In recent years, a lot of ink has been spilled on the application of science-based dating methods in different parts of the Mediterranean. The possible implications of this exercise for our understanding of early ‘colonization’ as a historical process, however, tend to receive rather less attention. So, with this talk I shall take the opportunity not to dwell on the technicalities of any specific dating method, but rather to address some more general problems we are facing when trying to establish a chronology of ‘early colonization’, before then turning to some more specific data.

The most fundamental question to ask ourselves before embarking on any exercise of chronology building probably should be what we are actually trying to date when dealing with the material remains of ‘early Colonization’? Is the respective piece of the archaeological record – be it pottery, other small finds, architecture, whatever – to be read as evidence for newly established long distance contacts? Is it evidence for a more permanent presence of incomers? Does such a presence invariably qualify as ‘colonization’? These questions at first glance may perhaps appear irrelevant to chronology, but certainly when it comes to relating a particular part of the archaeological record to a specific historical ‘foundation’ date, these are issues that do matter.

The matter might be somewhat different were we are dealing with direct, science-based dating of archaeological remains, but the underlying problem persists. To make things even more complicated, the diversity of methods we use in trying to establishing absolute chronologies inevitably adds some degree of temporal fuzziness. For the period of interest here, we are hardly ever dealing with the ideal case of an object or feature directly attributable to a specific calendar year or range of calendar years based on historical evidence. Rather, virtually all our efforts of directly dating objects rely on scientific techniques, essentially radiocarbon or dendrochronology. It also does not help that the vast majority of our dating efforts do not attribute dates directly at all, but instead rely on some kind of typological comparison with similar objects that already have some kind of chronological label attached to them by one of the methods referred to above. During the age of early colonization these comparisons frequently stretch considerable distances across the Mediterranean basin, to the extent that quite a few areas still effectively import their chronologies from other places.

In many cases the respective links tend to work one-way only, so we are not even dealing with proper cross-dating, where contexts in region A contain imports from region B and vice versa. This inevitably creates further uncertainties, in light of which one would expect that the availability of
scientific dating methods had long done away with the continued reliance on this approach in some parts, at least for the centuries and decades preceding the onset of the Hallstatt plateau.

Still, many regional chronologies for the early first millennium BC to an alarming extent continue to rely on the ‘import’ of absolute dates from other areas via type-fossils.

On the other hand, in regions where suitable type-fossil pegs are rarer and further between, such as most of the Western Mediterranean, over the last couple of decades necessity has been turned into virtue, and there now is a substantial number of Phoenician sites or sites betraying substantial Phoenician influence both in Iberia and Northern Africa whose earliest occupation layers have produced radiocarbon dates clustering at the end of the 9th century cal BC. This is all the more remarkable as the corresponding section of the calibration curve is quite steep and thus not particularly prone to produce any clustering effect.

So obviously, we are looking at an increase in settlement activity at this stage. Due to the sometimes ambiguous nature of the archaeological record this activity is not always well defined, but at a number of sites clearly involves the appearance of architectural features that lack local prototypes, following Eastern Mediterranean models instead.

In many cases those same sites have also produced ‘foreign’ pottery types that can be traced back specifically to metropolitan Phoenicia. In some, but certainly not in all instances these are from stratigraphical features linked to the same settlement phase that have produced ‘foreign’ architecture and also radiocarbon samples providing late 9th century cal BC dates. The problem is, however, that the respective pottery types according to conventional Phoenician chronology would usually be attributed to the second half of the 8th century BC.

There is no easy and straightforward solution to this problem, but it does have wider repercussions, because conventional Phoenician pottery chronology traditionally has depended on the conventional chronology of Greek Geometric pottery, as do a number of other conventional pottery chronologies, e.g. those of the Cypro-Geometric period and to some extent also those of the Early Iron Age in Italy.

The absolute chronology of Greek Geometric pottery in turn draws on specific readings of a number of historical sources, for the lower end mainly Thukydides, for the upper end ultimately on the historical chronology of Egypt’s New Kingdom. In between there are rather few and quite tenuous links to Biblical chronology and a lot of dead reckoning.

In principle then, there would be enough leeway for shifting most internal subdivisions between individual phases within this framework up or down by several decades without any ill effect on its overall integrity. Also, the various building blocks making up this framework are by no means as monolithic as most textbooks might have us believe. Even the temporal relationship between different regional styles of Greek Geometric pottery is not set in stone to the extent that they could only be moved about as a rigid whole.

So perhaps we should avoid becoming to settled in with our current chronological frameworks. There have been some game changers over the last couple of decades, and we have no reason to expect that there are no further to be expected. For Early Iron Age archaeology in Central and North-western Europe one such game changer has been dendrochronology, which ended the reliance on the ‘import’ of historical dates from the Mediterranean.

As regards the Early Iron Age in the Mediterranean, with dendro-dates at present still unavailable in most parts, the situation is slightly different. But here also, radiocarbon is changing the game. In particular the Iron Age dating project run by our Israeli colleagues has served to expose some of the weaknesses of the conventional framework for Phoenician, Greek Geometric, and by extension also a number of other regional chronologies. It has not, however, done away with all of these inherent weaknesses.

Rather it has thrown some of these into sharp relief, by proposing to lower some of the 10th and 9th century chronology at many Biblical sites, while maintaining the conventional dates for the Phoenician and Greek Geometric pottery sequences.

It is certainly a step forward that for dating archaeological remains in different parts of the
Mediterranean we are no longer required to put our trust in a specific interpretation of certain parts of the archaeological record that in turn is based on a specific reading of the Biblical account. However, putting our faith entirely in radiocarbon dates from Tel Dor and other Levantine sites instead, when trying to establish the absolute chronology of particular assemblages in Italy, Iberia or North Africa, does not solve the inherent problems that come with ‘importing’ chronological reference points.

There may be cases where it is unavoidable to rely on the ‘import’ of absolute dates from other areas, but wherever possible it is of course imperative to employ scientific dating techniques locally, in order to reduce the fuzziness that is almost inevitably introduced by acquiring dates indirectly, relying on the assumption that strata at both ends of the Mediterranean containing similar pottery types, sometimes in very small quantities, will be more or less of the same date. There can be little justification for not routinely employing radiocarbon to date early 1st millennium contexts also in the Aegean, rather than continuing to rely exclusively on imported dates, certainly with regard to contexts that would be expected to pre-date the Hallstatt plateau. The same of course holds true for those other parts of the Mediterranean world whose chronologies still rely mostly on the import of absolute dates from other areas.

With chronological inferences based on the Biblical account it might have been feasible to argue that such ‘imported’ dates provided more exact reference points than radiocarbon chronology, but with the temporal reference scale for Phoenician and Greek pottery sequences now supplied by radiocarbon dates from the Levant, such an argument is no longer sustainable.