

# The Death of Hannibal

*Excerpts from Appian, Justin, Juvenal, and Plutarch*

Appian, *Roman History* 11.2.11 (translated by H. White)

At the end of this conversation Hannibal invited [Publius Cornelius] Scipio to be his guest, and Scipio replied that he would be so gladly if Hannibal were not living with [king] Antiochus [III the Great], who was held in suspicion by the Romans. Thus did they, in a manner worthy of great commanders, cast aside their enmity at the end of their wars. Not so Flamininus, for, at a later period when Hannibal had fled after the defeat of Antiochus and was wandering around Bithynia, Flamininus sent an embassy to king Prusias on other matters, and, although he had no grievance against Hannibal, and had no orders from the Senate, and Hannibal was no longer formidable to them, Carthage having fallen, he caused Prusias to put him to death by poison. There was a story that an oracle had once said: "Libyssan earth shall cover Hannibal's remains." So he believed that he should die in Libya. But there is a river Libyssus in Bithynia, and the adjoining country takes the name of Libyssa from the river. These things I have placed side by side as memorials of the magnanimity of Hannibal and Scipio and of the smallness of Flamininus.

Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus* 32.4  
(translated by J. S. Watson)

Ambassadors were dispatched by the senate to require the two kings to make peace, and demand the surrender of Hannibal. But Hannibal, learning their object, took poison, and frustrated their embassy by his death.

This year was rendered remarkable by the deaths of the three greatest generals then in the world, Hannibal, Philopoemen, and Scipio Africanus. Of these three it is certain that Hannibal, even at the time when Italy trembled at him, thundering in the war with Rome, and when, after his return to Carthage, he held the chief command there, never reclined at his meals, or indulged himself with more than one pint<sup>11</sup> of wine at a time; and that he preserved such continence among so many female captives, that one would be disposed to deny that he was born in Africa. Such, too, was his prudence in command, that though he had to rule armies of different nations, he was never annoyed by any conspiracy among his troops, or betrayed by their want of faith, though his enemies had often attempted to expose him to both.

Juvenal, *Satires* 10.147–167 (translated by A. S. Kline)

Put Hannibal in the scales: how much do you find the greatest  
General weighs? A man too big for North Africa, that stretches  
From Moroccan ocean's pounding to tepid Nile, then mounts it  
As far as the Ethiopian tribes, and another species of elephant.  
He adds Spain to his empire, and then vaults the Pyrenees.  
Nature then bars his passage with the snowy Alps; whose rocks  
He splits with vinegar and fire, bursting through the mountains.  
He holds Italy now, yet aims to advance still further. 'Nothing  
Is won,' he claims, 'until our Carthaginian army has shattered  
The City gates and I plant my flag at the heart of the Subura.'  
O what a sight, what a painting it would make, the one-eyed  
General riding an African elephant, his Mauretanian beast!  
So how does it end? O Glory! That very man, defeated, sits  
A noted dependant, in the King of Bithynia's palace, there  
To wait till his majesty chooses to wake. No sword, or stone,  
Or javelin makes an end of a life that once troubled humanity,  
But a little poisoned ring, avenging the rings, spoil from Cannae,  
Repaying all that blood. Go, madman, and climb the hostile Alps  
To entertain schoolboys, and provide matter for their speeches.

Plutarch, *Life of Flaminius* 20–21 (translated by B. Perrin)

§20 Now, the native ambition of Titus, as long as it had sufficient material to gratify it in the wars which I have mentioned, met with praise, as, for instance, when he served a second time as military tribune after having been consul, though there was no necessity for it; but after he had ceased to hold office and was well on in years, he met the rather with censure, because, although the portion of life which still remained to him did not admit of great activity, he was unable to restrain his passion for glory and his youthful ardour.

For by some such fierce impulse, as it would seem, he was led to his treatment of Hannibal, which made him odious to most people. Hannibal had secretly fled from his native Carthage and spent some time at the court of Antiochus; but when Antiochus, after the battle in Phrygia, had gladly accepted terms of peace, Hannibal took to flight once more, and after many wanderings, finally settled down at the court of Prusias in Bithynia. No one at Rome was ignorant of this, but all ignored him on account of his weakness and old age, regarding him as a castaway of Fortune.

Titus, however, who had been sent by the senate as ambassador to the court of Prusias on some other business, and saw that Hannibal was staying there, was incensed that he should be alive, and although Prusias made many fervent intercessions in behalf of a man who was a suppliant and a familiar friend, would not relent. There was an ancient oracle, as it would appear, concerning Hannibal's death, and it ran as follows:—  
“Libyssa earth shall cover the form of Hannibal.”

Hannibal thought this referred to Libya and a burial at Carthage, and believed that he would end his days there; but there is a sandy tract in Bithynia on the sea-shore, and on its border a large village called Libyssa. Near this village Hannibal was living. But

he had always distrusted the weakness of Prusias and feared the Romans, and therefore even before this time his house had been provided with seven underground exits leading from his own chamber. These ran in different directions beneath the surface of the ground, but all had secret issues far away.

Accordingly, when he now heard of the behest of Titus, he set out to make his escape by way of the underground passages, but encountered guards of the king, and therefore determined to take his own life. Some say that he wound his cloak about his neck and then ordered a servant to plant his knee in the small of his back, pull the rope towards him with all his might until it was twisted tight, and so to choke and kill him; some, too, say that he drank bull's blood in imitation of Themistocles and Midas; but Livy says that he had poison which he ordered to be mixed, and took the cup with these words: "Let us now put an end to the great anxiety of the Romans, who have thought it too long and hard a task to wait for the death of a hated old man. Nevertheless, Titus will not bear away an enviable victory, nor one worthy of his forefathers, who sent secret information to Pyrrhus, when he was at war with them and a victor over them, of the poisoning that was going to be attempted."

§21 Such are the accounts of the death of Hannibal. When the story of it was brought to the senate, many of them thought the conduct of Titus odious, officious, and cruel; for he had killed Hannibal when he was like a bird permitted to live a tame and harmless life because too old to fly and without a tail, and there had been no necessity for his doing this, but he did it to win fame, that his name might be associated with the death of Hannibal.