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# Gaia Servadio, *Motya: Unearthing a Lost Civilization*

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**Gaia Servadio, *Motya: Unearthing a Lost Civilization*. London: Phoenix Paperback, 2001.**

In all of our ISCSC conference discussions of “what is a civilization?” one of the world’s more ancient cultures, the Phoenicians, has rarely come up. We all know something about them—certainly from the Roman accounts of their long relationship with them at first as trading partners, and ultimately in a war to the death, which the Carthaginian Phoenicians lost. We have also heard them described in the Hebrew Scriptures as being among the inhabitants of Canaan.

We have not heard anything from the Phoenicians themselves, because although they are credited with having invented the very alphabet that is used in variations by Greeks, Hebrews, Romans, and Muslims, any literature that they may have written was destroyed by enemies who had the last word.

This leaves us with the work of archaeologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries who have painstakingly put together a picture of this amazing civilization. One site has been particularly productive—a small island city at the western tip of Sicily, called Motya. An eccentric Englishman, Joseph “Pip” Whitaker, whose family made their fortune producing and exporting Marsala wines, was an amateur archaeologist who bought the little island of Motya and devoted his life to excavating and publishing his findings. This site has become a treasure trove of information on the inhabitants, a trading post with a relationship to Carthage.

In 397 BC, the city was sacked by Dionysius I, ruler of the Greek city of Syracuse in eastern Sicily. Dionysius used long siege catapults, perhaps for the first time in history, and the city fell. There was a massive slaughter, and the remaining women and children were hauled off into slavery. The empty city fell into ruin—and was virtually untouched until Whitaker began digging. The author of this book, Gaia Servadio, has been visiting this site over fifty years, and although a writer and not an archaeologist, she has explained why she was so obsessed with it.

“Motya is unique in having been destroyed suddenly, leaving the inhabitants just enough time to hide their treasures. Its ground therefore still conceals what individuals buried as their best objects, thereby saving them from the Greeks but not from twentieth century archaeologists... This, for me, is one of Motya’s main attractions: the slow unveiling of a mystery, of a way of life which has been erased by time and by defeat, but civilized enough to leave behind many clues. I knew that under my feet lay the secrets of an entire civilization which hitherto had been described only by hostile pens.”

This introduction was enough to hook me too. Although this is not a scholarly book on the civilization of the Phoenicians, it provides more than enough on the romance of its archaeology, tantalizing glimpses of these ancient masters of the seas, and the biographies of the wealthy British who lived and made their fortunes in Sicily. The bibliography is voluminous, and points the way to further in-depth reading. This little book is crammed with all sorts of data, except for a biography of the author herself—which one is compelled to glean from her comments. Apparently she was born in Italy (she mentions her father, who was a scholar and a Jew), educated in England, and has lived with her husband and children in England, Sicily, and Umbria. She is a writer, historian, and artist, and certainly is interested in archaeology. I suspect that a book about her would be fascinating too.

What she achieves with this book is to awaken our interest in the

Phoenicians, who had an enormous influence on western history—from antiquity to today. This culture had its roots in today's Lebanon which, with Israel, lay within the land once known as Canaan. We know them from biblical account as neighbors of and a cousin tribe of the Hebrews. Religious scholars also tell us of how difficult it was for the Hebrew prophets to wean their people from the fertility cults of the Canaanites, who were much more attuned to an agricultural life than the fierce desert god, Yahweh. But Yahweh prevailed, and became the root deity for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

We also hear about the Sea People who come from an unknown place, but seemed to blend with the Canaanites and became the Philistines, who were neighbors of the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians became the greatest seagoers of antiquity—even daring to go beyond the Mediterranean to Cornwall, where they may have mined tin and brought it back to the ancient world. There are even stories that they may have crossed the Atlantic to leave remnants in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Being traders and seagoers, the Phoenicians established port cities throughout the ancient world, and some of these became colonies. The most famous of these was Carthage, the people of which were called Punic (remember the Punic Wars with Rome?). Servadio provides useful descriptions of these various Phoenician descendants and shows how their customs and religions changed over time and circumstances. Motya, a colony and close ally of Carthage, was destroyed by the Sicilian Greeks long before Carthage was destroyed by Rome, which provides archaeologists with a marvelous opportunity to explore a Punic city at its height.

It really is unfortunate that the writings, both poetry and prose, of these people, who were the first to write in the ancient world, have never been found. This leaves history to be written by one's enemies, who will rarely be sympathetic. But as archaeologists continue to dig, more will be found.

Motya is certainly an intriguing probe of who Phoenicians/Punics were—and how much they affected the world. Their descendants can be found in western Sicily, Spain, Portugal, and North Africa—as well as the homeland of the original Lebanese in the Middle East, where they are part of modern conflicts and consumers of arms. It makes one think.

Laina Farhat-Holzman