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BEFORE ATHENS: EARLY POPULAR GOVERNMENT IN PHOENICIAN AND GREEK CITY STATES

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ABSTRACT. There is no question that Athens developed, named and refined democracy in the late 6th and early 5th centuries BC but a number of scholars have pointed to evidence that suggests the ideas and institutions that constitute democracy had previously been tested in other Greek city states and even further afield, in the Middle East. This paper explores the political environment in the eastern Mediterranean in the 6th century and earlier to establish whether any Phoenician cities had their own form of democratic government and whether Phoenician trade into the Greek sphere might have contributed to democratic experiments in other polities before Athens.

Keywords: Athens, democracy, Phoenicia, Greek, city, state

1. Introduction

Most accounts of the origins of democracy suggest that the idea and its institutions sprung into life, fully-formed, in Athens in the late sixth century BC. Typical is John Dunn's (1992) *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey 508 BC to AD 1993* which dates the beginning of democracy to the reforms of Kleisthenes that first provided for regular meetings for the citizen assembly in Athens. This paper picks up a concern raised by Simon Hornblower in Dunn's book that Phoenician cities and then other Greek cities had proto-democratic government well before Athens: "The Phoenicians... had something comparable to the self-regulating city-state or *polis* (and) the Greek political arrangements we most admire. Scientific study in this area has, however, hardly begun" (Hornblower 1992: 2).

The Phoenicians were ill-served by their stationery. The papyrus they used to record their business, diplomatic and political history has rotted long ago. The sciences – genetic, forensic, archaeological and linguistic – still have a long way to go before we have anything near a definitive view of the Phoenicians but much has been learnt since Dunn and Hornblower’s work in 1992. It is timely to draw together established evidence as to the constitution of the Phoenician states and the Phoenician contribution to the Greek experiments with democratic forms before *demokratia* was named and perfected in Athens.

One point that emerges clearly in the discussion below is that before democracy was an idea, let alone an ideology, it was a practical exertion of political will by the people. This paper does not claim the Phoenicians “invented” democracy nor does it seek to lessen Athens’ contribution to the development of democracy but it does suggest a longer and deeper history to popular government by an active citizenry than is generally conceded.

2. Phoenicia – Developing Democracy?

Phoenician civilization was based on city-states such as Sidon, Tyre, Arwad Byblos, Beirut and Ugarit on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean around present day Lebanon. From 1550 to around 300 BC the Phoenicians created an adventurous maritime and mercantile culture that may have reached the British Isles and even the Baltic and that probably circumnavigated Africa more than two thousand years before Vasco da Gama (Herodotus 1972: 4.42). The Phoenicians certainly did build a trading network from the Far East to the Atlantic and along the way they founded Carthage which went on to challenge the power of Rome. Their trade was based on the timber, wine, olive oil, iron, glass and purple dye that they produced themselves as well as goods from Damascus and the caravan routes to Arabia and further east as well as goods from the west, across the Mediterranean from Egypt, the Aegean, North Africa and Spain (Ezekiel 27, Gore, 2004: 34–36, Markoe 2005: 109–120).

The Phoenicians were in the Levant from the third millennium BC and shared the genetic and linguistic history of the Canaanites (Gore 2004: 48) and much cultural history with ancient Israel. The alphabet that the Phoenicians popularized all along their trading routes came from the Sinai via Israel (Logan 2004: 36–42) and the

Phoenicians were close trading partners with Israel, providing Solomon with the timber and craftsmen to build the Temple in return for grain (1 Kings 5–7). Most significantly, the Phoenicians were exposed to the shift that Israel first brought to politics: the state depended not on the king’s relationship with God but with the people’s participation in the covenant. The Mosaic law created a leader constrained by the law of God just as the people were. The law ordained a limited monarch and a social structure tending towards the egalitarian with a citizenry that could, in times of turmoil, themselves choose the judges to lead the people (Wolf 1947, Buber 1967, Finer 1997: 238–44). Thus the Phoenicians were clearly innovators in manufacture, trade and literacy but the question here is how did their exposure to Mosaic ideas play out into innovation in their own political institutions? The Phoenician contribution to the development of democracy has been a vexed issue over the last twenty years. Below we review the available evidence.

The Phoenicians were predominantly a monarchical society. The kings of Phoenicia’s various city-states closely managed their civic/commercial and ritual/religious responsibilities and their cities expanded to become significant cultural and political forces. The wealth and power of the Phoenician kings can be seen in the sarcophaguses from Sidon now in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. The rise of the Phoenician cities depended on the kings’ coordination of largely independent sailors and traders who were building relations all around the known world but the cities growth could not be managed by key central figures alone. Kings required support and the trade off was that councils and assemblies that advised the King accumulated some power of the state. The interesting question is whether that power spread further than the oligarchic few, “merchant princes (Isaiah 23: 8), to become a robust forum for citizens more generally which would allow Phoenicia to make the claim for democracy.

Debate about the Phoenician contribution to democracy has been stirred by Martin Bernal’s *The Black Athena* which utilized a speculative linguistic approach to point out the likely “Afro-asiatic” roots of classic Greek society (Bernal 1991). His paper seeking to establish the contribution of Phoenician politics to the development the Greek city-state (Bernal 2001) depends to a large extent on some fine points of Marxist theory as Bernal seeks to re-establish the moment of transition between the Asian mode of production (where

productive effort was closely managed by the monarch) and slave society (where citizens' ownership of slaves generated the excess production that gave them time to participate in democratic governance of the city-state). Work by Bernal set off a mini-industry of academics connecting early Greece with the East, and particularly Phoenicia (Burkert 1992, Morris 1992, Goody 1996, West 1997, Aubet 2001). Evidence cited by Bernal as to the actual condition of Phoenician constitutions is slight, which is realistic given the slim sources available: two Egyptian administrative reports with passing references to early Phoenician constitutional arrangements, some biblical references, an Assyrian treaty and some extraneous chronology from first century AD chroniclers. While it is clear from this material that Phoenician cities were mostly in the hands of strong monarchs, there are a number of references to alternative constitutional arrangements that deserve close inspection.

The Amarna Letters (Moran, 1992) are clay tablets containing many diplomatic reports from the mid fourteenth century BC. The tablets were found at the site of the Egyptian capital built by Akhenaton, the heretic pharaoh who insisted on monotheism and sought to abolish the Egyptian pantheon. They tell of the travails of various Egyptian commissioners and emissaries confronted with holding the Phoenician cities together in the face of Hittite attack and Hittite-inspired insurrection.

The Amarna Letters contain references to assemblies of elders or magnates with which local kings might consult regarding the important matters of the state and who might even frustrate the king (Moran 1992: 243). Further, these assemblies might act on their own behalf as when "Irkata and its elders" write to the pharaoh to profess their allegiance with no reference to the local ruler (Moran 1992: 172). There are also some startling examples where "the citizens of Tunip" and "people from Gubla (Byblos)" directly address Egyptian officials which gives rise to the possibility of "republican" organization, even if only for a brief period (Moran 1992: 130–1; 332). The most pronounced republican moment is revealed when "the men of Arwad" exchange oaths of rebellion with Zimredda of Sidon against the pharaoh. Further, Egyptian officials were concerned when there was concerted opposition to their position because "my towns are threatening me (and) they have all agreed among themselves against me" (Moran 1992: 138).

The weight of evidence of the Amarna Letters is convincing, as Flinders Petrie (1898:139) claims, that municipalities existed in Phoenicia in the fourteenth century BC. On the balance of evidence in the Amarna Letters, it might also be concluded that those municipalities were ruled, at least from time to time, by deliberative forums of a broad cross-section of the citizens.

The Report of Wenamun (Goedicke 1975) dates from the early part of the eleventh century BC, about 250 years after the Amarna Letters, and it shows that deliberative municipal forums were still to be found in Phoenician cities. The Report follows the journey of a priest to Byblos in his attempt to acquire timber to build a sacred barge. Egyptian influence in the Phoenician cities has clearly waned since the Amarna letters, leaving strong local monarchies. Wenamun meets Zakarbaal, the king of Byblos, who manages all aspects of the trade with the Egyptian and who is central to the religious life of the city. Zakarbaal is advised by “his assembly” with regard to state matters, in this case the extradition of Wenamun to another jurisdiction to answer charges of theft (Goedicke 1975: 123). This assembly is probably referred to in Ezekiel (27: 9) as “the ancients of Gebal (Byblos) and the wise men thereof”. Initially Wenamun’s hieroglyphic for assembly resisted translation but Wilson (1945: 245) pointed out that it transcribed as *mw’d* which is close to the Hebrew *mo’ed*, translated as “assembly”, constituted by 250 “men of renown” in Numbers 16: 2, for example. It might be noted that the philological distance between Semitic *mw’d* and the Indo-Aryan *moot* is not great. With or without the philological connection, there is a clear inference that Zakarbaal’s assembly is something more than an elite, oligarchic council.

As trade increased, the power of the king became constrained by the wealth of merchant families keen to influence public affairs: “after Hiram in the tenth century (the kings of Tyre) are not imposing figures” (Drews 1979: 47; Markoe, 2005: 105). Throughout their long history, the Phoenician cities fell under the sway of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians and later the Persians and Macedonians. Invasion and internal dissension saw the kings’ power decline while the councils’ base broadened and their power grew. It was during these periods of invasion and upheaval that the councils of elders exerted their authority. In the seventh-century treaty between Asarhadon of Assyria and Baal of Tyre, the text clearly suggests that the council of Tyre’s elders govern alongside the monarch:

it is agreed that the Assyrian governor will work “in conjunction with you (Baal), in conjunction with the elders of your country” (Auebet, 2001: 146, Markoe, 2005: 101).

In the later Phoenician period, power was not simply vested in the king and the wealthy. During Nebuchadnezzar II’s invasion early in 6th century BC, Josephus notes, from the vantage of the first century AD, that the council of Tyre governed without the monarchy for seven years and the city was administered by suffetes (or judges) who were elected to office for short terms: “after him were judges appointed, who judged the people: Ecnibalus, the son of Baslacus, two months; Chelbes, the son of Abdeus, ten months; Abbar, the high priest, three months; Mitgonus and Gerastratus, the sons of Abdelemus, were judges six years” (Josephus 2001: s21, Markoe 2005: 46-7; Herm 1975:153). Even Bondi (2001: 153) who is otherwise resistant to suggestions of democratic rather than dynastic interpretations of Phoenician constitutions admits that Tyre was “a republic headed by elective magistrates” at this period.

Tyre’s resort to government by judges rather than kings is another step along the democratic continuum that begins with the Israeli experience on which they could call and extends to the judges or suffetes (rather than kings) who governed the Phoenician colony of Carthage with the support of the senate and the people’s assembly (Markoe, 2005: 103–104). The Greek historian Polybius suggests this embrace of democracy explains Rome’s dominance over Carthage because “In Carthage therefore the influence of the people in the policy of the state had already risen to be supreme, while at Rome the Senate was at the height of its power: and so, as in the one measures were deliberated upon by the many, in the other by the best men...” (Polybius 1989: VI,51).

Towards the end of the Phoenician period of influence there is clear evidence that the monarchy had been eclipsed by the people but with such authority that one is left to suppose, albeit from a later Roman sources, that the people expressed their views as an assembly. Sources go so far as to suggest that the “inhabitants” of Sidon (Arrian 1893: II,15) or “the people of Sidon” (Arrian 1970: 81) made the peace with Alexander the Great. Quintus Curtius Rufus (2001: 4.1.16) tells how Strato, King of Sidon, surrendered to Alexander in 333BC “prompted by his citizens’ wishes rather than his own” and when the Greeks sought to replace the king, the nominated citizens disdained the opportunity and instead nominated a member

of the royal family reduced to meager circumstances by his honesty. This speaks of people confident in their right to be heard.

As Alexander's army approached Tyre it was met by "representatives" (Arrian 1970: 81) sent by "the commonwealth" (Arrian 1893: II,15) or the "community" (Bondi 2001: 154). Alexander wished to offer sacrifice at the temple of the Tyrian Heracles, but when this message was relayed by the ambassadors, it was "the people" (Arrian 1893: II,15) who passed a decree to obey any other command of Alexander, but not to admit into the city any Persian or Macedonian. This decision resulted in Alexander laying waste to Tyre.

It is clear from this historic arc that the Phoenician cities commenced as strong monarchies and ended with relatively weak kings. It is also clear that all along the way, from the fifteenth century BC to the fourth, the leaders were advised by councils or assemblies which gradually took greater power. There are questions as to how broadly those institutions represented the populace and how free and unconstrained their deliberations were but on the balance, it may be concluded that the active role that the assembly took on the few occasions we see it in operation suggests that the Phoenicians had something more than an autocracy or even oligarchy and that it earns categorization as a proto-democracy, at least, if not full recognition as a democracy.

3. Phoenician Influence on Emerging Greek City-States

In Homer's *Iliad*, Phoenician craftsmanship is the byword for excellence: when instructed by Hector to give her best gown in sacrifice to the goddess Minerva, Hecuba chooses one embroidered by Sidonian women (Homer 1950: 338–51); when Achilles offers a prize for the fastest man at the funeral of Patroclus, it is a Sidonian bowl imported by the Phoenicians (Homer 1950: 823–31). It might be concluded from these references that the Phoenicians were already influential in the Greek sphere in the eighth century BC when Homer is supposed to have created the *Iliad*, if not in the twelfth century BC when the Trojan War most likely occurred.

There is clear archaeological evidence of Phoenician influence in first Rhodes from 800BC (Lipinski 2004: 155). As they spread through the Aegean, the Phoenicians brought not only metals, glass and the color purple but also ideas, myths, and knowledge from the

Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Israeli worlds. The Phoenicians typically established “enclaves of craftsmen in communities where native technical skills were less developed” (Drews 1979: 46). It is most likely that the transmission of these new technical skills depended on the recently developed Phoenician alphabet that Herodotus (1972: V, 60) sees as having such a major influence on the creation of the Greek alphabet. It is most likely that it was from the workshops in these enclaves that the nascent scientific method emerged to be crystallized and refined into philosophy by Greeks with Phoenician connections such as Thales of Miletos (Herodotus 1972: I, 170).

The transmission of these ideas did not happen overnight, the arrival of the enlightenment was not a revolution at one particular moment, rather Greece emerged from its Dark Ages over the generations, in gradual increments, prompted by a range of ideas from a range of sources including the Phoenicians. As those ideas coalesced, they helped spark a cultural revival in Greece, one which led to the Greek’s golden Age and hence the birth of Western civilization (Solmsen 1975, Gore, 2004: 37). One idea central to the Greek enlightenment is democratic governance. Of course, the Phoenician influence the emergence of new political forms in this period should not be overstated. Greece benefited from a number of developments coinciding in the period from 800 to 500BC. The overthrow of tribal kings by aristocrats, long distance sea trade, intensive agriculture and mining and the introduction of coinage “created a stratum of newly rich agrarian proprietors (with wealth) not matched by any equivalent power in the city” (Anderson 1974: 30). It was this emerging class who prompted various city-states to experiment with forms of diffused decision-making. Democracy has since become regarded as quintessentially Greek (and therefore Western) but the question that now arises is that if the practices of democracy were already being explored in the Phoenician city states then were they too transferred to the Greek sphere of influence to be developed, systematized and eventually named? Any exacting answer to this question was lost long ago but some sort of indication of Phoenician influence might be judged by looking for its occurrence in the early adopters of democracy.

Of course there is no overwhelming pattern as that would have been noticed long ago and there are clearly centers of Phoenician influence where democracy did not flourish particularly well: Milet-

os for example was an imperialist tyranny while Thales and his pupils were founding philosophy. Nevertheless consideration of the sixteen sites suggested by Robinson (1997) in his work on early popular governments outside Athens throws up repeated examples of Phoenician influence.

Chios is a good case in point. The Ionian island is considered an early adopter of democracy on the strength of the inscription on a stone recovered in 1907 from a road wall near the village of Tholopotami in southern Chios and now in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum (Meiggs and Lewis 1988: 14). The inscription is dated to the early sixth century BC and it sets out laws on the accountability of magistrates: judicial decisions may be tested in a monthly people's council (*boule demosie*) composed of 50 representatives from each tribe (Robinson 1997: 90–1). Three tribes at least are known: “Chalazoi, Totteidai, Klytides” (Archontidou-Argyri and Kyriakopoulou, 2000: 196). The people's council was composed of at least 150 citizens. The inscription also suggests another assembly with apparently broader powers but its composition is unclear. There is little further textual or archaeological confirmation of Chian democracy at such an early date. Aristotle (1946: 1306, 3–5) confirms the overthrow of authoritarian oligarchs in Chios but leaves no date and no sketch of its constitution. Given the sparsity of evidence, it is not surprising that the so-called constitution stone of Chios has caused so much controversy about its dating, the order of its sides, the quality of its democracy and whether or not the stone really comes from Chios: Meiggs and Lewis (1988: 17) mention that the red trachyte stone on which the constitution is inscribed is not common on Chios but that it is plentiful in nearby Erythrae. Aristotle (1946: 1305, 18–23) says that the people of Erythrae also overthrew their autocratic oligarch so if the stone did come from there then arguments about democracy in Chios could be simply transferred to Erythrae.

The important question for this research is whether there is any evidence of Phoenicia in either city and preliminary investigation finds that both cities bear the imprint of Phoenicia in their foundational institutions and imagery. From the eighth century BC, the symbol of the Chian city-state was the sphinx in the form of a winged female figure with the body of a lion that originated in Phoenicia. (Archontidou-Argyri and Kyriakopoulou, 2000: 18) Distinctive Chian amphorae, marked with the sphinx, were used for shipping wine to the ports of the Aegean and Black Seas from at least

640BC (Archontidou-Argyri and Kyriakopoulou, 2000: 156–8, 218). Phoenician influence is similarly evident in Erythrae. While the site is presently unknown, in the second century AD Pausanias (1918: VII, 5, 5) reports one of the two temples in Erythrae is “the sanctuary of Heracles”, notable for its age, where the statue of the god was from Tyre in Phoenicia. In the case of either Chios or Erythrae, there is clear evidence of Phoenician influence ahead of their experiments with democracy.

In further preliminary work on Robinson’s (1997) list of sixteen sites of early democracy, either archaeological or textual evidence of Phoenician influence is apparent in Kos from the mid-eighth century BC and Samos from 725BC (Lipinski 2004: 155) as well as Elis near Olympia where “Phoenicians (who) sailed from Tyre, and from Phoenicia generally... dedicated... a Heracles, the pedestal as well as the image being of bronze.” (Pausanias 1918: V, 25, 12) Further work on Robinson’s list is obviously required.

Beyond Robinson’s list, there is the interesting case of Sparta. While an Athens-centric view of democracy relegates their traditional enemy to the fields of autocracy and oligarchy, a number of recent authors see early Sparta as governed by a constitution that “stipulates that a Spartan popular assembly should meet at regular intervals... about 600 BC... well ahead of Athens” (Hornblower 1992: 1) and that it is likely “Spartan systems, like the Carthaginian, followed Phoenician prototypes.” (Drews 1979: 47) The Spartan constitution is often attributed to a mythical figure, Lycurgus who is credited with institutionalizing *eunomia*, good order through effective laws (Forrest 1980: 64). With or without Lycurgus, Forrest (1980: 59) dates the Spartan constitution to the first half of the seventh century BC when the Spartan system of dual kingships was moderated by the expansion of the *Gerousia*, or elders council and the election of new members by a popular assembly. Over the following century, the assembly established broader powers to overrule the elders and annually appoint their own officials, *Ephors* who presided over civil cases, conducted foreign policy and came to exercise executive power (Forrest 1980: 77).

Aristotle (1946: 1273a) was an early commentator who pointed out the similarities of the Spartan and Carthaginian constitutions. It is unlikely that the Spartans copied the Carthaginians and much more likely that they were both influenced by the older Phoenician experience. Early Spartan trade with Phoenicia is apparent from the

processing of mollusk dye by the Phoenician methods at the port of Gytheum and the 200 Phoenician ivory carvings found at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia (Fitzhardinge 1980). Also seventh century BC terra cotta masks certainly influenced by Phoenicia have been found at the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia in Sparta (Culican 1975: 55–64). It is clearly likely that the Phoenicians also brought ideas of popular government and diffused political power into the Spartan sphere of influence where they found fertile soil in a period of change.

Finally there is the question of Athens itself. While suggestions that Athens began as a Phoenician colony are not sustainable on present evidence, Phoenician influence is attested by motifs in seventh and eighth century Athenian hammered metalwork, by later inscriptions and “a decree exempting Sidonian traders in Athens from taxation” and by Tyrian coins featuring an owl, “an image unattested in the ancient Near East, but closely connected with the city of Athens” (Markoe 2000: 219–20, 52, 124). This material does not prove any Phoenician influence on Athenian politics but is sufficient to call for further investigation.

4. Conclusion

The preceding discussion does establish significant democratic experiments in the Phoenician cities throughout their history from 1500 to 300 BC. Further we have established significant and sometimes foundational Phoenician involvement in the culture of Greek cities that adopted democracy early in comparison to Athens. The Phoenicians brought more than just trade into the Greek sphere and they could have quite possibly had a formative influence on Greek political institutions that resulted in democratic configurations equivalent to Kleisthenes’s reforms. Athenian democracy was a complex set of interlocking institutions with regular meetings. There is some evidence that at least Byblos, Sidon, Tyre, Sparta and Chios can match this formulation. While conclusive evidence of direct and incontrovertible Phoenician influence on Greek democratic experiments is not presently obvious, such is the lively trade in both goods and ideas between Phoenicia and the early Greek cities that further investigation may well be rewarded.

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