

Rome & the Punic Wars

In their first three centuries the Romans divided their efforts between farming and conquering their neighbors. Rome grew from an insignificant city-state into a world state in three distinctive stages: first, the Romans subjugated the other Italic peoples and brought Italy under their control; second, they defeated Carthage in the Punic Wars; and finally, the Romans conquered the Hellenistic successor states in the east while sending Roman armies into the barbarian west.

The Conquest of Italy (509-264 BCE)

Rome conquered Italy through a mixture of diplomatic skill and force. Shortly after the expulsion of the Etruscans, the Romans began to draw their Latin neighbors into coalitions. When the entreaties failed, the Romans used their army. Rome's policy toward the other Italic peoples varied. Some were granted full citizenship. Those further from Rome were given municipal status. By 264 BCE Rome had defeated the last of its adversaries on the Italian peninsula and had resolved the internal domestic struggle between the patricians and the plebeians.

Punic Wars

Rome fought three wars against Carthage. The Phoenicians founded Carthage around 800 BCE as a trading outpost. From that, Carthage grew in importance. In 264 BCE there were five major powers in the ancient world: the Seleucid Dynasty in the Near East; the Ptolemies in Egypt and Palestine; the Kingdom of Macedonia; Carthage and Rome. Two of the powers, Rome and Carthage, were locked in a struggle for control of the Mediterranean. The leaders of the Senate who favored war believed that victory over Carthage would open the path to Rome's hegemony in the ancient world.

The First Punic War (264-241 BCE)

The First Punic War began when Carthage tried to dominate the eastern Sicilian cities of Messina and Syracuse. Rome allied itself with the Sicilians and war broke out. Rome had a superior land force while Carthage possessed a greater fleet. To win the war, Rome was forced to fight at sea as well as on land. In 257 BCE, Rome won an important naval victory and landed an army near Carthage. The Carthaginians repulsed the Romans, but Roman objectives grew as the war progressed. In 241 BCE Carthage agreed to Rome's terms. In the peace treaty Carthage relinquished its interest in Sicily and the other islands between Italy and Sicily. Additionally, Carthage agreed to pay war reparations. Reparations are compensation required from a defeated nation as payment for damage or injury during a war to the victorious country.

The Second Punic War (218-201 BCE)

The peace treaty at the end of the First Punic War was not unduly harsh. The Second Punic War would have never occurred if both parties had conscientiously tried to abide by its terms. Initially, the Romans were preoccupied in continuing their campaign against the Gauls in Northern Italy. In 238, Rome used a rebellion of Carthage's mercenaries in Sardinia as a pretext to seize the island and demand an additional war payment from Carthage. During this period Carthage sought to recoup its losses by expanding its influence in Spain. In 218 BCE, the Romans sent an ultimatum to Hannibal, who was a Carthaginian general and leader of the Punic forces in Spain. Hannibal refused and the Second Punic War began.

In the Second Punic War, Rome controlled the seas. This forced Hannibal to attack Rome overland. Hannibal led an army of 26,000 troops and 60 elephants across the Alps and into Italy. Once in Italy, he rallied another 15,000 soldiers to his side and marched to Rome. The Republic barely escaped defeat over the next ten years. Hannibal was a brilliant general but met his match with Roman general Publicus Scipio. In 210 BCE, Scipio defeated the main Punic army and by 202 BCE, he had carried the war to Africa. When Scipio attacked Africa, it spelled the end for Carthage because they surrendered in 201 BCE.

The Second Punic War had tremendous consequences for Rome. It gave Rome control of Spain and the Western Mediterranean. The peace treaty that followed the war also eliminated Carthage as Rome’s main rival. The defeat reduced Carthage to the status of a minor state.

The Third Punic War (149-146 BCE)

The Second Punic War left Rome in control of the Western Mediterranean. During the war, Philip V of Macedonia allied himself with Carthage. This provoked three wars between the Macedonians and the Romans. These wars had the net effect of extending Rome’s influence to the east while bringing Hellenistic culture to Rome. Shiploads of Greek artifacts and slaves who served as teachers and interpreters of Greek culture were brought to Rome during this period. Rome’s final campaign against Carthage came in 149 BCE. Despite the fact that Carthage had lived up to the peace treaty, the Roman’s hatred of Carthage remained unshaken. Cato the Elder, a Roman Senator exemplified this. Cato ended every speech he delivered in the Senate—no matter what the topic—with the sentence “Carthage must be destroyed.” In 146 the Romans burned Carthage to the ground, and salted the earth so nothing would ever grow there again.

Event/War	Time Period	Causes/Leaders Involved	Effects/ Results
The Conquest of Italy			
The First Punic War			
The Second Punic War			
The Third Punic War			