Primary and Secondary Sources Activity

The Romans

Livy on Cannae and Zama

Background
It is generally agreed that Roman historian Livy was a gifted writer, though he was not necessarily an accurate historian of every detail related to the Second Punic War. Written more than a century after the events of that war, Livy’s account is best appreciated as a nostalgic reflection on the courage demonstrated by the people and government of Rome in refusing to be conquered by the Carthaginians.

In the first selection, Livy describes events that took place immediately after the Romans suffered a crushing defeat at Cannae. It was assumed at the time that Hannibal would follow up this victory by advancing on Rome and conquering it. He instead chose to negotiate with Rome for the ransom of the soldiers he had captured. Historians have long debated whether it would have been possible for Hannibal to conquer the city, but most of them seem to agree that his long-term goal was to gain the support of Rome’s neighbors on the Italian Peninsula and force the city to surrender. If true, this strategy backfired. The Roman Senate refused Hannibal’s ransom offer for the prisoners at Cannae and refused to surrender. They rebuilt their army and eventually launched an attack on Carthage, forcing Hannibal to leave Italy and defend his country. In the second selection, Livy depicts the Roman victory at the battle of Zama, which brought an end to the Second Punic War.

Directions: Read the selections. Then answer the questions.

Hannibal was quiet at Cannae, trafficking about the ransoms of the prisoners and the other [treasure] in anything but the spirit of a conqueror, in anything but the fashion of a great general.

Then the names of the dead were communicated to their families. So full was the city of lamentation that the yearly festival of Ceres was dropped. It was not lawful for a mourner to keep it, and there was not at that time a single matron who was not a mourner. In the fear that for this same reason other sacred rites, public or private, might be neglected, a decree of the Senate limited the mourning to thirty days. . . .

The plains of Cannae are covered with heaps of Roman dead, and we survive only because the enemy had not sword or strength to slaughter any more. There are some, too, among us who were not even in the battle, but were left to guard the camp, and came into the hands of the enemy when the camp was surrendered. I do not envy the fortune or position of any fellow-countryman or comrade, nor would I wish to exalt myself by depreciating others; but—unless there is some prize for speed of foot and for running—they who fled, without arms for the most part, from the battle, nor stopped till they reached Canusium or Venusia, cannot justly put themselves above us, or boast

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that the commonwealth finds more help in them than in us. But you will employ both them (good and gallant soldiers too) and us, who will be yet more eager to serve our country, seeing that it is by your kindness that we shall have been ransomed and restored to that country.

—Livy, from The Second Punic War, first century B.C.—first century A.D.

[The front ranks of the Carthaginians were thus forced back upon Hannibal’s veteran Italians, who angrily drove them from the field as useless, and who themselves prepared to face the Romans; while, however, they were reforming for the final shock] Scipio promptly signaled to his spearmen to retreat, and had the wounded taken to the rear. Then he brought up his “principes” and “triarii” from the wings in order to strengthen the spearmen of the center. Thus a fresh battle commenced, inasmuch as now the Romans had reached their genuine antagonists, men a match for them in their weapons, in their experience in war, and in their overwhelming hopes and fears. But both in numbers and in courage the Romans had advantage. They had routed cavalry, elephants, and front line, and were now closing with the second line [and the last.]

Laelius and Masinissa, who had pursued the routed cavalry, now most opportunely returned, and charged the enemy’s rear. Before this cavalry attack the Carthaginians at last succumbed. Many were surrounded and perished on the field; many, fleeing over the open plain, were slain by the [pursuing] cavalry. Of the Carthaginians and their allies about 20,000 that day perished, and about as many more were captured, as well as one hundred and thirty-three standards and eleven elephants.

Hannibal escaped with a few horsemen, not fleeing the field until he had tried every expedient both in the battle and before it began. [After having done everything possible for his country] he returned to Carthage in the six-and-thirtieth year after he had quitted it when a boy. There, in the Council House, he confessed he had lost not only the battle, but the war, and that the only hope of salvation was to make peace.

—Livy, from History, Book XXX, first century B.C.—first century A.D.

1. **Identifying Cause and Effect** What effect did the defeat at Cannae have on the Roman population? What action did the Senate take to counter this situation?

   It decimated it as far as the military population and the civilian population was left to mourn their dead. The Senate passed a decree to limit the mourning period to 30 days.
2. **Making Inferences** Though the leader of the delegation representing the prisoners referred to Roman soldiers who escaped the battle as "good and gallant soldiers," what did his remarks imply about those who escaped and those—like him—who surrendered?

   He was implying that those who fled & escaped were fortunate but should not be honored.

3. **Drawing Conclusions** Why did the delegation leader believe that those who surrendered and were currently prisoners would be more eager to serve Rome? What did the Senate decide to do?

   They put themselves & their needs second to the Republic. They rejected Hannibal's offer of prisoner exchange for surrender & rebuilt their military.

4. **Summarizing** According to Livy, what advantages did the Romans have in the battle at Zama and how did they exploit these advantages? What losses did Hannibal's army suffer?

   They had men who were a match in weapons, skill, & "overwhelming hopes & fear." They used these advantages to rout the enemy cavalry, elephants, & first line, then surrounded their enemy. "20,000 perished, many more captured" only "a few horsemen" returned to Carthage with Hannibal.

5. **Speculating** Livy reported that Hannibal escaped only after having tried every expedient both in the battle and before it began. What measure might Hannibal have attempted before the battle began?

   He could have gone to Rome itself & destroyed it after the 1st Punic War rather than proposing a surrender & prisoner exchange.

6. **Identifying Cause and Effect** According to Livy, what did Hannibal do in the aftermath of the battle? What was his eventual fate?

   He confessed to Carthaginian Council his failure & that he had most likely lost the war. He was disgraced for his loss.