



Essential Histories

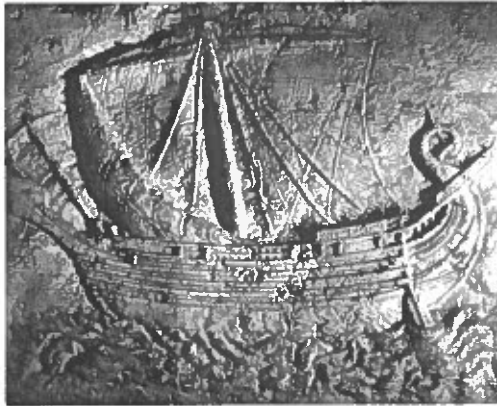
The Punic Wars  
264–146 BC

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Relief of a Carthaginian merchant ship. (Roger-Viollet)

He never lived to see his wishfulfilled, dying shortly after the Third Punic War began. He was an austere, single-minded and ruthless man, but one who possessed both physical and moral courage.

## Conclusion and consequences Expansionism and the disposition for war

Since the history of the Punic Wars is written almost entirely from a military point of view, inevitably the conclusions will also be military. The consequences, however, which will be considered at the end of this chapter are not so restricted. But let us first look at the causes for war, then briefly consider its conduct by both antagonists, before drawing a broad conclusion as to why the Carthaginians were vanquished.

The causes of war are seldom explicit or simple, nor do they lend themselves to broad generalisations, such as commercial rivalry, social unrest or religious fanaticism. Usually there are also a number of interacting, if subsidiary, factors. These can include national or individual ambitions, prejudices and fears, all heightened by a generous measure of misunderstanding and miscalculation. To isolate one of these factors risks over-simplification, while to follow several can result in confusion.

Then there are the theorists: some consider war to be a cyclical process, the revulsion of a generation which has participated in a prolonged conflict being replaced by the romantic ardour of the next. Others put forward the theory of delinquency: nations are human beings writ large who inevitably squabble and then fight. A third group believes that wars arise from ignorance, which, through increased commercial, personal, cultural and other contacts, can be abolished. Although such explanations all contain elements of truth, in the light of experience none has given grounds for thinking that it is capable of standing alone.

If so much contemporary analysis and theorising has been devoted to determining the causes of war, it may well be asked what purpose will be served by considering what happened over 2,000 years ago. The available evidence is fragmentary, the opinions expressed often hearsay, even at the time, and the relevance of such distant events is questionable. Even so, there are two clearly identifiable factors which made the First Punic War more probable and remain just as relevant today. First, the Romans saw an opportunity to gain a foothold in Sicily by aiding the Mamertines, and secondly, because they saw that the Carthaginians were unprepared militarily, they succumbed to the temptation.

The seemingly obvious cause of the Second Punic War was Hannibal's determination to avenge the loss of Sicily and his father's humiliation. This was certainly the immediate cause of the war but the overall setting was far more complex. There was an undeniable momentum behind Roman expansion: periods of peace were temporary interludes to be broken when a favourable opportunity for advancement presented itself. So it was with Sardinia, which the Romans seized in 238 BC and then unconvincingly claimed that it was one of the islands referred to as 'lying between Sicily and Italy' ceded to them following the First Punic War. In Italy itself, the Romans annexed Ager Gallicus on the Adriatic coast from the Gauls and incorporated the Etruscans into their confederation. Given Rome's clear cultural disposition for war, another conflict with Carthage was inevitable, only the timing was uncertain until decided by Hannibal.

The cause of the Third Punic War can be attributed to the loss of Scipio Africanus' moderating influence when he fell victim to political in-fighting, and his replacement by Cato with his advocacy of vigorous confrontation with Carthage. We can see the timelessness of these events by looking back to the Cold War,

when the Soviets incorporated most of Eastern Europe into their brand of confederation, attempted to secure Berlin by blockade and drew down the Iron Curtain. Fortunately the West was more able to defend itself against confrontation than was Carthage.

Looking at the events of the three Punic Wars, we can see how important it is to adjust force structures to changing political and military requirements, and then to conduct war with a purposeful strategic aim. As we have seen, the Romans began a war which clearly had a major maritime dimension without possessing a navy, while the Carthaginians had an army which, without a long period of mobilisation, was incapable of defending its widely dispersed possessions. Then there was the direction of the war itself. The Romans initially had the limited, short-term objective of securing a foothold in Sicily, but by failing to define their long-term aim, they drifted into a prolonged conflict.

In the Second Punic War the Romans were initially thrown on to the defensive by Hannibal's superior generalship, until he lacked the strength to maintain the offensive and defend the cities he had gained. Ultimately the Romans prevailed on the battlefield because, however incompetent and divided the leadership was at times, military service formed a part of every aspiring citizen's upbringing. In sharp contrast, the Carthaginian politicians were mainly merchants, irreconcilably divided between those wishing to preserve their overseas interests by opposing Rome and those wanting to compromise in order to expand their African possessions. This was a political division which precluded any clear strategic national aim. In the end it was this, together with the inattention paid in peace-time to the provision and training of competent commanders, that led to Carthage's downfall rather than, as has sometimes been suggested, the Romans' greatly superior human and material resources.

Finally, let it be repeated, human nature does not change, only the circumstances with which it is surrounded. We should then never be led astray by wishful thinking, especially about totalitarian regimes, as was Chamberlain by Hitler at Munich, and Roosevelt by Stalin at Yalta; both were deceived and ultimately betrayed at terrible cost.

Since Carthage was obliterated and its population dispersed, it is only the Romans with whom we are concerned, so we cannot do better than begin by relating the prediction made by Scipio Africanus' grandson, Scipio Nasica. Shortly before the Third Punic War he warned the Senate that though Rome's position as a dominant power should be preserved, Carthage should not be destroyed as a rival. Were this to occur, there would be no check to Rome's arrogant disregard for the legitimate interests and concerns of smaller states. Moreover, in the absence of any external threat, the Roman Confederation would be in danger of disintegrating as fractious political and social groups pursued their own self-interested ends. Events proved Scipio's prediction to be remarkably perspicacious.

With ruthless determination the Romans extended their boundaries to the Euphrates, Danube, Rhine and Atlantic Ocean. A single city had expanded into an immense empire, but its arrogance brought its nemesis. The legions were no longer a citizen militia controlled by the Senate and enrolled to meet a passing need, but a long-service force of independent contingents whose loyalties had been transferred from a distant state to its immediate military commanders, many of whom had political ambitions. So it was in 49 BC when, at the head of five cohorts, Caesar crossed the Rubicon, the river marking the boundary between Cisalpine Gaul and Roman Italy, to unleash a civil war which was to extend from the Italian peninsula to Greece, Syria and Cappadocia, down through Africa, Sicily and Sardinia to Spain. Internecine struggles first weakened then extinguished the military vigour of the Roman world until Rome itself was sacked in AD 410 by Alaric the Visigoth.

The relentless expansion of the Roman Empire transformed the social and economic fabric of the Italian Confederation as the spoils of war poured into Italy. While the young men were drafted into the legions deployed along the empire's distant frontiers, they were replaced by tens of thousands of slaves who worked

on the land or in domestic service. This could include concubinage, as was provided for Cato, or more debauching vices such as paedophilia, a practice acquired from the Greeks. But as time passed many slaves were enfranchised and became Roman citizens, though judging by Scipio Aemelianus' rebuke of those once thronging the Forum—'Silence, spurious sons of Italy!'—of intemperate if not insolent behaviour. Thus a new breed of people arose who, holding different beliefs, customs and expectations, frequently rejected the social discipline and solid virtues practised by their Roman predecessors.

There had been an equally traumatic shift in economic conditions. Much of the new-found wealth found its way into the pockets of the powerful, including members of the Senate, who bought up land which they then worked with slave labour, displacing those peasant farmers who remained. The resulting impoverishment of the peasant class was further aggravated by long-serving soldiers being obliged to surrender land which they were unable to manage, leaving them homeless and destitute once they had completed their military service. A resentful class of Rome's once-loyal citizens then swelled the ranks of those seeking social justice. In 133 BC Tiberius Gracchus, a tribune and bold reformer, was assassinated for attempting to reverse this trend, as was his younger brother Gaius, when he tried to revive the reform. In this way the old inculcated Roman virtues of uprightness and duty to the state slipped into a decline marked by selfishness and insatiable greed.

In spite of the wealth that had flowed into Italy following the Romans' overseas conquests, its misappropriation and economic mismanagement necessitated higher taxes, a burden that was shifted by the rich and powerful on to the poorer classes, who, as Gibbon expressed it, 'bore the weight without sharing the benefits of society'. The rot at home invited the intervention of ambitious overseas commanders who, as we have seen, were not slow to pursue their own interests.

So Scipio Nasica's second prediction was fulfilled: internal disintegration would follow from the defeat of Carthage; a disintegration which ultimately led to the collapse of the Roman Empire. On the positive side, however, we should recall that Rome's defeat of Carthage paved the way for Western civilisation and the establishment of the Christian religion. For a brief period Rome unified most of modern-day Europe, to such an extent that, though the centre of gravity has shifted northwards, it is comparable with what is occurring some 2,000 years later. Gibbon, however, had harsh words to say about the impact of Christianity:

*The clergy successfully preached the doctrines of patience and pusillanimity; the active virtues of society were discouraged; and the last remains of the military spirit were buried in the cloister; a large portion of private and public wealth was consecrated to the specious demands of charity and devotion.*

However, to balance this critical assessment, he went on to say:

*The pure and genuine influence of Christianity may be traced to its beneficial, though imperfect, effects on the Barbarian proselytes of the North. If the decline of the Roman Empire was hastened by the conversion of Constantine, his virtuous religion broke the violence of the fall, and mollified the ferocious temper of the conquerors. This awful revolution may be usefully applied to the instruction of the present age.*

A knowledge of history plays an important part in understanding how we got where we are and in helping us to decide what we should do in the future; which brings us back to Polybius' contention, quoted at the beginning of this book: 'There are two sources from which any benefit can be derived; our own misfortunes and those which have happened to other men.'