



## **“BELLATOR EQUUS”. ROMAN REPUBLICAN CAVALRY TACTICS IN THE 3rd-2nd CENTURIES BC**

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### **Abstract**

*One of the most interesting periods in the history of the Roman cavalry were the Punic wars. Many historians believe that during these conflicts the ill fame of the Roman cavalry was founded but, as it can be observed it was not the determination that lacked. The main issue is the presence of the political factor who decided in the main battles of this conflict. The present paper has as aim to outline a few aspects of how the Roman mid-republican cavalry met these odds and how they tried to incline the balance in their favor.*

**Keywords:** Republic; cavalry; Hannibal; battle; tactics

The main role of a well performing cavalry is to disrupt an infantry formation and harm the enemy's cavalry units. From this perspective the Roman cavalry, especially the middle Republican one, performed well by employing tactics “if not uniquely Roman, were quite distinct from the normal tactics of many other ancient Mediterranean cavalry forces. The Roman predilection to shock actions against infantry may have been shared by some contemporary cavalry forces, but their preference for stationary hand-to-hand or dismounted combat against enemy cavalry was almost unique to them”.<sup>1</sup> The main problem is that there are no major sources concerning this period except for Polybius and Titus Livius. The first may come as more reliable for two reasons: he used first-hand information from the witnesses of the conflicts between 220-167 and “furthermore Polybius’ account is particularly valuable because he had served as hyparch in Achaëa and clearly had interest and aptitude in analyzing military affairs”<sup>2</sup>. Livy on the contrary seems less reliable because his sources were members of the aristocracy who

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah Mc Call, *The cavalry of the Roman republic*, Routledge, London-New York, 2002, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 54.

served as cavalry officers. Anyway, Polybius's descriptions, combined with archaeological evidence provide a clear image about the tactics employed by Roman republican cavalry. From this point of view two circumstances can be observed, following an example set by Keegan.<sup>3</sup> cavalry against infantry and cavalry against cavalry. As Mc Call stresses out: "these divisions are somewhat artificial and certainly overlap (...) we must not lose sight of the two fundamentally dynamics involved in all encounters. The morale of the forces involved predominantly determined victory or defeat in combat, and the Roman cavalry seem to have consistently preferred stationary close combat to any other order of fighting".<sup>4</sup>

In the first case: the role of the cavalry, and its effectiveness lies in its capacity to disrupt close infantry formations and to transform a well-organized unit into a band of individuals unable to protect themselves and their comrades. In this aspect the Roman republican cavalry performed rather well. During the many conflicts of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BC, Roman cavalry obtained a number of positive results either alone or (mostly) in a good cooperation with the infantry. Usually, the cavalry would obtain positive results in charging an infantry formation when foot soldiers would rather flee than to wait to be trampled by the horses. But in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries this seldom happened mostly because infantry units were trained to stand as one against cavalry charges and, secondarily the cavalry would never take a head on charge against closed order infantry, preferring flanking and rear attacks. Nevertheless, Polybius and Livy described such an exception when in 173 B.C. the Roman legions under the command of M. Popilius, in a battle against the Ligurians, charged and penetrated the center of the enemy battle line and came out on the rear of the Ligurian army<sup>5</sup>. If it is real it would be an extraordinary display of courage, but "the Roman infantry would have had withdrawn to a significant distance to allow the cavalry room to attack from the front (...).if there is a kernel of truth in this account it is probably that the cavalry worked in conjunction with the infantry to break the Ligurians by attacking their flanks and rear"<sup>6</sup>. Was the cavalry charge a story made up by Livy whose aristocratic roots were well known or it was an act of extraordinary valor? "Being young

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<sup>3</sup> John Keegan, *The face of battle*, Viking, New York, 1976, passim.

<sup>4</sup> J. Mc Call, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> "...pugnatum amplius tris est horas ita, ut neutro inclinaret spes. quod ubi consul uidit nulla parte moueri Ligurum signa, imperat equitibus, ut equos conscendant ac tribus simul partibus in hostis, quanto maximo possent tumultu, incurrant. pars magna equitum mediam traiecit aciem et ad terga pugnantium peruasit. inde terror iniectus Liguribus; diuersi in omnes partes fugerunt". Titus Livius, *Ab ube condita*, XLII,7 <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/livy/liv.42.shtml#7> (accessed 2020.02.29).

<sup>6</sup> J. Mc Call, *op. Cit.*, p. 56.

aristocrats, the *equites* were enthusiastic and brave, but better at making a headlong charge on the battlefield than patrolling or scouting. This was a reflection of the lack of a real cavalry tradition in Rome, as well as the fact that the *equites* included the sons of many senators, eager to make a name for courage and so help their future political careers. Before being eligible for political office in Rome a man had to have served for ten campaigns with the army”<sup>7</sup>. So, in this case (and Roman military history is full of such acts) we are dealing with a case of individual enterprise which did not act “by the book” instead by taking chances managed to change the outcome of the battle.

Usually Roman cavalry (and not only them) engaged infantry units when they were not in close battle formations. This, could appear in two circumstances: either the enemy infantry is not yet formed in a battle line, or – the worse scenario- the infantry is on retreat after losing a battle. Again, Livy is the one to give examples: In the first case in the year 207 BC the Roman cavalry managed to put the Carthaginian infantry on the run by attacking them when they while they were forming the battle line.<sup>8</sup> The cavalry charge was so successful that not even the intervention of Hannibal itself could save the retreat of the infantry.

Another case, in 195 BC, in Spain: although in the first phase of the battle the Roman cavalry was successful in driving the Spanish infantry out of the battlefield, in the second phase the cavalry charges were repulsed by the infantry who managed to get organized<sup>9</sup>. This stresses out the fact that cavalry tactics employed routing out enemy infantry by the sheer strength of the charge or, by pouring into the gaps left by a retreating and disorganized infantry. In the second case,

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<sup>7</sup> Nic Fields, *Lake Trasimene 217 BC. Ambush and annihilation of a Roman army*. Osprey Publishing, Oxford, 2017, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> *tribuno militum tertiae legionis C. Aurunculeio imperat ut equites legionis quanto maximo impetu possit in hostem emittat: ita pecorum modo incompositos toto passim se campo fudisse ut sterni obterique priusquam instruantur possint*. Titus Livius, *Ab ube condita*, XXVIII, 41,10. <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/livy/liv.42.shtml#7> (accessed 2020.02.29).

<sup>9</sup> *equites primos ab utroque cornu in pugnam induxit; sed in dextro extemplo pulsii cedentesque trepidi etiam pediti terrorem intulere. quod ubi consul uidit, duas cohortes delectas ab dextro latere hostium circumduci iubet et ab tergo se ostendere priusquam concurrerent peditem acies. is terror obiectus hosti rem metu Romanorum equitum inclinatum aequavit; tamen adeo turbati erant dextrae alae pedites equitesque ut quosdam consul manu ipse reppererit uerteritque in hostem. ita et quamdiu missilibus pugnatum est anceps pugna erat et iam ab dextra parte, unde terror et fuga coeperat, aegre Romanus restabat; ab sinistro cornu et a fronte urgebantur barbari et cohortes a tergo instantes pauidi respiciebant. ut emissis soliferis phalaricisque gladios strinxerunt, tum uelut redintegrata est pugna: non caecis ictibus procul ex improviso uolnerabantur, sed pede conlato tota in uirtute ac uiribus spes erat*. Titus Livius, *Ab ube condita*, XXXIV, 14,5-6. <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/livy/liv.42.shtml#7> (accessed 2020.02.29).

the cavalry forces went into action alone, without the supporting infantry.

The Romans soon learned, by their own bitter experience, or by learning from the Hellenistic generals, that cavalry alone can seldom break the enemy line (actually a battle from 222 B.C. against the Gaul and the one from 173 BC are singular examples) and it is better to combine infantry and cavalry if they wanted to obtain success on the battlefield. The infantry was meant to engage the center of the enemy infantry and if “the pressure of the infantry did not disrupt and disperse the enemy formations; the cavalry could deliver an additional blow against the flanks or rear of the enemy formation. The flank and rear attacks generated additional fear and disorder among the enemy often with devastating effect”<sup>10</sup>. Excellent examples are the battle from Telamon in 225 BC when, Roman cavalry after defeating the Gallic cavalry in hand to hand combat, charged down on a hill on the flank of Gallic infantry obliterating it. Likewise, at the battle of Zama in 202 when the Roman (and Numidian) cavalry after routing out Carthaginian (and also Numidian) cavalry from the battlefield, attacked Carthaginian infantry from the flank and rear. To mark the fact that Roman cavalry usually dispatched enemy infantry in hand to hand combat even though they had been equipped with missile weapons.

The same predilection for hand to hand combat is to be noticed in a second instance of cavalry tactics: cavalry against cavalry. To mark the fact that in some cases the custom of the Roman cavalry interoperability with the infantry could turn against the Romans as the battles of Trebia and Cannae demonstrate.

It is well known that fighting between cavalry forces is more fluid than between infantry, implying a lot of maneuvering, skirmishing, advance and retreat. Finding a superior position, engaging the enemy with missile weapons and fast retreat was the general tactics of the Greek/Hellenistic cavalry... but not for the Romans. They employed a stationary tactic, using hand to hand combat or even dismounted and fought as infantry. So: mobility and maneuvering versus position!

In a strange way the latter tactics seemed to work: bypassing the Gallic and Samnite infantry and cavalry, the first great challenge was represented by the campaigns of king Pyrrhus. “His was a Hellenistic style army, that is to say it was basically modeled on the model of Macedonian army of Alexander, with some developments. The *sarrisae*, or pikes of Hellenistic phalanxes were now even longer than in Alexander’s day, (...) rendering them more impervious than ever to cavalry frontal assault as long as they maintained good order

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<sup>10</sup> J. Mc Call, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

(...) On the flanks however, the Roman cavalry would face the famous Thessalian heavy cavalry and others modelled on Alexander’s Companions, commanded by the king himself<sup>11</sup>. To the great surprise of the Epirote king the Romans proved to be more disciplined than expected: “and when he (Pyrrhus-n. n.) had observed their discipline, the appointment of their watches, their order, and the general arrangement of their camp, he was amazed, and said to the friend that was nearest him: “The discipline of these Barbarians is not barbarous; but the result will show us what it amounts to”.<sup>12</sup> And the result showed that Roman cavalry not only repelled the much better trained and heavier equipped Thessalian and Companion cavalry but, began to gain ground. The Romans eventually were driven back only when Pyrrhus brought his war-elephants on the battlefield. Like Celtic chariots, elephants “created a temporary tactical advantage centered on shock and momentum. The exotic smell also terrified European horses”<sup>13</sup>. Next year at Asculum the battle lasted for two days and again the intervention of the elephants turned the tide in favor of the Epirote king. Only in 275 BC he was defeated “and sent packing”<sup>14</sup> at Maleventum (renamed later Beneventum by the Romans), but it seems that in this case the cavalry played little, or no role at all. As described by Greek and Roman historians it seemed the Roman cavalry preferred stationary –even as infantry - hand to hand combat “while Pyrrhus’s Greek cavalry resorted to flanking and wheeling maneuvers (...) In any case, the Greek cavalry troopers, when they found the Romans to be their equals in close combat, swerved and rode past them then turned and charged back”.<sup>15</sup> This stubborn, cruel hand to hand tactics prevailed against the Celts in 225 BC. Near Telamon circa 7200 Roman, Latin, Etruscan and Sabine cavalry, dispatched a much larger Celtic cavalry force and, slaughtered the infantry when “the Roman horse charged down from the high ground on their flank, and attacked them vigorously, the infantry of the Celts were cut to pieces on the field, while their horse turned and fled”<sup>16</sup>. So, actually the Roman cavalry win the day due to its “discipline, and

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<sup>11</sup> Ph. Snidell, *Warhorse. Cavalry in ancient warfare*, Continuum Books, London, 2006, p. 165.

<sup>12</sup> Plutarch, *Vieți paralele, Pyrrus*

[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Pyrrhus\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Pyrrhus*.html) (accessed 2020.03.01)

<sup>13</sup> Roman Jarymowycz, *Cavalry from hoof to track. The quest for mobility*, Praeger Security International, Connecticut-London, 2008, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ph. Snidell, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>15</sup> J. McCall, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> Polybius, *Histories* 2.30 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0234%3Abook%3D2%3Achapter%3D30> (accessed 2020.03.3)

cohesion to re-form and launch the decisive attack on the enemy's infantry".<sup>17</sup>

This disciplined, well-trained and cohesive army corps faced its worst enemy during the Punic Wars. Especially in the Second Punic War (218-202 BC) was destructive to the reputation of the Roman cavalry. "The disasters of the early part of that war, and particularly the spectacular defeat at Cannae in 216 BC, are blamed to a large degree on the failings of Rome's horsemen and usually used as then only case study by which a supposed lack of a Roman cavalry tradition is used".<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the challenges facing the Roman republican cavalry were greater then never before. As all know the Second Punic War started in 218 BC when Hannibal Barca crossed the Alps "designed to carry the war into Rome's backyard. He left Spain with fifty thousand infantry and nine thousand cavalry, a far higher proportion of horsemen than any Roman army".<sup>19</sup>

Not only the great number but also the quality and equipment of the Carthaginian cavalry was challenging: The Numidian light cavalry, the Hellenistic type Carthaginian one and the Iberian cavalry.

The Numidian cavalrymen, "were regarded as the light skirmishing cavalry par excellence in the western Mediterranean during the span of the Roman Republic, and performed a crucial role for both Hannibal's and the Roman armies during the Second Carthaginian war Mounted on small ponies without saddles, bridles, or bits they steered their mounts with their thighs and were equipped with light javelins together a small round *caetra* like shield, and either a dagger or a short sword"<sup>20</sup>. Their role was scouting and screening "in battle largely restricted to harassing tactics in loose formations".<sup>21</sup> Usually they avoided direct contact by charging forward and flooding the enemy with a rain of javelins and quickly retreating after. Likewise, due to their mobility and stamina, Numidians were used as "bait" in luring enemy in ambushes.

The Carthaginian cavalry, consisted of those who were wealthy enough to provide for the horse and equipment. They employed Hellenistic type equipment: a round shield and a spear and short sword, crested helmet, and a cuirass made of linen or bronze.

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<sup>17</sup> Ph. Snidell, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem* p. 171.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 171.

<sup>20</sup> Alastair Richard Lumsden, *Ante bella punica. Western Mediterranean military development 350-264 BC*, University of Auckland, 2016, p.134. Titus Livius, *Ab urbe condita*, XXXIV, 35.7-  
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Liv.+35.+11&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0144> (accessed 2020.03.3)

<sup>21</sup> Ph. Snidell, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

The Iberian cavalry, who was made of from the tribes which came under Carthaginian control in the time or after the First Punic War, wore little armor, maybe the aristocrats used Greek type cuirass, or Celtic chainmail. They also employed a small, round shield, thrusting spears and sword (*falcata* or a short two-edged sword which was later adopted by the Romans under the name *gladius hispanensis*). Their tactics resembled somehow the Numidian one, with the difference that Iberians used bridles (some of them included a plate meant to protect the horse's head and nose) and a saddle, therefore could be used also as heavy cavalry, whose impact was based on shock and momentum.

After crossing the Alps, the first major encounter between the Carthaginians and Romans took place in December 218 BC at Trebia, "It was the tactical precursor to Cannae and a good example of lessons learned turning against the student. (...) Carthaginian elephants and cavalry drove into the Roman front and blitzed the Roman horse away from the flanks of the attacking army. The trapped Romans kept their cool and fought with determination, actually breaking through the Carthaginian center. This brief success was soon savaged from three sides as Hannibal's disciplined cavalry returned and the remaining elephants trampled through the cohorts"<sup>22</sup>. The problem, as the battles from Ticinius, Trasimene and especially Cannae, will show was not merely tactical and logistical for Roman cavalry but, at the command level. The Carthaginians just were better in terms of command and maneuverability.

At Ticinius, the disposition of troops showed the prudence of the Romans and the audacity of Hannibal: "Scipio (Publius) placed his light infantry and Gallic cavalry in front and formed the rest of his cavalry in line and advanced cautiously. Hannibal put his 'bridled cavalry' including all the heavy-cavalry units, in the center of the line, with the unbridled Numidians massed out in either flank 'ready to make an outflanking movement'. He attacked straightaway"<sup>23</sup>. The great number of cavalry massed in one great shock unit, frightened the *velites* who retreated in hurry without throwing their javelins. So the Roman cavalry was directly confronted with the Carthaginian heavy cavalry, while the Numidians attacked in the flank. That was the moment when without the aid of the light infantry (trampled by the Numidian cavalry), the Roman cavalry broke and fled the battlefield, although up the moment of the flanking maneuver of the Numidians they managed to inflict heavy losses the Carthaginian heavy cavalry. Interesting remark is made by Polybius: "a great many men dismounting on the actual field, there was a mixed fight of horse

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<sup>22</sup> R. Jarymowycz, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Ph. Snidell, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

and foot”.<sup>24</sup> It is more than clear that the Romans were the ones who dismounted due to the fact that: “any hope of forward maneuver was lost and the flanks and rear penned in by encircling Numidians and the panicking masses of *velites*, individual *equites* might have well started to dismount to squeeze their way to the front lines”.<sup>25</sup>

The situation got worse at Trebia. In this case, the Roman cavalry, “had probably adopted the heavier equipment and the Greek style lances described by Polybius”<sup>26</sup> could not control the much lighter equipped Numidians who, by using the “hit and run” tactics, lured them (and the following Roman infantry) in the icy river. After that the Carthaginian heavy cavalry and elephants charged the Roman cavalry and drove them out of the battlefield. In the meantime, the Roman heavy infantry, heavily pressed in the front by the elephants, was attacked in the flanks and rear by Numidian skirmishers, and obliterated.

The battle at Lake Trasimene in June 217 BC, was set in “a natural amphitheater bounded on all sides by hills or water, a perfect killing ground for an unsuspecting foe”.<sup>27</sup> The battle, actually a massacre for the Roman troops<sup>28</sup>, ambushed due to the complete lack

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<sup>24</sup> Hannibal placed his cavalry that rode with bridles, and was most to be depended on, in his front, and led them straight against the enemy; having put the Numidian cavalry on either wing to take the enemy on the flanks. The two generals and the cavalry were in such hot haste to engage, that they closed with each other before the sharpshooters had an opportunity of discharging their javelins at all. Before they could do so, they left their ground, and retreated to the rear of their own cavalry, making their way between the squadrons, terrified at the approaching charge, and afraid of being trampled to death by the horses which were galloping down upon them. The cavalry charged each other front to front, and for a long time maintained an equal contest; and a great many men dismounting on the actual field, there was a mixed fight of horse and foot. The Numidian horse, however, having outflanked the Romans, charged them on the rear: and so the sharpshooters, who had fled from the cavalry charge at the beginning, were now trampled to death by the numbers and furious onslaught of the Numidians; while the front ranks originally engaged with the Carthaginians, after losing many of their men and inflicting a still greater loss on the enemy, finding themselves charged on the rear by the Numidians, broke into flight: most of them scattering in every direction, while some of them kept closely massed round the Consul. Polybius, *Histories*, 3, 60.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0234%3Abook%3D3%3Achapter%3D65> (accessed 03.06.2020).

<sup>25</sup> Ph. Snidell, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 177.

<sup>27</sup> N. Fields, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> “When the soldiers of both armies had engaged, at the very crisis of the battle, an earthquake occurred, by which cities were overthrown, rivers diverted from their channels, and fragments of cliffs torn away. And yet, although the disaster was so violent, no one of the combatants noticed it at all. 3 Flaminius himself, then, while displaying many deeds of daring and prowess, fell, and round about him the flower of his army. The rest were routed with much slaughter. Fifteen thousand were cut to pieces, and as many more taken prisoners. The body of Flaminius, to which Hannibal



of reconnaissance, marked not only great victory for Hannibal’s tactical genius but also was a warning to the Roman leadership about their weaknesses...And about the fact that a change in tactical approach should be made. But it does not happen. Now it is obvious that the period between Trasimene and Cannae was marked by the dominance of the Carthaginian cavalry. The Roman response was finally a good one by appointing Fabius Maximus as *dictator*. Nicknamed *Cunctator* (“the Delayer”), he followed “a strategy of shadowing the Carthaginians but refusing to be drawn into a pitched battle. By keeping his army on high and rough terrain (...), he made sure Hannibal could not attack him without throwing away the advantage of his cavalry. (...)”<sup>29</sup>. His strategy was considered unusual by the Romans, who were still adepts of head-on battles. “His officers and soldiers contemptuously called him ‘Hannibal’s *paedagogus*’ after the slave (Greek, invariably) who followed a Roman schoolboy carrying his wax tablet and stylus”.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, Fabius’s evasive tactics payed off: using mostly cavalry in his “hit and run” operations against Carthaginian foragers and skirmishers he managed not only to buy precious time for Rome to assemble a new army but, also, he cut the supply lines of the enemy. In addition to these he also raised the combat effectiveness and the morale of the cavalry. Unfortunately, the “abandonment of this strategy the following year, 216 BC, that led to the greatest defeat ever suffered by a Roman army”.<sup>31</sup>

Cannae was one of the most decisive battles “at a tactical level, of all time (...) has been studied ever since by generals seeking the secret of victory. The German Schlieffen plan of 1914 and Operation Desert Storm in 1991 are but two strategic planes consciously influenced by it”.<sup>32</sup> Beyond this, is clearly stressed out that the Romans learned the wrong lesson from Trebia and thought that a well disciplined and strong heavy infantry could destroy any enemy infantry unit. That is why instead of continuing Fabius’s delaying

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was eager to give honourable burial because of his valour, could not be found among the dead, but disappeared, no one ever knowing how.” Plutarch, *Vieți paralele, Fabius Maximus*

[https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Fabius\\_Maximus\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Fabius_Maximus*.html) (accessed 03.09. 2020)

<sup>29</sup> Ph. Snidell, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>30</sup> *He was annoyed, however, by his Master of Horse, Minucius, who was eager to fight all out of season, and over bold, and who sought to win a following in the army, which he filled with mad impetuosity and empty hopes. The soldiers railed at Fabius and scornfully called him Hannibal's pedagogue;* Plutarch, *Vieți paralele, Fabius Maximus* [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Fabius\\_Maximus\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Fabius_Maximus*.html) (accessed 03.09.2020) Fields, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>31</sup> Ph. Snidell, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 180.

tactics, the Romans gathered eight legions and the same number of allied infantry but, in terms of cavalry they were much weaker: around 2400 Roman and 1500 allied cavalry. In addition to this the Roman commander appointed by the Senate, Gaius Terentius Varro, had only one tactic in mind: frontal attack. “The maneuver problem, which featured superior Carthaginian cavalry and the threat of turned flanks, was given secondary concern”.<sup>33</sup> That is why, from the very beginning Hannibal managed to dominate not in terms of terrain but also in disposition of the troops. Like in any other occasions the infantry was in the center, and the cavalry on the wings. Problem was that Varro placed the Roman cavalry on the right flank between the infantry and Aufidius river, while the Latin allied cavalry was placed on the left flank. In this manner, Hannibal’s Numidian cavalry, with its extraordinary maneuvering ability faced the Latins, while his heavy cavalry confronted the Roman citizens. Later, it was proved that a good tactic from the Romans would be to concentrate all the cavalry on the left flank, while the infantry would extend its lines up to the bend of Aufidius. This fact can be observed from the early stages of the battle when the Latin cavalry managed to cope with the much lighter equipped Numidians while the Roman cavalry trapped between the infantry and river had only one option: head on attack. The confrontation between the Romans and the Iberian and Celtic heavy cavalries was brutal and it resulted in the annihilation of the former<sup>34</sup>. Another daring move from Hannibal was to place his best infantry units not in the center (there were placed the Celts and Iberians armed with the weapons and equipment captured from the Romans in the previous battles) but on the wing near the cavalry. This meant that while the Roman heavy infantry gradually pushed the Celts and Iberians from the battlefield, actually a kettle was created: by disposing the Roman heavy cavalry the Iberian and Celtic cavalry attacked the Roman infantry from the right flank and rear. Likewise, the Numidians closed the trap on the left flank. The result is well

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<sup>33</sup> R. Jarmowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> “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 mêlée, all the Romans fighting with desperate bravery, and began to drive the rest along the river, cutting them down mercilessly.” Polybius, *Histories*, 3, 115. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plb.+3.115&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0234> (accessed. 23.03.2020). See also: Gergory Daly, *Cannae. The experience of battle in the second Punic war*, Routledge London-New York, 2002, p. 177; Adrian Goldsworthy, *Roman army at war. 100 BC-AD 200*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996. pp. 235-236.

known: total annihilation of the Roman army and an extraordinary example of control of battlefield, command and maneuvering abilities.

For many (military) historians, and even for the Romans the loss of the battle was due to the incapacity of the cavalry in maintaining the unity of the Roman army. Actually, if we analyze the behavior of the opposing cavalymen it is clear that they fought alike but the Romans were heavily outnumbered and had no place to maneuver (not to mention the errors in command made by Varro). Anyway, an interesting fact is revealed again: in the first phase of the cavalry encounter both sided, the riders actually started to pull one another from their horses, transforming the confrontation into an infantry battle. The explanation is simple: lacking stirrups, and place to maneuver, the Romans dismounted because an infantry man is not only more stable than a cavalryman but, also could deliver fatal blows to the exposed parts of the rider as well as to the horse. Another fact is that Romans were the only army who used these peculiar tactics forcing the enemy cavalryman to fight in an unfamiliar style.<sup>35</sup>

The outcome of Cannae<sup>36</sup>, at least for the Carthaginians was unexpected: Rome was defeated on the battle-ground but not in terms of political will. After Cannae the Romans resumed the hit and run tactics of Fabius Cunctator. As for Hannibal "his immense to maraud Italy for fifteen years against huge numerical odds demonstrated his immense skill, yet at the same time he failed after Cannae to force decisive battles on the Romans-allowing them to turn the war in Italy into a war of attrition and sieges, in short a war of manpower".<sup>37</sup> And what Hannibal lacked was manpower and time.

As this war of attrition went on, the Roman cavalry played a key role, especially in shadowing the Carthaginian army, dispatching patrols and foragers, interrupting lines of communications. And even developed new tactics: each cavalryman carried into the battle line a *veles* a light-infantry man, equipped only with a small shield and a bundle of javelins. By rapidly dismounting and forming a battle-line

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<sup>35</sup> J. Mc Call, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>36</sup> Such was the end of the battle of Cannae, in which both sides fought with the most conspicuous gallantry, the conquered no less than the conquerors,(...) the Carthaginians being on this occasion, as on previous ones, mainly indebted for their victory to their superiority in cavalry: a lesson to posterity that in actual war it is better to have half the number of infantry, and the superiority in cavalry, than to engage your enemy with an equality in both. On the side of Hannibal there fell four thousand Celts, fifteen hundred Iberians and Libyans, and about two hundred horse. Polybius, *Histories*, 3, 117.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plb.+3.115&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0234>

(accesat. 23.03.2020)

<sup>37</sup> Ph. Sidnell, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

which rapidly overwhelmed the enemy with a rain of javelins, these light infantry units allowed the cavalry to attack the shaken enemy lines and to prevail.

In 202 BC when “Hannibal and Scipio met for the final showdown at Zama”<sup>38</sup> the Roman and allied cavalry (this time including the famous Numidian light cavalry), outnumbered not its infantry but also the Carthaginian cavalry (even though Hannibal used 80 war elephants). The outcome of the battle was clear: Scipio not only used many of Hannibal’s tactics against him but proved to be more resourceful in terms of maneuvering. After the elephants were driven off the battlefield (some of them panicked and stampeded their own lines), the Roman/Numidian cavalry decided the fate of the battle in the same manner the Carthaginian cavalry did at Cannae: by attacking Hannibal’s infantry in the rear. The battle ended the war and proved once again that a well-trained and disciplined Roman cavalry can turn the tide.

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 194.