

HANNIBAL CROSSES THE ALPS

26 B.C.—A.D. 14

Livy

In 218 B.C., Carthage took the offensive in its war against Rome. Seeking a surprise attack, the Carthaginian general Hannibal and a huge army began a long march from Spain across the Alps to Italy. In the mountains the Carthaginians battled hostile tribes, fierce snowstorms, and a nearly impassable descent. After fifteen days of the most brutal conditions and the loss of thousands of men and animals, Hannibal prevailed, and his exhausted army reached the plains of northern Italy. In the following selection, the Roman historian Livy describes the Carthaginians' struggle through the Alps, one of history's most famous war stories.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Causes

Despite great obstacles, Hannibal brought his army through the Alps and invaded Italy. What were some of the reasons for his success?

From Druentia [in Gaul], by a road which ran mostly across the plains, Hannibal reached the Alps without molestation from the inhabitants of the region. Now at length, despite the very highly colored reports which had come to them, the height of the mountains from near view, with the snow almost mingling with the sky, the shapeless huts clinging to the cliffs; the cattle and sumpter beasts all withered by the cold, with everything, living or inanimate, stiffened with frost, and so many other like terrors; all these, in short, smote the soldiers with alarm.

As they marched up the first slopes, overhead on the heights they beheld the mountaineers [ready for sudden attack.] Hannibal ordered a halt and sent forward some Gauls to view the ground. And when he found no passage in the direction he had been following, he pitched camp in the wildest possible valley, in country infinitely rugged. At length he learned from the Gauls, who had mingled with the mountaineers, and from whom indeed they differed little in language and habits, that the pass was only beset during the day, for at nightfall the defenders withdrew, each man to his own dwelling. He accordingly made a feigned attempt during the daytime in another direction, [but in the night] he put himself at the head of a body of picked light troops, and rapidly cleared the pass; taking his post on the very heights once held by the enemy.

Fighting the Mountaineers

At dawn the troops broke camp, and the rest of the army moved forward. On a signal, the mountaineers swarmed from their forts to their wonted stations, but they suddenly beheld a part of their enemies clear above them, holding their old

positions, while the rest of the army was passing up the road. For a little while they stood bewildered at all they saw; but when speedily they perceived how the troops were confused while going up the pass, and that the marching forces were disordered by the very tumult they were making,—for the horses were especially terrified,—then the mountaineers thought they could create enough additional terror quite to annihilate the army. They therefore scrambled along the dangerous rocks, accustomed as they were to all this rough going; and now were the Carthaginians indeed beset, opposed at once by the foe, and by the sheer difficulties of the ground. Each man of them strove to escape the first, and there was actually more struggling among themselves than against the enemy. Especially the horses made danger in the lines, driven frantic as they were by the discordant clamors which were echoed back from the forests and valleys. They fell into dire confusion; and if any were hit or wounded, they were so uncontrollable that they caused great loss both to men and baggage of every kind. As the pass was broken and steep on both sides, many were flung down to an awful depth, including some even of the soldiery; while the sumpter beasts, with their loads, rolled down like the fall of some vast fabric.

Distressing as was the sight of these losses, Hannibal for a while kept his place, lest he increase the danger, but later when he saw his line broken [he hastened down with his detachment] from the higher ground [which they held]. At the first onset he routed the enemy; and after the paths had been cleared of the mountaineers, the tumult [along the lines] soon ceased. He then took a fortified village, the chief town of the district, and fed his army for three days with the captured corn and cattle.

Hannibal then came to another canton, very populous for a mountainous country. Here he was almost overcome, not in open war, but in his own game of treachery and ambush. Some old men, commanders of the forts, came to the Carthaginians as envoys, and offered provisions, guides, and hostages. He answered them in a friendly manner, [fearing alike to reject or wholly trust them, and continued his advance most warily]. The elephants and cavalry formed the van of the advancing host, and he in person, watching everything that befell, followed with the picked infantry. When they came to a narrow pass, the barbarians rose at once on all sides from their ambush and assailed the Carthaginians, front and rear both at close quarters and at long range, while huge stones were rolled down upon the army. The greater number of the foe attacked the rear [where they were beaten off with great difficulty, and even as it was] one night was spent by Hannibal while separated from his cavalry and his baggage.

At the Summit of the Alps

[The next day the advance continued amid great loss, especially of the sumpter beasts.] Though the elephants were driven only with many delays over the steep and narrow paths, yet wherever they went they protected the army, because the enemy, to whom they were utterly strange, feared approaching them

too closely. On the ninth day they came to the summit of the Alps over regions trackless. For two days they remained encamped on the summit, and rest was given the soldiers, spent as they were by toil and battle. A fall of snow, however, put the men in great panic, worn out as they were by so many hardships. (Remember, a large part of Hannibal's army was made up of Africans, to whom snow was a fearful wonder.)

[When the troops resumed the advance they went forward very wearily, until Hannibal ordered a halt] on a certain eminence whence there was a view reaching far and wide. Here he pointed out to them Italy, and the plains of the Po,¹ extending themselves beneath the Alpine mountains. "Now," spoke he, "you are not merely surmounting the ramparts of Italy, but those of Rome. The rest of the journey will be smooth and downward. After one, or at most the second battle, you will have the citadel and capital of Italy in your power and possession!"

The army now began its advance, the enemy making no attempts against them except petty thefts, as chance offered. But the journey downward proved much more difficult than the ascent, as the slope of the Alps is shorter on the Italian side, and, as a consequence, steeper.

The Struggle through the Snow

At length they came to a rock so narrow and perpendicular that a light-armed soldier attempting it most carefully and clinging to the bushes and roots around could barely lower himself down. The ground, naturally very steep, had been broken by a recent avalanche into a precipice of nearly a thousand feet. Here the cavalry halted as at the end of their journey, and it was announced to Hannibal [in the rear] that the rock was impassable. He surveyed it personally, and imagined he must lead the army around it no matter how great the circuit, through regions pathless and untrodden. But this route proved impracticable [for it was entirely out of the question to force the army through the soft and yielding snowdrifts.]

At length after men and beasts had been uselessly fatigued, the camp was pitched on the summit; the ground being cleared for that purpose with great difficulty, so much snow was there to dig and to carry away. The soldiers were then set to work to make a way down the cliff, by which alone a passage could be won. It was needful to cut through the rocks themselves, and the men lopped down many large trees which grew around, and made a huge pile of timber. As soon as a strong wind came to stir the fire, they kindled the mass, and pouring vinegar upon the heated stones [beneath] rendered them soft and crumbling. They then could use their iron instruments upon the rock thus heated, and smoothed its slopes so that not merely the sumpter beasts but even the elephants could be led across and downward.

Four days had the army spent on this rock, the animals nearly perishing with hunger, for the mountain summits were mostly bare, and any pasturage was under the snows; but the lower parts [which they now reached] contained valleys and some sunny hills, with streams flowing through woods—scenes in short worthy for human abode. There the sumpter beasts were set out at pasture, and the men,

1. Po: a river in northern Italy

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so wearied with the passage, were given three days of rest; then they descended to the plains, where the country and the people were alike less rugged.

In this manner they came to Italy in the fifth month after leaving New Carthage [in Spain], having crossed the Alps in fifteen days.

Source: Excerpt from *History of Rome* by Livy, Book XXI, translated by Daniel Spillan and Cyrus Edmonds, in *Readings in Ancient History*, Volume 2, edited by William Stearns Davis (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912), pp. 62–67.