

A TALK FOR A PRESS CONFERENCE IN BARLETTA, ITALY, ON JULY 29, 2013

Buona sera, cari amici italiani. Il mio nome é Yozan Mosig. Sono professore presso l'Universita del Nebraska a Kearney. Il mio italiano non é molto buono. Ed allora Vi prego di perdonarmi se continuerò a parlarVi in lingua inglese. Grazie per l'attenzione!...

I am speaking to you from the Hannibal Library in Nebraska, which holds close to 7,000 books in a dozen languages, all of them connected to Hannibal and the Punic Wars, plus hundreds of periodicals, audio recordings, films, and miscellanea.

The occasion for this videoconference is the 60th Anniversary of the Comitato Italiano pro Canne della Battaglia, of which I am the foreign member, as well as the approaching 2229th Anniversary of the Battle of Cannae.

The battle of Cannae is without a doubt the most astonishing military victory in history, still assiduously studied in military academies worldwide, and the inspiration for a number of relatively recent war engagements, from the Schlieffen Plan in WWI to General Schwarzkopf's envelopment of Saddam Hussain's army in the first Gulf War. It has generated an extensive literature, ranging from specialized books and studies published in many languages to chapters and discussions in numerous textbooks.

Allow me to briefly review the historical background and share with you some conclusions from my 15 years of research on this event.

After being defeated by Hannibal in three battles, in the year 216 BCE the Romans decided to raise a super-army to crush once and for all the Carthaginian invader. They recruited no less than eight legions, to be matched by an equal number from their Italian allies, for a grand total of 16 legions! They also increased the numerical strength of each legion to 5,000, which gave them no less than 80,000 infantry soldiers to oppose to Hannibal's 40,000. But how large were the cavalry forces of both sides? Hannibal had 10,000, of which we are told 6,000 were heavy Gallic and Iberian riders and 4,000 light Numidian horsemen. As for the Romans, Polybius claims that they had "over 6000," but doesn't say how much over. He does state that "on occasions of exceptional gravity" the Romans increased the size of the equestrian complement of each legion from 200 to 300 or even 400, and we know that the Italian allies were required to supply three times as many. My research suggests that in all likelihood the total number of riders in the Roman super-army may have been actually 3,200 Roman equites plus 9,600 allied horse, for a total of about 12,800, and that therefore, contrary to common belief, the Roman cavalry was numerically greater than Hannibal's. This is significant, because the usual explanation of Hannibal's victory is tied to the claim that Hannibal had great superiority in cavalry, which was not the case.

Another point of controversy concerns the question of who was actually in command of the Roman army that fought at Cannae. After the Roman disaster at Lake Trasimeno in 217 BCE, the Romans put Fabius Maximus in charge with the power of dictator. Realizing that he was no match for Hannibal on the battlefield, he wisely followed him with his army at a distance, harassing his supply lines but refusing to face him in battle. This approach was unacceptable to the Senate, and at the end of his six-month term replaced him with two new consuls who were given the specific assignment of annihilating Hannibal in battle with the Roman super-army. The traditional accounts of Polybius and Livy name the consuls as the prudent and aristocratic Lucius Aemilius Paullus and the brash and impulsive Gaius Terentius Varro, a plebeian, the son of a butcher. We are told that Varro was a demagogue and a braggart, and that he was in command at the time of the battle, and thus deserves the blame for the worst military disaster in the history of Rome. My research suggests otherwise, namely that Aemilius Paullus was in charge and that Varro was made a scapegoat to protect the reputation of the Aemilian family, who, by the way, were Polybius's employers. Several factors confirm this.

At the start of the battle Aemilius Paullus was commanding the right wing, with the Roman equites, the traditional place for the consul in charge. Wounded in battle, he refused to escape when defeat was clear, choosing to die with his army, which makes sense if he felt responsible for having led Rome's greatest army to a total catastrophe. Varro, on the other hand, had the less prestigious command of the allied cavalry on the left wing. He escaped and was received with open arms in Rome for "not having despaired of the Republic." Not only that, but he achieved further military commands during the war, which would have been highly unlikely had he been the consul responsible for the disaster. Incidentally, claims that Aemilius Paullus voted against engaging Hannibal in battle at Cannae because the open plain would have provided advantage to Hannibal's cavalry are nonsense, since, as we have seen, the Romans actually had numerical superiority in cavalry. It is likely that both consuls agreed to face Hannibal at Cannae because the most important consideration would have been that there was no place where Hannibal could have concealed an ambush, as he had done in the previous battles at the Trebbia River and at Lake Trasimeno.

A third point of controversy concerns the casualties suffered by the Roman army at Cannae. Livy gives a figure of about 50,000 because he counted only 6,000 for the Roman cavalry. If we take into account that their number was actually over 12,000, the Roman army had over 90,000 combatants, and the totals for escaped, 10,000, and captured, also 10,000, are compatible with Polybius's claim that 70,000 Romans were killed. For this reason, I believe that Polybius's figure should be accepted. Hannibal's own losses numbered only around 5,000.

All of this makes Hannibal's victory at Cannae even more amazing than previously thought. How was it possible for an army of 50,000 not only to defeat, but to practically annihilate a force twice its size? How could an army composed of disparate elements from various ethnic backgrounds, mostly mercenaries, destroy a better equipped massive super-army composed of the best soldiers of their time, fighting to defend their own land, and expertly led by experienced officers? The answer lies in the genius of one man, Hannibal, whose virtuosity in the battlefield resembled that of a chess grandmaster, allowing him to accomplish what anyone else would have regarded as impossible.

Hannibal knew himself, and understood perfectly the capabilities of all the diverse elements composing his army, positioning them like pieces on a chessboard. More importantly, he understood the Romans and exploited their greatest flaw: their hubris, which made them predictable. He knew that they would not position half of their cavalry on each wing, which would have given them a much better chance. Instead, as he had predicted, they placed the smaller contingent of Roman equites on the right and the much larger Allied cavalry on the left, for Roman noblemen would not ride next to their "lesser" Italian allies.

This error was fatal, and doomed the Roman army even before the battle had started. On his own left wing, facing the 3,200 equites, Hannibal positioned his 6,000-strong heavy cavalry, guaranteeing their swift victory, and used his 4,000 highly skilled Numidian horsemen, experts in hit and run tactics, to keep the over 9,000 allied riders busy until his triumphant Iberian and Gallic heavy horse could join their charge, coming around from behind the battlefield. Attacked from both sides, the Allied cavalry broke and fled from the battlefield, being decimated with the Numidians in pursuit. In one master stroke, Hannibal had wiped out the entire cavalry of the Roman army.

The infantry battle that was taking place at the same time seemed to favor the Romans at first, who advanced like a battering ram, pushing back Hannibal's weakest forces in his convex center, composed of Gauls and Iberians commanded by Hannibal himself together with his brother Mago. In a perfectly disciplined retreat, the line gradually flattened and then became concave, acting as a great sack into which the Romans marched, believing they were winning. But the Carthaginian elite forces Hannibal had kept in reserve, 6,000 on each side, wheeled in and attacked from the flanks, as the order was given for the center to stop its disciplined retreat.

The heavy Gallic and Iberian cavalry charged from the back, and the greatest army of Rome was trapped, completely surrounded, and gradually compressed and immobilized by pressure from all sides. The genius of Hannibal had found the way to cancel the numerical superiority of his enemies. Yes, the Romans outnumbered the Carthaginians 2 to 1, but trapped and encircled as they were, only the men at the edges could fight, the rest having to wait in horror until their turn came to die.

At the end of the day, Rome's super-army was no more, and the dead outnumbered the living. 75,000 men lost their lives on that fateful day, a casualty figure that was not equaled or surpassed in any battle for the next 2,000 years. It was finally matched in deadliness by the killing fields of World War I, but it must be remembered that Hannibal's victory was achieved with swords and spears, in a single day, without the artillery, tanks, machine guns, bombardment, and poison gas of the 20th Century. The Battle of Cannae, on August 2nd, 216 BCE, remains unparalleled in the history of the world.

You can find a lot more detailed information on my research on Hannibal and the Punic Wars in a series of 12 articles I have made available online at TheHistoryHerald.com, or even better, read the recent book written by the leading Tunisian expert on the subject, Abdelaziz Belkhdja, titled *Hannibal Barca: L'histoire veritable*, published in French, in 2011, by Apollonia Publishers in Tunisia. Highly recommended!

History comes alive in Barletta every year, thanks to the efforts of any single members of the Comitato Italiano pro Canne della Battaglia in Italy near the representative offices in Milano, Trieste, Venezia, Firenze, Napoli, and its indefatigable president, Mr. Nino Vinella.

I am honored to be a member of the Comitato, which celebrates this year its 60th anniversary, together with the 2229th anniversary of the most amazing military victory in history, Hannibal's triumph at Cannae.

Thank you and... CIAO A TUTTI!