

Hannibal and the battle of cannae

War



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HANNIBAL AND THE BATTLE OF CANNAE The battle of Cannae was a major battle of the Second Punic War near the town of Cannae, an ancient village in southern part of Italy. The battle took place between the outnumbered Carthaginian army under Hannibal against the Romans under the command of Lucius Aemilius Paullus and Gaius Terentius Varro. For the most part, the Romans were overpowered by the undermanned Carthaginian forces. Many historians agree that the battle of Cannae is one of the greatest strategic victories in military history.

Numerous historians have examined the possible route Hannibal took from New Carthage to the Pyrenees and then over the Alps to Rome. Along with using scientific data, these historians and scientists allege that there are three possible routes Hannibal may have taken from New Carthage in Iberia across Europe to get to Italy. Scientists and historians do disagree on which route is most accurate do to the fact that the only historical accounts of Hannibal's journey are that of Livy and Polybius. Neither historian leaves a very detailed account of the surroundings for Hannibal and his troops.

Through paleobotanical reconstruction, attempts have been made to more clearly identify if the places noted by Livy and Polybius resemble any of these places today¹. Hannibal came from the very well-known Carthaginian Barca family. His father, Hamilcar Barca was the military leader of Carthage during the first Punic War. At the conclusion of the First Punic War, Carthage's mercenaries revolted and Rome took advantage of her rival's distraction and, in spite of the recent peace agreement, took control of Sardinia and Corsica and forced Carthage to pay a large indemnity².

Carthage finally won the mercenary war, but the loss of Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica left her economic empire crippled and reduced the area from which she could hire troops. After regaining control, the Carthaginians were forced to major war concessions. Of those concessions, Carthage was to pay a war indemnity to Rome and could no longer recruit Italian sailors. Carthage also sent Hamilcar Barca to Iberia to eliminate the Spaniards and build an empire in Spain. Unfortunately, Barca was killed in an ambush at Helice in 229 B. C. E. but not until after he had been able to take over control of the Iberian southern coast.

In 226 BC, Hasdrubal reached an agreement with Rome that recognized the Ebro River in northeastern Spain as the northern limit of Carthaginian interest in the area. Five years later, Hasdrubal was assassinated, and Hamilcar's son Hannibal became the leader. At about that time, Rome began involving itself in the affairs of Saguntum, a city on the Mediterranean coast of Spain well south of the Ebro and therefore presumably in Carthaginian territory³. Hannibal viewed the Roman moves as an intervention similar to the ones that had touched off the first war.

Hannibal laid siege to the town, which fell after eight months. Hannibal's strategic insight now became evident⁴. When Hannibal came to the head of the Carthaginian army he took it upon himself to rebuild Carthaginian fortunes by occupying Spain. The Romans had aligned themselves with Saguntum in an attempt to show strength and power against Carthage. Since Carthage's fleet was no longer a match for Rome's, the invasion of Italy would need to occur by land. To that end, Hannibal did his best to speak with tribes in his line of march well in advance of the arrival of conflicts.

He also established alliances with various north Italian Celtic tribes that were traditional enemies of Rome. Hannibal's forces were the first civilized army to cross the Alps⁵. Exposure, desertion, accidents and fierce resistance by mountain tribes reduced his army from 40, 000 to 26, 000 during the trip, and most of the elephants accompanying the remarkable host also perished. Fortunately, once Italy was reached, the Celtic alliances provided replacements that brought the army back to its original strength. The Carthaginian troops endured great hardship and suffered serious casualties.

Shortly thereafter, Hannibal fought two battles that demonstrated his resolve as a field commander and his determination to destroy rather than merely defeat his enemy. At the Trebia River, only 10, 000 Romans escaped an ambush out of 40, 000 involved, and at Lake Trasimene, nearly an entire Roman force of 25, 000 was killed or captured. From then on, the Romans were hesitant to fight a large-scale engagement. Hannibal was careful to treat prisoners from Rome's allied cities courteously, often freeing them without ransom to encourage dissatisfaction with Rome's cause⁶.

Captured Roman citizens, on the other hand, were held for ransom used to pay Hannibal's men or were often sold into slavery. The Carthaginian army lived off the land causing as much damage to the economy as possible. After victory at Lake Trasimene, Hannibal moved his army to southern Italy in order to recruit additional troops⁷. This moving of troops by Hannibal and their subsequent looting forced the Romans to become more aggressive. Two now consuls, Gaius Terentius Varro and Lucius Aemilius Paulus, were given command of the combined legions of Rome with orders to make an end to the feared Carthaginian.

Normally, the two consuls would have independent commands but, when their forces were combined, command of the whole alternated daily. Hannibal's effective intelligence organization soon informed him that Varro was the more rash and impulsive of his opponents, and so Hannibal decided to force an action on a day that Varro was in command of the Roman forces⁸. Hannibal seized a grain depot to lure the Romans to the site he had chosen for battle. The depot was located at the small village of Cannae, south of Rome.

Dawn of that August morning in 216 BC found Hannibal, commander of Carthage's army in Italy, looking down at the plain separating his vantage point from the waters of the Adriatic Sea about three miles away⁹. The Roman enemy was already advancing with an army of more than 85, 000 men, aligned in the standard offensive formation of the dreaded legions. Hannibal's force, some 56, 000 in number, faced long odds. The Roman force available for battle was large by the standards of the day. Eight full legions of infantry, some 40, 000 men, were improved by 40, 000 allied infantrymen.

About 2, 000 Roman cavalry and 4, 000 allied horses completed the army, for a total strength of 86, 000¹⁰. In battle, the Roman infantry usually advanced on a wide front, with cavalry on the flank. The heavy infantry was led by skirmishers, who opened the fighting with the throwing of javelins. They would then fall to the rear of the formation and were able to pass through the Roman formation because deliberate gaps were left in each line. The basic fighting unit of the heavy infantry was the maniple of about 160 men divided into two centuries.

Rather than forming a constant line, the two centuries were deployed one behind the other, leaving the gaps used by the skirmishers. At the point of attack or when in a defensive position, the rear centuries could be moved up to fill the gaps¹¹. The Hastati made up the first line of heavy infantry of the Roman army. They were equipped with a heavy shield, a helmet, light and heavy javelins and a short, straight sword. The Princeps were the second line of heavy infantry. Although armed like the Hastati, the Princeps were somewhat older and more experienced and formed behind those of the Hastati, but were offset to block the gaps in the Hastati line. The third line, made up of the old veteran troops known as the Tritarii, had its centuries form behind the gaps in the second line, giving an overall checkerboard result to the formation. The Tritarii had a thrusting spear in place of the javelin of the first two lines¹². In the hands of an experienced commander, the flexibility possible with this formation was useful, particularly against older military formation such as the phalanx.

Unfortunately, the Roman method of appointing new consuls each year and rotating command daily made it unlikely that the top military talent would be allowed to pursue a logical plan. Roman courage, discipline and patriotism were rarely lacking, but the coming battle of Cannae would highlight the need for changes in the selection and responsibilities of army commander¹³. Aside from the top leaders, very few Carthaginians were present in Hannibal's army. His army at Cannae consisted of North African, Spanish and Celtic personnel. Perhaps the soundest foot soldiers available to Hannibal were the Libyan-Phoenician heavy infantry.

The Phoenicians living in Libya were subject to Carthaginian military service and cleared themselves well. Originally armed like Greek hoplites, they now began equipping with Roman arms captured at the Trebia and Lake Trasimene. In addition to the infantry, 2, 000 Spanish cavalry were at Hannibal's disposal. They were heavily armed and used as heavy cavalry, but the outstanding quality of their horses allowed them to rival the speed of the Numidian cavalry¹⁴. About 25, 000 Celtic infantry and 5, 000 Celtic cavalry made up the remainder of Hannibal's force.

These people lived for war, but without the guidance of a commander like Hannibal, their absence of discipline made them unpredictable. At the time of Cannae, Hannibal was arming these men with captured Roman weapons. He liked to use the Celts as troops that would cause disruption in enemy ranks prior to sending in his African infantry. At Cannae, the Romans were determined to crush Hannibal's center. They formed deep battle lines in order to bring pressure to stand against the middle of the Carthaginian line. On the Roman right, the legion cavalry, some 2, 400 strong, faced Hannibal's Spaniards and Celts, totaling 7, 000.

The mismatch would prove a decisive element in the battle's surprising outcome. On the Roman left, the 4, 000 allied cavalry faced an equal number of Numidians. Hannibal aligned his infantry in an unusual manner. The center of his position was curved, facing outward toward the advancing Romans. The flanks bent backward from the center. Alternating units of Spanish and Celtic swordsmen held this line, and they were greatly outnumbered by the approaching Romans. Hannibal positioned himself at the left end of the line, and his youngest brother Mago, held the right.

Each end of the line was anchored by a dense square of African infantry, the location of which guaranteed that they would not be engaged until long after those at the center¹⁵. As the Romans advanced, a hot west wind blew dust in their faces and obscured their vision. At a range of about 35 yards, the Romans hurled their light javelins, causing casualties among the Spaniards and Celts. These javelins often caused problems even if they only pierced a man's shield, because the shaft was difficult to remove and weighed the shield down, making the man vulnerable to an onrushing legionary.

At closer range, the heavy javelin was thrown, and then the infantry lines collided, the swift Celts and athletic Spaniards against the disciplined Roman masses. In time, the weight of the Roman assault began to take effect on Hannibal's troops, and the center of the Carthaginian line retreated. As Hannibal's men were forced back, they found themselves slowly backing up a slope. Due to the nature of the terrain, the Romans fought uphill as they advanced and at the same time were restricted into a narrowing front as their mass of men entered the 'V. Although the Roman infantrymen did not know it, their fate was all but sealed by this time. Hannibal had planned for his cavalry to strike the decisive blows while his infantry fought a large-scale delay. As the battle opened, Hannibal launched the Spanish and Celtic cavalry on his left against the outnumbered Roman cavalry¹⁶. The consul Aemilius accompanied these cavalymen but they could not endure the Carthaginian assault. Aemilius was wounded and the bulk of the Roman cavalry was driven from the field, exposing that flank of the Roman army.

While this occurred on the Carthaginian left, the Numidians on the right had been engaged with the horsemen of Rome's allies¹⁷. The Carthaginian

cavalry commander on the left, reorganized his units and proceeded to ride behind the Roman infantry to the far side of the battlefield, where the stalemated cavalry fight continued between the Numidians and Rome's allies. The allied horsemen now were taken by surprise and caught between the two Carthaginian forces. The allied cavalry fled the field, taking the consul Varro with them.

At this point, Aemilius was dead or dying, and Varro, the other commander, no longer was with the Roman army. The Roman and allied cavalymen had been killed, captured or driven from the field¹⁸. By that time, the Roman infantry had fought its way up the slope and into the enclosed end of the 'V,' the point. As the men became more tightly packed into a confined space, fewer of them could use their weapons effectively. Romans in the rear ranks continued to push forward, but found they had little room to maneuver.

Hasdrubal, Hannibal's younger brother, assaulted the Roman rear with his heavy cavalry, assisted by the Carthaginian light infantry. The encirclement was complete. Many Romans first discovered the danger when they realized they were being cut down and hamstrung by the Carthaginian troops. Historians have estimated that the fighting continued until evening and that approximately 600 Romans died per minute of the battle. Cannae represented the apex of Hannibal's career, although he has been criticized for not attempting to end the war by sacking Rome itself at that point.

Hannibal remained in Italy for 13 more years, but the determination of the Romans to fight on, regardless of losses, eventually gave them the opportunity to defeat the great Carthaginian. The failure of Carthage to rebuild its fleet in order to challenge that of the Romans made Hannibal's

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task extremely tough. He attempted to reduce Rome's naval advantage by occupying the Italian coastal cities. If Hannibal had been able to hold them, the odds against the Carthaginian fleet would have improved, but his limited number of troops made it difficult for him to isolate enough garrisons to prevent Roman recapture of the port cities.

For 15 years in all, from 218 to 203 BC, Hannibal occupied large areas of Italy. He fought and defeated the Romans on numerous occasions but could not break their spirit¹⁹. After Cannae, the Romans again became cautious about entering into full-scale battle against Hannibal, but their command of the sea and the decision to invade Spain, made reinforcement of Hannibal's army difficult. Slowly, the troops who had crossed the Alps with Hannibal decreased in number and in age. But Carthage's absence of naval power prevented Hannibal's alliances with Syracuse and Macedonia from becoming fruitful.

The Roman navy captured a treaty between Hannibal and Philip V of Macedonia, and by the time the second received a copy and acted on it, the Roman fleet barred his troops from crossing to Italy. In spite of all the complications, Hannibal proved to be a gifted leader able to get the very best from his men. His army was made up of mercenaries with no real obligation to the Carthaginian cause however no record shows any mutiny during the 5 years in Italy. The army did not more than just survive it maintained a high level of morale and fighting spirit.

Spain was taken from Carthage and the Barcid family after Hannibal's brother Hasdrubal repeated a crossing of the Alps with a reinforcement that gave the Romans in Spain a free hand. Hasdrubal was incapable of uniting

with Hannibal before being opposed by a strong Roman army in 207 BC. In the ensuing battle, Hasdrubal was defeated and killed²⁰. In October of 203 BC, Publius Cornelius Scipio, the conqueror of Spain, invaded North Africa and forced Hannibal to defend Carthage. Hannibal's defeat at Zama at the hands of Scipio in the following spring, caused mostly because of a shortage of cavalry strength, ended the Second Punic War.

Hannibal rose to the position of prominence in Carthage after the war and took steps that helped Carthage recover economically from the conflict. Rome viewed Carthage's revival with suspicion, and Hannibal was forced to flee to the east, where he committed suicide in 183 BC rather than fall into Roman hands. Hannibal Barca was one of history's greatest generals and Rome's greatest enemy. Although later Roman tradition belittled him, it respected his prowess as a great military commander. Had Hannibal not underestimated the strength of the Romans, he might have rewritten European history.

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