

THE PHOENICIANS: FIRST MAJOR COMMUNITY IN LEBANON

Adapted by Tony G. Bikhazi

From "Lebanon in History" by Philip K. Hitti

Lebanon is literally the bridge between East and West. At the crossroads of the great land and sea routes that link Europe, Asia and Africa, Lebanon, through the centuries, benefited from trade throughout all times. The intermingling of cultures began with the extraordinary Phoenicians, the early settlers along Lebanon's coast.



Herodotus, the chronicler of the ancient world, claimed that around the year 2800 B.C. a Semitic people, the Canaanites, were found in occupation of the Lebanese coastal shores as well as western Syria and southern Syria (Palestine).

The Canaanites belonged to the same wave of migration that brought the Amorites from the Persian Gulf and Arabian deserts and spilled them over the Fertile Crescent (refers to what is known today as Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Iraq). Presumably, they entered the region through Al Bika' and North Syria as Bedouins. The Amorites spread eastward and established a dynasty in Babylon. The Canaanites settled in the major coastal cities of Lebanon like Beirut, Byblos, Tripoli and Aradus in the north; Sidon and Tyre in the south. These ancient cities went on to become small kingdoms and City States.

The Greeks dubbed the Canaanites as Phoenicians after the purple dye that they discovered and were selling from the Port of Tyre. The name originated from the Greek word "phoenix" which means dark or blood red.

Byblos was not only one of the mightiest Phoenician cities, but it was the greatest religious center. Byblos gave its name to the Bible because of the papyrus it produced and exported. It was here that the first linear alphabet, ancestor of our current alphabet, was invented by the Phoenicians and spread throughout the known world at that time. This alphabet came about in the 7th century B.C. by using exclusively the consonantal signs that were developed into 22 letters written from right to left. These signs were given Semitic names and values.

The manufacture of glass was one of the basic industries in which the Phoenicians excelled and traded heavily in; traditionally they are credited with its discovery. They were also known for their pottery and produced as well expensive metal objects and decorated weapons, embroidered clothes, elegant vases, furniture and chariots studded with gold and silver. They cultivated the musical art to a very high degree. Their musicians and singers, male and female, were in great demand especially in Egypt.

The best known of their architectural works is the Temple of Solomon, which took 7 years to build, using cedar lumber transported from the mountains of Lebanon. Their architects also built King Solomon's palace, using the same wood. So rich in cedar columns was the royal quarters that it became known as the House of the Forest of Lebanon. The same wood provided Solomon with his chariots and his fleet, the first in Hebrew history.

However, the real wealth came from carrying cargoes of others. Their triremes, which were built from cedar wood, were larger, faster and easier to handle than any other ships in existence. This is what

made the Phoenicians the best mariners of their era who conquered the seas, colonized and founded cities in Europe, with their biggest colony in northern Africa, the State of Carthage (which is Tunis today). They also mastered the arts of sailing by night by discovering the usefulness of the Pole star. The secret of the Phoenicians' success was their daring, cunning and incredible talent for business. The Phoenicians used to launch their corps of carrier pigeons to fly messages back and forth between far-flung business associates, thus maximizing their ability to buy low and sell high.

In the name of commerce, the Phoenician traders reigned as cultural synthesizers. Their ships took the arts and sciences of Egypt, Crete and the Near East and spread them to Greece, Italy, North Africa and Spain. From the crossroads of the Levant, they bound together East and West in a commercial and cultural web.

Largely maritime, the Phoenician trade was in reality amphibious. Land routes connected their Mediterranean ports with their Persian Gulf ports. Among their imports was silver, iron, tin and lead from Spain; slaves and brass vessels from Ionia; linen from Egypt; lambs and goats from Arabia. Their caravan knew no frontier. Their best nautical achievement was sailing around Africa over a thousand years before the Portuguese navigators to whom the honor of circumnavigating the continent is usually accorded.

Wherever the Phoenicians went, there they built. In small communities they could filter into a new land without arousing much suspicion and, without undue emotional strain, adapt themselves to any new situation as their modern successors the Lebanese are known to do.

As colonizers and organizers, they excelled no less than they did as traders and navigators. One trading factory after another developed into a settlement; one settlement after another into a colony; until their colonies, linked together to the mother cities by navigation, spread from the Egyptian Delta, along the Sicilian Coast to Greece and other ports in the Mediterranean. Phoenician colonies in Cyprus, Rhodes, Crete, Malta, Sicily, Sardinia, Cadiz in Spain and Utica (in what is now Tunisia) were founded about 1000 B.C. In the year 800 B.C., Carthage was the most distinguished and successful of all Phoenician colonies, followed by Tarshish in Iberia. Malaga and Cordoba were not built but rather taken over by the Phoenicians.

Their cargoes embraced such plants and products as the rose, palm, fig, pomegranate, myrrh, plum and almond, which they disseminated over the entire Mediterranean. The olive tree was introduced to Greece, Italy, North Africa and Iberia and with it was introduced olive and oil.

Except for Carthage, the decline in Phoenician supremacy was accelerated in the late 7th century by the rising wave of Greek colonization. Carthage stood at the head of a mighty empire extending from Cyrenaica (Lybia) to the Pillars of Hercules, Malta, Sardinia and scattered settlements on the coast of Iberia and Gaul.

Carthage pre-eminence was bound to bring her into conflict with another rising mid-Mediterranean power, Rome. The issue was supremacy of the sea on which the Carthaginians had the stronger hold. Their rivalry ended in the 2nd century B.C. when the mighty city was given to Roman flames for 17 days until its very site was concealed by a heap of ashes.

The Phoenicians are considered by most Lebanese to be the forefathers of the country. Throughout history, the coastal cities of Lebanon had been invaded, besieged, desecrated, burnt and rebuilt numerous times. All those who invaded had settled and inhabited the land like the Egyptians, Assyrians,

Persians, Aramaeans, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and Arabs, who came around the 6th century A.D. and brought with them Islam. During the 11th century and while on their way to Jerusalem, the Frankish Crusaders found haven in Lebanon and settled in its major cities for 200 years. Thereafter, the Ottoman Turks ruled the country for 400 years, which ended by their defeat in World War I. The country was then mandated to the French until independence in 1943.

These civilizations with their different cultures and religions are reflected in the mosaic groupings of the people of Lebanon today.