



The Ancient World: Extraordinary People in Extraordinary Societies

Cannae, Battle of

Date: August 2, 216 BCE

Locale: Cannae, Italy

Related civilizations: Republican Rome, Carthage

Significance: Cannae was the largest defeat ever of an army of the Roman Empire.

Background: During the Second Punic War (218-201 BCE), Hannibal of Carthage led his North African and Spanish army through the Alps and attacked Italy. Cannae (KA-nee), located on the Adriatic coast south of Rome, was a major food and supply depot for the Roman army and was a vital logistical site for both armies.

Action: Some 68,000 infantry and 6,000 cavalry under the Roman leaders Lucius Aemilius Paullus and Gaius Terentius Varro attacked 25,000 infantry and 10,000 cavalry led by Hannibal. Placing his elite African infantry and cavalry on the ends of his defensive line, Hannibal successfully directed a double envelopment. The center soldiers yielded backward, and with strategic timing, the end/flank troops attacked forward, resulting in the Romans being nearly surrounded, compacted in on themselves, and slaughtered. Estimates of casualties are 60,000 Roman and 8,000 Carthaginian.

Consequences: News of the loss sent Rome into a panic and influenced military policy for the next several years. Cannae did not win the war for Carthage, but it kept the war going for several years. Rome's fear of the consequences of a divided command led to the appointment of Scipio Africanus as sole commander; he would eventually defeat Hannibal in 201 BCE.

See also: Aemilius Paullus, Lucius (10.3331/CWEP_0502); Carthage (10.3331/CWEP_0549); Hannibal (10.3331/CWEP_0625); Punic Wars (10.3331/CWEP_0726); Scipio Africanus (10.3331/CWEP_0748).

—Alan P. Peterson

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