

# Hannibal smashes his foes “at the very gates of Rome”

**IN JUNE 217 BC**, Rome waited for news. For almost half a century, the republic had been locked in a bitter rivalry with its chief Mediterranean competitor, Carthage. Now war had broken out again, and this time the outcome seemed terrifyingly uncertain. In a stunning manoeuvre, the Carthaginians' 30-year-old commander, Hannibal, had led tens of thousands of troops, cavalry and elephants north from modern-day Spain and across the Alps into Italy. In December Hannibal had crushed a Roman army in the Po Valley, and by the spring of 217 he was in central Italy. Never had Rome's survival seemed in greater danger.

Even Hannibal's enemies recognised in him a worthy opponent. Centuries later, the Roman historian Livy told his readers that Hannibal took after his famous father, Hamilcar, with “the same bright look; the same fire in his eye, the same trick of countenance and features”. Crossing the Apennines, the Carthaginian general had lost an eye to conjunctivitis and thousands of men to disease. But nothing dimmed his desire for victory. The problem was that Hannibal was fighting on foreign soil. The Romans could afford to wait and hope that he ran out of food and allies. His priority, therefore, was to lure them into battle.

It was Hannibal's good fortune that the Roman commander, the consul Gaius Flaminius, was nowhere near his equal. Flaminius was camped at Arretium, but Hannibal had a plan to winkle him out. “He calculated,” wrote the Roman historian Polybius, “that, if he passed the camp and made a descent into the district beyond, Flaminius (partly for fear of popular reproach and partly out of personal irritation) would be unable to endure watching passively the devastation of the country but would spontaneously follow him... and give him opportunities for attack.”

Hannibal was right. As the countryside went up in flames, Flaminius chafed at the bit. Some of his officers urged him to wait for reinforcements, but Flaminius was worried about his reputation. “They should think about what would certainly be said by their fellow citizens back in the city,” he replied angrily, “when they saw their countryside being laid waste almost up to the very gates of Rome.”

What followed was one of the greatest disasters in Roman history. Hannibal had chosen his ground well, stationing his men in the wooded ridges above Lake Trasimene. And at dawn on 21 June, as the Roman columns

came into view, he knew the gods were with him. “It was an unusually foggy morning,” wrote Polybius. Yet Flaminius had not even bothered to send scouts ahead. When Hannibal struck, according to Polybius, most of the Romans were “cut to pieces while still in their marching formations and unable to support one another... So they were annihilated before they even realised what was happening, and while they were still wondering how they should react.”

It must have been a dreadful scene, the air

ringing with steel and screams, the earth soaked with blood. “In such a thick fog,” wrote Livy, “ears were of more use than eyes; the men turned their gaze in every direction as they heard the groans of the wounded

and the blows on shield or breastplate, and the mingled shouts of triumph and cries of panic.”

Flaminius himself was cut down, and Roman resistance turned into

flight. His men ran into the lake and tried to swim to safety, but it was “an endless and hopeless task”. They either drowned in the lake, or struggled back to the shore, where the Carthaginians were waiting with swords drawn. Afterwards the waters ran red with blood.

In Rome, news of the defeat came as a terrible shock. Weeping women gathered at the city gates, desperate for news of their loved ones, while “the people flocked into the Forum in a great state of panic and confusion”. Yet the blow they most feared – an attack on the capital – never fell.

Hannibal lacked the siege engines to take Rome itself, and instead of advancing on the city, he moved south to the fertile soil of Campania. Perhaps even then he wondered whether his strategy of taking the fight to the Romans would ever really work. The battle of Lake Trasimene is remembered today as one of the most stunning victories in military history, yet in the long run it mattered little. Everybody remembers Hannibal and his elephants, yet as he would have been the first to point out, it was Rome, not Carthage, that won the war. **H**

Dominic Sandbrook's latest book is *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974–1979* (Allen Lane). His BBC Two history of Cold War Britain will be broadcast in the autumn

**BBC**



**A big day in history**  
by Dominic Sandbrook

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June 217 BC



A 16th-century painting of the battle of Lake Trasimene, which is “today remembered as one of the most stunning victories in military history”