Polybius describes the invasion of Africa in 256-55 BC during the First Punic War, commanded by M. Attilius Regulus, as a nearly unprecedented disaster, in which Rome lost over 90% of the army, and the commander was captured alive by a ruthless and vengeful enemy. Polybius uses Regulus as a perfect example of the caprice of Tyche, whereby after a string of successes and the opportunity to end the war on very favorable terms, the Roman commander pushed his luck and demanded overly harsh terms of surrender, forcing the Carthaginians to fight him again in a battle that ended in complete Punic victory. The tables completely turned: the Roman army was nearly annihilated, Africa was freed from the constraints of occupation, the hubris of Regulus was severely punished, and Rome was abruptly thrown on the defensive. Polybius ends his account of Regulus there, leading modern historians (Frank Walbank et al.) to discount the Regulus sequel as legendary (contra Tenney Frank, 1911). The First Punic War dragged on another 14 years, utterly exhausting both sides, until Rome forced Carthage to surrender after the Battle of Aegates Islands in March 241 BC, on terms lighter than those Regulus had proposed in 256.

Originally, and briefly in the historical record, Regulus was a failure, whose vainglory prolonged the First Punic War, resulting in 250,000 additional Roman casualties. Fabius Maxumus Cunctator unsuccessfully cited the results of his invasion of Africa to try to prevent Scipio from taking the war to Carthage in 204 BC, warning that Scipio too would fail and lose another Roman army in the process. However, in Roman imagination and as a result in Roman popular consciousness, history was revised to lighten Regulus’s shame by providing a mission on which he salvaged his honor, probably on the heels of the Battle of Cannae in 216. In the fictional version, Regulus returned to Italy after five years of captivity to participate in a delegation requesting an exchange of POWs and exploring peace terms after the Roman defeat at Drepanum. At the critical moment, Regulus allegedly surprised his Carthaginian masters by condemning the POW exchange, revealing (how did he know if he was in prison?) that Carthage
was desperate for manpower, so Rome should not exchange prisoners. Having broken his word to endorse the exchange, he kept his word to return to Carthage if the mission failed, knowing he would suffer a terrible, torturous death.

The Regulus legend thus consists of two voyages, the invasion of Africa in 256 that ended in disaster and the return of a redeemed Regulus to Africa in 250 to accept martyrdom with near religious zeal. Seneca and Cicero applaud Regulus and explain that he died happy, despite the torture, knowing he had done the right thing. By no coincidence, his actions led to Rome’s victory and the rise of her empire. It also made Regulus

The Regulus legend has a triple connection to the disgraceful debacles against the Senones Gauls in 387 BC and against the Samnites at Caudine Forks in 321 BC in that all three stories involve POWs, Roman tradition revised history to avoid the truth that Rome surrendered, and they all employ the phenomenon of the disgraced commander redeemed. In modern American parlance, an alternate version of history was invented to refute the “fake news” that Roman forces had surrendered. But Regulus goes beyond Camillus and Postumius Albinus on a voyage in Roman imagination that transcends history into fiction, legend, and eternity, making him the leading hero of the Republic until Cato the Younger.