

Phoenician bowl: from the Red Sea to Italy



The British
Museum

Clore West
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This object was made from a Red Sea tridacna shell and brought to a Phoenician workshop on the Levantine coast. Phoenician workshops specialising in the carving of ivory, shell and bone, intricately carved deities, sphinxes and lotus flowers into tridacna shells turning them into beautifully decorated dishes and cosmetic pallets.

Decorated tridacna shell dishes were traded across the Mediterranean and Middle East regions, from Vulci, Italy in the west to Susa, Iran, in the east. These high value objects have been found in sanctuaries and tombs in Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Libya, Egypt, Iraq and Iran. They may have been used in religious and funerary rituals by members of the Etruscan, Greek, Phoenician, Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures during a period when contact between these cultures was made possible via long distance maritime trade. They were used to contain liquids or pastes, possibly cosmetics such as eye makeup, or used in the pouring of offerings.



Tridacna shell distribution

**Tridacna shell from the Red Sea carved into dish
with a female head**

Phoenician, from Vulci, Italy, 630-580 BCE

This Red Sea shell was carved in a Phoenician workshop. It was decorated with two winged sphinxes and lotus flowers. The veiled female head has large almond shaped eyes. This cosmetics dish was found within a rich Etruscan tomb at Vulci, a symbol of the long distance trade between the Red Sea and Italy via Phoenicia.

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