Panel: “Culture and Society in the Ancient World”

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Title: “The Odyssey to Mediterranean Empire: The Roman Republic’s Movement into Naval Dominance at Carthage’s Expense during the Third Century BCE”

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Abstract

The Roman Empire was the largest in western civilization’s antiquity. Under the Emperor Trajan, it spanned from Britain to the Persian Gulf, enveloping the perimeter and interior of the Mediterranean Sea, or as the Romans called it Mare Nostrum (“Our Sea”). On its path to becoming the dominant terrestrial and naval power in Europe, the Republic’s concerns had to evolve into consolidating its claim over the Mediterranean, leading the Roman people to branch from peninsular Italy (terra italica) and become more heavily involved in the maritime world beyond their shores. This inevitably brought them into conflict with Carthage, a former Phoenician colony in modern Tunisia that, at the start of the Punic Wars, was the preeminent naval power. During its contest against Carthage for Mediterranean dominance in the third century BCE, the Roman Republic embarked on its odyssey toward empire: quickly developing a vast, innovative, and powerful navy; venturing far outside its homeland to places like Gibraltar and the Aegean; and establishing its first overseas provinces in Sicily and Sardinia-Corsica. The Romans played to their strong suits while at sea, stabilizing ships and developing a way to have their superior foot soldiers overwhelm enemy vessels.

By the time the dust settled and the waves calmed, Rome had become the strongest military force in classical antiquity, and the Roman hunger for land beyond the peninsula, which would bring the Republic and successive Empire into eternal glory, was whetted. Concern for sovereignty and economic greed brought the two powers into conflict in the First Punic War, which Rome very well may have lost had it not been able to integrate Carthaginian ships and Greek tactics into a Roman navy. The Republic’s deceptive conquest of Messana and conquest of Agrigentum moved the Senate to consider conquering Sicily entirely. After the war, this notion grew, and Rome took Sardinia and Corsica. The three islands formed Rome’s first two overseas provinces, the beginnings of a vast empire, conquests which were solidified during the Second Punic War. Rome capitalized on Carthage’s fall, ultimately enveloping the whole perimeter and interior of the Mediterranean. After the Punic Wars, the previously terrestrial
Roman Republic had the ability to flex its powerful army and navy almost anywhere in *Mare Nostrum*, having established itself with its expansionist odyssey during the third century BCE.

**Bibliographical Note**

Unfortunately, primary sources for ancient history can be very challenging to acquire, leaving Titus Livius’ *History of Rome: Book 21* as my only source contemporary with my subject. To fill in the gaps, I employed ten different secondary sources, the most useful two written by Dexter Hoyos: *History of Warfare: A Companion to Roman Imperialism* (2013) and *Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World: A Companion to the Punic Wars* (2011). Much of the analysis of Roman warships and naval tactics came from Smith Bosworth’s *Epochs of Ancient History: Rome and Carthage: The Punic Wars* (1889). Other secondary sources used include works by Thomas Arnold, Richard Gabriel, and John Prevas.