



Polybius on Cannae

Hannibal now seeing that it was imperative for him to give battle and attack the enemy, and careful lest his soldiers might be disheartened by this recent reverse, thought that the occasion demanded some words of exhortation and called a meeting of the men. When they were assembled he bade them all look at the country round, and asked them what greater boon they could in their present circumstances crave from the gods, if they had their choice, than to fight the decisive battle on such ground, greatly superior as they were to the enemy in cavalry. As they could see this for themselves they all applauded and, he continued: "In the first place then thank the gods for this; for it is they who working to aid you to victory have led the enemy on to such ground, and next thank myself for compelling them to fight, a thing they can no longer avoid, and to fight here where the advantages are manifestly ours. I do not think it at all my duty to exhort you at further length to be of good heart and eager for the battle, and this is why. Then, when you had no experience of what a battle with the Romans was, this was necessary, and I often addressed you, giving examples, but now that you have beyond dispute beaten the Romans consecutively in three great battles, what words of mine could confirm your courage more than your own deeds? For by these former battles you have gained possession of the country and all its wealth, even as I promised you, and not a word I spoke but has proved true; and the coming battle will be for the cities and their wealth. Your victory will make you at once masters of all Italy, and through this one battle you will be freed from your present toil, you will possess yourselves of all the vast wealth of Rome, and will be lords and masters of all men and all things. Therefore no more words are wanted, but deeds; for if it be the will of the gods I am confident that I shall fulfill my promises forthwith." After he had spoken further to this effect, the army applauded him heartily, whereupon he thanked them and

acknowledging their spirit dismissed them, and immediately pitched his camp, placing his entrenchments by the same bank of the river with the larger camp of the enemy.

Next day he ordered all his troops to look to their persons and their accoutrements, and on the day following he drew up his army along the river with the evident intention of giving battle as soon as possible. Aemilius was not pleased with the ground, and seeing that the Carthaginians would soon have to shift their camp in order to obtain supplies, kept quiet, after securing his two camps by covering forces. Hannibal, after waiting for some time without anyone coming out to meet him, withdrew again the rest of his army into their intrenchments, but sent out the Numidians to intercept the water-bearers from the lesser Roman camp. When the Numidians came up to the actual palisade of the camp and prevented the men from watering, not only was this a further stimulus to Terentius, but the soldiers displayed great eagerness for battle and ill brooked further delay. For nothing is more trying to men in general than prolonged suspense, but when the issue has once been decided we make a shift to endure patiently all that men regard as the depth of misery.

When the news reached Rome that the armies were encamped opposite each other and that engagements between the outposts occurred every day, there was the utmost excitement and fear in the city, as most people dreaded the result owing to their frequent previous reverses, and foresaw and anticipated in imagination the consequences of total defeat. All the oracles that had ever been delivered to them were in men's mouths, every temple and every house was full of signs and prodigies, so that vows, sacrifices, supplicatory processions and litanies pervaded the town. For in seasons of danger the Romans are much given to propitiating both gods and men, and there is nothing at such times in rites of the kind that they regard as unbecoming or beneath their dignity.

Next day it was Terentius' turn to take the command, and just after sunrise he began to move his forces out of both camps. Crossing the river with those from the larger camp he at once put them in order of battle, drawing up those from the other camp next to them in the same line, the whole army facing south. He stationed the Roman cavalry close to the river on the right wing and the foot next to them in the same line, placing the maniples closer together than was formerly the usage and making the depth of each many times

exceed its front. The allied horse he drew up on his left wing, and in front of the whole force at some distance he placed his light-armed troops. The whole army, including the allies, numbered about eighty thousand foot and rather more than six thousand horse. Hannibal at the same time sent his slingers and pikemen over the river and stationed them in front, and leading the rest of his forces out of camp he crossed the stream in two places and drew them up opposite the enemy. On his left close to the river he placed his Spanish and Celtic horse facing the Roman cavalry, next these half his heavy-armed Africans, then the Spanish and Celtic infantry, and after them the other half of the Africans, and finally, on his right wing, his Numidian horse. After thus drawing up his whole army in a straight line, he took the central companies of the Spaniards and Celts and advanced with them, keeping rest of them in contact with these companies, but gradually falling off, so as to produce a crescent-shaped formation, the line of the flanking companies growing thinner as it was prolonged, his object being to employ the Africans as a reserve force and to begin the action with the Spaniards and Celts.

The Africans were armed in the Roman fashion, Hannibal having equipped them with the choicest of the arms captured in the previous battles. The shields of the Spaniards and Celts were very similar, but their swords were entirely different, those of the Spaniards thrusting with as deadly effect as they cut, but the Gaulish sword being only able to slash and requiring a long sweep to do so. As they were drawn up in alternate companies, the Gauls naked and the Spaniards in short tunics bordered with purple, their national dress, they presented a strange and impressive appearance. The Carthaginian cavalry numbered about ten thousand, and their infantry, including the Celts, did not much exceed forty thousand. The Roman right wing was under the command of Aemilius, the left under that of Terentius, and the centre under the Consuls of the previous year, Marcus Atilius and Gnaeus Servilius. Hasdrubal commanded the Carthaginian left, Hanno the right, and Hannibal himself with his brother Mago the centre. Since the Roman army, as I said, faced south and the Carthaginians north, they were neither of them inconvenienced by the rising sun.

The advanced guards were the first to come into action, and at first when only the light infantry were engaged neither side had the advantage; but when the Spanish and Celtic horse on the left wing came into collision with the Roman cavalry, the struggle that ensued was truly barbaric; for there were none of the normal wheeling evolutions, but having once met they dismounted and

fought man to man. The Carthaginians finally got the upper hand, killed most of the enemy in the mellay, all the Romans fighting with desperate bravery, and began to drive the rest along the river, cutting them down mercilessly, and it was now that the heavy infantry on each side took the place of the light-armed troops and met. For a time the Spaniards and Celts kept their ranks and struggled bravely with the Romans, but soon, borne down by the weight of the legions, they gave way and fell back, breaking up the crescent. The Roman maniples, pursuing them furiously, easily penetrated the enemy's front, since the Celts were deployed in a thin line while they themselves had crowded up from the wings to the centre where the fighting was going on. For the centres and wings did not come into action simultaneously, but the centres first, as the Celts were drawn up in a crescent and a long way in advance of their wings, the convex face of the crescent being turned towards the enemy. The Romans, however, following up the Celts and pressing on to the centre and that part of the enemy's line which was giving way, progressed so far that they now had the heavy-armed Africans on both of their flanks. Hereupon the Africans on the right wing facing to the left and then beginning from the right charged upon the enemy's flank, while those on the left faced to the right and dressing by the left, did the same, the situation itself indicating to them how to act. The consequence was that, as Hannibal had designed, the Romans, straying too far in pursuit of the Celts, were caught between the two divisions of the enemy, and they now no longer kept their compact formation but turned singly or in companies to deal with the enemy who was falling on their flanks.

Aemilius, though he had been on the right wing from the outset and had taken part in the cavalry action, was still safe and sound; but wishing to act up to what he had said in his address to the troops, and to be present himself at the fighting, and seeing that the decision of the battle lay mainly with the legions, he rode along to the centre of the whole line, where he not only threw himself personally into the combat and exchanged blows with the enemy but kept cheering on and exhorting his men. Hannibal, who had been in this part of the field since the commencement of the battle, did likewise.

The Numidians meanwhile on the right wing, attacking the cavalry opposite them on the Roman left, neither gained any great advantage nor suffered any serious loss owing to their peculiar mode of fighting, but they kept the enemy's cavalry out of action by drawing them off and attacking them from all sides at once. Hasdrubal, having by this time cut up very nearly all the enemy's cavalry

by the river, came up from the left to help the Numidians, and now the Roman allied horse, seeing that they were going to be charged by him, broke and fled. Hasdrubal at this juncture appears to have acted with great skill and prudence; for in view of the fact that the Numidians were very numerous and most efficient and formidable when in pursuit of a flying foe he left them to deal with the Roman cavalry and led his squadrons on to where the infantry were engaged with the object of supporting the Africans. Attacking the Roman legions in the rear and delivering repeated charges at various points all at once, he raised the spirits of the Africans and cowed and dismayed the Romans. It was here that Lucius Aemilius fell in the thick of the fight after receiving several dreadful wounds, and of him we may say that if there ever was a man who did his duty by his country both all through his life and in these last times, it was he. The Romans as long as they could turn and present a front on every side to the enemy, held out, but as the outer ranks continued to fall, and the rest were gradually huddled in and surrounded, they finally all were killed where they stood, among them Marcus and Gnaeus, the Consuls of the preceding year, who had borne themselves in the battle like brave men worthy of Rome. While this murderous combat was going on, the Numidians following up the flying cavalry killed most of them and unseated others. A few escaped to Venusia, among them being the Consul Gaius Terentius, who disgraced himself by his flight and in his tenure of office had been most unprofitable to his country.

Such was the outcome of the battle at Cannae between the Romans and Carthaginians, a battle in which both the victors and the vanquished displayed conspicuous bravery, as was evinced by the facts. For of the six thousand cavalry, seventy escaped to Venusia with Terentius, and about three hundred of the allied horse reached different cities in scattered groups. Of the infantry about ten thousand were captured fighting but not in the actual battle, while only perhaps three thousand escaped from the field to neighbouring towns. All the rest, numbering about seventy thousand, died bravely. Both on this occasion and on former ones their numerous cavalry had contributed most to the victory of the Carthaginians, and it demonstrated to posterity that in times of war it is better to give battle with half as many infantry as the enemy and an overwhelming force of cavalry than to be in all respects his equal. Of Hannibal's army there fell about four thousand Celts, fifteen hundred Spaniards and Africans and two hundred cavalry.

The Romans who were made prisoners were not in the battle for the following reason. Lucius had left a force of ten thousand foot in his own camp, in order that, if Hannibal, neglecting his camp, employed his whole army in the field, they might during the battle gain entrance there and capture all the enemy's baggage: if, on the other hand, Hannibal, guessing this danger, left a strong garrison in the camp, the force opposed to the Romans would be reduced in numbers. The circumstances of their capture were more or less as follows. Hannibal had left an adequate force to guard his camp, and when the battle opened, the Romans, as they had been ordered, delivered an assault on this force. At first they held out, but as they were beginning to be hard pressed, Hannibal, who was now victorious in every part of the field, came to their assistance, and routing the Romans shut them up in their camp. He killed two thousand of them and afterwards made all the rest prisoners. The Numidians also reduced the various strongholds throughout the country which had given shelter to the flying enemy and brought in the fugitives, consisting of about two thousand horse.

The result of the battle being as I have described, the general consequences that had been anticipated on both sides followed. The Carthaginians by this action became at once masters of almost all the rest of the coast, Tarentum immediately surrendering, while Argyrippa and some Campanian towns invited Hannibal to come to them, and the eyes of all were now turned to the Carthaginians, who had great hopes of even taking Rome itself at the first assault. The Romans on their part owing to this defeat at once abandoned all hope of retaining their supremacy in Italy, and were in the greatest fear about their own safety and that of Rome, expecting Hannibal every moment to appear. It seemed indeed as if Fortune were taking part against them in their struggle with adversity and meant to fill the cup to overflowing; for but a few days afterwards, while the city was yet panic-stricken, the commander they had sent to Cisalpine Gaul was surprised by the Celts in an ambush and he and his force utterly destroyed. Yet the Senate neglected no means in its power, but exhorted and encouraged the populace, strengthened the defences of the city, and deliberated on the situation with manly coolness. And subsequent events made this manifest. For though the Romans were now incontestably beaten and their military reputation shattered, yet by the peculiar virtues of their constitution and by wise counsel they not only recovered their supremacy in Italy and afterwards defeated the Carthaginians, but in a few years made themselves masters of the whole world.

I therefore end this Book at this point, having now described the events in Spain and Italy that occurred in the 140th Olympiad. When I have brought down the history of Greece in the same Olympiad to the same date, I shall pause to premise to the rest of the history a separate account of the Roman constitution; for I think that a description of it is not only germane to the whole scheme of my work, but will be of great service to students and practical statesmen for forming or reforming other constitutions.

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