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The prolific military historian Richard Gabriel’s new “military biography” of Hannibal is considerably more military than biographical. Although there are nods toward the experiential or dramatic styles of military history now in vogue, this is a very traditional book, combining a series of campaign histories with military analysis in a persuasive narrative-based, for the most part, solidly on the ancient sources.

There are, however, some serious problems with Gabriel’s analysis. Hannibal is a difficult subject for a biography, since all our information about him comes from heavily biased Roman sources—a classic example of writers writing the history. We know what he did, but little of what he said or thought. In the absence of such information, Gabriel espouses a tenuous central thesis: that, though Hannibal was a brilliant tactician, his victories were wasted because he failed to grasp larger strategic realities.1 Readers used to routine assertions of Hannibal’s “genius” and endless recountings of the Cannae Kesselschlacht (encirclement battle) will be surprised by Gabriel’s conclusion that he was a “sacrificial pawn in a much larger game that he never really understood” (218).

The introductory chapter evokes the style of bad historical fiction. Its horrifying opening scene of child sacrifice at Carthage is misleading, since the ancient evidence for the practice is very thin.2 Fortunately, Gabriel, perhaps realizing he has started on the wrong foot, soon adopts a more scholarly caution: “it is not impossible that [Hannibal’s father] sought the intercession of his god…. [H]e may well have offered his newborn son…. Hannibal may have attended the ritual…. Perhaps in gratitude … they named [a younger son], ‘the gift.’ … We will never know the true human being that was Hannibal. All we can do is to evaluate his abilities as a commander of men in battle on the basis of his actions” (3, 5; my emphases). Back on firm ground, the rest of the book features sturdy, readable, military-analytic prose—but untenable speculation will recur.

Though no specialist in ancient history, Gabriel does know the Second Punic War well, having written about it several times before.3 Moreover, his notes reflect a broad erudition, grounded in the work of both the giants among German historians and influential current scholars of the Roman army.4 Yet there are some significant lapses. For instance, on the question of relative cruelty in sacking cities, Gabriel accepts without criticism Polybius’s idealized description of the Roman sack of New Carthage.5 Similarly, he too

1. Relying on Aubrey de Sélincourt’s translation of Livy (NY: Penguin, 1954; rev. 1972), Gabriel renders consilium (deliberation or counsel) as “superb tactical ability,” as if it were a technical military term. But “tactics” as a subject taught to soldiers and officers did not emerge for at least another 1500 years. The Loeb Classical Library translator, B.O. Foster (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1929), renders consilium as “judgment,” which is much closer to the sense of the original Latin; e.g., Hannibal showed “the greatest judgment [plurimum consili] when in the midst of dangers,” Livy 21.4.5.

2. There is no significant archaeological evidence for any aspect of Hannibal’s personal life or military decision-making and the reports of Baal-worship are just the sort of biased, rhetorical, untrustworthy sources that Gabriel elsewhere avoids or treats with due circumspection. Why venture into such debatable territory just for a bait-and-switch?


often attributes a unified, long-term strategy to “Rome” or “the Romans” (e.g., 82, 213), but the senatorial 
oligarchy was more concerned with the intramural competition for glory than with strategic planning. 6 
There are other, minor errors of content 7 and style 8 as well.

A more pervasive shortcoming is a frequently problematic use of ancient sources. Though Gabriel can 
be intelligently critical of their many omissions and lack of clarity (e.g., 189), his limited general under-
standing of the Greco-Roman world sometimes leads him astray. Thus, he assumes that a pre-battle speech 
is a signal event, rather than both standard practice and a historian’s trope. More troubling is the inconsis-
tent treatment of religion and other aspects of culture. After the early, gruesome vignette of ritual infan-
ticide, Gabriel makes virtually no mention of culture until his concluding assessment of Hannibal’s strategic 
limitations (212), where he writes with a rationalist appreciation of cultural differences. But what of Livy’s 
report (21.22) that Jupiter commanded Hannibal to destroy Italy? Or the possibility that religious beliefs 
might have induced a skilled general to remain in Italy even while the war was gradually being lost else-
where?

“History” denotes a range of endeavors and subjects: it may seek to provide a sense of the human expe-
rience or simply to establish the facts of what took place. Gabriel opts decisively for the latter: he targets 
what he believes happened, almost exclusively militarily; he is not chronicling events of the late third cen-
tury BCE generally. Even so, he sometimes gets it wrong, especially in his forays into comparative history: to 
call Hannibal “an ambitious field-grade officer” leading “perhaps the equivalent of a battalion or regiment” 
and to write of his leadership abilities that “[s]oldiers expect the same traits in the officers who lead them 
into battle today” (11) blithely disregards many differences between ancient times and modern. History 
must counterbalance appealing similarities to our own experience with a healthy appreciation of what is so 
very different, such as child sacrifice or the fact that Hannibal’s soldiers were in no way free men like to-
day’s citizen soldiers. To assert or imply otherwise is not comparative history so much as anachronism.

Despite these problems, by chapter 3, Gabriel hits his stride with a gripping narrative combined with 
perceptive commentary on the military logic of Hannibal’s movements. By chapter 5 we are following the 
seasoned and adept Carthaginian campaigner into Italy. Gabriel rightly observes that this period marked a 
transition from “soldiers’ battles” to “generals’ battles.” Yet, while his military reasoning seems impeccable 
on the surface, it rashly presupposes that ancient generals operated with a clear sense of “tactical doctrine.” 
But Roman commanders were not trained tacticians—they were members of a social elite, lacking any sort 
of systematic professional training. They learned by example and fought from common sense and tradition, 
not doctrine. Gabriel does well to stress one strange and significant aspect of Roman military culture, 
namely the dogged refusal to concede defeat even after repeated disasters. This posed an unfamiliar strateg-
ic problem for Carthage: how to win a limited war against an enemy who will not discuss terms.

By chapter 7, the balance between narrative and analysis slips, 9 and, sadly, some of the most colorful 
bits from the sources slip through the cracks. 10 Still, those unfamiliar with warfare of the era will find much 
to hold their attention.

6. And, in any event, Republican Rome lacked the capability to carry out long-term political goals: since there was no “foreign of-
face” or “general staff,” we know little even about senatorial record keeping.

7. E.g., an apparent confusion (perhaps a translation issue) of the socioeconomic category equites with their earlier role as cavalry 
(154); or the failure to recognize that the practice of cavalry operating together with light infantry, and even carrying infantryman into 
battle clinging to their mounts, was widespread (125, 170n49). An unsubstantiated claim that Roman “legionnaires” were trained to 
attack to the right rather than the front is highly dubious, both because there is no contemporary evidence for any sustained tradition 
of Roman arms drill and because Gabriel adduces the battle of Culloden Moor (43) as relevant.

8. The high-velocity prose is generally lucid, but there is some occasional lack of clarity, e.g., when Gauls are said to charge like 
“wild beasts,” while holding large shields in an overlapping formation (31); Gabriel’s opinion on the relative value of the sword and the 
pilum (javelin) is difficult to untangle as well (42). The book is well-provided with notes and mostly cleanly edited, apart from the rare 
stray dash, omitted period or missing “that” to start a noun clause; in terms of orthography, “mantlet” and “Masallia” (for “Massilia”) is an outright error.

9. As does the balance of sources: in one stretch, thirty-five of thirty-six footnotes cite only Livy, Polybius, or Gabriel’s other 
books.
Gabriel occasionally abandons campaign narratives to fight scholarly skirmishes of his own. For example, he dismisses earlier explanations of Hannibal’s decision not to march on Rome after the battle of Lake Trasimene. Polybius’s odd claim (3.86) that Hannibal was so confident of ultimate victory that he saw no need to besiege the city will not do. Gabriel disagrees with the many scholars who think the Carthaginian was too weak to risk an assault on Rome, but his argument is badly flawed. (He goes out on this limb to support his contention that Hannibal misunderstood the war’s strategic realities.) He rejects Polybius’s report on the poor state of Hannibal’s army (3.87) after a hard winter and contends that “there was nothing particularly formidable about Rome’s defenses given the Carthaginians’ engineering ability” (142).

Gabriel might seem to be pushing his customary methodology—applying military logic to source problems—further than usual. But he is not merely questioning the sources, he is plugging his ears and shouting them down, using Sachkritik (factual criticism) to overrule rather than elucidate plain statements in Polybius, not because they are patently impossible or contradictory, but merely because they do not conform to his own analysis of the facts. Thus, he states that Hannibal’s army must have recruited thousands of Gauls over the winter, then flatly denies Polybius’s report of a bitter winter and difficult march. Instead, he imagines a winter spent cozily with Gallic allies and a pleasant march through Etruria the following spring. Other commentators do not doubt that the Carthaginian army needed rest and trust plausible statements in the sources that Hannibal would certainly have marched on Rome had he thought it advisable. That Gabriel is wrong here is less important than his cavalier disdain for the sources.

Gabriel admits that Hannibal feared being tied down before the walls of Rome, but, despite his many assertions of Rome’s remarkable determination in the face of apparent calamity, suggests that even a failed assault might have broken the Romans’ will to resist. Hannibal’s army, he goes on, could easily have taken Rome by a sudden strike and, if not, Carthaginian engineers could have conducted a successful siege. While Hannibal may have lacked strategic vision, the ancient evidence will not support the notion that a gamble on taking Rome itself made more sense than his strategy of separating Rome from its Italian allies.

Also problematic is Gabriel’s version of the climactic battle of Zama. His account builds on Polybius’s statement that Scipio deployed his three battle lines of maniples in line rather than in the quincunx or checkerboard pattern, and that the second-line principes were stationed “at some distance” behind the hastati. But this reads too much into Polybius’s simple phrase ἐν ἀποστάσει (in an interval), which may only be a reminder to his Greek readers that the Romans did not use a single phalanx but left both “hor-
horizontal” and “vertical” gaps in their lines. It need not indicate an unusually widely-spaced formation at all.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, there is no basis for detecting new “tactical dynamics” in a Scipionic “echelon” battle plan.\textsuperscript{19} Gabriel is not the first historian to convert skimpy descriptions of Roman formations into hard “evidence” of long-standing realities. Any permanent Roman unit reorganization with a tactical purpose would be more surprising than the lack of a “standard [Carthaginian] tactical system” (35). Gabriel’s version of the tactics adopted at Zama is a creative thought experiment based on the “rules” of modern tactics, not the meager evidence for actual ancient combat. Unmoored from the historical sources, the entire Zama “battle piece” devolves into second-rate historical fiction.\textsuperscript{20}

Norman Whatley gives very sage but little-heeded advice in warning against historians’ too confident reconstructions of poorly documented ancient battles and identifies five categories or methods of interpretation that may forestall egregious silliness.\textsuperscript{21} Gabriel is skilled, if sometimes heavy-handed, in three of these: topography, Sachkritik, and the “Sherlock Holmes [deductive] method.” As for the other two—a priori use of strategic theories and a “most thorough study” of the armies engaged—he over-reliance on putative universal principles and inconsistent attention to the men who fought often take his reconstructions far off course, as in his accounts of Trasimene and Zama. Even his tacit supposition that correct strategy is essential to victory may be disputed: Rome lost wars because they lost too many battles, not because opposing leaders were subtle strategists. That Hannibal was a skilled battle-winner but a strategic dunce is a provocative idea, but Gabriel does not make his case.\textsuperscript{22} True, Hannibal won many battles and still lost the war, but this does not mean he failed to comprehend what we call “strategy.” Gabriel commits a “cardinal sin” of historians, against which Polybius himself warns: “At the same time portraying Hannibal as a general of unrivalled daring and foresight, they also leave us in no doubt that he was utterly thoughtless” (3.47).\textsuperscript{23}

While Polybius’s errant historians paper over their contradictions by invoking the gods, Gabriel has introduced the false god of perfectible rational analysis. When an ahistorical notion of “military science” becomes the thick black marker that redacts good ancient sources, a basic line has been crossed—from scholarship to something else.

\textsuperscript{18} Polybius (3.114.3) also uses the word to mean something like “not flush or adjacent, but with a bit of room (to maneuver) between.” F.W. Walbank, \textit{A Historical Commentary on Polybius} (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1967) 2.455, reserves judgment on whether Polybius refers to a greater-than-usual gap.

\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, \textit{quincunx} is a modern coinage for a very sparsely attested formation and the “manipular legion” was not as uniform as Gabriel presents it (40).

\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, Gabriel twice even inserts descriptions of Zama from the \textit{Punica} of Silius Italicus, an epic poem written three hundred years later than the battle; worse yet, only in his notes does he make it clear that the passages derive from the poet, not Polybius.

\textsuperscript{21} See note 12 above.

\textsuperscript{22} He is correct that Rome’s expansion of the war to other theaters while containing Hannibal in southern Italy brought a victory that was remarkable and, in view of the early string of devastating defeats, unexpected. But, on the other side, he gives no sense of how Carthage might have won the war. If Rome’s superior manpower and refusal to yield were all that mattered, there is little to be learned from counterfactual speculation or pondering the merits of Hannibal’s operational decisions.

\textsuperscript{23} Trans. Robin Waterfield (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2010). He concludes the following section with a telling rhetorical question “why would we expect a sensible ending after a nonsensical beginning?”