
The subject is a familiar one, but the multidisciplinary treatment of this book is interesting and, in any case, the Second Punic War was a major watershed in Roman history and historiography. Not only did it set Rome on the road to Mediterranean conquest, it also compelled the Roman nobles to take an interest in the writing of history, so affected were they by criticism of their behaviour circulating among the Hellenised élite of the Mediterranean from about the late 3rd century BC. This criticism produced the orientation, detail, and to some degree the survival of Polybius and Livy.

The first and most substantial paper in this collection, by John Rich (‘The origins of the Second Punic War’, 1-37), deals with the old question of responsibility for the war, and focuses especially upon Rome’s murky relationship with Saguntum. This, of course, requires a close re-reading of Polybius, our major source (esp. 5-14). Polybius (3.9.6-13.2) sees the war as planned by the Carthaginians and ultimately attributable to the wrath of Hamilcar Barca after the humiliation of the First Punic War and the loss of Sicily. Yet Rome is blamed for the seizure of Sardinia in 238, an act ‘against all justice’ (Polybius 3.28.1-4). One might think, then, that in Polybius’ view Carthaginian aggression was justified. However, there is a fundamental ambiguity in his account. It is not clear how or when Rome formed her alliance with Saguntum, and Polybius contradicts himself by making the basis of Rome’s ultimatum in 218 the breach of the Ebro treaty before Hannibal’s actual crossing of the river (10-13).

Rich rightly, in my view, follows E. Meyer and M. Gelzer in arguing that Polybius was misled by Roman tradition when he made the irrelevant Ebro treaty a justification for war (12). It is also surely right to follow Polybius in rejecting Fabius Pictor’s portrayal of the Barcids as a maverick group who acted independently of the rest of the Carthaginian
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nobility (13). There can be no certainty on the date of Fabius Pictor's History, but this looks rather like an attempt to create or support a split between Hannibal and his political opponents at Carthage after the war, implying Roman backing for a faction opposing the reforms and ascendancy of Hannibal.

The most controversial part of Rich's analysis, however, is the support he gives for another Polybian view: that Carthage moved into Spain, prompted by the wrath of the Barcas, as a springboard for revenge upon Rome (14-18). There are few modern commentators who now think that the construction of a Carthaginian empire in Spain was aimed at Rome. Instead, the general view (e.g. H. Scullard in CAH²) is that it was meant to compensate for the loss of Sicily. Rich agrees that the events surrounding Saguntum gave rise to the war's timing and final stimulus, but he argues that Carthage did not derive commercial benefits from Spain. She won wealth from its mines and a pool of potential mercenaries (17). These things, he goes on, support Polybius' view that Carthaginian aims were ultimately military and hostile to Rome (17-18). The argument deserves serious consideration, but wealth is wealth, income replaced lost income, and I'm not sure that the distinction between commercial and mineral wealth is entirely valid; and the potential 'mercenaries' could be as much a danger as an advantage. On the other hand, if the Carthaginian government had concluded after the First Punic War that further aggression from the Romans was likely, then they could hardly be blamed, and hindsight indicates that they would have been wise to draw this conclusion. It may, therefore, be that there is something in both the ancient (wrath of the Barcas) and the modern (compensation for Sicily) views. Moreover, it can be stressed that they are not mutually exclusive.

The embassy of 231 (whose historicity is doubtful) (Dio fr. 48), the Ebro treaty (Polybius 2.13), and the alliance with Saguntum were Rome's major responses to the Carthaginian empire in Spain (18-33). To a large degree the agenda for evaluating them remains that established by the ancient commentators: The Romans were either responding to aggression or they were aggressive themselves. They were either defensive and somewhat fearful or they were aggressive; either just or unjust; legal or illegal, and so on. Carthage, by contrast, was the opposite in whichever dichotomy one chooses, and the concentration has been upon the psychology of the party under consideration. Recently, W.V. Harris and J.A. North have argued strongly that Rome was structurally predisposed
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towards aggression, thus shining a spotlight on impersonal structures rather than personal psychology. I am not in favour of removing the personal element altogether, but it should be admitted that human motivation is extremely complicated, often multifaceted and not necessarily (possibly never completely) rational. Men can be fearful and aggressive, rational and irrational at the same time, and the competing forces become infused into their decision-making. So the traditional dichotomies, invented at first instance by those attempting to assign or avoid unequivocal blame, are artificial and largely unhelpful. It is for this reason that it is hard to become enthused about Rich's idea that Rome's responses were essentially defensive (though to be fair he is no friend to moncausal explanations of Roman warfare and imperialism: 19 and n. 73). He rejects the notion that the Ebro treaty was designed to prevent Carthaginian association with the Gauls who were threatening Italy (21-22), but believes that it does indicate Roman fear of Carthage's growing power in Spain (22-24) and argues that the Saguntum alliance was formed soon afterwards out of similar fear, at the instigation of an opportunist, pro-Roman group among the Saguntines (esp. 24-26). Thus, in Rich's reconstruction the Ebro treaty was irrelevant to Rome's declaration of war (and one can agree on this) (21-22, 29-32). Nonetheless, Polybius' overall interpretation is supported: that Rome's actions were essentially defensive and that the wrath of the Barcids was the fundamental cause of the war (33-34).

My summary hardly does justice to the careful progression of Rich's argument, but it is difficult to see either side aiming at an inevitable war, though each side probably wanted to be in as strong a position as possible if fighting were to develop. Moreover, it was Rome who interfered in Spain, not Carthage in (say) Sicily or Italy. Finally, on top of their customary arrogance towards defeated enemies (noted at 33) the Romans' willingness in the early days of the war to meet Hannibal on ground not particularly favourable to them (e.g. at the Trebia) does not help the 'fear' thesis. It might instead be that they were convinced of their superiority on the open field after the land-battles (as distinct from the sea-battles) of the First Punic War and that this helps to explain the discernible recklessness of 218-16. The question of responsibility is becoming moribund in terms of the traditional dichotomies. There are no absolute standards for making a judgement and therefore much has always depended upon the viewpoint of the particular commentator. I favour a reconstruction with a more complex idea of motivation and responsibility, and little or no sense of
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long-term intent. Why is Rome’s alliance with Saguntum not simultaneously defensive, aggressive, responsive to a particular situation and yet aware of the general situation together with potential future consequences? Why is Carthage’s entry into Spain not likewise? There is something about the structural place of war in ancient life which is actually determinative. It was more an accepted and nurtured obligation (even habit) than a distressing interruption to normal conditions of peace. Questions of responsibility and blame often make decisions for war seem too conscious, distressing and rational.

In fact, the irrational dimension could profitably receive more emphasis. Conflict almost inevitably arises when insecurity creeps in, from whatever rational or irrational source. Paranoia manifests itself in ways which tend eventually to engender the threatening attitudes and behaviour which may have been wrongly perceived in the first place. There was certainly reason on both sides for fluctuating degrees of insecurity. We might do better to concentrate upon each side’s relative capacity to respond, or upon their limited means for avoiding war, rather than follow the ancient cues and seek to assign total or relative blame.

John Lazenby (‘Was Maharbal right?’, 39-48) questions Hannibal’s reputation for genius by asking whether the great general’s strategy in Italy was a match for his brilliant battle tactics. According to Livy (22.51.1-4), his cavalry commander Maharbal advised him to march on Rome after Cannae. Should he have done so? Not surprisingly, Lazenby reasserts his long-held position (Hannibal’s War, [Warminster, 1978], 85-6): that it would have taken about four weeks to reach Rome from Cannae, that he would have been met there by heavy resistance, which would have allowed time for all Rome’s surviving forces to concentrate against him, and that at the same time he would have lost the support of potential Italian allies by leaving their territory (41-42). Hannibal’s strategy was to strip Rome of her Italian allies, wear her down, and bring her to terms, rather than to destroy her completely (42-44). Less convincing is the supplementary assertion that Hannibal nearly achieved this aim: in combination with the defection of the two largest cities in the enemy’s country, along with over forty per cent of the enemy’s allies (47), twelve Latin colonies refused to supply troops in 209, there was a significant drop in the census figures for 208/7, and Hannibal continued to win victories in the field until the time of his withdrawal in 203 (44-46). Viscount Montgomery thought Hannibal’s strategy ‘a complete failure’
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(47); Lazenby feels it came very close to success. No one could argue against the seriousness of the situation for the Romans, but that Hannibal came very close during the period 215-203 is a bit further than I would necessarily go. In particular, I am uneasy about the readiness of Italians to go over to Hannibal if they sensed the Romans faltering (though Lazenby does mention Hannibal’s naivety with regard to the Latins and Italians: 42). Some plainly were (and even did so), but others were as appalled as the Romans at the presence of a Carthaginian army in Italy, and all of them hated the Gauls who were with Hannibal.

Boris Rankov (‘The Second Punic War at sea’, 49-57) contributes a most interesting chapter on the naval side of the war. Why did neither side behave more decisively in this arena, especially the Carthaginians? In Rankov’s view this was not due to a ‘landlubber’ mentality on the part of the Romans or to the Carthaginians’ supposed shortage of manpower. Instead, it is to be connected with the capabilities of ancient war-galleys and the difficulties posed by the geography of the western Mediterranean for any fleet planning to invade Italy. Since oared warships had a severely limited capacity for carrying supplies and water, given that the crews were tightly huddled together within the narrow hulls, it was necessary for them to hug the coast wherever possible in order to make frequent, usually twice-daily, landfalls on friendly shores where the crews and troops could disembark (49-52). Rome held all the crucial coastlines—the Ligurian coast, the vital stepping-stones of Sicily and Sardinia, the coastline between Brundisium and Tarentum—and in addition was able to match Carthaginian fleets at sea (52-55). It proved virtually impossible for Carthage to break through. An interesting feature of the analysis in this chapter was the employment of findings from recent experience aboard the reconstructed Athenian trireme, Olympias (51-52).

Philip Sabin (‘The mechanics of battle in the Second Punic War’, 59-79) investigates the ‘decisive battles’ of the Second Punic War. This has, of course, been done before (many times) at the grand tactical (i.e. army) level. There is an attempt in this paper, however, to integrate the traditional approach with a focus upon the tactical (i.e. unit) level (59-61). A raft of differences from earlier hoplite warfare emerges. Sabin emphasizes three distinctive and quite unusual characteristics of Second Punic War battles: symmetry, infantry manoeuvre, and flank and rear attacks (64-68). With reference to the ‘internal clock’ of battlefield manoeuvres (the amount of time necessary to perform the movements
described in our sources), he calculates that battles lasted for hours rather than minutes. It also seems that there was a greater discrepancy between the losses of the victors and the vanquished, with most damage being done after one side had broken. Generals in this war were ‘battle managers’ rather than ‘heroic warriors’, and they depended upon pre-arranged plans and delegation of authority to subordinates. The extensive use of light infantry and cavalry meant that the contests were far from being a simple slogging-match between heavy infantry.

A problem emerges at this point (70), for it is very difficult to imagine massed infantry combat lasting several hours without high casualties on both sides. Sabin compares anthropological models with the experiences of modern re-enactment societies before concluding that battles must have consisted of short bursts of local fighting and withdrawal punctuated by long pauses (71-73). The key moment came when one side broke, particularly under the weight of a surprise attack from flank or rear. This, combined with fatigue, produced a drop in morale and cohesion so that troops huddled together in a futile attempt to seek protection in numbers which in fact prevented active resistance and left men waiting for their turn to die. Hence the high casualty figures from the defeated armies. The eventual outcome could be affected by good or bad generalship to a degree which did not apply in the static, frontal struggle between similarly armed hoplite forces (73-77). Accordingly, Sabin leaves his readers with the conclusion that the Second Punic War consisted of ‘generals’ battles’ rather than ‘soldiers’ battles’ (77).

Louis Rawlings (‘Celts, Spaniards, and Samnites: warriors in a soldiers’ war’, 81-95) focuses upon the participation of Celtic, Spanish and Samnite troops. The title of his paper is not a challenge to the conclusion of the previous paper, as I initially thought it might be. It turns out that both papers concern themselves with the experience of individual units. Rawlings starts from the observation that whilst Rome’s allies tended to be equipped and to fight like the legions, Hannibal relied upon the diversity provided by both mercenaries and allied troops, many of whom came from tribal, warrior societies, in which men were bound to, and fought for, individual chieftains (81-84). The heroic ethos of such societies, especially the Celts, centred upon band-leaders who engaged in single combat and were celebrated by their own bards. These men were hot-blooded, of terrifying appearance, and they took heads, but they were also fickle and panicked easily. Hannibal used these characteristics to his
advantage when he employed Gauls in the centre of his line at both Cannae and Zama. He knew that they would eventually give way and draw the Roman legions into a trap at Cannae; he hoped that they would wear the Romans down at Zama. Our sources depict the Celtiberians, Spaniards and Samnites as having characteristics like those of the Celts, but the influence of a ‘barbarian’ topos can be sensed, and its application to the Samnites is especially unfortunate and perhaps likely to mislead (90-91). There are numerous indications of the importance of such units: they played vital parts in Hannibal’s early victories and in Scipio’s success in Spain, and both Hannibal and Scipio went to lengths to reward them with pay and to recognise their thirst for honour.

The final paper is by Tim Cornell (‘Hannibal’s Legacy: the effects of the Hannibalic War on Italy’, 97-117), who re-examines A.J. Toynbee’s influential thesis that the Second Punic War resulted in the devastation and depopulation of south-eastern Italy and led to the replacement of small peasant farms with large slave-run estates, coupled with a growth in urbanisation and hellenistic influences. In the long-run, the argument goes on, these were the forces which undermined Roman society and led to the fall of the Roman Republic, and ultimately of the Roman Empire (esp. 99-103). Toynbee’s ideas have attracted severe criticism, notably from P.A. Brunt, who emphasizes the absence of evidence for famine and finds reports of supposedly ruined land being worked at a later date (104-106). Cornell himself feels that many of the changes usually attributed to the war had begun to develop earlier in the 3rd Century, but in other respects he seeks to support Toynbee. Whereas Brunt finds the accounts of devastation in Polybius and Livy to be exaggerated and contradictory, Cornell cautions against taking the sources too literally and feels that large-scale devastation cannot be discounted, particularly because the Carthaginians killed many peasants in the south-east. The land of these people was either taken over by the rich or later confiscated by the Romans as ager publicus from communities who were accused of helping Hannibal. Both Brunt and Cornell agree that there was an agrarian crisis in the second century, but whereas the former blames peasant recruitment for the wars in Greece and Spain, Cornell insists that it was the Second Punic War which was the crucial factor and that its effects only began to be felt acutely after the end of colonisation in the 170s (106-113).

We can conclude, therefore, that while Hannibal failed to defeat the Romans in the Second Punic (or ‘Hannibalic’) War, Cornell’s analysis
seems to re-establish the view that it was nonetheless his war which acted as the main stimulus in the process which led to the fall of the Roman Republic. In this light it is hard to underestimate its importance and imperative that regular reappraisal is undertaken. We should hope that future studies match the present volume in quality, interest, and variety of approach.

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