

The light infantry on each side now withdrew, and the two lines of heavy infantry closed to do battle. Once within striking distance, the Roman front rank charged. Silius describes their attack:

The spears were hurled with speed and force, the air was shaken and a fearsome cloud spread over the sky. Next came the sword at close quarters, and face pressed close to face, and eyes blazed with baleful flame. Those who despised the danger and rushed forward to meet the first shower of missiles were all laid low, and the earth grieved as she drank the blood of her sons.

Polybius offers a more straightforward account:

The whole battle then became a hand-to-hand struggle of man against man. In this contest the courage and skill of the mercenaries at first gave them the advantage, and they succeeded in wounding great numbers of Romans. Even so, the steadiness of their ranks and the superiority of their weapons enabled Scipio's men to make their adversaries give ground. All this while the rear ranks of the Romans kept close behind their comrades.

The account suggests that the Roman second line had closed with the first line to support their comrades. Hannibal's front line, consisting mainly of Mago's mercenaries, soon broke. According to Polybius, the Carthaginian second line did not come up in support, as the Romans had done, but "shrank back in cowardly fashion and failed to support the mercenaries." But Polybius may have misunderstood the tactical role of the echelon. Hannibal had deliberately left gaps between his lines, deploying his men to crash against the Romans in successive waves, not in one large mass. The Carthaginian second line didn't hold back because they were cowards, but because they were executing Hannibal's tactical plan.

Polybius' misunderstanding further led him to believe that when the mercenaries saw they were not supported by the second line, "they retreated and turned upon

the soldiers in their rear and began to cut them down." More likely, the Carthaginian front gave way under the pressure of the Roman assault and was essentially destroyed. As the *hastati* pursued the mercenaries, Hannibal ordered his second line to attack, entangling the fleeing mercenaries between it and the advancing Romans. In the swirling hand-to-hand combat that followed, some mercenaries and Romans may have fallen under the weapons of their countrymen. Polybius is not credible when he writes that the Carthaginian lines both fought each other and fended off the Roman assault.

The Carthaginian counter-attack pressed hard upon the *hastati*, forcing the *principe* to join the fray. Scipio's troops again resorted to the

HANNIBAL
'By positioning his veterans far to the rear, Hannibal was setting a trap'

phalanx to steady the front, so any hope of using echelon maneuvers was now gone.

With both Roman lines engaged, the now outnumbered Carthaginians eventually succumbed. The surviving mercenaries and second line troops retreated, hoping to shelter behind the line of Hannibal's veterans standing ready 200 yards to the rear. "Hannibal then barred the fleeing survivors from entering the ranks of his veterans," says Polybius. "He ordered his ranks to level their spears and hold the men off when they approached, and they were obliged to take refuge on the wings or in the open country." Hannibal's refusal made sound tactical sense. His veterans were fresh and unbloodied, and he intended to use them to deliver the fatal blow against the weary Romans. Permitting frightened, wounded and exhausted men into their ranks just before launching his attack would add

little to their fighting strength while disrupting morale and discipline. As it was, the remnants of the first two lines found their way to the flanks, regrouped and later joined Hannibal's veterans on the attack.

The success of the Roman attack had left Scipio's own formations scattered and disorganized. As Livy observes: "Consequently, the *hastati* of the front line broke up their maniples and ranks to pursue the



A 15th century medallion in the collection of the Louvre portrays Hannibal at the height of his power. Scipio threatened Carthage to draw Hannibal into battle—and ultimate defeat.

enemy where they could over the piles of bodies and arms and through pools of blood. Then the maniples of the *principe* also began to break up, as they saw the first line losing formation." He went on to describe the battlefield behind them as "slippery with gore, the corpses lying in blood-drenched heaps, and the spaces between encumbered with arms [weapons and shields] that had been thrown away

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While this 16th century Italian painting takes liberties with the landscape and uniforms at Zama, the battle itself was almost certainly as chaotic, leaving tens of thousands dead.

at random.” This detritus of war presented an obstacle to Scipio’s *triarii*. Furthermore, the rapid Roman advance had carried his lead troops beyond the starting point of the Carthaginian second line, placing the scattered Roman maniples some 500 yards to the front of his *triarii*, who had not yet been committed. Hannibal’s 15,000 veterans, however, lay just 200

yards to the front. Scipio’s tactical plan had been ruined by the dynamics of the battle itself, and he now lay exposed to Hannibal’s counterattack.

Scipio surely realized the threat. His only option was to play for time and hope for Laelius’ and Masinissa’s quick return with their cavalry. Scipio first brought the *hastati* and *principe* to a halt with trumpet signals and then ordered his *triarii* to advance. Consolidating his troops just forward of the cluttered battlefield, he formed them into a single infantry line, the usual intervals

between maniples closed. He positioned the bloodied *hastati* in the center of the line, says Livy, “and then sent the *principe* and *triarii* to take up positions in close order on both the wings and in line with the *hastati*.” In that formation, the Roman line overlapped Hannibal’s line at both ends. Evacuating what wounded he could, Scipio prepared to receive Hannibal’s attack.

But Hannibal did not attack. With 15,000 fresh troops positioned just 200 yards from Scipio’s weakened center, why didn’t he press his advantage?

tacked Scipio immediately, he would have done so at considerable disadvantage.

Hannibal had accepted a pause in the battle because he too needed time to regroup and reposition his men for battle. If we assume he was able to assemble only 9,000 of the remnants of his first two lines, his army would have comprised about 24,000 men, almost equal to Scipio's army.

Hannibal surely understood that time played to Scipio's advantage. As soon as he was able to regroup his lines, he went into the attack. Livy describes the action:

The two main bodies hurled themselves upon one another with the greatest ardor and fury.

'Many were surrounded and cut down,' writes Livy. 'Many were scattered in flight over the open plain'

Since they were equally matched, not only in numbers but also in courage, in warlike spirit and in weapons, the issue hung for a long while in the balance. Many fell on both sides, fighting with fierce determination where they stood.

The impression Livy and Polybius give in their accounts is that neither side was able to gain the advantage—until Laelius and Masinissa's cavalry squadrons arrived. Writes Livy:


Laelius and Masinissa had pursued the routed cavalry for a considerable distance; now, at the right moment, they wheeled round and charged into the rear of the enemy's line. . . . Many were surrounded and cut down where they stood; many were scattered in flight over the open plain, only to fall everywhere beneath the cavalry, the undisputed masters of the field.

Polybius observes with a more experienced military eye that the level ground permitted a more effective pursuit, and "the greater number of his [Hannibal's]

men were cut down in their ranks." Silius adds, "The Numidians, riding barebacked according to their custom, had filled the plains and broad alleys alike, and their javelins hurtled in thick clouds through the air and concealed the sky." Afoot on the plain, the fleeing Carthaginians made easy targets for these expert horsemen.

The initial cavalry charge physically and psychologically disrupted Hannibal's line, allowing incursions by the Roman maniples at several points. The dismounted Roman cavalry, then fighting as infantry, would have forced sections of the Carthaginian line to turn and defend its rear, thus exposing them to further frontal incursions by the maniples. And so the dynamic went, the Roman infantry successively isolating sections of the Carthaginian line and cutting it to pieces. At some point panic would have overtaken good sense, and soldiers would flee to the open plain, only to be picked off by Masinissa's cavalry. Most of Hannibal's men would fall in close combat.

Polybius tells us that at the end of the day 20,000 Carthaginians lay dead and that almost as many were taken prisoner. Polybius is certainly exaggerating either the number of dead or the number of prisoners. He places Roman infantry losses at 1,500 men or about 5 percent of the force, about average for a victorious Roman army. Appian, however, says Roman losses were 2,500, which, given the heavy fighting, may be more accurate.

After the battle, Hannibal and a handful of his officers fled for Hadrumetum. Scipio entered Carthage and imposed a just peace upon the vanquished city. He returned to Rome and entered the city in triumph, Livy says, "as had never been seen before." Sometime later Scipio acquired the surname *Africanus*. Livy was unable to determine how the name came about, but affirms that "Scipio was the first general to be celebrated by the name of the people he had conquered." 

For further reading, Richard Gabriel recommends his book *Scipio Africanus: Rome's Greatest General, due out this spring from Potomac Books.*