Section 1: Ancient Societies on the Mediterranean

The Hittites

The Hittites were an ancient Anatolian people of the Bronze Age, who manufactured advanced iron goods, ruled through government officials with independent authority over various branches of government, and worshipped storm gods.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe the key characteristics of the Hittite Empire

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- The Hittite Empire was established at Hattusa in north-central Anatolia around 1600 BCE, and reached its height during the mid-14th century BCE under Suppiluliuma I.
- After c. 1180 BCE, the empire came to an end during the Bronze Age collapse and splintered into several independent “Neo-Hittite” city-states, some of which survived until the 8th century BCE.
- The Hittite language was a member of the Anatolian branch of the Indo-European language family.
- The Hittite military made successful use of chariots and advanced iron working technologies.
- After 1180 BCE, amid general turmoil in the Levant associated with the sudden arrival of the Sea Peoples, the kingdom disintegrated into several independent “Neo-Hittite” city-states.
- The head of the Hittite state was the king, but other officials exercised independent authority over various branches of the government.
- Storm gods featured prominently in the Hittite religion, which was heavily influenced by Hattic, Mesopotamian, and Hurrian religions.
Key Terms

- **Hittite Empire**: An ancient Anatolian people who established an empire at Hattusa in north-central Anatolia around 1600 BCE. It reached its height during the mid-14th century BCE.

- **Indo-European language**: A member of a family of several hundred related languages and dialects that includes most major current languages of Europe, the Iranian plateau, the Indian subcontinent, and ancient Anatolia.

- **cuneiform**: Wedge-shaped characters used in ancient Mesopotamian writings, typically on clay tablets.

- **Tarhunt**: The Hurrian god of sky and storm who oversaw Hittite conflicts with foreign powers.

The Hittites were an ancient Anatolian people who established an empire at Hattusa in north-central Anatolia around 1600 BCE. The Hittite Empire reached its height during the mid-14th century BCE under Suppiluliuma I, when it encompassed an area that included most of Asia Minor as well as parts of the northern Levant and Upper Mesopotamia. After c. 1180 BCE, the empire came to an end during the Bronze Age collapse, and splintered into several independent “Neo-Hittite” city-states, some of which survived until the 8th century BCE.

The Hittite language was a member of the Anatolian branch of the Indo-European language family. They referred to their native land as Hatti. The conventional name “Hittites” is due to their initial identification with the Biblical Hittites, according to 19th century archaeology. The Hebrew Bible refers to “Hittites” in several passages, and links them to an eponymous ancestor Heth, a descendant of Ham through his son Canaan. The Hittites are thereby counted among the Canaanites. The Hittites are usually depicted as a people living among the Israelites—Abraham purchases the Patriarchal burial-plot from “Ephron HaChiti” (Ephron the Hittite), and Hittites serve as high military officers in David’s army. In 2 Kings 7:6, they are depicted as a people with their own kingdoms.

Despite the use of Hatti as the core of their territory, the Hittites should be distinguished from the Hattians, an earlier people who inhabited the same region (until the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE), and spoke a different language, possibly in the Northwest Caucasian language group known as Hattic.
The Hittite military made successful use of chariots. Although their civilization thrived during the Bronze Age, the Hittites were the forerunners of the Iron Age and were manufacturing iron artifacts from as early as the 14th century BCE. Correspondence with rulers from other empires reveal a foreign demand for iron goods.

After 1180 BCE, amid general turmoil in the Levant associated with the sudden arrival of the Sea Peoples, the kingdom disintegrated into several independent “Neo-Hittite” city-states. The history of the Hittite civilization is known mostly from cuneiform texts found in the area of their kingdom, and from diplomatic and commercial correspondence found in various archives in Egypt and the Middle East.

Government

The head of the Hittite state was the king, followed by the heir-apparent. However, some officials exercised independent authority over various branches of the government. One of the most important of these posts was that of the Gal Mesedi (Chief of the Royal Bodyguards). It was superseded by the rank of the Gal Gestin (Chief of the Wine Stewards), who, like the Gal Mesedi, was generally a member of the royal family. The kingdom’s bureaucracy was headed by the Gal Dubsar (Chief of the Scribes).

Religion

Hittite religion and mythology were heavily influenced by their Hattic, Mesopotamian, and Hurrian counterparts. In earlier times, Indo-European elements may still be clearly discerned.

“Storm gods” were prominent in the Hittite pantheon. Tarhunt was referred to as “The Conqueror,” “The King of Kummiya,” “King of Heaven,” and “Lord of the land of Hatti.” As the god of battle and victory, especially against foreign powers, he was chief among the gods and was depicted as a bearded man astride two mountains and bearing a club.

The Phoenicians

Known for their alphabet, the Phoenicians were an ancient Semitic maritime trading culture in the Mediterranean. They fell under both Persian and Hellenistic rule.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe key aspects of Phoenician culture

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- Phoenicia was an ancient Semitic maritime trading culture situated on the western, coastal part of the Fertile Crescent and centered on the coastline of modern Lebanon and Tartus Governorate in Syria from 1550 to 300 BCE.
- The Phoenicians used the galley, a man-powered sailing vessel, and are credited with the invention of the bireme.
- Each Phoenician city-state was a politically independent unit. City-states often came into conflict with others of its kind, or formed leagues and alliances.
A league of independent city-state ports, with others on the islands and along other coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, was ideally suited for trade between the Levant area (which was rich in natural resources) and the rest of the ancient world.

Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Phoenicia in 539 BCE, and divided Phoenicia into four vassal kingdoms: Sidon, Tyre, Arwad, and Byblos.

Alexander the Great conquered Phoenicia beginning with Tyre in 332 BCE. The rise of Hellenistic Greece gradually ousted the remnants of Phoenicia’s former dominance over the Eastern Mediterranean trade routes.

**Key Terms**

- **city-state**: An independent or autonomous entity, not administered as a part of another local government, whose territory consists of a city and possibly its surrounding territory.
- **Phoenicia**: An ancient Semitic maritime trading culture situated on the western, coastal part of the Fertile Crescent.
- **bireme**: An ancient oared warship (galley) with two decks of oars, probably invented by the Phoenicians.
- **Alexander the Great**: Also known as Alexander III of Macedon. His military was extremely successful, and he created one of the largest empires in history.
- **Cyrus the Great**: Also known as Cyrus II of Persia, Cyrus the Elder. Founder of the Achaemenid Empire.

Phoenicia was an ancient Semitic civilization situated on the western, coastal part of the Fertile Crescent near modern-day Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, and Syria. All major Phoenician cities were on the coastline of the Mediterranean. It was an enterprising maritime trading culture that spread across the Mediterranean from 1550 BCE to 300 BCE. The Phoenicians used the galley, a man-powered sailing vessel, and are credited with the invention of the bireme oared ship. They were famed in Classical Greece and Rome as “traders in purple,” which refers to their monopoly on the precious purple dye of the Murex snail, used for royal clothing, among other things.

**Assyrian Warship**: Assyrian warship (probably built by Phoenicians) with two rows of oars, relief from Nineveh, c. 700 BCE.

Phoenician became one of the most widely used writing systems. It was spread by Phoenician merchants across the Mediterranean world, where it evolved and was assimilated by many other cultures. The Aramaic alphabet, a modified form of Phoenician, was the ancestor of modern Arabic script, while Hebrew script is a stylistic variant of the Aramaic
The Greek alphabet (and by extension its descendants, such as the Latin, the Cyrillic, and the Coptic) was a direct successor of Phoenician, though certain letter values were changed to represent vowels.

Phoenicians are widely thought to have originated from the earlier Canaanite inhabitants of the region. Although Egyptian seafaring expeditions had already been made to Byblos to bring back “cedars of Lebanon” as early as the 3rd millennium BCE, continuous contact only occurred in the Egyptian New Empire period.

It is important to note that Phoenicia is a Classical Greek term used to refer to the region of the major Canaanite port towns, and does not correspond exactly to a cultural identity that would have been recognized by the Phoenicians themselves. It is uncertain to what extent the Phoenicians viewed themselves as a single ethnicity and nationality. Their civilization was organized in city-states, similar to that of ancient Greece. However, in terms of archaeology, language, life style and religion, there is little to set the Phoenicians apart as markedly different from other Semitic cultures of Canaan. As Canaanites, they were unique in their remarkable seafaring achievements.

Each Phoenician city-state was a politically independent unit. City-states often came into conflict with one another, with the result that one may dominate another. City-states were also inclined to collaborate in leagues and alliances. Though ancient boundaries of city-centered cultures fluctuated, the city of Tyre held the southernmost border of Phoenician territory.

**Phoenician Sarcophagus:** A Phoenician sarcophagus at the burial grounds of Antarados, northern Lebanon, 480-450 BCE. Made from Greek marble.
Rise and Decline

The high point of Phoenician culture and sea power is usually placed c. 1200-800 BCE, though many of the most important Phoenician settlements had been established long before this period. Archeology has identified cultural elements of the Phoenician zenith as early as the 3rd millennium BCE. The league of independent city-state ports, with others on the islands and along other coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, was ideally suited for trade between the Levant area (which was rich in natural resources) and the rest of the ancient world. During the early Iron Age, around 1200 BCE, Sea Peoples appeared in the area from the north, which weakened and destroyed the Egyptians and Hittites, respectively. In the resulting power vacuum, a number of Phoenician cities rose as significant maritime powers.

These societies rested on three power-bases: the king; the temple and its priests; and the councils of elders. Byblos first became the predominant center from where the Phoenicians dominated the Mediterranean and Erythraean (Red) Sea routes. It was here that the first inscription in the Phoenician alphabet was found, on the sarcophagus of Ahiram (c. 1200 BCE). Tyre rose to power several hundred years later. One of its kings, the priest Ithobaal (887–856 BCE), ruled Phoenicia as far north as Beirut and Cyprus. Carthage was founded in 814 BCE, under Pygmalion of Tyre (820–774 BCE). The collection of city-states constituting Phoenicia came to be characterized by outsiders and the Phoenicians as Sidonia or Tyria. Phoenicians and Canaanites alike were called Sidonians or Tyrians, as one Phoenician city came to prominence after another.

![Phoenician Trade Network](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/Book%3A_World_Civilizations_I/Chapter_3%3A_Early_Civilizations/Section_15)

**Phoenician Trade Network:** Map of Phoenicia and its trade routes.

Persian Rule

Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Phoenicia in 539 BCE. The Persians divided Phoenicia into four vassal kingdoms: Sidon, Tyre, Arwad, and Byblos. Though these vassal kingdoms prospered and furnished fleets for the Persian kings, Phoenician influence declined after this period. It is likely that much of the Phoenician population migrated to Carthage and other colonies following the Persian conquest. In 350 or 345 BCE, a rebellion in Sidon was crushed by Artaxerxes III.
Hellenistic Rule

Alexander the Great took Tyre in 332 BCE after the Siege of Tyre, and kept the existing king in power. He gained control of the other Phoenician cities peacefully, and the rise of Hellenistic Greece gradually ousted the remnants of Phoenicia’s former dominance over the Eastern Mediterranean trade routes. Phoenician culture disappeared entirely in the motherland. Carthage continued to flourish in North Africa. It oversaw the mining of iron and precious metals from Iberia, and used its considerable naval power and mercenary armies to protect commercial interests. It was finally destroyed by Rome in 146 BC, at the end of the Punic Wars.

The Minoans

The Minoans were an Aegean Bronze Age civilization on the island of Crete that flourished between 2800-1450 BCE. They left behind extensive material culture showing the extent of their handicap and influence upon Mycenaean culture.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Evaluate the impact of Minoan culture on other cultures and empires of the time

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

• The Minoan civilization was an Aegean Bronze Age civilization that arose on the island of Crete, and flourished from approximately the 27th century to the 15th century BCE.

• The term "Minoan" was coined after the mythic “king” Minos, who was associated in Greek myth with the labyrinth identified with the site at Knossos.

• The Bronze Age allowed upper Minoan classes to practice leadership activities and to expand their influence, eventually replacing the original hierarchies of the local elites with monarchist power structures.

• The apex of Minoan civilization occurred during a period of large building projects, as palaces were rebuilt and settlements sprung up throughout Crete.

• Evidence of the influence of Minoan civilization outside Crete can be seen in Minoan handicraft on the Greek mainland, likely the result of a connection between Mycene and Minoan trade networks. The Minoans were also connected to Egypt and the Canaanite civilization.

• The Minoan civilization declined due to natural catastrophe, but the Dynasty of Knossos was able to spread its influence over Crete until it was overrun by the Mycenaeans.

• Minoan culture is known best for its pottery and handiwork, and its religion was based primarily on the worship of female goddesses.

Key Terms

• Linear A: The primary script used in palace and religious writings of the Minoan civilization, one of two currently undeciphered writing systems used in ancient Crete.

• Neopalatial period: The period of the new or second palaces of Minoan Crete, corresponding roughly with 17th and 16th centuries BCE.

• Knossos: A syllabic script that was used for writing Mycenaean Greek, the earliest attested form of Greek.

• Minoan civilization: An Aegean Bronze Age civilization that arose on the island of Crete and flourished from approximately the 27th century to the 15th century BCE.
• **Linear B**: A syllabic script that was used for writing Mycenaean Greek—the earliest attested form of Greek.

The Minoan civilization was an Aegean Bronze Age civilization that arose on the island of Crete, and flourished from approximately the 27th century to the 15th century BCE.

![Minoan Crete: A map of Minoan Crete.](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/Book%3A_World_Civilizations_I/Chapter_3%3A_Early_Civilizations/Section_1)

The early inhabitants of Crete settled as early as 128,000 BCE, during the Middle Paleolithic Age. It was not until 5000 BCE that the first signs of advanced agriculture appeared, marking the beginning of civilization. The term "Minoan" was coined by Arthur Evans after the mythic “king” Minos. Minos was associated in Greek myth with the labyrinth, which is identified with the site at Knossos.

The Bronze Age began in Crete around 2700 BCE, when several localities on the island developed into centers of commerce and handwork. This development enabled the upper classes to continuously practice leadership activities and to expand their influence. It is likely that the original hierarchies of the local elites were replaced by monarchist power structures—a precondition for the creation of the great palaces.

Around 1700 BCE, there was a large disturbance in Crete, possibly an earthquake or an invasion from Anatolia. The palaces at Knossos, Phaistos, Malia, and Kato Zakros were destroyed. But with the start of the Neopalatial period (the 17th and 16th centuries BCE), population increased again, palaces were rebuilt on a larger scale, and new settlements sprung up all over the island. This period represents the apex of the Minoan civilization.
Knossos – North Portico: Restored North Entrance of the Knossos palace complex, with the charging bull fresco.

The influence of the Minoan civilization outside Crete has been seen in the evidence of valuable Minoan handicraft items on the Greek mainland. It is likely that the ruling house of Mycene was connected to the Minoan trade network. After c. 1700 BCE, the material culture on the Greek mainland achieved a new level due to Minoan influence. Connections between Egypt and Crete are also prominent. Minoan ceramics are found in Egyptian cities, and the Minoans imported several items from Egypt, especially papyrus, as well as architectural and artistic ideas. The Egyptian hieroglyphs served as a model for Minoan pictographic writing, from which the famous Linear A and Linear B writing systems later developed. There has also been evidence of Minoan influence among Canaanite artifacts.

The Minoan culture began to decline c. 1450 BCE, following an earthquake, the eruption of the Thera volcano, or another possible natural catastrophe. Several important palaces in locations such as Mallia, Tylissos, Phaistos, Hagia Triade, as well as the living quarters of Knossos were destroyed, but the palace in Knossos seems to have remained largely intact. The preservation of this palace resulted in the Dynasty in Knossos spreading its influence over large parts of Crete until it was overrun by Mycenaean Greeks.

Society and Culture

Pottery

The best surviving examples of Minoan art are its pottery and palace architecture with frescoes that include landscapes, stone carvings, and intricately carved seal stones. Ceramics from the Early Minoan period are characterized by linear patterns of spirals, triangles, curved lines, crosses, and fishbone motifs. In the Middle Minoan period, naturalistic designs such as fish, squid, birds, and lilies were common. In the Late Minoan period, flowers and animals were still the most characteristic, but the variability had increased. The "palace style" of the region around Knossos is characterized by a strong geometric simplification of naturalistic shapes and monochromatic paintings. The similarities between Late Minoan and Mycenaean art are notable. Frescoes were the main form of art during the period of Late Minoan culture.
Religion

The Minoans seem to have worshiped primarily goddesses, and can be described as a “matriarchal religion.” Although there is some evidence of male gods, depictions of Minoan goddesses vastly outnumber depictions of anything that could be considered a Minoan god. While some of these depictions of women are speculated to be images of worshippers and priestesses officiating at religious ceremonies, as opposed to the deity, several goddesses appear to be portrayed. These include a mother goddess of fertility, a mistress of the animals, a protectress of cities, the household, the harvest, and the underworld, to name a few. The goddesses are often depicted with serpents, birds, or poppies, and are often shown with a figure of an animal upon her head.