



Livy's History of Rome

Book 22

The Disaster of Cannae

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The Disaster of Cannae

[22.43]When Hannibal saw that the ill-considered movement which the Romans had commenced was not recklessly carried out to its final stage, and that his ruse had been detected, he returned to camp. Owing to the want of corn he was unable to remain there many days, and fresh plans were continually cropping up, not only amongst the soldiers, who were a medley of all nations, but even in the mind of the general himself. Murmurs gradually swelled into loud and angry protests as the men demanded their arrears of pay, and complained of the starvation which they were enduring, and in addition, a rumour was started that the mercenaries, chiefly those of Spanish nationality, had formed a plot to desert. Even Hannibal himself, it is said, sometimes thought of leaving his infantry behind and hurrying with his cavalry into Gaul. With these plans being discussed and this temper prevailing amongst the men, he decided to move into the warmer parts of Apulia, where the harvest was earlier and where, owing to the greater distance from the enemy, desertion would be rendered more difficult for the fickle-minded part of his force. As on the previous occasion, he ordered camp-fires to be lighted, and a few tents left where they could be easily seen, in order that the Romans, remembering a similar stratagem, might be afraid to move. However, Statilius was again sent to reconnoitre with his Lucanians, and he made a thorough examination of the country beyond the camp and over the mountains. He reported that he had caught a distant view of the enemy in line of march, and the question of pursuit was discussed. **As usual, the views of the two consuls were opposed**, but almost all present supported Varro, not a single voice was given in favour of Paulus, except that of Servilius, consul in the preceding year. The opinion of the majority of the council prevailed, and so, driven by destiny, they went forward to render Cannae famous in the annals of Roman defeats. It was in the neighbourhood of this village that **Hannibal had fixed his camp with his back to the Sirocco which blows from Mount Vultur and fills the arid plains with clouds of dust.** This arrangement was a very convenient one for his camp, and it proved to be extremely advantageous afterwards, when he was forming his order of battle, for his own men, with the wind behind them, blowing only on their backs, would fight with an enemy who was blinded by volumes of dust.

[22.44]The consuls followed the Carthaginians, carefully examining the roads as they marched, and when they reached Cannae and had the enemy in view they formed two entrenched camps separated

by the same interval as at Gereonium, and with the same distribution of troops in each camp. The river Aufidus, flowing past the two camps, furnished a supply of water which the soldiers got as they best could, and they generally had to fight for it. The men in the smaller camp, which was on the other side of the river, had less difficulty in obtaining it, as that bank was not held by the enemy. Hannibal now saw his hopes fulfilled, that the consuls would give him an opportunity of fighting on ground naturally adapted for the movements of cavalry, the arm in which he had so far been invincible, and accordingly he placed his army in order of battle, and tried to provoke his foe to action by repeated charges of his Numidians. The Roman camp was again disturbed by a mutinous soldiery and consuls at variance, Paulus bringing up against Varro the fatal rashness of Sempronius and Flaminius, Varro retorting by pointing to Fabius as the favourite model of cowardly and inert commanders, and calling gods and men to witness that it was through no fault of his that Hannibal had acquired, so to speak, a prescriptive right to Italy; he had had his hands tied by his colleague; his soldiers, furious and eager for fight, had had their swords and arms taken away from them. Paulus, on the other hand, declared that if anything happened to the legions flung recklessly and betrayed into an ill-considered and imprudent action, he was free from all responsibility for it, though he would have to share in all the consequences. "See to it," he said to Varro, "that those who are so free and ready with their tongues are equally so with their hands in the day of battle."

[22.45] Whilst time was thus being wasted in disputes instead of deliberation, Hannibal withdrew the bulk of his army, who had been standing most of the day in order of battle, into camp. He sent his Numidians, however, across the river to attack the parties who were getting water for the smaller camp. They had hardly gained the opposite bank when with their shouting and uproar they sent the crowd flying in wild disorder, and galloping on as far as the outpost in front of the rampart, they nearly reached the gates of the camp. It was looked upon as such an insult for a Roman camp to be actually terrorised by irregular auxiliaries that one thing, and one thing alone, held back the Romans from instantly crossing the river and forming their battle line - the supreme command that day rested with Paulus. The following day Varro, whose turn it now was, without any consultation with his colleague, exhibited the signal for battle and led his forces drawn up for action across the river. Paulus followed, for though he disapproved of the measure, he was bound to support it. After crossing, they strengthened their line with the force in the smaller camp and completed their formation. On the right, which was nearest to the river, the Roman cavalry were posted, then came the infantry; on the extreme left were the cavalry of the allies, their infantry were between them and the Roman legions. The javelin men with the rest of the light-armed auxiliaries formed the front line. The consuls took their stations on the wings, Terentius Varro on the left, Aemilius Paulus on the right.

[22.46] As soon as it grew light Hannibal sent forward the Balearics and the other light infantry. He then crossed the river in person and as each division was brought across he assigned it its place in the line. The Gaulish and Spanish horse he posted near the bank on the left wing in front of the Roman cavalry; the right wing was assigned to the Numidian troopers. The centre consisted of a strong force of infantry, the Gauls and Spaniards in the middle, the Africans at either end of them. You might fancy that the Africans were for the most part a body of Romans from the way they were armed, they were so completely equipped with the arms, some of which they had taken at the Trebia, but the most part at Trasimennus. The Gauls and Spaniards had shields almost of the same shape their swords were totally different, those of the Gauls being very long and without a point, the Spaniard, accustomed to thrust more than to cut, had a short handy sword, pointed like a dagger. These nations, more than any other, inspired terror by the vastness of their stature and their frightful appearance: the Gauls were naked above the waist, the Spaniards had taken up their position wearing white tunics embroidered with purple, of dazzling brilliancy. The total number of infantry in the field was 40,000, and there were 10,000 cavalry. Hasdrubal was in command of the left wing, Maharbal of the right; Hannibal himself with his brother Mago commanded the centre. It was a great convenience to both

armies that the sun shone obliquely on them, whether it was that they had purposely so placed themselves, or whether it happened by accident, since the Romans faced the north, the Carthaginians the South. The wind, called by the inhabitants the Vulturinus, was against the Romans, and blew great clouds of dust into their faces, making it impossible for them to see in front of them.

[22.47]When the battle shout was raised the auxiliaries ran forward, and the battle began with the light infantry. Then the Gauls and Spaniards on the left engaged the Roman cavalry on the right; the battle was not at all like a cavalry fight, for there was no room for maneuvering, the river on the one side and the infantry on the other hemming them in, compelled them to fight face to face. Each side tried to force their way straight forward, till at last the horses were standing in a closely pressed mass, and the riders seized their opponents and tried to drag them from their horses. It had become mainly a struggle of infantry, fierce but short, and the Roman cavalry was repulsed and fled. Just as this battle of the cavalry was finished, the infantry became engaged, and as long as the Gauls and Spaniards kept their ranks unbroken, both sides were equally matched in strength and courage. At length after long and repeated efforts the Romans closed up their ranks, echeloned their front, and by the sheer weight of their deep column bore down the division of the enemy which was stationed in front of Hannibal's line, and was too thin and weak to resist the pressure. Without a moment's pause they followed up their broken and hastily retreating foe till they took to headlong flight. Cutting their way through the mass of fugitives, who offered no resistance, they penetrated as far as the Africans who were stationed on both wings, somewhat further back than the Gauls and Spaniards who had formed the advanced centre. As the latter fell back the whole front became level, and as they continued to give ground it became concave and crescent-shaped, the Africans at either end forming the horns. As the Romans rushed on incautiously between them, they were enfiladed by the two wings, which extended and closed round them in the rear. On this, the Romans, who had fought one battle to no purpose, left the Gauls and Spaniards, whose rear they had been slaughtering, and commenced a fresh struggle with the Africans. The contest was a very one-sided one, for not only were they hemmed in on all sides, but wearied with the previous fighting they were meeting fresh and vigorous opponents.

[22.48]By this time the Roman left wing, where the allied cavalry were fronting the Numidians, had become engaged, but the fighting was slack at first owing to a Carthaginian stratagem. About 500 Numidians, carrying, besides their usual arms and missiles, swords concealed under their coats of mail, rode out from their own line with their shields slung behind their backs as though they were deserters, and suddenly leaped from their horses and flung their shields and javelins at the feet of their enemy. They were received into their ranks, conducted to the rear, and ordered to remain quiet. While the battle was spreading to the various parts of the field they remained quiet, but when the eyes and minds of all were wholly taken up with the fighting they seized the large Roman shields which were lying everywhere amongst the heaps of slain and commenced a furious attack upon the rear of the Roman line. Slashing away at backs and hips, they made a great slaughter and a still greater panic and confusion. Amidst the rout and panic in one part of the field and the obstinate but hopeless struggle in the other, Hasdrubal, who was in command of that arm, withdrew some Numidians from the centre of the right wing, where the fighting was feebly kept up, and sent them in pursuit of the fugitives, and at the same time sent the Spanish and Gaulish horse to the aid of the Africans, who were by this time more wearied by slaughter than by fighting.

[22.49]Paulus was on the other side of the field. In spite of his having been seriously wounded at the commencement of the action by a bullet from a sling, he frequently encountered Hannibal with a compact body of troops, and in several places restored the battle. The Roman cavalry formed a bodyguard round him, but at last, as he became too weak to manage his horse, they all dismounted. It is stated that when some one reported to Hannibal that the consul had ordered his men to fight on foot, he remarked, "I would rather he handed them over to me bound hand and foot." Now that the

victory of the enemy was no longer doubtful this struggle of the dismounted cavalry was such as might be expected when men preferred to die where they stood rather than flee, and the victors, furious at them for delaying the victory, butchered without mercy those whom they could not dislodge. They did, however, repulse a few survivors exhausted with their exertions and their wounds. All were at last scattered, and those who could regain their horses for flight. Cn. Lentulus, a military tribune, saw, as he rode by, the consul covered with blood sitting on a boulder. "Lucius Aemilius," he said, "the one man whom the gods must hold guiltless of this day's disaster, take this horse while you have still some strength left, and I can lift you into the saddle and keep by your side to protect you. Do not make this day of battle still more fatal by a consul's death, there are enough tears and mourning without that." The consul replied: "Long may you live to do brave deeds, Cornelius, but do not waste in useless pity the few moments left in which to escape from the hands of the enemy. Go, announce publicly to the senate that they must fortify Rome and make its defence strong before the victorious enemy approaches, and tell Q. Fabius privately that I have ever remembered his precepts in life and in death. Suffer me to breathe my last among my slaughtered soldiers, let me not have to defend myself again when I am no longer consul, or appear as the accuser of my colleague and protect my own innocence by throwing the guilt on another." During this conversation a crowd of fugitives came suddenly upon them, followed by the enemy, who, not knowing who the consul was, overwhelmed him with a shower of missiles. Lentulus escaped on horseback in the rush. Then there was flight in all directions; 7000 men escaped to the smaller camp, 10,000 to the larger, and about 2000 to the village of Cannae. These latter were at once surrounded by Carthalo and his cavalry, as the village was quite unfortified. The other consul, who either by accident or design had not joined any of these bodies of fugitives, escaped with about fifty cavalry to Venusia; 45,500 infantry, 2700 cavalry - almost an equal proportion of Romans and allies - are said to have been killed. Amongst the number were both the quaestors attached to the consuls, L. Atilius and L. Furius Bibulcus, twenty-nine military tribunes, several ex-consuls, ex-praetors, and ex-aediles (amongst them are included Cn. Servilius Geminus and M. Minucius, who was Master of the Horse the previous year and, some years before that, consul), and in addition to these, eighty men who had either been senators or filled offices qualifying them for election to the senate and who had volunteered for service with the legions. The prisoners taken in the battle are stated to have amounted to 3000 infantry and 1500 cavalry.

[22.50]Such was the battle of Cannae, a battle as famous as the disastrous one at the Allia; not so serious in its results, owing to the inaction of the enemy, but more serious and more horrible in view of the slaughter of the army. For the flight at the Allia saved the army though it lost the City, whereas at Cannae hardly fifty men shared the consul's flight, nearly the whole army met their death in company with the other consul. As those who had taken refuge in the two camps were only a defenceless crowd without any leaders, the men in the larger camp sent a message to the others asking them to cross over to them at night when the enemy, tired after the battle and the feasting in honour of their victory, would be buried in sleep. Then they would go in one body to Canusium. Some rejected the proposal with scorn. "Why," they asked, "cannot those who sent the message come themselves, since they are quite as able to join us as we to join them? Because, of course, all the country between us is scoured by the enemy and they prefer to expose other people to that deadly peril rather than themselves." Others did not disapprove of the proposal, but they lacked courage to carry it out. P. Sempronius Tuditanus protested against this cowardice. "Would you," he asked, "rather be taken prisoners by a most avaricious and ruthless foe and a price put upon your heads and your value assessed after you have been asked whether you are a Roman citizen or a Latin ally, in order that another may win honour from your misery and disgrace? Certainly not, if you are really the fellow-countrymen of L. Aemilius, who chose a noble death rather than a life of degradation, and of all the brave men who are lying in heaps around him. But, before daylight overtakes us and the enemy gathers in larger force to bar our path, let us cut our way through the men who in disorder and confusion are clamouring at our gates. Good swords and brave hearts make a way through enemies,

however densely they are massed. If you march shoulder to shoulder you will scatter this loose and disorganised force as easily as if nothing opposed you. Come then with me, all you who want to preserve yourselves and the State." With these words he drew his sword, and with his men in close formation marched through the very midst of the enemy. When the Numidians hurled their javelins on the right, the unprotected side, they transferred their shields to their right arms, and so got clear away to the larger camp As many as 600 escaped on this occasion, and after another large body had joined them they at once left the camp and came through safely to Canusium. This action on the part of defeated men was due to the impulse of natural courage or of accident rather than to any concerted plan of their own or any one's generalship.

[22.51]Hannibal's officers all surrounded him and congratulated him on his victory, and urged that after such a magnificent success he should allow himself and his exhausted men to rest for the remainder of the day and the following night. Maharbal, however, the commandant of the cavalry, thought that they ought not to lose a moment. "That you may know," he said to Hannibal, "what has been gained by this battle I prophesy that in five days you will be feasting as victor in the Capitol. Follow me; I will go in advance with the cavalry; they will know that you are come before they know that you are coming." To Hannibal the victory seemed too great and too joyous for him to realise all at once. He told Maharbal that he commended his zeal, but he needed time to think out his plans. Maharbal replied: "The gods have not given all their gifts to one man. You know how to win victory, Hannibal, you do not how to use it." **That day's delay is believed to have saved the City and the empire.** The next day, as soon as it grew light, they set about gathering the spoils on the field and viewing the carnage, which was a ghastly sight even for an enemy. There all those thousands of Romans were lying, infantry and cavalry indiscriminately as chance had brought them together in the battle or the flight. Some covered with blood raised themselves from amongst the dead around them, tortured by their wounds which were nipped by the cold of the morning, and were promptly put an end to by the enemy. Some they found lying with their thighs and knees gashed but still alive; these bared their throats and necks and bade them drain what blood they still had left. Some were discovered with their heads buried in the earth, they had evidently suffocated themselves by making holes in the ground and heaping the soil over their faces. What attracted the attention of all was a Numidian who was dragged alive from under a dead Roman lying across him; his ears and nose were torn, for the Roman with hands too powerless to grasp his weapon had, in his mad rage, torn his enemy with his teeth, and while doing so expired.

