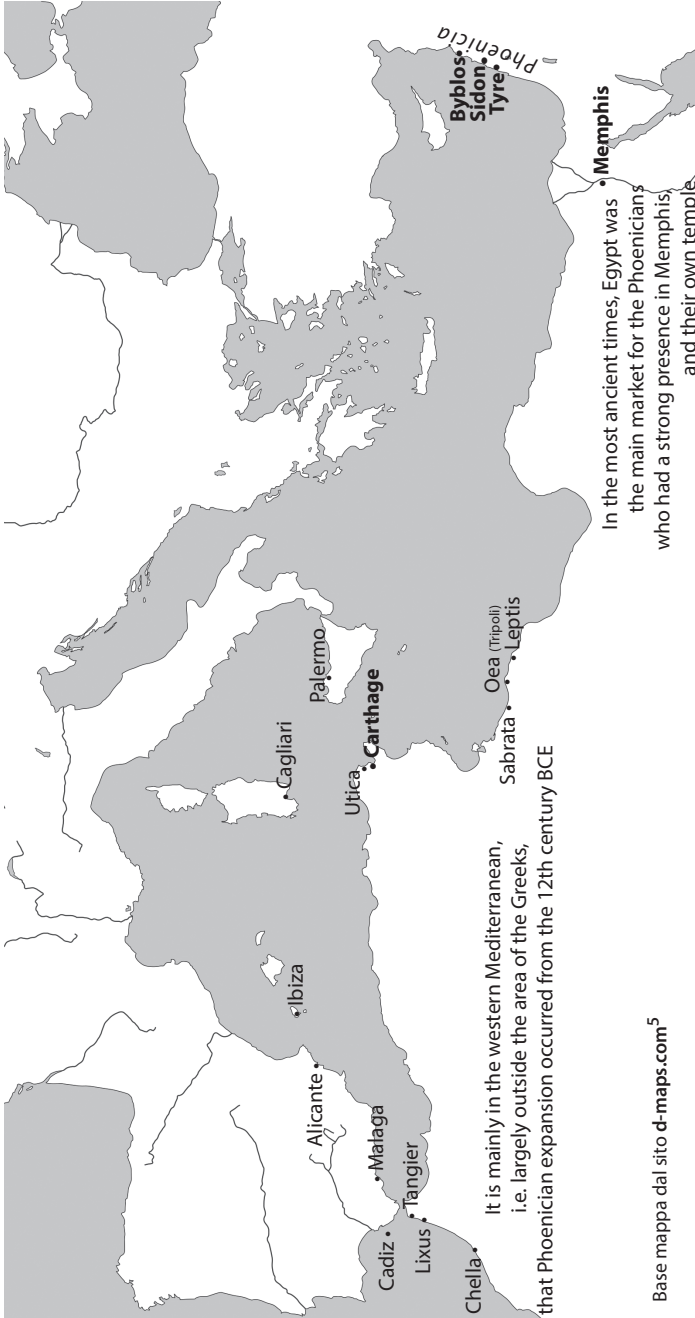


# The Phoenician world



Base mappa dal sito [d-maps.com](http://d-maps.com)<sup>5</sup>

## The exception that proves the rule

In my book *La rovina delle nazioni*, I already presented the ‘gene-character thesis’, the idea that character and institutions of populations depend on their different DNA. But, at one point, I thought I had found something that looked like a clear and suggestive confirmation of this.

The initial forms of today’s democratic parliaments are the assemblies of the warriors of the Bronze Age, in which the majority decides.

These seemed to me only typical of the Indo-European peoples who, in this regard, differed from the Near East Semites, whose important decisions were not taken by assemblies of free men but by kings or priests, as we see in the Bible.

It occurred to me that such diversity of behaviour could correspond to an innate difference in character: it might be that while the Semites are inclined to let themselves be ruled by chiefs, Indo-Europeans are natively more individualistic and cannot bear important decisions about their future to be taken by others.

Another difference between *Indo-Europeans* and *Semites* seemed to be that the former showed a more adventurous spirit. This may have led them to abandon their homes to found colonies, like the Greeks and Romans did, and shows in the Italic *ver sacrum*, where all those born in a certain year were consecrated to the gods, and at a certain age had to leave to create another homeland elsewhere.

All this seemed very satisfying to me until I realised that the rule has a major exception: the Phoenicians, a Semite people who travelled the seas and founded colonies like the Greeks. The most important is Carthage.

But worse was to come: their cities hosted assemblies of citizens so authoritative that even kings bowed to them! Carthage, indeed, had no king but a form of governance more democratic than Rome itself. Polybius says:

As among [the Carthaginians] it was the people who decided, and among [the Romans] the best [i.e. the senate], the Romans’ decisions on political matters were more valid.<sup>6</sup>

And we cannot get out of the quandary by saying that the Phoenicians may have been influenced by their contacts with the Greek democracies,

because if the behaviour and institutions of a people depend on DNA, they cannot be worn at will, by way of imitation, as if they were suits.

The Phoenicians seem to be the perfect counter-example to the gene-character thesis.

When a theory provides a good explanation for many things but then runs up against a serious exception, rather than abandoning it instantly, it comes natural to ask yourself if there is any possible explanation why it might still be valid...

Some premises:

The ancient Greeks were to a large extent an Indo-European *steppe people*, nomads and warriors, who entered Greece from the North or Northeast around 2000 BCE and conquered it, reducing the resident populations, the so-called Pelasgians, into servitude and creating the so-called Mycenaean civilisation. These aggressive northern invaders were also very enterprising and by the 15th century BCE were already competent enough navigators to be able to invade Crete and overthrow the Minoan empire whose fleets had dominated the Aegean until then.

At that time Lebanon was a region of monarchic city-states - Tyre, Sidon, Byblos - small but very active in trade. Ships from the Aegean landed at its ports: first Minoan, then Mycenaean. Hence the hypothesis I came up with, which I would ask the reader to consider with indulgence.

Let us suppose that around the 16th century BCE Mycenaean merchants took up permanent residence in Lebanese towns. They mixed with the local population and adopted their language, continuing their maritime trade.

Having become mainstays of the city's wealth, they might have acquired influence over its government continuing the Indo-European institution of deliberative assemblies.

This would fit in well with Lebanese chronology. We know that Phoenician cities started out as oriental-despotic-type monarchies, before councils of important men appeared in the 15th century curtailing kingly power.

A modern historian...

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 BCE to the fourth, the leaders were advised by councils or assemblies which gradually took greater power.<sup>7</sup>

Greek emigration to Lebanon may have started in the 16th-15th centuries BCE but it certainly became attractive in the 13th century, when Greece was on the verge of collapse.

Thucydides writes that, after the Trojan War, “refugees left [the cities] to found new settlements”<sup>8</sup> Greece then plunges into its dark centuries, just while the Phoenicians, until then known only for land trade, begin to sail the Mediterranean with extraordinary success.

Foundations of Phoenician colonies began to be spoken of in the 12th century BCE: Lixus in Morocco, then Cadiz in Spain and Utica in Tunisia.

This would also explain another small oddity linked to the arrival of the Philistines in Palestine. In the terminal crisis of the Late Bronze Age, around 1200 BCE, the Hittites and numerous small states of the Near East disappeared. From the North adventurers and predators came to attack cities left with few defenders. Emigrants and pirates emerged from Greece too.

Apparently around 1180 BCE, a great mass of migrants, mostly Greeks, moved with wagons and families along the southern coast of Turkey, heading towards Egypt. But it seems this was stopped in a great battle by Ramses III, pharaoh of a state that was weakened but still in a position to defend itself.<sup>9</sup>

Failing to enter Egypt, the migration ground to a halt in Palestine, which takes its name from the new people of the Philistines, of Greek character to a large extent, which now entered the scene.

Along their route, archaeologists have found cities and towns in ruins, but the wealthy Phoenician cities on the coast have remained curiously immune to destruction. As an explanation, the hypothesis has been put forward that the close commercial ties between Aegean merchants and the Phoenicians might have created bonds between them and the 12th century raiders, resulting in the Phoenician sites being spared.<sup>10</sup>

We would say more simply that links were strong between migrants and Phoenicians because Greeks were predominant on both sides.

Thus also the democratic, or ‘Greek-type,’ constitution of Carthage would no longer be an anomaly.

And this would also explain the oddity that, before Israel, which is inhabited by European emigrants, Lebanon was for a long time the only country in the region where a European-style democracy worked. It could depend on the fact that the modern Lebanese are in part the descendants of an ancient Greek-Mycenaean merchant bourgeoisie.

I had been led to these conjectures by unexpected features of Phoenician civilisation and my confidence in the gene-character thesis, but I realised that it would appear but some feeble fantasy to all the moralists who would reject a priori the idea that people’s ways of acting and their political institutions might depend on their DNA, more than on their ‘culture.’

But their problem is the same as that of the partisans of many ‘faiths’: the relentless surge in knowledge gradually makes inroads into the area of ignorance where they fashion their pies in the sky. And here their most serious problem is the new ability to read the DNA of peoples.

Perhaps their troubles can be said to have started from a tiny oddity, in itself difficult to interpret, detected in 2007 on so called “mitochondrial DNA haplogroups”. These interest us only because they are divided into variants which, like blood groups, are differently distributed among the populations of the globe. Two of these variants are named J1 and J2.

A study conducted in many countries showed that in Lebanon J2 is more widespread than J1, as is the case in all European countries but in no other country in the Near East except Turkey and Iran.<sup>11</sup>

This could point to some genetic proximity to the Indo-Europeans, given that in Turkey and Iran there is evidence of an important past presence of Indo-Europeans: the Hittites, the Medes, the original Persians...

J2 is also high among the Kurds, a population that proclaims itself a descendant of the Medes and is so different from its neighbours that some have considered it Indo-European, even if now its origin appears to be more complex.<sup>12</sup>

2011 saw a second warning in the form of an article on the DNA of the Christian-Maronite and Muslim Lebanese, which estimates somekind of separation roughly 3400 years ago.<sup>13</sup> This span takes us

back precisely to the time when, according to our hypothesis, the Greeks-Mycenaeans entered Lebanon to adopt it as their new residence.

Are those Christian Maronite Lebanese who claim to descend from the ancient Phoenicians right? We ourselves would rather suspect them to be the main genetic heirs of the enterprising Phoenician-Greek merchant bourgeoisie.

Based on gene-character logic it immediately strikes us that the Christian religion, with its emphasis on personal independence, is more suited than the meticulously prescriptive Islam to the more individualistic nature of distant great-grandchildren of the ancient Greeks.

The third and conclusive discovery came in 2017 when, without fully realising what they had found, a team of researchers, some of whom were involved in the previous case, fully resolved the question!<sup>14</sup>

They analysed the remains of five Lebanese from around 1700 BCE and verified, as might have been expected, that their DNA is genetically close to that of other Near East populations.

They then compared this DNA with that of the Lebanese of our own day and discovered that only about 93% corresponded. The remaining fraction unexpectedly originated from 'peoples of the steppe', which we can immediately identify with our hypothesised Greek-Mycenaean immigrants!

They also manage to restrict the period when this mixture took place: between 1750 and 150 BCE, a time span fully compatible with our hypothesis.

It was after finding this article that I decided to write the book you're reading.

Let's come now to Carthage and its political regime, more democratic than the Roman.

Staying with the gene-character thesis it comes to mind that if the Indo-European component is strong within the Phoenician merchant bourgeoisie, it should be even more so in the adventurous band that emigrated from Lebanon to the other end of the Mediterranean.

One can look at such an emigration as a character distillation similar to that of the Americans compared to the English, on which the eminent

‘anti-racist’ geneticist Luigi Cavalli Sforza, explaining the speed with which the Americans accept novelties, writes:

It is possible... that the emigrants who came to America were not a random sample, but a group selected on the basis of their shared intolerance of old age, government oppression and unjustified poverty.<sup>15</sup>

Notice that this suspicion that parents’ love of novelty is transmitted to their children and to the children of their children... qualifies Cavalli Sforza as an unequivocal adherent of the gene-character theory.

So I immediately discovered that other geneticists, analysing the DNA of the remains of a young Carthaginian from 500 B.C. in 2016, had found an unexpected and rare but typically ‘European’ component,<sup>16</sup> which surprised them but no longer ourselves.

The further our knowledge of the genetics of peoples increased, the more corroboration the gene-character thesis obtained!

Let us sum up the ground we have covered...

Observing the tendency to adopt forms of democracy and to found colonies, the gene-character thesis led us to conjecture that a particular population did not belong to the Semitic group to which everyone had allocated it, but to a different and European group that practices these same behaviours.

DNA analysis of that population now confirms that a significant part of it comes from that hypothetical ‘European’ group.

So Phoenicians, who seemed to be the soundest refutation of the gene-character thesis, turned out to provide a most spectacular confirmation of it!

This is the correct way to speak of “exception that proves the rule”.

### ***In conclusion***

Current opinion is that the differences in behavior and institutions between peoples depend solely on historical and cultural factors, but evidence like this shows that this is a mistake. For behaviours and institutions, what matters a lot, indeed above all, is DNA.

And any devotee of the prejudices of our time doubting this should be informed that the goal of this book is precisely to remove them fully.