44. Hannibal had pitched his camp near the village of Cannae, with the wind called 
Vulturnus at his back; the region is parched and dry, and the wind carries clouds of 
dust. The position was not only comfortable but would bring a distinct military ad-
vantage when they formed for battle, for they would have only their backs exposed 
to the blasts and fight against an enemy blinded by enveloping dust. The cons-
suls were careful enough in scouting the route as they followed the Carthaginians, 
but when they arrived at Cannae and had the enemy in sight they built separate 
camps, at a considerable distance from one another, and divided their troops as 
they had done previously. The river Aufidus flowed past either camp and afforded 
approach to the watering parties of each, but they had to watch for opportunities and 
sometimes fight. The lesser camp was on the other side of the Aufidus, and 
there water could be fetched more freely because the enemy had no guard on the 
farther bank.

The a terrain was suitable for cavalry action, in which arm Hannibal was invincible, 
and he conceived hopes that the consuls would afford him an opportunity for battle; 
he marshaled his forces, therefore, and provoked his opponents by flying charges of 
Numidians. Again the Roman camp was embroiled by insubordination and by dis-
agreement between the consuls. Paulus chided Varro with the foolhardiness of 
Sempronius and Flaminius, and Varro instanced Fabius as the specious model for 
timid and slow-moving generals. He called gods and men to witness that it was in no 
way his fault that Hannibal had assumed squatter’s rights in Italy: he was tied down by 
his colleague, and the soldiers who were indignant and eager to fight had sword and 
buckler taken from their hands. Paulus protested that if mischance befell the legions 
when they were exposed to ill-advised and imprudent battle he would be free of 
blame though he would share the consequences. Men whose tongues were so nimble 
and rash, he warned, must have hands equally vigorous when it came to fighting.

45. While the Romans were frittering time in altercation rather than deliberation 
Hannibal had kept his troops in formation till late in the day; now he withdrew 
them to his palisade and sent the Numidians across the river to attack a water-
ing party from the lesser camp. This disorganized group the Numidians routed 
by their shouting and turbulence before they had well reached the opposite bank, 
and their rush carried them to an outpost in front of the rampart and even to the 
very gates of the camp. The Romans were outraged that their very camp should
be menaced by a disorderly troop of mere auxiliaries; all that kept them from crossing
the river forthwith and forming for battle was the circumstance that the supreme com-
mander that day was Paulus. But on the day following, when it was Varro’s turn,
Varro posted the battle signal without consulting his colleague, formed his troops,
and led them across the river. Paulus could refuse approval but not support, and
so he followed.

After crossing the river they were joined by the troops, from the smaller camp. Then
drawing up their line, they placed the Roman cavalry on the right wing nearer
the river and next to them the infantry. The cavalry of the allies held the ex-
treme left, with their infantry between them and the Roman legions. The javelin
men along with the rest of the light-armed troops made up the front line, The two con-
suls commanded the wings, Varro left and Aemilius the right, while Geminus
Servilius had charge of the center.

46. At daybreak Hannibal crossed the river after sending ahead the Balearics and
the other light-armed troops. He located each division in the battle line in the
order in which it had crossed. On the left wing, opposite the Roman horsemen, he
placed the Gallic and Spanish cavalry, and the Numidians on the right. The infan-
try formed the center, with the Spaniards and Gauls in the middle between the
Africans on each side. The Africans were armed with the equipment captured at
Trebia and at Trasumennus and had almost the appearance of a Roman division.
The shields of the Gauls and Spaniards were almost alike, but their swords were
very different both in size and in shape; the blades of the Gauls were very long
and had no points, while the Spaniards, who were accustomed to fight by thrust-
ing rather than cutting, had short and efficient pointed weapons. The costumes of
these peoples as well as their great stature gave them an extremely formidable
appearance: the Gauls were naked above the waist, while the Spaniards were dressed
in purple-bordered tunics of remarkable whiteness. The total number of infantry in
the Carthaginian line was forty thousand, with ten thousand cavalry. The left wing
was commanded by Hasdrubal, the right by Maharbal, while Hannibal himself
with his brother Mago had the center. Whether the lines were so disposed inten-
tionally or not, as it happened the Romans faced the south and Hannibal the north
so that the sun shone in the eyes of neither army. But the wind, which the natives
called the Volturinus, was against the Romans and, blowing dust in their eyes, made
it difficult for them to see.

47. The auxiliaries charged with a shout and the fighting began with the light-
armed troops. Next, the Roman right wing clashed with the Carthaginian left.
They were obliged to meet head on and could not resort to the usual cavalry tactics,
since the river on one side and the infantry on the other left no room to maneuver.
Each side drove straight ahead and the horses were brought to a standstill in a tight
press. The riders could only grapple; with their enemies and drag them to the
ground. Soon most of the horsemen were fighting on foot; the battle was violent
but brief and soon the Roman cavalry turned and fled in defeat. Just as the horsemen
were routed the infantry began to fight. At first the Gauls and Spaniards fought
fiercely and bravely, as long as they maintained their line unbroken. But finally after long and repeated efforts the compact and even Roman front pushed back the thin projecting wedge of the enemy line. As the enemy was hurled back and retreated in panic the infantry pressed forward without stopping through the line of unresisting fugitives, until they came even with the African reserves on the wings which were slightly behind the middle of the line. As the center was pushed back, the enemy line first straightened, then yielding further bulged inward and formed an arc with the Africans standing on each end. As the Romans rushed recklessly forward into this pocket the African wings extended around, enclosing them in the rear. At this the Romans were forced to turn from the Gauls and Spaniards, whom they had been pursuing and cutting to pieces, and begin the contest anew with the Africans. The battle now was extremely unequal, for not only were the Romans surrounded, but after fruitlessly winning one battle they were exhausted, while their enemy was fresh and vigorous.

48. Now the fighting had commenced sporadically on the Roman left, where the cavalry of the allies was opposed by the Numidians. The Carthaginians began the battle with a trick. Five hundred Numidians hid swords under their corselets in addition to their regular arms and pretended to desert, riding forward from their lines with their shields behind their backs. When they reached the Roman lines they leaped from their horses and flung their shields and spears at the feet of the enemy, who received them into the Roman lines and ordered them to take their place in the rear. Until the fighting became widespread they kept still; but as soon as everyone was occupied with fighting, they snatched up shields which lay everywhere among the piles of bodies, and attacked the rear of the Roman line. By cutting at the backs of the Romans and hamstringing them they caused great injury and even greater panic and confusion. The Romans now were routed in one area and in another were struggling hopelessly in a desperate situation. The fighting on the right wing now was slow; so Hasdrubal, who was commander in that area, sent some of the Numidians from the middle of this wing in pursuit of Roman fugitives. The Spanish and Gallic cavalry he sent to aid the Africans, who had exhausted themselves with killing rather than fighting.

49. On the Roman side Paulus had been wounded by a sling at the beginning of the battle. Nevertheless time and again he confronted Hannibal; leading a compact division of cavalry he restored the battle in several places. As he became too weak even to control his mount the horsemen were finally forced to abandon their horses in order to protect him. When Hannibal was informed that the consul had ordered his cavalry to dismount, he is said to have exclaimed, “I would prefer him to deliver them to me in chains!” However, the dismounted cavalry fought like men who knew they would be conquered and chose to die in their tracks rather than flee. The victors were enraged at them for dragging on the battle and cut to pieces those whom they could not rout. Finally, however, the few wounded and exhausted survivors were routed and dispersed; those who were able caught their horses and fled.
As Gnaeus Lentulus, a military tribune, rode by on his horse he discovered the consul, covered with blood, sitting on a rock. “Lucius Aemilius,” he cried, “you are the one man whom the gods should consider innocent of blame for today’s misfortune. Here, take this horse while you still have the strength and I am here to help you up and protect you. Do not make this day more disastrous because of a consul’s death. Even without that there is enough grief and tears.” To this the consul replied, “You are a brave man, Lentulus. Heaven be with you. But don’t waste time pitying me or you won’t be able to escape from the enemy. Go, tell the senators publicly to fortify Rome before the conqueror arrives. Tell Quintus Fabius privately that Lucius Aemilius lived and died mindful of his precepts. Let me die here among my slaughtered soldiers. Better this than to be prosecuted after my consulship, or to accuse my colleague to protect my own innocence.” As the consul said this a crowd of fugitives suddenly appeared, pursued closely by the enemy. Not realizing who the consul was they cut him down, while Lentulus escaped on his horse in the confusion. The Romans now were totally routed.

Seven thousand men fled to the smaller camp, ten thousand to the larger. Almost two thousand fled into the village of Cannae, but since the village was unfortified they were immediately captured by Carthalo and his cavalry. The other consul, either by chance or purpose, managed not to fall in with any group of these fugitives but escaped to Venusia with about fifty horsemen. It is said that forty-five thousand infantry and twenty-seven hundred cavalry were killed, of whom about half were allies. Among these the quaestors of both consuls, Lucius Atilius and Lucius Furius Bibaculus, twenty-nine military tribunes, and several former consuls, praetors, and aediles fell. These included Gnaeus Servilius Geminus and Marcus Minucius; the master of horse of the previous year, who also had been consul several years before. In addition there were killed eighty senators and men who had held offices which qualified them for the senate. It is said that the captured numbered three thousand infantry and fifteen hundred cavalry.

50. This was the Battle of Cannae, a disaster as famous as that at Allia. Its consequences were less serious because the enemy was slow in pursuing his advantage; but the loss of lives was more appalling. For while the flight to Allia proved fatal to the city, it saved the army. At Cannae barely fifty men followed one consul in flight; almost all the rest joined the other in death.

51. All Hannibal’s officers surrounded him, hailing him victor. As a reward for completing this great war they persuaded him to allow his exhausted men to rest the remainder of the day and overnight. On the other hand, Maharbal, the commander of the cavalry, did not think they should delay a moment. “No,” he said, “you must realize what has been accomplished in this battle. In five days you will feast victoriously in the Capital. Follow me. I will go ahead with the cavalry and they will learn of your arrival before they know you are coming.” However, to Hannibal his victory seemed too great and fortunate to comprehend immediately. He answered that he appreciated Maharbal’s eagerness, but he needed time to think about what should be done. To these words Maharbal replied, “The gods do not
grant all their gifts to one man, Hannibal. You know how to conquer but not how to use your victory.” The delay of that day is thought to have been the salvation of the city and of the empire.

The next day at daybreak they set to work collecting the spoils and examining the results of their slaughter—a horrible sight even for enemies. Many thousands of Romans, cavalry and infantry, lay heaped indiscriminately, as chance had united them in battle or in flight. Some were aroused as the early morning cold stung their wounds and rose up from the carnage covered with blood, only to be cut down by the enemy. Some they found who were still alive but had their thighs or tendons cut through; these bared their necks and throats and begged them to drain whatever blood was left. Some were found with their heads buried in the ground who had apparently suffocated themselves by digging holes, and covering earth over their heads. They were especially awed at the sight of a Numidian with torn ears and nostrils who was pulled still alive from beneath a dead Roman. The Roman had been unable to hold a weapon in his hands and died frantically rending his enemy with his teeth.