

HANNIBAL OF CARTHAGE



During the time when Rome was a republic, the city of Carthage in North Africa became a rival for power in the Mediterranean world. Carthage was located just 300 miles across the sea from Rome. In between were the islands of Corsica, Sardinia, and Sicily—all controlled by Carthage, which also ruled parts of Spain and much of North Africa. Fighting eventually broke out between these two cities. After a long struggle lasting 23 years, Rome and Carthage agreed to a peace settlement, which ended what was called the First Punic War.

During the First Punic Wars, Carthage's army was led by the experienced general named Hamilcar Barca. When Barca made his plans for invading Spain, he decided to take with him his 9-year old son Hannibal. Just before leaving North Africa, he had his son take the following oath: "I swear that so soon as age permit, I will follow the Romans both at sea and on land. I will use fire and steel to arrest the destiny of Rome."

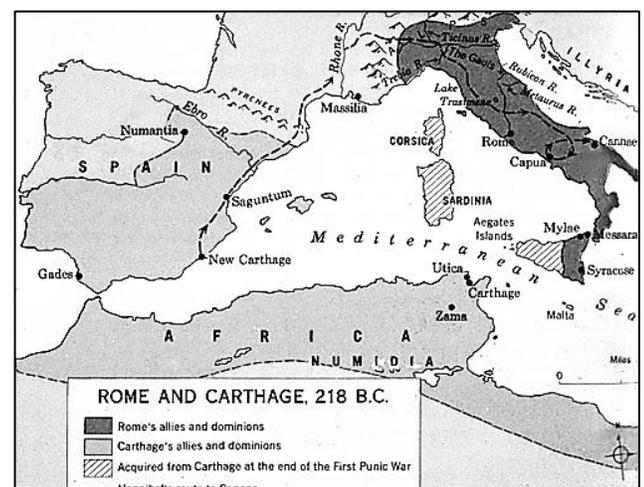
Years of fighting in Spanish territory saw Hannibal develop into a successful and respected officer. At age 26, five years after his father died, Hannibal became the army's choice to be their commander-in-chief. Hannibal attacked a city friendly to Rome. The Romans responded by declaring war on Carthage. Thus began the Second Punic War.

Hannibal decided on a bold plan to defeat Rome. He would invade Italy and fight the enemy on their soil. His strategy called for taking foot soldiers and cavalry from Spain across southern Gaul and over the towering Alps to northern Italy. It would be one of history's most daring marches. Just before leaving for Italy, Hannibal left his brother Hasdrubal in command of an army to protect Carthage's land in Africa and Spain. With about 40,000 soldiers and horsemen, plus 38 war elephants, the army began marching through.

After a march of several months, the army reached the white-peaked Alps. It was October and early snows made the narrow, winding mountain passes slippery and dangerous. Both soldiers and animals occasionally lost their footing along the steep mountainsides and tumbled to their death. Blinding snowstorms added to the misery. To make matters worse, unfriendly tribesmen in the area rolled heavy stones down upon the marchers causing more men and animals to lose their balance and fall. Baggage animals and troops at the rear of the army were favorite targets of the enemy. At one point a landslide blocked the path of the marchers. Cold, hunger, and exhaustion brought death to many soldiers, horses, and elephants that were used to the warm climate of Spain and Africa.

Finally, 20,000 weary foot soldiers and 6,000 cavalry came down from the Alps onto the plains of northern Italy. Almost half of the army and nearly all of the war elephants failed to survive the ordeal. Yet the loyal army continued to follow their determined commander. The men of Carthage soon won two battles against the Romans. Hannibal outmaneuvered two Roman armies before winning another on-sided victory.

About a year later, Carthage had its great victory at Cannae after Hannibal tricked a large Roman army numbering nearly 100,000. Hannibal positioned his outnumbered soldiers in a long line, then ordered the center of the line to retreat. The Romans, who thought the enemy was falling back in defeat, advanced into the middle. Hannibal then had the ends of the battle line move quickly around the rear of the Roman army. The Romans were surrounded and their hopeless situation ended in terrible defeat. About 50,000 were killed, including former consuls, senators, nobles, and many leading citizens.



Following their shocking defeat at Cannae, the Romans avoided major battles in the years ahead. They were afraid to risk open warfare with Hannibal. Their strategy succeeded because as time went on Hannibal's army grew weaker. It became increasingly difficult to find adequate supplies, and Carthage had no navy to back up land operations. Worst of all, badly needed reinforcements led by Hannibal's brother Hasdrubal failed to reach him. They were defeated in northern Italy after crossing the Alps. Hannibal learned of this brother's defeat when Hasdrubal's head was thrown into his camp.

After 15 years on the Italian peninsula, Hannibal was forced to return to Carthage. He had won many victories, but had not won the war. Carthage was now under attack by the troops of Scipio. The city soon fell and 20,000 defenders were lost. But Hannibal managed to escape.

The remaining years of Hannibal's life were spent helping several Mediterranean kingdoms fight the power of Rome. In one memorable battle at sea, he attacked the enemy by throwing kettles of snakes onto the decks of Roman ships. Finally, however, he was tracked down. But instead of surrendering, he chose to die by swallowing poison, which he kept secretly in a ring. This act ended at age 64 the brilliant career of a military genius whose greatness puts him in a class with only Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon.