

## Hannibal and predicament suicide

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### Abstract

**Objective:** We learnt Hannibal, the famous military commander, died by suicide, and set out to examine his life and the circumstances of his death, with a view to better understanding this event and determining whether it fitted a particular category of suicidal behaviour.

**Conclusion:** Hannibal is ranked with Napoleon and Alexander the Great in military skill and achievement. After his formal military service he served as the Chief Magistrate of Carthage. In the last years of his life, he was three times betrayed to his enemies (Romans) and on the last occasion, escape was impossible. There is no evidence Hannibal suffered a mental disorder. His death fits the category of ‘predicament suicide’ - suicide arising in the absence of mental disorder from set of distressing circumstances, from which escape is otherwise impossible.

### Hannibal

We recently learnt Hannibal, the famous military commander, died by suicide. We were keen to examine his life and the circumstance of his death with a view better understanding this event and determining whether it fitted a particular category of suicidal behaviour.

Hannibal was born in 247 BC in Carthage, a city of antiquity, established by the Phoenicians on land where Tunis (in Tunisia) now stands. Carthage controlled the shipping in the Mediterranean Sea between Africa and Sicily and was a rival of Rome.

Hannibal’s father was the commander-in-chief of the Carthaginian army and spent many years fighting tribes of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain). When Hannibal was 9 years of age, he asked his father to take him to the wars. His father agreed on condition the boy swore he would never be a friend of Rome. This transpired and Hannibal lived in his father’s tent and learnt about warfare. At 18 years of age he was actively engaged in fighting. In 221 BC, when he was 26 years of age, Hannibal became commander-in-chief of the Carthaginian army.

He possessed great strategic and tactical skills. He used spies with fineness and would himself, dress in disguise and enter enemy camps to collect information.

Rome became concerned about Hannibal’s military success in Iberia and formed an alliance with the town of Saguntum (near the modern town of Sagunto, Spain). In 218 BC, aware of the alliance, Hannibal attacked and overran Saguntum – triggering the Second Punic War between Rome and Carthage.

Hannibal then determined to attack Rome and travelled east around the Mediterranean – this meant fighting off hostile tribes and crossing the Pyrenees, the Rhone and the Alps – he set out with 50 000 infantry, 9 000 cavalry and a force of war elephants. Against the odds, he arrived on Italian soil (albeit with a reduced force) and commenced a series of battles. In 216 BC he annihilated the Roman army at the battle of Cannae [1]. The Romans engaged with 76 000 troops, Hannibal commanded half this number, but it is estimated 70 000 Romans were killed or captured.

In 212 BC he captured the city of Tarentum, on the south coast of Italy, and then controlled the southern part of the country. On more than one occasion Hannibal was nearby Rome, but never attacked the city. The Romans developed a policy to avoid direct conflict and instead, to obstruct, starve and gradually weaken their enemy.

The Roman general Publius Scipio was sent to North Africa and began to threaten Carthage. In 203 BC, after 15 years of fighting in Italy, Hannibal was called home to defend his birthplace.

In 202 BC the Carthaginian and Roman armies fought at Zama (south west of Tunis). Although Hannibal commanded more infantry and 80 war elephants, the Romans were overwhelmingly victorious. Carthage surrendered and agreed to no longer oppose Roman, bringing the Second Punic War to an end.

In 201 BC Hannibal (46 years of age) was elected Chief Magistrate of the Carthaginian state. He began to reorganize state finances and eliminate corruption. His efforts displeased and made him the enemy of oligarchs and other influential people.

Rome became concerned that Hannibal was assisting Antiochus III, king of the Seleucid Empire (a Greek state comprised of Anatolia, Persia, modern Iraq, Afghanistan and parts of Turkmenistan). In 195 BC a delegation was sent to Carthage alleging Hannibal was helping an enemy of Rome. With limited local support he fled Carthage before he was surrendered to Rome.

Hannibal first went to Tyre (in modern Lebanon) and then to other Seleucid Empire centers. He spent 5 years in the Seleucid court and worked with the Seleucid navy.

Hannibal then became suspicious that Antiochus was preparing to surrender him to Rome and fled, finding refuge with King Prusias I, of Bithynia (and ancient region in northern Turkey). However, circa 183 BC, Rome pressured Prusias to surrender Hannibal and this was agreed. When Hannibal discovered his residence was surrounded by Roman soldiers and escape was impossible, he drank poison and died. He was 66 years of age and left a letter stating, “Let us relieve the Romans from the anxiety they have so long experienced, since they think it tries their patience too much to wait for an old man’s death” [2].

## **Discussion**

The term/concept ‘Predicament Suicide’ describes suicide arising in the absence of mental disorder from distressing circumstances from which escape is otherwise impossible [3]. We have compiled details of many individuals who completed suicide in the millennia before the arrival of the theory that all, or almost all, suicide is the result of mental disorder [4].

Hannibal is ranked with Napoleon and Alexander the Great in military skill and achievement. He is known to have dressed in disguise and ventured into enemy territory to collect intelligence. After his military service, he worked in the civilian world, including time as the Chief Magistrate of Carthage. He was given protection by King Antiochus of the Seleucid Empire and King Prusias of Bithynia. There is no evidence that he suffered a mental disorder, and his accomplishments indicate a person possessing a good understanding of himself and human nature.

Finally, Hannibal was surrounded by enemy soldiers and escape was impossible - life beyond this day would be bleak, indeed. He had opposed the Romans all his life, to be their prisoner would be humiliating and unacceptable. It was likely he would be tortured and executed. It is highly probable, Hannibal completed suicide to escape his predicament.

Also, Hannibal was 66 years of age when he died - experts advise the average life span in ancient Greece and Rome was 20-35 years [5]. In his suicide letter, Hannibal referred to himself as an “old man”. He may also have been “tired of life” (*Tedium vitae*) [6]. He had led an army for two decades and was rewarded for trying to root out corruption with the wrath of powerful countrymen. Under threat he had fled Carthage, then the Seleucid Empire, and was about to flee Bithynia when he found himself trapped. While he was caught in perilous situation from which suicide may have been his only means of escape, he may also have been tired of his life of perpetual struggle.

Suicide was not uncommon in the time before Christ. The Bible gives 6 examples. Other examples include Ajax (died circa 1184 BC) - the mythical Greek hero, entered a competition for the armor once worn by Achilles – he lost and got so drunk he killed a herd of goats (thinking them to be enemy soldiers). When he sobered up, he was deeply humiliated and fell on his sword. Spargapises (died circa 530 BC) - a Massagetae general was in continuous battles with Cyrus the Great of Persia. Cyrus tricked, captured, humiliated and released Spargapises, who then stabbed himself to death. Metellus Scipio (died 46 BC) - a Roman senator – when he was defeated by Caesar at the Battle of Thapsus, he stabbed himself and threw himself into the sea.

The evidence indicates Hannibal was a highly capable person who can be added to the list of people free of mental disorder who completed suicide as a means of escaping an unacceptable predicament.

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