“Hannibal, then about nine years old, was ... pestering Hamilcar to take him along to Spain. His father, who was sacrificing to the gods before crossing over into Spain with his army, led the boy up to the altar and made him touch the offerings.”

What would these offerings have been? Hamilcar Barca, a powerful North African general, would probably have sacrificed a black dog whose body he had split in two with his sword, along with a white bull and a ewe whose throats he had slit. After killing the animals, he would have burned them on an altar so the gods could enjoy the smell of meat roasting in the flames. Military leaders made such sacrifices to persuade the gods to give them victory over their enemies. Livy tells us that as Hannibal touched the bodies of the slaughtered animals, Hamilcar made him “solemnly swear . . . that as soon as he was able, he would become the declared enemy of the Roman people.”

Hannibal kept the promise that he had made to his father. He became a great general. And in 217 BCE, he took war elephants from Carthage (in modern
Tunisia), his hometown in North Africa, and marched to the gates of Rome. Rome had never faced a more dangerous enemy in all of its long history.

Who were these Carthaginians who hated the Romans so much? They were seafaring people who left their homeland in Phoenicia (modern-day Lebanon) around 800 BCE. They set up colonies in North Africa and Spain, and also on the island of Sicily—the ball that the Italian boot seems to be kicking.

The most powerful Phoenician colony was the North African city of Carthage. It became a busy trading post for merchants from all over the Mediterranean world. In time, Carthage gained independence from its mother country, conquered other Phoenician colonies, and founded colonies of its own. By the 3rd century BCE, this thriving and wealthy city controlled trade across the western Mediterranean.

Like two bullies on the same playground, Rome and Carthage both wanted to be the power in the western Mediterranean world. They both wanted to dominate the fertile island of Sicily and control trade at the Straits of Messina, between Sicily and the Italian mainland. Even before Hannibal’s time, the clash between the two cities was brewing. Although both cities were strong and proud, they were very different. Rome’s army had already conquered all of Italy. Yet Carthage was wealthier and had a much better navy.

A titanic struggle between Rome and Carthage began in 264 BCE—17 years before Hannibal was born. It started when the Sicilian city of Messina asked Rome to join in its fight against Syracuse, another city in Sicily. Then Syracuse asked Carthage to join in its fight against Messina and Rome. A series of wars raged, on and off, for a century, with these two military alliances fighting against one another. These were called the Punic Wars, from the Latin word for Phoenicia. The enemies fought one another in Italy, Spain, Sicily, and North Africa.

At the beginning of the First Punic War, the Romans had no navy, only trading ships. They didn’t even know how to fight on the sea. They only knew how to fight on land, so they invented a grappling machine that made sea battles more like land battles. The machine had huge hooks with heavy ropes attached. The Roman soldier-sailors lobbed the hooks over the side of an enemy ship. The hooks bit into the other ship, holding it while the Romans pulled it up beside their own. With the enemy’s ship locked in place, the Romans scrambled aboard and fought hand-to-hand on deck. This technique literally gave the Romans a “fighting chance” at sea.

In 241 BCE, a Roman commander attacked a Carthaginian fleet of 170 ships. Despite stormy seas, Rome sank 50 enemy ships and captured 70 more. What was left of the Carthaginian fleet sailed home, defeated. When the ships arrived in their home port, the commander was executed.

After 23 years of battle, the First Punic War was over. Rome controlled Sicily and dominated the western Mediterranean. The Roman army had broken Carthage’s grip. The memory of this shameful defeat tortured Hannibal’s father.
As part of the peace treaty, Rome demanded that Carthage pay 80 tons of silver—equal to a year's pay for 200,000 Roman soldiers. The city had to find some way to pay this huge bill. Carthage sent its top general, Hamilcar Barca, to Spain. His assignment was to conquer the region and develop the silver and copper mines there. Hamilcar took his son Hannibal to Spain with him, and he did his job well. He sent money and goods back to Carthage.

When Hamilcar died, the 26-year-old Hannibal took over the job. Like his father, Hannibal considered Spain to be his territory. He believed Carthage must be the only power there. So when Rome made an alliance with the Spanish city of Saguntum, Hannibal fought back and fulfilled the promise he had made as a boy: to be the sworn enemy of Rome. He laid siege to Saguntum, cutting off all supplies of food and military aid. After eight months, Saguntum fell to Hannibal's warriors. And in 218 BCE, Rome declared war on Carthage—again. The Second Punic War had begun.

The Romans planned to invade Spain and fight Hannibal there. But Hannibal didn't wait around. He decided to surprise them and invade Italy first. The journey toward Rome took five months, beginning with a long march across France. Then Hannibal led his soldiers through the Alps. He lost one-third of his men during the icy mountain crossing. But still he marched on, with men, horses, and war elephants. These African elephants were decorated for battle and painted in bright colors. (Their trunks were usually red.) Swords were attached to their tusks. Some carried towers on their backs—small fortresses that protected the soldiers riding inside as they shot arrows and hurled stones at their Roman enemies.

The Romans first faced Hannibal's elephants at the Battle of Lake Trebius in northern Italy in 218 BCE. When Hannibal gave the signal, the elephant handlers jabbed the beasts with iron pokers—whips are not enough for elephants—and drove the trumpeting animals forward. Most Italians had never seen an elephant. Their size alone must have been terrifying. The Roman horses—and many soldiers too—panicked at the sight and smell of these monstrous creatures.

Pressing deeper into Italy, Hannibal showed his cleverness at the Battle of Lake Trasimene, in central Italy, in 217 BCE. Pretending to march against Rome itself, he lured the Romans into a narrow pass and ambushed them from the hills. His troops demolished the Roman army.

A year later, Hannibal conquered the Roman troops again at the Battle of Cannae, in southern Italy, thanks to his powerful cavalry and a brilliant battle plan. Hannibal commanded the soldiers fighting in the center to pretend to retreat—to move back, as if they were losing. The Romans fell for Hannibal's trick and followed. Then the Carthaginians fighting on the flanks closed in on the Romans and surrounded them. The Romans were trapped.

Rome lost nearly 60,000 soldiers. Another 10,000 were captured. Fewer than 6,000 Carthaginians fell in the battle. The Romans had never suffered a worse defeat and they were terrified. Whenever a watchman thought he spotted an army approaching the city, his cry, "Hannibal ad portas" ("Hannibal at the gates") would echo through the streets. But the stunning defeat at Cannae became a turning point. More and more men joined the Roman military, and wealthy citizens gave generously to the war effort. The leaders in the Senate decided not to meet Hannibal in fixed battles, but to let him wear himself out in smaller battles in the countryside.

Rome's new battle plan worked. The Carthaginian troops became exhausted. Hannibal's soldiers had been in Italy for more than 10 years, and Carthage refused to send fresh troops. When the Roman general Publius Cornelius Scipio took charge of the Roman forces in Spain, he cut Scipio Africanus, sculpted in black marble, has a firmly set jaw, which shows the determination that brought him victory over Hannibal.
The Greek historian Polybius was with the younger Scipio when Carthage finally burned to the ground. In his eyewitness account, Polybius wrote that his friend Scipio wept to see such a great and beautiful city demolished.

Scipio... reflected on the inevitable change which awaits every city, nation, and kingdom, as it does every one of us men. . . . When I asked him boldly what he meant, he grasped my hand and said, “O Polybius, I am terrified that one day someone will give an order to destroy my own city.”

Wounded soldiers fall in the midst of fierce combat, and frightened elephants trumpet and retreat in this 16th-century painting of the battle at Zama, in 202 BCE.