



## The Battle of Ruspina: 46 Bce: An Alternative Perspective

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**Abstract:** *Many scholars assert that Julius Caesar lost the Battle of Ruspina in 46 BCE. This conclusion is reached by examining only the early part of that engagement. The thesis of this paper is that Caesar won the battle when one considers the battle to its conclusion. Methodology: Historiography and conceptual analysis of the writings of ancient and modern historians. Results: Through brilliant defensive and offensive operations, the army of Caesar defeated the army of the Pompeians at the Battle of Ruspina. Conclusion: When one considers the battle until its conclusion, Caesar won the Battle of Ruspina in 46 BCE.*

**Keywords:** *Ruspina,, Caesarians, Pompeians, Civil War, African War.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

When Gaius Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon River in 49 BCE, he violated an ancient, Roman law that no general should enter Roman territory at the head of an army without official permission. This act was not unprecedented. In 88 BCE, Roman general Lucius Cornelius Sulla (138-78 BCE) marched his army into Rome for the first time in the Roman history. Sulla seized political control of the Republic that had been legally granted by the Centuriate Assembly to Gaius Marius as Consul. Sulla marched into Rome again in 82 BCE. Caesar's similar act spurred a great Roman Civil War (50-44 BCE). The conflict could be classified as a world war as battles were fought from Spain to Egypt and into Africa. The war even affected events in Asia. Most historians declare that Titus Labienus and his Roman allies defeated Caesar and his legions at the Battle of Ruspina, Africa in 47 BCE. This conclusion is incorrect but understandable. Caesar confronted Labienus, the ablest of Caesar's generals in the Gallic War, and his second-in-command there. Labienus fought against Caesar in the Civil War. He knew his strengths and his weaknesses and once surrounded Caesar's forces at the Battle of Ruspina. However, Labienus underestimated Caesar's creative, innovative mind on the battlefield.

Caesar and his battle-hardened legions engaged in successful, hard fought battles in Europe, Macedonia, and Egypt against Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey's) (106-48 BCE) armies. Pompey was an outstanding commander and some of his army consisted of Roman legionnaires. Caesar prevailed. and during 48 BCE Pompey retreated to Egypt, where Egyptian officials assassinated him. However, a formidable force of Pompeians (Optimates) held a strong position in the Roman province of Africa. Caesar sailed to Lilybaeum (Marsala), a port in western Sicily to assemble an army and navy designed to destroy the Pompeian stronghold. He had six legions and 2,000 cavalries aboard his fleet, but only a bare necessity of supplies due to lack of space, as he set sail on December 25th. Part of his force, 3,500 legionnaires and 150 cavalries, landed near Hadrumentum on the 28th.

The city was hostile to him, so he established a fortified camp at Ruspina. (Monastir, Tunisia) In Africa, Caesar engaged with the forces led by Labienus, Marcus Petreius, Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, Metellus Scipio, and King Juba of Numidia. Scipio was the commander of the Pompeian force. On January 1, 46 BCE Caesar moved some of his forces at Leptis (Lebda, Libya), where he encountered more of his troops. The next day several more reinforcements arrived at Ruspina. He left six cohorts (circa 2,880 men) to hold Leptis and march back to his major base at Ruspina. On January 4th Caesar led a foraging expedition with (30 cohorts 14,440 men), escorted by 400 cavalry and 150 archers.

## **2. BATTLE OF RUSPINA**

Titus Labienus, commander of a Pompeian force which included 7,000 Numidian cavalry, 1,600 Gallic and Germanic cavalrymen, 1,600 Roman cavalry led by Petreius, and circa 57,600 infantrymen, attacked the Caesarian forces. Caesar deployed his forces in one extended line, with his archers in front and cavalry on the wings. Labienus' cavalry pushed back Caesar's cavalry and enveloped Caesar's legionnaires. Caesar stretched out his line, which forced the encirclement of Labienus' into a looped formation. A looped formation is weak at the ends of the loop, where forces in the center cannot easily aid their comrades at the ends of the formation. An enemy can attempt to punch through at these points. Scipio commanded a backup force of eight legions, 20,000 cavalry, many light-armed troops and 30 elephants. The Numidian light infantry advanced forward to hurl javelins and slings at Caesar's men, and then moved back to avoid counterattacks by Caesar's projectiles. Labienus rode up to the front rank and taunted Caesar's troops. He shouted at one: "What do you think you are doing rookie?" The soldier replied: "I'm no raw recruit, Labienus; I'm a veteran of the Tenth." He then hurled his javelin and it landed inside the chest of Labienus' horse. Caesar broadened the length of his line and had every other cohort turn around, so his faced the Numidian cavalry in the rear and the other cohorts faced the Numidian light infantry to the front. Caesar's legionnaires charged in both directions, threw their javelins, and scattered the Pompeian infantry and cavalry. They pursued their enemy for a short distance, and then began to march back to camp at Ruspina. Suddenly, Marcus Petreius and Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso appeared with 1,600 cavalry and many light infantries to harass Caesar's legionnaires as they retreated. Caesar's army drove the enemy back and wounded Petreius. They then moved into the camp at Ruspina. At this point, many historians claim Caesar lost the battle of Ruspina. For example, the eminent scholar, Adrian Goldsworthy, of Yale University, wrote: "the battle was without a doubt a defeat for Caesar."

Goldsworthy might be correct if the Battle of Ruspina had ended at this point, but it did not. Caesar was unable to gain supplies for his legionnaires, but his army remained intact. Caesar merely executed a maneuver to break Labienus' encirclement and gain time for his reinforcements to arrive. He reinforced the camp at Ruspina, employed sailors as light infantry, and had craftsmen produce javelins and slings. His legionnaires harvested the sea for fish and other edible foods. They fed the horses seaweed, with the salt washed out of it, mixed with a little grass. The powerful construction of Caesar's camp, with towers manned by soldiers and equipped with artillery, discouraged an attack upon it. Caesar also sent messages to bring grain and other supplies to him. Metellus Scipio joined forces with Labienus and Petreius and set up camp three miles from Caesar's encampment. King Juba's forces military could not engage in the battle, because the army of King Bocchus II of Mauretania attacked his forces. Publius Sittius, a Roman eques, and mercenary commander, attacked and forced the surrender of Cirta, the richest town in the Kingdom of King Juba I. This act compelled the king to withhold troops designed to support Scipio's available manpower. The precision of the timing and location of Sittius' operations make it likely this event was coordinated by subordinates with Caesar after his arrival in Africa. After the end of the campaign, Caesar granted Sittius lands at Cirta, within Western Numidia where he founded a colony with his followers named the Colonia Cirta Sittianorum cognomine. Sittius shared all of Caesar's rewards with his followers. Caesar's reinforcements of two legions, 1,000 archers and slingers, and 800 Gallic cavalries arrived from Sicily. They brought enough grain with them to meet the most urgent needs. Caesar now had the upper hand. Caesar made overtures to the Pompeian soldiers and promised that he would grant them pardon and prizes. He behaved with restraint and clemency, whereas Pompeians ruled with brutality and cruelty. Desertions from the Pompeian army increased as they alienated the local population by their brutal treatment of them. Scipio launched war elephants against Caesar's position. However, Caesar's skirmishers drove the animals away by throwing missiles at them. Caesar launched an offensive on January 25th. Scipio's left wing collapsed, and the battle turned into a rout. The Caesarian army killed the Numidian cavalry under Labienus and the Germanic Warriors who supported them. Perhaps 5,000 Pompeians died in battle, while Caesar lost circa 50 soldiers. Many of Scipio's army managed to escape, but Caesarians killed most of them in the coming weeks.

## **3. CONCLUSION**

Titus Labienus was an outstanding military commander. His attack on Caesar's foraging expedition, before Caesar's total forces arrived in Africa, was sound military strategy. His tactic of surrounding Caesar's expedition was a viable military decision. Many generals would attempt to fight their way out of this situation. Many warriors might attempt to flee when confronted with an encirclement. However,

Labienus faced Caesar, a Master of Military strategy, and tactics. Caesar's extension of his military line forced Labienus to extend his circular formation into a looped formation. This allowed Caesar's men to break through the loop at its ends. Caesar gained time to receive reinforcements, and logistical supplies. When Caesar attacked the Pompeian army it collapsed. The Battle of Ruspina was a great victory for Caesar and his legionnaires. After a series of inconclusive clashes, Caesar's army fought the decisive battle of the African campaign at Thapsus in 46 BCE. They inflicted a crushing defeat of the Pompeian army.

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