Hannibal

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Youth (247-219)

When Hannibal (in his own, Punic language: Hanba'al, "mercy of Ba'al") was born in 247 BCE, his birthplace Carthage was about to lose a long and important war. The city had been the Mediterranean's most prosperous seaport and possessed wealthy provinces, but it had suffered severe losses from the Romans in the First Punic War (264-241). After Rome's victory, it stripped Carthage of its most important province, Sicily; and when civil war had broken out in Cartage, Rome seized Sardinia and Corsica as well. These events must have made a great impression on the young Hannibal.

He was the oldest son of the Carthaginian general Hamilcar Barca, who took the ten-year old boy to Iberia in 237. There were several Carthaginian cities in Andalusia: Gadir ('castle', modern Cádiz), Malkah ('royal town', Málaga) and New Carthage (Cartagena). The ancient name of Córdoba is unknown, although the Punic element Kart, 'town', is still recognizable in its name.

Hamilcar added new territories to this informal empire. In this way, Carthage was compensated for its loss of overseas territories. The Roman historian Livy mentions that Hannibal's father forced his son to promise eternal hatred against the Romans. This may be an invention, but there may be some truth in the story: the Carthaginians had excellent reasons to hate their enemies.

When Hamilcar died (229), Hannibal's son-in-law, the politician Hasdrubal the Fair, took over command. The new governor further improved the Carthaginian position by diplomatic means, among which was intermarriage between Carthaginians and Iberians. Hannibal married a native princess. It is likely that the young man visited Carthage in these years.

The citadel of Saguntum

In 221, Hasdrubal was murdered and the Carthaginian soldiers in Iberia elected Hannibal as their commander, a decision that was confirmed by the government. The twenty-six-year old general returned to his father's aggressive military politics and attacked the natives, capturing Salamanca in 220. The next year, he besieged Saguntum, a Roman ally. Since Rome was occupied with the Second Illyrian War and unable to support the town, Saguntum fell after a blockade of eight months. Already in Antiquity, the question whether the capture of Saguntum was a violation of a treaty between Hasdrubal and the Roman Republic was discussed. It is impossible to solve this problem. The fact is, however, that the Romans felt offended, and demanded Hannibal to be extradited by the Carthaginian government.

From Saguntum to Cannae (218-216)

While the negotiations about his fate were going on, Hannibal continued to extend Carthage's territory: he appointed his brother Hasdrubal (not to be confused with Hannibal's brother-in-law) as commander
in Iberia, and in May 218 he crossed the river Ebro in order to complete the conquest of the Iberian peninsula. On hearing the news, Rome declared the Second Punic War and sent reinforcements to Sicily, where they expected the main Carthaginian attack.

Hannibal interrupted his campaigns in Catalonia, and decided to win the war by a bold invasion of Italy before the Romans were prepared. In a lightning campaign, he crossed the Pyrenees with an army of 50,000 infantry, 9,000 cavalry and 37 elephants; next, he crossed the river Rhône (at Aenusio, modern Orange), ferrying his elephants across the water on large rafts. Thence, by a heroic effort, made difficult by autumn snow, he crossed the Alps, probably taking the Col du Mont Genèvre (more...). In October 218, 38,000 soldiers and 8,000 cavalry had reached the plains along the river Po in the vicinity of the Italian town Turin.

The plains along the Po were inhabited by Gauls who had recently been subjected to Rome, and were only too willing to welcome Hannibal and throw off the Roman yoke. The Romans were aware of the danger that Hannibal might entice the Gauls into rebellion, and immediately sent an army to prevent this. However, in a cavalry engagement at the river Téhin (east of Turin), the Carthaginians defeated their opponents. Immediately, some 14,000 Gauls volunteered to serve under Hannibal. Thanks to their help, Hannibal won a second victory at the river Trebia (west of modern Piacenza), defeating a Roman army that had been supplemented with the troops that had been sent to Sicily earlier that year (December 218).

In the early Spring of 217, Hannibal left his winter quarters at Bologna, traversed the Apennines and ravaged Etruria (modern Tuscany). During a minor engagement, he lost an eye (although some historians claim that he suffered from ophthalmia). The Romans counterattacked with some 25,000 men, but their consul, Gaius Flaminius, was defeated and killed in an ambush between the hills and the Trasimene lake. Two legions were annihilated. Hannibal expected that Rome's allies would now leave their master and come over to Carthage. This, however, did not happen, and he was forced to cross the Apennines a second time, hoping to establish a new base in Apulia, the 'heel' of Italy. At the same time, Rome attacked his lines of commuciation and his supply base in Iberia (more).

While Hannibal tried to win over Rome's allies by diplomatic means, the Romans appointed Quintus Fabius Maximus as a dictator (a magistrate with extraordinary powers). He tailed the invader, but evaded battle; the Romans found Fabius' strategy unacceptable and would later call him 'the dawdler' (Cunctator). This was not entirely fair: Fabius had no experienced troops and had to train an army, and this policy was successful. Besides, a Roman army had attacked Carthage's African possessions, which prevented the Carthaginians to sent reinforcements. And, contrary to Hannibal's expectation, Rome's allies remained loyal.

In 216, the Roman Senate decided that time had come to solve the problem by one great, decisive battle. Taking no risks, the two consuls raised an army of no less than 80,000 men, whereas Hannibal's army counted some 50,000 men. In July, the Romans pinned down the Carthaginian army in the neighborhood of Cannae on the Italian east coast; battle was engaged on the second of August.
Hannibal’s convex, crescent shaped lines slowly became concave under pressure of the Roman elite troops in the center, which, being encircled and finally surrounded by the Carthaginian cavalry in the rear, failed to break through the Carthaginian lines and were eventually destroyed.

After this event, many Roman allies switched sides. Sardinia revolted; Capua became Hannibal's capital in Italy. The successful commander was thirty years old when he entered Capua, seated on his last surviving elephant. His brother Mago Barca was sent to Carthage to announce this victory. He made quite an impression when he poured out hundreds of golden rings taken from the bodies of the Romans killed in action at the entrance of the Carthaginian Senate building.

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However, the Senate refused to come to terms and Rome's closest allies, those in central Italy, remained loyal. Therefore, Hannibal endorsed a larger strategy to make the Romans dissipate their strength. In the winter, he launched a diplomatic offensive, and in 215 he secured an alliance with king Philip V of Macedonia. Syracuse became a Carthaginian ally in 214.

Meanwhile, the Romans regained self-confidence and ground: Hannibal's attempts to capture ports like Cumae and Puteoli -necessary to receive fresh troops- failed. In the end, this would seal his fate.

Hannibal realized the problem and decided that he had to abandon his offensives in central Italy. He had been in Italy for almost four years, and his army still needed reinforcements. Therefore, he turned his attention to southern Italy, where he captured Tarentum and several other ports (213), facilitating the supply of new soldiers from Macedonia and Carthage. Rome countered this by an alliance with the Greek towns in Aetolia; the Aetolian League started a war against Macedonia. Although Carthage sent an army to Sicily, Hannibal himself received hardly any troops.

In 212, Rome was able to take the initiative again and started to cut off Hannibal's lines of contact. First, it sent armies to recapture Syracuse and Capua. Syracuse was betrayed to Marcellus and re-entered the Roman alliance. (The famous scientist Archimedes of Syracuse was killed during the fights: text.) The Roman siege of Capua lasted for a long time and seemed to end in failure, but Hannibal realized that his exhausted troops would not be able to hold it. He therefore tried to force his enemies to raise their siege by a diversionary attack on Rome itself. He camped in front of the walls of Rome, but the Romans knew their city could not be taken. They continued the siege of Capua, and took it in 211.

Slowly, the Romans pushed Hannibal southward. In 209, they recaptured Tarentum. Hannibal's situation became difficult and his government was unwilling to risk extra troops: the lines of contact were too long. Therefore, Hannibal decided to ask help from his brother Hasdrubal, who was still in charge of the Iberian armies. This time, the Romans were not surprised by the Carthaginian invasion across the Alps:
Hasdrubal was defeated at the river Metaurus before he could contact his brother (207). Hannibal's hope of reinforcement had evaporated.

The Romans hunted him down in southern Italy, but Hannibal was able to continue a kind of guerilla war in the 'toe' of Italy. (Several modern scholars have argued that Hannibal destroyed the countryside of southern Italy, but the archaeological data contradict this. The radical changes must be dated to the second century, when the Romans introduced mass slavery to their plantages.)

Meanwhile, the Romans conquered Iberia. This proved harder than they had suspected. After some initial successes, the Roman generals were killed in action and almost all was lost. However, a young commander, Publius Cornelius Scipio, took the Carthaginian capital of Iberia, Cartagena, by surprise and brought the Spanish war to a good end in 206. After a short while, Scipio was sent to Sicily and across the Mediterranean. He found an ally in the Numidian king Massinissa, and attacked Carthage itself. Unlike the Roman Senate, which had not panicked when Rome was under attack by Hannibal, the Carthaginian government was disheartened and recalled Hannibal's still unconquered veterans from Italy (203).

The decisive battle of the Second Punic War was therefore, thanks to Roman stubbornness, not fought on Italian soil, but in Africa. After several preliminary engagements, the armies of Scipio and Hannibal clashed at Zama (19 October 202). Hannibal tried to repeat his Cannae tactics, but Scipio had better cavalry than the unfortunate consuls fourteen years before. Hannibal's encircling movement failed, and the Carthaginians were defeated. Hannibal escaped to Carthage, where he advised negotiations. In 201, peace was signed. Rome asked an enormous prize: it demanded the Carthaginian fleet, recognition of the Roman conquests in Iberia, and an indemnity of no less than 10,000 talents, to be paid in fifty annual installments. Hannibal was forced to resign as a general.

Looking for revenge (202-182)

Carthage's economy was ruined and in 196 the people of Carthage choose Hannibal as suffete. In this capacity, Hannibal promoted a moderate democracy, reorganized the revenues, and took measures to stimulate agriculture and commerce. However, the constitutional reform clipped the wings of the landed aristocracy; its members informed the Roman Senate of Hannibal's plan to ally Carthage with the Seleucid Empire (i.e., Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Iran); they suggested that Hannibal wanted to invade Italy a second time, if only the Seleucid king Antiochus III the Great gave him an army. It is unknown if this accusation was true, but when the Romans sent a commission of inquiry, Hannibal fled to Antioch, the capital of the Seleucid Empire. He had been in power for less than a year. His house was destroyed.

In these years, both Rome and the Seleucid king showed an interest in Greece and Macedonia. Rome defeated king Philip in the Second Macedonian War (200-197), and unexpectedly recalled their troops - leaving Greece unprotected against a Seleucid invasion. Antiochus swallowed the bait and invaded Greece (192). In this Syrian War, Hannibal advised Antiochus to invade Italy. It is easy to guess who was to be the commander of the expeditionary force. Instead, he was given a minor naval command; he was defeated in a naval battle off Side by Rome's maritime ally Rhodes (190).
Rome inflicted a devastating defeat upon its enemy near Magnesia, and Antiochus had to accept that what is now Turkey was to be added to the small kingdom Pergamon, a Roman ally (Peace of Apamea, 188). One of the Seleucid governors became independent: his name was Artaxias and he proclaimed himself king of Greater Armenia. Hannibal, whose life was in danger when he remained at the Syrian court, stayed with Artaxias, who followed his advice to built a new capital, Artaxata (modern Yerevan).

Later, Hannibal had to flee again: this time, he found refuge at the court of king Prusias I of Bithynia, whom he supported in its war against the Pergamene king Eumenes II Soter. As an admiral, the Carthaginian celebrated his last victory, defeating the Pergamene fleet (184). However, Rome intervened in Pergamon's favor, and Hannibal poisoned himself to avoid extradition (winter 183/182).

The place where this happened, Libyssa, was venerated by later generations. Among the pilgrims were Romans; the monument erected by the emperor Septimius Severus (193-211) was still visible in the eleventh century.

Assessment

The Mediterranean world of the third and second centuries was in a process of transforming itself into some kind of unity. It had been a divided region in the fifth and fourth centuries, but now it was reorganizing itself, both culturally and politically. The creation of one, big Mediterranean Empire was inevitable, and the issue of the Second Punic War was whether this Mediterranean Empire would have a Roman or a Carthaginian face.

This does not mean that Rome or Carthage were actually aiming at world dominion. It simply means that their imperia were a consequence of a process of cultural homogenization. One way or another, some kind of Mediterranean unity was bound to come, and the big question was whether the Greek-Roman or the Phoenician-Carthaginian culture was to be the crystallization point. After Hannibal's death, Roman power was not seriously challenged for almost six centuries.

Literature

The most important ancient sources on Hannibal are Livy's books 21-39 (an ancient excerpt can be found here) and books 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 of the World History by Polybius of Megalopolis. Both make excellent reading. Additional information can be found in Appian's Roman history, especially the parts on the Hannibalic war, the Spanish war, the African war, and the Syrian War.