

The Second Punic War and the Ineffectiveness of Hannibal's War Elephants

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In 218 B.C.E., the Roman Republic faced the greatest crisis in its history as renowned Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca marched on Rome.¹ He began his surprise campaign by crossing the Alps to invade Roman soil, famously bringing 37 war elephants with him.² War elephants had been used extensively in Southeast Asia and were introduced to the Hellenistic World after Alexander the Great's conquest there. Archers and other ranged units were mounted in perches or towers on the elephants' backs, while the elephants themselves trampled and smashed into enemy frontlines as the riders fired at their targets below. Historians often exalt Hannibal for his use of these animals in warfare. Hannibal did employ war elephants to some degree of success; however, their impracticality and unruly nature hindered his campaign more than they provided an advantage.

The cost of the elephants, along with the logistics of transporting them, was one of the first major hurdles Hannibal faced. Carthage, primarily a merchant society, was not traditionally warlike. As a result, its armed forces were almost entirely made up of mercenaries. During the First Punic War, Rome accumulated enough naval power to threaten Carthage with a land invasion.³ For Hannibal, a fast campaign on Roman soil was the only way to prevent such an invasion and achieve victory. After crossing the Alps and engaging in the Battle of Trebia, only

¹ Brian Caven, *The Punic Wars* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1980), 98.

² Donald R. Dudley and T. A. Dorey, *Rome Against Carthage* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 38.

³ Harriot I. Flower, ed., *The Cambridge Guide to the Roman Republic* (Cambridge, UK: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2004), 76-77.

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one of Hannibal's elephants survived.⁴ This led to the only instance where Carthage supplied Hannibal, in 215 B.C.E., with 40 replacement elephants.⁵ However, this expenditure proved to be hardly worth the effort since specialty mercenaries had to be hired and the elephants trained for two to three decades.⁶ The resources required for these elephants were costly and could have been better used elsewhere, such as hiring more foot soldiers and purchasing additional weapons or food rations, all of which Hannibal desperately lacked throughout the war.

Many consider Hannibal's use of elephants at the Battle of Trebia on December 22, 218 B.C.E., as the best example of the successful deployment of war elephants⁷; however, accounts from writers at the time suggest that Hannibal's elephants were stampeding, highlighting the unpredictability and unreliability of war elephants. Polybius, a classical historian from ancient Greece, tells us that Hannibal's elephants were positioned at the front of his army, on the left and right flanks. This placed them in direct contact with the Roman infantry.⁸ While the Romans had yet to devise a clear strategy to counter them, they knew that war elephants could easily be provoked into panic. The Romans attempted to cause a stampede, as Livy, another classical historian from ancient Rome, records: "Maddened with pain and terror, they were beginning to rush wildly on their own men, when Hannibal ordered them to be driven away to the left wing against the auxiliary Gauls on the Roman right. There they instantly produced unmistakable

⁴ E. T. Salmon, "The Strategy of the Second Punic War," *Greece & Rome*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1960): 131–42 at 138.

⁵ Caven, *The Punic Wars*, 154.

⁶ H. H. Scullard, "Hannibal's Elephants," *The Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society*, vol. 8, no. 3/4 (1948): 158–68 at 159.

⁷ J. F. Lazenby, *Hannibal's War: A Military History of the Second Punic War* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1978), 56.

⁸ Polybius, *The Histories*, Book 3, trans. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh: *The Project Gutenberg EBook of the Histories of Polybius*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/44126/pg44126-images.html>.

panic and flight, and the Romans had fresh cause for alarm when they saw their auxiliaries routed.”⁹ The Gauls, unfamiliar with elephants, did not know how to deal with them as the Romans did. Hannibal's quick thinking and decisive action turned this potential disaster into victory, as he used the animal's panic against his enemies. Michael B. Charles and Peter Rhodan, historians specializing in ancient Greece and Rome, similarly conclude: “the Trebia, rather than an entirely successful deployment of elephants, came perilously close to precisely the opposite.”¹⁰ This suggest that without quick decision-making the Battle of Trebia most likely would have ended in a disastrous loss for the Carthaginians. The panic of the elephants demonstrated that the use of war elephants acted as more of a liability to be managed rather than an advantage to be gained.

Rome's response to Hannibal's success further diminished the usefulness of war elephants, as Rome employed unconventional methods to counter them. Early in Hannibal's campaign, he won what is considered one of the most one-sided victories in history at the Battle of Cannae, in 216 B.C.E. During Cannae, Gaius Terentius Varro, one of the consuls of Rome, survived but was blamed for the defeat, leading the Roman Senate to revert to the strategy of Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus. During his earlier dictatorship in 218–217 B.C.E., Fabius had earned the nickname “*Cunctator*” or “The Delayer” because of his use of “Fabian Tactics.” Fabian Tactics consisted of fast-moving light skirmishes and guerrilla warfare. Fabius would harass the enemy's forces and cut off their supply lines, forcing Hannibal into a war of attrition

⁹ Livy, *History of Rome*, Book 21, trans. Canon Roberts (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1905), <https://www.yorku.ca/pswarney/Texts/livy-21.htm>.

¹⁰ Michael B. Charles and Peter Rhodan, “‘Magister Elephantorvm’: A Reappraisal of Hannibal's Use of Elephants,” *The Classical World*, vol. 100, no. 4 (2007): 363–89 at 376.

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that delayed him from making further advances.¹¹ Fabius' strategy gave Rome enough time eventually to gather resources to threaten the Carthaginian mainland, thus drawing Hannibal away from Italy.¹² Jacob Edwards, a historian who defends Hannibal's use of war elephants, argues: "Importantly, too, a significant elephant presence may have enabled Hannibal to deal with Rome's saviour Fabius 'The Delayer.'" ¹³ However, the cumbersome beasts actually made Hannibal more susceptible to Fabius's strategy. In direct response to Edwards, Charles and Rhaodan retort: "[More elephants] would not have helped Hannibal at all in dealing with Fabian tactics. Indeed, a large number of slow-moving elephants would have slowed down the movement of his troops even further. It would also have made Hannibal's forces even more vulnerable to enemy attack."¹⁴ This is because war elephants found their usefulness in more traditional "set-piece" warfare. They would destroy enemy formations and stop enemy cavalry from charging. Fabian's guerilla tactics were unaffected by their presence since his forces did not have to engage in direct combat. The Roman guerrilla fighters dealt with Hannibal's elephants, freeing the cavalry to charge the Carthaginian infantry.¹⁵ Fabius's response to Hannibal's attacks meant that his use of elephants only stifled his campaign and cost him valuable time, resources, and men.

The only other major battle in which Hannibal used elephants was his defeat at the Battle of Zama in 202 B.C.E., a battle in which his elephants were of little use and arguably caused

¹¹ Philip Sabin, "The Mechanics of Battle In the Second Punic War," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement*, no. 67 (1996): 59–79 at 65.

¹² Lazenby, *Hannibal's War*, 194.

¹³ Jacob Edwards, "The Irony of Hannibal's Elephants," *Latomus*, vol. 60, no. 4 (2001): 900–905 at 904.

¹⁴ Rhaodan, "Magister Elephantorum," 17.

¹⁵ Rhaodan, "Magister Elephantorum," 16.

great harm. At this time, an assault was launched on Northern Africa by Consul Scipio Africanus that forced Hannibal out of Italy and into Carthage. To prepare for this assault, the Carthaginians sought out more elephants. We know this from the prominent Greek historian Appian of Alexandria, who records, “When the Carthaginians learned these things they sent Hasdrubal, the son of Gisco, to hunt elephants.”¹⁶ This tells us that Hannibal was still confident in the elephants’ abilities and relied on them in his strategy. Having foreseen Hannibal’s reliance on elephants, Scipio implemented measures against them. He shaped passageways in his infantry formation, which were filled with foot soldiers who could swiftly make way for the elephants and attack them from either side.¹⁷ This meant that the elephants chose the path of least resistance and avoided harming the Roman formation. Due to the provocation by the infantry, some of the elephants trampled into Hannibal’s left and right cavalry wings.¹⁸ Scipio’s strategy to counter Hannibal’s elephants and the ensuing incident undoubtedly influenced the outcome of Zama. In the first century C.E., a prominent writer named Frontinus aimed to capture military greatness in history. In his writings, he cited Scipio’s formation against war elephants as an example: “This shrewd scheme of arrangement was undoubtedly the cause of his victory.”¹⁹ Frontinus understood that Scipio’s strategy was the key to victory as Scipio recognized the vulnerability of war elephants. Hannibal had overlooked this vulnerability, giving the Romans a tremendous advantage when fighting against them. Thus, the Battle of Zama serves as further

¹⁶ Appian (ca. 95–165 C.E.), *The Punic Wars*, trans. Horace White, *Loeb Classical Library*, <https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Appian/home.html>.

¹⁷ Willam Morris, *Hannibal Soldier, Statesman, Patriot, and the Crisis of the Struggle Between Carthage and Rome* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1901), 316.

¹⁸ Rhaodan, “Magister Elephantorvm,” 21.

¹⁹ Frontinus (ca. 40–103 C.E.), *Stratagems*, Book 2, trans. Charles E. Bennett, *Loeb Classical Library*, https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Frontinus/Strategemata/2*.html#4.

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evidence that Hannibal's reliance on war elephants was misguided, since any value they brought Hannibal was heavily outweighed by the impracticality and hazard they imposed on him.

In conclusion, during the Second Punic War, Hannibal's elephants played no significant role in any victory apart from the Battle of Trebia, where their greatest contribution was preventing disaster. As Roman soldiers adopted Fabian Tactics, the elephants' presence increasingly hindered Hannibal's Italian campaign. Ultimately, Scipio's effective use of countermeasures at the Battle of Zama delivered a crushing defeat to Hannibal. Combined with the challenges of acquiring and training the elephants, these factors meant that they served more as a hindrance than an advantage to Hannibal.

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