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Un viaje entre el Oriente
y el Occidente del
Mediterráneo

A Journey between East
and West in the
Mediterranean

SEBASTIÁN CELESTINO PÉREZ
ESTHER RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ
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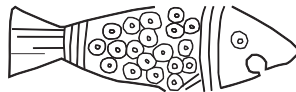
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ÍNDICE GENERAL

VOLUMEN I

Presentación

Sebastián Celestino Pérez, Esther Rodríguez González.....	31
---	----

CONFERENCIA INAUGURAL

Phoenicians and Punic in the Mediterranean and Beyond: New theoretical and methodological challenges

Ana Margarida Arruda.....	39
---------------------------	----

HISTORIOGRAFÍA

Reificar o no reificar? Fenicios, Tartesios, y el problema de las identidades sin voz

Carolina López-Ruiz.....	51
--------------------------	----

Tartesso na primeira História de Portugal de Fernando Oliveira (C. 1580)

Pedro Albuquerque, José Eduardo Franco.....	57
---	----

Los fenicios vistos por los Asirios

J. Elayi.....	67
---------------	----

Les barcides des confins de la cyrenaique aux frontieres de la petite syrte

Adel Njim.....	77
----------------	----

La influencia orientalizante en la Necrópolis de Tútuqi (Galera, Granada). Una relectura de la documentación original de Juan Cabré Aguiló

Gabriela Polak, Jorge Del Reguero González.....	85
---	----

NUMISMÁTICA

De la moneda al sello alfarero. Análisis comparativo de dos fenómenos simultáneos en Gadir

Alicia Arévalo, Elena Moreno.....	101
-----------------------------------	-----

La monetización púnica en Cerdeña: emisiones, cronologías y distribución

Gianluca Mandatori.....	121
-------------------------	-----

<i>Divinidades masculinas en la moneda púnica de Scilia: Análisis y estudio de su iconografía</i> José Miguel Puebla Morón.....	129
--	-----

RELIGIÓN E ICONOGRAFÍA

<i>El santuario púnico-ebusitano de Na Galera: Últimos hallazgos y nuevas interpretaciones</i> Ramón Martín Gordón, Elena Diana Balboa Lagunero.....	137
---	-----

<i>I sacrifici animali nel mondo fenicio e punico: Caratteri e specificità</i> Bruno D'Andrea.....	149
---	-----

<i>Los colores de Belcebú</i> José Luis Escacena Carrasco.....	167
---	-----

<i>Comida decorada: Un análisis iconográfico, simbólico y contextual de los sellos de arcilla en el Mediterráneo occidental</i> Meritxell Ferrer, Mireia López-Bertran.....	181
--	-----

<i>Altars con forma de piel de toro, asherim y masseboth: Tríada de elementos religiosos de tradición cananea en la península ibérica</i> Álvaro Gómez Peña.....	193
---	-----

<i>La cueva de es Culleram (Ibiza). Un santuario singular en el Mediterráneo púnico</i> María Cruz Marín Ceballos, María Belén-Deamos, Ana María Jiménez Flores.....	207
---	-----

<i>Gli dei al buio. Un riesame di Grotta Regina</i> Adriano Orsingher.....	223
---	-----

<i>Un santuario tardopúnico en Mijas (Málaga)</i> María Dolores Simón-Vallejo, Juan José de la Rubia de Gracia, María Belén-Deamos, Eduardo Ferrer-Albelda.....	239
---	-----

<i>Coroplastia contestana. Figuras de terracota en la Ileta dels Banyets (El Campello, Alicante)</i> Enric Verdú Parra.....	253
--	-----

<i>The ideology of the tophet. Some ethno-anthropological remarks</i> Paolo Xella.....	271
---	-----

EPIGRAFÍA

<i>Liberti nel mondo fenicio e punico</i> Maria Giulia Amadasi Guzzo.....	283
--	-----

<i>La « mise en pierre » des inscriptions pheniciennes dans un milieu hellenistique : Travail de scribes et de lapicides</i> Jimmy Daccache.....	293
---	-----

<i>Una lamina d'oro iscritta dal Tofet di Sulci (S. Antioco, Sardegna)</i> Valentina Melchiorri, Paolo Xella.....	305
--	-----

<i>La stele et le fragment pheniciens de Nora en Sardaigne et Tarsis</i> Émile Puech.....	317
--	-----

<i>Per un corpus dei marchi di cava punici e neopunici nell'edilizia della Tunisia. Prime note</i> Francesco Tomasello, Mounir Fantar, Rossana De Simone, Carla Del Vais, Gilberto Montali, Faouzzi Ghazzi.....	327
---	-----

FUENTES

<i>“Vesci corporibus humanis docendo”. Su Annibale e l'antropofagia</i> Giuseppe Minunno.....	337
--	-----

ARQUITECTURA Y URBANISMO

<i>Os Fornos do Convento de Corpus Christi (Lisboa, Portugal)</i> Ana Sofia Antunes, José Miguel Oliveira, Cláudia Rodrigues Manso.....	349
--	-----

<i>Formes et transformations de l'espace sacré du Temple de Mlkashtart a Oumm el Amed – Naqoura</i> Hassan Ramez Badaw.....	361
--	-----

<i>El área urbana fenicio-púnica del sector norte de Útica</i> Imed Ben Jerbania, José Luis López Castro, Amparo Sánchez Moreno, Ahmed Ferjaoui, Iván Fumadó Ortega, Bartolomé Mora Serrano, Luis Alberto Ruiz Cabrero, Faouzzi Abidi.....	369
--	-----

<i>Nueva Gadeira: Proyecto general de investigación arqueológica y puesta en valor del yacimiento fenicio-púnico de el Cerro del Castillo, Chiclana (Cádiz)</i> Paloma Bueno Serrano, Juan Antonio De La Mata, Elisa Sánchez Marín.....	381
--	-----

<i>Los templos fenicio-púnicos del sector norte de Útica</i> Eduardo Ferrer Albelda, José Luis López Castro, Imed Ben Jerbania, Carmen Ana Pardo Barrionuevo, Ahmed Ferjaoui, Victoria Peña Romo, Walid Khalfali.....	393
---	-----

<i>Cerro Macareno (La Rinconada, Sevilla): Nuevas investigaciones en un yacimiento paradigmático del Guadalquivir protohistórico</i> Francisco José García Fernández, Pedro A. Albuquerque, Livia Guillén Rodríguez.....	407
---	-----

<i>Los modelos arquitectónicos y urbanos de tipo púnico-helenísticos en yacimientos indígenas: la ciudad ibérica del Castellet de Banyoles (Tivissa, Tarragona) y su papel geoestratégico durante la segunda guerra romano-cartaginesa</i> Rafel Jornet Niella, David Montanero Vico.....	423
--	-----

<i>Demolishing Casemate walls: Pasos hacia una primera clasificación tipológica de las murallas de la Edad del Hierro IIA-IIB en Fenicia y el norte de Israel</i> David Montanero Vico.....	443
--	-----

<i>Colonias fenicias, casas y la “casa” como institución</i> Marisa Ruiz-Gálvez Priego.....	461
--	-----

<i>La complejidad urbanística de Tejada la Vieja (Escacena del Campo, Huelva) a partir de las últimas intervenciones</i> Clara Toscano Pérez, Juan M. Campos Carrasco.....	471
---	-----

VOLUMEN II

TERRITORIO Y TOPOGRAFÍA

<i>Relaciones entre indígenas y fenicios en el curso inferior del Ebro. La primera fase de ocupación del asentamiento protohistórico de L'Assut (Tivenys, Baix Ebre, Tarragona) y su integración en el territorio</i>	
Jordi Diloli Fons, Ramon Ferré Anguix, Jordi Vila Llorach, Ivan Cots Serret, Laura Bricio Segura, Marc Prades Painous, David Bea Castaño.....	507
<i>Peña Negra (Crevillent, Alicante): La ciudad orientalizante de Herna y su territorio</i>	
Alberto J. Lorrio Alvarado, Sara Pernas García, Mariano Torres Ortiz, Julio Trelis Martí, Pablo Camacho Rodríguez, Laura Castillo Vizcaino.....	521
<i>Les Peuples de La Mer ont-ils eu une influence sur la plus ancienne rade de Tyr ?</i>	
Ibrahim Noureddine.....	541
<i>La fase I de la Gessera (Caseres, Terra Alta, Tarragona). Una residencia aristocrática de la Primera Edad del Hierro</i>	
Marc Prades Painous, Jordi Diloli Fons, Ivan Cots Serret, Jordi Vilà Llorach.....	551
<i>La vigilancia de la costa entre Ibiza y el litoral alicantino durante el período Bárquida</i>	
Feliciana Sala-Sellés, Fernando Prados-Martínez, Jesús Moratalla-Jávega, Victor Cañavate-Castejón, Juan Luis Martínez-Boix, Pascual Perdiguero-Asensi, Pedro Ramón-Baraza.....	567
<i>Estrategias territoriales en las comunidades indígenas localizadas entre la Bahía de Málaga y la axarquía ante el proyecto colonial fenicio entre los siglos IX-VII a.C.</i>	
José Suárez Padilla, Emilio Martín Córdoba.....	577
HÁBITAT Y VIDA COTIDIANA	
<i>Nuovi dati sulla Palermo Antica alla luce dei recenti scavi</i>	
Carla Aleo Nero, Stefano Vassallo.....	599
<i>Los fenicios en el sureste sardo: nuevas excavaciones en el asentamiento de Cuccureddus (Villasimius)</i>	
Michele Guirguis.....	609
<i>Macine granarie da Tharros: Note preliminari per la caratterizzazione funzionale degli spazi abitativi punico-romani</i>	
Melania Marano.....	625
<i>Nuraghe S'Urachi (San Vero Milis, Sardegna): continuità e trasformazioni nel corso dell'età punica e romana repubblicana</i>	
Andrea Roppa, Jeremy M. Hayne, Emanuele Madrigali, Alfonso Stiglitz, Carlo Tronchetti, Peter Van Dommelen.....	635
<i>Risorse e pratiche nel Sulcis di età punica: i dati di Pani Loriga</i>	
Emanuele Madrigali, Livia Tirabassi.....	645

<i>Vida cotidiana en la periferia púnica: hábitat y grupos domésticos en la Mallorca y Menorca postalayóticas (VI-II A.N.E.)</i>	
Octavio Torres Gomariz.....	659

ECONOMÍA Y COMERCIO

<i>Los restos de gallo (Gallus gallus) como bioindicador de presencia foránea. El paraje de Can Roqueta en el noreste de la península ibérica y su relación con el comercio fenicio</i>	
Silvia Albizuri Canadell, F. Javier López-Cachero, Ricard Marlasca, Noemí Terrats Jiménez, Almudena García, Tona Majó, Xavier Carlús, Mònica Oliva Poveda, Alba Rodríguez, Antoni Palomo.....	675
<i>La explotación de recursos agropecuarios en la Ibiza púnica. Estado actual de la cuestión</i>	
Benjamí Costa Ribas, Glenda Graziani Echávarri.....	689
<i>La comercialización de productos turdetanos en la fachada atlántica peninsular durante la II Edad del Hierro (siglos V-II a.C.)</i>	
Francisco José García Fernández.....	705
<i>Carthage et la Péninsule Ibérique dans leurs rapports avec le monde étrusque : entre Orient et Occident</i>	
Jean Gran-Aymerich.....	729
<i>Andar per Emporia a Cartagine? Sulla lamella oracolare dodonea DVC 1363A</i>	
Maria Intrieri.....	739
<i>La circolazione delle anfore puniche nell'area laziale e nell'etruria meridionale</i>	
Alessandro Maria Jaia, Danilo De Dominicis.....	751
<i>Les relations entre le cercle du detroit et le monde romain (206-44 Av. J.-C.): un cadre interprétatif à nuancer ?</i>	
Max Luaces.....	763
<i>Tel Regev, an industrial and agricultural producer for the Late Bronze anchorage of Tell Abu Hawam</i>	
José M. Martín García, Carolina Aznar Sánchez, Ester López Rosendo, Pamela Carrillo Pineda, Michal Artzy.....	777
<i>Le reti commerciali di Mozia. Una proposta di ricostruzione attraverso l'analisi della documentazione edita</i>	
Andrea Perugini.....	785
<i>De fenicios a púnicos en la Bahía de Mazarrón: el registro de las ánforas t-11 en el promontorio costero de Punta de Los Gavilanes</i>	
María Milagrosa Ros Sala, Benjamín Cutillas Victoria.....	801
<i>Atunes púnicos y vinos egeos en una taberna de la Grecia clásica. Resultados iniciales del Corinth Punic Amphora Building Project</i>	
Antonio M. Sáez Romero, Tatiana Theodoropoulou, Ricardo Belizón Aragón.....	817

<i>Los Almadenes (Hellín, Albacete) o la meta de un sistema productivo y comercial del siglo VI a.C. a través del río Segura</i>	
Feliciana Sala-Sellés, Javier López Precioso, Rocio Noval Clemente, Victor Cañavate Castejón, Ismael Carratalá Ibáñez, Sara Fernández Molina, Pascual Perdiguero Asensi, Patricia Rosell Garrido.....	837

ARQUEOMETRÍA, GEOARQUEOLOGÍA, PALEOAMBIENTE

<i>Caracterización tecnológica y procedencia del metal de las barras-lingote de Peña Negra (Crevillent, Alicante)</i>	
Alberto J. Lorrio Alvarado, Ignacio Montero Ruiz, Sara Pernas García, Mariano Torres Ortiz, Julio Trelis Martí, José Luis Simón García, Fernando Simón Oliver	851
<i>Analytical contribution to the understanding of metallurgical activities in central Morocco in the pre-roman period</i>	
Chiara Lucarelli, Fiammetta Susanna, Tilde De Caro, Daniela Ferro	869
<i>Scavi e ricerche geoarcheologiche e paleoambientali nell'area del Porto di Tharros (Laguna di Mistras, Cabras)</i>	
Carla Del Vais, Vincenzo Pascucci, Giovanni De Falco, Ignazio Sanna, Giuseppe Pisanu, Maria Mureddu, Alfredo Carannante, Salvatore Chilardi.....	879
<i>Medio ambiente y acción antrópica en las costas almerienses durante el I milenio a.C. a partir de la antracología</i>	
María Oliva Rodríguez-Ariza.....	889

PROYECTOS DE INVESTIGACIÓN

<i>Why is the domain of phoenician-punic studies still so fragmented? A plea for the creation of an International Organization for Phoenician and Punic Studies</i>	
Roald F. Docter	903
<i>Les symboles de Tanit a Thubursicum Numidarum</i>	
Mansouri Farida.....	911
<i>The TCM Project studies and reflections on (phoenician) "identity"</i>	
Giuseppe Garbati.....	917
<i>Reflexiones desde el proyecto Giribaile sobre la presencia púnica y cartaginesa en el alto Guadalquivir</i>	
Luis María Gutiérrez Soler, Antonio Jesús Ortiz Villarejo, María Alejo Armijo	925
<i>Il Progetto internazionale "ARS" "Archaeological Research in Sardinia". Nuove ricerche archeologiche al Tofet Di Sulci</i>	
Valentina Melchiorri, Thomas Schäfer	935
<i>Antes de las Columnas. Málaga en época púnica y su proyección en el SE ibérico y mar de Alborán</i>	
Bartolomé Mora Serrano, Ana Arancibia Román	949
<i>The TCM Project. Interculturality and "mediterranean-centric" perspective</i>	
Tatiana Pedrazzi.....	961

<i>Entre Cartago y Roma. Son Catlar y el impacto púnico en Menorca</i> Fernando Prados Martínez, Helena Jiménez Vialás, M ^a José León Moll, Joan C. De Nicolás Mascaró, Andrés M. Adroher Auroux, Octavio Torres Gomariz.....	969
--	-----

VOLUMEN III

MUNDO FUNERARIO

<i>Ceramica fenicia di Sardegna le urne d'impasto del Tofet di Sulky scavi 1956 e 1968-1969</i> Piero Bartoloni.....	1003
<i>Un nuevo conjunto de enterramientos de la necrópolis púnica de Gadir.</i> <i>Excavaciones en el solar de Avenida de Andalucía 1-3 en Cádiz</i> Ricardo Belizón Aragón, Antonio M. Sáez Romero, M. Luisa de la Bandera Romero.....	1013
<i>Phoenician trade in the Nile Valley: the contribution of some luxury items from Sudan</i> Luisa Bonadies.....	1035
<i>La necropoli fenicia e punica di Nora (Sardegna, Italia): nuovi dati dagli scavi 2014-2018</i> Jacopo Bonetto, Eliana Bridi, Filippo Carraro, Simone Dilaria, Alessandro Mazzariol.....	1047
<i>Sepulture atipiche nella necropoli punica di Solunto</i> Alba Maria Gabriella Calascibetta.....	1065
<i>Culti comunitari, devozione privata e pietas funeraria a Tharros – Capo San Marco in età punica:</i> <i>dati dalla ricerca sul campo e nuove linee di intervento</i> Anna Chiara Fariselli.....	1093
<i>Instrumenta domestica metallici e rituali funerari nel Mediterraneo centrale fenicio e punico</i> Giulia Congiu.....	1103
<i>New perspectives on the Early Iron Age necropolis of Olival do Senhor dos Mártires</i> <i>(Alcácer do Sal, Portugal)</i> Francisco B. Gomes.....	1111
<i>Avance al estudio de la necrópolis fenicia de la “Casa-Cuartel de la Guardia Civil”/San Severiano</i> <i>Nº 10 (Cádiz, España). Primeros datos espaciales y arqueométricos</i> Ana M ^a Niveau De Villedary y Mariñas, Natalia López Sánchez, M ^a Milagros Macías López, Pablo Sicre González, Francisco J. Blanco Jiménez, Isaac Legupín Tubío, Juan V. Fernández De La Gala, Yolanda Carrión Marco, Guillem Pérez Jordá, Ricard Marlasca Martín, Marcos A. Martelo Fernández.....	1123
<i>Nouvelles fouilles dans le sanctuaire de Ba’l Hamon a Carthage</i> Imed Ben Jerbania, Ahmed Ferjaoui, Victoria Peña, Taoufik Redissi, Kaouhter Jendoubi, Nesrine Maddahi, Walid Khalfalli.....	1141
<i>Nuove tombe dalla necropoli punica di Villamar (Sardegna). Alcuni aspetti del rituale funerario</i> Elisa Pompianu.....	1157
<i>Le Tombe puniche della necropoli di Pill’e Matta, Quartucciu (Ca)</i> Donatella Salvi.....	1173

<i>Le tombe a Pozzo del Lotto 7 nella necropoli di Tuvixeddu, a Cagliari</i> Donatella Salvi	1183
<i>Códigos funerarios: sobre los rituales funerarios a través de la incidencia de la vajilla para aceites perfumados en los ajuares de la necrópolis de Motya</i> Gabriella Sciortino	1193
<i>Nuovi dati dalla necropoli arcaica di Mozia (Campagne 2013-2017)</i> Paola Sconzo	1205
<i>La necropoli punica di Tuvixeddu (Cagliari): recupero di contesti funerari indagati nel novecento attraverso la ricerca d'archivio, lo studio dei corredi funerari e l'analisi spaziale</i> Pietro Francesco Serreli, Carla Del Vais, Giovanna Pietra	1219

CULTURA MATERIAL

<i>L'apport des épaves de Marsala à la connaissance de la galère punique</i> Ouiza Ait Amara	1229
<i>El olivo y la producción de aceite en la península ibérica durante el primer milenio a.n.e. El caso fenicio-púnico y el estudio particular de las prensas ebusitanas</i> Isabel Bonora Andujar	1245
<i>La toréutica orientalizante en la península ibérica e Ibiza: los smiting god</i> Yolanda Díaz Alonso	1261
<i>I motivi antropomorfi nella pittura vascolare di Tharros in età punica: note su alcuni esempi dalla collina di Su Murru Mannu</i> Stefano Floris	1273
<i>Cerámicas grises orientalizantes en el santuario rupestre de Gorham's Cave, Gibraltar</i> José M ^a Gutiérrez-López, Antonio M. Sáez-Romero, M ^a Cristina Reinoso-Del-Río, Francisco Giles-Pacheco, Clive Finlayson, Geraldine Finlayson	1285
<i>La Cerámica de Cartago en el Museo Nacional en Poznań</i> Michał Krueger, Inga Głuszek	1299
<i>La necrópolis de les Casetes (Villajoyosa, Alicante). Un material fenicio inédito: los huevos de avestruz</i> Diego Ruiz Alcalde, M ^a José Velázquez Pascual, Hélène Le Meaux	1307
<i>La primera ocupación fenicia de Utica</i> José Luis López Castro, Imed Ben Jerbania, Alfredo Mederos Martín, Ahmed Ferjaoui, Víctor Martínez Hahn Müller, Kaouther Jendoubi	1315
<i>Un escarabeo de metabasalto verde con reparación antigua procedente de Ibiza</i> Jordi H. Fernández, María José López-Grande, Francisca Velázquez, Benjamí Costa, Ana Mezquida Orti	1327
<i>Tel Regev y el comercio fenicio en el período persa</i> Ester López Rosendo, Carolina Aznar Sánchez, José María Martín García, Pamela Carrillo Pineda, Michal Artzy	1337

<i>Gli scarabei del Museo archeologico Ferruccio Barreca di Sant'Antioco</i> Sara Muscuso.....	1347
<i>La producción cerámica fenicia en oriente y occidente. Algunos aspectos a reconsiderar</i> Francisco J. Núñez.....	1365
<i>Economia, produção e comércio na Quinta do Almaraz (Almada, Portugal) durante o 1º milénio a.n.e. – balanço e perspectivas de investigação</i> Ana Olaio.....	1375
<i>Proposta di classificazione integrata per la produzione ceramica sardo fenicia del ferro II (625-560 a. C. ca.)</i> Carla Perra.....	1389
<i>Nota sobre una escultura púnica de piedra inédita procedente de Ibiza</i> Joan Ramon Torres.....	1407
<i>Tras las huellas de Himilcón: materiales púnicos y tardopúnicos en las Rías Baixas gallegas</i> Rafael María Rodríguez Martínez, Diego Piay Augusto, María Luisa Castro Lorenzo, Francesca Verde.....	1413
<i>The bronze bowl of Berzocana and its connection to the East Mediterranean</i> Carlos Zorea.....	1427

NUEVAS METODOLOGÍAS

<i>Scrittura su Argilla e Ceramica 2.0. Un database per il corpus delle iscrizioni fenicio-puniche</i> Paola Cavaliere, Danila Piacentini.....	1443
<i>Fragments de Tartesos. Reconstrucción de un puzzle arqueológico</i> María José Merchán García, Emiliano Pérez Hernández, Santiago Salamanca Miño, Pilar Merchán García, Esther Rodríguez González, Sebastián Celestino Pérez.....	1449
<i>La puesta en valor de la estratigrafía arqueológica en favor de la patrimonialización de la cultura fenicio púnica en España</i> Ana Seisdedos Ribera.....	1461

VOLUMEN IV

CONTACTOS Y RELACIONES

<i>Santa Olaia – a centre of phoenician influence in River Mondego (Portugal). Assessment and expectations</i> Sara O. Almeida, Raquel Vilaça.....	1495
<i>La navigation maritime et fluviale en Mediterranee occidentale : le cas du Maroc entre le VIII siecle av. J.-C. et l'ier siecle ap. J.-C.</i> Mohamed El Mhassani.....	1505

<i>La presencia fenicio-púnica en los confines de Iberia</i> Francisco José García Fernández, Eduardo Ferrer Albelda, Javier Rodríguez-Corral, Antonio M. Sáez Romero, Josefa Castiñeira Rey.....	1513
<i>Cultura materiale e interazioni coloniali nella Penisola Iberica tra VIII e VI sec. a.c.</i> Sara Giardino.....	1531
<i>The impasto ware development in the phoenician and punic world. The recognition of the production groups between east and west</i> Cecilia Guastella.....	1543
<i>Reflexions sur la presence phenicienne a Chypre</i> Christina Ioannou.....	1553
<i>El período orientalizante en el Valle del Río Guadalete (Cádiz)</i> Ester López Rosendo.....	1561
<i>Melqart, Tiro y los fenicios de la hispania romana: la construcción de una identidad situada</i> Francisco Machuca Prieto.....	1581
<i>Los Castillejos de Alcorrín (Manilva, Málaga): la envergadura de una empresa autóctona en la esfera de la colonización fenicia en las proximidades del Estrecho de Gibraltar</i> Dirce Marzoli, José Suárez Padilla, César León Martín.....	1591
<i>O impacto da colonização fenícia no estuário do Tejo: o caso de Lisboa/Almaraz</i> Elisa De Sousa.....	1603
<i>Fenici, punici e sicelioti nella Sicilia occidentale tra contatti, relazioni e conflitti: storiografia e registro archeologico</i> Francesca Spatafora.....	1615
<i>Progetto S'Urachi: incontri culturali intorno a un nuraghe di età fenicio-punica</i> Peter Van Dommelen, Damià Ramis, Andrea Roppa, Alfonso Stiglitz.....	1627
POSTERS	
<i>Archaeometric analysis on phoenician and punic amphorae from Pani Loriga (south-western Sardinia, Italy)</i> Virginia Avogaro, Lara Maritan.....	1639
<i>Hallazgo de una máscara púnica y un relieve androcéfalo en el mundo ibérico septentrional. Estudio arqueométrico, contexto e interpretación</i> Jaume Buxeda I Garrigós, Marisol Madrid I Fernández, Eva Miguel Gascón, David Asensio I Vilaró, Rafel Jornet I Niella, Dani López Reyes, Jordi Morer de Llorens.....	1647
<i>La iconografía marítima en las monedas fenicias orientales</i> Agustín Campos de la Guía.....	1659
<i>Il popolamento del Mediterraneo Antico</i> Alfredo Coppa, Michela Lucci, Sihem Roudesli-Chebbi, Francesco La Pastina.....	1665

<i>Pozzi e sistemi di canalizzazione a Mozia: i nuovi dati provenienti dall'edificio J.</i> Martina Di Giannantonio.....	1671
<i>La adopción del torno en las producciones indígenas del s. VIII-VII a.c. en el sudeste de la península ibérica vista a través de los vasos de 'paredes finas'</i> Alberto Dorado Alejos, Fernando Molina González	1677
<i>Cippi, stele e segnacoli funerari della necropoli arcaica di Mozia</i> Giacchino Falsone, Caterina Ferro	1685
<i>Las monedas fenicio-púnicas en Extremadura</i> José Miguel González Bornay	1693
<i>Un amuleto egiptizante en forma de mono procedente de los fondos del Museo de Cáceres</i> José Miguel González Bornay, Esther Rodríguez González	1699
<i>New evidence for local continuity and phoenician influence in the ceramic assemblage from Iron Age Su Padrigheddu (west-central Sardinia)</i> Linda R. Gosner, Jeremy Hayne, Emanuele Madrigali, Jessica Nowlin.....	1705
<i>La Necropoli di Monte Sirai come laboratorio bio-archeometrico: nuove datazioni al 14c e analisi del DNA antico</i> Michele Guirguis, Giampaolo Piga, Rosana Pla Orquín	1715
<i>Nuragici e fenici nella Sardegna meridionale: il caso di Cuccuru Nuraxi a Settimo San Pietro (Sardegna)</i> Maria Adele Ibba, Gianfranca Salis, Alfonso Stiglitz	1725
<i>Infraestructuras portuarias y zonas de atraque natural en el contexto de Toscanos y el paleoestuario del Bajo Vélez (Málaga, España) a través de SIG</i> Jaime Márquez Morant.....	1733
<i>Pautas de asentamiento de la expansión colonial fenicia</i> Eduardo Martínez Andújar	1741
<i>Influencias culturales fenicio-púnicas en la religión de las culturas protohistóricas Canarias ¿Un posible caso de Molk?</i> Ruth Medina Hernández.....	1747
<i>S. Antioco (Sardinia, Italy). "Sulci: Progetto Tofet". First remarks on archaeometrical analyses of pottery (2015-2017)</i> Valentina Melchiorri, Stefano Naitza, Silvana Grillo.....	1753
<i>Il popolamento di Tharros in età fenicia e punica. Analisi antropologiche preliminari dalla necropoli meridionale di Capo San Marco (Penisola del Sinis - Or)</i> Francesca Meli, Anna Chiara Fariselli, Luca Sineo.....	1761
<i>Motivos orientales en ambientes locales: la flor de loto en las cerámicas pintadas San Pedro II de Alarcos</i> Pedro Miguel Naranjo	1769

<i>Elementi lignei dall'area del Porto di Tharros (Laguna di Mistras, Cabras)</i>	
Maria Mureddu, Francesco Solinas, Carla Del Vais.....	1777
<i>La relación entre el hábitat urbano y los santuarios de Gadir (Cádiz, España).</i>	
<i>Una propuesta de análisis de visibilidad mediante SIGs</i>	
Natalia López Sánchez, Ana M ^a Niveau De Villedary y Mariñas, Pablo Sicre González, Juan Ignacio Gómez González.....	1785
<i>Singularidades de uma matriz comum: arquitectura e urbanismo orientalizante na Quinta do Almaraz (Almada, Portugal)</i>	
Ana Olaio, Fernando Robles Henriques, Telmo António.....	1795
<i>Immagini in contesto: Riflessioni sulle stele di Sulky e di Monte Sirai (Sardegna - Italia)</i>	
Rosana Pla Orquín.....	1805
<i>Interacción fenicia y púnica en el sector central del sureste ibérico: aportaciones desde el proyecto Arqueotopos III</i>	
Sebastián F. Ramallo Asensio, María Milagrosa Ros Sala, Benjamín Cutillas Victoria, Felipe Cerezo Andreo.....	1813
<i>Un askos de producción mediterránea en el confín del mundo</i>	
Rafael María Rodríguez Martínez, Diego Piay Augusto, María Luisa Castro Lorenzo, Francesca Verde.....	1821
<i>El olor del festín: perfumes y aromas litúrgicos en espacios domésticos y funerarios del NE de la península ibérica</i>	
Samuel Sardà Seuma.....	1829
<i>Child inhumations on the island of Motya. New evidence from the archaic cemetery</i>	
Gabriele Lauria, Paola Sconzo, Gioacchino Falsone, Luca Sineo.....	1837
<i>Paesaggi funerari tra età punica e romana nella Sardegna centro-occidentale: il caso della necropoli di Punta Zinnigas (San Vero Milis, OR)</i>	
Maura Vargiu.....	1843
<i>El cinabrio en la protohistoria hispana. Algunos indicios para la apertura de una vía de investigación</i>	
Mar Zarzalejos Prieto, Patricia Hevia Gómez, Germán Esteban Borrajo.....	1851
TALLER DOCTORAL	
<i>Necrópolis de hipogeos en las islas Baleares (ss. VI-II a.n.e): ¿origen local o fruto de una interacción con grupos fenicio-púnicos?</i>	
Sonia Carbonell Pastor.....	1863
<i>Alfarerías y producción cerámica durante el Bronce Final y la Primera Edad del Hierro en el sector central del sureste ibérico</i>	
Benjamín Cutillas Victoria.....	1871

<i>Tel Shiqmona: a forgotten phoenician site on the Carmel coast</i> Golan Shalvi.....	1885
<i>La producción de ánforas en el ambiente púnico de La Illeta dels Banyents</i> <i>(El Campello, Alicante). Un breve avance</i> Pascual Perdiguero.....	1893
<i>Il sistema idrico urbano di Solunto fra IV E I secolo a.C.</i> Polizzi Giovanni.....	1903
<i>Infancia y prácticas funerarias en la necrópolis del Puig des Molins, Ibiza (ss. VII-II a.C.)</i> Aurora Rivera-Hernández.....	1921
<i>La posible influencia fenicia en la residencia fortificada de la Primera Edad del Hierro</i> <i>de Sant Jaume (Alcanar, Tarragona) a partir del estudio de las estructuras de combustión</i> Carme Saorin	1935
<i>Territorio ed economia del Marocco pre-romano: studio di archeologia del paesaggio e</i> <i>delle risorse nella regione di Meknès</i> Di Fiammetta Susanna.....	1943

THE TCM PROJECT STUDIES AND REFLECTIONS ON (PHOENICIAN) “IDENTITY”

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ABSTRACT

The TCM project, born in the CNR from the collaboration between Tatiana Pedrazzi and me, aims to investigate the phenomena and processes of cultural interactions and “identity” construction through the presentation of various case studies concerned with the communities of the ancient Levant, including the Phoenicians who settled in the western Mediterranean at the beginning of the first millennium BCE. The research also has the objective – which is by no means secondary – of considering the methodological tools that might be used to develop such a study, especially from a terminological point of view (as in the case of the word/concept “identity”).

KEYWORDS

Phoenicians, transformations, crisis, identity, interculturality, continuist approach.

RESUMEN

El proyecto TCM, nacido en el CNR fruto de la colaboración entre Tatiana Pedrazzi y yo, tiene el objetivo de investigar los fenómenos y procesos de las interacciones culturales y la construcción de la “identidad”, a través de la presentación de diferentes casos de estudio; estos últimos concernían a las comunidades del antiguo Levante, incluidos los Fenicios que se asentaron en el Mediterráneo occidental desde el principio del primer milenio. Además, la investigación tiene también el objetivo, no secundario, de pensar en los instrumentos que pueden usarse para desarrollar dicho estudio, especialmente desde un punto de vista terminológico (como en el caso de la palabra/concepto “identidad”).

PALABRAS CLAVE

Fenicios, transformaciones, crisis, identidad, interculturalidad, enfoque continuista.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Formally launched in 2013, the TCM project – “Transformations and Crisis in the Mediterranean: ‘Identity’ and interculturality in the Levant and Phoenician West” – is the result of the close collaboration that started in 2011 between Tatiana Pedrazzi and me. The project can be described as the direct outcome of the progressive enlargement and confluence of two different lines of investigation, originally and individually developed within the *Istituto di Studi sulle Civiltà Italiane e del Mediterraneo Antico*, which later became the *Istituto di Studi sul Mediterraneo Antico* (CNR, Rome)²: “Cult and identity construction of the western Phoenicians: Geographic, cultural and symbolic borders” (Giuseppe Garbati) and “Cultural identities and commercial dynamics in the Levant between the end of the Bronze Age and the first Iron Age (13th-9th century BCE)” (Tatiana Pedrazzi). Although these two lines of study were each devoted to their respective topics, from the outset they were based on common methodologies, theoretical approaches and objectives: both were aimed at the analysis of Mediterranean contacts and exchange dynamics, particularly taking into account the processes by which communities were formed – with their complex modalities of self-representation and self-definition – and their encounter, which developed on different levels, with the “other”. Given these premises, a desire to cooperate soon arose; it resulted in a need to delineate a field of study that could address shared scientific interests. Thus, the TCM project was born.

As suggested by the title, the project’s main aim is to analyse cultural interactions and phenomena of “identity” construction – the latter, we think, are inseparable from the former – through the presentation of different case studies (passing through disciplines such as archaeology, history, history of art, epigraphy, history of religions, etc.). The protagonists are the communities of the ancient Levant, including the Phoenicians who settled in the western Mediterranean at the dawn of the first millennium BCE, observed from a *longue durée* perspective; indeed, in chronological terms the TCM is wide-ranging, covering the long period from the 12th to the 2nd century BCE. Notably, the core focus of the research has been found in periods of “crisis” and “transformation”: it is in such moments that the degrees of the groups’ aggregation, their accessibility from outside or their rejection of “alien” elements are most perceptible; the analysis of changes, then, allows us to try to observe and examine the internal cohesion of a group and the strength of links and social connections, as well as the modalities by which it reacts to – and sometimes opposes – the foreign, the other, the outside. From such a perspective, the ancient Mediterranean – conceived as a *middle place* and then as a *place of mediation* (Guarracino 2007) – constitutes an excellent field of study. Four terms (and concepts) – deeply connected and interrelated and, as it were, arranged in pairs – have therefore emerged as the main keywords of the project: the above-mentioned “transformations and crisis” and “identity and interculturality”. The first pair represents, in a sense, the historical framework in which the different case studies can be understood. The second, on the other hand, reflects the main methodological aspects of the investigation; after all, the study also has the objective – which is by no means secondary – of considering the methodological tools that might be used to develop the investigation, particularly from a terminological point of view³.

As the TCM project matured, following the approach just outlined and focusing on a long period, three distinct stages were established, each one corresponding to a particular macro-phase and tangibly represented by a single editorial product (Garbati; Pedrazzi 2015, 2016 and in elaboration). More specifically, the first results of the project were presented at the International Meeting held in Rome in 2013, followed in 2015 by the publication of its Proceedings (Garbati; Pedrazzi 2015, dedicated to the period from the 12th to the 8th

² Tatiana Pedrazzi and I would like to warmly thank Paola Santoro, Director of ISCIMA/ISMA from 2009 to 2014, for her strong support for the project since its first steps. The ISMA has just become part of the new ISPC – *Istituto di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale*.

³ On the word “identity” see 2; see also the contribution by Tatiana Pedrazzi in this volume.

century). Approximately one year later, at the end of 2016, the second volume was published (Garbati; Pedrazzi 2016, 8th to 5th century). The third and final volume, which is now in progress, is devoted to the 5th to 2nd century BCE (Garbati; Pedrazzi in elaboration). Many colleagues – specialists from different disciplines – have contributed their energies and expertise to the TCM, and during the project's various stages have helped to open up an intense and fruitful scientific dialogue.

2. A BRIEF FOCUS ON IDENTITY: THE TCM PERSPECTIVE(S)

As mentioned above, the term “identity” is one of the project's keywords. It is on this that I would like to focus now in order to underline some questions – specifically those relating to terminology – that have arisen so far during the development of the TCM (and the publication of the first two books).

As is well known, for some time now the expression “cultural identity” has been widely employed in studies concerned with the ancient world, and particularly in those devoted to the Phoenician civilization (besides the TCM volumes, cf. on this topic Garbati 2014; Pedrazzi 2014; Porzia 2018; Quinn; Vella 2014; Quinn 2018, with the respective bibliographical references). However, its widespread utilization has led to its becoming somewhat hackneyed nowadays, in so far as its use has come to be commonplace and sometimes uncritical, not to mention unoriginal. From this point of view, I broadly agree with a comment made by Marco Bonechi – not least for its challenging stance – in his concluding article in the first TCM volume (Garbati; Pedrazzi 2015): «temo che in ultima analisi la parola identità appartenga a due soli lessici, quello psicologico e quello politico» (Bonechi 2015: 278)⁴. Nevertheless, the debate about the ways in which the term is applied in historical studies cannot be said to be resolved, still less outdated. Indeed, the adoption of the word “identity”, especially when paired with the adjective “cultural”, continues to oscillate between positions that see the word itself as a definition – or even as an interpretative category – and positions that, on the contrary, entirely reject its operativity.

From the various contributions included in the TCM volumes, two trends, in particular, have emerged with regard to this specific question, reflecting (at least in part) the orientation of current studies (Garbati 2016). The first tendency is directed, in principle, towards searching in the available documentation for features of coherence that may allow us to circumscribe a human group and its cultural manifestations; it moves towards the recognition of characteristics of homogeneity (in different aspects of life), while also considering factors such as variability and contextual situations. The second tendency, in which I recognize myself more directly, looks at identity as a human attitude that must be investigated – not therefore as a research tool (cf. Remotti 2010) – trying to pick out its forms and dynamics; it is not necessarily linked to the delineation of a broad cultural – I would venture to say ethnic – framework (although it could be), but rather to examining phenomena aimed at claiming a unitary and stable sense of belonging, which can be expressed on different levels (individual, familial, corporative, urban, regional, etc.).

Both tendencies have in common an approach that cannot but operate by means of differentiation: indeed, they proceed by establishing distinctions and specificities by comparison (if not by opposition). However, they function on two different levels – the first favouring the etic approach, aimed at identifying different human groups, cultures and their possible correlations, and the second preferring the emic one, which tends to look to the interior of the communities in question⁵. Though each has its own reason for being – which we may respectively characterize as the delimitation of an object of study, however fluid it

⁴ «I fear that the word identity belongs ultimately to only two lexicons, the psychological and the political» (author's translation).

⁵ On the application of the “emic” and “etic” approaches to the study of Phoenicians see, for instance, Xella 2007.

may be, and as the analysis of cultural processes carried out by that object – the two positions entail certain specific problems for historical reconstruction. It may therefore be useful to touch upon some of these problems now (and two of them in particular), since inevitably they are intimately connected with the choice of a particular research methodology.

On the one hand, the etic perspective, distinguishing one community or one culture from another (delineating borders between them), implies the necessity to find a specific collocation for those elements that do not appear to belong fully to any of the differentiated subjects (or fully to both?). With regard to the Levantine area, such a problem has been clearly stated, for example, in the work of Marian H. Feldman dedicated to luxury artifacts – ivories and metal bowls specifically – at the beginning of the first millennium (Feldman 2014). As Feldman indicates, the classification of products has often been approached on an ethnic-geographical basis; such a methodology has often led to difficulty in ordering and understanding items that are placed *in between* given cultural entities: «Critically, those ivories that don't fit easily into defined style-groups signal a potential disconnect between equating artistic style with singular place of production. Thus, as our stylistic criteria have attained more precise articulation, they have revealed the immense stylistic variability of these works of art – a variability that in fact seems to defy a tidy classification» (Feldman 2014: 17). In an attempt to move beyond this difficulty, it has been noted – rightly, I think – that there is an advantage to adopting a “continuist approach” in some cases, «that is to analyze human activities focusing on the identification of what is indistinct instead of what is well defined and classified», as recently stressed by Ida Oggiano (Oggiano 2016: 90; cf. Porzia 2018). Such an approach can help to delineate something like mixed and/or transversal identities – such as *style communities*, to paraphrase the title of Feldman's book – according to cultural manifestations that cannot be circumscribed within the limits of a single specific “ethnic” group. Consequently, this approach offers the advantage that it makes it possible to consider, as one of the preliminary and inescapable aspects, the fluidity of cultural borders, not always and necessarily coinciding with geographic and/or political confines, nor with ethnic and linguistic boundaries (on this cf. Fabietti 2005).

On the other hand, the investigation aimed at analysing identity on the emic level first needs to establish whether certain forms of belonging – of adherence to a group in order to obtain unification and stabilization – can actually be traced back to identitarian processes. After all, anthropological studies have repeatedly pointed out that the claim of identity cannot always be ascribed to the efforts of individuals and communities to achieve continuity and consistency; so, the use of the term risks equating processes and phenomena that do not actually coincide with each other. Francesco Remotti, for instance, has asked: «Ma è poi vero che gli esseri umani, o le loro società, vogliono sempre e comunque l'identità, pur riuscendo a realizzare soltanto approssimazioni?» (Remotti 2010: XXII)⁶. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, for their part, have stated: «Conceptualizing all affinities and affiliations, all forms of belonging, all experiences of commonality, connectedness, and cohesion, all self-understandings and self-identifications in the idiom of “identity” saddles us with a blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary» (Brubaker; Cooper 2000: 2). A rather clear example of such questions, is that of the temple of Antas in Sardinia (Bernardini; Ibba 2015; Manca di Mores 2018, with respective references). From the late Republican age, the local cult, which was initially addressed – at least from the beginning of the 4th century – to the Phoenician god Sid *b'by*, takes on a different form, evident both in the temple architecture, which adopts an Italic appearance, and in the name of the deity, which becomes Sardus Pater *bab(...)*. Directed towards a father god with eponymous connotations, the cult, then, seems to clearly express – as does the Latin theonym first and foremost – a strong sense of belonging (or “identity”) projected on to the whole island. However, the transformation of the religious dimension does not seem to occur through processes of maintaining a pre-existing integrity or of establishing a new one by

⁶ «But then, is it true that human beings, or their societies, want identity at all times and in all circumstances, even if they can only achieve approximations?» (author's translation).

deleting the former, but through the absorption of new forms (Roman in this case), which inevitably entails the maturation of new values. It is not possible to present here all the features of the cult that relate to such a complex process; nevertheless, it may be sufficient to recall that in the transition from Sid to Sardus Pater, the deity retains the epiclesis *baby/bab(...)*, manifesting change and tradition at the same time (and introducing, finally, an original cultural product: cf., on this topic, Garbati 2017). Thus, in a certain period of its history, the temple does not seem to belong to a specific cultural sphere of the island (of local, Phoenician and Roman tradition); it rather constitutes, as just stated, an original product, another kind of “in between”, born out of interaction. What, then, is the identity claimed in the context of this phenomenon? Is the sense of belonging manifested at Antas really linked to dynamics of cultural opposition, as the identity claim should theoretically require?

In the end, the problems briefly discussed above concerning both the emic and the etic perspective deal directly with the ambiguity of the term “identity”, since it describes something fictional⁸ and affirms unity and stability against inevitable cultural plurality and continuous change. Not by chance, François Jullien has recently suggested rejecting the term “identity” and attempting instead to use the concept of *écart* (something like “gap”), conceived as the “in between” that simultaneously separates and connects two different elements/entities, producing something in common, and that is therefore worthy of exploration (Jullien 2016).

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Based on what has been stated so far, it appears undeniable that the discussion on the use (and perhaps abuse) of the word “identity” in historical studies – with specific reference to the disciplines to which our research belongs – remains open, especially within the context of the TCM project: indeed, many problems have emerged, while unequivocal solutions appear to be some way off. However, as I conclude these brief reflections, two points seem evident enough. Firstly, it is quite clear from my perspective that the word “identity” should primarily be understood as a human attitude, a collective or individual behavior that may perhaps be investigated if it is recognizable in the available data (thereby reducing the risk that it will be taken for granted and consequently applied uncritically to different processes and phenomena); in this way, it should not be conceived and used as a tool of research, a definition, an operative category in the service of historical interpretation⁹. Secondly, a question should be asked – one that is necessary even if it is not new: it is clear that the meaning of words depends on their use and, more specifically, on the delimitation of their semantic field, often bound to the approach that is adopted for a given piece of research; however, while circumscribing the use of a particular terminology, is it really possible to overcome the conditionings inherent in it? To what extent is the use of certain words really advantageous

⁷ The meaning of the word remains unknown: see Bernardini and Ibba 2015: 77-78, notes 9-12.

⁸ This does not mean that “identity” is considered false or misleading by those who claim it and ask for its acknowledgement (quite the opposite: they conceive it as truly existent). The word “fictional” rather means something that is artificially – historically, socially, culturally – constructed, but which has nothing in it that is substantial (as in the Latinate sense of the term *fingere* : see Garbati 2014 and Pedrazzi 2014).

⁹ From this point of view, a very interesting distinction has been drawn concerning the process of identity(/ies) construction, recognizing three moments within it: a) *self-perception* (which is «le moment le plus intérieur, puisqu’il s’agit d’une relation de soi à soi médiatisée par le langage et l’intériorisation du regard d’autrui»); b) *presentation* («un moment intermédiaire, puisqu’il s’agit de l’image offerte à autrui par le sujet»); and c) *designation* («le moment de plus grande extériorité, étant le retour de sa propre image donnée au sujet par autrui»). Such a distinction could offer a promising starting point for research that intends to deal with identitarian matters (Heinich 2018 [quotes from pp. 74-75]).

in terms of historical interpretation? In short, is being fully aware of the problems posed by words enough to render them convenient, serviceable and, above all, operative in spite of those problems¹⁰?

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¹⁰ The question of Phoenician identity, which has often arisen in recent times, is emblematic, as it is the result of a combination of two different viewpoints, the emic and the etic approaches (cf. Garbati 2016): in this specific case, the key point probably lies not so much in the more or less real existence of the Phoenicians as in the fact that it is identity itself that does not exist.

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El presente volumen recoge parte de las contribuciones presentadas durante el IX Congreso Internacional de Estudios Fenicios y Púnicos que tuvo lugar en Mérida entre los días 22 y 26 de octubre de 2018. Este encuentro, reúne cada cuatro años a los mayores especialistas en el conocimiento de las Culturas Fenicia y Púnica. Estos cuatro volúmenes recopilan parte de las novedades históricas y arqueológicas que fueron presentadas durante las jornadas. Los libros se estructuran en 15 áreas temáticas, además de los posters presentados y los trabajos correspondientes al Taller Doctoral.

This volume contains some of the contributions presented at the 9th International Congress of Phoenician and Punic Studies that took place in Mérida (Spain) between the 22-26 October 2018.

This international scientific meeting is held every four years to bring together experts in Phoenician and Punic culture. These four volumes compile part of the new historical and archaeological data that was presented at the congress. The books are structured into 15 thematic sections and posters and papers derived from the Doctoral Workshop are also included.