

Chapter 7: New Civilizations and Empires in Western and Central Asia: 7-2 The Phoenicians

Book Title: World Civilizations

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## 7-2 The Phoenicians

Another small but significant Semitic people were the unwarlike [Phoenicians \(\(c. 3000–1000 B.C.E.\). The peoples of ancient Phoenicia, a region that approximately includes modern Lebanon. They were noted sailors, merchants, and colonizers of the ancient Mediterranean Sea.\)](#), who originally inhabited a strip along the coast of what is now Lebanon. From their ports of Tyre (pronounced “tire”) and Sidon (SIGH-don), they became the greatest maritime traders and colonizers of the ancient Near East. Their trade in luxury wares such as copper and dyes took them through the Mediterranean Sea and into the Atlantic Ocean as far as the coast of Britain (Cornwall). There they obtained the precious tin that could be mixed with copper and lead to form bronze, the main metallic resource before 1000 B.C.E.

The Phoenicians apparently also spread the art of iron making from the Hittite settlements to the Greeks and westward into Africa. They established a whole series of colonies in the western Mediterranean. Some of these became important in their own right, and one of them—the rich city-state of Carthage, founded around 800 B.C.E.—became the great rival to Rome until its final defeat around 200 B.C.E. The Phoenicians themselves were absorbed into the Assyrian and succeeding empires but remained the paramount Mediterranean traders and seafarers until the rise of Greece in the 600s B.C.E.

The Phoenicians’ most notable contribution came in the linguistic field. They were the first to use a *phonetic alphabet*, a system of twenty-two written marks (“letters”), each of which corresponded to a specific consonant sound of the oral language. The Phoenicians’ alphabet, which emerged about 1000 B.C.E., was a definite advance in the simplicity and accessibility of written communication over both the cuneiforms of the Sumerians and the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians. The Greeks later improved the Phoenician alphabet, added signs for the vowels (which the Phoenicians did not use), and thereby created essentially the same alphabet (although in a different letter form) that we use in Western scripts today.

### Phoenician Female Tambourine Player

from the northern coast of Israel, eighth or ninth century B.C.E.

Figurine of a female tambourine player, from Shikmona on the northern coast of Israel, 9th-8th century BC (ceramic), Phoenician / Private Collection / Photo © Zev Radovan / Bridgeman Images



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