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THE PYRRHIC WAR

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509 and 338 BC was the period of endless attempts of Romans to control the central Italy, between Rome and Latin. Romans fought many battle, among which was the battle with king Pyrrhus of Epirus. Pyrrhic was complex battle of minor and regional conflicts in different part of Italy among different coalition. Greek coalition included Epirus, Macedonia and Magna Graecia which Roman coalition included Samnites, Etruscans and Carthaginians. The war initially began as a minor and regional conflict between Romans and Tarentum, but the involvement of Epirus escalate the battlefield. The war took place between 282 and 270, and the two major rivals were Roman and king Pyrrhus of Epirus, a Greek city state. There were major battle during the war years, both of which were the defeats of Romans. Only at last battle at Beneventum did Romans managed to decisively defeat Pyrrhus in 275 BC.

Thurri, a Greek city state, asked Roman for help to fight with another Greek city state called Lucanii. In 282 BC, Roman deployed a fleet of ships to assist Thurri under the command of Admiral Lucius Valerius. Ten Roman ships drown off in the storm and entered the Gulf of Taranto accidentally on the festival of Dionysis. As a result, Tarentum claimed that Roman violated a longstanding naval treaty between Roman and Tarentum. In return, Tarentum destroyed four Roman ships and seized the rest out of the bay. Later, Roman sent Postumius, a diplomat, to defuse the incident and misunderstanding. Tarentum insulted Postumius and the negotiation was not successful and Roman declared war against Tarentum. In response, Tarentum turned to king Pyrrhus of Epirus, the mainland Greece, for military help.

Because Tarentines used to help Pyrrhus in the war with Corcyra, Pyrrhus decided to help Tarentum in the war with Romans. In fact, Pyrrhus wanted to enlist Samnites Lucanians, Britti and Illyrians while fighting with Romans in order to defeat Carthaginians and raise funds, manpower and fleet against Macedonian. Pyrrhus In 280 BC, Pyrrhus sent 25,000 troops with a score of elephants to Italy to take up battle. Led by Publius Laevinius, 50,000 troops of Roman were deployed to the territory of Lucanian, where the first battle near the city of Heraclea took place. The battle of Heraclea was bitter for Romans since Pyrrhus had the advance military force, the elephant. Elephant was the used by Hellenistic Kingdom, Greece and Mediterranean states long ago, but it was new to Roman troops. During the battle, wounded elephants made Roman troops and panic, so Pyrrhus troops could easily gain victory. Pyrrhus attempted to provoke anger among Italic tribes and asked them to join and rebel against Roman, but it was not successful; and this represented the strong unity and stability
of Roman. In this battle 7,000 Roman troops were killed, while Greeks lost only 4,000 men (Cambridge University Press, 2007). Epirus later sent Cineas, an eloquent diplomat, to talk to Roman senate—the negotiation was that he would return Roman war prisoners back without ransom, but Roman had to stop extending to southern Italy. Persuaded by Appius Claudius, the senate the proposal.

However, the war between Roman and Epirus did not end with the battle of Heraclea. In 279 BC, Pyrrhus furthered another second major attack on Romans at Asculum. This was in a very great scale and it took two day at the hill of Apulia. With Publius Mus command, Romans used terrain to cut off the effectiveness of Greek cavalry and elephants. There was no fighting in the first day of battle. In the second day, Pyrrhus managed to attack Romans with support from elephants and infantry, and finally Romans were defeated once again. In this battle, there were 6,000 Romans killed and Pyrrhus’s 3,505 casualties (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Pyrrhus, in turn, attempted to ally with Carthage against Rome. Seeing Pyrrhus as a major threat to Carthage, Carthaginian refused the ally offer. In contrast, Carthage sent it troops up to Tiber mouth to help Rome against Pyrrhus according to the ‘Third Treaty of Friendship with Carthage. The treaty prohibited Africa, Latium and Sardinia, but Sicily was open to both parties (GENCYA). Roman interests and settling in Pyrrhus, then, moved to Sicily to aid Greeks there, who were repressed greatly by Carthaginians. Pyrrhus broke the Syracuse surrounding by Carthaginians and conquer all over Sicily. He then pushed Carthaginians to the city of Lalybaeum, the west coast of Sicily before he decided to return to Italy and took up another campaign.

When Pyrrhus returned back to Italy in 275 BC, he encountered Romans at the town of Malenventum in southern Italy. In this battle, Romans learned how to deal with spearmen and elephants. Romans could wound elephants with pila, so the elephant turned into panic and ran out of control trampling their own men. Finally, Pyrrhus was defeated successfully by Romans; and he returned to Epirus, but left enough army to garrison Tarentum. The town Maleventum was renamed to be Beneventum—meaning Good Event) in the honor of the victory. Linguistically, ‘Pyrrhic victory’ means the victory with the great cost.

In 272 BC, Tarentum surrendered. Romans treated Tarentum with patient by allowing self-governance, and in turn Tarentum recognised Rome’s control in Italy and became another Rome’s ally. Other Greek city states and Bruttian tribes likewise surrendered and paid tributes to Rome.
Bibliography