

## **Contestualizzare la “prima colonizzazione”:**

**Archeologia, fonti, cronologia e modelli interpretativi fra l'Italia e il Mediterraneo**

## **Contextualising “early Colonisation”:**

**Archaeology, Sources, Chronology and interpretative models between Italy and the Mediterranean**

**Towards a polarized Mediterranean Iron Age chronology**

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### *Introduction*

The data that provide the archaeological sequence with absolute dates is directly influenced by two kinds of factors. On the one hand, there stand the nature and quality of the available sources of information, as well as the methodological approach employed to handle them. On the other, possible perspectives or agendas that may condition the analysis and, especially, its results.

There is one aspect that sometimes does not seem to be clear, or it is simply forgotten. Namely, any chronological framework has to result from a balanced and coherent combination of three basic information sources: first, the analysis of the material culture and its synchronic-diachronic nature and characteristics; in the second place, a critical analysis of the available written sources; thirdly, an objective use of dates obtained through non-historical methods. It is obvious that the particular nature of each of these sources will give place to three different sorts of data provided with particular characteristics. At the same time, it should remain clear that paying more attention to one of them will necessarily lead to a different result than if they are considered altogether.

Often Iron Age chronological issues concerning the Mediterranean in general and the Levant in particular, refer to broad periods of time; but more often than not, few decades can make a significant difference. In front of this situation, it is fundamental to reconsider the capability of those information sources and the methods employed to handle their data to provide us with this accuracy. Several questions would raise in this respect: is it possible to gain a precise picture of the evolutionary stages of the material culture?; is it always possible to rely on dates derived from ancient written sources?, can all historical events and processes be reflected on the material culture?, if so, how?; given the actual nature of <sup>14</sup>C as a dating method, can its estimations condition the discussion?, are these dates always handled objectively?.

Scholars involved in the study of the diverse cultural areas around the Mediterranean have combined these factors in the way that best fitted their respective paradigms. In some instances such

as the Aegean or the Cypriot, the reference has been the analysis of the evolution of their respective ceramic repertoires, while in other cases, for example the Biblical Archaeology, that reference has been the historical and unhistorical events recorded in the Bible. No doubt, the linearity between historical periods and manifestations of the material culture described for the southern Levant is an issue that may deserve a separate study. Nowadays there are two main interpretative lines: one that follows Yadin's parameters, in which the so-called 'United Monarchy' plays a central role, and the 'Low chronology', for whom that role is rather related with the 'Divided Monarchy'. As a consequence, any possible variation in the historical interpretation of these archaeological remains leads to significant changes in its chronological framework. In any case, this local dichotomy should not have major repercussions for the rest of the Levant. However, its relevance becomes capital as this area provides most of the main references for the before mentioned cultural areas.

One way or the other, we are left with the impression that the core of the chronological controversy in Biblical Archaeology is of a purely historicist nature. The whole issue is about a dispute on the actual or supposed relevance of certain historical periods and how these are reflected on the archaeological record. In the course of the controversy many elements have been employed to defend the position of the two camps. First historical and archaeological data has been exhausted and then attention has been lately drawn to 14C, which now dominates the discussion. However, this source has also experienced a complex process that goes from taking the estimations as they are, to subject them to statistical approaches such as the Bayesian analysis, taken as a third revolutionary step in the evolution of 14C techniques. Broadly, this approach is based on the idea that previous evidence and observations can be employed in the analysis in order to update or infer the probability that a given hypothesis may be correct. The final outcome has been the reaffirmation of both camps, which keep on standing behind their historicist ground positions.

In the actual circumstances, it is evident that we stand not only far from reaching a consensus; even agreements on minor details seem to be difficult. However, the obvious result, that is, any given context can be dated differently depending on one's perspective, should not represent a problem, especially if the reader is aware of all the circumstances that are involved in the controversy. In this context, for example and from a general Mediterranean perspective, the new corrections proposed by the Groningen Team for the Aegean chronology do represent nothing but its harmonisation with the traditional proposals of the Biblical Archaeology. One can agree with its results or not, but no one can deny that it is an adequate procedure, which will serve as a reference for those who follow the standards of the Biblical high chronology in the rest of the Mediterranean. However, the second consequence, probably the most important one, has been that the chronological debate generated in southern Levant has been finally exported to the rest of the Mediterranean.

#### *The Phoenician sequential and chronological framework*

Unfortunately, up to now metropolitan Phoenicia has been unable to provide strong chronological references. Local historical sources are nonexistent and stratigraphic record on which to reflect the few known events are scarce. Therefore, the only solution is to look for references abroad, and all attention goes mainly to Palestine, as it has been the case of the Aegean and the Cypriot sequences. However, the use in this context of certain correlations between written history and archaeological record does not mean a vindication; it is all about valid references that may include also certain 14C dates under discussion. Actually, there is no reason for the Phoenician archaeology to get involved

in Biblical Archaeology issues as those already mentioned, even if they could indirectly affect the Phoenician history.

Furthermore, the lack of local historical references should be taken as an advantage. It allows focusing on the evolution of the material culture without chains and agendas that may affect the perception of its nature and, therefore, would condition its interpretation. This task has a long history in this discipline, starting with Bikai's horizons, which represent the first attempt to formulate a Phoenician sequence based on its own characteristics. This is also the approach followed for al – Bass, whose contexts have probed that the stratigraphic sequence recorded at Tyre is coherent in general terms. On the other hand, in order to reinforce its particular character, it has been proposed the formulation of a different articulation and terminology for this sequence, based on the two periods already described by Chapman, Culican or Bikai (bichrome – red slip; Early and Late Iron Age). This circumstance, together with recent projects developed in Lebanon, for example at al – Bass, the cemetery of Tyre, in Beirut and north Israel, especially at Tel Dor, has led to a better knowledge of the evolution of the metropolitan Phoenician material culture.

Finally, we cannot deny the potential that an accurate sequential analysis can offer in this chronological controversy. In fact, in our opinion the sequence of the material culture should be playing the leading role that 14C method and its results have taken nowadays. It should be remembered that 14C estimations emanate from contexts, not the contrary, and their sequential nature should always have something to say.

### *Two examples*

There are two cases that may reflect the consequences of the expansion and consolidation of the two positions of chronological interpretation: Huelva and Carthage.

#### Huelva

The evidence recovered in Huelva is related to two different corpora of materials, obtained by different means, but both sharing a common factor that conditions their nature and relevance: their original context is unknown and probably as a result of this fact, their respective compositions are everything but coherent.

On the first hand, the metal hoard found in the Ría de Huelva was recovered thanks to dredging works in the river undertaken in the early decades of the last century. Notwithstanding the fact that it is practically impossible to discern if all these metallic objects come from a single or successive depositions, together with the extremely polluted original environment in which they have been resting for centuries, many studies have taken the assemblage, first, as a chronologically coherent and, second, as a suitable object for 14C analyses when possible. The result is that a date in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century BC has been proposed for the deposit; more or less the time when the written sources say that the initial contacts between the Phoenicians and Tartessos started.

The second element would be the materials recovered in the Plaza de las Monjas of the actual city of Huelva. In this respect, there is a complete range of interpretations obtained from these materials, which also lack an actual context, including the samples used for 14C chronological estimations that date this assemblage somewhere between 930 and 830 BC. However, from the perspective of

the Phoenician, Cypriot and Aegean ceramics collected there, it is possible to talk of a sequentially quite coherent repertoire that may have been deposited in a relatively short period of time, which probably was contemporary to Tyre Strata VI-IV. At the same time, there would be certain contexts found in Cyprus and recently in al - Bass, which may place this assemblage, whatever its depositional nature was, in a sequential moment that is later to Tel Rehov IV. From a chronological perspective, it is relevant that the lower limit of this period has been placed around 840 BC through a series of 14C estimations, and this date has been taken by A. Mazar as a reference for the end of the so-called 'Extended Iron Age IIa'.

### Carthage

Recent excavations undertaken by the University of Hamburg in the area of the *Decumanus Maximus* of the city have reached the bedrock. Relevant from a chronological perspective has been the significant number of shards of imported Aegean Late Geometric ceramics that have been registered in the course of those works, as well a series of 14C estimations obtained from some organic remains. The problem is that those radiocarbon estimations have placed those lowest layers somewhere in the last decades of the 9<sup>th</sup> century BC, and some scholars have connected them directly with the historical foundation of the city and the mentioned Aegean imports. However, there would be certain aspects that should be taken seriously.

The first and the most relevant aspect is that there is not a direct relationship between the Greek Geometric shards and the layers that have produced the 14C dates. Actually, those layers in question have produced only a much reduced corpus of material, most of them, if not all, of indigenous ascription.

Second, the chronology of metropolitan Phoenicia in general, and that of Tyre in particular, should be considerably raised by nearly a century, which may even contradict the dates proposed for the deposits from Huelva. Accordingly, we may also fall in a contradiction with the evidence obtained and maintained in some sites from the East. It is also especially important the short space of time that would exist then between the end of Rehov IV and those deposits recovered at Carthage.

The third consequence, and probably not the last one, would be an extension of the duration of the Aegean Late Geometric for more than a century, especially if the Archaic period is supposed to remain concentrated in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC.

### *Conclusions*

One of the main conclusions drawn from the arguments presented above would be that a strong controversy, once centred in southern Levant and closely linked with the relationship between Bible and Archaeology, has been now exported to the rest of the Levant. This circumstance has brought about two opponent positions on Mediterranean Iron Age chronology that are becoming more strongly fixed, leaving little space to agreements.

Despite the fact that something has to be going wrong when atomic isotopes have gradually displaced ceramic shards in the discussion, there is a fact that should call everyone's attention: the close relationship existing between the new chronological proposals, obtained through non-historical methods, and the chronological framework obtained from a combination of the ancient

written sources, especially the Bible and the Classical authors. From our perspective, the issue needs a deeper consideration, which necessarily implies a careful analysis of aspects related with the sequential evolution of the material culture, something that has not been done. However, if this was the real case, that is, that the classical dates have been probed on the western ground, it should not represent a problem at all. On the contrary, it would be a big relief. However, one is not quite sure if the 14C dates coincide with the historical ones or, rather, have demonstrated their validity. This is the reason why the whole discussion, at least in the way it has been carried out up to now, reveals a strong historicist background.

At the end, the whole issue is about interpretation of the available data, and given its nature and the methods to deal with it, the best solution would be to keep a flexible attitude towards possible corrections and agreements.