

Amazed am I here I made Zama

An analysis of Hannibal's last battle by Patrick Waterson

Slingshot 262, Jan 2009

The title palindrome is rather like the standard reconstruction of Hannibal's intentions for the battle of Zama. It looks neat but something is missing.

We are generally told that Hannibal deliberately sought battle knowing himself to be inferior in cavalry, collected a disputed number of elephants for reasons that are not wholly clear, brilliantly threw away half his infantry and then brilliantly failed to achieve success with the other half.

Hannibal would seem to deserve a dunce's cap for his planning and showing in this battle rather than approbation as a military genius.

Below is an account that seeks to shed some light on the mystery of what Hannibal planned for Zama. The primary source throughout is Polybius (mainly Book XV, reverting on occasion to Book I) – Livy's version of the battle is too confused and irrational to be of value for this exercise.

Hannibal knew that the situation he faced had been duplicated – or nearly so – in a previous Punic War (Polybius I.32-34). The year was 255 BC. The Roman army under Regulus had defeated the Carthaginian army in Africa, commanded by Hasdrubal, Hanno and Bostar at a battle near the city of Adys, and was ranging freely from its base at Tunis while a Numidian invasion was causing further concern. Back then, the problem had not been bad troops, it had been bad leadership. In the most recent battle, the Carthaginian mercenaries had, perhaps surprisingly, “delivered a gallant and vigorous charge, and forced the first legion to give ground and take to flight” (Polybius I.30) before being surrounded and cut up by the second legion because the cavalry and elephants were unable to support them.

The situation had been remedied, in the best Mediterranean tradition, by the appointment of a Spartan general. Arriving with a contingent of mercenaries from



Greece (possibly not the best of mercenaries, as they seem to have been the ones routed by the Romans in the subsequent battle) came Xanthippus, an officer who quickly came to the notice of the desperate city authorities. Xanthippus was placed in charge of the Carthaginian army for the forthcoming battle, and we should pay careful attention to his preparations, for they do seem to explain what Hannibal was intending to replicate in 202 BC.

Xanthippus, according to Polybius, displayed his "... decisive manner of leading out the army, drawing it up in regular formation in front of the city, manoeuvring the various detachments and giving his commands in the correct military terms, stood out in striking contrast to the ineptness of his predecessors." He advanced against Regulus' 15,000 foot and 500 horse with 12,000 foot, 4,000 horse and "nearly 100" elephants. The foot consisted mainly of "a phalanx of Carthaginian citizens" with some mercenaries, evidently those who had arrived with Xanthippus. There were placed behind an almost solid phalanx of elephants, which drew up shoulder-to-shoulder ahead of the Carthaginian troops. There were insufficient elephants to cover the entire Carthaginian infantry front, so the mercenaries were left unscreened. Xanthippus placed his cavalry "in advance of both wings," supported by the 'most mobile' mercenaries (evidently acting as *hamippoi*, infantry who accompanied cavalry into battle). This suggests that the mercenaries were either all peltasts or a mixture of hoplite and peltast/psiloi types.

Regulus' army "moved forward eagerly to meet them". Polybius says (IX.33) that "... alarmed by the prospect of a charge by the elephants, ... they stationed the velites in the front line; behind them were drawn up the legionaries in a formation many maniples deep, and the cavalry were divided between the wings." The 250 or so cavalry covering each flank may have been expected to do more than they were capable of, because Polybius adds: "*This order of battle was well enough designed as a defence against the elephants,*" perhaps a surprising assertion for those who believe that depth simply invites extra casualties from the pachyderms, "*but it failed to take*

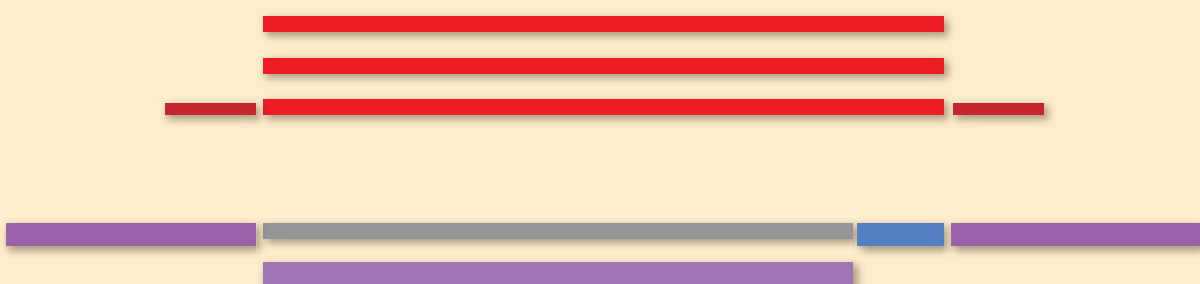
sufficient account of the Carthaginian cavalry, which far outnumbered their own."

This superiority in cavalry was one of Xanthippus' cornerstones for winning the battle. The other was the use of elephants, and in this he went against standard Hellenistic practice. What we know of Hellenistic practice (at Ipsus, Raphia and elsewhere) was for the elephants to be assigned supporting light troops and deployed on the wings, usually covering the juncture between infantry and cavalry, the better to intimidate enemy cavalry and overlap (and perhaps close in against) the vulnerable flanks of phalanxes. Intervals between individual elephants were often extensive, generally in the range 10-50 yards. Xanthippus appears to have deployed his elephants shoulder to shoulder, without supporting light troops, and against the enemy infantry only.

Given that Regulus began with around 15,000 total infantry, less any losses in the engagement mentioned previously, this indicates a standard consular two-legion army with allies. He deployed his men "*many maniples deep,*" which implies that he deployed six maniples deep rather than the usual three. The Roman legion contained 30 maniples in what would later become ten cohorts. Given that Regulus would begin with 120 notional maniples (two legions plus two allied legions), six maniples deep implies 20 maniples wide. Regulus' maniples would have been at about 70-75% strength and thus (assuming he kept the usual depth) occupying 70-75% of their usual 30' per century, 60' per manipule frontage, hence working out at 42'-45' per manipule. At 20 maniples wide, this would give him a 900' frontage (1,200' had his units been at full strength). If Regulus accepted less ranks per manipule, he could have preserved his notional 1,200' frontage. 2,000 of his 15,000 or so men overlapped the elephants, so the elephants faced perhaps 13/15 of his infantry frontage. 13/15 of 900' is 780', or just over 7.8' per African forest elephant (Xanthippus had 'nearly 100' of the beasts), which we can take to equate to 8' per animal – it would be hard to pack them closer than that. (If Regulus had a 1,200' frontage, 13/15 of this is 1,040', equating to about 10'6" per animal. I leave it to the

Deployment at Bagradas

Roman infantry ■
 Roman cavalry ■
 Carthaginian elephants ■
 Carthaginian phalanx ■
 Mercenaries ■
 Carthaginian cavalry ■



reader to decide which he considers more suitable.) This calculation assumes, naturally, that the elephants were deployed in a single line.

As the battle began, the outnumbered Roman cavalry were quickly routed on both wings. Meanwhile Xanthippus opened the action against the infantry with his elephants and “... *the maniples in front fell back before the weight of the charge, were trampled underfoot and perished in heaps in the fighting, but the main body of the legionaries, because of its great depth, was able for a while to hold its formation unbroken.*” This is what apparently gave the Romans the momentum to push through between the elephants, accepting losses in transit (anyone who has watched the film ‘Return of the King’ will have seen the Rohirrim doing something very similar in the battle outside Minas Tirith), and then regrouping to face “*the Carthaginian phalanx of heavy infantry, which was completely fresh and in unbroken order,*” and cut the disordered legionaries to pieces. Two thousand legionaries on the Roman left, having no elephants opposite them, set upon the Greek mercenaries forming the right of the Carthaginian infantry line and routed them, showing the difference in effectiveness between an ordered Roman formation and a disordered (even if regrouping) one. The other 13,000 legionaries were encircled between the elephants and the Carthaginian cavalry and “*From this point the Romans came under terrible pressure from all sides. The greater number were trampled to death by the enormous weight of the elephants, while the rest were shot down in their ranks as they stood by the overwhelming numbers of the Carthaginian cavalry.*” Of the 13,000 only Regulus, and 500 men who had tried to retreat with him, were captured alive. The 2,000 who had routed the mercenaries escaped and made their way to the coast, returning to Italy.

We note the Carthaginian cavalry used their weapons as missiles and did not apparently undertake shock charges against the Roman infantry, which seems to have kept its order, or, to be more accurate, its ranks, to the last. This suggests, although it is never mentioned by Polybius (at least in the writer’s abbreviated Penguin version), that infantry surrounded by cavalry would turn to face them, which would explain why the Carthaginian cavalry used missiles rather than close-combat weapons. This preference for missiles was the case even at Adrianople in AD 378 (another ‘surround and destroy’ battle), where Ammianus Marcellinus (Book XXXI.13) tells us: “*Dust rose in such clouds as to hide the sky, which rang with frightful shouts. In consequence it was impossible to see the enemy’s missiles in flight and dodge them; all found their mark and dealt death on every side.*” Horsemen were apparently able to see well enough to mark their infantry targets, but not vice-versa, a possibly overlooked advantage possessed by the mounted trooper in the endemically dusty Mediterranean world. Polybius does not mention any activity by the accompanying *hamippoi*.

The carnage wreaked by the elephants is the principal feature of the battle: they appear to have trampled the Romans frontally, velites and all, without suffering

casualties (or at least any casualties worthy of Polybius’ note). Also of interest is the way the Carthaginian levies (the “phalanx of Carthaginian citizens”) were able to defeat the Roman infantry who managed to push through between the elephants. This performance was not matched by the Greek mercenaries on the right wing, who had to deal with undisrupted legionaries (or, considering their wing position, undisrupted *socii*, i.e. Italian allies) and suffered accordingly.

The noteworthy features of the battle are: deep Roman deployment, vastly superior Carthaginian cavalry, the use of large numbers of elephants on a very narrow frontage as shock weapons, the effectiveness of Carthaginian citizen levies in unbroken formation against disrupted legionaries, and the effectiveness of legionaries not disrupted by elephants. We might also remember the successful “gallant and vigorous charge” of the mercenaries at Adys, even though they were no longer around at the Bagradas.

Now we scroll forward to 202 BC (Polybius, Book XV) and see Hannibal making his preparations. Scipio, basing himself on Tunis, is ranging freely across the landscape of Africa. Hannibal, “weak in the cavalry arm,” enlisted “the best cavalry in Africa”, 2,000 Numidians under Tychaeus, to supplement his own. He then, in his own time, moved to Zama, from whence he despatched three spies to scout out the location and composition of the Roman forces. Scipio, famously, having captured these men, allowed them to go where they liked in the camp and take note of what they saw. He knew that what they would see was an absence of Numidians, thus giving Hannibal the misleading impression that he was superior in cavalry. (Scipio, too, knew his First Punic War history and seems to have had a very good idea of what was going through Hannibal’s mind, as will be apparent.) The day after the spies returned to Hannibal, Masinissa brought his Numidians into camp. Scipio now had, unbeknown to Hannibal, a decisive superiority in cavalry.

Shortly after came the famous interview between the two commanders (Polybius XV.6-8). The significance of this lies not in the platitudes exchanged between the famous commanders, but the fact that Scipio occupied Hannibal’s attention sufficiently to prevent him discovering that the Numidians arrived (Hannibal’s interest had evidently been piqued by Scipio’s treatment of his spies, and the interview seems to have been Hannibal’s way of assessing whether Scipio was a man of unbridled vanity or deep design). Scipio successfully adopted a ‘Regulus act’ (apparent vanity and intransigence) to fool Hannibal into trying to repeat history. And repeating history was exactly what Hannibal intended to do, but with refinements.

The Carthaginian commander had not been able to muster “nearly 100” elephants, but he did have “over eighty,” and these would have to do. Mindful of the fact that 2,000 of Regulus’ legionaries had been ‘missed’ by Xanthippus’ deployment, Hannibal arranged his lesser number of elephants to cover the whole of Scipio’s more extensive infantry line, with one elephant every ten yards rather than one every ten feet. This, although very Hellenistic-

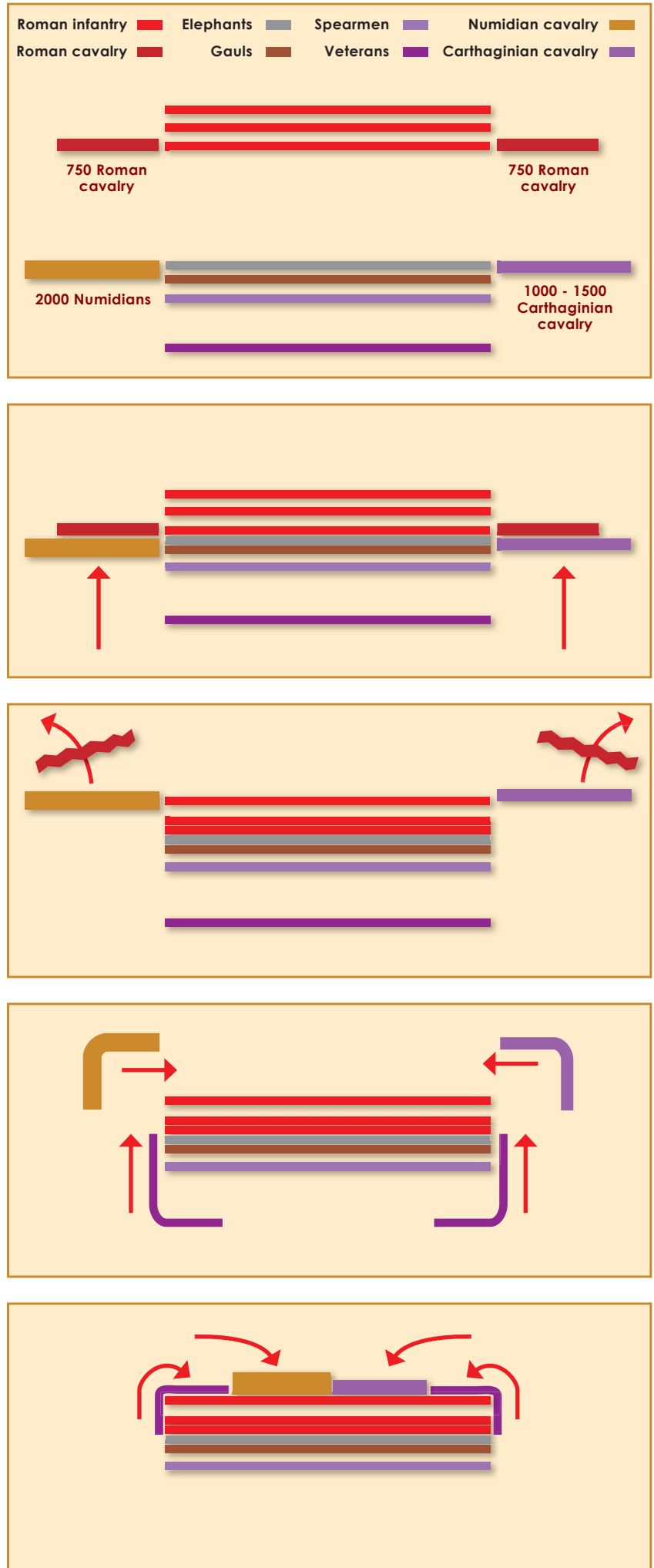
looking, was to prove fatal to Hannibal's scheme, as it allowed Scipio to create 'elephant lanes', a measure which would have been ineffectual had the elephants been grouped as closely as Xanthippus' with no room to divert laterally. (He might have been better off using his elephants Hellenistic-style, covering the junction between infantry and cavalry, as at Trebbia.) But Hannibal thought he had a way to compensate for the looser elephant density he was forced to use to cover the whole of Scipio's infantry frontage.

Possibly remembering the "gallant and victorious charge" of the mercenaries at the battle near Adys, and knowing from his own battles the initial impact on Roman soldiery of enthusiastic Celts, he mustered his Gauls and Ligurians in the front line with the army's skirmishers, probably intending to have the impact of their charge 'force the Romans to give ground and take to flight', or at least to bring about sufficient disruption for the Carthaginian levies to 'cut up' the disordered legionaries in the manner of their forebears at Bagradas in 255 BC. It would make sense to assume that the Celts were ordered to pour into the 'elephant lanes' while the Carthaginian spearmen came up behind them and took on the leading centuries frontally: this would go as long way to explaining why the mercenaries became so annoyed when the Carthaginians failed to 'support' them, and how, when the mercenaries fell back, the Carthaginian second line was fighting them and the Roman *hastati* simultaneously. The *prior* and *posterior* centuries of the *hastati* would by then not have been in a line, but in a staggered chequerboard with Celts filling the gaps, and as they pushed the Celts back onto the spearmen, so the *prior* centuries would have fought the spearmen while the *posterior* centuries were still driving frustrated Celts onto the Carthaginian line.

In Hannibal's plan, it seems, the elephants would smash into the *prior* centuries of *hastati* while the Celts poured into the gaps between them before the *posterior* centuries could move out to assume their position in line. Meanwhile, the Carthaginian spearmen, following closely behind the Celts, just as Xanthippus' Carthaginian spearmen had followed their elephants into action, would tumble back the disordered *prior* centuries into the *posterior* centuries and drive back the whole line of *hastati*, necessitating commitment of the *principes* in support to stabilise the action. Hannibal's 'superior' cavalry, better in both quality and numbers than Scipio's, would clear their opponents from the flanks and, when able, close in from behind. And his veterans would deliver the coup de grace.

To deliver this, the obvious method would be to form a column on each flank, as at Cannae, and

Hannibal's battle plan



crush the Romans inward by lapping round flank and rear. To wait for one's own forward lines to disintegrate before committing the veterans to a decisive move not only looks wasteful and irresolute, even stupid, but would unduly hearten the Romans and give them precious time to reorganise before the final clash. And yet this hesitant and apparently indecisive commitment is exactly what happened. Why? Because Scipio's little bit of misdirection before the battle meant that things did not go according to Hannibal's plan.

The veterans themselves had served with Hannibal in Italy for many years: they knew him and he knew them. He had also, as Polybius (XVIII.28) relates, *"...as soon as he had won his first battle discarded the equipment* with which he had started out, armed his troops with Roman weapons*, and continued to use these till the end of the war."* As his Italian allies had also been using Roman weapons and formations for the better part of at least two generations (c.270-220 BC), it made sense for Hannibal to retrain his original troops to fight using the Roman system or a slightly more evolved cohort-based variant of it. This would have optimised the military value of his Italian allies, who would have been able to use their training and equipment exactly as they were accustomed, playing *socii* to Hannibal's African (and surviving Spanish) *legionarii*. Hannibal's third line (of veterans) would thus have deployed almost indistinguishably from a Roman army, and used similar tactics. As (Polybius XV.14) this line matched Scipio's entire committed infantry force *"...not only in numbers, but also in courage, in warlike spirit and in weapons*,"* Hannibal may well have been entitled to think – if the thought occurred to him - that he could afford to throw away his first two lines just to soften up

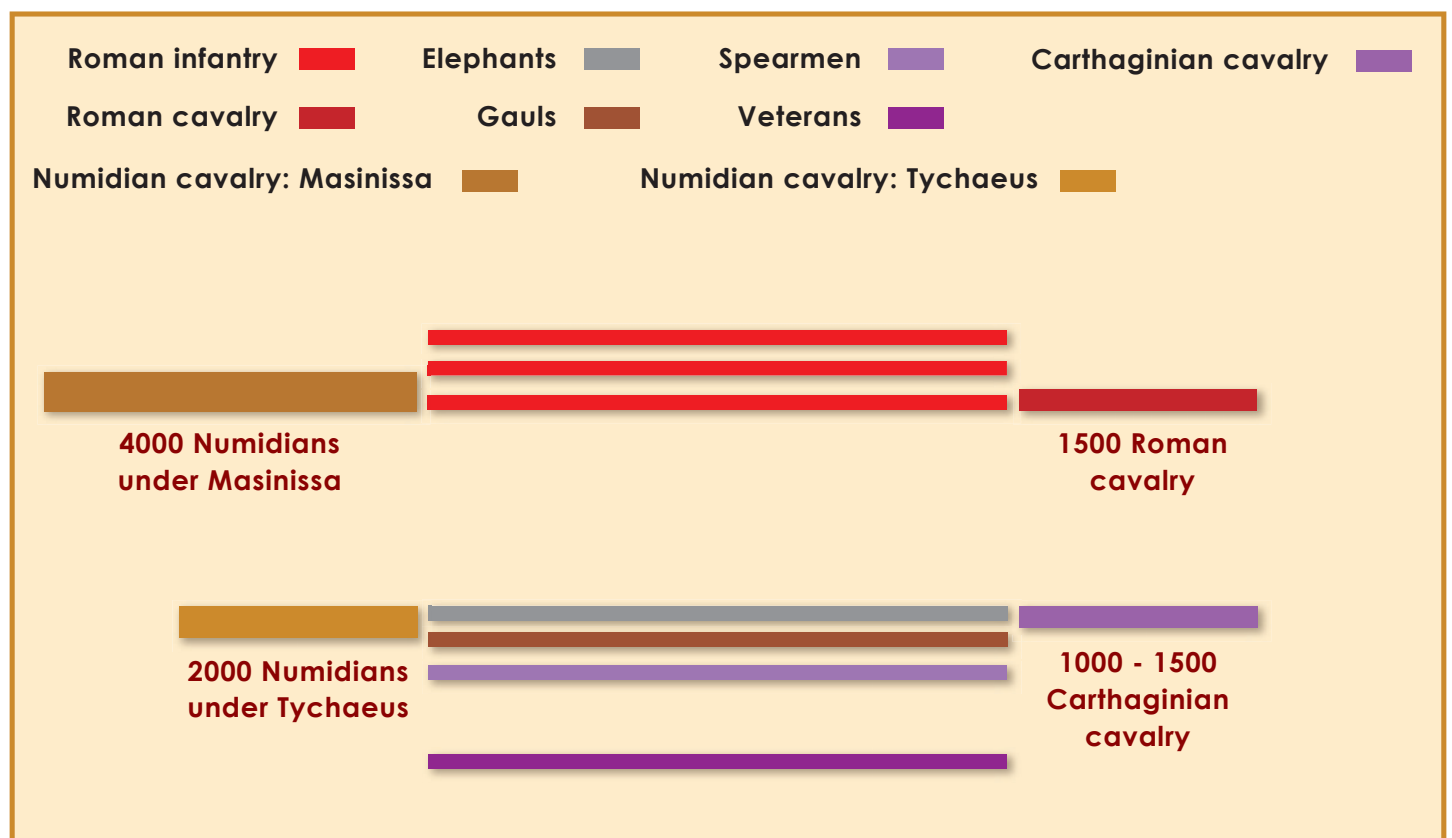
the Romans. If however this was really the sum of his plan, then he had degenerated from a great Hellenistic general to an indifferent Ottoman one. Instinct suggests there was more to the matter than this, and further that he had planned some decisive stroke with his veterans, a stroke that was seriously compromised by Scipio's winning the cavalry battle.

All depended upon winning the cavalry battle. If Scipio really had around 1,500 Roman and Italian cavalry, then Hannibal, with 2,000 Numidians (the *crème de la crème* of Numidia) and at least 1,000 (and perhaps even 1,500) Carthaginian cavalry, undoubtedly felt that the all-important cavalry fight would go his way at Zama just as much as at Cannae (or as for Xanthippus at Bagradas back in 255 BC). Hannibal, having received his spies' report and wondering whether Scipio's open display of his assets was vanity or deep craft (and having arranged an interview to find out which), remained convinced that Scipio had the vanity of a Regulus and could be induced to bring an inferior Roman force to fight a battle of Hannibal's choosing.

When Hannibal began the battle, it must have been obvious to him that he had been tricked: the Roman cavalry was not split between two wings, but grouped on one, and on the other Masinissa's numerous Numidians were in view. It was too late to change plans, or to retire, so Hannibal appears to have gone ahead with his plan – or, as we shall see, a hasty modification of it - and hoped for the best.

"The two contingents of Numidian horse had both been skirmishing for some while, and it was then that Hannibal ordered the drivers of his elephants to charge the enemy."

**The implication here is that Hannibal definitely adopted the Roman military system. Common sense should tell the reader that using the pilum and gladius with a hoplite-based system simply would not work.*



This suggests Hannibal was near the front of his army when he gave this order. He would thus be aware of the presence of Masinissa's cavalry and the fact that, far from being superior in cavalry, he would be fortunate to draw the cavalry actions on both wings. Possibly at this point he sent back frantic orders for the veterans to cancel, or at least postpone, the intended flanking manoeuvre. If they moved out with the cavalry action still in doubt, they would get in the way of friendly cavalry and not only cause, but also suffer from, a Carthaginian cavalry rout.

So Hannibal ordered the first part of his plan into action, perhaps assuming that the initial impact of the elephants and Celts would shake the Roman infantry and unsettle their cavalry. Or perhaps even now he was contemplating replacing the veterans' outflanking move with a delayed advance once the Celts and spearmen had weakened the Romans for him.

It started well. The elephants charged and killed many velites, but then it all began to go wrong. Scipio, too, had done his homework on Bagradas (having recently fought a successful battle of his own on the same site, he could not fail to be reminded of its history) and divined Hannibal's intentions and, just as importantly, capabilities. Scipio's pachyderm prophylactics eschewed Regulus' deep formation in favour of intimidating noise by every trumpet in the Roman army and – the trick made possible by Hannibal's enforced dispersion of elephants to cover the frontage – elephant lanes between his maniples. A maniple covered about 30 feet of frontage: the gap between one maniple and its neighbour was about 30 feet. Hannibal deployed his elephants at about 30-foot intervals. The arithmetic fits neatly: every 60 feet of frontage contained on one side two elephants and on the other 30 feet of solid formation and 30 feet of elephant freeway, just convenient to allow two elephants to pass through, assuming they could be persuaded not to have other plans. Any other plans they may have had were interrupted when “...the sound of trumpets and bugles pierced the air all around them, some animals panicked, turned tail and stampeded to the rear, colliding with the squadrons of Numidian cavalry which had come up to support the Carthaginians.” (Despite appearances, this does not suggest that some elephants were deployed facing Masinissa's cavalry, because “the two opposing contingents of Numidian horse had been skirmishing for a while” before Hannibal ordered his elephants to charge. As the elephants, which had not moved since the lines had drawn up, would have had to charge through Hannibal's own Numidian contingent, such a deployment would have resulted in a conscious ‘own goal’.)

Masinissa acted with the instinct of the true cavalry leader and charged while Tychoaeus' horsemen were still dodging out-of-control elephants. His 4,000 cavalry swept Tychoaeus' inferior numbers off the field, and spent some time dealing with them ‘off-table’. But this action would not have immediately left the Carthaginian flank bare, merely exposed. A bare flank, vacant of quadrupeds of any description, would have allowed Hannibal to march out a flanking column of veterans without further ado.

An exposed flank, with rogue elephants and possibly detached groups of cavalry running around in the noise and dust, was a different proposition. If Hannibal did intend a Cannae-style double envelopment with his veterans, it must have been about now that he decided against executing the plan. He would have moved back to his veterans, tried to communicate their new orders, and waited. In doing so, he would have had to pass through the spearmen of his second line. They may have wondered what their commander was doing, and what they themselves were supposed to do.

On the other wing, panicked elephants began running loose, but against the Roman cavalry. These, however, kept both their heads and their formation, and the elephants “...were met with volleys of javelins from the cavalry, and in the end stampeded clean off the battlefield. It was at this moment that Laelius, taking advantage of the confusion caused by the elephants, launched a charge against the Carthaginian cavalry, drove them back in headlong flight and pressed the pursuit ...” which suggests that Laelius may not have felt confident enough to try conclusions with the Carthaginian cavalry before they were thrown into confusion. If so, this would indicate that Laelius had little if any numerical, and no qualitative, superiority over his foes.

Both cavalry wings now presented a similar picture: disordered Carthaginian cavalry streaming off the field pursued closely by enthusiastic opponents and possibly still mingled with the odd stray elephant. Laelius' and Masinissa's cavalry followed their respective leaders *en bloc* and are not heard of again until near the end of the battle. However, the action on the cavalry wings took some minutes to the accompaniment of much dust, shouting and earthquake-like thundering of thousands of hooves, all of which conveyed to the Carthaginian infantry that things had not gone according to plan while at the same time making almost impossible the reception of voice-conveyed orders. This does much to explain the hesitancy of the Carthaginian second line, which “shrank back in cowardly fashion and failed to support the mercenaries.” It is fashionable among wargame designers to rate the Carthaginian levies as troops of a very poor type and category on account of this hesitancy, but such disparagement fails to explain how when they did engage, they “defended themselves with desperate courage and killed a great number both of the mercenaries and of the enemy.” They “even threw some of the maniples of *hastati* into confusion,” requiring action by the “officers of the *principes*” that “held their own ranks firm,” which indicates that the Carthaginian levies, able to drive the *hastati* back upon their supports even while engaged with bands of furious Celts, were not poor troops.

But we digress. Returning to the elephants' opening charge, if Hannibal had intended his Celtic mercenaries to act as surrogate elephants then he had underestimated the effect of Mago's training, because instead of following the pachyderms in a furiously howling Celtic charge, the mercenaries advanced “at a slow and resolute pace” while the elephants were crushing *velites* and being serenaded

by Scipio's trumpeters. Or perhaps they, too, were waiting to see which way the elephants, most of which opted for departure via Scipio's elephant lanes, would run. In any event, despite not being able to follow the elephants closely in (if that had been the plan), their initial impact was still effective. *"The whole battle then became a hand-to-hand struggle of man against man. In this contest the courage and skill of the mercenaries at first gave them the advantage and they succeeded in wounding great numbers of the Romans."* And it appears that they were able to insert themselves between the leading centuries of the *hastati*, just as Hannibal seems to have intended.

The Romans, however, had two advantages: *"...the steadiness of their ranks and the superiority of their weapons*,"* which *"enabled Scipio's men to make their adversaries give ground."* The Romans weathered the passage of elephants and the impact of the Celts, and then bounced back, pressing back the mercenaries in an irregular pattern, the *prior* centuries pushing through their line and the *posterior* centuries attempting to plug the Celt-filled intervals. This was exactly what the Carthaginian spearmen were supposed to move up and deal with, but these gentlemen, unsure what the outcome of the cavalry action portended, and almost certainly unsure of their orders in the new situation, dallied instead of moving up to deal with the Roman centuries emerging through the mercenary line. This caused the unsupported surviving clumps of mercenaries to drift back and, aggrieved to a degree to which Celts seem particularly prone, try to hack their way out through their paymasters' apparently duplicitous citizen soldiery. This patchwork distribution of opponents, with the *prior* centuries advancing and the intervals between them full of Celts being pushed back by the *posterior* centuries, is how the Carthaginian spearmen ended up fighting *"both the barbarians and the Romans at the same time."* It also seems to confirm that Hannibal assumed that odd centuries would appear through the mercenary line and that it was the task of the spearmen to 'cut up' any such units as had their predecessors at Bagradas in 255 BC.

Now, caught without a plan (and the sheer noise of the rampaging elephants and fleeing and pursuing cavalry may have prevented Hannibal from communicating any change of plan, or possibly, he failed to see the need for confirming their part in the old one), the Carthaginian spearmen fought for their lives, and *"killed a great number both of the mercenaries and the enemy."* They threw some of the *hastati* into confusion (almost certainly the centuries that contacted them directly rather than those which were engaged in finishing off the mercenaries), *"but as soon as the officers of the principes saw what was happening, they held their own ranks firm,"* which suggests, as they *"kept close behind their comrades and*

cheered them on" that some of the *hastati* were actually pushed back onto the *principes*. Hannibal's original plan, despite Scipio's drawing the sting of the elephantry and throwing a metaphorical spanner into the works of the infantry combination, had worked to that extent. The Carthaginian spearmen maintained their struggle against both the Romans and their own mercenaries until *"most of the mercenaries and the Carthaginians were cut down where they stood, either by their own side or by the hastati."* This voluntary combat persistence despite the puzzling inactivity of Hannibal's veterans, the Carthaginians' "sure foundation for victory," indicates good morale and troop quality on the part of the levies, not the standard categorisation as hopeless also-rans.

Eventually, though, run the survivors did, and *"Hannibal then barred [them] from entering the ranks of his veterans; he ordered his rear ranks to level their spears** and hold the men off when they approached, and they were obliged to take refuge on the wings or in the open country."*

The cavalry and stray elephants were by now long gone, but still Hannibal, who had evidently stationed himself with his veterans, had made no move with them. The obvious time to execute a battle-winning move with Hannibal's best troops would have been while the Romans were engaged to their front with the *hastati*, while the rear ranks of the Romans "kept close behind their comrades and cheered them on," and hence would have had a difficult scramble to redeploy against outflankers. What was Hannibal thinking? We can only conjecture, but looming large in his mind was undoubtedly the eventual return of Scipio's cavalry, which would have meant disaster to spaced-out flanking formations. If he had originally intended a Cannae-style encirclement, he by now seems to have definitely changed his mind and opted for a straight slugging match with his best troops against Scipio's, presumably with his own rear ranks briefed to watch for and turn to face the Roman cavalry when it arrived. It was a compromise, and like most compromises, it failed in both its principal aims. Victory required a decisive stroke, even at some risk, and at this critical time Hannibal seems to have been critically indecisive. Unable to see how far Scipio's cavalry had pursued (all he would have been able to see would have been horizon-to-horizon dust, with indeterminate equine thundering at an unspecified distance), he must have assumed the worst and waited for a threat that did not materialise.

In any event, with the mercenaries and Carthaginian spearmen no longer in the fight, except for a few reassembling on the wings of his veterans, Hannibal now waited for the Romans to disorder themselves crossing the corpse-strewn field; Scipio took advantage of the interval to remove his wounded, sound trumpets to recall the pursuing *hastati*, and rearrange his lines, putting everything

*Not just their weaponry, but their military system.

**The expression Polybius uses is '*probalesthai*' (from '*proballo*', basic meaning: to throw or toss). This word has various additional meanings, but 'level spears', which is one of the variants, would be: '*probalesthai ta hopla*'. Polybius lacks '*ta hopla*', which suggests instead the original sense of preparing to hurl missiles, e.g. *pila*, rather than levelling spears. cf. Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon, entry '*proballo*'.

in the 'shop window'. "...he regrouped the **hastati** in the forefront of the ground where the battle had just been fought, and opposite the enemy's centre, and ordered the **principes** and **triarii** to deploy and, picking their way over the dead, to take up positions in close order on both the wings and in line with the **hastati**." There were evidently few unwounded *hastati* left: originally, they alone had matched the Carthaginian frontage; now, with the addition of both remaining lines of Roman infantry (Polybius says nothing of Masinissa's Numidian foot, which may have been left to guard the camp; at any rate, it is not mentioned as participating in any way), Scipio's line matched that of Hannibal's veterans with the surviving mercenaries and levies (who by now had presumably ceased fighting each other) on their wings. Scipio had cleared the major battlefield obstacle in his way by assembling his troops on the far side of the layer of corpses: Hannibal had supinely let him do it. Was Hannibal really still confident of victory at this stage, or did he see himself as playing out the last act of a foredoomed event? At any event, the inaction he displayed throughout the battle, starting from when his plan first went astray, was still with him.

Scipio's deployment of the *triarii* on his wings, where these veteran troops would be expected to encounter the already-defeated survivors of the Celtic mercenaries and Carthaginian citizen-spearmen, suggests he may have hoped to rout them in short order and roll up Hannibal's flanks. That the *triarii* were unable in an extended fight to make any apparent headway against these troops indicates that either Hannibal somehow stiffened them or they were much better than commentators and wargame designers assume.

Now began the final act, as "... the two main bodies hurled themselves upon one another with the greatest ardour and fury. Since they were equally matched not only in numbers but also in courage, in warlike spirit and in weapons, the issue hung for a long while in the balance." Time is often relative on a battlefield, but if the action was as protracted as Polybius suggests, it indicates that Hannibal had made a tremendous miscalculation in not sending his veterans round the Roman flanks while the mercenaries and levies were still fighting. He had the opportunity for such a manoeuvre once the cavalry and remaining elephants left the field, and the protracted fight between his veterans and Scipio's infantry shows that he would have had plenty of time before Scipio's cavalry returned. As it was, Polybius says (XV.14) that the Roman (and Numidian) cavalry "*arrived by a stroke of fortune at the crucial moment.*" [**anakamptontes daimonios eis deonta kairon sunepsan**] Reading between the lines, if the moment was crucial (Polybius' literal meaning is along the lines of 'heaven-bound by fortune'), how could it have differed from all the other moments in this "long while in the balance" struggle - unless Scipio's troops were starting to fold? Polybius, a guest and friend of Scipio's family, stops short of saying the Roman infantry were beginning to collapse, but if Hannibal's troops had finally gained the upper hand (and effectively won the infantry action) when Scipio's cavalry "*arrived by a stroke of fortune at the*

crucial moment," this would explain the praise lavished on the Carthaginian commander by Polybius (XV.16):

"Nevertheless in countering each of these advantages on the Roman side and applying at the critical moment every resource that could reasonably be expected to succeed, Hannibal displayed a skill that could scarcely have been surpassed."

Polybius goes on to say that Hannibal, using his Celts to blunt the Roman swords and his levies (to whom he attributes a certain reluctance for combat, a judgement that seems to have coloured the thinking of many subsequent analysts – as we have seen, the sudden unexpected departure of the friendly cavalry may explain this apparent reluctance) to exhaust his foes further, "*kept the most warlike and the steadiest of his fighting troops at some distance in the rear,*" acting as spectators until "*he could draw upon their martial qualities at the critical moment.*" Polybius' writing sounds like an encomium on a successful plan, rather than a postscript to a lacklustre performance, and reinforces the supposition that Scipio's infantry were breaking and starting to run when his cavalry arrived "at the crucial moment" to pull their chestnuts out of the fire.

In conclusion, it would seem that Hannibal really did seem to do his utmost with the troops he had, and really did deserve the praise of his enemies. But what if he had marched his veterans around the Roman flanks while the struggle between the *hastati* and the Carthaginian spearmen was still in progress, while the *principes* were having to be 'held firm' by their officers and Scipio's cavalry were a cloud of dust on the horizon? The Zama might well have been Hannibal's last, and greatest, victory.

Sources: Polybius, *The Histories*, Penguin Classics volume 'The Rise of the Roman Empire' ISBN 0-14-044362-2

Polybius online text, Perseus Project: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0234;query=chapter%3D%23776;layout=;loc=15.13>

Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon, available through the same site (and integrated with the Greek text version of Polybius – very handy!)

