

Scipio Africanus, the first imperator.

By Dexter Hoyos.

Simon Laub. 3 min read.

Scipio Africanus is a great book by classics professor Dexter Hoyos (University of Sydney) about Scipio Africanus, “the greatest general in Roman history”, renowned for never having lost a battle.

According to Hoyos: Invincibility brought Scipio (ca. 235–183 B.C.) laurels, but with them the unease and envy of contemporaries [1].

The short version: Scipio Africanus commanded his first army at the age of 25, never lost a battle, led a daring invasion in Africa to personally defeat Hannibal and secured Rome’s dominance over the Mediterranean [2], starting what was later to become an empire.

With more words:

In the book we get something that almost feels like an eyewitness account of the events in the Second Punic war which would eventually give the romans victory, and empire, in Zama.

Normally, in battles at the time, both Roman and Carthaginian armies would have their best troops in the center and weaker allies on the flanks, but in the battle of Ilipa [3] (probably near Seville, Spain), in the second Punic War (206 BC), Scipio suddenly reversed his deployment: Now it was elite Roman legions on the wings, weaker Spanish allies in the center, which ended up creating a double envelopment, forcing the Carthaginian army inward and then back.

Apparantly, the Carthaginians, were confused by the sudden change in formation and could not redeploy in time due to the rigidity of ancient battle lines. Still, as Hoyos quotes Cicero of saying “*good luck, felicitas, is also an essential ingredient in a great generals formula for success*”. Indeed, “The reward at Ilipa to Scipio and Rome at that day was total. Carthage on that day lost Spain” (p.71).

During the *Second Punic War*, the city of Illiturgis tried to be on both the Roman and Carthaginian sides. First they has supported Rome so as to keep themselves alive and well, this would also apply when Carthage had the advantage in Spain. After he victory at Ilipa Scipio stormed the city. Men, women, and children were killed, survivors were enslaved and the city was razed to the ground. Teaching the Spaniards that Rome had a long memory both for good, and no less, for ill. Resistance could be forgiven. Treachery could not.

Afterwards, back in Rome, Scipio was reunited with his wife and children after 5 years of war.

After defeating the Carthaginians in Spain, Scipio proposed:

Invading Africa to force Carthage to recall Hannibal from Italy. Senior senators, especially [Fabius Maximus](#), opposed him, seeing the Africa expedition as reckless, and more so in the hands of a young, ambitious, and unconventional man as Scipio. According to Fabius Maximus sufficient forces should remain in Italy to defend Roman territory if Scipio was defeated (Another motive mentioned by Plutarch was personal jealousy of Scipio’s popularity).

In the end Scipio accepted a “*Compromise*” Command assigning him Sicily, not Africa. Allowing Africa only if he judged it in Rome’s interest. Later, when senators tried to stop him, he had already crossed into Africa, where early victories made opposition politically impossible...

Lilybaeum was Rome’s main naval base in Sicily. The last staging point before crossing to Africa. Before sailing, Scipio performed formal sacrifices to Jupiter, Neptune, and other gods. And took the auspices (observing divine signs).

With favorable omens the expedition to Africa could begin under Scipio’s command. Indeed, in Rome, religion and politics were inseparable. Soldiers could now believe that the gods were on their side. Invading Africa was risky; divine backing made it acceptable. The gods would favour their enterprise, and allow him, Scipio, to punish the Carthaginians from the harm they had inflicted on Rome.

Scipio and Hannibal met face to face once, shortly before the Battle of Zama, North Africa, in 202 BCE. Hannibal sought survival and damage control. Scipio sought irreversible victory. Negotiations failed. The Battle of [Zama](#) followed shortly after. Scipio defeated Hannibal decisively. The Second Punic War ended.

Demonstrating, also here, that outcomes are often decided by framing, timing, and preparation, not just raw strength. In the middle of it all Scipio gained an admiring nickname, Africanus, “*the man of Africa*”.

Indeed, what a story. And what a great book Dexter Hoyos has written about it all!

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-Simon

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