CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A BALANCE-SHEET

The Truceless War had threatened the Carthaginians with the loss of all their territories in Africa and, for a time, seemed to threaten even the existence of the city. Thousands of combatants were killed in battle or after capture. Hamilcar in his campaigns across Libya’s heartland had stormed towns which resisted him, no doubt adding numbers of civilians—men and women—to the kill total. As armies marched and counter-marched around the countryside, they foraged and plundered as armies always did. The damage to crops, fields, livestock and property must have been severe. Moreover, deserters from either side would not invariably join the opposing army; many Libyans would try to return home and, to provision themselves on the way, they would surely loot, rob and sometimes murder too. Others would prefer to turn bandit, as long as opportunities offered.

A general picture of Libya’s condition by 237 is thus inevitably bleak. A more nuanced one is harder to develop, because Polybius and the other, much briefer sources are so miserly with place-names and geography. All the same, the Carthaginians seem to have emerged from the war less damaged than they, and others, probably had expected. Relatively few citizens lost their lives—unlike the tens of thousands of Roman deaths in the first three years of the Second Punic War—because the republic’s armies were made up only partly of Carthaginians, and defeats had been few, Hannibal’s outside Tunes the most notable. As noted more than once above, the Cape Bon peninsula seems to have been loyal to Carthage and (very largely) untroubled by rebels; fighting in Byzacium, it seems, may chiefly have been between rebel and loyal communities—not on a large scale, therefore—until the final campaign. War-damage to both regions was thus probably limited. Because of both areas’ productivity this would be a major help to Carthage’s economic and financial recovery.

Conditions will have been worse in the heartlands of Libya—the Bagradas, Siliana and Mellane valleys and surrounding uplands, and along the coast from Tunes to Hippacra. In all likelihood these were
the districts that bore the brunt of inland campaigning. On the other hand, the impact of these campaigns looks more limited on second appraisal. Hamilcar’s first foray inland, leading to his entrapment and then the turning of the tables on the enemy, took up the summer and perhaps early autumn of 240, as estimated earlier. The second campaign, culminating at The Saw, began around spring 238 and by September Hamilcar and Hannibal were back at the coast blockading Tunes. Actual campaigning in the interior, then, engrossed at most twelve months of the war’s forty. No doubt there were other episodes of fighting, for example where rebel and loyalist towns were neighbours and inclined to harass each other. Still, the damage inflicted on Libya, though in places it must have been extensive, could not be of the same order of magnitude as the havoc wrought by the later Hannibal’s fourteen years of war in southern Italy, or the desert-making horror of the Thirty Years’ War on the most devastated parts of Germany, like Pomerania, Württemburg and the Palatinate.

The sectors most constantly warred over were, in fact, the environs of Carthage, Utica and Hippacra, though there too the situation was static—blockades or sieges—for much of the time. Outside Carthage and at Tunes, at least, once the fighting was over it was in the Carthaginians’ own interest to rehabilitate farms, fields, orchards and fisheries. It was in their interest again, even if a less urgent concern, to help Utica and Hippacra rehabilitate their own territory. Restoring a pro-Carthaginian élite there to preside over lasting impoverishment and neglect would be a recipe for fresh discontent; and, after 237, the Carthaginians could not risk another Utican dedītio-offer to Rome. Utica’s stubborn defiance of its Roman besiegers three decades later suggests, as noted above, that the Carthaginians dealt with it and Hippacra reasonably.¹

All the same, Carthage’s and Libya’s recovery would have been slower without Spain. Hamilcar’s and his successors’ conquests included unashamedly economic aspects. Taxes and trade grew as well as the military forces. Mineral wealth was exploited: a decade and a half later, one silver mine, according to the later encyclopaedist Pliny the Elder, 