How to Read Ancient Texts

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With a Focus on Select Phoenician Inscriptions from Malta

Anthony J. Frendo

Cover Image (photo by Nicholas C. Vella): Count Saverio Marchese's copy of CIS I, 123 *bis*, courtesy Cathedral Museum, Mdina, Malta

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To my beloved wife Lillian, ever so loving, self-effacing, and unassuming

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Acknowledgements

To say that I owe so much to so many is – in the context of this monograph – definitely not a worn-out phrase. The topics I deal with in this book are partly those from many years gone by and partly from very recent times. For over thirty years, I taught a good deal of the issues discussed in this book, however, the topic I finally investigated demanded that I also had to dig into fresh soil.

I first want to thank all those students who over the years sat in my lectures on methods of research, and Phoenician archaeology and epigraphy. I underscore the fact that the questions some put to me were of a type that revealed how intelligent, observant, and dedicated they were. It is impossible to single out these students, however, suffice it to say that many of them are today friends and colleagues. The research for this book was carried out over many years – partly here at the University of Malta, and partly at the University of Oxford, where I went on research visits practically every year for many years. Heartfelt thanks to all my friends and colleagues in both institutions – they know who they are – true friends. I also thank the librarians and their staff at both institutions; as far as Oxford is concerned, I thank those who were responsible, and their staff, at the Bodleian library, the then Sackler Library, and the library of the Oriental Institute.

In connection with my observations on poetry, I want to thank Ivan Callus, Professor of English at the University of Malta, who pointed out to me three important articles about poetry in volume 3 (2017) of the Journal *CounterText* (see the Bibliography). I cherish the conversations that Ivan and I had.

I definitely cannot forego thanking the Academic Work Resources Fund Committee of the University of Malta, without whose support I would not have been able to carry out my research at Oxford and obtain a number of expensive, but highly important, bibliographic sources.

As can be seen in the captions of the Figures of this book, I also owe a great deal to various people who were very generous in providing me with photographs of various objects, or granting me permission to reproduce their own illustrations. I would thus like to thank heartily the following: Dr Maxine Anastasi, Senior Lecturer in Roman Archaeology at the University of Malta, who very kindly set out the photographs, formatted them, and made the drawings; Ms Sharon Sultana, Senior Manager, Archaeology and Natural History, Heritage Malta, for the different photographs of the Tal-Virtù Papyrus Inscription that she kindly sent, allowing me to publish them here, and for allowing me to see this inscription, as well as CIS I, 123, which are held in the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta; and Professor Nicholas C. Vella FSA, Professor of Mediterranean Archaeology and Director, Doctoral School at the

Note to the Reader

When I cite an inscription as, e.g., CIS I, 123 this means the reader is being referred to inscription number 123 in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, Part I. If I cite the inscription as, e.g., KAI 61 this means the reader is being referred to Inscription number 61 in *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*. For specific details on *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, Part I see CIS I 1883- in the Bibliography, whereas for details on *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften* see KAI: 1966-1969 in the Bibliography. Note, however, that when reference is made to a commentary on the text in, e.g., KAI, then the reference follows the general style of citing author/s and date followed by page number. Note also that there could also be a reference to the updated volume 1 of KAI, namely KAI 2002, for which see KAI: 2002 in the Bibliography.

When I cite texts in French, German, Italian, and Latin, I then provide the reader with my own translation (unless otherwise stated), normally in the footnotes.

Preface

For about three decades or so, one of the courses I taught at the University of Malta was on Phoenician inscriptions from the Levant and from Malta. Over the years I had in mind to go back and study in more depth a select number of these inscriptions with a view to publishing an updated interpretation of them in the light of the advances being made in Northwest Semitic epigraphy and philology. Owing to various teaching and administrative duties at the University, as well as because I had other publications to attend to, this project on the Phoenician inscriptions never got off the ground. However, over the years I accumulated many insights from my research, as well as from the intelligent questions my students put to me in class, with the result that I deem this moment to be the best for me to undertake the task I had originally had in mind.

The original plan was to do the usual thing undertaken in such types of research, i.e. to study (in this case) a number of select inscriptions from the Maltese archipelago, concentrating on the script, the philology, and the cultural information that could be gleaned from the texts examined. I had intended to concentrate on a selection of Phoenician inscriptions that had actually been found in the Maltese archipelago, at the same time including any pertinent information gleaned from other parts of the Mediterranean. I had planned to entitle this projected work: *Faint Voices from Canaanite Malta during the first Millennium BCE: a Study of select Phoenician-Punic Inscriptions.*

But it so happened that the more I delved into the subject the more it became apparent that there were a number of crucial preliminary issues to be dealt with at a deeper level. Not to examine these properly would have meant sweeping them under the carpet, with the result that the study of ancient inscriptions, especially in the field of Phoenician, would be left with a host of unexamined assumptions. In such a scenario, we would be missing out on significant information about one very important group of our Mediterranean ancestors, i.e. the Phoenicians. Thus, for example, it became clear to me that there were many things which we generally assume to be true but which definitely need much more careful analysis. Such matters included the principles of interpretation, and these same principles applied to the reading of ancient texts, the notion of verse and poetry, the role of orality in antiquity, the problem of word division (or the lack thereof), and not least the issue of how to read verse in an inscription written in *scriptio continua*.[1] Permeating these problems was the question of the relationship between the 'knower' and the 'known', and hence the problem of what is meant by objectivity. More attention also needs to be paid to pinning down the literary genre and the life setting of the texts the archaeologists retrieve in their excavations.

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[1] For the meaning of *scriptio continua*, see n. 5 in Chapter 3.

Issues such as the foregoing eventually led me to change the title of this book from the one mentioned above to the current one, i.e. *How to Read Ancient Texts: With a Focus on Select Phoenician Inscriptions from Malta*, with the aim of examining three Phoenician inscriptions retrieved in Malta, while at the same time dealing in depth with the aforementioned issues (and related ones) that are often either neglected or given insufficient attention. The result, hopefully, is an enhanced understanding of the inscriptions chosen and the coalescence of an approach that can be used on other inscriptions from antiquity. The target audience in mind here includes colleagues and scholars working in the field of Northwest Semitic inscriptions (especially Phoenician) and the Hebrew Bible, as wells as classical scholars and archaeologists of the Mediterranean (especially of the Levant).

It is clear that by undertaking the aforementioned tasks, and in aiming to reach the projected objectives, I had to delve into interdisciplinary research, at times studying certain issues for the first time. This should not be a problem, assuming most of us accept the fact that *dies diem docet*,[2] and that even the study of the Humanities often demands research of this nature. Indeed, there are fields of study – archaeology, the Bible, and the topics discussed in this book – that, by their very nature, have to draw on various disciplines. Thus, for example, 'the study of the Bible in the humanities is not a discipline as is often thought, but a field of study that draws on various disciplines and other fields for its conceptual frameworks and methodologies.'[3] The same holds good for this study.

In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that 'to be interdisciplinary, scholarship must embrace approaches that are not traditionally in conversation with the datasets or methodologies already present within a given field. Such work is informed by areas of study beyond our shared chronological and geographical scopes that can illuminate our evidence in fresh ways'.[4] The ideal is for there to be a two-way flow of traffic, in the sense that interdisciplinary research also aims at permitting 'findings in our present scholarly domains to enrich those fields from which we draw new methods and ways of seeing'.[5] It is clear that in research of this type (as in any area of research after all) we should be wary of employing concepts that, although very familiar to us, were not used in the languages and cultures of the ancient Near East, i.e. terms such as 'culture', 'migration', 'imperialism', etc.[6] Notwithstanding such an important point, we have also to keep in mind, however, that the way to understand ancient societies is, on one hand, by using the analogy of human experience, while on the other keeping in mind all the time the aforementioned fact that certain concepts

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[2] A Latin proverb literally meaning 'day teaches day', i.e. that we learn as we go along, and thus by experience. The point being that there is always something new to learn.

[3] Zevit 2001: 9.

[4] Alderman *et al.* 2022: 2.

[5] Alderman *et al.* 2022: 4.

[6] Alderman *et al.* 2022: 5.

normal for us were foreign to past societies. The way forward is to study carefully all the available evidence whilst correcting and/or refining our own understanding as we proceed in our research. In this book, such an approach is especially helpful when the notions of ethnicity, verse, poetry, and prose are brought into the argument. The theoretical discussion of such concepts is very important. However, it is crucial in the first place to describe accurately the data being examined, since it is precisely these data which we have to understand, and it is by going back to them that we can verify whether our understanding is correct or otherwise. In this process we accept or revise our own insights.[7]

Although the target readership for this book, as mentioned above, is likely to consist of scholars studying various societies of the ancient Mediterranean, this should not be taken to mean that anyone with an interest in the subject under examination is excluded. For this reason I list the full details of all the bibliographical works consulted at the end of the book, providing in the footnotes only the basic information that directs readers to the respective works listed in the Bibliography. This 'author–date' system,[8] inter alia, also allows those who so prefer to ignore the aforementioned basic bibliographic information and any other notes.

I very much hope this monograph, which took so long to research and write, will be of help to many – primarily those involved in the arduous task of epigraphy and philology of the ancient Mediterranean, especially of Phoenician inscriptions, an area of study where great attention to detail is of paramount importance.

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[7] On my take on how we can know the past, see Frendo 2003.
[8] Ritter 2002: 18.

Chapter 1

Introduction

As already mentioned in the Preface, this monograph is an interdisciplinary work which draws upon areas that go beyond that of Phoenician epigraphy as such. By now readers know that I shall be concentrating my attention on two main areas: first, that of the principles of interpretation involved in reading and understanding texts from the ancient Mediterranean world, and secondly that of applying the results gained in discussing such principles to three Phoenician inscriptions retrieved from the Maltese archipelago. However, the title of this monograph – *How to Read Ancient Texts: With a Focus on Select Phoenician Inscriptions from Malta* – is not self-explanatory.

This last point, together with the interdisciplinary nature of this study already discussed in the Preface, make it clear why I shall be dealing with questions such as the following: What is meant by an objective reading of an ancient text? What is the relationship between the knower and the known? What is exactly meant by Phoenician? Why not speak of Canaanite rather than of Phoenician? What is the main difference between verse and poetry, and between these latter two on the one hand and prose on the other? It will be shown that, even if not relaying a poem in the strict sense, a text can still have a poetic form and therefore fall within the category of verse and not that of prose. Why did the ancients make use of *scriptio continua*?[1] How did they read and understand texts written in this type of script? What was the role of orality and aurality in the ancient world? Do the select inscriptions studied in this monograph allow us to conclude that we have evidence of poetry in Malta in the first millennium BCE, or at least of utterances relayed in poetic form? Does a study of two inscriptions in particular allow us to conclude with a higher degree of probability that there was the practice of child sacrifice in Malta during the first millennium BCE?

I deal with the aforementioned questions either directly, such as when I discuss the problem of the identity of the Phoenicians in Chapter 2, or by tackling some issues (for example that of the principles of interpretation and objectivity) also in different chapters of the monograph, where and when the topic at hand demands that I do so, besides discussing such points explicitly in Chapter 5. As just stated, in Chapter 2 I discuss the thorny issue of the identity of those people whom the Greeks had labelled Phoenicians, just like many modern scholars do under their influence. It will be shown that every Phoenician is a Canaanite but that not every Canaanite is a Phoenician. In this regard the important point is to keep in mind that the Phoenicians can be

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[1] For the meaning of *scriptio continua*, see n. 5 in Chapter 3.

tagged as 'maritime Canaanites'[2] and that many scholars use the terms 'Phoenician' and 'Canaanite' interchangeably. Since the Phoenicians are generally credited with having 'invented' and passed on the alphabet to the Greeks, in Chapter 3 I consider the general Mediterranean background and context of the reading of Phoenician texts by concentrating on the main hallmarks of communication in antiquity. The prime and crucial role of the lectors who read texts aloud in the ancient Mediterranean world helps us to understand better how Phoenician texts written in *scriptio continua* could be read and interpreted. The challenges that this type of writing posed applied both to prose and verse. Indeed, there is evidence that poems could even be written without any structured layout. Once again, the essential role of orality, and thus also of aurality, comes to the fore. In Chapter 4 I proceed to consider the main hallmarks of verse in the Levant, with a focus on Classical Hebrew verse, seeing that this provides the best analogue to Phoenician verse. However, before going any further, as already pointed out above, I stop to consider in Chapter 5 the basics of hermeneutics, namely of the general principles of interpretation that we employ when understanding any area of research, clearly also when coming to grips with ancient texts. It will be shown that we do not invent truth, but that we fashion it on the basis of the available data; it is clear that in doing this a bit of ourselves is involved, but this is not tantamount to a failure of objectivity. This chapter includes a consideration of the basic specific points to keep in mind when interpreting Phoenician inscriptions. Amongst other things, here I highlight the difficulties that we encounter when reading texts that are purely consonantal, written in continual script (though not always so, since we do have a number of Semitic inscriptions with interpuncts and spaces between words), without vowels, and lacking punctuation. In this regard, I underscore the role of loud reading, the importance of keeping the context of a text always in mind, as well as that of examining via an analysis of the literary genre of a text whether we are dealing with prose or with verse/poetry. In Chapter 6 I offer a close reading of two 'twin inscriptions' – CIS I, 123 and CIS I, 123 *bis*. I present various philological solutions, finally reducing them to only one that is highly probable; I do this by looking into the context of these inscriptions – both the textual and the archaeological. In the following Chapter (7), I attempt a reading and interpretation of a Phoenician text, which, even if not a poem in the strict sense of the word, is drafted in poetic form and which therefore classifies as verse. I am referring to the Phoenician remnant generally known as the Tal-Virtù Papyrus inscription. Once again, it turns out that philology and serious consideration of the context have to work hand in hand; indeed, this time round the context includes that of ancient Egyptian texts and belief. Finally, in Chapter 8 I present the main conclusions reached in this study, highlighting the role of orality and aurality in the reading of texts in antiquity, the importance of strict philological study, and the crucial role that context plays when reading ancient texts. The context I have in mind is threefold: 1) the textual context of an inscription itself; 2) its archaeological context; and 3) the cultural context of

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[2] Smith 1995: 88.

the ancient Mediterranean, including that of how the Greeks, Romans, and Christians read texts, and how ancient Egypt influenced certain beliefs of the Phoenicians.

My main aim in this monograph is to discuss a number of thorny issues that we encounter when attempting to read and understand ancient inscriptions revealed to us from archaeological research. Thus, I purport to highlight the unexamined assumptions we often unconsciously make when studying these inscriptions, with the result that we either do not fully appreciate them or that we simply misunderstand them. I do this in the hope we gain a better understanding of these inscriptions while having a more solid theoretical and methodological foothold when examining them.

The scope of this monograph is to examine very closely three Phoenician inscriptions (CIS I, 123; CIS I, 123 *bis*; and the Tal-Virtù Papyrus inscription) from the Maltese archipelago in light of what we also learn from how people in the Greek, Roman, and Christian world read texts. This means that, although the strict chronological scope is that of *c.* 700 BCE to 218 BCE, both the geographical and the chronological scope will at times necessarily include inscriptions from elsewhere in the Mediterranean, from other times, and also from people other than those hailing from the Eastern Mediterranean seaboard.

This latter point indicates that I shall also include examples from the classical world as well as from Medieval Europe, since this will help throw light on matters such as that of *scriptio continua*, orality and aurality, and the ambiguity of texts before the introduction of punctuation. The method I use, therefore, is that of an empirical examination of the select inscriptions by reading them also according to the rules of Semitic philology, whilst keeping in mind their immediate context (both archaeological and textual), as well as the broad context that inscriptions of the ancient Mediterranean world other than the Semitic ones provide.

Before dealing systematically with the tasks outlined above, I shall here give some concrete examples in a rather summary and random fashion of what this study entails, thereby throwing some initial light on the questions that I raised at the beginning of this chapter. The first point I would like to highlight is that of the role played by readers in antiquity, and thus of the great importance of orality. The Hebrew Bible, for example, shows us clearly that the readers of a text knew the text before reading it out aloud to their audiences, and that the consonantal text acted simply as an aide-mémoire. There is a highly interesting idiom in this regard, since in biblical Hebrew 'the ability to read is literally "to know the document"'.[3] Hence not being able to read means not to know a document, which clearly implies that the person concerned had not been trained to read an unseen and unvocalised text (Isaiah 29: 11-12).[4]

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[3] Dobbs-Allsopp 2015: 321.
[4] Dobbs-Allsopp 2015: 321, 502 n.435.

It is clear that a situation such as the one just mentioned could lead to a certain amount of ambiguity. However, in this regard it is important to also keep in mind the fact that in antiquity authors very often purposely wanted to write ambiguous texts. Indeed, ambiguity can be viewed 'as being more expressive of the complexity of the human dilemma'.[5] This clearly allows for there to be various possible interpretations of ancient texts, and this comes to the fore when we read these texts in the language in which they were originally drafted. Such is the case, for example, with the alphabetic poems of the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, 'any translation of the Bible is no substitute for commentaries. By reading the text in its original language, however, we become aware of alternative interpretations.'[6] Thus when we read ancient texts their meaning is not so much a question of either/or, but of both/and.

This latter point makes it even more important to examine carefully the context of ancient texts, both the immediate textual as well as the archaeological one, where applicable. Knowledge of the context helps us to understand a text more fully; archaeology provides us with multiple concrete tangible examples of how context throws light on artefacts in general. Thus, it is context, for example, which shows us that amphorae, that are per se storage jars, in fact had multiple uses, e.g. acting as transport containers. Indeed, 'they were also used as toilets, for burial urns, and even as weapons in naval warfare.'[7] It is context that helps us to minimise the constraints texts make on their interpreters, since it leads the latter to realise that, while texts can have multiple meanings, their meaning is not indeterminate. As in the case of Phoenician inscriptions, it is the archaeological and linguistic contexts which allow us to choose the most likely meaning of multivalent words.

As already pointed out above, the context I have in mind is the one the text itself provides, i.e. what the words of a given inscription mean in their immediate verbal context; the archaeological context, by which I mean the findspot of a given inscription within a controlled excavation; and, finally, the general cultural context of the ancient Mediterranean and Levantine worlds. One of the reasons why I chose to focus on CIS I, 123; CIS I, 123 *bis*, and the Tal-Virtù Papyrus inscription, is that (with the exception of the generally very brief inscriptions, or often better still graffiti, retrieved from Tas-Silġ[8]) they are the only ones coming close to having a 'findspot' of sorts, at least in the sense of their having been definitely retrieved in a certain area in Malta as will be shown in Chapters 6 and 7. The majority of the major Phoenicia-Punic inscriptions that allegedly stem from the Maltese islands might not even have been originally found there.[9] It is a commonplace that the literary genre of the majority

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[5] Armstrong 2019: 387 and reference there.
[6] Muraoka 2020: 20.
[7] Woolmer 2019: 162.
[8] Frendo and Mizzi 2015: 516-517.
[9] For the analysis of the extremely brief (tantamount to being graffiti), but numerous Punic inscriptions retrieved in the controlled excavations at the site of Tas-Silġ carried out by the University of Malta, see

of the Phoenician-Punic inscriptions from the Maltese islands is that of dedicatory, votive, or funerary inscriptions.

Another point to consider is that of the differences obtaining between poetry and prose. It will be shown that the distinction is not so easy to establish, especially when we consider that in some languages there is 'no single word that exactly covers our "poetry"'.[10] Moreover, we also have to keep in mind the role of orality; oral poetry really exists when it is performed, since 'an oral poem is an essentially ephemeral work of art, and has no existence or continuity apart from its performance. The skill and personality of the performer, the nature and reaction of the audience, the context, the purpose – these are essential aspects of the artistry and meaning of an oral poem'.[11] We can understand this better if we remember that although our Christmas carols are written, 'they surely achieve their main impact and active circulation through ever-renewed oral means'.[12]

The interpretation of ancient texts is beset with multiple problems and this is certainly the case with Phoenician inscriptions. The fact that the latter inscriptions are written without vowels, and that at times even certain consonants are omitted, certainly adds fuel to the flames. Thus, for example, the divine name *bʿl* lacks the *ʿ* in the personal name *ʿzrbʿl* which can actually be found as *ʿzrbl*.[13] The same phenomenon is already found in the Ugaritic texts, where we find *bnbl* instead of *bnbʿl*.[14]

The study of Phoenician inscriptions is generally focused on philological issues. In this regard, various possible solutions are offered in conjunction with different possible vocalisations of the unvocalised texts. This approach is useful and important; however, it is not sufficient. Other aspects need to be kept in mind. There is, for example, the question of context that was discussed above. Not least, we also need to consider and understand better the literary structure of these inscriptions. Wolfgang Röllig had highlighted the importance of the latter approach very aptly when he wrote: 'I am convinced that the way to improved grammatical and substantival understanding of the content of the sometimes very condensed texts (which can only be understood with difficulty) is through paying attention to the literary structure of the inscriptions'.[15] This means that the study of the literary structure of Phoenician inscriptions will enhance our grammatical understanding itself of these inscriptions

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Frendo and Mizzi 2015, where reference is also made to the excavations at the same site that the Italian archaeological mission carried out four decades earlier, and to their epigraphic finds. For examples of Phoenician-Punic inscriptions allegedly found on the Maltese islands, but actually most probably originating elsewhere, see Guzzo Amadasi 1967: 15, 43.

[10] Finnegan 1977: 26.
[11] Finnegan 1977: 28.
[12] Finnegan 1977: 5.
[13] Benz 1972: 89, 203.
[14] Greenstein 1976: 55.
[15] Röllig 1995: 211.

and ultimately of their content, and hence of their most probable meaning. In this context it is clear that we also need to consider the literary genres and the life setting from which the literary genres of the inscriptions grew.

The foregoing examples are meant as samples (discussed in a summary and rather random fashion) of the issues that I shall be examining in detail in this monograph. By now readers will have realised that the general principles of interpretation as applied to the three Phoenician inscriptions I examine occupy roles that permeate different chapters of this study. Another important issue is that of the identity of the Phoenicians – a topic virtually flogged to death, but one which still demands further elucidation. Finally, last but certainly not least, is the discussion of reading and writing in antiquity, with a view to providing solid comparisons to what we find in Phoenician inscriptions. However, before proceeding any further we first need to understand what we mean by 'Phoenician'.