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The Main Phoenician Cities in Lebanon and their expansion into the Western Mediterranean
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Topic: The Main Phoenician Cities in Lebanon and their expansion into the Western Mediterranean

Abstract: The Phoenician civilization, centered in the main cities of Lebanon, notably Tyre, Sidon, Byblos, and others, played a pivotal role in the ancient Mediterranean. Their maritime expertise and trading networks established these cities as thriving hubs of commerce, culture, and seafaring. The Phoenician expansion into the Western Mediterranean, marked by prominent colonies like Carthage, Gadir (Cadiz), and Utica, facilitated the spread of Phoenician influence. These colonies not only extended Phoenician trade but also promoted cultural exchanges and the diffusion of the Phoenician alphabet. While these Western Mediterranean colonies are well-documented, there are also tantalizing hints of Phoenician exploration into the Atlantic, raising questions about their potential voyages to the Americas. The legacy of these Lebanese Phoenician cities, with their impressive seafaring capabilities, continues to intrigue historians and remains a vital part of Mediterranean and world history.

Overview: Lebanon, a country situated at the crossroads of the East and the West, has a rich history that has been profoundly influenced by its strategic location as the gateway to the Middle East. At the heart of this historical tapestry lies the Phoenician civilization, whose legacy continues to captivate the imagination of historians, archaeologists, and travelers alike. This article delves into the main Phoenician cities in Lebanon and their expansion into the western Mediterranean, shedding light on the enduring legacy of this ancient seafaring people.

The Phoenician civilization can trace its origins to the Canaanites, who inhabited the eastern coast of the Mediterranean for over a millennium. It is among the Canaanites that we find the inventors of one of humanity's most significant achievements – the alphabet. The Phoenicians, who are often regarded as a subset of the Canaanites, emerged as a distinct group and contributed significantly to the cultural and historical tapestry of the region.

The early Phoenicians established their roots in the city of Byblos, which served as the cradle of their unique society. As their civilization blossomed, they founded several key cities along the coastline of Lebanon, each playing a pivotal role in their maritime and trade-based culture:

1. Tripoli: Situated in northern Lebanon, Tripoli became a major Phoenician port, connecting their civilization to the wider Mediterranean world.
2. Anfeh: Is among the coastal Phoenician cities and towns that still exist today in Lebanon.
3. Batroun: This coastal town in northern Lebanon was known for its ancient maritime activities and trade connections.
4. Byblos: As one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, Byblos holds a special place in Phoenician history. It was a center of trade and culture, contributing to the spread of the Phoenician alphabet.
5. Jounieh: This picturesque coastal town played a role in the Phoenician maritime endeavors, serving as a stopover for their ships.
6. Beirut: The modern capital of Lebanon was once a Phoenician settlement, boasting a history rich in trade and maritime activities.
7. Sidon: Renowned for its purple dye production, Sidon was a major Phoenician city that contributed to the wealth and influence of the civilization.
8. Tyre: Perhaps the most famous of all Phoenician cities, Tyre became a powerful maritime city-state, playing a central role in the Mediterranean trade network.
9. Baalbek: While not situated on the coast, Baalbek was a remarkable Phoenician city in the heart of the Lebanon Mountains. It served as an inland trading hub and is known for its impressive Roman ruins.

The Phoenicians were not confined to Lebanon's coastal cities. They ventured into the rugged terrain of the Lebanon Mountains and into the Beqaa Valley. Here, they established the city of Baalbek, which served as a significant inland trade center. The Beqaa region, with its fertile lands, was essential for sustaining the Phoenician civilization and its economic activities.

The Phoenicians, renowned for their seafaring skills and trading networks, established colonies not only in the Western Mediterranean but also ventured into the Atlantic and possibly reached the Americas, although evidence of the latter remains speculative.

Overview of Phoenician colonies in the Western Mediterranean and their potential connections to the Americas:

Western Mediterranean Phoenician Colonies:

1. Carthage: Carthage, located in modern-day Tunisia, was one of the most powerful Phoenician colonies. It grew into a major maritime and trading power in the Western Mediterranean,

establishing a formidable empire. Carthage played a central role in the Phoenician expansion in this region.

2. Gadir (Cadiz): Situated on the southern coast of modern Spain, Gadir was a key Phoenician colony, serving as a bridge between the Phoenician homeland and the Iberian Peninsula. It facilitated trade and cultural exchanges between the Phoenicians and the indigenous peoples of the Iberian Peninsula.

3. Utica: Another significant Phoenician colony, Utica, was located in modern Tunisia. It had close ties to Carthage and contributed to the Phoenician presence in North Africa.

Phoenician Exploration into the Atlantic and the Americas:

While there is limited direct evidence of Phoenician exploration in the Atlantic and the Americas, some theories and circumstantial evidence suggest the possibility:

1. Tin and the Cassiterides: Phoenicians were known to trade extensively for tin, a vital component in the production of bronze. The source of this tin, which came from the "Cassiterides" (thought to be somewhere in the Atlantic or British Isles), hints at Phoenician exploration into the Atlantic.

2. The Story of Hanno the Navigator: Hanno, a Carthaginian explorer, embarked on an expedition around 500 BCE, possibly sailing down the West African coast. His account described unfamiliar lands and people, and it's often cited as evidence of early transatlantic exploration, although the exact route and destination remain debated.

3. Phoenician Shipbuilding and Navigation Skills: The Phoenicians were renowned for their shipbuilding techniques and navigational abilities. This proficiency could have enabled them to venture beyond the Mediterranean and into the Atlantic.

While it's challenging to conclusively prove that the Phoenicians reached the Americas, their influence and legacy in the Western Mediterranean and North Africa are well-documented. The possibility of their exploration into the Atlantic and the Americas remains an intriguing aspect of ancient history that continues to be researched and debated.

The legacy of the Phoenician civilization in Lebanon is a testament to the enduring impact of this ancient culture. Their pioneering contributions to trade, maritime navigation, and the development of the alphabet continue to shape our understanding of the ancient world. The main Phoenician cities in Lebanon, with their rich history and cultural significance, provide a glimpse into a society that thrived for over a millennium and left an indelible mark on the Mediterranean and the world.

Lebanon's position as the homeland of the Phoenicians and its essential role in Euro-Mediterranean culture, along with its active partnership in the Phoenicians' route and participation in the cultural routes of the Council of Europe, including its accession as a member state to the enlarged partial agreement, has been instrumental in enriching and expanding the Phoenician intercultural dialogue and connectivity. This has made significant contributions to enhancing the cultural tourism sector among the main Phoenician cities in Lebanon and their expansion into the Western Mediterranean.

Lebanon's unique status as the Phoenicians' historical heartland has allowed it to serve as a living testament to this ancient civilization's legacy. By actively participating in the Phoenicians' route and the cultural routes of the Council of Europe, Lebanon has reinforced its commitment to preserving and promoting this rich heritage.

Lebanon accession to the enlarged partial agreement with 40 member states amplifies the scope of this intercultural dialogue and fosters stronger connections between nations. This collaboration not only celebrates the shared Phoenician past but also encourages cross-cultural exchanges, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds.

As a result of our Euro-Mediterranean intercultural dialogue and collaboration, the cultural tourism sector has thrived in the main Phoenician cities of Lebanon and their colonies in the Western Mediterranean. Tourists and travelers are drawn to the region to explore its rich history, visit archaeological sites, and engage in cultural events. This dynamic interplay of historical preservation and modern tourism has not only benefited Lebanon but has also fostered a deeper appreciation of the Phoenician heritage across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

ⁱ The Phoenicians' Route aims to foster Mediterranean intercultural dialogue, sharing the values of the Council of Europe, especially human rights and democracy. Established in many non-European countries, including several places of conflict, the routes help to promote freedom of expression, equality, freedom of conscience and religion, and the protection of minorities. This network is a way to work together for the development of peace and mutual respect in the Mediterranean.