

THE HISTORY OF PHOENICIA

JOSETTE
ELAYI



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The History of Phoenicia

Josette Elayi

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translated from the French by Andrew Plummer

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“This audacious Phoenician did not stop
pondering in his mind the problem of navigation.
In himself, he ceaselessly agitated the Ocean.”

Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos or The Architect*, 1923

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Preface

The history of Phoenicia is little known, widely scattered, and fragmented. Narrating it poses a challenge as the Phoenicians were spread out over the whole of the Mediterranean world for roughly a thousand years. The sources of documentation available are multiple, disparate, intermittent, and all in all extremely limited. What a paradox for a people that invented the alphabet to have left behind so few written traces! Archaeological exploration of Phoenician sites is also limited, as they are buried under the modern cities of Lebanon with a few in Syria and Israel. Sometimes construction work or building restorations bring to light some ancient remains, a narrow window on the past. If the Antiquities Authority is alerted in time, it can carry out salvage excavations before the bulldozers move in. This was how, in 1969, the Lebanese archaeologist Roger Saïdah discovered in Beirut, at the bottom end of Martyrs' Square on a building site next to the old Rivoli cinema, some rich Bronze Age tombs and a superb stonework sphinx, engraved with the name of the Pharaoh Amenemhat IV, who ruled around 1772–1764.* He wrote, and not without bitterness: "This dig will most likely be the last opportunity for archaeologists to study the history of the ancient city." However, history was to prove him wrong: the civil war which ravaged Lebanon from 1975 to 1985 totally destroyed the city center of Beirut, enabling archaeologists from all over the world to carry out excavations before reconstruction work started. This was how the Phoenician city of Berytus was miraculously resurrected.

Up until now, no Phoenician specialist has risked writing a history of Phoenicia focusing both on historical events and the socioeconomic facets of the civilization.

Only a small number of general books have been published about the trade, industry, religion, art, and writing of this supposedly mysterious people, offering just a few pages of what is, at best, a "historical overview." Despite the difficulty of this task, I have decided to take on

* The dates mentioned are all BCE (Before Common Era) unless stated otherwise.

the challenge. I wanted to unwind a common thread in this impassable and arcane labyrinth that I have been visiting for more than thirty years now. I think the reader will be able to follow me with the help of the chronological frame of Phoenicia's history that I have endeavored to weave. I have presented the core of this history, based on the most recent research developments, so as to make it understandable and easily accessible. When several interpretations were possible for the same event, I have opted for the one which, to me, seemed the most plausible. I have pointed out the uncertainties when I was simply unable to get off the fence. The history of Phoenicia spans a period of nearly nine centuries, between 1200 and 332. I have centered it essentially on Phoenicia and its colonies, giving a brief mention to the history of the Punic city of Carthage and its colonies.

Which Phoenicia are we talking about? Which region of the globe are we in, and in what era? Indeed, even though the history of Phoenicia started in 1200, what happened in this region before then? We know that it was inhabited since prehistoric times when, around 5300, Byblos was a Neolithic fishing village, and that the site was occupied continuously thereafter. Between 1200 and 883, Phoenicia enjoyed an exceptional period of independence. Our knowledge of that period is very hazy, hence the reference sometimes made to the "dark age," just like the corresponding period in ancient Greece. Yet, this was Phoenicia's golden age, as, it was not again to enjoy another genuine period of independence. After 883, it was continuously dominated by the great powers of the moment and its own history became embroiled in theirs. It fell successively under Assyrian domination from 883 to 610, then under Babylonian domination from 610 to 539, and lastly under Persian domination from 539 to 332, the latter date traditionally marking the end of its history. The region subsequently went through periods of Greek domination, then Roman, then Byzantine, then Turkish, before concluding with French colonization. It was not until 1943 that Lebanon, the principal successor of ancient Phoenicia, finally became an independent state.

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