

History

Looking at a map of modern Tunisia, you might be forgiven for thinking that this is a country that could only have ever been a bit-part player, a tiny speck trapped between the giants of Algeria and Libya. But Tunisia's history is actually a rich and storied one, from the ruins of Carthage, whose ruler Hannibal dared to challenge Rome, to the glories of medieval Islam and into the forward-facing modern period. The footsteps of history are there to be followed and marvelled at by all visitors to Tunisia.

Barnaby Rogerson's *A Traveller's History of North Africa* places Tunisia directly in the currents of regional history, from prehistory to the late 20th century.

The cultivation of olives was introduced to Tunisia by the Phoenicians. Today, Tunisia's 56 million olive trees cover 16,000 sq km – by area, that's 19% of the world's olive groves.

The founding myth of Carthage and Queen Dido is most famously told in Virgil's *Aeneid*, but for a quick primer see p92.

FIRST PEOPLES

Africa is the cradle of humanity, and around 200,000 years ago Stone Age people were taking their first baby steps on Tunisian soil. This period was wetter than the present, and the Sahara was a long way from North Africa. Rather than sand, southern Tunisia was covered with forest and savannah (with animals to match), as remains discovered in oases like Kélibia have shown.

However, even ancient humans weren't immune to climate change. At the end of the last Ice Age, some 8000 years ago, the Sahara began to dry and spread, isolating North Africa from the rest of the continent. Migrants arrived from the east, most notably the Capsians, named for the city of Gafsa (p260), where many of their finely sculpted stone and bone implements have been excavated. The Capsians were well placed to take advantage of the new practices of agriculture and animal domestication introduced from the Nile Valley, settling into village life and developing sophisticated pottery. By about 1200 BC, the introduction of the horse into North Africa completed the picture. The Capsians were history, and the Berbers had arrived.

THE GLORY DAYS OF CARTHAGE

One name looms above all in Tunisia history: Carthage. Now a well-heeled northern suburb of Tunis (see p89), this great trading city emerged to dominate the western Mediterranean in the 6th century BC.

The Berbers had remained isolated from the Bronze Age revolution that had swept the Near East, and must have been more than a little bemused when ship-loads of Phoenicians (from modern Lebanon) struck anchor on the Tunisian coast in the 9th century BC, looking for ports to link their mother city of Tyre to the silver mines of southern Spain. Their first coastal settlement was Utica (Utique; p133), about 35km northwest of Tunis, founded around 1100 BC, with Hadrumetum (Sousse), Hippo Diarrhytus (Bizerte) and Thrabaka (Tabarka) following in quick succession.

TIMELINE

6000 BC

Capsian culture emerges in Tunisia, brought by early human migrants from the east to the region around modern Gafsa. Domesticated animals and crops, sophisticated pottery and organised villages kick-start Tunisian culture.

1200 BC

The arrival of the domesticated horse from the Nile Valley prompts a revolution in Capsian culture. The people now recognisable as modern Berbers arise to take advantage.

1100 BC

Phoenician seafarers from the Levant visit the Tunisian coast for the first time. Initial contacts with the Berbers result in the settling of the trading port of Utica.

Of all the settlements, the most glorious was to be Carthage. Founded in part as a response to a growing Greek presence in the region, its importance grew as Tyre itself suffered at the hands of the rising Assyrian empire of modern Iraq. Carthage eventually grew into the great metropolis of the Phoenician world, its wealth and trading craft protected by a powerful navy. By the end of the 6th century BC, Carthage had become the main power in the western Mediterranean, controlling the North African coast from Tripolitania (western Libya) to the Atlantic, with colonies in the Balearic Islands, Corsica, Malta, Sardinia and Sicily.

With control of the seas, for the next two centuries Carthage turned its face inland, carving out territory from the Berbers until it held lands roughly equalling the map of modern Tunisia. Most important were the fertile lands of the Cap Bon Peninsula and the Medjerda Valley, which supplied Carthage with a large agricultural surplus for export. From small roots, the Carthaginians had found themselves sitting astride a regional empire.

Conflict inevitably followed, with rival Mediterranean powers squaring up to take a swing at this new power. Carthage fought several wars with Greece over possession of Sicily (just 150km northeast of Carthage), eventually taking permanent control of the island in the middle of the 3rd century BC. The rule of Athens had waned, only to be replaced with an even more potent rival in an ascendant Rome.

The scene was thus set for the first of the three Punic wars that would preoccupy the two powers for the next 100 years. Rome launched the first war in 263 BC with a campaign to win control of Sicily. The Roman army was the superior machine on land, but Carthage's navy held the whip hand at sea, ensuring a stalemate that dragged on for 20 years.

Rome finally achieved a breakthrough when its fledgling navy destroyed the Carthaginian fleet off Trapani (eastern Sicily) in 242 BC. Crippled and close to bankruptcy, Carthage sued for peace and abandoned Sicily; four years later it was forced to give up Sardinia and Corsica, too. Trouble on the home front also grew as unpaid mercenaries in Carthage's army revolted, sparking further conflict.

The Second Punic War is most famously remembered for Hannibal marching his elephants over the Alps (see the boxed text, p28), but while Hannibal won a famous victory at the Battle of Cannae that nearly toppled Rome for good, the war ultimately resulted in another humiliating defeat for Carthage.

However, Carthage's potency couldn't be kept down for long. Despite losing its overseas possessions to Rome, and much of its African territory to the Numidian king Massinissa (a Roman ally), Carthage slowly rebuilt itself as a commercial centre. Political ambitions would surely follow.

The first two Punic wars had taken a mighty toll on the Roman Empire in blood and treasure, and Carthage's resurgence caused increasing unease in Rome. Whipped up by the Senate, Rome launched the Third

Carthage: a History, by Serge Lancel, is a detailed but accessible history of the Punic state from its foundation to its ultimate destruction by Rome in 146 BC.

The area covered by modern Tunisia is, apart from the Sahara, remarkably similar to that ruled by Carthage 2500 years ago.

Phoenician, and therefore Carthaginian, civilisation in North Africa came to be called 'Punic' because the Romans referred to the people of Carthage as 'Poeni', a Latinised version of Phoenician.

814 BC

The Phoenician city of Carthage is founded. Within a century it is a wealthy power in its own right, controlling Corsica and Sicily and penetrating deeper into Tunisia proper.

263–242 BC

Imperial rivalries between Carthage and the growing power of Rome spark the First Punic War. The prize is control of Sicily, which after a long war of attrition eventually goes to Rome.

218–202 BC

Carthage demands a rematch with Rome, and launches the Second Punic War. Carthage's legendary general Hannibal marches his elephants over the Alps and comes within a whisker of toppling Rome itself.