Punic Wars -- CARThAGE VS ROME!

The three Punic Wars between Carthage and Rome took place over nearly a century, beginning in 264 B.C. and ending with the destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C. By the time the First Punic War broke out, Rome had become the dominant power throughout the Italian peninsula, while Carthage—a powerful city-state in northern Africa—had established itself as the leading maritime power in the world. The First Punic War broke out in 264 B.C. when Rome interfered in a dispute on the Carthaginian-controlled island of Sicily; the war ended with Rome in control of both Sicily and Corsica (islands) and marked the empire’s emergence as a naval as well as a land power!

In the Second Punic War, the great Carthaginian general Hannibal invaded Italy and scored great victories at Lake Trasimene and Cannae before his eventual defeat at the hands of Rome’s Scipio Africanus in 202 B.C. left Rome in control of the western Mediterranean and much of Spain. In the Third Punic War, the Romans, led by Scipio the Younger, captured and destroyed the city of Carthage in 146 B.C., turning Africa into yet another province of the mighty Roman Empire.

SECOND PUNIC WAR (218-201 B.C.)

Over the next decades, Rome took over control of both Corsica and Sardinia as well, but Carthage was able to establish a new base of influence in Spain beginning in 237 B.C. Eventually, the military general Hannibal took command of Carthaginian forces in Spain. Two years later, he marched his army across the Ebro River into Saguntum, an Iberian (Spain) city under Roman protection, effectively declaring war on Rome. The Second Punic War saw Hannibal and his troops—including as many as 90,000 infantry, 12,000 cavalry and a number of elephants—march from Spain across the Alps and into Italy, where they scored a string of victories over Roman troops at Ticinus, Trebia and Trasimene. Hannibal’s daring invasion of Rome reached its height at Cannae in 216 B.C., where he used his superior cavalry to surround a Roman army twice the size of his own and inflict massive casualties.

After this disastrous defeat, however, the Romans managed to rebound, and the
Carthaginians lost hold in Italy as Rome won victories in Spain and North Africa. In 203 B.C., Hannibal’s forces were forced to abandon the struggle in Italy in order to defend North Africa. Hannibal’s losses in the Second Punic War effectively put an end to Carthage’s empire in the western Mediterranean, leaving Rome in control of Spain and allowing Carthage to retain only its territory in North Africa. Carthage was also forced to give up its fleet and pay a large indemnity to Rome in silver.

**THIRD PUNIC WAR (149-146 B.C.)**

The Third Punic War, by far the most controversial of the three conflicts between Rome and Carthage, was the result of efforts by Cato the Elder (Roman Senator) and other hawkish members of the Roman Senate to convince their colleagues that Carthage (even in its weakened state) was a continuing threat to Rome’s supremacy in the region.

In 149 B.C., after Carthage technically broke its treaty with Rome by declaring war against the neighboring state of Numidia, the Romans sent an army to North Africa, beginning the Third Punic War.

Carthage withstood the Roman siege for two years. After tightening the Roman positions around Carthage, Rome launched a forceful attack on its harbor side in the spring of 146 B.C., pushing into the city and destroying house after house while pushing enemy troops towards their citadel (fort).

After seven days of horrific bloodshed, the Carthaginians surrendered, obliterating an ancient city that had survived for some 700 years. The surviving 50,000 citizens of Carthage were sold into slavery. It is said that the Romans were so cruel as to burn everything to the ground and pour salt all over the remains of the city. This was in an attempt to make rebuilding the once great city impossible, as the salt would prevent agriculture in the area for years to come.
Also in 146 B.C., Roman troops moved east to defeat King Philip V of Macedonia in the Macedonian Wars, and by year’s end Rome reigned supreme over an empire stretching from the Atlantic coast of Spain to the border between Greece and Asia Minor (now Turkey).

“A Roman Lake!”

[Map of the Western Mediterranean in 264 BC]
Critical Thinking Questions...

1) What might have changed about history had Carthage won the Punic wars instead of Rome?

2) While Rome ultimately won the Punic Wars, the great Carthaginian general Hannibal almost won the war during the 2nd Punic war. How did Hannibal get his massive army to Italy?

3) Why was Rome concerned with Carthage in the first place? In other words, what made them want to fight?

4) What did the Romans do to the North African city of Carthage at the end of the 3rd Punic war?

5) How was Rome expansionist and imperialist?