

PUNIC WARS—ERA SUMMARY

274 TO 146 B.C.

FIRST PUNIC WAR TO DESTRUCTION OF CARTHAGE

The period of the Punic and Macedonian Wars was a critical one in Rome's history. At the dawn of the [Punic Wars](#), in 264 B.C., Rome was master of Italy, but controlled no colonies or provinces outside of the Peninsula. She had neither a navy nor a merchant based economy. One hundred and twenty years later, she had entirely subdued both the Carthaginian empire in the west and the Macedonian empire in the east. She had provinces and allies throughout the Mediterranean and was the undisputed master of the seas. Although it took another century to expand and consolidate her power, by the end of the Punic Wars Rome had laid the foundation of an empire.

The Punic Wars, which raged between the city of Carthage and Rome for over a century, were so named because the Carthaginians were of the Phoenician (or Punic) race. There were three Punic Wars, but the second was by far the most critical.

The first Punic War lasted 24 years, involved many skirmishes, and was won primarily by perseverance. Rome gained a small amount of Carthaginian territory but never achieved a decisive victory. Carthage capitulated as much because of internal troubles as due to pressure from Rome. However, this war did much to establish Rome as a naval power. The best known Roman hero of the first Punic War was [Regulus](#), and the best known Carthaginian heroes were [Xanthippus](#) and [Hamilcar](#).

The second Punic War was a great catastrophe for Rome and all of Italy. The early part of the war was fought entirely on Italian soil at great cost to Rome and its allies. The *Battle of Cannae* was the worst loss in Roman history, yet it was only one of several disastrous defeats inflicted on Rome by its implacable Carthaginian foes. Eventually the tide of war turned when Rome attacked Carthaginian strongholds in Spain and Africa. Again, perseverance through great difficulties changed the fortunes of Rome from great peril to ultimate victory.

This time Rome continued the fight until it won a decisive victory against Carthage and eliminated its threat as a military power. The outstanding character of the Second Punic War was undoubtedly the Carthaginian [Hannibal](#), who is universally acknowledged as one of history's greatest generals. Some of the Roman generals who opposed him over the years



"WE ARE BEATEN, O ROMANS, IN A GREAT BATTLE, OUR ARMY IS DESTROYED."

included [Cornelius Scipio](#), [Fabius Cunctator](#), [Aemilius Paulus](#), [Varro](#), and [Marcellus](#), but it was [Scipio Africanus](#), who drove Hannibal out of Italy, defeated him on Carthaginian soil, and brought the bloody war to a final close.

The third Punic War was fought without serious provocation, for the purpose of destroying Carthage altogether. Having eliminated Carthage as a military threat, Rome desired to exterminate it, partly out of vengeance, partly out of envy from its continuing commercial success, and partly out of contempt for its culture (which did involve some heinous elements, such as human sacrifice.)

The [Roman Macedonian Wars](#) in the east were not as protracted or ruinous as the Punic Wars, but resulted in territory and plunder for the Romans. The Romans valued many elements of Greek civilization, unlike the Carthaginian civilization, which they hated. Therefore, they preserved or imitated much of Greek culture rather than destroying it. Captured Greeks were the most valuable of all slaves and were frequently employed as teachers, tutors, or household servants rather than laborers.

The first Roman campaign against Macedonia was fought during the second Punic War, after king Philip V of Macedonia took advantage of the disruptions in Italy to seize some contested territory on the North Adriatic. Two subsequent campaigns were fought over the next thirty years and resulted in much plunder, which helped re-invigorate Rome after its losses in the second Punic War. The *Battle of Pydna* in 168 B.C. destroyed the power of the Macedonian kingdom in Greece and the subsequent destruction of Corinth, following a rebellion of some Greek city states, ushered in the Greco-Roman era.

The famous characters of these ages were almost invariably military leaders. [Polybius](#), a Greek writer who wrote the histories of the Punic Wars, and [Cato \(the censor\)](#), who ardently resisted the extravagance and luxury that went along with the increasing influence of Greek culture in Rome, are two of the only characters of this age who are famous mainly for their cultural contributions, rather than their martial feats.