

Carthaginian Empire

Part One

The **Carthaginian Empire** was an informal empire of [Phoenician](#) city-states throughout North Africa and modern [Spain](#) from 575 B.C.E. until 146 B.C.E. It was more or less under the control of the city-state of [Carthage](#) after the fall of Tyre to Babylonian forces. At the height of the city's influence, its empire included most of the western [Mediterranean Sea](#). The empire was in a constant state of struggle with the Roman Republic, which led to a series of conflicts known as the [Punic Wars](#). The Carthaginian general [Hannibal](#) is regarded as one of the greatest military minds in [history](#).

After the third and final Punic War, Carthage was destroyed then occupied by Roman forces. Nearly all of the empire fell into Roman hands from then on. As a result, a major transformation took place in ancient world that continues to impact on human life today. Rome ceased to be a regional power and began to tread on a larger stage. In order to administer newly acquired extensive territories, Rome developed a sophisticated imperial structure and began to see her role as one of bringing peace, order, stability, and the rule of law to the known world. Later, the governmental and legal systems of many modern nation states, including the [United States](#), adapted many Roman practices, values and systems. Roman governance and Roman law remains the foundation of their contemporary counterparts. Carthage's demise also shifted the stream of civilizational development from [Africa](#) to Europe. Much of what Africa had to offer was assimilated into the Roman intellectual legacy due to Rome's acquisition of former Carthaginian territory.

Important Dates in Carthaginian History

814/3 BCE

Carthage founded by Tyrian colonists according to Timaeus (350-260 BCE), a historian from Taormina in Sicily historian. F.Gr.Hist. 566 fr.60

6 th CENTURY BCE

Oligarchic Constitution established. Originally a governor (skn) reported to the king of Tyre.

508 AND 450 BCE

Rome and the Carthaginians sign treaties.

480 BCE

The Greek colonies under the tyrants Gelon and Theron defeat the Hamilcar Barca and his Carthaginian at Himera in Sicily, thereby impeding Carthaginian interests in that area. Note that the Western Greeks are fighting this battle at the same time the Greeks on mainland Greece are fending off the Persians under Xerxes. Under Hamilcar's grandson, Hannibal, Himera is destroyed in 409 BCE. After the 480 battle, a temple to Athena was built to mark the victory. See below two views of the temple in its present form—a church but one can clearly see the Doric columns and doric frieze.

END 5th BCE

Takes over Greek colonies in western part of Sicily, including Selinus in 406 BCE.

HELLENISTIC PERIOD (323-30 BCE)

The city of Carthage at its largest extent. By the end of the fourth century, about 200, 000 people were living there—an extraordinary number for cities in the ancient world.

264-40 BCE

First Punic War. As consequence of War, Sicily and Sardinia fall into Roman hands.

218 BCE

Hannibal Barca precipitates war against Rome when he besieges Saguntum in Spain. He escapes the Roman army sent to stop him, marches across the Alps in the winter, and defeat three consular armies in 218, 217 and 216 BCE.

202 BC

L. Scipio Africanus defeats Hannibal at Zama (in Tunisia). Second Punic War ends (218-202 BCE). During siege of Syracuse, Archimedes dies (212 BCE)

146 BCE

L. Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus destroys Carthage. End of Third Punic War (149-146 BCE)

19 BCE

Vergil dies; Augustus has his 'unfinished' national epic published. Integral to the epic is Aeneas' stay in Carthage. In the Aeneid, Vergil explains the mythical causes of the enmity between the Romans and Carthaginians

LATE 1st BCE

Augustus, following the intentions of his adoptive father Julius Caesar, establishes a colony of veterans on the site of Punic Carthage.

2nd CENTURY

Apogee of city under Romans. Carthage at this time is the third largest city in the empire and the second largest in the Western Mediterranean after Rome itself. The emperor Antoninus Pius has a large bathing complex constructed for the city, the ruins of which are still visible today.

2nd – 4th CENTURIES

Carthage enjoys prosperity and becomes a center of the Christian church in the West. Such notable Christian writers as Tertullian and Augustine lived in Carthage.

439

Succumbs to Vandals and eventually to the Byzantine Empire.

697

Falls to Muslims.



Extent of Phoenician settlement

In order to provide a resting place for merchant fleets, to maintain a Phoenician monopoly on an area's natural resource, or to conduct trade on its own, the Phoenicians established numerous colonial cities along the coasts of the Mediterranean. They were stimulated to found their cities by a need for revitalizing trade in order to pay the tribute extracted from Tyre, Sidon, and [Byblos](#) by the succession of empires that ruled them and by fear of complete Greek colonization of that part of the Mediterranean suitable for commerce. The Phoenicians lacked the population or necessity to establish self-sustaining cities abroad, and most cities had fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, but Carthage and a few others developed into large cities.

Some 300 colonies were established in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Iberia, and to a much lesser extent, on the arid coast of Libya. The Phoenicians controlled [Cyprus](#), Sardinia, Corsica, and the Balearic Islands, as well as minor possessions in Crete and Sicily; the latter settlements were in perpetual conflict with the Greeks. The Phoenicians managed to control all of Sicily for a limited time. The entire area later came under the leadership and protection of Carthage, which in turn dispatched its own colonists to found new cities or to reinforce those that declined with Tyre and Sidon.

The first colonies were made on the two paths to Iberia's mineral wealth—along the North African coast and on [Sicily](#), Sardinia and the Balearic Islands. The centre of the Phoenician world was Tyre, serving as an economic and political hub. The power of this city waned following numerous sieges and its eventual destruction by [Alexander the Great](#), and the role as leader passed to Sidon, and eventually to Carthage. Each colony paid tribute to either Tyre or Sidon, but neither had actual control of the colonies. This changed with the rise of Carthage, since the Carthaginians appointed their own magistrates to rule the towns and Carthage retained much direct control over the colonies. This policy resulted in a number of Iberian towns siding with the Romans during the [Punic Wars](#).

Governance

Government was vested in officials known as "Suffetes" (judges). Two were elected every two years by the citizens. Real power, however, resided with a council that comprised of the leaders of the wealthiest families, who were members for life. Hence, the governance of Carthage is usually described as oligarchic. There was also an elected Senate of some 300 members itself controlled by a council of 30 to which most power was delegated. The ordinary citizens, though, had their own assembly to which unresolved matters were referred for final decisions. Apparently, the citizens enjoyed free speech and did have ultimate authority—at least in theory. Generals were also elected and were under civil authority, that is, they carried out the orders of the civil government; they did not themselves take part in governance or in the formulation of policy.

Treaty with Rome

In 509 B.C.E., a treaty was signed between Carthage and Rome indicating a division of influence and commercial activities. This is the first known source indicating that Carthage had gained control over [Sicily](#) and Sardinia.

By the beginning of the fifth century B.C.E., Carthage had become the commercial center of the West Mediterranean region, a position it retained until overthrown by the Roman Republic. The city had conquered most of the old Phoenician colonies, for example, Hadrumetum, Utica and Kerkouane, subjugated the Libyan tribes (with the Numidian and Mauretanian kingdoms remaining more or less independent), and taken control of the entire North African coast from modern [Morocco](#) to the borders of [Egypt](#) (not including the Cyrenaica, which was eventually incorporated into Hellenistic Egypt). Its influence had also extended into the Mediterranean, taking control over Sardinia, [Malta](#), the Balearic Islands and the western half of [Sicily](#), where coastal fortresses such as Motya or Lilybaeum secured its possessions. Important colonies had also been established on the Iberian peninsula. Their cultural influence in the Iberian Peninsula is documented, but the degree of their political influence before the conquest by Hamilcar Barca is disputed.^[1]

Part Two

The Sicilian Wars

First Sicilian war

Carthage's economic successes, and its dependence on shipping to conduct most of its trade, led to the creation of a powerful Carthaginian navy to discourage both pirates and rival nations. This, coupled with its success and growing hegemony, brought Carthage into increasing conflict with the Greeks, the other major power contending for control of the central Mediterranean.

The island of [Sicily](#), lying at Carthage's doorstep, became the arena on which this conflict played out. From their earliest days, both the Greeks and Phoenicians had been attracted to the large island, establishing a large number of colonies and trading posts along its coasts. Small battles had been fought between these settlements for centuries.

By 480 B.C.E., Gelo, the tyrant of Greek Syracuse, backed in part by support from other Greek city-states, was attempting to unite the island under his rule. This imminent threat could not be ignored, and Carthage—possibly as part of an alliance with Persia, then engaged in a war with Greece—fielded its largest military force to date, under the leadership of the general Hamilcar. Traditional accounts give Hamilcar's army a strength of

three hundred thousand men; though these are almost certainly exaggerated, it must nonetheless have been of formidable force.

En route to Sicily, however, Hamilcar suffered losses (possibly severe) due to poor weather. Landing at Panormus (modern-day Palermo), he was then decisively defeated by Gelo at the Battle of Himera. Hamilcar was either killed during the battle or committed [suicide](#) in shame. As a result the nobility negotiated peace and replaced the old monarchy with a republic.

Second Sicilian war: the Great Hannibal

By 410 B.C.E., Carthage had recovered after serious defeats. It had conquered much of modern day [Tunisia](#), strengthened and founded new colonies in North Africa, and sponsored Mago Barca's journey across the [Sahara Desert](#), Hanno the Navigator's journey down the African coast, and Himilco the Navigator's exploration of the European Atlantic coast. Although, in that year, the Iberian colonies seceded—cutting off Carthage's major supply of [silver](#) and [copper](#)—Hannibal Mago, the grandson of Hamilcar, began preparations to reclaim Sicily, while expeditions were also led into [Morocco](#) and [Senegal](#), and also into the [Atlantic](#).

In 409 B.C.E., Hannibal Mago set out for Sicily with his force. He was successful in capturing the smaller cities of Selinus (modern Selinunte) and Himera, before returning triumphantly to Carthage with the spoils of war. But the primary enemy, Syracuse, remained untouched and, in 405 B.C.E., Hannibal Mago led a second Carthaginian expedition to claim the entire island. This time, however, he met with fierce resistance and ill-fortune. During the [siege](#) of Agrigentum, the Carthaginian forces were ravaged by plague, Hannibal Mago himself succumbing to it. Although his successor, Himilco, successfully extended the campaign by breaking a Greek siege, capturing the city of Gela, and repeatedly defeating the army of Dionysius, the new tyrant of Syracuse, he, too, was weakened by the plague and forced to sue for peace before returning to Carthage.

In 398 B.C.E., Dionysius had regained his strength and broke the peace treaty, striking at the Carthaginian stronghold of Motya. Himilco responded decisively, leading an expedition which not only reclaimed Motya, but also captured Messina. Finally, he laid siege to Syracuse itself. The siege was close to a success throughout 397 B.C.E., but in 396 B.C.E., plague again ravaged the Carthaginian forces, and they collapsed.

Sicily by this time had become an obsession for Carthage. Over the next sixty years, Carthaginian and Greek forces engaged in a constant series of skirmishes. By 340 B.C.E., Carthage had been pushed entirely into the southwest corner of the island and an uneasy peace reigned.

Third Sicilian war

In 315 B.C.E., Agathocles, the tyrant of Syracuse, seized the city of Messene (present-day Messina). In 311 B.C.E., he invaded the last Carthaginian holdings on Sicily, breaking the terms of the current peace treaty, and laid siege to Akragas.

Hamilcar, grandson of Hanno the Navigator, led the Carthaginian response and met with tremendous success. By 310 B.C.E., he controlled almost all of Sicily and had laid siege to Syracuse itself. In desperation, Agathocles secretly led an expedition of 14,000 men to the mainland, hoping to save his rule by leading a counterstrike against Carthage itself. In this, he was successful: Carthage was forced to recall Hamilcar and most of his army from Sicily to face the new and unexpected threat. Although Agathocles' army was eventually defeated in 307 B.C.E., Agathocles himself escaped back to Sicily and was able to negotiate a peace which maintained Syracuse as a stronghold of Greek power in Sicily.

Pyrrhic War

Between 280 and 275 B.C.E., Pyrrhus of Epirus waged two major campaigns in the western Mediterranean: One against the emerging power of the Roman Republic in southern Italy, the other against Carthage in Sicily.

Pyrrhus sent an advance guard to Tarentum under the command of Cineas with 3,000 infantry. Pyrrhus marched the main army across the Greek peninsula and engaged in battles with the Thessalians and the Athenian army. After his early success on the march Pyrrhus entered Tarentum to rejoin with his advance guard.

In the midst of Pyrrhus's Italian campaigns, he received envoys from the Sicilian cities of Agrigentum, Syracuse, and Leontini, asking for military aid to remove the Carthaginian dominance over that island.^[2] Pyrrhus agreed, and fortified the Sicilian cities with an army of 20,000 infantry and 3,000 cavalry and 20 War Elephants, supported by some 200 ships. Initially, Pyrrhus' Sicilian campaign against Carthage was a success, pushing back the Carthaginian forces, and capturing the city-fortress of Eryx, even though he was not able to capture Lilybaeum.^[3]

Following these losses, Carthage sued for peace, but Pyrrhus refused unless Carthage was willing to renounce its claims on Sicily entirely. According to [Plutarch](#), Pyrrhus set his sights on conquering Carthage itself, and to this end, began outfitting an expedition. However, his ruthless treatment of the Sicilian cities in his preparations for this expedition, and his execution of two Sicilian rulers whom he claimed were plotting against him led to such a rise in animosity towards the Greeks, that Pyrrhus withdrew from Sicily and returned to deal with events occurring in southern Italy.^[4]

Pyrrhus's campaigns in Italy were inconclusive, and Pyrrhus eventually withdrew to Epirus. For Carthage, this meant a return to the status quo. For Rome, however, the failure of

Pyrrhus to defend the colonies of *Magna Graecia* meant that Rome absorbed them into its "sphere of influence," bringing it closer to complete domination of the Italian peninsula. Rome's domination of Italy, and proof that Rome could pit its military strength successfully against major international powers, would pave the way to the future Rome-Carthage conflicts of the [Punic Wars](#).

The Punic Wars

When Agathocles died in 288 B.C.E., a large company of Italian mercenaries who had previously been held in his service found themselves suddenly without employment. Rather than leave Sicily, they seized the city of Messana. Naming themselves Mamertines (or "sons of Mars"), they became a law unto themselves, terrorizing the surrounding countryside.

The Mamertines became a growing threat to Carthage and Syracuse alike. In 265 B.C.E., Hiero II, former general of Pyrrhus and the new tyrant of Syracuse, took action against them. Faced with a vastly superior force, the Mamertines divided into two factions, one advocating surrender to Carthage, the other preferring to seek aid from Rome. While the Roman Senate debated the best course of action, the Carthaginians eagerly agreed to send a garrison to Messana. A Carthaginian garrison was admitted to the city, and a Carthaginian fleet sailed into the Messanan harbor. However, soon afterwards, they began negotiating with Hiero; alarmed, the Mamertines sent another embassy to Rome asking them to expel the Carthaginians.

Hiero's intervention had placed Carthage's military forces directly across the narrow channel of water that separated Sicily from Italy. Moreover, the presence of the Carthaginian fleet gave them effective control over this channel, the Strait of Messina, and demonstrated a clear and present danger to nearby Rome and her interests.

As a result, the Roman Assembly, although reluctant to ally with a band of mercenaries, sent an expeditionary force to return control of Messana to the Mamertines.

The Roman attack on the Carthaginian forces at Messana triggered the first of the [Punic Wars](#). Over the course of the next century, these three major conflicts between Rome and Carthage would determine the course of Western civilization. The wars included a Carthaginian invasion led by [Hannibal](#), which nearly prevented the rise of the [Roman Empire](#).

Shortly after the First Punic War, Carthage faced a major mercenary revolt, which changed the internal political landscape of Carthage (bringing the Barcid family to prominence), and affected Carthage's international standing, as Rome used the events of the war to base a claim by which it seized Sardinia and Corsica.

Roman Carthage

[Julius Caesar](#) built a new city on the ruins of the old as the administrative capital of their African empire. Villas, baths, and splendid public buildings were constructed. Carthage's administrative role ensured that the new city continued to be a significant center of culture and later of the emerging Christian religion. One of its early bishops, Tertullian, was the first Christian theologian to write in Latin, while [Augustine](#) studied rhetoric and ran an academy there.

Legacy

Carthage's achievements were built on trade and, despite Rome's ascendancy, testifies to the role that trade plays in linking human communities together with ties of commerce, culture, and language. Much of what is known about Carthage is from Roman writers such as [Plutarch](#) and Livy, who cannot altogether be trusted to do justice to her legacy. Carthage was the ancient enemy whom Rome, in their view, was predestined to defeat. Accounts by Carthaginians were destroyed at the end of the Punic Wars. In reality, there probably was not enough room for both Rome and Carthage, so their clash was almost certainly inevitable. Carthage's own legacy and achievements can be said to have become entwined with that of Rome, whose subsequent development was in many respects shaped by her successes against the former Phoenician colony and maritime power.

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