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Jeff Champion, *Pyrrhus of Epirus*. Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword Books, 2009. Pp. xx, 156. ISBN 978-1-84415-939-0.

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There is a marvelous story that, after the Second Punic War, Hannibal and P. Cornelius Scipio Africanus met at the court of the Seleucid monarch Antiochus III.¹ Scipio asked Hannibal who was the greatest general the world had ever seen. This was a typical question of concern to ancient aristocrats: “Who is Number One?” Hannibal answered that Alexander the Great was the greatest of all generals. Scipio agreed and then asked who was second. Hannibal answered Pyrrhus of Epirus. A little irritated, Scipio then asked who was third. Hannibal answered that he himself was third—the third greatest of all generals. Scipio exclaimed, “But I conquered you!” And Hannibal replied, “Yes. But given the imbalance of resources between myself and the Romans, if I had conquered you, Scipio, then I would be the first of generals, not third.”

The story is probably apocryphal, but Alexander, Pyrrhus, and Hannibal had two things in common. First, at the strategic level, all three achieved great things in war with comparatively slender resources. (Actually, Scipio worked with limited resources, too, both in Spain and later in his invasion of Africa, because the Senate had to provide forces to so many different fronts during the Hannibalic War.) Second, at the tactical level—despite the terrible noise, dust, confusion, and violence of ancient battle, combined with the primitive means of communication available to them—they effectively maneuvered large sections of their forces against the enemy, instead of urging all their soldiers simply to push forward, as was more typically done. (Again, this was true of Scipio as well.) And they did all this while fulfilling the traditional, Homeric role of ancient generals, which was to lead from the front, risking wounds or death at the enemy’s hands, thereby setting an example of courage for their men and supporting their morale. These strategic and tactical accomplishments of great commanders led the ancients to judge achievement in war to be the greatest of human endeavors.

Jeff Champion rightly stresses these two themes in his *Pyrrhus of Epirus*. First, regarding the paucity of resources, the Epirote confederation of polities (three major “tribes”) that Pyrrhus ruled was an undeveloped and impoverished region of northwest Greece and never produced armies of truly impressive size. At best, Pyrrhus could field a force of about 20,000–25,000 men, including mercenaries, a significant army, but no match for either the full levy of Macedon (as he found out three times in the 280s [34, 53]) or the Romans’ seemingly endless supply of military manpower, despite significant Italic and Italiote Greek help. It took a great general to achieve what Pyrrhus did, given so slender a resource base. Champion correctly observes that Pyrrhus spent his entire career trying to increase his resources by acquiring populous, wealth-producing territory.

Champion is also correct to emphasize that Pyrrhus’s success derived from an unusual ability to maneuver large sections of his army on the battlefield. The best example of this is the battle of Asculum (279 B.C.), where Pyrrhus dealt with three crises caused by major Roman breakthroughs in his battleline by deploying reserves kept back for such an eventuality or judiciously redirecting large forces from other parts of the battleline to the breakthrough points (without jeopardizing any part of the line). It is difficult for moderns to imagine just how difficult this maneuvering must have been (94). That Pyrrhus was ultimately defeated in all his grand projects was thus beside the point to both Hannibal and Scipio in their evaluation of Pyrrhus as a general.

Pyrrhus was born in 319 B.C. into a divided and violent Epirote royal family. As a child, he was forced into exile during a coup d’état by one branch of the family. He grew up among the barbarous Illyrians to the

1. See Livy 35.14, Appian, *Syriaca* 9–10, and Plutarch, *Flaminius* 21.

north of Epirus (their major economic activity was piracy). As an adult, he served as a mercenary for Antigonus the One-Eyed, the best of Alexander's Successor-kings. Eventually, he murdered his way to the Epirote throne (297 B.C.). During the next fifteen years, he tried without success to increase his domains (and hence his resources) via conquest, always aiming to become king of Macedon—which in this period was itself beset by civil wars alternating with tyranny. Though he failed to take Macedon, he did gain a reputation for personal courage in battle (like his Homeric archetypes, he loved the *mano a mano* duel with opposing commanders). When the large Greek city-state of Tarentum in southern Italy became embroiled in a war with Rome, the Tarentines asked him for assistance (as they had asked previous kings of Epirus to help them in their struggles against Italic hill peoples). Pyrrhus answered their plea, thereby missing a chance to become king of Macedon when it fell into chaos around 280 B.C. because of civil war and large-scale attacks from Celtic tribes to the north. Pyrrhus brought an army of 25,000 to Italy (perhaps half of them actual Epirotes). He no doubt aimed to establish his own empire in the West and draw on its resources to defeat the powerful monarchies founded by the generals of Alexander in the decades after the Conqueror's death in 323 B.C.

In Italy, he at first swept all before him: the Greeks of southern Italy went over to him; he beat Roman forces at Heraclea in 280 B.C. and at Asculum the next year, though his casualties were high; and he marched north to the gates of Rome itself. But Rome's central Italian and Campanian allies remained loyal and the Romans refused to make peace. Moreover, these "Pyrrhic" victories had come at a huge cost in dead. Disappointed now with his Italian prospects, Pyrrhus accepted the appeal of the great city-state of Syracuse in Sicily to serve as champion of the Greek polities on the island against the threat of Carthage. Once more, he enjoyed initial success, expelling the Carthaginians from all their strongholds except Lilybaeum (278–277 B.C.), where Pyrrhus gave up his siege after only two months, and instead planned a new expedition—this time to Africa to attack Carthage. In preparation, he made major requisitions from the Sicilian city-states (especially for the building of warships); these were unpopular and led to resistance, which Pyrrhus met with bloody purges and executions in the cities. Meanwhile, the Carthaginians had landed a large army on the island, and, faced with this, the out of favor Pyrrhus abandoned the Sicilian Greeks, returning to Italy.

Pyrrhus rallied the southern Italian states for one more effort against the Romans; the result was a bloody drawn battle at Beneventum (275 B.C.). Pyrrhus now returned home and tried to use Epirus as a base from which to expand his power. He was again successful—at first. He drove Demetrius the Besieger's son, Antigonus II, from control of Macedon, the whole of the Macedonian army coming over to him. Here at last were the large-scale resources he had always sought. But Antigonus held the coastal towns with a large fleet, and, instead of finishing him off and stabilizing his rule over Macedon, Pyrrhus turned toward perceived new opportunities to the south, in the Peloponnese, where Sparta was undergoing civil strife. But his large army brought down from Macedon failed to take the city, thanks to the staunch bravery of the Spartans (including their women). Pyrrhus, again wary of a siege, marched on to Argos, another large city in the Peloponnese suffering civil unrest. There, he was killed during confused street fighting. With his death, everything collapsed: Antigonus II regained control of Macedon, establishing a dynasty that ruled for 120 years, while Epirus sank back into third-rank status.

In the first English-language book about Pyrrhus since Petros Garouphalias's encomiastic *Pyrrhus: King of Epirus* over thirty years ago,² Jeff Champion tells this exciting and puzzling narrative of ups and downs—eventually leading nowhere—with clarity and verve. But who in reality was this adventurous king of the Epirotes? Our major source, Plutarch, in his "Parallel Lives" format, linked Pyrrhus with the Roman general Gaius Marius, depicting both as grim military men with little learning or charm. Champion is dubious about the parallel, but offers few new insights into Pyrrhus's personality, as opposed to narrating his adventures. Pyrrhus was literate, even a writer—but only of military manuals. His statues show a strong-jawed brute of a man (a genetic defect evidently made his upper teeth appear to be one continuous bone). He en-

2. London: Stacey International, 1979.

joyed personal combat with spear or sword, and gloried in his nickname “The Eagle.” His ambitions were nearly limitless, no surprise in a cousin of Alexander the Great. He had come up via a hard school: his childhood was spent in exile among the fierce Illyrians and his adolescence in the military encampments of Antigonus the One-Eyed, where he was influenced by Antigonus’s talented but erratic son Demetrius the Besieger (from whom he later tried to seize Macedon). He murdered a cousin who was about to become king of Epirus before (so he said) the cousin could murder him first.

Pyrrhus’s restless energy—and his demands for Epirote soldiers and funds—were never-ending. He showed outstanding physical bravery in many single combats, most famously in personally leading the assault on the huge walls of the city of Eryx in Sicily in 277 B.C. (109). But he lacked staying power: hence his abandonment of the Italian campaign in midstream to go to Sicily, of the Sicilian states to go back to Italy, and then of the unfinished Macedon project to go off in hopes of conquering Sparta. When the Greek states of the West wanted a champion, they got a harsh military tyrant. (He did like animals, however, and his pet eagle is said to have starved itself to death over his grave.) But the problem here was not personality alone: Pyrrhus needed to expand well beyond the assets of Epirus to realize his huge ambitions. In taking on Rome, Carthage, or the other Hellenistic monarchs, he confronted regimes with far more resources than he could handle. Once the futility of a situation became clear, he moved to another target in his confrontations with both Rome and Carthage. His setting out to conquer Greece in 272 B.C. when he should have focused on consolidating his rule in Macedon is less understandable. All in all, Pyrrhus is a formidable figure, not a likeable one.

Champion’s book offers a needed corrective to at least one major misunderstanding of the period. He rightly doubts the claims of ancient writers, and some modern ones, that the Tarentines, because of their “wealth and decadence,” were of limited military value to Pyrrhus in Italy (65). The ancient historians were engaging here in traditional moralizing about the alleged debilitating effects of wealth, something belied, as Champion indicates, by the fame of the Tarentine cavalry, the large numbers of infantry and cavalry the Tarentines put into the field for Pyrrhus, and the occasional Tarentine victories over the Romans on their own (54). Moreover, Pyrrhus could never have crossed the Adriatic to Italy in the first place without the protection of the Tarentines’ war-fleet, and he acknowledged their contribution to his victory over the Romans at Heraclea in his thanksgiving dedication at Dodona in Epirus. Champion could have made this point even stronger, had he referred to the contemporary thanksgiving dedication by the Tarentines themselves at Delphi, which honors their cavalry general at Heraclea: “From the city of Tarentines, that fights on horseback.”³ Our sources indicate war-weariness and draft protests at Rome—not at Tarentum (119)—before the climactic clash at Beneventum. When Pyrrhus gave up and returned to Epirus, the Tarentines held out against the Romans for three more years. Even in the absence of Pyrrhus, the Romans had faced a formidable opponent: they found the Tarentine gods frightening (Livy 27.16).

Champion has a First in Classics and Ancient History from Western Australia University, but he is not a trained ancient historian. Sometimes it shows, as in the following errors: the Romans were not in fact at war with Tarentum in 303 B.C. (42); the great Roman victory over the Seleucids at the battle of Magnesia occurred in 189 B.C., not in 171 (63)—not a small detail, since this battle brought Rome to world power status in the eastern Mediterranean as Zama had done in the western Mediterranean. The Roman assembly responsible for declaring war was the *comitia centuriata*, not the *comitia curiata*, and it neither comprised primarily “poor plebeians,” nor always followed senatorial recommendations (49)—famously, it rejected a proposal for war against Macedon in 200 B.C. Polybius 1.11 refers not to Roman war-weariness after Asculum (95), but to conditions fifteen years later, in 264. The cities of Himera and Selinus in Sicily are not east of Agrigentum (102), nor is Messene east of Sparta (130). The Romans had no long-standing alliance with Carthage, renewed for the third time in 279 B.C.; their treaties with Carthage were in fact commercial—there was never a military alliance (though the Carthaginians proposed one against Pyrrhus in 279). Enemy generals were not offered as a sacrifice at the culmination of a Roman triumphal parade (115). Finally, Polybius

3. See Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 2006) 157.

(1.37) says Romans depended on *bia* to accomplish much in life; Champion⁴ translates *bia* as “military violence” and makes the passage his principal evidence for the alleged exceptionally violent militarism of the Romans (45). Actually, *bia* as used in this particular passage of Polybius—where he is explaining why Roman admirals ignore threatening weather at sea—merely means “will-power.”

A more serious shortcoming is a general lack of analysis. Champion provides an exciting enough, detailed narrative of Pyrrhus’s triumphs against the odds, mixed with eventual disasters. His accounts of Roman and Epirote/Macedonian military organization and tactics are very good (24–25, 61–62). But there is no discussion of what growing up as a royal child in exile in barbarian Illyria would have meant to Pyrrhus; what the vicious infighting among Alexander’s cousins for control of Epirus would have meant to him when he was old enough to understand; what participation in the huge but even more complex, violent, and treacherous struggles of the great Successors meant to Pyrrhus as an adolescent. Above all, there is no extended discussion of what the model of his cousin Alexander the Great would have meant to him. I am not asking for psychoanalysis, but simply for some insight into Pyrrhus’s character.

Further, Champion does not seek to explain why the Romans were so successful in bringing large territories under permanent hegemony, while Pyrrhus was not. We get no sense that, in the centuries-long seesaw struggle of Carthaginians and Greeks for control of Sicily (recounted in detail), the Carthaginians had gradually gained the upper hand by the 280s. Why that occurred, what it meant to the Greeks, and why the Punic government poured such enormous resources into this struggle—these questions remain unaddressed. Nor do we learn why, even after Pyrrhus’s victories at Heraclea and Asculum, Rome’s allies in Campania and Central Italy remained loyal. Had they not, the course of Mediterranean history would have been starkly different. These questions lie at the core of Pyrrhus’s career and of his ultimate and total failure; the exciting fighting is merely *histoire événementielle*.

Champion has, nevertheless, written a generally lucid and useful introduction to Pyrrhus and his tumultuous career; the reader who knows little of this period will learn a great deal. But Pyrrhus still awaits a more thorough and rigorous study in English.

4. Under the influence of William V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome* (Oxford: OUP, 1979).