Assess the validity of Polybius’s statement:

The General who must be acknowledged as the greatest on either side, both in daring and in genius was Hamilcar surnamed Barca.

Synopsis
Ever since I first read about it the First Punic War has always fascinated me. I had found it curious that historians had traditionally allowed the First Punic War to be overshadowed by the Second and Third Punic Wars; yet the first war was longer, involved more men, had a more uncertain outcome and was arguably more significant in terms of its consequences.

My preliminary research revealed that too little had been written about the First Punic War to supply detailed information in relation to its major players or specific events. In the course of my research I recalled a movie called The Emperor's Curb in which Hamilcar Barca had been described as “an unequaled commander with the misfortune of being on the wrong side”. Consistent with the description of Hamilcar Barca as “an unequaled commander” I found that Polybius, arguably the best of the available ancient sources on the First Punic War, had written:

The General who must be acknowledged as the greatest on either side, both in daring and in genius was Hamilcar surnamed Barca.

It was the validity of this statement that I sought to test in my major work. This paper seeks to do so by focusing on three areas. The first is a consideration of Hamilcar Barca’s conduct in the First Punic War to assess whether he was in fact worthy of Polybius’ praise. The second area reflects on any possible reasons for bias on Polybius’ part towards Hamilcar over other generals. The final area involves the identification of another general in the First Punic War who was arguably greater than Hamilcar.

On the basis of a consideration of each of these factors this paper seeks to lay down a foundation for the view that Polybius’ statement may well have been in error.

Essay
The First Punic War was the longest continuous war in Greek and Roman history. It was also one of the greatest naval wars in history. It helped shape the world as we know it today. Yet in the light of all this, it is surprising that there is so little written about it.

There is no question that of the available ancient sources on the First Punic War, limited as they are, Polybius is our best. His historiographical techniques were ahead of his time. He is one of the only sources whose entire work on the subject has survived and he attempts to write exhaustively and objectively. Further, an examination of the vast majority of the other surviving sources and fragments on the First Punic War seem to suggest that they used Polybius as their primary source. For all of these reasons, his success as a scientific historian, the lack of other sources and the fact that he appears to have been the basis for most of the few other ancient sources as mentioned above, historians have failed to question the validity of certain statements of his, such as the one describing Hamilcar as the greatest general of the First Punic War.

Indeed Polybius appears to be the best source that one could realistically have hoped for. Yet in his closing line of Book One he makes a bold statement:

The General who must be acknowledged as the greatest on either side, both in daring and in genius was Hamilcar surnamed Barca. He was in fact the father of that Hannibal who later made war on the Romans.
Polybius offers no justification for this statement. The thesis upon which this paper is based is that Polybius's closing statement goes very much against the methods of the 'ideal historian', about which he writes so passionately.

To support this thesis, three factors are to be considered: Hamilcar Barca's actions in the First Punic War to see if he is worthy of this praise; Polybius himself to find possible reasons for a bias toward Hamilcar over other generals, and finally there is the identification of another general in the same war who, it can be argued, was greater than Hamilcar. Once these have been considered, a firm basis for departing from the statement of Polybius may be expressed.

Hamilcar Barca is praised by nearly every single ancient writer who mentions him. While some attribute this to his success it is more likely these later writers used as a common source an early historian who praised him such as Polybius or Philinus. This makes it difficult to criticise Polybius's assessment of Hamilcar as, generally, the only useful source available to us concerning Hamilcar is Polybius. Yet a critique can be achieved.

Nearly nothing is known about Hamilcar before his entrance into the war. He enters near the close of the war and at once takes full command of the war in Sicily. Nepos seems to imply that he was a young man at the time and Brian Caven goes so far as to suggest the possibility that he may have first seen action fighting under the command of Xanthippus against Regulus at the battle of Tunis. Neither of these inferences are concrete; so besides the fact that Hamilcar came from one of the leading Carthaginian families, his early life remains a mystery. As Walkbank points out, Barca is associated with the Semitic Baraq meaning lightning. Whether this was a surname his family already possessed or a name given to him as a result of his actions in the war is unknown. Whatever the case we can assume that his arrival into the war was most probably due more to political motives than for a purely military function.

After consolidating himself and having to repress a mercenary revolt Hamilcar proceeded to engage in defensive guerrilla warfare. He chose to place himself in a defensive position where he could not be attacked, yet from where he could not effectively attack. His marked caution may seem to go against the image of the "daring general" described by Polybius. Caven points out that this "Hamilcaric interlude" in the large scale fighting gave the Romans the opportunity to recover from disastrous naval blunders and made it possible for the Romans to gather the men and resources for one last effort to win the war. In effect Hamilcar's conduct may have indirectly lost Carthage the war which would mean that he was not a "great general" as Polybius describes. His apparent lack of daring and genius, traits that Polybius attributes to him in greater quantity than to any other general of the war, may have been the cause of Carthage's defeat.

Hamilcar eventually displayed some level of command when in a daring attack he took Mt Eryx and established it as his new base. Yet all that was achieved was a prolonging of the stalemate. He then spent the next two years defending and skirmishing. According to Polybius, over 1,500 soldiers revolted against him during this time and attempted to betray him to the enemy. He may not have been as charismatic as Polybius describes. Dexter Hoyos suggests that the problem Hamilcar never solved was how to use his position to make a real impact. He sums up Hamilcar's situation:

In practical terms he was having no effect on the war. In fact the entire Carthaginian war-effort in Sicily kept going only thanks to the Roman forbearance in not building a fleet to cut supply links from North Africa. This forbearance ended in 242.

In 241 BC the Romans won a decisive sea battle at the Aegates Islands. It was a crushing defeat for the Carthaginians and they decided to end the war. Hamilcar was appointed with full negotiating powers. Many later writers have expressed the view that Hamilcar wanted to go on fighting, that he believed that victory could be won but was let down by the "spineless authorities" back in Carthage. Hoyos points out that this is part of a naïve romantic notion that as soon as the first war was over Hamilcar began plotting the second. He also points out the difficulty in Hamilcar's situation. Hamilcar had commanded longer than any other general in Sicily yet at the same time his veterans had not been paid in years and were ready to revolt. Further, Hamilcar's political standing at home had eroded whilst he was gone. If the negotiated terms were harsh Hamilcar would be a convenient scapegoat. Fortunately for him the consul Lutantius was tired of the war and his terms were not overly harsh. He also allowed Hamilcar to refuse to hand over his troop's weapons and Roman deserters. This probably saved Hamilcar politically because he managed to retain an image of the undefeated general.
Hamilcar was a competent general who was skilled politically and who managed to build a power base for the Barcids that would allow his son Hannibal to lead the Second Punic war. Yet these actions are not one of an outstanding general. Whilst some view him as a great man who was overshadowed by his son, the reality may be that he was not a spectacular man and having Hannibal as his son made him appear greater than he was in reality.

What possible motives could Polybius have had for exaggerating Hamilcar's greatness? This is a question which no well known historian has attempted to answer. There are, however, several motives that may be identified through a consideration of Polybius the man as well as Polybius the historian.

Polybius was originally a Greek statesman who was transported to Rome as one of 1,000 hostages. In Rome he became the tutor of Scipio Aemilianus who had been adopted into the Scipio family by the son of Scipio Africanus. Scipio Aemilianus later became the victor of the Third Punic War and Polybius became his client and one of his greatest friends.

Polybius was now tied to the Scipio family, whose political fortune was due to Africanus's defeat of Hannibal. In Roman eyes the greater Hannibal had been, the greater the Scipio family was. Therefore if Hannibal was not only a great general but was also the son of a great general, who had been a thorn in Rome's side, then the Scipio family was that much greater. By this reasoning Polybius may have deemed it was in his best interests to make Hamilcar seem a greater general than was actually the case. It was for this reason that Polybius chose to conclude book one, after describing Hamilcar as "the greatest on either side..." reminding the readers "He [Hamilcar] was in fact the father of that Hannibal who later made war on the Romans."

All of the above however does not of itself support a successful challenge to Polybius's view of Hamilcar as the greatest general in the First Punic War. For the reasons set out earlier, Polybius may have misrepresented Hamilcar and there may have been a basis for Polybius to inflate Hamilcar's greatness. Yet until a general in the First Punic War greater than Hamilcar can be identified the thesis of this paper has not been established. Only then can Polybius's evaluation of Hamilcar as the greatest general in the First Punic War be challenged effectively.

One general available for this purpose is Xanthippus of Sparta who fought in the ninth year of the war, eight years before Hamilcar made his first appearance. He arrived at the time when the successful Roman general Regulus had inflicted a number of catastrophic defeats on Carthage both on land and at sea. Trying to cut their losses, the Carthaginians attempted to sue for peace but were unable to accept Regulus's outrageous terms.

Another factor deserving of consideration is Polybius's ideas of historiography. He believed in the idea of universal or catholic history. In Polybius's eyes Hannibal could not be studied out of context. For Hannibal to have been as great as he was, he must have had a great father. Both of them must have been the greatest generals in their own respective wars. This reasoning may have been used as justification for his 'tidying up' of history.

Finally some focus should be diverted to Polybius's sources. Polybius used two primary sources for his work on the First Punic War. They were Fabius Pictor who was biased toward Rome and Philinus of Agrigentine, a Sicilian who was biased toward Carthage. The generally accepted view is that for the most part Polybius made use of Philinus, only referring to Fabius Pictor to supplement gaps in Philinus's work as well as to correct too much bias. Unfortunately very little is known about Philinus as a person. Yet it is safe to infer that at the time of Philinus's writing, the Barcids would have been a power in Carthage and Hamilcar himself may have still been alive. There is a strong possibility that flattery of the Barcid family may have been as important to Philinus as flattery of the Scipio family was to Polybius. Even without this incentive Philinus would have praised Hamilcar, simply because the Barcids were the pride and face of Carthage and Philinus was pro-Carthaginian. The greater Hamilcar had been, the greater the prestige of Carthage. A nation's greatness was measured through its leaders and heroes.

Polybius writes that when Xanthippus heard of this situation he studied the battles and began to spread the word that the losses were not due to Roman superiority, but to the lack of experience of the Carthaginian generals. Desiring an explanation the generals sent for him. Xanthippus explained to the generals their previous mistakes and went on to say that if they followed his advice they would find it easy to defeat the Romans. The generals apparently accepted these criticisms and placed their forces under his command.
Xanthippus then began training the troops, making several adjustments in their formations and styles of fighting. The troops responded to this and Xanthippus soon became somewhat of a hero amongst them. Polybius writes:

The soldiers demonstrated their feelings with loud cheers and showed themselves impatient to engage the enemy, for they were convinced that no harm could come to them as long as Xanthippus was in command.  

Ancient sources put the Carthaginian numbers at 12,000 infantry, 4,000 cavalry and nearly 100 elephants while they place Roman numbers at around 32,000 infantry and 500 cavalry. Xanthippus sent the elephants ahead and they wreaked havoc among the Roman lines. His infantry marched in formation and engaged the disheveled enemy whilst his cavalry swept the enemy cavalry away and proceeded to flank the Roman lines. It was a massacre in which only 2,000 of the enemy escaped and Regulus was captured. It would be remembered as the Battle of Tunis.

This victory was significant. It completely turned the tide of the war allowing Carthage to go on the offensive. It also restored Carthaginian morale while damaging that of the Romans. There is little doubt that were it not for this victory, Carthage would not have lasted half as long in the war as it finally did. The tactics and troop formations used at Tunis also became the standard Carthaginian warfare methods used later by both Hamilcar and Hannibal.

In this episode Xanthippus displayed both greatness and daring. We can see the full extent to which his victory was respected by looking at events that took place many years later in year 202 BC, at the end of the Second Punic War in the battle of Zama. Whilst no historians have yet linked these two battles this is only because they have had no reason to. At Zama the great strategist Hannibal, one of the most famous generals of all time, appears to have based his strategy on a modification of the battle of Tunis. It is quite plausible to theorise that Hannibal was trying to recreate Xanthippus’s victory at Tunis.

All the ancient historians praise Xanthippus and seem to see this as a victory of intelligence over might. Yet while Polybius praises him, he does not seem to give him his due credit. There are several possible reasons for this. Polybius may have consciously wished to avoid the elevation of a general above one of the Barcids. Walbank suggests that Polybius may not have even seen Xanthippus as a proper general. Another reason may have been due to Polybius’s own bias. Polybius was born in the city of Megalopolis, which had been invaded and torched by the Spartans around 20 years before his birth. He may have exhibited some hesitation in giving too much credit to a Spartan like Xanthippus. A final reason may be because of Phoenius. There are varying stories, all of which Polybius disregards as fiction, that speak of Xanthippus being killed by people jealous of a successful foreigner. Of the two main variations, one says Carthaginians killed him whilst according to another the Sicels killed him. Being a pro-Carthaginian from Sicily, Phoenius would have good reason for wishing to hush such stories. The greater Xanthippus was, the greater crime it would have been to kill him. It is therefore possible that Phoenius downplayed the importance of this role. Even without this motivation, a pro-Carthaginian writer like Phoenius would not have wanted Carthage to seem so weak that a foreigner was needed to fight their battle for them. For this reason he would have elevated a Carthaginian-born general like Hamilcar over a Spartan like Xanthippus.

Studying the First Punic War in depth is always difficult owing to the lack of information. It is therefore understandable that inferences are often required to arrive at bold conclusions that challenge the conventional views. On the basis of the reasoning set out above one can discern a sound basis for the view that Hamilcar was not the greatest general in the First Punic War as described by Polybius.

Endnotes
1. There is a noticeable inadequacy of modern sources concerning the First Punic War. While it is covered in the standard histories of both Rome and Carthage very few historians seem to give it the attention it deserves. Reasons for this may include its apparent lack of bold strategies and impressive characters displayed by the Second, and to some extent the Third Punic war in the forms of Hannibal, Scipio Africanus and the later Scipio Aemilianus. It is therefore understandable that many historians (for example Theodor Mommsen in Bk III in his History of Rome, 1854. Translated by Dickson, W. in 2007) may have considered the First Punic War overshadowed by its byproducts and have therefore thought that reference to it was useful only as an introduction to the other wars. The
result is that much of what the ancients write about the First Punic War has been left unquestioned.

2. *The Histories*, Bk 1
3. Polybius, *The Histories*, Bk 1.64
4. For the purpose of coming to a fair conclusion, the general must be a land general rather than an admiral.
5. These include historian Diodorus Siculus and the Roman biographer Cornelius Nepos
6. This can be seen in a line of Diodorus Siculus (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, Trans. Walton, F., Bk 24.5. “He surpassed all his fellow citizens both in daring and in ability at arms”) which is in wording similar to the statement by Polybius under examination.
11. Ibid.
13. Such as Diodorus Siculus
15. Ibid.
16. This marked the end of Hamilcar’s actions in the First Punic War. His veterans later revolted and this caused the Mercenary War in which Hamilcar managed to distinguish himself; yet this should not interfere with any evaluation of him as a general in the first war.
17. Hoyos goes so far as to compare him to a less successful Philip II of Macedon. (Hannibal’s Dynasty pg 71)
18. However a few such as Hoyos and Caven have noted that Polybius does indeed have a bias (Hoyos’s, pg 38 and Caven’s, pg 59)
19. Polybius, *The Histories*, Bk 1.64
20. This is the idea that one cannot study an event, period or person in a vacuum. It should properly be viewed in the context of what occurred prior to and after the event in question. For example the Mercenary War can only be studied if the historian is aware of both the First and Second Punic Wars.
22. Philius lived during the First Punic War
23. Xanthippus was a Spartan mercenary who had been bought to Carthage by a recruiting officer to help the war effort. Polybius (Polybius, *The Histories*, Book one, part32) notes that he was originally an officer in a large group of soldiers who had been recruited from Greece.
24. Regulus had taken the war to Africa and captured two major cities, each one very close to Carthage.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Eutropius, *Historiae Romanae Breviarium*, Book 2.22. These numbers are probably manipulated to make the Carthaginian victory appear greater. However we can assume that the Romans had many more infantry whilst the Carthaginians vastly outnumbered them in terms of cavalry.
29. This was the last major battle fought between Rome and Carthage in Africa.
30. Walbank, *A historical commentary on Polybius Vol.1*, pg 91

**Bibliography**

**Modern Sources**


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