



In Search of the Phoenicians

Josephine Quinn

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The Phoenicians left no surviving literature and relatively little material evidence of their existence, yet they were established explorers and traders before the emergence of the Greek and Roman empires. Who were these people we call “Phoenicians”? Josephine Quinn’s *In Search of the Phoenicians* argues in favor of an intricate, often politically expedient, identity that was and is read onto a group of people by those on the outside.

Quinn is methodical as she examines sites throughout the Mediterranean, Levant, and Atlantic ranging from Bronze Age to late-antiquity periods. By no means does she deny the existence of the Phoenician language or an ancient people referred to as Phoenicians. Rather, she examines ancient literary, epigraphic, numismatic, and artistic evidence to traduce the ways in which modern assumptions of ethnicity, nationhood, and collective identity may have caused the back-formation, rather than the discovery, of an ancient people.

An expansion of three lectures given at Tufts University, Quinn’s book challenges the notion of self-aware, collective Phoenician identity. The book’s three sections allow Quinn to drill down into specific, divergent areas of inquiry. By the conclusion, she’s explored topics as diverse as votive artifacts and funerary inscriptions (of which there are over ten thousand in Phoenician), Roman-Carthaginian antagonism, and modern nation building in places as disparate as Lebanon and Ireland, which grafted Phoenician roots onto their identity formations during their nascent nationalism.

Filled with informative, arresting images and deep-thinking argumentation, Quinn’s *In Search of the Phoenicians* makes a compelling, wide-ranging case that suggests “Phoenician” was a political rather than a personal description. As Quinn herself says, she’s arguing “from silence. A lack of evidence for collective identity is not evidence for its absence,” but it’s definitely an omission worthy of attention.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (November/December 2017)

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