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[Review of] The Ghosts of Cannae: Hannibal and the Darkest Hour of the Roman Republic By Robert L. O'Connell

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Robert L. O'Connell, *The Ghosts of Cannae: Hannibal and the Darkest Hour of the Roman Republic*. New York: Random House, 2010. Pp. xvii, 310. ISBN 978-1-4000-6702-2.

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The Ghosts of Cannae refers to the *legiones Cannenses*, legions raised from the survivors of the battle of Cannae in 216 BC and treated as pariahs by the Roman state. Their story is a leitmotiv of the book, which is much more than simply a retelling of the battle. Robert O'Connell begins with a short discussion of warfare from the Paleolithic to Roman times, then gives a synopsis of Roman and Carthaginian history before turning to the Punic Wars. He outlines the First Punic War (264-241) and the origins and beginning of the Second (218-201), before turning to the battle itself. He carries the story through the end of the second war, with a short coda on the Third Punic War (149-146). A final chapter treats the afterlife of Cannae in military history.

"A little learning is a dangerous thing," wrote Alexander Pope, a warning that military historians tackling ancient subjects should take seriously. In fairness, one cannot blame O'Connell, a retired intelligence analyst and author of several important books on military history,¹ for accepting a publisher's invitation to write on Cannae for a series on important battles. However, the series' editor, Robert Crowley, should have recruited an ancient historian. O'Connell argues that culture, not military technology, is the most important driver of military change. That position may be disputed, but if one makes culture the center of one's analysis, then a lack of understanding of ancient societies will be a serious problem.

O'Connell begins with chapters on the cultures and societies of Rome and Carthage. While the respective militaries and their weapons are mentioned, the focus is on the "essence" of the cultures—Rome's being military, Carthage's commercial. This is a false dichotomy, since cultures, like that of the present-day United States, may be both commercialized and militarized. In addition, O'Connell's lack of background in ancient history leads him to espouse one-sided visions of the ancient states. His Rome, for example, is a pseudo-democracy where elections and assemblies were in fact controlled and exploited by an all-powerful oligarchy. This view goes back to Ronald Syme's influential 1939 work, *The Roman Revolution*. But later scholars have questioned this orthodoxy, arguing that there were very real democratic elements in Rome.²

In another area, O'Connell follows William V. Harris's characterization of Roman culture as exceptionally bellicose,³ but ignores the work of others who have compellingly challenged this idea and see all ancient societies as warlike and mutually hostile.⁴ Now, O'Connell may certainly favor one scholarly line of thought over another, but failure to mention the existence of opposing viewpoints leaves the reader with a false impression of consensus.

The discussion of Carthage here reveals a profound ignorance. The city was, like Rome, an important trading center, but O'Connell conjures up a cartoonish vision of "Corporate Carthage," interested in, and understanding, only money and commerce. He lacks the most basic understanding of Carthaginian culture. For instance, he is unaware that Hebrew is a dialect of Canaanite, the language of Carthage, asserting that "their written language remained a consonantal skeleton devoid of vowels and really best at recording transactions not thoughts" (59). This will surprise readers of the Bible. The notion that Carthaginians were

1. Including *Of Arms and Men: A History of War, Weapons, and Aggression* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1989), *Sacred Vessels: The Cult of the Battleship and the Rise of the U.S. Navy* (1991; rpt. NY: Oxford U Pr, 1993), and *Ride of the Second Horseman: The Birth and Death of War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1995).

2. See, esp., Fergus Millar, *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan Pr, 1998).

3. *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1979).

4. See Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2006) and *Rome Enters the Greek East: From Anarchy to Hierarchy in the Hellenistic Mediterranean, 230-170 B.C.* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

unwarlike is very problematic, since Hannibal was one of the greatest generals of ancient times, a fact that O'Connell tries to circumvent by making his subject "un-Carthaginian."

In his retelling of the story of the Punic Wars, O'Connell does provide a passable summary of an often complicated chain of events. His style of writing, however, leaves much to be desired. An elephant, for example, is a "panzer pachyderm." We also read of "a barn burner of an operation" and "Hannibal looming like a guardian vulture." The following typifies O'Connell's breathless prose, focus on culture, and love of hyperbole:

They were the Numidians, Hannibal's version of killer bees, proverbially swarming their opponent if given the slightest opening. The Numidians were the closest thing a western Mediterranean battlefield saw to an inner Asian steppe horseman. They lacked only the steppe horseman's deadly composite bow, relying instead on a brace of light javelins and a slashing dirk. Characteristically, Numidians pinned and herded their foes through absolute mastery of their hyper-agile ponies, and then ran the enemy down with ruthless efficiency, able to cut their hamstrings even at full gallop. (140)

Given O'Connell's professional background, strategic analysis is a surprisingly weak aspect of his book. In his view, ancient states and individuals do not follow their political and military interests so much as play out cultural biases. Though interested in the nature and tactics of ancient battle, O'Connell evinces unwarranted confidence in light of the fierce academic debate over exactly how the Romans and other ancient peoples fought. And, too, major aspects of military history go entirely unexamined; logistics is an especially glaring omission.⁵ Similarly, his reflections on large plantations versus small farms rely on outdated literature, overlooking recent, seminal work on the subject.⁶

In view of such shortcomings, I cannot recommend *Ghosts of Cannae* even as a work of popularization. General readers will be better served by the books of Adrian Goldsworthy⁷ and Nigel Bagnall,⁸ while those seeking a good academic study should start with books by J.F. Lazenby⁹ and Gregory Daly.¹⁰

5. O'Connell seems unacquainted with either Paul Erdkamp's *Hunger and the Sword: Warfare and Food Supply in Roman Republican Wars (264-30 B.C.)* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1999) or my own *Logistics of the Roman Army at War (264 B.C.-A.D. 235)* (Boston: Brill, 1999).

6. Such as Nathan S. Rosenstein, *Rome at War: Farms, Families, and Death in the Middle Republic* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2004).

7. *Cannae* (London: Cassell, 2001) and, more broadly, *The Punic Wars* (London: Cassell, 2002).

8. *The Punic Wars* (Oxford: Osprey, 2002).

9. *Hannibal's War: A Military History of the Second Punic War* (1978; rpt. Norman: U Oklahoma Pr, 1998).

10. *Cannae: The Experience of Battle in the Second Punic War* (NY: Routledge, 2002).