

# Hannibal Barca, Perhaps the Greatest General of All Time

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this manuscript is to provide biographical data on Hannibal Barca (hereafter referred to as Hannibal) from the 3rd – 2nd century B.C., who was one of the greatest generals of all time. The focus will be on his life, from his birth, until immediately after his incredible defeat of the Roman army in the Battle of Cannae; one of the most studied battles in ancient history.

To understand Hannibal's military actions, the authors chose to compare Hannibal with another successful and famous military commander, Alexander the Great (hereafter referred to as Alexander); both of whom were studied and admired by Sigmund Freud. In addition, the present manuscript serves to complement a longer manuscript that was published in *Psychoanalytic Review* in 1995 by the senior author of the present manuscript about Alexander. That manuscript averaged about 45,000 reads on Research Gate [1].

In covering the Battle of Cannae, the authors focus on two aspects:

- How Hannibal changed the odds of the battle to his favor by strategically taking control of food resources, water supplies, and the theater of engagement – the geographical area where the battle was to take place.
- Some possible reasons why Hannibal did not conquer Rome after his victory at Cannae utilizing psychoanalytic terms about his character strengths and possible reasons why Hannibal decided not to conquer Rome when he had clearly earned the chance.

## Introduction

The senior author's professional interest in Hannibal developed from learning and comparing Hannibal and Alexander through the lens of Freudian's Oedipus Complex Theory and the complex and subsequential conflicts that arose from their vastly different leadership life choices. The theory states that a son will either rise to surpass his father's successes and expectations or fail to do so and experience subsequential shame for failing. However, the son can also experience guilt for surpassing the father.

## Freud's Oedipal Complex and the Two Leaders

### Alexander

The author's interest in Alexander began with the reading of Alexander's famous bet with his father, Phillip the Great (hereafter referred to as Phillip), regarding the horse named, Bucephalus. The bet was whether Hannibal could ride Bucephalus, a temperamental horse that no one could control.

The bet was for one talent, an enormous sum of money at that time. What Phillip didn't realize was just how smart and observant Alexander was. Specifically, Alexander noticed that Bucephalus was afraid of his own shadow, and every time he faced it, the horse would become temperamental and difficult to control. Alexander turned the horse away from its shadow and rode the horse competently. Thereafter, the horse would remain Alexander's steed for the rest of its life. The horse was significant to Alexander for many reasons, including the fact that he won the bet with his father, and gained control of a horse that could not be controlled by others. These factors signified strength and power especially when foot soldiers would look up to see their valiant commander riding ahead of them into battle, which was signified power and authority. Certainly, for a confident young leader on the path to kingship, the status and ego of Alexander and his horse Bucephalus would certainly positively reinforce each other and especially so after going into battles together. His life

depended on his horse. Alexander named many cities after the horse throughout Asia. The relationship between Alexander and his father illustrates an Oedipal Complex to succeed his father. Many aspects of Alexander's life and his eventual participation in the death of his father all reinforce Freud's Oedipal theory.

Hannibal was a leader who listened and incorporated the advice and strategies of his commanders. He did not attempt to usurp his father's or cousin's leadership and in the end kept his childhood vow to his father not to be a friend to Rome and to fight Rome vigorously. He did not ultimately succeed in the campaign to defeat Rome to the extent that Rome would be destroyed and thereby no longer be a threat to Carthage. Specifically, Hannibal's failure to win the Battle of Zama resulted in Carthage being completely and permanently annihilated as a city of importance and economic superiority.

While Alexander is the most well-known general and is held by many historians as the leading military general of the 4th century BC, three other generals stand out as well; namely, Scipio Africanus, Julius Caesar and Hannibal. The focus of this article will be on Hannibal, who will be frequently compared with Alexander, not only in terms of their military accomplishments, but also in terms of their character, personality development and motivation. In many respects Hannibal and Alexander were both similar. There were many similarities related to their fathers, but their relationship to their mothers was drastically different.

Both fathers held high positions in their respective societies: militarily, politically and socially. Phillip was The King of Macedonia and Hamilcar was the commander and most famous statesman of the Carthage nation. Alexander's father, Philip, and Hannibal's father, Hamilcar (the most famous general in the history of Carthage), posed significant Oedipal challenges for their sons. However, their relationships with their fathers were vastly different. For example, it is widely believed that Alexander may have conspired with his mother, Olympia, to assassinate Philip; whereas, Hamilcar intentionally chose to protect his sons from death at his own expense at the Battle for Akra Leuke [2]. Hamilcar died in the river fighting hand-to-hand combat with Celtic tribesmen. Hamilcar's strategy was to save his talented sons (Hannibal and Hasdrubal) for the ultimate war with Rome, a task they both fulfilled with honor, Hannibal in Italy and Hasdrubal in Spain.

Hannibal had one unique experience with his father when he was nine years old. His father took him to the great Temple of Ba, the chief god of Carthage, and required Hannibal to take a vow that his life's mission was to always be an enemy of Rome.

Alexander was born in 356 BC. His mother, Olympia, was conniving, not respected, feared by her community, and suspected to having conspired to have Phillip assassinated, along with one of Phillip's other wives, and their two children. Olympia was an evil woman. An example of this can be demonstrated by what she did to Phillip's other wife and children. According to Green she tied up the wife and burned both her children alive in front of their mother [2]. She then directed her violence at the mother and killed her as well. Additionally, it has been said that Olympia wanted Alexander to furnish her with the spoils of war from his conquests, such that Alexander is rumored to have

said, "My mother makes me pay a large rent for the nine months that I spent in her womb." In contrast, Hannibal was born in 267 BC but not much is known about his mother other than that she was likely a member of the Carthaginian upper class and well respected. Because Hannibal's father, Hamilcar, was away at war for long periods of time, Hannibal's mother played a key role in his upbringing. Despite these differences in the two leaders, both mothers adored their sons and were advocates for their sons' successes.

Alexander and Hannibal had many similarities as young men. Both were athletic, intelligent, and skilled horsemen. Both were educated by Greek tutors. They also exercised leadership skills and aspired to military careers that involved leading their respective armies. Both also aspired to carry on their father's ambitions against their arch enemies for wrongs committed toward their homelands. Alexander wanted to right the wrongs Persia had committed against Greece, and Hannibal wanted to avenge the wrongs committed by Rome against Carthage.

Both Alexander and Hannibal had to confront significant challenges and setbacks from environmental factors. In 325 BCE, Alexander suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of mother nature and human navigation errors by his admiral. His army was expecting a flotilla of ships to meet them and transport them to Persia. The ships never arrived leaving Alexander and his soldiers with the need to find an alternate route to Persia. The alternate route selected was crossing the Gedrosian Desert. This desert had an infamous reputation for being dangerous after wiping out Cyrus the Great's entire army in mid 500 BC. Having decided to cross the desert, Alexander lost more soldiers to the heat and exhaustion than in many of his battles to conquer the world. Importantly, shortly after the desert experience, Alexander died from an unknown and rather mysterious cause.

In 217 BCE Hannibal's army faced his own challenges. Being pursued by the Roman legions he opted to avoid detection by crossing the Arno River marsh. The marsh was a wide and flooded region in central Italy. Traversing the marsh took four days and resulted in serious set-backs for Hannibal as he lost a large number of soldiers and animals due to exhaustion, drowning and pestilence. Hannibal himself suffered the loss of sight in one eye, which, interestingly was a disability shared with Philip the Great.

Despite Hannibal's army's setback, he succeeded to elude the Romans and exit the marsh into Central Italy. His uncanny ability to rise above overwhelming odds in situation after situation was likely due to his intellect, proven military strategies, determination, and good fortune.

#### **Dissimilarities between Alexander and Hannibal**

The first difference between the two men was that Hannibal wanted to protect the Carthaginians from Rome, whereas Alexander wanted to conquer Persia and control the world. Alexander also wanted to defeat the Persians as revenge for the damage and insult Persia did when they attacked Greece. Even as a youth, Alexander planned and strategized ways to defeat the Persians.

By contrast, Hannibal was not in line for the throne as his father was not a king of Carthage. His father was a general and the most well-known military person in Carthage. Hannibal served in the military under his father and cousin until age 26, when Hannibal was appointed as general and succeeded his father. Whereas, Alexander was in line for the throne with Phillip, and as a conqueror, likely possessed and exhibited aspirations to succeed his father as the King even at an early age.

Prior to Alexander's fight against Persia in the Battle of Gargaumela, he contested and challenged the strategies of some of his father's former generals. Alexander opposed his generals suggesting a night assault to hide their troops. Although his army was later victorious over the Persian Empire, Alexander became upset and resented the generals' strategies which reflected the philosophies and strategies of Phillip, as the strategies were not up to his standards. It appears that Alexander was still in competition with his father because he had not resolved his Oedipal complex.

Hannibal in contrast adhered to and followed his father's and cousin's military strategies and ambitions while serving under them. Hannibal was more willing to use his father's military strategies and care for the wellbeing of his troops and the citizens he was protecting. Hannibal did not view others' strategies as a type of competition against him. Hannibal seemed less defensive in accepting ideas and strategies that were not his own.

Alexander was more focused than Hannibal on acquiring new territories for the purpose of power and wealth. Whereas, Hannibal was more focused on defending and protecting Carthage and its way of life. After Hannibal's successful military campaign against Rome, his objective was to continue and defend Carthage against.

### **Mercenary War**

In terms of Hannibal's psychological development there are three places (Northern Africa, Spain, and Sicily) that he and his cousin viewed the barbaric behavior toward the citizens of Carthage.

The Mercenary War centered around the fact that mercenaries were recruited to fight in the First Punic War as allies alongside the Carthaginians, but had not been paid. The mercenaries came back to avenge their anger on the Carthaginian populations. The vengeance of the mercenaries was extreme in that they severely beat, mutilated, castrated and killed the Carthaginians, even though crucifixion. Although the formal Mercenary War phase had ended, there was lingering regional violence afterwards and Hamilcar, Hannibal and Hasdrubal were very aware of these animosities.

Hamilcar spent nine years in Spain after fighting in North Africa in the Mercenary Wars. The literature suggests that at least three times during the Mercenary Wars Hannibal was either exposed to or knowledgeable about the castration and other brutal activities perpetrated by the Mercenaries on Carthaginian residents.

Such violence could have had significant psychoanalytic implications on Hannibal in the coming years.

Hamilcar was the general in command of the Carthaginian forces during the last years of the First Punic War with Rome which was between 264–241 BCE. Hamilcar Barca, died in battle, most likely drowning in the Jucar River while besieging a place called Helice fighting Celtiberian tribesmen.

Hasdrubal, his cousin, who was then the commander of the Carthaginians, was assassinated and Hannibal at 26 was appointed General of the Carthaginian army. This appointment served as the commencement for Hannibal to pursue and hopefully accomplish his childhood vow to be a life-long enemy of Rome and lead the fight in the Second Punic War, which was part of the Battle of Cannae.

### **Moving Towards Cannae**

In writing about the Battle of Cannae, the present author focuses on two aspects:

- How Hannibal changed the odds of the war to his favor by strategically taking control of food resources, water supplies and the theater of engagement (i.e., the geographical area where the battle was to take place).
- Some possible reasons why Hannibal did not pursue Rome after his victory at Cannae utilizing psychoanalytic terms about Hannibal's character strengths.

The Carthaginian army was multi-national and well trained. They were composed of Spanish, Italian, African and Greek soldiers. Hannibal's successful recruiting of skilled allied forces and cavalry enabled him to elevate the size and ability of his army prior to the long march to Italy. The journey to Rome had deleterious impacts on their numbers and the health of the soldiers and animals in Hannibal's army. The journey itself began in Spain, then crossed the Northern Alps, into the lowlands of Italy, and then into the infamous Arno River Marsh. Additionally, Hannibal's army had three battles with the Romans along the way: Ticinus, Trebia and Lake Trasimene. The battle at Lake Trasimene was particularly bloody and decisive in that the Carthaginians won. Hannibal won all three of those battles. His forces also engaged smaller tribal territories which added time delays and strain, but also added supplies and grain. On the other hand, it also added precious battle experience.

### **The Battle of Cannae**

Hannibal traveled through the Arno River marsh, which was a huge set-back for him and his troops. Hannibal lost vision in one eye and critical animals and men from disease. However, after passing through the marshes, they arrived in the fertile lands of Italy with rich agriculture and animals for food and provisions. From this respite, the troops recuperated and proceeded on towards the climactic battle against Rome.

The primary decisive factor leading to Hannibal's victory was controlling the theater for the upcoming engagement with the Roman army. He won the battle against overwhelming odds illustrating Hannibal's genius as a strategist. This battle has been studied for centuries by military strategists around the world.

### **Some Interesting Features of the Battle Were**

- Hannibal's army was vastly inferior in size to the Roman army which was known to be the largest army that Rome

had ever assembled until that time. Specifically, Hannibal was outnumbered two to one and had to devise a strategy to change the odds to his favor.

- He lured the Romans into a vulnerable physical location that favored the small infantry and skillful cavalry Hannibal possessed, but was a handicap for the large army Rome possessed. To lure the Romans to this location, Hannibal utilized existing food supplies and provisions needed by the Roman army.
- Hannibal had knowledge that the Roman army rotated generals in charge every other day to minimize one leader possessing too much power. The two consuls in charge were Varro, the more brash of the two and Aemilius Paulus who was more cautious. Varro was militarily less skilled than Aemilius and was over confident in his troops superior size. In contrast Aemilius was more mindful of his opponent Hannibal.

Although Hannibal had a vastly smaller army, he realigned his strategy with regards to the landscape, theater of engagement, and capturing a food depot that was used by the Romans to feed their vast armies. Hannibal realized that in taking the food depot, he would deprive the Roman army of food, thus he lured the Romans to him when they tried to retake the depot. Hannibal's advantage was overlooked by Varro, whereas, Aemilius was aware of Hannibal's strategic advantage in an open, treeless landscape which perfectly benefited Hannibal's calvary. While Aemilius was in charge, he told the army not to advance against the Carthaginians; however, when Varro was in charge, he directed his army to pursue the Carthaginians. Varro's over confidence and his naivety led his army into Hannibal's plan, for which Hannibal, being aware of Varro's current leadership position and decision to advance, resulted in Hannibal giving orders for an all-out advance against the Romans. The battle was not victorious in anyone's favor, but the Carthaginians claimed victory.

The next day Aemilius took charge and broke his army into two defensive camps in hopes to better their position the next day under Varro. However, Hannibal capitalized on Aemilius' decision by directing his calvary to thwart the Roman army's water bearers from bringing water to their troops from the Aufidus River. Thirst and hunger were taking their toll on the Romans, which is what Hannibal intended by controlling the food depot and now the water source. Lack of water and high summer temperatures would exhaust the Roman troops quickly.

The Africans were the best army/cavalry Hannibal had. In particular, Hannibal knew his Northern African Calvary could work in this battlefield and turn the tide in his favor.

### **Post Cannae**

Some possible reasons why Hannibal did not pursue Rome to conquer it following his victory in the Battle of Cannae. There were three psychoanalytic reasons and one practical reason:

The victory at Cannae came with much effort and time to traverse the Italian Alps and enter into Italy. At this time, Hannibal and his troops were a great distance from Carthage and the supply chain was taxed. Many of the soldiers and animals were lost, injured or in declining condition due to localized skirmishes on

the journey to Cannae and passing through the Arno River. They would have needed to be highly motivated in order to defeat an ever-determined Roman army on their home ground. Defeating Rome in a peripheral region, like Cannae, was far easier than to defeat Rome in its homeland. Hannibal accomplished what he set out to do and continuing the war into a protracted war would not be in the interest of his Carthaginian army, his fighting allies or his commanding officers. In addition, a period of rest was required. Finally, Rome would have had time to resupply their forces with new and fresh troops.

### **Psychoanalytic Paternal Reasons**

According to Freudian Oedipal theory, male children compete with their fathers, and if they win, feel guilty about it. However, Hannibal may not have wanted to exceed his father's accomplishments by defeating Rome. Had he continued to attack Rome with his depleted army's reserves, he may have suffered substantially. Hannibal defeated and embarrassed the Romans in Cannae and did not want to worsen the condition of his troops and allies. Hannibal also had shown a willingness to subject his decisions and leadership to his father and his cousin while they were in charge. Thus, it appears that Hannibal had no desire to usurp his father's glory.

### **Psychoanalytic Maternal Reasons**

Hannibal had many positive maternal influences in his life which could have influenced his adult decision making. His goal was not to be a land-hungry emperor but rather to protect his countryman and allies from Rome. Hannibal was raised by his mother, who was highly respected generally and who cherished Hannibal. Thus, Hannibal would want to please her in his life choices, and she was by nature a kind and gentle person. Moreover, Hannibal may have also been influenced by the cultural influence of women in his society. Historically Carthage was founded by a woman, which was most unusual in that time period. She brought prostitutes to Carthage to give them a better life, more respect and companionship opportunities, all of which was uncommon at that time. The city of Rome, came from the word Roma, which is a feminine name, and Hannibal may have felt that to attack Rome would be an insult to his mother and other women.

Being a leader requires balancing the paternal and maternal influences in one's decision making. After experiencing the brutality of the Mercenary's war and the suffering of the Carthaginians, it is possible that Hannibal's distaste for the horrible consequences of war tempered his drive to pursue war; thus, expressing a less aggressive, more maternal decision-making process.

### **Character Reasons**

Hannibal was a military general, and as such he was a diplomat for Carthage and any nation whose soldiers and military allies were represented in his army. Thus, in thinking of the wellbeing of his troops, their families and communities from where they came, Hannibal may have opted to preserve his troops following their success in Cannae so they could return home. If he attacked the city of Rome, he and his troops may have been defeated through fatigue, soldier attrition, and lack of supplies. He was more mindful of the suffering and cost to the soldiers on such military campaigns.

Hannibal was not the kind of general that went out to kill people for the sake of killing people.

According Ernest Jones who was the official biographer of Sigmund Freud, who idealized Alexander and Hannibal; however, his favorite general was Hannibal [3]. Some possible reasons were as follows:

Sigmund Freud, not only being Jewish, likely had shared ancestry with Phoenicians in that he was from the Eastern Mediterranean region as was Hannibal. Hannibal was closely related to the Phoenicians, associated with the Jews, Egyptians and Lebanese. Consequently, the Phoenicians and Jews shared some cultural and language origins. Furthermore, the founders of Carthage were from Tyre, Lebanon. In contrast, Alexander was Greek and thus did not share the same ancestry as Hannibal.

Hannibal was of better character than Alexander. Hannibal was not ambitious for personal gain but fought for his city, family, culture and regional interests. Alexander, on the other hand, fought for personal and political achievements, fame and power. Hannibal was not a conqueror, whereas Alexander was a conqueror. Hannibal and his countrymen were merchants and pursued trade whereas Alexander pursued control, dominance, territory and fame.

Rome was not a likeable government and society. Carthage and the countries they traded with throughout the Mediterranean, were less aggressive and more respectful than the Romans. Carthaginians were not warriors but merchants. They hired mercenaries to fight most of their battles. This practice was a striking difference between Rome and Carthage.

Skilled craftsman, engineers, and artisans from Tyre and other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean region participated in the building of King Solomon's Temple. Sigmund Freud being Jewish might naturally align with his cultural and ethnic ancestry. Because the founders/predecessors of Carthage came from Tyre, Sigmund Freud could align and sympathize with this region more than with the conquerors and Catholics of Rome.

## Conclusions

### Positive Assessments

In constructing the title for this article, the senior author asked somewhat rhetorically whether Hannibal was one of the greatest generals of all-time. According to Philip Freeman, the author of *Hannibal: Rome's Greatest Enemy*, this question is not even debatable. In fact, Freeman stated the following in the first chapter of his book: "As a military leader like Alexander the hearts of men before him and Julius Caesar after, he had an uncanny ability to read the unseen weaknesses of his enemy. As a commander in war, Hannibal had few equals in history and has long been held as a model of strategic and tactical genius who is still studied in military schools even today. But Hannibal was much more than a great general. He was a practiced statesman, a skilled diplomat, and a man deeply devoted to his family and country."

As a psychoanalytic scholar, the senior author of this article believes that there were psychoanalytic reasons why Hannibal did not conquer Rome after his spectacular victory in the Battle

of Cannae, but he also believed there were other reasons, the first being the fact that Hannibal was basically a decent man who would have never stooped to the barbarism and mass killing behaviors that the Romans used after defeating Carthage after the Third Punic War.

In addition, Hannibal's witnessing the brutality by the mercenaries on his Carthaginian citizens (none military) in Sicily could have influenced Hannibal's better side of showing concern and respect for his and other fighting members of his army and allied armies. It might also explain why he may not have invaded Rome when he could have after defeating Rome because it is one military thing to destroy an opponent's army and another to destroy innocent citizens of that government represented by that opposing army. Hannibal was not a barbarian [4-10].

### Negative Assessments

Hannibal was a great general, but a terrible conqueror. In fact, his decision not to conquer Rome after the Battle of Cannae eventually led to the murder of thousands of Carthage residents and the total destruction of Carthage. Had Hannibal, for whatever reason, punished Rome for its years of tyranny against Carthage by demanding reparations and disarming Rome's military by sending its soldiers into slavery many lives would have been saved and the world would have been a better place. Carthage would have survived as an economic and trading powerhouse for many years. Instead, Hannibal gave in to his unconscious and unanalyzed guilt about besting his father by defeating Rome and/or possibly the feminine forgiving side he probably learned

### End Note

For those readers interested in a more detailed, exhaustive account of the Battle of Cannae, please see reference below. Goldsworthy, Adrian. (2019) *Cannae, Hannibal's Greatest Victory*. Adrian Goldsworthy did an exceptional job covering the battle details, formation, casualties and other military details.

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