



THE PUNIC WARS: A “CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS” IN ANTIQUITY Mădălina STRECHIE

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Abstract: *The conflict that opposed the Carthaginians, called puny by the Romans, and the Eternal City, was one of epic proportions, similar to the Iliad, because, just as in the Iliad one of the combatants was removed forever, not only from the political game of the region, but also from history. The Punic Wars lasted long, the reason/stake was actually the control of the Mediterranean Sea, one of the most important spheres of influence in Antiquity.*

These military clashes followed the patterns of a genuine “clash of civilizations”, there was a confrontation of two civilizations with their military blocks, interests, mentalities, technologies, logistics, strategies and manner of belligerence. The two civilizations, one of money, the other of pragmatism, opposed once again, after the Iliad and the Greco-Persian wars, the Orient (and North Africa) with the West, thus redrawing the map of the world power.

The winner in this “clash” was Rome, by the perseverance, tenacity and national unity of its army to the detriment of Carthage, a civilization of money, equally pragmatic, but lacking national political unity. So the West was victorious, changing the Roman winners in the super-power of the ancient world, a sort of gendarme of the world around the Mediterranean Sea which was turned into a Roman lake (Mare Nostrum.)

Keywords: *Mediterranean Sea, “clash of civilizations”, wars, Rome, Carthage.*

1. Introduction

The Punic wars represented a new “clash of civilizations” in Antiquity after the Trojan war and the Greco-Persian wars. They lasted long, involving diverse and numerous forces, real politico-military coalitions mainly controlled by Carthage. These conflicts of epic proportions from a temporal perspective (264 BC – 146 BC) covered three military episodes between two military blocks, both with economic interests in the tempting sphere of influence of Antiquity at that time: the Mediterranean Sea.

These conflicts between a world power of trade, of money, Carthage, and an emergent power, Rome, followed the scheme of a

genuine “clash of civilizations”[1], the winner eliminated the defeated one and took over its empire.

The ancient world around the Mediterranean Sea had after this “clash”, in which the Western world prevailed over the Orient, a single master: Rome.

2. Carthage versus Rome: “the clash of civilizations”

Carthage and Rome confronted each other due to their commercial interests, both wanting hegemony in the Mediterranean Sea, which was the most important economic base of Antiquity and the world communication channel.

The Punic wars can perfectly be described within the coordinates of a genuine “clash of civilizations”. In this real world conflagration, the war took place between “two worlds” with different “cultural identities”, Carthage as a representative of the Orient, and Rome as a representative of the Western World, both belligerents actually being “fault lines”[2], with “a competitive living” [3] especially for the resources in the Mediterranean Sea, considered “the boiler of civilizations”[4]. The Punic wars were mainly “hegemonic wars”[5] between the holder of the Mediterranean Sea monopoly, a commercial and financial power: Carthage, and an assertive power, like an alternative power pole: Rome.

Although it was a civilization of money, Carthage was not “a political entity”[6] like Rome, Carthage was more of a commercial entity, a multinational company which, in the long term, could not manage to coordinate an almost one-century war. In a long-lasting world war like the confrontations between Carthage and Rome, the one having the chance to win was the one having a national armed force, an advantage: “namely the national feeling: enthusiasm, fanatic zeal, faith, opinions”[7]. Rome possessed this quality, one of the “main moral forces of war, ... the talent of the high commander, the military virtue of the army and its national feeling”[8], even if their opponent, Carthage benefited from the first “moral force of war”, i.e. the command of a titan of military strategy, Hannibal (his name could be translated by *the grace of Baall* [9], the supreme god of the Phoenicians, Hannibal being the most famous of the Phoenicians/Punics). An army like the Roman army was a militarized institution within the Punic wars, for republican Rome had a “military elite due to the numerous wars and to recruitment,...it was trained for any situation”[10].

3. The Punic wars

3.1. Premises and casus belli

The causes of the Punic wars were the “history, politics and ambition”[11] of Rome for its autonomy and also for assuming a hegemonic destiny, therefore its enemies had to disappear from history for ever. The best enemy is the one that does not threaten you, i.e. the eliminated enemy, a theory also supported by a Roman political trend of a conservative type, represented by Cato the Elder in his famous syntagm: *Censeo Carthaginem esse delendam = I believe that Carthage must be pulled down* [12].

Initially, these wars were “transition” wars involving the invasion of a civilization over another civilization, actually “wars of fault lines” [13]. These two civilizations were structurally different, one was a commercial power, Carthage, and the other a homeland, Rome.

The rivalry between them was an important reason, especially because in the Latin collective mentality there was an aversion against the Punics, present in such Latin expressions as *crudelitas quam punica* (Punic cruelty), which led to a demonization of the adversary of Rome and a psychological motivation of the Romans to fight against this opponent.

Casus belli was the “Messana affair” [14]. The conflict between the Romans and the Punics was opened by the Roman intervention in this protectorate of Carthage. The Romans had the pretext to intervene in this city at the request of the Samnites here, but they actually wanted to purify the Italic Peninsula and its surroundings from foreign protectorates: the Greek and the Carthaginian ones. This is how the first of the three conflicts between Rome and Carthage started. They lasted for more than 100 years. Carthage intervened through Syracuse, its ally, although the latter was controlled by the Greeks [15].

3.2. Theatres of operations

The fights between civilizations overwhelmed the entire world. The first Punic war took place between 264 and 241 BC and aimed at the liberation of the Italic

Peninsula and its surrounding islands which Rome wanted as part of its power. For this Rome built a fleet which, even if it lost several battles, in the economy of war, yet, brought Rome the possibility of entering the Mediterranean Sea [16]. This first war caused many losses to Rome in the beginning (it had to rebuild its destroyed navy several times), but it gained one victory, the final victory that turned it “into a political actor in the Mediterranean Sea” [17].

The second Punic war was between 218 and 201 BC and it was initiated by Carthage, in the beginning as a revenge [18].

Carthage attacked Rome by surprise, through the Alps not at sea, as expected by the Romans. Carthage gained quick victories at Trasimene (217) and Cannae (216) which was a disaster for the Romans, almost destroying their army.

At Trasimene, the Romans were defeated again due to the marshy land chosen by Hannibal, forcing the Romans to fight in the sector he imposed. This land, although Roman, served Hannibal, who camouflaged his troops in an ambush [19], enabling them to push the Roman troops into the swamp of the lake, prevent their retreat and kill them. Over 15,000 Romans were killed here and only 1,500 Carthaginians.

It was a disaster that was announcing another bigger disaster for the Roman troops: Cannae, which was “the most unbalanced victory of all times” [20], the Romans lost “75% of the army” [21]. Ancient sources (Titus Livius) tell us that more than 10,000 were officers that the Punic identified by cutting the finger with the ring showing their socio-professional rank, an episode which strengthened the Romans’ feeling of revenge, but also motivated them to fight.

In 211 *Hannibal (is) ante portas* (Hannibal at the gates of) Rome, but he hesitates to attack Rome, which is defenceless. It was the beginning of the end of Hannibal (and Carthage), which had become the new “merchant”, no longer a general [22].

Rome withdraws and attacks its opponent in its fief, thus moving the theatre of operations from Rome onto the enemy’s territory. Hispania, the strongest Carthaginian possession is conquered by Scipio, the Roman commander, who goes to Africa where in 202 at Zama, he defeats Carthage, imposing a hard peace on it [23]. The third Punic War lasted from 149 to 146 BC [24], the fights taking place on African land, it was a war for the elimination of Carthage.

The enemy of Rome was literally erased, the city emblem was burnt, torn down and the land was ploughed so that it could never be reborn. Rome thus avenged its defeat and would lead the Mediterranean world, taking over all the possessions of the economic empire of the Carthaginians.

The basin of the Mediterranean Sea was a Roman world, nobody threatened its now extensive borders, according to the Latin expression: *terra marique* (on land and at sea), *urbs* (city) had become after the Punic wars an *orbs* (world).

3.3. Strategies, weapons, technologies and commanders

In the Punic Wars, strategies were implemented, new military technologies were introduced, new weapons were tested and developed, while troops and commanders faced belligerence skills.

The commanders who made history in these “clashes of civilizations” were Hannibal of Carthage and Fabius Cunctator and Scipio of Rome.

Hannibal was considered the “father of strategy” because he devised attack plans on multiple fronts: land and sea. He used the right manoeuvre in military operations, and prevailed over his enemy by deception, by the speed of the attack, by surprise, by using field advantage, by using special engineering constructions. His favourite weapon was the cavalry, and the most common attack, the most successful as well, was from all sides, which ensured Hannibal’s freedom of movement and the flexibility of his troops for military

operations. The Carthaginian commander also established a supply line and used elephants as a battle platform, which caused considerable damage and panic among the enemies [25].

However, the army of Hannibal did not match the commander's talent. He defended a power, with a financially motivated military coalition of different nations, while the Roman army was a national army. It was ready for any situation, being driven by the dictum: *PRO PATRIA DIMICARE* (to fight for the country). It had the strength to recover after all the disasters. The Romans' main weapon was the infantry, which had multiple configurations with "different impulses" [26], the Roman soldiers were infantrymen par excellence, perhaps the best infantry of the ancient world, agile, strong and fast, who could turn into mobile units such as the *manipuli* (with an extraordinary freedom of movement) and could thus defeat the fast Carthaginian cavalry. The Romans' victory was gained by this army, not only by such commanders as Fabius, whose strategy was to "delay and avoid battle" [27]. This strategy was meant to save the Roman troops, but also to avoid the traps of the enemy and, at the same time, enabled the Romans to refuse to fight on the territory chosen by the enemy. This "slow and frustrating" strategy [28] brought him the cognomen of *Cunctator*: *he who delays, the timer, he who stalls*.

Scipio is the Roman commander who turns the scale and wins the laurels, taking the cognomen of *Africanus* (the African) because he brings the victory to Rome on the enemy's ground, in Zama, Africa. He was in turn an effective military commander, considered by many an "imitator" of Hannibal, he brought new innovations in terms of weapons, he founded the Roman military doctrine, he introduced the row instead of the manipule which increased the malleability of the Roman forces on the battlefield, enabling him to quickly change the disposition of the troops in the heat of battle. He also

strengthened the cavalry and embraced Hannibal's favourite assault, on the flank. Scipio studied his opponent so that he could be predictable in the "game of forces"[29] His merit is undoubtedly that he motivated the Roman army to fight, for he had found a broken army after the disasters of Trasimene and Cannae, showing tenacity, will, patriotism and typically Roman pragmatism.

The Punic wars[30] were not only the wars of commanders, coalitions and military alliances, they also tested old weapons or prototypes. After these ancient world conflagrations, the belligerence technique was not the same any longer. If we were to make an inventory, we owe most inventions to the Romans, rather than the Carthaginians, which explains their final victory, although they suffered insurmountable disasters. Thus Hannibal introduces a new battle platform: the elephants, which yet did not slow down the attack.

Rome also invented new combat techniques and new weapons, if we think that it innovated *corvus*, a kind of spike attached to its heavy ships, which was meant to pierce the enemy ships and sink them.

Likewise, the Romans implemented the boarding technique for the first time, so that they were no longer disabled in naval battles. They fought in their own way, what we call today naval infantry, so that the infantry could fight on the enemy vessel as if they were on land. By using the boarding device, the Romans settled the handicap of their navy in terms of speed, as well as the lack of military sailors.

4. Conclusions

The Punic wars were the third great "clash of civilizations" in the ancient world after the Trojan war and the Greco-Persian Wars. The Roman Occident eliminated from the Mediterranean Sea and the world that was known at that time, the competition with the Orient, changing the conquered world into a Roman one. Rome secured not only its borders, but an entire world after the defeat

of the most important of its enemies, Carthage.

The instrument/force of its victory was its national army, a unitary, professional army loyal to the Roman ideology, later masterly transposed by Virgil in the lyrics of the *Aeneid*:

Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento:

Haec tibi erunt artes: parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.

(You, Roman, remember that you rule the peoples by force:/These shall be your methods: to spare the submissive and defeat

the proud ones in wars – our transl.).

The Mediterranean Sea became a Roman sea, it was therefore called by the Romans: *Mare nostrum*.

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