

2019

# Hannibal Barca: For Carthage: The Right Man for the Wrong Time

Michael McCabe

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the\\_histories](https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McCabe, Michael (2019) "Hannibal Barca: For Carthage: The Right Man for the Wrong Time," *The Histories*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.  
Available at: [https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the\\_histories/vol10/iss1/3](https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol10/iss1/3)

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarship at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Histories by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [careyc@lasalle.edu](mailto:careyc@lasalle.edu).

I

**Hannibal Barca: For Carthage:  
The Right Man for the Wrong Time**

By Michael McCabe



A familiar expression in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century reminds Americans that if Germany won the Second World War we all would be speaking German; a much less common thought is that if Carthage won the Second Punic War we would be speaking a derivative of Phoenician, not Latin. How close was Rome, the superior military force in all of antiquity, to being defeated? The answer is very close. Rome's survival was a mixture of an adaptation of usual Roman tactics to face a superior foe and a bit of luck. Rome had met her match in Carthage; however, to say that the Second Punic War was Carthage's war would be giving undue credit to the capital city. This war was Hannibal's war. Hannibal commanded the Carthaginian invasion force of Italy proper and won several decisive military victories on the peninsula.

Hannibal was one of, if not the best, military generals in all of antiquity and his superior battle tactics went unmatched. Rome's best consuls of the day were no match in open warfare for Hannibal. How then, was Rome able to survive their first major threat to the continued existence of the Roman Republic? The answer lies in Hannibal's lack of support from his home city of Carthage and his inability to translate military victories into the conquering of Rome. Furthermore, the tactics of Roman Dictator Q. Fabius Maximus was critical in buying Rome time to rebuild and save Rome from final defeat.

Hannibal wanted to bring the war to Rome, and brought it he did. Hannibal's strategy was to break Rome's will, and he believed that once he proved Rome to be vulnerable her allies would desert and support Carthage. Fortunately for Rome, Hannibal underestimated Rome and her allies. Additionally, although Hannibal went unmatched on the battlefield, he was unable to translate his victories into ending the war. Roman historian Livy tells of Hannibal's flaw in a conversation with his lieutenant Maharbal. Maharbal supposedly told Hannibal after his victory at Cannae, "no one man has been blessed with all God's gifts. You know Hannibal, how to win a fight; you do not know how to use your victory."<sup>1</sup> The final flaw of Hannibal's campaign was his lack of support from his home city of Carthage. His enemies in the senate were suspicious of his success and unwilling to provide Hannibal with reinforcements or siege equipment—both were essential if he was to assault the city of Rome.

---

<sup>1</sup> Livy. *The War with Hannibal*. London: Penguin Books 1965. 153

The showdown between Rome and Carthage was inevitable; both city-states grew rapidly and vied to be the dominant power in the Mediterranean. Virgil's epic poem the *Aeneid* tells us the legend of Carthage's hatred of Rome stemming from one of Rome's supposed founders Aeneas spurning the love of Carthaginian queen Dido. Dido's last words before her suicide were "a malediction to Aeneas and his descendants."<sup>2</sup> Historically the rivalry truly began after the Romans "involved themselves with affairs in Sicily."<sup>3</sup> Rome inserted itself into the boiling cauldron that was an island controlled by the Greeks, Carthage, and now mercenaries that pledged allegiance to Rome. Rome's power play was the direct cause of the First Punic War, in which Rome was able to best Hannibal's father, Hamilcar in battle. Defeat against the Romans did not stop Hamilcar Barca's vision of a Carthaginian Empire. After he settled Carthage's mercenary rebellion, Hamilcar set off to regain lost Carthaginian territory in Spain. By the time of his death in 247 BC he had "re-established and strengthened Carthaginian domination in southern Spain as far north as his new foundation of Acra Leuce [today, Alicante]."<sup>4</sup>

Most importantly Hamilcar brought his nine year old son, Hannibal, along to see the military action. Livy in his history of Rome tells of the legend that at age nine Hannibal was led up to a temple altar by his father and binded himself to an oath that "so soon as he [Hannibal] should be able he would be the declared enemy of the Roman People."<sup>5</sup> This oath was one that Hannibal took to heart—his family's name had been disgraced after the defeat in the First Punic War, but his father had managed to regain some prestige with his victories in Spain and over the mercenaries in the Truceless War. Hannibal saw the opportunity not only to make his family the most import in Carthage, but to immortalize himself in history—an opportunity Hannibal seized on.

After his brother-in-law Hasdrubal died while commanding forces in Spain, Hannibal was given supreme command of the Carthaginian forces. Hannibal quickly made a power play that was the direct cause of the Second Punic War—he attacked the town of Saguntum, a Roman ally. The Second Punic War had begun, "Hannibal had thrown down the gauntlet. The fall of Saguntum had fanned the sparks of rivalry into a blaze and made war inevitable."<sup>6</sup> One of Hannibal's greatest qualities was his decisiveness. He did not waiver when faced with adversity and post-Saguntum shows this quality in Hannibal. He did not wait for Rome to bring the war to his doorstep—Hannibal wanted to dictate the place and the conditions of battle. Hannibal's strategy was evident:

It is quite clear that Hannibal carried out a carefully prepared plan which he inherited from his father. His object was nothing less than the destruction of the power of Rome before Rome destroyed Carthage, and Rome's most vulnerable spot was in Italy itself where the Roman federation of states was still loose and the Celtic Tribes of Gauls in the North were in revolt.<sup>7</sup>

Hannibal's next move was to make his famous march over the Alps and bring the war to the Italian Peninsula.

---

<sup>2</sup> Matyszak. *The Enemies of Rome*. 2004, p. 21

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Caven. *The Punic Wars*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980. 78.

<sup>5</sup> Livy. *Volume V: Books XXI-XXII*. 1905, p. 5

<sup>6</sup> Scullard. *A History of the Roman World*. 1961, 180.

<sup>7</sup> Beer. *Alps and Elephants: Hannibals March*. London: Geoffrey Bless, 1955. 3.

An essential element to all of Hannibal's military operations was surprise and his march over the Alps was no exception. The Roman's had control of the sea and felt there was no rush to bring the war to Spain. Hannibal, they believed, had run out of territory to annex and would decay on the Iberian Peninsula until the mighty Roman Army arrived. The thought that an opposing army could navigate the treacherous passage through the Alps had not crossed their minds. Hannibal settled affairs in Spain, leaving his brother Hasdrubal (both Hasdrubal and Hannibal seem to be very common names in Carthage) as governor, and began his march with "90,000 infantry, 12,000 cavalry and 37 elephants, composed of men from Carthage and her dependencies, Numidia, Spain and the Balearic Islands."<sup>8</sup> The march over the Alps took a toll on the army of Hannibal where he lost a large amount of men to illness, some to desertion, and others to fighting mountainous tribes who were much more accustomed to fighting in the Alps. Hannibal arrived in Italy with about 20,000 infantry and 6,000 cavalry—a substantial force in its own right but one must wonder what if Carthage had controlled the seas and Hannibal had been able to convoy his forces to Italy? It appears that Rome would have been defeated by this massive force. Despite the shortcomings of the mountain passage, Hannibal made it across the Alps "to the utter surprise and consternation of the Romans. Hannibal and his army had crossed the Alps which [the Romans] had never thought of guarding."<sup>9</sup>

Hannibal's strategy hinged on the ability to convert local people to the Carthaginian cause—he needed supplies and more manpower. In addition to supplies and troops, Hannibal's army did not possess any siege equipment due to it being a gigantic burden to force his infantry men to carry ladders over a mountain and impossible to transport the massive siege towers over the Alps. Carthage would be of little help for Hannibal, "in everything that Hannibal did, he had to rely solely on himself, for the home government at Carthage could not be relied upon to support him or to prosecute the war with any energy at all."<sup>10</sup> Carthage's senators had always been suspicious of the success of its generals and the enemies of Hannibal made no exception for him. They constantly refused to provide him with reinforcements, even when victory was within the reach of Carthage. Under different political conditions Hannibal's offensive could have been more organized and constantly been resupplied.

Fortunately for Hannibal, the Celtic tribes in Gaul were filled with resentment toward the Romans and more than willing to provide him with soldiers, supplies, and horses.<sup>11</sup> The Celtic forces were a double edged sword—they were unreliable and they had no real interest in Carthage's foreign affairs—the Celts wanted revenge on the Romans and would achieve it through plunder. In battle Hannibal saw these mercenaries as expendable assets—very useful, but also very unreliable. They had given Hannibal what he needed most—reinforcements—and now it was time to square off with the Romans for the first time in his military career.

Hannibal's surprise invasion over the Alps led to the crushing defeat of the Romans at Ticino. Hannibal and his allies descended on the Roman army under the command of Publius Cornelius Scipio. Scipio's army was routed and his own life was only saved by his young son heroism. Scipio's son would play a major role in the events to come; however, Hannibal still had the massive upper hand, but he needed to prepare himself as all of Italy was now alert to his presence. His next conflict, and the first true battle of the Second Punic War, was now at hand.

---

<sup>8</sup> (Dorey and Dudley. *Rome Against Carthage*. 1971, p. 38)

<sup>9</sup> Beer: 1955. 77

<sup>10</sup> Beer. 4.

<sup>11</sup> (Dorey and Dudley. *Rome Against Carthage*. 1971, p. 46)

December, 218 BC on the banks of the Trebia was the scene of this battle and once again Hannibal was able to use surprise to his advantage. The Romans knew Hannibal had made his way into Italy, but constantly throughout the Second Punic War the Romans had great trouble in locating Hannibal's sizeable army. The Battle of Trebia was no exception. In the early morning Hannibal sent out his light and speedy Numidian horse riders to draw the Romans from their camp. The timing of this event became crucial in the outcome of the battle. While the Roman infantry and cavalry chased Hannibal's horses back toward his main army, Hannibal's heavy infantry was able to rest, remain warm, and eat a hearty breakfast. Morale in Hannibal's army was high; the same could not be said for the hungry, tired, and cold Romans. As soon as the Roman's made their way across the Trebia, Hannibal's forces met them head on—keeping them in the frigid water as long as possible. The fight was quick—some Romans fled back across the river, but most “perished on the banks of the river, before the elephants and the Gaulish cavalry.”<sup>12</sup> The message to the Romans was clear: Hannibal was a force to be reckoned with and was in Italy to stay.

Hannibal was able to minimize casualties in his first war effort against the Romans and had hoped to wait until the spring to continue campaigning against the Romans. His reasons were two-fold; first, he wanted his men to rest after a hard fought battle and all the marching they had done over the past years. Second, his mighty elephants were not accustomed to the cold and he feared for their health if he continued to exert them. Unfortunately his situation with the Celts dictated that he march on:

Hannibal was moving. His situation in Cisalpine Gaul was an uncomfortable one; the Gauls did no more than barely tolerate him, and had no enthusiasm for the presence of an army in their own country. The only condition on which they could achieve any feeling of cordiality was the prospect of carrying the war south into the rich lands of Etruria and Campania. Hannibal intended to cross the Apennines into Etruria at the first possible moment.<sup>13</sup>

While Hannibal was most comfortable on the battlefield, his diplomacy and his political tactics were not his strength. For Hannibal the sooner that he was on the move again, the more secure he would feel. His next move was to march south.

Hannibal decided to take the route down into central Italy under the least amount of Roman guard. Hannibal, as has been stated, was quite possibly the greatest general in all of antiquity; however, the Roman consul opposing Hannibal, Flaminius was not. Flaminius believed that he had been tracking down Hannibal's forces; however Hannibal was able to double back and was able to place his forces in position for a trap. The shores of Lake Trasimene would be where Hannibal would spring his next surprise assault. After an uncomfortable night's sleep for his troops, and under the cover of an early morning fog Hannibal sprung his trap. It was a short, ferocious battle and ended in disaster for the Roman's, claiming fifteen thousand men, including their general Flaminius, and Hannibal took another fifteen thousand prisoners. On the Carthaginian side only 1,500 men perished most of them being Gauls.<sup>14</sup> Once again Hannibal had been able to use superior tactics and the element of surprise to overwhelm the Roman forces. Hannibal had finally achieved something no other enemy of

<sup>12</sup> Baker. *Hannibal*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company 1929. 91

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 102.

Rome had been able to up to the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC—he stuck fear into the hearts of the people of Rome.

The defeat of Flaminius was a crushing blow to the Roman psyche; however shortly afterward Rome was in for another defeat. Hannibal was able to surround and defeat the propraetor, Centenius. Two Roman armies had again been bested by Hannibal within the span of a couple of months—a drastic strategy change was needed in Rome. The senate “determined to appoint a dictator...the man chosen for the office was Quintus Fabius Maximus.”<sup>15</sup> Roman historians do not give Q. Fabius Maximus enough credit in his role in the Second Punic War—eventually he would earn the title of the delayer. Fabius was a pioneer in guerrilla tactics and believed in keeping the bulk of the Roman army away from Hannibal’s superior forces. His ability to limit Hannibal’s advantage allowed the Roman’s to rebuild, recuperate, and develop a counter attack. However, traditional Roman’s were not proud of the guerrilla warfare tactics under Fabius—they did not possess the honor of the traditional Roman battle.

Fabius’ tactics had been tried and tested, “he would follow Hannibal’s army, always taking advantage of the ground, refusing to fight in conditions that favored the enemy, but losing no chance to cut off his forage parties and deny him supplies.”<sup>16</sup> The guerrilla style tactics exposed Hannibal’s greatest weakness—his lack of supplies. What little supply caravans being supplied to Hannibal were often hijacked by Roman forces making Hannibal’s forces hard pressed for weapons, food, and manpower. ‘The delayer’ bought Rome time and began to reestablish its depleted military for another traditional battle with Hannibal’s forces—this time the battle was to take place at Cannae.

The war seemed to have reached a stalemate. Hannibal could not gain ground against Roman forces that would not present themselves for traditional battle. However, Hannibal’s army received some promising news. Fabius’ term as dictator had reached its limits and the central authority in Rome would again be in the hands of the consuls. The consuls deviated from Fabius’ guerrilla war strategy and raised a massive army with the intention to finally crush Hannibal’s forces in open warfare. Livy’s account of the events leading up to Cannae is that the new Roman consuls and their new massive army followed Hannibal to the fields at Cannae and then divided their forces. Hannibal was more than prepared for this attack; in fact, he hoped the Romans would choose the fields of Cannae due to the fields allowing for a fighting place for his cavalry, who had proved thus far to be invincible.<sup>17</sup> Hannibal’s elaborate military game of chess had now been set on the fields of Cannae.

Hannibal capitalized on the separation of the Roman forces, quickly sending his light Numidian cavalry into the flanks of the Roman camps. While this attack served only as an opening skirmish, it struck the Romans with fear, and quickly took away their confidence. When the battle proper began, the Roman armies found themselves stuck in positions with very little maneuverability, which would lead to disaster for the Roman armies. The military tactics employed by Hannibal at Cannae have been studied for centuries after his victory, but in essence what occurred was:

“The Spanish bulge [Hannibal’s infantry], were struck by the irresistible advance of the enormous Roman centre, [and] began to cave in; and it caved in by degrees, till the Roman centre was sucked as if into a funnel. The Romans went on, insensible crowding

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>16</sup> (Dorey and Dudley. *Rome Against Carthage*. 1971, p. 56)

<sup>17</sup> (Livy. *Volume V: Books XXI-XXIII*. 1905, p. 347)

closer, and the bulge gave way before them, until the two deep columns of Libyan infantry, facing inward, became two long lines enveloping the Roman flanks.<sup>18</sup>

Although Hannibal's forces were fewer in number, they had managed to completely surround the bulk of the Roman army. The final piece to Hannibal's masterpiece was the flank by his general Hasdrubal, who had managed to attack the rear of the Roman Generals. The army was in disarray, separated from its leaders, and completely surrounded. Cannae was a crushing defeat for the Romans, and the closest Hannibal would come to conquering the Italian Peninsula.

Hannibal had once again displayed military brilliance in his victory; however, his actions after Cannae showed his fatal flaw. His general Maharbal urged Hannibal to march on the capital as the entire Roman state would be in complete disarray. Hannibal chose to rest his troops instead; a decision that would save Rome. Hannibal sent his general Hanno to Carthage in order to rally support for his effort in Italy and for the senate to send him a convoy of reinforcements. The Carthaginians had always been distrustful of the success of their generals and they sent Hannibal "4000 Numidians and 40 elephants."<sup>19</sup> A substantial force, but not one that Hannibal could employ in a siege of the city of Rome. The aftermath of Cannae and Hannibal's inability to lay siege on the Roman capital city saved the Italian war effort in the Second Punic War.

While Rome had once again been crushed on the battlefield, there was a shining light to come out of the battle; the allies of Rome stood by her. The main political component of Hannibal's strategy—to convert Rome's allies to the side of Carthage with his displays of military power—had failed. Additionally, the Roman will had still yet to have been broken—"with every disaster the Roman determination to resist was strengthened, and in spite of his triumphs on battlefields Hannibal had already failed, for the Roman federation remained unshaken."<sup>20</sup> Although Hannibal's forces remained strong in numbers, had yet to be defeated in battle, and held a substantial position in Italy, the war had effectively turned against Hannibal for good. He was never able to gain another military victory that rivaled the significance of Cannae—Hannibal had one chance at seize Rome and he passed on it.

The war in Italy turned to a stalemate, but there seemed to be one final hope for Hannibal. His brother Hasdrubal had raised an army in Spain and was mirroring Hannibal's passage of the Alps and had arrived in Italy. If they were to link "their victory would be an absolutely decisive victory. Rome was in no condition to recover from a serious defeat."<sup>21</sup> The Roman generals would not be fooled this time. A legion led by Claudius Nero was ready for Hasdrubal after his mountainous journey and planned an ambush. Nero's legions were victorious, and Hasdrubal was killed in action. Hannibal had no knowledge of his brother's defeat until before one of his last battles in Italy. His brother's head was thrown into his camp and Hannibal supposedly declared "I see there the fate of Carthage."<sup>22</sup> Hannibal would receive no more reinforcements in his conquest of Rome, and his declaration of the fate of Carthage proved to be an incredibly accurate one.

With the war in Italy stalled, Rome changed its tactics and went on the offensive. In the last years of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC a Roman army under the leadership of the greatest Roman general of the time, Scipio the younger, brought the fight to the doorstep of the Carthaginian

---

<sup>18</sup> Baker. 137

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>20</sup> Beer. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Baker. 239.

<sup>22</sup> Beer. 80.

capital. Hannibal was recalled from Rome in order to lead the defense of his homeland. The irony here is rich: a city that would not lend support to its greatest general in his campaign on the greatest power of antiquity, called for his support to protect their city.

Hannibal would meet his rival, Scipio, on the fields outside of the Carthaginian town of Zama. The two forces were equal in number and strength; however, it seemed Hannibal had one final advantage: he had 80 elephants at his disposal. In what appears to be the only miscalculation of his military career, Hannibal believed the elephants would break through the Roman army ranks, which were fairly inexperienced in elephant warfare. Scipio's military genius showed in his organization of his ranks to allow for the elephant charge to run directly through his ranks. The elephants proved to be more of a burden, some "insufficiently trained, were scared by the blare of trumpets, and ran amok among the Numidian cavalry."<sup>23</sup> Hannibal's elephants were a disaster, and he found his cavalry was in disarray. In the main bulk of the battle Scipio was able to successfully adapt his tactics to prevent Hannibal from effectively using his last lines of highly trained veterans to overwhelm the Roman ranks.

For the first time Hannibal had been defeated on the battlefield, and with it brought an end to the Second Punic War. The Romans were again victorious against Carthage despite the military brilliance of Hannibal Barca. He waged war on the Italian Peninsula for nearly a decade and a half before his final defeat on the African plains of Zama. Hannibal would survive the war and spend the rest of his life on the constant run from the Romans until at the age of sixty-four, he consumed poison and supposedly declared "let us now put an end to the great anxiety of the Romans who have thought it too lengthy and too heavy a task to wait for the death of a hated old man."<sup>24</sup>

The story of Hannibal is a tragic one. One man, unsupported by his homeland, brought fear to the hearts of the greatest military power in the ancient world. Had Hannibal been successful in his strategy to convert Roman allies to his side his success would have all but been assured. Hannibal would have then had access to more manpower and siege equipment. Rome was disorganized and in a state of panic after many of Hannibal's victories. If Carthage had been willing to provide Hannibal with reinforcements sent across the sea rather than having to travel across Europe and through the dangerous pass in the Alps, Hannibal's forces could have been resupplied and refreshed with fresh legs. Despite Hannibal's dominance as a military general, he was not the victor in the Second Punic War. The political situation seemed calculated against him, and he did not have the ability to use his victories to further his cause of the annihilation of Rome.

Hannibal seemed to have met his match in Scipio Africanus (the title he received after his victory at Zama). Scipio was able to capitalize on the few mistakes Hannibal made; which leads to the inevitable question: Did the fifteen years of unsuccessful campaigning in Italy, followed by the death of his brother, weaken Hannibal's resolve? The answer appears to be yes; however, credit must be given to Scipio's brilliance at Zama. Make no mistake, despite his defeat, the Second Punic War was Hannibal's war. One man stood up to the military machine of Rome and was nearly victorious. Hannibal achieved a feat no army had been able to do—having Romans fear him, which has eternalized Hannibal as one of the greatest generals in antiquity.

---

<sup>23</sup> (Dorey and Dudley. *Rome Against Carthage*. 1971, p. 146)

<sup>24</sup> Beer: 1955. 82

Work Cited

- Baker, G. (1929). *Hannibal*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company.
- Beer, S. G. (1955). *Alps and Elephants: Hannibals March*. London: Geoffrey Bles.
- Beer, S. G. (1969). *Hannibal: The Struggle for Power in the Mediterranean*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Caven, B. (1980). *The Punic Wars*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Dorey, T. A., & Dudley, D. R. (1971). *Rome Against Carthage*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Livy. (1965). *The War with Hannibal* (Vols. XXI-XXX). (A. d. Selincourt, Trans.) London: Penguin Books.
- Livy. (1905). *Volume V: Books XXI-XXII*. (B. Foster, Trans.) London: William Heinemann LTD.
- Matyszak, P. (2004). *The Enemies of Rome: From Hannibal to Attila the Hun*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Scullard, H. (1961). *A History of The Roman World: From 753 to 146 BC*. London: Methuen & Company.