



The Story of Carthage

Alfred Church

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Sicily would naturally be the place in which Carthage would first seek to establish a foreign dominion. At its nearest point it was not more than fifty miles distant; its soil was fertile, its climate temperate; it was rich in several valuable articles of commerce. We have seen that, in the treaty which was made with Rome about the end of the sixth century B.C., the Carthaginians claimed part of the island as their own. It is probable that this part was then less than it had been. For more than two hundred years the Greeks had been spreading their settlements over the country; and the Greeks were the great rivals of the Phoenicians. If they were not as keen traders—and trade was certainly held in less estimation in Athens, and even in Corinth, than it was in Tyre and Carthage—they were as bold and skillful as sailors, and far more ready than their rivals to fight for what they had got or for what they wanted. The earliest Greek colony in Sicily was Naxos, on the east coast, founded by settlers from Euboea in 735. Other Greek cities sought room for their surplus population in the same field; and some of the colonies founded fresh settlements of their own. The latest of them was Agrigentum on the south coast, which owed its origin to Gela, itself a colony of Cretans and Rhodians. As the Greeks thus spread westward the Carthaginians retired before them, till their dominions were probably reduced to little more than a few trading ports on the western coast of the island. As long, indeed, as they could trade with the new comers they seemed to be satisfied. They kept up, for the most part, friendly relations with their rivals, allowing even the right of intermarriage to some at least of their cities. But in point of fact they were only waiting their opportunity, and the opportunity came when the Persians invaded Greece for the second time. Some historians tell us that it was agreed by the two powers that a combined effort should be made, that, while Persia was attacking the mother-country of Greece, Carthage should attack its important colonies in Sicily. Others insist that there is no proof of any such agreement having been made. It is not easy to see what proof we could expect to find. But there is nothing, I think, improbable about it. The Phoenician admirals in the service of the Great King who had refused to obey Cambyses when he ordered them to sail against their kinsmen in Carthage, may very well have managed a matter of this kind. Anyhow it is clear that Carthage knew that the opportunity had come, and eagerly seized it. One of the family of Mago, Hamilcar by name, was appointed commander-in-chief. He set sail from Carthage with a force which, when it had been joined by auxiliaries gathered from Sicily and elsewhere, amounted, it is said, to three hundred thousand men. There would have been even more had not the squadron which conveyed the chariots and the cavalry been lost in a storm. The number is probably exaggerated—the numbers in ancient history are seldom trustworthy—but we may take as genuine the list of the nations from which the army was recruited. The land-force consisted, we hear, of Phoenicians, Libyans, Sardinians, Corsicans, Iberians, Ligyes, and Helisyki. The first four names need little explanation. The Phoenicians were native Carthaginians and men of kindred race from the mother-country of Phoenicia, from Cyprus, and from other settlements on the Mediterranean shore. Sardinia, we know from its mention in the treaty of 509, belonged to Carthage; Corsica had probably been since acquired. The Iberians were Spaniards, over whose country Carthage was gaining some influence. The Ligyes were the Ligurians from the northwest of the Italian peninsula; the Helisyki may have been Volscians, neighbours of Rome on the southeast and for some time its most formidable enemies...

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