

Phoenicians and Cultural Exchanges in Herodotus

Over the last forty years, scholars have conclusively shown that ancient Greece's cultural and technological exchanges with other cultures were much greater than had previously been acknowledged. Most works have simply pointed to "the East," as the source of many aspects of Greek culture, without pinpointing any particular cultures or peoples (Burkert, 1992). I argue that at least one Greek author, Herodotus, was not only aware of the Greeks' interactions with "the East" but also identifies the people who caused them: the Phoenicians. A study of the Phoenicians in Herodotus reveals that they consistently appear as facilitators of interactions between foreign peoples and that interactions between Phoenicians and other peoples are catalysts for cultural change. The consistency of this pattern suggests that Herodotus considered the Phoenicians a driving force of cultural and technological exchanges in the ancient world.

For example in the beginning of his work, Herodotus, citing Persian authorities, says that the Phoenicians were responsible for the dispute between Europe and Asia; the Phoenicians had been trading with the Egyptians and the Assyrians for some time, and eventually began to trade with Argos (1.1). As the Phoenicians leave Argos, they kidnap Io, which is the start of hostilities between Europe and Asia; in recompense, the Hellenes sail to Tyre and abduct Europa, a princess (1.2.1). This series of east-west abductions continues until Paris steals Helen, leading to the Trojan War. The references to Io, Europa, and the Trojan War place this discussion in a mythological context, but significantly, Herodotus cuts out Zeus and the judgment of Paris. Instead, the Phoenicians, while trading Egyptian and Assyrian goods in Argos, abduct Io and precipitate a lengthy series of interactions between Greece and the East. Studies of the ethnographic sections in Herodotus have shown that these passages are not designed to present a reader with indisputable, true facts regarding the cultures in question; rather they are a means for

Herodotus to reveal peoples' general customs and nature (Benardete, 1969; Hartog, 1988). The customs and nature of the Phoenicians as facilitators of exchange between east and west are brought to the forefront of Herodotus' inquiries at the very opening of his work about a war between Greeks and Persians.

Elsewhere, the Phoenicians are cited as the mediators of more concrete technological exchanges. At times, this technology is used in unexpected ways, suggesting cultural misunderstanding—a phenomenon known to occur when foreign technology is introduced (Lopez-Ruiz, 2010). For example, Phoenician date-palm wine is the most mentioned material good from Phoenicia in the *Histories*, and its myriad uses reveal a complex array of cultural interactions and misunderstandings. The earliest mention of this wine appears when Herodotus is describing the Armenian trade with Babylon: “the Armenians’ most common cargo for Babylon is Phoenician date palm wine. They put it on marvelous circular boats and float it down the river to them” (1.194). While this is a rather straightforward exchange of goods, it is exemplary of Phoenician goods linking two distinct peoples. In the Egyptian ethnography though, the Phoenician wine plays a strikingly different role; having declared that the Egyptians do not adopt customs from other people, we would not expect them to change their ways in the face of Phoenician influence. However, Herodotus tells us, “When embalming a corpse, the Egyptians wash out the abdominal cavity with Phoenician date-palm wine” (2.86). The Egyptians’ use of the Phoenician wine is demonstrative of a cultural misunderstanding, in that the wine was designed as a beverage, but they have reappropriated it for an Egyptian context. Later, we are told that the empty wine jars are filled with water and buried in the Egyptian desert, facilitating travel between Egypt and Persia (3.6.1). In this instance, we see a Phoenician good that has been reappropriated for use in Egypt as embalming fluid, and then used again as water storage to

reach Persia; this water in the desert links Egypt to Persia. Clearly, this is an instance of Phoenician cultural items serving to connect disparate peoples.

This Phoenician date-palm wine is one of several instances of the Phoenicians filling this mediating role, in Herodotus. Throughout his *Histories*, Herodotus provides clear evidence that the Phoenicians were the primary mediators between eastern and western cultures, the catalysts of the Orientalizing revolution.

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