

BOOK REVIEW

Hannibal: A Hellenistic Life. By EVE MACDONALD. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. viii + 332. Hardcover, \$38.00. ISBN 978-0-300-15204-3.

Regarding Hannibal there is a curious paradox, usually forgotten: he was one of the most hated men by ancient writers, yet he is one of the most beloved among modern historians. And every year we have at least one book where he is present, entitled *Hannibal*, or *The Second Punic War*, or *Carthage [in the IIIrd century BCE]*. So, when seeing the *Hannibal* of MacDonald, we ask two questions: what shall we find in it? Mostly: what new shall we find in it?

The book is divided in twelve chapters and an epilogue. To begin, MacDonald summarizes Carthage's history, the First Punic War and the life of Hannibal's father, Hamilcar, who had also been a great general (chapters I-III). She comes to her hero later. All of the Carthaginian portion of the Iberic Peninsula was under Hannibal's control and he provoked the Romans by laiding siege to Saguntum: he said that this town was under Carthaginian authority; Romans answered that it was an allied city (chapter IV).

Once he elected to wage war against the Romans, Hannibal crossed Eastern countries of Spain, South part of France and the Alps (chapter V). For centuries two points have interested historians: the crossing of the Rhône River by the elephants and the identification of the location of the pass through the Alps. MacDonald, however, seems to have read only ancient sources, and we cannot find here any debate about these questions. It is well known nowadays, that elephants can swim and that it is impossible to say by which pass Hannibal crossed the mountains.

In Italy, Hannibal vanquished the Romans in four famous battles, by the Ticinus River, The Trebia River (ten lines in MacDonald), near Lake Trasimene (one page) and at Cannae (chapters VI-VII). After his famous victory at Cannae, Hannibal had a strategic and political dilemma: protect either Capua or Tarentum, two allied towns besieged by Romans (chapters VIII-IX). He lost both, and also Syracuse. His brother Hasdrubal, who had also lost South Spain, came to

reinforce him, but he was vanquished and killed at the battle of the Metaurus River.

During this time, the Romans were divided: Fabius Maximus preferred to fight against Punic army in Italy; Scipio thought that it was better to make war in Africa. The last one was designed to go to Carthage. He could vanquish Hannibal at another famous battle, near Zama (chapter XI). After this defeat, Hannibal fled to Asia, near the King Antiochus, and he committed suicide to avoid prison in Rome (chapter XII). He was so a great man that his memory went on until our days (Epilogue).

Macdonald's book is essentially based on Greek and Latin texts and without great interest to military history (the battle of Cannae, which is still studied at West Point and Sandhurst, is readily described in three pages, 131–133, without an accompanying illustration). It is also mostly a psychological portrait, which lacks a serious study of some aspects of the man: his knowledge of Greek civilization, his cleverness for stratagems (the book of Wheeler E. L., *Stratagem and the vocabulary of military trickery*, *Mn.*, Suppl., 108, 1988, Leyde, XVII, has been forgotten in the bibliography, and also some interesting studies of Giovanni Brizzi, such as *Annibale, Strategia e immagine*, 1984, Spolète,, and *Metus punicus*, 2011, Imola), and so on; we must not forget that he was one of the greatest generals in history.

More vexingly, we find much paraphrase in a book often shallow for specialists of this period. Be that as it may, we must also address compliments to the author. Although it was difficult, and even impossible, to give us much new information, the book draws a good picture of Hannibal's psychology. We can see it from the Introduction, where the man is described as "brave, inexhaustible and virtually impossible to defeat" (1); the whole book is dedicated to develop this description. It is pleasant to read, based on the good texts, and nothing important has been forgotten: it has its place in any good library.

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