



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.

#1. Who was actually in command of the massive Roman army that fought at Cannae?

Fabius Maximus was appointed dictator for six months, following the defeat of the Roman army and the death of consul Gaius Flaminius at Lake Trasimene in 217 BCE. He wisely followed Hannibal at a distance with his army, harassing the Carthaginians but refusing to face Hannibal in battle (an approach that has become known as Fabian tactics). This earned him the derogatory nickname of “Cunctator”, or “delayer”. Roman pride could not tolerate the situation for long, and at the end of his term the Senate replaced Fabius with two new consuls who were given the specific assignment of dealing with Hannibal once and for all. The traditional account names the consuls as the prudent and aristocratic Lucius Aemilius Paullus and the brash and impulsive Gaius Terentius Varro, a plebeian, the son of a butcher. Varro was a demagogue and a braggart, and it was supposedly he who was in command at the time of the battle, and thus deserves the blame for the worst military disaster in the history of Rome.

But was Varro really in command? And did Aemilius Paullus advise against engaging Hannibal in battle, as the classical accounts (Polybius and Livy) claim? The consuls alternated command on a daily basis, and we are told that Aemilius Paullus refused to commit himself to battle the previous day, but on August 2, when Varro was in charge, the hot-headed plebeian consul ordered the Roman army to deploy for battle. In the first place, this does not make sense, because the stated mission of the largest Roman army ever assembled was to face and defeat Hannibal in battle—clearly both consuls were interested in engaging and destroying the Carthaginian invader. But perhaps Aemilius Paullus's alleged reluctance resulted from the battlefield being favorable to the tactics of Hannibal, a factor overlooked by the supposedly impulsive Varro?

Was the plain of Cannae, next to the Aufidus River (today's Ofanto) really a poor choice of battleground for the Romans? Hannibal was a master of the ambush, and had surprised the Romans both at the Trebbia and at Lake Trasimene, where he hid his entire army in ambush. Clearly, the Romans needed a battlefield where Hannibal could not hide forces or spring a surprise attack from some unexpected angle. Cannae was perfect for this—a plain allowing no

shelter for hidden forces to launch an ambush. The argument that the plain offered ideal terrain for the deployment of cavalry, Hannibal's strongest contingent, and that although in infantry the Romans outnumbered the Carthaginians 2-to-1, Hannibal had numerical superiority in horse, is also flawed. Recent research suggests that such superiority was fictitious, and that in reality the Romans had parity or even numerical superiority in cavalry as well (a matter to be examined in another article). The plain of Cannae offered the Romans the perfect field to use their enhanced equestrian forces and their massively superior infantry, with no worries of a surprise ambush. Both Aemilius Paullus and Varro would have approved of the battlefield.

A key factor that points toward Aemilius Paullus having been in command is his position at the start of the battle. As Seibert points out, the traditional place for the commanding consul would have been with the Roman horse on the right wing, which is precisely where Aemilius Paullus was. He could also have been with the infantry, but most certainly as commanding consul he would not have been on the left wing, with the allied cavalry (the horse supplied by the Italian allies of Rome), a position of less honor and distinction. It was Varro who was positioned on the left wing, a clear indication that he was not the commanding consul that day.

There is an additional factor that points to Aemilius Paullus, and not Varro, as the consul in command, namely that the former, injured in battle, when offered the opportunity to escape when it was clear that defeat was inevitable, refused to leave. His choice of certain death makes sense if he felt disgraced and responsible for having caused the greatest calamity in the history of Rome. Varro, on the other hand, fled with a small surviving contingent of the allied horse, and, upon returning to Rome, was received with open arms and thanked for "not despairing of the Republic," hardly the reception he would have received had he been in command and thus responsible for the massacre. That this was not an uncharacteristic act of largesse on the part of the Roman Senate is confirmed by the fact that Varro held further command during the war years that followed—it is unthinkable that further forces would have been entrusted to Varro, had he been considered the incompetent and disgraced commander responsible for the crushing defeat of the Roman legions at Cannae.

But why do the classical records distort the identity of the commanding Roman general? In the case of Polybius, our otherwise most reliable source, it must be remembered that he was in the employ of the Aemilian family. It is possible that he may have intentionally changed the name of the consul in charge to protect the honor of the patrician family he served, as well as the memory of Aemilius Paullus, who, in his version of the battle, appears as a wise and prudent man, a hero who sacrifices himself to die with his soldiers. Varro was the obvious scapegoat on whom to blame the defeat. And as for Livy, who wrote two centuries after Cannae, his patriotic zeal in praising the virtues of the Republic to inspire the Roman youth of his day would naturally have inclined him to follow Polybius, protecting the honor of an aristocrat and blaming the calamity on a plebeian demagogue.

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