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Richard A. Gabriel, *Scipio Africanus: Rome's Greatest General*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008. Pp. xxii, 303. ISBN 978-1-59797-205-5.

Review by John David Lewis, Duke University (classicalideals@yahoo.com)

Richard Gabriel, a retired U.S. army officer and a distinguished and prolific military historian,[1] has set out to correct a historical injustice: the misunderstanding and neglect that is often the fate of great military commanders. There is a plethora of books on Hannibal, who launched a war of conquest and was defeated, but no current scholarly biography of the genius who defeated him. B.H. Liddell Hart's 1926 *Scipio Africanus: A Greater than Napoleon*[2] was written in defiance of the anti-Scipionic, pro-Hannibalic works then flooding the market, but as Gabriel notes, that work is neither scholarly, accurate, nor comprehensive. H.H. Scullard's *Scipio Africanus: Soldier and Politician* was designed to counter the problems in the Liddell Hart's treatment, but it is out of print and in any case unsuitable for non-expert readers.[3] Gabriel has crafted an energetic narrative that remains true to the evidence. He stresses Scipio's stature as "Rome's Greatest General," without falling into conjecture or unsupported encomium.

Gabriel tells a compelling story while eschewing jargon and digressions into academic debates, all the while synthesizing a broad range of scholarship. The focus is dominantly strategic—Scipio's status rests on a breathtaking strategic vision—but Gabriel also delves into tactical innovations, diplomatic solutions, and political maneuverings. In the process, he exposes inconsistencies in the major sources—Polybius gets some dressing down, while the poetic *Punica* of Silius Italicus is given a bit more credence than it deserves—and then presents commonsensical solutions to the problems that arise.

The structure of the account is basically chronological, with a topical overlay. Gabriel wisely begins with a chapter, "The Man," that surveys Scipio's life. This concern for context then extends into two chapters that establish Rome's strategic position and the state of the army prior to Scipio's assuming command in Spain (211 B.C.). The events of his life are marked by notable firsts: Scipio was the first Roman to shave, a practice that was extended to the entire army; he was the first commander called *imperator* (he refused the title "king"); he established the first Roman overseas colony, at Italica, modern Santiponce, about five miles northwest of Seville in Spain (this city later gave Rome its emperors Trajan, Hadrian, and probably Theodosius); and he made the first land grants to soldiers un-

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[1] See, e.g., among other books, *No More Heroes: Madness & Psychiatry in War* (NY: Hill & Wang, 1987), *The Culture of War: Invention and Early Development* (NY: Greenwood Pr, 1990), *The Great Armies of Antiquity* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), and *Muhammad: Islam's First Great General* (Norman: U Oklahoma Pr, 2007).

[2] Rpt. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 1994.

[3] Ithaca, NY: Cornell U Pr, 1970. Although not noted by Gabriel, Alexander Acimovic has released a biography *Scipio Africanus* (NY: iUniverse, 2007), reviewed by John Jacobs in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2008.01.20 <www.miwsr.com/rd/0901.htm>.

der a state commission that avoided extending the authority of the commander to preeminence over Rome itself (3, 138–9, 205). But most importantly, Gabriel sees Scipio as the first military thinker to combine wide-ranging strategic insight with tactical genius as a means to securing specific policy ends.

Scipio's first task was to break Carthaginian power in Spain. Gabriel's treatment of the "Spanish Campaign" illuminates the real problems Scipio faced: the division of Roman forces between two Roman officers, Lucius Marcius and Gaius Claudius Nero; the fickleness of the Spanish tribes, the difficulties of terrain and geography, as well as three Carthaginian armies. One of Scipio's greatest achievements—perhaps embellished in the historical record, but showing his ability to integrate a range of knowledge into a single daring action with broad strategic consequences—was his attack on New Carthage. Polybius says Scipio surprised the Carthaginians by accomplishing this in seven days. Gabriel convincingly shows that Scipio could not have traversed 400 miles of hostile territory in such a time—it would have taken twenty days at minimum—but also how he did indeed achieve tactical surprise while an enemy army was actually closer to the goal than he was. Gabriel is at his best when he sets out such a problem and takes us through to a solution.

As is often the case in such narrative treatments, Gabriel at time grants more weight to the sources than a classicist would. He assumes there were two battles at Herdonia and then confidently cites figures of those killed (50–1); similarly he cites the precise figure of 54,200 killed at Cannae (49). He accepts as uncontroversial the claim that Scipio built the ships he needed for the invasion of Africa in forty-five days (143). We read "As Scipio himself tells us ..." in a passage composed by Livy (132). But these lapses—difficult to avoid in continuous narrative—are more than outweighed a straightforward willingness to hold Polybius and Livy accountable for implausible, missing, or contradictory information and interpretations, and to consider problems military commander actually faced. Why, for instance, did Hasdrubal engage Hannibal at Baecula, even though outnumbered and acting contrary to his own mission?

Though staunchly pro-Scipio, Gabriel does not ignore Scipio's limits and even failures, like his diversion to Locri in Italy on the eve of the African invasion, which put him at risk of both a Carthaginian siege and a clash over authority with his fellow consul. Similar perplexities accompany Scipio's attack on Africa, in which he again maintained tactical surprise during an expedition that could not be hidden, this time by keeping his final objective secret (like Sherman in his march to the sea). But why did Scipio besiege Utica, which "seems to have been a strategic error?" Gabriel reminds us that we may not have the facts right, or may be misunderstanding Scipio's goals: he was attempting to control factions in the Carthaginian and Roman senates, the Numidian leadership, his own men and his allied soldiers, as well as the people of the African countryside, all the while well aware that a replacement commander could rob him of credit for his victory.

The deeper question about this narrative is whether it distorts the nature of Scipio's strategic intentions and his vision. Of the last battle in Spain, at Ilipa, Gabriel writes: "There is no better example in military history of a battle in which a weaker force gained so complete a victory over a stronger one" (122). But he then raises the stakes to a higher level, granting to Scipio "a disciplined, strategic mind seeking a long-term solution to Rome's security problems with Carthage" (125). This frames Gabriel's account of the final battles

on Spain, which were designed to "eradicate" Carthaginian power by exerting permanent Roman mastery of the Spanish tribes: "Scipio saw the occupation of Spain as the beginning of a policy of Roman territorial expansion" (126). The comprehensiveness of Scipio's final victory over Carthage makes this plausible—but it is far from certain that Scipio thought within the kind of strategic framework available to a modern-day military officer.

Gabriel risks overestimating the scale of Scipio's strategic vision. Hannibal's invasion of Italy certainly put Rome at a crossroads: to defend Italy required military action overseas, in all four directions. But do the ensuing Roman victories so clearly attest to the strategic thought processes of their chief architect in the Republican era? Such conclusions could also be drawn about Hannibal, who sought a strategic solution to the problem of Rome (the permanent dissolution of Rome's political leadership on Italy), pursuing alliances in Greece, Gaul, Spain, and Africa, even forming an Italian federation, centered on Capua, to fill the vacuum left by Rome's retreat. By achieving this wide range of purposes, Hannibal could have returned Carthage to the forefront of Mediterranean affairs. His ultimate failure may not demonstrate a lack of strategic thinking, but, as Susan Mattern and others have shown, our use of strategic categories to begin with may obfuscate the serious differences between ancient thinking as regards time and space and our own satellite views today.[4]

This criticism aside, Gabriel does a superb job of connecting major conclusions to events on the ground, dealing with load capacities of ships, land battle formations, and the broader implications of such matters for Roman strategy and policy. According to Gabriel, for instance, Polybius's interpretation of Zama—Scipio's final defeat of Hannibal in 202 B.C.—fails to distinguish between standard phalanx tactics and Scipio's use of more maneuverable, echeloned formations: Scipio's tactics allowed his second and third lines to move laterally and create an envelopments, rather merely push the front line forward. This lends credibility to Gabriel's claim that at Cynoscephalae in 197—in the absence of Scipio—one of the military tribunes saved the day by abandoning the line and swinging around the enemy. Many officers at Cynoscephalae had trained under Scipio, whose campaigns pioneered just such methods.

Gabriel stresses Scipio's enormous influence after the war with Carthage at the higher levels of grand strategy and policy. His election for a second term as consul in 194 is only the most visible aspect of a political *auctoritas* exerted to support at least six consuls, and to promote colonies and land reform. His influence on foreign policy did not end with the terms of the peace with Carthage, but carried into Roman action against Philip V, arguably business leftover from the Hannibalic war. Gabriel connects Scipio's support for Flamininus during the Second Macedonian War (200–196) to philhellenism, a shared awareness of the value of Greek culture tempered by the need to chastise a tyrant. But Scipio himself did not get a command, an example, as Gabriel follows others in pointing out, of how Rome could be manifestly unfriendly to one of its own saviors.

In the end, one must ask whether the book's narrative and strongly stated conclusions do justice to the evidence. Almost every assertion in it may be challenged on some level—such is ancient history. But to have highlighted such disagreements would have changed the tenor of the narrative and done violence to the exciting life of Scipio. Gabriel displays his

[4] Susan P. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate* (Berkeley: U California Pr, 1999).

own organized train of thought—the product of modern military training—in subjecting Scipio's life to systematic evaluation. The product is a vibrant addition to the corpus of materials on the Second Punic War, focused on its greatest hero and its victor, Scipio Africanus.

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