

Phoenician society: seafaring and maritime knowledge



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Discuss the role of seafaring and maritime knowledge within Phoenician society and its expansion.**Introduction**

As a people the Phoenicians endured for some three thousand years and were already flourishing by 3, 000 B. C. but it was not until about 1100 B. C., with the demise of the existing dominant peoples in the area, that the Phoenicians came to the fore as a significant force. From this time, until around 600 B. C., they dominated the Mediterranean by trading and establishing colonies – one of the most important being Carthage. The success of their culture seems mainly to have been due to the proximity of the Mediterranean that encouraged dependence on seafaring and trade. Indeed, as Holst ^[1] indicates, international trade formed part of the guiding principles on which the Phoenician civilization was founded that also included a commitment to resilient partnerships, peaceful settlement of disputes, equality, privacy, religious freedom and respect of women. Although the majority of Phoenician trade was initially land based, a significant amount began to take place by sea ^[2] testified by the wealth of Tyre that, along with Byblos, Sidon, Arados and Simyra, were the main home-based Phoenician sea ports. Initially, Phoenician sea trade was mainly with the Greeks involving glass, slaves and Tyrian purple dye made from a sea shell called Murex and textiles coloured with such dyes formed one of the main Phoenician exports. Most of the major Mediterranean countries were involved in trade with the Phoenicians that included such commodities as cotton, timber, wool, precious stones, embroidery, wine, corn and various other

foodstuff including spices whereas countries as far away as Spain traded metals such as tin, iron and lead. ^[3]

The Importance of Trade

Trade and colonisation originally centred on bartering indigenous timber as well as fishing skills, the latter of which is thought to have provided the competence for later seafaring abilities. ^[4] The far reaching sea trade of the Phoenicians took two forms – with existing Phoenician colonies and countries in navigable reach. The colonies provided a means by which the home country could be assured of supplies of goods deemed essential. In this respect, Cyprus became a colony to ensure the supply of wood and copper, Sardinia and Spain for useful metals. In return for such goods, Phoenicia supplied such finished items as cotton and linen, pottery, ornaments, weapons, and glass. It was not, however, just with the Mediterranean that trade occurred but also with the Propontis and ports within the Black Sea. ^[5] The dominance of Phoenicians in seafaring has not gone without criticism however as early reports of such supremacy in Homer's *Odyssey*, and also by Herodotus, has been viewed by some modern commentators as erroneous. ^[6] The extent of Phoenician preeminence in this respect seems to have been settled by Bass's underwater excavations of the Cape Gelidonya wreck that highlights the extent of Phoenician trade. ^[7] The archaeological evidence from this excavation seems therefore to support the dominance of Phoenician seafaring from 1200 B. C. onwards. The recent discovery of two exceptionally large Phoenician merchant ships adds further substance to this view. ^[8]

It is probable that the Phoenician maritime empire was preceded by trade with various outposts throughout the Mediterranean or otherwise began as safe anchorage points along the coast. ^[9] It was only later that these places became colonies set up to protect Phoenician interests that required ships of war which, unlike merchant vessels were employed all year round, ^[10] to protect both colonies and trade routes. The Phoenician character of many of these ports was lost due to the rise and dominance of other powers such as the Greeks and Romans that has masked the extent of Phoenician influence. Importantly, trade by sea was linked to specialist product areas that otherwise would not have come together that allowed the Phoenicians to establish a rate of exchange to their advantage. ^[11] Transportation of various metals available in the western Mediterranean by sea, such as Spanish silver, thus allowed the Phoenicians to link the demand in the east, from countries like Assyria etc., to the raw material centres of the west. The Phoenicians also took advantage of turning the raw materials transported from the west into quality refined goods to be later exported. These products, because they tended to be more refined and better quality than what most other countries could supply, were therefore much sought after and such goods have been found in western ports such as Carthage. ^[12] Moreover, the direct sea route through the Mediterranean provided the best means of direct and efficient transport of materials and products and the extent of this trade along the Mediterranean is confirmed by the fact that Phoenician coins came to be manufactured in Tyre from the fifth century B. C. onwards. ^[13]

The Extent of Phoenician Trade Links

It is thought that the growth in Assyrian power and pressure on the coastal cities first led the Phoenicians to turn to seafaring. ^[14] In this respect, Assyrian power is thought to have blocked access to resources to the east to the extent that the Phoenicians were obliged to turn west towards the Mediterranean for raw materials. ^[15] Others, however, contend that it was the growth in Assyrian wealth and power that stimulated Phoenician interest in Mediterranean seafaring because of the increased demands for products. ^[16] This could have likewise been hastened by the economic growth and increased demand of Tyre and other Phoenician ports for raw materials. It is likely, however, that rather than one factor there was a set of interrelated events involving political, historical, economic criteria that led to the Phoenician exploitation of the Mediterranean. Indeed, Tyre and associated ports were ideally situated to act as a conduit through which the products and resources of the Mediterranean and countries to the east could be exchanged. ^[17] Moreover, a massive investment in time and resources would have been required to mount expeditions throughout the Mediterranean by sea that suggests Tyre was economically and politically secure.

The exploits of the Phoenicians in the Mediterranean should not be viewed as exploration as most of the main sea routes had been charted during the Bronze Age. Rather the Phoenicians were able to use and improve their maritime skills to become the dominant force in the Mediterranean for six hundred years. Yet, there are reports that they ventured much further afield which suggest exploration was part of a general outlook. For example,

Herodotus reports that they sailed down the Red Sea to circumnavigate Africa returning via the Straits of Gibraltar. ^[18] Some even propose that they may have voyaged as far as southern Britain to acquire Cornish tin but this was probably based on indirect rather than direct trade. ^[19] In this respect, reports of a tin ingot discovered in a Cornish harbour similar to those of ancient Crete remain controversial. ^[20] The Veneti of Brittany may also have actually been Phoenicians who controlled the trade route to Britain and were thought to be adept seafarers.

The control of trade routes seems to have been a characteristic of Phoenician dominance in that this allowed more exclusive access to resources around and outside the Mediterranean that helped to reinforce Phoenician power. The interest in regions outside the Mediterranean is supported by the notion that some coastal ports such as the present Portuguese port known as Peniche is claimed to derive from the Greek for Phoenicia. ^[21] Moreover, there are many Phoenician remains to be found along the Portuguese coast. ^[22] Such exploits beyond the Mediterranean may have partially been encouraged by the fact that the Greeks had prevented Carthage from gaining access to the home ports. ^[23] Indeed, it may have been the rise in Greek power that led to Carthage becoming such an important city port for the Phoenicians in the central Mediterranean and could have been a factor leading, in the 8th century B. C., to Carthage succeeding Tyre as the main Phoenician city. There is also some evidence that the Phoenicians may have even reached some of the Atlantic islands such as the Azores and Canaries. ^[24] Ultimately, it was the rise in Greek

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power in the east, the barrier of the Atlantic in the west and the rise of Rome that brought an end to Phoenician power. ^[25] In sum, the Phoenician influence along the Mediterranean coastline appears to be both a consequence of great initiative and impressive seafaring skills that was instigated by the promise of trade and pressures from the rise in other Mediterranean powers to the east.

Types of Boats

The initial attempts in seafaring by Phoenicians are thought to have been quite crude based on travel between islands by means of rafts followed by more sophisticated but still crude sailing vessels inspired by the need to fish. ^[26] The first boats seemed to have consisted of a keel, a rounded hull and a raised platform for the steersman with the oars intersecting the bulwark. ^[27] This formed a template for a subsequent craft where four upright rowers operated curved oars in a boat that lacked a rudder with a mast held aloft by two ropes secured at the front and rear of the vessel. The mast, however, seems not to have been used for a sail, but to support a viewing structure from which an archer or other attacker was able to launch missiles. From this, a larger vessel evolved with a low bow and raised stern with a rudder with a pointed prow and oars on each side of about fifteen to twenty in number that the Greeks referred to as triaconters and penteconters that are represented on coins but were shown without a mast so must have been a type of refined rowing boat. Around 700 B. C. further advances occurred in ship construction in that, instead of being situated on one level, rowers were now placed on two levels thus doubling the number of oarsmen. These vessels were known as “ biremes ” by the Greeks and incorporated two <https://assignbuster.com/phoenician-society-seafaring-and-maritime-knowledge/>

steering oars issuing from the stern some with a mast and yardarm to support a sail that came in two forms – one designed for war, the “ long ship”, and another, with a more rounded prow used for the purpose of trade. [28] Inspired by the Greek example, the Phoenicians also went on to develop their own version of the trireme with three levels of rowers. [29] The size of these vessels can be gauged by the fact that the top level consisted of 31 rowers. [30] The Phoenicians have also been credited with inventing both the keel and ram as well as the caulking of planks with bitumen – though some believe that the ram or beaked prow is said to have been adopted by the Phoenicians from the Mycenaeans It was the use of an adjustable sail, more oarsmen and a double steering oar that led to increased speed and manoeuvrability allowing the furthest points of the Mediterranean to be reached and it was the round-shaped merchant ships called “ gaulos” that was mainly relied on in this respect. [31] Such innovations to ship construction illustrate the commitment of the Phoenicians to seafaring and their seafaring skills were so renowned throughout the ancient world that Phoenician ships and sailors were often co-opted into foreign war fleets. [32]

Navigation

The Phoenicians are thought to have invented the art of navigation. They used oars when there was little or no wind and large square sails at other times. Although they obviously practiced coastal navigation, the distribution of ports indicates that more long distance open sea voyages were also undertaken. [33] The fact that the Phoenicians had important centres at Sardinia, Sicily and Ibiza suggests that they often sailed the high seas. This

would have involved extended periods at sea essential for the effective transportation of goods. They would probably, however, have employed short coastal journeys to travel from one port to the next but relied on deep sea navigation for longer voyages ^[34] and in places like the Aegean, with the many islands and dangerous currents, oars would have been used rather than sails. It is thought that the Phoenicians were also able to sail at night and used the Pole star and knowledge of astronomy for navigation. This knowledge – along with the fact that, given favourable viewing conditions, land is nearly always visible anywhere in the Mediterranean -allowed the Phoenicians to use their seafaring skills to good effect.

Conclusion

The Phoenicians obviously depended on seafaring skills in order to extend trade links and their influence throughout the Mediterranean and beyond. This seems to have gone hand in hand with a need to develop more sea worthy vessels and navigational abilities to venture further into the open seas. Evidence from historical documents, such as found in Herodotus and others, indicate the extent of Phoenician maritime skills that evolved in tandem with the foundation of ever distant colonies and trading outposts. These skills seem to have been further encouraged by the advantages that came from the home ports being located where raw material from the west, which were in demand by countries in the Levant, could be traded for finished products. The Phoenicians were able to exploit this further by producing high quality manufactured goods that were exported to all areas thus increasing their economic power and wealth that allowed more sophisticated ships to be built for longer voyages. This tendency is reflected

in the progressive growth in Phoenician influence and colonisation from east to west from about 12, 000 B. C. onwards. Trade went first, however, with colonisation following when the opportunity arose. Ultimately, however, Phoenician influence may have declined in the Mediterranean due to an over-reliance on seafaring that was unable to compete with more land based powers. In other words, their greatest strength eventually became their greatest weakness.

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Footnotes

[1] Holst, 2005

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[2] See, for example, Judgement of Ezekiel 26-1- “ Judgement on Tyre” in Greenberg, 1997

[3] Perrot and Chipiez, 1893

[4] Culican, 1991

[5] Tilley 2004 p. 76

[6] Tilley, 2004; p. 77

[7] Bass, 1972

[8] Tilley, 2004; p. 78

[9] Harden, 1962; p. 158.

[10] Moscati and Grassi, 2001; p. 85.

[11] Harrison 1988; p. 42

[12] See, for example, Boucher-Colozier, 1953

[13] Hill, 1910

[14] Frankenstein, 1979

[15] Aubert, 2001; p. 70

[16] Culican 1991; p. 486

[17] Harrison, 1988

[18] see de Sélincourt, 1959

[19] Harden, 1962; p. 171

[20] Hencken, 1932.

[21] Guthrie, 1970; p. 103

[22] Tilley, 2004; p. 80

[23] Harden, 1962; p. 171

[24] See, for example, Diodorus Siculus 1935 v. 20; Harden, 1948

[25] Boardman et al. 1991; p. xvi.

[26] Rawlinson,; 2004 p. 122.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Perrot and Chipiez, 1893; p. 34

[29] Basch, 1969

[30] Casson, 1971 p. 95

[31] Barnett, 1958

[32] Grayson, 1991; p. 220

[33] Aubert, 2001; p. 167

[34] Moscati and Grassi (2001); p. 84