I want to begin a long way from Phoenicia: in Ireland, at the end of Brian Friel’s play *Translations*, which was first performed at the Guildhall in Derry in 1980. We are in a schoolroom in Baile Beag, the “small town” in County Donegal in which Friel set many of his plays. The year is 1833, shortly after the British have established a system of National Schools, with English as the language of instruction, as an alternative to these more informal “hedge schools” that taught in Irish. Even more recently a group of British soldiers have arrived in Baile Beag as part of the new Ordnance Survey of Ireland, which is replacing every Irish place name with an English equivalent, and a lieutenant called George Yolland has gone missing after a dance. The wrath of the British Army descends on the town as a whole, and Captain Lancey has just announced that unless information as to the whereabouts of the young man is forthcoming within twenty-four hours, all the livestock in the town will be shot, and that twenty-four hours later the settlement itself will be razed to the ground. Amidst the ensuing panic, the old schoolmaster Hugh O’Donnell remains on stage with his old students Maire and Jimmy Jack, and a few drinks inside him. He leaves his pupils and the audience with the Roman poet Virgil’s description of Carthage, translating from Latin into Irish as he goes:

*Urbs antiqua fuit*—there was an ancient city which, ’tis said, Juno loved above all the lands. And it was the goddess’s aim and cherished hope that here should be the capital of all nations—should the fates perchance allow that. Yet in truth she discovered that a race was springing from Trojan blood to overthow some day these Tyrian towers—a people *late regum belloque superbum*—kings of broad realms and proud in war who would come forth for Lybia’s downfall—such was—such was the course—What the hell’s wrong with me? Sure I know it backways. I’ll begin again . . . .

What are these lines from book 1 of the *Aeneid* doing in a play about the experience of British imperialism in Ireland? Friel is alluding here to an Irish intellectual fashion popular in Hugh’s younger days that postulated ancient Phoenician settlement on the island and influence on its culture, with some scholars even tracing the Irish language back to Phoenician. This theory encouraged people to interpret the British colonial occupation of Ireland in terms of the great struggle between noble Carthage and savage...
Rome. And what’s awful here, what makes Hugh stumble in his translation, is that Virgil’s lament for Phoenician Carthage is in Latin; the story of the conquered can only be told in the language of the conqueror. Friel’s play was of course written in English.3

It is not only Friel’s evocation of Irish Phoenicianism in his closing scene that makes Translations a good place for us to start: the play as a whole highlights the contingency of collective identity. When the English soldiers arrive, many of the townspeople offer them hospitality and even guarded friendship, more shocked to discover that the soldiers speak neither Irish, nor Latin, nor Greek, than by their mission to rename Irish places. There are mutterings of discontent, and rumors of serious resistance offstage, but these are prompted by the practical irritations of British rule, and the townspeople relate much more to their immediate surroundings than to Ireland as a whole. Hugh himself is attached to Irish among other languages, and his fondness for the traditions and history of Ireland is colored by alcohol and compromised by his ambition to take a job at one of the new National Schools. At the end of the play, he reminisces with Jimmy Jack about how they marched together for twenty-three miles to Sligo to take part in the 1798 rebellion of the United Irishmen against the British: “Two young gallants with pikes across their shoulders and the Aeneid in their pockets,” but then “in Phelan’s pub” homesickness overtook them, “the desiderium nostrorum—the need for our own.” They turned around and marched back. “Our pietas, James, was for older, quieter things.”4

The only person who maintains a strongly resistant attitude to the British on what seems to be principle is Hugh’s son Manus, an ambiguous character, superficially sympathetic, but also weak, jealous, and perhaps by the end of the play a murderer. His brother Owen, by contrast, just back from several years in Dublin and proud of his command of English, enthusiastically assists the renaming project. For him it is an exercise in modernizing a backward and somewhat embarrassing corner of his country’s and his own past—until Captain Lancey’s announcement convinces him that he has made a terrible mistake. Owen’s Irish roots and affiliation emerge only under the pressure of a brutal foreign army, and his change of heart is jarring: a complex situation fades swiftly for him to black and white. The horrific turn of events does not affect everyone the same way. For most of Friel’s characters, being Irish is a sentiment based more on present circumstance than nature or conviction, when it is felt at all. Whatever the contingent reasons in this particular colonial context for their specific self-conceptions, they remind us of the dangers of stamping ethnic labels on people who may themselves have felt ambivalent about or simply
uninterested in them, people whose own collective identities came, went, and in some cases never rose above the level of their own towns or even families. The Phoenicians, I will suggest in this book, constitute just such a case.

The ancient Phoenicians have been credited with discovering everything from the pole star to the Cornish cream tea, and there is no doubt that sailors, traders, and settlers from the narrow strip of coast below Mount Lebanon that the Greeks labeled Phoenicia had a disproportionate impact on the ancient Mediterranean. Their heyday came after the collapse of the great powers of Hittite Anatolia, Kassite Babylonia, and Mycenaean Greece around 1200 BCE: merchants from Levantine ports including Tyre, Sidon, Byblos, and Beirut (fig. I.1) seized a new set of opportunities, trading cedar from Mount Lebanon, along with exquisite items crafted from metal, ivory, and glass, for raw metals from the west. In the process they refined the art of navigation and—so it was said—taught the Greeks another of their inventions, the alphabet. They traveled the length of the Mediterranean and beyond (fig. I.2), and from at least the ninth century BCE established new settlements from Cyprus on their doorstep to the Atlantic coast of Spain, long before the Greeks began to migrate west. The most famous of these western Phoenician settlements was Carthage, founded according to legend by the Tyrian princess Dido. Carthage became a major power in its own right, vying with Rome for supremacy in the west, and under Hannibal Barca almost winning it. The Greek historian Polybius, who witnessed Carthage’s final destruction by the Romans in 146 BCE, said that it seemed at the time to be the richest city in the world.

Despite all this, Phoenician history and culture have traditionally been underappreciated by classical historians and archaeologists, who are more interested in the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome. The language is taught, when it is taught at all, in Near Eastern or Oriental studies departments; the material remains are often studied as biblical or prehistoric archaeology; and the lack of surviving literature means that the Phoenicians seem simply irrelevant to most classicists brought up on Greek and Latin texts. One of the rare exceptions in the English-speaking world was Miriam Balmuth, whose work on archaeology and numismatics regularly analyzed the Phoenician contribution to the history of Sardinia, Spain, and the Near East, as well as blazing a trail for later women scholars to walk in her wake; it was a great honor to give lectures at Tufts University on this topic in her name.

However, my intention here is not simply to rescue the Phoenicians from their undeserved obscurity. Quite the opposite, in fact: I’m going to
L.1 The Levant and neighboring regions, with places mentioned in the text. The inset depicts the northwestern Levant and Cyprus in greater detail.
1.2 The western Mediterranean and neighboring regions, with places mentioned in the text. Inset a depicts the central Mediterranean; inset b the far west, and inset c Sicily and Sardinia.
start by making the case that they did not in fact exist as a self-conscious collective or "people." The term "Phoenician" itself is a Greek invention, and there is no good evidence in our surviving ancient sources that these Phoenicians saw themselves, or acted, in collective terms above the level of the city or in many cases simply the family. The first and so far the only person known to have called himself a Phoenician in the ancient world was the Greek novelist Heliodorus of Emesa (modern Homs in Syria) in the third or fourth century CE, a claim made well outside the traditional chronological and geographical boundaries of Phoenician history, and one that I will in any case call into question later in this book.

Instead, then, this book explores the communities and identities that were important to the ancient people we have learned to call Phoenicians, and asks why the idea of being Phoenician has been so enthusiastically adopted by other people and peoples—from ancient Greece and Rome, to the emerging nations of early modern Europe, to contemporary Mediterranean nation-states. It is these afterlives, I will argue, that provide the key to the modern conception of the Phoenicians as a "people." As Ernest Gellner put it, "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist." In the case of the Phoenicians, I will suggest, modern nationalism invented and then sustained an ancient nation.

Identities have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years, serving as the academic marginalia to a series of crucially important political battles for equality and freedom. We have learned from these investigations that identities are not simple and essential truths into which we are born, but that they are constructed by the social and cultural contexts in which we live, by other people, and by ourselves—which is not to say that they are necessarily freely chosen, or that they are not genuinely and often fiercely felt: to describe something as imagined is not to dismiss it as imaginary. Our identities are also multiple: we identify and are identified by gender, class, age, religion, and many other things, and we can be more than one of any of those things at once, whether those identities are compatible or contradictory. Furthermore, identities are variable across both time and space: we play—and we are assigned—different roles with different people and in different contexts, and they have differing levels of importance to us in different situations.

In particular, the common assumption that we all define ourselves as a member of a specific people or "ethnic group," a collective linked by shared origins, ancestry, and often ancestral territory, rather than simply by contemporary political, social, or cultural ties, remains just that—an assumption. It is also a notion that has been linked to distinctive nineteenth-century
European perspectives on nationalism and identity, and one that sits uncomfortably with counterexamples from other times and places.

The now-discredited categorization and labeling of African "tribes" by colonial administrators, missionaries, and anthropologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provides many well-known examples, illustrating the way in which the "ethnic assumption" can distort interpretations of other people’s affiliations and self-understanding. The Banande of Zaire, for instance, used to refer to themselves simply as bayira ("cultivators" or "workers"), and it was not until the creation of a border between the British Protectorate of Uganda and the Belgian Congo in 1885 that they came to be clearly delineated from another group of bayira now called Bakonzo.

Even more strikingly, the Tonga of Zambia, as they were named by outsiders, did not regard themselves as a unified group differentiated from their neighbors, with the consequence that they tended to disperse and reassimilate among other groups. Where such groups do have self-declared ethnic identities, they were often first imposed from without, by more powerful regional actors. The subsequent local adoption of those labels, and of the very concepts of ethnicity and tribe in some African contexts, illustrates the effects that external identifications can have on internal affiliations and self-understandings. Such external labeling is not of course a phenomenon limited to Africa or to Western colonialism: other examples include the ethnic categorization of the Miao and the Yao in Han China, and similar processes carried out by the state in the Soviet Union.

Such processes can be dangerous. When Belgian colonial authorities encountered the central African kingdom of Rwanda, they redeployed labels used locally at the time to identify two closely related groups occupying different positions in the social and political hierarchy to categorize the population instead into two distinct "races" of Hutus (identified as the indigenous farmers) and Tutsis (thought to be a more civilized immigrant population). This was not easy to do, and in 1930 a Belgian census attempting to establish which classification should be recorded on the identity cards of their subjects resorted in some cases to counting cows: possession of ten or more made you a Tutsi. Between April and July 1994, more than half a million Tutsis were killed by Hutus, sometimes using their identity cards to verify the "race" of their victims.

The ethnic assumption also raises methodological problems for historians. The fundamental difficulty with labels like "Phoenician" is that they offer answers to questions about historical explanation before they have even been asked. They assume an underlying commonality between the people they designate that cannot easily be demonstrated; they produce new identities
where they did not to our knowledge exist; and they freeze in time particular identities that were in fact in a constant process of construction, from inside and out. As Paul Gilroy has argued, “ethnic absolutism” can homogenize what are in reality significant differences.22 These labels also encourage historical explanation on a very large and abstract scale, focusing attention on the role of the putative generic identity at the expense of more concrete, conscious, and interesting communities and their stories, obscuring in this case the importance of the family, the city, and the region, not to mention the marking of other social identities such as gender, class, and status. In sum, they provide too easy a way out of actually reading the historical evidence.

As a result, recent scholarship tends to see ethnicity not as a timeless fact about a region or group, but as an ideology that emerges at certain times, in particular social and historical circumstances, and, especially at moments of change or crisis: at the origins of a state, for instance, or after conquest, or in the context of migration, and not always even then.23 In some cases, we can even trace this development over time: James C. Scott cites the example of the Cossacks on Russia’s frontiers, people used as cavalry by the tsars, Ottomans, and Poles, who “were, at the outset, nothing more and nothing less than runaway serfs from all over European Russia, who accumulated at the frontier. They became, depending on their locations, different Cossack “hosts”: the Don (for the Don River basin) Cossacks, the Azov (Sea) Cossacks, and so on.”24

Ancient historians and archaeologists have been at the forefront of these new ethnicity studies, emphasizing the historicity, flexibility, and varying importance of ethnic identity in the ancient Mediterranean.25 They have described, for instance, the emergence of new ethnic groups such as the Moabites and Israelites in the Near East in the aftermath of the collapse of the Bronze Age empires and the “crystallisation of commonalities” among Greeks in the Archaic period.26 They have also traced subsequent changes in the ethnic content and formulation of these identifications: in relation to “Hellenicity,” for example, scholars have delineated a shift in the fifth century BCE from an “aggregative” conception of Greek identity founded largely on shared history and traditions to a somewhat more oppositional approach based on distinction from non-Greeks, especially Persians, and then another in the fourth century BCE, when Greek intellectuals themselves debated whether Greekness should be based on a shared past or on shared culture and values in the contemporary world.27 By the Hellenistic period, at least in Egypt, the term “Hellene” (Greek) was in official documents simply an indication of a privileged tax status, and those so labeled could be Jews, Thracians—or, indeed, Egyptians.28
Despite all this fascinating work, there is a danger that the considerable recent interest in the production, mechanisms, and even decline of ancient ethnicity has obscured its relative rarity. Striking examples of the construction of ethnic groups in the ancient world do not of course mean that such phenomena became the norm. There are good reasons to suppose in principle that without modern levels of literacy, education, communication, mobility, and exchange, ancient communal identities would have tended to form on much smaller scales than those at stake in most modern discussions of ethnicity, and that without written histories and genealogies people might have placed less emphasis on the concepts of ancestry and blood-ties that at some level underlie most identifications of ethnic groups. And in practice, the evidence suggests that collective identities throughout the ancient Mediterranean were indeed largely articulated at the level of city-states and that notions of common descent or historical association were rarely the relevant criterion for constructing “groupness” in these communities: in Greek cities, for instance, mutual identification tended to be based on political, legal, and, to a limited extent, cultural criteria, while the Romans famously emphasized their mixed origins in their foundation legends and regularly manumitted their foreign slaves, whose descendants then became full Roman citizens.

This means that some of the best-known “peoples” of antiquity may not actually have been peoples at all. Recent studies have shown that such familiar groups as the Celts of ancient Britain and Ireland and the Minoans of ancient Crete were essentially invented in the modern period by the archaeologists who first studied or “discovered” them, and even the collective identity of the Greeks can be called into question. As S. Rebecca Martin has recently pointed out, “there is no clear recipe for the archetypal Hellene,” and despite our evidence for elite intellectual discussion of the nature of Greekness, it is questionable how much “being Greek” meant to most Greeks: less, no doubt, than to modern scholars. The Phoenicians, I will suggest in what follows, fall somewhere in the middle—unlike the Minoans or the Atlantic Celts, there is ancient evidence for a conception of them as a group, but unlike the Greeks, this evidence is entirely external—and they provide another good case study of the extent to which an assumption of a collective identity in the ancient Mediterranean can mislead.

The book falls into three parts, expanded versions of the three Balmuth lectures I gave at Tufts. The first contrasts the familiar picture of the Phoenicians as a coherent people or culture with the very different story told by our ancient sources. Chapter 1 situates the modern image of the Phoenician people in the rhetoric and politics of the modern era. I begin
in twentieth century Lebanon and Tunisia, where new nation-states found it helpful to invoke the Phoenicians as literal and spiritual ancestors, and argue that such modern uses of the ancient Phoenicians rely on an underlying conceptualization of the Phoenicians themselves as a “nation,” which was in itself a relatively new idea, a product of nationalist interpretations of antiquity in nineteenth-century Europe.

In chapter 2, I show that the ancient evidence for self-identification as what we would call an ethnic group is by contrast very weak. Although we have more than ten thousand inscriptions in Phoenician, almost all of which are votive or funerary, and so identify a dedicant or defunct, they identify that person according to their family relationships, or, occasionally, their cities or islands of origin. We have no evidence before late antiquity of people referring to themselves as Phoenician, or using any other collective self-description, or for a sense of shared ancestry, origins, or native land. In chapter 3, I turn from internal to external perceptions, and in particular to the literature of the Greeks and Romans to show that even when they defined “Phoenicians” as a collective, they used the term as a rather vague label invoking a variety of social and cultural distinctions, including linguistic differences, rather than to denote a distinct ethnic group linked by history, territory, or descent.

In the second part, I move on from texts to objects and practice, looking at how Phoenician-speaking people acted and interacted, at home and abroad, without starting from the assumption that they were acting as a “people.” My argument in chapter 4 is that there is no evidence from material culture for a larger Phoenician civilization or identity until Carthage began to mint coinage at the end of the fifth century BCE depicting a palm tree (in Greek, phoinix). Even this, however, was not so much an embrace of collective identity as the exploitation of an external notion of Phoenicity to consolidate Carthage’s growing regional power. I look particularly at the effects of settlement overseas, since it is sometimes suggested that distance strengthens identities based on a common homeland, but although Levantine communities throughout the Mediterranean engaged in a great deal of cultural and technological exchange with each other, these ties were partial and ambivalent, and they also cultivated associations with many other peoples and places.

At the same time, the dynamics of migration did produce new sets of cultural and political links between subsets of Phoenician-speakers that transcended familial, professional, and civic ties. In the rest of part 2, I explore two examples of group-making in the religious sphere: the cult of Baal Hammon (chapter 5), which from the eighth century BCE separated
a relatively small group of migrants from the Levant and tied them closely to each other through the practice of child sacrifice, and the cult of Melqart (chapter 6), which from at least the fourth century BCE linked a much larger number of migrant communities throughout the west back to the homeland. Carthage was a central player in both these communities, and I will make the case that the new level of political, religious, and cultural interconnection across the Phoenician-speaking Mediterranean in the fourth century coincided conveniently, again, with that city’s rise to imperial power.

The final part of this book is about the vivid afterlives of these phantom Phoenicians. I will argue that despite the view taken in most textbooks that Phoenician history comes to an end with the conquests of Alexander in the east and the destruction of Carthage in the west, interest in Phoenician culture and the Phoenician past actually increased in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. This interest was however driven by outsiders’ perceptions in the east (chapter 7) and the west (chapter 8), and it was premised on cultural identification rather than ethnic identity. While the original Levantine cities and settlements remained focused on their own local past and local disputes, “Phoenicianisms” were used both to contest and to promote the imperial power of larger states.

This was a pattern that continued in later European history, when identifications with the Phoenicians featured regularly in the construction of national identities from the early modern period. My final chapter traces another set of examples that takes us back to the beginning: the intertwined identifications with the Phoenicians by English and Irish intellectuals from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. English intellectual fantasies established historical roots and authority for the Kingdom of Great Britain in a Phoenician past, while as we have seen, Irish scholars used imagined Phoenician settlement on their island to oppose British imperial ambitions there. Long before the era of nation-states—and the modern scholarly accounts of the Phoenicians themselves as a “nation” with which I begin—the Phoenicians were contributing to nationalist ideologies and being constructed by them.

There is one very obvious objection to my basic approach here, which is that in arguing that ancient Phoenician-speakers rarely if ever identified themselves as such, I am arguing from silence. A lack of evidence for collective identity is not evidence for its absence, especially when we have no surviving Phoenician literature and relatively little material evidence at all. Some would argue that the loss of the kind of literary sources in which Phoenicians would have more naturally expressed and explored larger
communal identities gives us a false impression of their self-understandings, although there is no positive indication that such literature ever in fact existed in Phoenician, and I suggest in this book that a lack of shared identity may even explain why it never developed. Others would make the even stronger point that the major coastal cities of the Levant were built around good ports that mostly survive to this day, obscuring the ancient levels, and even where they have been exposed—as at the sites of ancient Tyre—excavation has understandably tended to stop at the spectacular Roman levels. And although the material evidence from the western Mediterranean is more abundant, it is poorly published and understood, and even the extensive epigraphic record is almost entirely composed of formulaic dedications from sanctuaries. A chance find of a new inscription could produce a self-identified ancient Phoenician tomorrow.

Mine is not, however, so much an argument from silence as an argument for silence: a silence that can open up other spaces of investigation. I cannot demonstrate that no one in the ancient Mediterranean ever thought of herself or himself as Phoenician, nor will I try to do so. But without positive evidence for such a collective identification, I will insist that we cannot arbitrarily adopt one as our working assumption. We don’t have to plaster over this gap in our knowledge by applying an arbitrary label according to our own taste: we can choose instead to attend to the evidence that we do have and to the stories it tells. This book is not about the lack of evidence for Phoenician identity; it is about what we can do with that fact.

I should also emphasize right from the start that the suggestion that the Phoenicians were not a self-conscious collective, or even a clearly delineated historical civilization, is not new: this point has been made in a variety of ways in recent years by a large number of scholars, including Claude Baurain, Corinne Bonnet, Eduardo Ferrer Albelda, Giuseppe Garbati, Helena Pastor Borgonon, Tatiana Pedrazzi, Jonathan Prag, Michael Sommer, Erik van Dongen, Nicholas Vella and Paolo Xella. My work is deeply indebted to theirs, as it attempts to extend it in space, across the whole of the Mediterranean, in time, from the Bronze Age to late antiquity, and in scope, to suggest a series of alternative modes of identification and association among Phoenician-speakers in the ancient world, as well as by contextualizing the modern idea of the Phoenicians in nationalist discourse.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the numerous debts I have accumulated over the course of this project. First and foremost, I want to thank Bruce and Becky Hitchner, Noah Barrientos, and everyone else at Tufts for making me so welcome when I delivered the Balmuth Lectures there in 2012. I owe particular thanks to Bruce for the invitation, for the interest he has...
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A significant number of the arguments proposed in this book have also been discussed in essays and articles along the way, most of which were collaborative publications.37 I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my coauthors, Daniel Hadas, Bob Kerr, Matthew McCarty, Neil McLynn, Valentina Melchiorri, Peter van Dommelen, Nick Vella, and Paolo Xella, not only for the expertise that they brought to those publications, but for the lengthy and illuminating discussions that went into producing them and the many other ways in which they have all helped me with this project.

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I have tried as far as I can in what follows to retain the tone of the Balmuth lectures, which were delivered to a refreshingly mixed group of students, graduates, and faculty from a range of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. This is not therefore primarily a book for specialists—who will already know the evidence presented here and will have their own views on my interpretation of it—nor is it a textbook; instead, what I present is a set of hypotheses, inviting debate and dissent. This means that the book necessarily gives only a very partial perspective on Phoenician history and geography, relying on examples and case studies rather than exhaustive description and catalogue. Two of the bigger and more regrettable geographical gaps are Cyprus and the far western Mediterranean: for the latter, see now Celestino and López-Ruiz (2016). For those who would like to know more about the people and places discussed in this book, the most up-to-date syntheses of research on Phoenician history and archaeology are Bondi et al. (2009), Elayi (2013), and Morstadt (2015). English language overviews include Markoe (2000), Aubet (2001), Woolmer (2011), and, with a particular emphasis on Carthage and the west, Lancel (1995), van Dommelen and Gómez Bellard (2008b), Hoyos (2010), and Miles (2010). Recent essay collections give a glimpse of current scholarly preoccupations: Jiménez (2010), Xella (2013b), Quinn and Vella (2014b), and Garbati and Pedrazzi (2015). Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated; names in English of places and people are those that seem to me most familiar, and therefore least distracting.