

The Tale of Two Ancient Cities: Rome and Carthage

In the Mediterranean there were two powerhouses that competed against each other for trade and land. The Roman Republic had expanded its borders for more than two centuries and was looking for more. The city-state of Carthage controlled most of Northern Africa and the western portions of the Mediterranean. It was only a matter of time before these two powers would come into conflict with each other and would be known as the Punic Wars.



The first war between Rome and Carthage occurred in 264 B.C. and would last for 20 years. The conflict began over a small city called Messana. Messana itself was experiencing an almost civil war. One side of the conflict went to Rome for help, the other Carthage. When Carthage shows up to Messana with a fleet of ships, the Romans send a large contingency of soldiers to meet the fleet. In the end, the Carthage fleet was forced to retreat. In anger, Carthage's leaders send a large army, of about 20,000, to meet the Romans and were defeated. Unfazed, Carthage sent 50,000 more troops and was defeated once again by the superior Roman forces.

The conflict died down temporarily until the year 218 BC. Both sides claimed the colony of Saguntum and war soon broke out. This time, however, the Carthaginian army was lead by Hannibal Barca. At the age of 25, Hannibal was determined to defeat the enemy he had grown to hate. Hannibal's plan was simple; he would take his smaller army and invade Italy directly. Rome had grown overconfident that no army would be able to approach Rome over the mountains. Hannibal, however, was able to get past the Roman army again and again.

Within a year, Hannibal had managed to get into Italy with of all things, a number of elephants and about 28,000 men. With his troops, Hannibal was able to inflict huge losses against the larger Roman army. It is estimated that during the first two years of the Second Punic War, Hannibal's army had killed 90,000 Roman troops. The conflicts continued and the Carthaginians and Romans exchanged territories. By 208 BC, however, Hannibal's situation had become desperate. Hannibal had depended on the enemies of Rome to help him defeat the Republic. Unfortunately for him, they did not. Hannibal called for his brother and his brother's troops to join him. His brother was defeated right before he was able to join forces.

In 204 BC, a Roman invasion fleet led by Scipio Africanus landed near Carthage. Hannibal knew that he had to return to Carthage to defend it. Under the nose of the Roman army, Hannibal was able to smuggle 20,000 troops out of Italy and back to Carthage. At the Battle of Zama, Hannibal and Scipio fought evenly matched. Hannibal used elephants once again, hoping to scare and surprise the Romans. The plan failed and Carthage was forced to surrender. Not only did they lose the war, they also lost all of their holdings. The territory of Carthage was reduced to the city of Carthage itself.



The Third and final Punic War began when part of the Carthaginian Army crossed into Roman territory to pursue a group of bandits. Rome, still worried about the rebuilding of Carthage, declared war and became determined to crush Carthage forever. In 149 B.C. the Roman army crossed the Mediterranean and attack Carthage. It would take three years to defeat Carthage and the Roman army would tear apart the city, basically leveling it to the ground. It would become against Roman law to trade, farm, or work in the area where Carthage once stood.