

Contact Without Contact: or, The Problem of Cultural Exchange in the Iron Age Mediterranean

A unique situation has arisen in the scholarly discussion of cultural contact and exchange in the Iron Age Mediterranean: nearly everyone admits that there is significant cultural exchange, but no one wants to admit that any cultures had knowledge of one another. In response, scholars have posited theories of cultural exchange largely based on impersonal forces, largely inspired by center-periphery models. In other words, essentially a large-scale game of “telephone” was at work with local communities only communicating with the next community over, thereby creating the appearance of a deeply integrated set of cultures around the Mediterranean. I suggest, however, that the real problem is that we simply lack sources: we simply do not have documentation of the individuals (as we do for later periods) who would have been the intermediaries that passed cultural knowledge back and forth between cultures. In other words, I argue that scholars have built a scholarly apparatus and methodology around the contingency of the silence of our sources rather than investigate whether this apparatus is actually fundamentally sound on the merits. Moreover, much of the debate is structured around the field of Classics and the ideology of the “Greek Miracle” structures thought patterns here. The Greek Miracle was conceived in the 19th century through racial pseudo-science that posited Greek inventions of science, democracy, etc. were due to Greek Aryan (!) racial purity without contact with other cultures (here usually deemed (proto-)“Jewish” as many of the Near Eastern cultures spoke Semitic languages). I will (very briefly) discuss a couple examples of cultural-exchange that suggest difficulties with the predominant theories and frameworks on the question.