

Lukas Grossmann, *Roms Samnitenkriege. Historische und historiographische Untersuchungen zu den Jahren 327 bis 290 v. Chr.*, Düsseldorf: Wellem Verlag, 2009, X, 201 pp., ISBN 978-3-941820-00-5, € 39.00.

The series of wars between Rome and the Samnites in the 4th and 3rd c. BC hold an eminent position in modern historiography, not only as the conflict that led to the Roman conquest of the Peninsular Italy and so laid foundations of her world-rule, and during which (and to a large degree in response to which) the institutions of the Republic acquired their “classic” shape, but also as the period when many a specialist trace the great divide starting from which the evidence available to the sources of our sources increased dramatically, making it possible for the authors of the extant narratives to choose between more or less complete and reliable reports of events that had actually occurred rather than to go on filling the accounts of consecutive years with glaring anachronisms and outright fabrications. However, this sudden profusion of records was not without problems, at least for Livius, our principal source. In no other part of his narrative do we find as many admissions of major disagreements in sources at his disposal; and the discrepancies about the person and status of the commander in one of the victories over the Samnites (a shameless invention in its own right) led to his famous complaint about falsifications of historical events in noble families’ records (VIII 40, 4 f.), ending with the pessimistic constatation: “nec quisquam aequalis temporibus illis scriptor extat quo satis certo auctore stetur”. No wonder that attempts on the part of modern historians to reconstruct in detail the course of events during these wars have been going hand in hand with efforts to disentangle and evaluate individual threads of tradition in our sources¹.

The book under review conforms to the pattern in that, as the title proclaims, it is composed of studies whose professed character is both historical (factual reconstructions) and historiographical (analyzing relations between sources). In reality, the latter aspect is clearly predominant. GROSSMANN [= G.] emphasizes that his aim is not to provide a uniform narrative of the Romano-Samnite wars but to concentrate on matters for which there exists the possibility of a fruitful source analysis, such that should give us a better understanding not only of events under discussion but also of the nature of the whole conflict and of its presentation in the extant accounts and so, ideally, make it possible to appraise correctly the events for which a similar analysis cannot be made (p. 2). Interestingly, the heuristically barren (and so left out of the analysis) events are not confined to the years for which we have only the plain Livian narrative: right at the outset he informs the reader that the *cause célèbre* of the consuls of 298, whose achievements are contradictorily reported by Livius (X 12, 3–13, 1), *Fasti Triumphales (Inscriptiones Italiae XIII 1, p. 71)* and the funerary *elogium* of one of the pair, L. Cornelius Scipio Barbatus (*CIL* 12 6 = VI 1284 = *ILLRP* 309), has been consigned to this category as well (*ibid.*).

What we do have are six analytical chapters (chs. 2–7) preceded by an introduction (ch. 1) and closed by a very short recapitulation (ch. 8). In the introduction the author first presents the aims of the work and methods with which he proposes to overcome differences in the sources; then he briefly discusses the parties of the conflict and more precisely key aspects of the Roman politics of the period, especially the extent of the magistrates’ political and military initiative before and after the passing of the *lex Ovinia*, and the level of the Samnites’ cultural and political development, including the reality behind the modern notion of the Samnite League; finally he criticizes the

¹ Apart from the old but still irreplaceable G. DE SANCTIS, *Storia dei Romani*, vol. II: *La conquista del primato in Italia*, Torino ¹1907, pp. 291–429 (Firenze ²1960, pp. 277–408), and the widely read but rather outdated E.T. SALMON, *Samnium and the Samnites*, Cambridge 1967, see especially T.J. CORNELL, *The Conquest of Italy*, in: *CAH* VII 2 (1989), pp. 351–419, and now the relevant parts of the four thick volumes by S.P. OAKLEY, *A Commentary on Livy, Books VI–X*, Oxford 1997–2005.

division of the conflict into three Samnite wars of 343–341, 327/6–304 and 298–290 as a modern misconception based on analogy with the Punic and Macedonian wars, emphasizing the unity of the years 327–290 as – from the Romans’ perspective – the true period of the Samnite war, when the Samnites were the chief opponents of their aggressiveness.

The analytical chapters are studies in which G. finds it possible to apply his methodological precepts. They are as follows. There having been no contemporary historical *Primärquellen* of the Samnite wars (see Livius’ words quoted above), our sources relate variants, often extensively developed, of a basically untraceable tradition. In these conditions, source analysis must differ from the classic *Quellenforschung*. G. defines it as reconstructing the development of given variants and critically assessing their reliability in confrontation with others, and enumerates the following methods of solving disagreements in the sources. First, reconciling accounts by showing that they are variants of the same tradition, written down from a different perspective; second, demonstrating that various accounts present the same tradition, original (= reliable) in some and developed (= falsified) in others; third, identifying the same, variously falsified tradition, with no possibility of showing which account is more reliable; fourth, accounts representing disparate, mutually irreconcilable traditions. Four of these chapters are built around single themes: the outbreak of the war between Rome and the Samnites (ch. 2), the Caudine disaster (ch. 3), the Sentinum campaign (ch. 6) and the controversial consulate of L. Postumius Megellus in 291 (ch. 7). The other two deal with longer periods, from the resumption of hostilities after the *foedus Caudinum* till the Roman victory in 314 (ch. 4) and the years 311–304, more precisely 311, 306 and 305 (ch. 5).

The title of the last-mentioned chapter, *Ausgewählte Ereignisse der Jahre 311–304*, might, with the time-span changed to 327–290, well stand as a subtitle of the whole work. We have been given several studies on selected events or their sequels, loosely connected by the subject (the Samnite wars) and the historiographical slant of the argument. The criterion of selection is clear: the author investigates themes on which he thinks he has something important to say. Important, not new: as might have been expected, almost every solution proposed by G., be it of historical or historiographical nature, had already been put forward (the one for which I have found no predecessor is playing down the decisiveness of the battle of Sentinum, Rome’s ultimate victory having in his view been guaranteed anyhow by her political, demographical and military superiority [pp. 153–155, 178]). His research is based on two premises, one uncontroversial (in the Romano-Samnite confrontation the Romans were the aggressors; the Samnites’ aims were strictly defensive), the other much less so: until the consequences of the new rules of *lectio senatus* specified by the *lex Ovinia* began to be felt (in his opinion at the end of the first decade of the 3rd c., with the conflict between Megellus and the senate as the visible proof of the political ascendancy shifting to the latter), the external policy of Rome was dictated by personal and gentilician interests of consecutive pairs of consuls, which ruled out strategic thinking not only in her wars but in her colonisation as well! Luckily, this particularly unfortunate premise, squarely contradicted by direct statements of our sources (a fact, of course, not conclusive *per se*), but especially by the course of the conflict (think of the strategic encirclement of Samnium after the disastrous failure of the all-out invasion of its heartland in 321)², has little effect on G.’s particular analyses, the strength of which lies in identifying, comparing and evaluating variants of tradition(s) in our sources. It is a fact that in this field, even when inquiry concerns periods the sources for which are much richer than those for the Samnite wars, the results are seldom as evident as to command universal acceptance. Still, every student of these wars will read with profit the author’s discussion of the sources for the Naples campaign or his analysis of the complex relation between the Livian narrative and

² It is worth observing that the work which brings out more forcefully than any other the strategic dimension of the Roman conquest of Samnium and the rest of Italy, A. TOYNBEE, *Hannibal’s Legacy. The Hannibalic War’s Effects on Roman Life*, vol. 1: *Rome and Her Neighbours before Hannibal’s Entry*, Oxford 1965, is missing from G.’s bibliography.

Diodoros for the years 318–303. For the present reader the most refreshing trait of the book, apart from the overtly *Quellenforschung* perspective, are solutions expressed in the indicative rather than conditional mood. G.'s insistence on arriving at definite answers in the face of contradictory reports may seem unsophisticated; yet, e.g., his reading of the sources for the campaign of 311 (pp. 103–109) – a flat Roman defeat, as in Zonaras VIII 1, 1, contra Liv. IX 31, 7–16, Diod. Sic. XX 26, 3 f. and *Fasti Triumphales (Inscriptiones Italiae XIII 1, p. 71)* – carries more conviction than inconclusive expositions by CORNELL³ or OAKLEY⁴. In spite of a limited field of vision and a debatable vision of the antagonists, *Roms Samnitenkriege* is a commendable addition to one's reading list.

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³ *O.c.* (n. 1), p. 354.

⁴ *O.c.* (n. 1), vol. 3, pp. 401–404.