

Hannibal

Source: Cornelius Nepos, "Hannibal," *De Viribus Illustribus*. Translated by J. Thomas.

Cornelius Nepos is a Northern Italian biographer writing in the first century BCE. His essay on Hannibal is the earliest surviving biography of the general in Latin.

Hannibal the Carthaginian, son of Hamilcar. If it be true, as no one doubts, that the Roman people have surpassed all other nations in valor, it must be admitted that Hannibal excelled all other commanders in skill as much as the Roman people are superior to all nations in bravery. For as often as he engaged with that people in Italy, he invariably came off victor; and if his strength had not been impaired by the jealousy of his fellow-citizens at home, he would have been able, to all appearance, to conquer the Romans. But the disparagement of the multitude overcame the courage of one man. Yet after all, he so cherished the hatred of the Romans which had, as it were, been left him as an inheritance by his father, that he would have given up his life rather than renounce it. Indeed, even after he had been driven from his native land and was dependent on the aid of foreigners, he never ceased to war with the Romans in spirit.

Aside from Philip, whom from afar Hannibal had made an enemy of the Romans, he fired up Antiochus, the most powerful of all kings in those times, with such a desire for war, that from far away on the Red Sea he made preparations to invade Italy.

To his court came envoys from Rome to sound his intentions and try by secret intrigues to arouse his suspicions of Hannibal, alleging that they had bribed him and that he had changed his sentiments. These attempts were not made in vain, and when Hannibal learned it and noticed that he was excluded from the king's more intimate councils, he went to Antiochus, as soon as the opportunity offered, and after calling to mind many proofs of his loyalty and his hatred of the Romans, he added, "My father Hamilcar, when I was a small boy not more than nine years old, just as he was setting out from Carthage to Spain as commander-in-chief, offered up victims to Jupiter, Greatest and Best of gods. While this ceremony was being performed, he asked me if I would like to go with him on the campaign. I eagerly accepted and began to beg him not to hesitate to take me with him. Thereupon he said, I will do it, provided you will give me the pledge that I ask. With that he led me to the altar on which he had begun his sacrifice, and having dismissed all the others, he bade me lay hold of the altar and swear that I would never be a friend to the Romans. For my part, up to my present time of life, I have kept the oath which I swore to my father so faithfully, that no one ought to doubt that in the future I shall be of the same mind. Therefore, if you have any kindly intentions with regard to the Roman people, you will be wise to hide them from me; but when you prepare war, you will go

counter to your own interests if you do not make me the leader in that enterprise."

Accordingly, at the age which I have named, Hannibal went with his father to Spain, and after Hamilcar died and Hasdrubal succeeded to the chief command, he was given charge of all the cavalry. When Hasdrubal died in his turn, the army chose Hannibal as its commander, and on their action being reported at Carthage, it was officially confirmed. So it was that when he was less than twenty-five years old, Hannibal became commander-in-chief; and within the next three years he subdued all the peoples of Spain by force of arms, stormed Saguntum, a town allied with Rome, and mustered three great armies. Of these armies he sent one to Africa, left the second with his brother Hasdrubal in Spain, and led the third with him into Italy. He crossed the range of the Pyrenees. Wherever he marched, he warred with all the natives, and he was everywhere victorious.

When he came to the Alps separating Italy from Gaul, which no one before him had ever crossed with an army except Hercules (the Greek) because of which that place is called the Greek Pass, he cut to pieces the Alpine tribes that tried to keep him from crossing, opened up the region, built roads, and made it possible for an elephant with its equipment to go over places along which before that a single unarmed man could barely crawl. By this route he led his forces across the Alps and came into Italy.

He had already fought at the Rhone with P. Cornelius Scipio, the consul, and routed him; with the same man he engaged at Clastidium on the Po River, wounded him, and drove him from the field. A third time that same Scipio, with his colleague Ti. Longus, opposed him at the Trebia. With those two he joined battle and routed them both. Then he passed through the country of the Ligurians over the Apennines, on his way to Etruria. In the course of that march he contracted such a severe eye trouble that he never afterwards had equally good use of his right eye. While he was still suffering from that complaint and was carried in a litter, he ambushed the consul C. Flaminius with his army at Trasumenus and slew him; and not long afterwards C. Centenius, the praetor, who was holding a pass with a body of picked men, met the same fate.

Next, he arrived in Apulia. There he was opposed by two consuls, C. Terentius and L. Aemilius, both of whose armies he put to flight in a single battle; the consul Paulus was slain, besides several ex-consuls, including Cn. Servilius Geminus, who had been consul the year before.

After having fought that battle, Hannibal advanced upon Rome without resistance. He halted in the hills near the city. After he had remained in camp there for several days and was returning to Capua, the Roman dictator Q. Fabius Maximus opposed himself to him in the Falernian region. But Hannibal,

although caught in a defile, extricated himself by night without the loss of any of his men, and thus tricked Fabius, that most skillful of generals. For under cover of night the Carthaginian bound torches to the horns of cattle and set fire to them, then sent a great number of animals in that condition to wander about in all directions. The sudden appearance of such a sight caused so great a panic in the Roman army that no one ventured to go outside the entrenchments. Not so many days after this exploit, when M. Minucius Rufus, master of horse, had been given the same powers as the dictator, he craftily lured him into fighting, and utterly defeated the Roman. Although not present in person, he enticed Ti. Sempronius Gracchus, who had been twice consul into an ambushade in Lucania and destroyed him. In a similar manner, at Venusia, he slew M. Claudius Marcellus, who was holding his fifth consulship.

It would be a long story to enumerate all his battles. Therefore it will suffice to add this one fact, to show how great a man he was: so long as he was in Italy, no one was a match for him in the field, and after the battle of Cannæ no one encamped face to face with him on open ground.

Then, undefeated, he was recalled to defend his native land; there he carried on war against P. Scipio, the son of that Scipio whom he had put to flight first at the Rhone, then at the Po, and a third time at the Trebia. With him, since the resources of his country were now exhausted, he wished to arrange a truce for a time, in order to carry on the war later with renewed strength. He had an interview with Scipio, but they could not agree upon terms. A few days after the conference he fought with Scipio at Zama. Defeated incredible to relate he succeeded in a day and two nights in reaching Hadrumetum, distant from Zama about three hundred miles. In the course of that retreat the Numidians who had left the field with him laid a trap for him, but he not only eluded them, but even crushed the plotters. At Hadrumetum he rallied the survivors of the retreat and by means of new levies mustered a large number of soldiers within a few days.

While he was busily engaged in these preparations, the Carthaginians made peace with the Romans. Hannibal, however, continued after that to command the army and carried on war in Africa until the consulship of P. Sulpicius and C. Aurelius. For in the time of those magistrates Carthaginian envoys came to Rome, to return thanks to the Roman senate and people for having made peace with them; and as a mark of gratitude they presented them with a golden crown, at the same time asking that their hostages might live at Fregellæ and that their prisoners should be returned. To them, in accordance with a decree of the senate, the following answer was made: that their gift was received with thanks; that the hostages should live where they had requested; that they would not return the prisoners, because Hannibal, who had caused the war and was bitterly hostile to the Roman nation, still held command in their army, as well as his brother Mago. Upon receiving that reply the Carthaginians recalled Hannibal and Mago to Carthage. On his return Hannibal was made a king, after he had been general for twenty-one years. For, as is true of the consuls at Rome, so at Carthage two kings were elected annually for a term of one year.

In that office Hannibal gave proof of the same energy that he had shown in war. For by means of new taxes he provided, not only that there should be money to pay to the Romans according to the treaty, but also that there should be a surplus to be deposited in the treasury. Then in the following year, when M. Claudius and L. Furius were consuls, envoys came to Carthage from Rome. Hannibal thought that they had been sent to demand his surrender; therefore, before they were given audience by the senate, he secretly embarked on a ship and took refuge with King Antiochus in Syria. When this became known, the Carthaginians sent two ships to arrest Hannibal, if they could overtake him; then they confiscated his property, demolished his house from its foundations, and declared him an outlaw.

But Hannibal, in the third year after he had fled from his country, in the consulship of L. Cornelius and Q. Minucius, with five ships landed in Africa in the territories of Cyrene, to see whether the Carthaginians could by any chance be induced to make war by the hope of aid from King Antiochus, whom Hannibal had already persuaded to march upon Italy with his armies. To Italy also he dispatched his brother Mago. When the Carthaginians learned this, they inflicted on Mago in his absence the same penalty that Hannibal had suffered. The brothers, regarding the situation as desperate, raised anchor and set sail. Hannibal reached Antiochus; as to the death of Mago there are two accounts; some have written that he was shipwrecked; others, that he was killed by his own slaves. As for Antiochus, if he had been as willing to follow Hannibal's advice in the conduct of the war as he had been in declaring it, he would not have fought for the rule of the world at Thermopylae, but nearer to the Tiber. But although Hannibal saw that many of the king's plans were unwise, yet he never deserted him. On one occasion he commanded a few ships, which he had been ordered to take from Syria to Asia, and with them he fought against a fleet of the Rhodians in the Pamphylian Sea. Although in that engagement his forces were defeated by the superior numbers of their opponents, he was victorious on the wing where he fought in person.

After Antiochus had been defeated, Hannibal, fearing that he would be surrendered to the Romans—as undoubtedly would have happened, if he had let himself be taken—came to the Gortynians in Crete, there to deliberate where to seek asylum. But being the shrewdest of all men, he realized that he would be in great danger, unless he devised some means of escaping the avarice of the Cretans; for he was carrying with him a large sum of money, and he knew that news of this had leaked out. He therefore devised the following plan: he filled a number of large jars with lead and covered their tops with gold and silver. These, in the presence of the leading citizens, he deposited in the temple of Diana, pretending that he was entrusting his property to their protection. Having thus misled them, he filled some bronze statues which he was carrying with him with all his money and threw them carelessly down in the courtyard of his house. The Gortynians guarded the temple with great care, not so much against others as against Hannibal, to prevent him from taking anything without their knowledge and carrying it off with him.

Thus he saved his goods, and having tricked all the Cretans, the Carthaginian joined Prusias in Pontus. At his court he was of the same mind towards Italy and gave his entire attention to arming the king and training his forces to meet the Romans. And seeing that Prusias' personal resources did not give him great strength, he won him the friendship of the other kings of that region and allied him with warlike nations. Prusias had quarreled with Eumenes, king of Pergamum, a strong friend of the Romans, and they were fighting with each other by land and sea. But Eumenes was everywhere the stronger because of his alliance with the Romans, and for that reason Hannibal was the more eager for his overthrow, thinking that if he got rid of him, all his difficulties would be ended.

To cause his death, he formed the following plan. Within a few days they were intending to fight a decisive naval battle. Hannibal was outnumbered in ships; therefore it was necessary to resort to a ruse, since he was unequal to his opponent in arms. He gave orders to collect the greatest possible number of venomous snakes and put them alive in earthenware jars. When he had got together a great number of these, on the very day when the sea-fight was going to take place he called the marines together and bade them concentrate their attack on the ship of Eumenes and be satisfied with merely defending themselves against the rest; this they could easily do, thanks to the great number of snakes. Furthermore, he promised to let them know in what ship Eumenes was sailing, and to give them a generous reward if they succeeded in either capturing or killing the king.

After he had encouraged the soldiers in this way, the fleets on both sides were brought out for battle. When they were drawn up in line, before the signal for action was given, in order that Hannibal might make it clear to his men where Eumenes was, he sent a messenger in a skiff with a herald's staff. When the emissary came to the ships of the enemy, he exhibited a letter and said that he was looking for the king. He was at once taken to Eumenes since no one doubted that it was some communication about peace. The letter-carrier, having pointed out the commander's ship to his men, returned to the place from which he came. But Eumenes, on opening the missive, found nothing in it except what was designed to mock at him. Although he wondered at the reason for such conduct and could not find one, he nevertheless did not hesitate to join battle at once.

When the clash came, the Bithynians did as Hannibal had ordered and fell upon the ship of Eumenes in a body. Since the king could not resist their force, he sought safety in flight, which he secured only by retreating within the entrenchments which had been thrown up on the neighboring shore. When the other Pergamene ships began to press their opponents too hard, on a sudden the earthenware jars of which I have spoken began to be hurled at them. At first these projectiles excited the laughter of the combatants, and they could not understand

what it meant. But as soon as they saw their ships filled with snakes, terrified by the strange weapons and not knowing how to avoid them, they turned their ships about and retreated to their naval camp. Thus Hannibal overcame the arms of Pergamum by strategy; and that was not the only instance of the kind, but on many other occasions in land battles he defeated his antagonists by a similar bit of cleverness.

While this was taking place in Asia, it chanced that in Rome envoys of Prusias were dining with T. Quinctius Flaminius, the ex-consul, and that mention being made of Hannibal, one of the envoys said that he was in the kingdom of Prusias. On the following day Flaminius informed the senate. The Fathers, believing that while Hannibal lived they would never be free from plots, sent envoys to Bithynia, among them Flaminius, to request the king not to keep their bitterest foe at his court, but to surrender him to the Romans. Prusias did not dare to refuse; he did, however, stipulate that they would not ask him to do anything which was in violation of the laws of hospitality. They themselves, if they could, might take him; they would easily find his place of abode. As a matter of fact, Hannibal kept himself in one place, in a stronghold which the king had given him, and he had so arranged it that he had exits in every part of the building, evidently being in fear of experiencing what actually happened.

When the envoys of the Romans had come to the place and surrounded his house with a great body of troops, a slave looking out from one of the doors reported that an unusual number of armed men were in sight. Hannibal ordered him to go about to all the doors of the building and hasten to inform him whether he was beset in the same way on every side. The slave having quickly reported the facts and told him that all the exits were guarded, Hannibal knew that it was no accident; that it was he whom they were after and he must no longer think of preserving his life. But not wishing to lose it at another's will, and remembering his past deeds of valor, he took the poison which he always carried about his person.

Thus that bravest of men, after having performed many and varied labors, entered into rest in his seventieth year. Under what consuls he died is disputed. For Atticus has recorded in his Annals that he died in the consulate of M. Claudius Marcellus and Q. Fabius Labeo; Polybius, under L. Aemilius Paulus and Cn. Baebius Tamphilus; and Sulpicius Blitho, in the time of P. Cornelius Cethegus and M. Baebius Tamphilus. And that great man, although busied with such great wars, devoted some time to letters; for there are several books of his, written in Greek, among them one, addressed to the Rhodians, on the deeds of Cn. Manlius Volso in Asia. Hannibal's deeds of arms have been recorded by many writers, among them two men who were with him in camp and lived with him so long as fortune allowed, Silenus and Sosylus of Lacedaemon. And it was this Sosylus whom Hannibal employed as his teacher of Greek.