

The World According to Polybius

by Mark Herman

Gibbon wrote about the fall of the Roman Empire; Polybius witnessed its rise. The burning question at the beginning of the third century BC was, "why Rome?" Who were these Romans, and how did they become the preeminent Mediterranean power?

Our most recent "Great Battles of History" game, "S.P.Q.R.", covers many of the critical battles that led to Rome's ascendancy over the ancient Mediterranean. My purpose in this article is to place the game in relation to the key events that led to the longest continuous political system in the history of the world, and like Polybius, come to some conclusions on why it happened.

In 321 BC Rome was defeated by the Samnites in the battle of Caudine Forks, Alexander the Great had been dead for two years, and the empire he had conquered was in disarray -- as his generals fought for the right to be one of his successors, or Diadocchi. By this year Alexander's empire had begun to fragment into five major powers; whose attention would remain diverted from the developing situation on the Tiber -- until it was too late.

Under Seleucus, Alexander's general, the Eastern part of the empire formed, centered on Babylonia (modern Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan). Ptolemy became Pharaoh in Egypt and controlled one of the key granaries of the Mediterranean. Antigonus controlled Asia Minor, and Coele Syria (modern Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel). Lysimachus controlled Thrace, while Cassander controlled Macedonia proper.

Greece continued to consist of independent city states dominated by Macedonia, although the Achaean league was forming in the Peloponnesus. It was from one of the cities in this region that our main source, Polybius, was born a century later in 200 BC. Meanwhile a Phoenician colony, Carthage, continued to consolidate its military and trading power in both Africa and throughout the Western Mediterranean. As these powers continued to expand, it was inevitable that they would eventually come into conflict. It is unlikely that anyone in the ancient world would have predicted Rome to be the eventual winner.

Rome had suffered during its early history under the yoke of the Etruscans and had been overrun by the Gauls. From these formative experiences Rome developed a security complex that led it to clear the field of all potential aggressors. As a direct result of this policy they would, in less than one century, become the premier power in the Mediterranean. They started with their immediate neighbors, the Samnites, whom they had defeated in 290 BC. (Meanwhile, the Diadocchi continued to wage border wars on each other, with their heirs continuing the struggle in a constantly shifting set of brutal, balance-of-power alliances that continued with few breaks -- until Rome defeated Antiochus at Magnesia in 190 BC.)

In 307 BC, one of the greatest and most overrated generals in history, Pyrrhus of Epirus, began his rule as a minor. By 281 BC, when the Tarentines invited Pyrrhus to intervene on their behalf, he had been thrown out of Epirus, conquered Macedonia, and had been thrown out of Macedonia. (I suspect the Tarentines hadn't thought it through.) But, whatever Pyrrhus lacked in strategic insight he made up for in tenacity on the battlefield. His initial invasion of Italy resulted in two battles, Heraclea and Asculum, which he won, but at a great cost -- putting him well on the way to becoming an adjective. Then, on the spur of the moment, he accepted an invitation to invade Sicily; where he once again failed to make his mark. In 275 BC, with his reputation intact but no where to hang his hat, he made another run on Rome, but was turned back at Beneventum (featured in "S.P.Q.R."). Three years later, the man who would be king was killed in another bid for power in Argos.

"S.P.Q.R." uses Beneventum as an illustration of a Macedonian style army against the tactics of the Roman legion, including for the first time its camp. As a result of Rome's victory over Pyrrhus, at Beneventum, they extended their control over all of Southern Italy by 271 BC. This ended Rome's tenure as a back water city state and elevated her to the status of regional power.

Polybius from Megalopolis was a Greek cavalry commander who was taken to Rome after they defeated Philip V of Macedon at Cynoscephalae. He was a political hostage who chose to use his captivity to narrate and comment on the rise of Rome from regional power to the master of the Mediterranean Littoral. Polybius' work originally covered the period from 264 BC, when the Romans first left Italy to intervene in Sicily against Carthage, until 146 BC, when Rome totally destroyed Carthage. Polybius was an eyewitness to the destruction of Carthage and was deeply moved by the event.

Polybius began his narrative with Rome's intervention into Sicily. In 264 BC a violent mercenary group that had conquered Messenia, the Mamertines, were "on the ropes", with the Syracusans moving in for the knockout. In desperation they called on both Carthage and Rome to aid them in their hour of need. Both sides saw the strategic value of the straits and simultaneously intervened to aid the Mamertines against the Syracusans. The result of this help was the First Punic War.

During the course of the First Punic War, Rome defeated a succession of Carthaginian fleets while losing to Poseidon over 480 ships in storms. (The Romans were fighters, not sailors). During the course of the war, a Roman consular army was put ashore in North Africa to threaten Carthage. The Carthaginians were having as little success on land against the Romans as they had on the sea. Luckily the Carthaginians had the good sense to hire a defense contractor, Xanthippus, who gave the Carthaginians their one notable land victory at Bagradas (featured in "S.P.Q.R."). In spite of Bagradas, the Carthaginians lost the war in Sicily and sued for peace in 241 BC. Rome gained Sicily and soon thereafter Corsica and Sardinia in contravention of the peace treaty. Rome learned Realpolitik quickly and never looked back.

While Rome continued to develop her power, Carthage, under the Barcas (Hamilcar, Hasdrupal, and Hannibal), conquered critical silver resources in Spain in

replacement for its losses in the Central Mediterranean. A new crisis brewed up in 218 BC over Carthage's siege of Saguntum, within their legal sphere of influence. Rome pushed the manufactured crisis to the brink and the Second Punic War was in motion. This time Rome almost bit off more than it could chew, as Hannibal descended on Italy like an avenging angel, winning victory after victory (Trebiana and Lake Trasimene) in 218 and 217 BC.

In 217 BC, while Hannibal was defeating the Romans at Lake Trasimene, the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt was defeating the Seleucid empire at Raphia (see the upcoming "War Elephant" module). It was this continuing warfare in the Eastern Mediterranean that prevented any new contenders, besides Philip V of Macedon, from entering the fray against a vulnerable Rome. (If timing is everything, then Rome's Timex kept on ticking!)

After Lake Trasimene, Rome changed her tactics and dogged the heels of Hannibal's army while avoiding pitched battles. In 216 BC a new group of Consuls changed that strategy and Cannae (featured in "S.P.Q.R.") was the result. In this battle Hannibal put it all together and devastated two Roman field armies. We felt that no game on Rome would be complete without this classic of classic ancient battles. It is an illustrative example of the vulnerabilities inherent within the Roman tactical doctrine, which only a genius like Hannibal, or Xanthippus for that matter, was capable of exploiting.

One of the casualties of the battle of Cannae was the political consul as general. In its stead arose generals who were appointed based on ability. One of these, Rome's first great military genius -- Scipio Africanus -- became a career general who met Hannibal at Zama (featured in "S.P.Q.R."). This was the decisive battle of the second Punic war, and it ended in Carthage's total defeat. As Carthage's star fell, it went from being a regional power to nothing more than an impoverished city-state. As a result of this, Rome, by 201 BC, controlled the Western Mediterranean.

As the Second Punic War wound down to its climatic finale on the plains of Zama, Antiochus III had just returned from his pacification of the Eastern portions of the Seleucid empire; Ptolemy IV had died and his infant son Ptolemy V became a pawn in a series of bloody domestic coups in Egypt. Antiochus moved against the Egyptians in their moment of weakness and reconquered Coele Syria (which he had lost after Raphia). (Meanwhile, far to the East, the Great Wall of China was Being Built.)

During the Second Punic War, an incident occurred that would have long term ramifications for the Eastern Mediterranean. Hannibal, during his sojourn in Italy, had gotten Philip V to intervene on Carthage's behalf. The so-called First Macedonian War was a neither-here-nor-there affair that led to little action and an inconclusive peace. The rematch came in 200 BC and resulted in Philip's defeat at Cynoscephalae (featured in "S.P.Q.R.") in 197 BC. As a result, the long shadow of Rome was cast over the Eastern Mediterranean.

As the vaunted Macedonian Phalanx succumbed to the Roman Legion on a ridge shaped like a Dog's Head, Antiochus III was expanding his influence into Asia Minor at the expense of Pergamon, another of the Successor states. The next clash came between

a security conscious Rome and an expansionist Antiochus at Thermopye in 190 BC, where Antiochus was ousted from Greece and humiliated at Magnesia a year later (see the upcoming “War Elephant” module).

Philip’s successor Perseus made another bid for power, but he became another notch in the Roman belt at Pydna in 168 BC. In the same year, a Jewish revolt against the Seleucids led to the last free Jewish state prior to 1948, and generated a memorable holiday of lights. (Can you spell Menorah?)

Back in Rome, the expansionists worried about the reemergence of Carthaginian power. Cato, a famous Roman senator, ended every speech with a call for Carthage’s destruction. Rome finally got the incident it needed in 150 BC, provoking the Third Punic War, which ended with the most famous sacking in Ancient history as Carthage was eradicated from the face of the earth. Polybius saw in the flames flickering over Carthage the new world order; Rome had come of age.

How did it happen? Was it inevitable? Polybius thought that it was the fickle finger of Fortune. I think he had a point. The wars of Alexander’s successors consumed the attention of the Diadochi and prevented their resources from being channeled into Western expansion. This political inattention allowed Rome to solve its local security problems. With Rome’s local security assured, it was enabled to fight a series of major wars with its chief regional rival, Carthage. (Who was demographically ill-equipped to defeat an adversary with superior manpower resources.) By the time the successors of Alexander became cognizant of Rome, they were exhausted from their internecine wars and ill-equipped to contend with her political acumen and military strength.

It takes an organized government to marshal resources and produce an army of any size and quality. When Alexander died in 323 BC, Rome was a third rate power. The Mediterranean contained numerous powers capable of destroying Rome. Rome’s rise to power was due to its political acumen which was its enduring strength. As Rome conquered its neighbors, its unique political institutions incorporated their manpower into its military organization. Traditionally, conquered people were exploited, necessitating the conqueror’s military to watch the angry population, hence weakening it. Rome’s new political theory allowed it to gain strength from its conquests. As its manpower resources grew, so did its ambitions. Once all the organized governments on the Mediterranean Littoral were subjugated, no serious contenders could arise to challenge Rome’s leadership for centuries. In the final analysis, it pays to have Fortune and Political insight on your side. That’s the way Polybius saw it.