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The development of byblos. In the geopolitical context of the eleventh and tenth centuries bc

El desarrollo de Biblos en el contexto geopolítico de los siglos XI-X a. C

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Abstract

This article reassesses the history of Byblos at the beginning of the first millennium BC in the light of the latest discoveries in Huelva, Spain. Firstly, it discusses the geopolitical changes that occurred in the Levant in the course of the twelfth century BC, which enabled Byblos to expand into its hinterland maintaining a certain degree of stability. Secondly, it examines the major role played by Phoenician trade in the Mediterranean at the beginning of the tenth century BC. All of which leads to the logical suggestion that these seafaring activities constituted a substantial part of the voyages and exchanges that preceded Phoenician colonisation in the western Mediterranean basin.

Key words

Byblos; Huelva; Spain, Mediterranean; Sidon; Tyre; Kingdom of Israel; Jerusalem; Lebanon; Cedars.

Resumen

Este artículo revisa la historia de Biblos a principios del primer milenio a.C. a la luz de los últimos descubrimientos en Huelva (España). En primer lugar, analiza los cambios geopolíticos ocurridos en el Levante durante el siglo XII a.C., que permitió a Biblos expandirse hacia su interior manteniendo un cierto grado de estabilidad. En segundo lugar, examina el importante papel desempeñado por los fenicios en el comercio del Mediterráneo a principios de el siglo X a.C. Todo lo cual conduce a la sugerencia lógica de que estas actividades marítimas constituyeron una parte sustancial de los viajes e intercambios que precedieron a la colonización fenicia en la cuenca del Mediterráneo occidental

Palabras clave

Biblos; España; Mediterráneo; Sidón; Tiro; Reino de Israel; Jerusalem; Líbano; Cedros

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Our knowledge of Byblos' history during the Iron Age I and Iron Age II-A is widely accepted as still incomplete. This is not only due to methodological challenges faced by archaeological excavations in complex urban contexts (Lemaire, 2012, 291-307), but also to the dearth of direct historical sources; and still, additional pieces from different areas are constantly being added to the incomplete jigsaw of Byblos history. Therefore, I do believe that it is reasonable to reassess the history of Byblos at the beginning of the first millennium BC in the light of new discoveries like some of the latest ones in Huelva, Spain (figs. 1-4) (González de Canales *et al.*, 2008, 631-655; Perez, 2014, 587-600).

These discoveries are particularly interesting since, amongst other information, they provide ostraca on which Phoenician inscriptions were engraved. It is to be particularly noticed that using paleographic methods, the aforementioned inscriptions can often be dated between the eleventh and the ninth centuries BC (González de Canales *et al.*, 2004, 133-135). It is worth noting, moreover, that some of these inscriptions contain letters whose features are similar to Byblian ones dated to the tenth and ninth centuries BC (González de Canales *et al.,* 2004, 133-135, pls. XXXV and LXI) (figs. 1 and 5). Furthermore, the Huelva excavations have yielded a large number of Phoenician amphorae that, according to ^{14}C dating (Nijboer, 2006, 31-36), and compared to those from Tyre (Bikai, 1987, 67-68), can easily be dated to the ninth century (González de Canales *et al.*, 2008, 633).

Figure 1. Ostraca with Phoenician inscription found in the archeological excavation of Huelva (González de Canales et al., 2008: 631-655; Perez, 2014: 587-600).

Figure 2. Ostraca with Phoenician inscription found in the archeological excavation of Huelva (González de Canales et al., 2008: 631-655; Perez, 2014: 587-600).

Figure 3. Ostraca with Phoenician inscription found in the archeological excavation of Huelva (González de Canales et al., 2008: 631-655; Perez, 2014: 587-600).

In the light of these new archeological finds, many questions arise. Did Byblos take advantage of the geopolitical circumstances in order to expand its territory over its hinterland at the end of the second millennium BC? and, therefore, did Byblos have the capability to build commercial ties with the inhabitants of other areas in the Mediterranean basin at the beginning of the first millennium BC?

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Figure 4. Ostraca with Phoenician inscription found in the archeological excavation of Huelva (González de Canales et al., 2008: 631-655; Perez, 2014: 587-600).

Geopolitical Context

As an *Ausgangspunkt*, I am inclined to propose that, between the eleventh and the tenth centuries BC, Byblos enjoyed relative stability, as informed by (a), the tale of Wenamun (Eyre, 1996, 415-433), which was written after Wenamun's journey to Byblos in May 1075 BC (Lichtheim, 2003, 89), and in which the Egyptian emissary stated that there were twenty boats in the port of Byblos (Wenamun 1: 59), (b), the Assyrian annals (Grayson, 1991), which do not mention any military expeditions against the city of Byblos, and (c), the royal Byblian inscriptions (*KAI*[5] 1; 4; 5; 6), which mention a peaceful transition and transfer of power between several of its kings. This relative stability could have resulted from the emergence of a new geopolitical landscape on the eastern Mediterranean coastline after the invasions of the Sea Peoples that took place between 1204 and 1170, and which, based on archaeological evidence (Liverani, 2014, 387; Lipiński, 2015, 4), did not affect Byblos (Klengel, 2000, 21) nor the other Phoenician cities such as Sarepta and Tyre (Yasur-Landeau, 2014, 168).

More importantly, this stability that prevailed in Byblos was certainly due to overlapping geopolitical reasons. In the first place, the conflict that had pitted Egypt against the Hittite Empire in the ancient Levantine world came to an end when Hattusa, the capital of the Hittite Empire, was burnt to the ground by the Assyrian army of Tukulti-Ninurta I sometime around 1180 BC (Bryce, 1998, 378). Secondly, Egypt was not able to consolidate its position throughout the ancient Levant since the reign of Ramses X (1108-1098 BC) (Brandi, 1982, 371-405), as it suffered from several political and economic challenges (Niwiński, 1995, 329-360), including the ceaseless struggle for power (Bonhême, 1987, 26), and the forays of semi-nomadic peoples into the southern region of the Levant and Palestine (Klengel, 2000, 22). Thirdly, Byblos was not a target in the campaign launched by Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076), since it was aimed to punish the Arameans (Grayson, 1991, 20) and limited to the region of Arwad (Elayi, 1984, 77). And, finally, Byblos was not threatened by the Aramean raids which took place, between the eleventh and the ninth centuries BC, in the Middle Assyrian territory (Lafont *et al.*, 2017, 593), Karkemish (Bachelot and Joannès, 2001, 444-447), and Palistin/Walistin in the north-west of the Levant (according to the Inscription ALEPPO 6, describing Taita "Hero and King of Palistin," from the Temple of the Storm God at Aleppo (Hawkins 2011: 42 fig. 5; Galil, 2014, 85) (fig. 6).

In view of the foregoing, it is feasible to propose that Byblos enjoyed its independence between the eleventh and tenth centuries BC and that, therefore, it could have exploited the advantages of its hinterland at its will since the latter was endowed with many natural resources, like its thickly forested mountains, which made it a notorious and valuable timber-producing region.

Evidence for Byblos as a Polity

The independence of Byblos and the exploitation of its hinterland, Mount Lebanon, can be validated by several sources. According to the tale of Wenamun, Zakarba'al, king of Byblos boasted about being the only master of Lebanon. He affirmed to the Theban envoy, *"If I should say(?) aloud to Lebanon, the sky opens and the logs lie here on the shore of the sea!"* (Wenamun 2: 14-24). However, in the present state of documen-

Figure 5. Ostraca with Phoenician inscription found in the archeological excavation of Huelva (González de Canales et al., 2008: 631-655; Perez, 2014: 587-600).

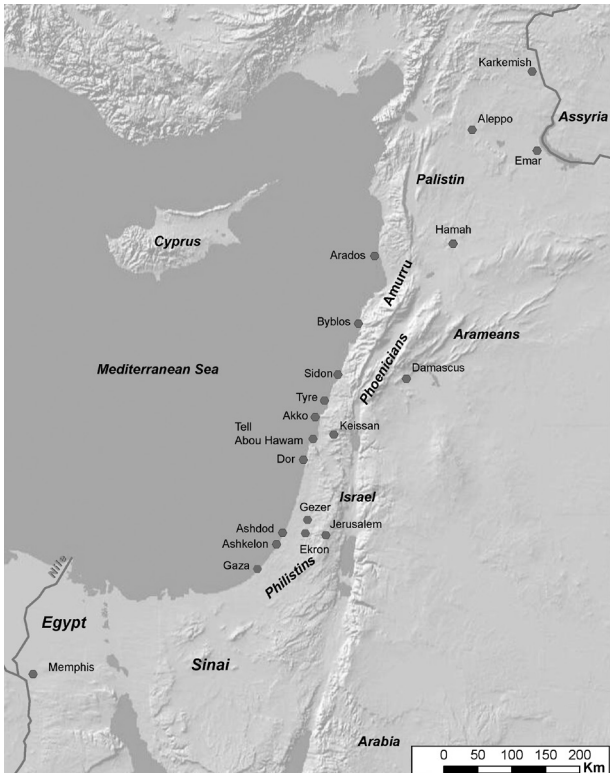

Figure 6. The new geopolitical landscape at the beginning of the 10th century BC.

tation, the sources from this period do not afford a clear picture of how the Byblos carried out the exploitation of its hinterland.

It is to be particularly noticed that the independence of Byblos as well as the exploitation of its hinterland, played a prominent role in the stability of Byblian urban areas. On this matter, I would like to think that such stability could have allowed Byblos kingship to create or develop an administrative substructure that might have included a scribal "school" (Abou Abdallah, 2018, 18), and a sort of and archival system (Wenamun 2: 8) (Galán, 2005, 162). The existence of a scribal school, dating from the eleventh to tenth centuries BC, can be corroborated by an inscription from Byblos (Dunand, 1932, 28, n. 1125), dated to the tenth century BC (Lemaire, 1981, 88, note 21), written by an apprentice scribe (Amadasi-Guzzo, 2014, 74). It is worth noting, that the importance of writing in Byblos at this time can be considered as strong evidence for the existence of a scribal school. Wenamun informs us in his tale that he paid five hundred papyrus scrolls to Zakarba'al, and this clearly testifies to the great demand of writing materials in the royal court (Katzenstein, 1973, 72). The importance of writing can also be confirmed by many inscriptions found in Byblos and dated to this period: (a), the Azarba'al spatula, describing a contract between two persons (*KAI*[3] 3), (b), Ahiram graffito (*KAI*[3] 2), engraved on the south wall of tomb V with the clear intention of being seen and read, and (c), and several inscriptions on clay cones on which personal names are incised (*TSSI*[3] 2, 3, 10).

As far as the maritime industry is concerned, it had been prevalent in Byblos since at least the middle of the third millennium BC, as confirmed by some Egyptian texts, datable to both the Old Kingdom (2686-2134) and the New Kingdom (1570-1069) (Urk 1: 141; 109; 107). Furthermore, according to a Ugaritic text (CAT 4. 338; RS 18.025), Byblos leased ships with their equipment (and/or crew) for six hundred shekels of silver to the (last?) King of Ugarit to help him to reinforce his fleet in order to face the threat of the Sea Peoples between 1203-1201 BC or slightly later (Wiener, 2014, 52). Moreover, the relative stability enjoyed in Byblos between the twelfth and eleventh centuries BC undoubtedly had a relevant impact on the maritime industry, as can be certified in the tale of Wenamun, dated to 1075 BC (Lichtheim, 2003, 89), in which Wenamun, an Egyptian emissary, stated that there were twenty boats in the port of Byblos (Wenamun 1: 59).

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That being said, it is reasonable to suggest that between the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the first millennium Byblos used the cedar beams exploited in its hinterland to develop its shipbuilding and maritime industry (Klengel, 2000, 24). Likewise, we can conclude that, given the Byblian royal inscriptions and the absence of military threats posed to Byblos, it can be proposed that Byblos had both a continued administrative substructure and maritime industry, as from the Late Bronze Age, which could have allowed the city to develop its mercantile activities through the Mediterranean Sea at the turn of the tenth century BC.

Reasons for Byblian development

The reasons that galvanised Byblos to challenge its hinterland, as well as it did afterward in the Mediterranean should now be examined. Given the lack of data and considering the inherent limitations of both archaeological and written sources, it is difficult to investigate these subjects with precision. However, it should be noted that during the Late Bronze Age, Byblos was the main Egyptian port of call in Lebanon (Stieglitz, 1990, 9), and within this period it was not just a source and arrival point for products and resources, but also an intermediary hub where goods were redistributed to other parts of the regional network (EA 126: 4-6; 77: 6-15; Kilani, 2020, 208). Therefore, based on the analytical evidence, it is cogently argued that Byblos could have been hastened to fill the vacuum that had been left following the crisis of the invasions of the Sea Peoples.

Owing to the latter, this interregional trade came to an end, and the Egyptian colonial network in Canaan collapsed sometime during the second half of the twelfth century BC (Koch, 2021, 72). It is relevant to remind that the Mycenaeans had already disappeared from the international political scene (Liverani, 2014, 423) in the late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries (Weinstein, 1998, 190); that Ugarit was totally destroyed around 1185 (Freu, 2006, 217-255); the local states and towns in the south-eastern part of the Hittite empire had also been devastated between 1180 and 1070 BC (Liverani, 2012, 343); the city of Arwad was destroyed as well by the Sea Peoples (Elayi, 2021, 4); the Canaanite city-states in the Sharon plain, along the Carmel coast, and in the Akko and Jezreel valleys were also totally ruined at the end of the twelfth century BC (Stern, 2012, 506); and the Egyptian local clients south-west of Canaan, left with no protection, were hit by internal clashes (Koch, 2021, 72-73), such as attacks by 'habiru' bandits, Shasu raiders, pirates along the coast, and, not least, intraregional rivalry among competing local groups (Millek, 2017, 113-140). Worthy of mention is also the fact that at that time Egypt did not have the ability to control this region, where they had been struggling since the days of Ramses III (1187-1156) (Kahn, 2012, 268). Then, following the brief reign of Ramses X, Ramses XI ascended to the throne and ruled for a relatively long period (*ca* 1115-1086 BCE), known for internal problems and strife among high officials, who divided the kingdom into several sub-territories (Koch, 2021, 71)

Consequently, interregional commercial activities ceased (Lafont *et al.*, 2017, 590) and it is speculated that this new geopolitical landscape jeopardized the interests of Byblos and the other Phoenician city-states; yet it is plausible that in spite of this situation, Byblos might still have had the opportunity to launch some initiatives in hopes of achieving its economic interests.

The new interregional commercial system

The exploitation of its hinterland allowed Byblos to resume its commercial activities with Egypt (Bunnens, 1979, 51), which, in the eyes of the Phoenicians, was considered at that time an equal trading partner (Katzenstein, 1973, 73). In the same vein, and in order to proliferate their commercial activities, the Phoenicians established themselves, via trade, in the Philistine cities in the southern part of the Levant (Gitin, 2010, 304). This region witnessed a fair economic development within the Iron Age I (Koch, 2021, 92), where the Philistines, who held a trade monopoly (Bunimovitz and Lederman, 2014, 252-265), strengthened their relationship with the Egyptians (Weinstein, 1998, 192).

It is worth noting, moreover, that with the still precarious situation of the Aramaic kingdoms in Syria, and the immobility of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the East (Aubet, 1993, 35), the populations in the Levant seemed to have established a new socio-political network. Consequently, the Levantines went through a period of reconstruction and innovation (Liverani, 1987, 66-73) during

which each population began to develop an individual identity and, perhaps, a distinct 'nationality' of their own (Liverani, 2014, 397) and, for this reason, the *Secondary State* (Smith, 2008, 253-254) appeared in the southern part of the Levant. In this regard, according to the new archaeological evidence dated to the Iron Age IIA from the city Khirbet Qeiyafa, the process of state formation and urbanisation started in the biblical kingdom of Judah as early as the late eleventh century BC (Garfinkel *et al.*, 2012, 174). In part owing to their interactions with the Philistines (Na'aman, 2017, 11, 17 y 25), the Israelites defined themselves in a distinct way (Faust, 2012, 121-135), so that their *Early State Module* could have taken place sometime around the early tenth century BC, as indicated by some textual (Melville, 2006, 291-293, 305-307 y 311-316), epigraphic (Puech, 2010, 183-184) documents and archaeological materials (Esse, 1989, 81-96).

Subsequently, a new urban-based interregional trade system was built (Anderson, 1990, 35-54) from Karkemish (Klengel, 2000, 23) in the north to Gaza in the south, including the Phoenician city-states and Cyprus (Gilboa *et al.*, 2008, 190). Interestingly enough, it is persuasive to argue that the Phoenicians played a pivotal role in this new interregional network since their city-states were relatively more secure than those of the northern and the southern parts of the Levant, which suffered from insecurity caused in the north by the raids of semi-nomadic groups and in the south by the conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines. Given these circumstances, the caravans, able to cross the Syrian desert following more southerly routes, with camels as the new means of transportation, now arrived at the Phoenician harbours. The main routes between Mesopotamia, the Gulf area or South Arabia, and the Mediterranean Sea now ended in Phoenicia, i.e. the central and southern coastal areas (Klengel, 2000, 24). On a parallel track, it can be speculated that Byblos could have taken advantage of these conditions. Also, since the commercial activities took place in the manner of a "joint-venture" (1 Kings 10: 22; Ezekiel 27: 12), the inhabitants of Byblos, as the Bible indicates (1 Kings 1-10; 1 Kings 5: 32), could have participated in the construction of the Temple of Jerusalem during the days of Solomon (Galil, 2012, 137-148).

Byblian and Levantine craftsmanship across the Mediterranean Basin

Considering that the palatial economies (Klengel, 2000, 26) relied on craftsmanship and trade (Bondi, 1995, 269), the aforementioned geopolitical dimensions and the new archaeological finds unearthed at Huelva (González de Canales *et al.*, 2008, 631-655; Perez, 2014, 587-600), it is probable that the Byblian kings, at the beginning of the tenth century BC, may have instructed their fleets to sail to the Iberian Peninsula in either competition or partnership with Tyrian ships.

It can be seen, moreover, that according to the countless number of Tyrian ceramics discovered at Huelva, in the light of the more than likely identification of Tarshish (1 Kings 10: 22; 1 Kings 22: 48; 2 Chronicles 9: 21) with the site of Huelva and the wider region of Tartessos (González de Canales *et al.*, 2009, 10), it is very possible that the Byblians might have come to Huelva with Tyrians and Israelite traders (Muhly, 1998, 315).This statement dovetails acceptably with the geopolitical circumstances: the nature of the commercial activities in the new interregional network, now based on the "joint-venture" system, the geographical proximity between Byblos, Tyre, and Israel, and the cordial ties built between the Israelites and the Phoenicians. These Levantine traders could have arrived in Huelva shortly before the reign of Hiram I in Tyre (969-936), and Solomon in Jerusalem (970-931 BC; 1 Kings 10: 22). It can be argued that these Levantines traders, according to *mémoire des lieux* (Bonnet and Niehr, 2014, 99) followed routes already known in the Late Bronze Age (Amadasi-Guzzo, 2012, 117), and which were followed by the craftsmen of this period (Niemeyer, 1995, 252) (fig. 7).

Worthy of notice is the fact that Huelva was not a *Terra Incognita*, actually, according to archaeological evidence, the Levantines had known about Huelva and its mineral ores since the Bronze Age (Niemeyer, 1984, 8-9). However, it is clear that Byblians and their Levantine partners came to Huelva in order to meet their demand for copper (Bouloumié, 1989, 213-221), silver (Hernández, 2013, 17-24), gold (2 Chronicles 8: 18), gemstones (2 Chronicles 9: 10), and tin for bronze (Lipiński, 2004, 217, 220 and 225-265), which were extremely rare in the ancient Levantine world.

It would be tenable to argue, since we do not have any firm evidence, that these Levantine trad-

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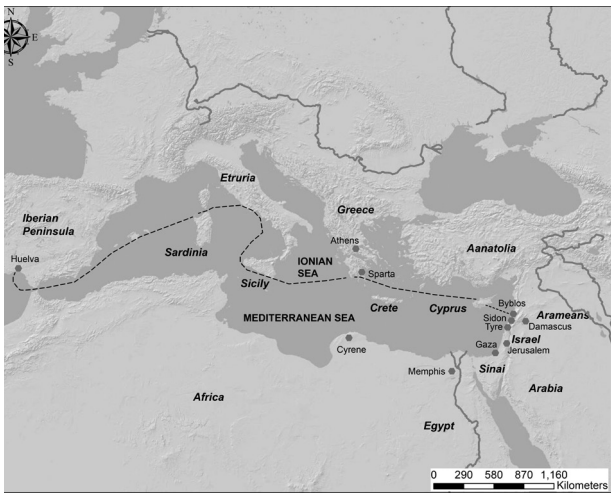

Figure 7. The maritime route used by the Levantine craftsmen at the beginning of the 10th century BC.

ers did not settle in Huelva at the beginning of the tenth century BC. During that period, it is most probably that the maritime movement and the commercial expansion at that time aimed exclusively at seeking raw materials rather than establishing permanent settlements (Aubet, 1993, 173).

The impact of these maritime activities on Byblos

Based on the evidence now available, it can be argued that Byblos could have practiced a self-sufficient economy and that it might have maintained a long-term presence in the expansion of Phoenician trade across the Mediterranean. Furthermore, Byblos certainly experienced relative economic growth during the tenth century BC, as indicated by the restoration of the temples shortly after the beginning of the reign of Yeḥimilk (*KAI*³ 4) in 970 BC, and the wall of the temple of the Ba'alat shortly after the beginning of the Šipitba'al's reign in 900 BC. Moreover, the raw materials obtained from Huelva were more likely used by the Byblians as a tribute paid to the Neo-Assyrian invaders in order to protect Byblos's autonomy between 744 and 627 (Abou Abdallah, 2018, 143-173).

Nonetheless, having kept privileged ties with Egypt during the Bronze Age, these facts undoubtedly had to have an impact on Byblos. I concur with Aimé-Giron (1943, 283-338) that Egypt might have played a certain role in the *coup-d'État* and in the ascension of Yeḥimilk to the throne of Byblos around 970 BC. All of this led to enhanced relations between Egypt and Byblos in the course of the tenth and the first part of the ninth centuries BC, as indicated by the Egyptian statues of Shoshenq I (945-924 BC), Osorkon I (924-890 BC), and Osorkon II (874-850 BC) discovered at Byblos.

It can also be argued that the extension of Egyptian influence in the Levant, and more accurately in Byblos, between the first half of the tenth and the middle of the ninth centuries, is due *inter alia* to the punitive campaigns led by the Neo-Assyrian rulers against the Arameans in Upper Mesopotamia (Liverani, 2014, 475). So, given those circumstances, Byblos was caught between the Egyptian-Assyrian rivalry, and consequently, this conflict put an end to that city's role in maritime commercial activity.

Conclusion

In essence, this article addresses the geopolitical changes that occurred in the Levant in the course of the twelfth century BC, which enabled Byblos to expand into its hinterland and to maintain a kind of relative stability. It also implies that the belief of some scholars in the sense that Byblos, unlike Sidon and Tyre, did not play a fundamental role in Phoenician trade activities, would have to be reassessed in the light of the new archaeological findings from Huelva and the reinterpretation of other sources.

The evidence shows that Byblos did play a greater part than that for which it is usually credited, highlighting its participation in Phoenician commercial activities in the Mediterranean at the beginning of the tenth century BC. Notwithstanding, it should be noted that had the external geopolitical circumstances not been advantageous for Byblos, it could certainly not have been able to play such a role.

It must be stressed, however, that this study does not suggest a pattern of migration nor colonisation (even less, a precolonisation), but, rather, a restricted movement, mostly of craftsmen, towards a land already well-known through traders' and seafarers' tales about the abundance of metal ores in the far west. Thus, it seems logical to suggest that these maritime commercial activities constituted a major part of the period of journeys and exchanges preceding Phoenician colonisation in the western Mediterranean basin.

Finally, since the geopolitical conditions were no longer favourable in the ninth century BC, the

outcome for Byblos was that its role diminished to decline 'vis-à-vis' Tyre's hegemony.

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