

The Punic Wars

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June 6, 2016

Introduction

In 264 BC,¹ the first of a series of conflicts between two powers in the Mediterranean erupted, which would become known as the Punic Wars. Primarily an ongoing struggle between Rome and Carthage, with various fluid allies on either side, it would rumble on for over a century and end with the destruction of Carthage (the city and its empire).

In this discussion we will be taking a broad overview to the three wars, with a particular focus on the second war as it was the most important in the long term. We will examine the state of affairs before the First Punic War, then move on to look at each war in turn. Finally, we will examine the immediate aftermath of the Third Punic War, and the implications this had for the balance of power in the Western Mediterranean.

The nature of warfare in this period means that, despite the length of time covered, there were long periods of inactivity – for example it was usual for the vast majority of battles to take place during the spring and summer months. As a result, we will skip over these periods and focus instead on specific events of importance – particularly the two crucial battles of the Second Punic War.

Background

The name of the wars comes from the fact that many of our sources are either Roman (e.g. Livy) or sympathetic to Rome (Polybius) and would therefore have seen these conflicts as wars against, and possibly started by, the Carthaginians. *Punic* was a cultural stereotype used by the Romans to refer to the ethnicity of their opponents, rather than the city-state of Carthage, and it is unlikely that the Carthaginians would have referred to themselves as such. Pro-Carthaginian sources (e.g. most Greek historians) referred to the Second Punic War as the Hannibalic War, after the Carthaginian general.²

Rome

By the time of the First Punic War, Rome was well-established as the main power in the Italian Peninsula. Having ejected the last king in 509, Rome established a republic, with the Senate, a collection of rich and powerful individuals, as the main decision-making body.³ Executive authority was vested

¹All dates are BC unless otherwise indicated.

²Polybius 1.3.

³The Senate could trace its roots back to the founding of Rome, but it was largely an advisory council to the monarch before the republic and to the emperor from Augustus onwards.

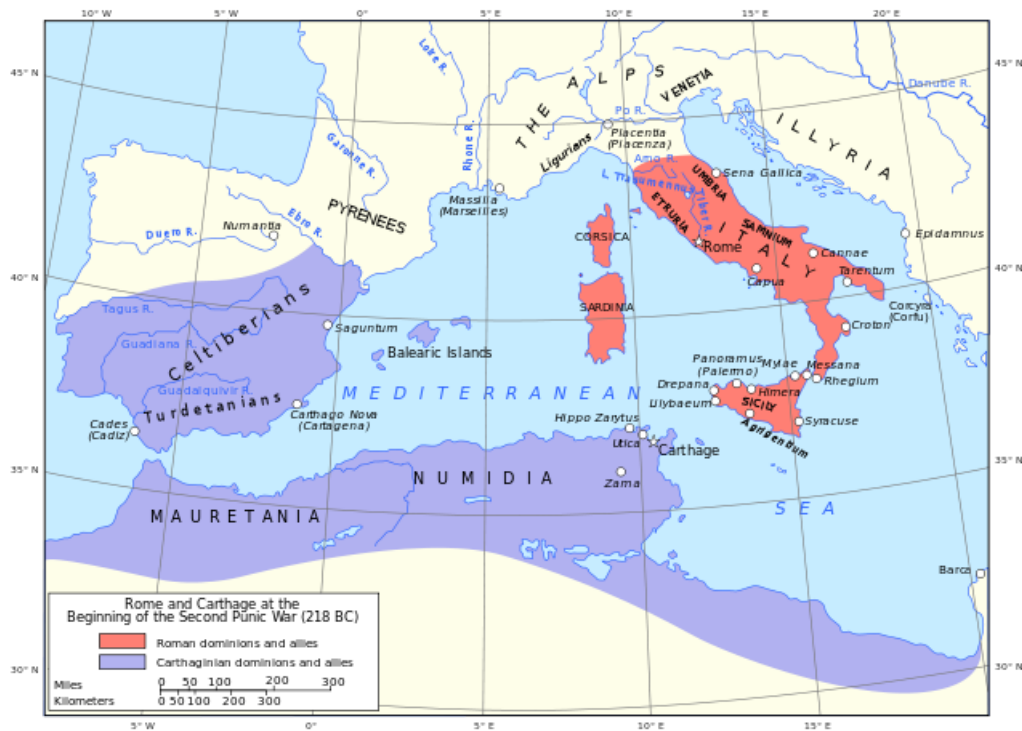


Figure 1: Locations of Rome and Carthage (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Punic_War)

in a collection of magistrates, including the two consuls who had command of the armies.⁴ The fact that magistracies were only held for a single year – though occasionally extended – and the desire to win military glories during that time, encouraged decisive and sometimes reckless action. Severe punishments for failure also appear to have been rare,⁵ and other than the risk of death in battle the risk/reward equation was weighted in favour of action. Failure could stall an ambitious man’s political career, but it was still possible to recover from a defeat.⁶

Rome’s army at the time consisted largely of citizens, drawn from both Rome and her allies.⁷ The bulk of the army consisted of infantry, with cavalry provided by *equites* who were entitled to a replacement horse out of state funds if theirs was killed in battle. Armies were split into legions with approximately 5,000 men each,⁸ and each consul would usually command two legions, giving a total of around twenty thousand men in the army at any one time (excluding allies).⁹

⁴Technically the censors were the most senior magistrates, as the eligibility requirements for office included having held a previous consulship. However, censors did not hold *imperium* (the power to order corporal and capital punishment) and for the purposes of discussing wars the consuls can be seen as the most senior magistrates.

⁵We do hear of a consul, Publius Claudius Pulcher, who was prosecuted after losing a battle, though possibly because he ignored bad omens rather than solely for military incompetence (Polybius 1.52). He is said to have lost his temper when the sacrificial chickens refused to eat, throwing them into the sea with the words ‘if they will not eat, let them drink!’ (Suetonius, *Life of Tiberius*, 2).

⁶For example, Cornelius Scipio Asina lost his ships to the Carthaginians in 260 and was their prisoner for a time, but managed to win a second consulship in 254, despite his military defeat and the embarrassing nickname *asina* (‘female donkey’).

⁷Some allies were required to supply troops as part of their treaty obligations. This often caused resentment, although the opportunity to share in the rewards on defeating an enemy army no doubt helped to keep this resentment under control.

⁸It was rare for a legion to be at full strength due to casualties, deserters etc., so this figure should be used as a rough approximation rather than an exact measure of manpower

⁹For full details on the Roman army in this period, see *The Making of the Roman Army* (Lawrence Keppie).

Carthage

According to myth, Carthage was founded by a woman named Elissa or Dido, to whom the Libyans granted all the land that she could cover with the hide of an ox. Elissa cut the hide into small thin strips, allowing her to cover a much greater piece of land than the Libyans expected. Such craftiness would come to be seen as typical Carthaginian trickery by the Romans.

The Carthaginian method of selecting military commanders differed markedly from their opponents. In Rome, supreme military command generally rested with the consuls, two elected officials who held office for a year and usually had to wait some time before holding the post again.¹⁰ Carthage, on the other hand, would appoint generals for much longer periods. This is most noticeable in the Second Punic War where Hannibal is the primary Carthaginian commander throughout, whereas the Romans had more than a dozen commanders.

Carthage meted out severe punishments to generals who failed in their mission, even if through events beyond their control, with several commanders suffering death by crucifixion.¹¹ In contrast, Rome was relatively lenient and, whilst a defeat might set back a political career, it did not preclude further commands. A Roman general was far more likely to meet his end at the hands of the enemy than from the Senate.

The armies of Carthage also differed markedly from those of Rome. Carthaginian forces comprised mostly of mercenaries, possibly as a result of the losses suffered in the Sicilian Wars. Citizens would only be drafted in large numbers if there was an immediate threat to Carthage. This method of recruitment could be costly, and there were several occasions when large numbers of mercenaries awaiting pay caused problems for the Carthaginians – particularly in the aftermath of the First Punic War where Carthage struggled to make payments.

At the outbreak of the First Punic War, Carthage had a trade network stretching out into Spain and North Africa. Its influence on the region was probably as great as Rome's, if not more so, and there was no reason to believe that Rome was certain to emerge victorious from the coming war.

Names

Both the Romans and Carthaginians would often name sons after their fathers, and selected male names from a relatively limited pool.¹² As a result, the same names appear in several places, but often refer to different people. For example, there were multiple Carthaginians with the names Hamilcar and Hannibal, and several Romans with the name Scipio. In some cases it is obvious that they refer to different people due to the amount of time between two events¹³ but in other cases some disambiguation is required.

¹⁰Whilst there were some notable exceptions to this rule, particularly in the late republic, for the most part the rules regarding the length of consulships were generally adhered to during the period of the Punic Wars. Furthermore, with only two consulships on offer each year, competition for the post was fierce.

¹¹Polybius 1.24.

¹²There also appears to have been a small pool of popular female names, but this is less of an issue given the limited role of women in this period – at least according to our sources, which rarely mention women except in relation to their husbands, fathers or sons.

¹³There was a military commander with the name Hannibal in both the First and Second Punic Wars, but one died around ten years before the other was born, so there is limited scope for confusion.

First Punic War (264-241)

At the beginning of the First Punic War, Rome was the leading city-state in Italy, having gradually conquered or absorbed most of the tribal towns and villages in the region. Less than a decade before, it had finally defeated Pyrrhus of Epirus, in a war in which they were at least fighting against the same enemy as Carthage, if not as part of a coordinated military alliance.¹⁴

However, the Romans did not have complete control over the Western Mediterranean, and Carthage had also been expanding her influence during this time. Matters came to a head when a group of Italian mercenaries, the Marmetines, appealed to both city-states for assistance in holding the recently captured city of Messana. The Carthaginian response was to send aid in the form of a garrison, which was installed in the city. The Marmetines appear to have been unhappy with this situation, and sent a delegation to Rome to request assistance. The Senate, after much deliberation, declined to intervene, possibly because of the way in which the Marmetines had captured Messana.¹⁵ However, when the proposal was put to the Roman people, they enthusiastically voted for war, and Appius Claudius, one of the consuls, was appointed to command the expedition.

The initial stages of the Roman campaign were successful, as they managed to land in Sicily and defeat the forces besieging Messana, and then moved on to make peace with Syracuse – the terms of which gave the Romans a supply base. As the war progressed, each side suffered various setbacks, including the loss of hundreds of ships in several different storms. Eventually, Rome's ability and willingness to keep funding new ships appears to have been the overall decisive factor, as the First Punic War was dominated by engagements at sea. Hamilcar Barca, the father of the Hannibal who would inflict a series of defeats on Rome in the next war, was forced to negotiate a peace.

The treaty imposed on Carthage was one-sided and required Carthage to pay 1,000 talents immediately¹⁶ and 2,200 talents over 10 years, and surrender all prisoners of war without ransom. Carthage was also required to 'evacuate the whole of Sicily'.¹⁷ Later, another clause was added, requiring the Carthaginians to evacuate Sardinia and pay a further 1,000 talents.¹⁸

Second Punic War (218-201)

By 219, Carthage was recovering from the costs of the First Punic War and was looking to expand her empire, particularly in Spain. The newly appointed Hannibal laid siege to the city of Saguntum on the eastern coast of Iberia (as Spain was known at the time). The city sent for help from Rome, but none was forthcoming, and after eight months the defences were overrun and the city captured. Hannibal had offered the inhabitants the opportunity to leave unharmed, provided that they left behind their gold, silver and other property, but in the end these negotiations failed and all inhabitants 'of fighting age' were put to death.¹⁹

¹⁴The war against Pyrrhus is where the phrase *pyrrhic victory* is derived from, used to describe a victory which is gained at too high a cost. Pyrrhus is reported to have said that he would be ruined if he was victorious in one more battle against the Romans (Plutarch, *Life of Pyrrhus*, 21.9).

¹⁵According to Polybius, the Marmetines had entered the city 'under the guise of friendship', and then proceeded to capture it and execute its male inhabitants, whilst taking the women as their wives (Polybius 1.7).

¹⁶A talent was a unit of mass, usually in the form of a precious metal such as gold. The exact amount varied as there were several different talents (Attic, Roman etc.) but most were around 30kg (66lb). There is no precise modern equivalent, but these were significant sums and a heavy burden on Carthage in the years following the war. For context, the Bank of England reserves as of May 2016 were around 10,000 talents (based on a simple conversion of 1,000 ounces = 1 talent).

¹⁷Polybius 1.62.

¹⁸Polybius 3.27.

¹⁹Livy 21.13-14.

Crossing the Alps

In 218, Hannibal completed one of the most famous military expeditions, by crossing the Alps into Italy. The exact route taken is open to speculation, and we have numerous options to choose from. Regardless, this was seen as a manoeuvre which wrong-footed the Romans, who do not appear to have expected Hannibal to march into Italy so quickly. Several battles were fought and Hannibal managed to defeat the Romans, including ambushing them at Lake Trasimene which also resulted in the death of the consul Gaius Flaminius Nepos. An increasingly worried Senate decided that the situation was serious enough to appoint Fabius Maximus as dictator, placing him in sole command of the Roman army.

Having been appointed dictator²⁰ in 217, Fabius Maximus employed a strategy of shadowing Hannibal but refusing to engage in battle.²¹ Instead of fighting pitched battles, Fabius harassed Hannibal's foragers and destroyed crops, hoping to gradually wear down the Carthaginians by restricting their movement and access to food. These tactics earned him the nickname *cunctator*, usually translated as 'delayer' or 'lingerer'. Whilst successful in delaying Hannibal and buying Rome time to prepare, being marked as a 'lingerer' was not a positive sign amongst a people who prized aggression and valour. At the end of his term²² the Senate replaced Fabius with the consuls Servilius Geminus and Marcus Aemilius Regulus.

Battle of Cannae

Shortly after, Gaius Terentius Varro and Lucius Aemilius Paullus were elected as consuls and placed in command of a newly raised army,²³ with orders to engage Hannibal and stop his largely unopposed advance across Italy. Usually only one consul, with their two legions, would be dispatched to deal with any given threat, but such was the fear of Hannibal that eight legions were raised and dispatched to battle the Carthaginians. The possibility of Italian towns defecting to Hannibal also appears to have been a concern to the Romans.

On the day of the battle, the Roman consuls followed their conventional method of deploying troops, although the numbers involved meant that the formations were deeper than usual. The primary tactic used with this formation was to close with the enemy and keep a large proportion of men in reserve to replace frontline troops who were tired, reinforce a weak position, or take advantage of a weakness in the enemy line.

Hannibal, on the other hand, did not stick to convention and deployed his men based on the terrain and the fact that the Romans had their retreats to the rear and right flanks blocked by a hill and river respectively. When the Romans advanced, Hannibal allowed the centre of his line to fall back, as if weakened. The Roman infantry pressed forward to take advantage of this seemingly weak position, only to be outflanked by Hannibal's African infantry units, and attacked in the rear by cavalry (the Roman cavalry had already been defeated by this point). Surrounded on all sides with nowhere to

²⁰Like many words from this time period, the Roman use of dictator differs from our modern usage.

²¹In this period of history, battles generally took place with the 'agreement' of both sides, and it was difficult to force a reluctant enemy to fight a pitched battle. Occasionally an army would be ambushed, or two armies would run into each other without warning, but generally the dust cloud thrown up by thousands of men marching would alert commanders to the presence of an army when it was several miles away. Often two armies would line up in formation outside of their respective camps, only to return without engaging.

²²Roman dictators were appointed for a specific period – usually six months – or for a specific purpose such as holding elections. They were expected to resign gracefully at the end of their term, and all appear to have done so in this period. The office was later discredited by Sulla and Julius Caesar (the latter becoming 'dictator for life' shortly before his assassination), who treated it more like the modern term where abuse of power is generally implied.

²³Polybius 3.106.

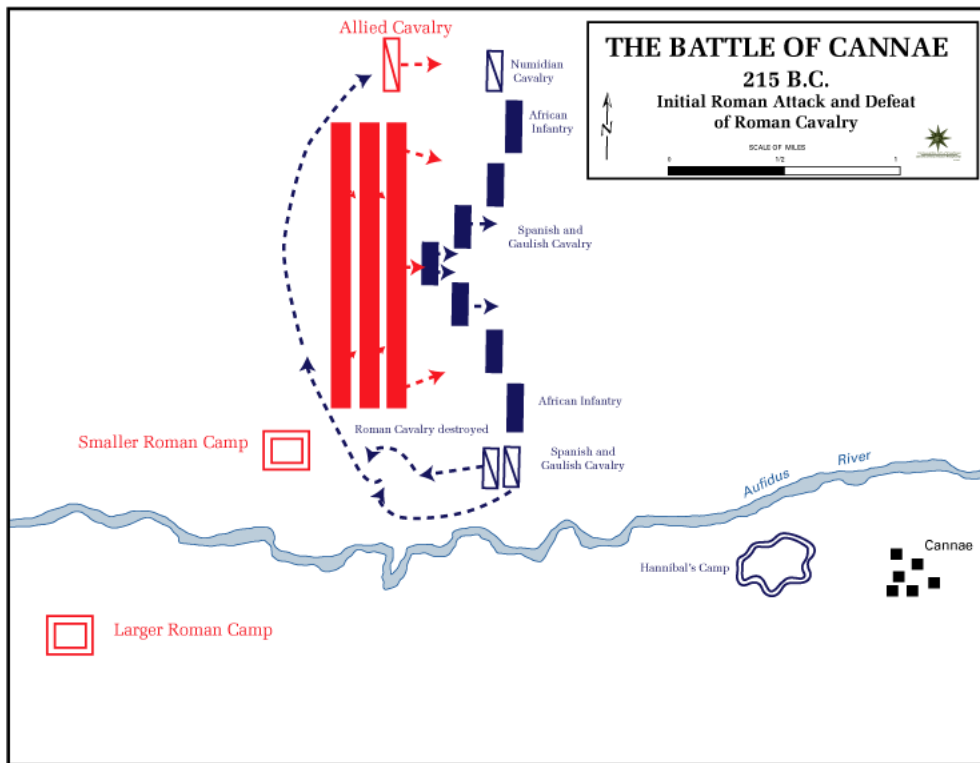


Figure 2: Initial troop deployment at Cannae (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Cannae)

run, the Roman forces were almost completely destroyed, although a small number (perhaps 5-10% of the total) managed to fight their way through and escaped to the nearby town of Canusium.

Although Hannibal had defeated Roman armies in the past, Cannae was particularly worrying due to the near total destruction of the Roman army. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of Rome's allies began to rethink their loyalties, and we are told of over a dozen who defected to the Carthaginians.²⁴

The blame for the loss has often been laid at the feet of Varro, as he was in command on the day of the battle.²⁵ He is seen by contemporary sources as being reckless and overconfident, although a more balanced view might be that he was outmanoeuvred by a more skillful general who was prepared to break with conventional forms of fighting and use the terrain to his advantage.

After the battle, Hannibal sent a delegation to negotiate a peace treaty with the Senate. Given the heavy losses suffered, it was not unreasonable for Hannibal to expect such an offer to be considered and accepted. Instead Rome stepped up her efforts to defeat Carthage, raising new legions to replace those lost at Cannae.

Carthage forced out of Spain

Although Hannibal continued to cause problems for the Romans in Italy, the Carthaginians fared less well in Spain. The two main Carthaginian generals in that area, Hasdrubal Barca (Hannibal's brother) and Hanno appear to have lacked Hannibal's military skills and suffered a series of defeats at the hands of the Romans. Whilst Hannibal continued to command successfully in Italy, the defeats in Spain deprived him of reinforcements. In particular, the almost complete destruction of the

²⁴Livy 22.61.

²⁵When two consuls were present, they generally held command on alternate days.

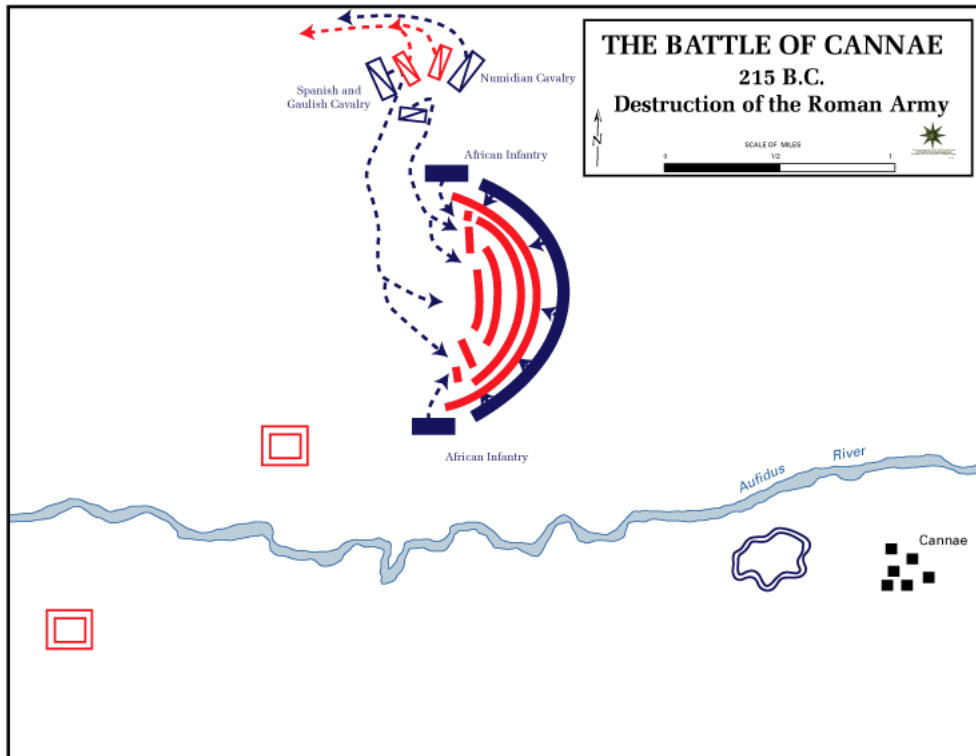


Figure 3: Rome army surrounded and destroyed (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Cannae)

Carthaginian army at the Battle of Ilipa (the Roman army commanded by Scipio Africanus) broke the Carthaginian hold on Spain.

Battle of Zama

In 205, Scipio Africanus secured the consulship and proposed to end the war by taking the fight to Carthage in their home land, demanding Africa as his consular province and threatening to take the vote to the people if the Senate did not comply.²⁶ Despite the opposition of Fabius Maximus, Scipio's demand was granted and he set off to Africa. In the meantime, the Carthaginian senate had recalled Hannibal from Italy.

The final battle at Zama began with both Roman and Carthaginian armies deploying in similar formations, with three lines of infantry in the centre and cavalry on both flanks. Hannibal also deployed his elephants at the front of his army, hoping that they would intimidate and trample the Roman infantry.

When the fighting commenced, Scipio avoided the elephants by having his cavalry blow large horns to frighten them, and then allowed the remainder to charge through the gaps in the Roman lines which had been left open for that purpose. The remainder of the battle was a long, hard slog between the infantry of both sides, but in the end the Roman cavalry managed to circle around the Carthaginians and attack them in the rear. The majority of the Carthaginians were killed or captured, although Hannibal himself managed to escape. Soon after, the Carthaginian senate sued for peace.

²⁶Livy 28.40-45.

Peace treaty

As with the First Punic War, Carthage was forced to pay a war indemnity, this time of 10,000 talents of silver over a period of fifty years. In addition, her ability to maintain a navy was severely restricted, she was forbidden from raising an army or waging war in Africa without permission from Rome, and completely forbidden from waging war outside Africa. Once again, Carthage was forced to hand over all prisoners of war free of ransom, whilst also paying for the return of around 200 of her citizens and handing over 100 hostages as a 'guarantee of good faith'.²⁷

Third Punic War (149-146)

In 151, the indemnity imposed on Carthage at the end of the Second Punic War was finally repaid. To Carthage this meant they had fulfilled their obligations and were therefore no longer bound by the treaty – in particular the condition that forbade Carthage from raising an army without permission from Rome. Numidia was once again encroaching on Carthaginian territory, and had already besieged one of the border towns. Carthage sent out a force to repel the Numidians and recover the lost ground.

Although the Carthaginian force was defeated, Rome appears to have used the raising of an army by Carthage and its use against the Numidians as an excuse to declare war, claiming that the actions of Carthage were a breach of the treaty.

This time, the war was relatively short. Rome gathered a significant force and marched towards Carthage, with a consular demand that all weapons and armour be handed over to them. When this demand was met, it was followed up by another, this time that the Carthaginians move inland so that their city could be burned. At this point, the Carthaginians realised that Roman demands were likely to continue until Carthage was destroyed, and so they abandoned negotiations. The Roman response was to place Carthage under siege.

Although the Carthaginians held out for nearly three years, and scored several minor victories against the Romans, the final result was a foregone conclusion. Carthage eventually fell in the spring of 146, when Scipio Aemilianus led a successful assault. The Romans spent 17 days razing the city to the ground, with the surviving inhabitants sold into slavery.

It is an oft-repeated myth that the Senate ordered the fields near Carthage to be salted, in order to ensure that nothing could grow there again. However, there is no archaeological evidence to support this, and it would be unusual for Rome to completely destroy a site which could be used for growing grain for its expanding population. In fact, a new city was built on the site, and it became an important part of the Western Roman Empire as the centre of the province of Africa.²⁸

Conclusions

At the beginning of the First Punic War, it was by no means clear which side would emerge victorious – often in ancient conflicts there would come a point where the two sides would agree conditions for peace. No one could have predicted that two more wars would occur and that the final result would be the complete destruction of Carthage – usually the victors wished to capture an enemy city rather than systematically raze it to the ground.

²⁷Polybius 14.18; Livy 30.43.

²⁸The Roman province of Africa was only the tip of the continent, and not the whole of modern day Africa.

Several reasons have been offered for the conflicts between Rome and Carthage, ranging from Rome's concern about the expansion of a neighbouring power to the conduct of third parties which pulled Rome and Carthage into war.²⁹ The treatment of Carthage by Rome after the First Punic War, especially in terms of the war indemnities, could be seen as a cause for the Second War.³⁰

Ultimately, the overall reason leading to the defeat and destruction of Carthage appears to have been a combination of Rome's desire to provoke war, or declare it based on a (sometimes dubious) technicality, and then continue to fight regardless of the cost. Unlike modern democracies, where high casualty rates and limited progress often results in strong pressure on politicians to bring a conflict to a close, Rome appears to have displayed an enthusiasm for conquest, regardless of the initial results and despite the fact that majority of the army consisted of citizens.

Chronology

- 264 Beginning of the First Punic War.
- 247 Birth of Hannibal.
- 241 End of the First Punic War.
- 221 Hannibal made commander of Carthaginian forces in Iberia.
- 219 Siege of Saguntum.
- 218 Beginning of the Second Punic War.
- 218 Hannibal crosses the Alps.
- 217 Roman forces ambushed and defeated at Lake Trasimene.
- 216 Roman army defeated at Cannae.
- 202 Carthaginian army defeated at Zama.
- 201 End of the Second Punic War.
- 149 Beginning of the Third Punic War.
- 146 End of the Third Punic War.

Sources and further reading

We are fortunate that this time period is well documented, and many of the primary sources are still available to us. There is also a wide range of further reading, from popular histories to academic works.

Primary sources

Our primary sources are a mixture of Latin and Greek. This period of history is well served by English translations, particularly of the most important works, and in several cases there are multiple

²⁹Third parties drawing more powerful neighbours into a conflict is also a possible cause of the Peloponnesian War, which we have discussed previously.

³⁰Perhaps similar to the way in which the Allies treated Germany after the First World War, making huge demands for reparations?

translations available.

Polybius: Greek with a heavy Roman bias. Polybius was a hostage in Rome between the Second and Third Punic Wars, and a tutor for Scipio Aemilianus. These connections meant that he had a greater insight into the Roman military, and he may have been present when Carthage was sacked in 146. Generally considered to be more reliable than Livy, Polybius is a major source for the Punic Wars.

Livy: Roman writing several centuries after the war, in the reign of Augustus. Whilst sometimes criticised as unreliable, patriotic and concerned mainly with telling a good story, Livy used several sources which would otherwise be lost, and is therefore a useful guide to the wars, although not one which can be relied upon in isolation.

Appian: Roman historian of Greek origin whose *Roman History* ranges from the beginning of Rome to the time of Trajan (c. 100 AD). Although writing several centuries after the Punic Wars, Appian's work is valuable as a large part of it has survived to the present day.

Plutarch: Greek (later Roman) biographer known for his 'Lives' which discuss who he considered to be great individuals (e.g. Cato the Elder, though sadly the Life of Scipio Africanus is lost). Care must be taken as Plutarch, like Livy, was writing several centuries after the war and was aiming to entertain rather than provide historical accuracy.

Further reading

For those who wish to delve into this time period in more detail, some specific works are listed below.

The Making of the Roman Army: From Republic to Empire, Lawrence Keppie. Comprehensive coverage of the changes in the Roman army from republic to empire.

Carthage Must Be Destroyed, Richard Miles. One of the few books focusing on Carthage and aimed at a general audience.

The Fall of Carthage, Adrian Goldsworthy. Covers all three wars and contains a number of maps.

In the Name of Rome, Adrian Goldsworthy. Biographies of individual Roman generals, including Scipio Africanus.

Rome versus Carthage: The War at Sea, Christa Steinby. A detailed examination of the role of the navy in the three wars.

A Companion to the Punic Wars, Dexter Hoyos (Editor). Collection of essays aimed at an academic audience, but still accessible to the interested general reader.

Hannibal: a Hellenistic life, Eve MacDonald. Biography of the Carthaginian general who inflicted many defeats on Rome.