

Response Paper Two

In the long history of the ancient Roman Empire, there were many generals who tried to take the massive state down. Though most were unsuccessful, few got as far under Rome's skin as the Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca. Son of Hamilcar Barca, a general in the First Punic War, Hannibal grew up seeing the clashes between Rome and Carthage. With Carthage's devastating loss, it was only natural that Hannibal would want to take a crack at the Romans himself. He hardly waited, sacking one of Rome's allies in the Iberian Peninsula and starting the Second Punic War. While he scored massive victory after massive victory against the Romans, he could never seem to capture Rome itself, or get the Empire to capitulate. Eventually he was called back to Carthage, where he would suffer a defeat at Zama which started the spiral towards Carthaginian defeat. The question is: what allowed Hannibal to be successful for so long and what led to his eventual downfall against the Romans? The answer lies in his strengths and weaknesses as a general. Hannibal's strengths lay in his strategic creativity and charismatic leadership which allowed him to launch a deadly offensive on Roman soil, while his weaknesses were his lack of securing a naval presence and over-aggressive defensive strategies which led to Carthage's downfall.

Starting with his strengths, Hannibal's strategic creativity was one of his main ones. Instead of simply taking into account his environment and the resources available to both sides of a battle, he often analyzed the enemy's commander as well. Understanding the enemy general allowed him to pull off many tricks to get battles in his favor. A notable example of this was when Hannibal used the Roman Commander Flaminius' hot headed nature against him. As Flaminius' army approached, Hannibal did not engage, but instead continued to ravage the

Roman countryside. “He [Hannibal] advanced a short distance beyond the Roman camp and launched a raid upon the surrounding countryside. Flaminius was immediately beside himself with rage, convinced that this was a deliberate insult by his opponents.” (Polybius, *The Histories*, 3.82). Of course, Flaminius immediately rallied his army to give chase, only to ride right into the foggy Lake Trasimene where Hannibal already arranged his troops to easily surround the Romans, “The shout of battle rose round the Romans before they could see clearly from whence it came, or became aware that they were surrounded. Fighting began in front and flank before they could form a line or get their weapons ready or draw their swords.” (Livy, *History of Rome*, 22.4). With the Romans surrounded and unable to see their enemy, the Carthaginian army claimed victory. Hannibal’s ability to use his opponent’s personality to draw them into his deadly trap is a showcase of one of his greatest strengths: his strategic creativity.

Another one of Hannibal’s strengths was his charismatic leadership. The greatest example of this was his crossing of the alps, where thousands of his troops died. But how did he get his soldiers to agree to such a perilous journey? The answer is that Hannibal understood an individual’s soldier's wants and needs. He appealed to their sense of nationalism and the thirst for wealth and glory, “So I have decided that if anyone wishes to visit his family, I am granting him permission to do so. But I require you to report back for duty at the beginning of spring. For then we shall embark upon a war which, with the help of the gods, will be a source of glory to our country and of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice.”, (Livy, *History of Rome*, 21.5). Hannibal knows the journey will be dangerous, but by letting his soldiers rest and see their families beforehand, he lets them approach the task with filled morale. Another key aspect in Hannibal’s leadership was his ability to sway factions to his side. When Hannibal entered Rome, he knew his army was exhausted from crossing the alps. This allowed him to see the value in the Gauls

and the other tribes subjugated by the Romans. By appealing to their mutual hatred of Rome, Hannibal was able to gain thousands of allies, right on Roman soil, “The tribes who revolted to the Carthaginians were the Atellani, the Calatini, the Hirpini, a section of the Apulians, all the Samnite cantons with the exception of the Pentri, all the Bruttii and the Lucanians. In addition to these, the Uzentini and almost the whole of the coast of Magna Graecia, the people of Tarentum Crotona and Locri, as well as all Cisalpine Gaul.” (Livy, *History of Rome*, 22.61). These extra resources proved invaluable, as Hannibal had to deal with an onslaught of Roman armies without any traditional way to resupply. Hannibal’s charismatic leadership was key to his success as a general.

One of the greatest difficulties of Hannibal’s Roman campaign was keeping his army supplied, this leads us to one of Hannibal’s weaknesses: his lack of naval prowess. At the time of the Second Punic War, Hannibal had little access to ships due to Carthage’s previous loss against the Romans. This often forced Hannibal’s hand when maneuvering his army: “Heading up the opposite bank of the Rhone towards the hinterland of Gaul, not because it was the direct route to the Alps, but because he thought that the further he got from the sea, the less chance there was of meeting a Roman army.” (Livy, *History of Rome*, 21.31). Hannibal clearly knew that the Romans had naval superiority at the start of the war, but he somehow did not aim to weaken the Roman’s superiority or increase his own in any way. If Carthage had the ability to supply Hannibal during his Roman expedition, he may have been able to sustain his army long enough for the Romans to capitulate. While sneaking his way into Rome’s back door was clever, he underestimated how long he would be stuck in the Roman countryside without the ability to properly resupply.

A weakness that Hannibal also suffered was his over-aggressiveness when fighting on the defensive. While Hannibal’s aggressive nature served him well when on the offensive, as seen

with his crossing of the alps and wrecking havoc throughout Rome; when it was time to protect Carthage, he found himself on the backfoot. The greatest example of his over-aggressive defensive strategy was rushing to face Scipio at Zama. The main issue was that Hannibal failed to get the information that Massanissa, a Numidian leader, had allied with Scipio and brought him thousands of Numidian cavalry, “Last of all he [Scipio] placed the triarii. On his left wing he posted Gaius Laelius with the Italian horse, and on the right wing Massanissa with the whole of his Numidians.” (Polybius, *The Histories*, 15.9). This addition to Scipio’s army meant that his cavalry vastly outnumbered Hannibal’s. Cavalry was often a factor that Hannibal had the upper hand in and allowed him to claim many of his victories. Instead of retreating and focusing on protecting Carthage, as the Romans did with Rome, Hannibal instead forged on with the battle, placing his trust in his war elephants. Unfortunately, Scipio was prepared to deal with the elephants, meaning that Hannibal was outgunned. The Romans claimed victory and ultimately won the war. Had Hannibal formulated a defensive strategy centered around Carthage instead of aggressively gambling with his war elephants at Zama, he could have at least given Carthage some more time to formulate a proper counter-attack.

Hannibal was a ferocious general, he was a master of strategy for his time and rallied countless groups into his army. Unfortunately he dismissed gaining naval superiority and was too aggressive when defending his home. But one must consider that Hannibal’s weaknesses as a general may have been more a product of Carthage’s lack of resources than a failure on his own part. Analyzing Hannibal’s strengths and weaknesses can show us how being an ancient general was more than just strategy and leadership. It was balancing a thousand different factors that could go against you at any moment.

Works Cited

- Polybius, The Histories (Cambridge, Mass. London, Harvard University Press, 1960.)
- Livy. History of Rome (Translated by B. O. Foster. Loeb Classical Library 114. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919.)