

# The Imperial Republic

Once a republic reluctant to fight wars except in self-defense, Rome became an imperial colossus capable of annihilating an entire nation out of sheer spite.

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by *Steve Bonta*

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*This is the third installment in a series of articles on the rise and fall of the Roman Republic.*

In all of human history, there have been few spectacles to rival the great battles of the ancient world, with their pageantry, color — and awful carnage. And few battles of that age could match the drama that unfolded under the hot Italian sun one August morning in 216 B.C. near Cannae during the Second Punic War. On that fateful day, two of the mightiest armies ever assembled faced each other for what was to be a cataclysmic showdown. On one side was arrayed almost the entire military force of Rome: eight full legions, amounting to more than 80,000 men. On the other were the forces of Carthage, led by the matchless Hannibal, the greatest foe Rome had ever faced.

With dazzling speed, Hannibal had led his vast army out of Spain, across southern Gaul, and over the Alps into Italy before Rome even realized he had left the Iberian peninsula. Hannibal's army quickly inflicted two crushing defeats on Roman forces, at Trebia and Lake Trasimene. For a time, the Romans adopted a policy of containment, avoiding direct battle with Hannibal while harassing his forces and attacking his supply lines. But Rome soon tired of permitting Hannibal to ravage Italy uncontested, and resolved to risk all in a single battle. Hannibal's forces, especially his celebrated elephants, had been depleted by the arduous trek over the Alps and the subsequent campaigning. But they were still formidable: around 50,000 men, including expert cavalrymen from Numidia in North Africa and slingers from the Balearic Islands.

Amidst the din of trumpets and of battle cries, the two massive forces charged across the plain, the respective infantries flanked on either side by crack cavalry units. As the lines crashed together, the

Romans, who had deployed extra infantry in the center of the formation in hopes of breaking through the Carthaginian lines, found themselves outflanked by elite North African cavalry units. Hannibal's cavalry overwhelmed the Roman cavalry on both flanks and then swept behind the Roman forces to attack from the rear. In short order, the Romans were completely hemmed in by the Carthaginians. Hannibal's numerically inferior forces then slaughtered the Romans on the field almost to a man.

When the choking dust of battle subsided, more than 70,000 Romans lay dead on the fields of Cannae, including one consul and at least two former consuls, not to mention most of the rest of Rome's land forces. Ten thousand more, who had been left to guard the Roman camp, were taken prisoner by the victorious Carthaginians, who themselves had lost only 6,000 men. Only 3,000 Romans escaped Cannae alive. By all appearances, Rome was doomed. The brilliant and apparently invincible Carthaginian general had virtually wiped out Rome's military forces in a single stroke, and the road to Rome itself now lay undefended.

How could such a tragedy come to pass? In the fairly recent past, Rome had successfully fended off the challenge of another military genius, Pyrrhus, the king of Epirus, a kingdom in southwest Greece. Rome's leader at Cannae, Lucius Aemilius Paulus, had earned distinction in successful campaigns in Illyricum (in the approximate area of modern Albania). In the First Punic War, the Romans had soundly beaten the Carthaginians, leaving Rome in possession of the island of Sicily and with significant alliances and interests elsewhere.

Now an upstart general with an unconventional, multinational force had invaded the Roman heartland and had struck a blow from which no reasonable observer could expect Rome to recover. Hannibal Barca was tutoring Rome in the costs of empire. His massive invasion force was showing

Rome by brute experience that imperial expansion has a high price.

Rome had never been a peaceful state. In the early centuries of the republic, however, many of Rome's conflicts were provoked by jealous neighbors like the Volscians and the Aequans. The early Italian peninsula was a tough neighborhood, with rival Etruscan and Latin states, including Rome, jostling for control, and the Gauls, who occupied parts of northern Italy, frequently making incursions southward. Enclaves of southern Italy, called Magna Graeca, or "Greater Greece," were Greek. Though conflict was frequent among all of these jostling ethnic groups, many of Rome's early campaigns against her peninsular neighbors were defensive, not expansionist.

It was Rome's dispute with the Greek city of Tarentum in southern Italy that gave Rome her first taste of conflict with an overseas power. The Tarentines requested the aid of Pyrrhus, who sailed with his forces across the Adriatic and defeated the Romans in two costly battles, Heraclea and Asculum. In a later campaign, Rome finally defeated Pyrrhus at the Battle of Beneventum, but was content to expel him from Italy, rather than to seek reprisals on Greek territory.

## A Fateful Choice

The situation was far different a decade or so later in 264 B.C., when Rome decided to intervene militarily in a conflict on the island of Sicily. The powerful Greek city of Syracuse had besieged the city of Messina, which was occupied by an unsavory band of Italian mercenaries called the Mamertines. The Mamertines frequently plundered surrounding territories, as bandits are wont to do, until Syracuse grew weary of their depredations. The Mamertines, in turn, called upon *both* Rome and Carthage for help. Initially only Carthage jumped into the fray, but then Rome — against her better judgment, and rationalizing that she needed to act as a coun-

terpoise against Carthage's occupation of Messina — jumped in as well. For the first time ever, Rome sent a large expeditionary force overseas, and soon found herself directly confronting the Carthaginians for control of Messina and the rest of Sicily. Thus began the first of the three Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage.

The First Punic War, one of the costliest in recorded history up to that time, lasted for 23 years. Because it was primarily a naval conflict, the Carthaginians, with their vast navy and experience with sea warfare, enjoyed a heavy advantage. Nevertheless, the Romans soon built a navy of their own, designing their craft after captured Carthaginian vessels, and before long, the tide of the war began to change. Rome enjoyed a substantial constitutional advantage over Carthage, because the old, oligarchic Carthaginian state could not match the vitality of Rome's comparatively open society and competitive marketplace. Rome failed in her attempt to conquer Carthage by land, but ultimately won the war at sea, forcing Carthage's army stranded on Sicily to surrender.

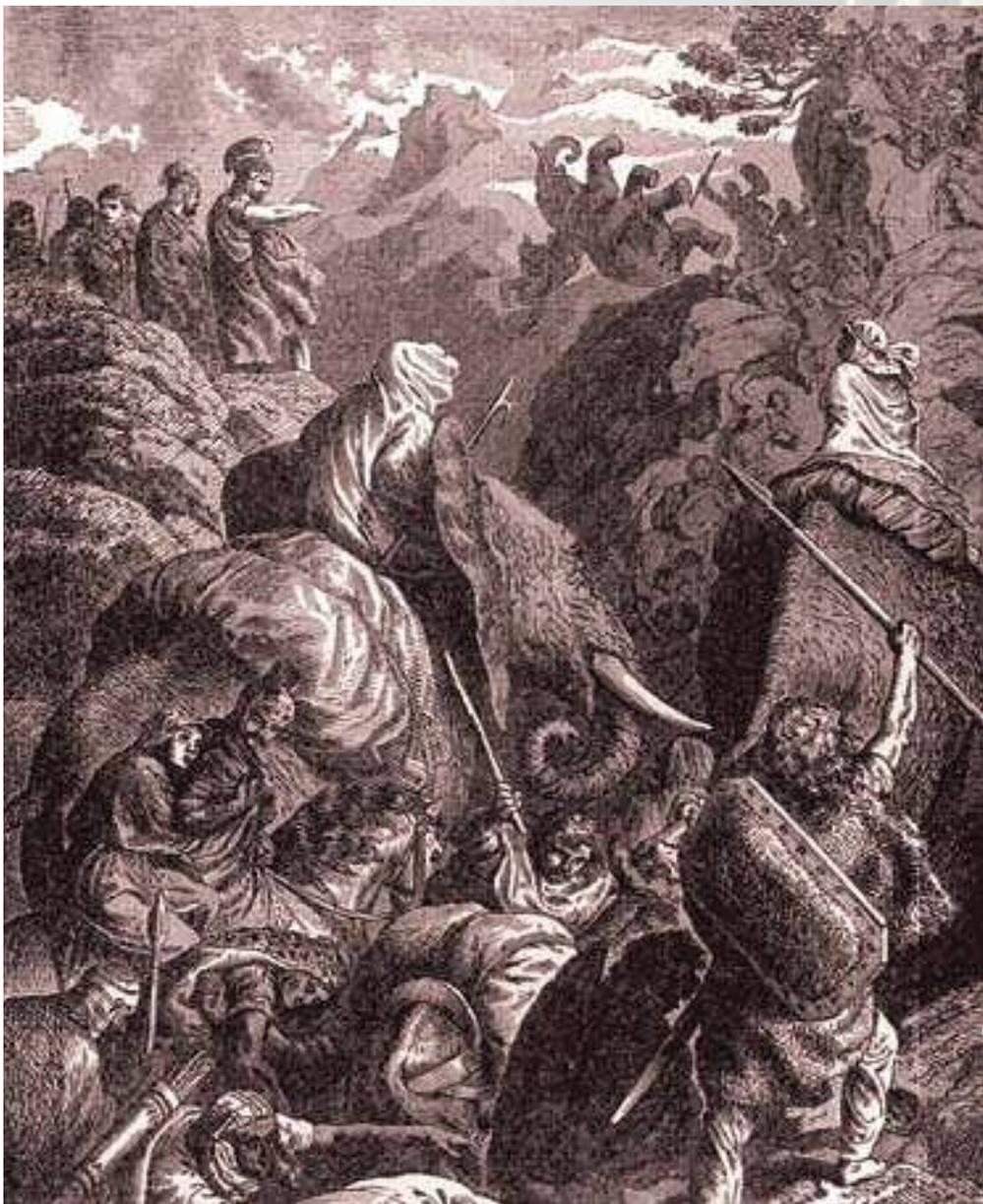
The First Punic War exhausted both Rome and Carthage for a generation, but it had kindled in Rome a fatal yen for conquest. No longer content to mind her own affairs in Italy, Rome began to see herself as the mistress of the Mediterranean. Besides governing her new Sicilian territory, Rome sought to dictate terms to Carthage at the far western end of the Mediterranean, in Iberia. There, Rome ordered the Carthaginians to keep their forces south of the Ebro River. When the impetuous young Carthaginian general Hannibal flouted Rome's dictate in 218 B.C., Rome declared war against Carthage for a second time.

The Second Punic War was shorter than the first, but its 16 years exacted a far heavier toll on both sides than the first. Hannibal, according to Roman accounts, had sworn an oath to fight Rome all his life and, unlike many of Carthage's dissolute nobility, possessed the re-

solve and the military genius to do so. After leading his army across the Alps into Italy, he won three monumental victories against the Romans culminating in the debacle at Cannae, victories that laid the Eternal City itself bare for conquest.

Fortunately for Rome, in one of history's more enduring mysteries, Hannibal chose not to follow his crushing victory at Cannae

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**Hannibal Crossing the Alps:** In one of the most brilliant and unconventional maneuvers in military history, the Carthaginian leader Hannibal led his forces, complete with war elephants, across the Alps into Italy. Thousands of his men and nearly all of the elephants were lost in transit, but Hannibal still won many victories over Rome in the Italian heartland.

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with an immediate assault on the Roman capital, but instead resumed his campaigning in Italy, seeking allies among the fickle Roman tributary cities. Some, like Tarentum and Syracuse, declared themselves for Hannibal and later incurred the wrath of Rome. Syracuse, defended by the ingenious war machines designed by Archimedes, fell to the Romans after a two-year siege. Tarentum became a focal point of the war in Italy, with control over the city changing hands several times between Rome and Carthage.

The Second Punic War produced its share of Roman leaders — among them Fabius Maximus, whose careful delay-

ing tactics kept Hannibal at bay where direct confrontation could not, and Marcus Claudius Marcellus, whose forces took Syracuse. But Rome's champion, and the central figure of the age, was Publius Cornelius Scipio, afterwards named Africanus.

### Scipio's Defiance

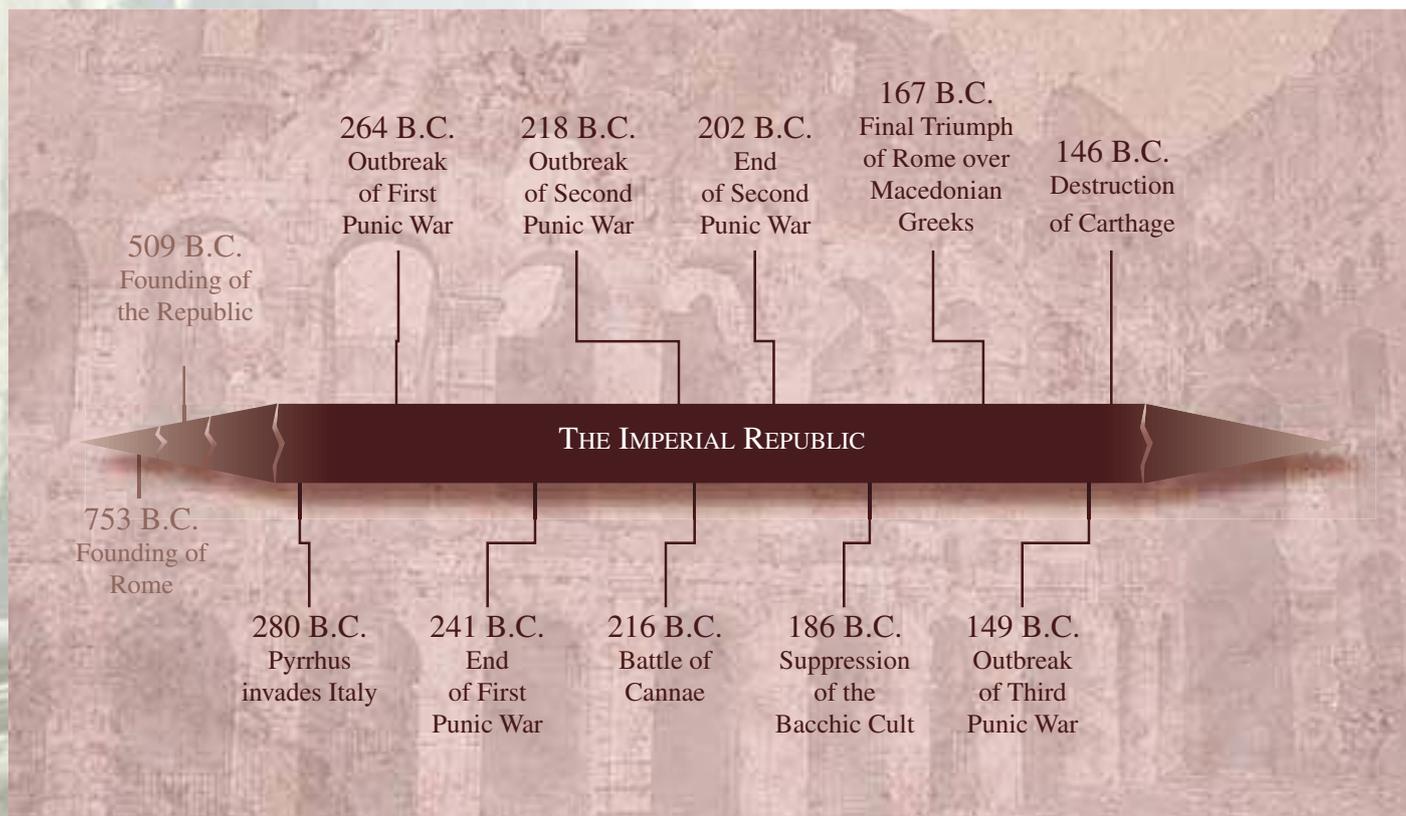
Several of Scipio's relatives had died in war against Carthage, and Scipio himself was one of the few to escape the carnage at Cannae. Young Scipio had, therefore, a very keen appreciation of the potency of the Carthaginian military. He volunteered to lead Roman forces in Iberia and, despite his youth, his demeanor so impressed the Senate that he was given the command. Scipio was as good as his word, and after his forces had defeated the Carthaginians in Spain, he was hailed as a hero.

Yet Scipio, for all his brilliance as a leader, orator, and military strategist, was also a man of boundless personal ambition. He wanted to achieve greater glory by leading Roman forces into Africa and taking the

war to Carthage itself. Only such a bold move, he argued, would induce Hannibal, who was still making trouble in Italy, to vacate the Roman heartland and return to defend his own borders.

Many senators, led by the now-venerable Fabius Maximus, opposed Scipio's plan. Besides the additional cost in men and materiel, the pitfalls of further overseas expansion troubled their republican instincts. Scipio, however, made it very clear that he would ignore Senate authority and appeal directly to the people, if need be, to secure approval for the invasion.

In an epic Senate debate recorded by Livy, Fabius reproved his younger colleague for being more interested in personal glory than in wise policy. Hannibal, Fabius pointed out, was still in Italy; did it not make better sense to undertake the less glamorous task of defending the Italian homeland than to seek glory and conquest overseas? "Although you naturally prize more highly the renown which you have acquired than that which you hope for," he told young Scipio, "yet surely you would not boast more of having freed Spain from war than of having freed Italy.... Why then



do you not apply yourself to this, and carry the war in a straightforward manner to the place where Hannibal is...? Let there be peace in Italy before war in Africa; and let us be free from fear ourselves before we bring it upon others." Concluding his address, Fabius added witheringly, "Publius Scipio was elected consul for the service of the state and of us, and not to forward his own individual interest; and the armies were enlisted for the protection of the city and of Italy, and not for the consuls, like kings, to carry into whatever part of the world they please from motives of vanity."

In reply, Scipio reminded the senators that he had lost his father and uncle to Carthaginian arms, and admitted that he did indeed seek greater glory — an instinct that he considered natural and noble. The Senate, having already been informed of Scipio's intent to bypass their authority, was unimpressed. Quintus Fulvius, a former consul, bluntly asked Scipio to declare openly to the Senate whether "he submitted to the fathers to decide respecting the provinces, and whether he intended to abide by their determination, or to put it

to the people." Leaving no doubt of his intentions, Scipio responded boldly that "he would act as he thought for the interest of the state," in Livy's words.

Scipio's defiance was the first time in the history of the republic — though not, unhappily, the last — when a charismatic, successful military leader placed his own judgment above the laws of Rome and the counsels of the Senate. The Senate, fearing a confrontation, eventually authorized Scipio to cross into Africa, giving the color of legality to the young general's challenge. But his impudence set another gloomy precedent, one that Rome would bitterly regret in generations to come — when military leaders less principled than Scipio would not scruple to trample underfoot the will of the Senate and the people alike.

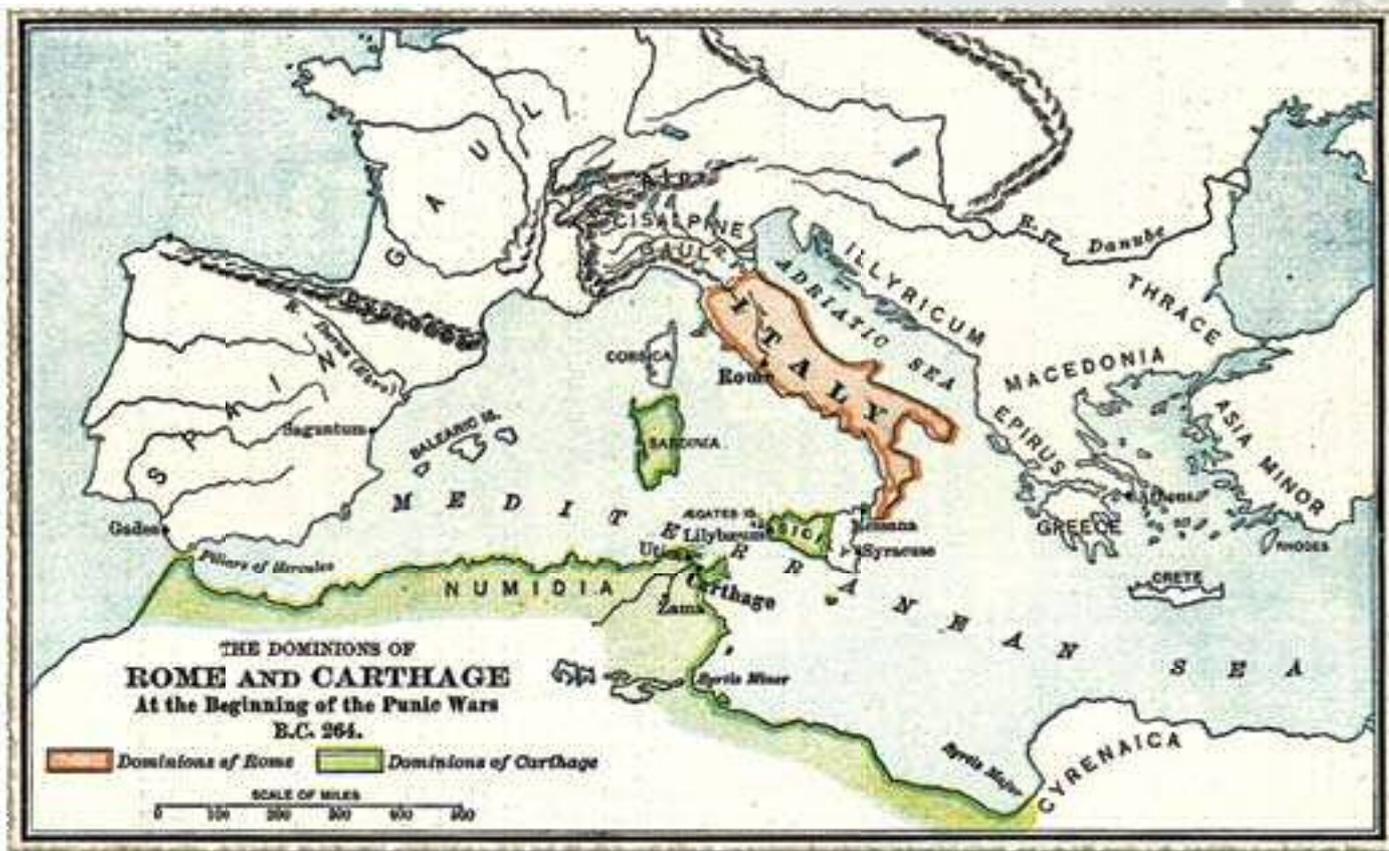
Scipio successfully invaded Carthaginian territories in North Africa and won a resounding victory at Zama over Hannibal's hastily recalled forces, ending the Second Punic War. The city of Carthage itself was left intact, but the terms of the Roman victory denied the Carthaginians all but a token military and reduced her to

a tributary nation. Hannibal himself, wily as ever, managed to elude capture and flee to Syria, where he took refuge with King Antiochus and played a significant role in stirring up that potentate to make war with Rome.

### War Without End

The third century B.C. closed with Rome in control of all of the former dominions of Carthage save a few portions of North Africa and the city itself. Having secured the western Mediterranean as Roman dominions, Rome now turned her attentions to the east, where the Greek city-states were in turmoil, threatened both by a resurgent Sparta under the despot Nabis and by ambitious Macedonian rulers seeking to establish hegemony over the Hellenic world. Now acclimated to her role as Mediterranean policeman, Rome sent troops to Greece to quell the ambitions of Nabis, justifying every step of the expedition as a mission to liberate the Greeks.

After defeating Nabis and his Macedonian allies, the Roman general Titus Quinctius made a dramatic announcement at Corinth to the effect that Rome, having



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restored to the Greeks the freedom that was their birthright, would now withdraw all her forces to Italy. The rumor-mongers were wrong, he claimed, who “had spread the calumny that the cause of liberty had been wrongly entrusted to the Roman people, and that the Greeks had merely exchanged Macedonian masters for Roman lords.” He laid down strong recommendations for how the Greeks should conduct their affairs in the future, and enjoined them to “guard and preserve [their liberty] by their own watchfulness, so that the Roman people might be assured that liberty had been given to men who deserved it, and that their boon had been well-bestowed.” According to Livy, the source of this account, “the delegates listened to these words as if to a father’s voice, and tears of joy trickled from every eye.” The servile Greeks watched with enthusiasm as, in 194 B.C., the Romans, as good as their word, evacuated their forces from Greek territory.

Unfortunately for Greece, the Romans’ ardor for Greek independence was short-lived. Within a few years, Antiochus of Syria, egged on by the vindictive Hannibal, declared war on Rome and sought allies among the Greeks. In the complex war that followed, the Roman military returned to Greece to fight Antiochus and his Greek allies, and then became embroiled in several decades of war in the eastern Mediterranean, primarily against the kings of Macedonia, that left Rome in permanent control of Greece by about 167 B.C.

During the first half of the second century B.C., Rome was not only conquering the eastern Mediterranean, but was also constantly at war in Iberia and in North Africa. While preserving the political forms of the old republic, Rome was transforming into an empire in substance. Her vast new dominions, with their unruly citizenries, alien cultures, and harsh, far-flung geography, would pose greater and

greater administrative challenges to the Roman state. The republic, after all, was designed to govern Romans within a single cohesive territory; her constitution was not well adapted to the suppression of multinational imperial subjects.

### **Social Decay**

At home, too, the character of Roman society was beginning to change. The Romans began to develop a taste for luxury and contempt for the austere virtues of earlier times. In 186 B.C., Rome was shocked by an unprecedented calamity that signaled the moral dry rot consuming Roman society. The crisis began, according to Livy, with the arrival in Italy of a mysterious Greek who claimed to be an initiate of a secret cult dedicated to Bacchus, the god of wine and transgressive behavior.

The cult, with its secret nighttime orgies, human sacrifices and other abominable practices, spread rapidly among the Romans. The adherents of Bacchus aimed not merely to corrupt Roman morals, but also to undermine the Roman government, according to the consul Spurius Postumius, who first exposed the conspiracy before the Roman Senate. “Never,” exclaimed Postumius, “has there been so much wickedness in this commonwealth, never wickedness affecting so many people, nor manifesting itself in so many ways.... And they have not yet put into practice all the crimes towards which they have conspired. Their impious conspiracy still confines itself to private outrages, because it has not yet strength enough to overthrow the state. But the evil grows with every passing day.... It aims at the supreme power in the state.”

In response to Postumius’ warnings, the Bacchic cult was broken up, its shrines destroyed, and many of its adherents imprisoned or executed. For the time being, the fabric of Roman society was kept from unraveling; but as the very potency of the Bacchic cult showed, it was starting to fray around the edges.

### **Carthage’s Last Stand**

With the Roman conquest of the Mediterranean all but assured by the middle of the second century B.C., only one lingering challenge lay yet unresolved — Carthage. After Carthage’s total defeat in the Sec-

ond Punic War, the Carthaginians, who were first and foremost a commercial, not a military, republic, rebounded economically. Seemingly content to prosper commercially under the Roman military yoke, the Carthaginians strove to keep the onerous obligations of their treaty with Rome. Unfortunately for them, the Roman lust for vengeance had not yet been satisfied.

A large number of Roman politicians viewed the resurgence of Carthage as an unacceptable challenge and agitated for a resumption of hostilities. Their mouthpiece was the senator Cato the Elder, whose condemnation of Carthage was so intense that he ended every speech with the famous phrase “Carthago delenda est” (“Carthage must be destroyed”). Rome would not rest until she found a pretext for eliminating Carthage. Massinissa, the Numidian king, finally gave her one.

The Numidians, a rival African power, had long been at odds with the Carthaginians, their former allies. When Massinissa began taking advantage of Carthaginian military weakness and attacked Carthaginian towns (with the support of Rome), the Carthaginians, unable to rely on protection from Rome, raised their own military and defended themselves.

This was all the pretext that Rome needed. Frothing senators, led by Cato, pointed to the developing new Carthaginian armed forces as an intolerable threat to Rome. The Carthaginians were put on notice that they could expect a Roman invasion and utter desolation unless they submitted to Roman terms. The supine Carthaginians sent envoys to Rome to plead their case, but found themselves confronted by a hostile united front of Roman leadership already resolved upon war. With perfidy more reminiscent of the smirking despots Rome had overthrown in nobler times, the Roman senators, holding out false promises of peace, deliberately misled the Carthaginians into surrendering hostages and armaments to Rome.

Even after a huge Roman expeditionary force had crossed into Africa, Carthage was still suing for peace. But it was not to be. The Romans finally showed their hand by deliberately demanding what even the terrified Carthaginians could not accept: evacuating their city and moving inland, where they would be resettled. Rome would demolish the city itself, to ensure

that it could never be a threat again.

In dismay, the Carthaginians resolved to fight their implacable enemy. The merciless Roman forces laid siege to the great city of Carthage, wonder of the Mediterranean for an entire age. The Carthaginians proved astonishingly resilient in their final struggle. Though they had been beguiled by Rome into destroying their navy and giving up their weapons, they managed to construct new ships and weapons using resources within the walls of their own city. The entire city worked night and day manufacturing weapons out of any available objects. All metal was melted down to be converted into spear and arrow tips and swords. Even women's hair was cut off and braided into cords for catapults.

The desperate Carthaginians enjoyed several military successes against Rome, but they could not break the siege. Finally, after two years of stalemate, Rome appointed Scipio Aemilianus, the adoptive grandson of Africanus, as the leader of the forces besieging Carthage. Under Scipio's energetic generalship, the war was soon resolved.

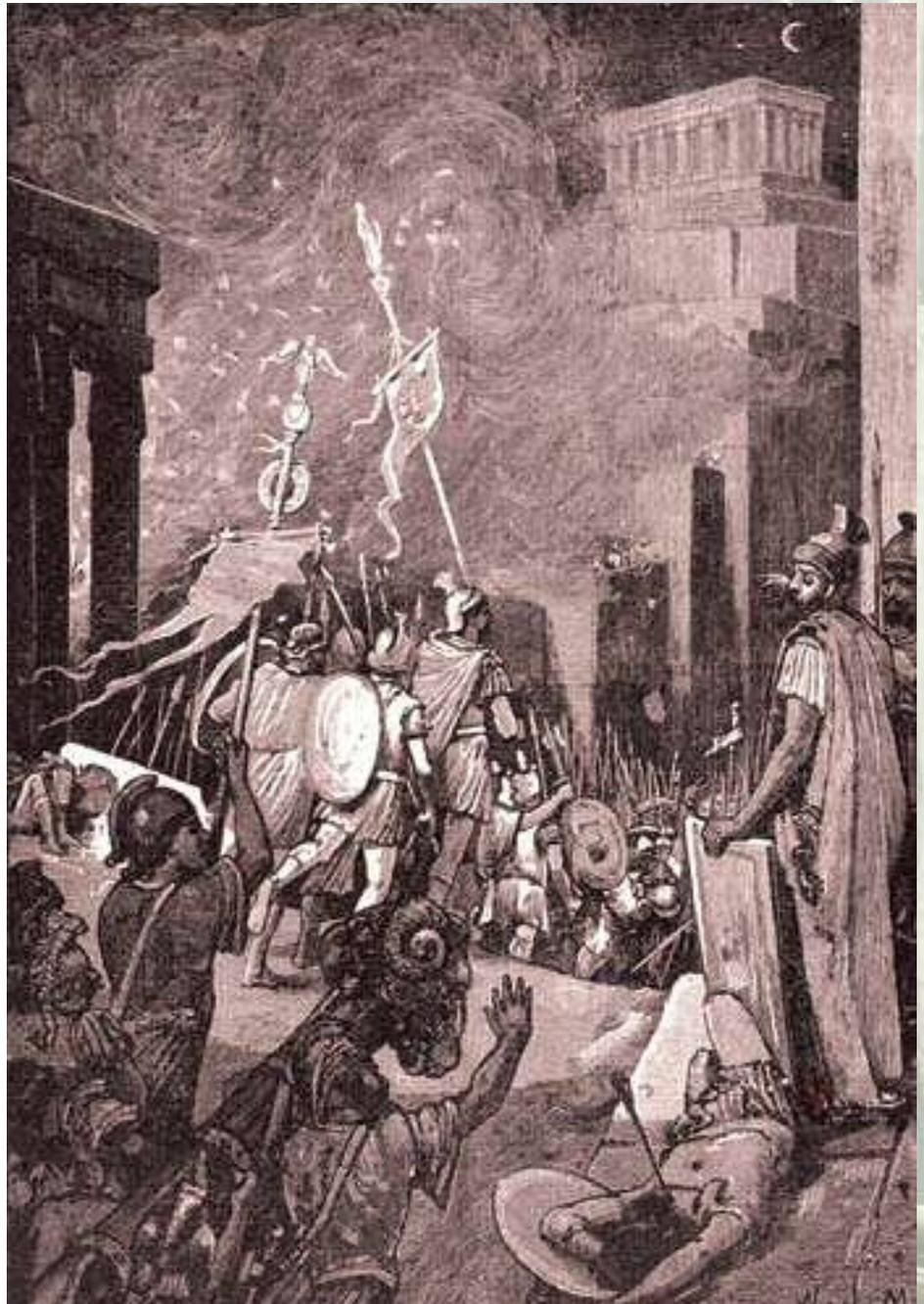
As the Carthaginian defenses collapsed, 50,000 of her citizens surrendered to the Romans under a promise of leniency. Their lives were spared, but they were eventually sold into slavery. The remaining inhabitants of the city, numbering as many as 650,000, were less fortunate. The Romans systematically slaughtered all the Carthaginians, including women and children, an event that may have been the worst butchery of civilians before the 20th century. It is said that Scipio Aemilianus shed tears of regret as he witnessed the destruction of Carthage, but that did not stop him from allowing his men to massacre the inhabitants. He then razed the entire city to the ground in a final act of fanatical vindictiveness that even the barbarians who sacked Rome in later centuries never equaled.

Such was the moral decline of Rome, from a republic reluctant to fight wars except in self-defense to a belligerent, self-absorbed colossus capable of annihilating an entire nation out of sheer spite. For Rome had become an imperial republic; her chief concern now was not securing the liberty of her own citizens, but the domination of foreign powers. But Rome

was soon to learn an awful lesson: Imperial republics are inherently unstable. They must either abandon their designs of conquest and domination abroad, or modify their domestic policies to better conform to a program of imperial administration — and renounce liberty into the bargain.

Scipio, as he watched the flames con-

sume Carthage, reportedly likened the scene to the destruction of Troy and wondered aloud whether a similar fate would befall Rome. As events turned out, the Roman Republic would not outlive fallen Carthage by many generations. Rome, having sown the wind abroad, before many years would reap the whirlwind at home. ■



**Death of a republic, rise of an empire:** It could be argued that two republics died in spring of 146 B.C., when Roman forces, resolved on a program of imperial conquest, stormed and destroyed Carthage, a centuries-old citadel of Mediterranean trade and culture.