

Battle of Thapsus, 46 a.c.

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I. Introduction

The battle of Thapsus was a significant victory for Caesar. It put an end to the Pompeian threat in Africa. This victory also removed a great number of Caesar's enemies. It was a relatively short campaign with a very high success. Caesar gained the Province of Africa, annexed the kingdom of Numidia, defeated an army that was considerably more numerous than his, with elephants, local supply and support from many towns and even other allied kingdoms. It was a tough campaign with a sharp decisive result. A good example of war as politics by other means.

II. Historical and Strategic Context

Caesar was a very ambitious young man who borrowed large amounts in Rome in order to buy himself favor with the electorate and thus accumulate several political offices, such as Pontifex, Praetor, Senator. At this time two powerful Romans also had political ambitions, Pompey Magno and Crassus. Pompey was a well-regarded general, Crassus while also having military experience, namely defeating Spartacus, was better known for his business fortune. Desiring to increase their faction's popularity with the Roman electorate, Crassus and Pompey invited Caesar to a political agreement, called the Triumvirate (rule of three). Caesar agreed to this arrangement in return for having his debts paid off by Crassus. (3)

In 59 a.c. Caesar with the help of his allies, was elected Consul. This office he used to ingratiate himself further with the electorate, which raised his popularity to new levels. After dominating public life in Rome, Caesar was named Proconsul in Gaul for five years. He then went on to conquer Gaul, by which deeds he made himself even more admired and famed in Rome.

In 53 a.c. Crassus was named Proconsul in Syria, and proceeded to implement his plan to gain glory and plunder to rival Caesar and Pompey, to this end he invaded Parthia and was defeated and killed at the battle of Carrhae by a force of light bow cavalry and heavily armored shock cavalry called cataphract. Most of this army was killed or captured, which was a great shock in Rome.

Once the balancing force of Crassus was removed from the alliance, it became a matter of time before Pompey and Caesar would attempt to gain dictatorial power in Rome, as Sulla had done before them. (3)

In 49 a.c. Caesar returns from Gaul to challenge Pompey and the Roman senate, he starts the roman civil wars by crossing the Rubicon river with his army and marching on Rome.

In 48 a.c. Caesar defeats Pompey's armies at Pharsalus, Pompey runs away but is soon after killed in Egypt. The defeat of Pompey reduces the effect of his power base for the Republican faction, Caesar shows mercy to his adversaries and many join him.

After the defeat at Pharsalus, the Senate in Rome named Caesar Dictator in 47 a.c.

Several of the Republican generals and Senators having escaped Pharsalus run to the African provinces, where they organize themselves to fight against Caesar the Dictator. (3)

III. Strategic and Tactic Objectives

The objective for Caesar was to defeat his political opponents in the Senate who still fought against him in Africa. Among them Cato, Scipio and Afranius. This he had to do because they planned to humiliate Caesar and remove him from power and public life due to his having too much power and influence with the mob in Rome. These senators and other patricians were still influential and were capable of organizing and financing armies against Caesar's rule in the name of the senate and the republic of Rome.

Caesar's strategy was to defeat his opponents in battle, and then pardon them, thus proving to be a merciful ruler, by this strategy he would gain the gratitude of the defeated and the appreciation of the mob in Rome for his virtue.

In North Africa the republican senators allied themselves with the Numidian king Juba I, which brought to battle 11.000 cavalry and 60 elephants. The senators also raised and trained several roman legions for their confrontation with Caesar. (3)

The Strategic objectives for the Republican senators was to build up an army that could defeat Caesar in battle, this was for the political aim of killing Caesar or at least removing his popularity with the mob in Rome, so that the Republican system of governance by the Senate and Consuls that had been temporarily deposed by Sulla, and now was threatened again by Caesar could continue free of influence by any one individual. (3)

Tactically, the Republican senators aimed at destroying Caesar's army, and possibly capturing or killing him in order to end his threat to the Roman Republic.

IV. Campaign overview

In December of 47 a.c. Caesar marches from Rome, where has been elected Consul after having been elected to the office of Dictator for the second time in the previous year. With the other opponents defeated in the east, Caesar moves towards Africa with 6 legions, 4 of new recruits and his veteran Legio V as well as 2.000 cavalry.

December 28, in a break during winter storms, Caesar sails to Africa and disembarks at Hadrumentum with 3.000 Legionaires and 150 cavalry and sets up camp. The town is not friendly so Caesar marches south to Leptis and then to Ruspina where he is better received and has his transports unloaded by January 3, bringing his force to 6 legions and 2.000 cavalry.

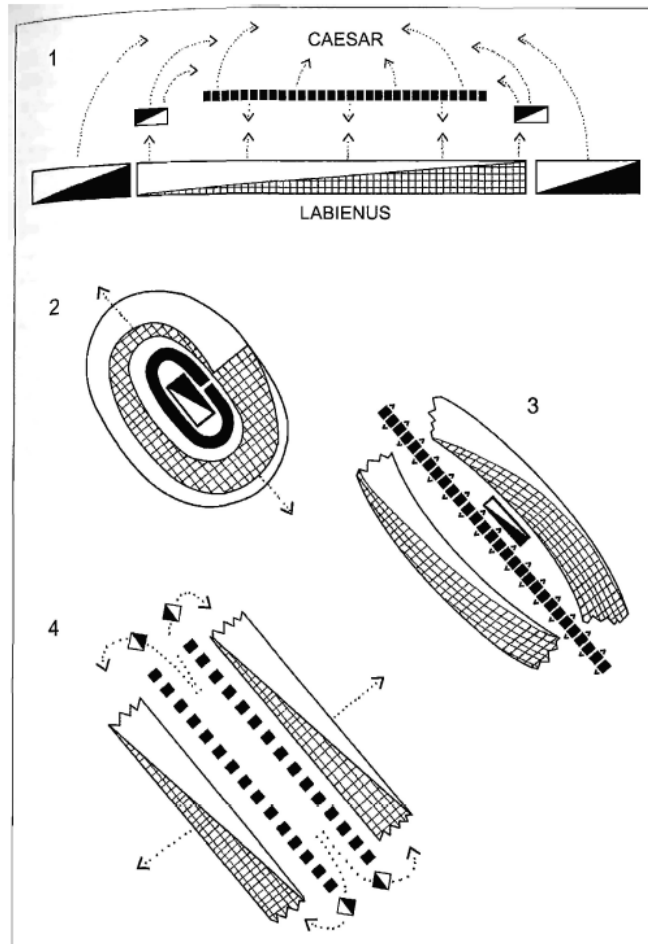
On January 4th Caesar is surprised by a large force of light cavalry and light infantry led by Labienus while foraging for supplies. **Battle of Ruspina 46 a.c.** It is estimated 10.000 to 11.000 light cavalry and 20.000 light infantry on the Republican side (5), Caesar had 30 cohorts, so about 10-12.000 men 2.000 cavalry and perhaps 150 archers .(1) Caesar's forces were surrounded by the light troops and they refused to engage in close combat with the infantry, relying on missile combat and skirmishing instead. This situation had occurred in the east at Carrahe 53 a.c. , where Crassus had been defeated by missile cavalry and armored cavalry cataphracts, as well as at Bagradas River 49 a.c. where Currio was defeated by Juba I's army consisting of mostly light infantry and cavalry. In both situations the roman legions were surrounded, prevented from escaping and killed by missile fire or by engaging smaller forces outside the protection of the main body with mobile troops capable of chasing them

and cutting them off from support. The result in both cases was very heavy losses, with both roman armies practically destroyed. (5)

Figura 1 (5) - Battle of Ruspina 46 a.c.

This was the situation that Caesar found himself in at Ruspina. He ordered the cohorts into an orbis formation, a circle facing outwards. (Figura 1, 2)

Caesar then ordered his infantry to form a single line (simplex acies) and extend it as much as possible. Then he ordered each other cohort to face in a different direction, and advance, turning his line into a double line (duplex acies). With this manoeuvre Caesar's infantry broke the envelopment by the light infantry and cavalry which could not stop the heavy infantry, possibly formed up in Testudo formation to avoid missile fire. (Figura 1, 4) Once the envelopment was broken, the legionnaire infantry engaged the light infantry and cavalry in a sudden violent attack and pursues for a short distance.



This is enough for the Republican forces to withdraw. Caesar then decides to withdraw to his camp, 3 miles away. Later in the day a second attempt by the Republican forces after being reinforced by 1.600 cavalry and numerous infantry develops in a similar way. At this point the Legionnaires are exhausted but still manage to perform a second counter attack of great violence, which ended the battle with significant losses for Caesar, but his army still intact.

Caesar then moves toward Scipio's supply base in the town of Uzita. He works on improving his supply situation while encamped at Uzita, as well he calls up more Legions to his aid from Italy. The Republican forces under Scipio, Labienus, Petreius encamp outside the walls of Uzita and work towards limiting Caesar's forces access to supplies and water.

The forces of king Juba I on the way to reinforce with large forces are turned back to Numidia due to attacks on the home front, leading Juba to also recall the large cavalry and light infantry auxiliaries under Scipio.

Over the next month Caesar received more reinforcements from Sicily, including two veteran legions, 800 Gaul cavalry and 1.200 light infantry. During this time Scipio received more recruits forced into service by Cato, as well as trained 30 elephants left by Juba. Scipio attempted to goad Caesar into a battle by forming his army in battle formation outside his camp every day until late evening, but Caesar decided to wait for reinforcements behind his fortified camp. There were numerous cavalry skirmishes during this time.

In February 46 a.c. King Juba returned to Scipio with three legions, 30 elephants and a large number of light cavalry and infantry.

With these reinforcements, Scipio is more aggressive in his approach and attempts to fortify a string of hills that dominate the plains near Uzita, prompting Caesar to do the same. Several attacks by Scipio are repulsed and defeated by Caesar's forces, which succeed in fortifying several hills on their left flank thus securing it. In the mean time, Caesar receives 2 more veteran legions as reinforcements, bringing his total to 10 legions, 6 of them veteran and 4 new recruits.

After several weeks of indecisive encounters and skirmishes, in March 46 a.c. , with Scipio unwilling to face Caesar in open battle, he decides to move towards the town of Aggar, where he finds plentiful supplies and sets up a fortified camp. Scipio follows Caesar and sets up 3 camps nearby. There follows another period of skirmishing and ambush, with neither side gaining an advantage.

While in front of the fortified camp at Ruspina, Scipio would form his army for battle and tempt Caesar to a battle, it was now Caesar's turn to tempt Scipio by forming his army in Battle formation on the plain outside Aggar on March 21 (1) which Scipio declines, probably because he wants to engage with an advantage.

During this time Caesar trains his legionnaires in methods to combat light infantry, also he brings over elephants from Italy, and trains his soldiers and riders in how to combat them, as well as ensuring that the horses of the cavalry are accustomed to the elephants. Caesar also receives more reinforcements, of 4.000 legionnaires, 400 cavalry and 1.000 light troops.

April 4 and 5, having received his reinforcements and trained his troops in dealing with elephants and light troops of the enemy, Caesar decides to force Scipio into battle. He does this by marching on the important city of Thapsus on the coast and besieging it on both land and sea, as well as fortifying the southern entrance to the city. Scipio follows and establishes camp on the south entrance to the city of Thapsus.

V. Roman Marian Legion

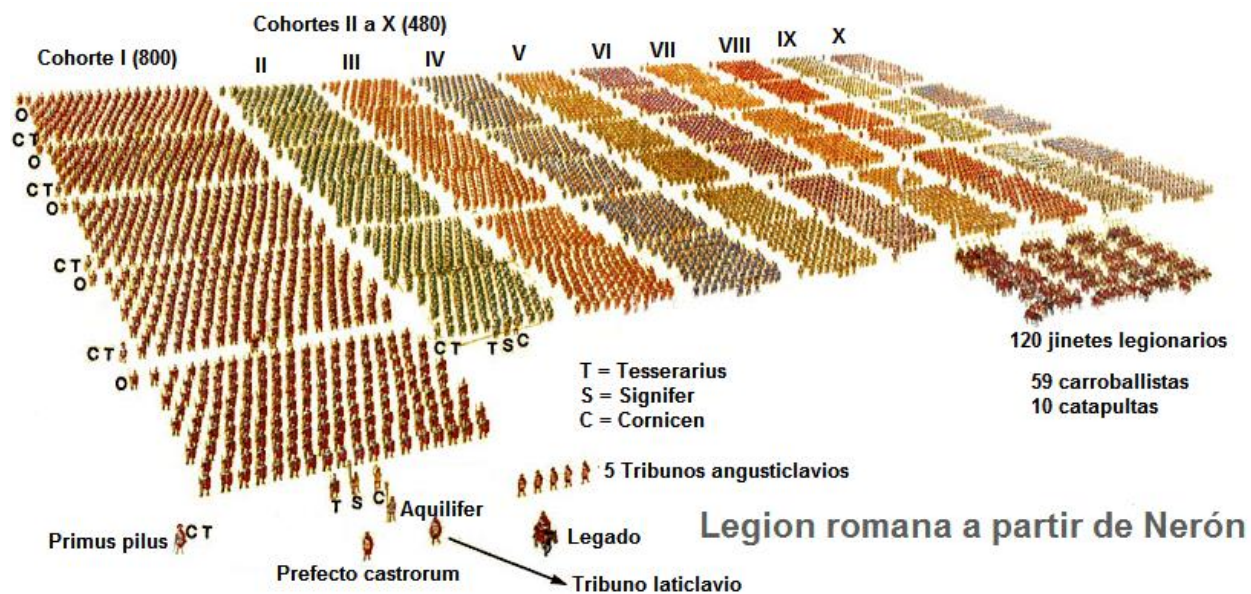


Figura 2 (9) - Marian Legion Organization

The roman legion after Marius reforms, about 100 a.c. consisted of about 5.000 soldiers, 120 being cavalry. Each legion was divided into 10 cohorts, the first cohort being about double the size at 800 men, it usually was placed at the right side of the battle line. The remaining 9 cohorts consisted of about 480 men each. The Cohorts were organized into 6 centuries of 80 men each. Finally, each

century was divided into contubernium of 8 men each. At the command level, each century was led by a centurion, with an optio as the second in command of the century.

The higher levels of command were not assigned to any one cohort or century, the overall commander of a legion was the Legatus, and under him could be one or more Tribunes. (5)

**Figura 3 (5) -
Roman Century
attacking**

The roman legion at this time had its weapons and armour standardized. The legionnaire would have a short sword, Gladius, a large rectangular shield, Scutum, a helmet, and body armor, either Lorica Hamata or



Lorica Segmentata. The centurions and other officers could wear scale armour or cuirass and crests on their helmets. (Figura 3) The roman Legionnaire would open combat by throwing their Pilum to disrupt the enemy formations and then charge into close combat. (Figura 3) They would usually fight in relatively open order, with perhaps 1 meter between each man, relying on individual skill. The relatively open order allowed the individual to advance or retreat as required and also to have his companions support and protect him from flanking attacks. In certain situations, the century could fight in close order using the pilum as spears, or forming into defensive shield walls of interlocking shields, as well as the Testudo formation, where the front two rank soldiers would make a shield wall while the rest of the formation would place their shields above to prevent missile attacks.

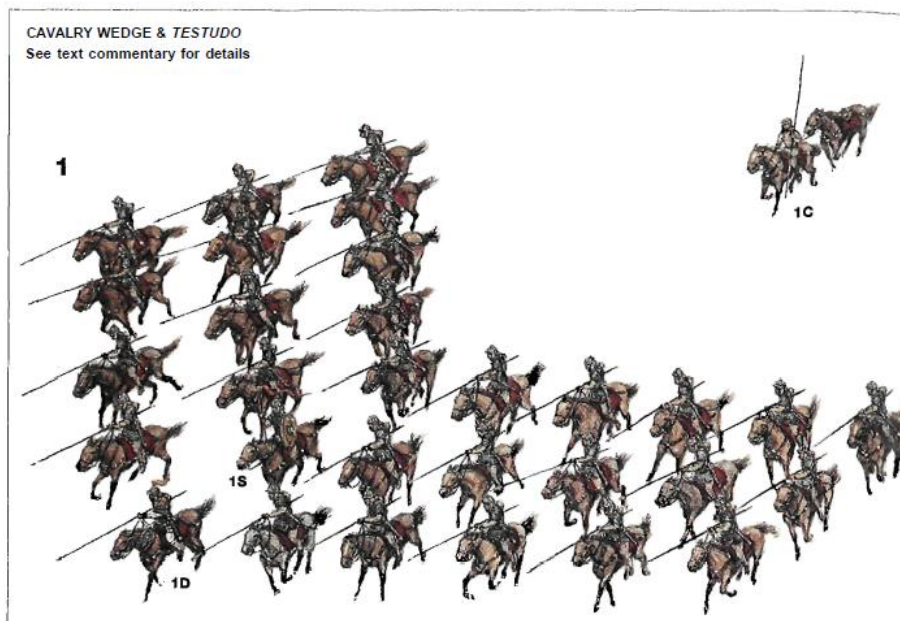


Figura 4 (5) - Roman Cavalry charging in wedge formation

Roman Equites cavalry was equipped with long lances, Lorica Lamata or Scale Armor, large oval shields, and longer swords called Spatha. They were organized into Turmae of 30 riders, which would act as a unit on the battlefield. The Equites would fight as shock cavalry, charging with their lances, and could also fight on foot if required. (Figura 4)

Other forces attached to the roman legion were organized into independent formations of auxiliary cohorts, led by their own leaders or a roman officer.

Gallic and Germanic cavalry was equipped similarly to Equites, with spears, swords, shields and helmets and chain mail, usually in the style of their own tribes. They usually fought under their own leaders, but sometimes had a roman officer assigned. They fought as shock cavalry, charging with their lances and also being able to fight on foot if required. (Figura 4)

Numidian Light cavalry was unarmoured, with javelins and perhaps daggers or other close combat weapons. They were fast skirmishing and missile cavalry and would usually not engage in close combat unless cornered or having a significant advantage.

Numidian light infantry would be without armour, throwing Javelins and some close combat weapon. They would usually not engage in close combat unless cornered or having a significant advantage.

Slingers and archers usually fought as skirmishing troops at the start of a battle, and then retreated behind the battle line to continue sending missiles over the heads of their comrades into the enemy lines. They would usually not engage in close combat unless cornered or having a significant advantage.

Elephants were used in war in the near east since the Alexandrian Wars in the 4th century a.c. There were two species of elephants used, the Indian elephant which was larger, and the African Forest elephant. Every elephant was led by a driver, who was responsible to direct the animal in battle, as well as killing it if it became a threat to friendly forces.

The Indian elephant could carry a tower on its back where two or three soldiers could fight using long Sarissa pikes, javelins or bows. The African elephants usually only carried their rider.

Elephants were usually deployed at the front of the formation to destroy enemy infantry formation, or on the flanks to defeat enemy formations and open their flanks to attack. They were usually supported by friendly light infantry and cavalry to protect them. Enemy cavalry, usually fled if they were not used to the animals. They could also be used to shatter infantry formations if they were not familiar with methods of combating them. Elephants were vulnerable to troops trained to combat them, using missiles, spears, fire and loud noises.

The great danger with using elephants was the unpredictable nature of the animals when afraid, wounded or losing their drivers. There were many occasions when Elephants proved to be as dangerous to friendly forces as to the enemy.

VI. Republican Army

The Republican army under Metellus Scipio consisted of survivors of Pharsalus 48 a.c. and newly recruited troops from the province of Africa.

Metellus Scipio (13) was named Consul in 52 a.c. together with Pompey Magnus. According to sources he was not known as a competent military commander. Scipio commanded the center at Pharsalus 48 a.c. After this defeat he fled to Africa was in command of the Republican forces there.

Cato the younger was a roman senator, mostly responsible for the Senate's attempt to remove his Proconsular appointment and thus remove Caesar from power and blocking his candidacy for Consul in 49 a.c. He was known as a stubborn man and an incorruptible defender of the Roman Republic and Senate. (14)

Titus Labienus was an experienced and very able cavalry commander under Caesar.(10) He led the army at Ruspina 46 a.c. and was close to defeating Caesar.

Marcus Petreius was a veteran commander affiliated with Pompey. During the civil war he was defeated by Caesar in Hispania at Ilerda 49 a.c. and again in Pharsalus 48 a.c. (11)

Lucius Afranius was a client of Pompey and an experienced commander. He fought against Caesar on his campaign in Iberia at Ilerda 49 a.c. He was defeated, captured and then pardoned by Caesar, under the condition of not joining with other Republicans. (12)

Juba I of Numidia was a ruler of Numidia in North Africa. His father had been aided by Pompey in 81 a.c. and owed him allegiance. While Caesar had insulted Juba in 50 a.c. on a visit to Rome. Juba had defeated the roman tribune Curio at the battle of Bagadas River in 49 a.c. Using light infantry and cavalry tactics against the Roman legion heavy infantry, similarly to Carrhae 53 a.c.(15)

The Republican army in Africa consisted of at least 12 Legions about 55.000 Heavy Infantry, 20.000 light infantry ,14 – 16.000 Cavalry and 60 elephants. In total about 90.000 soldiers.

VII. Caesar's Army

Julius Caesar was a very experienced commander, by 46 a.c. he had conquered Gaul and defeated Pompey Magno in battle. Caesar had been elected Consul in December 47 a.c. and embarked on an expedition to defeat the forces still loyal to Pompey and the Roman Republic in Africa.

Caesar initially arrived in Africa with about 3.000 Legionaires in the ned of December 47 a.c. Over the next 3 months he would transport the rest of his army of 6 Legions, including the veteran 5 th Legion to Africa. Once Caesar became familiar with the numbers and composition of the Republican army in Africa he called for reinforcements including several veteran legions.

At Thapsus Caesar had 12 Legions, 5 legions of recruits Legio XXV, XXVI, XXVIII, XXIX and XXX, and seven veteran legions; Legio V, VII, VIII, IX, X, XIII and XIV. The veteran legions were understrenght. In total perhaps 55.000 Legionaires.

Caesar also counted with 3 – 5000 cavalry mostly Gallic and German, as well as a large number of slingers and archers. The army is estimated at 60 – 70.000.

VIII. Geography

The topography of the battlefield is a long flat plain, with Mashas to the West and the Sea to the East. Caesar placed fortifications to defend the south approach to the town of Thapsus on the north east corner of the map. This was about 2.4 km wide. (Figura 5, 1) This is where king Juba and Afranius camped (1).

There was about 7.5 Km to the northern choke point where the battle took place west of the town of Thapsus (Figura 5, 4 and 3). This gave Caesar interior lines, the distance between the camps if marching around the swamp to the west of Thapsus to reach the norther choke point from the southern, would be about 26 km. (Figura 5, 2)

The terrain around Thapsus was a relatively flat plain between the Sea and a Marsh, there was a low hill on the southern chokepoint, where Caesar built a fortified line across the entire width. (1) (Figura 7)

On the Northern chokepoint, Caesar built a fortified camp outside the city of Thapsus, with fortified lines surrounding the city itself spreading out from the corners of the camp (1). The city was also besieged by sea by Caesar's fleet. (1).

In modern times the weather in the region in April is usually about 20 degrees, with low chance of rain. Perfect weather for campaigning. (16) However, in ancient times it seems that the weather was generally colder than now. (Figura 8)

The sources mention that there was heavy rain and hail in the first months of the campaign, but there is no indication that there was rain or unusual temperatures in April 46 a.c. (1)

The situation for the Republican forces seems to be favorable, they outnumber Caesar's army, and have also advantages in Cavalry, Light troops and Elephants. This seems like a very imposing force on the field.

I believe the objective for the Republicans was to contain Caesar and reduce his army's effectiveness by lack of supplies and reinforcements.

Scipio deployed his 12 legions of in the center, his cavalry on their flanks. On the flanks he placed 30 elephants on each side, partially in front of his legions, supported by very numerous light infantry and Numidian cavalry. (Figura 9)

The tactics would be to break Caesar's flanks with the elephants and then perform a double envelopment of Caesar's legions with the light infantry and cavalry, thus surrounding and annihilating Caesar's forces in a decisive engagement.

Caesar Strategy, Situation, Objectives, Tactics and Deployment

Caesar was informed of Scipio's position and decided to engage him, at the same time he ordered part of his fleet to proceed up the coast and position itself behind Scipio's army and provide a distraction at a given signal.

Caesar's situation was at a disadvantage in terms of numbers. However, Caesar could count on about half of his army being veterans, as well as the support of his fleet. Caesar had also spent the time and effort to train his troops to deal with the enemy's ace card, their elephants.

The objective for Caesar was to decisively defeat the republican army and leadership and secure the province of Africa for the senate.

Caesar deployed his cavalry and light troops on the flanks, his less experienced legions in the center and his more veteran legions on their flanks. This would boost the morale of the new recruits as well as having stronger flanks than the center, which could lead to the enemy line being defeated in the flanks and lead to a double envelopment. (Figura 9)

As a further measure, Caesar placed 5 cohorts of his veteran 5th legion in support of the flanking cavalry and light troops, making his deployment in fact a quadruplex acies, for having a 4th line of troops.

Caesar's tactics would be to engage and defeat the elephants on the enemy flanks with specially trained light cavalry and infantry, reinforced with veteran legionnaires, once that was accomplished these troops could hold the flanks against the numerous light infantry and cavalry of the enemy while the main battle line would engage and defeat the less experienced troops of the Republicans. If possible, Caesar's flanks would be able to repeat Cannae and perform a double envelopment of the enemy army. Giving him a decisive victory.

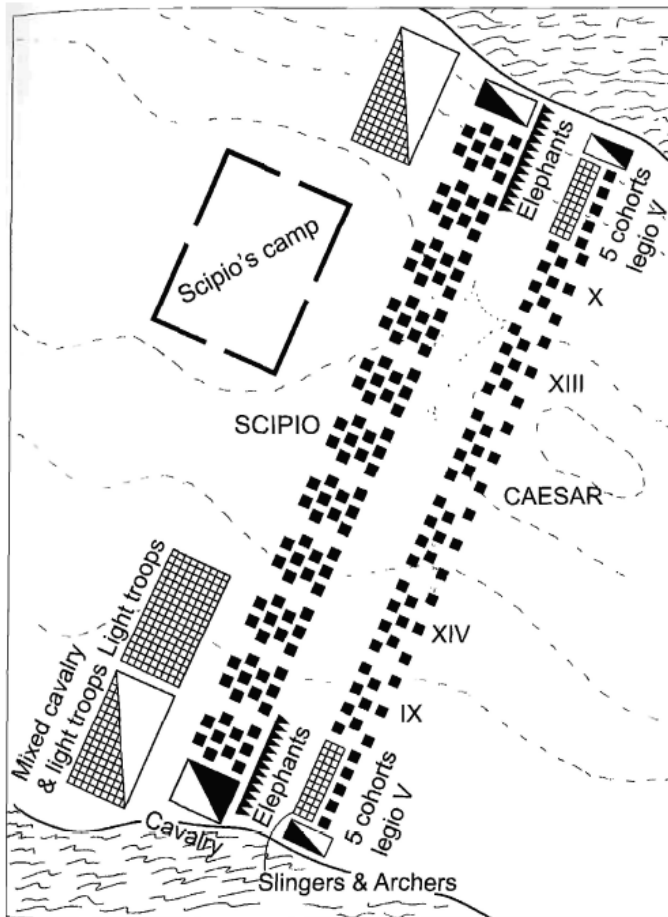
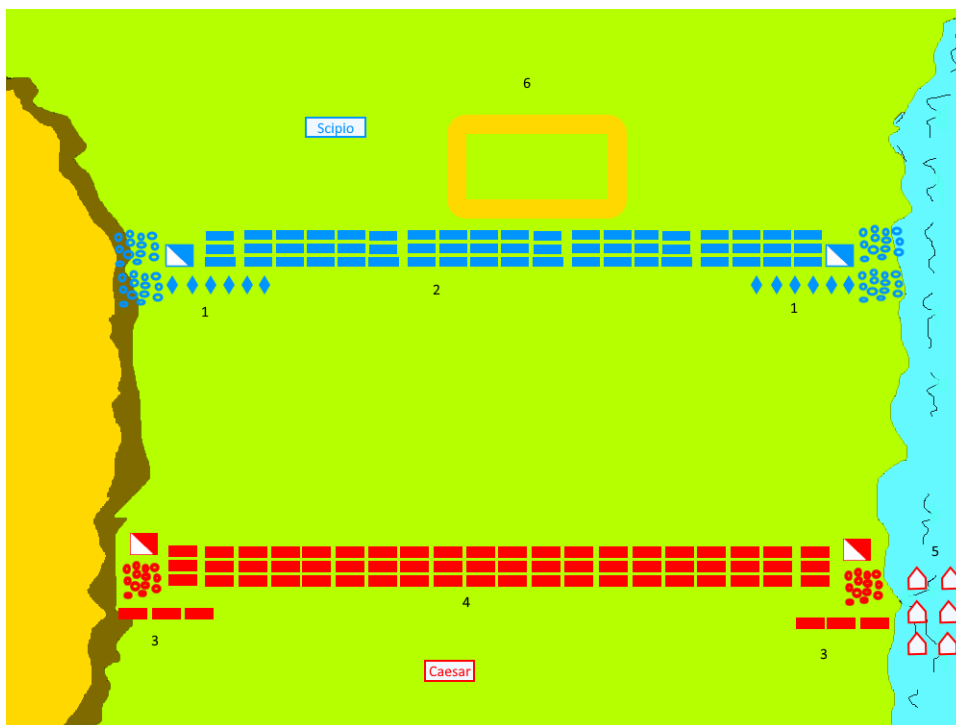


Figura 9 (5) - Deployment at Thapsus 46 a.c.

Battle of Thapsus Phase I



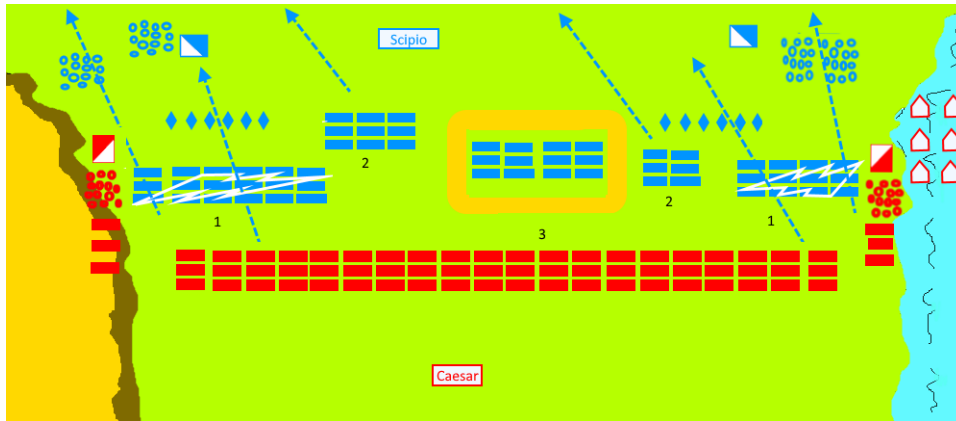


Figura 12 – Thapsus 46 a.c. phase 3

Having trained his troops extensively on fighting elephants, Caesar’s wings defeat the enemy elephants and drive them in a panic towards their own lines.

“The beasts terrified by the rain of arrows slingstones and bullets turned around and trampled down the dense crowd of their own troops behind them and made a frantic rush towards the half-finished gates on the rampart.” Julius Caesar (1)

Once the elephants fled, so did the light cavalry and infantry accompanying them on the wings of Scipio’s army. With their formations shattered by the elephants and with their flanks exposed, the Republican legions fled. (1)(Figura 12, 1 y 2) Some legionnaires attempted to fortify themselves in the camp, but did not find any commanding officers there, Scipio having fled the battlefield, and so continued to run. (Figura 12, 3) (1)

End of battle

With the enemy army in total rout, Caesar’s army gives chase and kills many opponents. Plutarch claims that 50 soldiers died on Caesar’s side, and 50.000 on Scipio’s.(3) This is probably a huge exaggeration. In any case, what is known is that about 10.000 republican soldiers surrendered, and were killed by Caesar’s army.(1) Plutarch states that this was because Caesar had an epileptic attack and was not in command at the time.(3)

In any case, the Republican army was defeated and more than likely annihilated.

X. Consequences of the battle

As a consequence of the battle of Thapsus, Caesar gained control of the province of Africa, gathered much plunder and the gratitude of those he pardoned, which was most of his opponents. With this task completed, Caesar Conquers Juba’s Numidian kingdom for Rome.

Finally, Caesar sails home for Rome on the 13th of June 46 a.c., having spent less than half a year on campaign in Africa.

Scipio escapes the battle only to drown off the coast of Iberia. King Juba I and Petreius comit suicide, so does Cato the Younger. Afranius escapes the battle but is captured and executed soon after.

Labienus escapes to Iberia, where he joins with Pompey’s sons for another campaign against Caesar.

This campaign was a decisive defeat for the Republican Cause, and now the only resistance left to Caesar was in Iberia where Gnaeus Pompei was gathering his forces.

The second roman civil war would conclude in Iberia with the battle of Munda in 45 a.c. And the defeat of Gnaeus and Labienus.

Caesar would soon after that victory be assassinated in March 44 a.c.

XI. Conclusions

There were several lessons to learn from this campaign. The first is from the strategic mistakes on the part of the Republicans, first in failing to intercept Caesar's ships to Africa and therefore allowing him to reinforce his precarious position. Caesar took a very large risk in crossing the Mediterranean in the middle of winter, and then continuing to do so to bring more reinforcements, this risk paid off.

The second lesson is the strategic mistake on the part of the Republicans. They hesitated bringing Caesar to battle while they still had overwhelming advantage of numbers. The battle of Ruspina could have decided the African campaign, and it was only due to Caesar's veteran troops and effective command that the battle did not prove catastrophic for Caesar, unlike similar situations at Bagrahas River and Carrhae. A similar situation could have developed at Uzita, before Caesar could have the opportunity to train his troops in combating elephants. The outcome could have been different if the elephants had engaged with the inexperienced forces that Caesar brought to Africa, 6 legions, only one of them the veteran 5th the others new recruits.

The third lesson, I believe is that elephants in battle can be effective only if the enemy has not encountered them, but by the end of the republican period, there had been several battles in the previous centuries where elephants had proven to be more of a risk to their own side than to the enemy. While Scipio tried to reduce the risk by placing the elephants on the wings, he still placed his infantry behind them, and did not give them a path of escape, instead he made the situation worse by placing them in front of a rampart.

Finally, it seems from the sources, as well as the development of the battle, that Scipio's army was not expecting to fight on the day. They had marched all night after having chased Caesar the previous day, they must have been exhausted. On top of that, they had to work at building fortifications after their night march and to stand probably several hours in formation defending the works while Caesar prepared for battle. Fighting a battle with exhausted and agitated soldiers was not a good idea.

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