

Workshop „Between foreign hegemony and expansion to the West: Phoenician society and economy from 10th until the 5th c. BCE”

Discussion results

During the discussions a series of problems and challenges hampering Phoenician studies has been addressed, one of the main problems being that Phoenician studies are generally scattered over a wide range of different disciplines in which the Phoenicians usually feature as a “Randkultur” (marginal civilisation).

One critique concerning archaeological investigations was that while a lot of valuable material comes to light in excavations, there is still a need to embed the material in larger theoretical frameworks. Important steps have been made in recent years, however, to alleviate this situation, especially in contributions to gender and postcolonial studies. Unfortunately, there is still a tendency among other disciplines from the field of classical and ancient studies, notably Egyptology, Near Eastern Studies and Classical Archaeology, to ignore research results from the field of Phoenician studies (which is, of course, partly due to the self-definition of those fields: e.g. focus on cuneiform cultures or on the “classical” cultures of the ancient Greeks and Romans). It would therefore be helpful to pay attention to trendsetting fields of research that would allow multi-disciplinary approaches as well as wider geographical reaches. One such promising field for future research could be to investigate the role of agriculture, both in the Levant and in the West, which has previously been underestimated due to the dominance of Phoenician trade and industry as topics, which are so often mentioned in the written sources. By employing DNA analyses, ¹⁴C dating methods, archaeobotanical, archaeometric or petrographic studies, for instance, a lot of new information has been obtained in the last twenty years, and should be employed in future excavations and surveys to give us a better understanding of environmental and living conditions as well as of the movement of goods – and possibly people – between places.

To facilitate exchange between disciplines, researchers in Phoenician studies should strive to establish a joint terminology. It would also be advisable to intensify interdisciplinary work on certain sets of research questions. Also, there is need for more handbooks and databases to compile information on various types of finds (such as FACEM for pottery studies) and to make certain types of finds more easily accessible to the wider academia.

It was emphasized that a better understanding of the Phoenician homeland in its “pre-colonial” phase would be key to gain deeper insights into the mechanisms that triggered the Phoenician expansion to the West. Environmental assessments of the Phoenician homeland and the investigation of households on a site by site level were mentioned as the necessary methods.

More general problems in Phoenician studies are the limitations of knowledge exchange due to the wide range of modern languages employed (English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish), which not all scholars (especially those whose first language is neither of these) are able to read easily. In addition, the political situation in certain countries (notably Israel, Lebanon and Syria, i.e. the Phoenician “homeland”) makes it difficult for scholars to cooperate on an official basis.

Some suggestions to overcome those challenges have been put forward. One would be a commitment by all scholars to supply English syntheses of their research results, especially when presenting material studies, to make results of investigations more readily accessible to all. Regarding future research, there was general agreement that provenance studies should be increased, especially when studying metals, to trace the routes these important resources took, and to compare the results of these provenance studies with the written record regarding Phoenician trade networks. The potential of Big Data should be made use of to deal with large quantities of information.

It was stressed that the field of Phoenician studies would highly profit from a closer and more regular exchange between scholar working in the eastern Mediterranean and those focusing on the central and western Mediterranean. It would therefore be helpful to have more workshops where people present their latest material finds from excavations, compare results and discuss what questions this material should answer, to accommodate the critique put forward by some scholars that an increase in material can be of more value if viewed in the context of wider research questions and theoretical frameworks. This would require a closer cooperation between field archaeologist, cultural theorists, historians, assyriologists and specialists in Semitics. Interdisciplinary workshops such as the one conducted in Mainz, where participants were chosen from a broad range of disciplines and where the individual presentations were recorded so they could be followed via live stream, will help further those ideas, especially since live streaming and the publication of the recorded papers online can be accessed worldwide.

