



**CANNAE: POINTS OF CONTROVERSY IN THE CLASSICAL RECORD OF POLYBIUS AND LIVY
A SERIES OF ARTICLES IN COMMEMORATION OF THE 2228th ANNIVERSARY OF HANNIBAL'S VICTORY
AT THE BATTLE OF CANNAE, August 2, 2012, by Prof. Yozan Mosig (University of Nebraska-Kearney)
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#6. The battle of Zama has been called a Cannae in reverse. Is Zama truly comparable with Cannae?

Attempts have been made to compare the battle of Zama with Cannae, and to call Zama a “Cannae in reverse,” but the comparisons simply do not hold up. First of all, the scale of Cannae was vastly larger. With 96,000 Romans and 50,000 Carthaginians, almost 150,000 men committed themselves to a death struggle on that fateful day, 14 years earlier. By contrast, if we accept the Roman accounts, likely to have exaggerated the number of Carthaginian combatants at Zama in order to make victory more impressive, we would have 35,000 on the Roman side and 40,000 (probably less) on the Carthaginian, or a total of 75,000—about half the number of combatants fielded at Cannae.

At Cannae discipline was absolute, and Hannibal's forces moved with clockwork precision, leaving nothing to chance. After the Carthaginian heavy horse under Hasdrubal defeated the Roman equites on the right wing of the Roman formation, they did not give in to the temptation of pursuing the survivors, a remarkable display of discipline. Instead they wheeled to the right like a well-oiled machine, swiftly riding behind the mile-long battlefield to fall upon the flank and rear of the large contingent of allied Italian cavalry under Varro, which was being kept in place by the hit and run tactics of the agile and versatile Numidian riders. When the allied cavalry panicked and broke, it was only the fast Numidian horsemen who undertook the pursuit, while Hasdrubal's heavy horse, again with perfect discipline, wheeled once more to the right and fell upon the rear of the Roman army already engaged with the Carthaginian center and in the process of being enveloped by Hannibal's elite Libyan forces closing in from the sides. Hasdrubal's preordained cavalry manoeuvre blocked the possibility of any retreat and doomed the legions under Servilius and Minucius to their fate.

Compare the above display of equestrian manoeuvrability and discipline with the cavalry engagement at Zama, where Hannibal was outnumbered by 6,000 to 4,000 in horsemen. It is clear that Hannibal instructed his smaller Numidian and Carthaginian horsemen to feign a retreat when the Roman horse attacked at the beginning of the battle, and, pretending to escape, draw away from the battlefield the pursuing Numidian horse from the right Roman flank, under the command of Massinissa, as well as the Roman equites under Laelius from the opposite wing. This they accomplished with perfection, removing the superior cavalry forces from the battlefield. Hannibal, and not Scipio, controlled this development.

With respect to the infantry engagement, only Hannibal's third line, which he held as a reserve far behind the others, was composed of seasoned veterans and elite forces from his Italian campaign. Naturally, most of them were not among the men who had crossed the Alps with him in 218 BCE, but

were experienced soldiers, including many from Bruttium, who were determined to shake the Roman yoke. His first two lines, on the other hand, were of questionable quality, and Hannibal probably expected them to cave in under the onslaught of the veteran Roman legionnaires, although not without first taking their toll from them, both in terms of casualties and fatigue. He wanted to insure that not only the Roman first line—the *hastati*—but also the second and third lines—the *principes* and the *triarii*—would come into the fray and gradually wear themselves out. Once Hannibal's first line broke, the retreating soldiers were not permitted to reintegrate themselves at random points in the next line, but were forced to move to the sides, extending the Carthaginian front. The same thing happened after the second line broke, and then the Romans were left facing the fresh and rested elite veterans of Hannibal's army, plus a vastly wider enemy line, threatening to engulf them from the flanks.

At that point in the battle, Scipio must have realized that his situation was becoming desperate, for he was in danger of being enveloped from the sides, with an immovable barrier of rested soldiers moving in from the front, and he ordered the Roman advance stopped. In haste he displaced the *principes* and the *triarii* to the sides, extending his front to match the width of the Carthaginian line and avoid encirclement. But Hannibal must have also used the momentary lull in the fighting to reorganize his forces, and it seems likely that he may have displaced his veterans to the sides, to face the *triarii* and the *principes*, while the survivors of his first two lines got ready to deal with the exhausted *hastati* in the center—it is not credible that Hannibal would have remained idle as a spectator while Scipio repositioned his men. There was nothing more that Scipio could have done at this point, and the battle resumed with increasing ferocity. In view of the rested condition of Hannibal's elite veterans, it is very likely that they were in the process of routing the *principes* and *triarii* while the center held, and defeat looked Scipio in the face.

What saved the day for Scipio was the fortuitous return in the nick of time of the horsemen under Massinissa and Laelius, who had been tricked away from the battlefield for what must have been hours, and who fell upon the Carthaginian rear. Ultimately it was Massinissa's switching of allegiance from the Carthaginian to the Roman side, and his fortunate (for the Romans) return to the field, rather than the generalship of Scipio, that decided the outcome of the battle. Had Massinissa and Laelius's return been delayed for another half hour, Hannibal would likely have prevailed. Even at this point, the Carthaginians were not completely encircled, as the Romans had been at Cannae. According to Polybius, the Carthaginian casualties numbered 20,000, an outcome hardly comparable with the 70,000 fallen at Cannae. Scipio, undoubtedly aware of how close he had been to defeat, had he not been saved at the last moment by Massinissa, later acknowledged that Hannibal had done at Zama everything anyone could have done (Livy 30:35, 5-8). The illusion that at Zama the student had matched and outdone the teacher, part of the Scipio legend propagated by Roman historiography, does not fit what actually happened in the last battle of the Second Punic War.

But there are further problems with the battle of Zama that diminish its standing vis a vis Cannae. The entire description of the battle in Polybius and Livy is not credible, starting with the matter of the 80 elephants that Hannibal is said to have fielded. While no serious military historian accepts that number, our detailed analysis (Mosig & Belhassen, in an article appearing in the *International Journal of the Humanities* in 2007) demonstrated that it is unlikely that there were any elephants at all at Zama. There are several other inconsistencies discussed in the same paper, which suggest that what really transpired was not what was claimed in the classical accounts.

The recent dating of the famed military port of Carthage to the second, rather than the third, century BCE, has opened further doubts and possibilities. As Abdelaziz Belkhdja argues in his 2012

book, "*Hannibal Barca: L'histoire veritable*," published by Apollonia in Tunisia, if the military port was built after, and not before, the second war between Carthage and Rome, this casts doubts on the treaty that allegedly Carthage was required to sign after being defeated at Zama, which included the dismantling of Carthage's naval forces. If, on the other hand, the war was concluded, not with a final battle, but with a peace treaty giving concessions to Rome (not including the dissolution of the Punic navy), as offered by Hannibal in his alleged meeting with Scipio prior to the battle, the construction of the military port after the war's end makes sense. Consequently, the latest research questions whether or not the battle of Zama actually took place! No such doubts have ever emerged concerning the authenticity of the battle of Cannae.

The battle of Cannae stands alone as the most brilliant victory and the most devastating defeat in the annals of warfare.

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