

The Flourishing Economic Aspects of Phoenician Civilization and Its Colonies – The North Africa as a model

ازدهار المظاهر الاقتصادية في الحضارة الفينيقية ومستعمراتها - الشمال الإفريقي
انموذجا-

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• Abstract:

The study aimed to examine the economic role of the Phoenician civilization and its colonies, particularly in North Africa, where the Phoenicians leveraged their strategic geographical position and maritime expertise to establish an extensive trade network, where the research adopted an analytical methodology based on ancient historical sources.

The study concluded that the Phoenicians achieved significant economic prosperity through their advanced navigational skills and refined craftsmanship, particularly in shipbuilding, which positioned them as key commercial intermediaries among Mediterranean civilizations, as their colonies, especially Carthage, further expanded this influence by engaging in trade with neighboring regions such as Egypt and the Numidians, capitalizing on local resources like agriculture and minerals.

keywords: Phoenician; North Africa; Maritime Trade; Economic Prosperity; Carthage

• الملخص:

تناولت هذه الدراسة الدور الاقتصادي للحضارة الفينيقية ومستعمراتها، لا سيما في شمال أفريقيا، حيث استغل الفينيقيون موقعهم الجغرافي الاستراتيجي وخبرتهم البحرية لتأسيس شبكة تجارية واسعة، حيث اعتمد البحث منهجية تحليلية تستند إلى المصادر التاريخية القديمة. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن الفينيقيين حققوا ازدهارًا اقتصاديًا ملحوظًا بفضل مهاراتهم الملاحية المتقدمة وحرفيتهم الرفيعة، لا سيما في بناء السفن، مما جعلهم وسطاء تجاريين رئيسيين بين حضارات البحر الأبيض المتوسط، حيث عززت مستعمراتهم، وخاصة قرطاج، هذا النفوذ من خلال التجارة مع المناطق المجاورة كمصر والنومبيين، مستفيدين من الموارد المحلية كالزراعة والمعادن.

كلمات مفتاحية: الفينيقيين، شمال إفريقيا، التجارة البحرية، الازدهار الاقتصادي، قرطاج.

• Introduction:

The Mediterranean Sea has been inextricably linked to the history of human civilizations, as its shores witnessed the rise of numerous cultural entities—from east to west, north to south, spanning Mesopotamia to Egypt, Anatolia to Troy and Macedonia, the Greek city-states to Phoenician civilization, and Carthage to Rome, as the Mediterranean peoples engaged in a prolonged process of civilizational interaction, while the sea itself became an arena of competition among ancient nations.

Among the most prominent peoples whose history was intertwined with the Mediterranean were the Phoenicians; for them, this sea served as an economic lifeline, where they exercised one of their most notable strengths: trade; meanwhile, their foremost colony, Carthage, from its cradle in the eastern part of ancient North Africa, capitalized on all the advantages offered by the Mediterranean in terms of trade and agriculture; as result, Carthage pursued expansion and sought to dominate the largest possible sphere of influence along the Mediterranean shores to achieve economic prosperity, which led it into prolonged conflicts with its rivals—the Greeks and the Romans—to preserve these gains.

I. The Phoenicians: (Designation and Homeland)

1. Designation:

The Phoenicians were a Semitic people who inhabited the Levantine coast before the Common Era, as ancient sources referred to the inhabitants of the Syrian and Lebanese coasts as "Phoenicians", yet both ancient and modern scholars have disagreed regarding the origin and usage of this designation by the region's inhabitants; Some argued that the name derives from the Greek word "Phoenix", meaning "palm tree," and others traced its etymology to the root "Phoinos", signifying "red" in Greek, while another group linked the name to the bronze complexion of the Phoenicians in contrast to the Greeks, or perhaps to their pioneering role in inventing purple dye; meanwhile, the Amarna letters referred to their land as "Kinahhu", and the name appeared in various forms in Egyptian and Akkadian documents to denote the inhabitants of the coasts of Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, as for the name the Phoenicians used for themselves, it was "Canaanites"¹.

2. Homeland:

Phoenician civilization emerged along the eastern Mediterranean coast, with the Phoenician shoreline extending northward from the region of Ras Shamra (Ugarit) to Mount Carmel in the south; to the east, it was bordered by mountain ranges, most notably the Latakia Mountains and the Lebanon Mountains, which run parallel to the sea²; thus, the Phoenician coast was confined between the sea and the mountains in a parallel formation between the eastern and western sides. The historical significance of the Phoenician coast lies in its strategic location between the ancient Euphrates and its central position linking Africa, Europe, and Asia, making it a bridge for

¹ Harden D, the phoeniciens, Thames and Husden, London,1963, PP. 32-38.

² Said Al-Bayazid, The Phoenicians and Carthaginians in the Mediterranean Basin and North Africa, Lecture Series, No. 15, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, 2018, p. 2.

transmitting cultural influences from neighboring regions as well as facilitating trade, where the Phoenician coast played a pivotal role, particularly through their activities as the first international merchants.

3. Economic Conditions in Phoenicia:

The economic conditions of the Phoenician coast were of great importance in the Mediterranean basin, as most civilizations sought to secure their economic survival—even at the expense of other civilizations, regardless of the political and military costs. Given that the economy was the backbone of a state's strength and given the interactions between civilizations, the Phoenician cities were easily influenced by neighboring regions, as after proving their economic superiority, they became the dominant economic power in the Mediterranean.

The Phoenicians' earliest activity was agriculture, although the arable land was insufficient for diverse cultivation due to the region's topography—encircled by mountains, rivers, and seas—they leveraged this geographical diversity to cultivate a variety of crops; moreover, they utilized mountain slopes as agricultural terraces, where archaeological excavations have revealed their use of numerous tools in farming, and their exceptional craftsmanship facilitated the production of these tools from various metals. In this regard, even archaeological evidence from neighboring civilizations, such as the Egyptians and Greeks, attests to the prosperity of Phoenician agriculture, which was intertwined with religious beliefs and rituals, as their commercial crops diversified, allowing them to exploit them industrially and transformed them through trade³.

The 14th and 13th centuries BCE witnessed a period of strength and prosperity for the Phoenician industry, which was well-organized despite the diversity of crafts and trades, as they built a robust economy despite the region's lack of raw materials essential for industry, instead monopolizing mineral resources by sourcing them from across the Mediterranean, where their exploitation of the Aegean islands and the early establishment of colonies there were particularly notable. Phoenician industry underwent significant transformation and development, and although they were not the first to innovate, most nations sought Phoenician manufactured goods due to their quality—a fact confirmed by historical sources.

Thanks to their diverse industries, they were compelled to seek resources by establishing a barter-based trade system initially, then asserting themselves as commercial intermediaries in the ancient Near East, as the reputations of cities like Tyre, Sidon, and Ugarit spread across the Mediterranean, where texts attest to their activity along both land and sea routes because they succeeded in disseminating their culture throughout the eastern and western Mediterranean.

4. The Maritime Character of the Phoenician People

Historical texts have mentioned the Phoenicians' ingenuity and superiority in the field of maritime navigation for commercial purposes, portraying them primarily as peaceful sailors and skilled merchants who traversed the seas, established trading posts, and connected with numerous markets across various regions of the Mediterranean, which is evident even in Phoenician myths themselves, which recount the story of their hero Osus as the first person to sail on a tree trunk, and their god Hephaestus as the first to build ships; In addition, historical texts provide extensive information on the maritime expertise of the Eastern Phoenicians, with the Torah—a religious and

³ Sabatino Moscati, *The Phoenician Civilization*, trans. Mohamed Abd al-Hadi Sha'ira, ed., Taha Hussein, Egyptian General Book Authority, 1997, p. 23.

historical source—mentioning the skilled Tyrian sailors in the fleet of the Prophet-King Solomon (960-935 BCE).⁴

Thanks to the Phoenicians, navigation achieved a breakthrough; until the second millennium BCE, it had been limited to the navigation conducted by the Egyptians on the Nile, the Sumerians in the Arabian Gulf, and the Mycenaeans in the eastern Mediterranean basin, as by the end of the second millennium BCE, Phoenician naval prowess had become one of the most renowned in the ancient world, daring to venture beyond the Pillars of Hercules; Initially, the Phoenicians relied on the natural harbors provided by their coastal geography, but they later achieved significant advancements in maritime construction, equipping their ports with quays, breakwaters, docks, and anchorages.

Nighttime navigation remained perilous throughout antiquity, as humans had not yet discovered the compass—until the Phoenician sailors emerged, and guided their voyages by the North Star, which the Greeks long referred to as the "Phoenician Star", where the Phoenicians, through their shipbuilding workshops in Phoenician cities, were able to construct sturdy vessels capable of withstanding waves and sea currents, as this maritime supremacy in shipbuilding across the entirety of Western Asia is underscored by the reliance of foreign powers on Phoenician sailors and ships, as seen with the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, the successors of Alexander the Great, and later the Romans.

5. The Phoenician Expansion in North Africa through Sources:

Most researchers believe that the Phoenician expansion in North Africa marks the beginning of the historical era, however, our knowledge of this expansion remains weak, as we only have access to late texts; In this regard, Diodorus Siculus believes that the Phoenicians, who had continued to sail for trade since ancient times, established many colonies on the coast of Libya, as Strabo spoke of the sea voyages of the Phoenicians, "who reached beyond the Pillars of Heracles and founded several cities on the central Libyan coast shortly after the Trojan War", while Philopatryclus believed that the Tyrians founded Utica about 80 years after the fall of Troy.⁵

Also, Menander of Ephesus, who relied on Tyrian documents, spoke of a city called Auza, founded by Ithubaal, king of Tyre in Libya, in the first half of the 9th century BC, as its location is now unknown, and it is unknown whether it was the city of Auza in Algeria (present-day Sour El-Ghozlane).

Sallistus wrote about the city of Leptis (the great Lebtis), located in the Gulf of Sidra, saying: "The city of Leptis was founded by the Tyrians who were expelled from their homeland due to civil strife", which is the same view held by Silius Italicus, who attributes the city's founding to the

⁴ DECREE F, Carthage or the empire of the sea, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1956.p132.

⁵ Mohamed Al-Saghir Ghanem, The Phoenician Expansion in the Western Mediterranean, National Book Foundation, Algeria, 1992, pp. 29-42.

Tyrians, while Solan indicated that the city of Hadramaut (Hadhramaut on the eastern coast of Tunisia) was a Tyrian colony... etc⁶.

Regarding the number of Phoenician colonies in North Africa, Pliny the Elder, citing Eratosthenes, mentions that 300 colonies founded by Tyrians existed along the Atlantic coast of ancient Maghreb.

- Carthage:

According to the legendary narrative, Carthage was founded by Elissa, daughter of Matthan, King of Tyre, when she fled the tyranny of her brother, Pygmalion, as she settled in Africa and sought the friendship of the Makistani, the Libyan inhabitants of the area near the Phoenician landing site, where these locals welcomed the new immigrants and sought to host them, and they founded their city, Carthage, at the end of the 9th century BC, a date most historians place at 814 BC⁷.

This city would develop from a commercial center into a civilized metropolis by the beginning of the 6th century BC through expansion at the expense of neighboring African regions, becoming a major commercial, political, and military power due to its location and capabilities.

Carthage was able to form a vast African area, including the regions extending between the city of Hippolytus (present-day Annaba) in the north, passing through the great plains and the inland oases, starting from Tebessa and Gafsa in the south, for that area to shrink towards the east, to include the coastal strip extending between the small and large Sirte, as the direct Carthaginian influence was concentrated on the coasts to be limited inland to the Numidian countries in central and western Tunisia today⁸.

- Carthaginian Commercial and Civilizational Interactions in the Mediterranean:

The Carthaginians established diverse trade relations with most regions of the Mediterranean, and their ships sailed the seas in search of markets to distribute their products and procure the raw materials necessary for their industries, as thanks to these commercial exchanges, Carthage became one of the most prosperous cities of the ancient world in the fields of trade and navigation; historical sources present it as the principal city of North Africa, a fact underscored by ancient writers' references to the wealth it amassed through trade.

Thucydides noted that Carthage possessed vast quantities of gold and silver, while Polybius described it as the wealthiest city in the world; Appian, for his part, asserted that the Carthaginians rivaled the Greeks in power and the Persians in riches, which is further evidenced by the commercial treaties Carthage concluded with rival powers vying for control over maritime trade routes, such as the treaty signed with Rome in 509 BCE, which prohibited the latter from trading with the coasts south of Carthage⁹.

⁶ BUNNES G, Expansion of the Arts: Interpretation essay on an analysis of traditional littéraires, Bruxelles, Rome, 1979.p 142.

⁷ Picard G, le monde de Carthage, Edition Corrrea, Buchet / Chastel, Paris, 1956, pp119-126.

⁸ LANCEL S., Carthage, Fayard, Paris, 1992, pp.88-94.

⁹ Titus Livius, XIII and XIV.

The Carthaginians also maintained trade relations with their African neighbors, such as the Greek colony of Cyrene; despite the natural obstacles posed by the dunes stretching between Carthaginian territory and Cyrenaica, interactions between the two regions persisted, where Strabo mentions that the Carthaginians imported the Cyrenaic plant silphium in exchange for Carthaginian wine at a place called Charax, while Cyrenaic coins discovered in Tunisia provide further evidence of commercial exchange between Carthage and the cities of Cyrenaica.

- Relations with Egypt:

Regarding Egyptian-Carthaginian relations, archaeological discoveries in many Carthaginian sites have revealed Egyptian products dating back to early periods, most notably scarabs and multicolored glass paste, in addition to jewelry and several clay seals dating back to the 6th-3rd century BC¹⁰.

- With the inhabitants of the ancient Maghreb:

The Numidian coasts were one of the most vital areas of Carthaginian trade, given their strategic location relative to trade in the Mediterranean basin, among the most important exchanges mentioned by ancient historians were wines and oils, metals such as copper, silver, iron, and gold, and decorative stones such as marble, where the Carthaginians also benefited from the region's abundant agricultural crops, especially wheat, in addition to selling their products to the local population and obtaining raw materials (the silent exchange).¹¹

Conclusion:

This study underscores the pivotal role of the Phoenicians as trailblazers in Mediterranean maritime navigation and urban development, distinguishing them as one of the most influential civilizations of the ancient world; far beyond mere merchants establishing colonial outposts for resource extraction, they served as cultural intermediaries, facilitating the exchange of goods, technologies, and ideas across the Mediterranean basin, as their extensive networks connected diverse civilizations—from the Greeks and Iberians to the Egyptians and Mesopotamians—enabling a unprecedented cross-pollination of cultural and technological innovations.

The Phoenician migration to North Africa and their subsequent integration with indigenous populations laid the foundation for a new political entity that would evolve into the Carthaginian civilization, as this transformation from a trading diaspora to a Mediterranean superpower demonstrates their remarkable adaptability and organizational prowess.

Carthage's emergence as a dominant military, economic, and political force was not merely an extension of Phoenician traditions, but rather a unique synthesis of Levantine heritage and North

¹⁰ Ghaleb Mohamed al-Sayyid, *The Phoenician Coast and Its Backbone in Geography and History*, 2nd ed., Al-Amal Lil-Malayin House, Beirut, 1969, p. 125.

¹¹ Mohamed Bayoumi Mahran, *The Phoenician Cities - The History of Ancient Lebanon*, Dar al-Nahda al-Arabiyya for Printing and Publishing, Beirut, 1994, p. 200.

African indigenous elements, as the resulting civilization, while rooted in its Phoenician origins, developed distinct characteristics through its interaction with local populations, ultimately producing a culture whose influence extended far beyond its North African heartland, as this cultural fusion highlights the complex dynamics of ancient Mediterranean civilizational development, where migration, commerce, and intercultural exchange served as catalysts for enduring historical transformations.

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