

# ZAMA

## Turning Point in the Desert

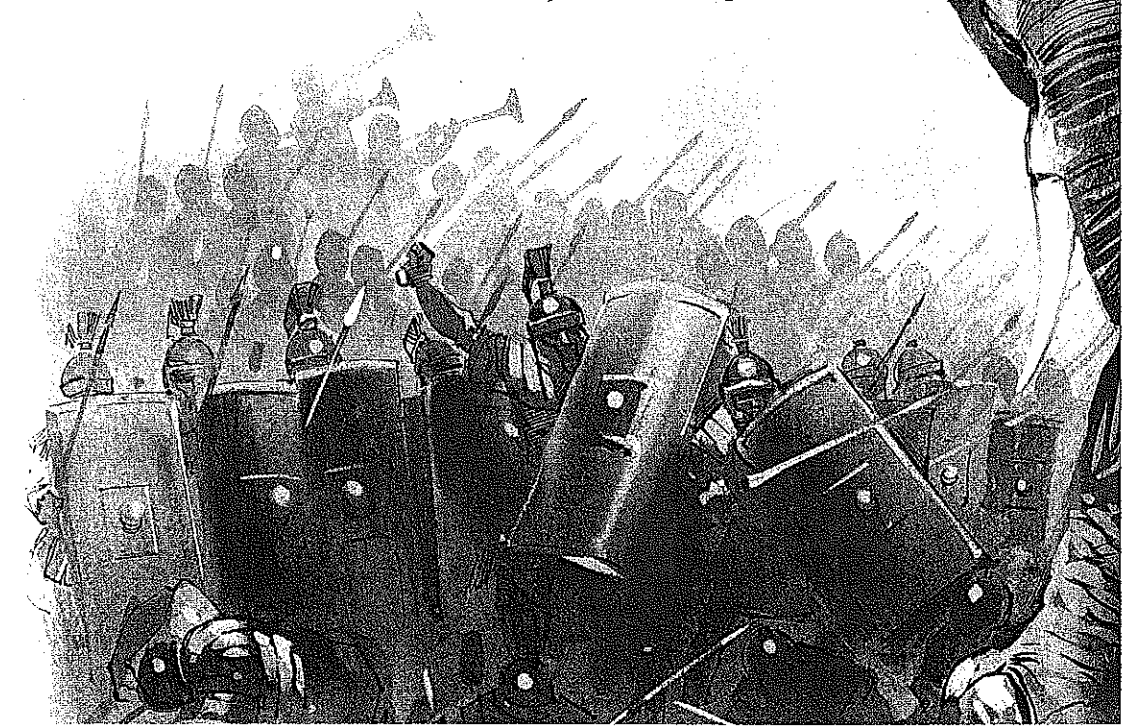
When Scipio and Hannibal faced each other at Zama in 202 BC, each had new tactics in mind. What followed was a grinding parallel infantry battle neither man had expected—or wanted

*By Richard A. Gabriel*

In 204 BC Scipio sailed from Sicily with an invasion force of some 30,000 infantry and 1,200 cavalry, landing near Utica on the North African coast. The strategic goal of the operation was to threaten Carthage and force Hannibal to leave Italy and return home to its defense. Scipio began operations immediately and over the next year defeated three Carthaginian armies in North Africa, leaving the city open to attack. Scipio instead offered a truce and negotiations, and Carthage acceded.

By then, Hannibal was homeward bound. Recalled by the Carthaginian

The name Hannibal is inseparable with the image of elephants charging into battle, as interpreted in this modern-day sketch. But at the 202 BC Battle of Zama, the war beasts weren't a factor, thanks in large part to Scipio's prescient tactics.



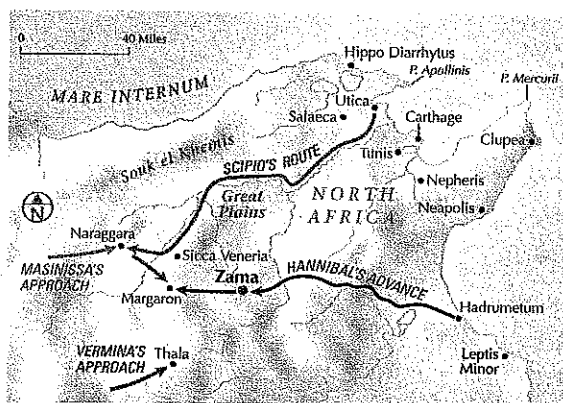
senate, he left Italy in autumn 203 BC, arriving soon thereafter at Leptis Minor (modern-day Lemta). Moving his army to Hadrumetum, some 100 miles south of Carthage, he mustered additional troops. Hawks in the Carthaginian senate, according to the contemporary Greek historian Polybius, wanted to renew hostilities once Hannibal had returned. To break the truce, they arranged to ambush a ship arriving from Rome with envoys aboard. The envoys' lives were spared, but the incident nevertheless sparked a fight.

The resulting Battle of Zama brought an end to the 16-year Second Punic War, which had ravaged southern Italy and threatened Rome's existence. More important, Scipio's defeat of Hannibal on the plains of North Africa (in what is now Tunisia) was a turning point in the military history of

the ancient world that set Rome on the path to empire. In little more than a decade its legions had reduced Greece to submission and pressed back the Seleucid Empire until Rome controlled the Mediterranean coast from the Hellespont to the Egyptian border. The 168 BC Battle of Pydna put an end to what remained of Greek autonomy, and a year later Antiochus IV acknowledged Roman

suzerainty over Egypt. In 146 BC Carthage itself was destroyed and the Mediterranean became a Roman sea.

By summer 202 BC Scipio was moving southwest from his base near Utica, storming one town after another, refusing offers of surrender and selling the captured populations into slavery, "to demonstrate the anger he felt against the enemy because of the treacherous action of the Carthaginians," explains Polybius. Scipio knew such attacks would force Hannibal to take the field, but he dared not face the great Carthaginian with the small number of cavalry at his disposal. He directed Masinissa, the Numidian king and former Carthaginian ally, to keep his promise and join the Romans with an army of infantry and cavalry. The Numidian



BOTH MAPS: BLUE MARBLE MAPS, LLC

## Battle of Zama, 202 BC

X Velites (Scipio)

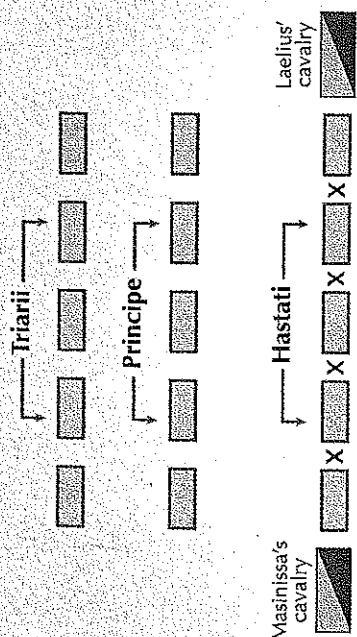
● Light Infantry (Hannibal)

▨ Scipio's Cavalry - 1st Phase of Attack

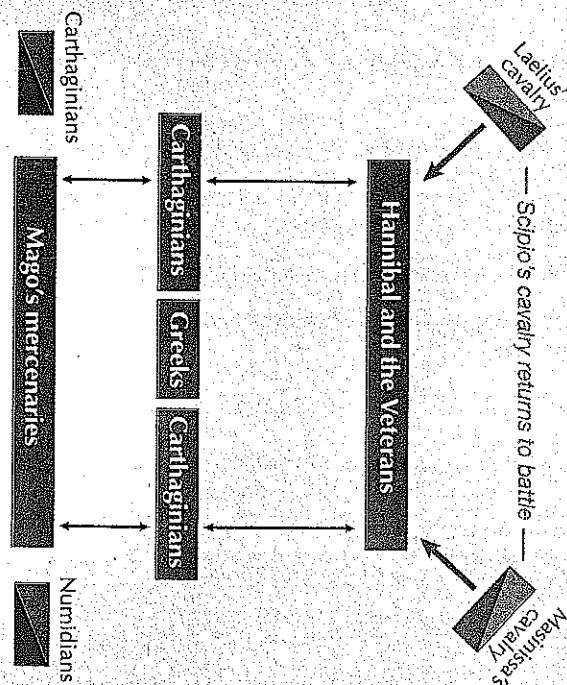
▩ Scipio's Cavalry - Final Phase of Attack



### SCIPIO'S TROOP DISPOSITIONS



### HANNIBAL'S TROOP DISPOSITIONS



Scipio and Hannibal each deployed his men in anticipation of the other's moves. Scipio left gaps between troops, hoping to funnel Hannibal's elephants harmlessly to the rear. Hannibal's cavalry lured the Roman cavalry away from the field early in the action. Both left maneuvering room between their lines.

cavalry was central to Scipio's plan to confront Hannibal on the plains of North Africa.

Under urging from the Carthaginian senate, Hannibal moved his camp from Hadrumetum to Zama, about 70 to 80 miles southwest of Carthage. Having left his horses in Italy due to a lack of transport, Hannibal was short of cavalry. Moreover, the bulk of his army comprised raw recruits, and even his elephants were untrained for war. So why would Hannibal take his army into the field unprepared?

The key to the puzzle is Vermina, the son of Syphax, a powerful tribal king who had been captured by Scipio at the Battle of Campi Magni the year before. The Romans had promised Syphax's rival, Masinissa, the old king's lands if he would help the Romans against the Carthaginians. Vermina remained free at the head of a large army with good reason to support Hannibal against mercenary Masinissa and the Romans.

Thus, Scipio and Hannibal were closing on one another with the same tactical objective in mind: to link up with their respective Numidian allies before the other could, and thus gain an advantage in cavalry. As Masinissa and Vermina approached from the west, Scipio and Hannibal maneuvered to shorten the distance between them and their allies. Whoever won the race would have a major advantage on the battle plain.

Scipio encamped west of Naraggara. Hannibal advanced to within four miles of Scipio. Polybius recounts that each was unaware of the other's presence; otherwise, Hannibal's reconnaissance units would have known that Masinissa's 6,000 light Numidian javelin infantry and 4,000 light horse had arrived in Scipio's camp—while Vermina was nowhere to be seen.

Hannibal found himself on an open plain confronted with an army now superior in cavalry. Why didn't he refuse to offer battle and withdraw?

**A classical marble bust of Scipio reveals little about the Roman general who matched Hannibal's prowess and ushered in a period of Roman dominance in the Mediterranean.**

Again, the answer is cavalry: Hannibal's base was 80 miles to the rear across open terrain. If he attempted to withdraw, Scipio's cavalry would have harassed his army, with deadly effect over a march of five days. So despite the unfavorable circumstances, Hannibal stood his ground.

**A**t Zama, Scipio fielded approximately 25,000 infantry and 1,500 cavalry, having left a rearguard detachment in Utica. Masinissa had arrived with 6,000 infantry and 4,000 horsemen, and Roman historian Appian states that a chieftain named Dakarnas contributed 600 cavalrymen. All told, Scipio's force likely numbered just over 30,000 infantry and 6,000 cavalry.

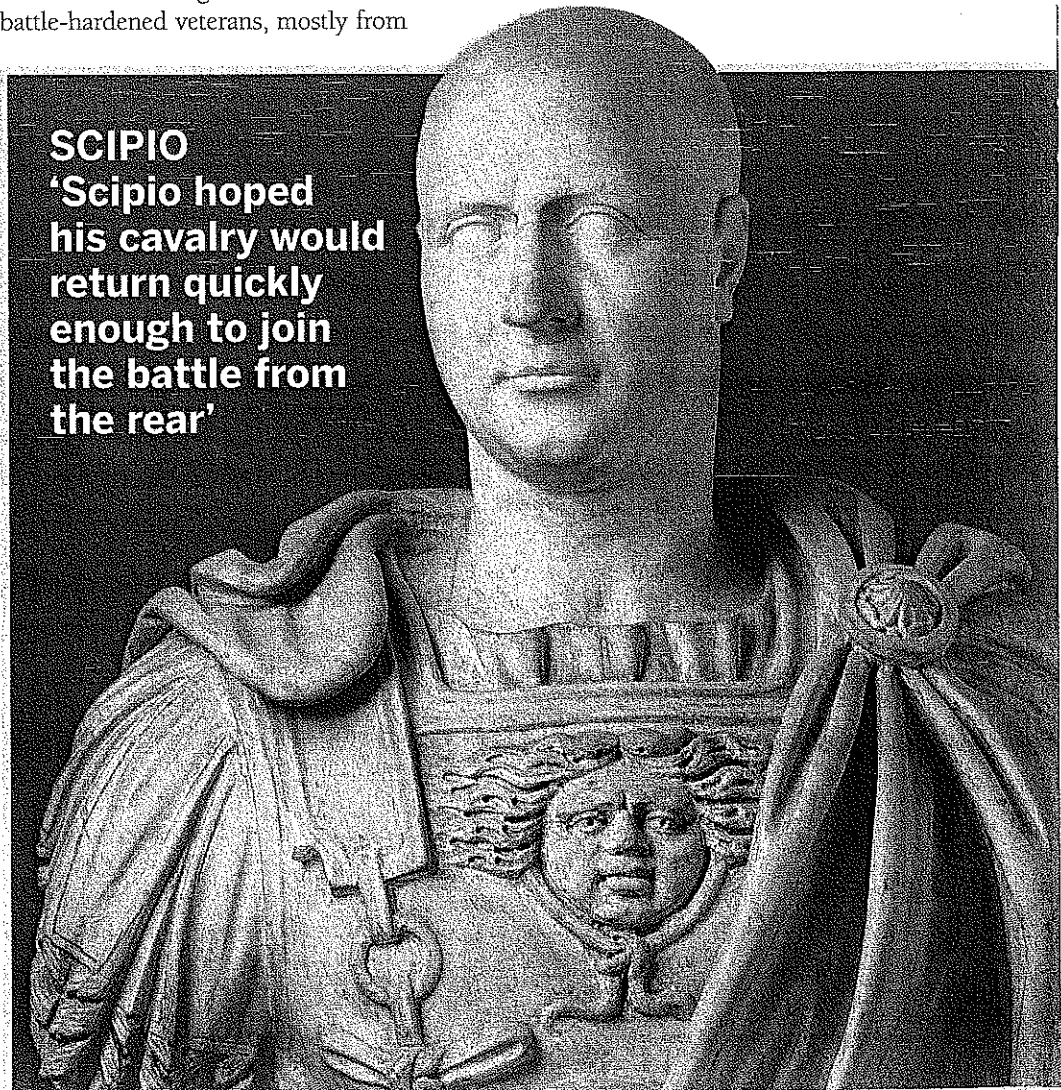
Hannibal's army comprised three contingents. The first was Mago's mercenary force of some 15,000, which had withdrawn from northern Italy and re-deployed to Africa in advance of Hannibal (Mago himself had died en route). The second contingent was Hannibal's battle-hardened veterans, mostly from

southern Italian towns and tribes. Estimates of their numbers range from 15,000 to 18,000, so a conservative estimate of 15,000 seems reasonable. These were Hannibal's best troops: disciplined, well led and capable of tactical maneuvers. The third contingent comprised infantry recently levied among the citizens of Carthage. Hannibal used them as his second line against Scipio's front line of 10,000, so they must have numbered between 8,000 and 10,000 to perform the tactical mission Hannibal set for them. Perhaps to stiffen the courage of these recruits, Hannibal deployed 4,000 veteran Greek phalangites sent by Philip V of Macedon in the center of the second line. Hannibal's army thus comprised approximately 44,000 infantry.

It is almost impossible to estimate the strength of Hannibal's cavalry. Arriving in Africa with only a few hundred mounts, he'd attempted to raise cavalry from among the tribes friendly to Carthage, with limited success. Polybius

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**SCIPIO**  
**'Scipio hoped his cavalry would return quickly enough to join the battle from the rear'**



tells us that a chief named Tychaeus provided 2,000 horsemen, and Appian says another chief, Mesotylus, offered 1,000 cavalrymen. Carthage itself could have raised another 500 or so, bringing Hannibal's cavalry strength to about 3,000, or half that available to Scipio. Hannibal also had some 15 or 20 elephants. Hannibal's challenge was how to weave these disparate elements into a force capable of executing his tactical plan against the best-trained and best-led army the Roman Republic had ever put in the field.

**T**he way troops are disposed within a combat box reflects their commander's tactical thinking. At Zama, Scipio deployed his legions in a different array than usual.

Traditionally, each legion presented a 1,200-foot front, with *hastati* deployed in maniples, or small tactical units, across the front and *velites*, or light infantry, filling the gaps. The other two lines, the *principe* and *triarii*, formed up behind the *hastati* as the second and third lines. Usually these two lines covered the gaps between the maniples in front of them—the famous *quincunx*, or checkerboard formation. At Zama, however, Scipio arranged the maniples of each line directly behind one another, leaving 100-foot-wide lanes from front to back. According to Polybius, the *principe* and *triarii* were placed “at some distance” behind the *hastati*, presumably more than the usual 250 feet from the front line. Scipio's cavalry covered his flanks, as usual. On his left was the 2,000-strong Roman cavalry under Laelius, while Masinissa guarded the right with 4,000 Numidian cavalry. Masinissa's infantry was probably placed with the Roman *velites* in the role of light infantry.

By moving the *principe* and *triarii* back a hundred yards or so from his front line, Scipio transformed his army's tactical dynamics, changing it from a phalanx into echelons. The advantages of the tightly grouped phalanx are that it creates mass, allows easy replacement of losses and instills psychological cohesion. The disadvantage is that the phalanx can only move forward or backward, lacking the ability to undertake flanking maneuvers or an envelopment. By placing his forces farther apart, Scipio made it possible for

his rear two lines to maneuver independently. This was no accident.

The lanes between the maniples were designed to channel Hannibal's elephants harmlessly to the rear. This done, Scipio's cavalry could attack the outnumbered Carthaginian cavalry on the flanks and, as Hannibal had done at Cannae, drive it from the field. The *hastati* were to mount a frontal assault and hold the Carthaginian center in place. When Hannibal's second line moved forward in support, Scipio would order his *principe* and *triarii* to march toward either end of the Roman line and sweep around the flanks, enveloping the Carthaginian lines. With the Carthaginians trapped, Scipio hoped his cavalry would return quickly enough to join the battle from the rear and annihilate the enemy.

**T**he Carthaginians' troop deployment suggests Hannibal had correctly discerned Scipio's tactical plan. Their infantry was drawn up in three echelons, with Mago's mercenary veterans, mostly heavy infantry, in the front line. The Greek phalangites anchored the second echelon, flanked on either side by the Carthaginian levies. Like Scipio, Hannibal placed his second line about 100 yards farther to the rear. Hannibal's veterans, whom he personally led, formed the third echelon. They were positioned about 200 yards behind the second line. Hannibal placed his Carthaginian cavalry on the right, the Numidian cavalry on his left.

The challenge for Hannibal was to neutralize the Roman advantage in cavalry. The first step was to have his own horsemen feign retreat and draw Scipio's cavalry into a skirmishing rearguard action until Hannibal could crush the Roman infantry. The second part of the plan involved the elephants: Hannibal placed them at the center of the line to support his light infantry. The idea was to have his men engage the Roman *velites* for as long as possible and then send in the elephants to scatter the Roman infantry. The ensuing chaos would delay the main infantry clash and buy time for Hannibal's cavalry to execute his plan. If Scipio's cavalry took the bait, Hannibal could fight an infantry battle in which he held the numerical advantage.

Hannibal evidently saw the possibility of a Roman flanking maneuver. By positioning his veterans far to the rear, he was setting a trap. If Scipio did attempt an envelopment, he would trap only the first two lines of Carthaginian infantry. Hannibal would then remain free to attack the Roman echelons from the rear and catch them between the Carthaginian lines. For his trap to work, however, Hannibal would have to conceal the position and strength of his veterans from Scipio. Working in his favor was the flat terrain, plus three lines of Roman infantry, two lines of Carthaginian infantry and a wall of elephants. In the event of a straight-up infantry battle, Hannibal would let Scipio waste his strength against the first two ranks before striking with his veterans.

Those were the plans, anyway, but the paradox at Zama was that neither commander was able to carry out his tactical plan in the face of the other's countermoves. Instead, each was forced into a traditional infantry battle, at equal strength, that neither wanted to fight.

**T**he battle opened with skirmishing by Numidian light cavalry on both flanks, followed by Hannibal's order to the elephant drivers to attack the Roman line. Masinissa quickly counterattacked, driving the Numidians from the field and following in hot pursuit. According to Silius Italicus, author of an epic poem about the Second Punic War, “Masinissa, hot by nature and hot with youth, hurled his huge frame against the front rank of the horsemen and dashed round the field with flying javeliners.”

The elephant attack soon fell apart. Some made their way through the lanes between the maniples to wander harmlessly at the legion's rear. Others fled down the lane between the two front lines, and Roman javeliners drove them from the field.

Encouraged by Masinissa's successful pursuit of the Numidian cavalry, Laelius attacked the Carthaginian cavalry and, says Silius, “drove them back in headlong flight and pressed the pursuit.” The opening phase of the battle was over, with the first round going to Hannibal, who succeeded in tempting Scipio's cavalry into pursuit, taking them out of the fight.