SAMNITES, a people of ancient Italy, whose name figures conspicuously in the early history of Rome. They occupied an extensive tract in the centre of the peninsula, which derived from them the name of Samnium. The territory thus designated was a wholly inland district, bounded on the north by the Marsi, Peligni, and Frentani, who separated them from the Adriatic, on the east by Apulia, on the south by Lucania, and on the west by Campania and Latium. But the Samnites were from an early period a numerous and powerful nation, and formed rather a confederacy of tribes than a single people. Hence the name is sometimes used in a wider sometimes in a more limited sense,—the Hirpini, espe­cially, who occupied the southernmost portion of their territory, being sometimes included amongst them, some­times distinguished from them. But according to the usual acceptation of the term—excluding the Frentani, who, though unquestionably of Samnite origin, were not usually regarded as belonging to the Samnite nation— they consisted of three principal tribes :—the Caraceni in the north, the Pentri, who may be termed the Samnites proper, in the centre, and the Hirpini in the south. Almost the whole of Samnium, as thus defined, was a rugged, mountainous country, and, though the Apennines do not in this part of their range attain to so great an elevation as farther north, they form irregular masses and groups, filling up almost the whole territory, and in great part covered with extensive forests. On the side of Campania alone the valley of the Vulturnus was richer and more fertile, and opened a natural access from the south into the northern regions of Samnium, while the Calor, a tributary of the same river, which flows from the east past Benevento, afforded in all ages a similar route into the upland districts of the Hirpini. Between the two, occupying the centre of the Pentrian territory and the very heart of Samnium, was the great mountain mass now known as the Monte Matese, of which the highest summit attains to an elevation of 6600 feet, and which must in all ages have been a region presenting peculiar difficulties of access.

All ancient writers agree in representing the Samnites as a people of Sabine origin, who migrated at an early period to the region of which we find them in the occupa­tion when they first appear in history. The period of this emigration is wholly unknown, but, if we can trust the tradition reported by Strabo, that it was the result of a vow to send forth the produce of a “ sacred spring ” (see Sabines), it could hardly have been in the first instance very numerous, and it is probable that the invaders established themselves in the midst of an Oscan population, with whom they gradually coalesced. It is certain that no very long interval elapsed before the Samnites in their turn found themselves exceeding the resources of their barren and rugged territory, and extending their dominion over the more fertile and accessible regions by which they were surrounded. The first of these movements was pro­bably that by which they occupied the land of the Frentani, a fertile district along the shores of the Adriatic, between the northern part of Samnium and the sea. The Hirpini also were in the first instance almost certainly a later offshoot of the central Samnite people, though they continued always in such close connexion with them that they were generally reckoned as forming part of the Samnite confederacy, and almost uniformly took part with the more central tribes in their wars against Rome. The Frentani, on the contrary, generally either stood aloof from the contest or secured their own safety by an alliance with Rome.

To a later period belong the emigrations that gave rise to the two powerful nations of the Lucanians and Cam­

panians. At the time when the Greek colonies were established in southern Italy the native tribes that occu­pied the regions to the south of Samnium were the Œnotrians and other Pelasgic races, and it was not till after the middle of the 5th century b.c. that the pressure of the Lucanians from the interior began to make itself felt in this quarter. From this time they gradually extended their power throughout the whole country to the Gulf of Tarentum and the Sicilian Straits. It was pro­bably at a somewhat earlier period (about 440 to 420 b.c.) that they effected the conquest of the fertile country to the west, intervening between the mountain regions of Samnium and the sea. Here they found an Oscan popula­tion, with whom they seem to have speedily coalesced, and thus gave rise to the people known thenceforth as Campanians, or “inhabitants of the plain.” But in this case also the new nationality thus constituted had no political connexion with the parent state, and retained its independent action both for peace and war. The first mention of the Samnites themselves in Roman history occurs in 354, when they concluded a treaty of alliance with the rising republic.

But it was not long before the course of events brought the two rival powers into collision. The Samnites, who appear to have been still actuated by aggressive tenden­cies, had attacked the Sidicini, a petty tribe to the north of Campania, and the latter, feeling unable to cope with so powerful an adversary, invoked the assistance of the Campanians. These, however, were in their turn attacked by the Samnites, and sustained so crushing a defeat, under the very walls of Capua, that they were compelled to implore the aid of Rome. Their request was granted, though not without hesitation, and thus began (in 343) the first of the long series of the Samnite Wars, which ultimately led to the establishment of the Roman domination over the whole of southern Italy. The events of these wars, which are related in all histories of Rome, can only be very briefly noticed here. The first contest was of short duration; and after two campaigns the Romans were willing not only to conclude peace with Samnium but to renew the previously existing alliance, to which the Samnites continued faithful throughout the great struggle which ensued between the Romans and the allied Campanians and Latins. The Second Samnite War was of a very different character. Both nations felt that it was a struggle for supremacy, and, instead of being brought to a close within three years, it lasted for more than twenty years (326-304), and was marked with considerable vicissitudes of fortune, among which the celebrated disaster of the Caudine Forks (321) stands most conspicuous. Nor was the struggle confined to the two leading powers, many of the neighbouring nations espousing the cause of the one side or the other, and often with fluctuating faith, in accordance with the varying fortunes of the war. The result, however, was on the whole favourable to the Roman arms, notwithstanding which they were willing to conclude peace in 304, on con­dition of the renewal of the previously existing alliance. This interval of tranquillity was of short duration, and little more than five years elapsed between the end of the Second Samnite War and the commencement of the Third (298). In this fresh contest they received a formidable auxiliary in a large body of Gauls, who had recently crossed the Alps, and, together with their countrymen the Senones, espoused the cause of the Samnites against Rome. Their combined forces were, however, defeated in the great battle of Sentinum (294), and after several successive cam­paigns the consul M. Curius Dentatus was able to boast of having put an end to the Samnite Wars (290), after they had lasted more than fifty years. It is true that a few