 SECTION 1 The Phoenicians

The Phoenicians lived in the northern part of Canaan. Most of what is known about them comes from the Bible, the writings of other ancient peoples, and the ruins of their cities and ships.

The Phoenician people were part of a larger group known as the Canaanites (kā’nuh nīts). The Canaanites came from the desert south and east of Canaan. They were herders who wandered from pasture to pasture. Another group—the Philistines (fil’uh stēnz)—lived in southern Canaan along the Mediterranean coast. They came from the eastern Mediterranean near Greece. The Philistines were traders and shipbuilders.
The Growth of Trade  

By 1200 B.C., the Phoenicians had built cities and towns along a narrow strip of land between the mountains and the sea. Although the land was rich, there was not enough to grow food for all of the people. For this reason, many Phoenicians turned to the sea to make a living.

The mountains near Phoenicia were covered with cedar forests. These forests provided wood that the Phoenicians used to build strong, fast ships. The Phoenicians started out as coastal traders. In time, they became widely traveled merchant shippers who controlled the trade of the Mediterranean. They exchanged cedar logs, cloth, glass trinkets, and perfume for gold and other metals. Many Phoenician ships were traveling workshops. Sailors who were also artisans carried their tools with them and worked onboard the ships.

Phoenician sailors and explorers plotted their courses by the sun and stars. They traveled to places where no one else dared to go. They brought Middle Eastern culture to unexplored areas of the western Mediterranean. Some experts believe the Phoeni-

Linking Across Time

Glass Making  

Artisans along the Phoenician coast discovered the art of glassblowing in the 1st century B.C. (below). This revolutionary technique remained in wide use until the late 1800s A.D. and is considered an art form today (right). What role did Phoenician trade play in spreading new ideas?
cians actually sailed around the west coast of Africa to India. They may even have sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas 2,000 years before Christopher Columbus.

From their business dealings, the Phoenicians learned the value of making agreements. They used the same idea to keep peace with their larger, more powerful neighbors. They signed peace **treaties**, or agreements between states or countries, in which they promised to supply free shipments of goods. In exchange for these shipments, the other countries agreed to guarantee Phoenician independence.

**The Cities of Phoenicia** Phoenicia never became a united country. Mountains separated one group of Phoenicians from another. The only contact was through narrow mountain passes or by sea. As a result, Phoenicia remained a collection of independent city-states. The largest of these were Tyre (tıuhr), Byblos (bib’ lus), Beirut (bā rū’ t’), and Sidon (sid’ uhn).

Though the people of all of these city-states spoke the same language and practiced the same religion, they did not always get along. The search for more profit from trade led to jealousy and quarrels among the city-states. The Phoenicians called themselves by the names of their city-states. Only people from other places called them Phoenicians.

At first, each city-state was ruled by a king who also served as high priest. In time, rich merchant families made the kings share their power with councils of merchants. Soon, the councils were telling the kings what to do.

Most Phoenician cities had stone walls around them for protection. Behind these walls stood the family-owned shops of merchants and artisans. Shopkeepers sold their goods outside their shops. Since wood was plentiful, many of the Phoenicians were carpenters and cabinetmakers. They were also very good at metalwork, which they learned from the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians.

Phoenician cities were very crowded. Streets were narrow and buildings were close together. Most buildings were made of stone or brick and had high narrow doors, windows, columns, and tiled roofs. Some houses had roof gardens.

Outside the walls of the city stood the port. It was the center of activity. Ships docked to load and unload goods. Phoenician merchants kept records of shipments of papyrus, gold, and linen from Egypt, pottery from Mesopotamia, and copper and hides from Cyprus (sī’ pruhs). Goods were stored in great warehouses until they went to market in Phoenicia or were shipped overseas.

Phoenician cities were also important cloth-dyeing centers. The Phoenicians made an expensive purple dye that was in great demand. In fact, the name “Phoenician” means “of purple merchants.” According to legend, a Phoenician god named
Melqart (mel’ kart) was walking along the seashore with his girlfriend Tyrus (tı¯’ rus) and a dog. When the dog picked up a shellfish called murex (myuhr’ eks) and bit into it, the dog’s mouth turned purple. Tyrus liked the color so much that she said she would not marry Melqart unless he gave her a gown of that color. Melqart gave her the gown and started the dye-making trade in Phoenicia.

Gods and Goddesses  The Phoenicians believed in many gods who were closely tied to nature. Since they thought the gods met people only on hills and under trees, they worshiped only in these places at first. Later, they built temples. Each had an entrance hall, a main hall, and a holy of holies, or most sacred chamber, where the image or sacred stone of the god was kept. Sacrifices of wine, perfume, animals, and humans were made on a nearby stone altar. Only priests could offer these sacrifices. It was thought that this strengthened the power of the gods and kept them friendly toward people.

The Phoenicians believed in a life after death. At first, they buried their dead in clay urns (ernz), or ornamental vases. Later, influenced by Egyptian customs, they embalmed the bodies, wrapped them in linen, and placed them in stone coffins in hillside cemeteries.

**PHOENICIAN TOMB**  The Phoenicians offered human sacrifices to please their gods. Inside this underground burial chamber at Carthage are clay urns that hold the ashes of victims who were sacrificed. Why were human and animal sacrifices made to the Phoenician gods?

**Reading Check**  What was the holy of holies?
Carthage  Some Phoenician sailors and traders set up trading posts along the coast of North Africa. Other Phoenicians built colonies, or permanent settlements, in these areas. These colonies soon turned into cities.

The most famous of these cities was Carthage (kar’ thij), founded in 814 B.C. in present-day Tunisia (tūn̩’ ē zhē uh). Legend states the city was founded by a Phoenician princess named Dido (dí’ dō). At first Dido ruled the city of Tyre. Her brother, however, thought that he should rule Tyre. So, he killed Dido’s husband and overthrew Dido. She fled to North Africa where she and her followers built Carthage.

Carthage soon became a Mediterranean power. It was a great trading city. Ships from Carthage may have traveled to the British Isles in search of tin, a metal highly valued by merchants.

The Alphabet  Through trade, the Phoenicians spread ideas as well as goods. Their most important gift was the idea of an alphabet. The Phoenicians did not invent the alphabet. They did, however, pass it on to other cultures.

At first, the Phoenicians used a system of picture writing. However, it was difficult to keep trade records this way. So, they looked for an easier writing system. They borrowed a simple version of Egyptian hieroglyphs from the people of the Canaanite towns that lay to the south. By the time the Canaanite system of writing reached Phoenicia, it had become an alphabet.

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### ALPHABETS

This chart shows how different alphabets developed from the Phoenician alphabet. The characters of the alphabets closely resemble each other. On whose system of writing did the Phoenicians base their alphabet?

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The Canaanite system of writing had 22 symbols, or letters, from which any number of words could be formed. Since it was easy to use, the Canaanite system provided the writing system Phoenician traders needed for keeping records.

The Phoenicians made the Canaanite alphabet their own. They carried it to Europe, where the Greeks borrowed it and made a few changes. Later, the Romans borrowed it from the Greeks. Most western alphabets, including the English, are based on the Roman alphabet.

Like the Phoenicians, the Hebrews, or Israelites, were a small group among the peoples of the ancient Middle East. Because of their religion, however, they have had a great influence on the world's civilizations. Their religion still exists today. It is called Judaism (ju¯' de¯ iz uhm).

Most early Hebrews were nomadic, or wandering, herders; some were traveling merchants. Leading long trains of donkeys loaded with goods, these merchants walked from one trading post to the next. The Hebrews followed a route that started from the city of Ur on the Euphrates River. There, Hebrew artisans made goods from gold, copper, and ivory. Hebrew merchants then stuffed the goods into bags, loaded them on donkeys, and started up the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates. At Harran (hah rahn'), a city near the Turkish mountains, they exchanged their goods for silver. Sometimes, merchants continued west and then south along the Mediterranean coast to trade with Egyptian, Phoenician, and Cretan (kre¯t' uhn) merchants.