

Nepos' Hannibal as a Trickster

Nepos' portrait of Hannibal is considered an oddity. It omits (or only briefly touches on) many iconic scenes from the general's life, such as the crossing of the Alps or Battle of Cannae. Instead it focuses at length on the Carthaginian's time in exile after his Italian campaign. Moreover, the picture of Rome's greatest enemy that emerges from the text seems to be ambiguous or even positive, which makes it a notable outlier in the Latin historical tradition. In light of recent scholarship on Nepos' literary and political aims (especially Stem 2012), I reevaluate the biography of Hannibal by proposing that many of the odd features of the text can be explained if we read the general as a trickster figure.

I start with a discussion of how Nepos, both in other biographies and at the beginning of the *Hannibal*, creates the expectation that his reader will encounter an exceptionally clever and skillful subject. This, I argue, sets the stage for viewing Hannibal as a trickster. Recent scholarship on the tricksters (e.g., Bassil-Morozow 2015) has emphasized that they are not just creatively resourceful, but also frequently act as isolated underdogs who need to overcome groups of authority figures. Such a tension between the individual trickster and a collective body that opposes him informs Nepos' biography throughout.

To support this interpretation, I consider three scenes that exemplify the resourcefulness, self-reliance, and isolation of Nepos' Hannibal. The first is his encounter with Q. Fabius (Nepos *Hannibal* 5): here the Carthaginian escapes a trap by capturing cattle that is grazing nearby, tying branches to the horns of the animals, setting the branches on fire, and chasing the panicked cows against the Roman troops. The second episode occurs after Hannibal has fled into exile and arrives in Gortyn on Crete (Nepos *Hannibal* 9): finding himself among Cretans—legendary tricksters—he has to resort to an extravagant rouse and a series of lies to protect his money from

the town's inhabitants. The final scene that I consider also takes place during the general's exile: he manages to defeat the far superior force of King Eumenes in a naval battle by catapulting pots filled with poisonous snakes onto the enemy's ships (Nepos *Hannibal* 10–11). All three of these episodes, I argue, illustrate what Nepos finds so interesting about Hannibal: he acts alone (although soldiers may help carry out his orders occasionally), manages to improvise outlandishly complicated escape plans on the spot, and makes use of unusual resources, especially animals. Nepos' portrait of the general therefore has little to do with that of a conventional military leader.

Finally, I briefly turn to Hannibal's death scene (Nepos *Hannibal* 12), which, I suggest, marks a significant departure from the rest of the biography. Whereas elsewhere the Carthaginian has relied on his ability to escape, once he arrives at Prusias' court, he barricades himself in his lodgings and hopes that this will protect him from his enemies. When he commits suicide, then, he is inescapably trapped in a structure of his own making. Hannibal's death illustrates the dangers of not relying on one's strengths and established ways of doing things, a message that is also found in other biographies of Nepos, especially the *Lives* of Datames and Eumenes. Since Nepos' Hannibal is primarily successful as an escape artist, I conclude that the biography actually reflects wider Roman thinking about the association between Carthaginians and trickery. Furthermore, while trickster elements give the general a certain admirable underdog quality, they also strip him of his image as a feared military strategist, which is found, for example, in Livy. Nepos therefore takes a creative approach to the life of Hannibal, but one that is neither positive nor unusual.

Bibliography:

Bassil-Morozow, H. 2015. *The Trickster and the System: Identity and Agency in Contemporary Society*. London: Routledge.

Stem, R. 2012. *The Political Biographies of Cornelius Nepos*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.