

[Back](#)

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Phoenicia

**Phoenicia**, «*fiH NIHSH uh or fiH NEE shuh*», was the name the ancient Greeks gave to the region of Canaan, which is now roughly the coastal areas of Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. The Eleutherus River formed the northern boundary and Mount Carmel the southern. This region lay between the Lebanon Mountains to the east and the Mediterranean Sea on the west.



Map  
Phoenicia and  
its colonies

The name *Phoenicia* may have originated from the word *Canaan*, meaning *land of purple*. Canaan was a main source of red-purple dyed goods. The Greeks probably used their word *phoinix*, which meant *red-purple*, when referring to the people who traded these red-purple goods to them. *Phoinike*, or *Phoenicia*, eventually became the name of Canaan's coastal strip.

The Phoenicians were among the great sailors, navigators, and traders of the ancient world. They were also among the first peoples to send out explorers and colonizers throughout the Mediterranean Sea area, and even beyond the Strait of Gibraltar. The Greek alphabet developed from that of the Phoenicians, and the Roman and all Western alphabets have been taken from the Greek.

### Way of life



Picture  
Phoenician art

Phoenicians cannot be easily distinguished from other peoples who lived in Canaan before the Israelites lived there. For this reason, the Phoenicians are sometimes called *Canaanites* in the Old Testament. More often, they are called *Sidonians*, from the name of the Phoenician city of Sidon. Scholars now know that the northern Phoenician city of Ugarit (now Ras Shamra in western Syria) was in contact with the Minoan civilization of Crete as early as 1900 B.C. Between 1400 and 1200 B.C., a Mycenaean colony thrived at Ugarit.

**Language.** The Phoenicians spoke a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew. It was more distantly related to Aramaic and to the Assyrian and Babylonian languages of Mesopotamia, such as Assyrian and Babylonian. Scholars once believed that the Phoenicians had invented their alphabet independently. But more recent discoveries indicate that they adapted it from earlier writing that might have originated in Egypt. The Phoenician alphabet consisted of 22 consonant signs. The Greeks added the vowel signs later.

By the beginning of the Christian Era, Aramaic had become the language of Phoenicia. But North Africans near the former Phoenician colony of Carthage continued to speak the Phoenician language until the A.D. 500's, using a dialect called *Punic*. Some names of places in southern Spain, colonized by the Phoenicians in the 700's B.C. or earlier, come from the Phoenician language. The name of *Gades* (now Cadiz, Spain) comes from the Phoenician word for *wall*. The word *bible* comes from the Greek word for *book*. The Greeks took this word from the Phoenician city of Byblos, a trading center for papyrus.

A few fragments of Phoenician literature have survived in Greek translation. Since 1929, important discoveries have been made at the site of ancient Ugarit. Religious inscriptions on clay tablets found there clarify some previously obscure passages in the Old Testament. The tablets were written in cuneiform, in an alphabetical style that differs from the standard Phoenician.

**Trade and manufacturing.** The Phoenicians were seagoing traders from the very beginning of their recorded history. The Egyptians knew about the "ships of Gebal" (Byblos) as early as 2900 B.C. But Phoenicia did not reach its peak as a great sea power until about 1000 B.C. and after.

The city of Sidon grew famous for its purple dye and developed a well-known glass industry. Tyre also had a purple-dyeing industry and became noted for the bad odor which the dye works caused. Phoenicia was one of the garden spots of the Roman Empire and exported wine, oil, and laurel and cedar wood, as well as textiles and other manufactured goods.

The Phoenicians learned many of their manufacturing methods from the Egyptians. They cast, hammered, and engraved such metals as gold and silver. They carved many objects from ivory, including decorations for furniture. From early times, Phoenicians knew how to weave woolen and linen cloth. The craftworkers dyed the cloth and often sewed it into robes before they sold it. The Greeks later adopted the *keton*, a Phoenician shirtlike garment.

**Religion.** Phoenicians had many gods and goddesses called *baal* (lord) and *baalat* (lady). All Phoenicians worshipped the same major gods, although these gods sometimes were known by different names in different cities. For example, Melqart, god of Tyre, could also be thought of as the *Baal* of Tyre. The Phoenicians practiced sacrifices similar to those

practiced by most other Semitic peoples. But they also offered sacrifices of young children in Phoenicia and in their colonies. This practice gained for them a reputation for cruelty in Greek and Roman historical sources. The Phoenicians also believed in a life after death.

The story of Astarte and her lover Adonis, well known in Phoenicia, was carried from there to Greece, where Astarte became the Greek goddess Aphrodite. The Romans later knew her as Venus. The tragic killing of her lover by the tusks of a wild boar and her lament for him comes down to us through Greek, Latin, and English literature in the story of Venus and Adonis.

**Government.** The ancient Phoenicians lived in a number of independent *city-states*, each consisting of a city and its surrounding territory. Like the Greeks, they never united their cities into a single country. These cities originally were aristocracies ruled by kings. Beginning in the 800's B.C., councils of elders ruled with the kings, and some of the councils were more powerful than the kings. Later, most cities were ruled by government officials called *shofets*. Most of the Phoenician mountains came down to the sea, and the ancient towns were originally built on islands, like Tyre and Arvad, or occupied a small harbor area on the mainland with hills behind it. The most important of these coastal cities, from north to south, were Arvad, Byblos, Berytus (now Beirut), Sidon, Tyre, and Acco. Beirut, the present-day capital and chief seaport of Lebanon, is the only city still important.

## History

**Foreign control.** Phoenicia was a natural meeting place for foreign cultures, because it lay on the main route between Egypt to the south and Asia Minor and Mesopotamia to the east. Egypt exerted perhaps the earliest influence on the Phoenicians. As early as the time of the Old Kingdom, from about 2650 to 2150 B.C., Egypt was importing the famed cedars of Lebanon. By the time of the Middle Kingdom, from about 1975 to 1640 B.C., the two countries had established regular trade. The Phoenicians exported timber and pitch, and imported gold and manufactured articles. In the 1400's B.C., Egypt brought the Phoenician cities into its empire, where they remained for about 100 years. During this time, the Phoenicians influenced Egypt almost as much as Egypt influenced them. Phoenician nobles often resided at the Egyptian court. Phoenician cults and religious ideas affected Egyptian thought.

Babylonian culture also influenced early Phoenicia. By the 1300's B.C., the scribes of Phoenicia were writing in Babylonian cuneiform (see [Cuneiform](#)). The Phoenicians learned to seal their documents with Babylonian cylinders and seals. The Phoenicians also learned many of the Babylonians' mythological tales about the beginning of the world, the birth of the gods, and the creation of human beings. Some scholars believe that Phoenicia may have been the channel through which the Babylonian legends about the creation and the flood passed to the Hebrews farther south and to the Greeks.

For a short period in the 1200's B.C., Phoenicia came under the Hittite sphere of influence. But Phoenicia gained its freedom when the Hittite Empire collapsed.

**The spread of Phoenician influence.** The Phoenician cities gained their independence about 1100 B.C. For the next 250 years, they stood at the height of their power and prosperity. There were Phoenician settlements on the island of Cyprus even before the 1100's B.C. After that date, Phoenician sailors opened up the entire Mediterranean to their ships and commerce. They established colonies along the southern coast of Spain, the northern coast of Africa, and the western coast of Sicily. It may be said that the western Mediterranean was a "Phoenician lake" before the coming of the Greeks. Phoenicians influenced Western culture through their colony of Carthage. This greatest of all Phoenician colonies in the West was founded by people from the city of Tyre about 750 B.C. Queen Dido was one of the legendary founders of Carthage (see [Dido](#)). Phoenician colonies, including Carthage, resembled the cities of Phoenicia. Many manufacturers, industrial workers, merchants, and sailors lived there.

The city of Tyre seems to have played the main part in the colonizing activity of the Phoenicians. A vivid description of Tyre's far-flung commerce appears in the Old Testament (Ezekiel 27:3-25). When the Israelite King David established his royal residence at Jerusalem, he built his palace with stone and cedars from Lebanon (II Samuel 5:11). The first book of Kings tells that Hiram, king of Tyre in the 900's B.C., was a friend of David's son and successor, Solomon. When Solomon built his famous Temple, he asked Hiram for firs and cedars from Lebanon. When Solomon built a fleet of ships, Hiram lent him "shipmen that had knowledge of the sea" (I Kings 9:27). The base of this fleet was the Red Sea port of Ezion-Geber on the Gulf of Aqaba. This site contains the remains of a once great smelting and mining center. Hiram and Solomon combined to send from this port great fleets of merchant vessels, which came back loaded with "gold and silver, ivory and apes and peacocks" (II Chronicles 9:21). In return, Solomon traded grain, olive oil, wine, and other agricultural products with Hiram.

Some scholars believe that Phoenician influence and perhaps Phoenician colonists reached Corinth and Thebes on the mainland of Greece. This tradition of Phoenician colonization in Greece may be exaggerated. But the Phoenicians appear in Homer's poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as skilled artisans, merchants, and sailors. The Phoenician alphabet also reached Greece soon after 800 B.C.

Control of both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar gave the Phoenicians access to the Atlantic Ocean. They established a trading monopoly along the coasts of northwestern Africa and western Europe. Some scholars believe that the Phoenicians may have sailed as far as Cornwall, in southwestern England, and worked the tin mines there. In his *Histories*, the Greek historian Herodotus wrote that the Phoenicians sailed all the way around Africa. It took some 2,000 years for Europeans to match this achievement in A.D. 1497, when the Portuguese succeeded in doing so.

**Decline.** The Assyrians captured the Phoenician cities in 842 B.C. and controlled them for the next 200 years. After the downfall of the Assyrians in 612 B.C., Phoenicia was briefly controlled by the Babylonians.

Later, Phoenicia became part of the Persian Empire created by King Cyrus I (see [Cyrus the Great](#)). At this time, the city of Sidon seems to have surpassed Tyre in importance. Under Persian rule, Phoenician cities prospered and the Phoenicians maintained their reputation as excellent sailors and shipbuilders. During the Persian Wars (490-479 B.C.), the Phoenician fleet led the Persian navy in its attack upon Greece. Herodotus says that in this fleet the king of Sidon ranked second only to Xerxes, the Persian ruler (see [Xerxes I](#)). But the Phoenician fleet was almost completely destroyed by the Greeks at the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C.

Phoenicia came under Greco-Macedonian rule when Alexander the Great captured the city of Tyre in 332 B.C. Alexander's successors, the rulers of Egypt and Syria, fought among themselves for possession of the Phoenician cities and for control of their shipbuilding and commercial resources. During this period, the culture of Phoenicia changed. Greek gradually became the language of literature and learning. Aramaic, which had earlier replaced the Phoenician language, became the language of the marketplace and of the common people. Many philosophers of the time, including Zeno of Sidon and Diodorus of Tyre, were of Phoenician origin.

In 64 B.C., the Roman general Pompey the Great made Phoenicia part of the Roman province of Syria. The Romans established a famous law school at Beirut. Tyre and Sidon became centers of learning and prospered commercially. Tyre became known for the manufacture of fine glass. Phoenicia and the rest of Syria fell to Arab Muslim invaders in the A.D. 600's.

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