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

The Mediterranean Dimension of Levantine Coast in the 1st millennium B.C.:
Ancient Sea routes, New Explorations and “Colonial” Foundations

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The study presents the context of the coastal Levant in the period between the end of the second millennium and the eighth cent. B.C. During those centuries we can collocate the assumptions and conditions of the so called “Phoenician colonial phenomenon”.

The Levantine coast, along the course of its history, has always been considered the Mediterranean “face” of the Oriental world, from a Mesopotamian perspective, or the “gate” of the Orient, from a Mediterranean, or better still, a Greek perspective. This “gate” was the access to lands that were perceived as fascinating but, at the same time, as dangerously “other”.

The documentation will be presented following at the same time a diachronic articulation and a regional perspective and according to a postcolonial approach to the “local” documentation.

End of the second millennium (twelfth – eleventh cent. B.C.)

Continuity and change are the tow aspects characterizing this period, depending on the single regional situation: some cities disappeared (Ugarit, Alalakh, Emar, Khattusha), other, like Hama, Carkemish and Malatya maintained an important position due to the stability of the local dynasties, reflected in the architectural and decorative activities of the Siro-Hittite cities.

In the Northern Orontes Valley the existing of settlement continuity during the transition from Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age is well documented and, at the same time, an important change is the shifting of the primary settlement from Tell Atchana (Alalakh) to Tell Taynat. Textual (i.e. two Hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions from the Aleppo Citadel, inscribed on the reliefs of the great Temple of the Storm God) and archaeological evidences point to the existence of a regional kingdom (defined by the toponym “Land of Palistin”) ruled by a king named Taita, whose power centered in Tell Taynat. D. Hawkins, who dated the inscriptions of Aleppo to ca. 1100 B.C., proposed that the toponym “Land of Palistin” shared an etymology with the “Peleset” mentioned in the Medinet Habu reliefs and presumed a common ethnic association between the two entities.

In recent years, the so-called “Philistine paradigm”, and, in general, the “Sea Peoples paradigm”, has been at the centre of many studies and debates based on two perspectives: on the one hand, attempts have been made to identify them “ethnically” and culturally; on the other, to define their chronological limits especially in respect of its initial phase. Since the debate about chronology is to be discussed in a specific section of the congress, attention will be focused on aspects concerning the origin and the size of these populations inhabiting these costal area.
The Phoenician coast, on the other hand, wasn’t touched by devastation and destructions, and the consequences of the crisis, inevitable if we consider the effect of the collapse of the palatial system, seem to have been soon transformed in opportunity by peoples navigating the branch of sea between Cyprus and the Levant.

Thanks to the emergence of a more flexible economic system, free from the complex palatial system, ancient sea routes, never forgotten, were navigated by merchants of Levantine origin and contacts with central western Mediterranean are well documented. A well known ancient route must have been, i.e. that connecting Cyprus and Sardinia.

The very controversial tenth century
This part of the paper will consider only some aspects of the historical consequence of this very controversial century.

In Luvian and Syro-Hittite kingdoms the extraordinary artistic activity of decorations of gates, temples and public monuments continued.

In the central and southern coastal regions the political and administrative organization was based on the so-called city-state system, with some differences between the Phoenician and Philistine areas.

The presence of the Levantine in western Mediterranean is still documented even more sporadically, or rather testified by documents that are difficult for us to collocate chronologically.

Ninth – eighth century
During the ninth century a series of changes in the political, administrative and social life of the Levantine region are well reflected in the material culture, even if with important regional variations. The kingdoms of Arameans, Israel and Judah were reorganized and the city once again took on a primary role after a hierarchical model of settlement had been established with capital cities (Arameans capitals, i.e. Damascus and Hamat; Samaria and Jerusalem), regional centres, villages, farms and fortresses positioned to control the caravan roads.

The ancient system of “city-state” with its territory survived in the coastal Philistine and Phoenician cities. Each city had its own territory to administrate but also its pantheon etc. Apart from Tyre, little documentation exists of the other important ports along the coast even if new excavations are yielding important data.

The Aramean, Phoenician and Israelite courts reached the peak of their magnificence, competing in the building of palaces and temples and sharing a common elitist language expressed in the use of precious artifacts and in some rituals as, i.e., the consumption of wine.

Levantine ivories and metal objects, used in a palatial context, were exported to Cyprus and Greece where they were used in different contexts.

Phoenician cities, with their rich ports, were the core of the coastal region. Their floruit, which can be traced back to the economical recovery of the twelfth – eleventh century, only can be said consolidated in the ninth century.

The extension of the economical and cultural influence along the coast reached the northern regions of inland Syria, as testified by the Brej stele. Cilician coast was the way through which cultural Phoenician influence penetrated in the southern Anatolia (Phoenician pottery at Tartus, the stele of Kilamuwa of Zincirli - Sam’al).

As in the rest of the Levant, the ninth century was the most prosperous period also for the kingdom of Damascus whose king, Hazael, conquered the northern part of the reign of Israel and satisfied his maritime trade ambitions through the strong relationship with the coastal Phoenician kingdoms.

An important role was that of the kingdom of Israel, even if continuously instigated by Damascus. Probably not directly involved in maritime activities, this part of the region was fundamental for the economy of the coastal cities. In particular, the Jezreel valley and Galilee were
the lands where agricultural products came from, including those for exportation to the western Mediterranean (documentation of the site of S. Imbenia in Sardinia).

The important documentation of S. Imbenia is only one of an ever increasing range of data that give evidence of the Levantine new explorations, along ancient sea routes well known from the end of the second millennium or already used by the Mediterranean people. Levantine ships, sailing along the route passing from Cyprus and southern Crete (Kommos) reached, already at the end of the ninth cent., areas rich in metal such as north-west Sardinia and Huelva, along the Atlantic coast of Spain.

The intensification of contacts with these distant regions, due principally to the presence of metals, was progressively accelerated by the growth of the Levantine economy and by the changes in the political panorama and the emergence of Assyrian power, that played a role in the political and economic life of the Near East.

The Assyrians, at least until the time of Esarhaddon, acted in twofold way towards the powerful coastal cities. On the one hand they limited their power controlling directly northern access to the mining areas of Amanus and Taurus; on the other hand they improved their commercial activities overseas that were impossible to be organized and controlled without the help of the coastal kingdoms.

Tyr was the “colonial city” (M.E. Aubet) and was a society “al massimo delle sue capacità espansive” (Bondi) that, with its commercial enterprise, created, between the eighth and seventh centuries, a network of settlements different in size and function, along the central and western Mediterranean coast.

In the first movement toward west the meeting with Greeks in the northern Levantine coast was important. Sites like Al Mina, Ras el-Bassit, Tell Sukas were the important coastal harbors giving access to the inner Syria ruled by Arameans and Siro-hittite kingdoms.

The recent research, still in progress, on the Phoenician and Syrian pottery from Al Mina and the evaluation of the Greek presence in the mouth of the Orontes according to a contextual approach, led to the final consideration that Al Mina can be understood only in its territorial context. The harbour, in fact, was founded during the eighth century, on behalf of local rulers of the regional state of the ‘Amuq plain (Unqi or Pattina), on the important commercial route connecting the north Syrian and Aramean kingdoms of the Syrian hinterland, eastern Mediterranean and Tyr.

The importance of Tyr in this area is documented at the trading place of Myriandros, in Cilicia, along the bay of Iskenderun and at Karatepe, in the northeastern corner of the Cilician plain, were the local ruler Azitawada around the 720 B.C. wrote a bilingual inscription, Luwian hieroglyphic and Phoenician.

The area at the mouth of Orontes was therefore of crucial importance and were probably there that first a commercial “Phoenician-Euboians connection” would originated. Even taking into account the redimensioning of the role of Euboeans, the importance of their involvement in commercial activities of this period along the Levantine coast and in the central Mediterranean (i.e Pithekussa but also Sardinia, Carthage etc. etc.) can’t be ignored.