

# Tarentum and the Battle of Sappriortis, 210 BC

## A WAR GALLEY Scenario

By Dan Fournie

Hannibal faced many difficulties during his Italian campaign due to the dominance of the Roman navy. Hannibal also faced a "catch 22" he needed a port as a base to challenge the Roman navy and open lines of communication with Africa, but he couldn't take a major port as long as Rome controlled the sea. With his superior army, he could besiege a port such as Neapolis, but the Romans could freely bring in supplies and reinforcements by sea. So Hannibal, though he tried often, was unable to capture a major port for the first six years of the war.

Of all the ports in Italy, Hannibal coveted Tarentum (modern Taranto) more than any other. Tarentum was the chief city of Magna Graecia, or Greater Greece, and a suitable capital for an anti-Roman state in southern Italy. Tarentum was also one of the finest seaports in Italy, ideally situated to provide naval communications with Sicily and Carthage to the southwest and Greece and Macedonia to the east. The Romans were also conscious of Tarentum's significance. It had been the last major city in Italy to submit to Rome, just 58 years ago. Romans remembered that it had been the Tarentines who had invited King Pyrrhus from Epirus to do battle with Rome (280-275 BC). Their loyalty was suspect. For this reason, a large Roman garrison had been posted in Tarentum shortly after Hannibal arrived in Italy in 218 BC. The sons of Tarentum's leading families were held as hostages in Rome. Nevertheless, Tarentines continued to serve in Rome's armies and fleets.

Five Tarentine military officers provided Hannibal with his first chance to capture the city in 214 BC. These men had been captured by Hannibal at the battles of Trasimene (217 BC) and Cannae. As with all the

allies of Rome who were taken prisoner by Hannibal, they had been treated well and sent home without ransom. Out of gratitude for this leniency, these Tarentines came to offer Hannibal their city. They assured Hannibal that if only he would bring his army within sight, they would stage a popular uprising and deliver the city to him. Unfortunately, the Romans got wind of the plot and further reinforced their garrison. A new commandant for the garrison, Marcus Livius Macatus (identified as Gaius Livius by Polybius) was also assigned. Livius arrived only three days ahead of Hannibal, but he had just enough time to quell the planned uprising.

### TREACHERY IN TARENTUM

Two years passed before another opportunity to take Tarentum arose, in 212 BC. But, it was in Rome, not Tarentum, that a catalyst appeared. Phileas, a Tarentine on a diplomatic mission in Rome, decided to stage a mass escape of the Tarentine hostages. This was not difficult, as they were lightly guarded. Phileas spent some time with the hostages, mostly boys in their teens, and easily persuaded them to attempt the escape. The group eluded their guards and slipped out of Rome without difficulty. As soon as their absence was discovered, the Romans quickly sent out detachments to hunt them down.

The young Tarentine hostages were soon apprehended. Rome applied its usual swift justice; all the hostages were scourged and then executed by being tossed from the Tarpeian rock. This ill-advised harshness turned the Tarentine populace against Rome and especially embittered the aristocratic relatives of the slain hostages. Shortly thereafter, thirteen Tarentine nobles, kin of the unfortunate hostages, conspired to place the city in



Hannibal's hands. Philemenus and Nico were the leaders of this group. Their first move was to go out on a "cattle raid" in order to contact Hannibal. Philemenus and Nico approached the Carthaginian camp and allowed themselves to be arrested by the sentries, requesting an audience with Hannibal. They quickly convinced Hannibal of their sincerity and resolve.

Hannibal sent the conspirators back to Tarentum with some "rustled" cattle. He directed them to make regular forays under the guise of hunting or cattle rustling. This allowed him to stay in contact, while the Roman guards became accustomed to opening the gates at night for the group. Philemenus made a point of presenting the gate guards and the garrison commandant, Livius, with game or cattle whenever he returned. Meanwhile, Hannibal moved his camp far enough from Tarentum to allay suspicion. He then feigned illness to account for his prolonged inactivity.

When the conspirators learned that Livius was planning to attend a feast that would feature heavy drinking, they passed the word to Hannibal that the time for action had come.

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Hannibal formed a flying column of 8,000 foot and 2,000 horse. With a screen of 80 Numidian cavalry simulating a raid, he force marched to a river gorge just short of the city. A two-part entry scheme had been devised for the night assault.

Hannibal would bring the main body of his force up to Temenid Gate, on the eastern side of the city. Nico and Tragiscus would be waiting there with their men to overpower the guards and open the gate. To secure an alternate entry, Philemenus would lead a force of 1,000 Libyan infantry to a small postern gate under a watch tower.

The advance of Hannibal's cavalry screen was duly reported as a small raid to Livius. He ordered a troop of his cavalry to prepare to drive the Numidians off in the morning, and continued his feasting free of concern. Some of Nico's men were posted as lookouts at strategic points throughout the city while others kept an eye on Livius. When the feast broke up, Livius returned to his quarters and fell into a drunken slumber. The conspirators sprang into action.

Hannibal arrived outside the Temenid Gate and signaled Nico with a torch, as planned. The inside group responded with the prearranged signal, and then received Hannibal's countersign. With total surprise, Nico and his band attacked and killed the gate guards. Hannibal had a gate! He rapidly marched his 7,000 infantry into the city, leaving the 2,000 cavalry in reserve outside. Meanwhile, Philemenus approached the tower gate with three men carrying an unusually large boar. At his whistle the Roman sentry hurried to open the gate, hoping as usual to

get a present of game. As the men came in with the boar, the guard leaned forward to examine the great beast. Swiftly, Philemenus thrust his hunting javelin through the Roman's breast. Thirty Libyans dashed to secure the opening. Hannibal had a second gate. The 1,000 Libyan foot now entered the city.

The Roman garrison was as yet unaware that they were under attack. Hannibal posted detachments at strategic points throughout the city. He also formed three assault battalions from his 2,000 Celtic warriors. Nico, who had earlier stolen some Roman horns, now had his men blow "assembly." As the confused, sleepy Roman legionnaires staggered into the streets the Celts attacked and slaughtered many of them. By the time Livius awoke, the city was lost. He fled by boat along the coast to the citadel where he was joined by the fugitives of his garrison and some pro-Roman Tarentines.

At dawn Hannibal summoned the populace and announced the liberation of Tarentum to rousing ovations.

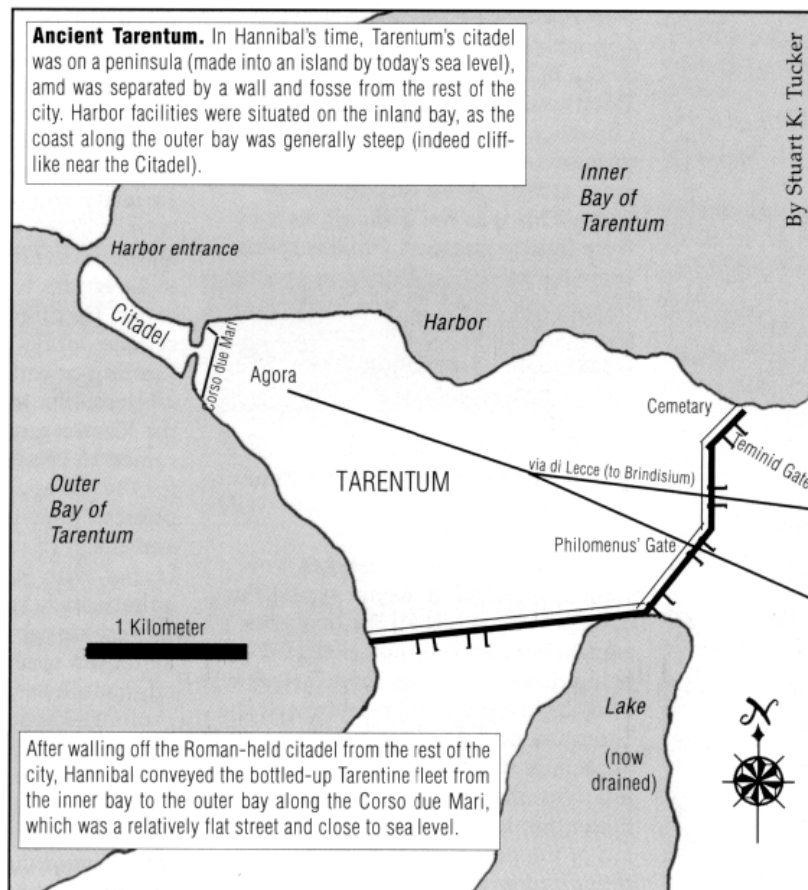
A systematic looting of Roman and collaborator property followed. Although Hannibal had the city, Livius still held the citadel which controlled access to the harbor. The Carthaginians first built a wall and entrenchment to protect the city from the Roman garrison in the citadel. Livius launched a sortie, but Hannibal repulsed the attack, inflicting heavy losses. The garrison of the citadel was now so weak that Hannibal planned a direct assault. Before the Carthaginians could strike, Roman reinforcements arrived by ship. Livius sortied again and this time set fire to Hannibal's siege engines.

### A NAVY ON WHEELS

Hannibal had the city, but the Roman garrison in the citadel prevented the Tarentine fleet from leaving port. Without that fleet, the city could not be safely resupplied by sea, nor could the Roman citadel be blockaded. However, Hannibal was not beaten. If the Tarentine fleet could not sail to the sea, he would move it overland. Calling for his sappers, he had rollers cut from the nearby woods. The

galleyes were lifted from the harbor, rolled through the city streets, and launched into the sea.

Of course, Tarentum had once been a naval power in its own right, and that was only some six decades past. Tarentine captains and crews had since fought for Rome against the Carthaginians, Illyrian pirates and other maritime foes. It is likely many of the Tarentine sailors currently serving in the Roman navy at this time deserted and made their way home. The small Tarentine navy, commanded by Democrates, ensured the city was kept supplied. They also maintained a tight blockade of Livius' garrison.



Although Rome had over 200 galleys in service, the Roman navy was stretched thin. With squadrons in Ostia, Greece, Spain, Sardinia and Sicily-including the large blockade of Syracuse-none could be spared to challenge the small Tarentine navy. Occasionally a Roman squadron would escort supplies into the citadel, but Democrates always managed to avoid contact with the larger Roman fleet.

### A ROMAN PRIVATEER

A Roman freebooter, Decimus Quinctius, organized a small privateer fleet of two triremes and three smaller vessels in 211. He was a man of obscure birth, but recognized ability. He was so successful at raiding enemy shipping that the Roman consul Marcus Claudius Marcellus assigned him three quinqueremes from the Roman navy in 210. Quinctius went all along the south Italian coast "requisitioning" more ships and enlisting crews for his growing navy from Rhegium, Velia and Paestum. He finally gathered 20 galleys for his squadron.

Soon thereafter, Livius reported his garrison had once again run short of supplies. Marcellus had a provision fleet of transports assembled at Rhegium. The consul ordered Quinctius to escort this fleet to Tarentum. Quinctius believed it was time someone taught the upstart Tarentines a lesson and welcomed the assignment. He knew his crews were no match for the Tarentines, but he had larger ships, and he gathered a powerful force of legionary marines. When his squadron and the transports were assembled in Rhegium, Quinctius sailed to confront the Tarentine navy.

### DECISION AT SEA

Democrates had heard of Quinctius' activities and welcomed the opportunity to face him in battle. He led his galleys out from Tarentum to lie in wait for the approaching Roman ships. The Roman fleet was still under sail when they spied the Tarentines in battle order 15 miles from the city. The two fleets met just off from the small port of Sappiortis. Just then the wind died down, enabling the Romans to stow their sails and prepare for battle.

The two squadrons rowed into battle, as the Romans deployed from column to line abreast. The galleys of both forces converged in the dance of ramming, avoiding, raking and grappling. A Tarentine captain, Nico Percon\* noted the location of Quinctius' quinquereme, the Roman flagship. The Tarentine skipper steered his trireme straight for the quinquereme, grappled the larger Roman ship and led his marines in a furious assault.

Quinctius led his own marines in person to repel the audacious, outnumbered borders. The two captains squared off in hand-to-hand combat. Percon thrust his spear into Quinctius' midsection, slaying the Roman with one stroke. The Roman marines were disheartened, but continued to fight. Percon and his small band of boarders were in danger of being overwhelmed. Then a second Tarentine trireme grappled the Roman flagship, and boarded from the stern. The Roman marines were crushed and the ship was captured. The remainder of the Roman fleet, observing the loss of their flagship, lost heart. Some ships disengaged and fled, but most were captured, sunk or run aground as they scattered along the pro Carthaginian coast of Magna Graecia. The transport ships took advantage of the battle to beat a hasty retreat. Livius' men would eat half rations for a while longer.

### THE END FOR TARENTUM

The valiant stand of the Tarentine navy ensured their city would remain free for a bit longer. However, soon Rome took stronger action. The two Roman consuls elected for 209 BC were Quintus Fulvius Flaccus and Quintus Fabius Maximus, the

Delayer. This was Fabius' fifth consulship, and, as he was now 66 years of age, most likely his last. Fabius had gained renown as the "Shield of Rome" by preserving Rome after the disasters at Trasimene and Cannae through his "Fabian tactics" of delay and attrition. He was the recognized elder statesman of Rome. Yet, Fabius' ambition was not yet satisfied. He desired one last great triumph. Fabius wanted Tarentum. The recapture of Tarentum became the centerpiece of Rome's campaign for 209 BC. Fabius would lead an army of 25,000 men and a fleet of 30 galleys against the city. This time the Tarentine navy would not challenge the much larger Roman squadron. To occupy Hannibal, the proconsul Marcus Claudius Marcellus would offer battle. The other consul, Fulvius, was also to distract Hannibal by moving against his bases in Bruttium (Italy's toe).

As Marcellus advanced against Hannibal, Fabius moved up to Tarentum with his siege train. Marcellus and Hannibal clashed in the Apulian woods near Canusium (near Cannae) in an indecisive but bloody two-day battle. Marcellus' army had to spend the remainder of the summer licking its wounds. Marcellus had kept Hannibal occupied only briefly. Believing that Tarentum could withstand a prolonged siege, Hannibal marched off to protect Bruttium against Fulvius.

At Tarentum, Fabius was preparing to launch land and naval assaults against the city. He equipped his army and fleet with all manner of catapults, ballista, ladders and towers. As his preparations were underway, the love affair of a mercenary captain presented Fabius with an unexpected opportunity. The Carthaginian garrison included a band of Bruttian mercenaries. The commander of this unit had fallen in love with a woman who happened to have a brother in Fabius' army. When the brother learned of the affair, he immediately went to Fabius and volunteered his services. Fabius decided to send him into Tarentum under the cover of being a deserter. The Roman agent, with the help of his sister, soon convinced the Bruttian officer to turn traitor. The mercenary

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*\*Ed. Note: The name Nico was a fairly common one to the Greek-influenced Tarentine population. In his discourse on the Hannibalic War, Livy gives one a last name of Percon, but only when discussing the battle of Sappiortis. It is probable that the sea captain Nico Percon was a different person than the nobleman Nico who co-led the conspiracy to have Tarentum join Hannibal and eventually died during the Roman recapture of the city.-SKT*

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agreed to have his unit allow the Romans to enter the city in his sector. The location of this sector of the wall was transmitted to Fabius, and the Roman general then planned his attack.

Fabius launched three diversionary assaults to draw attention away from the area where he would enter the city. In the dead of night, Livius attacked from the citadel, the fleet assaulted from the open sea, and a detachment of Fabius' army stormed the walls in another diversion. Fabius remained in hiding with his main body opposite the sector of the Bruttians. When Fabius was sure the Tarentines had committed their reserves to counter the diversionary attacks, he sent his scaling teams forward in silence. The Bruttians were there to help them cross the wall, as promised. Once inside, the Romans moved swiftly to clear a gate. Fabius then led his troops into the city, and took the defending forces by surprise. Organized resistance collapsed quickly, but the Romans continued to slaughter soldiers and unarmed civilians alike. Fabius then turned his army loose to loot and pillage.

Even as Tarentum fell, Hannibal was counter-marching from Bruttium to save the city. When Hannibal found it already in Fabius' hands, he reportedly commented, "so the Romans to, have their Hannibal; we have lost Tarentum by the same strategy as won it for us." Tarentum was sacked, the populace enslaved and there was once more only one navy in Italy the Roman navy.

### THE FATE OF COMMAND

The Carthaginian commandant, Carthalo, laid down his arms to surrender, but he was cut down anyway. Nico and the Admiral Democrates died fighting in the ranks of the infantry, but Philemenus disappeared in the confusion. The Bruttian captain and his mercenaries were also slaughtered, on Fabius' order, according to some reports. It seems Fabius wanted to keep secret the fact that the Romans entered the city by treachery rather than force of arms. Fabius returned to Rome in the fall to a magnificent triumph.

One issue remained to be settled. The fate of Livius, the Roman commandant, was debated in the senate. One faction wished to honor the garrison commander for his successful three year stand in the citadel against long odds. Another group was all for punishing him for initially losing Tarentum through negligence. Finally, Fabius was asked his opinion. The "Delayor" wryly commented, "I am prepared to admit that the recovery of Tarentum was due to Livius, as his supporters claim; for it could not have been recovered if it had not first been lost." In the end, the senate referred the case to the censors, who neither condemned nor honored Livius—his years of meritorious service apparently offset his negligence in losing Tarentum.

### Sapriortis—210BC Rome vs. Tarentum (Second Punic War)



#### Maps

The game uses the "sea" map. Sapriortis was 15 miles west of Tarentum, in the instep of the Italian boot. Tarentine side (east) hexrow xxOO. Roman side (west) hexrow xx28.

#### Balance

This is an unusual match between a cohesive, well-crewed Tarentine fleet and a hodgepodge Roman squadron with bigger ships and plenty of marines. The Tarentines are favored here.

#### Playing Time and Difficulty

This battle should take about 2 hours to finish.

Difficulty Rating: 2.5

#### Ship Scale

1 counter = 1 galley

#### Initial Deployment:

##### Romans

The Roman player receives the following *Red ships*:

- 1 Quinquereme (ID 50), flagship
- 2 Quinqueremes (ID 30-31)
- 5 Quadremes (ID 1-5)
- 6 Cataphracted Triremes (ID 31-36)
- 1 Tremiola (ID 1)
- 2 Biremes (ID 1-2)

The Roman receives the following **Squadron Commanders**: Quinctius (Admiral)<sup>a</sup>, \*Drusus, \*Agricola.

The Roman fleet is deployed as follows:

Quinctius' Squadron: (under sail in line astern) 3 quinqueremes and 6 triremes trailing off the board from 2920.

Drusus' Squadron: (under sail in line astern) 5 quadremes trailing off the board from 2121.

Agricola's Squadron: (under sail) 1 tremiola, 2 biremes and 3 lembi trailing off the board from 3721.

#### Initial Deployment:

##### Tarentines

The Tarentine player receives the following *Green ships*:

- 1 Quadreme (ID 20), flagship
- 15 Cataphracted Triremes (ID 26-40)
- 4 Reinforced Lembi (ID 1-4)

The Tarentine receives the following **Squadron Commanders**: Democrates (Admiral)<sup>a</sup>, Percon<sup>a</sup>, \*Aristodemus.

The Tarentine fleet deploys as follows:

Democrates' Squadron: (line abreast) 1 quadreme at 2701-00, 8 triremes from 2801-00 to 3501-00.

Percon's Squadron: (line abreast) 7 triremes from 2501-00 to 1901-00.

Aristodemus' Squadron: (line abreast) 4 R lembi from 3701-00 to 4001-00. Aristodemus may only command R lembi.

<sup>a</sup> These leaders were published on the insert in *C3i Nr. 12*.

#### Special Rules

##### Loss of Admiral

Rule 9.2 is modified as follows. If Quinctius is killed, the Roman fleet automatically withdraws, and victory is determined as in rule 9.2. If Democrates is killed, apply rule 9.2 as usual.

##### Wind

The wind has just died. There is no wind.

##### Victory

Either player wins when he has at least 45 VP, and that number is at least twice that of the enemy.

If neither of the above happens, and/or the players halt play by mutual agreement, a minor, indecisive victory goes to he who has the most VP.