The Battle of Cannae and Its Historical Importance

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Historical Paper
Word Count: 1645
The battle of Cannae in 216 B.C. had a huge impact on history. An extreme tragedy for the Roman side and an even bigger triumph for the Carthaginians. The Romans took its biggest loss in a century losing over 40,000 men and the Carthaginians getting one of the greatest victories. The Romans expected to win but they didn’t expect a genius battle strategy. The Carthaginians carried out their plan very well and made sure the Romans could not do anything about it.

So how could such a tragedy happen to the greatest empire of the time and also give the greatest triumph to the Carthaginians? Well part of it was the Romans underestimating the Carthage army most likely because the Romans already won a war against carthage. The other part was the determination from Hannibal. As a child his father had him take an oath to always hate Rome, and so he did.¹

It all started when Hannibal invaded Italy with 38,000 infantry, 8,000 cavalry and 37 elephants.² This event which angered Rome lead on to be a 17 year war known as the Second Punic war. In this war there was many battles. These battles would lead to each army learning more about each other and what to expect. What happened August 2nd, 216 BC is something the Romans never could of expected, the outcome of the Battle of Cannae.

On the day of the Battle of Cannae, the Romans pinned down the Carthage army in the neighborhood of Cannae.² They both knew what was going to happen so they decided this would be one great battle and would be a great victory for whoever won. At this point in the war Hannibal has about 40,000 men in total including allied forces.³

¹ [https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1479806](https://www.penfield.edu/webpages/jgiotto/resources.cfm?subpage=1479806)
This puts him at an extreme disadvantage compared to Scipio Africanus’ 80,000 man army. If these two armies went head on, Rome would easily win because he has twice as many men as Hannibal and Hannibal knew this. So he decided to use a genius strategy.

This strategy was well thought out but also very simple. It was a classic example of a flank maneuver that worked perfectly. A few things had to happen for this plan to work otherwise it would fail miserably. The battle field was set up with the infantry right in the middle and in the front, with the cavalry on each side. Hannibal needed to beat Rome’s cavalry or his plan would never work. This is how it was supposed to work.

The key to the plan was the 8-10,000 Libyan heavy infantry, amassed in strong columns on both flanks, probably hidden from the Romans. The Celtic and Spanish infantry were position slightly ahead of the rest of the army. Hannibal’s plan relied on the fighting ability of his men. The Spanish and Celtic infantry were to slowly retreat in the face of the Roman legions, while the Punic cavalry defeated the Roman and Latin horse. Once the Romans had advanced far enough, the heavy Libyan infantry was to plunge into the sides of the by then disordered Roman legions, while the Punic cavalry attacked the rear.

The leader of the Roman army, Scipio Africanus, had a different plan.”The cavalry on the wings would hold Hannibal’s superior horse for long enough for the infantry to do its job and destroy the Punic infantry, thus ending the threat from Hannibal.” This plan was very dependent on the fact that Hannibal had a normal battle plan and would not try anything special. In Rome’s point of view this seemed like an easy win. They outnumbered their enemy 2:1 and it was a nice open battlefield. The

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4 https://www.unrv.com/empire/after-cannae.php
5 http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/wars_punic2.html
Romans already took two large defeats, the first time in 218 BC with the Battle of Trebia, and a second major loss in 217 BC in the Battle of Lake Trasimene. They could not afford another one. The Romans were attacked a day before the Battle of Cannae and it did not hurt them much but it made one of the Roman consuls mad. So the next day when it was his turn to lead the army he used that anger in decision making and decided to battle Carthage.

Hannibal’s plan worked perfectly. Rome’s army pushed forward and pushed back the weak front of Hannibal’s army. Not only did they push forward but the Romans did so in a tight formation to really break through the front line. This is when Hannibal told them to start retreating. Now it was Carthage’s turn for some action. The two cavalries attacked Rome’s and the Roman cavalries stood no chance to Hannibal’s elite cavalry. Both of Rome’s cavalries retreated after taking some losses and went into the hills to escape. This left Rome with only one commander. Then Hannibal had his heavy infantry on the side start to push up and he told the front line to hold position. Now the Romans were being attacked at every direction. Then when the cavalries got back from chasing away Rome’s cavalry they attacked Rome from behind.

Now Rome was boxxed in and had nowhere to go. Every Carthaginian troop was ordered to keep pushing forward and so they did. At this point some Romans did not even have enough room to draw their weapon. Some resorted to suicide and others asked other Romans to kill them. In the end, 50,000 Romans died including the consul Paullus and another 26,000 were captured. And on that day the Carthaginians left what

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7 https://www.historynet.com/second-punic-war-battle-of-cannae.htm
is estimated to be 1.6 million pounds of human flesh on that battlefield, one of the worst losses in a single day in history.\(^8\)

This upset was bigger than anyone expected. The Romans knew that Hannibal was smart and that his army was much smaller but did not expect any outcome to be near what it was. This set out a rippling effect of shock and disbelief to Carthage, Rome, and even other countries. The people of Carthage saw this as a good sign for the war because this was Carthage’s third huge win against Rome.\(^9\) Rome obviously reacted very differently. People were freaking out and did not know what to do. Rome’s two consoles immediately tried to raise another army.\(^5\) Some of the people of Rome did some crazy things, but at the time was not as crazy as it would be now. Four people were buried alive as a sacrifice to the gods with hopes that it would help Rome.\(^10\) Some of the citizens thought that the Carthaginian army might go straight to Rome and attack them. We now know that never happened but it is understandable why they were so worried. Their empire was almost destroyed in just one single battle, in one single day.

Rome continued to fight and continued to get more troops. After the Battle of Cannae, Rome fought against Carthage for another fifteen years spanning across over thirty battles. Rome started to use their natural resources and army more efficiently which lead to their armies perseverance. Hannibal’s strategy went back to avoiding all conflict with Rome unless it was necessary. This plan worked pretty well economically for Carthage.

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\(^8\) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MeJY5ymg_DM
\(^9\) https://sites.psu.edu/hannibal/battles-of-trebia-and-trasimene/
After the first punic war, Rome agreed to peace if Carthage signed a treaty. This treaty economically weakened Carthage and helped Rome build its navy even larger and its empire stronger. Hannibal’s plan of starting a war and avoiding the fight allowed Carthage to not follow the treaty so they could then make themselves better. So as Hannibal is trying to avoid all conflict while in a war, he still manages to use his intelligence to win the few battles he is in. This man took a smaller army with less resources and showed that you do not need to be physically stronger, just smarter.

Hannibal and the Battle of Cannae even have impacts on war today. Blitzkrieg is a very similar tactic that was used in World War Two by the Nazi army. They were able to use this tactic and make it work multiple times. But there is one thing that separates what Hannibal did and what was used for Blitzkrieg. Hannibal had one small army against the most powerful army of that time. The chances of Hannibal winning were as small as the chances of the Patriots winning against England.

Hannibal changed the way people think about war. At one point in time, war was just two sides fighting against each other. Whoever had the bigger and stronger army would win. Simple as that. Then people started to get smarter and realized that there was other ways to win wars such as cutting off your enemies food supply. But then Hannibal came around and really raised the bar. War went from simple battling to mind games and complex battle strategies. This is not only something Hannibal did well at but he also introduced a lot of new strategies and then used them. War was never the same after Hannibal was in one.

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11 [https://www.unk.edu/academics/psychology/_files/mosigy/REVISION%20AND%20REC.pdf](https://www.unk.edu/academics/psychology/_files/mosigy/REVISION%20AND%20REC.pdf)
12 [https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/blitzkrieg](https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/blitzkrieg)
Hannibal made people realize that even the most unexpected things can happen. There is a lot you can learn from the battle of Cannae but it is all up to however you interpret it. Not only is how you interpret it but when you interpret it. People throughout history have learned about the Battle of Cannae and depending on what time period they are from can change their point of view and what they learn. This is what I learned. The most popular, strongest, or well rounded thing can be destroyed. In the Battle of Cannae, Rome was almost brought to its knees even though it had the largest and strongest army. I learned that sometimes the underdog is obviously going to win, you just might not see it until it has already happened.
Annotated Bibliography

Secondary Sources


This website had a lot of information regarding the Second Punic war and its many details. I used this to learn more about Hannibal’s war tactics and Rome’s war tactics. I also used it to double check some facts since there are no surviving primary sources.


This source had a lot of information on Hannibal Barca’s life and early childhood. I used this source to give a more in depth look at Hannibal and how he was raised.


This website had a lot of information about Hannibal Barca’s entire life and all of the major events he was in, including all wars, his social life, and his family. I used this source when talking about Hannibal’s childhood and his hate for Rome.


This source was a good in depth breakdown of the Battle of Cannae. It also explained much of the Second Punic war. I used this source when talking about the Second Punic war and also used it to fact check with other sources.

“The Outbreak of the Second Punic War Who Is to Blame?” SiOWfa15 Science in Our World Certainty and Controversy, sites.psu.edu/secondpunicwar/carthage/.

In this informative essay it explained the events that lead up to the Second Punic war and how the relation between Rome and Carthage got so bad. I used this source to learn about how the Second punic war started and the First Punic war.

This source was good at explaining what happened on the battlefield during the Battle of Cannae. It also talked about the two Roman consuls who led the army that day. I used this source for the in depth explanation of the Battle of Cannae to get a better understanding of what exactly happened.


This source was good for explaining what Hannibal did when he prepared for about three weeks in Cannae before the battle happened. This source also went into detail about the First Punic War and Hannibal’s father. I used this for learning more about the three different leaders in the Second Punic war and for general knowledge.


This source was very good for all information on the Battle of Cannae and the battle that ended the Second Punic war, the Battle of Zama. All information was very in depth and specific. I used this source to learn about the two most important battles of the Second Punic war and to know more about Rome’s and Carthage’s army.


This source explained the aftermath and consequences of the Second Punic war and its impact on social relations between countries. I used this source to fact check some information about what Rome did to the Carthaginians after winning the Second Punic war.


This source was good for explaining an overall summary of the Battle of Cannae and went into more detail about the troops that the Romans and Carthaginians had. I used this for specifics about army sizes and how many troops died.


This source explained a lot about how Hannibal had more of an impact on history besides when he was alive. It gave good and specific examples on what other
armies did because of Hannibal and what they learned. I used this source when explaining Hannibal’s impact on history and even know.


This was a good source for knowledge about Hannibal’s entire life and some lesser known details about him. It was also a good way to know about the way Hannibal thought because of the choices he made. I used this source to know about Hannibal and his interesting life story.


This source was good for a reference on how Hannibal affected recent history and explained how the tactic was used.