

Causes of the punic wars history essay



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The Punic Wars were a sequence of three battles that were fought in the period 264 to 146 BC between Rome and Carthage. They were the largest battles of the time. The main reason for the occurrence of the battles was the conflict in the vested interests of the Carthagian Empire and the rapidly expanding Roman Empire. The Romans saw the need to expand their vast empire through Sicily, which was then an important hub, and was partly under Carthagian control. Carthage, being the dominant power in the West of the Mediterranean and strong in its naval power, resisted all advances by the Roman Empire, which was an extensive maritime empire. This resulted in the first of three major wars that were characterized by a number of battles. At the end of wars fought for over a century, Rome emerged victorious in the Roman-Syrian War with the defeat of Seleucid King Antiochus III the Great and went on to be one of the most powerful empires of the time till the fifth century A. D

Carthage was a powerful thalassocratic city in modern day Tunisia. It had the largest navy and fought its wars through mercenaries, especially Numidian, rather than a permanent, standing army as was the case with the Roman Empire. In 264 BC, the Roman Empire conquered the Italian peninsula to the south of River Po bringing the conflict between the two rivals to a boiling point. This triggered the First Punic War that lasted between 264-241 BC.

The First Punic War was mainly a naval war which was also partly fought on land in Sicily between Hiero II of Syracuse and Mamertines of Messina. The Mamertines first enlisted the help of the Carthagians but went on to betray them and sign a treaty with the Roman Senate. This led to the Carthagians to directly support Hiero bringing them at loggerheads with the Roman

Empire for the control of Sicily. In 261 BC, after a defeat at the Battle of Agrigentum, the Carthagians resolved to fight their battles at sea rather than on land. They consequently successfully fought the Romans at the Battle of the Lipari Islands in 260 BC. Rome decided to expand its existing fleets to over 100 warships in two months so as to counter the all-powerful Carthagians in the sea. They were specifically designed to incorporate a Corvus so as to facilitate sinking and ramming of Carthagian ships. This guaranteed a stream of successes for the Roman infantries except for the Battle of Tunis. In 241 BC, the Carthagians signed a peace treaty with the Romans in which they were forced to evacuate Sicily In addition to paying an enormous war indemnity. Further, in 238 BC, the Carthagians lost the islands of Sardinia and Corsica to Rome during the Mercenary War. This ensured that Rome was the superpower and could comfortably control any sea-borne or land invasion of Italy, all sea trade routes in the Mediterranean and further invade foreign shores so as to expand the Empire. Rome further fought and conquered colonies through the Illyrian Wars. Carthage was however forced to retreat and build its finances and expand its empire in Hispania.

In the ensuing period between 238 BC and 219 BC, several trade agreements and mutual alliances between Carthage and Rome took place. These treaties were mainly about the release of all 8, 000 Roman prisoners without ransom and the handing over of all deserters serving in the Carthage army. This latter section of the agreement was not adhered to leading to a reject of the treaty by the Roman senate and an increase in the indemnity fines. This therefore resulted in a liquidity problem in Carthage leading to the Mercenary war in which the mercenaries that had previously fought for

Carthage to revolt due to loss of power over the sea-ways. With a comfortable win, Carthage and Rome enjoyed relative peace till 219 BC when Hannibal, having silver riches conquered by his predecessor Hamilcar Barca and a large native army from the subdued native tribes such as the Celts of the Po River, attacked Saguntum which was by then under special protection by Rome under conquest termed as the Iberian Conquest.

The Second Punic War occurred between 218-201 BC. Hannibal, leading the Barcid Empire, and allied to the Carthagians, crossed the Alps and invaded Italy in a series of highly successful battles. Hannibal, however, never attained the goal of creating a major division between Rome and its allies. These wars were fought on three frontiers. First, in Italy, Hannibal fought the Romans; secondly, in Hispania, Hasdrubal, a brother to Hannibal, constantly defended the colonies conquered and finally in Sicily, Rome fought for control which was further troubled by the continuing First Macedonian War. After a successful attack on Saguntum, Hannibal went further on to surprise the Romans by attacking Italy. Although he managed to win that particular battle, and also the Battle of Trebia, The Battle of Trasimene and the Battle of Cannae; he lost his only siege engines and most of the elephants and men to the icy mountains thereby strategically losing the battle in Rome which would have ensured a win of the entire war. His war strategy, which was to turn the allies of Rome against it since he could not take Rome on due to insufficient men, failed. Except for a few southern states, the rest remained loyal. Rome further drafted army after army after the defeats which ensured Hannibal was cut off from aid. Hannibal also never received any substantial reinforcements from Carthage which prevented him from decisively

conquering Rome and ending the war at a win. The war raged for fifteen years during which the Roman Empire was unable to conclusively end the battle since Hannibal was a master general coupled with the fact that they were already engaged in the Macedonian Wars. Hannibal, realizing he was eventually running out of supplies, decided to retreat to his home base in Africa in aid to an attack waged by Rome but was thoroughly defeated in The Battle of Zama. In Hispania, Hasdrubal was soundly defeated by a young Roman commander, Publius Cornelius Scipio. He therefore decided to abandon Hispania so as to reinforce his brother Hannibal. This alliance was later trampled upon ending the Second Punic War in 201 BC.

The Third Punic War, which lasted between 149-146 BC, was invoked by the extended Siege by Rome on Carthage and its consequent complete destruction. There was growing resurgence by Hispania and Greece against Rome coupled with the tangible increase in Carthagian wealth and martial power. The Roman Treaty incorporated a clause in which Carthage was to have no military thereby suffering attacks from the neighboring Numidia, a favorite of the Roman Empire. All arbitrations were done by the Roman Senate which was heavily in favor of Numidia. After 50 years since the end of the Second Punic War, The Carthagians decided they were no longer bound by the treaty and mustered an army to combat the Numidian attacks. This Punic Militarism was heavily objected to by Rome especially by Cato the Elder who declared that Carthage must be destroyed. In 149 BC, Rome issued demands that could not be met such as the proposal to demolish Carthage and build it further from the coast into the interiors of Africa. This drew Carthage into an open fight with the Romans. Over a short period,

Carthagians innovatively made a myriad of weapons and were able to resist initial Roman attacks on their city. However, a three year siege on the city ended the war in which the walls of the city were breached by the Romans under the command of Scipio Aemilianus, who burnt the city to the ground and aggrandized other Carthagian settlements. The Carthagians who were not killed were sold into slavery. This brought the Carthagian Empire to an end.