The First Punic War

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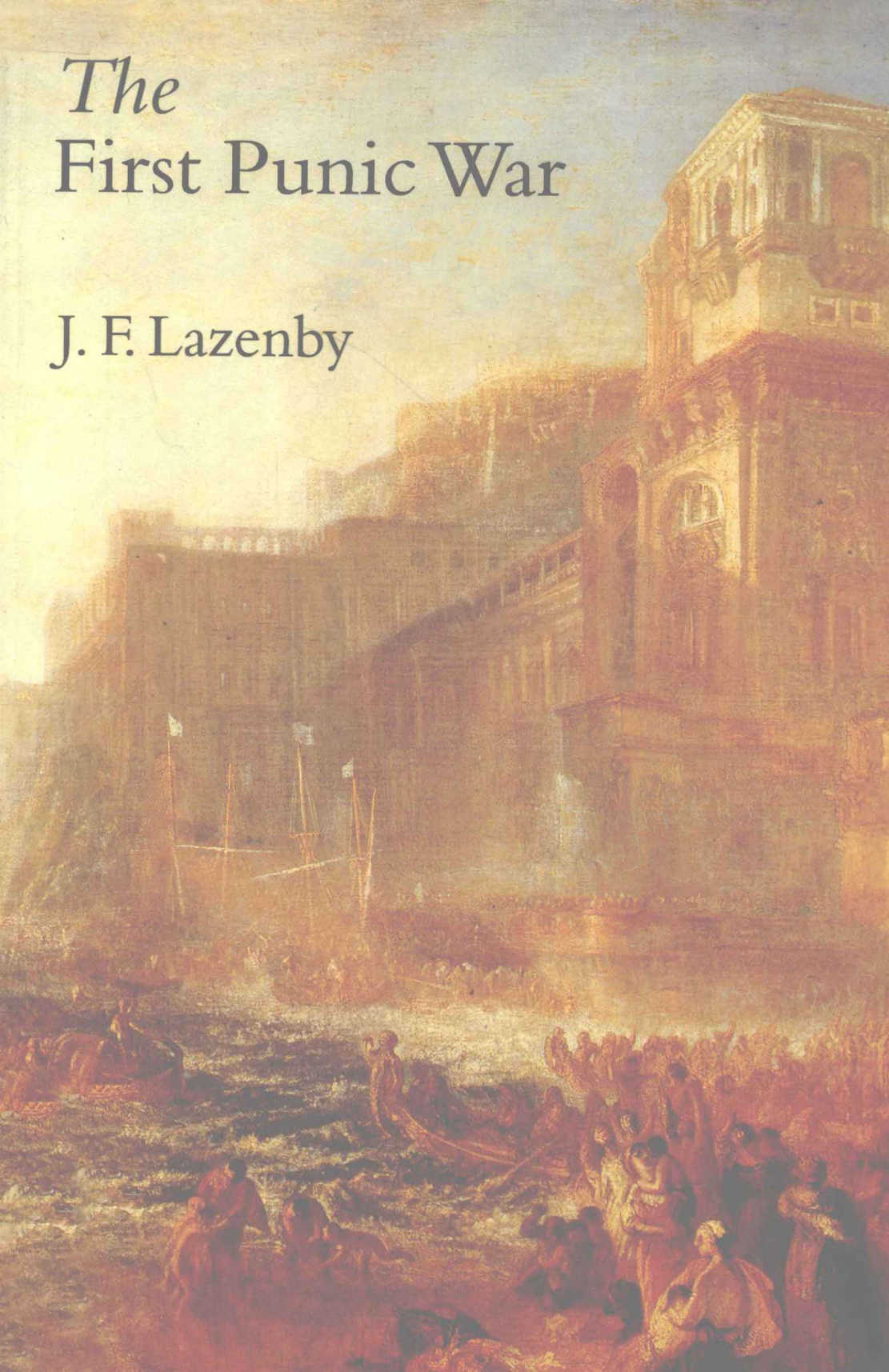

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A military history

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Cover illustration: *Regulus* by J. M. W. Turner, 1828
(courtesy of the Turner Collection, Tate Gallery, London).
Regulus, taken prisoner by the Carthagians, is said to have been sent to Rome to negotiate a peace, but refused to do so, and returned to Carthage to face torture and death.

The First Punic War

To Jerry Paterson – my strong right arm for so many years

Preface

It is odd, though understandable, that there is no modern book in English on the First Punic War, and this is an attempt to fill that gap. The war is, of course, covered in the standard histories of Rome and Carthage, and in books on the Punic Wars as a whole. But the accounts in the former are necessarily concise, and the three latter known to me all have serious faults. Thus the war takes up only 28 pages in Dorey and Dudley's *Rome against Carthage*, and the authors ignore many of the controversies. Brian Caven's account in *The Punic Wars* is over twice as long, and is lively and full of insight. But it still lacks detail and unaccountably gives no references to the ancient evidence. Finally, Field-Marshal Bagnall's version, again in a book called *The Punic Wars*, is occasionally interesting on strategy, but is marred by irritating inaccuracies of detail. The most comprehensive account of the war in English is by Thiel in his *History of Roman sea-power before the Second Punic War*, but, as its title suggests, this book is mainly concerned with the naval side of the conflict, and the fighting on land is only sketched.

It may, indeed, be thought that there is no point in studying the First Punic War in isolation. But whereas it is clearly not possible to understand the Second and Third wars without knowing something about the First, the converse is not true, and to study the First as just the opening round in a three-round contest may actually distort one's view of it. It is true that Polybios, our earliest surviving source, himself saw this war as but the prelude to what he regarded as the crucial period in Rome's rise to "world" dominion, but it is only in this limited sense that we have to take what happened later into consideration. Thus he may mislead us in thinking that the war began as a conflict between Rome and Carthage rather than Rome

and Hiero of Syracuse, or that the Roman naval building programme in 261/0 was motivated by the intention to conquer Sicily.

Despite this, however, the war clearly deserves a book on its own. It was the longest continuous war in Graeco-Roman history, one of the greatest naval wars ever fought, and the war which finally set Rome on the path to Empire. Given the lack of significant new evidence, it is not possible to give a radical reappraisal of it, and I make no pretence to do so, though I hope I may have clarified some points of detail, and perhaps shown more clearly why Rome won. Basically what I have attempted to do is to present a narrative of the war, with discussion of strategic and tactical issues where possible, based on the ancient evidence, and on such recent research as seemed to me significant. In the case of the latter, as anyone is bound to do, I have drawn heavily on my predecessors, and in particular Walbank, whose comprehensive *Historical commentary on Polybius* is indispensable.

The sources for this war are not as good as for the Second, largely through the loss of the relevant books of Livy, and we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that we shall never know the answers to many questions. Even the facts are difficult enough to establish, and it is rarely possible to discuss tactics and strategy at anything but a superficial level. The same is true of the armed forces of the two sides, both naval and military. For example, we do not even know exactly what a quinquereme was, and this was the principal battleship of both fleets, and there is little evidence for how the Roman army was raised, equipped and organized, unless we assume that Polybios' account of the army of his day applies to the army of a century earlier, which in some details it clearly does not. Again, we can only guess the answers to demographic and logistical questions, since even the accuracy of the Roman census figures for the period is doubtful. In view of all this, it goes without saying that with the possible exception of Regulus and Claudius Pulcher, on the Roman side, and Hamilcar Barca on the Carthaginian, the personalities of the protagonists are irrecoverable, and this war is not enlivened by the presence of a Hannibal or a Scipio.

But the sources are fascinating, nonetheless, since they appear to reflect a pro-Roman tradition, originating with the near-contemporary, Fabius Pictor, and reflected in the Livian derivatives, Eutropius and Orosius, a pro-Carthaginian tradition going back to the contemporary, Philinos, and reflected in Diodoros, and a third, apparently separate strand of tradition, reflected in the fragments of Cassius Dio and his epitomator, the Byzantine Zonaras. Foursquare in the middle of all this stands the sketch of the war in the first book of Polybios, who although probably more pro-Roman than

pro-Carthaginian, was certainly not slavishly so, and at least provides a framework around which one can attempt to weave a narrative using the other, later sources, at least as padding.

My thanks are due, as usual, to my colleagues at Newcastle for their invariable help and support, and to my wife who, in the midst of completing a PhD thesis, drew the maps and plans. I would also like to thank Steven Gerrard of UCL Press, who initially welcomed my proposal, and who, with Sheila Knight, helped to see the project through to – I hope – a successful conclusion.

J. F. Lazenby
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Chronology

NB: for the years 264–247 and 242–241 I have given the names of the consuls who were principally in command each year.

289–285	Mamertines seize Messana.
280–275	Rome's war with Pyrrhus.
280/79	treaty between Rome and Carthage against Pyrrhus.
278–276	Pyrrhus in Sicily.
275	Battle of Beneventum; Pyrrhus leaves Italy.
272	Tarentum falls to Rome.
270	Rhegium recaptured by Rome.
270/69(?)	Hiero seizes power in Syracuse.
265/4	Hiero's victory over the Mamertines at the Longanus; Mamertine appeal to Carthage and then to Rome; alliance between Hiero and Carthage.
264	(Ap. Claudius Caudex, M. Fulvius Flaccus, consuls): outbreak of war; Claudius Caudex crosses to Sicily, and lifts siege of Messana.
263	(M'. Valerius Maximus, M'. Otacilius Crassus, consuls): both consuls campaign in Sicily; Hiero makes peace with Rome.
262	(L. Postumius Megellus, Q. Mamilius Vitulus, consuls): both consuls lay siege to Agrigentum..
261	(L. Valerius Flaccus, T. Otacilius Crassus, consuls): fall of Agrigentum; Carthaginian navy raids Italy; Romans decide to build fleet.
260	(Cn. Cornelius Scipio, C. Duilius, consuls): Scipio captured at Lipara; Duilius wins battle of Mylae.

259 (L. Cornelius Scipio, C. Aquillius Florus, consuls): Scipio attacks Corsica and Sardinia; Aquillius campaigns in Sicily.

258 (A. Atilius Caiatinus, C. Sulpicius Paterculus, consuls): Caiatinus campaigns in Sicily; Paterculus attacks Sardinia and wins battle off Sulci.

257 (C. Atilius Regulus, Cn. Cornelius Blasio, consuls): Atilius Regulus wins battle off Tyndaris and raids Malta; Blasio commands in Sicily.

256 (L. Manlius Vulso, M. Atilius Regulus, consuls): both consuls defeat Carthaginian navy off Ecnomus and proceed to Africa, where Regulus remains, winning battle at Adys and capturing Tunis; abortive negotiations with Carthage.

255 (Ser. Fulvius Paetinus Nobilior, M. Aemilius Paullus, consuls): Regulus defeated and captured near Tunis; consuls bring fleet to rescue survivors, winning victory off Cape Hermaia and raiding Cossyra, but are caught in storm off Camarina on return.

254 (Cn. Cornelius Scipio, A. Atilius Caiatinus, re-elected consuls): both consuls campaign in Sicily, capturing Panormus and other towns.

253 (Cn. Servilius Caepio, C. Sempronius Blaesus, consuls): while Caepio commands in Sicily, Blaesus raids Africa, nearly losing his fleet on the Syrtis, and losing half of it in storm off Cape Palinurus.

252 (C. Aurelius Cotta, P. Servilius Geminus, consuls): Roman fleet reduced to 60 ships; both consuls command in Sicily, capturing Thermae and Lipara.

251 (L. Caecilius Metellus, C. Furius Pacilus, consuls): both consuls serve in Sicily; Carthaginians reinforce army there.

250 (C. Atilius Regulus, L. Manlius Vulso, re-elected consuls): Metellus wins victory at Panormus; consuls commence siege of Lilybaeum.

249 (P. Claudius Pulcher, L. Iunius Pullus, consuls): Claudius loses battle off Drepana, and Iunius loses fleet in storm near Camarina.

248 (C. Aurelius Cotta, P. Servilius Geminus, re-elected consuls): both consuls continue to besiege Lilybaeum and Drepana. Carthalo raids Italy.

247 (L. Caecilius Metellus, N. Fabius Buteo, consuls – Metellus for second time): Metellus continues with siege of Lilybaeum, Buteo with that of Drepana, where he captures island of Pelias. Hamilcar Barca arrives in Sicily and raids Bruttium.

246–244 skirmishing around Heirkte.

244–243 Hamilcar moves to Eryx; continued skirmishing.

242 (C. Lutatius Catulus, A. Postumius Albinus, consuls): Catulus sent to Sicily in command of new fleet; wounded at Drepana.

241 (A. Manlius Torquatus Atticus, Q. Lutatius Cerco, consuls – Torquatus for second time): Lutatius Catulus wins decisive battle off Aegates Island on 10 March, and with brother, Lutatius Cerco, negotiates peace.

240–237 Mercenary War in Africa.

238 Rome decides to annex Sardinia.

237 Hamilcar Barca arrives in Spain.

229 death of Hamilcar Barca in Spain; Hasdrubal takes command.

227 C. Flaminius appointed first praetorian governor of western Sicily, and M. Valerius (Laevinus?) of Sardinia.

221 assassination of Hasdrubal in Spain; Hannibal takes over.

219 Hannibal captures Saguntum.

218 beginning of Second Punic War.

Contents

Maps and plans

CHAPTER 1

The evidence

The conflict that is the subject of this book, the First Punic War, lasted from 264 to 241.[1] It was the longest continuous war in Greek and Roman history, and one of the most important. It marked the point at which Rome ceased to be a purely Italian power and became committed to the path that was to lead to empire. Before the war no Roman troops had ever set foot outside the mainland of Italy, and Roman sea power was negligible. During it Roman troops found themselves fighting in Sicily, Corsica, Sardinia and even, briefly, in north Africa, and, as a result of it Rome acquired her first "provinces" overseas, in Sardinia and western Sicily.

The war was also, in terms of the numbers of men involved, the greatest naval war in Greek and Roman history – indeed, one of the greatest ever fought. If the figures given by our main source for the battle of Ecnomus, in 256, are correct, more men probably took part there than in any other naval battle in history.[2] Moreover, as a result of the naval "arms race" on which Rome embarked in 260 and subsequent years, she became the most powerful naval state in the Mediterranean world – something that is often forgotten when people consider how she eventually came to dominate that world.

Apart from the brief Roman forays to Corsica, Sardinia and Africa, and one or two Carthaginian raids on Italy, the war was fought out in and around the coasts of Sicily, and domination of that island was the primary objective of both sides. An interesting modern parallel, in some ways, is "Operation Husky", the allied landings in Sicily in the Second World War. It is worth remembering that the Allies came from Tunisia, which was the Carthaginian homeland, and that their landing in Sicily was intended to be and became the prelude to landings in Italy. The United States 2nd

Armoured Division actually disembarked at Licata, on the south coast of Sicily, off which Ecnomus was fought.

But whereas Operation Husky can be studied down to the last detail in contemporary records, including photographs and newsreels, the First Punic War is poorly documented, even for an ancient war. Apart from some archaeological evidence (see below), and copies of a few inscriptions, the nearest thing to contemporary evidence that has survived are a few fragments of the Roman poet Naevius, who was born between 274 and 264 and lived until about 204. Unfortunately, although some of these can be seen to refer to specific episodes in the war, others are too vague. In any case, they tell us very little.

Undoubtedly, the most important evidence consists of some 60 chapters of the first book of the *Histories* of the Greek historian, Polybios. But Polybios was not even born until at least 30 years after the war had ended,[3] and since he was a Greek, who did not come to Italy until 167, it is most unlikely that he ever met anyone who had taken part in it; he certainly never claims to have done so, in contrast to his claim to have questioned men who took part in the second war (e.g. 3.48.12).

For him the questioning of participants was the most important part of historical study (12.4c. 2–5), and this was one of the reasons why he chose to make 220 the opening date for the main part of his work (4.2.2). He was, indeed, dubious about the value of non-contemporary history, since most of the evidence would be mere "hearsay from hearsay" (4.2.3). Thus although it is important to be clear about his own methods and attitudes, the first thing to do is to try to discover what kind of evidence he used.[4]

For our war it was probably almost wholly literary, and consisted mainly of the writings of two earlier historians – Philinos and Fabius Pictor – whom he describes (14.1) as "those who have the reputation of writing most authoritatively about it", but neither of whose works has survived. Philinos was a Greek from Agrigentum (Akragas, Agrigento) in Sicily, and probably contemporary with the war. Indeed, Polybios' account of the siege of Lilybaeum in 250/49 is so vivid (41.4 ff) that it is often thought to be based on an eyewitness account by Philinos.

The latter's work seems to have been a monograph devoted exclusively to the war, rather than a more general history,[5] and possibly because of the Roman treatment of his native city in 261 (19.5), he was hostile to Rome and therefore enables us to see something of the Carthaginian viewpoint. Polybios, indeed, thought he was too pro-Carthaginian (14.3), and was scornful, for example, of his belief that the Roman intervention in Sicily

contravened a treaty explicitly precluding them from the island (3.26). Since Philinos' work survives only in fragments (cf. *FGH* 174), consisting of references in later works, it is difficult to see how good a historian he really was, though there is reason to believe that he wrote in a somewhat sensational style. Polybios possibly used him more for the later years of the war, though he certainly did not neglect his account of the earlier years.[6]

Polybios' other principal source, Quintus Fabius Pictor, was born into the famous patrician *gens* ("clan") of the Fabii, and became a member of the Senate (3.9.4). He is said to have fought in the war against the Gauls that culminated in the battle of Telamon in 225 (Eutr. 3.5; Oros. 4.13.6), and to have gone to Delphi as an envoy of the Senate in 216 (Livy 22.57.5, 23.11.1–6). He was thus a contemporary of the Second Punic War, rather than the First, but certainly in a position to have met people who had taken part in the First. Unlike that of Philinos, his work appears to have consisted of a general history of Rome from its foundation to his own time, but, like Philinos', it, too, only survives in fragments (*HRR* i.5 ff). Fabius Pictor was the earliest Roman historian, but wrote in Greek (DH 1.6.2; Cic., *de div.* 1.43), apparently with the intention of justifying Roman policy to the Greeks. Since there were no Roman precedents for the writing of history, it was inevitable that he, too, was influenced by the contemporary Greek fondness for sensational and paradoxical episodes, and he may well have made use of Philinos' work. But he was also Roman enough to use evidence that lay nearer to hand, for example in lists of Roman magistrates and their deeds, the records of Roman priests, and family traditions, including monuments bearing laudatory inscriptions.[7]

Polybios himself may also sometimes have made direct use of this kind of material. This is suggested by his account of the treaties between Rome and Carthage (3.26.1), which, he says, "are preserved to this day, inscribed on bronze in the treasury of the Aediles in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus", though he may never have actually seen the originals.[8] Although a Greek, he was one of the prominent citizens of the Achaian League summoned to Rome after the final defeat of Macedonia in 167, on suspicion of "anti-Roman activities", and subsequently kept there for the next 17 years. But he was lucky enough to become intimate with one of the most eminent of Roman nobles, Scipio Aemilianus, the son of the conqueror of Macedonia, who had been adopted into the Scipionic family. As a result, he did not return home to Greece when the survivors amongst his fellow-exiles were finally allowed to go in 151, but spent something like the last 50 years of his life either in Italy or in the company of Romans. He thus had a unique

opportunity for getting at the kind of material of which only Romans would normally have been aware.

Polybios' justification for his digression on the treaties is typical of his attitude to the study of history.[9] It will be useful, he claims (3.21.9–10), both to the practical statesman and to students. This partly repeats what is said right at the beginning of the work, though there the study of history is also said to have an additional value – to teach people to endure the vicissitudes of fortune (*tychê* – τύχη: 1.2). It is notoriously difficult to define what Polybios meant by this – his use of the word and other similar expressions runs the whole gamut from mere synonyms for "as it happened" to something like a notion of "divine providence". But clearly he did believe that a knowledge of history would enable people to bear whatever might happen to them, whether as a result of inexplicable "acts of God" or of some inexorable destiny, and the very fact that his own views on the subject seem muddled and incoherent at least suggests that he did not try to bend the facts to suit some preconceived pattern.

But though Polybios conceived of history as essentially a teaching tool, he did not entirely reject the pleasurable element in it, and was not above indulging in the odd rhetorical flourish: an example in the part of his work that concerns us is his description of the amazement of the Romans and the anxiety of the people of Lilybaeum as they watch the Carthaginians trying to run the Roman blockade in 250 (44.4 ff); as was said above, this may be based on an eyewitness account by Philinos. But Polybios strongly believed that usefulness was the principal value of history, and continually criticizes writers who aimed only to please their readers – for example Phylarchos, the third-century historian, who, he believed, confused history with tragedy (2.56.10 ff).

But if history was to teach, it had to be true, and for Polybios, "truth is to history, what eyesight is to a living creature" (14.6, 12.12.3) – without truth, history just becomes a useless story. To arrive at the truth, he believed, it was necessary for the historian to study memoirs and other documentary evidence, acquire personal knowledge of the relevant geography, and have personal experience of both political and military affairs (12.25e) – not for him the endless poring over "sources" of the modern, academic, "armchair" historian. Nor would he have approved of the narrow specialism of many modern historians, since for him the specialist monograph was in danger of distorting the truth (cf. 4.10).

Needless to say, he was probably unable to live up to these impossibly high ideals. Indeed, he was himself prepared to allow departures from the