In what I like to call the serendipity of scholarship, it sometimes happens that responding to a framework set for a conference or volume brings one to the unexpected: a new perspective on one’s own material occasioned by an unusual lens, or, more rarely, by an unanticipated view of the lens itself.

It had been my intention to proceed from the evocative accounts of Phoenician merchant-seamen in the *Odyssey* to the *realia* of evidence for Phoenician trade—an interest that stems from work done on ivories from Spain and the westward expansion of the Phoenicians in the eighth–seventh centuries B.C.¹—and, by so doing, to pay tribute to the inspiring work of Emily Vermeule, who has done so much to bring the world(s) of “Homer”—that putative individual to whom we attribute the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—alive. As research for the present article proceeded, however, I became more and more interested in the texts themselves: specifically, in how to account for anomalies between the historical evidence and the way Phoenicians are represented.

Seductive though it may be to move from eloquence in a given text to mental image to historical reconstruction, recent work in literary and cultural studies has shown that one can no longer read the Homeric poems, or indeed any literary work, with an innocent assumption of transparency between “the world” and “the word”; archaeological data

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and other textual studies are necessary as corroboration or corrective. With respect to the Phoenicians, at issue is whether and to what degree one can distinguish historical and ethnographic description from literary construct—“fact” from fiction—in the epics. I hope my classical colleagues will permit me this foray into their territory, and see in it a response to Professor Vermeule’s passionate commitment throughout her career to the enduring life in those texts.

Phoenicians in Homer

The generic Phoenicians (Phoinikes) and the specific Sidonians (Sidones) are synonymous in the Iliad and the Odyssey, with the city standing for the people as a whole. References in the Iliad are but two, both associated with luxury production. In the first case, embroidered garments described as the handiwork of Sidonian women (Iliad 6.288ff.) are said to have been brought from Sidon by Paris himself on the same sea voyage in which he brought Helen to Troy. They were kept in the treasure chamber of Priam’s palace, and were clearly highly valued, the most beautiful of them selected by Hekabe, queen of Troy, as an offering to Athena. The second passage recounts the large, “richly wrought” silver bowl (krater) of surpassing beauty that was set by Achilles as a prize in the funeral games of Patroklos (Iliad 23.740ff.). We are told that it was made cunningly by Sidonians well-skilled in deft handiwork (Sidones poludaidalois) and brought over the sea by Phoenicians as a gift—presumably a royal gift—to Thoas, whose grandson gave it to Patroklos as ransom for a son of Priam. In other words, the bowl is not only described as being of superb craftsmanship; it has also had a complex history of elite ownership.

Inclusion of the krater’s previous owners both attests to and establishes the bowl’s quality and value; it also provides us with an example of the circuit of royal gifting well known in the Levant in both the Late Bronze

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