

**Gambling, Threats and Miscalculations:  
Discussing Rome's Reaction to the Fall of Saguntum and the Beginning of the  
Second Punic War**

The debate surrounding the causes of the Second Punic War is by no means a new one. Ancient and modern scholars alike have debated, examined and subsequently re-examined the data countless times. Whether Hannibal was fueled by sacred oath, as Polybius posits, or the fervor for war came to him in a dream<sup>1</sup>, the result was the same; Rome and Carthage would engage in yet another long and bloody war. Traditionally, the fall of Saguntum is seen to be the catalyst to warfare. And to some, including Polybius himself, the Mediterranean was seen as a veritable powder keg on the brink of explosion. Rome and Carthage would eventually and inevitably collide. Following the events of the late third century, each party expanded their influence throughout the Mediterranean, and it was in Iberia that these spheres would eventually overlap, resulting in unavoidable hostilities. However, both Rome and Carthage refrained from engaging openly. Each was awaiting a pretext to strike – a pretext that Saguntum would readily provide. While the fall of Saguntum, in retrospect, may conveniently fit within this theory of expanding spheres of influence, the political nature surrounding 218 BC and the years leading up to it may not have been so clear cut. This should bring pause to those ready to retroject modern models of state conduct onto an ancient past. As the following will reveal, the events surrounding Saguntum quickly become confusing and contradictory to this theory.

Rome's reaction to the siege of Saguntum was inherently ambivalent. Despite sending an embassy to Hannibal outwardly threatening the general in an effort to dissuade him from attacking the city, they did nothing during the siege of Saguntum in 219 BC. At times, seemingly on a whim, Rome places grave importance on the city and then shortly thereafter dismisses it entirely. The role that Saguntum itself played during the late third century BC becomes quickly confusing. Was the city a catalyst to warfare or something else? Were both parties simply looking for a reason to strike?

Polybius states firmly that the siege served as the spark for the entire affair that, to him, was clearly inevitable.<sup>2</sup> But whether or not that notion can be taken seriously first requires a deeper study of Saguntum as a city itself, in addition to their bond with Rome. Polybius suggests that there were ties between Saguntum and Rome previous to its fall, and that Rome had arbitrated a civil dispute resulting in the execution of some Saguntine officials some years earlier. Kramer credits Roman involvement in Saguntine affairs to strong diplomacy on the part of the Massilians – a northern city with established trading

<sup>1</sup> David Vessey, "Silius Italicus on the Fall of Saguntum." *Classical Philology* 69.1 (1974): 1

<sup>2</sup> Polyb. 2.36

connections to Rome.<sup>3</sup> Kramer posits that the Massilians, concerned with Hannibal's northward expansion and the threat it would present to Massilian economic interests, went to Rome and urged her to become more concerned with Iberian affairs. It was this involvement that enabled the Saguntines to realistically seek Roman arbitration during the 220s. This arbitration would result in some bound, formal or informal, between the two cities. When Hannibal finally attacked Saguntum, Rome was ready to respond in arms on account of her connection. However, there are two critical problems with this theory. Firstly, Kramer bases the "effectiveness" of Massilian diplomacy not on any formal inscription or evidence of an existing treaty between Massilia and Rome, but rather on the *invocatio* of Massilian Artemis into Rome proper in 229 BC.<sup>4</sup> A great deal of speculation has surrounded this idea, and the sway that the Massilians realistically had upon Roman senatorial matters has likely been grossly exaggerated. Secondly, it implicitly resides upon the notion that Rome did indeed seek war and that they were prepared, if not waiting, to act. Hoyos and Scullard both build upon this idea of jilted Roman fides as being the source and pretext for a war the Romans themselves would immediately initiate with the embassy sent to Carthage in 218 BC. All these theories seem to posit, though implicitly, that Saguntum was the ultimate catalyst to warfare.

While this jilted fides is integral to the progression towards war, it is unlikely that it was the immediate factor to produce it. The hesitation on Rome's part to intervene during the siege of 219 BC suggests that they were either not prepared or not moved enough to act. Further, the embassies sent to Iberia and Carthage throughout the third century BC may not have been acts of war, but rather diplomatic attempts (or miscalculations) to avoid it. The nature of these embassies was not to stimulate war, but rather to keep a reign upon Carthaginian affairs in Iberia while Rome was preoccupied elsewhere – nominally northern Italy and Illyria. Rome had no real designs for Iberia proper, at least not before the war itself began. The beginning of the war for Rome actually came sometime after the fall of Saguntum, only after news indicating Hannibal's swift movement north reached Rome. In short, Saguntum did not serve as a *direct* catalyst to warfare from the Roman perspective. The progression to war itself was more slow, and even more undesirable, than previously believed. To better illustrate this, the following will focus on a chronology of the events leading up to and following the fall of Saguntum as described by Polybius with the aid of Dio where appropriate, followed by a more focused discussion surrounding Saguntum's connection with Rome directly.

When attempting to decipher the nature of the events surrounding Saguntum, it

<sup>3</sup> Frank R. Kramer, "Massilian Diplomacy before the Second Punic War." *American Journal of Philology*. 69.1 (1948): 1

<sup>4</sup> Kramer 1948,15

is best to begin with a historical discussion of Rome's involvement in Iberia prior to 218 BC. The earliest record of contact between Carthage and Rome concerning Iberian affairs is preserved in a fragment of Cassius Dio.<sup>5</sup> The fragment states that in 231 BC, Rome sent *legati* to investigate Hamilcar's involvement in Spain. To this, Hamilcar replied that his occupation of Iberia was for the purpose of acquiring enough money to repay the war indemnity after the First Punic War. At this time, according to Errington, Dio suggests that the *legati* "were at a loss how to censure him"<sup>6</sup>. Though the veracity of this fragment is debated, if it is believed to be true, would suggest that Rome was at least mildly interested in Carthaginian movement relatively early on. The purpose of this embassy, however, may have been missed by Dio. It is unlikely that the legates actually desired to intervene in Iberian affairs at this time, but rather the purpose of the embassy was rooted in observation. Mobilizing a force to quell Carthaginian "threat" in Iberia would not have been practical at this time being so far from where Rome was currently operating in Italy. Simply to understand Hamilcar's movements, his pace, and whether or not he may prove a threat to Roman interests in the future seems a more practical explanation for the embassy. The legates' inaction is not one out of frustration, but is rather indicative that at this time, Rome was not concerned with interfering in Spanish affairs. Rome had interest in what was occurring within Spain in so far as acquiring information, but acting, at least aggressively, on this information was not seen as a priority.

When this fragment is taken into account with the start of Gallic intervention in 225 BC<sup>7</sup>, it makes sense that Rome would want to insure that all fronts would be accounted for prior to engaging in a potentially drawn out war with their northern enemies. It is unlikely that in 231 BC Rome expected Hamilcar to pose any real threat to their dealings with Gaul. However, as noted before, it was the potential future of this threat with which Rome concerned itself. Even in 226 BC, when the Ebro treaty was signed between both parties, Hasbrudal's armies were some 200 kilometers south of the river.<sup>8</sup> This would suggest again that Rome did not see Carthage, at this moment, as a direct threat to their operations in Italy, however to ignore their presence completely would be imprudent and foolhardy. The line of the Ebro river itself seems arbitrary. Whether the line was to be drawn at the Ebro or the Pyrenees, the purpose of the treaty was not to secure territory but rather to avoid any Carthaginian involvement, now or future, with the Gauls of northern Italy.

Polybius furthers this argument, stating: "So they sent envoys to Hasbrudal and entered into a formal treaty with him, in which no mention was made of the rest of

<sup>5</sup> Cassius Dio frg. 48

<sup>6</sup> R. M. Errington, "Rome and Spain before the Second Punic War." *Latomus* 19.1 (1970): 14

<sup>7</sup> Polyb. 2.23

<sup>8</sup> Errington 1970, 14

Iberia, but the Carthaginians undertook not to cross the Ebro river for military purposes”.<sup>9</sup> Polybius’ phrasing is pertinent. He stipulates that the treaty was not only formal, but that Carthaginian (and only Carthaginian) movement was bound in a strictly militaristic sense. Nowhere is trade controlled, nor is it stipulated that Rome shall not operate south of the river. The Ebro treaty and the possible embassy to Hamilcar demonstrate Rome’s sentiments towards Iberia as a whole – implying they were not interested in directly intervening nor conquering the region. This is further emphasized through the lack of mention within the treaty to Iberia’s interior. Carthage had full dominion to act as they desired but within their bonds. Rome was invested in other regions and in order to secure these interests, Rome had to ensure that Carthage kept within Iberia and Iberia only.

A year after the Ebro treaty, Rome went to war with Gaul.<sup>10</sup> The Boii in a coalition of kings marched towards the Po, threatening Italian colonies. This was in direct response to recent Roman occupation of land.<sup>11</sup> Land redistribution was conducted in 232 BC under Flaminius’ agrarian law concerning the *ager Gallicus*. This occupation posed a shift from seasonal warfare in which the Romans would periodically war with the Gauls and then leave to permanent Roman involvement and settlement.<sup>12</sup> The Ebro treaty, then, appears to be a document in which Rome is attempting to avoid Carthage’s involvement while they consolidated their hold on the north. The war with the Boii was ultimately successful with uprising quelled in 222 BC, however tensions persist in the region despite this. It would not be too great of a stretch of the imagination to presume that Rome worried about the future of their colonies, namely Cremona and Placentia, in the region. The Gauls were prone to aggressive military behaviour and it was unlikely that this would be their last attempt at uprising. While things were quiet now, Rome likely wanted to avoid the potential of future disturbances instigated through Carthaginian, albeit distant, involvement.

In 221 BC, Hannibal receives command and begins expanding north.<sup>13</sup> Within the year, settlements south of the Ebro with the exception of Saguntum were “too cowed to resist Hannibal with any effectiveness”<sup>14</sup>. The success of the general and the appeals from Saguntum piqued the interest of the Roman senate which sent an embassy to him in 220 BC, stating that Saguntum is not to be harmed and reaffirming the Ebro line.<sup>15</sup> Despite the

<sup>9</sup> Polyb. 2.13

<sup>10</sup> Polyb. 2.23

<sup>11</sup> Polyb. 2.21

<sup>12</sup> Kramer 1948, 9

<sup>13</sup> Polyb. 3.14

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Polyb. 2.15

threat, Hannibal would attack the city in 219, resulting in its fall eight months later with no Roman intervention<sup>16</sup>. There was no real help for their aggrieved ally beyond yet another embassy sent to Carthage during the same year. Before discussing Rome's reaction to the siege, however, a further study of Rome's foreign obligations beyond Iberia is necessary.

As previously stated, Rome's policy towards Carthaginian involvement in Iberia was one of containment. This is well demonstrated through the Ebro Treaty of 226, which allowed Rome to war with the Gauls in Northern Italy without fear of foreign intervention. Another opportunity for containment presented itself in 220 BC. It was during this period that Hannibal was moving rapidly throughout southern Iberia. An embassy was then sent to Hannibal, warning him not to attack Saguntum lest they force Rome to act.<sup>17</sup> Superficially, this embassy may be interpreted as being prompted by fear of a strengthening Carthaginian presence in Iberia. Further, the message carried by the embassy was also a direct threat to Hannibal himself, representative of a mounting aggression towards Carthage on behalf of the Romans. However, this would be to ignore Rome's foreign interests. It was during this year that Rome began yet another war – this time with Illyria.<sup>18</sup> During this war, both consuls were called outside of Rome to fight east of the Adriatic sea, far from Iberia. It is very unlikely then, given the position of the consuls, that Rome would choose to push for another conflict at this time. It is even more unlikely that they were even preparing for the notion of war with Carthage – their legions were spread thin and those who were not were still recovering from years of warfare in the north. Further, memories of the first Punic War, though perhaps distant now, would still have held a significant weight. It is unlikely, given their military capability at the time that Rome was prepared to fight another lengthy war with an opponent that had proven difficult to subdue before. If they were in no position to wage war, then, why is it that they sent to Hannibal at all? Why would they then choose to outwardly threaten Hannibal if they were not prepared to act accordingly? Why not simply leave Saguntum to fall quietly?

The situation in Saguntum during the 220s is characterized by urban and local tensions exacerbated by Carthaginian expansion.<sup>19</sup> Polybius makes mention of the domestic dispute within Saguntum as being so severe that it warranted foreign arbitration. Hannibal, having established himself around the city, called officials of the city before him and offered to arbitrate the matter himself.<sup>20</sup> To this, the officials responded with a scoff

<sup>16</sup> Polyb. 2.20

<sup>17</sup> Polyb. 2.15

<sup>18</sup> Polyb. 3.16

<sup>19</sup> B.D. Hoyos, *Unplanned Wars: The Origins of the First and Second Punic Wars*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co. (1998): 190

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

and instead stated that they would seek the help of the Romans. Rome responded positively and through their arbitration, some Saguntine officials were executed in an effort to restore order to the city.

Local territorial disputes exacerbated the internal discord of the city. The dispute was between Saguntum and a northern tribe. Livy claims them to be the Turitani, but this is unlikely. Regardless, the dispute was territorial in nature and likely longstanding, however, with Hannibal's expansion northward, the political climate had shifted.<sup>21</sup> The tribe had recently become allies to Hannibal meaning that Saguntum could no longer realistically preserve her independence for very long without some form of external help. When the interior of Saguntum's city apparatus began to collapse, the city had a few options. Either it could turn to Hannibal to mediate, as he had offered, and risk domination like their northern neighbours, or it could look elsewhere. Rome was far enough that it was unlikely that Saguntum would totally lose her autonomy with her aid. Saguntum was acting out of self-interest for her independence, or at least the majority of it, when she approached Rome. Rome had arbitrated disputes throughout the Mediterranean before. It was this intervention that secured Sardinia after the first the first Punic War, making Roman friendly Saguntum an ideal foothold and a possible thorn in Hannibal's side. Further, involvement in Saguntum may have put Rome in a more optimal logistic position for keeping an eye on Hannibal's movements throughout Iberia. There was very little risk for Rome to involve herself in this dispute at this time and only to gain with the potential of establishing a supervisory foothold in Iberia. It is for this reason that Rome likely agreed to help the distant Iberian city. Through arbitration, Saguntum had become a "friend" or, as Dorey posits, a "*dediticus*" of Rome.<sup>22</sup>

Sources on the exact nature of the tie between the two cities are ambiguous. It is clear that Saguntum was a "friend" of the Roman state as the second embassy to Hannibal illustrates, however the exact nature of this "friendship" is questionable. Scholars like Dorey strongly argue that no formal treaty between Saguntum and Rome ever existed.<sup>23</sup> However, it remains clear that Rome still held some sort of responsibility for her friend, even if she was not a formal ally. It was precisely this friendship that ultimately drew Rome into more aggressive relations with Carthage. Because of their bond of friendship, Rome was bound to help her ally. At minimum, she was required to appear as though she was willing to help. It was for this reason of appearances that Rome sent the embassy to Hannibal in 220 and later one during the siege to Carthage. Rome was simply fulfilling the bare minimum requirement to her Iberian friend without being willing to fully commit any

<sup>21</sup> Hoyos 1998, 191.

<sup>22</sup> T.A. Dorey, "The Treaty with Saguntum," *Humanitas* 11/12 (1959-1960): 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

amount of force behind her words. She could not afford, given the amount of allies and friend relations throughout the Mediterranean and Italy, to appear completely inactive. She could not let Saguntum fall without at least the pretence of care. It is this notion of mere appearances that is stressed, however. Whether or not Saguntum stood at the end of the day was of little to no concern to Rome – it was the attempt to preserve her greater political image in the face of her allies that concerned Rome, however weak an attempt it may have been.

It is for this reason that when Saguntum fell in 219 BC, Rome still failed to act meaningfully. Her only response was to send yet another embassy, this time directly to Carthage, demanding the release of Hannibal to the Roman state.<sup>24</sup> Again, this embassy carried with it threats. Rome demanded that Carthage surrender Hannibal directly to them as recompense for the fall of Saguntum – an unrealistic demand that Carthage could not have been expected to bend to. Again, this threat was one made out of pretence and responsibility to at least appear to be acting in favour of a fallen friend, but as far as strict action was concerned, despite her words, Rome was still unprepared.

Polybius states that the embassy to Carthage was sent immediately following the fall of the city. He makes mention that, within his sources, the senate deliberated heavily before sending this embassy. War was tensely discussed, however Polybius dismisses the notion stating “Why would the Romans assemble to debate whether or not they should go to war after the Carthaginian capture of Saguntum, when a year later they had threatened the Carthaginians with war if they merely set foot on Saguntine territory?”<sup>25</sup> Under the fundamental assumption that Rome had been anticipating war and awaiting an opportunity to strike, Polybius’ dismissal of the council proposed within his sources holds true. However, if one were to hold the opposite view – that Rome was indeed hesitant and unwilling to go to war, the presence of the council seems equally, if not more so, probable. With the absence of the consuls and the hesitation outlined at length above, it is likely that these discussions concerning Saguntum occurred. It was at this time that Rome began to consider the possibility that war may be at their doorstep, yet the issue was clearly contentious. Had Rome pushed Carthage too far with her empty threats? If so, what was their next course of action? Moreover, was there a possibility at further avoiding warfare? This is based upon much speculation and without Polybius’ sources; it is difficult to discern the content of the assemblies themselves. However, it is not too far of a stretch to posit that these may have been questions the senate posed themselves at the time. Regardless, the issue of Saguntum and its aftermath was highly contentious.

Much of the above argument has centered around an idea of empty threats – of

<sup>24</sup> Polyb. 2.20

<sup>25</sup> Polyb. 2.20

Rome pushing the boundaries of Carthage in an effort to assert her dominance. Rome liked the idea of a weak Carthage. By testing her, Rome would be assured in her position over her neighbour and the Mediterranean at large. By keeping Carthage at bay, Rome was able to operate relatively freely within the Mediterranean. These inflammatory threats were not amongst the first Rome has made against her neighbour. In a fragment of Cassius Dio preserved by Zonaras, a similar tense situation in which Rome threatens Carthage with outright war is described. The following concerns Carthaginian piracy around Sardinia during 233 BC.

The Romans declared the Carthaginians, as the instigators of these wars, to be the enemies, and they sent to them demanding money and bidding them remove their ships from all these islands, since these ports belonged to them. And to make their mind perfectly clear, they sent a spear and a herald's staff, bidding they choose one, whichever they please. The Carthaginians, quite dismayed, returned a sufficiently curt answer, in which they stated that they chose neither of the articles sent to them, but were ready to accept either that the Romans might leave them. Henceforth, the two nations hated each other but hesitated to begin war.<sup>26</sup>

If one believes in the veracity of this source, it offers a very interesting glimpse in Roman and Carthaginian conduct. The above is yet another blatant threat on behalf of the Romans, another instance in which Rome attempted to throw their political weight into cowing the Carthaginians. This threat is comparable to those made concerning Hannibal as it is equally inflammatory. The language is even similar. Above, Rome presents a spear or staff, letting Carthage choose between war or peace. In 2.33, Polybius states the same: "...he bore peace or war for them, and that he would leave them with one or the other; it was up to them which he produced."<sup>27</sup> Likely, when Rome continued this form of empty intimidation in the 220s they expected a similar result – that nothing should come of it. After all, Rome was only acting in meager defence of her friend; a defence that consisted of performing the bare minimum in terms of appearances, not a defence that would result in action. The difference here, however, is clear. Instead of the situation simply dissipating, Hannibal was ignited

<sup>26</sup> Cassius Dio, Zon. 8.18

<sup>27</sup> Polyb. 2.23

into action. Rome had miscalculated.

Hannibal moved quickly. He secured both Libya and Iberia, amassed his army, and began his march north towards the Alps. He sent word to the Celts, announcing his friendship and intent on crossing the Alps. They answered favourably and Hannibal set out in earnest.<sup>28</sup>

Before continuing on, it is best to pause and discuss why Hannibal would choose to act so aggressively, especially in light of the history of empty threats provided by Rome. There are a few factors at play. With the fall of Saguntum, Hannibal was able to replenish his resources. Recent victories in Spain left him in a relatively strong position to continue campaigning. Furthermore, the beginnings of Roman intervention in Iberia likely did not sit well with the general. Though beginning innocently enough, Rome's involvement with Saguntum could prove to be a greater thorn in his side later. It was this sort of intervention that resulted in the loss of Sardinia after the First Punic War. Thus Hannibal's actions were a result of recent victories, frustration with the possibility of future Roman intervention and upset over the continuation of empty threats. This time Rome had pushed too far.

Yet Rome, according to Polybius' narrative, still failed to mobilize immediately. Far from amassing an army as soon as Saguntum fell, it was only later when news had reached Rome of Hannibal's crossing the Ebro that Rome "set about recruiting troops and generally getting ready for war".<sup>29</sup> This shows a few things. Firstly, Rome may have been surprised that Carthage would finally act on their threats. Secondly, Rome always was truly hesitant to engage in warfare; they were not prepared. If Rome was merely awaiting a pretext to war with Carthage, they would have begun amassing an army long before Hannibal crossed the Ebro and arguably even before the siege of Saguntum. If they were so ready to war, they would have begun preparations as early as the embassy in 220 in which Rome first threatened Hannibal.

Rome's reaction at this point also requires further scrutiny. Again I stress that Rome's policy towards Carthage prior to this point was one of containment. Rome desired to keep a certain amount pressure upon their enemy so that they may continue to move about the Mediterranean freely. During this period, they were predominantly concerned with securing recently acquired territory in northern Italy and their Illyrian campaign. When Hannibal began his march north, when news had reached Rome that he had crossed the Ebro and was moving towards the Alps, it was the threat to their claim to northern Italy that truly set Rome into motion. Namely, two colonies near the Po River, Placentia and Cremona, would be threatened.<sup>30</sup> According to Polybius, the Boii, which were suppressed

<sup>28</sup> Polyb. 3.33-35

<sup>29</sup> Polyb. 3.40

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

in 225BC, were waiting a reason to rebel. An allegiance with Hannibal would have created an opportunity to reignite hostilities in the region. It was for this reason that Rome acted. The Second Punic War did not begin, in earnest, because Rome leapt to the aid of an Iberian ally, it was not in defence of Saguntum. In fact, given the above, Saguntum was in reality of little concern to Rome. Her only role was in providing an escalation towards warfare, but by no means was it the catalyst. It was the preservation of northern Italian interests that began the war in earnest, at least from a Roman perspective.<sup>31</sup>

It is easy for historians, both modern and ancient, to retroject and exaggerate historical factors. Due to the grandeur and devastation of the Second Punic War, it is not surprising that a catalyst was sought. The theory that both parties would inevitably clash in 218 BC in hindsight may seem clear, but the reality the historical facts presents is an altogether different, if less exciting story. Rome, concerned with northern Italy and Illyria, was in no position to think of warring with Carthage. However, she was caught in a difficult political position. Fides dictated that she act when Saguntum was attacked, however she was in no position to use force. Instead of confrontation Rome gambled and engaged in a policy of containment through threats. Eventually, this policy would result in Rome overstepping their bounds, pushing Carthage into aggression. It was only when Hannibal made himself perfectly clear that war was imminent through his movement towards the Alps that Rome began preparing for war. Thus, the beginning of the Second Punic war and the nature of Saguntum's role is illuminated – the reality was far slower than previously believed.

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<sup>31</sup> Polyb. 3.40

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