

The Battle of Cannæ

Source: Polybius, III.107–118. In *The Histories of Polybius*, 2 Vols., trans. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh (London: Macmillan, 1889), I. 264-275. Scanned by: J. S. Arkenberg, Dept. of History, Cal. State Fullerton. Prof. Arkenberg has modernized the text.

The Battle of Cannæ in 216 BCE, in which Hannibal smashed the Roman army, was one of Rome's greatest defeats.

Thus through all that winter and spring the two armies remained encamped facing each other. But when the season for the new harvest was come, Hannibal began to move from the camp at Geronium; and making up his mind that it would be to his advantage to force the enemy by any possible means to give him battle, he occupied the citadel of a town called Cannæ, into which the corn and other supplies from the district round Canusium were collected by the Romans, and conveyed thence to the camp as occasion required. The town itself, indeed, had been reduced to ruins the year before: but the capture of its citadel and the material of war contained in it, caused great commotion in the Roman army; for it was not only the loss of the place and the stores in it that distressed them, but the fact also that it commanded the surrounding district. They therefore sent frequent messages to Rome asking for instructions: for if they approached the enemy they would not be able to avoid an engagement, in view of the fact that the country was being plundered, and the allies all in a state of excitement. The Senate passed a resolution that they should give the enemy battle: they, however, bade Cn. Servilius wait, and dispatched the Consuls to the seat of war.

It was to Aemilius¹ that all eyes turned, and on him the most confident hopes were fixed; for his life had been a noble one, and he was thought to have managed the recent Illyrian war with advantage to the state. The Senate determined to bring eight legions into the field, which had never been done at Rome before, each legion consisting of five thousand men besides allies. For the Romans, as I have state before, habitually enroll four legions per year, each consisting of about four thousand foot and two hundred horse; and when any unusual necessity arises, they raise the number of foot to five thousand and of the horse to three hundred. Of allies, the number in each legion is the same as that of the citizens, but of the horse three times as great. Of the four legions thus composed, they assign two to each of the Consuls for whatever service is going on. Most of their wars are decided by one Consul and two legions, with their quota of allies;² and they rarely employ all four at one time and on one service. But on this occasion, so great was the alarm and terror of what would happen, they resolved to bring not only four but eight legions into the field.³

With earnest words of exhortations, therefore, to Aemilius, putting before him the gravity in every point of view of the result of the battle, they dispatched him with instructions to seek a favorable opportunity to fight a decisive battle with a courage worthy of Rome. Having arrived at the camp and united their forces, they made known the will of the Senate to the soldiers, and Aemilius exhorted them to do their duty in terms which evidently came from his heart. ...

Up to that time both Consuls had never been engaged together, or employed thoroughly trained soldiers: the combatants on the contrary had been raw levies, entirely inexperienced in danger; and what was most important of all, they had been entirely ignorant of their opponents, that they had been brought into the field, and engaged in a pitched battle with an enemy that they had never once set eyes upon. Those who had been defeated on the Trebia were drawn up on the field at daybreak, on the very next morning after their arrival from Sicily; while those who had fought in Etruria,⁴ not only had never seen the enemy before, but did not do so even during the very battle itself, owing to the unfortunate state of the atmosphere. ...

Next morning the two Consuls broke up their camp, and advanced to where they heard that the enemy were entrenched. On the second day they arrived within sight of them, and pitched their camp at about fifty stadia distance. But when Aemilius observed that the ground was flat and bare for some distance round, he said that they must not engage there with an enemy superior to them in cavalry; but that they must rather try to draw him off, and lead him to ground on which the battle would be more in the hands of the infantry. But C. Terentius⁵ being, from inexperience, of a contrary opinion, there was a dispute and misunderstanding between the two leaders, which of all things is the most dangerous. It is the custom, when the two Consuls are present, that they should take the chief command on alternate days; and the next day happening to be the turn of Terentius, he ordered an advance with a view of approaching the enemy, in spite of the protests and active opposition of his colleague.

Hannibal set his light-armed troops and cavalry in motion to meet him, and charging the Romans while they were still marching, took them by surprise and caused a great confusion in their ranks. The Romans repulsed the first charge by putting some of their heavy-armed in front; and then sending forward their light-armed and cavalry, began to get the best of the fight all along the line: the Carthaginians having no reserves of any importance, while certain companies of the legionaries were

¹ L. Aemilius Paullus, Consul for 216 BCE.

² Thus two citizen legions and two allied legions combined.

³ Thus eight citizen legions and eight allied legions combined—about 90,000 men.

⁴ At the defeat at Lake Trasimene.

⁵ C. Terentius Varro, Consul for 216 BCE.

mixed with the Roman light-armed, and helped to sustain the battle. Nightfall for the present put an end to a struggle which had not at all answered to the hopes of the Carthaginians.

But next day Aemilius, not thinking it right to engage, and yet being unable any longer to lead off his army, encamped with two-thirds of it on the banks of the Apennines—that chain of mountains which forms the watershed of all Italian rivers, which flow either west to the Tuscan sea, or east to the Adriatic. This chain is, I say, pierced by the Aufidus, which rises on the side of Italy nearest the Tuscan Sea, and is discharged into the Adriatic. For the other third of his army he caused a camp to be made across the river, to the east of the ford, about ten stades from his own lines, and a little more from those of the enemy; that these men, being on the other side of the river, might protect his own foraging parties, and threaten those of the enemy.

Then Hannibal, seeing that his circumstances called for a battle with the enemy, being anxious lest his troops should be depressed by their previous reverse, and believing that it was an occasion which required some encouraging words, summoned a general meeting of his soldiers. When they were assembled, he bid them all look round upon the country, and asked them “What better fortune they could have asked from the gods, if they had had the choice, than to fight in such ground as they saw there, with the vast superiority of cavalry on their side?” ...

Next day he gave orders that all should employ themselves in making preparations and getting themselves into a fit state of body. On the day after that he drew out his men along the bank of the river, and showed that he was eager to give the enemy battle. But Aemilius, dissatisfied with his position, and seeing that the Carthaginians would soon be obliged to shift their quarters for the sake of supplies, kept quiet in his camps, strengthening both with extra guards. After waiting a considerable time, when no one came out to attack him, Hannibal put the rest of the army into camp again, but sent out his Numidian horse to attack the enemy’s water parties from the lesser camp. These horsemen riding right up to the lines and preventing the watering, C. Terentius became more than ever inflamed with the desire of fighting, and the soldiers were eager for a battle, and chafed at the delay. For there is nothing more intolerable to mankind than suspense; when a thing is once decided, men can but endure whatever out of their catalogue of evils it is their misfortune to undergo.

But when the news arrived at Rome that the two armies were face to face, and that skirmishes between advanced parties of both sides were daily taking place, the city was in a state of high excitement and uneasiness; the people dreading the result, owing to the disasters which had now befallen them on more than one occasion; and foreseeing and anticipating in their imaginations what would happen if they were utterly defeated. All the oracles preserved at Rome were in everybody’s mouth; and every temple and house was full of prodigies and miracles: in consequence of which the city was one scene of vows, sacrifices, supplicatory processions, and prayers. For the Romans in time of danger take extraordinary

pains to appease gods and men, and look upon no ceremony of that kind in such times as unbecoming or beneath their dignity.

When he took over the command on the following day, as soon as the sun was above the horizon, C. Terentius got the army in motion from both the camps. Those from the larger camp he drew up in order of battle, as soon as he had got them across the river, and bringing up those of the smaller camp he placed them all in the same line, selecting the south as the aspect of the whole. The Roman horse he stationed on the right wing along the river, and their foot next to them in the same line, placing the maniples, however, closer together than usual, and making the depth of each maniple several times greater than its front. The cavalry of the allies he stationed on the left wing, and the light-armed troops he placed slightly in advance of the whole army, which amounted with its allies to eighty thousand infantry and a little more than six thousand horse. At the same time Hannibal brought his Balearic slingers and spearmen across the river, and stationed them in advance of his main body; which he led out of their camp, and, getting them across the river at two spots, drew them up opposite the enemy. On his left wing, close to the river, he stationed the Iberian and Celtic horse opposite the Roman cavalry; and next to them half the Libyan heavy-armed foot; and next to them the Iberian and Celtic foot; next, the other half of the Libyans, and, on the right wing, the Numidian horse. Having now got them all into line he advanced with the central companies of the Iberians and Celts; and so arranged the other companies next these in regular gradations, that the whole line became crescent-shaped, diminishing in depth towards its extremities: his object being to have his Libyans as a reserve in the battle, and to commence the action with his Iberians and Celts.

The armor of the Libyans was Roman, for Hannibal had armed them with a selection of the spoils taken in previous battles. The shield of the Iberians and Celts was about the same size, but their swords were quite different. For that of the Roman can thrust with as deadly effects as it can cut, while the Gallic sword can only cut, and that requires some room. And the companies coming alternately—the naked Celts, and the Iberians with their short linen tunics bordered with purple stripes, the whole appearance of the line was strange and terrifying. The whole strength of the Carthaginian cavalry was ten thousand, but that of their foot was not more than forty thousand, including the Celts. Aemilius commanded on the Roman right, C. Terentius on the left, M. Atilius and Cn. Servilius, the consuls of the previous year, on the center. The left of the Carthaginians was commanded by Hasdrubal, the right by Hanno, the center by Hannibal in person, attended by his brother Mago. And as the Roman line faced the south, as I said before, and the Carthaginian the north, the rays of the rising sun did not inconvenience either of them.

The battle was begun by an engagement between the advanced guard of the two armies; and at first the affair between these light-armed troops was indecisive. But as soon as the Iberian and Celtic cavalry got at the Romans, the battle began in earnest, and in the true barbaric fashion: for there was none of the usual formal advance and retreat; but when they once got to close quarters, they grappled man to man, and, dismounting from their horses, fought on foot. But when the

Carthaginians had got the upper hand in this encounter and killed most of their opponents on the ground—because the Romans all maintained the fight with spirit and determination—and began chasing the remainder along the river, slaying as they went along and giving no quarter; then the legionaries took the place of the light-armed and closed with the enemy. For a short time the Iberian and Celtic lines stood their ground and fought gallantly; but, presently overpowered by the weight of the heavy-armed lines, they gave way and retired to the rear, thus breaking up the crescent. The Roman maniples followed with spirit, and easily cut their way through the enemy's line; since the Celts had been drawn up in a thin line, while the Romans had closed up from the wings towards the center and the point of danger. For the two wings did not come into action at the same time as the center: but the center was first engaged, because the Gauls, having been stationed on the arc of the crescent, had come into contact with the enemy long before the wings, the convex of the crescent being towards the enemy.

The Romans, however, going in pursuit of these troops, and hastily closing in towards the center and the part of the enemy which was giving ground, advanced so far that the Libyan heavy-armed troops on either wing got on their flanks. Those on the right, facing to the left, charged from the right upon the Roman flank; while those who were on the left wing faced to the right, and, dressing by the left, charged their right flank, the exigency of the moment suggesting to them what they ought to do. Thus it came about, as Hannibal had planned, that the Romans were caught between two hostile lines of Libyans—thanks to their impetuous pursuit of the Celts. Still they fought, though no longer in line, yet singly, or in maniples, which faced to meet those who charged them on the flanks.

Though he had been from the first on the right wing, and had taken part in the cavalry engagement, L. Aemilius still survived. Determined to act up to his own exhortatory speech, and seeing that the decision of the battle rested mainly on the legionaries, riding up to the center of the line he led the charge himself, and personally grappled with the enemy, at the same time cheering on and exhorting his soldiers to the charge. Hannibal, on the other side, did the same, for he too had taken his place on the center from the commencement. The Numidian horse on the Carthaginian right were meanwhile charging through the cavalry on the Roman left; and though, from the peculiar nature of their mode of fighting, they neither inflicted nor received much harm, they yet rendered the enemy's horse useless by keeping them occupied, and charging them first on one side and then another. But when Hasdrubal, after all but annihilating the cavalry by the river, came from the left to the support of the Numidians, the Roman allied cavalry, seeing his charge approaching, broke and fled. At that point Hasdrubal appears to have acted with great skill and discretion. Seeing the Numidians to be strong in numbers, and more effective and formidable to troops that had once been forced from their ground, he left the pursuit to them; while he himself hastened to the part of the field where the infantry were engaged, and brought his men up to support the Libyans. Then, by charging the Roman legions on the rear, and harassing them by hurling squadron after squadron upon them at many

points at once, he raised the spirits of the Libyans, and dismayed and depressed that of the Romans.

It was at this point that L. Aemilius fell, in the thick of the fight, covered with wounds: a man who did his duty to his country at that last hour of his life, as he had throughout its previous years, if any man ever did. As long as the Romans could keep an unbroken front, to turn first in one direction and then in another to meet the assaults of the enemy, they held out; but the outer files of the circle continually falling, and the circle becoming more and more contracted, they at last were all killed on the field; and among them M. Atilius and Cn. Servilius, the Consuls of the previous year, who had shown themselves brave men and worthy of Rome in the battle. While this struggle and carnage were going on, the Numidian horse were pursuing the fugitives, most of whom they cut down or hurled from their horses; but some few escaped into Venusia, among whom was C. Terentius, the Consul, who thus sought a flight, as disgraceful to himself, as his conduct in office had been disastrous to his country.

Such was the end of the battle of Cannæ, in which both sides fought with the most conspicuous gallantry, the conquered no less than the conquerors. This is proved by the fact that, out of six thousand horse, only seventy escaped with C. Terentius to Venusia, and about three hundred of the allied cavalry to various towns in the neighborhood. Of the infantry ten thousand were taken prisoners in fair fight, but were not actually engaged in the battle: of those who were actually engaged only about three thousand perhaps escaped to the towns of the surrounding district; all the rest died nobly, to the number of seventy thousand, the Carthaginians being on this occasion, as on previous ones, mainly indebted for their victory to their superiority in cavalry: a lesson to posterity that in actual war it is better to have half the number of infantry, and the superiority in cavalry, than to engage your enemy with an equality in both. On the side of Hannibal there fell four thousand Celts, fifteen hundred Iberians and Libyans, and about two hundred horse.

The ten thousand Romans who were captured had not, as I said, been engaged in the actual battle; and the reason was this. L. Aemilius left ten thousand infantry in his camp that, in case Hannibal should disregard the safety of his own camp, and take his whole army onto the field, they might seize the opportunity, while the battle was going on, of forcing their way in and capturing the enemy's baggage; or if, on the other hand, Hannibal should, in view of this contingency, leave a guard in his camp, the number of the enemy in the field might thereby be diminished. These men were captured in the field in the following circumstances. Hannibal, as a matter of fact, did leave a sufficient guard in his camp; and as soon as the battle began, the Romans, according to their instructions, assaulted and tried to take those thus left by Hannibal. At first they held their own: but just as they were beginning to waver, Hannibal, who was by this time gaining a victory all along the line, came to their relief, and routing the Romans, shut them up in their own camp; killed two thousand of them; and took all the rest prisoners. In like manner the Numidian horse brought in all those who had taken refuge in the various strongholds about the district, amounting to two thousand of the routed cavalry.

The result of this battle, such as I have described it, had the consequences which both sides expected. For the Carthaginians by their victory were thenceforth masters of nearly the whole of the Italian coast which is called Magna Græcia. Thus the Tarentines immediately submitted; and the Arpani and some of the Campanian states invited Hannibal to come to them; and the rest were with one consent turning their eyes to the Carthaginians: who, accordingly, began now to have high hopes of being able to carry even Rome itself by assault. On their side the Romans, even after this disaster, despaired of retaining their supremacy over the Italians, and were in the greatest alarm, believing their own lives and the existence of their city to be in danger, and every moment expecting that Hannibal would be upon them. For, as though Fortune herself were in league with the disasters that had already befallen them to fill up the measure of their ruin, it happened that only

a few days afterwards, while the city was still in this panic, the Praetor who had been sent to the Gaul fell unexpectedly into an ambush and perished, and his army was utterly annihilated by the Celts.

In spite of all, however, the Senate left no means untried to save the State. It exhorted the people to fresh exertions, strengthened the city with guards, and deliberated on the crisis in a brave and manly spirit. And subsequent events made this manifest. For though the Romans were on that occasion indisputably beaten in the field, and had lost their reputation for military prowess; by the peculiar excellence of their political constitution, and the prudence of their counsels, they not only recovered their supremacy over Italy, by eventually conquering the Carthaginians, but before very long became masters of the whole world.