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### The Impact of the Phoenicians (Revised 12/13/16)

Before the Chinese junks, the Spanish galleons, and the Greek triremes, the Phoenicians had developed advanced seafaring technology that allowed them to create a trading empire that expanded beyond the boundaries of their region. Unfortunately, there is limited information known about their empire as there is little archaeological evidence available and Phoenician texts are untranslatable. Much of what we know about the Phoenicians comes from written accounts and art from other civilizations that were a part of the Mediterranean region during the time of the Phoenicians. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Phoenicians exploited their geographical position along the edge of the Mediterranean with access to great sources of timber to create a vast trading network that spread across the Mediterranean Sea and beyond for centuries that also had a serious detrimental effect on their environment.

The Phoenicians began very different from the typical model of river valley civilizations that ruled many parts of the world at this time. They rarely had a central leader and featured no central territory, no central identity, and perhaps not even a central genetic lineage (Markoe 11,12). The only unifying part of these loosely gathered city-states around the Mediterranean Sea was that they all were focused on the sea and utilizing it to their greatest ability (Markoe 12). They did not start as a small tribe of people that began to gain more and more territories under their control, which is unlike the ancient civilizations that we typically see and are familiar with at this time. Their rise to power and significance in the region came during the late Bronze Age

around 1200 BCE in the Levant when Egyptian power was greatly reduced and several coastal city-states could look beyond their neighbors to create trade networks (The Met). The Phoenicians were not a massive, unified empire: they were rather a cosmopolitan group of coastal urban centers that used their location to trade and control much of the Mediterranean from 1200 BCE all the way to 300 BCE.

They utilized their geographical location along the edge of the Mediterranean Sea to their advantage and are largely seen as the first great seafaring trading empire in the world. The key Phoenician city-states of Byblos and Tyre were located at the intersection of critical trade routes along the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, helping to explain why they decided to turn to the sea (Schleeter). They also had limited prospects to go any other direction other than west onto the sea, as they were located between the Assyrians to the east, the Egyptians to the south, and strong kingdoms in Anatolia in the north (Penn Museum). The sea provided them with an important resource that was used in a variety of ways, whether it was the industries of ship-building and purple dye production or waterways for them to work “as both primary shippers and commercial entrepreneurs” (Marloe 93). This diverse use of the sea highlights that the Phoenicians were focused on trading goods, not colonizing new lands. Their expansion westward for products and trading partners included the founding of Carthage in 814 BCE and the coasts of Iberia by 800 BCE (The Met). They also pushed eastward with the trade of rare commodities, like precious metals, on behalf of the Persians and Assyrians (Marloe 98). These dealings forced the Phoenicians to travel as far as Britain to find ore deposits that would satiate the demand for these metals (Schleeter). This impressive trading network that the Phoenicians were able to create opened up cultures to one another that had previously not existed. With this

great increase in trading goods, there also came an increase in the spread of languages, ideas, and religions around the Mediterranean region. Some argue that the Phoenicians might have connected more of the world than any civilization would for 1,500 years. Herodotus, a Greek historian, makes the claim that Phoenicians circumnavigated the end of Africa and contemporary academics even suggest that they traveled to North America at some point (McKenzie). These points are not largely supported by the academic community, but demonstrate their trading prowess and their ability to spread cultural connections with trade. The Phoenicians used their geographical position along the edge of the Mediterranean Sea between great land empires to create a vast trading network that spanned across three continents.

In addition to a beneficial location, the Phoenicians along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea also had access to Lebanese cedar trees, some of the finest trees available in antiquity to build their empire upon (AU). This type of timber was valuable for a variety of reasons: there were enormous trunks of upwards of 170 feet available, the wood resisted rot and insects, the trees has a pleasant aroma, and grain of the wood allowed for the wood to be easily worked and shaped (Cedars of Lebanon). From the ships to building materials to trading goods, the trees largely gave the Phoenicians the ability to become successful trading partners of highly demanded goods. The forests in Lebanon were such a prized commodity that they were frequently a source of military campaigns as it was a rare forest with tall and substantial trees in the Levant and Middle East region (AU). For the Egyptians, their lack of access to proper timber for their ships or monumental buildings forced them to rely upon trade with the Phoenicians, who supplied the Egyptians with upwards of forty ships stacked with cedar logs from

present-day Lebanon (A Forest Journey). The plentiful and accessible cedar forests in the Levant gave the Phoenicians the opportunity to build a thriving trade empire for several centuries.

Using this famed cedar wood, the Phoenicians developed some of the most advanced ships of their time that gave them the ability to create a successful trading empire from one end of the sea to the other. They created a diversity of types of ships to suit their needs at sea, whether it was a wider, rounded-hull cargo ship to transport more goods or sleeker warships to improve their chances in battle (Mariners' Museum). Two important innovations of the Phoenicians gave a distinct advantage in becoming the top trading power in the Mediterranean Sea. One was the development of the keel to increase the stability and carrying ability of their cargo ships, which allowed for them to move upwards of forty tons of goods across larger distances than ever before (The Great Sea). Another was the newfound ability to waterproof their vessels by caulking them with pitch, allowing the Phoenician vessels to move great distances across the Mediterranean without damaging the cargo (The Great Sea). The diversification and improvement of their ships allowed for the Phoenicians to become an economic and military power for centuries in the Mediterranean region.

However, the economic success of the Phoenicians came with the cost of environmental destruction. They initiated a succession of empires that would overuse the valued cedar forests in Lebanon because they used them in so many aspects of their lives (AU). For the Phoenicians, there is little available evidence regarding a desire for conserving the supply of trees, reflecting a mindset that these trees were an unlimited resource for them. This removal of so many trees also fundamentally changed the soil and landscape where these forests used to be, creating a barren landscape without fertile soil for the growth of any plants other than hardy, low-lying brush

(Cedars of Lebanon). While the groves of cedar trees boosted the Phoenicians towards success and wealth, the forests were forever harmed by this overuse and lack of a focus on replanting new cedar trees.

The Phoenicians are largely known for the creation of an alphabet that we use today, but they did so much more as a trading empire. They utilized their beneficial geography and topography along the edges of the Mediterranean Sea to impressively rule the seas and much of the coastal trade networks as well. However, their success meant destruction to the environment, as much of the timber they used in every aspect of society and trade was nearly depleted by the time of their decline around 300 BCE.

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