

Dentistry, a gift from Phoenicia to the World

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Hippocrates is the most ancient representative of Scientific medicine but sacerdotal medicine and popular medicine prevailed for centuries before.

Throughout the human history, healthy teeth have been the symbol of youth, health, beauty and strength. Old civilizations considered teeth as one of the principal ornaments of the face.

In these ancient times, a cavity could lead to a life filled with pain, and in extreme cases even death.

Paleo-odontological research has proven that various pathological conditions of the teeth and jaws were present among our ancestors and that cosmetic dentistry existed in ancient times and have been practiced for thousands of years.

Dental mutilation and dental decoration of anterior teeth have been documented in many cultures in the past for ritual-religious purposes, aesthetic reasons, as a symbol of prestige or a sign of belonging to a specific social group.

It is quite remarkable to think about all what was accomplished with so little knowledge and lack of tools.

All of the above could be described using a phrase borrowed from Scott and Turner: "Writing history with teeth".

And Phoenicians wrote a big part of their history through dentistry.

The Phoenicians were an ancient civilization whose culture was mainly based on trading. They occupied the area known today as Lebanon.

These ancient seamen traveled the Mediterranean Basin and through these explorations gained much insight and knowledge into various technologies such as dentistry technologies. Their contemporaries, the Egyptians, influenced much of their knowledge of dentistry.

One such example is in the treatment of periodontal disease. The Egyptians utilized a technique for treating teeth affected by periodontal disease where the mobile teeth were splinted. The Phoenicians took this technique and refined it.

The Phoenicians history of dentistry also showed that they experimented in bridgework. Several examples of fixed bridgework have been found in skulls unearthed during archeological digs. The method used consists of ivory-carved false teeth attached to natural teeth by thin gold wire. This is yet another example of the knowledge of the Phoenicians and its effect on the beginnings of dentistry.

Superior to the Greek dentistry are, the two remaining examples of Phoenician dentistry.

The two retentive appliances belonging to Phoenician dental art have been discovered, both from tombs near Sidon.

The best-known specimen of Phoenician dental art is the mandibular retentive appliance which dates from between the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. It consists of four natural lower teeth acting as anchors for two carved ivory teeth held between them, which were bound with golden wire. It is described in the following way by Dr. Gaillardot: "A part of the upper jaw of a woman with two canines and the four incisors united with gold wire. Two of the incisors would appear to have belonged to another individual and to have been applied as substitute for lost teeth. This piece discovered in one of the most ancient tombs of the necropolis proves that dental art in Sidon was sufficiently advanced. The Gaillardot specimen is the first specimen of ancient dental art unearthed in Phoenicia

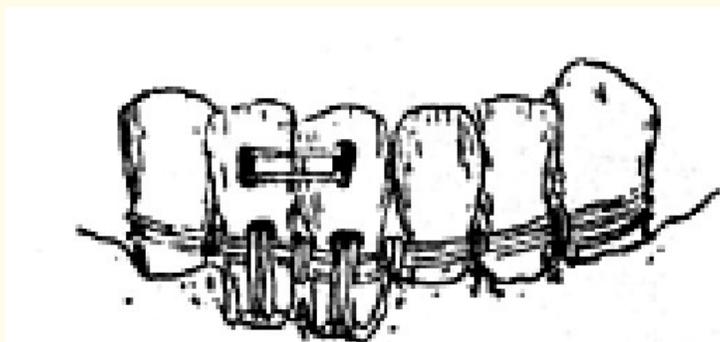


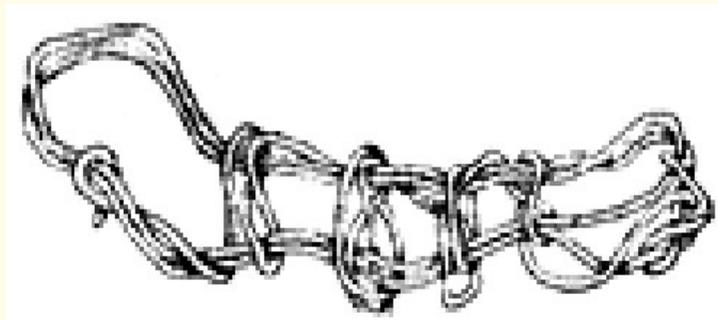
Figure 2: Phoenician denture, c 1000-210 BC.

The excavations of the 5th and 4th century Phoenician rock tombs, unearthed the second known specimen of Phoenician dental art.

The Ford mandible was discovered in a sarcophagus in Sidon in southern Lebanon. The 6th front teeth were about to fall due to periodontal disease. The specimen of retentive prosthesis was found attached to the anterior teeth of the lower jaw of a male skeleton which was recovered from a massive anthropoid sarcophagus. Phoenician dentist bound teeth together with a gold wire in a perfect technique.

Archaeologists state that this sarcophagus had remained unopened since the day of interment, probably early in the 5th century B.C.

The appliance itself (Figure 3) consists of a fine 24-gauge wire of pure gold ingeniously woven around and firmly binding together the six anterior teeth of the lower jaw (Figure 4).



The importance attributed to the Ford specimen of retentive prosthesis is that:

- It is one of the few existing dental appliances from antiquity in which esthetics and function are present
- The skeletal remains and the appliance are in a splendid state of preservation

- Periodontal disease existed and was more or less successfully dealt with by dentists some 2500 years ago.
- This dental appliance can, for archaeological reasons, fair accuracy to the 5th century B.C. be dated with

The Ford mandible is now permanently displayed in Beirut, in the Museum of Archaeology, and serves as an inspiration for dental practitioners and students alike, to uphold the high standards of art and craftsmanship established for them so long ago by, the Phoenician dentist of ancient Sidon.

In Conclusion, it would seem safe to say that Phoenicia borrowed only her therapeutic and not her mechanical knowledge from Egypt. She added to it the simplest forms of retentive prosthesis, mechanical proceedings different from those employed by the Etruscan.

Other ancient civilizations were fortunate, as the knowledge of the Phoenicians was passed on, thus making them a major vessel in the Phoenicians history of dentistry.

This is one of the gifts of Phoenicia to the world.

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