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Richard A. Gabriel, *Hannibal: The Military Biography of Rome's Greatest Enemy*. Washington: Potomac Books, 2011. Pp. xvi, 269. ISBN 978-1-59797-686-2.

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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 winners 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 Séincourt'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 consilii*] 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?

3. See, e.g., *The Great Battles of Antiquity* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994); *Great Captains of Antiquity* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001); *The Great Armies of Antiquity* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002); and *Scipio Africanus: Rome's Greatest General* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2008).

4. E.g., Theodor Mommsen, *History of Rome*, 3 vols. [German orig. 1854-55-56], trans. William P. Dickson (NY, 1862-66; often revised and reprinted); Johannes Kromayer & Georg Veith, *Heerwesen und Kriegführung der Griechen und Römer* (Munich: Beck, 1928); Tim Cornell, Boris Rankov, & Philip Sabin, eds., *The Second Punic War: A Reappraisal* (London: Inst of Classical Studies, 1996); Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War, 100 BC-AD 200* (Oxford: Clarendon Pr, 1996) and *Cannae* (London: Cassell, 2001).

5. Adam Ziolkowski, "Urbs direpta, or How the Romans Sacked Cities," in *War and Society in the Roman World*, ed. J. Rich & G. Shipley (London: Routledge, 1993) 69-91, shows that Polybius's account has little to do with what actually happened.

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 content⁷ and style⁸ 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 understanding 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 inconsistent treatment of religion and other aspects of culture. After the early, gruesome vignette of ritual infanticide, 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 elsewhere?

“History” denotes a range of endeavors and subjects: it may seek to provide a sense of the human experience 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 century 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 today’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 strategic 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 office” 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, “mantelet” is an uncommon variant of “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).¹¹

Gabriel might seem to be pushing his customary methodology—applying military logic to source problems¹²—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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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,¹⁷ 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 "hori-

10. E.g., M. Claudius Marcellus, a major adversary of Hannibal and one of the brashest Roman generals, makes only the briefest appearance (159), his death by ambush in 208 noted only because he was killed along with his consular colleague, T. Quinctius Crispinus.

11. But see his *Soldiers Lives through History—The Ancient World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006) 126: "Carthaginian armies also lacked siege trains."

12. On this, see Norman Whatley's indispensable article, "On the Possibility of Reconstructing Marathon and Other Ancient Battles," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 84 (1964) 119–39.

13. He also insists that the idea of Hannibal's failing in his assault on the town of Spolegium "cannot be accepted," presumably because he credits Carthage, on scant evidence, with great prowess in siege engineering.

14. See, e.g., Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Punic Wars* (London: Cassell, 2000) 192–93. Gabriel also relies on a secondhand reference to Plutarch, *Life of Marcellus* 13.2, to support his claim that the city of Rome lacked the personnel to man its walls. Whatever the value of this evidence, it refers to the following year, after the battle of Cannae.

15. In fact, logistical issues ruled out a prolonged, heavily engineered siege: several years later, Hannibal could not remain stationary near Capua for more than a few days, due to the lack of forage for his cavalry (Polybius 9.5).

16. Michael P. Fronda, *Between Rome and Carthage: Southern Italy during the Second Punic War* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), notes that Hannibal's success in winning many allies saddled him with the problem of defending all of them, no simple thing, but concludes that he had no better way to proceed. His skepticism about the utility of applying strategic analysis based on rational self-interest to the ancient world is a useful corrective to Gabriel's anachronistic forays.

17. This much is clear in Polybius—it is a tactic for dealing with the Carthaginian elephants at the beginning of the engagement.

zontal” and “vertical” gaps in their lines. It need not indicate an *unusually* widely-spaced formation at all.¹⁸ Thus, there is no basis for detecting new “tactical dynamics” in a Scipionic “echelon” battle plan.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.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.²¹ Gabriel is skilled, if sometimes heavy-handedly, 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—his 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.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).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.

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, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1967) 2.455, reserves judgment on whether Polybius refers to a greater-than-usual gap.

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

20. Indeed, Gabriel twice even inserts descriptions of Zama from the *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.

21. See note 12 above.

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.

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?”