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*Hannibal's Importance in the Second
Punic War*

By Steve Nery

Rome eventually won the Second Punic War, but not until after Hannibal ravaged Italy for over a decade and won many huge victories along the way. There is no doubt that Hannibal was a great Carthaginian general, at the very least. There are many factors in war, though, such as the battle terrain, the size of the armies, and the competence of each army. The question then must be asked: How much was the war influenced by Hannibal himself? By examining him and other Carthaginian commanders and their success, as well as the conditions surrounding their battles, it can hopefully be proved that Hannibal's role in the war was a major reason for the Carthaginians' success for many battles. Unfortunately, his ineffective grand strategy also led to the Carthaginians' loss of the war.

First let us examine Hannibal's exploits. In the winter of 218 B.C., he routed the Romans at the Battle of Trebbia. After days of being encamped near each other, the two forces met when the Romans were drawn out of their camp by some Numidian cavalry. Hannibal, having discovered that the Romans never planned for an ambush in open ground, dispatched his younger brother Mago with a small force to surprise the enemy from behind in the battle. When

the Romans came out, Hannibal brought out his infantry, numbering some 20,000, up in one big line, while his cavalry, numbering 10,000, were split up on both sides of the line. His slingers and pikemen, about 8,000 strong, were located in front of his infantry and cavalry. Tiberius Sempronius Longus, the consul in charge of the Romans on that day, brought out his three lines of infantry, 36,000 strong, and posted his 8,000 cavalry on the sides. Longus was not an incompetent man; he had won a small victory over Hannibal shortly before, but was perhaps a little too eager to follow it up. He was probably not quite as good of a commander as Publius Cornelius Scipio, the other consul. This battle took place on a flat and treeless piece of land, so the terrain gave neither side an advantage in this regard, although Longus had 6,000 more men than Hannibal. The battle initially began as a standoff, but on the sides Hannibal's cavalry outflanked the enemy's, as would be the case in most battles. After some heavy fighting, Mago emerged with his 1,000 infantrymen and 1,000 cavalry and attacked the Romans from behind. The Romans were routed, as only 10,000 men managed to escape from the battlefield. Every aspect of this battle seems to be equal, or even favor the Romans. The terrain was suited for an even battle, and the Romans held the strength in numbers. There is no evidence either that the Carthaginians were superior to the Romans in fighting ability, as the battle was at a standstill until Mago attacked. In fact, the Romans who

escaped actually fought better than Hannibal's men, as they "hacked a passage with the edge of the sword right through the African center (Livy 82)." The only thing that won the battle for Hannibal this day was his brilliant decision to somehow hide a contingent of his troops in an open field.

Hannibal's next great victory came at Trasimene the following summer. This time he faced the consul Gaius Flaminius, who was not the military equal of his predecessors. Hannibal knew this and realized that Flaminius would give him plenty of opportunities for a pitched battle. Livy praises Hannibal for this, calling his reasoning "both far sighted and strategically sound" and claiming, "there is no more precious asset for a general than a knowledge of his opponent's guiding principles and character (Livy 247)." Hannibal therefore led his men into a favorable place for a battle. He marched through a valley, with Lake Trasimene on his right, and hills on his left. As Flaminius followed him, he sent the slingers and pikemen, as well as the Celts and his cavalry under cover of the hills during one night. Flaminius pitched his camp next to the lake, not far from Hannibal's, just as was expected from him. At the first sign of dawn the next day, Flaminius marched his troops into battle. Once the Romans engaged Hannibal's contingent, his troops lying in ambush rushed at the Romans and fell upon them from every side at once. "In consequence, most of the troops were cut down while they

were still in marching order and without the least chance to defend themselves, delivered up to slaughter (Polybius 250)." About 15,000 Romans died in the valley and another 10,000 were captured, while Hannibal's losses amounted to no more than 2,500. The deck was stacked in Hannibal's favor here, as he chose a favorable spot for battle, and probably had more men than the Romans, with his new Gallic allies. He must still be commended for realizing that the opposing commander was brash and hungry for battle, and for plotting another ambush to produce yet another massacre. While Flaminius was foolish to fall into the trap, Hannibal was wise for knowing that he would.

His last and most impressive complete route came at Cannae in the summer of 216 B.C. The Romans, led by the cocky Gaius Terentius Varro and the wiser Lucius Aemilius Paullus, had a massive force of 80,000 infantry, and over 6,000 cavalry. Hannibal, by contrast, had about 40,000 men, and 10,000 cavalry. Never afraid to sacrifice his allies, Hannibal put the Celts in the front lines, in an arched formation, so that the center of the first line was closer to the Romans than the sides were. The two armies clashed on even ground, and Hannibal's cavalry almost completely destroyed Varro's. Meanwhile, the Romans defeated the thin first line and poured through the Celtic and Spanish center, and rushed triumphantly towards the Carthaginians. The Romans came through so heavily that "they then had both contingents of the African heavy

infantry on their flanks (Polybius 272)." The Carthaginian sides both turned inward and surrounded the Romans. "The result was exactly what Hannibal had planned: the Romans, by pressing too far ahead in pursuit of the Celts were trapped between the two divisions of Africans (Polybius 272)." Complete massacre ensued. About 10,000 Romans were captured, and nearly all the rest, including the consul Paullus, were killed. Hannibal lost at the most 6,000 men. This was the worst defeat in Roman history to this point. Although the Roman army was inexperienced and one of its generals was incompetent, it still had a great advantage in numbers. It was through Hannibal's sacrifice of his allies that he managed to surround and route the Romans. Again, his leadership must be praised.

Hannibal had a knack for short-term strategies away from battle as well. After the Battle of Trasimene and before the Battle of Cannae, eventual war hero Quintus Fabius Maximus, the "Cunctator," followed Hannibal around and had him trapped at a passage in the mountains. Recognizing that he was in an unfavorable position, and that his army would most likely lose a battle there, Hannibal fooled the Romans that night. Fabius had posted 4,000 of his men in a pass so as to prevent Hannibal from escaping. Once darkness set in, Hannibal had his men tie sticks to 2,000 cattle, light them, and drive them up the gorge. The Romans mistook the cattle for a large Carthaginian force coming at them at full

speed, and retreated. Hannibal subsequently "brought both his army and his plunder safely through the gorge (Polybius 260)," and even rescued 1,000 of his men who had been taken hostages. Because of his quick thinking, Hannibal had managed to escape from a position in which the Romans thought they had the possibility to end his campaign.

Even in defeat, Hannibal was still an amazing commander. Although his army was routed at Zama by Publius Cornelius Scipio the younger when he was recalled to Africa, Hannibal still apparently drew up an ingenious battle formation. Always spontaneous, he formed his ranks in the Roman fashion, in three distinct lines. He placed his elephants in the very front, to try to cause commotion in the Roman ranks, and make them lose formation. Unfortunately for him, the elephants were ineffective, as Scipio drew his ranks up with gaps in between maniples so that the elephants would charge right through. Not only that, but as modern historian Brian Caven iterates, "The elephants were in all probability inadequately trained (Caven 251)." On the flanks, Hannibal placed his cavalry to contend with the Romans', but he did not have the great cavalry upon which he typically relied to outflank the enemies. Behind the elephants Hannibal placed the auxiliaries, including thousands of mercenaries. These men were placed at the front to wound the Romans and cause disorder, so that his veterans (who were in the second line) could then move up and

crush the Romans. They were also at the front to prevent them from running away, as these men had no loyalty to Carthage. This too failed, though not by Hannibal's fault. Livy claims that the mercenaries ran away and were forced to fight the Carthaginians in order to make a retreat, while Polybius blames the Carthaginians for not supporting the mercenaries. In all probability, Livy is correct, as Hannibal's trusted veterans never showed any signs of cowardice in previous battles, and the mercenaries were more concerned about getting paid than about defeating the Romans. Hannibal had no reason to foresee that the mercenaries would have to make a path through his own men by blood; he probably presumed that they would simply drop back and get out of the way as the Roman *velites* commonly did. Had the mercenaries done their job, the veterans could have come up and faced a weakened Roman line. The third line was composed of his Italian contingent, of whose loyalty he was unsure. They were therefore placed some distance back, as to prevent a problem. This tactic had already worked before for Hannibal, such as when he was crossing the Alps with some Gauls. He placed the Gauls at the rear of his line, by his best troops, so that an attack by them would not prove disastrous. More could not have been asked from Hannibal, with the army that he had available. Livy writes, "He had tried everything he could both before and during the engagement before he withdrew from the battle, and on the admission even of

Scipio as well as of all the military experts, he achieved the distinction of having drawn up his line on that day with remarkable skill (663)." Polybius and even modern historians seem to agree with this assessment.

Based on his defeat, it is safe to conclude that not even Hannibal's genius could overcome the incompetence of his army, especially up against as formidable an adversary as Scipio. While Hannibal had routed the Roman army thrice before, and won several other smaller battles, Caven describes what it was he was lacking at Zama that his own genius could not make up for:

But at Zama, Hannibal had not encountered a Longus or a Varro or a Fulvius; his elephants were not the noble beasts that had crossed the Pyrenees, the Rhone and the Alps; his cavalry, inferior in number, had apparently no Hasdrubal, Hanno or Maharbal to lead them; his Balaerie slingers and Moroccan bowmen were of little use in hand-to-hand fighting and in retreat; and his second line, which might have done useful work if the mercenaries had succeeded in driving back the enemy in disorder, were not the stuff to stem an advance that was carrying all before it (253).

If Hannibal had the army that he took with him into Italy at the beginning of the war, his strategy at Zama should have worked. Instead he was left with only one competent line, that of his veterans, and they were much

older and less numerous than they were at Cannae. In all likelihood, no commander could have defeated Hannibal when he had a strong army. As we shall see, though, it was his own fault that he did not have a competent army raised and ready for the battle.

Hasdrubal, Hannibal's brother, was another Carthaginian commander, but he did not enjoy nearly the same kind of success that Hannibal did. His failure should help to dispel any theories about all of the Barcas being great generals, or of the Carthaginians simply being better fighters than the Romans, and should help show Hannibal's unique talent. Again, there are several factors that must be examined to see how much of an impact Hasdrubal had in his defeats, but it should be clear that many of his conditions were close to Hannibal's, yet he could not succeed on the same level as Hannibal.

Hasdrubal was stationed in Spain in the year 210 B.C., and Scipio was also in that area, trying to win the Spaniards over as allies. Hasdrubal was in command of a force of about 30,000 Carthaginians and Spaniards, whom Hannibal had left him in charge of before crossing the Alps several years before. Scipio's force also included a large contingent of Spaniards, whom Hasdrubal had previously defeated. The two armies met each other near the town of Baecula after having been wary of each other for some time. When Hasdrubal learned of Scipio's arrival near him, he positioned his men so

that they were protected both by a river and a steep ridge in front of them. "Scipio when he came up was eager to give battle, but felt uncertain as to how to proceed when he saw what a strong and advantageous position the enemy had chose (Polybius 421)." He finally decided to attack, though, alarmed at the possibility of Hasdrubal meeting up with Mago or another Carthaginian general. Scipio sent his best men up the ridge to attack the Carthaginian covering force. At this point, Hasdrubal initially did not make any move, until he saw that his men were suffering heavy losses. When this occurred, he led his men out to the brow of the hill, trusting the strength in their position rather than any strategy. Scipio sent his light-armed troops up the hill, and took half of his army with him to attack the Carthaginians from the left flank. Hasdrubal was still leading some of his troops out of camp, as he had not responded early enough to the attack. "Up to this moment he had waited there, trusting to the natural strength of his position and feeling confident that then enemy would never venture to attack him, and so because the flank assault took him by surprise, he was too late in deploying his troops (Polybius 421)." When Hasdrubal saw that he was losing the battle, he escaped with about 10,000 men. Scipio did not follow him to route the remaining force, for fear of running into another Carthaginian general. This was still a grand success for Scipio, though, as he had managed to defeat an army which should have been able to easily

hold their position if they had only been ready. The blame for this loss must fall on Hasdrubal's shoulders, as he had not prepared his troops for battle, even when he saw a part of the Roman force climb the ridge to attack his light armed troops. He had instead acted too confidently, and did not realize that the small force climbing the ridge was simply a diversion. While Scipio's men were experienced from conquering Spain, Hasdrubal's men were part of the force that had initially conquered Spain for Carthage some years before. With a division of the same genre of men, Hannibal had enjoyed great success in Italy to this point. Hasdrubal had managed to blow this battle despite his advantage in position and his army of veterans.

Hasdrubal and the men that he escaped with then proceeded to cross the Alps, in a much more successful manner than Hannibal had. The Romans sent the consul Marcus Livius Salinator to face Hasdrubal in northern Italy. Livius was reinforced with 7,000 of the other consul's men, to help him win this battle. According to Livy, when Hasdrubal saw that both consuls were present on that day, he thought that they might have already defeated Hannibal. Accordingly, he determined to fight this battle to the last man. He had an army composed of skilled fighters from Spain, a large number of Gauls, and some Ligurians. Hasdrubal drew his formation up so that it was deeper than it was wide, which made it easier to attack its sides. On the right

side of the lines, Hasdrubal and Nero (the other consul) clashed. "There, in that sector, were the two commanders-in-chief, the greater part of the Roman foot and Roman horse; there were the veteran Spaniards, wise in the ways of Roman warfare, and the tough fighters of Liguria (Livy 492)." Nero was unable to get directly through Hasdrubal's men, so he detached part of his force and sent them around the side. Once again, Hasdrubal did not adequately defend for an attack to the side, and he was outflanked. Nearly all of his army was killed, including himself. Polybius and Livy praise him for his fighting prowess and bravery, as Livy claims, "There, still fighting, he found a death worthy of his father Hamilcar and his brother Hannibal (Livy 493)." While Hasdrubal had done everything that he could do as a soldier, he was simply not nearly as gifted as his brother at commanding troops. Caven eulogizes him this way: "A man of very ordinary ability as a strategist and tactician, he would seem to have had some administrative capacity but hardly a spark of the genius or a scrap of the personal magnetism that made Hannibal almost unique (Caven 215)." In contrast to his brother, we see that Hannibal enjoyed far greater success with the same breed Carthaginians whom Hasdrubal was in charge of, as both of their armies were instrumental in victories in Spain before the Second Punic War even started. Therefore it would be foolish to stereotype all of the Carthaginian generals, or even just the

Barcas as being superior breed of leaders. It would also not give Hannibal due credit to claim that the Carthaginians were just a good fighting people. Indeed, it took a genius of Hannibal's caliber to come up with strategies to defeat Roman armies that were larger than his own.

As skilled as Hannibal was at commanding his troops in battle, he failed in several other exploits necessary to wage a successful war. One of these failures came before the war even began. In crossing the Alps, he lost over half of his men, and many of his pack animals. As B.D. Hoyos writes, "This had not been inevitable. As the Carthaginians well knew, many Gallic peoples had migrated (with wagons, families, and animals) across the Alps in both directions and without disaster, just as a decade later Hannibal's brother would bring a new army through in good shape (Hoyos 173)." Granted, neither the Gallic tribes nor Hasdrubal took as large of a force over the mountain range, but Hannibal could have averted disaster if he had timed his campaign better. Had he crossed the Alps either before or after the bitter mountain winter, he may well have been able to bring fifty to sixty thousand men to Italy in good shape. With this large of a force, as well as his Gallic allies, things may have turned out different.

Another flaw in his strategy lies in his failure to get reinforced. Carthage did seek at times to give him fresh troops, as when he received 4,000 new men in 215 B.C.,

and when Hasdrubal tried to join him. According to the ancient sources, though, Hannibal could have been reinforced more if he wanted to. "Polybius stresses that it was Hannibal who all these years held the threads to all theatres of war and diplomacy in his own hands. Thus it was Hannibal who allowed himself to do without reinforcements for years on end (Hoyos 175)." It is interesting to note that thousands of forces were sent to Spain and Sicily during the war, places that were not nearly as crucial as Hannibal's position in Italy. Perhaps Hannibal was too cocky to think he needed more troops, or perhaps he did not wish to ask Carthage for more men, as this was basically a war that he started with his own actions in Spain. Either way, his failure to get more men limited his ability to defend all his allies in the Italian peninsula and certainly restricted any possibility of a march on the city of Rome itself. This failure also prevented him from maintaining a strong army, with which he may have been able to defeat Scipio in Africa.

There was much speculation by the ancient sources that Hannibal missed his chance to win the war when he did not march on Rome after the battle of Cannae. According to legend, Maharbal, the commander of the Carthaginian cavalry, wished to make the march for Rome, and Hannibal refused. Livy quotes Maharbal as saying, "You know, Hannibal, how to win a fight; you do not know how to use your victory (Livy 151)." Livy goes on to claim,

"It is generally believed that that day's delay was the salvation of the City and of the Empire (Livy 151)." Most modern sources do not believe that Hannibal's refusal to march was actually the salvation of Rome, as Hannibal was not skilled at siege warfare and perhaps would not have been able to take the city. Hannibal may also have expected the Romans to negotiate a treaty to end the war, as was common after a crushing defeat in those days. The fact still remains that in order to win this war, Hannibal would have needed to take the city of Rome itself, whether he knew it at the time or not. Hoyos claims that Maharbal's idea was a good one, as he wanted to press on with his cavalry and take the city by surprise (177). This may well have worked, as the city would most likely have been in a great deal of panic after the loss of so many men in the battle, including one consul and eighty senators. There is also the matter that the Romans did not have a skilled veteran army to defend the city either. Whether or not Hannibal could have taken the city cannot be proclaimed for sure, but if there was one time in the war in which he had a good chance at it, this was that time.

It seems that with Hannibal's grand strategy for the war, he should have taken the chance of attacking Rome and ending the war in a single battle. After the Romans declined to negotiate following their loss at Cannae, he must have known how hard the Romans were determined to fight. He could not win a long drawn-out war, for he did not

acquire the men to defend all of his allies in Italy, nor could he count on them all remaining loyal. Only by keeping the energy he generated at Cannae constant could he have counted on keeping his allies. By slowing the war down after the battle, this possibility was lost.

It is safe to conclude that Carthage's initial success in the Second Punic War was because of Hannibal's brilliance as a leader. With a good army at his service, nobody in his time was his equal. His remarkable skill was not enough to make up for an incompetent army, though, such as the one he commanded at the Battle of Zama. He was also not the best at making up a grand strategy. Although his idea of winning over allies in Italy seemed like a good one, as it would get him more troops, it also meant that he had to spread himself too thin all their cities. Eventually, he was not able to defend any of them. He also failed at maintaining a good army, although he had the opportunity to do so. Therefore his role in the war can be assessed thus: his strategies were what won several huge victories over the Romans at the beginning (and lesser victories later on, as the Romans refused to fight any more huge pitched battles), but his flawed grand strategy also helped lead to Carthage's defeat in the end.

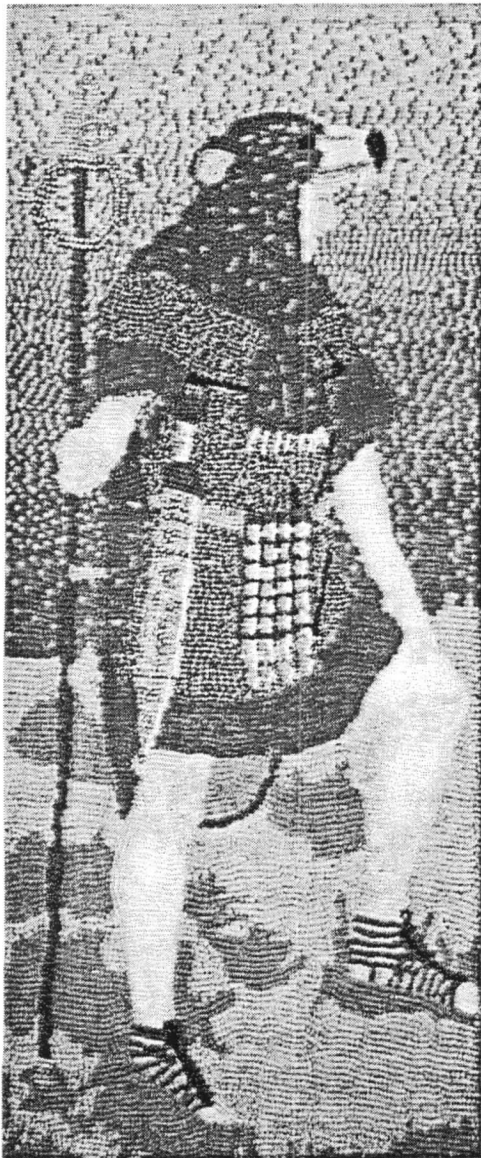
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Mosaic

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