

The involvement of carthage and rome in the three punic wars



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The purpose of this paper is to examine the involvement of Carthage and Rome in the three Punic Wars. The factors discussed in this paper are these: the undercurrents for conflict that existed between the two nations following the Pyrrhic War and Roman hegemony of southern Italy, the inevitability of war between the two powers, and the reasons why Rome emerged victorious in the three conflicts. The paper concludes with a discussion of Rome's unnecessary destruction of Carthage following the third Punic War. For centuries, Rome had remained a land power preoccupied with conquering territory in Italy.

Carthage was a major naval power whose ships controlled the western Mediterranean. While Rome expanded for political reasons, trade and commerce motivated Carthage's foreign policy. During the centuries of their earliest contact, Rome and Carthage had lived in harmony (Scullard, 1989 as cited in Walbank et al. , p. 517).

Because they had shared a common enemy in the Greeks for two and a half centuries, neither side felt threatened by the other (Asimov, 1966, p. 75).

Heichelheim and Yeo(1962, p. 115) agree that prior to 264 B.

C. relations between Rome and Carthage, if not friendly, had at least been diplomatically correct. In 509 B. C. , Carthage had entered into a treaty with Rome aimed at establishing friendship so that commercial contact could continue between itself and the new republic.

The treaty, devoid of political alignments, guaranteed the Carthaginians a trade monopoly in the western Mediterranean. In return, the Carthaginians

promised not to raid any town in Latium. This treaty was again renewed in 348 B. C.

“.... for a very long period of time both cities found it in their mutual self-interest to maintain friendly agreements which would last as long as Carthage was prepared not to promote her commercial interests in certain areas by aggressive force and Rome was primarily concerned with the peoples of Italy (Scullard, 1989 as cited in Walbank et al.

, p. 537). In 279 B. C.

, the commercial treaty that existed between Rome and Carthage was converted into a military alliance against their common enemy Pyrrhus. Following the war with Pyrrhus, Rome was able to bring the other Greek cities in southern Italy under Roman hegemony. Cowell (1967, p. 48) and Cary (1970, p.

32) agree that the peace that existed between Rome and Carthage became more precarious after the Roman victory over Pyrrhus and the Greeks of southern Italy. Before Roman rule had been brought to the Italian peninsula, Carthage had been in conflict with the Greeks in the western Mediterranean. Carthage regarded these waters to belong exclusively to her and enforced this claim by sinking any ship that entered her sphere of influence (Frank, 1931, pp. 94-95). Now, however, things were different.

Pyrrhus' defeat and Roman hegemony over the south of Italy meant that the Greek cities of Magna Graecia were now under Roman rule. With Carthage in control of the sea from Spain to Sicily, and Rome the master of Italy, it was

only a matter of time before Carthage came into conflict with the new Mediterranean power of Rome (Grant, 1978, p. 82). Suspicions and jealousies began to grow on both sides (Cowell, 1967, p. 48).

On the one hand, the Romans feared that any hostile power gaining control of Sicily would have a base to launch attacks against southern Italy (Dory and Dudley, 1972, p. v). On the other, it became clear to the Carthaginians that Roman control of the Greek cities in southern Italy might now lead them “to take a hand in Sicilian affairs and to support the Sicilian Greeks in their secular struggle with the Carthaginians” (Rostovtzeff, 1960, p. 51). For a lack of a common enemy in the Greeks (Heichelheim ; Yeo, 1962, p.

115) and the fact that Roman power had reached southern Italy, war became inevitable (Grant, 1978, p. 83). According to Plutarch, Pyrrhus as he abandoned Italy, aptly summed up the situation when he remarked, “How brave a battlefield we are leaving for the Romans and Carthaginians (Plutarch as cited in Liddell, 1889, p. 199). Caven (1980, p. 7) acknowledges the inevitability of war between Rome and Carthage, but claims that the event that began the First Punic War is a classic example of an incident that got out of hand.

The spark that started the First Punic War was a relatively insignificant one (Freeman, 1996, p. 319). The Mamertines were a group of Campanian mercenaries. They had been hired by the Greek city of Syracuse, but had deserted in 289 B. C.

and seized the town of Messina in Sicily (Heichelheim and Yeo, 1962, p.

115). The Mamertines killed the men of Messina, took their wives and began <https://assignbuster.com/the-involvement-of-carthage-and-rome-in-the-three-punic-wars/>

to plunder neighbouring towns that were allies of Syracuse. To eliminate the region of this menace, Heiro II, king of Syracuse, attacked Messina in 265 B. C.

The Mamertines appealed for help to the admiral of a nearby Carthaginian fleet. Their offer was accepted, but now the Mamertines feared Carthaginian troops would permanently remain in Messina and appealed to Rome for help. After much debate, Rome agreed to enter into alliance with the Mamertines. Rome's decision was based out of fear that Messina could provide the Carthaginians with a strategic base for future attacks on Italy (Heichelheim and Yeo, 1962, p. 115) and threaten Rome's control of the straits (Freeman, 1996, p.

319). In addition, Carthaginian control of Messina might threaten the trade of Italy's southern Greeks and eventually turn them against Rome. The Romans sent an advance force across the straits to relieve Messina that received only light resistance from the superior Carthaginian fleet.

Confronted now by Roman forces, the Carthaginians meekly withdrew from Messina (Freeman, 1996, p.

319). Despite the fact that Syracuse and Carthage had been long-standing enemies, Rome's occupation of Messina forced them into alliance. These new allies besieged Messina. Appius Claudia, the Roman commander, managed to move his troops across the straits and ordered the allies to lift their siege of Messina. His demand was rejected and Claudius first attacked the Syracusans and then the Carthaginians, recording easy victories over both.

When the Romans attacked Syracuse in 263 B. C. , Hiero became angry with the lack of support that he had received from his Carthaginian allies and surrendered into an alliance with Rome. Rome realized that a war in Sicily could not be won if the Carthaginian fleet was allowed to control the seas. Superior Carthaginian naval power could sever Rome's lines of communication in Italy and starve her forces in Sicily into submission.

The Carthaginian fleet would also be in a position to raid Rome's cities along the Italian coast. Rome's chances of subduing Sicily's coastal cities were further limited if Carthage was allowed to control the seas (Freeman, 1996, p. 320). Following the capture of Acragas, the decision was made to build a Roman fleet (Freeman, 1996, p.

320). Freeman (1996, p. 320) writes that the decision to build a fleet is proof of Rome's stubborn resolve and determination to win her war with Carthage. Using a grounded Carthaginian ship as a model (Polybius as cited in Crawford, 1982, p. 8), the Roman senate authorized the construction of 100 quinqueremes (Trueman and Trueman, 1965, p.

241) which were supposedly constructed in sixty days (Polybius as cited in Freeman, 1996, p. 320). The quinquereme was a single-decked vessel with 20 to 60 oars, five men to an oar. Unlike the outdated Roman trieme, where each rower had to be a skilled oarsman, on a quinquereme, only " one man directed the sweep and the other four had only to supply muscle power" (Trueman and Trueman, 1965, p.

242). While crews had to be trained on mock ships on land (Starr, 1971, p.

3), the quinquereme saved the Romans time because it did not have to train
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huge members of skilled oarsmen. Although heavier and less maneuverable than Carthaginian ships, the Roman quinquereme contained one important military advantage (Freeman, 1996, p.

320). Each quinquereme was equipped with a corvus or 'crow'. The corvus was essentially a gangplank hinged at one end and attached to the quinquereme. Roman vessels would manoeuvre alongside a Carthaginian ship and the ramp, attached to a rope, running through pulleys fastened to the mast, would be released.

The corvus or spike would penetrate the enemy ship's deck so that both ships would be held fast together. This allowed Roman legionnaires to cross over to Carthaginian vessels and engage the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. In essence, the corvus allowed the Romans to convert sea battles into land battles where they could utilize their well-trained soldiers. This approach gave them superiority over the Carthaginians who were better seamen, but seemed ignorant of the fact that naval victory went to those who were prepared to fight it out at close quarters (Dorey and Dudley, 1972, p. xiv). The corvus gave the Romans an advantage in several early naval battles such as at Mylae (Freeman, 1996, p.

321). Heichelheim and Yeo (1962, p. 117) also state that had the Carthaginians navy not been so devoted to ramming, as a battle technique, that they would have been more successful in many of these sea battles. By 242 B.

C. , and with both sides nearly exhausted from the war, the Romans won a major sea battle off the Aegates Islands. In effect, this meant that Carthage
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could no longer supply Sicily and she sued for peace (Heichelheim and Yeo, 1962, p. 119).

Rostovtzeff (1960, p. 3) writes that Roman victory in the First Punic War was due mainly to a number of Carthaginian mistakes made at the beginning of the struggle. Despite their original superiority at sea, the Carthaginians made the strategic error of allowing the Roman army to cross the straits from Italy into Sicily (Grant, 1978, p. 85 and Rostovtzeff, 1960, p. 53). Heichelheim and Yeo (1962, p.

116) support this argument and state that Carthage's naval forces should easily have prevented Appius Claudius from moving across the straits. Failure to do so, angered Hiero II which weakened his alliance with Carthage. Rostovtzeff (1960, p. 53) suggests that Carthage's failure to retain Hiero's support was another reason for her ultimate defeat in the war. According to Rostovtzeff (1960, p.

53), yet another reason for Rome's victory was the fact that the Carthaginians failed to send a large enough force needed to destroy the first Roman detachments that had landed in Sicily. Grant (1978, p. 86) writes that a further reason for Carthage's defeat was due to a lack of commitment by her government. Its ruling body was more interested in developing the continental territory of Africa than the war in Sicily. This lack of total commitment meant that Carthage's commanders could not follow up on Roman losses and deliver a final knockout blow. Instead, they had to settle for a war of exhaustion.

“ But in that sort of fighting they proved to be at a disadvantage against Rome, since their mercenaries lacked any patriotic incentive to fight: whereas the legions, on the other hand, were manned by men who belonged to a political system which Rome had welded into an effective unity” (Grant, 1978, p. 86). The peace that ended the First Punic War was really only a truce (Cairns, 1970, p. 0). By 218 B.

C. , the western Mediterranean proved to be no longer big enough to avoid future clashes between the Roman and Carthaginian empires. While Carthage, was busy building up a strong position in Spain, Rome annexed the islands of Sardinia and Corsica. It was only a matter of time before war would break out again. In 226 B. C.

, the Romans had imposed a treaty on the Carthaginians which set the limits to her northern expansion in Spain at the Ebro River. Saguntum was a Spanish city considerably south of the Ebro River and in Carthage's sphere of influence. When Saguntum entered into an alliance with Rome, Hannibal, the son of Hamilcar, regarded this act to be an intrusion into Carthaginian affairs. In 219 B. C.

after a long siege, Hannibal took Saguntum. The Romans regarded this attack to be an act of war and demanded the surrender of Hannibal. The Carthaginians refused and this Saguntine affair became the immediate cause of the Second Punic War (Bourne, 1966, p. 125). Neither side appeared to have had any reservations about avoiding the conflict (Freeman, 1996, p. 322).

Both powers decided on an offensive campaign. The Romans sent an army commanded by Gnaeus Scipio into Spain. Hannibal chose a daring plan to cross the Alps and to strike with speed and surprise Italy “ in the hope of humiliating Rome and destroying her links with her allies”(Freeman, 1996, p. 322). Hannibal believed that Rome’s power lay in the great reserves of manpower she received through her many alliances.

His tactical superiority, the quality of his veteran army and a few early decisive victories, he reasoned would cause these allies to leave Rome’s side. Without their support, Rome would weaken and crumble. Following his crossing of the Alps, Hannibal’s strategy called for his army to secure a base of operations among the Gauls in the Po Valley (Starr, 1974, p. 483).

The Gauls had been long and bitter enemies of the Romans and had only recently been subdued. Cowell (1967, p. 33) writes that the element of surprise gained by Hannibal in crossing the Alps and his early successes are really in itself only a confession of Carthaginian weakness. Had the Carthaginians been able to retain control of the seas, then the arduous journey across the mountains which cost Hannibal nearly half of his army might not have been undertaken. In Italy, Carthage was never able to match the number of troops that Rome could raise from her heartland (Bourne, 1966, p.

127). While it would take sixteen years to do so, in the end, numbers would resolve the issue (Bourne, 1966, p. 127) In 218 B. C.

, at the Trebia River and in 217 B. C. at Lake Trasimene, Hannibal inflicted two devastating defeats upon the Romans. Yet, despite these brilliantly
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executed military victories, the political success that Hannibal sought in dislodging Rome's allies eluded him. For the most part, Rome's allies remained loyal. While the Gauls had joined his cause, Rome's central allies of Latium, Umbria and Etruria never broke their alliances with Rome.

Their traditional fear of the Gauls and the belief that Hannibal's mercenaries were no better than barbarians kept them loyal to Rome (Freeman, 1996, p. 323 and Crawford, 1982, p. 56). The fact that Hannibal's forces ravished the land to live off its produce further did little to weaken these alliances (Cowell, 1967, p. 33). These losses prompted the appointment of Fabius Maximus as dictator.

The Fabian plan called for a radical departure from the fixed battle tactics used by his predecessors. Fabius conceded Hannibal's superiority as a tactician and recognized that his own troops were not thoroughly trained (Bourne, 1966, p. 130). While Hannibal sought another general action that would bring him a victory and undo Rome's alliances, Fabius refused to give him the opportunity.

Rather, he sought, to delay and avoid a pitched battle by using hit-and-run tactics against Hannibal's veterans until his troops were adequately trained (Bourne, 1966, p. 130). Fabius further planned to discredit Hannibal in the eyes of the allies as nothing more than a marauding brigand (Bourne, 1966, p. 30).

Unsuccessful in the north at breaking Rome's alliances, Hannibal turned his attentions south. Fabian's army followed Hannibal's troops into southern

Italy, 'dogging' the Carthaginians and choosing only to fight where it could
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isolate small parties of its enemy. Fabius Maximus' conservative tactics irritated many of Rome's politicians. Freeman (1996, p. 323) states that avoiding battle was so completely alien to Roman thinking that two new consuls who resumed the traditional policy of facing the Carthaginians in direct confrontation replaced him. In 216 B.

C. at the Battle of Cannae, Rome suffered one of its most devastating defeats ever. Yet, despite this loss, only Capua and a few lesser cities defected to the side of the Carthaginians. It further became clear in the immediate aftermath of Cannae that Rome had no intention of surrender (Crawford, 1982, p. 58). When Hannibal sent word to Rome that he was ready to accept ransom for his prisoners, the Roman senate replied that he could do as he pleased with them.

Rome had no use for men who surrendered in battle. The Roman senate was not in the habit of counting its costs (Lavell, 1980, p. 292). Cairns (1970, p. 2) writes of this undaunted Roman spirit, " It was hard to decide whether they were more human or less. " Roman persistence would prove to be a key factor in her ultimate victory over Carthage (Crawford, 1982, p.

56). Hannibal was now in a position to march on Rome but for the want of siege equipment, a nearby supply base and the numbers needed to attack its fortifications, he chose not to do so. Cowell (1967, p. 32) feels that Hannibal's failure to capture Rome was a mistake that ultimately hurt his chances for final victory.

The defeat at Cannae also resulted in Fabius Maximus being reappointed commander of the Roman army in Italy. Rome's new policy combined the <https://assignbuster.com/the-involvement-of-carthage-and-rome-in-the-three-punic-wars/>

Fabian strategy of avoiding pitched battles with the Carthaginians, diplomatic maneuvering and the proliferation of its armies (Bourne, 1966, p. 132). Because Rome's alliances were not broken, she was able to build up her military strength. By 212 B. C.

, Rome had managed to put 25 legions (8 consular armies) into the field (Boise State, 1996, <http://history.isbsu.edu/westciv/punicwar/10.htm>).

As well as avoiding an all-out confrontation with Hannibal, Roman strategy worked to keep the Carthaginian army confined to the south so that she would not be united with the Gauls in the north. Fields and vineyards were burned in an effort to starve Hannibal out of Italy. In seven years, Rome's new war policy had recovered most of her losses since Cannae (Bourne, 1966, p. 133). Hannibal's chances for victory in Italy were hampered by the weakness and inefficiency of Carthaginian rulers at home. Despite his military genius, without supplies and reinforcements, he was destined for failure (Cowell, 1967, p.

33). Because the Carthaginians no longer controlled the sea, (Cowell, 1967, p. 33) they controlled no major ports in Italy (Freeman, 1996, p. 324).

According to Cowell (1967, p.

33), even if the genuine will at home had existed to resupply Hannibal, the huge amount of manpower and supplies needed could not have been achieved without control of a seaport to receive these resources. By 208 B. C., Hannibal's army in Italy was in dire need of help. Word was sent to his brother, Hasdrubal, to come to Italy with reinforcements and join Hannibal.

Hasdrubal's defeat at the Metaurus was a huge blow to Carthaginian hopes for victory in Italy.

This proved to be the last major battle of the Second Punic War on Italian soil (Pelham, 1949, p. 18). The Roman victory left Hannibal 'bottled up' and unable to break out of southern Italy (Freeman, 1996, p. 324). In the end, although Hannibal had taught the Romans a lesson in military tactics, Rome's Fabian strategy of destroying the Carthaginians by slow attrition and her superior human resources carried her to victory (Bourne, 1966, p. 136).

In a sense, Hannibal had suffered the same fate as his Greek predecessor, Pyrrhus (Cairns, 1970, p. 17). Rome's superior human resources were the result of the wise treatment she afforded her defeated neighbours and allies. The terms of Roman rule were generally acceptable to its subjugated people. Dorey and Dudley (1972, p.

xvi) state that there were two main reasons for this acceptance. First, Rome was willing to extend some form of modified citizenship to its peoples and second, Rome avoided the burden of extracting heavy tributes from its subject allies. This ensured their loyalty to Rome and prevented Hannibal from breaking the alliances he needed to secure Carthaginian victory (Bourne, 1966, p. 136). According to Crawford (1982, p.

58) this loyalty remained the most important factor in deciding the war's outcome.