

The Battle of Cannae and the rise of P. Cornelius Scipio Africanus

‘No other nation in the world could have suffered so tremendous a series of disasters and not have been overwhelmed.’

(Livy, *History of Rome* 22.54)

Background

While fighting in the First Punic War (264–241 BC) was primarily conducted at sea, the Second Punic War (218–201 BC) consisted of a number of land battles on different fronts (in Spain, Italy and Africa). Hannibal’s invasion of Italy over the Alps was unexpected and initially he enjoyed decisive victories in northern Italy at Ticinus (218 BC), Trebia (218 BC), and Trasimene (217 BC). The result of these successive defeats was not only fear in Rome, but a situation in which few generals who encountered Hannibal had much experience of dealing with his tactics. At Ticinus, an eighteen-year-old Publius Cornelius Scipio (the younger) rushed in to battle to save his father (Livy, *History of Rome* 22.46).

Rome’s response to these defeats was to appoint a dictator – Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus (‘Warty’) – whose tactics, often called the ‘Fabian strategy’, involved a form of guerrilla warfare. The hope was simply to starve out the Carthaginians by cutting them off from their supplies. For his bold stance of delaying a large battle, he was also given the name Cunctator (‘Delayer’). As Hannibal came closer to Rome (at one point he was only fifty miles away), the Romans became more anxious and wanted to see action. When the term of dictator finished, two consuls were elected in 216 – Gaius Terentius Varro and Lucius Aemilius Paullus – and an army of unprecedented size was created to face the Carthaginians (estimates range from 60,000–100,000 Romans). Regardless of what figure one accepts, it is clear that these forces significantly outnumbered the estimated 35,000–50,000 soldiers under Hannibal’s command. Polybius (3.117), writing fifty years after the event, and Livy (22.49), writing some 200 years later, may well have exaggerated the numbers on both sides.

The battle strategy

At the end of July in 216 BC, the two Roman consuls, Varro and Paullus, arrived at Cannae. In the historical sources, Varro is depicted as an arrogant warmonger who wants to fight the Carthaginians immediately, even though the open plain may have put the Romans at a disadvantage. By contrast, Paullus is painted as a voice of reason who encouraged delaying battle in order to devise a strategy. The portrayal of Varro may be exaggerated and a product of revisionist history. As a man who did not come from a powerful family (unlike Paullus) and who returned from the battle alive, unlike Paullus and so many others, Varro was almost certain to face resentment and criticism.

Neither Varro nor Paullus had much experience with Hannibal, whereas Hannibal had encountered a Roman army a number of times. The Romans planned to force Hannibal’s troops into the river Aufidius (to the south) and the flat plain meant that

Hannibal could not hide or use ambush tactics as he had in the past. First, the Romans would attack the centre of Hannibal's troops in the hope of dividing them (Slide 2). However, Hannibal had also set up his troops, composed of Gallic tribes, Africans and Spaniards, with this tactic in mind. His strongest African troops and cavalry were placed against the inferior Roman allied cavalry, and once they defeated them they would move around the back of the Roman forces and force *them* into the river.

For the Roman forces, Hannibal's wide array of soldiers was intimidating because their battle tactics and weapons were somewhat unpredictable. Still, the Roman lines hammered the Carthaginian ranks in the centre, pushing forwards (Slide 3). However, while the Spanish and Gallic forces fell back, they did not break. Dust and momentum drove the Roman forces on, and they did not see Hannibal himself and his African forces at the edges of the fray, pushing in and crowding the troops, whose formation and organization were compromised. Hannibal's superior cavalry defeated their rivals, and began to assault the Romans from behind, closing a circle around them. From then on, the battle was an absolute disaster for the Romans, whose large infantry was surrounded and cut down from all sides. Polybius (3.17) records that 70,000 Romans were killed and 10,000 captured with only 3,000 surviving, while only about 6,000 Carthaginian soldiers (mostly Gauls and Spaniards) lost their lives: 'The outer ranks were continually struck down and survivors forced to huddle together. They were finally killed where they stood.'

The reaction in Rome

The reaction to the news in Rome was one of shock and horror, especially among the aristocracy (senatorial families), who suffered heavy losses. It is estimated that Rome lost a third of her adult male population in the first two years of the Second Punic War. The result had international ramifications, too: many of Rome's Greek allies swore allegiance to Hannibal, while others began to watch events closely, like vultures, hoping to snatch some of the booty when Rome fell. However, what should have made the city crumble in dejection made her citizens more resolute. Rome refused to negotiate peace with Carthage and finally considered fundamental changes in strategy.

From the ashes of Cannae, Rome began drafting a new army from a broader population (possibly including slaves). In parallel to this there were adjustments to the age requirements of the *cursus honorum*, with the result that Publius Cornelius Scipio (the younger), one of the few men to survive two battles against Hannibal, was allowed to run for quaestor before the appointed time (Slide 5). His father and uncle were both commanders in Spain, and when they died in 211 BC he was allowed to replace them as proconsul at the age of just twenty-five. In Spain, he studied the local strategies, weapons and tactics, then used them effectively against the Carthaginians. Scipio, who would come to be known as Africanus because of his exploits in that continent, became a model for a number of Roman generals as an ambitious young man who, in addition to flouting the rules regulating career advancement, recruited his own army, studied the enemy's tactics, then employed them on the battlefield.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that the heroic general at Cannae to whom Scipio Africanus became a son-in-law, Aemilius Paullus, could have won that battle. However, it is worth considering whether a victory at that stage would have been decisive. Without learning from a crushing defeat and altering its military policies, would Rome have triumphed in the longer term against Carthage? It was important for Rome to see who defected and who remained loyal after Cannae, and the meteoric rise of a figure such as Scipio Africanus provided a vital precedent for the long-term development of the Roman army. The battle had social implications, too. With so many aristocratic families decimated, Rome's social circles and her army recruitment were forced to expand, and the distinctions between patrician and plebeian became less rigid. Therefore, it has been argued that Rome's defeat at Cannae did more to shape her development and ultimate success than Scipio Africanus' final victory over Hannibal at Zama in 201 BC.

Web resources

Wikipedia can be a capricious source, yet the entry on the Battle of Cannae is lengthy and a very good place to start: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Cannae

Bibliography

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