The Phoenicians:

We go back to the long and often turbulent history of Lebanon 3,500 years ago, back to the dawn of civilization. Its earliest settlers were the Phoenicians who came from the Arabian Peninsula around 1,200 BC. They established great cities at Beirut, Byblos, Tyre, Sidon, and Baalbek and spread their 22-letter Phoenician alphabet throughout the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Canaanites settled the coast of what is now called Lebanon and established independent trading cities around 3,000 B.C. Phoenicia is a Greek term applied to the coast of Lebanon. Because the location at the intersection of land and sea routes linking the ancient world, Phoenicia became famous as a commercial center. Phoenicians discovered and used the North Star (Polaris) to keep their bearings at sea. They were the first ones to sail around Africa. They colonized parts of Cyprus and Rhodes and crossed the Black Sea. They founded Tarshish on the coast of Spain and Carthage in North Africa.

Among the items they exported were cedar, pine, fine linen, embroideries, metalwork, glass, wine, salt, and dried fish. The country imported papyrus for paper, ivory, ebony, silk, amber, ostrich eggs, spices, incense, horses, gold, silver, copper, iron, tin, and jewels. Cedar was very important in the ancient Middle East, which had little wood. The fragrant cedar was much prized. The Egyptian Pharaoh Tutankhamen had furniture in his tomb made of Phoenician cedar. Ancient Phoenicia also produced the rare purple dye that came from a special snail. Purple became the color of royalty. Needing some way to keep track of their commerce, the Phoenicians developed an alphabet, which the Greeks later adapted for their language and which in some ways shaped the English alphabet.

"Phoenicia' and 'Phoenician' are somewhat artificial terms which were applied by the classical authors to the city-states of the narrow coastal strip that corresponds roughly to northern Lebanon, and the inhabitants who occupied them, from 1200 BC onwards. Their main cities were Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos on the coast of Lebanon. The Greek word from which 'Phoenicia' derived meant 'purple', and was a translation of the name 'Canaan' which may have had some etymological connection with the purple dye produced from local murex shellfish for which the region was famous.

"The Phoenicians were an enigmatic people, who left little in the way of written records. Much of what we know of them from ancient times was recorded by Greek and Roman historians who mentioned their seamanship and shrewd business dealings. It was Napoleon III who put modern historians in touch with the Phoenicians. While subduing a revolt in Syria, he called upon the French scholar, Ernest Renan, to lead an expedition to the area, much as Napoleon the Great had one some fifty years earlier when he brought a group of scholars to Egypt during his campaign." - Pat Rremler
Because of Renan's interest in Semitic languages, he was particularly keen on investigating the site of Byblos. In addition to being a major Phoenician port, the name held linguistic implications. "Byblos" the Greek word for papyrus, lead to "biblion" or book, which lead to "bible." Renan was pursuing an Old Testament reference, "Gebel," which was the Semitic name for Byblos. The trail ultimately lead to nothing for Renan's linguistic research, but during the investigation he found several granite slabs covered with Egyptian hieroglyphs, and a bas relief which he believed to be the goddess Hathor. The relief was, in fact, Baalat-Gobal the Phoenician earth-mother goddess.

This find was the beginning of the rediscovery of ancient Phoenicia. Later more extensive excavations produced a series of semi-intact royal tombs that yielded a glimpse of Phoenician treasure, including vessels of gold, silver, and obsidian, sandals and breastplates of gold, and an array of royal paraphernalia. The most important find, however, was an inscription in the Phoenician alphabet on an elaborate sarcophagus: "This coffin was made by Ithobaal, the son of Ahiram, King of Byblos, as the eternal resting place for his father. If any ruler or governor or general attacks Byblos and touches this coffin, his sceptre will be broken...." This discovery in 1922 touched off a wave of excavation in Byblos and a renewed interest in the origin of the Phoenicians.

The Phoenicians called themselves Canaanites, and modern researchers tell us they were the descendants of two groups, the early Canaanites who inhabited the coast of Lebanon, and the Sea People who invaded Lebanon about 1200 B.C. The early Canaanites had a limited ship building technology, sailing only flat-bottomed barges that hugged the shore. The invading Sea People, some of whom stayed on, introduced among other things, a much more sophisticated maritime technology. Thus their descendants, the Phoenicians, appeared on the scene with an established maritime tradition, and the technology to build ships with a keeled hull. This allowed them to sail the open seas, and as a result, the Phoenicians developed a flourishing sea trade. They settled along the coast of Lebanon, in a loose federation of city states that were built on islands of rocky promontories which provided natural harbors for ship building and trade. The cities, Byblos, Tyre, Sidon, Arqad, studded the seacoast like jewels, and their wealth became legendary. At the height of their trading empire, they imported copper from Cyprus; linen from Egypt; ivory from India; tin from Spain; horses from Anatolla; and peacocks from Africa. They became famous for their highly prized purple dye extracted from the murex snail, and for the fine timber cut from their forests.

Their major cultural contribution was their alphabet. It consisted of 22 consonants, and was the foundation of our English alphabet, and it was the core for Hebrew, Arabic, and Syriac script.

"The Phoenicians did not suddenly arrive upon the historical scene as invaders or immigrants. They were Canaanites, and cannot be differentiated either ethnically or culturally from the general mass of Canaanites. They just happened to be the survivors of the havoc that overwhelmed the eastern Mediterranean at the start of the Iron Age around 1200 BC, with the onslaught of the Sea Peoples, the collapse of the Hittite empire, the disintegration of..."
Mycenaean power, and the destruction of the great coastal cities of Ugarit, Aradus and Sidon." - Magnus Magnusson, BC - The Archaeology of the Bible Lands

"Phoenician ritual is illustrated by an alabaster statuette from Tutugi (Galera), near Granada in Spain. From its artistic style it must be eastern of the seventh or sixth century BC, but the tomb in which it was found was perhaps not earlier than the fourth. It represents Astarte seated on a throne flanked by sphinxes. She holds a large bowl outstretched under her breasts, which are pierced. This is clearly a miracle-working statuette, which at an appropriate time in the cult ceremony enabled milk to flow through the breasts into the bowl from a hollow that would be filled through the head. Until the miracle was to happen the holes in the breasts were blocked with wax, or other material, removable by gentle heating." -Donald Harden, The Phoenicians

"'Phoenician' means 'red haired'. The Phoenicians and the Carthaginians expanded all across North Africa and western Europe. They pushed past the Straits of Gibraltar and founded the city of Gades (present day Cadiz) in Spain. While active in Spain, these Phoenician/Carthaginian descendants are called 'Celtiberians' by archaeologists. Later, some sailed away from Spain and colonized the British Isles, where they are simply called 'Celts' by archaeologists. In their migrations throughout the Mediterranean, these Celts picked up a number of different languages and alphabets. These languages and writing systems were in use by different Celtic groups at different times. Memories of some of these scripts were retained up until the medieval period in Ireland. The Book of Ballymote, believed to have been composed about 1200 A.D., gives an alphabet, described as 'African'. Until recently, scholars considered that this 'African' script was some sort of cryptic monkish secret alphabet, or maybe just gibberish, but since 1960 this alphabet has been shown to be an actual ancient North African one in use about 1000 B.C." [Fell, America B.C.] - Michael Bradley, Holy Grail Across the Atlantic

"Mention...of both the gens Hiernorum and the insula Albionum suggest that Himilco [c. 425 BC] did not stop at Brittany - the Oestrymnian promontory as he calls it - but passed on across the channel, and in effect led the way for Carthage to take part in the Cornish tin trade, which we may assume was already being exploited by Mediterranean traders via the overland route. There is, unfortunately, no direct archaeological evidence of Phoenician contacts with Britain at this period to support the Himilco story, though a number of Iron Age finds in Cornwall indicates Iberian contacts." - Donald Harden, The Phoenicians

"Following the breakdown of Aegean civilization, ca. 1200 B.C., central Europe developed a distinctive Late Bronze Age culture from which the Celts emerged. By about 700 B.C. the Hallstatt culture - the culture of the Celts - covered much of western Europe. It lasted into the fifth century B.C." - Barry Cunliffe, The Celtic World

The Phoenicians were skilled artisans noted for their fine crafts, often "borrowing" a basic idea or technology and improving on it. The craft of glass making was raised to a fine art by Phoenician artisans, and they may have been the first to develop blown glass. Their terra cotta vessels and pots often show a thoughtful refinement of shape, as do their votive statues. The Phoenicians worshipped a triad of deities, each having different names and
attributes depending upon the city in which they were worshipped, although their basic nature remained the same. - Pat Remler.

The primary god was El, protector of the universe, but often called Baal. The son, Baal or Melqart, symbolized the annual cycle of vegetation and was associated with the female deity Astarte in her role as the maternal goddess. She was called Asherar-yam, our lady of the sea, and in Byblos she was Baalat, our dear lady. Astarte was linked with mother goddesses of neighboring cultures, in her role as combined heavenly mother and earth mother. Cult statues of Astarte in many different forms were left as votive offerings in shrines and sanctuaries as prayers for good harvest, for children, and for protection and tranquility in the home. The Phoenician triad was incorporated in varying degrees by their neighbors and Baal and Astarte eventually took on the look of Greek deities. The Phoenicians reached the peak of their culture around 1,000 B.C. when they had established trading colonies in Cyprus, Sicily, Sardinia, Africa and Spain. Their north African city of Carthage was founded about 800 B.C. and remained strong until the sack of the Romans in 146 B.C. The great city states of Phoenicia ended with the fall of Tyre to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 573 B.C. The glory of the Phoenicians was in decline, when in 332 B.C. Alexander the Great conquered Tyre, and the remnants of the Phoenician culture were swept into the Hellenistic empire. - Pat Remler

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