



DECISIVE BATTLES OF THE WORLD

(2) The Battle Of Metaurus

NEARLY 300 years after Europeans had established ascendancy in battle over the Persians at Marathon (490 B.C.), we find the centre of conflict shifted westwards.

The dominance of the Persians had been shattered by the Greeks. At Marathon Athens had stemmed the tide. Through the pass of Thermopylae it threatened to overwhelm them again, but with the rise to power of Sparta under Philip and his son, Alexander the Great, it was finally breasted back and reduced.

In the 300 years since Marathon, much had been happening. The Athenians had given way in the Grecian balance of power to the Spartans. They had been defeated at Syracuse in an attempt to extend the bounds of their empire beyond reasonable limits. Sparta in her turn had fallen. Thebes had held away. Dissension had scattered the empire created by the force of Alexander.

The Growth of Carthage

In 800 B.C. Carthage was already on the way to fame. Built by traders, it flourished as a trading city. The Carthaginians developed merchant fleets that pushed out even through the Straits of Gibraltar, and probably traded with settlements on the Atlantic Coast of Spain; even perhaps with Britain. With their merchant fleets they developed naval forces, triremes at first, with three banks of oars, but later quinqueremes, with five. In the 400 years between 800 B.C., when they founded their city, and their first hostile contacts with the growing power of Rome, the Carthaginians made themselves into a nation strong alike on land and sea.

Only the Island of Sicily and a narrow strip of water separated this powerful nation from the toe of Italy.

Italy had been occupied in part by Aryan-speaking peoples, in part by Grecian colonists. Probably about the same time as the Semites were building Carthage, Rome was being established on the Tiber. It was definitely known as a settlement in the time of 753 B.C. But it was not governed by Romans. Etruscans, a non-Aryan people, coming most likely from the northern shores of the Aegean Sea, ruled over the central part of Italy. Rome's struggle for power is a history, at first, of the attempt of the Latin-speaking peoples to oust the Etruscans.

But something else had happened. Power had left the Eastern Mediterranean to rise again in the centre and in the west.

Pushed out of Rome, the Etruscans still held Veii, a few miles away; but this stronghold they lost in 474 B.C. From the south the Greeks from Sicily attacked them by sea. From the north the Gauls attacked them by land. Not till the Etruscans disappeared from history was Rome free to extend her power. Her strength was known by the time Alexander began his raids. But still in the south of Italy Greek colonies remained. Indirectly, their presence led to the conflict of Roman and Carthaginian.

Struggle for Sicily

The Greeks of Sicily, and in the toe and heel of Italy, looked about for assistance against the threat of Rome. It came from Pyrrhus, from Empirius, just across the Adriatic from the heel of Italy. Here was a kinsman of Alexander, an ambitious man, well armed. He set out to gain control of Sicily, and frightened the nearby Carthaginians into resisting him. They sent a fleet to help Rome against him. But when Pyrrhus was beaten, the Carthaginians found themselves face to face with the Romans.

The rivalry between these two nations lasted from 264 B.C. to 146 B.C., when Rome finally besieged and pillaged the City of Carthage itself. The Battle of Metaurus is the key to the long struggle for it was here that the Romans, caught between Hannibal in the south, and his redoubtable brother Hasdrubal in the north, won their first victory.

Hannibal Crosses the Alps

In 218 B.C. Hannibal crossed the Alps, defeated the Romans wherever he met them, and ensconced himself in southern Italy to await reinforcement from Hasdrubal. He had no siege train, and could not attack Rome. In addition, the Romans had brought about a stalemate by sending a naval expedition to cut his communications in the region of Marseilles. But Hasdrubal appeared through the Alpine passes above Lombardy in 207 B.C.

Black Days for Rome

For the Romans, this was a grave situation. Against Hannibal alone they had never been successful. Their strength in man-power was drained to the dregs by keeping their army in the field and maintaining their garrisons. Military stores and money to buy them were both almost exhausted. And here was Hasdrubal to complete a pincers movement with his much feared brother!

In the south, under the Consul Nero (not the Emperor who fiddled!) there were three armies. Nero had directly under his control 42,000 men, of whom 2,000 were mounted. South of Hannibal, in the city of Tarentum, was a Roman garrison army of 20,000. Hannibal did not wish to drain his garrisons and move against Nero with Tarentum behind him. Nero did not wish to force an issue before he knew how things were going in the north.

And in the north things looked black for Rome. Hasdrubal swept southwards. Of the three Roman armies in the north one was required to keep the discontented Etruscans in order. One was an advanced striking force. The main army, under Marcus Livius, was advancing slowly when Hasdrubal drove the advance army back on Livius.

Intercepted Plans

But Hasdrubal had hastened south without troubling to bring on his side the disaffected peoples in the northern provinces, as Hannibal had done in the south. All might have gone well for him, however, had it not been for a lucky chance that helped Nero to anticipate the plans of the brothers to effect a union of their forces. Hasdrubal hesitated long enough in his drive southwards to send messengers to Hannibal, telling of his intention to carry on to

a point where they might unite and wheel west at Rome itself.

His messengers fell into the hands of Nero. Assembling a force of 7000 picked men, ostensibly to attack one of Hannibal's garrisons, Nero marched out by night, swung northward, and in a magnificent march north joined Livius. By letter he warned Rome to throw out the legions of the home guard in case Hannibal marched before the consuls could get back to attack him.

Nero reached the encampment of Livius by night, but erected no more tents. The enemy knew nothing of these reinforcements. The next day Nero insisted that the Romans attack before Hasdrubal or Hannibal learnt of the changed circumstances. They drew up ready to do this, and the Carthaginians were actually advancing, when Hasdrubal saw signs of reinforced strength in the Roman lines and made up his mind to withdraw until he heard from Hannibal. He fell back on his lines, and both armies waited, facing each other all that day. By night Hasdrubal began a silent withdrawal towards the River Metaurus, but his guides betrayed him, he missed a good fording place, and morning came with his troops fatigued, discouraged, and ready for mutiny.

Nero's Winning Manoeuvre

The Romans came up, and Hasdrubal assembled his men to give battle. In fact, he gave as good as he received. Using his best troops under himself on his right wing, he "refused the Romans his left." Nero was therefore compelled to execute the manoeuvre that decided the day. He wheeled his men from the Roman right wing behind the Roman army, and charged in just where he was needed. The Carthaginians were routed, and Hasdrubal, seeing the day lost, died fighting sword in hand in the midst of a Roman cohort.

The battle won, Nero was back in front of Hannibal before the southern Carthaginian army knew he had been away. The first news of the battle which Hannibal received was Hasdrubal's head flung into his camp.

Hannibal actually retained his hold on southern Italy for some years after, but was forced to withdraw when Scipio carried the war into North Africa. Rome was left free as the dominant power of the new Europe.

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Destruction of Ramsgate

Ramsgate, where German bombs have destroyed over 1000 small shops and homes, is one of England's popular watering places on the Kentish Coast. Tradition has it that Hengist and Horsa landed near Ramsgate, at Ebbsfleet, which was also the landing place of St. Augustine. The harbour, 51 acres in extent, is enclosed by two sea walls, and in the 18th Century it became a refuge for The Downs, that celebrated roadstead extending for six miles along the Kentish coast. George Eliot described Ramsgate as "a strip of London come out for an airing," and Frith, the painter, made it famous with his picture, "Ramsgate Sands," in 1854. The town is a popular resort for Londoners, for the capital is only 72 miles away. Osengall Hill, near the town, is famous for its Saxon cemetery. Broadstairs, so beloved by Dickens, lies a little to the north of Ramsgate.