

The first challenge to Roman domination in Spain

Hannibal's excuse for attacking Saguntum

All Roman historians agree, with respect to Saguntum, that the treaty Rome made with Hasdrubal in 228 B.C. contained two essential elements, i.e.: 1) that the extreme limit of Carthaginian expansion to the North East was to be the Ebro; and 2) that although Saguntum lay south of the Ebro the Carthaginians had to abstain from incorporating it within their expansion and to respect its independence¹.

In spite of this second element Hannibal in 219 actually attacked Saguntum and when Roman ambassadors came to remonstrate and to ask him to withdraw he not only did not comply with their request but even refused to give them an interview. And when the envoys went to Carthage in Africa, the Carthaginian Senate, after hotly debating the matter and in spite of one party strongly objecting to the attack on Saguntum, by a majority vote, decided to uphold Hannibal. Although at an interview they had given to a previous Roman embassy the Carthaginian Senate had repudiated Hasdrubal's treaty with Rome as not having been ratified by them², still, the fact that the matter was long

1 Cf. Livy, 21, 2: «Cum hoc Hasdrubale, ... foedus renovaverat populus romanus, ut finis imperii esset amnis Hiberus, Saguntinisque mediis inter imperia duorum populorum libertas servaretur». Livy's words make it clear that Saguntum lay south of the Hiberus. In 21, 5 (sub fine), Livy, looking at the Ebro from the Roman territory which lay north of the river writes: «et iam omnia trans Hiberum praeter Saguntinos Carthaginiensium erant». *Trans Hiberum*, for anyone looking from the north side of the river, means south of that river.

2 Cf. Polybius, 3, 21, 1.

and hotly debated makes it clear that the Roman contention that Carthage had, in force of the existing treaty with Hasdrubal, to abstain from attacking Saguntum, had serious legal foundations and could not lightly be dismissed.

Hence G. V. Sumner³ stresses the point that Hannibal did not deny the existence of the treaty but that he found his *casus belli* both on the plea, as Appian says, that the Saguntines had refused to accept Hannibal as an arbitrator in their dispute with the Carthaginian-protected *Torboletae*⁴ and that, according to Polybius⁵, a short time previously, when there had been party strife at Saguntum, the Romans had assumed the role of arbitrators, and had unjustly executed some of the leaders of the pro-Carthaginian party. Hannibal stated that he could not stand by and do nothing about the faithless treatment of these men, for it was a traditional principle of the Carthaginians not to abandon any victim of injustice⁶.

This reason given by Polybius for the interference (i.e. that he could not stand by and let injustice go unheeded) is too slight, we think, to have serious weight against the Roman claims through their alliance unless Hannibal could bring up some serious reason for which he could not stand by and should therefore interfere. In fact when the Roman envoys saw Hannibal at New Carthage, previous to his beginning the attack on Saguntum, to the Roman warning not only not to attack Saguntum but also not to interfere in Saguntum's internal affairs (μή διαβαίνειν κ. ἰ. λ.)⁷ he, in the words of Sumner⁸, probably gave no answer and kept silent. Sumner attempts to find a reason for that, in the possibility that Hannibal may have considered the Hasdrubal covenant as not binding.

But, we think, Hannibal's real excuse may have been

3 Cf. G. V. Sumner, 'Roman Policy in Spain', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 72 (1967) 205-46.

4 Appian, *Iber.* 10. Livy, 21, 6, confirms that Hannibal was fostering disputes between the Saguntines and their neighbours and that he was supporting the latter. Polyb. 3, 15, 8, also, confirms that.

5 Polyb. 3, 15, 7.

6 Cf. G. V. Sumner, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

7 Polyb. l. c. (3, 15, 7).

8 Cf. G. V. Sumner, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

much more radical and fundamental than that⁹. He may not have given it to the Roman envoys at New Carthage, but it may well have come out at the fateful debate in the Carthaginian Senate during the course of which Appius Claudius, the Roman embassy's leader, declared war. It may not have been recorded by the Roman historian or historians which Polybius, Appian and Livy used because of its serious weight or because these may not have reported it themselves at all.

We give it only as a hypothesis for historians to consider. We think that Hannibal may have claimed to interfere in the case of the *Torboletae* and, later, in the Roman embassy's treatment of the Carthaginian party at Saguntum in view of the fact that Saguntum was not a Spanish (an Iberian) city but a Punic colony, i.e. it was one of the colonies the Phoenicians had originally set up in Spain for trading purposes (probably in view of Spain's silver mines), before Carthaginian expansion into Spain began. We know indeed that the colony of Cadiz was set up by the Phoenicians before they founded Carthage and Utica. And when the Carthaginian expansion into Spain was started by Hamilcar, the Saguntines must have been unwilling to lose to Carthage the rich profits they were deriving from their trade¹⁰.

The reason for our theory is drawn from the coins of Saguntum.

In the first three centuries B.C. it was the general prac-

9 Polybius, 3, 15, 9-11, says that Hannibal, in the interview he had with the Roman embassy at New Carthage did not allege the true reasons but took refuge in groundless pretexts. Polybius interpreted the true reason as that of reversing the result of the First Punic War, which is acceptable; but there may well have been another reason as well which Polybius did not surmise.

10 How anxious were the Saguntines that the Carthaginian progress be stopped and that as a consequence their own danger should not be increased, is shown by the continuous embassies they sent to Rome after 226 B.C. reporting Carthaginian progress to the Senate; cf. Polybius, 3, 15, 1: τὴν γινομένην εὐροισαν Καρχηδονίους τῶν κατ'Ἰβηρίαν πραγμάτων Sumner suggests (p. 233) that the party strife that developed in Saguntum (Polybius, 3, 15, 7; 3, 30, 2) was the result of the Roman apathy towards the uneasiness of the Saguntines. It is natural that there would come into being at Saguntum a party which genuinely believed that the best way was to find an accommodation with the Carthaginians who were nearby rather than entertain hopes in the Romans who were far away and seemed very little interested.

tice with Punic cities that were incorporated into the Roman Empire to put on their coins, when they minted them, types and symbols which recalled and demonstrated their Punic ethnical origins and character. If it was the head of a divinity which was put on the obverse, this would often be represented according to a Graeco-Roman identification of the Punic divinity, just as Vergil calls in the *Aeneid* the Carthaginian Astarte by the Roman equivalence of Juno; just as Cornelius Nepos ¹¹ makes the boy Hannibal vow eternal enmity to Rome on the altar of Jove while in fact it must have been the equivalent Carthaginian divinity of Baal Hammon or Baal Eshmun.

So in the coins of Melita (mod. Malta), the Punic Colony which Carthage definitely lost to Rome at the beginning of the Second Punic War: Astarte is therein identified with Hera but keeps her sign of Tanit as an indication of her Punic character ¹² and the *Punic god Eshmun is also found along* with her, with his serpentine knot ¹³. (Cf. fig. 1 and 2).

Now this is exactly what we find in the coins of Roman Saguntum after it was rebuilt. We find on the obverse of some of these coins the head of the Punic god Baal Melqart, sometimes identified with Hercules as the club shows (Br. Mus. No. 0525), sometimes in his purely Punic representation as the serpentine knot (Br. Mus. No. 0534) demonstrates: see fig. 3 and 4.

That knot, is not the caduceus of Mercury, but the serpentine knot of Aesculapius with whom the Punic consort of Astarte (known as *Eshmun* in Tyre and as *Melgart* in Sidon and as *Baal Hammon* in the colonies of the Western Mediterranean ¹⁴) is identified, as being a male healing divinity. When Silius Italicus says that the founder of Saguntum had been Hercules ¹⁵, he is calling by the Graeco-Roman name of «Hercules» the Punic god Melqart with whom Hercules is commonly identified. This serpentine knot is

¹¹ *Vit. Han.*, 2: *Iovi Optimo Maximo hostias immolavit.*

¹² Cf. E. Coleiro, 'Maltese Coins of the Roman Period', *The Numismatic Chronicle*, Seventh Series, XI (1971) 75-76; 85-86; and Plate 15, Coin No. 3 (obverse).

¹³ Cf. E. Coleiro, *op. cit.*, pp. 74; 82-85, and Plate 15, Coin No. 1 (obverse).

¹⁴ Cf. E. Coleiro, *op. cit.*, p. 83, Note 3.

¹⁵ *Bell. Poen.* 1, 271.

also frequently found, as identifying Melqart's female consort Astarte, both on Astarte's steles and with her images in coins, coupled with Astarte's very special sing of Tanit ¹⁶. See fig. 5.

That the serpentine knot was associated with Astarte in the Phoenician colonies of Spain is demonstrated by a coin of Ebusus ¹⁷ which contains the sign of Tanit (Astarte's) on the obverse and the serpentine knot on the reverse, cf. fig. 6.

It is found on the reverse of the Saguntine coin No. 0551 in the Br. Mus. Catalogue, showing that the female head on the obverse is Astarte, possibly identified with Roma: see fig. 7 and 8.

We must note that we endorse the doubts of G. F. Hill as to this identification ¹⁸. It may well be that Astarte is shown in this coin helmeted to recall the warlike qualities the Saguntines showed in their siege by Hannibal. In the coinage of Gozo, Malta's sister Island, Astarte is in fact shown helmeted to express the Gozitans' warlike solidarity with Antony and Sextus Pompeius in 40 B.C., when that coinage was first produced, and when Antony and Sextus were preparing to wage war on Octavian before the peace of Brundisium ¹⁹, see fig. 9.

The bull both with the human face which appears on the reverse of some of the Saguntine coins, e.g. No. 0525 Brit. Mus. —fig. 10— and without it, is also an indication of oriental origin ²⁰. In Mesopotamia the bull with a human head signified a beneficial influence and in Assyria, represented also as winged, was the guardian of the palace ²¹, see figura 11.

One would also recall that the Israelites in the Desert, despairing of ever seeing Moses any more, during his forty days on Sinai, fashioned for their adoration a golden bull.

¹⁶ Cf. *supra* *Maltese Coin*, fig. 1.

¹⁷ Lámina XI, G. F. Hill, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Cf. G. H. Hill, *Notes on the Ancient Coinage of Hispania Citerior*, p. 115.

¹⁹ Cf. E. Coleiro, *op. cit.*, pp. 78, 90; and Plate 16, Coin 12 (obverse).

²⁰ Cf. L. Villaronga Garriga, *Las monedas de Arse-Saguntum* (Barcelona 1967) p. 45.

²¹ Cf. L. Villaronga Garriga, *l. c.*

The star which appears on the obverse, along with the head of Melqart on Saguntine coin No. 0525 Brit. Mus. (cf. above, fig. 3) and with the cavalier on the reverse of the coin No. 0534 Brit. Mus. is also a symbol of divinity indicative of Astarte and is commonly found on Carthaginian steles and in the coin of Gozo²² along with the face of helmeted Astarte: see fig. 12.

The crescent which appears on Brit. Museum 0525 (reverse) along with the star near the bull with the human head is also an indication of Astarte; it is found with the helmeted head of that divinity on the Gozo coin (cf. fig. 9, above).

These pictorial elements in the coins of Saguntum suggest to us that that city was originally a Punic colony, and, as such, it may have given to Hannibal the pretext he needed for attacking it.

He may have argued that, irrespective of its political ties with Rome, as a Punic city it should have shown solidarity with the Carthaginians by accepting his arbitration in the Torboletae case, and that as the representative of the great Punic city of the day (Carthage) he could not allow fellow-Phoenicians to be unjustly treated and to be put to death by the Romans, much in the same way as Russia in 1914 entered the War against Austria on the alleged reason of not being able to allow the fellow-Slav Serbia to be conquered and engulfed by Austria, and recently as Turkey invaded Cyprus on the plea of defending the Turks of that Island from a possible incorporation with Greece. And such a contention, so often brought forward as a *casus belli* in world history, when possibly put forward by Hannibal, may have convinced the Senate of Carthage in 218 B.C.

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22 Cf. E. Coleiro, *op. cit.*, p. 79, and Plate 16, Coin No. 12 (reverse).



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 6

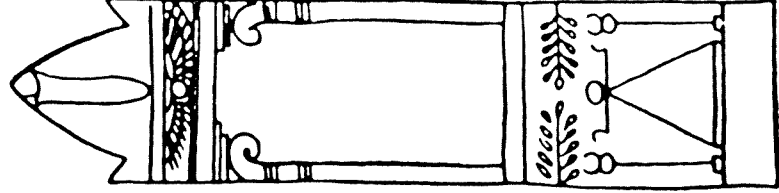
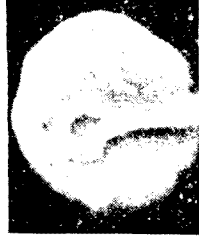


Figure 5



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 12



Gozo coin

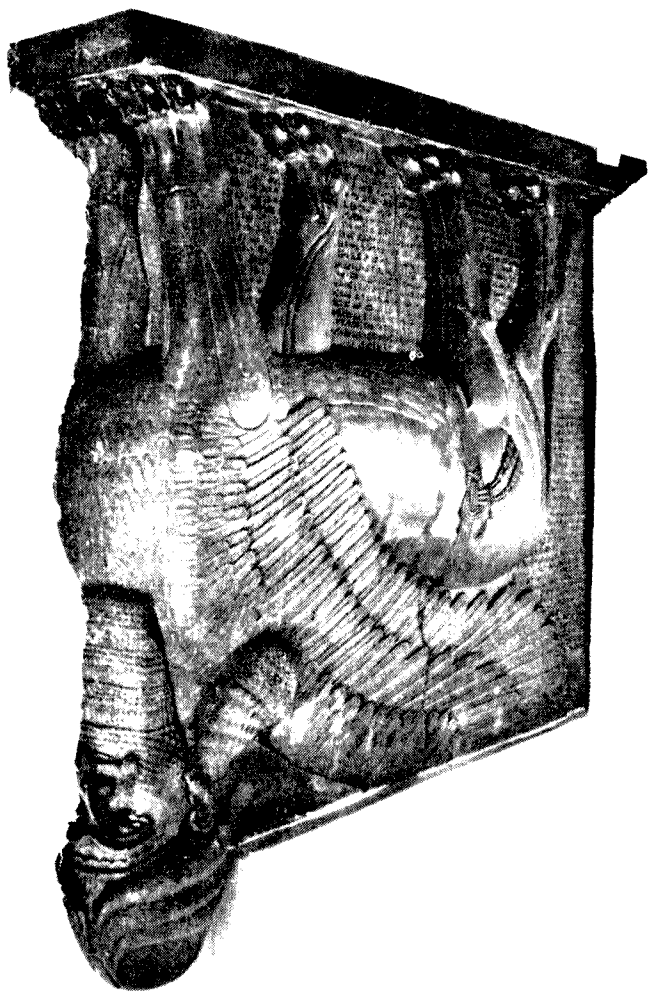


Figure 11