

The Punic Wars

In the third century, the greatest naval power was the city of Carthage. Carthage was located in Northern Africa near modern day Tunis. While the Romans were increasing their reach and controlled the Italian Peninsula the Carthaginians were in control of the North African coast from western Libya to the Strait of Gibraltar, most of southern Spain and the islands of Corsica and Sardinia in Europe as well. Commercial trade in the Mediterranean Sea was dominated by the Carthaginians, making them a formidable power. The city of Carthage also amassed tremendous wealth from gold and silver mines in Spain.

In the middle of the third century, Rome and Carthage came into contact. This happened when Rome's power reached the southern tip of Italy. Rome knew of the Carthaginians and their heritage, between them was the large island of Sicily. This island was very close to Italy, but Carthage controlled the western portion of the island. Messina, a Sicilian city, revolted against the Carthaginians, the Romans intervened, the first Punic War erupted.

The First Punic War

It was 264 BC when the war started. Taking place entirely on the island of Sicily, Rome laid siege on many of the Carthaginian cities on the island. Carthage tried laying siege to Roman strongholds with its navy, but the Romans destroyed them. This was the first time that the Carthaginians had ever experienced a loss of power on the sea. 241 BC saw the end of the war, the Carthaginians and Romans signed a treaty, Carthage gave up Sicily, and had to pay Rome to cover the cost of the war. Many of Carthage's mercenary troops became rebellious and angry over the treaty.

While Carthage was dealing with rebellion, Rome took advantage and seized the island of Corsica. The Romans were very afraid of the Carthaginians and wanted to create as much of a buffer zone between the two empires as possible. The next goal was the island of Sardinia. When the Carthaginians found out about this action, they were furious. Carthage started to increase their presence in Europe. General Hamilcar and his son-in-law Hasdrubal, were sent to Spain to build colonies and an army. Both men made allies that included native Iberians, and their armies. Carthaginian power and influence crept up the Iberian Peninsula growing more ominous as they made their way.

Second Punic War

The Romans were growing more and more anxious by 218 BC with the wealth and power that Carthage had built in Spain as they created a mighty empire. Rome imposed a treaty on Carthage that said their empire could not expand past the Ebro River in Spain. A small city, Saguntum, in Spain then approached Rome and asked to become friends and allies. The Romans were quite happy to oblige, since it gave them the ability to have an ally right in the heart of the Carthaginians Iberian Empire.

In 221 BC, a young man named Hannibal took over the Carthaginian command of Spain. At first Hannibal stayed away from the Saguntines, he did not wish to create conflict between the Carthaginian Empire and the Romans. Unfortunately, the Saguntines felt they were very safe having an alliance with Rome, and they started trying to play politics with other cities in Spain. Rome warned Hannibal that he was to leave the Saguntines alone, but he ignored the threats, and attacked and conquered Saguntum anyway. The Romans tried to solve the problem with diplomacy. Hannibal's dismissal was demanded and they were told to send him to Rome

immediately. This of course meant that the Romans felt that should have the right to deal with the individual that went against their threats. Carthage refused.

218 BC, the second Punic War began.

Over the years since the first Punic War, the Carthaginians had built a terrifyingly large and powerful army. Hannibal responded to the Roman demand by attacking them. Hannibal led his army, which included war elephant, through Spain, and southern France, followed by marching his men and elephants over snowy mountain passes through the Alps, and into Italy. As they passed through Spain and Italy, Hannibal and his army were attacked by the people they came into contact with.

Upon arrival in Italy, having only a handful of elephants and a much smaller and weaker army, Hannibal and his men were still able to smash the Roman armies that he came into contact with in northern Italy, he hoped that the Italians would revolt against Rome and join him. This of course was not to be the case. Within two months,

Hannibal had conquered all of northern Italy except for two cities, and a horde of Gauls, about fifty thousand, came from the north to join him in his conquests. The Romans were afraid that Hannibal was truly a threat, so as he was attacking the northern Italian cities, the Romans started attacking Carthage's armies in Spain. Hannibal was dependant on the help of Spain for future supplies and men and Rome decided to appoint a brilliant young man as consul over Spain, Scipio Africanus. He conquered Spain and divided it into two Roman provinces, then set his sights on Carthage.

Scipio crossed into Africa and took Carthage, the Carthaginians begged for peace with Rome. As part of the treaty, Hannibal was ordered to leave the Italian Peninsula. Hannibal, having won all of the battles, had lost the war. He returned to Carthage and in one last attempt the Carthaginians rose up against Rome. In 202BC, at Zama, in northern Africa, Hannibal and his army fought against Scipio and his army. This was to be Hannibal's first defeat. Rome turned Carthage into a dependant state and the Romans now controlled all of the western Mediterranean, including northern Africa.

Although the war was over, the Romans demanded that Hannibal be turned over to them. Hannibal refused and for the next few years, he was chased from place to place. In about 183 BC, Hannibal was cornered and unable to escape. Still refusing to give up, Hannibal poisoned himself and died.

Third Punic War

In the Second Punic War, Carthage had been soundly beaten, but the Romans still felt as if they were a threat, because the Carthaginians had caused the Romans so much trouble for so long. Cato, a Roman senator felt very strong about this subject and ended every speech he made with "Carthage must be destroyed!"

In 150 BC, Carthage defended itself against a small army from nearby, breaking the treaty with the Romans. This gave the Romans an excuse to send its army. Carthage did not want to fight, but the Roman said the only way they would not is for the Carthaginians to leave their homes and city and head far inland. Carthage's economy was built on the trade that the Mediterranean provided, so they refused. The Romans attacked.

The battle for Carthage was long and bitter. The Romans stormed the town and went from house to house killing all of the inhabitants. Many consider this the greatest systematic execution before World War II. In the end, out of a population of 250,000 citizens only 50,000 were still alive at the end of the war. The Romans had won, the survivors were sold into slavery, the city of Carthage was demolished and the harbor destroyed. To make sure that this area was uninhabitable, the Romans tilled the soil where the city once stood and the surrounding area then poured salt on the entire area.

This was the end of the Carthaginian Empire, though it did take one hundred years and three wars to do it.