CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE KILLING OF GISCO

Mathos, Spendius, Autaritus and their war council had plenty on their minds as the events in Sardinia unfolded. They kept in touch with the island mutineers and were delighted by their successes. At the same time they themselves were enduring a conspicuous lack of success in their own war, and the strain was starting to tell.

Polybius’ narrative at this stage is even thinner on military details than before. His interest is in the psychological and moral contrasts between the two sides, the ‘civilised’ (Hamilcar and the Carthaginians) versus the ‘barbaric’—which now emerge more tellingly than ever. On these he focuses extensively, leaving the reader to infer that warfare was continuing one way and another. If he were as interested in the actual operations, the picture would be much sharper. The area relationships between the various army groups on both sides, above all, would be clarified. With so many details unstated, only cautious inferences can be drawn from what he and others do report. Clearly the war now slowed to a grind both painful and oddly sectional. In the Libyan heartland, Hamilcar, with Spendius’ army gone, was continuing his campaign, winning towns by surrender or assault. As already noted, Polybius’ report of him winning these across ‘the rest of the country’ does not fit solely the period before he was entrapped, and the historian later shows him continuing operations after Mathos and his confrères reacted brutally and bloodily to his clemency policy. For in response he abandoned clemency, both in battle and towards prisoners.

At first, after the victory that Naravas helped him to win, Hamilcar seems to have had no rebel field forces confronting him. Polybius mentions further combats and savage treatment of prisoners only after the rebels’ impious atrocities on the coast. Not only that, but Hamilcar’s follow-up to the victory earned enough success to worry the rebel generals. This does not mean that he won over large areas permanently. As we have seen, some places did not change sides or surrender readily, and some that did surely acted out of calculation, not enthusiasm. Hamilcar was strong enough to capture places, but not to impose a permanent occupation or remain in one district indefinitely.
Some places may have come under the control of their revived pro-Carthaginian factions and so stayed loyal after he had gone, but others surely looked for the first chance to revert to rebellion. Other areas no doubt remained outside the reach of his army. His strategy, then, was inherently risky, whatever successes he gained.

Eventually, too, he had to go into winter quarters. Feeding both men and horses between October and February was always problematic and, reliant as he was on Naravas’ cavalry, Hamilcar needed to take special care of the horses. It is even possible that he and Naravas retired to coastal Byzacium, where the weather would be mildest and communications with Carthage safer.\(^1\)

The other sector of war was, of course, the coastlands around Carthage. Not much was happening there militarily, so far as we can tell. The rebels holding Tunes and its environs continued to blockade Carthage with little effect. The siege of Hippacra wore on, locked it seems in equal stalemate. Even though the besieged were hard pressed after a year’s blockade, they still held out. Mathos, last heard of outside Hippacra, was now rejoined by Spendius and Autaritus, still more implacable for war after their defeat. They met at the camp outside Hippacra, for some while afterwards Spendius and Autaritus in an army-assembly announced the arrival of a letter from Tunes. But Mathos does not appear in the grim events that his confrères then prompted. Maybe he stood back to let the foreign generals incur the odium; or he returned meanwhile to Tunes to take charge there, leaving them outside Hippacra but keeping touch in the carefully orchestrated scenario that ensued.\(^2\)

On the Carthaginian side, Hanno the Great’s movements are the biggest blank. That he continued to command an army is shown by Hamilcar’s later call to him to combine their forces. We have seen

\(^1\) Climate in Tunisia: Mensching (1968) 18–48; winter temperatures inland (sometimes falling below 0° C), ibid. 27–8; cf. also Chapter 21 n. 3.

\(^2\) Spendius and Autaritus rejoining Mathos: clearly implied by Pol. 1.79.8. So too Huss (1985) 261; Loreto (1995) 156; despite Veith (1912) 543 n. 1, and similarly Walbank, Comm. 1.144. In camp: 80.11 [τοὺς χάραξοις]. That Hippacra was no longer under siege (Meltzer, 2.381) is hardly likely, and that the army assembly was held at some third place (Walbank, ibid.; cf. Loreto, 156 n. 42, who suggests ‘il campo di Utica’) is even less plausible. Mathos’ whereabouts: after 1.79.8 he is next shown forming the siege of Carthage with Spendius (82.11), but of course it does not follow that both went from Hippacra to Tunes together. Mathos’ presence beside his colleagues cannot always be assumed: thus the later expedition against Hamilcar at first seems to include him (84.1–3), but this turns out not so (86.2–6, etc.).