The Battle of Cannae: The Science of Roman Defeat

Mary Jo Davies
American Military University

Abstract

Given their defeats at Trebia in 218 BC and Trasimene in 217 BC, it seems quite strange that the Romans would not have been more judicious in rethinking their tactical approach at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BC instead of simply relying upon the deployment of a larger army. Their army at Cannae was unprecedented in size: 80,000 Roman forces against 50,000 Carthaginian forces. As the Romans pushed Hannibal's center line back, they unintentionally created a concave shape in which they soon found themselves surrounded. Using the double-envelopment tactic, Hannibal's formidable African flank infantries from Libya then moved around to constrict and annihilate their enemy. History commemorates Hannibal's victory against a much larger enemy force as an astonishing feat and, indeed, it was. However, a careful analysis of the Roman army of the mid-Republic will yield information that proves that Rome's inadequate military traditions also played a significant role in causing Rome to lose so disastrously.

Keywords: Hannibal, Carthage, Rome, Second Punic War, Cannae, Aufidius River, double-envelopment, attrition

La batalla de Cannas: la ciencia de la derrota romana

Resumen

Dadas sus derrotas en Trebia en 218 a. C. y Trasimene en 217 a. C., parece bastante extraño que los romanos no hubieran sido más juiciosos al repensar su enfoque táctico en la batalla de Cannas en 216 a. C. en lugar de simplemente depender del despliegue de un ejército más grande. Su ejército en Cannas tenía un tamaño sin precedentes: 80.000 fuerzas romanas contra 50.000 fuerzas cartaginesas. Cuando los romanos hicieron retroceder la línea central de Aníbal, sin querer crearon una forma cóncava en la que pronto se vieron rodeados. Utilizando la táctica del doble envolvimiento, las formidables infanterías africanas del flanco de Aníbal desde Libia se movieron para restringir y aniquilar a su enemigo. La historia conmemora la victoria de Aníbal contra una fuerza enemiga mu-

cho mayor como una hazaña asombrosa y, de hecho, lo fue. Sin embargo, un análisis cuidadoso del ejército romano de mediados de la República arrojará información que prueba que las inadecuadas tradiciones militares de Roma también jugaron un papel importante en causar que Roma perdiera de manera tan desastrosa.

Palabras clave: Aníbal, Cartago, Roma, Segunda Guerra Púnica, Cannas, río Aufidio, doble envolvimiento, desgaste

坎尼会战：罗马军战败的推理

摘要

鉴于罗马人在公元前218年的特雷比亚战役和公元前217年的特拉西梅内湖战役均以失败告终，如果他们没有更明智地重新考虑其在公元前216年的坎尼会战中采用的战术方法，而是简单地依靠部署更大规模的军队，这则似乎是匪夷所思的。他们在坎尼部署了前所未有的军队规模：80,000名罗马军对抗50,000名迦太基军。当罗马军将汉尼拔领导的中军逼向后方时，其队列无意中形成了一个凹形，很快他们就发现自己被包围了。通过采用两面包围战术，汉尼拔领导的强大非洲侧翼步兵（来自利比亚）随后展开包围，压制并歼灭敌人。历史将汉尼拔战胜规模大得多的敌军的胜利视为一项令人震惊的壮举，事实也确实如此。然而，仔细分析共和国中期的罗马军队就会发现，罗马军事传统的不足也是造成罗马惨败的一个重要原因。

关键词：汉尼拔，迦太基，罗马，第二次布匿战争，坎尼，奥菲迪乌斯河，两面包围，消耗

History has recorded much about the tactics that Carthage—one of the wealthiest North African cities of the ancient world—used against Rome at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BC during the Second Punic War (218-202 BCE).[1] Mindful of Rome's traditional strategies, which put a large number of forces on the battlefield, Carthaginian General Hannibal (247–181 BC) (see Figure 1) outmaneuvered Rome's numerical strength by placing his most formidable fighters (the African phalanx warriors from Libya) on the wings of his battle line, further back from the center line of his infantry. Once the opposing armies engaged, the Romans pushed the Carthaginian center further

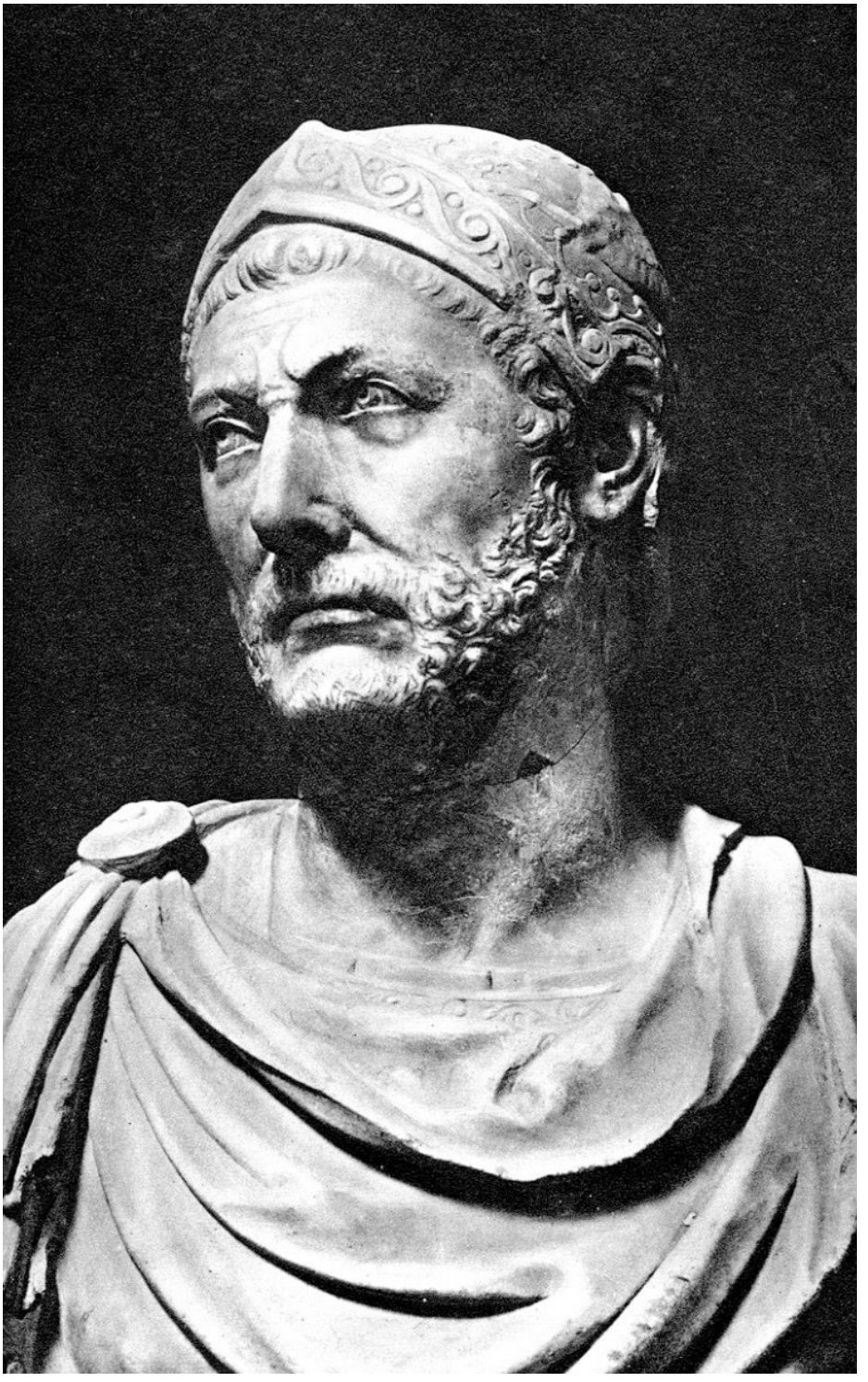

Figure 1. The Capuan bust, allegedly of Hannibal, originally found at the ancient city-state of Capua in Italy. Licensing: this media file is in the public domain worldwide.

and further back, but in doing so they created a concave shape in which they soon found themselves trapped. Given their defeats at Trebia in 218 BC and Trasimene in 217 BC, it seems quite peculiar that Rome would not have been more judicious in rethinking their tactical approach at Cannae instead of simply relying upon the deployment of a larger army—unprecedented in size: 80,000 Roman forces against 50,000 Carthaginian forces. In chapter 3.117 of *Histories,* Greco-Roman historian Polybius (200–118 BC) claims that the Romans lost about 70,000 men when Hannibal's Libyan flank units used the double-envelopment tactic to constrict and annihilate their enemy.[2] He specifies that "the circle becoming more and more contracted, they at last were all killed on the field."[3] History commemorates Hannibal's victory against a much larger enemy force as an astonishing feat—and indeed it was. However, a careful analysis of the Roman army of the mid-Republic will yield information that proves that Rome's inadequate military traditions also played a significant role in causing Rome to lose so disastrously.

A concise overview of the events leading up to Hannibal's war on Rome will prove helpful for understanding Rome's weaknesses which led to their tragic defeat at Cannae. In 250 BC, the Romans defeated the Carthaginian army in an effort to defend the city of Panormus in Sicily in one of the battles of the First Punic War. Roman confidence was so high it even enabled them to frighten the fearsome Carthaginian war elephants.[4] In 247 BC, under the leadership of Hannibal's father, Hamilcar Barca (275–228 BC), and Hannibal's brother-in-law, Hasdrubal the Fair (270–221 BC), Carthage lost to the Romans in the First Punic War. When Hannibal was still a child, his father had made him swear never to be a friend of Rome. Twenty-three years after the end of the First Punic War, Hannibal pledged to reclaim Carthaginian territory and, ultimately, supremacy. His expansionist interest in Spain worried the Saguntines, who were recent allies of Rome.[5] To bar Hannibal from entering Saguntum, Rome sent an embassy to Carthage in 231 BC, warning him to stay away. Hannibal rebuffed Rome's demands, acting, as Polybius states, "in a state of unreasoning anger and violent exasperation."[6] Polybius ultimately credited Carthage for "beginning the war, not only in defiance of reason, but still more in defiance of justice."[7]

Early in the Second Punic War, the Roman army was not able to replicate the same confidence it previously had against the Carthaginian war elephants. These fearsome beasts aided Hannibal's first few victories, including his first two major battles at Trebia and Trasimene, but by the time he fought Rome at Cannae, Hannibal had lost all his war elephants. This may have given the Romans an imprudent sense of self-assurance, considering that their army was now twice the size as that of Carthage.

Aside from Polybius, the primary sources this study will consult are Roman historian Livy (59–17 BC) (see Figure 2), Greek Philosopher Plutarch

Figure 2. Statue of historian Titus Livius (more commonly known as Livy) located at the Austrian Parliament Building in Vienna, Austria. Licensing: Creative Commons.

(46–119 AD) (see Figure 3), and Greco-Roman historian Appian (95–165 AD). It is important for modern researchers to keep the timeframe of these ancient sources in mind. Livy, Appian, and Plutarch all lived and wrote centuries after the Battle of Cannae took place. Nevertheless, being a near contemporary of this battle, like Polybius, does not necessarily guarantee accuracy. Hyperbole was common in the writings of the ancient world. As a result, an exact interpretation of history becomes a near impossible achievement. To overcome this hurdle, modern researchers should analyze all ancient texts together to create a reasonable picture of what *must* have happened.[8]

There is a near identical consensus among the ancient writings on the numerical size of the Roman army at Cannae. Polybius states that after the tragic losses at Trebia and Trasimene, "so great was the alarm and terror of what would happen, they resolved to bring not only four but eight legions into the field."[9] Commanded by two generals—Gaius Terentius Varro and Lucius Aemilius Paullus[10]—the eight legions comprised 80,000 infantry and more than double the usual size in cavalry: 6,000 *equites* strong. Ten thousand servicemen operated as garrisons in their two camps, rather than as battleground servicemen. In *The History of Rome*, Livy similarly asserts that "there were eighty-seven thousand two hundred soldiers in the Roman camp when the battle of Cannae was fought."[11] In *Fabius Maximus,* Plutarch notes that in the Roman army "[e]ighty-eight thousand men were arrayed for battle." Appian diverges slightly. In "The Hannibalic War" of *The Foreign Wars*, he claims that the army at Cannae had "altogether 70,000 foot and 6,000 horse."[12]

Hannibal's army was composed of allied and subject levies from Gaul, Spain, Numidia, and Libya, while Carthaginian nationals typically occupied positions of military authority. Both Polybius and Livy state that the Carthaginian army at Cannae comprised about 40,000 allied soldiers and 10,000 cavalry.[13] The center-line infantry consisted of Spanish and Gallic men, while their flank infantry comprised their most experienced African phalanx forces from Libya. Their light cavalry included Africans from Numidia while their Spanish and Gallic forces made up the heavy cavalry. While the Roman infantry greatly outnumbered the Carthaginian infantry, the Carthaginian cavalry outstripped the Roman cavalry numbering roughly 10,000 riders to Rome's 6,000. The Carthaginian camp garrison was roughly 8,000 men strong.[14]

On August 2, 216 BC, the two armies met and prepared for combat on the southern bank of the Aufidius River. Both sides began their battle with light infantry skirmishers, whose intent was to harass the other side, but at Cannae they produced no clear frontrunner; nor did they cause many casualties.[15] The Romans knew that while their own infantry was much larger than that of the Carthaginians, their citizen cavalry—commanded by Paullus on the right, along with their allied Italian cavalry commanded by Varro on the left—were woefully smaller and signifi-

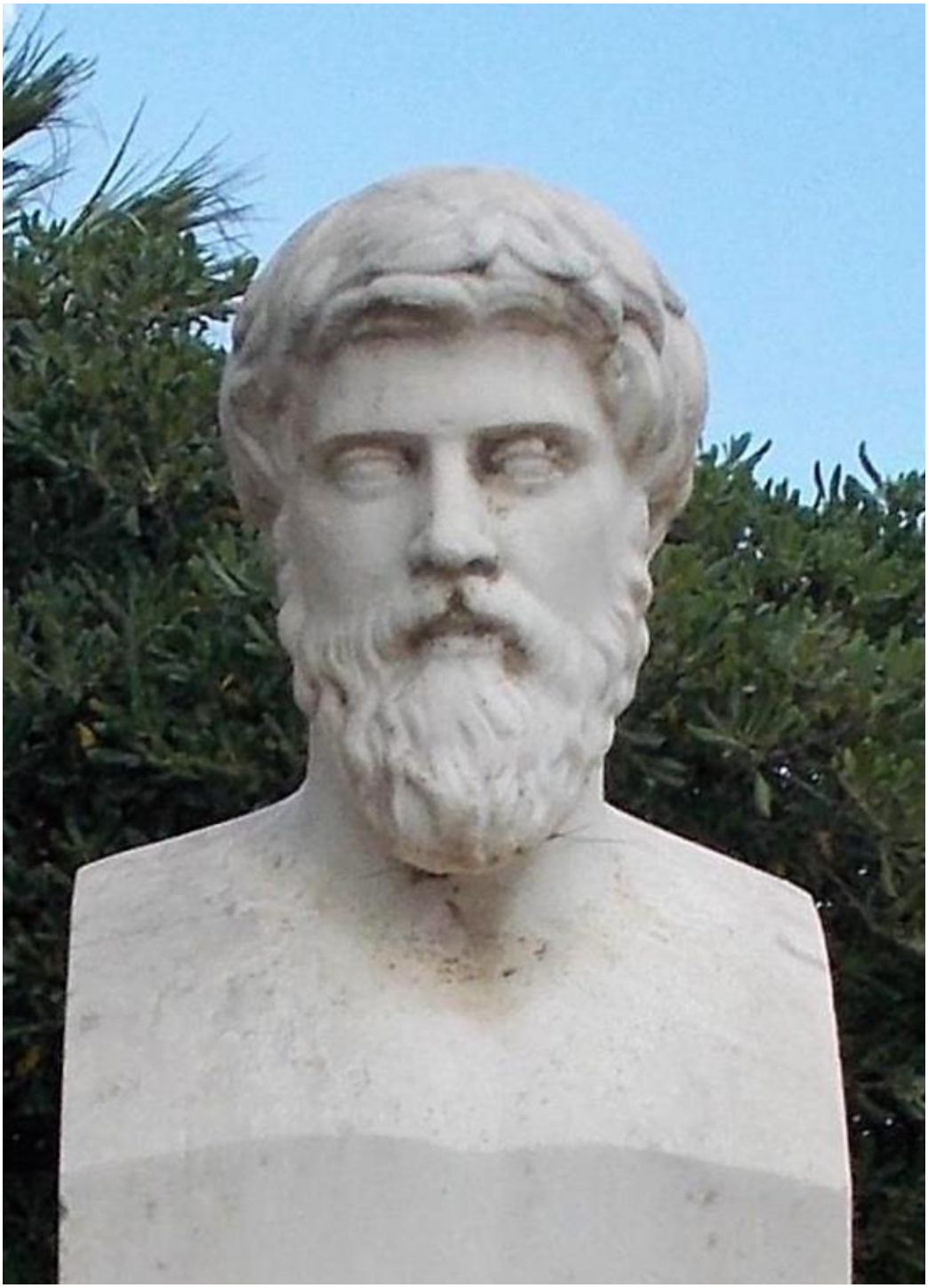

Figure 3. Located in Chaeronea, Greece, this bust is a modern rendition, presumably of philosopher Plutarch. It is based on a second century bust, also cautiously identified as Plutarch, which is located at the Archaeological Museum of Delphi in Greece. Licensing: Creative Commons.

cantly less experienced than the Carthaginian cavalry. The intent, therefore, was to prevent the Carthaginian cavalry from overwhelming their horsemen. The narrower battlefield area, which included a river on one side and hills on the other, seemed to ensure this would not happen, but it put the Romans in a position to reduce the spacing between their maniples, thus forcing her to diminish her usual inter-manipular flexibility. The manipular arrangement consisted of three rows of ten tactical units each. These tactical units, called maniples, had a gap as wide as the unit itself in between each of them. This created a flexible, accordion style battle line that could constrict and expand as needed. While each Roman soldier was part of a unit called the maniple, they fought, as Polybius states, in "individual motion for each man."[16] To make up for the limitations caused by the smaller battlefield area, the Romans matched the narrower width of the enemy line by moving men to the back of the legions thus adding depth and strength to their battle line.[17]

Unlike the linear position of the Roman army, Hannibal protruded his center line forward toward the enemy (see Figure 4). The Gallic and Spanish infantry made up this part of the battle line. The Libyan phalanx infantry, his most experienced soldiers, occupied the wings at the rear of the center line. They were not immediately visible to the Romans. Hannibal's heavy cavalry, commanded by Carthaginian commander Hasdrubal, occupied the left near the Aufidius River, while his light cavalry, led by commander Maharbal, occupied the right.[18]

During the first phase of the battle, Hannibal's heavy cavalry charged Paullus's much smaller cavalry head on, easily breaking through it. On the right, Hannibal's Numidian light cavalry were not able to beat Varro's horsemen until Hannibal's heavy cavalry stepped in to help.[19] Many of the Roman equites dismounted from their horses. Polybius states, "when they once got to close quarters, they grappled man to man, and, dismounting from their horses, fought on foot."[20] Appian similarly claims that "[t]he generals and all the others who had horses, although surrounded by Hannibal's cavalry, dismounted and fought on foot."[21] In contrast, Livy claims that it was the Carthaginian cavalrymen who dragged the Romans off their horses, where the "contest now came to be carried on principally on foot."[22] Plutarch provides further detail, specifying that,

> [t]he horse of Paulus, as it appears, was wounded and threw his rider off, and one after another of his attendants dismounted and sought to defend the consul on foot. When the horsemen saw this, supposing that a general order had been given, they all dismounted and engaged the enemy on foot. On seeing this, Hannibal said: 'This is more to my wish than if they had been handed over to me in fetters.'[23]

Whichever way it happened, the Roman cavalry suffered heavy losses. They had not even advanced forward much to meet the enemy, making their pos-

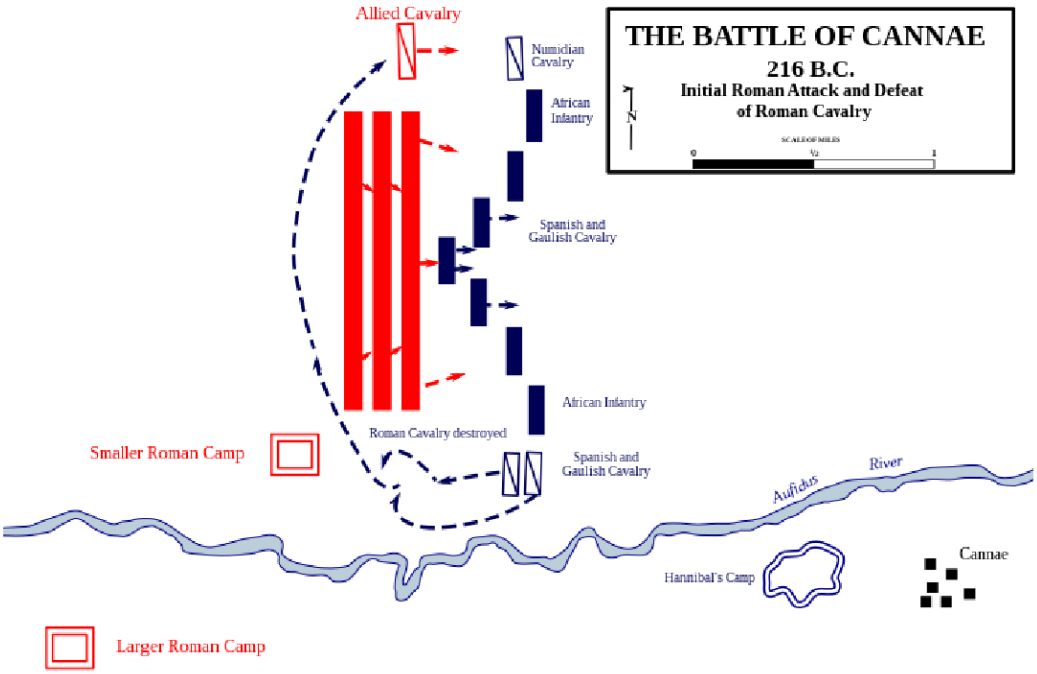

Figure 4. Diagram showing the battle lines of the two opposing armies right before the battle at Cannae began. The color red represents the Roman's linear battle line while the color blue represents the Carthaginian's protruding battle line. Licensing: this media file is in the public domain worldwide.

ture essentially defensive. While this was taking place, the Roman infantry moved forward—their center line coming into contact with Hannibal's Gallic and Spanish center. Hannibal had intentionally left his center weak, intending to win the battle with the double-envelopment tactic of his Libyan wing units. This caused the Carthaginian center to buckle under the pressure of Rome's massive push. During this struggle, the Romans no doubt felt victory in their hands, but as they continued to push forward, Carthage's center line became more and more concave. The Romans soon found themselves trapped in this bowl-shaped enemy line (see Figure 5). At this point, the previously unseen African wings moved forward and around to envelop the Romans. Having lost all inter-manipular flexibility, the Romans were unable to use some of their weapons to full capacity. They typically used their swords for slashing *and* thrusting, but now they could only operate them in a thrusting motion since slashing required a wide-ranging, side-by-side movement, which they no longer had room for without running the risk of injuring their own comrades. After defeating the Roman horsemen, the Carthaginian Spanish and Gallic cavalry routed their position and stood behind the Roman infantry effectively enclosing them in one enormous circle. Thus were the Carthaginians able to crush

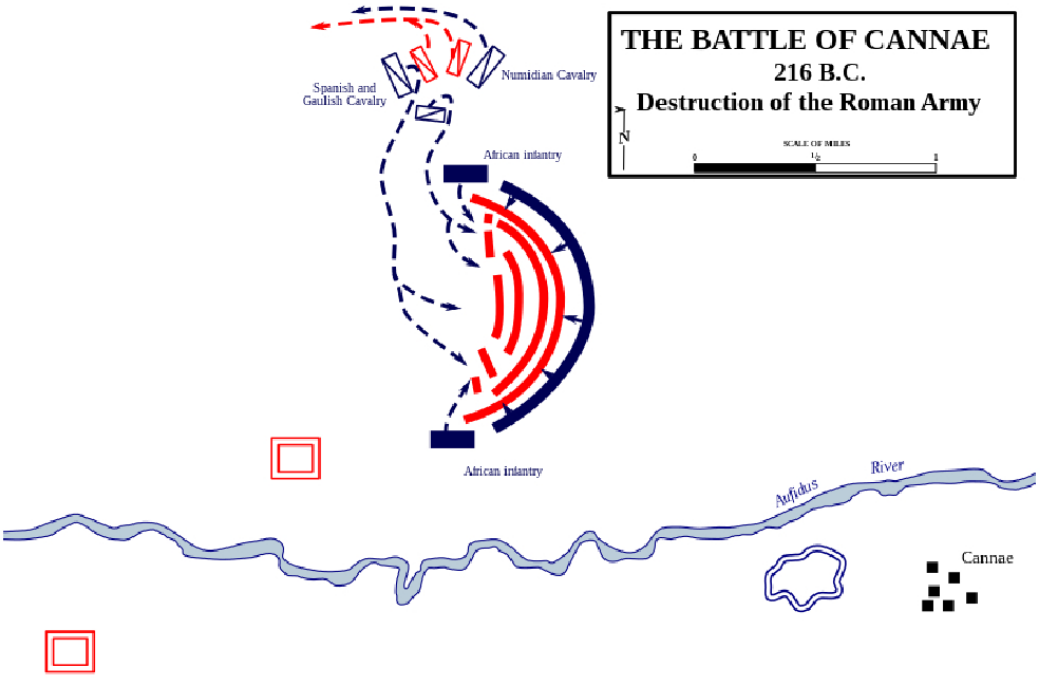

Figure 5. Diagram showing the Roman army as they became trapped in the bowl-shaped enemy line. The blue arrows show the African Libyan phalanx forces and the Carthaginian cavalry units as they are about to enclose the Romans. Licensing: this media file is in the public domain worldwide.

the Roman enemy. While General Paullus died early in the battle, General Varro managed to flee to Venusia, a town in the southern region of Basilicata.[24]

Though Polybius is a near contemporary of the Battle of Cannae, his casualty figures appear flawed because of the contradictory statements he makes in Chapter 3.117 of *Histories*, where he asserts that "out of six thousand horse, only seventy escaped" and that at the Roman camps "ten thousand were taken prisoners in fair fight." Of those who were on the battlefront, Polybius claims "about three thousand perhaps escaped," while "all the rest died nobly, to the number of seventy thousand."[25] However, later in that same chapter Polybius contradicts some of these claims thus throwing into question all other numbers. He states that at the Roman camps Hannibal killed 2,000 infantry and took 8,000 prisoner.

Other writers from antiquity, though far removed from the period in which the battle took place, give more plausible figures. Livy claims: "[f]orty thousand foot, two-thousand-seven hundred horse, there being an equal number of citizens and allies, are said to have been slain," while 17,000 fled to both Roman camps and about two thousand to the village of Cannae.[26] Appian claims, "50,000 of their soldiers were slain and a great many taken prisoners."[27] Plutarch similarly agreed with

Appian, stating "that fifty thousand Romans fell in that battle, that four thousand were taken alive, and that after the battle there were captured in both consular camps no less than ten thousand."[28]

Rome's devastating loss at Cannae was caused as much by their enemy's brilliant, double-envelopment tactic as by a combination of their own inadequate, long-standing military traditions. These included the lack of a sizable, professional cavalry, the hasty training of inexperienced soldiers, the discontent of some of their allies and, most significantly, problematic tactical practices.

Rome never regarded the cavalry as an important arm of their military. Often, they were not even well-trained. Their repeated poor performance reflected a tradition in the Roman Republic, which ordinarily required a paltry 300 cavalrymen per legion.[29] Though the army at Cannae allocated more than 300 *equites* for each of the eight legions, these were still not enough to match the enemy in strength. The Roman cavalry's mission was to help their infantrymen defeat the enemy's centerline, but they could only do so after defeating the enemy cavalry. The ability of the Roman cavalry to neutralize the enemy cavalry was integral to Rome's overall strategic effectiveness in battle.[30] It is understandable, then, why historians both ancient and modern would disparage the cavalry of the mid-Roman Republic. Both at Trebia and Cannae Hannibal's cavalry greatly outnumbered the Roman cavalry. Polybius correctly states that the tragic outcome at Cannae should be seen as a "lesson to posterity that in actual war it is better to have half the number of infantry, and the superiority in cavalry."[31] This might have given the Roman horse-mounted warriors a better chance at defeating Hannibal's cavalry at Cannae and then help the Roman infantry crush the enemy, which is exactly what the Carthaginians did.

As with all cavalrymen in the ancient world, *equites* of the mid-Roman Republic, who were often very young, spirited boys drafted from Rome's wealthiest families, lacked stirrups. [32] Thus the rider needed to be extremely well-trained *and* fit—not just wealthy and brave—to be able to generate the necessary strength to plunge and subsequently pull a weapon out of his victim without falling off his horse. Given their middling performance during the years of the Republic, the Roman cavalrymen may have been brave, but as historian Martin Samuels states, they lacked discipline.[33]

Like the Roman *equites*, Hannibal's cavalrymen came from wealthy families, but these men were very experienced, particularly the Spanish cavalry, who were, as historian Richard A. Gabriel describes, "a terrifyingly effective combat arm."[34] This advantage helped Hannibal exploit Rome's cavalry weakness.

At this time, Rome also did not have a standing professional army; it was, in fact, a temporary militia recruited from Rome's propertied citizen population. Polybius claims that after the yearly draft, the tribunes dismissed the men to their homes and only called

on them in time of war. After hasty training, they shipped them off to the frontline. Furthermore, at the end of each battle Rome disbanded the legions and sent the men home.[35] Like Rome, Carthage also did not have a standing army, but they recruited the most experienced professional fighters from their allied nations.

There were also reconnaissance problems facing the Roman army at this time because they did not have a permanent military arm to conduct intelligence. They typically relied on light infantry skirmishers accompanied by small troops of cavalrymen. On the other hand, Hannibal was a passionate advocate of intelligence service and used highly experienced operatives. He employed commercial agents and undercover provocateurs who posed as envoys to gather strategic intelligence. His Numidian light cavalry, however, was his primary means of communication.[36]

Another area of Roman military weakness involved their *socii,* Roman allies belonging to cities outside of Latium. From the start of his war on Rome, Hannibal knew that many of Rome's allies were disgruntled. They had grown restless fighting Rome's wars without the full benefit of Roman citizenship. Rome, in fact, would not extend full citizenship to her allied populations until the first century BC, after the Social Wars (91 and 87 BC).[37]

Hannibal's army incorporated a hodge-podge of allies from foreign kingdoms to whom he promised citizenship as a reward for victory.[38] Though Jakub Filonik et al. states "there is, in fact, no evidence of non-Carthaginian veterans ever being made citizens,"[39] Livy does write that Hannibal claimed that "if any of the allies desired to become citizens of Carthage, he would give them the opportunity."[40] Whether or not Hannibal's promise was sincere or if he ever did offer citizenship to his allied veterans, it is clear that he wanted to capitalize on Roman weakness. To strengthen his forces, he hoped to lure some of Rome's discontented allies to his cause. Following Roman defeat at Trebia in 218 BC, he gained the support of the Cisalpine Gauls who had defected from Rome after years of bloody conflict with them.

After Hannibal's crushing victory at Trasimene in 217 BC, the Romans, in a panic, gave full authority to Roman statesman and general Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus (280–203 BC) as temporary dictator. Fabius avoided another pitched battle, initiating instead a war of attrition by having the enemy shadowed and their foraging sources destroyed. This forced Hannibal to constantly move his camp from one location to another. Livy states that "he had not only nothing remaining of the provisions which he daily acquired by plunder, but there was not even anything left which he could seize, the corn in all the surrounding country having been collected into fortified cities."[41] Though they were living hand to mouth and nearly abandoned the cause, Hannibal pressed forward, moving his army south to the Apulia region of Italy, where the southern climate anticipated spring harvests from which he hoped to replenish his camp. Fortunately for the

Carthaginian general, by the time he and his army arrived in Apulia, Rome had brought an end to their war of attrition, since they believed that indirect warfare was dishonorable to their soldiers. Earning the nickname *Cunctator* (the Delayer), Fabius came to the end of his six-month term as dictator, at which time the senate did not renew his powers. The elections of 216 BC assigned consulship to Varro and Paullus who, as generals, offered pitched battle with Hannibal at Cannae.[42]

Hannibal's fortune came after his shattering victory at Cannae, which provoked further Roman defections from southern Italy, particularly from Capua and several Campanian towns. Though these were not enough to threaten Roman security—since Rome still had the full support of her allies from central Italy—they did strengthen Hannibal's forces to a great degree.[43]

Perhaps the most significant reason why the Romans failed at Cannae involved their lack of a battle plan. Their initial self-assurance at Cannae—where Hannibal had no elephants to frighten them—blinded their ability to realize that their numerical superiority would still not be enough to win the war. They seemed to stubbornly rely on their numerical advantage as a battle tactic. They had learned this at the Battle of Asculum during the Pyrrhic Wars (280–275 BC), which they fought against Greek King Pyrrhus I (r. 297–272 BC) in 279 BC.[44] Pyrrhus' strategy was, in fact, to rely on his superior numbers, combining them with a tight phalanx line, which made it easier for the warriors to collectively break through the enemy ranks. Phalanx warfare required one weapon—a forward-thrusting spear which is what allowed the men to fight together in tightly packed units. Although Rome had adopted the practice of King Pyrrhus's numerical superiority, they did not do so in phalanx form. By this time, Rome had already implemented the more open, manipular form. They had done so in 343 BC during the Samnite Wars (343–290 BC).[45]

Their heavy infantry all carried two *pila* (spears), which they used as projectile—and sometimes thrusting—weapons. They also carried a Spanish style sword called a *gladius hispaniensis,* which was a thrusting/slashing weapon. Slashing weapons precluded warriors from fighting in phalanx form since they required wide-ranging, side-swiping motion to employ. The men in the maniples stood at an approximate distance from each other of about three feet between both sides for a total tactical clearance of roughly six feet when counting the space that the soldier himself occupied. Echoing Polybius's claim, historian Gregory Daly states that the Roman army "as a whole was certainly not used to working as a unit."[46] The individual, open nature of their fighting tactics worked against them at Cannae, especially when confronted by Hannibal's Libyan flank units, who fought in phalanx form.

The center-line warriors of the Carthaginian army fought according to the customs of their individual nations and even used weapons, armor, and shields from their own countries.

There was no attempt on the part of Carthage to homogenize their individual fighting practices. While Hannibal's center-line infantry included weapons such as slings and swords—both of which required wide-ranging arm motion—they also carried heavy javelins (projectile/thrusting spears), but it was only Hannibal's Libyan flank units who operated their spears—which were Roman spoils from Trebia and Trasimene—as thrusting weapons in tight, shoulder-to-shoulder, phalanx form.[47] Spears provided a safe advantage for the warriors wielding them. The seven-foot length of these weapons allowed the fighters to inflict deadly injury on their opponents without the need of getting up close and personal with them, but in phalanx form they provided an added protective bonus. They created a defensive wall of pointed spikes which was nearly impossible to penetrate, and in which inflicting deadly injury became a collective effort. At Cannae, vanquishing the individual fighters of the Roman army proved nearly effortless for the Libyan phalanx units.

When at war, Roman generals took daily turns over who would be in charge of the decision-making, but there are historians today who do not agree with the ancient accounts as to who was in charge on the day of Rome's crushing defeat at Cannae. The ancient records claim that Varro was the Roman general in command and portray him as an impetuous demagogue who ignored the recommendations of his more skilled associate, Paullus. However, this depiction may be false and merely symbolic of a socio-political issue particular to Republican Rome—especially considering that the Senate treated Varro very well at war's end. Unlike Paullus, who was a patrician belonging to the aristocratic Aemilii Paulli family, Varro was the son of a butcher. He was, more particularly, a *novus homo*—a term describing a member of the plebeian population and first in the family elected to office. The Aemilii Paulii eventually took credit for defeating Hannibal. Had Paullus gone on record as the general responsible for Rome's greatest military defeat at Cannae, it would have sullied the name of such a noble family. Paullus' grandson, Scipio Aemilianus, who oversaw the final defeat and destruction of the city of Carthage in 146 BC in the Third Punic War, was also a friend and patron of Polybius—the first historian to write a detailed account of the battle of Cannae. Making Varro the scapegoat of such a humiliating disaster to salvage the image of the Aemilii Paulii family would have been easy for Scipio.[48]

Debating who was in charge on that fateful day for the purpose of laying blame on the right person is counter-productive, especially considering how far removed historians today are from the actual event. Daly offers a more practical assessment. He states that none of the Roman officers that day would have had the necessary experience to command an army of the size deployed at Cannae. Such an unprecedentedly large force would have no doubt posed extraordinary management and reconnaissance problems no matter who was in charge.[49]

Highlighting Rome's inadequate military traditions should not diminish

the tactical wisdom of Hannibal. Despite their military weaknesses, the Romans still had an unusually large army at their disposal and might have been able to beat the Carthaginians had they had a tactical plan in place. Hannibal was able to defeat an army nearly twice the size of his because he minimized the shortcomings of his own army by executing a clever plan that enabled him to outperform his enemy. Rome had provided Hannibal with the knowledge he needed to vanquish them. Hannibal had already been through quite a few battles with the Romans, thus he was fully aware of Rome's proclivity for small cavalry, very large infantry units, and weak strategic planning. Outmanning Rome's cavalry was typical for Carthage. They almost always had larger cavalry in battle since the Carthaginian cavalry was integral to their initial battle strategy. His infantry, however, was a different story, and at Cannae Hannibal was severely shorthanded. Knowing that Rome fought in open formation, Hannibal intentionally projected his center line forward and placed his most formidable forces (the Libyan phalanx fighters) on the wings toward the back of his center line where they were not immediately visible to the Romans. In doing so, these fighters were able to provide an element of surprise for the Roman infantry. As the Romans pushed Hannibal's center line further and further back into a concave position, they came into contact with the Libyans. With no chance to prepare for confrontation, the Libyans enveloped them from both sides and constricted their movements. Livy states that the Romans "were at a twofold disadvantage: they were shut in, while their enemies ranged on every side of them; they were tired, and faced troops that were fresh and strong."[50] In fact, the Libyan wings had only joined the fight at that moment. Up until then, the Romans had been battling Carthage's Gallic and Spanish center. By the time they came into contact with the Libyans, they were exhausted. Ultimately, Hannibal's shrewd military skills—combined with Rome's military weaknesses—helped the much smaller Carthaginian army annihilate the Romans. The Battle of Cannae is regarded concomitantly as one of the greatest tactical triumphs of military history and one of the worst defeats in Roman history.

About the Author

Mary Jo Davies is a graduate of history, having earned her master's degree in ancient and medieval studies from American Public University in 2018. She spends her time researching and writing articles for publication in scholarly journals. Although she writes on a variety of topics, her primary focus is on warfare in the ancient world. Apart from her journal contributions, she is compiling her published articles into a book encompassing warfare from the late Bronze Age through the end of the Roman Republic.

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Endnotes

1 Carthage was a city located in modern-day Tunisia. Cannae was located in the Apulia region of southeastern Italy.

2 Martin Samuels, "The Reality of Cannae," *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen Zeitschrift* 47, 1 (1990): 25; Note: the numbers Polybius claims are much disputed in the historical community and will be addressed later in the paper.

3 Polybius, *Histories* 3.116, The Perseus Catalog, accessed August 9, 2023. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu.

4 Nigel Bagnall, *The Punic Wars: Rome, Carthage, and the Struggle for the Mediterranean,* 1st ed. (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2005), 83; Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage: The Punic Wars 265–146 BC* (London: Phoenix, 2006), 93.

5 The Saguntines were from Saguntum, an ancient Iberian city located on the southeastern coastline of Spain.

6 Polybius, *Histories* 3.15.

7 Ibid.

8 William J. Hamblin, *Warfare in the Ancient Near East to 1600 BC* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 204.

9 Polybius, *Histories* 3.107.

10 The birth and death years of Varro are unknown and while the birth year of Paullus is equally unknown, the date of his death is August 2, 216 BC, since he died in battle at Cannae.

11 Livy, *The History of Rome* 22.36, The Perseus Catalog, accessed August 9, 2023. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu

12 Plutarch, *Fabius Maximus* 14.2, The Perseus Catalog, accessed August 9, 2023. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu; Appian, *The Foreign Wars*, "Hannibalic War" 3.17, The Perseus Catalog, accessed August 9, 2023. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu.

13 Polybius, *The Histories* 3.114; Livy, *The History of Rome* 22.46.6.

14 Gregory Daly, *Cannae: The Experience of Battle in the Second Punic War,* (London:

Routledge, 2002), 30; Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 40.

15 Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army*, 40; _____, *Cannae* (London: Cassell, 2001), 114-115; Mark Healy, *Cannae 216 BC: Hannibal Smashes Rome's Army* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1994), 72.

16 Polybius, *Histories* 18.30.

17 Mark Healy, *Cannae 216 BC*, 73; Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army*, 40; _____, *Cannae*, 93; Richard A. Gabriel, *Hannibal: The Military Biography of Rome's Greatest Enemy* (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books Inc., 2011), 150.

18 The birth and death years of Carthaginian cavalry commanders Hasdrubal and Maharbal are not known.

19 Richard A. Gabriel, *Hannibal*, 32.

20 Polybius, *Histories* 3.115.

21 Appian, *The Foreign Wars*, "Hannibalic War" 4.24.

22 Livy, *The History of Rome* 22.47.

23 Plutarch, *Fabius Maximus* 16.4.

24 Mark Healy, *Cannae 216 BC*, 74; Adrian Goldsworthy, *Cannae*, 120-121; Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001), 107; Philip Sabin, "The Mechanics of Battle in the Second Punic War," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 67 (1996): 69; Jerome S. Arkenberg, "Licinii Murenae, Terentii Varrones, and Varrones Murenae: I. A Prosopographical Study of Three Roman Families," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 42, 3 (1993): 328.

25 Polybius, *Histories* 3.117.

26 Livy, *The History of Rome* 22.49.

27 Appian, *The Foreign Wars*, "Hannibalic War" 4.25.

28 Plutarch, *Fabius Maximus* 16.8.

29 Mark Healy, *Cannae 216 BC*, 32.

30 Jeremiah B. McCall, *The Cavalry of the Roman Republic: Cavalry Combat and Elite Reputations in the Middle and Late Republic* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 62.

31 Polybius, *Histories* 3.117.

32 Gregory Daly, *Cannae: The Experience of Battle in the Second Punic War*, 75.

33 Martin Samuels, "The Reality of Cannae," 13.

34 Richard A. Gabriel, *Hannibal*, 30.

35 Polybius, *Histories* 6.26; Ibid., 6.19; Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Complete Roman Army*, 26.

36 Richard A. Gabriel, *Hannibal*, 45-46.

37 Immediately preceding the Social Wars, Roman politician and reformer Marcus Livius Drusus (124–91 BC) had recommended sweeping legislative reforms, which included proposing citizenship as well as a new grain law to all Italians. The senate strongly opposed this measure. (Marcel Le Glay, et al., *A History of Rome*, 4th ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Company, 2009), 131.) His assassination, committed by an unidentified person in 91 BC, is what precipitated the war. Appian states, that after Drusus' death, since the allies "saw no other means of acquiring citizenship they decided to revolt from the Romans altogether, and to make war against them with all their might" (Appian, *The Civil Wars* 1.5.38, The Perseus Catalog, accessed September 15, 2023. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu). It was only after the Social Wars that Rome offered full citizenship to all its non-Roman allied populations on the Italic peninsula.

38 Richard Miles, *Carthage Must Be Destroyed: The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Civilization* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 268; Serge Lancel, *Carthage: A History*. 1st ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995), 120.

39 Jakub Filonik et al., *Citizenship in Antiquity: Civic Communities in the Ancient Mediterranean (Rewriting Antiquity),* ed. by Jakub Filonik et al., 1st ed. (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2023), 505.

40 Livy, *The History of Rome* 21.45.

41 Ibid., 22:40.

42 K. W. Meiklejohn "Roman Strategy and Tactics from 509 to 202 B. C.," *Greece & Rome* 8, 22 (1938): 13; Adrian Goldsworthy, *Cannae,* 39-40; Mary T. Boatwright et al., *The Romans: from Village to Empire,* 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 104; John F. Shean, "Hannibal's Mules: The Logistical Limitations of Hannibal's Army and the Battle of Cannae, 216 B.C." *Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, 45, 2 (1996): 184; John Peddie, *Hannibal's War* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 1997), 119.

43 Marcel Le Glay, et al., *A History of Rome*, 4th ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Company, 2009), 77-78.

44 The city of Asculum, like Cannae, was located in the Apulia region southeast of Italy.

45 The Samnite region was located on a stretch of land along the Apennine Mountains south of Rome.

46 Gregory Daly, *Cannae: The Experience of Battle in the Second Punic War,* 37.

47 Ibid., 83; K.W. Meiklejohn, "Roman Strategy and Tactics from 509 to 202 B. C.," 12;

Adrian Goldsworthy, *Cannae*, 53-54; Martin Samuels, "The Reality of Cannae," 18-19.

48 Martin Samuels, "The Reality of Cannae," 22-23.

49 Gregory Daly, *Cannae: The Experience of Battle in the Second Punic War,* 37; Philip Sabin, "The Mechanics of Battle in the Second Punic War," 68.

50 Livy, *The History of Rome* 22.47.