

*THE GHOSTS OF CANNÆ*, BY ROBERT L. O'CONNELL:  
A REVIEW

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June 22, 2014

*The Ghosts of Cannae: Hannibal and the Darkest Hour of the Roman Republic*, by Robert L. O'Connell. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2011. 310 pages.

Robert L. O'Connell's military history, *The Ghosts of Cannae: Hannibal and the Darkest Hour of the Roman Republic*, is an examination of the pivotal Battle of Cannae in southern Italy in 216 BC, during the Second Punic War. In this battle, the brilliant general Hannibal Barca of Carthage defeated a much larger and more heavily armed Roman army. O'Connell uses his background as an analyst at the National Ground Intelligence Center and visiting professor at the Naval Postgraduate School to weave together the extant sources to construct a well-rounded picture of a catastrophic defeat that could have led to the end of the Roman Republic. The so-called "ghosts," the Roman soldiers that suffered defeat at Cannae and consequent banishment to Sicily, serve as a connecting thread throughout the book. They achieved some degree of redemption over a decade later under the powerful Roman general P. Cornelius Scipio "Africanus," as they finally defeated Hannibal at the Battle of Zama (202 BC). The descent into infamy of the *legiones Cannenses* and their subsequent renaissance under Scipio gives O'Connell's story a feeling of triumph after tragedy and a bit of a happy ending.

In another take on the word "ghosts," the Battle of Cannae haunted Roman military and political strategy long afterwards, perhaps contributing to conditions that led to the Third Punic War and the complete destruction of Carthage. Scipio's imperium in Spain may also have foreshadowed the rise of powerful generals such as Marius, Sulla, Julius Caesar, and Octavian, who transformed the Republic into an empire. Thus, according to O'Connell, Cannae was a hugely important battle with long-lasting repercussions for Rome and for the Mediterranean world. Its impact is also evident in medieval, Renaissance, and even modern military strategy. O'Connell's narrative of the battle, as well as the events preceding and following it, provides

scholars and amateur historians alike with an informative and entertaining analysis of this critical period of Roman history.

O'Connell's book contains nine chapters and an epilogue. These chapters are in part thematic, but also lead the reader through the chronological story. Each chapter is further divided into sections, an organization very reminiscent of ancient texts with books divided into sections or paragraphs. The front matter consists of a list of maps (the book contains only six maps throughout) and a very helpful "Cast of Characters" that introduces forty-four key Romans, Carthaginians, and neighbors who played a role in the story's events. While *The Ghosts of Cannae* exhibits O'Connell's scholarship and academic focus, this "who's who" list shows his effort to make the book accessible to the hobby historian as well. The back matter contains a useful glossary of Latin, military, and technical terms ranging from "auspicia" and "Cisalpine Gaul" to "imperium" and "quinquereme." While this glossary may exemplify O'Connell's effort to cater to those not specializing in Roman history, the back matter also contains hundreds of source citations and explanations, showing a dedication to scholarship and a desire to contribute to the ongoing historical debate surrounding Cannae.

In addition to various historical sources, O'Connell uses his own experience and research to draw numerous parallels and contrasts between Cannae and more recent military conflicts and political situations. In addition to making the more than two thousand year-old topic of Cannae more relevant to amateur historians, these parallels and contrasts also serve to either support or dismiss the assertions and observations written in the ancient sources. Problems with these extant sources make any reliable retelling of what actually happened at Cannae difficult, if not impossible. O'Connell clearly prefers Polybius (c. 200-c. 118 BC) and his monumental work *The Histories* to any other ancient source on this subject because of Polybius's contemporaneity with

the Punic Wars, his experience as a soldier and politician, his attention to detail, and his focus on history rather than dramatic storytelling.<sup>1</sup> However, only fragments of his *Histories* survive, so O'Connell reluctantly looks to Livy (c. 60 BC-AD 17) to fill in the gaps. Not only did Livy live long after the Punic Wars, but his dramatic storytelling and obvious bias makes his *Ab Urbe Condita Libri* (Books from the Foundation of the City) a second choice to Polybius's account. O'Connell also consults ancient authors such as Diodorus (c. 90-c. 30 BC), Plutarch (AD c. 46-c. 120), and Appian (AD c. 95-c. 165) to provide a broad and solid foundation of ancient sources. In addition to these, O'Connell also cites recent scholars such as Adrian Goldsworthy, J. F. Lazenby, H. H. Scullard, and Gregory Daly. The product of this mixture of ancient sources and modern scholarship is a well-rounded picture of the events and personalities of Cannae.

O'Connell begins *The Ghosts of Cannae* by "setting the stage," drawing analogies between Cannae and modern wars, between Hannibal and Islamic extremists, and between the "ghosts of Cannae" and Vietnam vets. He analyzes Rome and Carthage, the adversaries. According to O'Connell, "The Romans and Carthaginians fought as they did because of who they were and where they came from."<sup>2</sup> To illustrate this assertion, O'Connell describes the histories of both Rome and Carthage. He traces both societies from hunter-gatherer societies to civilized trade and military empires. Examining the strengths and weaknesses of both civilizations, O'Connell achieves some success in helping the reader understand the mindset of these great powers. After reading the first three chapters, the reader not only knows what each side hoped to gain or avoid in the conflict, but also the cultural, religious, military, and economic climate of each city. This stroll down memory lane from prehistoric communities to metropolises

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<sup>1</sup> Robert L. O'Connell, *The Ghosts of Cannae: Hannibal and the Darkest Hour of the Roman Republic* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2011), 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

may frustrate or bore readers interested in a factual description of Cannae alone. However, O'Connell's attention to the back-story and the resulting deep analysis is clearly a benefit to the amateur historian who lacks background in this area. It also explains to members of the scholarly community how he reached his conclusions. The historical equivalent of the math class maxim, "show your work."

The fourth and fifth chapters take turns examining the key people, as opposed to the empires, involved in this struggle: Hannibal and the other Barcids (ex. Hasdrubal, Maharbal, and Mago), the Roman commanders G. Terentius Varro, L. Aemilius Paullus, P. Cornelius Scipio Africanus, and Q. Fabius Maximus. O'Connell describes Hannibal's family and his upbringing to help the reader understand who he was and how his experiences led him to become one of history's greatest commanders. *The Ghosts of Cannae* also explains the dynamic between Hannibal and his Roman adversaries. Describing it as a "fox and hedgehog" relationship, O'Connell uses story after story to explain the interplay between the cunning Barcids and the on-again-off-again, many-headed hydra that was the Roman military response to Hannibal prior to Cannae.<sup>3</sup>

A detailed description of the Battle of Cannae itself finally begins halfway through the book, but it is worth the wait. Armed with a clear understanding of both sides of the conflict, the reader can now enjoy (if such a word should be used for such a horrific battle) O'Connell's blow-by-blow account of the event. O'Connell not only pits Hannibal against the Romans, but he also pits Polybius against Livy, with Appian left to fill in some of the gaps. Regarding the failure of Roman commander Varro at Cannae, O'Connell questions whether Varro was indeed a subpar commander as Livy's account portrays or whether Livy made Varro appear inept to have a

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 106.

scapegoat for the debacle.<sup>4</sup> Since Varro served as proconsul, propraetor, and as an ambassador after Cannae, he may not have been such a terrible leader after all. The brilliant Hannibal may simply have outfoxed him. O'Connell contends that the Roman military machine was designed to produce near cookie-cutter replicas of its great commanders so that the leaders were interchangeable and replaceable.<sup>5</sup> The problem this created was that Hannibal could quickly learn what Roman commanders would throw at him after just a couple battles. Learn about one commander and you've learned about all of them. While Varro may have been a good commander in his own right, he was a mere copy of other Roman commanders and no match for the outside the box thinking of the clever Hannibal. Certainly, the soldiers under Varro's command became scapegoats. Many of the survivors were sold into slavery in Sicily, becoming the "ghosts of Cannae."

The final three chapters of *The Ghosts of Cannae* deal with the "aftershocks" of the battle. Hannibal gained surprisingly little from his great victory, while the Romans licked their wounds and rose up stronger than ever before. According to O'Connell, Hannibal was a master at winning a battle, but he could not use his victory to win the war. In this way, the battle of Cannae was somewhat hollow for Hannibal. He "lost his joy" with the realization that his fight with Rome was far from over.<sup>6</sup> Rome, rather than mounting an offensive to drive Hannibal from Italy, contained him. Because Rome made alliances with each city one at a time, the allied cities did not necessarily have alliances with each other. Thus, when Capua allied with Hannibal, Rome maintained alliances with many of Capua's neighbors, and Capua was isolated. This greatly frustrated Hannibal. Another great frustration was the lack of reinforcements from

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 168.

Carthage. Hasdrubal was mired in Spain, and the delaying tactics of Fabius Maximus put great strain on Hannibal's forces in Italy. Such a large army required a great deal of food, and the scorched earth policy caused his forces to dwindle in size. Scipio focused on the war in Spain, drawing much needed resources away from Hannibal, but then turned Rome's attention to Africa, causing Hannibal to give up his position in Italy to protect his homeland.

Nearing the end of his book, O'Connell pulls the story together. He uses the power play between Fabius Maximus and Scipio Africanus to foreshadow the powerful generals of the decades to follow that would tear the Republic apart. Regarding battle strategy, he reasserts a contention made a few times earlier in the book that the famed Carthaginian elephants were more a liability than an asset, showing that Hannibal may have had some strategic weaknesses.<sup>7</sup> He was human after all. O'Connell routinely criticizes or commends strategies on both sides, Carthaginian and Roman, to point out what worked and what did not. He also emphasizes the human strengths and weaknesses of the "Cast of Characters," such as in the story of Syphax, Hasdrubal Gisco, and Sophonisba.<sup>8</sup> Such a story would fit well into a modern soap opera. The stories O'Connell includes in his narrative add a human element to the tale. While pandering more to the popular history reader than the scholar, O'Connell also routinely uses quips, such as the one regarding Hasdrubal Barca's escape from C. Claudius Nero in 211. O'Connell writes, "It was a vanishing act worthy of Bugs Bunny. But Nero was no Elmer Fudd."<sup>9</sup>

O'Connell waits until the last chapter to tie up the most important loose end from Cannae, the fate of the "ghosts." Scipio rescued the *legiones Cannenses* from the living death of slavery on Sicily, understanding that they were not to blame for the defeat at Cannae.<sup>10</sup> Over a

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 220-221.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 228.

decade after Cannae, these “ghosts” were battle-hardened veterans, not the ragtag, hastily collected Roman force Hannibal smashed at Cannae. It was time for them to seek revenge on Hannibal.<sup>11</sup> Once again, O’Connell is forced to play his primary sources off each other, adding Cassius Dio to the mix to help sort out the differences. The sources agree on the result of the battle of Zama. The Carthaginian threat in Italy was over, Spain was in Roman hands, Hannibal suffered defeat (but escaped again, as O’Connell points out), and Carthage survived to rebuild its trade empire, setting the stage for the Third Punic War. O’Connell uses the short epilogue to discuss the reverberations of Cannae and its aftermath, particularly how Rome changed. He also discusses how writings of medieval, Renaissance, and some modern historians and soldiers testify to Cannae’s enduring impact. It was truly a monumental battle, as O’Connell’s account successfully describes and analyzes.

While there is no perfect way to write a history that would completely please both scholar and amateur historian alike, Robert O’Connell’s *The Ghosts of Cannae* offers a blend of scholarship and popular history in an easy-to-read narrative that is both educational and entertaining. O’Connell’s writing style is clear, direct, and flows nicely. Readers with minimal background knowledge of Roman history should be able to read *The Ghosts of Cannae* without having a dictionary or encyclopedia nearby, thanks to the “Cast of Characters” and the glossary. Readers with more extensive backgrounds in Roman history might enjoy the way O’Connell sorts, blends, and interprets the extant sources to tell the complete story of the Battle of Cannae. His background in intelligence and military history provides a viewpoint that adds to the retelling of this great military story. Those interested in learning more about Hannibal or the Roman military should consider reading *The Ghosts of Cannae*.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 251.



## Bibliography

O'Connell, Robert L. *The Ghosts of Cannae: Hannibal and the Darkest Hour of the Roman Republic*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2011.