

THE PUNIC WARS (264-146 BC)

“The Punic Wars” is the collective name for the wars between the people of Carthage and the Romans. The Romans used the name *Poeni* for the people of Carthage, a city state in northern Africa outside modern-day Tunis, Tunisia. Carthage was the chief city-state and trading hub of the African territory controlled by the Phoenicians. The main reason the conflict began was intense competition. Rome and Carthage both wanted to be the master of trade in the Mediterranean Sea region. There were three separate, but related, wars that arose from this competition. The first war started in 264 BC, and the last war ended in 146 BC (a span of nearly 100 years!).

FIRST PUNIC WAR (264-241 BC)

In the first half of the 3rd century BC, Carthage held many territories, making it easy for them to control and dominate the western Mediterranean Sea region. They even controlled a portion of the island of Sicily, just southwest of Italy, making them a rival of the Romans, who had gradually conquered much of the Italian peninsula.

In 264 BC, King Hiero II of Syracuse (a city-state in southeastern Sicily) attempted to conquer the city-state of Messana (now Messina) on the northeastern tip of Sicily. The residents of Messana asked the Romans and the Carthaginians to defend them from the invading Syracusans.

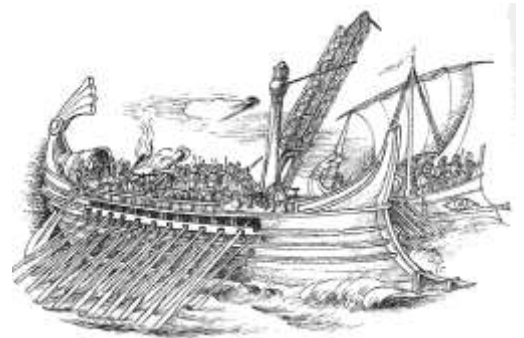
17 - ...Meanwhile the Roman Consuls who had made the treaty with King Hiero of Syracuse [in northeast Sicily], had left, and their successors, Lucius Postumius and Quintus Mamilius, had arrived in Sicily with their legions. On taking note of the plan of the Carthaginians [to take revenge on Hiero for making a treaty with Rome], and their activity at Agrigentum [where they built up an army of mercenaries], they decided on a bolder initiative. Abandoning therefore other operations they brought all their forces to bear on Agrigentum itself, and encamping at a distance of eight stades from the city, shut the Carthaginians up within the walls. ... [The Romans] pursued them with slaughter to the city.

Text from *The Histories* by the Roman historian Polybius where he describes the origins of the First Punic War on the island of Sicily and the first battle of the war. http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Polybius/1*.html#17

Seeing this as an opportunity to expel Carthage from Sicily, the Romans quickly answered the call for help from the people of Messana. Seeing this as a threat to its control of Sicily, the city-state of Carthage declared war on Rome. The promise of glory and plunder was of great importance to the Romans, who responded to Carthage’s declaration of war with their own declaration of war against Carthage.

This war was fought mainly at sea around the island of Sicily. Carthage, being perhaps the greatest sea-trading empire in the world at the time, was by far the stronger of the two in sea battles. True to the Roman desire for perfection, Rome met this challenge by starting a large-scale construction program to build its first naval fleet.

After building their navy, the Romans defeated a Carthaginian fleet off the Sicilian port of Mylae in 260 BC, but failed to capture the island of Sicily. In 256 BC, a Roman army under Roman general Marcus Atilius Regulus established a base in North Africa, but the following year the Carthaginian army under general Hamilcar Barca forced it to withdraw.



56 - The Carthaginians shortly afterwards appointed Hamilcar surnamed Barcas to the command and entrusted naval operations to him. He started with the fleet to ravage the Italian coast (this, I should say, was in the eighteenth year of the war) ...

57 - ... the forces on each side were evenly matched; their trenches were so strong as to be equally unapproachable, and the camps were at a quite small distance from each other, this being the chief reason why there were daily conflicts at certain points, but no decisive engagement.

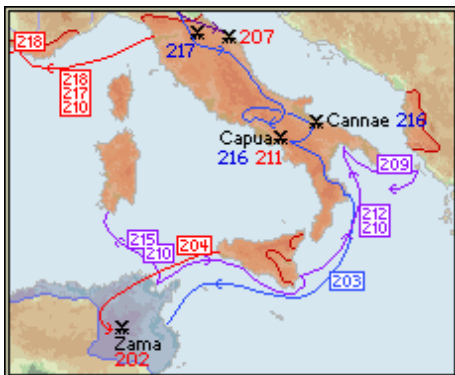
Text from *The Histories* by the Roman historian Polybius where he describes the Carthaginian navy under the command of Hamilcar Barca and its fight with Rome. http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Polybius/1*.html#56
http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Polybius/1*.html#57

For the next 13 years the war was fought in the area of Sicily. It ended with a major naval victory for the Romans in 241 BC in the Aegates Islands. Carthage was forced to give up its territory in Sicily to the Romans, who also captured the Carthaginian islands of Sardinia and Corsica in 237 BC.

SECOND PUNIC WAR (218–201 BC)

Carthaginian bitterness over the loss of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica strengthened its desire to regain power in the Mediterranean. It also strengthened its hatred for the Romans. Hamilcar Barca, the distinguished Carthaginian general of the First Punic War, devoted the remainder of his life to building up Carthaginian power in Spain to make up for the loss of Sicily.

In 226 BC, an agreement with Rome set the northern border of the Carthaginian conquest to the Ebro River (in northern Iberia). But the Romans themselves broke their agreement and crossed the Ebro river, heading south in their effort to take over the Iberian Peninsula (which now includes Spain and Portugal). Hamilcar's son Hannibal inherited control of the Carthaginian army in 221 BC and began to conquer parts of Iberia (now modern-day Spain). Having the same fighting spirit his father once had, Hannibal decided to face the Roman army at Saguntum (now Sagunto, north of modern-day Valencia, Spain) in 219 BC. Saguntum was one of Rome's allies, so in 218 BC, the Romans again declared war on the Carthaginians.



In the spring of 218 BC Hannibal did something the Romans never expected. He swiftly marched a large army including several elephants through Iberia (now Spain) and Gaul (now France) and across the Alps to attack the Romans in Italy before they could complete their preparations for war. He crossed the dangerous mountains, where many of his soldiers and elephants died, and secured a firm position in northern Italy. By 216 BC he had won two major victories, at Lake Trasimeno and the town of Cannae, and reached southern Italy. Cannae was a disastrous defeat for Rome.

[22.6] *For almost three hours the fighting went on; everywhere a desperate struggle was kept up, but it raged with greater fierceness around the consul. He was followed by the pick of his army, and wherever he saw his men hard pressed and in difficulties he at once went to their help. Distinguished by his armor he was the object of the enemy's fiercest attacks, which his comrades did their utmost to repel, ... At last, when the battle was over and the sun's heat had dispelled the fog, mountain and plain revealed in the clear light the disastrous overthrow of the Roman army and showed only too plainly that all was lost.*

A description by the Roman historian Livy in his book *History of Rome* of the Carthaginian victory led by Hannibal and his cavalry commander Maharbal over the Roman army at the Battle at Cannae. <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Livy/Livy22.html#livy.hist.22.6>

The Roman military tactic of engaging Hannibal in large, head-on battles did not work well. The Carthaginian army was too powerful and disciplined, and the Romans suffered embarrassing defeats. So, a Roman consul and general named Fabius Maximus refused to engage Hannibal in set battles. Instead,

he earned the nickname “the delayer” by keeping his troops close to Hannibal, hoping to wear down Hannibal’s forces a little at a time. The delaying tactics involved not directly engaging Hannibal while also exercising a “scorched earth” practice to prevent Hannibal’s forces from finding grains & other resources. Fabius tricked Hannibal by falling back in a pretended retreat, only to regroup later and attack the Carthaginians. While at first, Fabius was criticized for his “cowardly” strategy, he was later praised because of his success. “Fabian Tactics” are now a common part of modern military strategy.

In spite of Hannibal’s requests, he received insufficient reinforcements and siege weapons from Carthage. So, he worked hard to recruit locals to join his army. In 207 BC, Hannibal’s brother Hasdrubal left Iberia with an army to cross the Alps and join Hannibal in Italy. Hasdrubal crossed the Alps, but in a battle at the Metaurus River, in northern Italy, he was killed and his troops were defeated.

Meanwhile, the Roman general Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, known as Scipio Africanus the Elder, had totally defeated the Carthaginians in Spain, and in 204 BC he landed an army in North Africa (in modern-day Tunisia). The Carthaginians convinced Hannibal to return to Africa in 203 BC to defend Carthage against Roman general Scipio Africanus and his very large army.

Leading an army of untrained recruits, Hannibal was decisively defeated by Scipio at the Battle of Zama (in modern-day Tunisia) in 202 BC. This battle marked the end of Carthage as a great power and the close of the Second Punic War. Hannibal was eventually killed and the Carthaginians were forced to give up their land in Iberia (Spain) and the islands of the Mediterranean still in their possession. They were also forced to give up all but 10 ships in their large navy and pay a large amount of tribute money to Rome. These harsh terms of surrender led to continued tensions between Carthage and Rome.



Death of Hannibal.

[39.51] ... Hannibal had always looked forward to such a fate as this; he fully realized the implacable hatred which the Romans felt towards him, ... The guards surrounded the house so closely that no one could slip out of it. When Hannibal was informed that the king's soldiers were in the vestibule, he tried to escape through a postern gate which afforded the most secret means of exit. He found that this too was closely watched and that guards were posted all round the place. Finally he called for the poison which he had long kept in readiness for such an emergency. ... Then, invoking curses on [Rome] and appealing to the gods who guard the rights of hospitality to punish his broken faith, he drained the cup. Such was the close of Hannibal's life.

A description by Livy in his *History of Rome* of the death of the Carthaginian leader Hannibal at the hands of a Roman consul named Flaminius. <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Livy/Livy39.html#livy.hist.39.51>

THIRD PUNIC WAR (149–146 BC)

In the 2nd century BC, however, Carthage managed once again to return to much of its former glory. Their economy prospered, their fleet increased. All of this really irritated Rome because there seemed to be nothing that could force Carthage to its knees.

Also encouraging hatred between Rome and Carthage were the speeches of the famous orator (public speaker), Cato the Elder, who demanded *Delenda est Carthago* (“Carthage must be destroyed”).

... at the end [of his speeches] he would be sure to come out with this sentence, “ALSO, CARTHAGE, METHINKS, OUGHT UTTERLY TO BE DESTROYED.” ... it seemed a perilous thing to



Cato that a city which had been always great, and was now grown sober and wise, by reason of its former calamities, should still lie, as it were, in wait for the follies and dangerous excesses of the over-powerful Roman people; so that he thought it the wisest course to have all outward dangers removed, when they had so many inward ones among themselves.

Text from the Greek historian Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*: "Cato the Elder" in which the Roman orator Cato calls for war against Carthage. http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/mar_cato.html

The Carthaginians broke their treaty with Rome by extending their empire slightly beyond the treaty line established after the Second Punic War. This gave the Romans all the excuse they needed to begin the Third Punic War (149-146 BC).

Rome used its African ally, Masinissa, who ruled over the empire of Numidia to the west of Carthage, as a catalyst to begin the war. Masinissa deliberately provoked Carthage; and in 149 BC, Carthage attacked Masinissa. Rome, claiming to come to the aid of its ally Masinissa, declared war on Carthage. The difference in military force was now to Rome's advantage, and few battles were fought to decide who was the strongest.

At first a peace was agreed upon, but Rome increased its demands, decreeing that the Carthaginians must totally abandon their own city of Carthage. Rejecting Rome's harsh demands, the Carthaginians returned to the fight.

The Romans, led by Scipio Aemilianus (known as Scipio the Younger), captured the city of Carthage after a 3 year siege. The Romans burned Carthage to the ground, sowed salt in the fields to poison the farmland, and sold the surviving inhabitants into slavery.

At the sight of the city utterly perishing amidst the flames Scipio burst into tears, and stood long reflecting on the inevitable change which awaits cities, nations, and dynasties, one and all, as it does every one of us men. This, he thought, had befallen Ilium (Troy), once a powerful city, and the once mighty empires of the Assyrians, Medes, Persians, and that of Macedonia lately so splendid. And unintentionally or purposely he quoted---the words perhaps escaping him unconsciously---

*"The day shall be when holy Troy shall fall
And Priam, lord of spears, and Priam's folk."*

Text from *The Histories* by the Roman historian Polybius where he describes the destruction of Carthage by the Roman army under its general Scipio Aemilianus. <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/ancient/polybius-punic3.html>



PUNIC WARS OUTLINE (264-146 BC)

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| i. First Punic War (264-241 BC) | ii. Second Punic War (218-201 BC) | iii. Third Punic War (149-146 BC) |
| a. Syracuse | a. Hannibal | a. <i>Delenda est Carthago!</i> |
| b. Carthage | b. Fabius Maximus | b. Salt in the fields |
| c. Sicily | c. Scipio Africanus | |

Great resources for many different Ancient Roman primary sources:
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbookfull.html#Rome>

The History of Rome by Livy:
<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Livy/index.html>

The Histories by Polybius:
<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Polybius/>

Various classical texts:
<http://classics.mit.edu/>