“Apollophanes son of Sesmaios, Chief of the Sidonians at Marisa” is among the most famous inscriptions ever to have been exposed in the area of ancient Idumaea. Discovered in a large tomb decorated with extensive paintings in the necropolis of Marisa, it has since its publication in 1905, led many scholars to believe that a Sidonian/Phoenician community was present in Marisa, where it played a leading role in the city’s life and particular its upper class. However, a comparative examination of the archaeological material of Marisa vis-à-vis other Phoenician sites seems to question this assumption: Phoenician pottery, very common in the Hellenistic Phoenician cities of Akko and Ashkelon, and other Phoenician sites, is completely missing from Marisa. The Greek onomasticon of Hellenistic Marisa, with some 110 names, does not include Phoenician, but Idumean and Greek names common in the East. Finally, also the numismatic evidence from Marisa seems not to support a “Sidonian” presence, though the picture is more complex here. In this paper I will argue that the term “Sidonians” in the Hellenistic context at Marisa is instrumental, rather than an ethnic label indicating the ethnic identity of the people using it.

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