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Finding Out About THE PHOENICIANS

by

D. PHILLIPS-BIRT

Illustrated by
JEAN MAIN and DAVID COBB

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THE FIRST OF THE PHOENICIANS

You can find it marked on the map still—Carthage—a few miles to the west of Cape Bon in Tunis, close by the Mediterranean and not far from the mouth of the Majerda river. Travelling through hot, dusty country in a train today, you may look up and suddenly see that unforgettable name on a railway-station signboard. Once it may have been called not Carthage but Kart-hadjah, which means “new city”. That was very long ago—about two thousand seven hundred years—and ever since there has been a Carthage, many Carthages indeed, one raised upon the ruins of another. For the ancient town has known more of the glories and the tragedies of history than most.

There came a time in the Second World War when the Germans had been driven out of North Africa. It was 1943. The last rearguard troops of the German army had gone, and the battles that had swayed the armies to and fro between Egypt and Tripoli were over. The desert was soon to be calm again, just sand and rock with the wind
blowing over it, as if man had never been there and fought so noisily. It was at this time that Winston Churchill, then Prime Minister, visited Tunis and asked to speak to as many troops at once as possible.

It was decided that the best place for such a massed gathering of victorious soldiers would be the ruins of the old Roman amphitheatre in Carthage. It was here that the Romans had held their great assemblies; here, when Julius Caesar was alive, they had cheered and clapped at gladiatorial combats; and here now in 1943 Winston Churchill, standing on the central stage, spoke to forty-five thousand men of the armies more than two thousand seven hundred years after the Phoenicians had built the small trading station that was to grow into the great "new city".

But there was nothing visible of that very ancient Phoenician "new city" on the day Churchill spoke. For the Carthage whose ruins we see today was built upon the ruins of an earlier Carthage destroyed by the Romans, which in turn was built upon the ruins of that first Carthage of the Phoenicians. And that oldest Carthage of all is beneath the ground; though in an outlying part of the town some Phoenician graves have been laid bare to make a slender link between ourselves and the merchants of Tyre who sailed from their yet older town to settle in Africa and build their Kart-hadjah.

For Carthage, so old for us today, is far younger than the first cities of the Phoenicians—than Tyre,
Phoenicia, at the eastern end of the Mediterranean
Sidon, or Byblos—three names that you will be often hearing in this story. Tyre you may recognize by name from two lines of poetry that you perhaps have heard:

Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre.

There is no pomp in Tyre today, now a small fishing port and no more, which you will find on the map at the far eastern end of the Mediterranean on the Syrian coast, disguised perhaps under the name of Es Sur. No pomp in Sidon either, not far along the coast from Tyre, usually now called Saida, a little and graceful seaport town where oranges and lemons are loaded into ships. Cargoes have been loaded into ships at Sidon for nearly five thousand years now, and carried up or down that bare dry coast where mountains of limestone slope down to the edge of the sea. They were being loaded there when the place where Carthage was to be built was empty, windswept sand, which was to remain empty for another thousand years.

Rather more than forty miles to the north of Sidon on that same rocky stretch of Syrian coast and not far from the port of Beirut, there is another little town of such great age that we know hardly anything about its beginnings. Men today call it Jabel, and once it was called Gubla, but in its long history it has become best known as Byblos.

Byblos, standing today on a cliff above its
beautiful and now little-used harbour, is one of the oldest towns in the world. So old, indeed, that no reasonably accurate date can be given for the time when men first settled there in a primitive village the houses of which were perhaps skins supported upon a framework of branches.

Near the harbour is a hillock, and archaeologists digging deep into this have come upon the plaster floors of these ancient hutsments, the skin walls of which have of course disappeared. They have found pieces of dark burnished pottery, and also other sorts of ware of a kind that have also been unearthed in places far from Byblos, suggesting that even at this remote time Byblos was a kind of trading centre. This was perhaps four thousand years B.C. So the very long past may speak to us, but in the faintest of whispers only, in the clues provided by pottery or by the traces left of ancient hutsments that have long been buried.

In a similar way, by examining what may be found at different levels in the mound by the harbour, it has been learned that by about 3500 B.C., or five thousand five hundred years ago, a more elaborate village was founded. At about this period there was trading between Byblos and the rich and powerful Egyptians. We know this because Egyptian pottery has been found during excavations in Byblos, the date of which is approximately known, while flasks and other objects made in Byblos have been recovered from Egyptian royal tombs of about 3000 B.C. Whether these articles were carried
by land or sea we do not know; only that somehow they were exchanged between Byblos and Egypt.

A few hundred years later Byblos was severely damaged by a fire, but it was rebuilt bigger and more grandly than before. Byblos was becoming rich and important, for not only did it have its fine natural harbour, but not far inland from the port were the Lebanon mountains on whose slopes grew the cedar and pine-trees which were to make Byblos famous and the Phoenicians rich. For that timber was one of the most anxiously sought after commodities of the day, above all by the Egyptians, wealthy enough to erect buildings in the splendid manner yet without suitable timber in their own country. The Egyptians did much to make the Phoenicians what they became—the greatest trading people of their long day.

We do not know when the Phoenicians came to Byblos. We are not even sure where they came from. They walk into history out of a legend, a wandering people apparently in search of a suitable settlement. They may have come originally from somewhere in the region of what we now call Iraq, or north-east Arabia, perhaps from the shores of the Persian Gulf, perhaps from those of the Red Sea, or from all these localities. Then, wandering westward, they found themselves upon the shores of the vivid Mediterranean, the Lebanon mountains behind them, in the narrow coastal strip of Syria which was to become known as Phoenicia. They may have been in Byblos in 3000 B.C. They appear
to have been securely established there by 2000 B.C. And five hundred years later they were prosperous and well known through their trading.

Byblos and Carthage, two seaport towns, stand at the beginning and the end of the Phoenician story. For the Phoenicians were always seaport dwellers, and their story is not so much one of a country but of many trading cities that grew into greatness because their inhabitants, similar in skill and temperament if separated by distance, used the sea for trading and brilliant maritime exploits. Into the village of Byblos they come at some date we cannot be sure of—perhaps 2500 B.C. They leave the main scene of history when their great African colony Carthage—strong, fortified, populous, the master of the western Mediterranean—was finally conquered and sent up in flames by the soldiers of the Roman Republic; and for more than ten days the fires burned. The date was then 146 B.C.

Everyone who seeks publicity knows the importance of a name. It must catch the ear and be instantly memorable. So the managers of film actors and actresses devote much thought to inventing pretty combinations of Christian and surnames to fasten upon their new starlets, with the hope that soon they will become glowing stars with their names spread wide in neon lights and written in the heart of every housewife as she stands at the kitchen-sink.

Above all it is essential not to have two names.
When a great public figure like Pitt becomes Lord Chatham, when a Disraeli (who had already had his name modified once) becomes Lord Beaconsfield, it is confusing for everyone, and most people remember only the name under which they became famous. How dreadful it would have been had Winston Churchill become Lord Chartwell!

Unfortunately, the Phoenicians had more than two names. Indeed, five at least, so that often we may read of them and not recognize whom we are reading about. They called themselves Canaanites, for the sufficient reason that their home was in Canaan, or what we now call Palestine. Later, but still very long ago, when Sidon became one of their most important towns and seaports, they were often called Sidonites, while the Phoenicians of Tyre were called Tyrians. When the powerful Phoenician colony of Carthage was founded in North Africa the name Carthaginian was applied to the Phoenician colonists, who under this name played so famous a part in the later history of Europe when the original Phoenicians had sunk into unimportance. But the people of Carthage called themselves by the old name of Canaanite until late in their history.

In the Old Testament, on which we rely for some of the history of the people, they are never called Phoenicians but are most usually referred to as the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon; for it was with the Phoenicians of these two cities that the Israelites were most closely connected. The
word Phoenician, or at least Syrophoenician, does appear in the New Testament, when St. Mark writes of Christ going "away into the borders of Tyre and Sidon" where he met a woman who was "a Syrophoenician by race".

Today everyone knows them as Phoenicians, and we shall stick to this name throughout our story. We are not sure how this name first appeared, but we are pretty certain that the Greeks gave it to them, and it would seem to have come from their word meaning "blood red". But why should the Greeks have called them red, it may be wondered? There are two likely reasons. The Phoenicians who swarmed in the Mediterranean ports had the fresh and blustery complexions of seamen who are alternately swept over by the salt spray and burned by that hot southern sun. Or perhaps the name came from a deep-coloured dye used for colouring fabrics, a product for which the Phoenicians were famous.

In the museum of Palermo, the capital of Sicily, there is a large flat piece of black basalt rock only a few inches thick and carved on both sides with writing of the kind known as hieroglyphics, which was used by the ancient Egyptians. The rock is called the Palermo Stone, after the museum in which it is exhibited. It came originally from Egypt, and how it ever came to be in Sicily we are not certain; it is suggested that perhaps long ago it was used as ballast for a ship, and when no longer wanted was dropped ashore.
The hieroglyphics have been able to tell us much about the history of Egypt, for they give a list of kings’ names and some of the notable achievements of their reigns; and written on the stone by the name of the Pharaoh Snefre, who was ruler of Egypt in about 2650 B.C., or about four thousand six hundred years ago, is the statement that a fleet of forty ships carried logs of cedar to the Nile.

Here is the earliest written record we have of sea trading. Such trading we know there was, of course, and long before this time; but here we are told of it in words by a remote Egyptian who kept the royal annals, whereas we can only learn about the yet earlier times by following the speechless clues of pots and other objects unearthed by archaeologists in places far from where they were made, and showing that men from one country had travelled to another. Here, too, may be the first written evidence of the Phoenicians, for it was from Phoenicia that the ships of the Pharaoh carried the cargoes of timber.

It may be helpful, as you read the following pages, to have before you a list of some of the important dates in the Phoenician story; so one is given at the end of this book. But remember, few of the dates are certain. Most of them are useful guides only.
THEY WROTE ABOUT THE PHOENICIANS

WHEN STUDYING the history of the last six hundred years or so we rely chiefly on the written evidence of documents and books that have survived. We may still like to examine even such fairly recent history "in the solid" as it were, to visit Crusader castles in the Mediterranean, examine at first hand the battlefields of Blenheim or Waterloo, or look at the remains of monasteries in England which were stripped of their wealth by Henry VIII.

There is much value in this kind of historical study on the spot. It may sometimes teach lessons that have been missed by those who write purely from the study desk, and it certainly helps to make history what it should be—the vivid, enthralling story of our race made by men and women not unlike ourselves, but peopling a world entirely different.

But for the very oldest periods of human history there are no contemporary documents or books. The passage of thousands of years has raised the
level of the earth above the dwellings men once occupied and the fields they tilled. The knowledge of the past has then to be dug out of the earth. This science of archaeology is relatively new, unlike the learning of history from early writings. We lived with history beneath our feet long before we knew it was there.

Sometimes, and it is so with the Phoenicians, we learn about the past in both ways; there is much ancient writing, but a high proportion of it is unreliable or requires the most careful checking; and there is the testimony afforded by the spade, which enables the written records to be confirmed or modified.

We have to remember that the writing of history was an art slowly learned. At first historians did not bother much about checking their facts (there are still some like that today, but they do not carry so much weight as the ancients), and they would pack into their tales myths and legends and copy other good stories that came their way. Some of the stories were so outrageous that we can dismiss them instantly. Others might or might not be true. Sometimes by digging into the earth and finding remains of olden days, we may prove that the ancient writers were correct; at others that they were wrong. This does not mean that we are basically cleverer than the ancients, but simply that we have had longer in which to learn.

The first and greatest of the writers able to help us is Homer, a Greek writing for Greeks in
about 800 B.C. He is not only the earliest of the writers able to give us information about the Phoenicians and their world, but, as it happens, one of the first great writers in the world, a pioneer of literature.

It is in many ways easier to say what we do not know rather than what we do, about Homer personally. We are not at all sure when he lived, within centuries this way or that; nor do we know exactly where he came from. Worse than this, it is sometimes doubted whether he even lived at all! This is an awkward confession to make. What we do know is that, in what are sometimes called the Homeric Epics, we have the beginning of literature, the first of all European poems and stories, and still today amongst the greatest in the world.

That Homer, whatever he was—man or anonymous collection of authors—did not invent them we may be certain. They were tales of a time long past even for those alive in 800 B.C. which had been handed down from generation to generation, the storytellers' record of the past, and the stories became more than a little distorted in their countless re-tellings down the centuries. Homer gathered these tales together, weaving them so beautifully into the Iliad and the Odyssey that they remain for some the most splendid literature in the world. Homer may have been helped in the task; additions and modifications may have been made to the stories he had collected; but scholars today are generally prepared to believe that the Iliad
and the *Odyssey* were not the work of a committee of authors but of one man, a man called Homer, a Greek who once lived and was a genius. Or, as a schoolboy said, if they were not Homer’s work, they were the work of another chap with the same name.

Homer would not necessarily be of interest to us, for we are looking not for great poetry but fragments of information about the long past. We can do without the poetry so long as we can have accuracy; and nobody until recent times had any opinion of Homer as a recorder of facts. His stories were treated largely as myth and legend, wonderfully told, very exciting, but having no very close touch with reality. The great old pagan gods of the Greeks stride through his pages performing wonderful deeds on land and sea, while Troy is besieged, Odysseus is shipwrecked, and the lovely Helen herself, the cause of so much trouble, returns to her royal husband and knits, fades, and grows old beside him.

To the Greeks, the works of Homer meant no less than the Bible was to become in the minds of later European people. The stories embodied their religion, their philosophy and attitude to life. Homer was the law-giver; but whether the world he had portrayed had ever existed, other than in his imagination, whether there has ever been such a place as Troy, let alone a great Trojan war, was doubted by the modern world until lately, just as the ancient gods of Homer had become people of
story, not fact. The tales were philosophy, they were art, they were a form of religious expression; but history, almost certainly, so it was believed, they were not.

Then Troy itself was dug up by archaeologists. The town, whose siege by the Greeks in about 1190 B.C. had been so vividly described by Homer, was proved to be a real place. Its walls were there to touch, and its towers, and its golden treasures that people liked to believe were the jewels that had framed Helen’s face. Other great archaeological discoveries were made in the island of Crete; a great palace, tall chambers and stairways were revealed by digging, and eventually one morning a wall painting, or fresco, was found, a life-size painting of a man who had lived about fifteen hundred years before Christ.

All this digging up of the past in Greece and Crete revealed a civilization, one of wealth and sophistication, that had existed on the island and coastline of the sunny Aegean Sea a thousand years before Europe—it had been thought hitherto—had possessed any history worth telling. Homer himself became almost modern. Prior to this it had been thought that European history was unimportant before about 800 B.C. Now it was realized that eight hundred and more years earlier there had been a busy and brilliant Aegean civilization, the world of which Homer had written.

This is important for us; for that civilization was the world in which the Phoenicians grew to
greatness and became the principal seamen and merchants. When Troy was being besieged and Helen was still young, the Phoenician ports were busy with shipwrights and seamen, and their ships were sailing between the islands and ports of the eastern Mediterranean.

Homer sometimes mentions the Phoenicians. Above all he describes much of that remote world that we could not otherwise know as we do. For in spite of his tall stories, the mythical activities of his gods and the superhuman achievements of his heroes, Homer at times was as accurate and factual as a guide- or text-book. The *Odyssey* is a sea story, the Phoenicians were seamen, and from Homer we can learn much about the conditions of seafaring in the days when the Phoenicians were becoming powerful. He writes about the coastline, headlands and ports, describes how ships were navigated and steered by the stars, gives physical details of countryside and wandering rivers, so vividly that their features may be recognized today; and gives accounts too, of simple daily activities, clothes, jewellery, which bring to life again that remote world that was old even when Homer wrote of it. What we owe to him is the fact that he collected and enabled to be preserved the stories that even in his own day were history, and which to us are the earliest accounts we have of European civilization.

We owe some of our knowledge of the Phoenicians to the Greek historian Herodotus, who
lived in the period approximately 480-425 B.C. and has become known as the Father of History. He was writing long after Homer; and interestingly enough, Herodotus believed that Homer had lived four hundred years before himself, which agrees with what most authorities believe today. He wrote vividly and well, was a great traveller, and at a time when history was liable to be confused with fiction, he attempted to be accurate and critical in the information he collected. He was often very detailed in the information he gave, and was a pleasant gossip. Herodotus is able to make the events of his day come alive even for ourselves living nearly two and a half thousand years later.

Here he describes the way in which the Phoenicians would trade with the natives. They would, he says, “unload their wares [from the ships] and lay them out along the beach. Then they would return, go back aboard their ships, and raise a smoke signal. The natives, seeing the smoke, would come down to the shore, lay out the amount of gold they figured the goods were worth, and draw back some paces from them. Then the Carthaginians would come ashore and take a look. If it was enough they took it and left; if not, they they went back aboard and waited patiently. Then the natives would approach and keep adding to their gold until the sellers were satisfied.”

We owe several interesting and vivid details about the Phoenicians to another Greek writer
who lived shortly after Herodotus. This is Xenophon, a citizen of Athens, a general who fought against the Persians, and was later exiled from his city because he served for a time in the army under Athens' enemy, the King of Sparta. Xenophon wrote a great deal, mainly history and military works; also one work—rather surprisingly—on household management, but then good soldiers are often good housekeepers. It was his good housekeeping principle of neatness and tidiness that he was trying to illustrate when he described a visit he had made to a Phoenician merchant ship, on board which he found an impressive display of good order:

"I have never seen gear so well arranged, or so many coils of rope and tackles stowed so neatly. A ship needs a large number of spars and warps when she enters port or puts to sea; much rigging when under sail, and contrivances to protect her against enemy craft. She carries a stand of arms for the crew, and each mess needs a set of household utensils. In addition she carries a cargo which the captain sells for profit. All the gear necessary for these several functions was contained in a small store not more than fifteen by twelve feet. I noticed that each article was so neatly stowed, that it was ready to hand; it has not to be searched for, and there was nothing to cast off and cause delay when anything was needed in a hurry. I found that the bosun knew each particular locker so well that he could, even when on deck, say exactly where
everything was stowed, and how much there was
of it. I saw this man in his off-duty time carefully
inspecting all the stores most likely to be needed.
I asked him why he did this. 'Sir,' he said, 'I am
looking to see that all gear is properly stowed,
nothing foul, nothing missing. For when a storm
comes at sea, there is no time for searching for
gear or clearing it if foul. Careless sailors are
punished by the Gods and you are lucky if you
escape with your lives. You are fortunate if,
even when you show good seamanship, you arrive
safely into port'.”
THE GREAT COMMERCIAL PEOPLE

Of all the commodities in which the Phoenicians traded, including beautifully made objects in gold and precious metal, none was so widely known and sought after as the dyes they manufactured; indeed, we have suggested that the name "Phoenician" was perhaps derived from the colour of one of their dyes.

It may at first seem a little surprising that skill in making dye should be a source of so much profit and fame. But if you think about the matter, you will realize that even in our own more complicated civilization the processes of colouring cloth and fabrics play a most important part in daily life, whether you consider the clothes you wear, the curtains, carpets and cushions in a room, or any of the many common articles in use which have been artificially coloured. Today the production of dyes is a big branch of the great chemical industry.

In antiquity, dyes held an even more outstanding place in life, since the number of luxuries available
were fewer, and elaborate clothes rich in colour, and opulent hangings and tapestries for rooms, were the usual way of bringing beauty and a sense of luxury into life. Indeed purple, the basic colour of the Phoenician dyes, has taken on during the centuries a symbolical meaning; purple has become associated with royalty, with grandeur and great wealth.

The Phoenicians obtained the dye from a kind of shell-fish known as Murex, which they caught in baskets, rather as lobsters are still trapped. The dye was initially a colourless fluid in one of the glands of the fishes, but when opened and exposed to the air, it became an intense and lovely reddish-purple. By various treatments when boiling the fluid, the colour could be modified and a number of shades obtained; so it is not true to regard the Phoenicians’ dye as always purple. It seems that it could be changed into a violet or green and many intermediate tones and shades.

Fifteen hundred years before Christ, the Murex were being fished and the dyes boiled in the vats close to the shore; and today at Tyre and Sidon there are big mounds which consist of millions upon millions of Murex shells from the fishes which during the centuries were caught and opened up for the dyestuff in their glands. But the mounds become no bigger. The Murex does not swim any longer by the Lebanon shore. The famous old industry died long ago—why, we are not sure. But for centuries the Murex served the Phoenicians well, as the heaps of shell still testify.
And so, too, did the cedars and pine-trees which grew densely on the slopes of the mountains behind their coastal territory. We have already seen how the earliest recorded trading voyage was made from Egypt to obtain the cedar logs of Lebanon. It was because the Phoenicians were the most skilled fellers, carriers and workers of timber that they played so important a part in the building of Solomon’s temple. Today there are few trees on the mountain slopes behind Tyre, but in the days when the ports were thriving we must imagine thick forests, in the shadows of which Phoenicians toiled felling trees and carting the logs down to the quaysides. As in so many other parts of the world—our own New Forest in Hampshire, for example—the trees have almost all been cut down and nothing put to grow in their place. But like Murex fish, the pines and cedars of the mountains were for a long time a vital source of Phoenician wealth.

The Phoenicians may have been talented architects as well as great builders, and there are people who believe that some of the admired features of the architecture that the later classical Greeks were to make one of the glories of human culture, may have had Phoenician origins. Possibly the Phoenicians invented glass; and certainly they did most beautiful work in silver, gold, and ivory. Only a few years ago Professor M. E. L. Mallowan discovered, in the sludge at the bottom of an ancient Syrian well, a pair of beautifully carved ivory
Some examples of Phoenician jewellery and small ivory carvings that have been discovered
panels which must at some time have been the decoration on a piece of Phoenician furniture. One of the panels is now in the British Museum, and the scene depicted so brilliantly on it is both dramatic and horrible. It shows a fantastic jungle, and in its midst, a struggling Negro is being bitten in the throat by a lioness.

Bronze bowls with embossed decoration made by Phoenicians have been found, and some Carthaginian jewellery has survived until today; also silver filigree work of scarcely believable delicacy, all showing the wonderful skill of their craftsmen—though experts will still disagree whether the Phoenicians were great artists as well, or mere copyists of other people’s art.

That they were great manufacturers and traders cannot be questioned, but one of the troubles in learning about ancient people by archaeological methods is that only certain types of articles survive ages buried. The Phoenicians traded in wine and foodstuffs, textiles, skins—and slaves too—but we shall never know what a deep-hued Phoenician robe was like, or touch the hangings they wove for the walls of opulent houses. Much of their trade was in such perishable goods. Being skilful miners and having control, through their command of the seas, of mines in many parts of the Mediterranean and beyond, they traded in unworked metals as well as manufactured articles, in gold, silver, tin, and also iron.

We have a regular reminder in one word of our
own language of another article which the Phoenician merchants of Byblos regularly handled. The word is *Bible*, which is derived from the name Byblos, the derivation coming about thus. Writing was at this time done upon papyrus, a material made from the long, thick stems of a kind of reed that then grew in Egypt. By a process of cutting, joining, and then pressing and pounding, the inner part of the stem was made into thin sheets of a material that was white and might be written on. The material was not strong enough to be cut into pages made into books as we now know them, but was manufactured so that it might be rolled; and as early perhaps as 3000 B.C. “books” were these long rolls of papyrus. It was the Phoenicians from Byblos who brought the papyrus from Egypt and distributed it to the other peoples, especially the Greeks, and the material came to be known amongst them as *byblos*. The word was extended in meaning to cover not just the papyrus itself but also the written roll, in much the same way as we refer to a magazine or a newspaper simply as a “paper” because it is printed on paper, and the term *Biblia* came in time to refer exclusively to what was regarded as the most important of all books, the Bible. So today in our language we perpetuate the name of a great Phoenician seaport. But the Phoenicians have left a deeper mark upon the modern world than simply the word Bible.

Most people, though they may know little else about the Phoenicians, believe they invented the
alphabet we use today. This a little oversimplifies the facts, for our alphabet came to us from the Romans, and the Romans had learned it from the Greeks and modified it to suit themselves. And what the Greeks used was an earlier modification of an alphabet they had learned from the Phoenicians perhaps as early as a thousand years before Christ, and it was yet earlier, perhaps by about 1500 B.C., that the Phoenicians devised the first kind of writing by alphabetic means. From it, our own way of writing is directly descended; and this is perhaps the greatest mark that the Phoenicians have left upon the world.

It is typical of the Phoenician character that their invention of an alphabet was due to their wish to have a quicker, simpler, and more efficient way of recording their trading transactions and business than was possible with the forms of writing that were at first known to them. The alphabet that they devised has been the means of expressing many of the greatest thoughts and much of the widest knowledge that man has yet achieved; and through it man has conveyed and preserved in literature his deepest feelings about life. Of all the various kinds of writing that preceded the Phoenician alphabets, or are still used today in certain parts of the world, it seems generally to be agreed that the western alphabets are the most flexible, expressive, and subtle means of writing yet invented by man. And the Phoenicians devised it, at the time when their commercial power was at
its greatest, mainly to keep a record of bargains! All writing is derived originally from pictures. But it obviously cramps one’s powers of expression in writing if one can say only what one can draw. You may be able to express “Mary had a little lamb” by drawing Mary with the lamb beside her on a string, but it would take time, and Mary might be hard to identify at the end of it. And you would find it harder if asked to draw not Mary with her lamb, but with her head full of the idea that it was a lovely day and that she would like to lie down in the sun and dream of a new bonnet. And if Mary, instead of dreaming of a bonnet, wanted to think about how odd it was that the grass was green and the buttercups yellow, you would be baffled as to how it might be expressed in a picture.

In other words, pictures are not much use for conveying ideas. The next step in writing was the use of several pictures simplified and in combination which might be made to express ideas. For example, you cannot draw “sadness”, but a picture of an eye with tears dropping from it might be used to write the word “sadness”. The next step is for the drawings to represent not ideas, but merely the sounds of spoken speech. This form of a sign-for-each-sound writing was a big step towards our kind of alphabet.

Some of our earliest written information about the Phoenicians came from the Egyptian hieroglyphics, which was basically a kind of picture-writing,
but with the pictures become conventional, stylized, and capable of expressing ideas. Another form of writing was known as cuneiform ("wedge-shaped"). This was evolved for ease in writing on clay tablets, which made picturesque drawing impossible. Straight lines were easier to make than curved. The marks in the clay were no longer pictures but conventional signs which might denote either ideas or the sound of syllables.

In the years just before the Second World War, Dr. C. Schaeffer and a party of French archaeologists were making excavations at Ras Shamara, on the Syrian coast to the north of Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos, which we have seen was one of the earliest settlements of the Phoenicians beside the Mediterranean. Here, in a palace which was partially unearthed, a great number of clay tablets were discovered in a kind of cuneiform writing in which the signs—there were thirty-two of them—did not represent the sound of syllables but were letters in an alphabet. The tablets were found to be about three thousand five hundred years old; and when deciphered it was apparent that the language, though not Phoenician, was a close relation to it.

The Phoenicians later produced another alphabet with fewer letters, and this is the one that survived to become the father of our way of writing. We cannot say that the Phoenicians invented the alphabetic system. It was evolved in several places
and over a long period of time, but they played an important part in the work.

They were encouraged to make these important developments in writing not only because they needed to be able to record quickly and accurately their trading transactions, but as a result of their kind of society, in which wealth was well distributed, and with it education. A high proportion of people needed to be able to write, but had not the time to master the complicated scripts of other forms of writing, which needed professional scribes if they were to be used effectively. The scribes tended to be connected with the priesthood, and so earlier writing was strongly influenced by the prevailing religion. We might say that the Phoenicians took writing from the church and gave it to the counting-house and home—a long step towards the modern world.
THE PHOENICIANS IN THE BIBLE

FOR MANY years, while the Phoenicians had been inhabiting their narrow strip of coastal land, the Hebrew tribes that we know from the Old Testament as the Children of Israel were wanderers on their way back from Egypt to the promised land of Abraham. It was a long journey that began under the leadership of Moses, and ended in Palestine after many years of trial in the desert, where they lived in tents, moving on when their flocks needed fresh pasturage, and finding as the light to guide their life the Law and the rules for the worship of their god Jehovah—a name held by later Jews as one too sacred to utter.

Theirs was the hard life of the nomad, lived under wide, hot skies in arid country which set the scene for all the troubles, like disease and raiding enemies, that beset wanderers. And the prophets whose names are in the books of the Old Testament coaxed and bullied, swore and maintained the morale of the people. In the wandering years the Hebrew conception of a single, severe god whose demands at times were almost exorbitantly
harsh, but whose laws were carefully suited to his chosen people's need for rigorous self-discipline, gained in strength and inspired, then and for many years afterwards, the poetry of the Bible. Translated and re-translated, the words of ancient writers telling about the activities of semi-barbarous tribesmen of the slightest importance in the world of their day, bring us news of the then much more powerful Phoenicians with their wealth and sophistication. For the Phoenicians became their neighbours. They, of course, were
old-established in the land, and several hundred years earlier had been rich and powerful there.

It is not part of our story to tell of how the Hebrews returned to Palestine—the land that had been promised, they believed, to them by the god of Abraham, when perhaps eight hundred years earlier that unforgotten leader had taken his flocks and herds through the country. But between 1400 and 1200 B.C. Hebrews were coming in numbers, and not all of them from Egypt, into the high hill country to the south and east of low-lying Phoenicia.

We may pass over the time until the Hebrew tribes were fairly well settled in Palestine, though constantly at war with its earlier inhabitants, including the Phoenicians. They were not so much a nation as a collection of tribes united by a common religion (below whose exacting standards, however, they often slipped. It demanded a lot of living up to). And it was symbolized in the Ark of the Covenant, a large wooden box that had been carried on poles during the years of journey, or kept in a tent set apart for it, and contained the engraved tablets of the Law, which was the guide to the Jewish way of life.

It was Saul who made a kingdom of Israel—the Saul whom David, his successor as king, was able to lift out of his bouts of madness by singing to the accompaniment of the harp.

Warfare was almost continuous as the tribes, now a single kingdom, carved out their country
Long-faced, slender-jawed, bearded: this is a portrait of a typical Phoenician of the 7th-5th century B.C. Found in a tomb near the Palestinian town of Acre it is a mask that was placed, when the clay was wet, over the face of the dead man to obtain an exact impression.
This pleasant little female figure, about 8 inches high, represents the Phoenician goddess Astarte, who was supposed to have under her control everything connected with love and marriage.
Here is another little image of Astarte, the Phoenician equivalent of the Greek Aphrodite and the Roman Venus.
Astarte was sometimes represented as suckling a baby, as in this image from a tomb near Acre. Some twenty-five centuries have passed since the Phoenician sculptor dabbed, patted and shaped his clay.
against the opposition of the older inhabitants. Saul's reign ended when he committed suicide after a defeat by the Philistines, who figure so largely in the Old Testament. They were a seafaring race, though far inferior in this respect to the Phoenicians; and it is now believed that they may have been descended from the old Sea Kings of Crete who had built the great Minoan civilization, which had already disappeared long ago when David fought his battles.

David was more successful than Saul. He defeated the Philistines, and later captured, in a most skilful operation, Jerusalem, a town that already must have been in existence for centuries. Jerusalem lay between Israel in the north and Judah in the south, and so provided a suitable capital for the now united tribes of Judah and Israel. This was in about 1000 B.C.

The land they occupied was amongst the dry limestone hills behind the coastal strip of Palestine that is washed by the Mediterranean. Right through Israel and Judah lay the natural route between the greater empires to the north of Egypt, which made the country an unfortunately natural locality for the squabbles of powerful neighbours. To the west were the Philistines and Phoenicians, two peoples (and especially the Phoenicians) who held the ports which were the gateway to the sea. Tyre was about one hundred miles north of Jerusalem, and the Phoenician land route to the Red Sea lay across the country of the Israelites.
David was an adventurer of exceptional charm and talent. He was also a shrewd ruler with great prudence when it was needed; indeed, he was a remarkable man by any standards, at once a charmer, a poet, a soldier with a fine eye for the battlefield, and a man of great personal courage. He had, after all, killed Goliath in what was hardly a military operation. He was a diplomat too; he appreciated the arts of peace, and was wise enough to want to live quietly beside his neighbours. With whom less naturally than the rich Phoenician cities humming with trade and open to the sea on the coast not far away? He formed a kind of alliance with the King of Tyre, whose influence appears at that time to have extended to the other Phoenician cities. The king’s name is usually given as Hiram, but it would seem more likely that it was Hiram’s father. It was a fortunate alliance for the Israelites, and also for us, the historians of nearly three thousand years later.

For the Jews, unlike the Phoenicians, have left abundant records of their early history in the many books of the Old Testament. It is true—as we shall be seeing—that we have to treat these works carefully when using them as historical documents. They are the story of the Hebrews during a thousand years, and it so happens that the splendid period of Jewish history, to which the practising Jew of today is passionately attached, the period when David captured Jerusalem and Solomon raised the Temple there as a fit building
to house the Ark of the Covenant, was also the time when the Phoenicians were at their most powerful; and not only powerful but neighbours.

So it came about that the Phoenicians, who generally preferred writing accounts or trading lists to poetry, had themselves written about by a people who were able to use language as no people before or since have achieved. The Phoenicians were rich, cultured, the architects of brilliant buildings, the makers and owners of beautiful objects in gold and glass, of jewellery so delicate that you look at it and wonder. They may have walked on silver-soled shoes, and they wore the deep and rich coloured fabrics that glowed gloriously in the clear Mediterranean sunlight. But the Jews, with no such talents and skills, a poor people whose soul had been formed by the desert and the wilderness, found their compensation for poverty and simplicity in the creation of the world's greatest literature. While the Phoenicians used the writing that they themselves had done so much to evolve, and which the later Jews were to employ, largely to record commercial transactions, the Jews would create out of it such poetry as:

To every thing there is a season, and a time
   to every purpose under Heaven:
A time to be born and a time to die.

To have a part of your history written by people who could write thus, was the fortune of the less articulate Phoenicians.
The Bible may be considered in three different ways, or combinations of them. It may be treated as a wholly inspired work, Divine in origin and hence not to be questioned in any detail. This is an extreme attitude to take in the second half of the twentieth century A.D. but there are people who still adopt it.

It may be regarded as containing some of the most beautiful literature ever written, and with this no person of discernment is likely to disagree, whatever his beliefs about religion.

It is also a collection of history books. Those of the Old Testament in which we find reference to the Phoenicians were collected and completed from much earlier writings in about the third century B.C., or more than two thousand years ago. In the process of collection, the ancient writings, several hundred years old already, were often distorted by the views of the later compiler, or carelessly copied, while the rules of historical accuracy, in the modern sense, were unknown. The Bible is notoriously inaccurate in numbers and dates; being compiled from numerous sources, there are many contradictions; stories are told twice and disagree perhaps in important points; and the prejudice of the historian was allowed the freest scope.

The books were the history of the Children of Israel, their successes and misfortunes (the latter predominating) and, above all, the record of their
spiritual development. Nothing else much interested them. Through the most wonderful history books ever written we are, in fact, following in them the fortunes of a tiny, from the worldly point of view insignificant, and from the modern point of view, semi-barbarous people; and only distantly in their pages do we hear the clash of armies and the power policies of the greater empires which shaped the ancient world. But what we do hear in great, if sometimes prejudiced detail, are facts about the greater world whose fringes they touched. One fringe was Phoenicia.

However prejudiced and out of focus the Old Testament may be if treated as a general history of the ancient Middle East, archaeology has shown how accurate in detail it often is. The archaeology of the Bible is not our subject, but we are obviously concerned with the accuracy of what is said in the Old Testament about the Phoenicians.

One of the most famous buildings in the world to Christian and Jew alike is the Temple of Solomon; yet this temple, which was the heart of the Jewish faith, was built from materials supplied by Phoenicians, largely worked by Phoenician craftsmen; and modern archaeological evidence shows too, that the Temple was of Phoenician design. The Phoenicians themselves followed other gods, many gods, all utterly unlike the one Jehovah of the Hebrews.

No archaeologist's spade has ever touched any
remaining parts of the Temple erected at Jerusalem on the hill north of Ophel. Today it lies beneath the Moslem sanctuary known as the Haram esh-Sherif. In the centre of the Haram esh-Sherif platform is the "Dome of the Rock", whose beauty excites so many visitors to the sanctuary today, and beneath it is the site of the Temple that King Hiram's Phoenician craftsmen built for Solomon. It is unlikely that archaeologists will ever be able to dig down to the site itself; but in spite of this we may claim today to have a pretty close idea of what the Temple looked like and how it was built.

There is the guide provided by the long descriptions in the Old Testament, and other evidence is archaeological. In 1937, for example, the Oriental Institute of Chicago excavated a small Syrian temple which was built at much the same time as Solomon's, and may have been similar in design. This was a Phoenician building, and it is believed that its interior decorations, like those of Solomon's building, were also Phoenician.

It is told in the Old Testament how Solomon made an agreement with Hiram, King of Tyre, that the Phoenicians should fell the cedars and fir trees on the mountain slopes of Lebanon, bring them down to the sea, and float them to the destination named by Solomon. It is just this activity of towing massive logs astern of ships that we find illustrated in the old Assyrian piece of sculpture mentioned in another chapter. Then the servants of Hiram and Solomon went to work together,
under the direction of the former's skilled craftsmen, not only in fashioning the timber, but in quarrying and hewing the white stone similar to marble found near Jerusalem, which was also needed for the Temple. For this work and cooperation, Hiram was paid in wheat and pure oil, which he received year by year during the seven years spent in constructing the Temple.

A modern idea of what Solomon's temple may have looked like. As drawn, the end wall has been removed to show the interior.

According to the Bible account, its interior was glorious indeed. Solomon, we are told, "overlaid the house within with pure gold". There was gold upon the walls and floors; it covered the altar, which was of cedar, and a chain of pure gold was stretched before the space where the Ark of the Covenant was placed. Above all, there were the two cherubim carved of olive wood, so placed "that the wing of the one touched the one wall, and
the wing of the other cherub touched the other wall; and their wings touched one another in the midst of the house. And he overlaid the cherubims with gold”.

We can be sure that the amount of gold described in the Bible account is much exaggerated, and we may strip if off the floors, which would have been stone overlaid with cedar, and likewise from much of the walls and from the cherubim too. The description is intended to glorify Solomon and make his wealth appear fabulous, but it pays little tribute to Phoenician craftsmanship. Yet we can now be reasonably certain that the superb wood carving in the building, also the candlesticks, golden bowls and elegant furnishing, were products of the skill of Hiram’s craftsmen from Tyre. This was the kind of work in which the Phoenicians excelled.

Later, Solomon’s own palace was built, it seems, in alternate layers of stone and timber, which is believed to have been a Phoenician technique for preserving a building against earthquakes. For a further thirteen years Hiram’s servants continued their labours, and the Bible story mentions one who would seem to have been outstanding even amongst Phoenicians for his skill in working metal, “a man of Tyre . . . and he was filled with wisdom, and understanding, and cunning to work all works in brass . . .” The word “brass” in the Bible account probably means copper.

If you read the accounts of the Temple in the
Old Testament you may see, in spite of the exaggerations, a picture of busy and skilful Phoenicians engaged in the sort of activities that they performed better than anyone else in their world. Solomon was trying, indeed, to make Jerusalem a city on the model of Tyre or Sidon, imitating the opulence and splendour of the rich towns on the coast. He appears to have fallen for the Phoenician way of life, and he did in fact lapse into a reprehensible admiration for the Phoenician gods—in spite of his Temple.

While Phoenicia prospered, Israel, after its brief days of greatness under David and Solomon, sank into relative unimportance amongst her more powerful neighbours. Unlike Phoenicia, there was little practical or political wisdom among her rulers. With the death of Solomon, Israel ceased to be a united kingdom, and Solomon's son, Rehoboam, ruled the southern and poorer kingdom of Judah from Jerusalem. Long after this (as we shall be seeing in a later chapter) all friendship between the Jews and the Phoenicians had evaporated, and instead the Hebrew prophets were denouncing the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon in terrible language.
THE PEOPLE of that remote and very ancient world in the eastern Mediterranean which we described earlier knew nothing of the Mediterranean farther to the west, beyond Sicily and Sardinia. Cretans had passed their great days of sea power, leaving unvisited those far-western waters, which were a thousand miles from their island home. Nor had the ships of the Mycenaean Greeks penetrated far into the unknown west, and so that part of the Mediterranean remained dark and mysterious. Beyond it, but undreamed of, through the straits we now call Gibraltar, lay the huge Atlantic, on which no Egyptian, Cretan, Greek, or Phoenician had ever set eyes; an ocean as grey as the Mediterranean is blue, restless with bigger waves than the seamen of the Mediterranean had ever encountered, and swinging to tides that they had never experienced in their own almost tideless sea.

The Mediterranean Sea is famed for its brilliant blueness. There is no more pure blue in the sea anywhere in the world. You may see it today just
as it looked to those seamen of three thousand years ago. The blue comes to the water with the rising sun, pale at first, and then darkening, until within a few hours of the dawn you feel that if you took a bucket full of water from it, it would be like a vivid, deep blue dye—the sort of dye the Phoenicians themselves might have prepared. And there all day the sea will rest quiet, unmoving, becoming hotter, under a cloudless sky in which the sun dazzles. Later, with evening slipping gently into darkness, the blue deepens yet more, and by the time the sky is many-pointed with stars, everything is blue with the deep, deep blueness of night sky and sea. It is cooler now. The sea lies quite still along the beaches and under the rocks. But though the heat of the day is gone, it is still not cold, for we are in the Mediterranean where the climate is a joy to man; which is why the first European civilizations grew up here, and the first European seamen made voyages.

Which may make us wonder why, for so long, great races of seamen like the Cretans and Mycenaean Greeks never fully explored their great blue inland sea, and instead remained busy, yet apparently unadventurous, in its eastern half, while the shores of north Africa were empty and unvisited, or inhabited here and there by barbarian tribes who might be dangerous to meet.

The fact is that the Mediterranean deceives. Like anger in a hot-tempered man, that placid blueness may turn suddenly to purple and storm.
It is a fickle sea. The Roman poet Virgil, writing more than a thousand years after the time we are now considering, said: "Ah, Palinurus, who has too much confided in the fair aspect of skies and sea, naked will you lie on unknown sands." Those are the words of someone who knew the Mediterranean in its harsher moods, when it sinks and wrecks ships.

Again and again in ancient writers we find fear and distrust of the sea, and the one that they speak of is the sea they knew best, the Mediterranean. Here is what another Roman poet, Ovid, said of it in a work called *Tristia*: "Ah, wretched me! What mountains of water are heaped aloft! You would think that this very instant they would reach the highest stars. What abysses yawn as the sea recedes.... On whatever side you look, there is nothing but sea and sky; the one swelling with billows, the other lowering with clouds. Between the two the winds rage in fearful hurricane.... In truth, we are on the verge of destruction, and there is no hope of safety, but a fallacious one; as I speak, the sea dashes over my face. The waves will overwhelm this breath of mine, and in my throat, as it utters vain entreaties, shall I receive the waters that are to bring my doom.... Ah, wretched me! How the clouds glisten with the instantaneous flash. How dreadful the peal that re-echoes from the sky of heaven.... I fear not death; it is the dreadful kind of death; take away shipwreck, then death will be a gain to me. It is
something for one, either dying a natural death or by the sword, to lay his breathless corpse in the firm ground, and to impart his wishes to his kindred and to hope for a sepulchre, and not be food for the fishes of the sea.”

Well! Ovid was writing as a poet, and he describes the wind, waves, and thunderstorm pretty luridly. But those who have known the Mediterranean in a storm, and especially those who have looked on it under such conditions from even a modern ship, will recognize the scene. And bear in mind that though Ovid was writing long ago, in about the year of Christ’s birth, yet he was living more than a thousand years after the Cretans, Mycenaean Greeks, and Phoenicians had been sailing the seas of the eastern Mediterranean; and during those centuries ships had become bigger and safer, and seamen had learned more about navigation. Perhaps you are beginning to see that Greek and Cretan were not so unadventurous as they might seem in not sailing the length of the Mediterranean. We must remember, too, that the Mediterranean is a big sea, stretching more than two thousand miles from the straits now called Gibraltar to the sultry coasts of Palestine.

Ovid vividly describes the waves: “What mountains of water are heaped aloft!” Actually, in the Mediterranean the waves are not so high as in the Atlantic. It is an inland sea without the long, rolling swells of the ocean. But though the waves are shorter they may be quicker and more abrupt;
in high winds, surf beats violently on the coasts and fish are hurled ashore by the breakers, which is unusual on an ocean coast.

The Adriatic may be violently stormy. There are whirlpools, sudden eddies, and tide races. Unlike in the Atlantic, there is no great swing of the tides; but there is a small tide even in the Mediterranean, which makes strong currents amongst the islands and in the intricate bays. Then there are the winds, rushing down from the hilly coasts and reaching the sea with sudden fury. High winds may blow over Crete and round Cape Matapan; and off Sicily the dry and parched sirocco, the south wind from the desert, may suddenly lash the sea; while the dreaded mistral, the wind from the north, comes out of a blue sky, plunging down the Alps to the sea. A single cloud may appear and the day change abruptly to storm; then no less abruptly the turmoil will pass, leaving perhaps in those ancient times a trail of damaged or swamped ships, while the Mediterranean reverts to its blue placidity. It is a fickle, feminine sea, a sea of moods that may suddenly convulse and then pass as though they had never been.

This makes all the more remarkable the achievements of the Phoenicians which we are about to describe. We are coming now to their days of greatness. For unknown numbers of centuries they had been seamen, traders, and shipbuilders, while first the Cretans and then the Mycenaeans Greeks had passed through their days of power. Now it was
the turn of Phoenicia, and her seamen were to sail farther in their ships than any before them. The year was about 1100 B.C. or a little later.

We have seen that the Mycenaean Greeks were the great seamen of their day. Then they ceased to be so. We know this for one reason only; they left the record of their trading activities in the broken fragments of pottery which archaeologists have found when excavating the places which the Greeks visited. We have, of course, no written evidence of those days; but the broken pieces of pots, which experts are able to identify as having belonged to the Mycenaean Greeks, though not particularly beautiful or interesting in themselves except for their great age, are like the trail left in a paperchase. We follow the trail of the Mycenaean traders by means of the pottery they left behind them. Then the trail begins to thin until it peters out altogether. There are no more bits of Mycenaean pottery to be found lying in the earth after a date that archaeologists have been able to establish as about 1100–1000 B.C. From this we deduce that the Mycenaeans had ceased to be the great traders and seamen of the eastern Mediterranean. The day of the Phoenicians had arrived.

They were well prepared for it, with all their experience of trading and seamanship. Now they reached out over the Mediterranean, stretching eventually not merely to the limit of the seas of the yet unknown west, but—one of the most supreme
achievements of ancient people—passing outside their great inland sea into the Atlantic.

They became the first great colonizers. From the busy ports of Tyre and Sidon the ships went out into the west. For some time already the Phoenician ships had been sailing along the inhospitable coast of north Africa, which lacks good natural harbours, and where the coastal waters are dangerous with submerged shoals and banks; and as they voyaged along the deserted shore they had noted landmarks and beaches, inlets where they might find shelter from the sudden storms which were common, and places where they might pick up provisions.

Long after the days of which we are speaking, there was a Roman town in north Africa known as Sabratha, a fine natural harbour on what we now call the Gulf of Gabes, which makes a dent in Algeria at its eastern end. Archaeologists digging here in recent years have found evidence to show that the Phoenicians had used this place perhaps as long ago as 1800 B.C. as a temporary trading-post. Beneath the much later Roman city, under the forum and the earliest of the permanent houses that have been excavated, archaeologists have found the beaten floors of what must once have been temporary huts. These floors, most significantly, make alternate layers, with windblown sand, as one digs down into the ground; showing that at some much earlier period people visited the place at intervals, erected their temporary lodgings, and
then left again, to return at a later date, when the restless wind would have blown sand over the hardened floor that had been left behind. These were early Phoenician traders on their seasonal voyages.

Now, eight hundred years or so later, the Phoenicians no longer set up merely temporary trading-stations but established colonies. It was during this time that the most important event in Phoenician history occurred—the planting of a colony on the African shore, beside the Bay of Tunis, which became the “new city” that history knows as Carthage. The other Phoenician colonies always remained subject to and dependent on their parent cities to the east in Phoenicia itself. Carthage became independent, richer and much more powerful than Tyre, where the original Carthaginians came from; but even then the strong links that kept the scattered Phoenician people together held, and the later powerful Carthage continued to pay tribute to Tyre. We shall have much more to say about Carthage in later chapters.

Archaeologists have had to work hard in order to learn about the Phoenician colonies, where the citizens of Tyre, Sidon, Byblos and other famous old towns settled far from their home cities. It used to be believed that such colonies were being formed before 1000 B.C., but the evidence of archaeology shows that this is unlikely. Somewhere around 800 B.C., however, the Phoenicians sailed west to Utica, which is not far from the Tunis of today, and there
planted an outpost which became a colony. Later, at what was to become a Roman town, they settled at what the Romans knew as Leptis Magna. This may have occurred before the end of the sixth century B.C. The earliest object that archaeologists have yet found at Leptis is a piece of pottery which has been dated by the experts as about 500 B.C. and this was found under the stage of the Roman theatre. Also, below the much later Roman city, there have been found a number of Phoenician graves. This cemetery, though in the heart of the Roman town, would have been outside the much earlier town of the Phoenicians, which was built when Rome itself was young and no Romans had been to Leptis.

So, digging into the earth, reaching farther back into the past as the spades go deeper, we see dimly emerging the story of the Phoenicians spreading farther over the known world of their day—to Malta, to Sicily, and on to the west. Sicily was of particular importance, for it provided them with anchorages for their ships just at that point where the Mediterranean is narrowest—the eighty-mile-wide strait between Sicily and the African shore, which joins the eastern to the western Mediterranean.

In their colonizing and trading adventures the Phoenicians were governed by the great natural forces of wind, weather, and sea. Treacherous at all times, the sea was less so during the summer months, the season of seagoing at that time and
Some of the places where we know the Phoenicians settled and founded colonies in the Mediterranean.
for long afterwards. Then the mariner might hope reasonably for a share of warm, starry nights and days when the sea was quiet under an unruffled blue sky. But gales apart, there was the continuous ruling power of the wind, which during these summer months in the western Mediterranean blows from the north-west, and so on to the coast of Africa. And the wind creates a current in the sea. Phoenician ships working westward from Tyre or Sidon thus found, in the western Mediterranean, a foul wind facing them and also some danger of being set down on to the African shore and wrecked. They therefore kept away from the coast of Africa on the outward voyage, and this led to their planting stations on the northern shore of the Mediterranean, in the island of Sardinia, and on the Mediterranean coast of Spain. Many Phoenician objects have been recovered in different parts of Sardinia, where today you may also see numerous massive stone towers, that were standing there when the Phoenicians arrived in about 600 B.C.

Now the Mediterranean sea was virtually theirs. No seaman before had voyaged so widely over it as they. Nobody knew better its moods and the problems that it set in navigation; and about all this knowledge and experience they remained tight-lipped. For they were not adventurers; they were not merely following the gay pursuit of a perilous quest for its own sake, but because money lay in it. They made the Mediterranean their sea
because it was a profitable thing to do; and when they made the biggest adventure of all, passing out of the Mediterranean into the unknown ocean beyond, they did so because it was good for trade.

Unfortunately, their secretiveness, which hid from their contemporaries the specialized knowledge which they had found so useful, hides also from us the details of their trading and seagoing achievements. We have some fair idea of what they did, but not much about how they did it. Apart from the trails of objects which archaeologists today dig up at various places along the African or European shores, or in the islands between, and which they identify as Phoenician-made and can date approximately, all that we can learn about the Phoenician seamen comes from ancient and inaccurate writings, particularly by Greeks, who together with the Phoenicians and in rivalry with them were likewise voyaging westward. The Greeks had no love of the Phoenicians, though they greatly admired their ships and seamanship. They called the Phoenicians deceitful and crafty men, "famous for their ships, but greedy men". They were said to kidnap children and sell them into slavery. It is tantalizing to think of this race of pioneering seamen, reaching out towards the west as no Mediterranean people had done before them, encountering and solving numerous problems in the process, being puzzled or amazed by much that they discovered; but to have no word from them themselves about how they did it or what they felt
or whether they could justify themselves against the taunts of their traducers.

And in nothing is this more annoying than in their own biggest adventure, when they went out for the first time into the Atlantic. There is no information that archaeology has to offer, no written story, of that tremendous event when a Phoenician ship, the first of all ships belonging to the ancient Mediterranean peoples, found itself upon the ocean that stretched west to America and north to the green and yet barbarous islands of Britain. It was one of the great “first times” of history, yet we know nothing about it—only about what followed. For the Phoenicians founded the Spanish seaport of Cadiz.

We do not need to make any wild guesses to understand why the Phoenicians should have ventured out into the ocean. They had heard no doubt that out there to the west and north there were lands where they might find gold and silver, which were essential to the Phoenician gold and silver smiths at home, who worked precious metals so skilfully. There were rumours of tin too, and in that age when bronze, made by melting together copper and tin, was one of the most important materials in life, a supply of tin, which was lacking in the eastern Mediterranean, was vital to the prosperity of everyone. So, guided as usual by commercial instincts and a nose for profit, the Phoenicians on one far-off day passed along the Spanish coast through the Straits of Gibraltar.
and found their craft borne upon the long, heavy swells of an ocean.

They obtained the silver that was then mined not far from that part of the coast of Spain lying just beyond the straits. The Phoenician seamen worked up along the coast for rather more than fifty miles, and made themselves a harbour beyond Cape Trafalgar where Cadiz now stands. Today that naval station and seaport is one of the oldest seaports in Europe. There was no London then, there were no great ports at Le Havre, Amsterdam, or Cherbourg. But away up there in the north, tin was mined....
OUT INTO THE OCEAN

HERE WE come to the interesting question of whether the Phoenicians ever themselves voyaged to our own shores. Rudyard Kipling once wrote a poem in which he makes the river Thames speak. The river tells the tale of its own prehistoric days when tigers were stalked by ancient men in the place where Regent’s Park is now; days when the very first Cockneys pushed their way through forests which grew where the dense traffic now rolls down the Strand. And the river goes on to speak of times when men fought one another with axes of bronze beside the upper fords,

While down at Greenwich for slaves and tin
The tall Phoenician ships stole in.

Did they? That the Phoenicians reached Britain, at least the southern Cornish coast where the tin mines were, has been commonly believed. It has been suggested even further that they went not only to Ireland as well but even sailed on northward to
what is now Norway. If they had already crossed the Bay of Biscay, negotiated the fierce and most dangerous tides—the worst in the world—off Brittany, and set foot upon the "tin islands" which are now the British Isles, then it might be argued that, favoured by the prevailing south-westerly wind to push them yet farther, they just continued northwards until Norway appeared over the bow. But why should they have done this, since the canny Phoenicians, however daring as seamen, did not make dangerous voyages just for the fun of it? People have said that they may have sailed to Norway because they believed that Europe, like Africa, was an island, and that, if they continued sailing onwards roughly in the direction of the rising sun, they might sail round it and eventually find themselves back in the sunny Aegean Sea with the Phoenician coast nearby.

Unfortunately, this good story is not only guesswork, but so, too, is the story that the Phoenicians ever reached Britain at all. They may have done so. At least it is not impossible. Scholars have written learned books on the subject. One, Dr. L. A. Waddell, has even claimed that we have Phoenician blood in our veins—that enough Phoenicians left the warmer lands and seas of the Mediterranean and settled in the damp, boggy and overgrown islands that the British Isles then were to establish a kind of conquest. A few only might have gained control of a certain amount of country; for the Phoenicians were civilized while the inhabitants of
the British Isles at that time were not. But though we may weave stories and fascinating theories, none of them impossible, we have to come back in the end to the facts that we may learn when we try to find out about the distant past.

Nothing has been found or dug up by an archaeologist that is able to prove that the Phoenicians ever set foot in Britain, let alone settled here. It does not follow that the theories and stories are wrong. But there is nothing to show that they are right. We have been able to follow the trail of the Phoenician voyagers from the east to the west of the Mediterranean, and out into the Atlantic by means of the clues provided by pottery and metal objects left behind by them and recovered today, but the trail does not stretch to Britain. There is simply the mention in ancient writings of the “Tin Islands”, and we do not know what was meant by the name. The long past has hidden itself.

It is possible that the Phoenicians reached the Azores. The honour of discovering this hilly group of islands, which lie out in the Atlantic about eight hundred miles off the coast of Spain, is usually given to the Portuguese seamen of the fifteenth century A.D., more than two thousand years after the great Phoenician voyages.

In the fourteenth century A.D. there had been some vague knowledge that there was a group of islands out there, but only a few charts marked them, and then not clearly. So a ship was sent
sailing out over the blank ocean into the eye of the setting sun and eventually sighted the rocky fringes of the Azores; then sailed home without exploring farther. This was in the year A.D. 1431.

Had dark-skinned Phoenician seamen sighted and perhaps landed upon the Azores some two thousand years earlier? Again we can only guess. There were once rumours of Phoenician coins being found in the islands, but if they ever were found there, they have since been lost. But perhaps one day an article of unmistakably Phoenician origin may be found in one of the islands, an article in silver, perhaps, from Sidon or Tyre, a coin from Carthage. A single coin might not prove that it had been dropped by a Phoenician, but at least it would make one more link in the story. Such are the chances of archaeology. One coin may change an established view of history. But one coin may lie for ever undiscovered.

This leads us to one of the chief historical conundrums set by the Phoenicians—did they sail and row round Africa? They may indeed have done so some six hundred years before the birth of Christ.

If so, their achievement casts a long shadow upon the achievements of those mariners who, two thousand years later, when the Phoenicians were a dim, antique people about whom little was remembered, made what is often thought to be the first sea voyage round the long African coast. This was a mere five hundred years ago, when Europe was
emerging from the dark and land-bound medieval period and reaching out south and west across the wide oceans that edged the European shore. It was a great age of expansion and discovery, led by the seamen of Portugal and a strange, solitary, dedicated man now known as Henry the Navigator, a Portuguese prince, who lived his lonely life directing voyages of discovery and training seamen and navigators from his castle above the Atlantic, within sound of its waves. But this period of history, known so often as the Age of Discovery, we are more and more coming to see may have been the age of Re-discovery. Henry the Navigator died about five hundred years ago, and perhaps it was two thousand years ago that the Phoenicians made voyages no less remarkable than those of the Navigator’s seamen.

Our belief that the Phoenicians sailed round Africa is due to one source only, our useful friend Herodotus, and here is what he writes. Perhaps nothing he has said in his many books has been the cause of so much long argument as the following paragraph:

“As for Libya [by which Herodotus means what we call Africa] we know it to be washed on all sides by the sea, except where it is attached to Asia. This discovery was first made by Necos, the Egyptian king, who on desisting from the canal which he had begun between the Nile and the Arabian Gulf, sent to sea a number of ships manned by Phoenicians, with orders to make for
the Pillars of Hercules, and return to Egypt through them and by the Mediterranean. The Egyptians took their departure from Egypt by way of the Erythraean Sea [or Red Sea] and sailed into the southern ocean [which we call the Indian Ocean]. When autumn came, they went ashore wherever they might happen to be, and having sown a tract of land with corn, waited until the grain was fit to cut. Having reaped it, they again set sail; and thus two whole years went by, and it was not until the third year that they sailed again through the Pillars of Hercules, and made good their voyage home to Egypt. On their return, they declared—and I for my part don’t believe them, though perhaps others may—that in sailing round Libya, they had the sun upon their right hand. In this way was the extent of Libya first discovered."

There is much for us to think about in the above short story, for if it is indeed true (and you will notice that Herodotus, in his best manner, simply tells of what he has heard in his travels and does not vouch for its truth), then it is the all-too-brief account of the most remarkable sea voyage ever made by the ancient Mediterranean people.

The date of the voyage was about 600 B.C. Herodotus was writing some one hundred and fifty years later, so the tale that he was told already had the glow of tradition about it. You will notice that the Pharaoh Necos appears to have known that Africa was an island, except for its slender link with Asia at the north-east corner; otherwise
how could he have expected the Phoenician seamen to obey his orders and sail clockwise round Africa, re-entering the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar? But how he came by this knowledge we cannot tell. Herodotus was told that Necos "discovered" the fact, which would suggest that this was not the first voyage round Africa, but simply the first of which we today have any record. Here we can only guess.

Herodotus himself made a map of the world. In it he draws Africa as an island, though not of the shape that we now know the continent to be. He shows a big, broad, squat island, almost rectangular, longer from east to west than north to south, and with a long and straight southern coastline instead of that tapering tip to the Cape of Good Hope which we see in our atlases.

It will be obvious that for a voyage of this length the ships would be unable to carry the necessary food on board; so we find the mariners "living off the land", as it were, running the boats up on the shore for a period of seed-time and harvest; then, with the crop gathered, going off to sea again, pointing the bows to the south, with the seemingly endless and little-known African shore close on their right-hand side. Little of it was known. . . . Yet not, one feels, utterly unknown. The expedition seems to have been so well planned that Pharaoh Necos would appear to have had a prior knowledge of what was entailed. Once again one has the hint that this was not the first voyage of its kind.
But the most revealing remark in the story is Herodotus’ comment that in sailing around Africa the Phoenicians “had the sun upon their right hand”. And this, he frankly says, he does not believe, and he infers that only silly people would be gullied by such a statement. Yet the observation affords the strongest proof in the story that, whether the Phoenicians rounded Africa or not, they had certainly worked a long way to the south.

Herodotus himself had never travelled far enough south to know what it was to find the sun at midday to the north, instead of the south as we find it in our latitudes. We know that at the time of our midsummer in Europe, the sun has moved north as far as the tropic of Cancer, about fourteen hundred miles to the north of the equator. Then, if you are on the equator itself or near it, the sun in its daily journey across the sky lies to the north of you, as for us in Britain it lies to the south while the shadow on the sun-dial points north. That little item of information is able to prove to us that the Phoenicians had worked far down the African coast, perhaps far south of the Equator; and so, when following the shoreline as it trended to the west, or when rounding the southernmost tip of Africa, they found the sun on their right hand.

But we still cannot be sure that they made the whole round trip. We can say, however, that it would not have been impracticable. What we now know of the winds and currents round the African coast at different seasons can prove that in the two years
recorded by Herodotus the Phoenicians could have rowed and sailed, sometimes against foul currents but often by timing their passages right, with fair currents and winds, the whole way round the continent. They would have been helped by making their voyage clockwise, down the east coast and up the west coast, a very much easier task, owing to the currents and winds, than attempting to work round the other way. It is likely that the Phoenicians, when they undertook the voyage, underestimated how far they would have to go, for it was certainly not realized then what a distance to the south Africa extended. They may have often regretted having set off on such a voyage, as the coast stretched ever onwards, endlessly as it must have seemed, into the south. Herodotus appears to have accepted the story, except for that bit about the sun; but he is not enthusiastic enough to impress his feelings strongly. He seems to have retained an open mind. Another ancient historian, reading Herodotus' account two hundred years later, frankly disbelieved it. Today some scholars believe it, others do not. We are left guessing; but we may at least be sure that the Phoenicians did make extensive voyages along the coast of Africa.

For other famous voyages were made, one by Sataspes, a cousin of the great Persian king Xerxes, who had got himself into trouble and was given as a kind of imposition—with death as the penalty if he failed to complete it—the task of sailing round Africa. Sataspes failed to do so, and was
duly killed. The interest to us in the story is that almost certainly in his ship’s crew the expert navigators were Phoenicians from the colonies in the west, especially those from Carthage; for his voyage was made in the westward direction, starting out through the Straits of Gibraltar.

Of much more interest to us is a great voyage organized by the Phoenicians of Carthage some years later. The instructions given to the commander of the expedition, a Carthaginian named Hanno, were that he should “sail beyond the Straits of Gibraltar and found colonies for Phoenicians who lived in Africa”. We are not certain how far down the west coast of Africa Hanno sailed with his fleet. But he wrote a report of his voyage that was originally inscribed on a bronze plate and was found later by a Greek, who copied it. How many times it was re-copied between then and the report of some hundreds of years later that has survived until today, and which we may read, nobody can ever tell.

The report says much of interest: of how, sailing down the African coast the fleet “arrived at a lagoon not far from the sea . . . elephants and many other animals were there feeding”. How later they entered a “deep wide river, full of hippopotami and crocodiles”; and even worse, “reached the head of a lagoon which was dominated by very high mountains, inhabited by savages, who wore skins of wild beasts and prevented us from landing by throwing stones at us”. However, the voyagers fully compensated themselves later for this indignity when
“they came to a gulf called Southern Horn” and there “captured three women who bit and scratched us. We killed and flayed them, and brought their skins back to Carthage”. The “women” we now believe to have been baboons or chimpanzees. They were described in the account as having shaggy bodies.

Between such unfriendly meetings with the natives, the voyagers sailed down the African shore, and heard for the first time recorded in history, the sound of jungle tom-toms, “the noise of pipes, cymbals and drums”, and also “the shouts of a great crowd. We were seized with fear, and the interpreters advised us to leave the place. We sailed away quickly and coasted along a region with a fragrant smell of burning timber, from which streams of fire plunged into the sea. We could not approach the land because of the heat”.

Hanno’s report is of special interest to us, for it is the one example we have of Phoenician literature. And on the face of it, we should be surprised that the report should ever have appeared; for the secretive Phoenicians who guarded their profitable knowledge so carefully would not, you would think, tell the world, and especially the rival Greeks, so much about an important voyage of exploration. But in fact the report is a nice example of Phoenician craftiness. Parts of it are deliberately falsified, so that the places mentioned cannot be identified, while the distances the ships sailed are incorrectly reported.
The competitors of Carthage could have learned little from Hanno’s report. Neither can we; for apart from the deliberate falsifications, no doubt many accidental errors occurred when the report was copied and re-copied time and again in the course of centuries. Many scholars have examined it in detail, and it is generally believed that the fleet sailed as far as what today is called Sierra Leone, near the extreme western bulge of Africa, or perhaps a little farther south, possibly even as far as the Cameroons, deep in the Gulf of Guinea.

At least it was a distinguished voyage, a high tribute to Phoenician navigation and seamanship.
HOW THE PHOENICIANS NAVIGATED

So the wakes of the Phoenician ships cut across many seas and great distances. What we may overlook is the great skill required to achieve this in days when ships were not very seaworthy, and sailed badly. That ancient broad, shallow rectangular sail that the Phoenician vessel carried on its single mast was incapable of driving the ship except when the wind was fair, blowing from over the lofty stern, and it was too frail to stand the weight of a heavy wind. When winds were high or contrary the sail had to be lowered and the oars used.

The weight and the direction of the wind was the first concern of the navigator. The next was to know in what direction he was going, for we have to remember that the compass was unknown then; and here the winds came to the sailor’s aid. He named winds after the country from whose direction they blew, but his vital skill, the result of long experience, was to recognize the places towards which they might carry his ship. Mariners
A Phoenician merchant ship of about 800 B.C.
The massive horse's head figurehead will be noticed
acquired a sensibility to winds far more acute than people on shore. They would recognize not only the difference between the mild wind that blew from the direction of the sunset, or the dry wind of the east or the cold wind from the north, but the more subtle intermediate winds, one bringing a trace of damp, another squalls and rain. They had to learn to use the winds, whose direction they could not control and whose strength they could not master, to play their game to their own profit, and to make them their powerful servant.

The winds vary with the season, in some places with regularity, and the Phoenician sailors were able to make use of this fact. For example, setting sail from Tyre or Sidon on a voyage down the Red Sea early in the summer, they would find a fair wind from approximately the north-west; but when the time came later in the season to return home, they were conveniently provided with a wind from almost the opposite direction—a home-blowing wind—which would carry them back up the Red Sea to the coastline of their Syrian home.

But in the absence of the compass it was the signs in the sky, the stars during the brilliant summer nights of the seagoing season, that were essential to navigators. Knowledge of the stars and their movements was confined to a few clever men, and the pilots of the ships were amongst the most respected of Phoenician people. The prophet Ezekiel in the Bible speaks of the "wise men" of Tyre who were her navigators.
The first time we hear of a seaman steering by the stars is when in the *Odyssey* we are told how Odysseus sailed eastward for seventeen days by keeping that bright group of seven stars, the Great Bear, on his left hand. The stars, of course, were to the north of him and then, as now, do not rise or set. As Homer said, the constellation “wheels round and round where it is and never takes a bath in the ocean”. Homer was writing, we have seen, in about 800 B.C. or later, but we can be sure that seamen had been using the Great Bear for steering a thousand and perhaps more years before his. But when the Phoenicians sailed through the canal that the Egyptians had cut from the Mediterranean and down the Red Sea, which entailed going a long way south for their native coast—perhaps two thousand miles—the Great Bear would take a bath in the ocean, and instead the seamen would observe the brilliant light of Canopus, which the Phoenicians could hardly see from their own coast.

The Phoenicians were the most skilful people of their day in their knowledge of how to use the stars for navigation. For example, they found a better way of distinguishing north than by means of the Great Bear group of stars. This was by using another star group, the Little Bear. The Little Bear had the advantage of appearing brighter, and so was easier to mark, and it might be seen earlier in the night. The Greek poet Aratus, writing in 275 B.C., said that “By her guidance the men of
Sidon steer the straightest course”. We have other reasons to know that seamen had been using the Little Bear for steering a long time before this report of the fact.

Then, as now, one of the most important aids to navigation was what we call today “sailing directions”, which are collections of information about different coastlines, the appearance of various harbours from the sea, the safe way to enter them, the force and direction of currents, and the significance of landmarks. All such information would be gathered over the years of voyaging and sometimes collected into documents for the future guidance of seafarers. Herodotus mentions how one such set of sailing directions was made under the direction of King Darius of Persia, who was planning to attack Greece, and wished to learn more about the coast of the country. Not surprisingly, he obtained as his skilled sailors and navigators Phoenicians from Sidon, and here is what Herodotus says about the expedition, which consisted of three ships: “... they kept along the [Greek] shore and examined it, taking notes of all that they saw, and in this way they explored the greater portion of the country....”

Later the Phoenician seamen were wrecked, on their way home, on what is now the Cape Saint Maria di Leuca, on the heel of Italy about eighty miles to the west of the Greek coast.

The date of this was about 500 B.C. The days of the eastern Phoenicians’ greatest power was over,
but still they retained their great reputation as shipbuilders and seamen, while away to the west on the African coast the Phoenicians of Carthage were gaining over their part of the Mediterranean the ascendancy that Tyre and Sidon were losing in the east.

Homer, who writes with deep knowledge about the way seamen would recognize coastlines, pilot their way along shores, and steer by the stars, makes no mention of one most important piece of sea-going equipment, the leadline. Herodotus, however, writing perhaps five hundred years later does so. The leadline, still in use today, though the modern echo-sounder has replaced it in most larger vessels, is nothing more than a long length of line with a heavy weight at one end, which may be cast into the water and allowed to touch the bottom. Then, by means of various marks on the line, the depth of water may be determined.

We know from Herodotus that the leadline was used in his day, for he wrote: “When you get eleven fathoms and ooze on the lead, you are one day’s sail out from Egypt.” There are several points to notice about this brief but revealing comment. The leadline, it will be seen, was able to warn the mariner of an approaching coast. When, after perhaps days at sea and uncertain of his exact position, the water suddenly began shallowing with each cast of the leadline, he might gain a clue of where he was, and know that he must keep a careful look-out to avoid being stranded on
the approaching shore. You will notice, too, that Herodotus speaks of "ooze on the lead". This means that the mud or soil from the bottom that was carried up on the weight of the leadline was examined by the navigators, who from it might gain further knowledge of their position. The same method is still used today. The bottom of the sea, like the surface of the land, varies in texture. It may be composed of gravel, mud, pebbles, sand, rock, shells, weed, and many other substances. On a modern chart the nature of the sea bottom is described, and the skilful ship's master may judge with great accuracy the position of his ship by the nature of the sea bed revealed by the leadline.

The leadline was the first navigational instrument of which we know anything, as today it is the oldest still in use. The Phoenician seamen were without charts, and we may be sure that a vital part of the Phoenician pilot's skill lay in his knowledge of the sea bottom and his innate nautical ability in sensing his position when at sea, which made it so important to those who waited at Tyre or Sidon for the return of the ships. It was one of the skills in which the Phoenicians excelled, and which made them the rich and powerful people they were.

You will notice, too, Herodotus' use of the expression "one day's sail". This was a measure of distance used by seamen, and like much else in their navigation was inevitably crude and inexact. A day's sail was usually considered to be the
distance that a ship would sail in a fresh following wind during a day and a night. But how far was this? We know from documents that it might be considered as anything from one hundred to one hundred and thirty miles.

Through many skills that we may learn a little about while guessing at others, and by imaginatively coming to realize the peculiar abilities that men may develop when necessity drives them to it, we are able to discover something of how the Phoenicians were able to find their way across the seas and become admired by other peoples for their superior skill in the art. But you will understand that we have had to learn about their ability from a clue dropped here and there in the writings that are not by Phoenicians. For time has hidden so much, and the Phoenicians were well known for their silence over their own profitable knowledge. From the archaeologist's and historian's points of view, they are a tiresome people—which many of their contemporaries appear to have found them also, although for different reasons.
THE NEW CITY

WE DO not know the date when Carthage was founded by the group of Phoenicians who came from Tyre. But when a place comes to make such a soaring name in history, legend and myth are likely to fasten themselves round its origins to hide in romantic clouds what actually happened at the beginning.

The loveliest of all these stories is due to the Roman poet Virgil, which he tells in his poem the *Aeneid*. This he finished in about the year 19 B.C., which was at least eight hundred years after Carthage was founded, so there had been plenty of time for inaccurate tales to accumulate. Nor was Virgil particularly worried about being accurate, taking the story as he did from an earlier Roman poet and adjusting it as required to make his own more exciting. But in the process Virgil was inspired to create his most delightful character—Dido, daughter of a king of Tyre.

There may have been more of Virgil’s imagination than of truth in the person he makes of Dido; but somewhere behind the myth and the poet’s
treatment of it there was, we may hope, a remote Phoenician princess who once had personality and loveliness that made her memorable to her contemporaries. We need her; for she is the one warm-blooded Phoenician, amongst that apparently cold people, who comes down to us today still vivid with personality and charm.

Dido left Tyre secretly after the murder of her husband, taking his wealth with her—a shrewd move that seems truly Phoenician in character! She sailed to Africa, where it was said that she founded Carthage, getting the ground on which to build by a deft piece of dealing that seems to us no less typical of what we know of Phoenician craftiness. In fact, she tricked the natives most successfully, making a treaty with them for an amount of land that a bull’s hide could cover—not very much, on the face of it. But she cut the hide up into streamers, which were long enough to enclose sufficient space for the building of the fort that was to grow into the busy new city.

She became Queen of Carthage. When Aeneas, after his long voyage from fallen Troy, was wrecked on the coast of Carthage, Dido entertained him and then fell in love with her visitor. Aeneas, however, dutifully and piously obeyed the call of the gods to leave Carthage, and for a short time became king of the Latin people. Dido endeavoured to make him stay, and when her efforts failed she committed suicide. Virgil makes one of the greatest romantic stories in the world out of this tale, which
Shakespeare captured so well in spirit more than fifteen hundred years later in *The Merchant of Venice*:

*In such a night*
*Stood Dido with a willow in her hand*
*Upon the sad sea banks and waved her love*
*To come again to Carthage.*

Don’t worry about the historical events in this story. They are wrong. Underneath may be the greater truth, that there was once in Tyre a delightful Phoenician princess who went to Africa and began the story of Carthage.

Abandoning legend and trying to dig out a few facts, we may identify the name Dido, which is generally considered not to be a Phoenician one, with Elissa, which was; and it would seem that after a quarrel amongst the ruling family of Tyre, in which a Princess Elissa, sister of the king, was involved, a number of the king’s enemies led by the princess sailed to the point on the coast of Tunis and founded Carthage on its hill above the lagoons that made the harbours.

We are pretty vague about when this was: indeed, all we know definitely about the early Carthage is owing to archaeology, and the evidence here is slight. For, as we shall see later, in the last tremendous hours of her history Phoenician Carthage was burned to the ground, so archaeologists’ spades will never reveal more than a fraction
of the early city. But numerous graves which escaped the general destruction have been found, some of them supposedly dating from the first days. These were discovered in what is called the Sanctuary of Tanit, which is supposed to have been the locality earliest occupied.

As the spades dug deeper, layer upon layer of graves were discovered. In some of them were found jars containing the bones of children sacrificed in Phoenician religious rites. A lot of other Carthaginian pottery was unearthed too, and you will know that pottery is one of the means by which experts may establish early dates; and it was of course the pottery found in the graves at the lowest levels—the earliest of them, in fact—which enabled archaeologists to arrive at an approximate date for the foundation of the city. Some of the work was directed by a French archaeologist, P. Cintas, after the Second World War. Cintas undertook the difficult task of arranging the various types of Carthaginian pottery in chronological order, and as so much more is known about the pottery of the Egyptians and Greeks, the task was achieved partly by comparison; if an Egyptian pot of known date were found in the same grave or chamber as a Carthaginian pot, then the two were assumed to be of the same period.

By such means the foundation of Carthage is now believed to have occurred 800-750 B.C. Six hundred years of life stretched before the newly established
Found in a Phoenician grave in a site near the river Kishon, in Palestine, this clay bowl is more than three thousand years old. When it was placed in the grave, it doubtless held food intended for the refreshment of the dead man on his journey to the Underworld.
Phoenician ships. (Above) A warship of the bireme type, i.e. one propelled by rowers arranged in two banks of oars, one above the other. (Below) Galley with a single bank of oars.
(Above and below) Phoenician merchant vessels of the 14th century B.C., of the type shown in the wall-painting from an Egyptian tomb at Thebes.
Nearly four thousand years ago someone in the island of Cyprus made this clay model of a Phoenician boat such as was used for coastal or river voyaging.
colony of the Phoenicians from Tyre before ruin overtook it.

Carthage was to differ from the many other colonies. We have seen that most of these were in the nature of trading-stations—ports and bases on the routes used by the ships of Phoenicia. They were small usually, and subjects of their parent cities in the east, to which they paid tribute. They did not constitute an empire, for the merchants of Phoenicia were not interested in imperial affairs. But in Carthage, as the originally small town grew in size and magnificence, something of the imperial spirit appeared. The colony became fully independent of Tyre; more important, she became much richer than Tyre and Sidon and Byblos put together. As the early Phoenician cities declined in wealth and influence, Carthage grew in both.

The Phoenicians were an oriental people, but those of Carthage established a great African and western power. To east and west of the city a land empire grew up, and Carthage became virtually mistress of the north African coast from the borders of Egypt to the Atlantic. New towns were built along the coast, or those already established by Phoenicians from the east came under Carthaginian rule; and it seems that many Phoenicians left the older cities on the Syrian coast to join their kinsfolk in Carthage or in the dependent towns, which lived on trade with the African tribes farther inland. All the while the growing power of Carthage
rested on her undisputed seapower. As a writer was to say in the first century A.D., she "ruled on land and sea".

Unfortunately we can see little of those African Phoenician towns today, for on top of them in the centuries to come, when Rome and not Carthage ruled the western Mediterranean, Roman towns rose, and the magnificent remains that may be seen today—at Leptis, for example, which was mentioned in an earlier chapter—are those of the imperial Romans, not of the more ancient Phoenicians. Still today at Leptis the pillars and splendid arches, the massive stone walls, stand impressive though in ruin; but nothing will be seen of the Leptis founded by the Sidonians and which later paid tribute to Carthage. It is the same at Carthage itself. A few tombs, a crumbling wall, are all there is of Phoenician Carthage among the remains of the later town raised above it.

However, one Phoenician town near the tip of Cap Bon—just the kind of position in which the Phoenicians like to establish a town—was not built over by later civilizations, and at the present moment archeologists are digging there. When their work is complete, we shall perhaps have for the first time a definite picture of what a Phoenician town in Africa was like. Already it has been found that the houses were well built, with thick walls and brick roofs, cement floors and baths and lavatories, as well as carefully planned drains and sewers.
During the years while the influence of Carthage was expanding and her tributary cities were being built, the Greeks too were spreading over the western Mediterranean. It was the beginning of the power of ancient Greece, the people we regard as the talented fathers of modern Europe.
THE RICH AND THE HATED

SOME THREE hundred and fifty years after Solomon had died, and about two hundred after Carthage was founded, Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. Her leading people were taken into captivity, and “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept”, as the psalmist has it.

One of those who found themselves in exile was Ezekiel, and to him we owe the most vivid literary accounts of the Phoenicians at this time. He spent the first twenty-five years of his life in Judaea, and appears to have belonged to a priestly family. He was a practical man of the world with a lively mind; he was also a mystic with something in the nature of second-sight. Above all, he was a poet, who expressed in unforgettable language his absolute faith in the Jewish Jehovah and his certainty that his god would bring worldly triumph in the future to the now broken and beaten nation of Israel. What is, for our purpose, of more immediate interest is that in language no less splendid he spoke of Tyre and Sidon, and paints so luminous a picture
of Phoenicia’s prosperity that it all might be a thing of yesterday.

The Prophets, of which Ezekiel was one of the greatest, regarded themselves, what the Jews considered them to be, agents between man and Jehovah, interpreting and so far as possible assuring the execution of his wishes. And Jehovah as the Prophets interpreted him was no gentle god. Ezekiel was typical—gloomy, yet dreaming of greatness though an exile, preaching to exiles whose country was subjugated, poor, a land of barren hills and semi-barbarous people. But in proportion to Israel’s weakness, according to their Prophets, was the anger and the revenge which their god was storing up for the rich, powerful, godless nations surrounding Israel. And especially Phoenicia. The great seaport of Tyre was brilliantly rich, for ever making money and spending it on grandeur. But to Ezekiel, Tyre was also flushed with pride; her god was her own prosperity; her religion was without mystery or virtue, and generally immoral as well; she thought herself divine, whereas in fact she was merely a sinful commercial machine, more sinful for being so efficient. Furthermore, the Phoenicians had not been unhappy about the fall of Jerusalem, on the contrary; the Jews had been lying astride the Phoenicians’ route to the Red Sea, and had exacted taxes from such trade as went on which the wily Phoenician traders had no love of paying.

Not surprisingly, when Israel fell upon bad days, the people were liable to turn a little longingly to the
gods of the other more successful and prosperous people, which appeared to be more effective—during the Exile, for example, the Babylonian gods. The Prophets had an answer which was distinctly subtle; it was that the conquerors and oppressors of Israel were sent by Jehovah himself to punish the sins of Israel. But Jehovah might likewise turn their anger against other peoples for the satisfaction of Israel—against Tyre, for example. Listen to Ezekiel's interpretation of Jehovah's denunciation of Tyre. Nebuchadnezzar, who had caused such suffering to Israel, was going to cause much worse suffering to Tyre at the inspiration of Jehovah. So Ezekiel prophesied. This was how Jehovah, through the agency of Nebuchadnezzar, was going to treat Tyre:

"With the hoofs of his horses shall he tread down all thy streets: he shall slay thy people by the sword, and thy strong garrisons shall go down to the ground.

"And they shall make a spoil of thy riches, and make a prey of thy merchandise: and they shall break down thy walls, and destroy thy pleasant houses: and they shall lay thy stones and thy timber and thy dust in the midst of the sea.

"And I will cause the noise of thy songs to cease; and the sound of thy harps shall be no more heard.

"And I will make thee like the top of a rock: thou shalt be a place to spread nets upon; thou shalt be built no more...."

Then Ezekiel pictures the many maritime states
that have traded with Tyre, and the horror that they will feel at her downfall:

“And they shall take up a lamentation for thee, and say to thee, How art thou destroyed, that wast inhabited of seafaring men, the renowned city, which wast strong in the sea...."

The prophet goes on to describe aspects of Tyrian life that have clearly impressed him, and which revive for us the attitude of Ezekiel’s contemporaries towards this greatest of the seaports they know:

“...Tyrus, thou that art situate at the entry of the sea, which art a merchant of the people for many isles...”

“Thy borders are in the midst of the seas, thy builders have perfected thy beauty.

“They have made all thy ship boards of fir trees of Senir: they have taken cedars from Lebanon to make masts for thee.

“Of the oaks of Bashan have they made thine oars... thy benches of ivory boughs out of the isles of Kittim.

“Fine linen with broidered work from Egypt was that which thou spreadest forth to be thy sail; blue and purple from the isles of Elishah was that which covered thee.” (Ezekiel, chs. 26, 27)

Read the above passages first for their sound. I have taken the quotations from the Authorized Version of the Old Testament, and if not so easily understood as one of the versions in modern English prose, it has the pressure of poetry that in
spite of old-fashioned words, brings brilliantly alive the subjects it touches. Then re-read the passages carefully for the sense.

One can perhaps detect in the poet’s almost loving description of the material glories of Phoenician civilization which he condemns, and for which he predicts so horrible a fate, something of the weak’s envy of the strong, and the poor’s envy of the rich, and the poet’s envy of the beauty that may be created by money—the pleasant houses, the stone buildings and expensive timbers. The revolt against luxury and the pleasures of the senses is expressed in poetry no less sensuous in its way than the architectural beauties and the rich, often beautiful, merchandise that it denounces.

The last passage quoted is of particular interest historically, chiefly for the place names mentioned, which have been identified with the modern names, and so provide a clear idea of Phoenicia’s wide-ranging interests.

Senir, for example, where the cedar trees came from, is the modern Jebel esh-Sheikh, which consists of three tall mountain peaks in south Syria; and to this day it is encircled with the ruins of ancient temples dedicated to Baal, principal of the Phoenician gods. The boxwood which was the inlay of the ivory for the benches came from Chittim, which is today’s Cyprus. But what were the benches mentioned? It is suggested that they were the decks of the ships, but to a naval architect
the idea of an ivory deck is hardly less than astounding. We remain puzzled.

The paragraphs that immediately follow the above in *Ezekiel* (Chapter 27) provide some of our most valuable evidence concerning the trade of the ancient world. The Prophet may have been a mystic and a poet, but he was, too, a brilliantly well-informed man, and what he has to say here about Phoenician trade adds more to our knowledge of the subject than any other source of information. I quote them below, and give after them a key to some of the terms and place names. Again read the quotation first as poetry; it is not often that historical evidence appears in this happy form.

"The ancients of Gebal and the wise men thereof were in thee thy calkers: all the ships of the sea with their mariners were in thee to occupy thy merchandise.

"They of Persia and of Lud and of Phut were in thine army, thy men of war: they hanged the shield and helmet in thee; they set forth thy comeliness.

"The men of Arvad with thine army were upon thy walls round about, and the Gammadims were in thy towers: they hanged their shields upon thy walls round about; they have made thy beauty perfect.

"Tarshish was thy merchant by reason of the multitude of all kind of riches; with silver, iron, tin, and lead, they traded in thy fairs. Javan, Tubal, and Meshech, they were thy merchants; they traded
the persons of men and vessels of brass in thy market. They of the house of Togarmah traded in thy fairs with horses and horsemen and mules.

"The men of Dedan were thy merchants; many isles were the merchandise of thine hand: they brought thee for a present horns of ivory and ebony. Syria was thy merchant by reason of the multitude of the wares of thy making: they occupied in thy fairs with emeralds, purple, and embroidered work, and fine linen, and coral and agate.

"Judah, and the land of Israel, they were thy merchants: they traded in thy market wheat of Minnith, and Pannag, and honey, and oil, and balm. Damascus was thy merchant in the multitude of the wares of thy making, for the multitude of all riches; in the wine of Helbon, and white wool. Dan also and Javan going to and fro occupied in thy fairs; bright iron, cassia, and calamus, were in thy market.

"Dedan was thy merchant in precious clothes for chariots. Arabia, and all the princes of Kedar, they occupied with thee in lambs, and rams, and goats: in these were they thy merchants. The merchants of Sheba and Raamah, they were thy merchants: they occupied in thy fairs with chief of all spices, and with all precious stones, and gold. Haran, and Canneh and Eden, the merchants of Sheba, Asshur and Chilmad, were thy merchants.

"These were thy merchants in all sorts of things, in blue clothes, and broidered work, and in chests of rich apparel, bound with cords, and made of cedar,
among thy merchandise. The ships of Tarshish did sing of thee in thy market: and thou wast replenished, and made very glorious in the midst of the seas."

Here is a key to some of the more obscure names:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lut and Phut</td>
<td>These were African mercenaries of the Phoenicians.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arvad</td>
<td>A Phoenician seaport north of Sidon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarshish</td>
<td>The south of Spain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javan</td>
<td>Greece.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Togarmah</td>
<td>Armenia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedan</td>
<td>Rhodes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raamah</td>
<td>This is thought to be a place near the Persian Gulf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chilmad</td>
<td>This is unknown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright Iron</td>
<td>Probably, wrought iron.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pannag</td>
<td>Might be wax, but this is uncertain.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consider now the wide-ranging interests of the Phoenicians in the light of the above description, bearing in mind that it is concerned purely with their activities in the Mediterranean. It brings vividly before our eyes the exciting character of commerce as practised by the first great commercial people.

Ezekiel ends his powerful denunciation, in which he gives so much valuable information, by including Sidon in the awful fate being prepared by Jehovah
for Tyre. And in a final glorious burst of poetic imagery, he imagines Tyre herself to be a ship laden with the goods from many lands and rowed out to sea, where she is wrecked by an east wind, which we may suppose symbolizes the forces of Nebuchadnezzar:

“All the inhabitants of the isles shall be astonished at thee, and the kings shall be sore afraid, they are troubled in their countenance. The merchants among the people shall hiss at thee; thou shalt be a terror, and never shalt be any more.”

Nebuchadnezzar did besiege Tyre, but the outcome was not the catastrophe that Ezekiel desired. The city stands at the end of a rocky promontory connected to the mainland by a causeway. The Phoenicians retreated into the city, destroyed the causeway behind them, and from what then became their island refuge they defied the Babylonian king for thirteen years; and at the end Tyre remained unsubdued though the other Phoenician cities on the coast had long since capitulated. This was in the year 597 B.C. It was not until 332 B.C. that another conqueror, Alexander the Great, captured Tyre and in some measure fulfilled Ezekiel’s prophecy. But still Tyre did not become like the top of a rock, to be built on no more, and it was prosperous in the time of Christ.
THOUGH WE remember the Phoenicians as one of the great peoples of civilization, it is not because they were trumpet-blasting or militant, changing the shape of the nations and carving an empire by conquest at the end of the sword. At the time when their influence and wealth was at its greatest, they were still a small people, scattered round the Mediterranean coasts and a few places beyond in semi-independent cities. The outlying cities retained a close bond with the old Syrian homes like Tyre and Sidon, but such links were not imperial. There was never a Phoenician emperor.

As we have seen, in their earliest days, when out of the nearly impenetrable darkness of the long past we first hear whispers of a Phoenician people, Egypt was the great power, and the Phoenicians were their useful and skilful servants. Later the Phoenicians gained the independence and influence to which their skill in commerce and seamanship entitled them. The civilized world needed Phoenician ships, Phoenician seamen, Phoenician skill.
When their commercial power declined, it was great conquering Persia which became their master; but still the Phoenicians remained a people that we may still identify, busy all the time with their trade and shipbuilding. While the great empires swayed and surged around them, the hammers of the shipwrights were noisy in Byblos and Tyre from dawn to dusk, and away to the west the great daughter-city of Phoenician Carthage gradually became powerful, until finally, before the latest great people, the Romans, she too fell.

The Phoenicians could never have become, or remained, what they were for so long, except for their ships, and we should not remember them today but for the fact that they knew how to build ships which enabled them to carry their goods all over the civilized world of their day. Their business ability, their skill in making the commodities needed by other nations, would have been useless had they not been able to crowd the seas with their vessels and the ports with their sailors, and so prove themselves to be the fetchers and carriers as well as the manufacturers of the merchandise needed by the people around them.

As we have seen, we know quite a lot about what the Phoenicians did at sea, but the knowledge that we have of their ships has been put together with great difficulty. Apart from those illustrated on a few coins that have been recovered by modern archaeologists, especially two belonging to the city of Sidon, we have no carvings or pictures of their
ships made by the Phoenicians themselves, and we have to rely on what we can find elsewhere for information of the seagoing vessels that made them the great people they were.

We know a great deal about the ships of the ancient Egyptians; more indeed, about their ships of three thousand years ago than we do of British ships of a mere five hundred years ago. This is because archaeology has been able to shed brilliant light upon all the great civilizations of Egypt. Go to the British Museum and in one gallery you will see a number of models of Egyptian ships dating from 2000 B.C. to 1000 B.C., all carved by men alive in those far-off days. We have numerous carvings and pictures of Egyptian vessels too, made by the men who looked at them when they came up the Nile at the time when the Pyramids were being built.

We may make one intelligent guess: that the early Phoenician ships resembled those of the Egyptians. We know that the Egyptians were then the powerful nation, the richest and the most accomplished of all, and we have detailed information about Egyptian ships of about 1500 B.C.

It was at this time that Queen Hatshepsut sent a fleet to the land of Punt. Where Punt was we cannot be sure, but it was certainly beyond the Red Sea and somewhere along the coasts of Southern Arabia or Somaliland, perhaps including parts of both. The object of the expedition, composed of five ships, was to obtain those luxuries required by
the cultivated Egyptians of the period, and here is the description written at the time when the ships returned deep in the water with cargo:

"The ships were laden to the uttermost with the wonderful products of the land of Punt, and with the various precious woods of the divine land, and with heaps of the resin of incense, with fresh incense trees, with ebony and ivory set in pure gold . . . with sweet woods . . . and paint for the eyes, with dog-headed apes, with long-tailed monkeys and greyhounds, with leopard-skins, and with natives of the country, together with their children."

The expedition to Punt was a great success, and to celebrate it records were carved—both descriptions and fine pictures—on the walls of the temple of Deir-el-Bahari. And there you may see them today, in the temple which is among the foothills outside Thebes, the ancient capital of Egypt.

The ships illustrated in Queen Hatshepsut's temple were amongst the finest ever built by Egyptians. Fortunately we have too an illustration of Phoenician ships discharging their cargoes in an Egyptian port at this time. It was painted on the wall of the tomb raised above an Egyptian who had been an important official at the Pharaoh's court. There is no inscription on the painting to tell us where the ships have come from, but the busy crews unloading the cargo or furling the sails are clearly not Egyptian but Syrian, and perhaps the ships came from Byblos itself.

The most obvious thing about them is their
likeness to the vessels of Egypt. There are slight differences, but we cannot be sure that this is not due to the carelessness of the artist. Indeed, we cannot even be certain that the likeness of these Phoenician ships to those of Egypt means all it would appear to do, for artists are liable to be inaccurate when portraying marine subjects, and the artist, being an Egyptian, may well have been content to represent the ships as like those he was most familiar with, belonging to his own nation. All we can say is that before a certain date somewhere between 3000 and 2000 B.C. the ships of the Phoenicians probably resembled those of the Egyptians.

Experts in the Maritime Museum at Haifa, in Israel, have in the last few years examined the wall painting carefully, and with the help of naval architects have made scale plans showing what the ships depicted must have been like. From these plans a model was made, which provides perhaps the most accurate and vivid idea we shall ever have of the appearance of the Phoenician merchant-ships that sailed over the Mediterranean nearly three thousand five hundred years ago.

The time was come when it was the Phoenicians, not the Egyptians, who were the master ship designers and builders, and the later vessels bore no resemblance to those of Egypt.

To find two of the most important illustrations that we possess today of later Phoenician ships, we have to leave the Phoenician coast and go four hundred miles inland across the river Euphrates
to the banks of the Tigris, where it flows through the north of what is now Iraq. In what is today barren and hardly inhabited country, a vast mound rises to a height of about ninety feet about a mile from the river. Beneath this grass-covered hill Sir Austen Layard discovered ancient Nineveh, the Assyrian capital long known in story, which a poet grouped with the Phoenician city of Tyre in the lines that have been quoted earlier in this book.

Here, about 700 B.C., the Assyrian king Sennacherib planned and built his great capital, one of the most important features of which was his own massive and elaborate palace. This was further enriched by later Assyrian emperors, and in the numerous courts and chambers of the palace were collected a mass of sculptured stone slabs depicting scenes of Assyrian life in peace and war. Later, this glowing and luxurious capital, falling to enemies, was burned and reduced to ruins. The fire caused much damage, and this was added to by decay during centuries when the ruins lay earth-covered; but in the seemingly endless courts and chambers Layard discovered masses of stone slabs with their carvings, some of which were fairly well preserved. Amongst the multitude were two sculptures showing Phoenician ships with great clearness.

The stone carvings illustrated large and elaborately constructed vessels, and they were nothing like the earlier vessels of the Egyptians. These were fighting ships, and a long ram projected forward—a new weapon that had been introduced into sea
warfare—while high above the oarsmen and the hull of the ship proper there ran a fighting deck protected by a row of shields. Another stone carving showed a vessel similar in type, with a projecting ram, fighting deck, and shields, but with the stern curved most gracefully upwards.

Carving on a stone slab of part of a Phoenician ship, found in the palace of King Sennacherib at Nineveh

The most important feature of the ships in both carvings may be seen in the arrangement of the oars and oarsmen. The oars were arranged in two banks, the upper projecting over the top of the hull proper, the lower operated through holes in the hull. No Egyptian ship had ever been designed in this way. It was something new in naval architecture, an
invention almost certainly of the Phoenicians (though it is just possible that Greek shipbuilders thought of it first); and in the two sculptures from Sennacherib’s palace we have our earliest information of a type of vessel, the bireme, that was to become so common in the Mediterranean. We shall be saying more about this shortly. Another point to be noticed is the way in which the ships were steered—by means of two oars, one hung over each side at the stern.

We must not imagine that these carved ships sailing across the ancient slabs of stone represented with the accuracy of photographs the war biremes as they moved over the surface of the Mediterranean. Artists, so often inaccurate when portraying ships, are further handicapped by the limitations of their medium when they carve pictures in stone. We may be sure that the ships were not nearly as high in proportion to their length as they appear in the reliefs.

But we do not have to rely entirely upon the evidence of these two carvings. Coins of Phoenician towns have survived, some with ships embossed upon them. Coins, like pottery, are of great use to archaeologists. Phoenicia was well known for her coinage in silver and bronze, though it does not appear to have been the Phoenicians who invented this method of making trade transactions easier. The use of coins appears first in the eastern Mediterranean at about the same date as the ship carvings were being made for Sennacherib’s palace.
There are two coins of Sidon dated some two hundred and fifty years later than the carvings, or about 450 B.C., which have stamped upon them ships closely resembling those in the palace carvings. It might appear surprising that ships should have altered so little during two hundred and fifty years, but it is only the modern world that has become accustomed to the rush of change. Those two steering oars that we mentioned above, for example—ships were still being steered in just the same manner in the Mediterranean two thousand years later.

The palace carvings and the coins provide almost all the direct information that we have about Phoenician ships, and most of this applies to their galleys or warships. These had a grace of line, with their banked oars, low, lean hulls, and surmounting deck with its rail of shields, that was lacking in the heavier, lumbering merchant ships. Though the latter might be loaded with gold and ivory, amulets and rich carpets, they were without obvious glamour themselves.
MORE ABOUT THE SHIPS THEY USED

ONE OTHER piece of sculpture, also in the palace of Nineveh, shows a Phoenician merchantman of about 700 B.C., with its bow rising to a soaring figurehead representing a horse. The horse appears to have been a feature of decoration used in some types of Phoenician vessels, and there is a story of a horse figurehead being washed up on the coast of East Africa about 100 B.C. Where it had come from and how far it had drifted over the seas before coming to rest on the African shore we shall never know, but that it came from a Phoenician ship is probable.

The ship in the carving is being paddled; that is, the crew are facing forward and propelling the ship in the manner of a modern canoe, when a paddle is used over one side of the craft and is not pivoted to the side of the hull. The cargo is timber, loaded on board the vessel, while more of it is towed astern in the manner still used today when moving timber from place to place in calm water. It would not seem that this was much of a seagoing ship, but
rather one used for short passages up and down the coast. It reminds one a little of a simple model in clay of a ship which was dug up at Byblos when the city was being excavated. This too was a merchantman with very high sides and no deck, clearly able to carry heavy loads, but even less seaworthy than the relief picture of the ship carrying timber.

Working from the slender evidence available, the Haifa Museum has made a model reconstruction of a Phoenician merchant ship of the eighth century B.C.; that is, of about the same period as the fighting bireme we discussed earlier. In the model we see the soaring figurehead of the horse, the lovely curve of the stern; but one cannot help feeling a little doubtful about those lofty, upswept ends. Think of the size and weight of the timber needed to build them! Unlike the warship, the merchantman has a single bank of oars only, but her sail is much bigger. For there was no space in a cargo-carrying ship for hordes of oarsmen, and when possible the ship relied on the sail.

To discover more about Phoenician ships, we have to turn to the Greeks. From this artistic and articulate people we have been able to learn much more than from the Phoenicians about the types of vessel used in the Mediterranean for trading and fighting, and we may reasonably assume that the Phoenician shipbuilders had much the same ideas as the Greek.

Fortunately, we have from the Greeks a picture of a merchant ship of the kind that was sailing in
the Mediterranean at some time between 550-500 B.C. It is on a lovely vase, which you may see in the British Museum in London today, shaped rather like a rose bowl, round the sides of which are painted two vessels, one of them an oared galley of the bireme type, the other a high and spacious merchantman. The vase was found not in Greece but in the district of Italy known as Etruria. In real life the merchant ship which is represented sailing with such grace over its surface may have been squat, rugged, and useful rather than handsome; but the Greeks having a flair for the beautiful, the artist who painted the vase gives to the ship a swan-like elegance. She is high-sided, but with most gracefully curved bow and stern. You may see a sort of matting screen running for much of the length of the ship to protect the cargo. There is a ladder over the stern to serve as a gangway when in harbour, and another longer ladder, lashed on deck, which we may deduce was used when the ship was run ashore and unloaded on a beach, which was often done in those days, when harbours with wharfs were few. The ship is steered by two oars hung from the stern, but her chief means of propulsion is her big square sail.

The merchantman was a fuller, deeper ship than the galley, and relied mainly upon her sail for movement; and this may draw our attention to the difficulties of navigation in those days. For the Mediterranean was often windless; while even when there was wind it had to be blowing more or less in the direction in
which the ship wished to go; unlike the modern yacht, the ancient merchantman was unable to make way against a wind from ahead of the beam. Again, if the winds blew too hard, sail had to be reduced or lowered altogether, and the many ropes shown in the painting were the means by which the crew controlled the big area of canvas.

Such, then, was the type of merchant vessel in which Greek and Phoenician carried on the seaborne trade of two thousand five hundred years ago. And owing to the slowness of change, the ships were probably similar five hundred years earlier than the date of the vase, as they were five hundred years later. On many other vases, a number of which are also to be seen in the British Museum, we have paintings of Greek ships, but they are war galleys, not merchantmen. But we do have two representations of a Roman merchant ship of a date some four hundred and fifty years later than the one on the Greek vase. It is a piece of sculpture from a tomb in Pompeii, the fashionable Roman resort which was inundated by the lava and ashes of Vesuvius when the volcano erupted in November, A.D. 79. The vessel depicted in stone is larger than the Greek merchantman painted on the vase, and several features are different. But those of importance are similar—the sail, the steering oars, the high hull—and the passage of about five hundred years has not brought much change in ship design.

I have emphasized that the Greek and Phoenician
merchant vessels were in many respects similar. However, we must not overlook probable differences which we cannot prove, but may deduce with reasonable certainty from a knowledge of seafaring. The Phoenicians were much better seamen than the Greeks. The former sailed all over the Mediterranean, and also for months on the oceans beyond, while the Greeks kept mainly to the eastern part of the inland sea. Greek ships, we may be certain, were lightly built compared with the Phoenician, which were heavier in construction and appearance, bulkier, better able to carry heavy loads and face heavy seas.

So much for the merchant ships, which were of such importance. But for war purposes it was the oared galley that was used by the Phoenicians and others. We have many more representations of these than of the merchant vessels, and again we find them mainly on painted Greek vases or in later Greek and Roman sculpture.

The merchantman painted on the Greek vase is shown being pursued by a galley of the bireme type, not unlike the one that appeared in the carving found at Nineveh. Perhaps it is a pirate galley pursuing the richly freighted cargo-carrier. Her sails are drawing, but she is being rowed as well by the two banks of oarsmen.

Now we must go into more details of the Mediterranean galleys, for on that sea where calms are frequent or winds contrary, it was, since the Phoenicians became a great seagoing people, the
lithe, slim-lined, many-oared galley that had been used for all purposes but carrying cargoes. We have seen earlier that the Phoenicians probably invented the bireme. It was one of the most brilliant and original inventions in shipbuilding. The speed of a galley depended upon the number of oars that might be used to propel it, but there was a limit of length beyond which ships could not be built without becoming too slender and delicate. The greatest practicable length allowed some twenty-four rowers per side—a total of forty-eight men on the oars. Since length could not be increased, neither could the number of oarsmen, unless an entirely new design were devised; and thus appeared in what may have been the brilliant flash of genius in one forgotten Phoenician shipbuilder (for great ideas usually originate in the mind of one man, though they may have to be developed by many), the principle of arranging the oars in two banks, one above the other. This allowed more oarsmen to be accommodated in a vessel much shorter and more reliable than the old, over-long, single-banked galleys. Such was the vessel we described, first illustrated to us in the sculpture in Sennacherib’s palace.

The next step was logical—if we have two banks of oars and hence more power in a shorter ship, why not have three, and hence yet more power in a ship of much the same length as the bireme? Hence arrived the idea of the ship with three banks of oars. In the bireme, or ship with two banks, the
lower bank of oars projected through the side of
the hull, the upper bank over its top edge (or gun-
wale). Now another brilliant shipbuilder—and he
appears this time to have definitely been a Greek,
not a Phoenician—built a vessel with yet another
layer of oarsmen. This may have been done in
about 500 B.C. Room was made for the upper bank
of oarsmen by building an addition to the hull
proper of the bireme type of galley, raised above
the hull and extending slightly beyond it on either
side—a form of outrigger—and the oars of the
top level of rowers were pivoted on its outermost
part.

The trireme became the master of the seas, and
remained so for two hundred years, and we may
imagine, when this new type of galley first appeared,
the furious activity of the Phoenician shipwrights
at Tyre and Sidon, as they built fleets of them for
their own use and that of others. The trireme,
proving so powerful an instrument of war, played
an important part in shaping the destiny of the
ancient world, and as such we must regard it as
one of the important human inventions.

And yet—one more example of the erratic light
that archaeology sheds on the past—no really
reliable picture or carving of a trireme has ever
been found; and though we know the principle of
their design, as outlined above, many details are
obscure of the precise methods of seating the oars-
men and arranging the oars, and scholars who are
specialists in naval architecture have discussed
and disputed, built models and even full-size vessels, giving various interpretations of exactly how a trireme was arranged. And all this without arriving at certain conclusions.

No picture has been discovered of an assuredly Phoenician trireme; but at least we can be sure that they were much like all the others. A broken piece of sculpture from the Acropolis in Athens shows a portion of a trireme, but not too clearly. Some details have been learned from coins, and from a small relief carved on a fragment of Greek beaker. One of the great works of European sculpture, the Winged Victory, which was originally set up in 306 B.C. in the island of Samothrace to celebrate a naval victory, and may now be seen at the head of a stairway in the Louvre in Paris, has as its base the bow of a galley with the figure of the Winged Victory above it. This vessel is a bireme, not trireme, but it is able to show us details in three dimensions about the bow of galleys which cannot be seen clearly in vase paintings or bas-reliefs. We may be grateful to the Greeks, that with their subtle aesthetic perceptions they recognized in the fast and sweet-lined galley the poetry of motion. We learn about the secretive Phoenicians from the vivid, artistic Greeks as we do from the gaunt and mystical Hebrews of the Bible.

The raising up of bank upon bank of oarsmen did not stop at three. There is reliable written evidence, as opposed to pictures, of galleys having five and seven banks of oars, but it will be obvious
A merchant ship of about A.D. 300, when the Phoenicians were still sea trading but were no longer powerful.
that there is an early limit to this process of mounting rowers above one another. We know that galleys with four or even five banks of oars were used. But there are many written records of ships the descriptions of which would appear to indicate that they carried up to sixteen banks of oars; yet it can be shown quite easily that such a ship would be an impossibility if the term "banks" be taken to mean horizontal layers of oars one above the other. Scholars have been arguing for years about how ships reputed to have ten, or even up to sixteen banks of oars were arranged, which none of the ancient writers has bothered to tell us. It seems likely that in the bigger ships there may have been two men to each oar, and that the number of oarsmen was included in the term "banks"; or possibly that for ships with more than three, or five at the most, horizontal layers of oarsmen, the word "bank" applied to each vertical tier of rowers, and that the number of these tiers along the length of the hull gave the number of banks in the ship.
CARThAGE—POWER TO ASHES

CARThAGE BECAME one of the most renowned cities of the world; and as Carthaginians the Phoenicians gained a power, fame, and a place in history that has haunted the imagination of many people ever since.

One of them was the French writer Gustave Flaubert, whom some critics believe to be the greatest of European novelists. His imagination was fired by the thought of Carthage as it had been in the pagan days of splendour, before Rome was an empire or Christianity had been heard of, and the Phoenician city on the African shore was fighting its last great battles before its power was destroyed and its houses, palaces, and temples were reduced to ashes by the victorious Romans.

In his celebrated novel *Salammbô*, Flaubert did not write as an over-romantic historical novelist. He was an historian himself, an antiquary, and writing almost exactly a hundred years ago he was enthusiastic about the then new and fashionable science of archaeology, when for the first time men were discovering how much about the remote past
(Right) A Phoenician silver coin, dating from about 350 B.C., found on the site of the ancient trading city of Byblos, on the coast of present-day Lebanon.

(Below) An engraved gem-stone, showing a Phoenician ship of the horse-prowed type. The artist has introduced flying fishes (dolphins?) into his design.
Phoenician merchant ships put in at an Egyptian harbour, as shown in this tomb painting from Thebes of about the 14th century B.C. The ships are of the horse-prowed type. Some of the merchants have gone ashore, while others are preparing to do so, holding out their hands in greeting to their Egyptian friends and business acquaintances. Scribes are taking a note of the goods being brought ashore, probably with a view to deciding what customs dues are payable.
Phoenician water-flask from a tomb in the vicinity of Acre that still bears traces of the paint with which it was originally covered.
Another Phoenician water-flask of the same period.
might be learned from old broken bits of pottery, or the fragments of an ancient wall long buried in the sand. Small parts of that old Carthage were then being brought back to light.

Flaubert crammed himself with books on Carthage, reading at one time, it was said, a hundred in a fortnight. He studied all the relevant ancient lore about armour, costume, cookery, architecture, perfumes. He visited and revisited the place itself, soaking himself in the air, the landscape and seascape of the Carthage of 1858, which stood on the site of that Carthage of two thousand five hundred years earlier whose spirit he was trying to revive.

Then he describes what he imagined it might have been like on a hot night of moonlight six centuries before Christ was born (the quotation is from the English translation by J. S. Chartres in the Everyman Library):

"The moon was rising just above the waves, and on the town which was still wrapped in darkness there glittered white and luminous specks—the pole of a chariot, a dangling rag of linen, the corner of a wall, or a golden necklace on the bosom of a god. The glass balls on the roofs of the temples beamed like great diamonds here and there... below Malqua fishermen’s nets stretched from one house to another... the grinding of the hydraulic wheels which conveyed water to the highest stories of the palaces, was no longer heard; and the camels, lying ostrich fashion on their stomachs, rested peacefully in the middle of the terraces. The porters
were asleep in the streets on the thresholds of the houses; the shadows of the colossuses stretched across the deserted squares; occasionally in the distance the smoke of a still burning sacrifice would escape through the bronze tiling, and the heavy breeze would waft the odours of aromatics blended with the scent of the sea and the exhalation from the sun-heated walls. The motionless waves shone around Carthage, for the moon was spreading her light at once upon the mountain-circled gulf and upon the lake of Tunis.

Now Flaubert describes Carthage at dawn:

"A luminous bar rose towards the east; far below, on the left, the canals of Megara were beginning to stripe the verdure of the gardens with their windings of white. The conical roofs of the temples, the staircases, terraces, and ramparts were being carved by degrees upon the paleness of the dawn; and a girdle of white foam rocked around the Carthaginian peninsula, while the emerald sea looked as though it were curdled in the freshness of the morning. Then as the rosy sky grew larger, the lofty houses, bending over the sloping soil, reared and massed themselves like a herd of black goats coming down from the mountains. The deserted streets lengthened; the palm trees that topped the walls here and there were motionless."

Then Flaubert describes the rain when it came after a long drought as though from thousands of hoses upon that arid African shore:

"The Carthaginians had not re-entered their
houses when the clouds accumulated more thickly; those who raised their heads towards the colossus could feel big drops on their foreheads, and the rain fell.

"It fell the whole night plentifully in floods; the thunder growled. . . . The rain beat upon the terraces and overflowed them, forming lakes in the courts, cascades on the staircases, and eddies at the corners of the streets. It poured in warm heavy masses and urgent streams; big frothy jets leaped from the corners of all the buildings. . . ."

There we are then—vivid pictures of Carthage in moonlight, at dawn, or as the semi-tropical rains fell, when the city was one of the greatest places of the civilized world two and a half thousand years ago. Flaubert may have been wrong in some of his details. The Carthage of the Phoenicians vanished when their city was destroyed. The Phoenicians of Carthage themselves soon vanished too, their religion, their ideas and way of life. They had little influence on any people who came after them, and no Carthaginians of the heroic days told their story in a great history or poem. Only foreign peoples, usually their enemies, wrote of them with a brilliance that has allowed their works to live until today. The Phoenicians themselves are almost completely silent; so we may be pleased that a man like Flaubert, who knew his history and archaeology, and was also an inspired writer, should have painted such clear scenes of Carthage as it was once.
There were at this time—about 241 B.C.—over a million inhabitants in Carthage; some authorities believe that there may have been as many as a million and a third. Flaubert was writing of the period when Carthage was in the middle of the long series of wars with Rome which culminated in her own utter destruction. His book, in fact, is concerned with the time immediately following what in classical history is known as the First Punic War (Punic = Phoenician) when between 264 and 241 B.C. Carthage and Rome fought for what both states regarded as the key island of Sicily.

You should notice the dates. We are coming to the period which, only a few generations ago, was regarded as the dawn of accurately recorded history, the earliest days of the Europe that represented the beginning of our own civilization, during which the star actors were first Greece and then Rome. But most of the important part of Phoenician history had passed before this period opened. The Phoenicians continued to be active, it is true, they were busy seamen and merchants still; but it was at the time when Carthage was founded that they were at their greatest as a trading people. Now, some five hundred years later, the Phoenicians of Carthage are in the sunset of their race as dawn rises on the first great peoples of modern western civilization.

Rome, in those days just before she came into conflict with Carthage, was not the wide-ranging empire we commonly associate with the name.
There were no emperors yet. But Rome, once a village, was assuming the leadership in large areas of what is now Italy, split then into many city states, and gradually the citizens of these were becoming Romans of the Republic. The empire was in the early stages of development; but across the sea on the low marshy African shore that looks towards Sicily stood Carthage, older in power, richer, master of the western Mediterranean. Soon, in what was to be the bloodiest and cruellest series of wars yet fought, that mastery was to be challenged; and when peace came after fighting spread over no fewer than a hundred and eighteen years, there was no Carthage left. Rome was exhausted by the long struggle but was set on the way to her future greatness, whereas the Carthaginians were never of importance again amongst the powerful peoples of the Western world.

Naturally, the Carthaginians were chiefly interested in their trade, and frequently as the years passed they found reason for dispute with expanding Rome. Periodical treaties and agreements maintained peace. Carthage wished to keep all shipping but her own out of Africa except under strict terms, and at one time the Romans were not allowed to trade at all with Africa or Sardinia. Carthage usually had the better of the bargain in these agreements, but in return she would offer such a concession as keeping away from Rome’s immediate territories. But the latter gradually extended, and the gap between the two peoples narrowed, leading
irresistibly to a struggle for power—a struggle between what might be likened to a whale and an elephant. There was another difference between the power of Carthage and Rome; the latter was steadily growing, while Carthage was at the end of her growth.

The war started in 264 B.C. when Carthage established a garrison at Messina in the island of Sicily, the object of which was to suppress the pirates who roved in numbers over the Mediterranean. Rome saw danger in the presence of a strong body of Carthaginians so close to Italy. Roman troops were sent to Sicily, and for a few years war raged with indecisive results. So long as Carthage held command of the sea she could hardly be beaten.

It was now that the Romans decided a fleet must be built. The elephant must learn to swim. We depend for our knowledge of how that fleet was created on Roman writers, liable perhaps to be a little flushed with pride in the achievement. But certainly, in a remarkably short time, forests were cleared, the trees became ships, and a fleet was created to rival the old and experienced navy of Carthage. And by fighting as soldiers afloat and attacking the enemy ships across hinged draw-bridges which they fitted to their ships, the Romans were able to win their first sea battles, in 260 and 256 B.C. The second great naval engagement of the war was the largest that had been fought in the world up to this time.
A weary war dragged on with fluctuating fortunes. The Romans invaded Africa; they had an army trampled to death by elephants; they lost their fleet in a storm, and later a second fleet in battle in 249 B.C. But the war continued, a fight between two boxers on their last legs. But in the end it was Carthage who had to sue for peace.

Carthage was not beaten for good, however. The great Carthaginian general Hamilcar created a new empire in Spain, and this became the cause of a second war with Rome, who became fearful of the reviving Carthaginian power. It is now that the most celebrated Carthaginian in history appears, Hannibal, known so well to us today through Roman, not Phoenician, historians. The Phoenicians of Carthage, like those of Tyre and Sidon, remain silent even during their most dramatic days.

Hannibal made his celebrated crossing of the Alps from Spain into Italy with an army of Spanish and African troops, and there followed a brilliant campaign in which he was never defeated. But he was recalled home to defend Carthage itself, and close to the walls of the city he was defeated. In the peace that followed, Carthage lost all but her home territory, and was forced to pay a huge indemnity.

Even after all this Carthage revived. The great city on the African shore was still powerful enough, though now without any of her possessions beyond Africa itself, to frighten many good Romans, including one known to history as Porcius Cato the Elder, who was so impressed when he visited Carthage
that he is reported to have closed every speech he made in the Senate with the words, "Carthage must be destroyed".

And in the Third Punic War, which began in 149 B.C., she duly was, when on one terrific day after final defeat the city was set on fire while the Roman soldiers systematically pillaged the ruins. More than a week of dawns was made redder by the persistent flames, and afterwards what remained of Carthage was levelled to the ground and dramatically cursed. It was upon this ground that the later Roman Carthage, whose ruins we look at today, was raised. The Rome that we regard as ancient was in the fresh youth of its power as the last of her Mediterranean rivals collapsed, after three wars spread over more than a century.

What meanwhile of the eastern Phoenicians, the fathers of the race of which the Carthaginians do not seem in all ways typical offspring? While the Carthaginians became involved in what we would now call the "power politics" of the West, the eastern Phoenicians remained what basically all Phoenicians were—Oriental traders with a flair for seamanship. For centuries the rival world empires surged around them, the conquerors with unforgotten names had their days of conquering until they in turn were conquered and another empire appeared. For a long period while Carthage was growing in wealth, the Phoenician homeland was part of the great Persian empire, and making a contribution to the colossal forces of Persia. They
were the days of men like Darius and Xerxes, and battles such as Thermopylae and Salamis—names which reach us down the centuries because they imply world-shaping events.

Persia was the terrifyingly strong Oriental enemy ranged against the rising western Europe represented by Greece; but the Phoenicians were Orientals. The King of Tyre was second in command of the Persian fleet, and the Phoenician towns provided a big proportion of its ships. But the Phoenicians were a small part of an empire which could call to arms men from the borders of India to the banks of the Danube. But in the quiet strait between the island of Salamis and the Greek mainland the naval action was fought in which the Persians were defeated and the destiny of Europe given its new direction.

Then came the day when not Persia but the little hill kingdom of Macedonia to the north of Greece became a great power, and it was the name of Alexander the Great which loomed over the western world. When in the course of his conquests Alexander entered Phoenicia, the Phoenician towns welcomed him—except Tyre, which was ready to submit to him but would not allow the conqueror to enter the town. There followed a siege lasting seven months, and the town was captured only after the Macedonians had filled in the gap between the mainland and the island on which Tyre was built with a solid bridge of earth and attacked the town across this. The historical writings of the time
describe the slaughter that followed; and when allowance is made for the wobbly arithmetic of ancient historians we find that perhaps eight thousand citizens of Tyre were killed and thirty thousand sold into slavery. This was in the year 332 B.C. Still the town survived, and it was not until another fifteen hundred years had passed and the world was well into the Christian and modern era that Tyre was destroyed after the Crusades by the Moslems. Thus, long afterwards, was the wish of the old Hebrew prophet Ezekiel fulfilled: "... they shall break down thy walls, and destroy thy pleasant houses. . . ."

The empire of Alexander the Great passed the way of all others. Phoenicia became a shuttlecock amongst neighbouring Syrian kings and—as so long ago at the dawn of her history—of Egypt. Away to the west Carthage was now fighting her wars with Rome, which in the end made Rome master of the Mediterranean and the new world power. Phoenicia, like Carthage, became part of the Roman Empire, and like all other parts became Roman in character, losing its language and way of life.
THE LAST OF THE PHOENICIANS

TYRE AND Carthage lay in ruins—the parent city and its mighty offspring. Generations passed, and all the seaports and fine buildings of the powerful merchant princes from Phoenicia and all the glories of her warrior heirs in Carthage lay beneath ground on which stood the civilization of later peoples. Phoenician and Carthaginian became shadowy people in old documents, or spirits you might feel haunting the excavated site of a Syrian temple.

But the archaeologists’ spades and the ancient documents can give only hints of the whole picture. The Phoenicians may have been brought fairly close to you in the story we have been telling; if so, it is the triumph of archaeologists and scholars who out of a little evidence have enabled us to re-create a picture of days many of which were passing when what we regard as Ancient Greece was very young indeed, and long before Romulus had ploughed the furrow in fields beside the Tiber which marked where Rome was to be built. That seems ancient history; but remember that Carthage
was being built about a hundred years before a stone of Rome was raised, and Byblos and Tyre were very old when Carthage was new.

Documents and excavations may tell us much; but they can give only vague suggestions in answer to some questions that you long to answer about the ways and life of an ancient people who have captured your imagination. Why, for example, did the Phoenicians become the first great commercial power that the world had seen, the first founders of strong colonies, the first strong seapower whose life depended upon trade in the modern manner?

We look at Phoenicia, narrow and pressed between the mountains and the sea, and say that the sea was their natural outlet to the greater world, while behind them they had the forests in which was the timber for shipbuilding. Yet, in fact, their coastline was a bad one from which to go seafaring, while that of Egypt, whose seafaring was limited, invited men to go down the Nile through the many-armed delta and off to sea. They lacked, it is true, the timber for building ships; but not the means of obtaining it; which we have seen that they did, from Byblos. The Hebrews, with much to gain from the sea, used it little; yet had their thoughts turned ardently towards the sea, they might not have remained locked amongst their hills. The Philistines, living on the narrow coastal plain like the Phoenicians, were a seafaring people in some degree; but how slight was their achievement compared with their neighbours’! The Phoenicians had bred
in them that flair for trading and seagoing, for making money. Archaeology and history can show that flair in action, but cannot satisfactorily account for why it existed.

In other respects the Phoenicians were not a very admirable people. The virtues that make money are not usually amongst the most gracious. In their own day, it is said that they were called the biggest liars on earth; and they were certainly most secretive about the skills that brought them so much profit. Wealth brought with it culture, buildings beautifully constructed and decorated which we knew nothing about until the archaeologists began work; also a certain amount of literature. But it would seem that this acquisitive people were too material in outlook to be inspired artists, and in religion and philosophy they had nothing to leave whatever. They were perhaps the most civilized people in Syria; but they acquired and improved rather than created.

The Phoenicians were business men. They lacked heroes and poets. We have learned much about how they lived and what they did, but the individual Phoenician remains for us a canny, tight-lipped shadow. We cannot put flesh and blood on him. That quiet dust beneath the archaeologist’s spade may once have been Phoenician ladies and gentlemen, but we cannot hear them laugh or sigh, boast or be stupid, or open a door on their dreams. Their humanity has been lost somewhere along the winding trail of history.
How much better we should know the Phoenicians had a sufficient amount of their literature survived until today! We are enabled to enter a little way into the minds and hearts of Greeks and Romans who were contemporary with the later Phoenicians by reading their poets, historians, and philosophers; and we have seen that Greek and Roman authors have told us much about the Phoenicians. But we should prefer that the Phoenicians should have told us about themselves.

It is a little unfortunate for their reputations that the one individual of the race about whom we know much personally—Jezebel, wife of King Ahab of Israel—should have become a byword in our language for an impudent and abandoned woman. She was a princess, the daughter of a king of Sidon, and it cannot have been a great pleasure to her to leave the refinements and sophistication of that rich Phoenician city for the comparatively unpolished, comfortless kingdom of her husband. But she need not have behaved quite so badly as she did. She threatened to kill the prophet Elijah; she forged letters in her husband’s name which led to the death of Naboth, whose vineyard she wished to obtain; she painted her face (which today does not seem particularly vicious); but worst of all, she imported the gods of her own race, and Ahab was encouraged to build an altar to Baal. This put her badly in the wrong with the Prophets.

The Phoenicians were an intensely religious people, but their religion was far removed in
character from that of the Hebrews. Ahab was not the only Jewish king to be tempted towards the Phoenician gods; Solomon himself had been before Ahab, for he like Ahab had taken a wife from Sidon, and we are told in the Old Testament that Solomon went after Ashtoreth, a goddess of the Phoenicians.

The Phoenicians had many gods which appear under different names and even varied from city to city. Ashtoreth was important in Tyre and Sidon, and Melkart was worshipped as the Lord of Tyre. But in Carthage, Baal and the goddess Tanit were supreme. Much was learned about the Phoenician religion during excavations at the old Phoenician town of Ugarit or Ras Shamara, where there were found a number of clay tablets on which were written poems about the many deities.

There was nothing to inspire love or kindness in the Phoenician religion, and little beauty except in the temples, which were so cool by day, so light and airy under the moon of Mediterranean nights. But it was the smoke of human sacrifice rising into the hot sky rather than graciously built temples offering protection from the harsh sun that expressed the spirit of Phoenician religion. Numbers of urns have been found at Carthage containing the bones of burnt children, and it was the highly organized ritual of human sacrifice and its frequency that so shocked contemporaries of the Phoenicians, especially the Greeks and Romans, and this in an age far less squeamish about such things than our own.
We may wonder what would have happened if Carthage, not Rome, had won the wars that determined which of them should be master of the Mediterranean, and hence of the civilized western world. Not, we may be fairly sure, the creation of a wide-ranging all-powerful Phoenician Empire such as that of the Romans was to become.

Carthage was conquered in the end because the

An outline drawing showing a temple priest carrying a child who may have been destined for sacrifice
Phoenicians of Carthage were like their forefathers in Tyre, Sidon, Byblos, and all the many trading city states which they created. They had always lived by trade and the sea. The sound of their shipwrights’ hammers, the scratching of their accountants’ pens, prosperity and big business, a place in the world maintained by shrewd trading, were more to their taste than war drums and conquest by arms.

They lacked the vices of an imperialistic and fighting people; they lacked their more generous virtues, too. Since the Phoenicians would not write about themselves, they cannot blame us that we have to judge them largely through what was said about them by their enemies and rivals. And they appear as people too crafty, too earnest in preserving themselves, too lacking in vision and poetry, too concerned with purely material matters, ever to have become inspired leaders of Europe.

And when the Phoenicians disappeared from the stage of history on which they had played so comfortable and profitable (but rarely glorious) a part, they left behind them no religion to guide later people, no literature to inspire them, no philosophy and no system of law or government for future generations to use as a stepping-stone towards further improvement. Yet in some ways they were the modern-seeming people amongst the ancients, the greatest traders when merchants were despised and commerce was rudimentary, the greatest seamen before the seas had become the easily negotiated highway of modern times.
TABLE OF DATES

B.C.
(approx.)
3000–2500 Phoenician people arriving on the Syrian coast and settling there as seamen and traders.
2000–1300 Phoenicians under the influence, and sometimes the vassals, of the Egyptians.

During the same period the people of the island of Crete (Minoans) became a great and rich sea power and the creators of a wonderfully elaborate civilization in the island. Then the island was overrun by the Greeks whom we call Mycenaeans to distinguish them from the later classical Greeks. They in their turn became the great seafarers of the Mediterranean.

1400–1200 Hebrews returning to Palestine and becoming neighbours of the Phoenicians.
1200–1000 Phoenicians became a powerful, independent race of traders and seafarers. Also during this time the Assyrians from Mesopotamia became one of the most powerful nations. We have learned some of what we know about the Phoenicians from Assyrian sources.

Throughout this period Phoenicia was extending her influence and founding numerous colonies and trading stations along the European and African shores of the Mediterranean. There was keen rivalry with the Mycenaeans.
970–933(?), King Solomon was reigning in Jerusalem, and there were close and friendly relations between the Hebrews and the Phoenicians.

800 Approximate date when Homer was writing.
800–750 Carthage founded by the Phoenicians.
600 Phoenician seamen voyage round Africa.
480–400 Approximate time when Herodotus and Xenophon were writing.
480 Battle of Salamis. Persian fleet commanded by the Phoenician king of Tyre. By this time the Phoenicians were dominated by the great Persian empire.
470 Voyage of Hanno of Carthage down west coast of Africa.
332 Macedonia had now replaced Persia as the master of Syria. Alexander the Great besieged Tyre and after seven months captured the city.
264 First (Punic) War between Carthaginian Phoenicians and Rome.
241 End of First Punic War.
219 Second Punic War began. Hannibal crosses the Alps into Italy from Spain.
201 End of Second Punic War. Carthage defeated, but Rome still fearful of the commercial power of Carthage.
149 Third Punic War began.
146 Destruction of Carthage.
50 Tyre still a busy and prosperous city, now dominated by the Romans.
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