

The African Campaign, 204 BC to 202 BC

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Introduction

The Second Punic War must rank as Ancient version of a World War. From the straits of Gibraltar to the coast of Asia the armies and fleets of the two mighty alliances fought each other. History was to prove that the victor of this war would become the master of the known world.

While the truly decisive battles were fought in Spain and Italy, when the Romans had finally all but won they needed to take the war to the home of the Carthaginians, Africa. It was the African campaign which ended all Carthaginian offensives in Italy and which ended the war. Failure in this theatre may have left Carthage with a still strong position in Africa, a position which may have allowed them to strike back while Romans were occupied in Greece. This was the campaign which ended it all.

The First Raid - 217 BC

The ex-consul Gnaeus Servilius Geminus sailed with 120 quinqueremes to Sardinia and Corsica. He then set sail for Africa and made a landing of the undefended coast. While plundering the countryside a Carthaginian army appeared and attacked the Romans. The Romans were quickly routed by this surprise attack and retreated to their fleet where they embarked on their ships and departed. Once back in Sicily the combined force was put under the control of Crassus Titus Otacilius.

In 217BC Roman launched their first raid of the African coast, more as an annoyance than for any real military gain. It was probably made more as revenge for similar Carthaginian raids. Geminus had a force of 120 quinqueremes, which would of carried about 36,000 oarsmen and ships crew and between 4,800 to 14,400 marines, which would of been legionaries. As he sailed down from Sardinia he probably first landed in Africa around Hippo Diarrhytus and would of hugged the coast till he reached Utica or even Carthage. This was not a long journey but covered the richest part of the African coast. Somewhere along this journey his raiders on land were met by a Carthaginian army, defeated and scattered. Losses are unknown, but as Geminus sailed back home almost immediately and lost his command as soon as he got back, losses would not of been light. This defeat made it very clear that Rome was not ready for an invasion of the African mainland.

The Roman fleet was placed under the command of Crassus, who learned the lesson of his predecessors defeat well. He avoided any land conflict and kept to raiding and naval battles. A strategy which was to succeed.

The Second Raid, total success - 215 BC

The Romans sent a fleet under Crassus Titus Otacilius to Africa to raid the coast. After a successful raid he sailed to Sardinia where he defeated a Carthaginian fleet, the same one which brought Hasdrubal the Bald to Sardinia.

After a gap of one year Crassus decided to raid the African coast. He would of recouped his losses from the minor diaster in 217BC, however the bulk of the fleet was send elsewhere leaving Crassus with probably only 25 quinqueremes. During 215BC 80 quinqueremes under the command of Flaccius rejoined him and with this combined fleet of 105 quinqueremes he sailed to Africa. His raid would of been fast and very brief, probably landing around Utica and setting sail directly North to Sardinia, which probably avoid any possibility of being intercepted by the Carthaginian fleet in Carthage. In Sardinian he defeated a Carthaginian fleet of 60 quinqueremes and then he sailed back to Sicily. This was the patten of raiding which was to continue until Scipio finally landed in Africa.

The Revolt of Syphax - 213 BC

Syphax, the major leader of the Numidian tribes revolted and joined the Romans. The Romans sent men to help Syphax train his infantry, and with this force he managed to defeat a Carthaginian army. As a result Carthage recalled Hasdrubal from Spain to suppress the revolt. By backing Syphax opponent, Gala, Hasdrubal was able to amass a large army of Numidians commanded by Masinissa together with his smaller Carthaginian force. This combined army met Syphax and defeated him. It was said 30,000 men died in this battle. Syphax retreated to the far Western part of Africa and amassed another army but Masinissa followed him and finally forced Syphax to come to terms with Carthage. Hasdrubal sailed back to Spain soon after.

For whatever reasons the leader of the Numidians decided he was going to revolt from Carthage. He must of made considerable preparations as he got Roman help to train his infantry. Exactly what he was revolting from is a bit unclear, possibly the Carthaginians had a fairly tight control of Numidian and all he wanted to do was free Numidian from Carthaginian control. On the other hand he may of decided to attack Carthage and take territory. The problem with the last theory is that its hard to believe he actually intended to conquer Carthage. Whatever the reason his new army managed to defeat a Carthaginian army. This caused panic in Carthage and Hasdrubal Barca was recalled from Spain to deal with the problem. Its unclear if he brought any troops with him, however regardless Carthage would of had sufficient troops available anyway.

Hasdrubal first allied himself with any Numidian opposition to Syphax and got the full support of Gala and Masinissa. Using this alliance he amassed a large Numidian army and with his smaller Carthaginian force attacked Syphax. The result was a very bloody battle, with the losses of 30,000 men. This indicates the size of each army would of been in the area of 30,000 to 40,000 men, with possibly no more than 15,000 Carthaginians. Syphax was totally defeated and he withdrew deep into Western Numidian to raise a new army. However Masinissa followed him and forced him to come to terms.

Hasdrubal Barca sailed back to Spain soon after this and Syphax was made into a loyal Carthaginian ally by allowing him to marry Hasdrubal Gisgo's daughter. This alliance held firm until the very end of the war.

The final battle of this revolt is interesting as it indicates however the war started it ended up as a civil war, between opposing Numidian factions. Once again the exact situation is unclear, but one possible scenario is that Carthage keep Numidia weak by keeping it divided. Syphax on the other hand was not the sort of Numidian leader that would like this state to continue and it was his attempt to

unify the Numidians that may have caused all the trouble. This stands to reason because Syphax spent the rest of the war unifying Numidia diplomatically, which actually finally caused Masinissa to revolt and join the Romans.

The Third Raid - 212 BC

The Romans sent a fleet to Africa to raid under Titus Otacilius with 80 quinqueremes.

After a gap of two years the Romans were back in Africa, this time under the command of Titus Otacilius. His fleet number 80 quinqueremes and his raid would of been similar to the previous one, once again landing around Utica and leaving as soon as there was any real opposition. The Romans left a fleet of 20 quinqueremes in Sicily, indicated the pure raiding nature of this action. The fact that the Carthaginians had failed to intercept the last three raids at sea gives us an indication of how far Carthaginian naval skills had dropped.

One interesting scenario would of been a Roman raid during 213BC, which may have had the effect of supporting the Numidian revolt.

The Fourth Raid - 210 BC

Rome sent a fleet of 50 quinqueremes to Africa under the command of Marcus Valerius Messalla. This force raided the coast and returned to Lilybaeum 15 days after leaving Sicily.

After a gap of two years the Romans were back, this time with only 50 quinqueremes under the command of Valerius. This time the Romans left 50 quinqueremes back in Sicily, which indicates the raiding nature of this operation. The fact the raid only lasted 15 days also indicated the Romans were not hanging around too long. The Carthaginians once again failed to intercept the Romans.

The Fifth raid - 208 BC

The Romans sent Marcus Valerius with 100 quinqueremes to Africa to raid. After causing widespread damage the Carthaginians sent a fleet of 83 quinqueremes against him, which was defeated. Marcus Valerius Messalla then sailed back to Lilybaeum.

Again after a gap of two years the Romans were back in Africa. This time with a very large fleet of 100 quinqueremes under the command of Valerius, the same Roman commander who raided Africa in 210BC. This time there was a naval battle between his fleet and a Carthaginian fleet of 83 quinqueremes, which was defeated. The fact the Carthaginians came out indicates the Romans were there for a lot longer than normal and was causing a bit too much damage for comfort. The casualties are unknown, but Carthage raised a fleet of 70 quinqueremes the following year, which may indicate losses of about 13 quinqueremes.

The Sixth raid - 207 BC

The Romans sent Laevinus to Africa with a fleet to raid the coast. Their he met a Carthaginian fleet of 70 quinqueremes, which he defeated. He then returned to Sicily.

A new Roman commander visited Africa this year, possibly with the same fleet which came the previous year. As a result he may of had about 100, or less quinqueremes. Once again the Carthaginian came out, this time with only 70 quinqueremes and once again were defeated. The raids must of begun to hurt Carthage for the Carthaginian to risk a battle

outnumbered. The losses suffered by both sides is unknown, although as the Romans failed to come over the following year they may have been high.

The Seventh Raid - 205 BC

The Romans sent a fleet of 100 quinqueremes to raid Africa under Gaius Laelius.

This was to be the last raid of the war, the following year Scipio invaded Africa. It seemed that the Carthaginians did not contest the raid and there was no conflict, this may have been due to the fact Carthage was simply out numbered at sea too much we do not know. Some sources indicated the raid was carried out with only 30 quinqueremes and that it was a short and quick affair, thus no Carthaginian intercept would of been possible. At some point in the raid the Romans met up with Masinissa, who was fighting a civil war against Syphax at the time.

After the defeat in Spain the previous year, Masinissa returned to Numidia late in 206BC. His father, Gala controlled a large part of Numidia, which was in turn nominally controlled by Syphax. Gala died before Masinissa arrived back and Syphax attempted to take over the territory, a sort of continuation of the civil war which racked Numidia in 213BC, only seven year previously. This did not make Masinissa happy so he raised two armies in 206-205BC, each of which were defeated by Syphax's superior strength. He was raising his third army when he met up with Laelius and was all too happy to help out the Romans in return for a chance at taking his fathers land back.

According to sources Hasdrubal Gisco supported Syphax when he took the land of his rival Gala, an amazingly short term view of events. Carthage has a perfect situation as both factions were solidly behind Carthage, Syphax because he had married Hasdrubal Gisco's daughter, Masinissa because the Carthaginians under Hasdrubal Barca had helped his father re-secure their land in 213BC. Whatever the logic or reason this action sealed Carthages fate in the following three years, as without the Cavalry of the Numidians Scipio would of almost certainly lost Zama in 202BC.

The Invasion of Africa - 204 BC

Publius Scipio set sail for Africa with an army of two legions of 6,200 foot, 300 cavalry each, and 16,000 allied foot and 800 allied cavalry, and 40 quinqueremes. He landed at Porto Farina, near the town of Utica. Here he was joined by Masinissa with about 2,000 Numidian Cavalry. He then won a minor cavalry skirmish at the tower of Agathocles against Hanno Hamilcar who had 4,000 cavalry, of which 200 were Carthaginian nobles. After this success Scipio marched on to Utica.

The Carthaginians called on Hasdrubal to form a new Carthaginian army of 30,000 foot and 3,000 cavalry, and Syphax to bring his Numidian army of 50,000 foot and 10,000 cavalry up to join Hasdrubal. This combined army then marched on Scipio. Scipio withdrew from Utica to a strongly fortified camp near the coast. He then entered into negotiation with the Carthaginians.

Scipio invaded Africa with 40 quinqueremes, 28,400 infantry and 1,400 cavalry. These figures are disputed, but they seem the most reasonable. In addition to this he had 400 transports. He would of left 20 quinqueremes in Sicily, possibly because he did not have enough men to man them. He landed about 20 km north of Utica, where his army consolidated their position and the fleet sailed down to Utica to reconnoitre. Soon after this the Numidian

Masinissa joined him, with probably 2,000 Numidian Cavalry.

The Carthaginians responded by sending a pure cavalry force of about 2,000 men, under the command of Hanno Hamilcar, to scout the Roman position. This was ambushed by the now superior Roman cavalry. Hanno was killed and the Carthaginian Cavalry retreated back to Carthage, where they were to wait for the arrival of the main Carthaginian army.

Scipio then marched on Utica to lay siege on it and raided deep inland. After 40 days of the siege the Carthaginian army began to arrive. The Carthaginian had two armies, one under the Command of Hasdrubal Gisco of about 30,000 Carthaginian infantry and 3,000 Carthaginian cavalry, and the other under command of Syphax of about 50,000 infantry and 10,000 cavalry. These Carthaginian numbers are from Livy and must be taken with a grain of salt, however even if they are right the Numidian army's foot would of been both very poor quality and very lightly armed. The cavalry would of been good quality, but all would of been skirmish Numidian light cavalry. The Carthaginian force is of more interest, as 30,000 infantry seems like a large number. Possibly a lot of these would of been light troops also, possibly of militia standard. Regardless when Scipio launched his surprise attack during the following year their moral collapsed amazingly easily.

Whatever the truth about the numbers Scipio was scared and he abandoned his siege of Utica and withdrew into a well prepared Roman camp three km east of Utica. Winter occurred soon after this, which would indicate Scipio landed in Africa in early August or late July, although some sources indicated he started his invasion some time in June. If this was very late June he may have landed in Africa very early July. The bulk of the winter was spend in negotiations between the two sides, as the Carthaginian lacked the troop type to attack a prepared position and Scipio lacked the troops to give battle.

The fatal Blow - 203 BC

After negotiations with the Carthaginians failed Publius Scipio marched his army to Utica. Their he began to besiege the city again. Hasdrubal and Syphax, thinking Scipio was not interested in attacking them let security go lax. Scipio took advantage of this by launching a night attack against the two camps, destroying both Numidian and Carthaginian army.

Hasdrubal and Syphax, who had escaped, began to form a new army at the Great Plains. Hasdrubal used 4,000 mercenary Celtiberians as the nucleus of his army. Scipio decided to deal with this new army and splitting his army in two sent 12,000 men to the Great Plains, while maintaining his siege of Utica. Hasdrubal met Scipio in battle and was defeated. Scipio sent Masinissa and his brother Livius to pursue Syphax to his home country. Syphax made his last stand near Cirta where he was defeated and captured. The son of Syphax then fled into the desert where he continued the fight. Masinissa soon after took Cirta.

After this disaster Carthage recalled Mago and Hannibal. Soon after this the peace party took control of Carthage and began to negotiate for peace.

Early this year Scipio showed his genius by performing an act worthy of Hannibal himself. Realising he did not have the strength to face the combined Carthaginian army of 93,000 men with his

32,400 men he decided on a surprise night attack against the Numidian army, which caused it to break apart and retreat. The Carthaginian camp, close by, was also affected, forcing Hasdrubal into a retreat back to Carthage. It would be many days before Hasdrubal and Syphax could regroup their armies and face Scipio again. The losses were probably not great, but the low skill and moral of the armies could be seen here, as this Roman trick was sufficient to totally destroy Carthaginian resistance.

Scipio's trick would of occurred in March, possibly early March, and after his victory he was back at the walls of Utica besieging it. About early April about 4,000 Celtiberians mercenaries arrived to reinforce Syphax, and gathering what army he could he met Hasdrubal at the Great Plains by the end of April, which was about 120 km away from Utica. Scipio then split his army in two, leaving the minimum number of men required to besiege Utica and sending the rest to meet the Carthaginian force at the Great Plains. Livy claims Scipio sent the bulk of his army to meet the Carthaginians, leaving a token force behind. Assuming he used the crews of his ships and a token force of about 4,000 men he would of had 24,200 men and 1,400 roman cavalry. In addition he would of at least had his 2,000 Numidians. It is possible after the victory in March Scipio would of gained more Numidian allies, which may of swelled the size of his army. He probably had a force of 30,000 men, at least, of which probably 5,000 were cavalry.

Now the combined army of the Carthaginians was about 30,000. We also know that during the battle the Romans had cavalry supremacy, so the combined Carthaginian cavalry figure must of been no more than 5,000. This leaves us with 25,000 infantry. Syphax had 4,000 Celtiberians mercenaries, possibly 3,000 cavalry and 8,000 infantry giving him a total force of 12,000 infantry and 3,000 cavalry. Hasdrubal would of had a similar total number, although possibly 2,000 cavalry and 13,000 infantry. This gives a total Carthaginian figure of about 5,000 cavalry and 25,000 infantry. Some sources tell us the Romans were heavily outnumbered, however I don't feel this is the case.

Scipio marched out in early May, which would of taken 5 days. The two armies skirmished for 3 additional days before the battle occurred. The Numidian and Carthaginian armies were totally combined with the Carthaginian cavalry on the right, Carthaginians infantry next, Celtiberians infantry in the centre, Numidian infantry next and Numidian Cavalry on the left flank. Scipio placed Masinissa's Numidian on his left and the Roman cavalry under Laelius on the right. The Centre was held by his Roman infantry, with Numidian allies on each flank of this.

The Roman flanks managed to defeat their opposing Carthaginian forces early in the battle, which is interesting. This meant that Masinissa's Numidians defeated the Carthaginians cavalry and the Roman cavalry did the same with the Numidian cavalry opposing it. This really indicates that Syphax's Numidian cavalry strength was very low indeed, possibly much lower than my estimate of 3,000 cavalry, as how could 1,400 Roman cavalry defeat this. Possibly the Romans had some reinforcements, like some Numidian cavalry, which is my guess. Once the flanks collapsed the Roman infantry pinned the Carthaginians centre while the Roman cavalry hit them in the flanks. The result was a sort of mini Cannae.

Its clear this victory was mainly due to Roman Cavalry supremacy, a theme which was to continue the following year. After this victory Scipio marched up to the gates of Carthage, capturing a small town

called Runis. Scipio was possibly hoping this would cause the Carthaginians to make peace, however Carthage tried one more trick.

After this defeat and Scipio appearing at the gates of Carthage there was panic in Carthage and the Carthaginian fleet sailed out in an attempt to raise the siege of Utica. This may have occurred about 2 weeks after the Great Plains battle, which puts us at the end of May. We do not know how many quinqueremes the Carthaginians had, but it would of been between 50 and 60 quinqueremes. Scipio did not venture out to do battle with his 40 quinqueremes, mainly because they were not prepared for battle. Scipio formed them in a defensive formation close to shore and manned them with his army. All the Carthaginians succeeded in doing was capturing some transports. The Carthaginian fleet sailed home, being unable to raise the siege. On the other hand Utica managed to survive for an amazing length of time, so perhaps the Carthaginians were using their naval supremacy in this case to supply Utica. We never real hear about the fall of Utica.

While the naval battle was occurring, both Masinissa and Gaius Laelius pursued the fleeing Syphax into Numidia with their entire cavalry and Numidian foot force. Syphax probably got to Cirta where he very quickly raised a levy army. Masinissa also raised further troops and the Numidian civil war was on again. With these reinforced armies both Masinissa and Syphax met in battle, probably around Cirta, where Syphax was totally defeated. We do not know what the numbers were, but possibly both armies numbered 20,000 men, with Masinissa having a cavalry advantage. Syphax was captured, although his son did escape where he tried to raise yet another army to win back the throne of Numidia. This was to cause some minor difficulty later, but for now Numidian was fully a Roman ally. Carthage had no more allies. This probably occurred at the end of

June. While this drama was being played out Scipio continued his siege of Utica.

Scipio began negotiations with Carthage and a sort of peace was worked out. The conflict ended, Carthage had to supply Scipio's men with food and do a partial demoralisation, however Hannibal returned the following year throwing these plans into chaos. Scipio probably took Utica, although this is unclear. It is possible when the truce was agreed he stopped his siege and simply used his camp as his base. On the other hand when the war began again the following year Scipio did not attempt to take any towns, which may indicate he already had the base he required.

Hannibal Returns - 202 BC

Hannibal landed near Hadrumetum and was soon joined by Mago's army. His arrival caused Carthage to continue the war against Rome and Scipio was forced to recall Masinissa from his fighting with Syphax son.

In an attempt to prevent Scipio from joining with the army of Masinissa Hannibal marched to Zama, but Scipio was able to meet Masinissa by marching deep inland. The Roman army met the Carthaginian army at Zama, where Scipio was victorious, thus ending the 2nd Punic War.

Rome sent 30 quinqueremes and a large number of transports to Scipio, which may indicate he did not take Utica the previous year and thus did not have a source of supply. Anyway, this fleet was scattered by bad weather and Carthage sent 50 quinqueremes under Hasdrubal Gisgo to collect some of the transports. Soon after this Hannibal landed at Hadrumetum with his Italian army and soon after this Mago Barca's army joined Hannibal. Hannibal would of had an army of about 36,000 infantry and 4,000 cavalry, or which 24,000 came from Italy and the rest were Carthaginian from Africa. He also had

about 80- elephants, which were hurriedly assembled. Hannibal had a lack of cavalry and he needed something to counter it, elephants were all he had.

Scipio had an army of about 28,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry around Utica, while Masinissa had a large army at Cirta. Masinissa formed a small rapid force of about 4,000 cavalry and 6,000 infantry and possibly another 600 Numidians from a chieftain called Dacamas. This was based at Cirta and began to almost immediately move out when warfare began to flare again. This would of been sometime after the return of Hannibal.

Hannibal could not of arrived in Africa earlier than May and he needed to wait for Mago's troops and needed to reorganise his force. In addition he managed to train some elephants. So he would of begun to move out by possibly the end of May of during June. He was forced into quick action because Scipio marched his army through the rich Bagradas River valley, where he ravaged and plundered the countryside. Hannibal tried to put himself between Scipio's army and the Numidians by moving to a place called Zama, however he failed because Masinissa managed to get his flying column of about 10,000 men through and joined Scipio. It is possible that this only got through because it was small and that this manoeuvre did cause Scipio to not have the benefit of further Numidian reinforcements, however all he wanted was the cavalry and Masinissa would of been lucky to raise much more than 4,000 cavalry after the heavy losses of the previous year.

The battle itself was typical between two veteran armies under the command of good troops. It was slow and drawn out, with Hannibal winning the infantry battle, but losing the cavalry battle. The Roman Cavalry hit him in the rear, which effectively ended the 2nd Punic War.

SUMMARY OF BATTLES IN AFRICA (204 - 202BC)

| Battle | Date | Commanders | Forces | Infantry | Cavalry | Elephants | Total |
|----------------|-------|------------------------------------|--------------------|----------|---------|-----------|------------|
| Agathocles | 204BC | Hanno Hamilcar Masinissa/Scipio | Carthage | nil | 2,000 | nil | 2,000 |
| | | | Roman* | nil | 3,400 | nil | 3,400 |
| Utica | 203BC | Hasdrubal Gisgo/Syphax Scipio | Carthage | 80,000 | 13,000 | nil | 93,000 |
| | | | Roman* | 28,000 | 3,400 | | 31,400 |
| Great Plains | 203BC | Hasdrubal Gisgo/Syphax Scipio | Carthage Roman* | | | | |
| Cirta | 203BC | Syphax Masinissa/Livius | Carthage | | | | |
| | | | Roman* | | | | |
| Utica (Sea) | 203BC | Unknown Scipio | Carthage* Roman | | | | 50q 40q |
| Zama | 202BC | Hannibal Scipio/Masinissa | Carthage | 36,000 | 4,000 | 80 | 40,000 |
| | | | Roman* | | | | |

Note:

Pro-Roman Numidians will be called Roman, and pro-Carthaginian Numidians will be called Carthaginians

An asterisk next to the Forces nationality indicates the victor of the battle