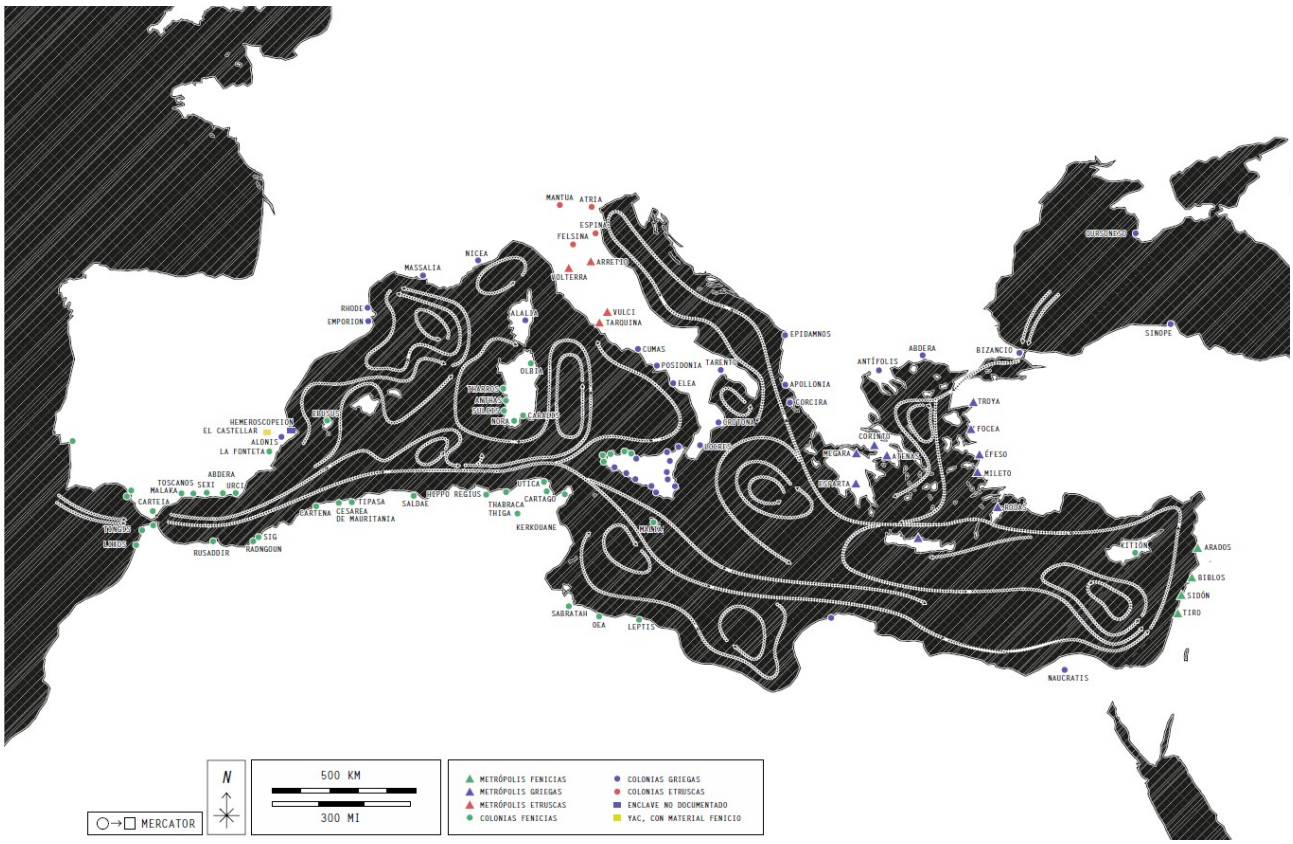
THE PHOENICIANS: MASTERS OF THE SEA

Originating from the Levantine coast, the Phoenicians stood out as skilled navigators and merchants of the Mediterranean. With naval expertise, innovation, and commercial acumen, they left an indelible mark on the ancient world.



Map of Phoenician, Greek, and Etruscan metropolises and colonies in the Mediterranean.

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PHOENICIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The territory known as Phoenicia was located on the central coastal strip of the Eastern Mediterranean, roughly where the modern country of Lebanon lies today. Its main cities—Byblos, Beirut, and Tyre—were located on coasts or promontories and shared cultural elements such as language and religion, though they were politically and economically independent.

The lands of Phoenicia had very fertile agricultural soils with abundant water sources. However, the terrain suitable for farming was limited due to the rugged topography, and it did not produce enough to sustain a dense population. Because of this, agricultural resources were largely imported, and the cities focused their economic activity on other productive sectors. Among their industries, textiles and the production of purple dye stood out, along with those derived from the sea, such as fishing and salted goods. The Phoenicians were expert and skilled artisans in various fields such as metallurgy, goldsmithing, ivory carving, and architecture. However, they were especially known for trade and the art of navigation.

The term “Phoenician” comes from the Greek *phoinós*, a word referring to dark red or blood, likely in comparison to the purple dye used in the Phoenician textile industry, for which they were well known in the ancient Mediterranean. In Greek mythology, the name of Phoenicia and its people comes from the eponymous hero Phoenix, son of Agenor and either brother or father (depending on the source) of Europa. This figure is also associated with the discovery of the purple dye. However, the Phoenicians referred to themselves as “Canaanites.” Today, the term “Canaanite” is used to describe the Semitic-speaking peoples who lived in the Syrian-Palestinian region from the early 2nd millennium BCE. Thus, we can say that the Canaanite societies with a shared linguistic, cultural, and geographical base have been referred to as “Phoenicians” from 1200 BCE until the conquest of Phoenicia by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE.

THE PHOENICIANS IN WRITTEN SOURCES

No Phoenician historiographical sources have survived. Therefore, to uncover their history, we rely on the historiographical, literary, and economic texts of other contemporaneous cultures whose sources have been preserved, such as Egyptian, Assyrian, biblical, and Greco-Roman texts.

The Egyptian papyrus of the Story of Wenamun narrates the political context of the Eastern Mediterranean in the late 2nd millennium BCE and provides insights into the economy of the Phoenician cities. Likewise, Assyrian annals offer

valuable information about Phoenicia's political and economic situation under the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

The Bible recounts intense commercial, political, and friendly relations between King Hiram I of Tyre and the Israelite monarchs David and Solomon. Prophets such as Ezekiel, in his lament for the fall of Tyre, and Isaiah, in his oracle on the city, also reference the metropolis. The Bible also documents Phoenician religious customs such as child sacrifice and sacred prostitution.

From the Greek and Roman worlds, we also have various documents that provide insight into Phoenician history and culture. Roman-era texts focus primarily on the Tyrian colony of Carthage, while Homeric poems describe the Phoenicians as expert sailors, shrewd, enterprising, and masters of deception (*Odyssey*, XIV, 285-300; XV, 415-480).

THE PHOENICIAN LEGACY: ANCIENT TRADE ROUTES

Contacts between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean have been frequent throughout prehistory; an example is the presence of Eastern Mediterranean materials in the Argaric culture, which developed in the Iberian Peninsula from the late 3rd millennium BCE to the mid-2nd millennium BCE.

Trade and communication existed in the Central and Western Mediterranean as early as the 14th century BCE. After the collapse of the Mycenaean world, Mediterranean trade opened to merchants and adventurers from the area of present-day Lebanon. These contacts increased over time, shaping the social and economic processes of post-Argaric cultures in the Iberian Peninsula, the Naveta culture in the Balearic Islands, and the Nuragic culture in Sardinia.

From the 11th century BCE, using Cyprus as a commercial platform, the Phoenicians began a commercial and colonial expansion from the Eastern Mediterranean to the far West, sailing north to present-day England and Ireland, and southward, colonizing parts of North Africa and circumnavigating the continent. This expansion of trade routes enabled unprecedented commercial development and a colonization process driven by demographic growth, leading to technical innovations in agriculture, metallurgy, and navigation.

The Phoenician expansion was rapid and constant. Between the 9th and 7th centuries BCE, many colonies were founded along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts—from North Africa to Sicily, Malta, Sardinia, the Balearics, and the entire southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula.

> *"The Phoenicians, then, set out from the Red Sea and sailed by way of the southern sea. And when it was late autumn, they would land wherever in Libya they happened to be, sow the land, and wait for harvest. After gathering the crops, they would sail again, and when two years had passed, on the third year they rounded the Pillars of Heracles and returned to Egypt."*
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> — **Herodotus**, Book IV (42-43)

The Phoenician colonization was a process of gradually establishing Phoenician communities in diverse and distant regions from their homeland. By the late 9th and early 8th centuries BCE, archaeological evidence confirms the founding of the first colonies in the Western Mediterranean, including settlements like Cádiz and Carthage. Classical sources date the foundation of Carthage to 814/813 BCE during the reign of the Tyrian king Pumayyaton (820-774 BCE). Colonies such as Utica (1100 BCE) or Cádiz (1110 or 1104 BCE) are cited by various classical sources as some of the oldest Phoenician cities in the West.

By the mid-10th century BCE, under King Hiram I, Tyre became the leading city of Phoenicia. Hiram initiated urbanization projects, major construction works, and monumentalization of the island city of Tyre. He also laid the foundations for a prosperous trade policy, asserting influence and economic control over both maritime and land trade routes in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, creating a commercial empire. This policy was continued and adapted by his successors according to the changing political landscape. In the 9th century BCE, Tyre's commercial policy focused on the regions of Cappadocia and Cilicia, as well as Mediterranean islands such as Cyprus and Crete. By controlling trade routes in these areas, Tyre ensured a monopoly over metal trade. In Cyprus, around the mid-9th century BCE, the Tyrian colony of Kition was established to control the copper trade from the island's interior mines. During this period, the first contacts with the Western Mediterranean were also made, as evidenced

by archaeological finds in places such as Huelva (southern Iberian Peninsula) and Karaly (Cagliari, Sardinia).

From the 11th century BCE onward, Phoenician contacts between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean intensified. Cyprus served as a launching platform for this expansion, which stretched as far as England and Ireland, and included the colonization of North African shores and even the circumnavigation of Africa. This expansion spurred an unprecedented level of commercial development and colonization.

Phoenician expansion must be understood from two perspectives: commercial contact and the establishment of permanent settlements. Initial contact likely began in the 12th century BCE and grew steadily. However, it was from the late 9th century BCE—and especially during the 8th and 7th centuries BCE—that intense colonization occurred, resulting in the creation of numerous settlements across the Mediterranean.

Between the 9th and 7th centuries BCE, numerous colonies were founded along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts—from North Africa, through Sicily, Malta, Sardinia, and the Balearics, to the southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula.

During the 8th and early 7th centuries BCE, the process of founding true and independent Phoenician colonies accelerated. Phoenician colonization of the Western Mediterranean followed different patterns depending on the region and function of the settlement. In North Africa and Sicily, settlements were often widely spaced and had commercial or strategic functions to control maritime routes connecting East and West. Examples include Utica, Carthage, and Motya. Meanwhile, along the southwestern coast of Sardinia and southern Iberia, settlements were typically located close to one another at the mouths of inland routes rich in mineral resources. These were generally located on islands (Gadir, Cerro del Villar), small peninsulas (Nora, Tharros), or promontories near the coast (Morro de Mezquitilla, Chorreras, Bithia, Monte Sirai, or Sexi).

From the 9th century BCE, archaeological data confirm the first Phoenician presences in the Iberian Peninsula, indicating the creation of direct communication routes that enabled large-scale transfer of objects, goods, knowledge, and people. Far from being just another stop in the Phoenician trade

expansion, the Iberian Peninsula was, according to sources, a planned destination in search of new markets and raw materials, especially precious metals like copper and tin. By the end of the 8th and beginning of the 7th century BCE, there is archaeological evidence of notable urban development in the port area of Huelva.

From the central Mediterranean islands, human groups from Phoenicia, stopping at various points along the African coast, founded numerous settlements along the Iberian Peninsula's coast. By the end of the Iron Age (9th century BCE), we find evidence of a Phoenician presence in the Strait area, including the settlement of "La Rebanilla" in Huelva. Throughout the 9th and early 8th centuries BCE, several settlements emerged along the entire southern coast of the Iberian Peninsula—Onuba, Gadir, Baesipo, Carteia, Barbesula, Salduba, Malaka, Sexi, Adra, Baria, and finally La Fonteta being among the most important. From this point forward, settlement development was continuous, fostering ongoing interaction with local indigenous societies. This process of cultural exchange and interaction eventually gave rise to the Iberian societies of later generations.

The arrival of Phoenician populations and their economic, cultural, artistic, technological, and religious practices had a significant impact on the native communities of the regions where they settled. The Phoenicians introduced new plant species such as grapevines, olives, almonds, and pomegranates; food production processes like winemaking and oil pressing; the alphabet; technological innovations like the potter's wheel and goldsmithing techniques such as filigree; new artistic and iconographic elements; and new architectural techniques. These technological advances were also accompanied by new spiritual and religious forms.

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