



CANNAE: POINTS OF CONTROVERSY IN THE CLASSICAL RECORD OF POLYBIUS AND LIVY

A SERIES OF ARTICLES IN COMMEMORATION OF THE 2228th ANNIVERSARY OF HANNIBAL'S VICTORY AT THE BATTLE OF CANNAE, August 2, 2012, by Prof. Yozan Mosig (University of Nebraska-Kearney) FOREIGN MEMBER OF COMITATO ITALIANO PRO CANNE DELLA BATTAGLIA.

#4. Are the casualty figures given by Polybius and Livy for the battle of Cannae credible?

Most historians agree that the casualty figures recorded in various ancient sources for battles in Antiquity are greatly exaggerated. The exception is Cannae, due to the nature of the double envelopment that resulted in the destruction of the Roman army. Even Delbrueck, who in his *History of Warfare* is very skeptical of such numbers, accepts as credible the enormity of the losses at Cannae.

Polybius (3:117) states that only 70 of the allied cavalry managed to escape with Varro and that 300 others "reached different cities in scattered groups." He further indicates that some 10,000 Romans were captured, "but not in the actual battle, while only perhaps three thousand escaped from the field to neighboring towns." He adds: "All the rest, numbering about seventy thousand, died bravely." As for Hannibal's losses, Polybius lists "about four thousand Celts, fifteen hundred Spaniards and Africans, and two hundred cavalry," or a total of 5,700. Livy (22:49), on the other hand, gives a lesser figure for the Roman losses (about 50,000) and a larger one for the Carthaginian dead (8,000). How credible are these figures, and why is there such a large discrepancy between Polybius's numbers and the ones reported by Livy?

Some historians, such as Goldsworthy (2001) and Daly (2002), in their respective books on Cannae, have balked at accepting the Polybian figures, because they seem larger than possible if one assumes that the Romans had only 6,000 cavalry. The total strength of the Roman army would then have been 80,000 infantry plus 6,000 horse, or 86,000, and Polybius's figures, 70,000 fallen, plus 10,000 prisoners, plus up to 10,000 survivors, would total about 90,000, which would constitute an impossibility. But we have already established that the real cavalry strength of the Romans at Cannae was, in all likelihood, somewhere between 9,600 and 12,800—quite a bit more than the 6,000 cited by most authors (who fail to heed the hint in Polybius's qualifier "over," indicating that the number was greater than 6,000). Taking the revised figures into account, the total strength of the Roman army at Cannae was between 89,600 and 92,800 and Polybius's casualty numbers create no contradiction.

Livy, on the other hand, followed Polybius's 6,000 figure literally, and, faced with the apparent contradiction, gave a much lower number for the Roman fallen, about 50,000 (45,000 foot soldiers and 2,700 horsemen). Livy does not actually name his source, and some think it may have been the now lost account of [Quintus Fabius Pictor](#). Nevertheless, it must be remembered that Livy's explicitly stated motivation in writing his history of Rome was to inspire patriotism in the Roman youth of his day. The creation of a fictional numerical superiority in the Carthaginian horse, plus a sharp reduction in the number of Roman dead, allowed for the greatest shame of Roman arms to be substantially diminished.

Due to the overall greater reliability of Polybius's account over Livy's, it seems reasonable to agree with Delbrueck and accept that, indeed, 70,000 Romans and a little over 5,000 of Hannibal's men died on the plain of Cannae, on that fateful day of August 2, 216 BCE. The Roman dead included the consul in command, Lucius Aemilius Paullus, two quaestors, 29 military tribunes, the proconsuls Servilius and Minucius, and at least 80 men of senatorial rank. It was the worst disaster Rome had ever experienced. Incidentally, it should be added that the 10,000 Romans that were captured, mostly when they surrendered in the Roman camps following the destruction of the army at Cannae, are not indicative of that many soldiers having been kept in the camps and not actually participating in the battle. Instead, it is reasonable to assume that many of them managed to escape from the battlefield before the completion of the fatal encirclement, and then took refuge in the camps.

The scale of the losses at Cannae is staggering. Over 75,000 men perished in a single day of combat. Not until the scale of destruction of the major battles of World War I in the 20th century, over 2,100 years later, were these terrible numbers surpassed. And those modern battles inflicted their death tolls with machine guns, bombs, cannons, tanks, and poison gas. Hannibal's tactics at Cannae resulted in losses comparable to the casualties resulting from the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in a single day of hand-to-hand combat with swords and spears.

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