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The Importance of Carthaginian Military Operations in Sicily Through Ancient Sources

NOUREDDINE Karima
University of Tizi Ouzou (Algeria)
karima.nouredine@ummt.dz

Abstract:	Article info
<p>Some historians attribute Carthage's reluctance to engage in military action in Sicily to its preoccupation with suppressing some revolts in Africa, which were caused by Carthage's weak taxation of the natives to cover the needs of war. The divergence of interests was also behind the differences in the position that had to be taken in Sicily.</p> <p>Hanno and his supporters from the ruling oligarchy leaned towards peace and opposed the policy of the Barcid family, since these merchants viewed state and social affairs only through the lens of their economic interests and what they could gain from them. They considered the continued presence of Carthaginian armies in Sicily a burden on the state treasury. Therefore, Hanno believed it preferable to concentrate efforts in African territories. On the other hand, the advocates of war, led by Hamilcar Barca, saw the necessity of holding on to Drepanum and Lilybaeum, from where uprisings should be stirred among Rome's subject peoples to weaken its power, because without this Carthage could never find peace.</p>	<p>Received: 10/10/2025</p> <p>Accepted: 17/11/2025</p> <p>Key words:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Sicily ✓ War ✓ Carthage ✓ Rome

Introduction

Carthage, under the leadership of the Barcid family, did not limit itself to confronting Rome on the edges of the western Mediterranean basin. The exploits of Hamilcar in Sicily against the Romans, his fight in Africa against the mercenaries, the opening of Spain, the victories of Hasdrubal—Hamilcar's son-in-law—followed by Hannibal's conquests in Spain and even in Italy where he kept the Romans engaged until the outbreak of the Second Punic War, all gave Carthage great influence and power in the western Mediterranean, and elevated the Barcid family as well.

The ambition of Hamilcar, and later Hannibal, went beyond gaining more influence in Carthage at the expense of the aristocracy, towards seeking the survival and glory of Carthage itself. This, in our view, gives special importance to studying the significance of Carthaginian military operations in Sicily.

1. The Role of the Barcid Family in Carthaginian Military Operations

When the First Punic War broke out in 264 BC, after the appeal of the Mamertines who had suffered under Carthage's iron grip which did not allow "piracy" in territory under its control (Gabriel, K., 210, p. 254), Hamilcar was no more than sixteen years old, assuming he was born between 280–275 BC. This explains the silence of sources about the "Barcid family" at the beginning of this war (Mubarak, M.M., n.d., p. 151).

The first mention of Hamilcar came after the failure of Regulus' campaign (Marcus Atilius Regulus). Some sources mention his recall from Sicily following the revolt of the Numidians against Carthage, taking advantage of the city's difficult circumstances. The hardships of war had already exhausted them, and the revolt worsened the situation until Hamilcar defeated them, imposing a tribute of 1,000 talents of silver and 20,000 head of cattle (Mohamed, S.G., n.d., p. 221).

If the Carthaginians recalled Hamilcar from Sicily after Regulus' defeat on the one hand, and the disaster of Camarina on the other, it was in line with the wishes of the large estate owners who wanted to expand their holdings in Africa, rather than invest in the costly war in Sicily (Bassam, A., 1980, p. 86).

This cost them the loss of Panormus at the end of 254 BC, one of the richest and most important Carthaginian cities in Sicily, inhabited by about 50,000 people. This led many other cities to surrender to Rome without resistance, including Soluntum, Petra, Enna, and Tyndaris. Rome also took Himera and Lipara in 252–251 BC. From 250 onwards, Rome prepared for further war by equipping a new fleet (Mohamed, H.H., 1013, p. 50).

At this time, Carthaginian forces under Hasdrubal attempted to recapture Panormus. Despite using elephants, the attack failed. Hasdrubal was condemned by the Council of One Hundred and Four and executed. This boosted Roman confidence to drive the Carthaginians out of Lilybaeum, Carthage's most important and fortified city in Sicily (Ayyoub, I., 1996, p. 155).

To achieve this goal, Rome appointed Consul Publius Claudius Pulcher in 249 BC to lead the fleet besieging Lilybaeum, whose garrison of about 10,000 mercenaries was commanded by Himilco. Among them, some mercenaries decided to defect to the besiegers.

The lack of experience of the Roman commanders led to their failure to prevent Carthage's relief forces from breaking the siege. Later, Pulcher decided to attack the Punic fleet stationed at Drepana. Ignorant of the harbor's geography-it had two entrances-he fell into the trap laid by Adherbal and Himilco (Bakri, H.S., 1924, p. 63).

Adherbal captured ninety-three ships with their crews, while Claudius managed to escape with only thirty. Meanwhile, the fleet of Lucius Junius Pullus, attempting to reach Lilybaeum, was defeated by Carthalo and then destroyed by a storm off Camarina. Carthage thus regained control of the sea, but failed to exploit its advantage by consolidating its positions in Sicily. Some historians saw the victory at Drepana as a great triumph, while Polybius described Rome's defeat as "a catastrophe beyond all imagination" (Bakri, H.S., *ibid.*, pp. 80–94).

2. Carthaginian Commanders in Sicily

Hamilcar Barca took command of operations in Sicily in 247 BC according to some (Polybius, 1970, p. 6–64), or in 246 BC according to others (Valère, M., 1935, p. 1–12). Some considered Hamilcar's appointment as an attempt to remove him from Carthage (Polybius, I, 36, 64). Others believed it was part of a general reshuffle of leadership. At this time, Amilcar Parpus relinquished power to Hanno the Great; Himilco handed over Lilybaeum to Gisco; Hasdrubal and his aide Carthalo also abandoned their posts in favor of Hanno (Diore, S., 1837, p. 12.1).

Some questioned why these three commanders were removed, despite their recent appointments and record of victories. Others argued that their victories themselves prompted their removal, as the triumph at Drepana had encouraged them to attack Rome (Piganiol, A., 1961, p. 275), an idea that did not appeal to the ruling oligarchy. The oligarchs hoped for peace after the return of the Fabii to power in Rome, who were known as peace advocates. They thus rejected exploiting the advantages offered by these victories (Dion, C., 1970, pp. 20–25).

Some of the dismissed commanders, such as Hasdrubal and Himilco, belonged to the Barcid faction. Amilcar Parpus may also have been close to them. By contrast, the newly appointed leaders, such as Hanno the Great, belonged to the Carthaginian oligarchy, known for opposing the Barcids. Gisco was also known for opposing the Barcids, while his father Hasdrubal had followed a middle policy between the Barcids and Hanno's faction (Bohec, Y., 1996, p. 222).

Appointing Hamilcar in these circumstances was surprising, unless seen as a concession by the ruling party to the opposition. King Bomilcar II may have established friendly ties with the Barcids, strengthened later by his marriage to Hamilcar's daughter. This could explain his support for them in the Senate (Gsell, St., 1928, p. 165). Carthage

may also have thrust Hamilcar into the spotlight while limiting his resources, hoping his failure would discredit the popular class backing him (Mohamed, F., 1981).

Despite the limited means provided to him, Hamilcar immediately launched raids on the Italian coast, neglected by his predecessors, ravaging the southern shores up to Cumae (Strabo, 1867).

In Sicily, Hamilcar relentlessly harassed the Roman forces, seized Mount Eryx, and after fierce battles, recaptured the city of Eryx. However, he could not overcome the resistance of Roman outposts built atop the mountain (Polybius, I, 8–78).

This change likely reflected a purely defensive strategy, aiming to relieve Lilybaeum and Drepana, besieged for six years during his command in Sicily.

Hamilcar showed remarkable activity despite having only a very small force and a few dozen ships (Roussel, D., 1970, p. 2–8). Yet he kept the Roman troops on the island constantly engaged, exposing them to continuous raids (Livy, XXI, 35, 05).

The war exhausted both sides, but the will to win determined the outcome. This will was stronger where interests were greatest. Sicily was far more important to Rome than to the Carthaginian oligarchy, which preferred African expansion (Decret, F., 1977, p. 85). Hence, Rome resolved to take decisive action, which required building a powerful fleet.

3. Roman Expansion in Sicily

Caius Lutatius Catulus led the fleet to positions before Drepana. The Carthaginians were surprised by Rome's new initiative and hastily equipped a fleet, loading it with grain and new recruits (Livy, 1958, p. 2–10). It sailed in March to join Hamilcar, but upon reaching the Aegates Islands off Lilybaeum, it was attacked by Roman units that had lightened their ships of all cargo. With well-trained crews skilled in maneuvering, the Romans won decisively. Carthage lost 120 ships, seventy of which were captured along with about 10,000 sailors (Mommsen, Th., 1872, p. 203).

Although the garrisons of Drepana, Lilybaeum, and Eryx held their positions and retained their fighting spirit, and decided to continue resisting, Hamilcar received orders from Carthage to begin truce negotiations with the Romans in 241 BC (Charles, P., 1970, p. 238).

4. Peace Negotiations

It seems that the mission entrusted to Hamilcar was not easy, if not dangerous, since assigning him this mission at such a sensitive and difficult moment was carefully considered so that Carthage would put him as a shield before the intransigent nationalists and before the Carthaginian forces in Sicily which had not lost their fighting spirit and wanted to continue resistance. Thus, Carthage gave Hamilcar free rein, in the opinion of some, to choose between continuing the fight without relying on any help from Carthage,

neither with money nor with men, or negotiating and concluding a truce whatever Rome's condition (Peubibuis, I, 2, 72).

Thus, we note that the "merchants" who dominated Carthage were indeed exhausted by the war, otherwise how can we explain their continuation of the war after the disaster of Mylas in 254 B.C., and the defeat of Tyndaris in 251 B.C., and now they weaken, while their forces in Sicily were ready to continue the war (Tite Live, P. 35, 05).

Hamilcar was in a sensitive position that he surely realized its seriousness, and he knew that assigning him this mission was intended to strike the "position" of the intransigent nationalists who could not oppose even the concessions approved by their own party man "Hamilcar." Moreover, Hamilcar was not one of those reckless enthusiasts who refused to acknowledge the inevitable results of defeat (Grimal, 1975, P. 208).

And if some point to Hamilcar's desire from now to take revenge, and even trying to prepare his son for that (Pollotino. M, 1963, P. 27), surely he knew that vengeance could only be achieved by preparing political, economic, as well as military means. Thus, he saw in this diplomatic mission entrusted to him a prelude and preparation for the work to be carried out in the future.

By entrusting the matter to Hamilcar (the military commander), the elders had for the first time conceded the "principle" of separation between political and military powers, which they had imposed as a fundamental rule for more than a century. This indicates that the elders wanted to end the war that had drained their treasuries by any means, regardless of the higher interest of the homeland.

Hamilcar sent to the Roman consul Lutatius Catulus a delegation requesting peace terms, and the Roman consul himself, at the end of his consulship, wanted to end the war before his term ended, so he sent a delegation to Hamilcar carrying the peace conditions:

- Carthage gives up the whole island of Sicily.
- Not to fight Syracuse or any of its allies.
- Carthage pays a war indemnity of two thousand and two hundred (2200) talents to be paid in installments over twenty years.
- All Roman prisoners are handed over.
- The Carthaginian armies in Sicily surrender their weapons, and all Roman soldiers who had deserted are handed over (Shenniti, Mohamed El-Bachir, 1982, p. 165).

But it seems that Hamilcar was firm and strict on one point: preserving his honor and the honor of his soldiers, by refusing to consider them prisoners of war (Decret. F, 1977, p. 165). He preferred death with weapons in hand (Mubarak, Mohamed El-Mili, p. 1151). Thus he rebelled against the last condition, which forced Catulus—who also wanted peace—to cancel it.

5. The Peace Treaty

The “Peace Treaty” was sent to the Roman Senate for ratification, but it saw in those conditions leniency, and that the demanded compensations did not equal the sacrifices made. Accordingly, the Senate sent a delegation to Sicily to study the matter closely and work to extract better conditions (Lapeyre.G&Pellegrin.A, 1942, p. 100). And even if this delegation increased the burden of those conditions, we sense that Rome itself was exhausted by the war and was seeking the truce, which was concluded under the following terms:

- Carthage abandons Sicily and the islands between it and Italy (the Lipari and Aegates islands).
- Return of prisoners to Rome.
- Not to wage any war against Syracuse and its allies.
- Carthage pays a war indemnity of three thousand and two hundred (3200) talents over ten years, with one third paid immediately upon signing the treaty.

Some secondary clauses were introduced into the treaty concerning non-aggression against each other’s allies as well as prohibiting the recruitment of mercenaries (Ali, 1974, p. 495).

After concluding the treaty, Hamilcar gave up his powers and handed his forces over to Gisco, and entered Carthage as a simple citizen. While Gsell and some historians suggest his dismissal, his withdrawal seems voluntary, since the mercenaries accused him of abandoning them.

This renunciation suggests that a misunderstanding occurred between Hamilcar and his soldiers, who wanted to continue resistance on one hand, and Hamilcar and the Carthaginian Senate on the other. Others interpret this withdrawal—as temporary in their view—that Hamilcar expected a conflict to arise between the government and his old soldiers as soon as the war ended, and it was expected of him to be at the head of the rebels and attempt to seize power by force. But Hamilcar realized that all who had tried to seize power by force always failed, since the Carthaginian people—whatever their situation—formed a block behind the elders and rulers against tyrants and resisted rebels strongly. This happened more than once, as the petty bourgeoisie of Carthage was satisfied with the aristocratic system which knew how to preserve its interests, and feared a dictatorship based on the army, the majority of which were foreigners (Mubarak, Mohamed El-Mili, op.cit., p. 960).

The pressing question is: why did Carthage give up in this way after a naval defeat that did not affect its positions in Sicily, nor weaken its main forces there, at a time when it did not do so after the disaster of Mylas in 254 B.C., nor after the defeat of Tyndaris in 251 B.C.?

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And if we know that many of the fluctuations of this war were suffered by Rome, and if we try to count the naval losses, we find that Polybius notes that the Romans lost during the war no less than seven hundred units, including those destroyed by storms, while the Carthaginians lost much fewer, as the same historian points to five hundred (500) units lost by the Carthaginians (Peubibuis, P. 1-63).

This leads us to look for another reason for Carthage's abandonment of Sicily outside the accidental variables of the military conflict. If we acknowledge that the Punic capital with its African borders had borne the war efforts alone, unlike Rome supported by Syracuse and its Italian allies in recruitment, and as the arsenals of Naples and all the cities of Magna Graecia (Elea, Locri, Tarentum) were at Rome's service, still Carthage's fatigue and exhaustion do not explain everything (Montesquieu, 2001, p. 08).

Carthage had entered this war to defend certain positions that formed part of the complex arrangements ensuring its dominance in the western Mediterranean basin, and Sicily was not considered to play an essential role. This is evident from the clauses of earlier treaties concluded with Rome, where it had never prohibited or conditioned any control over trade relations between Rome and Carthaginian Sicily, unlike Africa and Sardinia where trade was subject to prohibition and control. Carthage considered these areas as its own domain, and thus the true spheres of influence under its control (Aymard.A, 1957, pp. 277–293).

Moreover, the Carthaginian government did not realize that abandoning Sicily would cause the dismantling of existing trading stations. There was also an influential faction within the Carthaginian oligarchy that pushed to accept the “withdrawal solution” since the war was exhausting, and since there was an alternative, which was expansion in Africa, an operation undertaken by Hanno the Great after Hamilcar's appointment to Sicily in 247 B.C. (Shenniti, Mohamed El-Bachir, op.cit., p. 200).

The policy of expansion in this Libyan area perfectly suited the elders who had long begun acquiring “estates” in the rich rural regions, where they found a sure source of wealth compensating for the potential profits from commercial operations in Sicily.

After Hamilcar received the order to negotiate with Consul Catulus and sign the text of the truce (TALATLI. SE, 1978, p. 278), it seems Hamilcar did not want to guarantee for long the policy imposed by the estate owners. He went to Africa and stayed away from all activity while working to strengthen ties with the faction opposing—and hostile to—Hanno the Great.

Gisco, governor of Lilybaeum after Hamilcar's resignation, had to take on the heavy task of disbanding the army and transporting them to Africa by quickly evacuating the sites still held by about twenty thousand (20,000) soldiers who were eagerly waiting for their back pay, the majority being professional mercenaries. Among them were Iberians, Gauls, a number of Ligurians, Balearics, as well as half-Greeks according to Polybius (Peubibuis, P. 1-67). In addition, the Libyans were more numerous. Gisco organized the transport to Africa and took care to schedule the departures so as to give the government

time to pay the wages of the units as they arrived, send foreigners to their homelands, and avoid the concentration of forces around Carthage (Harsh, 2014, pp. 12–25).

CONCLUSION

Gisco organized the transport to Africa and took care to schedule the departures so as to give the government time to pay the wages of the units as they arrived, send foreigners to their homelands, and avoid the concentration of forces around Carthage. But if we know that Hanno was advocating the idea of ending the war, it was because this war required spending vast sums of money and caused the bankruptcy of the treasury. Moreover, the peace treaty with Rome required Carthage, upon signing, to pay one thousand (1000) talents of the imposed indemnity.

Under these conditions, the Punic government decided to postpone the wages and bonuses due to the hired soldiers “mercenaries,” which led to a fierce war extending from 241 until the end of 238 B.C.

The brilliance of Hamilcar and the emergence of his military genius at an “early” stage, if we consider what some historians say who see his call from Sicily to confront the Libyan revolt after the campaign of Regulus (Marcus Atilius Regulus) in 255 B.C., then his recall to confront the rebellious Libyans is proof of his military standing in this early period.

The discipline of the founder of this family “militarily,” despite his dissatisfaction with the results of the Punic War after the battle of the Aegates—which had not broken the fighting spirit of the Carthaginian forces, nor affected their positions in Sicily, nor undermined their main strength there—yet he obeyed Carthage’s orders assigning him the mission of negotiating with the Romans.

Entrusting Hamilcar with the mission of “negotiation” was a carefully considered act, so that Carthage would place him as a “shield” before the intransigent “nationalists” rejecting the results of the “war.”

We note that the “merchants” who dominated Carthage were indeed exhausted by the war, otherwise how can we explain their continuation of the war after the “disaster of Mylas” in 254 and the defeat of Tyndaris in 251, and now their “forces” weaken while their troops in Sicily were ready to continue fighting?

If some point to Hamilcar’s desire from now to take revenge on “Rome” which humiliated “Carthage” not only with harsh peace terms but also by occupying Sardinia and Corsica, surely he knew that “revenge” could only be achieved by preparing political, economic, as well as military means. Thus, he saw in the “diplomatic” mission entrusted to him as preparation for the work planned for the future.

By entrusting the negotiations to a “military” leader, the Punic elders had conceded the “principle” of separating political and military powers, which they had imposed as a

fundamental rule. This indicates that they wanted to end the war that had exhausted their resources by any means, regardless of the higher interest of the homeland.

The “resignation” of Hamilcar and his renunciation of his powers after the treaty invites the belief that a misunderstanding had occurred between Hamilcar and his soldiers who wanted to continue fighting on one hand, and Hamilcar and the Carthaginian Senate on the other. Others interpret this withdrawal—as temporary—as Hamilcar’s expectation of a conflict between the Carthaginian government and his old soldiers as soon as the war ended.

If we try to count the naval losses, we find that Polybius notes that the Romans lost during the war no less than seven hundred units, including those destroyed by storms, while the Carthaginians lost much fewer, as the same historian points to five hundred units lost by the Carthaginians. This pushes us to look for other reasons behind Carthage’s abandonment of Sicily outside the accidental variables of the military conflict:

A- We acknowledge that Carthage bore the war effort alone, unlike Rome supported by Syracuse and its Italian allies in recruitment, as well as the arsenals of Naples and all the cities of Magna Graecia in its service.

B- Carthage entered the war in Sicily to defend certain positions that were part of the complex arrangements ensuring its dominance in the western Mediterranean. Sicily did not play as essential a role as Africa and Sardinia, which is evident from previous treaties where Carthage never conditioned control over trade relations between Rome and Sicily, unlike Africa and Sardinia which it considered its true spheres of influence.

The Carthaginian government did not realize that abandoning Sicily would lead to the dismantling of the existing trading posts.

The influence of the Carthaginian oligarchic faction pushed toward accepting the “withdrawal solution” since there was an alternative, namely expansion in Africa. This expansion policy in the “Libyan area” fully satisfied the elders who had long been acquiring “estates” in the fertile rural areas of Africa near Carthage’s territories.

The war costs were behind Carthage’s inability to pay the dues of the “hired soldiers.” Although Gisco had taken measures for transport to Africa and had taken care to schedule the departures to give the government time to pay the wages of the units as they arrived, send foreigners to their countries, and avoid the concentration of forces around Carthage, yet Carthage’s inability to pay would lead it into a fierce war as a result of which it would lose Corsica and Sardinia, along with having to pay an additional financial indemnity.

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