Lesson 4

Student Handout 4.1—Student Reading

Trade: the Phoenicians

Trade flourished in the eastern Mediterranean long before 1200 BCE. By 1600 BCE, trade networks united Inner Eurasia, Southwest Asia, Egypt, and the Aegean. This thriving system was disrupted around 1200 with the collapse of the dominant powers in the region. Waves of marauders swept across the region, destroying cities and causing mayhem for reasons that are still unclear.

By 1000 BCE, however, life became more stable and trade resumed. Among the most successful traders of this period were the Phoenicians. They became the chief merchandisers of the region. During the eighth century BCE, the Greek poet, Homer, describes the Phoenicians, or the Phaiákians, as the Greeks called them, as "those renowned seafaring men, sea-dogs… [who] came ashore with bags of gauds for trading" (The Odyssey, 15:504-506). In the Old Testament, Ezekiel describes Tyre, one of the Phoenician cities, as that city "that dwelt at the entry of the sea," as being "the mart of the people for many lands" (Ezekiel Ch. 27: 3).

The name Phoenician came from the Greek language. It means "blood red," which may have referred to the purple dye that the Phoenicians extracted from a tiny sea snail, a member of the Murex genus. It took 10,000 of the tiny mollusks to produce a single gram of the dye. (The dye works produced mountains of smelly sea shells, which must have been a severe local nuisance.) The dye was so expensive that only the very rich could afford it, which is why it became the color choice of kings.

The Phoenicians lived in prosperous, walled city states, including Byblos, Tyre, and Sidon. These cities, many located at the water's edge in what is now Lebanon, were cut off from the interior to the east by mountains and deserts. Their livelihoods depended on their merchant seamen who sailed large, fast ships of local cedar equipped with both sails and banks of oars so that they were manageable in the wind. While most sailors hugged the coasts because of fear of losing sight of land, the Phoenicians learned to guide themselves by the North Star (called the Phoenician Star by the Greeks). They sailed mostly in the dry summer months when the seas were calm and the stars were visible for navigation. They generally sailed in vast fleets of cargo ships paired with fighting vessels to discourage pirates.

The Phoenicians established outposts along the North African coast about a day's sail apart. In these ports, they could stockpile supplies, refit their ships, and find safe havens during storms. They also established colonies at places along the coasts where inland trade routes terminated. Here they traded with locals and in some places, such as Carthage, they developed permanent settlements. Towards the end of the seventh century BCE, some of these colonial cities grew into independent city-states.

From about the eleventh century BCE, Phoenician ships exported local produce. Wood, especially cedar and pine, was in great demand in both the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates valleys, neither of which had much wood. Cedar oil, another export, was prized in Egypt for embalming. Other products, like wine, nuts, figs, apricots, inlaid furniture, blown glass, pottery, textiles, and dyes were sold to aristocratic families that ruled clans and micro-kingdoms in North Africa and western Europe.

Phoenician imports included male and female slaves and elephant tusks from Nubia; bales of linen, papyrus, and rope from Egypt; ostrich eggs from Africa via North African trade routes; and amber from the Black Sea. These exotic goods were snapped up by a growing urban population in the Levant and in the expanding Assyrian Empire.

The demand for metals, especially silver, by Assyria and Egypt was a major incentive for trade in the far west. In a world without coins, precious metals were universal mediums of exchange. The Iberian Peninsula proved to contain a wealth of silver in mines located on the Rio Tinto, which flowed west of modern Seville, Spain. At first, the Phoenicians were able to get the silver from the unsophisticated Iberians in exchange for a few colored beads. Before long, however, the locals realized the true value of their silver and were insisting on a better deal. By 650 BCE, a new urban Iberian elite was demanding chariots, glass, ivory inlays, and other status items. As the Phoenician investment of time and people in Iberia's silver mining enterprises expanded, there was a transfer of technology. More and more Phoenician artisans relocated to Iberian outposts in order to supply the operations with needed goods and services. Before long, the Iberians themselves were acquiring skills that enabled them to produce iron tools as well as local versions of expensive trade goods like Phoenician pottery. This region, which was barely able to work bronze a few decades previously, suddenly found itself in the Iron Age.

Basically, the Phoenicians were early international business people. Their enterprises, supported by both the governments of their cities and their religion, had branches throughout the Mediterranean. Their main temples were dedicated to Baal-Melqart (King of the City), who was pictured as the ideal Tyrian king. He was also the god of rain, storm, and prosperity. These temples served as warehouses and banks attracting private deposits of silver and goods. These temples took on the nature of multinational corporations, with branch temples in several cities. Priests acted as notaries, standardized weights and measures, and oversaw banking and warehousing. Consequently, the Phoenician gods became traders, and Iberians, Cypriots, Arameans, and others accepted them alongside their own deities.

The Phoenician's only real competition were the Greeks. A growing population of Greeks, which inhabited city states dotting the rocky Peloponnesian Peninsula and the islands of the Aegean, was strapped for food and space. The Greeks therefore began to export people and to import food. While the Phoenicians were busy making inroads along the southern and western coasts of the Mediterranean, the Greeks were establishing colonies along its northern shoreline as well as along the edges of the Black Sea.

Along with the competition between Greek and Phoenician traders and colonists, there were also exchanges of both goods and ideas. It is thought that the Greeks learned to use the North Star from the Phoenicians and even copied their ship-building techniques. However, the most significant thing the Greeks picked up from the Phoenicians was the clever symbolic code that they used to label their cargos and keep records. Today this system is called the alphabet. It was probably developed a couple of hundred years before the Phoenician merchants began to use it. The Phoenician script had twenty-two characters, each of which stood for a consonant. Vowels were supplied by the reader and depended on the context. For instance, if one wrote "Lrg blck bx", an English reader could decipher it as "large black box." The Greeks adopted this shorthand and added symbols for vowels. Eventually, it became the basis for several later alphabets, including the "Roman" alphabet you see on this page.

In addition to being traders, the Phoenicians were also expert builders and engineers. Their cities were defended by thick walls and usually only accessible by sea. Buildings could be six stories tall, and many had roof gardens. Water was supplied by wells and springs inside the cities so that they could easily withstand sieges. Tyre even piped in fresh water from an undersea spring by means of a leather hose. During the reign of the Hebrew King Solomon, his friend the Tyrian King Hiram sent wood and craftsmen to build Solomon a great temple to God.

The prosperity of Phoenician cities depended on their avoidance of war. Through the centuries, they did so and maintained their independence by paying tribute to their enemies. In the mid-seventh century, however, the Assyrians seized the Phoenician cities of the Levant and forced them to pay tribute. The Assyrian empire collapsed in 612, but other conquerors followed. In North Africa, Phoenician colonies like Carthage in modern Tunisia and Cadiz in modern Spain and became independent cities, pursuing their own interests and destinies.