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Fisher W. Ng
Riverdale High School

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Fisher Ng

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The Influence of Spanish Mines on Roman Victory in the Second Punic War

Research Question: To what extent did Rome's acquisition of Spanish mines allow Rome to develop economically during the Second Punic War and overcome Carthage?

While Rome is remembered for its militaristic power and cultural influence, it would not have been so powerful had it not acquired economically during the Second Punic War. Entering the war, the Roman Republic was weaker economically, but stronger militaristically than Carthage. Carthage's navy and trading fleet trumped Rome's, allowing it to trade with the greater Mediterranean, thereby empowering its economy. Carthage also controlled precious metal mines throughout Spain. Exiting the war, Rome profited at Carthage's expense by conquering territory and resources that in turn improved Rome's economy. Specifically, the Romans conquered the Iberian Peninsula, acquiring the Spanish mines in the process. At the end of the war, Rome managed to defeat one of its greatest enemies, Hannibal Barca, and triumph over Carthage. Rome's success owed to its acquisition of monetary resources to fund its military campaigns. It was Rome's securing of Carthage's mines in Spain that contributed most significantly to Rome's victory in the Second Punic War.

Tensions between Carthage and Rome escalated after the First Punic War, which ended in 241 BCE, as Rome forced Carthage to pay war reparations. It was only after the Carthaginian military leaders Hamilcar Barca, his son Hannibal Barca, and his son-in-law Hasdrubal invaded Spain that Carthage re-established its power ("Second Punic War"). By 229 BCE, Hamilcar Barca controlled half the Iberian Peninsula (Cartwright). To Rome's dismay in 219 BCE, Hannibal captured Saguntum, a city, on the Iberian Peninsula. After refusing to withdraw, Rome declared war against Carthage. The ensuing war, the Second Punic War, lasted from 218 to 201 BCE. Hannibal lead an incursion into Roman territory across the Alps in 218 BCE. While he did not assault the city of Rome, his attack against Italy's second largest city, Capua, was a severe threat against the Romans. Enraged by a major military defeat in 216 BCE, the Romans mounted a resistance, and in 211 BCE they recaptured Capua ("Second Punic War"). The Romans, led by the general Scipio Africanus, eventually defeated Hannibal.

Roman currency transformed drastically during the Second Punic War. For centuries, coinage was the foundation of trade between societies of Western Civilization. Coins were generally made from precious metal such as gold and, most commonly, silver, or of base metal such as bronze (Williams 173). In the 7th century BCE, the Phoenicians created a silver coinage to repay the Assyrian Empire, silver being "rare enough for coins to have value but common enough for many people to participate in the economy" (Yeoman 22); Carthage and Greece also favored silver currency (Bowen 93). Silver was not, however, the default metal. When it appeared in 300 BCE, Roman coinage was made of copper coins called the *as* (Bowen 93). After the *as* deflated during the Second Punic War, the Roman Republic subsequently issued the *denarius,* a silver coin (Bowen 96). With Rome's rise in the Mediterranean, local coinages disappeared as Roman silver and bronze coins prevailed (Williams 180).

The precious metal mines were originally used by the native Iberians, until the Phoenicians conquered and enslaved them, forcing them to excavate the mines; however, the Carthaginians, a Phoenician colony, were later defeated by the Romans (Rickard 131). As the Romans expanded the mines, “These ancient mining operations extended eventually over a distance of two hundred miles [...] the Rio Tinto [is...] one of the largest copper mines in the world” (Rickard 131). The Spanish mines produced copper, silver, gold and other precious metals (Richardson 140). The Spanish mines were originally held by the Carthaginians until 215 BCE when they were attacked. Rome eventually gained control of the mines in 209 BCE as Scipio Africanus, a Roman general, conquered the local Carthaginian forces.

The significance of the Spanish mines attracted the attention of numerous ancient historians during the Punic War period. Roman historian Titus Livius, who lived between 59 BCE and 12 CE, penned *The History of Rome,* an account spanning the foundation of Rome to the time of Augustus Caesar’s reign that glorified Rome’s triumphs. In book 31-34 he covers the Second Punic War. Pliny the Elder was a Roman author and natural philosopher born in 23 CE who recorded his observations of nature, including the Spanish mines, in his *Naturalis Historia.* Diodorus was another Greek historian, and he wrote extensively about the history of Rome, especially in book 5 of *Bibliotheca Historica.* Writers around the time period from multiple different nations regarded the Roman mines as a topic worthy to cover.

In defeating Carthaginian forces in Spain and gaining control over the mines, Rome not only set Carthage back financially by gaining control over precious metal sources, but it also improved its own economy. Carthage was already in an unstable state entering the Second Punic War. Diodorus reveals Carthage’s dependency on monetary resources for:

> Hiring the ablest mercenaries to be found and winning with their aid many and great wars. [...] in their wars the Carthaginians never rested their confidence in soldiers from among their own citizens or gathered from their allies, but that when they subjected the Romans and the Sicilians and the inhabitants of Libya to the greatest perils it was by money, thanks to the abundance of it which they derived from their mines (Diodorus 5, 38).

Carthage was dependent on money to assemble a military. Benjamin Wells, a scholar from Johns Hopkins University, points out how "Not more than 16,000 Phoenician youths came to military age annually" and how in Carthage's current state "the revenues would hardly have sufficed for more than 60,000 mercenaries in army and navy together" (Wells 515). Specifically in the Second Punic War, "Pliny reports that the mine [...] near New Carthage [...] yielded three hundred pounds of silver per day for Hannibal" (Richardson 140). Acquiring 300 pounds of silver from one of many mines in one day illustrates a major economic resource.

Rome achieved an edge in the Second Punic War by conquering the Spanish mines and using them to improve the Roman economy. Spain was "the original flashpoint of the war" (Cartwright) because "the Romans counted the mines among the choicest fruits of their conquest" (Rickard 133). The fact that the Second Punic War began with Spain shows the Romans viewed an incursion into the Iberian Peninsula to be the most important action to defeat Carthage. Control of the mines would reduce Carthage's military funding, cripple its recruitment of mercenaries, and serve to add to their economy. Roman author Pliny the Elder produced figures regarding the productivity of the mines, highlighting that "'Asturia, Gallaecia and Lusitania annually produce 20,000 pounds weight [...] of gold'" (Rickard 134). Roman ownership of the mines indicated a 20,000 pounds of gold setback for Hannibal, which is a severe military budget cut for Carthage, but a significant advantage to Rome. Titus Livius highlighted the vast gains in wealth brought back from Spain by Roman Generals. In 200 BCE, when "Lucius Cornelius Lentulus the proconsul returned from Spain [,] He brought home forty-three thousand pounds of silver and two thousand four hundred and fifty pounds of gold from the booty*"* (Livius 31, 20). Shortly after war in 194 BCE,

> Marcus Porcius Cato triumphed over Spain. He carried in his triumph twenty-five thousand pounds of silver bullion, one hundred and twenty-three thousand silver denarii, five hundred and forty thousand silver coins of Osca, and one thousand four hundred pounds of gold" (Livius 34, 46).

In acquiring the Spanish mines, Rome achieved the upper hand in the Second Punic War by improving financially in addition to crippling Carthage's economy, and in turn its military.

The Roman Republic paid soldiers to fight in the Second Punic War using Spanish precious metals. The democratic freedoms Roman soldiers had allotted them greater power to self-advocate and make demands. Because any demands the government did not meet might cause a military revolt, the Roman Republic found it critical to satisfy the demands of its soldiers. Currency was the most efficient method. However, the payment of the Roman soldiers was not a set amount. According to Bowen, "Roman generals in the field and abroad issued money, having it struck as occasion, according to their judgment, required, and stamping upon it their own names and portraits or *effigies,* by the authority of their *imperium*" (Bowen 97). In one instance, Proconsul L. Cornelius Lentulus, after his conquest in Spain, "presented to each of his soldiers a sum amounting to one hundred and twenty *asses*" (Livius 31, 20). Only 6 years later in

194 BCE, however, Marcus Porcius Cato, "gave to each of his soldiers two hundred and seventy *asses,* and thrice that amount to each trooper" (Livius 34, 46), a payment almost three times what Lentulus gave to his soldiers. While the payments may seem arbitrary, it is more likely that the generals offered just enough to satisfy their soldiers; in the case of larger treasure, Cato's included 1400 pound of gold while Lentulus' had only 50, soldiers likely demanded a higher pay.

Additionally, the use of the copper *as* to pay Roman soldiers secured loyalty. Copper, more than silver and gold, was the most common form of currency within the Roman Republic. Both Bowen and Frank highlight how Rome altered its financial system in 217 BCE, with "silver being the standard and copper coins thereafter recognized simply as token money [money for everyday use]" (Bowen 96). Milne contends that:

> The valuation outside Rome [of Roman currency...] still depended on the exchange [rate], and it was doubtless in consequence of this that for the pay of one soldier, which was reckoned in *asses*: many of the men on service be outside the area where Roman currency was the standard, and the silver denarius would be considerably more value than ten asses to them (Milne 100).

Essentially, the Roman Republic chose to pay its soldiers in copper coins instead of silver coins to prevent Roman soldiers from capitalizing on their pay in regions that are not well-regulated by Rome, which may be rebellious and encourage soldiers to rebel as well. Carthaginian and Greek currency were silver based (Milne 100). Rome's usage of copper coins, which were not of high-value in other cultures, ensured Roman soldiers spent their money where it was worth the most, in Rome. Rome's use of precious metals not only employed soldiers, but the use of copper ensured their loyalty, a critical development in the Second Punic War, as many conquered Roman cities allied with Carthage.

Rome's mass production of precious metals increased its treasury and afforded economic flexibility to confront the war. Rome's control over the Spanish mines--"The mining region that contributed the most to the imperial treasury was southern Spain" (Rickard 129)--granted Rome financial flexibility by creating a buffer. Diodorus notes that the Iberian mines were "marvellous in their deposits of copper and gold and silver [...] all the ore is full of solid silver-dust which gleams forth from it" and that the "the workers of the copper mines recover from the earth they dig out a fourth part of pure copper" (Diodorus 5, 36). Diodorus reinforces his argument that Spanish mines produce vast wealth,

> Great also is the contrast between these mines show when they are compared with those of Attica [a Greek city known for its silver mines]. The men, that is, who work the Attic mines, although they have expended large sums on the undertakings, yet "Now and then, what they hoped to get, they did not get, and what they had, they lost" [...] but the exploiters of the mines of Spain, in their hopes, amass great wealth from their undertakings [...] they are ever coming upon more splendid veins, rich in both silver and gold (Diodorus 5, 37).

Roman ownership over the Spanish mines provided them with unprecedented amounts of money. Rickard asserts that no other mining region in the West matched the productivity of the Spanish mines (Rickard 130). As a result, Rome developed an extensive treasury.

As Roman generals controlled the payment of their soldiers, their acquisition of vast wealth reflected an overall economic flexibility. Livy provides an example of the Roman general

Cato when he affirms that "Upon the pacification of the province [Spain], he (Cato) drew from the iron and silver mines a great revenue by regulations which day by day made the province more remunerative" (Livius 34, 21). Scholar J. J. Van Nostrand agrees that:

> the amounts of booty, *tributum,* brought back to Rome by returning governors [...] included silver and gold bullion as well as coined silver, *denarii Oscenses.* The size and regularity of these returns are proofs of exploitation rather than of the looting, which might follow a successful campaign (Van Nostrand 281).

While instead Roman generals could have stimulated more trade through the Empire by infusing local economies with coins, the Romans chose to bring their treasure back to the capital; as a result, Rome housed a vast treasury, which allowed it to develop a large economic reserve that later allowed Rome to defeat Carthage in the Third Punic War. By concentrating resources in the capital, Rome maintained its treasures at the heartland of the Republic, a hard place to steal from.

Rome's choice to privatize its mines also created economic flexibility and allowed Rome to focus on the war. Though the Roman Republic could have retained control over the mines, it chose to privatize them, as shown by "the names on the ingots of those of private citizen exploiters, [so] private ownership may be inferred for them" (Van Nostrand 282). Although the State appears to be giving up power, it established "regulations for silver and for copper mines [which] sustain[s] the belief that a general law for each variety of mine was in existence" (Van Nostrand 285) and asserted that "The mines, that is, the surface and the mineral wealth beneath belonged to the emperor. One half of the mineral extracted was normally retained by the state" (Van Nostrand 287). By relying on private citizens to fill their coffers, the Roman Republic did not need to contend with silver production during war times, but instead could focus on the war while establishing their treasury.

By inflating its economy by minting new currency with precious metals, Rome prevented economic collapse, allowing it to focus on the war. Scholar Tenney Frank cites Pliny's book 33 where Pliny describes how the Roman Republic inflated its economy by changing the value of its currency. During the Hannibalic War,

> in 217 B.C., Rome operated on a monometallic basis, silver being the standard [...] and copper coins thereafter recognized simply as token money [...] Under the stress and strain of the Hannibalic war the Roman Government put into circulation a *denarius* made of copper and plated with a thin coat of silver (Bowen 96),

which demonstrates how Rome was forced to dilute its currency because of the low supply and high demand of silver. The fact that the Roman "State had comparatively little gold, and so was not prepared to continue gold coinage, which ceased shortly after the crisis was passed, approximately 202 B.C." (Bowen 96) reveals the lack of gold in Rome as well. Frank reveals Rome's economic in stating:

> In 217 [BCE], however, after Rome's terrifying defeat by Hannibal at Trasimene Lake the bronze as was again cut in two, being now reduced to a one-ounce piece. This was, however, done in connection with a small reduction of the silver piece from 4.54 to about 4.00 grams and an official pronouncement that the silver piece should henceforth be exchange not for ten asses but for sixteen (Frank 319).

The Romans reassigned the values of their coins to cope with economic pressure. The economic strain made the silver coin more prevalent; it not only dropped in weight, but also equated to more copper coins than silver coins, which made the latter more valuable. Frank highlights that at one point,

> when the state credit was falling to the lowest ebb and when those who had good currency and metal would naturally hoard it, might resort to such drastic means of inflation to tide the treasury over the crisis. The government had presently to beg its citizens for gifts of jewelry, to mortgage the public lands, and to impose extraordinary income taxes (Frank 325).

The severity of Rome's inflation forced Rome to turn to its citizens to acquire more precious metal to stabilize its currency. The precious metals afforded by the Spanish mines were critical for Rome to avoid overtaxing its citizens and collapsing the economy, either of which could lead to rebellion or civil unrest.

The economic flexibility afforded by the Carthaginian mines in Spain allowed Rome to win the Second Punic War. Going into the Second Punic War, both Carthage and Rome flourished, yet coming out Rome had conquered mines on the Iberian Peninsula. While the productivity of Spanish mines improved Roman and Carthaginian economies, Rome's acquisition of the mines led to more drastic changes. The disparity arose because unlike Carthage Rome regulated currency and resources with great efficacy, allowing it to turn Carthage into a subsidiary state. With vast resources at hand, the Romans subjugated Carthage in the Third Punic War, turning a flourishing opponent into a submissive city state. The Roman conquest of the Spanish mines was transformational, allowing Rome to transition into a wealthy empire. The dichotomy between Carthage and Rome highlights how controlling resource production and circulation is critical to stabilizing a nation. While outsourcing production to other countries can be beneficial, a nation risks losing control of its fate. The fate of Rome and Carthage after the Second Punic War demonstrates how retaining control over resource bases encourages autonomy and builds power.

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