

# Sieges: Bombardment and Standoffs

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Entertainment

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

We're going to talk about famous historical sieges.

The word siege comes from the Latin "sedere," to sit. As in have a seat outside our walls and get comfortable, because this is going to take a while. Sieges are rarely short. A siege is what you get when one side of a conflict has a strong defensive position, usually holed up in a fortress or on an island or some other protected city or fortified location, and they decide that their best strategy is to weaponize boredom. It's the warfare equivalent of a staring contest. Sieges can last days, months, years, or decades, and the result generally comes down to whichever side has more patience and resources. The army outside of the walls or fortifications is betting that the occupants of the fortress will run out of food or water or experience some type of illness outbreak or a mental breakdown based on pure claustrophobia, or maybe they'll run

out of playing cards and get sick of marathon sessions of monopoly and charades. During most sieges, you don't have access to Facebook and Candy Crush. You have to improvise. By The 5000th round of Rock Paper Scissors, the thrill of competition has worn off. You have to add in new implements. Rock paper scissors lava, that's when you lost too many times and you're going stir crazy from being stuck in a siege and you just pee all over the other guy. Lava beats everything. It's game over. I can't imagine how boring it would be on the inside of a siege; boring and simultaneously terrifying, it's a contradiction( you're waiting around to find out if you're going to be murdered and you have very little control over the situation, you just have to snipe from the ramparts and pray that the assault becomes too expensive or time consuming or frustrating for the attackers to continue. Sieges typically have two possible outcomes: the most dramatic is a win for the attacking team, when the fortifications are breached and the city or castle or whatever is sacked. There's usually not a lot of mercy offered in that situation, because the longer a siege has dragged on the more resentment and frustration has built up in the minds and hearts of the attackers. Busting through the walls of a fortress is often like popping a champagne cork, it's an explosive outburst. Exceptive instead of toasting to a happy occasion it's more of a merciless slaughter. Still kind of a

festive mood, though. It's basically a soccer riot taken the logical extreme. The act of surrounding a city or fortress and cutting off supply routes to try to starve out the occupants has an official military term: investment. The typical strategy is to implement an investment and then use projectile weapons, like missiles, shells, or catapults (depending on the historical era), to either wipe out the population or destroy the fortifications and gain entry. If you have cut off your enemy from all of their resources, that's known as complete investment. If you also set fire to the fortress and simultaneously attack from all sides while adding shells and battering rams to the mix that's considered a diversified investment. Tactics for breaching a fort or fortress can include tunneling under walls, hammering the defenses with battering rams or other brute-force implements, and of course scaling fortifications with ladders and siege towers, which were tall wooden structures covered with animal skin and used to elevate the attackers to the same level as the defenders and negate the High-ground advantage. Siege towers would be pushed up to the walls of the fortress or city and then a gangplank dropped down to allow attackers to pour in over the walls. Giant siege implements like towers and trebuchets were too large and unwieldy to be transported more than a couple hundred yards so they typically had to be built on site, with any materials available. Which means

they were often kind of rickety, usually made of wood, and thus were vulnerable to counter attacks and fire. Flame was one of the most effective weapons for both sides in a siege but especially for the attackers...a fortress could have all the resources in the world and be prepared to hold out for months, but one guy falls asleep on his mattress with a lit cigarette and it's game over. so of course tossing flaming items over the walls of a fortress was a favored tactic. Unless it's winter time, in which case you're just probably helping them out. Because the seasons could also be weaponized: some cities or fortresses could last through 3/4 of the year with no problem but then would be decimated by a brutal winter. So when your enemies are huddled together for warmth in the middle of a frozen tundra, maybe don't send flaming arrows over the walls to thaw them out. There's one other popular method to gain entry to a fortified location, and it's the simplest of all: deception. The most obvious example is the Trojan horse, but if you happen to be attacking a city that ISN'T full of gullible idiots, who accept gifts of giant hollow statues from their sworn enemies, a more likely strategy was to try to convince someone on the inside to basically just unlock the door. Which isn't always as hard as it seems, life inside the besieged city or fort or fortress could be a tad bit... uncomfortable. We mentioned the boredom and claustrophobia and Constant paranoia resulting from

being surrounded by a hostile force, so you can imagine that there were plenty of occupants who were slightly less than committed to the cause. If you were the ruler of a castle under siege, it was not considered good form to open your door and let your people leave at will, so many occupants of besieged castles or fortresses or cities were...disgruntled...and potentially willing to bargain via passing notes through walls or using coded light messages or body language or just winking suggestively or whatever. I don't know how they did it, but where there's a will there's a way. Because if you think about it, life on the inside of a siege could be a lot like life in prison. It's stifling. Except it would be like a prison with no food where the guards are constantly hurling flaming spears into your cell.

A siege tends to be a showcase for engineers and construction workers, it's all about the power of positive building. So much construction. Often the attacking army would create their OWN fortifications to defend from counterattacks by allies of the enemy, basically a fortified line of defense on the perimeter of a giant circle surrounding the whole conflict. This is known as a **circumvallation**, and they **might also build** another smaller circle of spikes or wooden stakes or barbed wire or whatever facing inward toward the siege target in case of counter attacks from within the fortress, and these structures are known as **contravallation**, so you end up with layers of concentric defenses. You

have your defenders on the inside, like the chewy center of the lollipop, surrounded by their own walls and fortifications, and then there's a layer of fortifications aimed at them erected by the attackers, and then you have the attacking army just chilling like maybe the nougat part of a confection, and surrounding all of it another layer of fortifications aimed outwards in case of sneak attacks on the attackers. That would be the chocolate I guess, I don't know why I switched from a lollipop to a candy bar, but you get the idea. I mix my metaphors on purpose, no segregated metaphors here. All metaphors matter. It's very meta, concentric inception warfare.

Sieges can involve massive cities with giant dueling armies, or they can just consist of a small group of defenders taking refuge in a compound or even a house. We've talked on this podcast about the siege of The Branch Davidian compound in Waco Texas, the FBI versus a small cult comprised of a few families led by an aspiring musician with awesome hair. That was a divine mullet if I've ever seen one. If you are a small group but you have good fortifications, you can hold out against a much larger attacking force. In 1304, after the defeat of William Wallace which many of you probably recognize from the completely fictitious movie Braveheart—and which Duncan thoroughly debunked in the Scottish host swap episode—anyway, after William Wallace and the Scottish rebellion had mostly been mopped up

by the Brits, their last stand occurred at Sterling Castle, when 30 Scottish defenders held out for approximately 4 months against over 1500 English attackers. The castle was at the top of a large hill and featured many of the ingredients required for a successful siege defense: its own internal well for fresh water, and stores of salted meat and fish as well as sacks of grain etc. And presumably bagpipes, for entertainment, and to keep the enemy from encroaching on the castle. If you play the bagpipes all night the enemy soldiers will keep their distance. Presumably also large quantities of scotch, in order to tolerate the isolation and also to tolerate the bagpipes. But of course it's not just a matter of stocking up on resources, you also have to create all of those fortifications. Walls and towers and parapets and little tiny slitted windows through which you can poke a gun or bow or just toss rocks or dirt or even spit at the enemy or urinate on them if you're desperate and bitter. That's if you're really confident you're going to win or really confident you're going to lose. And of course you want to have plenty of hot oil to pour on defenders who try to scale your walls, and also to pour on your naughty bits for copious masturbation because as we pointed out, lots of free time. But all of that preparation still might not be enough, depending on the strength of your enemy. In the case of Stirling Castle, the attacking British army built the largest trebuchet ever created, called the war wolf. A trebuchet is just a giant

catapult; in general, catapults hurl small objects *over* walls and trebuchets hurl big objects *into* walls. There are also Mangonels which use the tension of a twisted, taut cable to provide thrust as opposed to just the heavy-counterweight-and-gravity method used by trebuchets. So after furious bombardment by the War Wolf, Stirling Castle surrendered, and I'm sure the British were very proud of themselves for their hard-won victory over 30 starving Scots. To be fair, they probably had no idea how many people were inside, that must've been a little awkward. They did end up sparing the lives of the occupants, probably out of embarrassment. "Sir, we have searched the castle and it seems like we spent four months attacking what amounts to a starving soccer team. Ok Scotsmen, here's the deal, you don't say anything about this, you can go. And take these fucking bagpipes with you."

The challenges facing a besieged castle or fort or city are not just about replenishing resources, there is also the matter of disposing of waste. In the days before modern plumbing, restrooms were basically just big piles of excrement that needed to be hauled out of the city, and very few attacking armies are going to be polite enough to allow for occasional shit runs. If they were smart maybe they would, because defending armies frequently did exactly what you might expect, and flung their excrement over the walls. But turnabout is fair play, and it was just as common for the attackers



to use catapults and trebuchets to rain down feces from above, this is actually a really effective technique if you think about it: just bombard a fort or castle with human waste and the idea of surrender starts to seem a lot more appealing. "On the one hand, we will be tortured and murdered if we walk outside these walls, on the other hand, we will die in fresh air. Dilemma."

Btw, excrement warfare is not rare. Human waste has been Weaponized throughout history. "In 12th century China, a slightly more advanced version of the shit catapult was used, which Stephen Turnbull writes about in his snappily titled book *Siege Weapons of the Far East (1): AD 612 - 1300*. The weapon, which the author calls an "excrement trebuchet bomb" was a type of explosive device made from hemp string and filled with gunpowder, human shit, and poison, which was lit with a hot poker, before being flung at the enemy."

This strategy has also been implemented on a smaller scale.

"Aleksandr Georgievich Semenov, a Russian inventor with approximately 200 patents to his name, filed a patent in 2009 that was titled "Method of Biowaste Removal From Isolated Dwelling Compartment."

Which, in non-patent-title-terms, is a device that would allow tanks to fire human shit."

The strategy here was twofold: get rid of feces without exiting the vehicle, and also humiliate/disgust your enemy. The inventor claimed that his poop cannon would not only be effective

way to dispose of feces, but also would result in "additional military-psychological and military-political effects." Yes. That is a lethal level of humiliation. Getting shot with poop is both insult *and* injury.

If you think about it, this is basically just biological warfare. Excrement is aesthetically and aromatically unappealing, but even more effective from a warfare standpoint, it's also tremendously unsanitary and carries disease. And Weaponized disease has a long and storied history of military application. In our "plagues" episode we talked about the common practice of hurling fomites over walls during sieges: Fomites are inanimate objects infected with disease and capable of transferring their infection via contact. The word also refers to counterfeit mites purchased on the black market. Faux mites. One common version of fomites consisted of the corpses of plague victims which were lobbed over walls during the Black Death to infect defenders during sieges and probably also to make them generally queasy. Because: ew. That is both biological and psychological warfare.

Let's talk about some notable sieges through history.

## THE SIEGE OF TYRE

Back in the year 332 BC the city of Tyre was the jewel of the Phoenician civilization, on the coast of modern

day Lebanon. It was also a strategic port, and Alexander the great wanted to use it as a stronghold for his Macedonian army in their battle against the Persians. The problem for Alexander was that the Tyrians didn't want to get involved in his drama. It was not their fight. My name is Paul and this is between y'all. And they didn't feel any particular pressure to help him out, because they didn't have to. Before Alexander's forces arrived, the women and children of Tyre had already evacuated to Carthage, while the men took refuge on an island—which is now a peninsula—about a kilometer off the coast, fortified by 150 foot walls. It was a fortified sausage fest. Lotta dudes. Probably smelled awful. There was a lot of high-fiving and very little bathing. High testosterone low hygiene. Alexander's first strategy was to demand that he be allowed to use the temple on the island to make a sacrifice to Heracles, and he promised that if the inhabitants complied, they'd be spared. The inhabitants for their part declined to voluntarily lower their defenses and invite a notorious mass murderer to borrow their temple. So we'll never know whether the offer was legit. But I don't blame them. "Why yes, bring your legendary invading army into the heart of our fortified island and kill some things in our holiest structure, I'm sure you'll limit your murderous rampage to an ox or three. Get the fuck out of here. We didn't build 150 foot walls to be hospitable."

I think the idea that Alexander's offer

was on the level is kind of undermined by the fact that there was a perfectly serviceable temple in the old city, the pre-island version of Tyre back on shore, but for some reason Alexander didn't want to use the one that was less strategically located for his army. But he didn't take the refusal kindly. You could say that Alexander was miffed. He sent a delegation to try to change the minds of the Tyrians; the delegation was executed and tossed over the walls into the ocean. Which... a smidge too far. See, I was on your side initially, and then you killed a bunch of innocent messengers, and now you're on your own. I no longer have your back from a podcart studio 2000 years in the future. Slaughtering unarmed messengers is not strategically nor morally defensible. But what WAS defensible was the island city of Tyre. Alexander was stuck on the shore with over half a mile of ocean plus those massive walls between him and his target.

So Alexander's second strategic attempt at accessing the island was less diplomatic. He started building a causeway from the shore, using dirt and silt and rubble from the old city. The water was reasonably shallow for the first stretch, and then depth increased to around 20 feet, still manageable, but it's a little tough to build a bridge when there are Tyrians perched on 150 foot walls tossing spears and arrows and also probably insulting your mother and mooning the construction crew, it's just

demoralizing.

Alexander responded by constructing two siege towers at the end of the causeway, and using them to return fire, which was moderately successful. Work was slow going but it proceeded. At least it proceeded until the Tyrian's switched tactics: they packed a wooden ship full of resin, sulphur, torches and other flammable items, set the sails on fire, and launched it at the causeway. For good measure they positioned cauldrons of oil at the top of the sails so that when they burned through, the cauldrons would topple and stoke the blaze into an inferno. Simultaneously they sent soldiers to the causeway to fend off attempts to fight the fire, and much of the causeway and the siege towers were destroyed. So, minor setback.

Alexander was extra miffed. He doubled down on the construction of the causeway and simultaneously switched tactics by calling in naval reinforcements and initiating attacks from the open-ocean side of the island, the west, where the walls weren't as high. This marked the most grueling and almost comical stretch of the siege, just a bunch of measures and counter measures that unfolded like a spy versus spy cartoon. The Tyrians hurled giant stones into the water so that Alexander's approaching ships would be wrecked; Alexander lassoed them and began towing them away one by one. Meanwhile, the Tyrians sent divers to cut the anchor ropes of Alexander's ships so that the vessels would constantly have to

shuffle around in endless maneuvers. Alexander replaced the ropes with chains. The Tyrrians next began pouring cauldrons of molten sand over the walls of the city, which carried on the wind and set both ships and soldiers ablaze, further miffing Alexander. We are moving beyond miffed at this point. Unfortunately for the city of Tyre these were just stalling tactics, ultimately it was becoming clear that the inhabitants of the island were just delaying the inevitable, and so, increasingly desperate, the Tyrrians decided to attempt a sneak attack. They observed that Alexander had a routine: every day at approximately the same time, he and many of his men retreated to the shore for lunch. You always have to take a break from attempted raping and pillaging to have finger sandwiches and tea. So the Tyrrians hung up giant sails across their harbor to conceal the preparations and then dramatically whipped them aside as they launched a surprise lunchtime naval assault. This was like the Vegas magician version of a sneak attack. Snatch the curtain away, and "Wah-la!! Feast your eyes on an inadequate number of underpowered ships in this feeble attempt at surprise. You never saw it coming. Misdirection!" Like how did they think this was going to work? "Pay no attention to this giant curtain we have constructed. It is clearly not a naval assault, but rather we are preparing a surprising and delightful rendition of the Tony award winning musical 42nd St.. For your sieging

pleasure." The attack sort of worked for like a minute and then it really really didn't. Crushed by Alexander's superior naval forces, many of the Tyrians abandoned their sinking ships and literally swam back to the island. And with most of the submerged giant stones finally towed away or hauled out of the water with crane ships, Alexander was now able to move his battering rams into position, and that was all she wrote. Legend holds that Alexander himself participated in the final attack, at this point it was personal. He supposedly showed mercy to anyone who had sought shelter in the temple inside the city, but pretty much everyone else was slaughtered or sold into slavery. Approximately 8,000 Tyrrians were killed, and some 30,000 enslaved. The entire siege had taken seven months, and that's a lot of time for resentment to build, so alexanader was ornery. He had achieved maximum miffage. As a final FU, Alexander would make a big show of performing a sacrifice to Heracles in the now ravaged temple in the city of Tyre. Basically saying, "You should've just let me in eight months ago, because this was inevitable from day one." Kind of a dick move but also kind of gangster. Alexander had some swagger.

Post script: the causeway that Alexander created would over time accumulate silt and sand and rubble and eventually become a permanent feature, turning the former island into the aforementioned current peninsula.

## Siege of Ceuta (soo-tah)

You're probably asking yourself, what was the longest siege in history? It was the siege of Ceuta, a Spanish city in northern Africa which was attacked by morocco in 1694, and the conflict lasted an exhausting 30 years. That's crazy, like you're not even fighting the same people anymore. That's a war that is passed on to the next generation. Shittiest inheritance ever. "I bequeath to you my son, this eternal pointless conflict."

So backstory: at the very northwest tip of Africa, the very tippy top off the shores of morocco, is the Strait of Gibraltar, and if you cross that strait you're in Spain. The hop from Spain to Africa is tiny, on a map it looks like I could probably float it on an inner tube. It's probably not quite like that, but that's how it looks. There are probably like waves and tides to worry about, maybe some sharks. I'm pretty sure I could swim it. So Spain had sent colonizers across the strait and founded a city at that very northernmost tip, an extremely strategic port. in 1694, the sultan Ismail bin Sharif of Morocco dreamed of building a powerful empire, and he charged one of his governors, Ali Bin Abdala with taking the city. And I cannot say that name without hearing the song from Aladdin in my head and I've never felt more like a horrible basic bitch Caucasian. Prince Ali, fabulous he, Ali Ababwa. I love that song.



When the initial attack failed, both sides dug in. Citizens of the city relied on food shipments from Spain through the strait of Gibraltar while the attackers settled down, built shelters and grew fields of crops, they made themselves comfortable, so these cities were less like opposing armies and more like bitchy neighbors. I'm surprised that after a couple decades anyone even remembered what they were fighting about. It's like a married couple sleeping on opposite sides of the bed, they don't even remember why they're upset or what the original argument was, now it's just muscle memory. Like I don't even know why I spit in your Coffee every morning, I just know you deserve it.

I'm not going to bother going through all the details, there were tons of little skirmishes, minor victories for either side, and at a couple points the Moroccans took control only to be dislodged by Spanish counterattacks. There were no decisive blows struck, by which I guess you could say that ultimately the Spanish won. Because to this day Ceuta is still an autonomous Spanish city-state.

Winning a siege if you're the defenders is not very dramatic. It's like being released from house arrest. You don't gain any riches or spoils of war, you just gain the ability to go on a hike.

## Siege of Leningrad

Leningrad no longer exists, but not because of the siege. You can probably guess why, the Soviet union

fell in 1991 and suddenly the name Lenin was a little less popular. Leningrad is now Saint Petersburg, named after a man called Peter who I believe, and don't quote me on this, might've been a holy man of some kind. All the best facts here at Midnight Facts for Insomniacs. Actually Saint Peter was one of the original 12 apostles, an OG of the Jesus crew, and in the mythology of the Bible he is lauded as the longest serving pope of the Catholic Church. And none of this is historically verified, but what IS verified is that the siege of Leningrad was so brutal that it has often been classified as a genocide, and quite possibly was the costliest siege in history based on sheer loss of life and human suffering, The blockade of the city of three million people lasted some 900 days, almost 3 years, and the toll on the citizens was epic. Starvation and exposure would result in the death of a third of the population, 1 million people, and many of the survivors resorted to cannibalism. Not just a few, this story reads like night of the living dead. It starts, as many of the worst stories in history do, with Adolf Hitler. Hitler had signed a nonaggression treaty with Russia in 1939 while he aggressively battled the entirety of Europe; for Hitler it was basically a, "We'll get to you later" situation. But the Russians were shocked—*shocked* I say—when barely 2 years after signing a nonaggression pact, Hitler turned around and invaded Russia. This was the infamous and disastrous operation

Barbosa, which should have been called operation backstab or operation why the hell did you trust me in the first place, or operation not well thought out. Operation oops. Most listeners are probably familiar with Hitler's biggest mistake. He was already fighting basically, you know, the world, on the eastern front, and by attacking Russia he opened up the battle to both sides, now fighting on two fronts, it was a power-hungry move and (debatably) the primary reason he eventually lost the war. But while the Germans lost the war, they weren't the biggest losers when it comes to loss of life. the Soviet Union would suffer by far the most casualties of World War II, some 15% of the Soviet population or more than 20 million deaths due to starvation and bloodshed. Hitler viewed Leningrad as a symbol of communism, and he wanted to completely pound it to rubble. This wasn't just a strategic acquisition of territory, this wasn't an annexation, Hitler wanted to make an example of Leningrad. In a memo he wrote, "The Führer has decided to erase the city of Petersburg from the face of the earth," admitting to the planned crime of genocide and also the horrific crime of referring to himself in the third person.

There were actually more than two countries involved here: in 1941 The Germans encircled the city from the south, north, and west, while soldiers from Finland locked it up from the north, cutting off all supply routes and sealing the city. Traitorous Finns. This

was actually totally understandable, because Finland had been invaded by Russia a year earlier in the winter war. For Finland this was a partnership of convenience, it was a "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" situation. Finland would eventually unite with the allies toward the end of the war when it became increasingly clear that Adolf Hitler was the enemy of everyone's enemy and also no one's friend. It feels like it's impossible to be surprised by Hitler's inhumanity, but I still find myself shell shocked, so to speak, by reading what actually happened during the siege, it feels like the work of a cartoon villain, like it couldn't be real. At first the Germans approached the city and engaged in trench warfare, shelling the populace relentlessly from a distance, but Hitler quickly decided that he was wasting resources and settled on another tactic: he informed his generals that he would not be accepting the city's surrender, because he didn't want to have to worry about feeding and sustaining the population, and instead he would simply squeeze Leningrad to death like an anaconda, cutting off all resources and support and simply waiting for the entire three million to starve and die off.

The details of this siege are horrific. Like, it's hard for me to even talk about so this part will be short. That level of suffering is just inhuman. Not inhumane, inhuman. The residents of Leningrad burned their furniture and dismantled their houses for firewood;

to survive they ate wallpaper and lipstick and petroleum jelly, they boiled leather belts, they munched on dry grasses and weeds. In science labs they cultivated bacteria and drank vials of it.

From the Los Angeles Times:

"cannibalism was so much a fact of everyday life that parents feared their children would be eaten if allowed out after dark. New documents show that the city police created an entire division to fight cannibals, and some 260 Leningraders were convicted of and jailed for the crime."

The pictures are not something you want to look at if you value your peace of mind, trust me. During the first winter, which became known as "hungry winter," as many as 100,000 people a month were dying.

The tide would finally turn in 1944, as the attackers were driven back from Russia and the city was freed. Or what was left of it. You don't fully recover from that, at least not in one generation.

## The Siege of Saguntum

I chose this one because of the historical implications. Are you familiar with the Punic wars? They were a series of battles fought between Carthage and Rome, which would be roughly modern day Spain versus Italy, and the primary aggressor against Rome was The Carthaginian general Hannibal, who is famous for leading an army equipped with war elephants on a frigid March through the alps to

attack Rome.

As a boy Hannibal had sworn to his father that he would defeat the Roman Empire. Pretty heavy. I remember in high school I promised my mom I'd learn to do my own laundry. And I still haven't mastered it. I turned all of my washcloths pink last week. Keep their expectations low and they'll never be too disappointed. If your first ever goal is "I'm overthrowing an empire" you're only hurting yourself, because it's going to be real hard to argue that you can't find the motivation to clean your room or whatever. "Finish your homework, Napoleon."

But Hannibal had a lot to live up to, because his father was a famous and decorated Carthaginian general, whose name was Hamilcar. Which sounds not real. Hamilcar Barca, No joke, had been a celebrated general during the first Punic war, the first of three clashes between Rome and Carthage. I don't know what they were celebrating. While obviously he must've been successful to be as famous as he was, there were two more Punic wars so he couldn't have been THAT successful. Carthage clearly didn't win the first and would lose decisively in the third and final Punic war. By the time of Hannibal's initial reign, the two empires had achieved a tenuous peace. But Hannibal had a promise to keep, and so he needed to find a pretext for war. He found it in the city of Saguntum. Saguntum is modern day Sagunto, Spain, and had been initially founded

as a settlement known as Arse. I'm assuming it meant something else back then, we've covered the fact that language is fluid—so you just kind of have to hope that the name of your city never ends up being slang for asshole or something. "Kiss my Santa Cruz, bitch." I don't think we have much to worry about. By 218 BC, the former Arse had become a fortified Spanish city that happened to be an ally of Rome, and it was located right on the edge of the Iberian territory controlled by Hannibal's father Hamilcar. The City formally known as Arse. The prince of municipalities. Hannibal didn't feel that The Carthaginians would support him if he attacked Rome without provocation, but annexing a rogue city on the edge of his territory would be the perfect spark, potentially dragging the two empires into a second and hopefully decisive conflict. This is a common strategy for picking a fight whilst trying not to look like the bad guy. It would be like if Russia attacked a NATO state tomorrow, and the United States would feel obligated to respond.

Saguntum did call for Roman help, and the Romans helpfully declared war on Carthage and then helpfully waited around for Hannibal to finish sacking the city. Pick your allies wisely. Rome was like Saguntum who? You mean, Arse? Hell no. Send reinforcements my ass." Maybe that's where it came from. But even without Roman interference, the siege wasn't a cakewalk for Hannibal. The city was well-defended

by massive walls and expert javelin throwers, one of whom speared Hannibal from the top of the wall, and the Carthaginians had to put the siege on hold while he recovered. Awkward.

"Hey, time out, guys. Not cool. We didn't realize you were out here spearing generals Willy nilly. I don't know how you conduct yourselves in Arse, but in Carthage we only spear poor people. Show some decorum."

The siege lasted eight long months before the fortifications finally crumbled,

"Hannibal offered to spare the population on condition that they were "willing to depart from Saguntum, unarmed, each with two garments".

When they declined the offer and began to sabotage the town's wealth and possessions, every adult was put to death." I'm not going to offer any kind of justification for the murder of the entire adult population of a city, but when the walls fall down and the invading general gives you the opportunity to leave with two garments, maybe grab a couple jumpsuits and get the fuck out. You don't need more than two outfits. You have some pajamas, you have some business casual, your head is attached to your body, you're good to go. Two outfits in your life is not a bad deal when you lost the war.

The fall of Seguntum marked the beginning of the second Punic war, and Hannibal would go on to use the city as a base of operations. So, Elephant shit everywhere. Insult to injury. Spoiler alert, he did not take



down Rome. But he did have a very impressive march across some very impressive mountains, it was historic, and completely pointless.

## The Siege of Tenochtitlan (tuh-nōtch-tit-lan)

We'll end here in the Americas. Back in the 1300s a tribe of hunters and gatherers settled in what is now Mexico City and founded tenochtitlan, which would become the crown jewel of the Aztec empire. By 1502 the Empire extended as far north as modern-day Nicaragua and was ruled by moctezuma II. However, many of the territories that had been conquered and annexed by the Aztecs were restless and chafing under increasing taxation and harsh treatment.

So the potential for rebellion existed among Aztec territories long before Hernan Cortes arrived, but the Spanish conquistador would leverage popular discontent for his own benefit, subjugating the region and ultimately destroying the entire Aztec empire. As luck would have it he first landed at Cempoala, one of the bitterest of the Aztec vassal states. It was a salty town, they did not like their Aztec rulers. Cortes showed off his military might in a few scuffles, and then promised to lead the rebels to victory over their Aztec rulers, assuring them that he would end the practice of human sacrifice, and enforce law and order. The common version of this story, you may have heard it, is the

idea that the Aztecs believed the conquistadors were gods, specifically that Cortes was

The feathered serpent Quetzalcoatl, who had been prophesied to make an appearance right around the same time, but there doesn't seem to be any agreement as to whether The Aztecs really believed the Spaniards were gods or if it was just obvious that conquistadors were foreign and dangerous and possessed advanced military technology. When you're holding a spear and the other guy has a gun it doesn't really matter if you believe he's a god or not, if you're smart you're going to humor him. Whatever the reason, Moctezuma invited Cortes into his inner sanctum in Tenochtitlan and did anoint him with the feathered serpent headdress. It seems clear at this point that he was pursuing a strategy of appeasement, but the Spaniards were still nervous. They were hugely outnumbered, so eventually they became paranoid and essentially held Moctezuma hostage. Meanwhile, a rival contingent of Spaniards had landed nearby under the leadership of Pánfilo de Narváez, a nemesis of Cortes who felt that he Cortes had gone rogue and exceeded his authority and was under orders to arrest him. Cortes left 80 soldiers in Tenochtitlan under the command of Pedro de Alvarado, and along with the remaining 240 of his soldiers attacked his fellow countrymen, wounding Narváez and taking control of his forces. So now the Spanish were fighting amongst themselves,

basically competing to decide who would get to do all of the raping and plundering. Fighting over the privilege of fighting. These were a bunch of messy bitches.

And the messiness wasn't limited to infighting, because back at Tenochtitlan, Pedro de Alvarado had become increasingly paranoid and greedy; he eventually began torturing Aztec priests and nobility in an effort to get them to cough up more treasure, which raised the temperature between Aztecs and Spaniards and threatened to devolve into chaos.

Learning of the events back in the city, Cortes rushed back to Tenochtitlan and initially was granted entrance, but the situation was rapidly deteriorating. Cortes forced Moctezuma to publicly plead with the Aztecs for peace, and according to the Spaniards, Moctezuma was stoned to death by his own citizens. Aztecs on the other hand would claim the Spaniards had murdered him, who knows, it seems like that would've been counterproductive but in either version he was equally dead, and the Spanish were chased from the city. After an ill-advised full frontal attack on the city failed miserably, Cortez retreated, licked his wounds, and focused on shoring up allegiances with local tribes and Aztec states that favored revolution.

Meanwhile, a lucky break for the Spanish decimated the Aztec population: while the conquistadors hadn't succeeded in conquering the capital through violence, what they

lacked in military might they made up for in filth and disease. Smallpox was now raging through Tenochtitlan. The city was located on an island in lake Texcoco, with dry access provided only by a series of causeways and various bridges that could be retracted. Cortes imported and constructed a bunch of small boats and cut off support for the city by policing the lake and making sure that supplies and fresh water didn't reach the island. There were attacks and counter attacks, plots on Cortes's life, and at one point, 65 Spaniards were captured alive and sacrificed dramatically to the gods. "the dismal drum of Huichilobos sounded again,...we saw our comrades who had been captured in Cortés' defeat being dragged up the steps to be sacrificed...cutting open their chests, drew out their palpitating hearts which they offered to the idols...the Indian butchers...cut off their arms and legs...then they ate their flesh with a sauce of peppers and tomatoes...throwing their trunks and entrails to the lions and tigers and serpents and snakes." Presumably they finished off with a nice Chianti. It's kind of reads like a recipe from a cookbook. "Filletted Spaniard with a pepper and tomato sauce." The Aztec emperor who had taken over for Moctezuma, his cousin Cuauhtemoc, "then sent the hands and feet of our soldiers, and the skin of their faces...to all the towns of our allies..." This just gets more and more silence of the lambs. "The Aztec sacrificed a batch

of Spanish prisoners each night for ten nights”

The Aztecs would eat another 70 hearts of captured Spanish prisoners during the bloody final stand, which culminated in their surrender on August 13, 1521. Gotta get in those last snacks before you throw in the towel. After 75 days of fighting and starvation, the Aztecs had been overrun by a fighting force mostly comprised of Native Americans. Cortes claimed that after the victory, his Native American allies ritually sacrificed over 15,000 of their Aztecs rulers. Total deaths numbered between 100,000 and 240,000. Estimates put Spanish losses around 100, or 1,800 if you include casualties due to sickness and accidents. The Spanish experienced many tragic twisted ankles and Charlie horses. It's a cruel irony that Cortes was only able to conquer the city due to his alliance with Native Americans, and that most of the slaughter was among indigenous people but completely instigated by and puppeteered by the colonists. There are no happy endings, have we mentioned that before?

**New patron: Laurie**

**Review:**

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Jan 20, 2022

★★★★★

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