

A Historical Study Of The Ancient City Of Byblos

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Abstract

Perched on the Lebanese Mediterranean coast, just 30 kilometers north of Beirut, lays the ancient city of Byblos. This city was more than just a picturesque port; it was a powerhouse of Phoenician commerce. Its wealth was built on abundant local treasures like prized cedar wood, olive oil, wheat, and oats. These valuable goods allowed Byblos to forge strong economic ties and become a vital trading partner with powerful empires like Egypt and Mesopotamia. But perhaps its greatest gift to the world emerged from its soil: the Phoenician alphabet, whose earliest known examples were discovered, etched into the walls of its royal tombs.

Introduction

The ancient Phoenician city of Byblos was a major commercial hub, renowned for its extensive maritime trade networks. It famously exported valuable commodities such as cedar wood, which played a crucial role in establishing direct economic ties with neighboring regions like Egypt and Mesopotamia. These areas highly prized cedar timber for construction, whether for tombs, homes, ships, or other daily necessities. Its strategic coastal location on the Mediterranean also made it a desirable trading post and a target for domination by neighboring powers, particularly the Assyrians, who sought to control key Phoenician cities, including Byblos. Religion also held profound significance in Byblos. Understanding the city's pantheon, the deities worshipped, their roles, and their importance to the people, offers deep insight into the spiritual and social life of its inhabitants. In addition to its religious influence, Byblos played a foundational role in the development of writing. Its script evolved into one of the most important alphabetic systems in Phoenicia, which later spread to Greece and became a cornerstone of Western writing. This transmission marks a major cultural and intellectual leap, particularly for Byblos and the Phoenician world at large.

This study seeks to explore the historical and archaeological significance of Byblos, tracing its development across commercial, economic, political, and cultural dimensions. Special attention is given to the role of religious belief in the city, focusing on the worship of major deities such as El, the supreme god; Baal, the god of life and vitality; and Baalat Gebal, the patron goddess and "Lady of Byblos." Through this multifaceted approach, the research aims to illuminate the enduring legacy of one of the ancient world's most influential cities.

Keywords: Location, Naming, Historical Monuments and Artifacts, Economic and Political Aspects, Cultural Heritage.

Chapter One

First: Geographical Location

Byblos is one of the most important ancient Phoenician cities, located on the Mediterranean coast, approximately 30 kilometers north of Beirut (Abboudi, 1991, p. 305). It was considered an area of exceptional natural advantage due to its position on a low rocky hill surrounded by fertile plains and backed by dense forests, making it one of the well-populated cities (Salim, 1989, p. 291). Its inhabitants regarded it as one of the oldest cities, mentioning in their myths that the god El built Byblos. It was also considered an important center for the worship of the goddess Ishtar (Mehran, 1990, p. 95; Zayed, 1966, p. 247) and became a religious hub for the Phoenician god Adonis, as well as the Egyptian deities Osiris and Isis (Abboudi, 1991, p. 306).

Byblos was distinguished by its significant commercial position, especially in maritime trade, where its people were among the pioneers. Their role involved marketing cedar wood, whose forests extended across their mountains (Issa, 1998, p. 129). These trees were cut in Byblos, processed into square planks, loaded onto ships, and transported to the coast (Mazil, 1998, p.

40). This important commercial status enabled the city to establish relations with neighboring regions, such as Egypt, with whom it shared a longstanding relationship due to its exports of cedar wood and Caucasian copper (Ismail, 1991, p. 152).

Second: Naming

The name Byblos appeared in various inscriptions and texts. It was mentioned in cuneiform texts as "Gubli" (Abboudi, 1991, p. 306). The ancient Egyptians referred to it as "Kbn" during the Twelfth Dynasty, and later as "Kbn," "Kpn," and "Kpni." Additionally, the Egyptians called the sea vessels "Gebaly," meaning "traveler to Byblos," a term distinguishing Byblos ships. Thus, the name was derived from the city of Byblos (Mohsen, 2019, p. 113). In the Torah, it was called "Geba," and in the Old Testament, it was referred to as "Gabal." Its name appears in Joshua (13:5) as "the people of Geba" and in Ezekiel (27:9). The Greeks called it "Byblos," meaning "papyrus paper," a name derived from the material exported to them from Byblos. Greek traders transported this papyrus from Egypt to Greece on Byblos ships (Frayha, 1956, p. 89).

Third: Archaeological and Historical Landmarks

The archaeological sites of Byblos are among the richest and most diverse. Byblos is considered the only Phoenician city where layers of Phoenician archaeological debris are clearly visible. When viewing the city, one is struck by its beauty, as it appears almost modern despite being nearly eight thousand years old. Numerous precious archaeological treasures dating back to before the tenth century BCE have been discovered in Byblos, including a royal lyre, a sword with a golden scabbard, and armor. Statues expressing the pure local artistic style of Byblos have also been found, along with the royal tombs discovered in the necropolis. Among these is the sarcophagus of its King Ahiiram and other stone sarcophagi belonging to members of his family (Mazil, 1998, pp. 43-45).

Furthermore, its ancient structures in the East are among the oldest stone buildings, dating back to around 3200 BCE. In prehistoric times, Byblos held a principal position on the coast of the Levant, as revealed through excavations conducted by the French archaeologist M. Dunand. He identified five distinct phases for Byblos during this period, which were later re-examined by archaeologist E. Garfinkel. These phases begin with the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (6500-8800 BCE), the Pottery Neolithic (5300-6500 BCE), the Chalcolithic period (4300-5300 BCE), and the Late Chalcolithic (3600-4300 BCE). Dunand referred to the latter as the "Flourishing Ancient Stone Age." It is from this period that cedar wood was discovered in Egypt, having reached the Levantine coast on ceremonial boats made of cedar wood found in the royal tomb of Umm el-Qa'ab at Abydos in southern Egypt (Zalloua, Jimmy, & La Revue, 2020, p. 62).

Additionally, remains of ornaments made of silver and gold dating to this period have been uncovered, reflecting a high degree of refinement and cultural advancement (Karlheinz, 1999, p. 27). From the Paleolithic era, traces of a fishermen's village dating back to the Neolithic and Chalcolithic ages were found in caves at the foot of the hills. Archaeological excavations have revealed remains attributable to various eras, from the third millennium BCE up to the second century CE. Important findings also belong to the Early Bronze Age II and III (3050-2300 BCE) (Zalloua, Jimmy, & La Revue, 2020, p. 66).

In the final centuries of the fourth millennium BCE, Byblos underwent a radical transformation, emerging as a major urban center. During the Early Bronze Age (3000-2800 BCE), its relations with Pharaonic Egypt reached their peak, elevating the city to the status of a commercial depot exporting luxury goods such as cedar wood, olive oil, and wine. Numerous structures were built in Byblos, including public temples where the palace of the city's rulers was constructed northwest of the Temple of Baalat. Massive tombs were carved into the rocky hills, along with carefully crafted sarcophagi made of limestone, basalt, and marble. These sarcophagi resembled early prototypes from the Egyptian Old and Middle Kingdoms.

The Temple of the Lady of Byblos was built near a well, in front of which stood numerous colossal statues resembling Egyptian styles. A fragment of a diorite vessel bearing the name of Pharaoh

Khasekhemwy, the last king of the Second Dynasty (c. 2690–2686 BCE), was also discovered. Additionally, gold plates inlaid with bronze, similar to Egyptian examples, and objects inscribed with Pharaonic symbols were found throughout the Third Early Bronze Age. The export of cedar wood and other products such as wine and resins indicates a continuous relationship with Egypt, one that remained alive, though it has been described as a relationship of complete political subjugation rather than purely commercial (Salim, 1989, p. 291).

Discoveries from the third millennium BCE include cylinder seals, bronze weapons, pottery, and stone tools, all testifying to the greatness and prosperity of Byblos until around 2300 BCE, when the city suffered a violent destruction. Despite this catastrophe, which particularly affected the southern Levant, Byblos maintained connections with empires such as the Third Dynasty of Ur in Mesopotamia (2112–2004 BCE). A cuneiform tablet and a lexical list written in the name of a trained scribe attest to this continuity.

By the end of the third millennium BCE, during the reign of Pharaoh Mentuhotep II (c. 2060–2010 BCE) in the Middle Kingdom, Egyptian ships once again sailed to Byblos. Numerous votive offerings discovered at a worship site known as the "Camp des Offrandes" (Offerings Camp), which remained in use into the second millennium BCE, provide evidence of this revival. Precious metal objects, statues, and ceramic vases were buried there. These findings, along with discoveries at Jarremonte, again illustrate the city's wealth.

During the second millennium BCE, in the Middle to Late Bronze Age, Byblos was protected by a stone wall, and its sacred buildings, such as the temples of Baalat and Resheph, were rebuilt. Rows of statues and obelisks were erected within the sacred complex, along with a series of votive deposits and a collection of gold axes. A bas-relief depicting a Seleucid ram, possibly the royal emblem of a king of Byblos, and another carving representing the goddess Hathor/Anat/Ishtar demonstrate the skill of local artisans. An obelisk in the temple bore a hieroglyphic inscription naming the ruler who built it, Abishemu, beloved of Resheph, and his niece Yapishamuabi.

Royal tombs from the first, second, and third phases contained numerous precious items, including royal gifts inscribed with the names of Egyptian pharaohs. The name of Amenemhat III (c. 1860–1815 BCE) was inscribed on an obsidian and gold box in the first tomb, while the name of his son and successor Amenemhat IV (c. 1814–1806 BCE) appeared on a cylindrical ointment jar. These valuable objects offer important insights into Byblos' relations with countries across the central and eastern Mediterranean, from Crete and Anatolia to Cyprus, Syria, and Palestine.

Also dating to this period is the sarcophagus of King Ahiiram and the account of Wenamun, the Egyptian envoy who visited Byblos and met its king, Zakar-Baal. This text describes an actual journey that took place in the second millennium BCE, during the renaissance under Ramses XI (c. 1107–1077 BCE). It illustrates the decline of Egyptian power in the Levant but confirms the enduring role of Byblos as a port and trading hub with Egypt and an early Phoenician city (Zalloua, Jimmy, & La Revue, 2020, pp. 67–69).

In 1920, a collapse of coastal rocks revealed an underground royal tomb belonging to the ruling family. The tomb of King Ahiiram, contemporary with the reign of Ramses II in the thirteenth century BCE, was uncovered. It contained an ornate sarcophagus decorated with religious scenes and Phoenician inscriptions. Excavations also uncovered texts resembling hieroglyphs and Neolithic-era tombs over which the temple had been built (Abboudi, 1991, p. 306).

Chapter Two

First: The Economic and Political Aspects

The environment had a profound impact on the economic life of the Phoenicians, shaped by the region's natural conditions, resources, and the crafts practiced by its inhabitants, including agriculture, fishing, manual labor, and the use of tools. Key crops cultivated by the population included wheat, oats, grapes, olive oil, citrus fruits, vineyards, and other Mediterranean products. Due to their coastal location, the people also engaged in fishing and became skilled in

shipbuilding using cedar wood. Craftsmanship held significant importance, with each trade (or *hirfa*) being learned and passed down from fathers to their children (Saadallah, 2001, p. 241).

Politically, Byblos held considerable influence due to its strategic location and valuable resources, particularly its cedar wood, which was in high demand among neighboring regions such as Egypt and Mesopotamia. Each of these powers sought to extend control over the city to secure access to timber and dominate Mediterranean trade, a topic that will be discussed later. These events unfolded under the rule of several kings of Byblos, including Ahiiram, Ahiiram-Baal, Abi-Baal, Eli-Baal, and Sipti-Baal, whose names appear in inscriptions found in Byblos and other regions like Egypt and Mesopotamia. These rulers governed from the tenth to the eighth centuries BCE (Abboudi, 1991, p. 308; Ismail, 1991, p. 153).

Turning to Egypt, its relationship with Byblos was shaped by two main aspects. The first was commercial: Egypt depended on cedar wood for constructing temples, palaces, homes, and tombs (Saadallah, 2001, p. 244). During the Old Kingdom, Byblos served as a major commercial port, facilitating trade between Egypt and Crete. An Egyptian community was established there, as referenced in the Palermo Stone inscriptions (Mehran, 1990, p. 66; Ismail, 1991, p. 244). Egyptian imports from Byblos were not limited to cedar; they also included products derived from pine, olive oil, perfumes, and resins, which were essential in the Egyptian embalming process (Elayi, 2018, p. 40). In return, Egypt exported gold, metal artifacts, and papyrus to Byblos (Asfour, 1968, p. 279; Conteneau, n.d., p. 45).

This commercial exchange was also tied to mythology, particularly the Osiris myth recorded on pyramid texts inside the pyramid of Unas, the last king of the Fifth Dynasty. The myth tells of Isis arriving in Byblos in search of her husband, retrieving him from a tree, and returning to Egypt (Ali, 2002, p. 143).

The second aspect was political. Egypt generally sought to subdue and control various Phoenician cities, including Byblos, which served as a strategic base for military campaigns (Ismail, 1991, p. 153). Numerous archaeological findings in Byblos attest to this relationship, such as pottery vessels gifted to the rulers of Byblos dating back to the reigns of Khasekhemwy, Khufu, Menkaure, Sahure, Unas, Teti, Pepi I, and Pepi II.

Relations continued during the Fifth Dynasty. The Palermo Stone records that during the reign of Sneferu, forty ships laden with cedar wood arrived in Egypt. A relief in the sun temple of Sahure depicts a campaign to Phoenicia, and Pepi I conducted both land and naval expeditions to the region. The objectives were to obtain cedar wood needed for religious and architectural projects, resources Egypt lacked, and to protect its eastern borders from incursions by nomadic tribes from West Asia (Zayed, 1966, p. 254).

Additionally, a wanatiya vessel was discovered containing various objects such as bracelets, pins, stone beads, ivory and glass statues, cylindrical rings, amulets, and seals (Mehran, 1990, p. 116). During the Twelfth Dynasty, Byblos was under Egyptian sovereignty, as evidenced by King Ahiiram inscribing his name in Phoenician script during this period (Zayed, 1966, p. 260). In the Middle Kingdom, Byblos was subjected to Egyptian influence, with its king acknowledging himself as "the servant of the King of Egypt." The rulers of Byblos also adopted Egyptian titles, wrote their names in Egyptian hieroglyphs, and used Egyptian ornamental objects (Ismail, 1991, p. 153). Discovered texts and artifacts in Byblos confirm these practices, further illustrating that Egyptian influence was both political and economic, as the city served as a vital coastal hub for trade between Asia and the Nile Valley.

Archaeological finds in Palestine and Syria not only highlight this relationship but also excavations at Tel el-Dab'a in the northeastern Nile Delta during the eighteenth century BCE reveal Byblos' role as an intermediary linking the Hyksos and Avaris (Tel el-Dab'a) with Syria. These excavations uncovered evidence of wine and olive oil imports from Syria, as well as painted pottery from Qatna and a cylinder seal crafted in Egypt depicting a weather god similar to the Egyptian deity Seth (Klingl, 1998, pp. 88–89).

During the reign of Ramses II (1290–1224 BCE), the Battle of Kadesh took place in 1285 BCE between the pharaoh and the Hittite king Muwatalli II. Many princes in northern Syria and Phoenicia aligned with the Hittites, using northern Byblos as a starting point for their advance into battle (Mehran, 1990, p. 133). Despite warnings from the ruler of Byblos, Rib-Addi, in his correspondence with the Egyptian pharaoh, his concerns went unheeded. The battle concluded with a peace treaty in 1278 BCE. Significant archaeological discoveries from the time of Ramses II include two vessels found buried with one of the kings of Byblos, inscribed with the name of Ramses II (Zayed, 1966, p. 260; Ismail, 1991, p. 153).

The ruler of Byblos took advantage of the weakened Egyptian relations with its Asian colonies, detaining Egyptian messengers during the reign of Ramses IX for seventeen years without allowing them to return to Egypt. The journey of Wenamun also serves as evidence of declining Egyptian influence in Phoenicia. His negotiations to purchase cedar wood from Byblos during the reign of Ramses XI, the last king of the Twentieth Dynasty, were fraught with difficulties; he was robbed, repeatedly threatened, and only completed his mission after extensive bargaining with the king of Byblos (Mehran, 1990, p. 136).

During the reign of King Herihor (1080–950 BCE), he sent an envoy to Byblos to obtain cedar wood for the repair of the sacred barque. The mission faced numerous obstacles but eventually succeeded in acquiring the timber (Ali, 2002, p. 112). (Under Sheshonq, I and his successors, friendly relations with Byblos were restored). This was marked by the gift of a seated statue to the Temple of the Lady of Byblos, signaling the return of commercial and political ties with King Abi-Baal of Byblos (Mehran, 1990, pp. 137–138). Statues of Sheshonq I and Osorkon I were also discovered in Byblos, dedicated to the city's deity and protector (Ali, 2002, p. 112).

In 1921, Montet visited Byblos and observed its inhabitants uncovering archaeological artifacts inscribed with decorative elements or hieroglyphic texts. These findings confirmed that Byblos and Egypt maintained close ties well into the first millennium BCE (Asfour, *Phoenician Cities*, 1981, p. 19).

Similarly, the relationship with Mesopotamia resembled that with Egypt. Mesopotamian kings obtained cedar wood from Byblos, as seen during the reign of Gudea of Lagash. Northern Syria fell under the control of Sargon of Akkad and later Naram-Sin (c. 238 BCE), while the Assyrians repeatedly sought to dominate Byblos to secure cedar wood and expand their territorial control (Asfour, 1968, p. 279).

Under Tiglath-Pileser I (1116–1090 BCE), Assyrian expansion westward began following the collapse of the Hittite Empire. He secured the allegiance of Byblos and other Phoenician cities. During this period, the ruler of Byblos was Zakar-Baal. Tiglath-Pileser I cut cedar logs and sent them to Assyria for constructing temples to his gods.

During the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE), Assyrian forces advanced into northern Syria and moved southward to the Mediterranean coast. They subjugated the Phoenician cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos around 876 BCE, imposing tribute payments. The inhabitants offered gold, silver, copper, tin, colored textiles, quantities of boxwood, ivory, and other materials (Mehran, 1990, p. 155). An inscription carved on the walls of his temple records :

“ I took possession of the mountains of Lebanon and reached the Great Sea of Amurru. I washed my weapons in the Great Sea. The inhabitants of the Lebanese coast, Tyre, Sidon, Byblos, Mahallata, Kaiza, Amurru, and the island of Arwad, paid tribute in gold, silver, tin, copper ”...

He also erected a victory stele at the Nahr al-Kalb, north of Syria (Ali, 2002, p. 109).

Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BCE) aimed to control Syria, Palestine, and Phoenicia, attracted by the region's rare timber, mineral wealth, long Mediterranean coastline, and prosperous trade. These territories also provided access to southern Anatolia and Egypt. Although he campaigned against several Phoenician cities, he left Byblos and Arwad with a degree of autonomy, imposing fines on them following a campaign in 734 BCE (Mehran, 1990, p. 156).

Under Sennacherib (705–681 BCE), Phoenician cities in Syria, Ashkelon, and Judah rebelled, but he subdued them by 700 BCE. He appointed Ittobaal II as king of Sidon and fixed the tribute to be paid. The king of Byblos pledged loyalty to the Assyrian monarch. Subsequently, Sennacherib relocated Phoenician craftsmen to his capital, Nineveh, to build ships modeled on those of their homeland. These vessels were crewed by sailors from Sidon, Tyre, and Greeks, enabling naval campaigns to subdue the Bit-Yakin and the Elamites (Ali, 2002, p. 110).

During the reign of Esarhaddon (681–669 BCE), Byblos came under the influence of Tyre after he concluded a treaty with its king, Baal (Mehran, 1990, p. 159).

Second: The Civilizational Aspect

-Religion

Like other Semitic peoples, the Phoenicians worshipped natural forces and phenomena, attributing to these deities celestial, marine, and terrestrial qualities. Each Phoenician city had its own patron deity (Naim, n.d., p. 18). Clay tablets discovered at Ugarit, dating back to the mid-second millennium BCE, provide insights into some of these gods, including :

- El, the chief of the gods
- Shamash, the sun god
- Aliyan Baal, the god of life
- Mot, the god of death
- Rashaq, the god of lightning
- The great goddess Asherah

Baal eventually rose to become the most significant deity and was known by various names. In the city of Byblos, he was called Adonis, as he was believed to have been born in the mountains overlooking the city near freshwater springs. According to myth, Adonis went hunting despite warnings from his lover Aphrodite and was fatally wounded when a wild boar attacked him, goring his thigh. As he lay bleeding on a bed of herbs, his blood seeped into the flowers that bloom each spring .

The legend of the Adonis River, which flows into the sea south of Byblos, tells that its waters turn red each year during this season. Elderly farmers say, “It is the blood of Adonis.” The story of Adonis is known from Greek and Latin sources and is also referenced in the Amarna letters under the name “Da-mu” (Mazil, 1998, p. 33).

Additionally, archaeological evidence from Byblos includes an ancient Egyptian cylinder seal depicting the local god Baal in Egyptian form, resembling the goddess Hathor (Zayed, 1966, p. 269).

The inhabitants of Byblos worshipped El and Baalat Gubl (the Lady of Byblos), who held a central position in the city. She was associated with ancient traditions, including the protection of the city, the royal lineage, and its people. Worshipers prayed to her for blessings and long life, as recorded in early inscriptions found in Byblos (Hammoud, 2014, pp. 128–129).

The Byblos Alphabet

The Phoenicians were the first to use and spread an alphabetic writing system across the ancient world. They based their method on Egyptian hieroglyphic sources, as hieroglyphic symbols were pictorial representations of objects. From these, they developed an alphabetic system consisting of twenty-two signs without vowels. These letters are considered to be the invention of the Phoenicians in Byblos (Hitti, n.d., p. 12).

These characters appeared in many forms and signs, emerging around the middle of the second millennium BCE. Inscriptions documenting these signs have been found, but the most significant for our research are those from Byblos. The script discovered in Byblos is among the most important recently unearthed. The writings found there date back to the first millennium BCE, with some inscriptions belonging to the time of King Ahiiram (Baqir, 2011, p. 287; Naim, n.d., p. 19). This is evidenced by various inscriptions discovered in the royal tomb, where the Phoenician alphabet, or the Ahiiram alphabet, was used. This script is considered the origin of

the alphabet (Mazil, 1998, p. 45) and is regarded as one of the earliest and most successful writing systems in achieving the alphabetic principle. Composed of twenty-two letters, the script found in Byblos serves as a model for other Semitic scripts (Baqir, 2011, p. 289; Naim, n.d., p. 19).

By the thirteenth century BCE, the people of Byblos began using a primitive linear alphabet instead of cuneiform. The oldest example of this alphabet was found on the tomb of King Ahiram, now housed in the National Museum of Beirut. Its text warns thieves of the calamities that will befall them if they disturb the tomb. The scribes of Byblos used symbols for each word, moving away from hieroglyphic and syllabic writing. They adopted a phonetic order, using twenty-two consonant letters. This alphabet traveled to Greece with merchants and trade around 800 BCE.

Ink and papyrus were used, giving writing a linear form rather than a cuneiform one. Each letter had a name derived from Phoenician words. For example :

-The letter alef (A) meant "ox head "

-The letter beth (B) meant "house "

-The letter gimel (G) meant "camel "

-The letter dalet (D) meant "tent door" and was triangular in shape.

The Byblos alphabet evolved through three stages: the ancient period (twelfth to nineteenth centuries BCE), the middle period (ninth to sixth centuries BCE), and the modern period (fifth century BCE to first century CE). The Arameans used the Byblos alphabet to write their dialect, which spread throughout the ancient world. The Phoenician Cadmus brought this alphabet to Greece, where the Greeks adopted it for their writings. They introduced vowels since the original letters were consonants. Later, this alphabet spread to other parts of Europe, with the exception of China (Joudallah, n.d., p. 49).

Conclusion

In concluding this research, several key points emerge that underscore the significance of the city of Byblos:

Archaeological inscriptions and excavations have played a major role in verifying and documenting the importance of Byblos, as well as the developments, crises, and conflicts that occurred there.

Byblos held great economic importance due to its possession of cedar wood, a resource of such value that it enabled the city to build economic relations with Egypt and Mesopotamia, and also to establish political connections with regions interested in controlling Byblos due to its strategic position linking Egypt to Asia Minor and Mesopotamia to both Asia Minor from the south and to Egypt.

Religion in Byblos evolved around the worship of Baal and Asherah, deities that attracted significant devotion from the people and became the subject of numerous myths and legends.

The alphabet of Byblos is of great importance because it introduced a linear writing system to replace the cuneiform script initially used in their writings. This alphabet gained considerable importance among Greek traders, who adopted it and made modifications to suit their needs.

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