Battle of Cannae 216 BC

Carthage v Rome
Second Punic War 218-201 BC

I am sure you've heard of Hannibal, the famous soldier who crossed the Alps with his elephants. He has been called the Enemy of Rome.

Hannibal was a great general; truly one of the greatest. He had a number of great victories to his credit. I will be talking about his most outstanding piece of generalship: The Battle of Cannae.

The Battle of Cannae is one of the most influential battles in history. I expect its taught in military colleges.

I won't say much about the historical background, except, in short, Carthage and Rome were two rival powers in the western Mediterranean and just didn't get on. Carthage was located in modern day Tunisia. As Rome, then largely a state on mainland Italy, tried to expand beyond its borders it came into conflict with the Carthaginian Empire.

This conflict was actually a series of separate wars, which spread over almost 120 years (264-146BC). These were the three Punic Wars, as they're called.

Punic Wars
First 264-241 BC
Second 218-201 BC
Third 149-146 BC

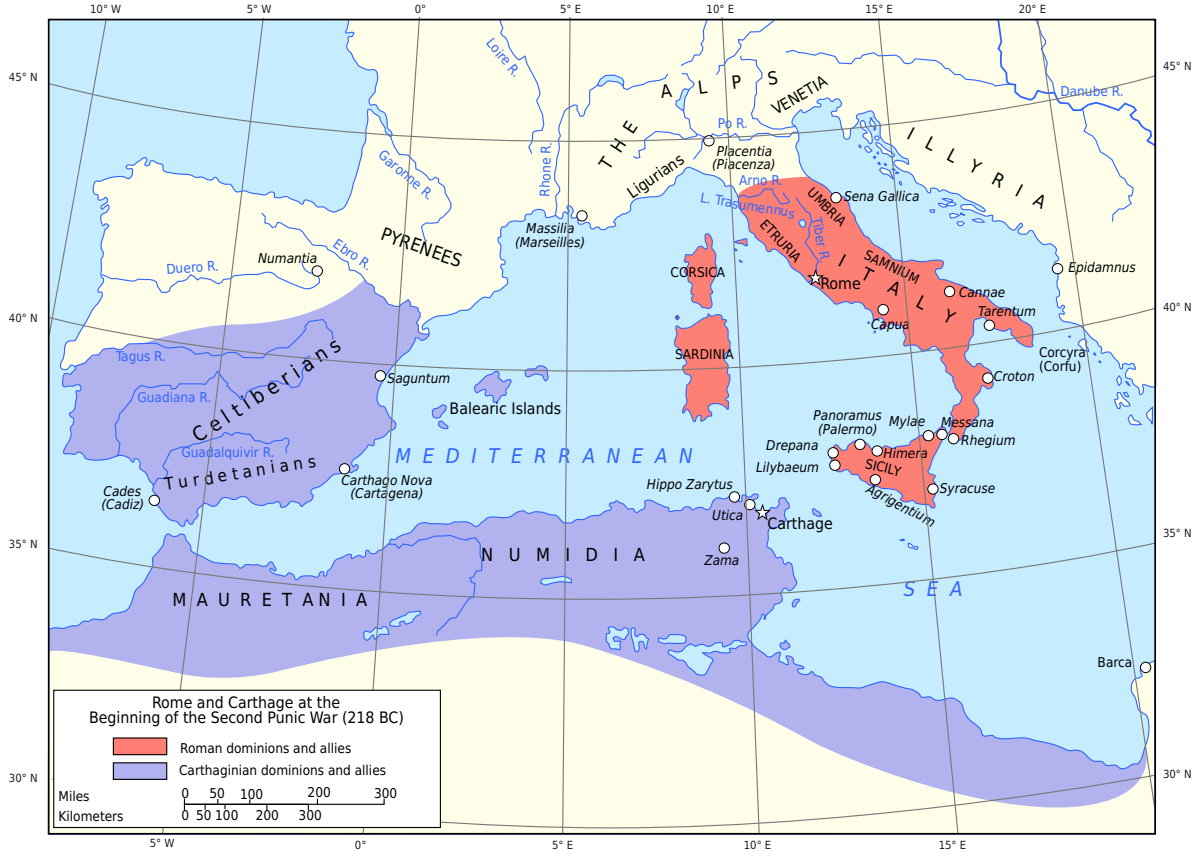
In the end, Rome was the ultimate victor and Carthage was literally wiped off the map.

However, during the Second Punic War, Hannibal did his best to upset the Roman applecart.

Early in his life, Hannibal's father, Hamilcar, made him swear to never be a friend of Rome. He swore that and said he would do all in his power to bring down Rome.

He learnt his military trade fighting in Iberia, seeking to expand the Carthaginian empire. The deaths of his father and elder brother brought him to the command of the Carthaginian army in Iberia when he was only 26.

The successful capture the supposedly neutral, but pro-Roman, city of Saguntum – a city near the modern town of Sagunto in the province of Valencia, Spain. The capture of Saguntum led to the Second Punic War.



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Carthage had been a great naval power, but had lost her naval supremacy in the First Punic War. Hannibal decided to take the war to Rome, by invading Italy and capturing Rome itself. He took his army through Iberia, Gaul and into Italy through the Alps.



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I won’t go into his journey. I’ll just say that it was not easy. Of his troops, he lost almost half and of the 34 elephants he took with him, most were lost crossing the alps and it was not long after before he only had one left

He had a couple of tremendous successes at the Battles of the Trebbia and Lake Trasimeno. After those crushing defeats, Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus – usually referred to as Fabius - was appointed as a dictator of Rome. He wasn’t too keen to engage Hannibal in open battle and employed delaying tactics, what we today might call guerilla tactics. However, this was contrary to the Roman idea of fighting opponents and eventually the scene was set for a clash near the village of Cannae in the south-east of Italy.

This time, Rome assembled their largest force to date, some 8 legions, totalling at least 80,000 troops. At that time Hannibal only had about 50,000.

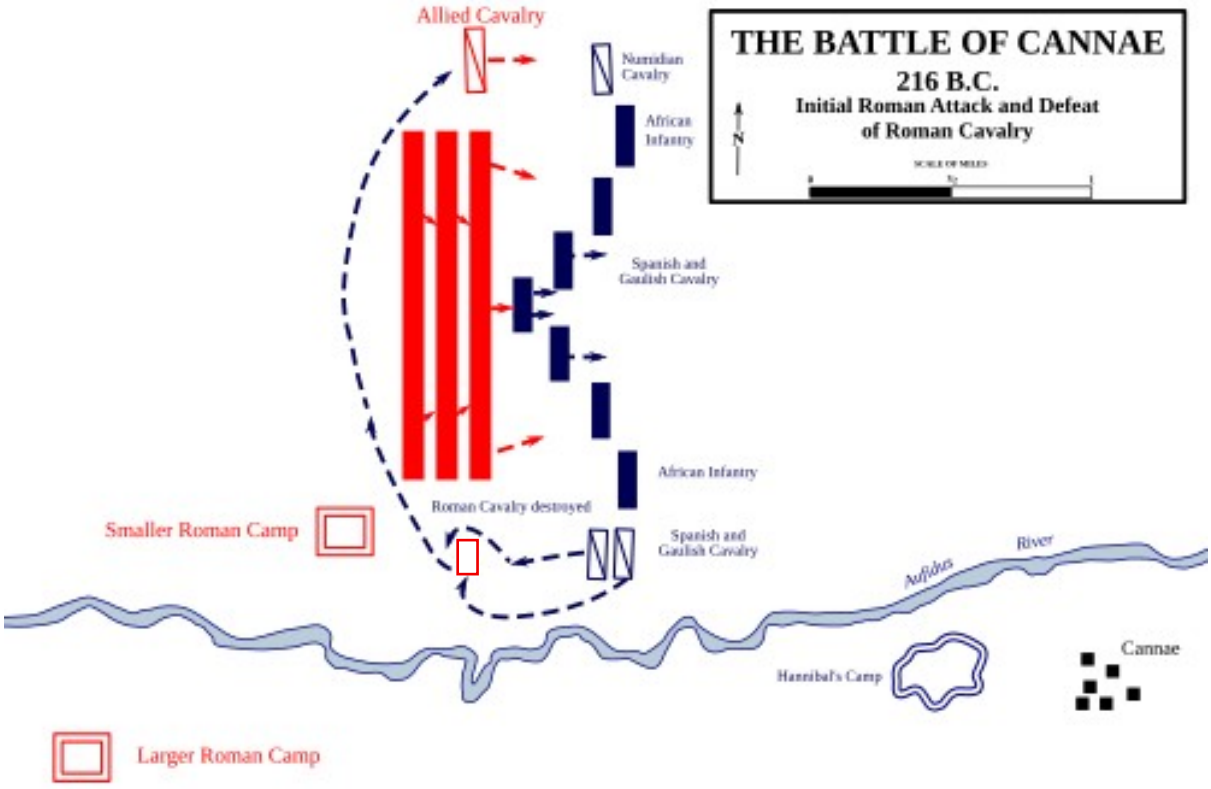
In 216 BC, new elections saw the end of Fabius’ rule and the election of new consuls.

Under Roman laws at the time, the new Roman army, really a combined force of two armies, was led by two consuls, who each took command on alternate days. When the opposing armies came near each other, one consul - Paullus - was apprehensive about engaging Hannibal unless the situation seemed very promising, but not the other – a gentleman called Varro.

Hannibal knew about Varro's keenness, so when Varro was in command, Hannibal took his army out, inviting combat. Varro took up the offer and marched his army out to attack.

Varro, presumably with his substantial numerical superiority, felt confident of victory. To ensure he would crush the Carthaginians, he had the troops form up in a tighter formation.

Hannibal, faced with such a larger opposition came up with a formation that would encourage the Romans to push forward in the centre while he closed in on their sides and rear.



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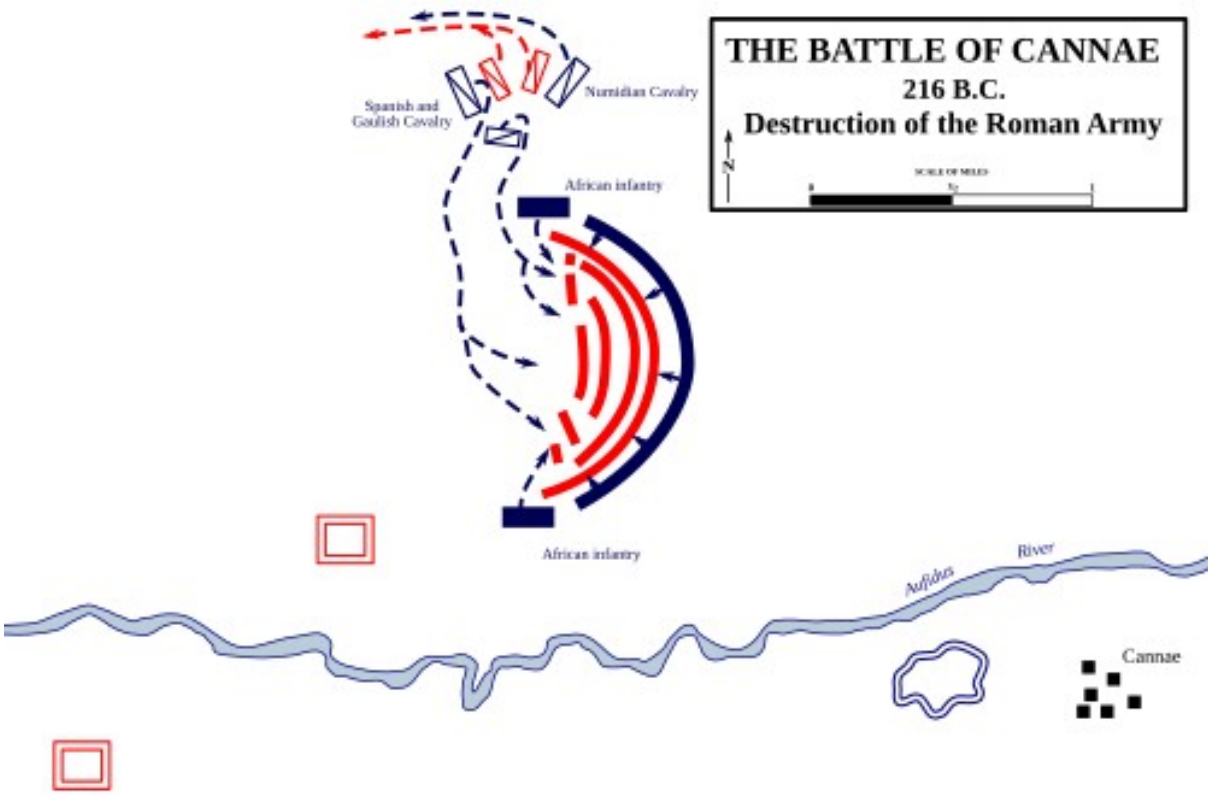
Hannibal placed his Gallic and Iberian troops in the centre and his more formidable African troops on the wings.

Both sides had cavalry, which, as usual, was placed on the wings. Although, in total numbers, Hannibal was heavily outnumbered, he actually had more cavalry than the Romans. He had some 10,000 cavalry, against the Romans' 6,400. He placed 6,000, on his left flank, facing about 2,400 Roman horsemen.

The battle saw the Roman infantry advance to fight the Carthaginian infantry, while the cavalry forces eyed each other. The Carthaginian cavalry on the left attacked the smaller Roman cavalry in front of them and quickly defeated them. They then swept around the rear of the Roman infantry and in conjunction with Hannibal's right-wing cavalry attacked the remaining Roman cavalry and forced them off the field of battle.



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As the massed Roman infantry legions pressed forward, the Gauls and Iberians deliberately fell back, but in good order, maintaining their line, until their crescent, concave starting shape became a convex shape.

At this point, Hannibal's crack African troops swung into the sides of the Roman infantry … and his cavalry, having disposed of the Roman cavalry swept into the back of the Roman infantry … a total encirclement.

Up to that point, the Roman infantry, pushing back the Carthaginian line in the centre, believed they were on the cusp of a great victory.

If you put yourself in the position of one of the Roman legionaries, either fighting in the front line or some ranks behind waiting to get stuck in. You imagine everything's going fine, the enemy is being forced back, you're surrounded by thousands of your comrades all cheering each other on, and believing that victory is certain. You probably don't hear the shouts and screams coming from way behind and can't see much for the clouds of dust churned up by tens of thousands of feet. … Then when we you do start to hear some worrying cries, it's all too late … and panic sets in.

Hannibal's encirclement of the larger Roman army delivers an absolutely crushing victory. Of the 80,000 Romans in the battle that day, perhaps no more than 10,000 manage to escape. Among the dead is the cautious consul Paullus. The other consul, Varro is one of the lucky ones.

The Carthaginians don't get off scot-free, but their losses of 6-8,000 are much less.

Although this was an absolutely crushing victory; the worst or one of the worst Rome ever suffered; it did not lead to Hannibal winning the war. Over a period of some 15 years, he was able to defeat the Romans sent against him, but he was never able to capture Rome. In the end he was summoned back to Carthage to confront the Roman army which was threatening the capital. At the Battle of Zama in 202 BC he was defeated. In 201 BC, the Second Punic war was over.

Hannibal was a great general, particularly as a tactician. Some might argue differently, but I don't see him as being as great as say Alexander the Great, but he truly was one of the world's great generals.

Cannae was famous for its double-envelopment and annihilation of the enemy. There had been such battles before, for example, the Battle of Marathon, but it seems unlikely Hannibal either knew about them or was influenced by them.

Cannae was a battle which has influenced generals down the ages; all hoping to achieve such an annihilation of their enemy.