

The Phoenicians: Sailors, Traders and Artists

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Phoenician merchants and traders. Photo from Wikimedia.

The Phoenicians were an ancient people of traders and merchants. They lived along the Mediterranean coast in what is now Lebanon. This part of the Middle East was in a very special location. The Mediterranean touches the coasts of northern Africa, the Middle East and Europe. The Phoenicians could sail to all these places to buy and sell goods.

The Phoenicians lived in many different cities. The most famous were Tyre, Byblos and Sidon. These cities often fought each other to control the region. They could not work together and were often taken over by other civilizations.

The Phoenicians invented the first known alphabet more than 3,500 years ago. Many languages, like English, have alphabets that came from the Phoenician alphabet.

Alphabet soup

The Phoenicians made the alphabet, but they did not invent writing. About 5,000 years ago, the Sumerians and the Egyptians already had writing systems. The Sumerians were an ancient people in Mesopotamia in the Middle East. The Egyptians were in northern Africa.

Both of them used symbols, or signs, with certain meanings. These early alphabets were mainly used by merchants and traders. They were used to keep track of agreements and to write lists of goods.

Yet, both the Egyptian and Sumerian writing systems were hard to use. They had hundreds of different symbols to mean different ideas and sounds. The Phoenicians wanted an alphabet that would be much easier to learn.

The Phoenicians noticed that most words only had a small number of sounds. They found out that these sounds could be represented with only 22 symbols.

Phoenician traders taught their alphabet to other people near the Mediterranean. The Greeks began using it and came up with a slightly different version. Later, the Romans took the Greek alphabet and changed it a bit more. The English alphabet is almost the same as the Roman one.

Trading on the seas

The Phoenicians were the greatest traders in the ancient world. They were very skilled shipbuilders and sailors. They built strong and fast boats to carry their goods. The Phoenicians learned how to sail and how to use the North Star. By looking at this star, they could tell exactly where north was. They might have gone as far as Britain and around the southern tip of Africa.

Pirates often attacked trading ships. The Phoenicians made special warships to fight them off. They also built trading towns that later became great cities. The most famous of these was Carthage in northern Africa. Today, Carthage is in the country of Tunisia.

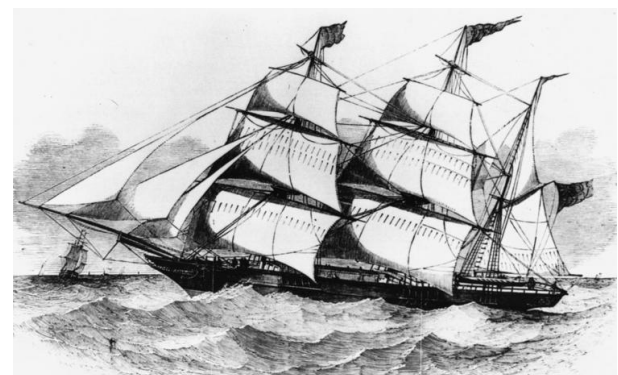
Phoenician ships also carried goods for their neighbors. They carried cloth and papyrus from Egypt. They carried copper from Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean. Spices were brought from Arabia, and ivory, gold and slaves from Africa.

Royal purple

The Phoenicians had very good artisans. They made a bright purple dye from a small sea snail called the murex. People from all over the Mediterranean wanted clothes dyed with murex. But this was not cheap. It took 60,000 murexes to make one pound of dye. The dye was called royal purple and was worn by Roman emperors.

Artists also used many different materials. They used glass, pottery, textiles, wood and metal.

About 2,500 years ago, the Phoenicians were defeated by the Assyrians, a people of the Middle East. Later, the Phoenicians' two most important cities, Sidon and Tyre, were conquered by the Persians and then Alexander the Great. Many Phoenicians left the Mediterranean coast and joined other cultures.



Quiz

- 1 Which paragraph from the section "Alphabet soup" helps the reader understand that other groups thought the Phoenicians created a useful way of writing?
- 2 Which sentence from the article BEST supports the idea that Phoenicians were very powerful and successful traders?
- (A) The Phoenicians could sail to all these places to buy and sell goods.
 - (B) These early alphabets were mainly used by merchants and traders.
 - (C) They also built trading towns that later became great cities.
 - (D) Phoenician ships also carried goods for their neighbors.

- 3 Read the paragraph from the section "Alphabet soup."

Yet, both the Egyptian and Sumerian writing systems were hard to use. They had hundreds of different symbols to mean different ideas and sounds. The Phoenicians wanted an alphabet that would be much easier to learn.

Which answer choice BEST describes the structure of the paragraph?

- (A) process
 - (B) cause and effect
 - (C) chronological order
 - (D) compare and contrast
- 4 Which selection from the section "Trading on the seas" uses a problem and solution structure?
- (A) The Phoenicians were the greatest traders in the ancient world. They were very skilled shipbuilders and sailors.
 - (B) By looking at this star, they could tell exactly where north was. They might have gone as far as Britain and around the southern tip of Africa.
 - (C) Pirates often attacked trading ships. The Phoenicians made special warships to fight them off.
 - (D) Phoenician ships also carried goods for their neighbors. They carried cloth and papyrus from Egypt.