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Hamilcar's role in suppressing the mercenary revolt of 241-238 BC

دورها ميلكار في إخماد ثورة المرتزقة 238-241 ق.م

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Abstract:

The interest of Greek and Latin historians and writers in Carthage and the Carthaginians began with the beginning of the clash between Rome and Carthage, especially with the appearance of Hannibal in the war that they arbitrarily called the Second Punic War, in which some became aware of Hannibal's decisive role, so they called it "Hannibal's War." Given this role, the spotlight was on him, so some tried to delve into his roots. When they collided with the difficult reality, they resorted to methods that allowed us to see more clearly, as during this period they resorted to giving nicknames for important figures, and thus Hannibal's father Hamilcar became known as "Hamilcar of Cyrenaica", and thus Hannibal became Cyrenaica, and his son-in-law Asdrubal distinguished himself from those who bore this name by considering him also Cyrenaica, so the entire family, its supporters and mothers-in-law formed a "party" or "league" "Al Cyrenaica."

Keywords: Lineage; Name; Family; Politics; Hamilcar.

المخلص:

بدأ إهتمام المؤرخين والكتاب الإغريق واللاتين بقرطاجة والقرطاجيين من بداية الصدام بين روما وقرطاجة وخاصة مع ظهور حنبعل في الحرب التي أطلقوا عليها تعسفا الحرب البونيقية الثانية، التي تفتن البعض إلى دور حنبعل الحاسم فيها، فأطلق عليها "حرب حنبعل"، ونظرا لهذا الدور، سلطت الأضواء عليه، فحاول البعض الغوص في جذوره، وعندما إصطدموا بالواقع الصعب لجأوا إلى طرق تسمح لنا برؤية أوضح، إذ لجأوا في هذه الفترة إلى إعطاء "كُنْيَات" لشخصيات كبيرة، وهكذا أصبح هاميلكار والد حنبعل يعرف "بهاميلكار برقة"، وأصبح بذلك حنبعل برقي، وتميز صهره أصدروبعل عمن يحمل هذا الإسم بإعتباره هو الآخر برقي، فأصبحت كل العائلة، وأنصارها وحمايتها يشكلون "حزب" أو "عصبة" "آل برقة".

الكلمات المفتاحية: النسب؛ التسمية؛ العائلة؛ السياسة؛ هاميلكار.

1. Introduction

It is not easy to attempt a study of a family in Carthage due to several considerations that can be summed up in the absence of genealogical records. While *Silius Italicus* traces this family back to *Belus*, a companion and relative of *Elissa*, the founder of Carthage-according to the account transmitted to us by *Justin*-*Silius's* version cannot be separated from poetic imagination. This was a common method among both the ancients and moderns, who often trace their ancestry back to a mythical forefather. This was even common among the ancient Libyans, among whom *Juba II*, for instance, traced his lineage back to *Heracles*, claiming descent from a Libyan woman, *Tingé*, widow of *Antaeus*, whom the god *Heracles* united with after her husband's death.

This is the first consideration. The second is the limited lexicon of names among the Carthaginians and their link to religion, in addition to the absence of family

names like we have today, where a person carries a first name followed by a family name inherited by all descendants of the same family. This was also common among the Romans, who added the father's name between the given name and the family name, making it easier to trace genealogies. This was not the case with the Punic people, who contented themselves with the person's name and added "son of so-and-so," along with the limited number of names and the widespread custom of grandchildren bearing the names of their grandparents. As a result, we sometimes find ourselves facing four or five people from the same generation with the same name, without any blood relation or familial connection.

For example, in the time of *Hannibal Barca*, whom we know best, there were at least four individuals named *Hasdrubal*-one of them his younger brother, who was killed in the Battle of *Metaurus* in 207 B.C.; another, his brother-in-law, who also died in 221 B.C. and was succeeded by Hannibal in

command of the army in Spain; the other two had no connection to the family.

If we take for instance *Hamilcar* (the family patriarch) and *Hannibal* (one of his most famous sons), we find that the names *Hamilcar* and *Hannibal* appear frequently in Carthaginian history. Many commanders, admirals, and *suffetes* bore these names in the years -even centuries- preceding the Second Punic War. The same applies to the names *Magon*, *Hasdrubal*, from the family of *Hamilcar* and *Hannibal*. But there is nothing that allows us to prove lineage or kinship connections. This, without a doubt, complicates our task of tracing origins.

To help the reader follow the research without getting lost in these names, and to distinguish between similar (homonymous) names, we are left with no choice but to do as some researchers have done and use nicknames or personal traits. Thus, we say: *Hasdrubal the Fair*, *Hasdrubal the Younger*, *Hasdrubal Gisgo*, and so on. All these names were widespread in Carthage, just as names like *Mohamed* and *Ahmed* are among us -except that we use family names (surnames), whereas the Carthaginians used the term "son of."

This issue has led those who wish to study the origins of this family to resort to intuition, speculation, and even assumptions. And we are aware that assumptions carry many weaknesses that may destabilize the research and steer it away from the truth. That is why we try to avoid resorting to assumptions except when absolutely necessary and only in the total absence of any indication in historical sources.

2. Origin of the Name:

While *Silius Italicus* did not hesitate to consider the Barcids among the early migrants with Elissa, and others likewise considered this family to be among the ancient and noble families of Carthage, still others gave the name an etymological interpretation by deriving it from the Semitic word for "lightning"¹ or "thunderbolt"².

In this case, the name has several connotations -particularly its association with swiftness in execution-which led those interested in the Barcids' history to study the meanings of this word, which also connotes military brilliance³.

If we do not rule out these epithets, typically derived from the traits of their bearers -just as *Hannibal* descended like a thunderbolt upon Italy in his war -so too did his father, entrenched at Mount Eryx, descend like lightning on the Roman forces invading Sicily. This makes such a derivation plausible.

However, the derivation of the name from the word *baraka* (blessing) or seeking blessings, even if such piety characterized many Punic names and even carries a sense of urgency (as in "rush upon the enemy")⁴, is unlikely due to the clear difference between *barq* (lightning) and *baraka* (blessing) in matters of genealogy.⁵

Even if we accept the possibility that this epithet is derived from *lightning*, we find no reference or specific event to allow us to assume that it was originally given to *Hamilcar* for a particular trait.

Another hypothesis-among many others lacking any support-is that proposed by some writers who suggest that the origin of the "Barcid"⁶ family is the region of *Barca* in present-day Libya.

Thus, we observe that the difficulty in researching this family lies not only in the obscurity of their lineage, but also in the origin of the name itself -especially in the absence of any historical text that can definitively settle the matter. Speculation

²*Silius Italicus, The Punica*, translated by E.F. Corpet and N.A. Dubois, Pauckouke Publishing (3 volumes), (Paris 1836–1838), Book I.

³See the story in Plutarch, *Life of Sertorius* Plutarch, *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated by J. Amyot, edited by Gérard Walter, Gallimard (Paris 1951).

⁴Cornelius Nepos, *Hamilcar*, XXII, 1.

⁵Justin, *Universal Histories* (2 volumes), translated by J. Pierrot, Pauckouke Publishing, (Paris 1833), Book XVIII, 4.

⁶Cornelius Nepos, *Hamilcar*, XXII, 1.

¹Cornelius Nepos, *Hamilcar*, XXII, 1.

and conjecture remain dominant, even when dealing with the origins of one of the families that played a leading-indeed decisive- role in the conflict between the two greatest powers of the time: Carthage and Rome.¹

If it is difficult, as we've seen, to make final judgments about this family's origins or the etymology of their name, we have nevertheless come to know some figures from this family, whether through their role in the conflict with Rome or their rivalry for power in Carthage with the *Hannonids*-the family that represented the interests of the Carthaginian aristocracy, as opposed to the *Barcids*, who relied on the common people.

Among these figures, we can mention Hamilcar, the "founding patriarch"² of the family, whose birth is estimated around 272 B.C.- assuming he went to Sicily to lead Carthaginian forces at the age of 26, as *Cornelius* notes that he was a young man at that time. Others suggest his birth occurred between 280–275 B.C.³

3. The Barcid Policy in the Western Mediterranean Basin

Hamilcar emerged during the six consecutive years he spent in Sicily, according to contemporary historians, as a great "man of war" -the victorious commander against all the Romans, according to *Cornelius Nepos*. He confronted them while entrenched in a fortified position on Mount Eryx near present-day Trapani, exhausting his enemies with deadly sorties and terrifying raids.

But more importantly, he studied the most modern military strategy of his time and brought about a real revolution in

military strategy, devising methods that would later empower the supernatural exploits of his successor, Hannibal.

After returning to Carthage following the defeat at the Battle of the Aegates Islands, Hamilcar is credited with crushing the *Mercenary Revolt*, which had become a thorn in the side of defeated Carthage. This victory further increased the popularity of the *Barcid* family, which from then on based its strength on the people.⁴

4. Circumstances of the outbreak of the revolution

If those factors helped fuel the revolution against Carthage, the circumstances surrounding Carthage were also conducive. Besides the traditional conflict between the "Barcas" and the "Hannos", there was the rising influence of the owners of large estates whose interests differed from those of the sailors, dock workers, craftsmen, and small traders - who constituted the majority of the urban population and lived directly or indirectly from the sea. These craftsmen and merchants saw in the "Catulus" treaty their ruin, as it removed the previously imposed customs barriers against Italian competition. Thus, the most active segment of the population was ready to join the opposition behind the disappointed military leaders.⁵

Carthage, therefore, was experiencing internal discord during a time when enemies were on its soil. While Gisco, according to Polybius, had found a way to prevent the gathering of these mercenaries on Carthaginian land, the government, under the pretext of financial hardship, allowed them to gradually assemble, hoping to handle the matter all at once by persuading the troops to forgo part of their dues. But as their damages grew, their officers were ordered to move them to Sicca (modern El

¹Gabriel Audisio, *Hannibal*, Berger-Levrault Publishing, (Paris 1961).

²For more information, see:

Gsell (St.), *Ancient History of North Africa*, Hachette, (Paris 1913), Vol. 3, pp. 96–97.

³In this context, for example, the name Hannibal means "He has the favor of Baal," Hamilcar means "Protected by Melqart," Azariel means "Supported by the god Baal," etc. See: Violaine Vanoyeke, *Hannibal*, France Empire Publishing (Paris 1955), pp. 37–50.

⁴Gabriel Audisio, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁵For more on this revolt and its events, see: Chapter One of this study, pp. 40–49. Violaine Vanoyeke, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

Kef) ¹to await the funds needed for their payment.²

The Senate then realized the seriousness of the situation and tried to calm it by supplying them with food, but this leniency from Carthage was met with new demands from them.

After wages, they began demanding grain rations and compensation for the horses lost during the Sicilian campaign, calculated at the highest price grain reached during the war years.

Thus, Gisco - who previously enjoyed the soldiers' trust - went to pay their wages and tried to persuade them and encourage loyalty to Carthage. But among the soldiers were those with personal reasons for continuing the "rebellion," knowing the dangers of reconciliation. Among them was Spendius, who then joined Mathos, who is presented by the sources as an instigator of unrest.³

5. Matos's role in the mercenary revolution

Mathos, seeking national liberation and revenge for the conditions his fellow citizens had reached, and Spendius, seeking to escape his master's punishment, worked together to prevent any reconciliation with Carthage. They placed "shackles" on Gisco and his companions, making them prisoners of war, thus entering into "open war."⁴

Although some refer to this war as the "Mercenary War," Polybius realized that it exceeded the scope of a mercenary conflict and instead called it the "Libyan War." He may have been right, considering Mathos's role in giving it a social and national dimension by inviting all African tribes to join the war effort.

These tribes responded to his call with men and money, enabling Mathos to pay the

mercenaries' dues owed by Carthage and meet the needs of the revolution. He also received around seventy thousand (70,000) volunteers for the war, according to Polybius. This revolution quickly spread among the local population, who adopted and supported it enthusiastically. Even women pledged not to withhold their possessions, taking off their jewelry without hesitation to fund the war. Thus, what was initially described as a rebellion became a broad social revolution.

The situation became serious, and Hanno the Great was appointed. He assembled forces composed of mercenaries and citizens, supported by about one hundred (100) elephants, and managed to lift the siege on Utica. However, he failed to capitalize on this victory due to his lack of experience in major battles, being accustomed only to small operations against civilians who had been excessively exploited.

Hanno's failure benefited Hamilcar Barca, who, after Gisco's capture and Hanno the Great's loss of prestige at the walls of Utica, became the only commander capable of saving Carthage. He was summoned to command, while Hanno remained in service under his authority.⁵

6. A study of the politics of the Carthaginian Barca dynasty:

Thus, the positions concerning the results of the First Punic War and visions for the future led to an intensification of the conflict between two opposing policies. The people, represented by the *Barcids*, leaned toward expansion and war, seeking revenge. Their vision was far-reaching, aimed at distant, resource-rich Spain -beyond Rome's immediate view- to compensate for the losses of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica.

The *Barcid* policy aimed to rebuild the power of Carthage, which had lost its dominance in the eastern Mediterranean basin and its fleet, despite being a maritime

¹George (Masroua), previous reference, p. 166.

²Pais (E.), *Histoire Romaine*, (Paris 1988), p256.

³Gilbert Charles-Picard, *Hannibal*, Hachette Publishing, (Paris 1961), pp. 51-52.

⁴Ahmed Safar, *Madaniyat al-Maghrib al-Arabi fi al-Tarikh*, Dar al-NashrBouslama, (Tunis 1950), p. 201.

⁵Polybius, *Histoires*, Book III, 1.1, translated, presented, and annotated by Denis Roussel, Gallimard (Paris 1970).

power. Roman oversight commissions would not allow Carthage to rebuild its fleet, and so the *Barcids* turned their attention toward Spain.¹

Opposing this policy were the *Hannonids*, who represented Carthage's commercial aristocracy. They leaned toward peace, accepted the status quo, and were content with expanding territory in Africa and increasing their personal wealth. Regarding Rome, they favored negotiation and peaceful settlement.

The Romans, for their part, took advantage of Carthage's difficult situation following the events after the defeat at the Aegates Islands and the signing of the *Treaty of Catulus* in 241 B.C., which imposed harsh terms on Carthage and left it unable to pay its mercenary soldiers. These soldiers then revolted in Africa and Sardinia, prompting Rome to intervene and force Carthage into a second treaty in 238 B.C., by which it ceded Sardinia and Corsica after already giving up Sicily and the islands between it and Italy in the first treaty.

These events strengthened the position of the vengeful faction, represented by the *Barcids*, over the retreating and compromising stance of the *Hannonids*.

7. Hamilcar the Lightning's strategies in turning his attention to the island of Iberia:

Hamilcar's success in achieving these results was supported significantly by *Hasdrubal*, a wealthy aristocrat described in contemporary sources as elegant, agile, and so attractive that he was nicknamed *Hasdrubal the Fair*. Though from the aristocracy, he too had populist leanings while maintaining support in financial circles through secret business groups of the

time -called *brotherhoods*,² and what we would call today *lobbies*.

Hamilcar Barca and Hasdrubal the Fair were close partners. To strengthen that relationship, Hamilcar married him to his daughter -leading *Cornelius Nepos* to say, "A great man like that doesn't lack cunning," in reference to Hamilcar's shrewdness in reinforcing his bond with the man.

Alongside Hamilcar Barca and Hasdrubal the Fair, we must mention *Hannibal* to complete the formation of the Barcid family. Hannibal was one of its central figures, along with his brother *Hasdrubal the Younger* and *Mago*.

These five men left for Spain in 237 B.C. -most likely by land, as Carthage had abandoned its fleet, which led to a lack of ships and the inability to secure maritime communications.

In Spain, with the help of his son-in-law, Hamilcar worked for nine years (237–229 B.C.) to conquer all of southern Spain. Upon his death, his son-in-law *Hasdrubal the Fair* took over general administration of Carthaginian Spain and command of the army for seven years (229–³221 B.C.). He expanded further into Spain, exploiting its vast resources and the silver mines of *Sierra Morena*, and founded a new city that became the real capital: *Carthago*⁴ *Nova* (Cartagena). Upon his death, *Hannibal* succeeded him.

The *Barcids* were celebrated and chosen by their troops in Spain as commanders, then confirmed in their positions by the Carthaginian government. Each of these three-Hamilcar, Hasdrubal, and Hannibal - held both civil and military

¹ Harche (Mohamed El Hadi), *Ancient Maghrebian History: Political and Civilizational (From Prehistory to the Islamic Conquest)*, Algerian Printing Institution (Algiers, 1995), p. 62.

²On this policy, see Chapter Two of this study: *The Barcid Family's Policy in Spain*, pp. 51–78.

³George (Masroua), *Hannibal*, Vol. I, Samia Press (Beirut, 1959–1960), p. 157.

⁴Chenti (Mohamed El Bachir), "Aspects of the Carthaginian State's Relationship with the Maghreb: The National Content of the Mercenary Revolt," *Journal of History*, Issue 4 (April 1977), pp. 119–219;

powers simultaneously. At times, the fate of Carthage was in their hands.¹

This is all we were able to gather from scattered accounts of one of Carthage's greatest families-one which, however much writers may have wronged it, remains immortalized in the pages of history thanks to the roles played by its sons: from the family's founder *Hamilcar*²*Barca*, to his successor *Hannibal*, who astonished the world of his time³ and continues to inspire at least one new scholarly work every year, in various languages, making him one of the greatest military commanders humanity has produced.

8. Conclusion:

After studying the various aspects of the subject and delving into its details, we arrived at the following conclusions:

1. Hamilcar is the head of the family, despite what SiliusItalicus claimed about the family's descent from Belus, companion and relative of Dido, founder of Carthage. There is no evidence to support this, so we cannot separate Silius's account from poetic imagination. Hamilcar represents the clear historical starting point for this family.

2. The study of family history in Carthage is challenging-even for the Barcid family, which produced influential historical figures such as Hamilcar, conqueror of the mercenaries, Hasdrubal, founder of Carthago Nova (Cartagena), and Hannibal, "the spirit of the Second Punic War." The reasons include:

- The absence of genealogical records among the Carthaginians, which left the field open to storytellers who often trace lineage back to mythical ancestors.
- The limited pool of personal names, often linked to religious significance, along with the absence of family names

(surnames) inherited through generations, which poses a major obstacle.

- The tradition of naming grandchildren after their grandfathers leads to multiple individuals within the same generation bearing the same name without being directly related.

3. Hamilcar's military genius emerged early. According to some historians, he was recalled from Sicily to suppress the Libyan revolt following Regulus's campaign in 255 BCE. This recall is proof of his military stature at that early stage.

4. The cost of the war left Carthage unable to pay its mercenary troops. Although Gisco organized the transfer of troops back to Africa in stages to give the government time to pay them and send foreigners home-thus avoiding troop concentrations near Carthage-the city's financial failure led to a brutal war in which it lost both Corsica and Sardinia and had to pay an additional fine.

5. Several factors turned the mercenary mutiny into a social revolution, even acquiring a national revolutionary tone when Mathos called on all Libyans to join the uprising to lift their chains.

6. The founder of this family demonstrated military discipline. Though dissatisfied with the outcome of the Punic War after the Battle of the Aegates Islands-which did not weaken Carthaginian military spirit or control in Sicily- he still obeyed Carthage's orders and took on the task of negotiating with the Romans.

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²Harche (Mohamed El Hadi), *op. cit.*, p. 76.

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