

# *• Are the Phoenicians the First pirates*

## **MASTERS OF THE SEA: THE PHOENICIANS (c.1200-500 B.C.E.)**

It is easy for us today to take sea-borne trade and travel. But what if no one had dared to venture across the sea. After all, humans do not take naturally to water, and it is conceivable that a natural fear would have kept us complete landlubbers. If that had been the case, the Americas, Australia, Britain, Japan, and numerous other islands would have been completely outside the mainstream of history. Even contact between points within the vast land mass of Asia, Europe, and Africa would have been much more restricted when one considers how much of that contact has been by way of rivers and seas. The lack of water travel might have slowed the progress of human civilization to a virtual snail's pace. Of course, we cannot know for sure how severe the impact would have been, but it certainly would have been significant. However, people with their natural curiosity did take to the water. Although the Phoenicians were not the first to do so, they advanced the art and technology of seafaring to the point that they are considered the premier sailors of antiquity.

**Geopolitics.** As with other civilizations, the Phoenicians' environment, or geopolitics, largely influenced their history. First, ancient Phoenicia, modern day Lebanon, was a hilly coastal area whose rough terrain made it hard to unite. As a result, independent city-states such as Byblos, Ugarit, Tyre, and Sidon emerged along the coast.

Secondly, the Phoenicians did not have the sort of rich soil that one found in Egypt and Mesopotamia. In fact, they had only two major natural resources that were useful for trading: timber and snails. Their timber, the fabled cedars of Lebanon, was highly prized for use on the building projects and navies of the ancient Near East. Unfortunately, all that remain are a few isolated clumps of trees, since the cedar forests on the hillsides were clear-cut to meet the demands of ancient customers. The result has been the serious and most likely irreversible erosion of Lebanon's soils. Most likely, the absence of trees to transpire moisture and moderate temperatures also produced a hotter drier climate. The other, rather unlikely resource was the murex snail. This creature, when left to rot in a pool of water under the hot Near Eastern sun, secreted a hormone that produced a precious colorfast dye of scarlet (ancient purple) color. It took 30,000 of these rotting snails to produce one pound of this dye, making it very expensive. As a result, purple is still seen as the color of royalty, since kings were about the only ones who could afford to dye anything purple. All those decaying snails must have also made it imperative to place the dye works downwind from the cities.

With virtually only these two things to trade, the Phoenicians had to become shrewd traders and, indeed, they were among the sharpest businessmen in the ancient world. Part of their cleverness was the ability to copy other peoples' art and manufacturing styles in order to produce and sell those goods at a cheaper price. It is difficult to identify a distinctive Phoenician artistic style since they were such brilliant copycats. Another example of their business acumen is how they adapted an Egyptian script into the alphabet we use today, minus the vowels. This allowed each merchant to keep his own records rather than having to rely on an expensive scribe to do it for him.

The third and final geopolitical factor of Phoenicia was its position between the two great civilizations of the time: Egypt and Mesopotamia. This brought a lot of trade their way, but also left Phoenicia caught in wars between its powerful neighbors, a situation that modern Lebanon still faces today. For example, the city of Tyre supposedly withstood a siege of five years by the Assyrians and another siege of thirteen years by the Babylonians. Hemmed in and harassed by these empires, the Phoenicians found themselves with only one way to go: across the sea.

**The evolution of the Phoenician sailing ship**, like so many other developments, was largely the fusion of other people's ideas, although the result bore the distinctive mark of Phoenician genius. There were two main shipbuilding traditions the Phoenicians would draw upon: those of the Minoans on Crete and the Egyptians.

The Minoans who flourished from around 2000 to 1500 B.C.E. were the first real sailors of the ancient Near East. Their ships evolved from dugout canoes to larger craft, with the canoe itself serving as a backbone or keel to which other planks were fastened to build up the sides. The Egyptians did most of

their sailing in the safe waters of the Nile or on short excursions along the coast between Egypt and Palestine. Unfortunately, they only had the short stubby acacia tree from which to make planks. As a result, their ships were patchworks of boards resembling a jigsaw puzzle and requiring a lot of internal support. So the Egyptians put in ribs and cross braces, called thwarts, to hold their ships together.

The Phoenicians, in deciding between using the Minoan keel or Egyptian ribs and thwarts, chose both. This resulted in a rather bulky, but sturdy sailing vessel. In order to seal it against leaking, a layer of tar or pitch covered the lower part of the hull, which the Greek poet, Homer, was referring to this when he spoke of the "black ships". Ships' hulls also often had lead or copper sheaths to guard against sea worms eating into the wood.

For short journeys, men could row these ships, but that was tiring, labor intensive, and expensive in wages and food (which would also take valuable cargo space from trade items). Eventually people figured out how to use wind power, an especially ingenious way of harnessing free energy from nature. Sailing with the wind was no problem. Sailing with a cross or headwind was an entirely different matter. The Phoenicians learned the technique of tacking, turning the sails at an angle to the wind in order to go in the general direction desired. This involved a good deal of zigzagging at different angles to the wind, but it beat rowing, and became a basic part of the sailor's art from then on.

Unfortunately, sea travel and trade also brought piracy, which led to designing specialized warships and naval tactics to meet this threat. At first, naval fights consisted of firing arrows at each other and then grappling enemy ships with hooks to board them for hand-to-hand combat. This mode of fighting at sea continued to be used all the way up through the 1500's C.E. However, around 1000 B.C.E., someone got the idea that sinking enemy ships was a much easier and safer way of disposing of the enemy than fighting them face to face. To this end ships were made much sleeker and more maneuverable with rams attached below the waterline on the bows (fronts) of the ships. The goal now was to ram a hole in the side of the enemy ship and sink it. If that failed, sweeping the enemy ship to shear off its oars with one's ram was the next best thing, since it crippled the other ship and set it up for getting rammed on the next pass. Eventually, a new type of warship evolved, the trireme, a streamlined, low lying ship powered by three banks of oars. It was the most lethal weapon on the high seas, especially when powered by highly trained expert crews. Slaves were not generally used in ancient fleets, since they were too unreliable, and the main difference between two fleets was often the quality of their rowing crews.

**Phoenician exploration and colonies.** Equipped with reliable ships and sailing techniques, the Phoenicians took to the sea in search of new markets, resources, and homes. In the process, they explored new lands where they often founded colonies. Their travels took them across the Mediterranean and through the Pillars of Hercules (Straits of Gibraltar), which most people considered the ends of the earth. From there, they sailed to Britain, which to most people was no more than a legend, but for the Phoenicians was a valuable source of tin. Even more astounding, they probably sailed around Africa two thousand years before Vasco da Gama did it for Portugal. Unfortunately, we have few details of Phoenician voyages since they wanted to keep geographic knowledge secret from any competition, in particular the Greeks, who might want to invade their markets. We do know that their method of exploration involved coast hopping rather than open sea sailing, since there were no reliable ways to navigate in open waters at this time.

The Phoenicians also founded colonies around the Mediterranean, in particular along the coast of North Africa. The most famous of these colonies was Carthage, founded by refugees from Tyre who were led by a woman known variously as Elissa, the Biblical Jezebel, and Dido in the Roman epic, the *Aeneid*. Carthage commanded the passage between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean and soon surpassed its mother city in power and wealth. The Carthaginians claimed the Western Mediterranean was their "lake" and tried to keep other peoples out. This led to centuries of bitter warfare between the Carthaginians and Greeks over the island of Sicily. In the end, both sides wore each other out and left the way open for another power, Rome, to take over. After three long and bitter wars, the Romans finally destroyed Carthage in 146 B.C.E., pronouncing a curse on anyone who dared settle there again. However, a century later the Romans themselves, recognizing the Phoenicians' excellent eye for a city, re-founded a new city on that site, even naming it Carthage. Ironically, some 500 years later, a

Germanic tribe, the Vandals, seized Carthage and used it as a base from which to launch a raid and sack Rome in 455 C.E.

Masters of Sea: Reading Comprehension Questions.

<p>1. What land masses would not have been discovered if it was not for the Phoenicians?</p>	
<p>2. What factors of Geography forced the Phoenicians to take to the seas?</p>	
<p>3. What happened to the land and climate of modern day Lebanon because of the Phoenicians cedar trade?</p>	
<p>4. Why was the Phoenicians purple dye so expensive? How many snails did it take to make 1 pound of dye?</p>	
<p>5. How did the Phoenicians become clever traders?</p>	
<p>6. How did their adaptation of Egyptian script help them become better businessmen?</p>	
<p>7. What made the location ideal for trading? What made it challenging?</p>	
<p>8. Did the Phoenicians borrow the ideas of the Minoan keel or the Egyptian ribs and thwarts?</p>	
<p>9. What sailing skills did the Phoenicians master?</p>	
<p>10. Why did the Greek poet Homer call the Phoenician ships</p>	
<p>11. How far did the Phoenicians travel by boat?</p>	
<p>12. What was the most famous Phoenician colony? Where was it?</p>	