



HISTORY OF LEBANON

The country we now call Lebanon is located on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea, in the Middle East, which happens to be in Asia. For the people of the Mediterranean, Lebanon is in the area where the sun rises. It was decided that this eastern section of the Sea will be called the Levant. So, everyone can call the Lebanese Levantines just like the Greeks and the Egyptians.

Lebanon is a very small country, perched on 2 mountainous ranges called the Lebanon and the anti-Lebanon, with a valley in the middle named the Beka'a. It is bordered by Syria in the North and East, by Israel in the South, and the Mediterranean Sea in the West. Unlike the rest of the Middle East, Lebanon is a very "green" country, with lots of flowers and trees and small rivers. There is no desert in Lebanon, just lots of Rocky Mountains.

The Stone Age -- a long time ago -180,000 years

Lebanon has been inhabited for hundreds of thousands of years. River banks were the natural high-ways of prehistoric people. They moved along the Litany, Nahr Ibrahim, Nahr el-Kalb and Nahr Beirut rivers in search of food, hunting, fishing and gathering roots, wild plants and fruit. The only weapon they had were branches and stones, which they used to defend themselves and to kill wild animals. Lions, tigers, wolves, rhinoceros, gazelles, goats, bears and foxes roamed the mountains, forests and the inland and coastal plains. They took shelter in the caves of the mountains overlooking the entire coast. The discovery of fire allowed them to heat themselves, cook meat, have light at night and frighten away wild animals for the first time. They learned to chip the stones they used as weapons and tools in order to make them sharper and more pointed. These people were known as Neanderthals. About 80,000 years ago, the Neanderthals disappeared, and their place was taken by Homo sapiens, the modern human species. They also lived in caves, but produced a greater variety of stone tools.

The Beginnings of Agriculture -- about 7,000 years ago

People understood that seeds falling in the ground grew into plants. They cultivated the land near their caves and sowed crops. They domesticated dogs, sheep and goats. They kept their grain harvest in storage jars made out of clay. Now that they started organizing their food supplies, they spent less time hunting, and started decorating their tools. With the discovery of Copper, people started coming up with new tools and weapons, and also started creating personal decorative items to hold their clothes together. Jewelry became very much sought after. Gradually, people moved away from their caves and settled in the plains where they had

more space for cultivation. Here, near their fields, they built their shelters, their first houses. The first villages began to appear. The new houses were round or oval. Walls were made of mud mixed with straw. The floors were made of beaten earth, sometimes covered with crushed limestone, and rested on foundations made of large pebbles gathered from the surrounding area. Villages were scattered along the coast, in the mountains, and in the plain now called the Beka'a.

Birth of the City-State -- about 4,800 years ago

The people living along the Lebanese coast during this period called themselves Canaanites, and belonged to Semitic tribes which had spread throughout the Middle East. Others often referred to them as Phoenicians. Trade with Egypt developed. To travel between Egypt and Lebanon faster and easier, the Phoenicians invented the boat. These boats carried cedar, pine and fir wood as well as jars of olive oil. The boats came back laden with Nubian gold, linen, ropes and grains. The growth of barter trade, by sea as far away as the Nile (in Egypt), and by land as far as Mesopotamia (Iraq), transformed the little village of Gubla (later referred to as Byblos) into a city-state. Metal workers, potters, soldiers and fishermen lived and worked side by side. City-states were always located by a harbor or on a trade route, and were often surrounded by fertile land where smaller villages grew up. A stone rampart safeguarded the town from jealous neighbors. Each city had its own king and priests.

The Phoenicians - Kings of Mediterranean Trade

The Phoenicians sailed west and set up trading settlements throughout the Mediterranean. They brought back copper from Cyprus, tin from Spain and ivory from Africa. The seafaring people of Sur (one of the Phoenician city-state) collaborated with their new neighbors, the Hebrews. Together they brought back gold, silver and spices from Arabia and Ethiopia, by way of the Red Sea. The Phoenicians were good craftsmen and their skilled work was highly prized. They crafted gold, silver, bronze, ivory and wood. They invented glass, and produced jewelry. They were excellent builders and helped the Hebrews build King Solomon's temple and palace. These men were known as the **"Free Masons"** as they were not the "property" of any King. They were also called on to decorate many palaces in Mesopotamia. In Sur and Sidon, a shellfish called the murex was processed to obtain a dye called the Tyrian purple. That color -known as Urjuwan- was used to mark royalty. As they had to deal with many people around and about the Mediterranean, the Phoenicians needed a simple system to write down their business deals. So they invented a set of 22 symbols, which composed the first alphabet of the World. The Phoenician alphabet was written from right to left. The ancient Greeks based their alphabet on the one that was taught to them by the Phoenicians. Their most famous teacher was Prince Cadmus, brother of Princess Europa of Tyre who gave her name to the Continent. The Greeks changed the writing order from left to right. Many other alphabets derived from the Phoenician one, and kept the order from right to left, such as the Arabic alphabet. They engraved their documents in stone and wood, and often recorded their transactions and letters on papyrus paper. Gubla, the city where the alphabet was discovered, traded a lot with paper. The Greeks called this paper Byblos, and -at the time of Alexander The Great- started referring to Gubla as Byblos. Byblos later on gave its name to the first holy book, the "Bible".

The Phoenician cities were prosperous Sea ports, coveted by many people of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Often, to escape an invasion, the Phoenicians took refuge in some of their trading settlements, which gradually became colonies. There were so many invaders! First the Egyptians, led by their Pharaoh Akhenaton, then the Hittites who came from the north -around Turkey-, then the Egyptians' armies of the Pharaoh Ramses, the Assyrians who ruled further east in Mesopotamia, then the Babylonians from Mesopotamia again, under the leadership of king Nebuchadnezzar, the Persians with King Cyrus, the Greeks with their Macedonian King - Alexander the Great- and, of course the Romans with General Pompey and Caesar. All these invasions happened in the part of history referred to as B.C. or Before Christ. One of the colonies sprung out of the Motherland -as the Phoenicians around the Mediterranean called Lebanon- is Carthage, in Tunis, North Africa. This famous city that grew to challenge Rome was founded by Elissa, princess of Tyre. According to the legend, the African King told her he will give her as big a land as the skin of a bull. Princess Elissa had the bull skin cut into very thin strips, and used them to line out the perimeter of her new city, which in Phoenician is Kart-Hadasht. Carthage's fame is mostly credited to Hannibal whose army crossed the European Alps with his elephants. After Rome defeated Hannibal, he took refuge in Lebanon, showing that links between the colonies and the motherland were very strong. The Phoenicians were great adventurers, they explored all of the Mediterranean, went out of it into the Atlantic Ocean, traveled along the Atlantic European Coast, establishing colonies along the way. They also circled around Africa, all the way back to Egypt. Legend has it that they even came to the Americas, but could not repeat their adventure. Maybe that was the origin of the Legend of Atlantis!