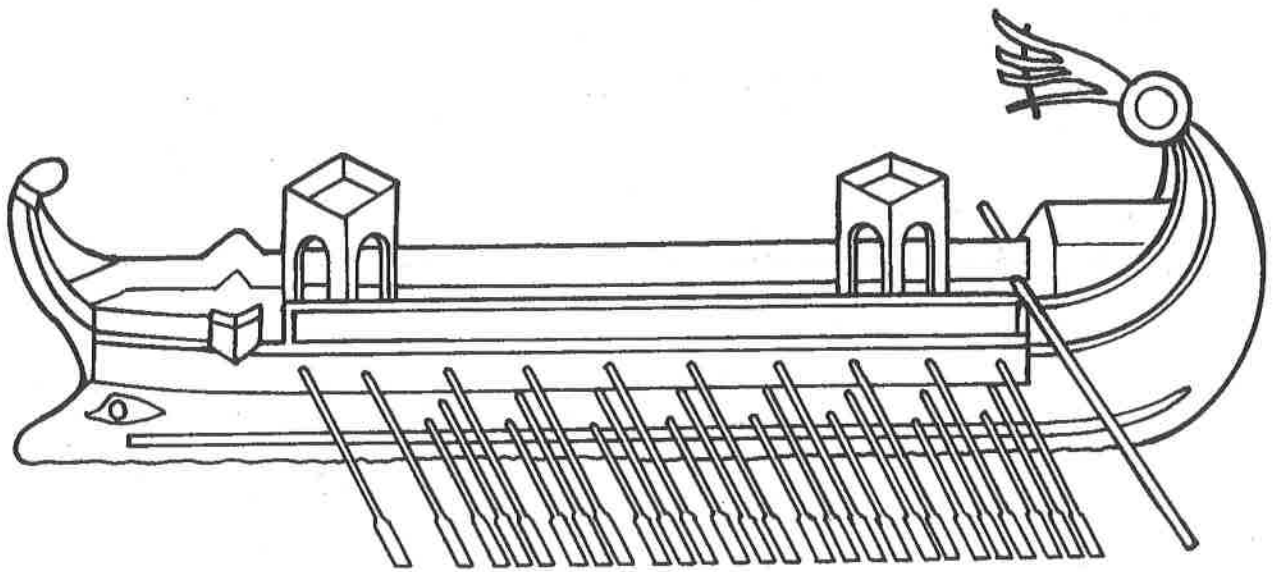


The Punic Wars

By 270 B.C. the Romans had conquered the entire Italian peninsula and began looking outward for expansion. Some countries in the Mediterranean region accepted Roman domination, while others resisted. At this time there was also another great power in the Mediterranean offering competition—Carthage, a region on the North African coast that had been settled by Phoenicians who came from Syria. Carthage had become a great seafaring nation and led the area in trading. Carthage also had settlements on the islands of Sicily and Sardinia, as well as some settlements along the coast of Spain. It was inevitable that these two great powers would someday come into conflict.

The ongoing battle between the Roman Republic and Carthage over the right to rule the Mediterranean took the form of three major wars known as the Punic Wars. “Punic” is Latin for “Carthaginian.” In 264 B.C. the Roman Republic broke an earlier alliance with Carthage and invaded Sicily. This caused the First Punic War. The Republic did well on land but suffered many defeats at sea. But the Romans learned quickly and soon developed a more efficient navy. The ships from Carthage were built to ram the enemy. To better defend against them, the Romans built ships designed to hook onto the sides of the Carthaginian ships to fight, rather than face the enemy head on.



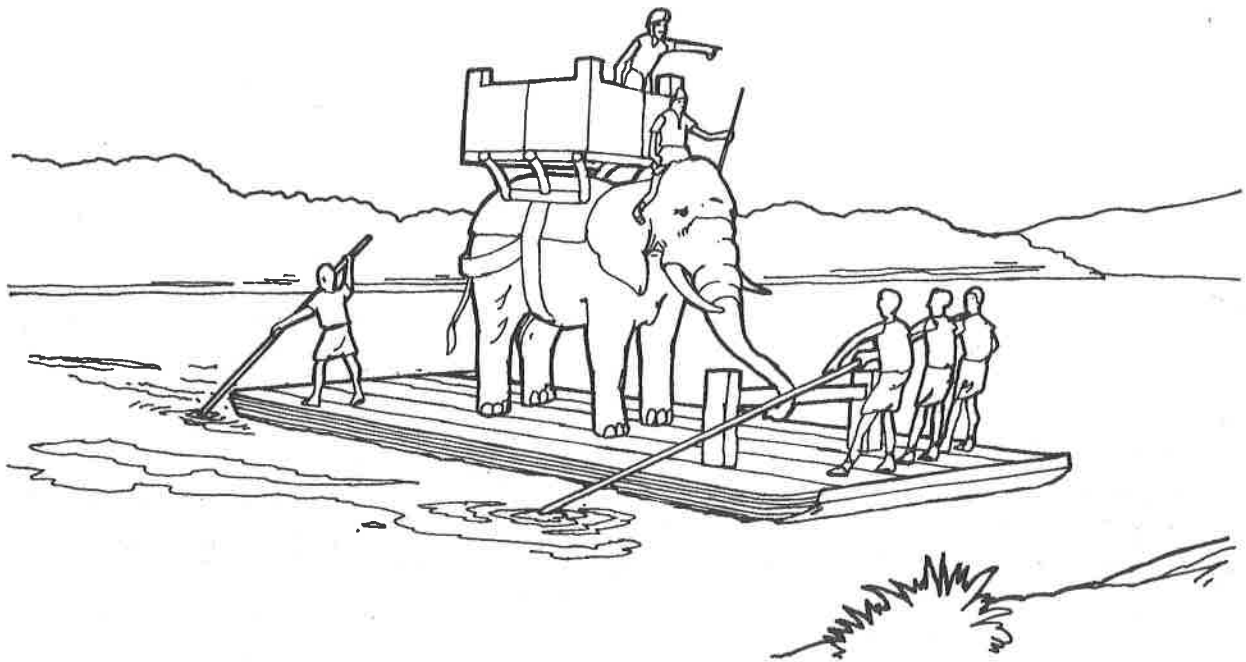
Many times the Romans were rebuffed, but they forged ahead, expanding their fleet to 200 ships. Finally, at the battle of Aegates, they won a great victory and began their march into the Mediterranean. They captured the islands of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica in 225 B.C. These islands were strategic trading posts for the Carthaginians and therefore great losses for them.

Now the Carthaginians had to look elsewhere to form their trading center, and they chose Spain. General Hamilcar Barca quickly expanded control over a large area of Spain using their already established trading posts. Spain proved to be a wise conquest for Carthage. Not only did it supply fish and many other needed foods, but it also contained rich deposits of copper, iron, and silver. Unfortunately, Hamilcar was killed in battle while expanding land holdings. In 221 B.C. his son, Hannibal, was elected commander. Hannibal had been raised by his father to be a sworn enemy of the Roman Republic. Although he was only 26 years old, it was time for him to fulfill his destiny.

The Punic Wars *(cont.)*

Rome looked on anxiously as Carthage expanded throughout Spain. Then, in 219 B.C., Hannibal and his troops attacked Saguntum, an ally of Rome. The fall of Saguntum marked the beginning of the Second Punic War. This time the disputed territory was Spain. As Rome sent troops to the west, Hannibal planned a surprise invasion of Italy from the north. He gathered a force of 60,000 soldiers, 6,000 horses, and 37 elephants. He felt his advance by land was the last thing the Romans would expect, because the route from Spain over the Alps was difficult and dangerous.

The long march began in Spain and moved across the south of Gaul (France). One of Hannibal's first problems was to get his army across a wide river. Big rafts were built to ferry the elephants across. Five months later he reached the Alps, which were covered in snow and ice. Only half of his original army remained, but this did not deter Hannibal.

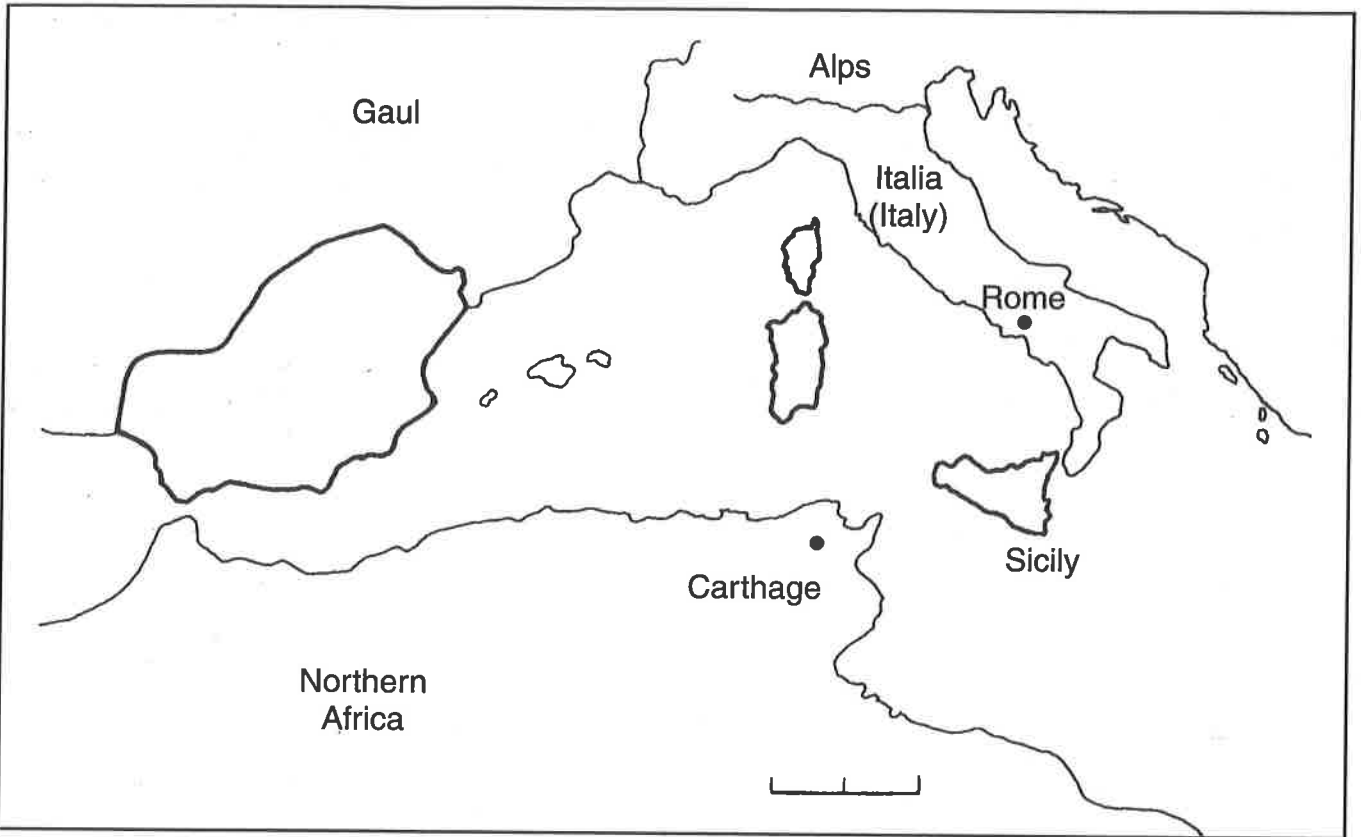


The main passes through the Alps were guarded by the Romans, so Hannibal chose a narrow twisting route instead. His elephants acted as battering rams when he needed to crush through deep snow. Many men and animals died on the journey. Once Hannibal reached Italy, he began recruiting more men. He rebuilt his army, then moved quickly through Italy, enjoying victory after victory until he reached the very walls of Rome itself. Once there, he did not have enough supplies for a siege, and he saw that the walls could not be breached.

Meanwhile, the Romans knew they had to try something different with Hannibal. Instead of meeting him head-on in battle, they decided to lead him on a wild goose chase, keeping his army just outside striking distance. This tactic worked. Hannibal pursued the Roman army over much of Italy without really engaging them in battle. This gave the Republic time to recruit more soldiers and caused the Carthaginians to run low on supplies.

The Punic Wars (cont.)

Still Hannibal was invincible in Italy, although the Roman Republic defeated the Carthaginians everywhere else. The Romans now had a brilliant general named Scipio. He conquered Spain for Rome and turned his attention to North Africa. After 14 years in Italy, Hannibal was forced to return home to defend his homeland.



These two powerful generals had great respect for one another. They agreed to meet and talk before the planned battle at Zama near Carthage. Hannibal asked for a private interview with Scipio, to be held in an open area between the two armies. Although they had known of each other for over 15 years, this was the first time they had met face to face. Using interpreters, they spoke together at great length. Still, the fight began.

Miraculously, both great leaders survived Zama. However, Hannibal was defeated and Carthage was forced to give up Spain. The peace terms put forward by Scipio allowed Carthage to keep its own lands. Hannibal escaped to the Middle East, but some years later the Romans demanded his surrender. Rather than face captivity in Rome, Hannibal, then 65 years old, committed suicide by poison.

Peace existed between Rome and Carthage for some years. However, many Romans still felt threatened as long as Carthage existed. When Carthage again rebelled, the Roman army destroyed the city once and for all in the Third Punic War. The surviving Carthaginians were sold into slavery, and North Africa became part of the growing Roman Empire.

With the final defeat of Carthage, Rome was now the most powerful force in the western Mediterranean. Rome turned eastward and began its further conquest with Greece and Macedonia. By 50 B.C. the Roman Republic was in control of the entire Mediterranean region and well on its way to becoming a mighty empire.