

Phoenicians

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Phoenicians

More than 2,500 years ago **Phoenician** mariners sailed to Mediterranean and southwestern European ports. The **Phoenicians** were the great merchants of ancient times. They sold rich treasures from many lands.

These **Phoenicians** (the Canaanites, or Sidonians, of the Bible) were Semitic people. Their country was a narrow strip of the Syrian coast, about 160 miles (260 kilometers) long and 20 miles (32 kilometers) wide. The area now comprises Lebanon and parts of Syria and Israel. Their territory was so small that the **Phoenicians** were forced to turn to the sea for a living. They became the most skillful shipbuilders and navigators of their time. They worked the silver mines of Spain, passed through the Strait of Gibraltar, and founded the city of Cádiz on the southern coast of Spain. They sailed to the British Isles for tin and may have ventured around southern Africa. They founded many colonies, the greatest being Carthage.

The **Phoenicians** began to develop as a seafaring, manufacturing, and trading nation when the Cretans—the first masters of the Mediterranean—were overthrown by the Greeks (see [Aegean civilization](#)). Not only did they take the fine wares of the Eastern nations to the Western barbarians, but they also became skilled in making such wares themselves—especially metalwork, glass, and cloth. From a snail, the murex, they obtained a crimson dye called Tyrian purple. This was so costly that only kings and wealthy nobles could afford garments dyed with it.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the **Phoenicians** was a syllabic writing, developed in about 1000 BC at Byblos. From this city's name come the Greek word *biblia* (books) and the English word Bible. This form of writing was spread by the **Phoenicians** in their travels and influenced the Aramaic and Greek alphabets (see [alphabet](#)).

There were two great cities of Phoenicia—Sidon, the center of the glass industry, and Tyre, the center of the purple-dye industry. In the middle of the 10th century BC, Tyre assumed the leadership of all Phoenicia. Friendly relations were established with the Hebrews, and King Solomon sent to King Hiram of Tyre not only for materials but also for skilled workmen to build the temple.

The **Phoenicians** supplied the great Persian fleets with which Darius and Xerxes attacked Greece (see [Persian Wars](#)). Usually they submitted readily to foreign conquerors and paid tribute. In return they were allowed to pursue their commercial enterprises as they liked. Alexander the Great took Tyre in 332 BC, after one of the greatest sieges of history. In 64 BC Phoenicia came under the control of the Romans.

The chief divinities of the **Phoenician** religion were the god Baal and the goddess Astarte, or Ashtoreth. In times of great distress human sacrifices were offered to the god Moloch.

Today the small island on which Tyre once stood is connected with the mainland by a broad tongue of land. It grew out of the causeway built during Alexander's siege. The town is called Sur in Arabic.

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