



Hannibal: A Hellenistic Life by Eve MacDonald.

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This new biography of Hannibal enters a crowded field of over a hundred books on the Carthaginian general whose exploits have stirred the popular imagination for centuries. Archaeologist Eve MacDonald (Univ. of Reading) takes an innovative approach, casting Hannibal as an integral player in the Hellenistic culture of his day. In a lucid, readable narrative, the author gives enough detail without swamping the reader with minutiae.¹ Occasional redundancies do not detract from the book, which will appeal to a general public interested in the Punic Wars, as well as specialists looking for new insights.

The introduction surveys the qualities attributed to Hannibal by the ancient sources. Unfortunately, nearly all are pro-Roman, since Carthaginian records or histories were lost or destroyed. MacDonald correctly identifies Polybius as “the most reliable of all the ancient sources on Hannibal” (2). Asking whether Hannibal’s characteristics conform to a stereotype of a Carthaginian or actually created that stereotype, she concludes that “the narrative of the life and death of Hannibal has come down to us filtered through a Roman lens but was deeply rooted in Carthaginian culture and traditions” (6).

Chapter 1, “Hannibal and Carthage,” concerns the “rich cultural heritage and origins of Carthage [that] shaped Hannibal’s early life and were fundamental to his education and the creation of his identity” (7). MacDonald examines the foundational myth of the Punic avenger in Vergil’s *Aeneid*² and the influence of John Dryden’s 1697 translation of the epic in modern times. She also elucidates connections between Etruscan, Greek, and Carthaginian cultures as compared with Rome’s. Particularly interesting are the differences between the economies of Carthage (mercantile) and Rome (agrarian), and the stereotype of the Carthaginian merchant in Roman literature. She notes that “We learn from Plautus [the *Poenulus*] that the Carthaginian men of Hannibal’s time were culturally different from their Greek and Roman counterparts. Their style of dress was different, they pierced their ears, were often multilingual and did not eat pork” (16). Also described is the famous dual port of ancient Carthage, though MacDonald omits the controversy over its late dating. Carthaginian governmental and religious institutions and customs are discussed in detail. The author is rightly skeptical of reports of child sacrifices during rituals at the Tophet or child cemetery, but states that “at least some of the offerings seem to be the remains of sacrificed children” (22). This is far from certain.³

Chapter 2, “The Great Man in the Hellenistic World,” surveys transformations in the image of the hero from Alexander the Great to Hamilcar Barca, which often included divine patronage. MacDonald

1. Extensive endnotes and bibliography will aid those seeking to learn more. (A minor citation error should be noted: the title of Michael P. Fronda’s book is *Between Rome and Carthage*, not *Between Hannibal and Rome*.) Other ancillaries include three maps and nine plates.

2. Viz., *Aen.* 4.625: “from my bones let some avenger rise” (*exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor*). Spoken by Dido, the legendary founder and first ruler of Carthage.

3. See Jeffrey H. Schwartz et al., “Skeletal Remains from Punic Carthage Do Not Support Systematic Sacrifice of Infants,” *PLOS ONE* (17 Feb 2010), and “Bones, Teeth, and Estimating Age of Perinates: Carthaginian Infant Sacrifice Revisited,” *Antiquity* 86 (2012) 738–45.

argues that that “no event had more of an impact on Hannibal, from his earliest childhood to his formative years, than the First Punic War” (31). She briskly summarizes the events of that conflict, in chapter 3, “His Father’s Son,” and sketches the role of Hannibal’s father, Hamilcar, in it. Unfortunately, in the absence of substantial information on Hannibal’s youth, she resorts to material from such unreliable sources as Silius Italicus’s tedious propagandistic poem *Punica*, written almost three centuries after her subject’s death.

Chapter 4, “Barcid Iberia from Gades to Saguntum,” examines events in Spain leading up to the Second Punic War. MacDonald correctly discounts Hannibal’s alleged hatred of Rome as a true causal factor: “There is little reason to doubt that the Barcids and many other Carthaginians were suspicious of Rome; however, we should not see this as the driving force behind their subsequent conquests” (62). As for the siege and capture of Saguntum, “a more circumspect view of these events sees the Romans as having provoked Hannibal into war using Saguntum as the bait.... There seems little doubt that events have been adapted to fit a particular narrative and to place the blame on Hannibal’s shoulders.... We can never know the full story but a healthy skepticism over the Roman version of the origins of the war makes sense” (77–78, 81).

Chapter 5, “Legend: Hannibal into Italy,” recounts Hannibal’s crossing of the Alps and traces the origins of the myth of Hannibal to his early victories in Spain:

His philosophy of leadership gained him great loyalty from his troops, whilst his victories among the Iberians and the sack of Saguntum made him famous. By 218 BCE, as Hannibal prepared to leave Carthaginian Iberia and fight the Romans, he was backed by an army that would follow him anywhere and the reputation of being able to outmanoeuvre the gods themselves. (82)

MacDonald explains Hannibal’s impressive intelligence network and his blending of the multiethnic components of his army “into a successful and unified machine [that] like a virtuoso chess player [he] moved ... in a coherent strategy” (85–86). Hannibal’s connection with the god Melqart (whom the Greeks equated with Herakles) and the dream announcing his future destruction of Italy furthered the notion of divine support—“a multicultural Hellenistic army needed the unifying force of a leader who was divinely sanctioned” (89). The chapter describes the vicissitudes of the arduous journey to and through the Alps; MacDonald seems unaware here of recent research⁴ showing that Hannibal’s losses were on the order of five hundred men, not the twenty thousand claimed in the pro-Roman sources, though, to her credit, she grants that “it may well be ... that the losses and the hardships of the long journey have been exaggerated in our sources for dramatic impact” (98). The chapter ends with some marvelous comments by Napoleon on Hannibal, offering the perspective of “one military genius on another” (99).

Chapter 6, “Hannibal the Conqueror: From the Trebia to Trasimeno,” concerns Hannibal’s first great victories against the Romans, with the caution that “Polybius’s narrative is decidedly pro-Scipionic” (105), that is, providing a needed heroic Roman counterpart of Hannibal. The chapter also assesses the role of religion and superstition in the Roman reaction to Hannibal’s devastating early victories.

Chapter 7, “The Apogee: Cannae and the War in Italy,” concerns Hannibal’s signature battlefield victory. The Roman dictator Quintus Fabius Maximus had famously advised against any direct confrontation with Hannibal, instead preferring harassing tactics to impede his foraging efforts. But many

4. See, esp., Salvador García Tomás, *Aníbal, genio de la guerra: Una visión más realista de sus hazañas* (Madrid: Cultiva Libros, 2011), an important book not listed in MacDonald’s bibliography.

in Rome disagreed with Fabius. “The political infighting at Rome was the result of Hannibal’s skilled tactics and creative abilities. He was playing the Romans like pieces in a board game” (126).

The author’s account of the battle of Cannae is unsatisfactory. She cites Polybius’s figure for the size of the Roman cavalry as 6,000 when he actually says *over* 6,000. Others have recently argued for 12,800 horse (3,200 Roman plus 9,600 allied).⁵ This is important because the Roman defeat is often ascribed to Hannibal’s superiority in cavalry. But his victory in fact resulted from the Romans’ overconfident deployment of the 3,200 *equites* on their right wing against Hannibal’s 6,000 heavy horse. At the same time, their 9,600 allied horsemen on the left wing were pinned down by Hannibal’s crack Numidian cavalrymen until his heavy horse could circle around and obliterate the *equites* from the rear.

As for casualties sustained in the battle, MacDonald rejects Polybius’s figure of seventy thousand Romans killed as inconsistent with the total number of Roman troops, although it makes perfect sense if one accepts the higher cavalry count. Hannibal’s own losses, a little over five thousand, did not include his “finest soldiers” (133) but primarily his more expendable Gauls. The author concludes that “by the conventions of third-century warfare a defeat of the magnitude of Cannae demanded that the losing side sue for peace, terms be agreed and the victors impose their conditions on the defeated” (134).

In chapter 8, “After Cannae,” MacDonald maintains that “Just after Cannae the Romans appeared, by any contemporary standard, to have lost the war” (140). Yet the war continued. Hannibal won further victories, while the Romans reverted to Fabian tactics, mostly avoiding open battle with the Carthaginian commander. Hannibal’s original strategy had been to weaken the alliances of Rome, and after Cannae some of them did shift their loyalty to the Carthaginian side. The most significant defector was Capua, the second largest city in Italy. Hannibal gave the Capuans their freedom and did not force them to serve in his army. This was a mistake that allowed superior Roman forces to recapture the city five years later, auguring things to come.

In the ensuing years the Romans ground down Hannibal’s gains and won back the pieces of Italy that had been lost, one by one. Yet the fact that, despite their massive manpower advantage, the Roman armies never massed again to meet Hannibal in a fixed battle in Italy reveals just how close Hannibal came to victory.... [I]t took them almost a decade to regain control of southern Italy—which illustrates the astonishing tactical and military skill that Hannibal displayed. To carry on military operations, often successfully, without reinforcements against so many Roman legions was a staggering achievement. (147)

MacDonald also gives an eloquent account of Archimedes’s role in defending Syracuse with his war machines until the city fell due to treachery. In the ensuing brutal sack, a Roman soldier killed the greatest scientific mind of his time, while he was working out his equations in the sand.

In chapter 9, “Hannibal’s Dilemma,” on the years 212–209, MacDonald contends that “For the Romans, the sack of Syracuse was a turning point and marked the beginning of almost a century of the looting of cities across the Hellenistic world” (160). She describes Hannibal’s final victories, for example, at Herdonea in 212, when the praetor Gnaeus Fulvius Flaccus became overconfident and faced Hannibal on the battlefield. The Romans suffered sixteen thousand casualties, more than at Lake Trasimene. This and other encounters show that Hannibal’s army had not lost its edge while wintering “in luxury” at Capua, as Roman propaganda insisted. In contrast to Livy, Polybius states that Hannibal never lost a battle to the Romans in his sixteen years in Italy. MacDonald finds Livy guilty “of exaggerating his accounts and conflating different events” (172).

5. See Yozan Mosig and Imene Belhassen, “Revision and Reconstruction in the Punic Wars: Cannae Revisited,” *Internat’l Journal of the Humanities* 4.2 (2006) 103–10.

This chapter also traces the development of the legend of Scipio as a Roman hero to inspire the youth of the Augustan age, especially by Livy, whose “narrative of the Second Punic War was written to parallel the lives of Scipio and Hannibal.... [T]he story sets out to balance the pure virtue of Scipio against the duplicity and faithlessness of Hannibal” (177). Polybius had been more critical; he writes, for instance, that, when New Carthage fell, Scipio “let loose the majority of his troops against the inhabitants, according to Roman custom; their orders were to exterminate every form of life they encountered, sparing none.... The carnage was especially frightful” (179).

Chapter 9, “Over the Alps, Again,” details the war in Spain and Hasdrubal’s eluding of Scipio at Baecula to cross the Alps in hopes of joining his brother. After his defeat and death at the Metaurus River, the Romans denied him the sort of honorable funeral that Hannibal had consistently given Roman generals he had defeated in battle; instead, they tossed the corpse’s severed head into Hannibal’s camp. Despite Roman successes in Spain and against Hasdrubal in Italy, by 209 “twelve out of the thirty Latin allies told the Roman consuls that they would no longer supply the men necessary to fill their quotas for recruitment” (185). When trouble arose in Etruria, the Romans entrusted Terentius Varro (the surviving consul at Cannae, scapegoated to preserve the reputation of Aemilius Paullus) with quelling disturbances near Arretium; this suggests he was not seen as responsible for the disaster at Cannae.

The Romans, who had indulged in human sacrifices after Cannae, hoping to appease the gods, also engaged in child sacrifice when they learned that Hasdrubal was approaching: “the citizens of Rome went into a frenzy of religious placation of the gods.” An infant born at Frusino who appeared too large and “had no visible gender” was “placed alive in a box and thrown into the sea” (188).

By 205, Hannibal’s (still undefeated) forces were confined to Bruttium at the tip of the Italian peninsula. Four legions were assigned to watch his movements but not challenge him to battle.

One of the most revealing aspects of Hannibal’s remarkable leadership and personality was the loyalty of his army through this period in Italy. Despite being “often short of money for pay and short of provisions as well,” the army did not abandon him or rebel. Livy finds it “amazing that there was no mutiny in his camp” and it is a testament to the loyalty the men owed their commander, and their belief in him. (195–96)

Chapter 11, “Hannibal Returns,” highlights the Roman invasion of Africa, the return of Hannibal, and his confrontation with Scipio. The author again cautions that the sources are notoriously unreliable. In discussing the forces under Hasdrubal Gisgo and the Numidian king Syphax confronting Scipio’s army at Utica, she remarks that “the unsolvable issue of actual troop numbers reflects the ambiguities in our sources and their narrative intent to exaggerate Scipio’s achievements” (204). Syphax offered a peace plan and Scipio pretended to consider it, but in the middle of the night ordered his men to attack and set fire to the enemy camp. Livy claims forty thousand men were slaughtered or burned to death. Hasdrubal Gisgo and Syphax retreated to an area known as the Great Plains and were defeated in battle rather than by fire and treachery. The Carthaginians sued for peace and signed a treaty accepted by the Roman senate, stipulating that Hannibal be recalled from Italy. After he landed near Hadrumetum, Scipio claimed the Carthaginians had broken the peace terms and “took his forces and pillaged town after town in the Carthaginian heartland. He sold the population into slavery and destroyed everything and everyone he came across” (212). The Carthaginians asked Hannibal to intervene and, in a face to face conference with Scipio at Zama, he offered peace but was refused. The next day, Hannibal suffered his (supposedly) sole defeat on the field of battle.

Hannibal allegedly fielded no less than eighty elephants at Zama (though Carthage seems to have been out of elephants, having had none at either Utica or the Great Plains). Frightened by the din of battle, the animals ran through gaps opened in the Roman ranks or even attacked their own side.⁶ The ancient sources' accounts of the Battle of Zama are chock full of inconsistencies and (suspiciously) portray the battle as a sort of reverse Cannae. The crucial discovery that the dual port of Carthage dates to the second century, *after* the end of the war,⁷ renders untenable the reported text of the peace treaty, which limited the Carthaginians to ten warships while the new port had berths for 220. MacDonald alludes to the "new ports" only in passing (221) and elides the ten-ship restriction in her discussion of the putative treaty (219). Recent research (not cited by MacDonald) has argued strongly that the treaty and possibly even the entire Battle of Zama may be fabrications of Roman propagandists after the destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE!⁸

Chapter 12, "Hannibal in Exile," is a valuable discussion of Hannibal's work as suffete (elected chief magistrate), when, in a single year, he eliminated corruption and restored the Carthaginian economy, but made powerful enemies of the city's oligarchic plutocrats, who betrayed him to Rome by accusing him of plotting with the Seleucid king Antiochus III. He then went into exile to avoid capture by the Romans. MacDonald recounts his last years, travels, and victories (including a famous naval battle where he used snakes catapulted in earthen pots into enemy ships), his betrayal by King Prusias of Bithynia, and his suicide by poisoning. An epilogue, "Hannibal's Afterlife," evaluates the man's personal character and genius and neatly rounds out the portrait of a great commander whose image and influence continue to the present day.

Eve MacDonald has written a generally superb, highly accessible biography that places one of the giants of military history in the context of Hellenistic culture. There are flaws, especially in her handling of the battles of Cannae and Zama, the latter a place for which there is neither archaeological evidence, nor any Roman commemorative monument, nor even a certain location. While *Hannibal: A Hellenistic Life* is not a definitive biography, it is a welcome and significant contribution to the literature on its subject.

6. On the improbabilities of all this, see Yozan Mosig and Imene Belhassen, "Revision and Reconstruction in the Second Punic War: Zama—Whose Victory?" *Internat'l Journal of the Humanities* 5.9 (2007) 175–86.

7. See H. Hurst, "L'ilot de l'Amirauté, le port circulaire et l'avenue Bourguiba" in Abdelmajid Ennabli, ed., *Pour sauver Carthage: Exploration et conservation de la cité punique, romaine et byzantine* (Paris: UNESCO, 1992) 79–94.

8. See Abdelaziz Belkhdja, *Hannibal Barca: L'histoire véritable et le mensonge de Zama* (Tunis: Apollonia, 2011).