The Phoenicians were master seafarers and traders who created a robust network across—and beyond—the Mediterranean Sea, spreading technologies and ideas as they traveled.
A seafaring people

The Phoenicians were an ancient people who traveled to many areas around the Mediterranean Sea. They called themselves Can'ani (Canaanites). The Greeks called them Phoenicians, which means “purple people”. This was because the Phoenicians were famed for a rare purple dye they made from snail shells. The name the Greeks gave them seems to have stuck, partly because historians mainly used Greek, Assyrian, and Latin sources along with Biblical references to learn about Phoenician society.

The Phoenicians are perhaps best known for creating the first alphabet. The Phoenicians used this alphabet to record their histories on papyrus. Unfortunately, almost all of their original writings were lost. Historians have had to learn about the Phoenicians from reading what other civilizations said about them.

“Phoenicia” was not an empire or a unified society. It was a collection of city-states in modern-day Lebanon and Syria that included Tyre, Byblos, Beirut, and Sidon. Phoenician cities were also often controlled by other regional powers like the Egyptians and Assyrians.

The Phoenician people were master seafarers and traders. They formed networks across the Mediterranean Sea. They spread technologies and ideas. They formed important connections between the Middle East, Europe and North Africa which would impact the world for thousands of years.

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1 Ancient societies like the Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Greeks used papyrus or paper made from plant fibers for writing and record keeping.
Masters of the sea

The Phoenicians were expert sailors. They were first to travel from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. They dominated the seas between 1200 BCE and 800 BCE. They built trading colonies in Spain, North Africa and many Mediterranean islands.

Their success was due to their advanced ships. They were fast and could move through rough seas. Phoenician boats had room for many rowers and were built to sail long distances. Phoenician sailors were some of the first people to use stars to navigate.

Phoenician sailors traded many things, including their famous purple dyes. They traded textiles, wood, glass, metals and food. They also traded papyrus, a common writing material in the ancient world.
The Phoenician community

Merchants were very important people in Phoenician society. They made up the Phoenician senate. People were able to move up in society and become leaders.

Women had more freedom than many other women in the ancient world. The Phoenicians also had respected female gods and famous female leaders, including Dido, the queen of Carthage.

There were many enslaved people in Phoenician society. Many of these enslaved people were captured enemy soldiers.

The Phoenicians’ belief system included multiple gods. People from different Phoenician colonies would gather for religious events. Many of their beliefs were based on traditions from Mesopotamia. This was an ancient region in modern-day Iraq.
Phoenicians abroad
The Phoenicians traveled in search of land and resources to feed their people. Some of their colonies became larger and more powerful than the original city-states. Carthage was a Phoenician colony located in modern-day Tunisia. It became one of the biggest cities in the world, with half a million residents in 500 BCE.

Phoenician colonies formed important trade networks. The colonies had people from different ethnic backgrounds. Phoenicians, native people and migrants from Europe and Africa lived in them.

The Phoenicians didn’t really build an empire because they didn’t directly rule over their large territory. They did have power over the colonized people, though. In Carthage, enslaved people farmed to provide food for the Phoenicians.

A revolutionary script
The Phoenician alphabet transformed written language. There were earlier writing systems in Egypt and Mesopotamia. These systems used pictographs, which are pictures used as symbols. The Egyptian system had a thousand different characters.

The Phoenicians adapted these systems to create their own. They used symbols to represent sounds. Their alphabet had twenty-two characters. They didn’t have to learn the meanings of countless little pictures. This made reading and writing a lot simpler and easier to learn.

The Phoenicians’ system of writing spread through the Mediterranean. By 800 BCE, the Greeks had adopted it. It would help shape Latin and dozens of other languages in Europe, the Middle East and India.

*Figure of the god Ba’al with raised arm, 14th–12th century BCE, found at ancient Ugarit (Ras Shamra site), a city at the far north of the Phoenician coast. By Jastrow, public domain.*
Where did the Phoenicians go?

Historians question what happened to Phoenician society. Large empires like Persia took power away from the original Phoenician city-states. Eventually, the colonies were the only independent Phoenician societies left.

The Phoenicians had a large effect on world history. As they traveled and traded, they mixed with local populations. They spread cultural ideas and created new technologies.
Sources


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The author of this article is Eman M. Elshaikh. She is a writer, researcher, and teacher who has taught K-12 and undergraduates in the United States and in the Middle East and written for many different audiences. She teaches writing at the University of Chicago, where she also completed her master’s in social sciences and is currently pursuing her PhD. She was previously a World History Fellow at Khan Academy, where she worked closely where she worked closely with the College Board to develop curriculum for AP World History.

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A satellite image of Carthage, in modern-day Tunisia, jutting into the Mediterranean Sea. By NASA Earth Observatory, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carthage__Tunisia_EO-1.jpg#/media/File:Carthage__Tunisia_EO-1.jpg

Assyrian warship (probably built by Phoenicians) with two rows of oars, relief from Nineveh, c. 700 BC. CC BY-SA 3.0. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenicia#/media/File:AssyrianWarship.jpg

Papyrus with Greek writing from the second century CE, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Papyrus#/media/File:P._Oxy._VI_932_private_letter_on_papyrus_from_Oxyrhynchus_written_in_a_Greek_hand_of_the_second_century_AD.jpg


Figure of the god Ba’al with raised arm, 14th–12th century BCE, found at ancient Ugarit (Ras Shamra site), a city at the far north of the Phoenician coast. By Jastrow, public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenicia#/media/File:Baal_Ugarit_Louvre_AO17330.jpg

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