

ANCIENT HISTORY

Consequences of the First Punic War

The 1st Punic War spanned 23 years (264-241 B.C.E) between Rome and Carthage. For Rome, victory brought a series of territorial, economic, social, cultural and political outcomes. These short and long term consequences had varying degrees of importance on the establishment of Rome as first a Mediterranean, then later imperial power.

The subjugation of the islands of Sicily was a vital territorial gain, becoming the first Roman province (Sicilia) outside of the Italian peninsula. It immediately became an important source of grain and trade for Rome, allowing new resources and wealth to flow into the city. Rome as a result was able to quickly rebuild its wealth and increase its power after “the longest and most severely contested war in history”¹. In the long term, Sicily provided a foothold within the Mediterranean, which provided a way for Rome to push outward in the idea of further conquest. However, the Romans exploited the land, hindering the economic development of Sicily, through employing slave labour on the roman estates (latifundia) that would provide the grain for Rome. As a result, Sicilia as a province was always undeveloped economically, and the security of the island was always in jeopardy, due to frequent revolts by slaves.

Economically, Rome was exhausted after the war. She was able to recover fairly quickly however, as one of the consequences of winning the war was the indemnity Rome emplaced upon Carthage, demanding that Carthage “pay to the Romans by instalments in ten years, two thousand two hundred talents”¹. This amount was on top of 1,000 talents to be paid immediately, minimising strain on Rome’s finances (whilst weakening Carthage’s). Much more significant however, was the realisation that overseas provinces brought great wealth to Rome. The “opening up of Rome to the outside world”² provided a monetary influx into the economy of Rome, thanks to the development of a trading economy within a city predominantly focused on agricultural activity. Furthermore, this also had an effect on the Senate within Rome. ‘Extortionate financial loans and investments became the underhand business of the wealthy’, with senate members so heavily involved with these trade-based activities, that ‘an anti-corruption law was implemented in 218 B.C.E’³ to prohibit senate members from doing so.

The triumph over Carthage produced profound changes within Rome’s social structure. Initially, the society of Rome was charged with life and a sense of patriotism, exulting at the victory, with living standards for the majority of Romans increasing, as the new trade and captured coin fed its way into the city. Unfortunately, as years continued to pass, the prices of grain dropped dramatically, as more and more became available from overseas provinces (such as Sicily). The result was a rise in ‘proletarianization’⁴, a process whereby citizens that owned crops around Rome were forced to sell and be employed by someone else. This widened the gap between the plebeians and the wealthy,

¹ Polybius & W.R. Paton, *Polybius: The Histories.*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922, p. 171-174.

¹ Polybius & W.R. Paton, *Polybius: The Histories.*

² M. Le Glay, J.L. Voisin & Y. Le Bohec, *A History of Rome.* 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996, p. 91-106.

³ U. N. R. V (2003). Sicilia. In *The Roman Empire*,1(2). Retrieved June 18, 2010 from United Nations of Roma Victrix, Web site: <http://www.unrv.com/provinces/sicilia.php>

⁴ U. N. R. V (2003). Ancient Roman Economy. In *The Roman Empire*,5(1). Retrieved June 18, 2010 from United Nations of Roma Victrix, Web site: <http://www.unrv.com/economy.php>

as those who could afford it, purchased these new tracts of land and turned them into vineyards and olive groves.

In terms of cultural outcomes of the war, there was not many to do with short term significance. Rome did spread her culture a little further throughout the Mediterranean, and absorbed new lifestyles and people from Carthage, becoming the world's "original melting pot of culture"⁵. However, it was the long term results that so drastically affected Roman culture. As more enemies and conquests were subjugated, Rome's culture was influenced by these people as well as Carthage, turning its 2nd Century eye towards 'grandiosity, luxury and refinement'². Carved stone aqueducts and buildings appeared, including 15 temples between 200 – 175 B.C.E. Romans replaced woollen tunics with togas of linen, and Roman cuisine was envied for both its styles and tastes. The First Punic War was important for Rome, through exposing her to cultural changes and refinement over time, becoming not just a military power, but a cultural one of sophistication and taste.

The First Punic War had political consequences that would forever alter the governing of Rome. Initially, the Senate realised the value of wealth and passed a law proclaiming that the four, yearly elected Aediles (magistrates) had to pay for large costs within the city, such as the funding of all sacred games. This recognition of (and desire for) money meant that "wealth became the standard of merit at Rome"⁶. Aediles were elected for their riches, not proficiency and it became commonplace for senators to use their fortunes to gain higher positions of office (such as Censor or Praetor) than they justly deserved. Even more importantly however, victory in the First Punic War gave rise to Roman Imperialism; with Rome discovering it had "a positive will for conquest and territorial expansion"². This realisation would be immensely significant for Rome, being the initial stepping stone towards its universal domination. It is proclaimed by Polybius that this was "an unprecedented achievement, the Roman State able to extend its domination over nearly all the inhabited world". This imperialism was arguably made possible by the confidence instilled in Rome after victory in the First Punic War.

For Carthage, the consequences of the First Punic War were immediate and severe. The loss of Sicily, as well as the 3,200 talent war indemnity they had to pay resulted in a huge strain on their economy. This financial difficult was a huge issue for Carthage, as 'the mercenaries in Africa and Sardinia rebelled because they did not receive their pay'⁷. This 'Mercenary War' allowed Rome to wrest two further islands (Sardinia and Corsica) from Carthage's grasp. Being a mercantile empire, Carthage relied heavily upon their seafaring trade to generate wealth, and the loss of naval dominance in the Mediterranean forced the Carthaginians to extend their spheres of influence into Hispania, as the lack of a navy meant distant colonies were out of reach, and retaking those seized by Rome was no longer a possibility.

Overall, the consequences of the First Punic War were substantial in defining Rome. In the short term, the war won Rome recognition and power within the Mediterranean. Yet, it was the long term

⁵ A. Goldsworthy, *The Punic Wars*. 2nd ed., Great Britain: Cassell, 2001, p. 128-129.

² M. Le Glay, J.L. Voisin & Y. Le Bohec, *A History of Rome*.

⁶ Rev. Dr. Brewer, *A Guide to Roman History: From the Earliest Period to the Close of the Western Empire.*, New York: C.S. Francis & Co., 1856, p. 247.

² M. Le Glay, J.L. Voisin & Y. Le Bohec, *A History of Rome*.

⁷ C.G. Starr, *The Ancient Romans.*, London: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 24.

effects of the war that have proved so definitive, giving rise to Rome as a superpower that maintained the “largest and single most impressive empire the world has ever seen”⁷.

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⁷ C.G. Starr, *The Ancient Romans*.