

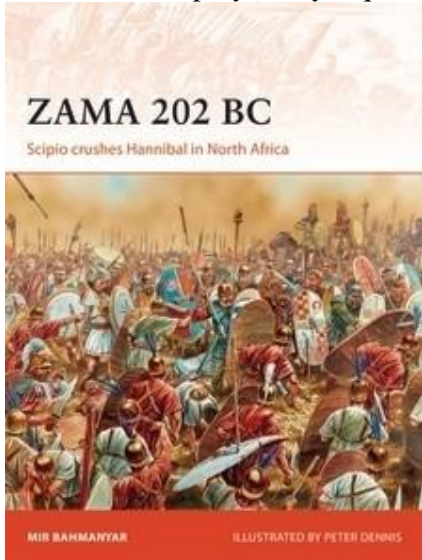
Zama 202 BC
Osprey Campaign series No. 299 (2016)
By Mir Bahmanyar
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Review by Jonathan Aird

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Zama was a major and decisive land battle of the Second Punic War, and as such it guarantees the need for an extensive scene setting in the origins of the campaign. The casual reader (if such exists for an Osprey!) may require a quick overview of the causes of war between Rome and



Carthage, an outline sketch of the First Punic War and the events so far of the Second Punic War ó including Hannibal's exploits in Italy. This is quite a lot for a single chapter ó something Osprey are probably aware of since one of their Essential History titles is devoted to the Punic Wars. Suffice to say that this section is a little õbusyõ and in places a bit confusing. However, it does serve to set the scene and is expanded on in particular detail for this campaign in the Opposing Commanders and Opposing Plans chapters. It also, sadly, becomes apparent quite quickly that this book is going to be bedevilled by the use of inappropriate illustrations. There are many reproductions of pictures of famous scenes in the history depicted in art, or photographs of modern busts of the major commanders and political personalities ó and this is something that it is hard to forgive in a modern military history. What earthly use is a picture of a 19th century

painting of a pivotal moment in the campaign history? The people look wrong, the clothing is wrong, the armour and weapons are wrong. And, on top of this, all too often the paintings are themselves quite murky. Annoyingly, the author knows what is really needed: There are representations of Samnite soldiers from a 4th century BC tomb painting, there are pictures of surviving armour and weapons from museum collections, but these are in a minority compared to the useless art history trawl through depictions of Romans from the 17th century onwards.

The chapter on Opposing Forces really starts to get into the meat of the battle background, with a good description of the nature of the troops on both sides, emphasizing the importance both combatants saw in recruiting North African allies, and on the differing attitude to the deployment of mercenary troops. Both armies can be said to be multi-national, and Carthage had some advantage here in being closer linked to some of its allies and also more used to recruiting armies this way. This section is also where the next major point of contention with the book's thesis appears. A lot of time is spent on working out how much space a man fought within, and the conclusion drawn here is that the Romans stood nine feet apart in order to be able to wield their spears and use their shields in single combats to the greatest effect. They

could contract and expand their line with great ease, but aimed to do their actual fighting in this very open order. This is for all infantry other than the Triarii who are allowed to fight in a close order, like a phalanx. The suggestion is added that only the bravest men in the front ranks would have actually fought, the rest of the Roman legions hanging back from the fight. This is illustrated in a double-page colour painting where legionary maniples are shown engaging velites and elephants and whilst the front rank from one maniple rush at the enemy velites and a few men rather lackadaisically throw spears at the elephant. But the majority of the army stands around seemingly uninterested in the events around them. It's an interesting suggestion, but not wholly convincing. Why would a man fighting in such a way equip himself with a relatively short sword like the gladius when he knew that his opponent would likely have a much longer weapon?

If this seems a little odd then the suggestion given that the Carthaginian cavalry adopted a 5m (that's 15 feet if you prefer!) spacing in combat may raise the odd eyebrow. Even if one believes that such spacings could actually be maintained in a rolling combat of individual fights, it means that most cavalrymen would charge not at an enemy infantryman, but at the spaces between two enemy infantrymen (who, you will recall, are standing only 9 feet apart). It seems like a small point, but these assumptions are used to underpin every stage of the battle description – how long was each army's lines? Could they overlap their opponents? Can the size of the army be determined from the spacing of the troops? The larger estimates give very long and unbelievable battle lines. Of course, if the men stood closer together – as is actually depicted in all but one of the new colour illustrations of the battle! – then this would also serve to reduce the battle line length. So whilst the overall battle description tallies with historical sources, the detail that is extracted based solely on battle line length to determine troop densities does seem to be questionable.

Overall, a bit of a mixed offering from Osprey – one that relies on a particular set of assumptions, which, in the absence of time travel, are impossible to prove. Unlike, for example, galley rowing methods, there are likely to be few practical archaeology experiments that can be done to prove these assumptions one way or another.