

Life of Hannibal

Cornelius Nepos

1.1

I. HANNIBAL was the son of Hamilcar, and a native of Carthage. If it be true, as no one doubts, that the Roman people excelled all other nations in warlike merit, it is not to be disputed that Hannibal surpassed other commanders in ability as much as the Romans surpassed all other people in valour;

1.2

for as often as he engaged with the Romans in Italy, he always came off with the advantage; and, had not his efforts been paralyzed by the envy of his countrymen at home, he would appear to have been capable of getting the mastery over the Romans. But the jealous opposition of many prevailed against the ability of one.

1.3

He, however, so cherished in his mind the hatred which his father had borne the Romans, and which was left him, as it were, by bequest, that he laid down his life before he would abate it; for even when he was exiled from his country, and stood in need of support from others, he never ceased in thought to make war with the Romans.

2.1

To say nothing of Philip, whom he rendered an enemy to the Romans, though at a distance from him, Antiochus was the most powerful of all kings at that period; and him he so inflamed with a desire for war, that he endeavoured to bring troops against Italy even from the Red Sea.

2.2

As some ambassadors from Rome were sent to that prince, in order to gain information

respecting his intentions, and to endeavour, by underhand contrivances, to render Hannibal an object of suspicion to the king (as if, being bribed by them, he entertained other sentiments than before); and as they were not unsuccessful in their attempts, and Hannibal became aware of that fact, and found himself excluded from the privy council, he went at a time appointed to the king himself,

2.3

and, after having said much concerning his attachment to him and his hatred to the Romans, he added the following statement: My father Hamilcar, said he, when I was a very little boy, being not more than nine years old, offered sacrifices at Carthage, when he was going as commander into Spain, to Jupiter, the best and greatest of the gods;

2.4

and while this religious ceremony was being performed, he asked me whether I should like to go with him to the camp. As I willingly expressed my consent, and proceeded to beg him not to hesitate to take me, he replied, I will do so, if you will give me the promise which I ask of you. At the same time he led me to the altar at which he had begun to sacrifice, and, sending the rest of the company away, required me, taking hold of the altar, to swear that I would never be in friendship with the Romans.

2.5

This oath, thus taken before my father, I have so strictly kept even to this day, that no man ought to doubt but that I shall be of the same mind for the rest of my life.

2.6

If, therefore, you entertain any friendly thoughts towards the Romans, you will not act

imprudently if you conceal them from me; but whenever you prepare war, you will disappoint yourself unless you constitute me leader in it.

3.1

At this age, accordingly, he accompanied his father into Spain. After his father's death, when Hasdrubal was made general-in-chief, he had the command of all the cavalry.

3.2

When Hasdrubal also was killed, the army conferred upon him the supreme command, and this act, when reported at Carthage, received public approbation.

Hannibal being thus made commander-in-chief, at the age of five-and-twenty, subdued in war, during the next three years, all the nations of Spain, took Saguntum, a city in alliance with the Romans, by storm, and collected three vast armies,

3.3

of which he sent one into Africa, left another with his brother Hasdrubal in Spain, and took the third with him into Italy. He made his way through the forests of the Pyrenees,²³¹ he engaged, wherever he directed his course, with all the inhabitants of the country, and let none go unconquered.

3.4

On arriving at the Alps, which separate Italy from Gaul, and which no one had ever crossed with an army before him, (except Hercules the Greek, from which achievement the forest there is now called the Grecian forest), he cut to pieces the people of the Alps who endeavoured to prevent his passage, laid open those parts, made roads, and put things in such a state, that an elephant fully equipped could walk where previously one unarmed man could scarcely crawl. Along this tract

he led his army, and arrived in Italy.

4.1

On the banks of the Rhone he engaged with the consul Publius Cornelius Scipio, and put him to flight. At the Po he fought with the same consul for the possession of Clastidium, and expelled him from that place wounded

4.2

and defeated the same Scipio, with his colleague Tiberius Longus, came against him a third time at the Trebia; he came to battle with them, and put both of them to flight. He then passed through the country of the Ligurians over the chain of the Apennines, directing his course towards Etruria.

4.3

During this march he was afflicted with so violent a distemper in his eyes, that he never had the use of his right eye so well afterwards. But even when he was troubled with this malady, and carried in a litter, he cut off Caius Flaminius the consul at the lake Trasimenus, being caught with his army in an ambush; and not long after he killed the praetor Caius Centenius, who was occupying the forest with a choice body of troops. He then proceeded into Apulia,

4.4

where the two consuls, Caius Terentius Varro, and Paulus Aemilius, met him, both of whose armies he routed in one battle; the consul Paulus he killed, with several others of consular dignity, and among them Cnaeus Servilius Geminus, who had been consul the year before.

5.1

After fighting this battle, he marched towards Rome, nobody opposing him, and halted on the hills near the city. When he had lain encamped there some days, and was turning back towards Capua, Quintus Fabius Maximus, the Roman dictator, threw himself in his way in the Falernian territory.

5.2

Here, though enclosed in a confined space, he extricated himself without any loss to his army. He deceived Fabius, a most skilful commander; for, when night had come on, he set fire to some bundles of twigs, tied upon the horns of oxen, and drove forward a vast number of those cattle, scattering themselves hither and thither. By presenting this object suddenly to their view, he struck such terror into the army of the Romans, that nobody ventured to stir beyond the rampart.

5.3

Not many days after this success, he put to flight Marcus Minucius Rufus, master of the horse, who was equal in power with the dictator, and who had been drawn into an engagement by a stratagem. While he was at a distance, too, he cut off 234 Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, consul for the second time, in the country of the Lucanians, after he had been inveigled into an ambush. In like manner he caused the death of Marcus Claudius Marcellus, consul for the fifth time, at Venusia.

5.4

To enumerate his battles would occupy too much time; and this one observation, accordingly, (from which it will be understood how great a general he was), will be sufficient, that, as long as he continued in Italy, none made a stand against him in a regular engagement, none, after the battle of Cannae, pitched a camp against him in the field.

6.1

Being recalled, without having suffered any defeat, to defend his country, he maintained a war with the son of that Publius Scipio whom he had routed first on the Rhone, again on the Po, and a third time on the Trebia.

6.2

As the resources of his country were now exhausted, he wished, by a treaty with him, to put a stop to the war for a time, in order that he might engage in it afterwards with greater vigour. He came to a conference with him, but the conditions were not agreed upon.

6.3

A few days after this meeting, he came to battle with Scipio at Zama; and being defeated (incredible to relate!) he made his way to Adrumetum, which is about three hundred miles from Zama, in two days and two nights.

6.4

In the course of his retreat, some Numidians, who had left the field in his company, formed a conspiracy against him; however he not only escaped them, but deprived them of life. At Adrumetum he assembled those who had survived the defeat, and, with the aid of new levies, drew together, in a few days, a numerous force.

7.1

While he was most vigorously engaged in preparing for action, the Carthaginians made an end of the war by a treaty with the Romans. He had nevertheless afterwards the command of the army, and continued to act, as well as his brother Mago, in Africa, until the time when Publius

Sulpicius and Caius Aurelius became consuls;

7.2

for, during their term of office, ambassadors from Carthage went to Rome, to thank the Roman senate and people for having made peace with them, and to present them, on that account, with a crown of gold, requesting, at the same time, that their hostages might reside at Fregellae, and that their prisoners might be restored.

7.3

An answer was made them, by a resolution of the senate, that their present was acceptable and welcome, and that their hostages should live in the place which they desired, but that they would not restore the prisoners, because the Carthaginians retained Hannibal, by whose acts the war had been occasioned, and who was the bitterest of enemies to the name of Rome, in command of the army, as also his brother Mago.

7.4

The Carthaginians, on hearing this answer, recalled Hannibal and Mago home. When he returned, he was made praetor, in the two-and-twentieth year after he had been appointed king; for, as consuls are elected at Rome, so, at Carthage, two kings are annually chosen, retaining their office for a year.

7.5

In that post Hannibal conducted himself with the same activity as he had exhibited in war; for he took care, not only that there should be money raised from new taxes, to be paid to the Romans according to the treaty, but that there should be a surplus to be deposited in the treasury.

7.6

In the year after his praetorship, when Marcus Claudius and Lucius Furius were consuls, ambassadors from Rome came again to Carthage; and Hannibal, supposing that they were sent to demand that he should be delivered to the Romans, went secretly, before an audience of the senate was given them, on board a vessel, and fled into Syria to Antiochus.

7.7

His departure being made public, the Carthaginians sent two ships to seize him, if they could overtake him. His property they confiscated; his house they razed to its foundations; and himself they declared an outlaw.

8.1

In the third year, however, after he had fled from home, and in the consulship of Lucius Cornelius and Quintus Minucius, Hannibal landed with five ships in Africa, on the coast of the Cyrenaeans, to try if he could move the Carthaginians to war, by giving them hope and confidence in Antiochus, whom he had now persuaded to proceed with his forces to Italy. Thither he summoned his brother Mago;

8.2

and, when the Carthaginians knew of the circumstance, they inflicted on Mago the same penalties as they had laid on his absent brother. When they had let loose their vessels, and sailed off, in despair of success, Hannibal went to join Antiochus. Of Mago's end two accounts have been given; for some have left on record that he perished by shipwreck, others that he was killed by his own slaves.

8.3

Antiochus, if he had been as ready to obey Hannibal's advice in conducting the war as he had resolved to be when he undertook it, might have fought for the empire of the world nearer the Tiber than Thermopylae. Hannibal, however, though he saw him attempt many things imprudently, left him in nothing unsupported.

8.4

He took the command of a few ships, which he had been directed to bring from Syria into Asia, and with these he engaged the fleet of the Rhodians in the Pamphylian sea, and though his men were overpowered in the struggle by the number of the enemy, he had the advantage himself in the wing in which he acted.

9.1

After Antiochus was put to flight, Hannibal, fearing that he should be delivered to the Romans (an event which would doubtless have come to pass, if he had given the king an opportunity of securing him), went off to the people of Gortyn, in Crete, that he might there consider in what place he should settle himself.

9.2

But, as he was the most perspicacious of all men, he saw that unless he took some precautions, he should be in great danger from the covetousness of the Cretans; for he carried with him a large sum of money, of which he knew that a report had gone abroad.

9.3

He therefore adopted the following contrivance; he filled several pots with lead, covering the

upper part with gold and silver, and deposited them, in the presence of the leading men, in the temple of Diana, pretending that he trusted his fortune to their honesty. Having thus deceived them, he filled the whole of some brazen statues, which he carried with him, with his money, and threw them down in an open place at his own residence.

9.4

The Gortynians, meanwhile, guarded the temple with extreme care, not so much against others as against Hannibal himself, lest he should remove any thing without their knowledge, and carry it off with him.

10.1

The Carthaginian, having thus saved his property, and deceived all the Cretans, went into Pontus to Prusias, with whom he showed himself of the same mind as to Italy; for he did nothing but excite the king to arms, and animate him against the Romans,

10.2

and seeing that he was not at all strong in domestic resources, he induced other princes to join him, and united warlike nations on his side. Eumenes, king of Pergamus, was at variance with Prusias, and war was maintained between them by sea and land, for which reason Hannibal was the more desirous that he should be crushed.

10.3

Eumenes had the superiority on both elements, and Hannibal thought that, if he could but cut him off, his other projects would be easier of execution. To put an end to his life, therefore, he adopted the following stratagem.

10.4

They were to engage by sea in a few days; Hannibal was inferior in number of vessels, and had to use art in the contest, as he was no match for his enemy in force. He accordingly ordered as many poisonous serpents as possible to be brought together alive, and to be put into earthen vessels,

10.5

of which when he had collected a large number, he called the officers of his ships together, on the day on which he was going to fight at sea, and directed them all to make an attack upon the single ship of King Eumenes, and to be content with simply defending themselves against others, as they might easily do with the aid of the vast number of serpents;

10.6

adding that he would take care they should know in what ship Eumenes sailed, and promising that, if they took or killed him, it should be of great advantage to them.

11.1

After this exhortation was given to the soldiers, the fleets were brought out for action by both parties. When the line of each was formed, and before the signal was given for battle, Hannibal, in order to show his men where Eumenes was, despatched to him a letter-carrier in a boat with a herald's staff;

11.2

who, when he reached the enemy's line of vessels, held out a letter, and signified that he was looking for the king; he was therefore immediately taken to Eumenes, because nobody doubted

that there was something written in the letter relating to peace. The messenger, having thus made the king's ship known to his party, returned to the same place from which he had come.

11.3

Eumenes, on opening the letter, found nothing in it but what was meant to ridicule him; and though he wondered as to the motive of it, and none could be discovered, yet he did not hesitate to come at once to battle.

11.4

In the conflict, the Bithynians, according to the direction of Hannibal, fell all at once upon the ship of Eumenes. That prince, as he was unable to withstand their onset, sought safety in flight, but would not have found it, had he not taken refuge behind his guards, which had been posted on the neighbouring shore.

11.5

As the rest of the Pergamenian ships bore hard upon the enemy, the earthen pots, of which we have previously spoken, began suddenly to be hurled into them. These, when thrown, at first excited laughter among the combatants, nor could it be conceived why such a thing was done;

11.6

but when they saw their ships filled with serpents, and, startled at the strangeness of the occurrence, knew not what to avoid first, they put about their ships, and retreated to their camp upon the coast.

11.7

Thus Hannibal, by his stratagem, prevailed over the force of the Pergamenians. Nor was this the

only occasion; but often, at other times, he defeated the enemy with his troops on land, and with equally skilful management.

12.1

While these transactions were taking place in Asia, it happened accidentally at Rome that certain ambassadors from Prusias took supper at the house of Lucius Quintus Flamininus, one of the consuls; and there, as mention was made of Hannibal, one of them observed that he was in the dominions of Prusias.

12.2

This information Flamininus communicated the next day to the senate. The conscript fathers, who thought that they would never be free from plots as long as Hannibal was alive, sent ambassadors to Bithynia, and among them Flamininus, to request the king not to keep their bitterest enemy with him, but to deliver him up to them.

12.3

To this embassy Prusias did not dare to give a refusal; he made some opposition, however, to one point, begging them not to require of him what was contrary to the rights of hospitality, saying that they themselves might make Hannibal prisoner, if they could, as they would easily find out the place where he was. Hannibal indeed confined himself to one place, living in a fortress which had been given him by the king; and this he had so constructed that it had outlets on every side of the building, always fearing lest that should happen which eventually came to pass.

12.4

When the Roman ambassadors had gone thither, and had surrounded his house with a number of men, a slave, looking out at a gate, told Hannibal that several armed men were to be seen,

contrary to what was usual. Hannibal desired him to go round to all the gates of the castle, and bring him word immediately whether it was beset in the same way on all sides.

12.5

The slave having soon reported how it was, and informed him, that all the passages were secured, he felt certain that it was no accidental occurrence, but that his person was menaced, and that his life was no longer to be preserved. That he might not part with it, however, at the pleasure of another, and dwelling on the remembrance of his past honours, he took poison, which he had been accustomed always to carry with him.

13.1

Thus this bravest of men, after having gone through many and various labours, found repose in the seventieth year of his age. Under what consuls he died, is not agreed; for Atticus has left it recorded in his chronicle that he ended his life in the consulship of Marcus Claudius Marcellus and Quintus Fabius Labeo; but Polybius says in that of Lucius Aemilius Paullus and Cnaeus Baebius Tamphilus; and Sulpicius in that of Publius Cornelius Cethegus and Marcus Baebius Tamphilus.

13.2

This great man, though occupied in such vast military operations, devoted some portion of his time to literature; for there are some books of his written in the Greek language, and amongst them one addressed to the Rhodians on the acts of Cnaeus Manlius Vulso in Asia.

13.3

Of the wars which he conducted many have given the history; and two of them were persons that were with him in the camp, and lived with him as long as fortune allowed, Silenus and Sosilus

the Lacedaemonian; and this Sosilus Hannibal had as his instructor in the Greek language.

13.4

But it is now time to make an end of this book, and to give an account of commanders among the Romans, that, when the actions of both are compared, it may be the better determined which generals deserve the preference.