Legend has it that the city of Rome was founded on the plain of Latium by the twin brothers Romulus and Remus in 753BC. It was merely one city among many in the Italian peninsula, surrounded by a number of tribes, Etruscans to the north in today’s Tuscany, Sabines in the centre east of the Tiber, Samnites in the central Apennines and Campania to the south.

The initial development of Rome as a city and militarily was influenced most by the Etruscans, who themselves had learned the art of pottery, military organisation and the alphabet from the Greeks. The original government of Rome was monarchy, but in 509BC the last king was ousted and a republic established. For the next 250 years Rome was involved in a struggle for control of Italy south of the river Po. Having made allies with the other city-states of Latium, Rome proceeded to take the Etruscan capital in 396BC, suppress a revolt by its Latin allies in 338BC and fight three wars against the Samnites between 343BC and 290BC, subduing them. The only setback was when Rome was sacked in 387BC during a brief incursion into Italy of Celts, whom the Romans called Gauls. But the conquest of the Samnites in Campania brought the Romans into contact with the Greek coastal trading cities of southern Italy. Alarmed at the rise of Rome these cities called for help from King Pyrrhus of Epirus, in mainland Greece. The so-called Pyrrhic War lasted from 287–267BC and the Romans were again victorious, taking all southern Italy.

Rome had been successful. But how was this success consolidated so as to lay the foundation for the state that was soon to take over the Mediterranean world?

First, in all territories they conquered, the Romans planted colonies in strategic locations. Second, these colonies were linked to Rome by road. Third, Italy was divided into territory either directly administered by Rome, which included the colonies and towns with privileges of private and/or public citizenship and amounting to one-third of the peninsula, or ruled by ‘allies’ of Rome whose relations with Rome were determined by special treaty but who were allowed their own municipal administrations. Fourth, all those
involved in what amounted to a Roman confederation had to provide a military (and in the case of Greek cities, naval) service. Fifth, Rome decided all questions of war, peace, foreign policy and the coinage.²

Rome was undoubtedly helped by the fact that these tribes had no common consciousness like that of the Greeks.³ It would be for Rome to provide it. But other factors were also helpful. One was determination, particularly to learn from failure. The other was opportunism. Rome did not set out to conquer the world; it merely took advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves. The result was that if it took Rome 250 years to conquer Italy south of the Po it took half that time to become mistress of the Mediterranean world.

The great power in the western Mediterranean was Carthage, which controlled most of the African shore, southern and eastern Spain and the islands of Corsica and Sardinia and the western part of Sicily. And it would be support for rival Greek cities in Sicily that would bring Rome and Carthage into conflict in three wars.

Rome appreciated the agricultural wealth of Sicily and its strategic importance to the security of southern Italy. Rome, like Sparta before it, had an army but lacked a fleet, without which it would not be possible to get to grips with Carthage. The problem for the Carthaginians was that behind their navy the army was mostly made up of mercenaries. Rome therefore followed Sparta’s example and built a fleet which, in the First Punic War (264–261 BC), despite initial defeats, eventually triumphed. Sicily was captured and Rome established control over the western Mediterranean sea. Three years later, taking advantage of domestic troubles in Carthage, Rome seized Corsica and Sardinia.

The Second Punic War (218–201 BC) rose from rivalry in Spain. To compensate for the loss of the islands Carthage had expanded its empire in Spain in order to get manpower for its armies and to exploit copper and silver mines in the south to get revenue. Carthage and Rome had, however, divided Spain into spheres of influence but soon fell out. Denied control of the sea, the Carthaginian leader Hannibal led an army of 40,000, including elephants, from Spain through southern France, over the Alps and into Italy. But though he defeated three Roman armies – at the Trebia and Lake Trasimene in 217 BC and Cannae in 216 BC, he lacked the means to capture cities. Almost all Rome’s allies stood firm, and after the defeats the Romans refused to meet him again in pitched battle,