



The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies

Punic Wars

Date: 264–146 BCE

Locale: Sicily, Italy, Spain, North Africa

Related civilizations: Republican Rome, Carthage

Significance: Rome defeated Carthage in three wars and replaced it as the dominant power in the western Mediterranean. The Punic Wars marked Rome's transition from a regional power to a Mediterranean empire.

Background: Originally on friendly terms, Rome and Carthage fought increasingly over their respective spheres of influence. The settlement of the first war planted the seeds for the second war, and the third war was largely the product of the second.

Action: The First Punic (PYEW-nihk) War lasted from 264 to 241 BCE. When the city of Messina (in northeast Sicily) appealed to Rome for help against the Carthaginians, the Romans entered Sicily to defend Messina. The Romans seem to have feared the prospect of Carthaginians controlling territory so near to Italy. For more than twenty years, Rome and Carthage fought to control Sicily by land and sea. In 241 BCE, the Romans forced the Carthaginians to evacuate Sicily and pay a large war indemnity. Adding insult to injury, Rome soon bullied Carthage into surrendering the islands of Sardinia and Corsica (238 BCE). The Carthaginians, under Hamilcar Barca, spent the intervening years rebuilding their strength and resources.

The Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) saw the conflict between Rome and Carthage expand to include Spain, Italy, and North Africa. From 237 to 219 BCE, the Carthaginians had carved out an empire in Spain. When the Carthaginian general Hannibal laid siege to Saguntum, a Spanish town allied with Rome, the Romans declared war on Carthage. Rather than waiting in Spain to meet the Roman armies, however, Hannibal, son of Hamilcar, surprised the Romans by marching overland from Spain, through southern France and across the Alps into Italy, famously bringing war elephants on campaign. During the first three years of the war (218–216 BCE), Hannibal defeated the Romans at the battles of the Trebia

River, Lake Trasimene, and Cannae. The Romans weathered these disasters largely because of their great reserves of manpower and the steadfast loyalty of many of their central Italian allies. Eventually, the tides of the war turned. From 216 to 204 BCE, the Romans steadily won back the Italian territory Hannibal had seized. Meanwhile, Roman armies gained control of Spain and defended Sicily from Carthaginian forces. In 204 BCE, the Roman commander Scipio Africanus invaded Africa and defeated Hannibal and Carthage at the Battle of Zama (202 BCE).

Depiction of Hannibal and his army crossing the Alps during the Second Punic War.



After the prolonged struggles of the first two wars, the Third Punic War was anticlimactic. When Carthage broke its treaty with Rome and began to rearm itself in 149 BCE, the Romans laid siege to the city. The Romans captured Carthage after three years, razing the city and sowing salt in the surrounding fields in order to obliterate Carthage completely.

Consequences: Rome acquired from Carthage its first overseas provinces: Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, and Spain. Ultimately, the Romans

utterly destroyed Carthage, occupied the territory around Carthage, and named it the province of Africa. This final decimation of Carthage was famously pushed for by many Romans, especially Cato the Elder, who supposedly ended every public speech with the phrase “ceterum [autem] censeo, Carthago delenda est” (But I think, Carthage must be destroyed).

See also: Cannae, Battle of (10.3331/CWEP_0545); Carthage (10.3331/CWEP_0549); Hannibal (10.3331/CWEP_0625); Rome, Republican (10.3331/CWEP_0738); Scipio Africanus (10.3331/CWEP_0748); Zama, Battle of (10.3331/CWEP_0889).

—*Jeremiah B. McCall*

Citation Types

Type	Format
MLA Style	. "Punic Wars." <i>The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies</i> , edited by Shally-Jensen Michael, Salem, 2016. <i>Salem Online</i> .
APA Style	. (2016). Punic Wars. In S. Michael (Ed.), <i>The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies</i> . Hackensack: Salem. Retrieved from https://online.salempress.com
CHICAGO Style	. "Punic Wars." <i>The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies</i> . Hackensack: Salem, 2016. Accessed January 31, 2018. https://online.salempress.com .