

The Unconquerable Mind of Hannibal Barca

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From the very beginning, conflict between Rome and Carthage was inevitable. The two emerging superpowers of the Mediterranean at the time were destined for conflict because of the rivalry and hatred that stem back to the origin story involving both powers. In 264 B.C.E, as Rome began to shift its territorial ambitions from the Italian peninsula and central Italy to the Mediterranean Sea, Carthage, the dominant power in this region, sensed the change and tensions began to rise between the two. The First Punic War broke out as a result of conflict over Sicily. In 247 B.C.E., during the First Punic War, Hannibal's father Hamilcar Barca took command of the Carthaginian forces in western Sicily. Hamilcar eventually began to have success on Sicily, however he ultimately had to surrender after the Romans cut off his supply lines. Although Rome won the First Punic War, at the time of Hannibal's birth, tensions between Rome and Carthage remained high. As Hamilcar was traveling with young Hannibal throughout Spain, he made Hannibal swear a mighty oath to always be an enemy of Rome. As a result, from a very young age, Hannibal had a hatred for Rome, and when Carthage and Rome began to have border skirmishes in Spain around the Ebro River, the stage was set for Hannibal, where he would prove to be one of the greatest military geniuses in history. Hannibal Barca was a military genius. His rightful claim to the title of military genius stems from his adeptness at deceiving and outwitting

the Romans both on and off the battlefield, through a variety of cunning strategies and tactics that would be praised for centuries after his death.

Hannibal Barca's military genius was evidenced by his repeated demonstration of superior strategic and tactical acumen on the battlefield, as he consistently outsmarted and outmaneuvered his foes time and again. Leading up to this point in the Second Punic War, Hannibal had been unstoppable. His daring cross of the Alps caught Rome off guard, and after picking up many men from the surrounding Germanic tribes, Hannibal time and time again proved victorious against superior Roman forces. The city of Rome was in full panic, as they watched Hannibal sweep into southern Italy, picking up allies from the surrounding Italian City-States as he rampaged through Roman territory. Upon meeting Hannibal at the depot of Cannae, Polybius explains, "So great was the alarm and terror of what would happen, they [Rome] resolved to bring not only four but eight legions into the field [thus eight citizen legions and eight allied legions combined--about 90,000 men]."¹ The Roman military system consisted of two Consuls. Each Consul would get two legions, and normally most of their wars are decided and fought by one Consul and two legions.² The Battle of Cannae was an unprecedented moment in Roman history, as the Roman army deployed eight legions to face Hannibal, a number that had never been seen before. This illustrates the magnitude of the threat posed by Hannibal in the Roman eyes, and the realization that Rome was vulnerable for the first time. For in the first place both Consuls were with the army: and were not only prepared to share the danger themselves, but had also induced the Consuls of the previous year to remain and take part in the struggle.³ Never before in Roman history had four consuls been present on the battlefield at the same time,

¹ Polybius, "Polybius (c.200-after 118 BCE): *Book III of The Histories: The Battle of Cannae*," 2nd Century, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/polybius-cannae.asp>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

which underscores the gravity of the situation and the fear Hannibal had instilled in the Romans. Prior to the battle of Cannae, Roman general Fabius Maximus had the Carthaginians penned up near Capua where the Volturnus River blocked retreat. "One night, the Romans saw a line of torches moving from the Carthaginian camp emplacement toward an area they knew was held by a strong garrison of their own. It seemed clear Hannibal was trying to break out of the trap. Fabius' generals encouraged him to mount a night attack to support the garrison and crush the enemy between them but Fabius refused, believing that the garrison in place could easily prevent Hannibal from breaking out and would hold until morning. When the garrison mobilized to march out and meet Hannibal in battle, they found only cattle with torches tied on their horns and Hannibal's army had slipped away through the pass the Romans had left untended."⁴ This event displays his military genius because he was able to get out of a situation that almost every other general would have failed to do, or gave up and surrendered. Hannibal defied all odds and successfully used his wits and clever mind to outthink and maneuver the Romans. Time and time when in the toughest of situations, Hannibal was able to display tactics unique and effective to gain the upper hand on the Romans. Leading up to the battle of Cannae, Hannibal would take into account every single detail that could provide him an advantage. "Hannibal's peerless tactics of using topography, fighting in winter, night fighting, depriving enemies of water sources and other environmental factors as a secret weapon would prove to be pivotal in battle."⁵ Hannibal's use of the elements of nature, and his attention to detail when looking for advantages against the Romans prove his military genius, because he was willing to do what no other general would think to do, to gain the smallest advantages to help him win decisive victories. His ability to exploit his surroundings and nature to his advantage would prove crucial in winning battles,

⁴ Joshua J Mark, "Hannibal." World History Encyclopedia. Last modified March 29, 2018. <https://www.worldhistory.org/hannibal/>.

⁵ Patrick Hunt, *Hannibal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), [267], digital file.

especially when the odds were against him like at the battle of Cannae. As the battle of Cannae began, Hannibal sent out his Iberian and Celtic cavalry in the center of his line as the first part of a strategic plan that would not only alter the course of the battle but forever make Hannibal known as a great military general. When his cavalry were eventually overpowered by the weight of the heavy-armed lines of Romans, they gave way and retreated to the back of their formation. This worked perfectly to Hannibal's plan because "The Romans, however, going in pursuit of these troops, and hastily closing in towards the center and the part of the enemy which was giving ground, advanced so far that the Libyan heavy-armed troops on either wing got on their flanks. Those on the right, facing to the left, charged from the right upon the Roman flank; while those who were on the left wing faced to the right, and, dressing by the left, charged their right flank, the exigency of the moment suggesting to them what they ought to do. Thus it came about, as Hannibal had planned, that the Romans were caught between two hostile lines of Libyans---thanks to their impetuous pursuit of the Celts."⁶ Hannibal was able to trick the Romans and lead them right into the crescent formation, enveloping the Romans and inflicting devastating damage on them. Hannibal's use of the crescent maneuver stands as a testament to his military genius, as he was able to strategically and masterfully outmaneuver and devastate a superior Roman force that included four Consuls, representing the pinnacle of Rome's military leadership. The Battle of Cannae showcased Hannibal's exceptional military commandment, as he proved time and time again that he was always one step ahead of his enemies. His cunning tactics and strategic prowess in this battle were instrumental in securing his place in history as one of the most brilliant military minds of all time.

⁶ Polybius, "Polybius (c.200-after 118 BCE): *Book III of The Histories: The Battle of Cannae*," 2nd Century, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/polybius-cannae.asp>.

Hannibal's military brilliance lay in his skillful employment of deadly tactics that consistently outmatched his enemies, regardless of the challenges or limitations he faced. He was adept at staying ahead of his adversaries and using the resources available to him to his advantage. From the very beginning of the War, Hannibal was able to outthink and outwit the Romans. Hannibal and Carthage had been eager to get revenge for the first Punic War, and all that was needed was an excuse. The opportunity presented itself in 219 B.C.E. when Rome violated a treaty with Carthage by intervening in the political affairs of the Spanish state of Saguntum. Hannibal dismissed a Roman commission sent to investigate the matter and then laid siege to the city, which fell eight months later. Rome's failure to aid its client state probably encouraged Hannibal to extend Carthaginian dominion northward to the Pyrenees. When Carthage refused to surrender Hannibal, Rome declared war.⁷ Hannibal was able to use the conflict around Saguntum as a way to start a war. He was able to take advantage of this opportunity as an excuse to go to war with Rome, and ultimately achieve his goal of starting a war. As the war continued, Hannibal continued to demonstrate his use superior tactics against the Romans. After declaring war on Carthage, Rome anticipated an attack on Sicily and southern Italy because of how strong Carthage's naval fleet was and where its capital was located. However this was not the case, and early in the war, Hannibal astonished the Romans with a daring maneuver. Starting from Spain with about 60,000 troops, he crossed the Pyrenees, France, and the Alps, and entered Roman Italy. Snow and cold and fierce mountain tribes killed many Carthaginians in the Alps. Hannibal reached the Po Valley in northern Italy with only about 26,000 troops and 6,000 horses.⁸ Hannibal's decision to cross the Alps took the Roman navy

⁷ Larry W. Usilton, "Hannibal," Salem Online, https://online.salempress.com/articleDetails.do?bookId=274&articleName=GLAW_3611127011&searchText=Ebro%20&searchOperators=any&category=History.

⁸ Arthur M. Eckstein, "Hannibal," World Book Online, accessed November 7, 2022, <https://www.worldbookonline.com/advanced/article?id=ar245260&st=hannibal#tab=homepage>.

entirely off guard. They thought the Alps would shield them like a wall, and reasoned that Hannibal wouldn't be crazy enough to send his army through the treacherous terrain of the Alps. On top of that, crossing the Alps would mean that Hannibal would have little to no supply lines, making it virtually impossible for him to invade from there in the Roman Empire's mind. The Roman Republic was a naval power following the First Punic War, and they had a strong navy that controlled the Mediterranean Sea. They expected Hannibal to attack them by sea, and therefore, their navy was concentrated on the coasts, especially in the southern part of Italy and Sicily. By crossing the Alps, Hannibal was able to attack the weakest part of Rome, which gave him a strategic advantage and allowed him to win several early victories against the Roman army before they could organize a coordinated response. His crossing of the alps also contributed to a bigger plan of his, "Recognizing that he might lose half of his 100,000-man army crossing the mountains to Italy, he proceeded anyway, aware that the Gauls on the other side would gladly make up his losses for the opportunity to fight their Roman overlords."⁹ Hannibal knew that his best chance of defeating the Romans was to get some of their subjugated peoples to revolt, and in northern Italy, he had extremely good success and was able to win over a lot of men that would be crucial in his upcoming battles. However, Hannibal expected Rome's subject peoples to rise up in his support and while some did the inner core of central Italy stayed loyal. Hannibal didn't have as much success with gaining men in central Italy compared to northern Italy, which some would argue does not demonstrate his military genius. But had Hannibal been successful, Rome would have collapsed almost in an instant. His plan was designed perfectly, and although he misread what the population would do, Hannibal was still able to achieve major success in central Italy. With the failure of his plan, Hannibal was able to adapt to his situation and

⁹ Larry W. Usilton, "Hannibal," Salem Online, https://online.salempress.com/articleDetails.do?bookId=274&articleName=GLAW_3611127011&searchText=Ebro%20&searchOperators=any&category=History

improvise tactics that would prove extremely successful such as the crescent maneuver. This shows that regardless of his situation, Hannibal was able to outsmart the Romans by using superior planning and tactics.

Hannibal's impact on the Mediterranean world and legacy establish him as a military genius. Hannibal had earned the reputation of being a brilliant military strategist and general which was earned from his campaign in the Second Punic War. In fact, the battle of Cannae was a devastating defeat for Rome which resulted in a number of the Italian city-states defecting to Hannibal and Philip V of Macedon (r. 221-179 B.C.E.) declaring in favor of Hannibal and initiating the First Macedonian War with Rome.¹⁰ This excerpt represents the immediate impact Hannibal had on the civilizations in the empires surrounding him. Rome at this time was the dominant superpower in the region without a doubt, and the fact that Hannibal was able to win over so many Italian states and even Macedonia suggests that generals and leaders of this time had a deep respect and admiration for Hannibal. With his astonishing military success, he established that he was not to be messed with and struck fear deep into Rome and its allies. Following and leading up to Hannibal's defeat in the battle of Zama, his successful tactics and formations were incorporated into the Roman army. "Hannibal's strategies, learned so well by Scipio, were incorporated into Roman tactics and Rome would consistently use them to good effect following the Battle of Zama. Ultimately, Hannibal taught a reluctant Rome how to conduct war."¹¹ The success of Hannibal's campaign and military victories inspired change in Rome and in Roman generals' tactics and strategies for years to come. Great Roman generals like Nero and Scipio would come to adopt many of Hannibal's practices. "Taking a page out of Hannibal's book", these generals would learn and incorporate his successful methods and would

¹⁰ Joshua J Mark, "Hannibal." World History Encyclopedia. Last modified March 29, 2018. <https://www.worldhistory.org/hannibal/>.

¹¹ Patrick Hunt, *Hannibal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), [269], digital file.

use them successfully in battle. Ultimately, in the Second Punic War, the only way that Hannibal was beaten was by Scipio studying his tactics and using some of them against him. This further proved the effectiveness of Hannibal and his military genius because of how successful it was against himself. In addition, off the battlefield, Hannibal would also impact the Romans. Long after the second punic war, Hannibal would continue to strike fear in Roman children through legend and storytelling, "Roman mothers would continue to frighten their unwilling children to bed with the phrase "Hannibal ad Porto" (Hannibal is at the door)."¹² This illustrates Hannibal's impact on Rome, and how he was remembered and feared as a renowned general by Romans for centuries after his death. Furthermore, this passage demonstrates the legacy Hannibal created for himself, and how he left a permanent mark on the people of his time. Hannibal would establish a legacy that depicts him as one of the greatest military generals in history. In the words of Patrick Hunt, "Hannibal is regarded today as one of the greatest military strategists in history."¹³

The Second Punic War saw an impressive display of intelligence, wits, and resourcefulness from Hannibal and Carthage. From the very beginning, Hannibal was one step ahead of the Romans, using every strategic and tactical advantage available to him, from wind patterns to the diversity of troops among his ranks to his advantage. Both on and off the battlefield, Hannibal managed to deceive and outsmart the enemy on countless occasions, amassing victories against the most powerful army in the world. His tactics and strategies would leave a permanent impact on the Mediterranean world following the Second Punic War and establish a renowned legacy as a brilliant military leader. Hannibal's military prowess and legacy have cemented his place in history as one of the most outstanding military leaders and strategists of all time.

¹² Joshua J Mark, "Hannibal." World History Encyclopedia. Last modified March 29, 2018. <https://www.worldhistory.org/hannibal/>.

¹³ Patrick Hunt, *Hannibal* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), [269], digital file.

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