

[home](#) : [ancient Carthage](#) : [ancient Rome](#) : [index](#) : article by Jona Lendering ©

Hannibal



The Carthaginian general **Hannibal** (247-182 BCE) was one of the greatest military leaders in history. His most famous campaign took place during the so-called Second Punic War (218-202), when he caught the Romans off guard by crossing the Alps.

[Youth \(247-219\)](#)
[Saguntum to Cannae](#)
[\(219-216\)](#)
[Cannae to Zama](#)
[\(216-202\)](#)
[Looking for revenge](#)
[\(202-182\)](#)
[Assessment](#)

Youth (247-219)

When Hannibal (in his own language: *Hanba'al*, mercy of Baal) was born in 247 BCE, his birthplace **Carthage** (the capital of what is now Tunisia) was losing a long and important war. It had been the Mediterranean's most prosperous seaport and possessed wealthy provinces, but it had suffered severe losses from the Romans in the so-called 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 Carthage, 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 Spain 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 element *Karth*, '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 Romans believed 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 good reasons to hate their enemies.

When Hamilcar died (229), Hannibal's brother-in-law Hasdrubal took over command. The new governor secured 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.



In 221, Hasdrubal was murdered and Hannibal was elected commander by the Carthaginian army in Spain. The

Carthaginian government confirmed the decision. He returned to his father's aggressive military politics and attacked the natives: in 220 he captured Salamanca. The next year, he besieged **Saguntum**, a Roman ally. Since Rome was occupied with the Second Illyrian War and consequently unable to support the town, Saguntum fell after a blockade of eight months.



Saguntum

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 handed over by the Carthaginian government.

From Saguntum to Cannae (218-216)



First phase of the Second Punic war

While these negotiations were still going on, Hannibal continued to extent Carthage's territory: he appointed his brother Hasdrubal (not to be confused with Hannibal's brother-in-law) as commander in Spain, 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 a Carthaginian attack.



The Pyrenees

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 Arausio, modern Orange [[pictures](#)]). His elephants were ferried across the water on large rafts - a remarkable achievement. Thence, by a heroic effort, made difficult by autumn snow, he crossed the Alps, probably taking the Col du Mont Genève (click [here](#) for the story). In October 218, 38,000 soldiers and 8,000 knights had reached the plains along the river Po in the vicinity of the Italian town Turin.

The Po-plains 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 **Ticinus** (east of Turin), the Carthaginians defeated their opponents. Now, 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 Roman troops that had been sent to Sicily earlier that year (December 218).

In March 217, Hannibal left his winter quarter 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](#) Flaminius was defeated and killed in an ambush between the hills and **lake of Trasimene**. Two Roman 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.

While he 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 called him 'the dawdler' (*Cunctator*). This was not entirely fair: Fabius' policy had been successful. Besides, a Roman army had attacked Carthage's African possessions, which prevented the Carthaginians to send reinforcements. And, contrary to Hannibal's expectation, Rome's allies remained loyal.



Cannae

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 destroyed (picture). 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.

From Cannae to Zama (216-202)



Cannae

However, the Roman senate refused to come to terms and Rome's allies 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



Philip V of Macedonia

-necessary to receive fresh troops- failed. Hannibal 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 the south of Italy, where he took 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, who started a war against Macedonia. Although Carthage sent an army to Sicily, Hannibal himself received hardly any troops.

Second phase of the
Second Punic war

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 and re-entered the Roman alliance. (The famous scientist [Archimedes](#) was killed during the fights: click [here](#).) The siege of Capua lasted for a long time, but Hannibal knew that his exhausted troops were unable to hold it. He tried to force the Romans to lift their siege by a diversionary attack on Rome itself. He camped in front of the walls of Rome that can be seen today in front of Stazione Termini, but the Romans knew their city could not be taken. They continued the siege of Capua, and took it in 211.



Hasdrubal

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 Spain. 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. There were several radical changes after 200.)



Scipio

Meanwhile, the Romans conquered Spain. 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 Spain, Cartagena, by surprise and brought the Spanish war to a good end (206). After a short while, Scipio was sent across the Mediterranean 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 army from Italy (203).

Napoli ([Museo archeologico nazionale](#))

The decisive battle of the Second Punic War was therefore, thanks to Roman stubbornness, not fought on Italian soil, but in Africa: after some minor engagements, Scipio and Hannibal clashed at Zama (October 19, 202). This battle is also known as the battle of Naraggara.

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 Spain, and an indemnity of no less than 10,000 talents, to be paid in fifty annual installments. And it forced Hannibal to resign as a general.

Looking for revenge (202-182)



Hannibal

Carthage's economy was ruined and in 196 the people of Carthage choose Hannibal as *suffete* (a kind of consul). In this capacity, Hannibal promoted a modest democracy, reorganized the revenues and stimulated 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 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.



The Syrian war

In these years, both Rome and the Seleucid king tried to establish a zone of influence in Greece and Macedonia. Rome was very successful, and Antiochus decided to invade 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 invading army. Instead, he was given only a minor naval command and was eventually defeated in a naval battle off Side by Rome's maritime ally Rhodes (190).

Rome inflicted a devastating defeat upon its enemy and Antiochus had to accept that what is now Turkey was to be added to the small kingdom Pergamum, a Roman ally. One of the Seleucid governors became independent: his name was [Artaxias](#) and he proclaimed himself king of Great-Armenia. Hannibal, whose life was in danger when he remained at the Syrian court, stayed with Artaxias, who followed his advice to build a new capital, Artaxata (modern Yerevan).

Later, Hannibal had to flee again: this time, he found refuge in Bithynia, which he supported in its war against Pergamum. As an admiral, he celebrated his last victory, defeating the Pergamene fleet (184). However, Rome intervened in Pergamum'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 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 was to be a Roman or a Carthaginian world.

This does not mean that either 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. We should probably be grateful, because a victory by Hannibal would have given the development of the Mediterranean cultures a push into the direction of the Phoenician-Carthaginian culture. A book on human rights in Carthage would not be a big volume; on the other hand, the Romans offered the inhabitants of Italy and -later- the Mediterranean world a civil law code that contained some elements that we still consider to be important. (This is not to deny that Rome could be a cruel and savage ruler.) In fact, this is why Rome won the war against Hannibal. Its Italian allies knew that Rome had more to offer than Carthage.

Literature

The most important ancient sources on Hannibal are [Livy's](#) books 21-39 and books 3-16 of the *World history* by [Polybius of Megalopolis](#). Both make excellent reading. One of the many modern biographies: Serge Lancel, *Hannibal* (1995 Paris).

[home](#) : [ancient Carthage](#) : [ancient Rome](#) : [index](#)