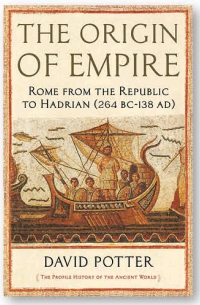
ANCIENT ROME

How Hannibal met his match

DAISY DUNN applauds a readable march through Roman history from its defeat of Carthage to its establishment of the largest multi-ethnic state Europe has ever seen



The Origin of Empire: Rome from the Republic to Hadrian, 264 BC – 138 AD
by David Potter
(Profile Books, 448 pages, £30)

By the time he died in battle in c229 BC, the Carthaginian general Hamilcar Barca had expanded his power base and established "not a Carthaginian state in Spain, but rather a Spanish state run by Carthaginians", as David Potter puts it in his expansive new history of Rome. The book opens with the Romans making the crossing into Sicily that led them to engage directly with Carthage. This crossing, says Potter, was the Romans' "first step in the acquisition of their empire".

The ensuing Punic wars, which Rome waged against Carthage between 264 and 146 BC, were fraught with difficulties. Hamilcar's son, Hannibal, fostered a hatred of the Romans and violent ambition for his people to defeat and replace them as leaders of the world. He also had at his disposal a sizeable army; Potter suggests that he invaded Italy with an infantry of 20,000 and cavalry of 6,000. And then there were the animals. When the Romans finally met Hannibal's forces at Zama, in modern Tunisia, in 202 BC, they had to contend with what Potter imaginatively calls "a tsunami of elephants".

Fortunately, the Romans' commander, Scipio, knew better than to allow exotic beasts to trample their success. The animals, Potter relates, were cornered in tight gaps where they were disposed of by the infantry. The Roman cavalry then came at the Carthaginians from the rear. The tactics proved so successful that the fearsome Hannibal had little choice but to surrender. The exultant Scipio even added 'Africanus' to his name in recognition of his victory.

If Rome's empire was hard won, then its preservation was a near impossible feat. Every ambitious man had his own ideas about what it should look like and how he might leave his mark upon it. Potter proceeds chronologically through the Punic wars to the late republic, when Scipio's famous but short-lived grandson Tiberius Gracchus set out his populist legislation for reform. And in the second half of the book he looks at the emperors who ruled after the republic finally collapsed. The challenge for many of them was how to win glory while maintaining the frontiers their predecessors had established.

Beasts of battle A 16th-century depiction of the battle of Zama. Fought between Roman troops led by Scipio and the Carthaginians under Hannibal in 202 BC, the battle marked the end of the Second Punic War

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Potter follows a traditional 'grand narrative' of Roman history that stresses how "a democracy tore itself apart and ultimately voted itself out of existence" to bow to a line of emperors. He includes a vast cast of characters, culminating with Hadrian, and documents in some detail how they responded to the dilemmas they faced in building and managing "the most successful multi-ethnic, multicultural state in the history of Europe and the Mediterranean".

Potter draws especially widely on the historical accounts of Polybius, Tacitus and Livy – the last of whom, we learn, filled an impressive 142 papyrus rolls in roughly 50 years. He also quotes widely from works of literature, particularly the often overlooked Latin comedies, to provide some insight into the culture of the period. It would have been nice to read more on the art of Rome and its political significance, and to have found fewer parentheses along the lines of "(We will see further instances of this sort of diplomacy anon)". Nonetheless, *The Origin of Empire* is a highly readable history of a fascinating period. H

Daisy Dunn is the author of *In the Shadow of Vesuvius: A Life of Pliny* (William Collins, 2019)

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