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The Phoenicians in the Southern Iberian Peninsula: The Significance of Metal Resources

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It is assumed that one of the major causes of the Phoenician and then the Carthaginian expansion towards the west was the significant resources of precious metals in the Iberian Peninsula. Most authors acknowledge that climatic change, the need for food, and structural shortages of the Phoenician towns (which influenced the preservation of the demographic balance) were related to the expeditions of the Phoenicians. It seems highly likely that ancient colonisation processes were strictly connected with the movement of people, and the use and appearance of differences and inequalities. The reduction of those processes to relations based on the colonizers' dominance over the native people and local resources, or so-called 'cultural assimilation of the colonized regions' would be a considerable simplification. Furthermore, it would be an oversimplification of the processes which were much more complex and consisted of subtle changes as far as social relations and contacts based on power were concerned.

Reasons for settlement

Business ventures were run by the Phoenician aristocracy, because that social class controlled production and trade. The aristocracy was connected with political power and did not identify with independent merchants. The privileged class of owners wanted to preserve control over production and communication and supervise the main activities and key points along the trade and exchange 'chain'. However, they lacked direct political means. Archaeological proof of this hypothesis is to be found in the first settlements established in the west. These walled settlements and the oldest graves are evidence of the aristocratic character of the Phoenician colonization, which is supported by artefacts which were found in *Sexi* and basements from *Trayamar*. Many researchers stress that retrenchments (a typical feature of the

Phoenician colonization) were already present on the Iberian Peninsula around a millennium and a half earlier, as at Los Millares, Vilanova de San Pedro and Orce.¹

In order to understand the significance of metals from the Iberian Peninsula for the Phoenician colonizers, one should consider the role of metals in the Phoenician economy, the sources of demand for them, and the use of the mined resources. For this purpose, one should understand the connections between the west and east, a large-scale autonomy with respect to affairs in the west, and easy 'flow of information' and goods through the Mediterranean Sea.²

Until 1100 BC, written sources did not mention metals in the context of tributes which were paid to Tiglatpileser I (1116-1078 BC) by the Phoenicians. Perhaps this was caused by the fact that at that time the overseas expansion had not yet started, and metals were not treated as prestigious goods of strategic significance. In the first half of the ninth century BC, silver, gold and tin were mentioned as one of the Phoenician tributes which were paid to Ashurnasirpal. In the middle of the ninth century BC, Salmanassar III received gold, silver, tin, and copper as a form of tribute, whereas Tiglatpileser III received 150 talents of gold. It is assumed that tributes in the form of gold came from, above all, the Iberian Peninsula.³ Some researchers think that the paying of tributes, in the form of metals, to Ashurnasirpal by the Phoenicians in the beginning of the ninth century BC took place earlier than the first traces of a Phoenician presence on the Iberian Peninsula, and even earlier than the political and commercial alliance (concerning the expansion on the Red Sea) between Solomon (965-928) and Hiram of Tyre.⁴

Several studies indicate that Anatolia provided the Phoenicians with silver, iron, tin, and lead. The inhabitants of Tyre obtained iron and copper from Asia Minor and Cyprus, silver from the regions of the Aegean Sea, and gold from Orfir.⁵ In the second half of the eighth century BC, Anatolian settlements were already weakened

¹ Blázquez 2002: 43.

² Orejas Saco del Valle *et al* 2000: 127.

³ Blázquez 2002: 43.

⁴ Blázquez 2002: 43.

⁵ Blázquez 2002: 43.

by the exploitation of minerals coming from Urartu, which forced the Phoenicians to look for new sources of metals.⁶

The Mycenaeans lost control over the Aegean sea routes in result of the invasion of the 'sea peoples' in Greece circa 1200 BC. The Phoenicians took advantage of the Mycenaean plight.⁷ The supply needs of particular markets and the response of the inhabitants of Tyre to Assyria's tribute requirements could have influenced the expansion of Tyre's inhabitants toward the west. All these factors could have contributed to the consolidation of long distance trade.⁸

In the tenth century, and in the beginning of the ninth century BC, the Phoenicians started to settle down in the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, Sardinia, Sicily, and Malta, on islands located near the mainland, small peninsulas, and hills near estuaries and small gulfs (Fig. 1).⁹ In the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula, the Phoenicians established many settlements whose names were mentioned in works of Greek and Roman writers. The most significant settlements include: *Gadir* (Cádiz), *Malaka* (Malaga), *Sexi* (Almuñecar), *Abdera* (Adra), *Baria* (Villaricos).¹⁰

⁶ Blázquez 2002: 44.

⁷ Moscati 1968: 115.

⁸ Orejas Saco del Valle *et al* 2000: 128.

⁹ Carrilero Millán *et al* 2001: 94.

¹⁰ Carrilero Millán *et al* 2001: 94.

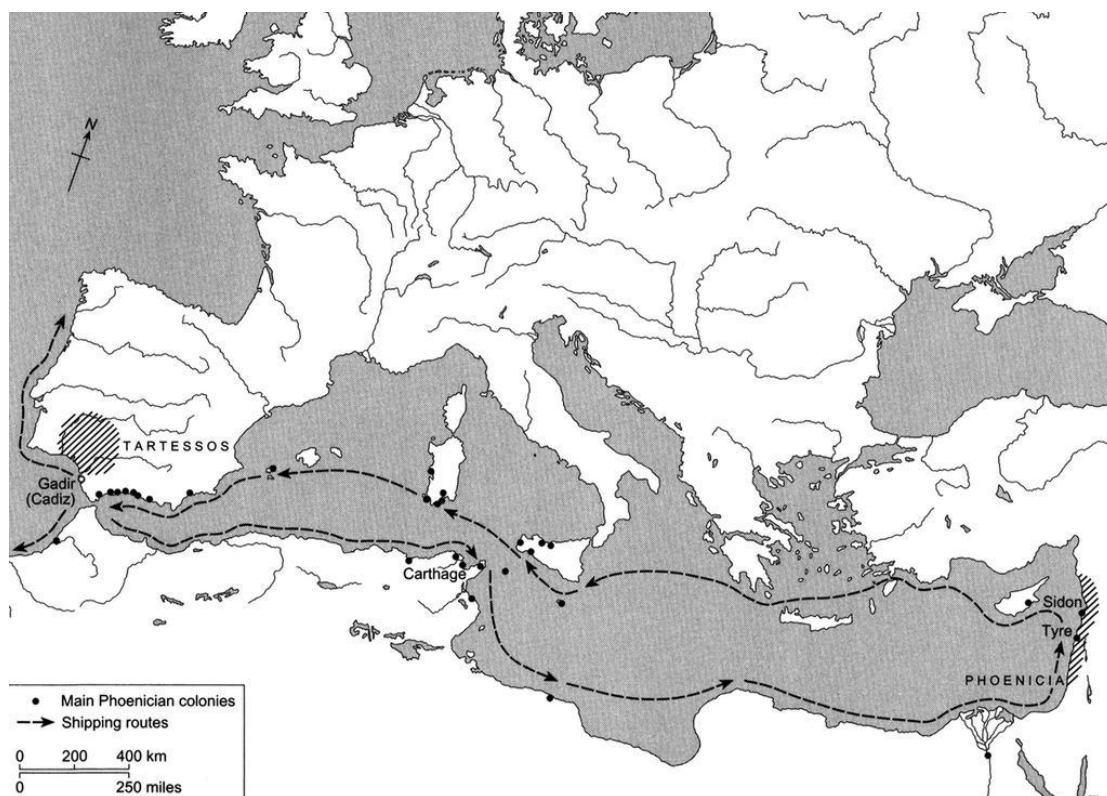


Figure 1: Phoenician trade and colonization (approx. 1000 – 500 BC.)

Some researchers think that the aim of the ‘first phase’ of the Phoenician expansion was to redirect the flow of the Atlantic production towards the Mediterranean. Later, during the seventh century BC, the exploitation of the Tartessic silver began.¹¹ Other researchers think that the interest in the seizure of the Atlantic routes appeared later. In that way, the Phoenicians settlements could consolidate their positions not only as suppliers of luxurious products but also of natural resources to Assyria.¹²

According to Assyrian archivists, by the tenth century BC Tyre had begun metal trading in the Near East. Up to the second half of the eighth century BC, the Assyrian empire limited its activity to the collection of tributes and the use of the Phoenician trade routes. It seems that from the eighth century BC the situation changed, and military and economic interventions in the Phoenician settlements became more intensive.¹³ The interest in the legendary deposits of Tartessic silver seems to be reflected in the archived documentation. In Assyria, an increased interest in silver must have appeared during the seventh century BC. The white ore in the form of

¹¹ Orejas Saco del Valle *et al* 2000: 128.

¹² Orejas Saco del Valle *et al* 2000: 128.

¹³ Orejas Saco del Valle *et al* 2000: 128.

bullions, nuggets, and hoops was used as money, which is proved by specially-designed comparative tables which were used to calculate the value of particular metals. At the end of the eighth century BC, in the Assyrian empire, a large increase in the amount of silver circulating in trade can be identified. This can be linked with the beginning of the acquisition of that metal on the Iberian Peninsula in the region of Tartessos.¹⁴

By the beginning of the seventh century BC, Tyre was significantly weakened and its territory was very limited and most of it was under the strict control of Assyria. Some researchers consider that this evidence favours a case for the autonomy of Tyre in the western part of the Mediterranean Sea Basin.¹⁵

The establishment of Cádiz was undoubtedly the most significant aspect of the Phoenician colonisation in the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula. The location of Cádiz was significant because it was situated on the boundary of the Tartessian culture. The Phoenician colony maintained significant commercial and cultural contacts with that culture. Archaeological studies which were conducted in a settlement located at the other side of the Gulf of Cádiz (beneath urban areas of Puerto de Santa María) indicate that the place was the original location of ancient *Gadir*. At this location archaeologists have discovered all the features of an authentic town: battlements with bastions and a double moat and traces of arranged town buildings with houses, settlements and streets which formed a so-called 'Phoenician district' (Fig.2).¹⁶ Some 2000kg of metallic lead was found in a room in Doña Blanca, which confirms the fact that metal trade was one of reasons for which the Phoenicians inhabited that strategic region.¹⁷

Archaeological materials also indicate the presence of a significant international trade route. It was established already in the eighth century BC and it is attested by the discoveries of amphorae across the region. These include vessels from Carthage,

¹⁴ Orejas Saco del Valle *et al* 2000: 127-128.

¹⁵ Orejas Saco del Valle *et al* 2000: 127-128.

¹⁶ Torres Ortiz 2001: 49.

¹⁷ Torres Ortiz 2001: 49.

Sardinia, and examples from Phoenicia, and indicate significant commercial relations between Cádiz and the rest of the ancient world.¹⁸



Figure 2: The archaeological remains of arranged town buildings with houses and streets which formed a so-called 'Phoenician district' at Castillo de Doña Blanca.

Colonization processes

Many researchers think that there was an earlier phase of relations preceding a constant Phoenician colonisation in the west. According to that concept, the inhabitants of Tyre initiated colonial contact which was not based on hegemony. This initial stage of relations is characterised by trade exchange without a simultaneous

¹⁸ Torres Ortiz 2001: 49.

seizure of regions of trade exchange, domination over the people of the region in question, and without exploitation of natural resources.¹⁹

Another form of communication with the native people could be so-called systematic contact. In this form of contact, the trade exchange concentrated on the use of the work of others, dominating the indigenous communities and the natural resources in the region.²⁰

Some researchers have argued that the phase preceding the colonisation and constant colonisation are mutually exclusive, like the two aforementioned stages. Moreover, they consider that the latter way of communication does not have to result in either a conquest of new territories or domination over the native people. The example is the first stage of colonisation in Huelva, which was established at the end of the Bronze Age during the Tartessic pre-colonial period. Huelva is located between the following hills: San Pedro la Esperanta, El Cementerio Viejo, El Molino de Viento and Mondaca. Probably in the lower part of the town there was a Phoenician *emporion* similar to Doña Blanca or Sexí. The relations between that town and the indigenous peoples were completely harmonious and symbiotic. The archaeological evidence found at Huelva indicates peaceful trading contacts with both Phoenicians and the original inhabitants. In the case of Huelva, arguments that the Phoenician subjugation of the native people and the seizure of their territories took place in order to seize control of natural resources and thus derive profits are unfounded.²¹

The Phoenician settlement in Cádiz had a considerable influence on the people of the whole of lower Guadalquivir. Close contacts with other cultures, huge economic opportunities, and a large concentration of population rendered the region particularly attractive for the Phoenicians.²² The presence of the inhabitants of Tyre resulted in deep changes within the sphere of material culture, particularly in the pottery output, and beliefs of the whole region.

¹⁹ Blázquez 2002: 51.

²⁰ Blázquez 2002: 51.

²¹ Blázquez 2002: 52.

²² Tulon de Lara *et al* 1997: 26.

The Phoenician trade system used a network of sanctuaries distributed along the principle routes of access to the sources of supplies. Places of cult dedicated to Melqart, Astarte and Ball, all closely connected with mining, were found in Castulo, Baria and Huelva. The temple found in Baria, probably in honour of Astarte, was associated with the mines of Herrerías (...) Unlike the sanctuaries, the role of the great temples, such as that in honour of Melqart in Gades, although no doubt linked to the supply system of metals, also played an integral part on a vaster economic scale, being situated where three important trade routes converged - the Atlantic route, the Mediterranean route and the Tartessans' route.²³

Moreover, their presence contributed to the distinction of a cultural sphere which is called the Tartessic culture (the present provinces of Cádiz, Huelva and Seville) (Fig.3).²⁴ Ancient writers described Tartessos as a town or a kingdom which was situated in the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula. However, they did not define its location precisely. The people of that region were characterised by different ethnic and cultural origin (predominantly Greek rather than Phoenician). Because of its military predominance, a military caste was the dominant caste. They looked for new sources of wealth. According to researchers, the Tartessic culture developed between the second half of the second millennium and the sixth century BC. The initial phase ended about the eighth century BC.²⁵

²³ Torres Ortiz 2001: 53.

²⁴ Manfredi 2009: 33.

²⁵ Blázquez 2002: 54.

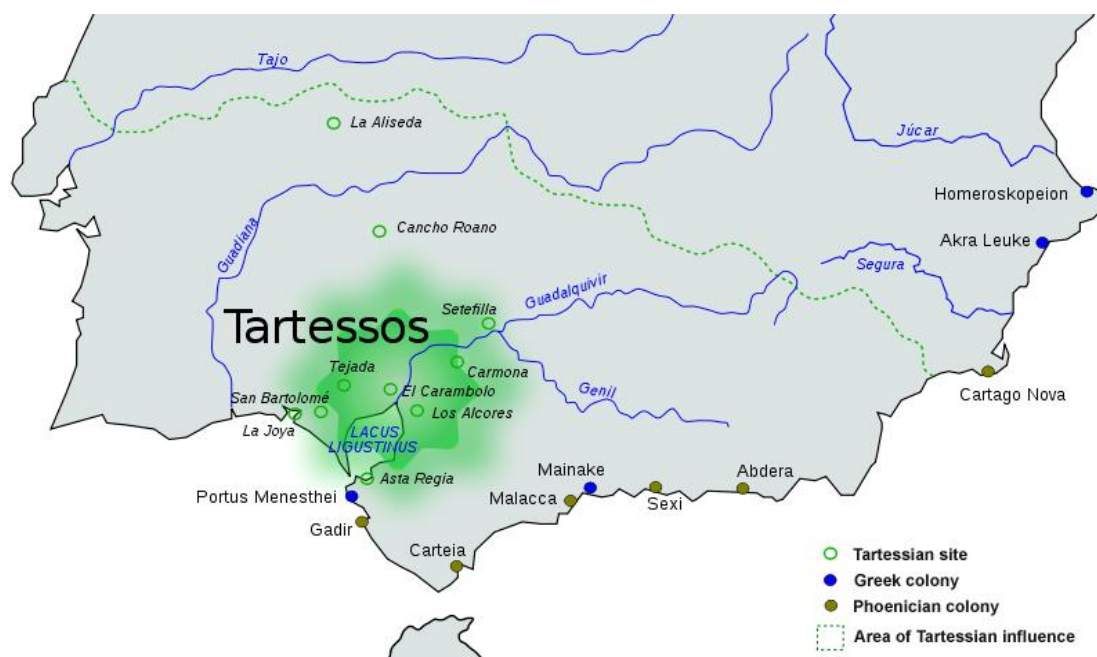


Figure 3: Map of the southern Iberian Peninsula with the shaded area denoting the region of Tartessian cultural influence.

It appears that in the areas occupied by the Tartessian culture there was neither a hierarchic, nor a complex socio-economic structure, which could have existed before the arrival of the Phoenicians. The nature of the second half of the second millennium BC depends on the interpretation of settlement and funerary evidence. By that time the population had dwindled. As a result, settlement was very scarce in contrast the high number of settlements from the Copper Age. In the absence of special architectural finds for these phases, there is no evidence of the developing social organisation. The pottery, both in the shapes and the decoration, was simple. Funerary practices show the submergence of local lineages or clans. The graves from this period have been excavated in Huleva (Andévalo), Seville (El Gandul) and Cádiz. There were no obvious symbols of rank. When Tyre's inhabitants arrived, the number of settlements (which were based on new patterns of spatial arrangement) started to increase. At that time, the arrangement of settlements in hierarchy started, too. Most of the settlements were concentrated in the Gulf of Cádiz. The earliest phase of development includes such sites as: Valencia de la Concepción, Huelva, San Bartolomé, and El Carambolo. At the beginning of the first millennium BC, the patronage of places was established. These settlements were usually located at the riverside and provided resources for metallurgy, agriculture, and product commercialization. Mining zones in Huelva became populated. Metallurgical activity

was launched,²⁶ with the massive mining centre including sites in Huelva, Quebrantahuesos, Tejada la Vieja (Fig. 4), Cerro de la Matanza and the basin of the Guadalquivir River.²⁷



Figure 4: Aerial photograph of the site of metal extraction at Tejada la Vieja.

The presence of the Phoenicians in the southern Iberian Peninsula influenced the sacred architecture of the Guadalquivir River Valley. In recent years, studies have focused on excavations around the sanctuaries of the Tartessic culture: Coria de Río and Casa Palacio del Marcus de Saltillo de Carmona.²⁸ It seems that in Tartessos there was not any direct transmission of colonial elements from one culture to another. The elements were gradually assimilated, filtered and incorporated into the existing cultural system depending on need. This implies that the presence of the Phoenicians did not mean a complete semitisation of the people inhabiting the southern Iberian Peninsula.²⁹

²⁶ Blázquez 2002: 55.

²⁷ Blázquez 2002: 55.

²⁸ Torres Ortiz 2001: 53-54.

²⁹ Torres Ortiz 2001: 53.

The area of the Tartessic culture was regarded as an '*El Dorado*' of the west, because for centuries the region was one of the main sources of precious and base metals –in particular, silver. It is not known how the Phoenicians reached the white bullion supply sources coming from the south western part of the Iberian Peninsula. It can be assumed that information (coming from the previous millennium) about that was known in the world and the local trade had already been established along regular routes. On the other hand, if there was an initial phase of contacts preceding a constant colonisation, it could have initiated the taking over of the exploitation of natural resources. Significant quantitative and qualitative changes in silver production can be observed at the beginning of the seventh century BC.³⁰

The location of the most substantial concentration of the Phoenician artefacts in the Guadalquivir River Valley is also the area where Carambolo and Alcores de Carmena were located. Archaeological excavations conducted around this valley led to the discovery of numerous elements of Phoenician archaeology typical of that region of the Iberian Peninsula. This included ivory, which at that time was associated with the Phoenician artefacts, or rather the Punic ones.³¹ Moreover, information about the presence of Tyre's inhabitants on the Peninsula is provided by excavations of settlements in the provinces of Huelva (i.e. Tejada la Vieja and Niebla) and mining settlements in the Río Tinto Basin.³²

Technological changes are quite clear in some respects, but they are not unequivocal and always of the same significance. That is why researchers differed in their assessments of the role of the Phoenicians in the Iberian Peninsula, with particular reference to the Phoenician influence on metal acquisition. The technique of bronze working spread in the eleventh century BC and continued to spread during the period of colonisation. The inhabitants of Tartessos dealt with hardware. Among other artefacts, long thin swords known as '*espadas pistiliformes*' were manufactured with the use of 'Tartessic bronze'.³³ The technique of bronze working started to become less significant during the seventh century BC, due to the introduction of iron

³⁰ Torres Ortiz 2001: 53.

³¹ Orejas Saco del Valle 2000: 128.

³² Torres Ortiz 2001: 55.

³³ Torres Ortiz 2001: 55-56.

working.³⁴ It is commonly thought that Tyre's inhabitants introduced various metal working techniques which were unknown before on the Iberian Peninsula.³⁵ According to this notion, the Phoenicians responded to technological changes and the initial organization of mining activity which was supposed to be transferred into the hands of the native people.³⁶ Techniques which were introduced by colonisers include iron metallurgy, which was noted in Toscanos, Adra, and Villaricos as demonstrated by the discovery of tuyeres, which belonged to furnaces used for the smelting of metals, and slag waste resulting from the smelting of metal ores.³⁷

James Mulhy claims that the presence of Tyre's inhabitants shall be regarded only as an intervention in commercial relations and an external factor stimulating production.³⁸ Thus, changes having started in the Mediterranean area were not caused by the presence of the Phoenicians on the Iberian Peninsula. According to this hypothesis, the indigenous Iberian inhabitants did not require Phoenician colonisers to teach them the technology of silver smelting. Furthermore, he affirms that there is no evidence that the Phoenicians knew how to smelt silver.³⁹ The hypothesis is said to be proven by the presence of slag wastes from iron working, which were noted during excavations at Toscanos, Cerro del Penón, and Morro de Mezquitilla. This slag waste was found within a context which was considered local and not Phoenician.⁴⁰ I. Keesmann refutes such statements and claims that the aforementioned waste resulted from the Phoenician metallurgy because they were found within a Phoenician context.⁴¹

On the other hand, some studies maintain the thesis concerning a real cultural assimilation in the southern part of the Peninsula, which is manifested by the establishment of the Tartessic state 'kingdom'. Other authors consider metal exploitation as a factor of the establishment of relations between the centre and peripheries which later started to influence social changes, but not cultural ones.⁴²

³⁴ Tulon de Lara *et al* 1997: 26.

³⁵ Tulon de Lara *et al* 1997: 26.

³⁶ Tulon de Lara *et al* 1997: 28.

³⁷ Orejas Saco del Valle 2000: 130.

³⁸ Carrilero Millán 2001: 94.

³⁹ Mulhy 1998: 319.

⁴⁰ Mulhy 1998: 319.

⁴¹ Carrilero Millán 2001: 95.

⁴² Keesmann 1989: 103.

The question of how the introduction of Phoenician centres with their own social structure and aristocratic centres influenced the cultural relations in the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula is open to debate. We face difficulties interpreting the mixed archaeological records of Phoenician enclaves which were inhabited by local people. These difficulties demonstrate the diversity of social and cultural relations in this region.⁴³

Apart from the fact that metals became the main driving force for the development of the Phoenician colonisation, they are also considered as the cause of the end of that process during the middle of the sixth century BC. The argument concerning resource depletion cannot be accepted fully because at that time almost all mining centres remained active (however, working and extraction at these locations was variable with respect to intensity).⁴⁴ Changes involving mining activity and metal production and working, along with such factors as changes in population, should be considered as a part of a general conversion of the western Phoenician world, and not as the collapse of the colony.⁴⁵ At the same time, the Celtiberian culture from the Meseta region started to spread toward the south. The above-mentioned phenomena should be understood as factors which led to an internal transformation of the Tartessian culture. Indeed, the Tartessian tradition was cultivated by the Turdetans.⁴⁶

⁴³ Orejas Saco del Valle 2000: 130.

⁴⁴ Orejas Saco del Valle 2000: 130.

⁴⁵ Orejas Saco del Valle *et al* 2000: 129.

⁴⁶ Tulon de Lara *et al* 1997: 27.

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