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Hannibal: The Military Biography of Rome's Greatest Enemy

by Richard D. Gabriel

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Any biography, old or new, of Hannibal Barca is problematic. There are no Carthaginian textual sources on the famous general, archeological evidence (although fairly plentiful) does not give direct information on the man or his life, and the two major Roman sources have been examined from every conceivable angle. Nevertheless, Richard Gabriel has published his take on the great Carthaginian general, who, despite his eventual defeat, makes most great captains lists. This book complements Gabriel's earlier biography of Hannibal's arch enemy Scipio Africanus (reviewed in *Parameters* Summer 2009) and is based on much of the same research. Thus, Gabriel is not offering anything particularly new; however, as with most of his books, he tells an old story in a refreshingly readable manner.

We know virtually nothing about Hannibal's childhood—what you find is repetition of old legends, pure speculation, or extrapolation from archaeological evidence. Gabriel uses a little of each. He opens with an unnecessary scene based on the disputed practice of Carthaginian child sacrifice, but overall he gives a reasonable description of what a young Carthaginian boy of Hannibal's class might have experienced growing up. Similarly, lack of evidence makes description of the Carthaginian military system difficult. The default model has to be the Roman army, about which we have detailed information; however, Carthage's mercenary army would not have been trained, equipped, supplied, administered, disciplined, or fought like their Roman opponents. Even assuming similarity of weapons after years of capturing Roman equipment, one cannot infer Hannibal's forces changed their tactical patterns or if they did, how. Gabriel recognizes this and gives an informed assessment of the Carthaginian military.

One strength of *Hannibal* is its discussion of the strategic environment. Gabriel gives a good assessment of the strategic situation and the choices (and lack thereof) of the two sides. While it is common to recognize the strategic significance of Roman seapower, Gabriel gives a more complete and thorough analysis of the impact of seapower than many other authors. He points out frequently during the narrative where Rome's control of the seas inhibited Hannibal or influenced events. Conversely, Gabriel can reason himself into corners on minor points. For example, he asserts that the classical descriptions of the method of crossing the elephants over the Rhone River (ferrying them on rafts with at least some jumping off partway across) seems to assume the Carthaginians had limited knowledge of elephants, which they did not. Gabriel's alternative technique of enraging a dominant female and having her

charge into the water while the herd followed makes no sense either. What competent handler would purposefully start an elephant stampede in hopes they would swim across a river just because they can swim? Sometimes, we need to simply believe the source.

A more significant issue is the question first raised in antiquity of why Hannibal never attacked Rome. Gabriel scoffs, I believe correctly, at the idea that Hannibal could not attack Rome because he did not have siege equipment. Ancient armies frequently constructed siege equipment on site, and there was no unique technology involved. However, the idea that the defeat of Servilius' cavalry in a skirmish after the Battle of Lake Trasimene (June 217 BC) left the way open to Rome stretches credibility. Servilius had an intact consular army at Ariminum on a good road not much farther from Rome than Hannibal, and the consul would certainly have responded had the Carthaginians approached the capital. Even after Cannae (August 216 BC), Hannibal did not have sufficient force to besiege a major city regardless of the magnitude of his victory. In his narrative of the maneuvering before Cannae, the author emphasizes that Hannibal had to resort to foraging to feed his army, and the presence of a Roman force prevented that. The situation outside Rome would have been no different. Unless one assumes Rome would have surrendered in panic at his approach, regardless of when he attempted the feat, Hannibal would have had to besiege a major, fortified city while simultaneously securing and protecting supplies and fending off relief forces. He never had the requisite force to accomplish that, and he did not think it was necessary. Hannibal believed he could defeat Rome without capturing or destroying it. Gabriel would agree with the last statement if not the previous.

Gabriel's description of the Zama campaign and battle mirror the analysis in his biography of Scipio Africanus, which is to be expected. Gabriel has little new to add to the story of Hannibal's life after Zama, his exile, or his death.

Overall, there are better sources on specific issues, events, battles, and campaigns of the Second Punic War. For example, Adrian Goldsworthy has published an excellent book on Cannae (*Cannae: Hannibal's Greatest Victory*, Phoenix Press, 2007) and another on the entire struggle between Rome and Carthage (*The Fall of Carthage: The Punic Wars 265-146BC*, Cassel, 2002). Or, one might consult John Prevas' *Hannibal Crosses the Alps: The Invasion of Italy and the Punic Wars* (De Capo Press, 2001) on the route across the Alps, a traditional controversy Gabriel avoids. Gabriel's work is an academically viable piece focused on Hannibal and aimed at a general audience, and as such is a valuable addition to the literature.