

Battle of Cynocephalae (197 BC)

After the final defeat of Carthage in the Second Punic War at Zama, Rome began to find itself drawn into the internal politics of Greece. Philip V of Macedon had been an ally of Hannibal and despite having done little to help his ally during the war there was a sour feeling in Rome towards those who aided their enemies.

Despite the war-weariness of the Senate and the people of Rome, Titus Quinctius Flaminius managed to get senatorial authority to wage war in Greece. He then invaded Thessaly in 200 B.C. with two legions, including the Cannae legions who had not seen their homes for over 14 years. Philip mobilised his forces and a series of indecisive manoeuvres followed.

Relative forces

The Romans had 8,400 of their own infantry and 10,000 Italian allies; 4,000 phalangites and 2,000 peltasts from the Aetolian league; a total of some 2,600 cavalry (including 400 Aetolian); and around 20 elephants. Philip had 16,000 phalangites, 1,500 mercenaries, 4,000 peltasts, 2,000 light armed Thracians and 2,000 Illyrians, and about 2,000 cavalry total.

Finally, the two armies ended up camped on opposite sides of a series of rocky ridges with hillocks named Cynocephalae or "Dogs Heads" for their appearance. The exact location of the battle somewhat disputed but in any case the battle was fought on the Cynoscephale ridge itself, so terrain was certainly a factor.

Philip placed light troops on top of the ridge although he was as yet unaware of the proximity of the Roman forces. The Romans sent out velites and cavalry to recon the slopes and a combat began.

Skirmishers from both sides met. Philip's forces were initially prevailing and the Romans were driven off the slopes until Roman reinforcements arrived and pushed the Macedonians back. Philip's cavalry then arrived and turned things again, but the Romans were able to make an orderly retreat under the cover of the Aetolian cavalry, and once at a safe distance turn and hold their ground.

As the mist began to clear both armies marched out to do battle. The scene was set for a battle pitting two fundamentally different theories of ancient warfare -- phalanx vs. legion. The result of this battle would be decisive. It is a rare example of a true encounter battle. Philip was not happy about fighting with his phalanx on such difficult terrain, but was inspired by the reports that the Roman skirmishers had been driven back, sees an opportunity to defeat the Romans while they are dealing with this setback.

Philip marched half his phalanx, with Thracian light-armed troops, up to the summit and deployed them on his left.

The Roman forces managed to fully deploy albeit down the slope from the advancing Macedonians. Philip had deployed his left wing while his other wing trailed behind in order of march. Realising that his right wing was dangerously exposed, Philip ordered his left wing phalanx to lower their spears and attack. They drove the Roman right wing down the slope in disarray. Flaminius in response orders his right to hold their ground, and

leads his left (4,200 infantry plus allied support) to relieve his light troops near the summit. The Roman left wing had attacked the disorganised Macedonian right wing and broken it.

Roman troops force back the Macedonian light infantry, and the light infantry on both sides retires. Philip puts his phalanx and light-armed troops in double-depth, thus halving his front to leave room for his left wing to move up the pass in column. Philip's right charges downhill on the Romans, and begin to force them back.

But while his left wing is still deploying across the ridge, Flamininus orders his right wing, with the elephants, to attack the Macedonian left, still in echeloned formation as it deploys, is easily pushed back by the Romans and their elephants. But the Roman left is still in trouble.

At this decisive moment, when victory hung in the balance, a Tribune in the advancing Roman left wing realised the dire position in which the Roman right wing stood, and detached 20 maniples (probably the reserve Triarii) from the left wing to attack the victorious Macedonian phalanx in the rear (since it had already moved farther forward than the right). This broke the Macedonian left and completed the Roman victory. There is great slaughter of the exposed Macedonian phalanx.

Results of the battle: The Macedonians in retreat raised their pikes as a symbol of surrender, but the Romans didn't understand the signal. 7-8,000 Macedonians killed, 4-5,000 captured, c. 1,000 Romans killed.

The inability of the Macedonian phalanx to deal with an attack on its rear reflects the trend in the years since Alexander toward a heavier-armed phalangite, with less flexibility than it had had when developed by Philip II; and the consistent development of the Roman maniple toward flexibility.

Aftermath of Cynoscephalae

Philip's influence in Greece proper was broken, and he was essentially confined within Macedonia. Flamininus conducted some mopping-up campaigns after Cynoscephalae to push back Macedonian influence. In 196, Flamininus proclaimed at the Isthmian games that the cities of Greece were to be free, with no garrisons and no Roman control, and Flamininus was hailed as the liberator of Greece.

The Battle of Cynoscephalae

Had Roman involvement in Illyria and the Macedonian alliance with Carthage in the Second Punic War (right after Cannae!) not made Rome and Macedon the best of friends, then peace of 205 BC was destined not to last.

Rome suspiciously watched its neighbour across the sea. Philip V of Macedon sought supremacy over the Greeks, who requested help.

No doubt confident after their defeat of Carthage in 202 BC, Rome now deemed it best to remove the Macedonian threat as soon as possible. The pleas by Greek city states for assistance were all the excuse they needed to intervene in 200 BC, beginning the Second Macedonian War.

In 198 BC command passed into the hands of Titus Quinctius Flaminius. Had the previous Roman efforts led to nothing much, then things took a decisive turn with the arrival of Flaminius. He pushed on and finally managed to force a battle at the hills called Cynoscephalae.

Both sides were roughly equally matched, mustering about 25'000 men each. But both sides employed different systems, the Romans used the legionary method which had brought them victory over Carthage, the Macedonians fought in the Greek phalanx, which had under Alexander the Great defeated the Persians.

1. The Armies start the day either side of the Cynoscephalae

The armies closed on each other from either side of the chain of hills called Cynoscephalae. Both armies then made camp and spent the night on their side of the hills. In the morning both sides found the hills covered in dense mist, making visibility poor.

The Macedonian king Philip was the first to send out a party to take control of the top of the hill chain in order to gain an advantage.

When Flaminius also sent out a small force they found the Macedonian party already atop the pass between the two main hills. Clearly at a disadvantage the Romans suffered losses in the following skirmish and sent message for help. Once Flaminius had sent some reinforcements up the mist-covered hill, then the Romans began to gain the upper hand.

But the mist-covered skirmish escalated further, as Philip then sent more reinforcements up his side of the hill, once more driving the Romans back off the pass.

Had all the fighting so far been skirmishing, then it is at this point that both armies finally set out to do battle.

2. The Phalanx attacks, the Roman right advances

The skirmishing had caused Philip to hold the advantage of the higher ground. However it was the Macedonian center and right wing which held the heights, their left was still marching up the hill. This break in the Macedonian line was to prove a fatal flaw.

With the Macedonian left nowhere to be seen, Flaminius ordered his right to stay at the bottom of the slope.

As the Romans brought up their forces to meet the enemy at the pass, Philip simply ordered his phalanx to level their spears and attack. With such

heavily armoured infantrymen bearing down on them, there was little Romans could do, as they began to take losses and were forced back.

The phalanx being the evidently superior force in the contest so far, Flaminius needed to act fast, if his left was not simply to be crushed by the Macedonian advance. He took control of his army's right and advanced rapidly, hoping to divert some of Philip's main force to the aid of the left wing. With elephants leading the way, the Roman troops rushed up the hill, trying to save the day. They met the Macedonian left which had only just reached the summit of the hill and was not yet in proper formation .

3. The Macedonian left driven back, small Roman force wheels around into enemy's rear

If the Macedonian left was being forced back by the Roman advance, then the main contest was beyond doubt still being fought between the heavy Macedonian infantry and the Roman left.

A single military tribune on the Roman right now acted on his own.

He broke away with a force of 20 maniples and swung them around into the rear of the Macedonian heavy infantry in the centre.

This decisive action caused chaos among the Macedonians. Their battle order fell apart, many fled, others simply surrendered.

In essence the victory at Cynoscephalae was the triumph of the Roman legionary system over the Greek phalanx. The phalanx was a superb force when meeting its enemy head-on. This can be clearly seen in the fact that the Roman right stood little chance against Philip's heavy infantry as it advanced.

As the Macedonian wall of shields, with thousands of 20 foot (ca. 6 metres) lances protruding from it, came down the hill, there was little to nothing which could stop it.

But the Greek system was not as responsive as the Roman one. The fact that a Roman officer could break away from his main force in an independent unit and so swing around to attack the Macedonian main force from behind illustrates this point perfectly.

If the Romans reported to have lost 700 men, then 13'000 Macedonians were either killed or taken captive.

Rome's victory was absolute, Macedon's threat to the Greek states was no more and Philip V had to sue for peace, accepting Rome's terms.

Had Rome not won any land, it had now essentially established itself as the protector of Greece.