that the process of the establishment of Roman rule was underway, there arose among the Phoenician peninsular communities ethnic strategies and mechanisms of self-recognition which used the past as the principal element of legitimation. This does not mean that the civic arena ceased to operate as a mechanism for forming identity, but now, after the arrival of Rome, also came into play a new complementary axis.

Given this state of affairs, our primary thesis, as I have already noted, is that from the time of the arrival of Rome into the Iberian Peninsula there was ample opportunity for the Phoenician communities located there (like *Gades*, *Malaca*, or *Sexs*, to mention a few of the more well-known ones) to participate in a process of ethnic construction and/or re-elaboration related to their gradual integration into the structures of the new Roman government.

As a base was used a series of cultural elements which displayed their specificity in the face of other contemporary identities by means of a connection with a prestigious ancestral past. There were two fundamental components of this process: the recognition of certain common origins, real or putative, which took root

along with the **city of Tyre**, the oldest metropolis, and the **figure of Melqart**, not only because he was the tutelary divinity of that city but also because he was the quintessential founding god within the Phoenician orbit.

The goal of our dissertation is to explain why and how this process occurred.

With regards to the first question, I think it necessary to explain, even only briefly, that this elaboration of a native ethnic discourse within a fundamentally Hellenistic-Roman era could be explained largely by the needs of the elites of the above-mentioned cities for political legitimation, totally immersed as they were in the complex game of ethnic oppositions and aggregations which sustained the ideological structures of the Roman Empire. That is to say, alongside municipal civic identities, which, as is known, constitute the most important framework of ethnic reference within the Roman world, there was generated what we could consider constitutes a new «Phoenician identity» which until that point had not existed as such, due above all to the ambition of these communities and their aristocracies to secure the most favorable position possible in the recomposition of powers and hierarchies within a political system like that of the Roman Empire, which was notably flexible in its ability to integrate conquered peoples.

With respect to the how, the thesis that I am setting forth considers that a good part of that identity would have been linked to the reception on the part of the above-mentioned elites of the essentially positive "ethnic image" of the Phoenicians –*phoinikés*– which we find in certain authors of the Hellenistic era such as Diodorus Siculus or Strabo. This is a phenomenon of assimilation which is not only identifiable in Roman Hispania but also in other parts of the Mediterranean, including Phoenicia

itself, as has been studied previously by Fergus Millar and Corinne Bonnet. In postcolonial terms, I would be talking about seeing how the Greek and Roman writers constructed the other, but also in what way that other represented itself while employing the tools which had been placed at their disposal as well as their own tools.

So then, the construction of this identity with a strong Phoenician component would not completely oppose itself to «Roman identity», but rather would be integrated into the complex array of identities which sustained the imperial edifice. I believe that the integration of the Phoenician communities into the Roman world did not have to necessarily be linked to an imitation of «Romanness». I defend the idea that beginning in the second century BCE, there could have taken place in the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula a rediscovery of «Phoenicianness», not as a reaction to «Romanness», but more appropriately as a «Phoenician way to be Roman».

Therefore, according to my focus, the transformations produced by the Roman conquest beginning at the end of the third century BCE are the real stimulus which motivated the configuration, based on criteria which were themselves ethnic, of a «Phoenician identity» apparently composed by specific groups within these communities for the purposes of self-recognition within a context which was above all political.

Although the new ethnic discourse which we are discussing would have taken its own form in each city, it seems clear that the formation of this new identity is above all related to the reworking of histories, myths, legends, and traditions

concerning the ancient origin of the Phoenician communities. Melqart, the primary Tyrian god, turns out to be a central component of the process, as I have already noted. The tutelary Tyrian god appears until the Imperial period on the most notable types of Gaditanian coinage as an ethnic symbol, typically accompanied by the representation of tunas or dolphins, a symbol of maritime riches and the commercial ascendancy of the city.

The figure of Melqart is also present on the obverse of coins from *Carteia*, *Sexs*, and *Abdera* until well into the first century BCE. The purpose for this is none other than to make clear the great antiquity of such foundational concepts and to demonstrate their affinity to Tyre, whether actually real or not. Indeed, the first Latin inscriptions do not appear on these coins until the time of Augustus. But even so, they still maintain the head of Melqart on the obverse for some time, as can be clearly seen on the sesterces and dupondii of series VII.A 1 and 2 minted by the mint of *Gades* around 19 BCE to commemorate the pontificate of Balbus Minor.

The Phoenician imprint on the Roman *Gades* of the second and first centuries BCE is also noticeable in the funerary arena, since there are numerous examples both of rituals and of funerary objects as well as in the typology of burials which demonstrate continuity. A similar tendency can be seen in other cities of southern Spain in which the Phoenician component is notable, like *Baelo Claudia,* where the population of ancient *Bailo* ultimately settled. Or *Carmo*, whose early Imperial necropolis is characterized by the absence of typical Roman *terra sigilata* and the presence of a funerary iconography of Phoenician-Punic origin –for example, the Tomb of the Elephant–.

I believe that this cultural continuity which manifests itself as much in the funerary sphere as in the arena of coinage is related to the process of ethnic elaboration and re-elaboration.

I observe that, coinciding with the monumentalization and the urban transformations experienced beginning at the end of the first century BCE by a large number of cities in the southern part of the peninsula, which served as a show of their constantly increasing integration into the Roman world, nonetheless their material culture and funerary practices indicate, as already discussed, a significant connection with Phoenician customs. This means that certain ethnic markers, reformulated as they were, continued to be fully active as a form of expression in an open, heterogeneous, and dynamic context. *Gades, Malaca, Sexs,* or *Abdera* do not cease to be Phoenician cities when they fall within the Roman orbit at the end of the third century BCE. From various graffiti found in some of these cities, we know with certainty that Neo-Punic was still written in them until the Imperial era.

For this reason, the significance of the Phoenician elements must have still been important in a period in which Hispania in general and *Baetica* in particular had long been immersed in the governmental structures of Rome.

In conclusion, I'm trying to show that we have shifts constantly between unity and diversity, local and global. The survival of cultural elements rooted in traditions prior to the arrival of Rome certainly does not indicate an active and hostile resistance to Roman customs. On the contrary, this continuity is seen as a renovation, a way of giving free rein to integration without renouncing the particulars: «a Phoenician way to be Roman».