

How Hannibal crossed the Alps

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HOW HANNIBAL CROSSED THE ALPS.

The Punic wars — life and death struggle between ancient Rome and Carthage — were fought out in three stages of twenty-two, seventeen, and three years' duration, within the period 260 B.C. to 146 B.C. They ended with the complete destruction of the City of Carthage by a Roman army under the command of the younger Scipio, after a terrible siege lasting more than two years.

It was the second of the Punic wars that brought Hannibal into prominence. He was the eldest son of Hamilcar Barca who commanded the Carthaginian forces in the first Punic war. The Barca family were one of the richest and most influential in the oligarchy which ruled Carthage at the time. Hannibal, as a boy, is said to have been made to take an oath that he would devote his life to fighting the Romans. Whether the story be fact or legend, he certainly was a thorn in the side of the Romans as long as he lived and at one period in his Italian campaign came near to decisive victory over them. After the battle of Cannae, the most crushing defeat ever suffered by Roman arms, the fate of Rome and her empire trembled in the balance. Had Hannibal then received the support which a corrupt and short-sighted Government in Carthage denied him, the history of the world might have been changed and the progress of civilization in Europe arrested or retarded.

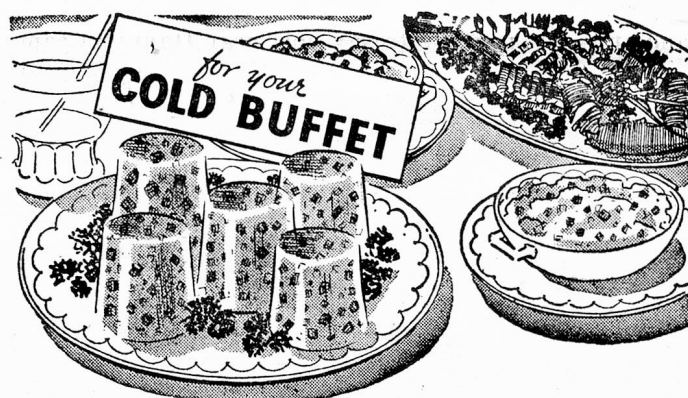
Though he failed, Hannibal remains for all times the dominating personality of his age. He ranks with Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Napoleon as one of the greatest Captains in history. His far-seeing statesmanship and his military genius were unsurpassed. During fifteen years, cut off from all outside aid and with a heterogeneous army of mercenaries, he fought the Romans in their own land, inflicted untold damage on them, never lost a battle and in the end effected an orderly withdrawal by sea, landing his army safely in Carthage.

Of his private life and his appearance little is known. No Punic literature has survived, no letters, dispatches or memoirs of his exist; all records of his doings are derived from Roman and Greek sources and oblique references are found in Plutarch's "Lives." The only glimpse of his domestic life is afforded by a mention of his bride, a Spanish princess and his infant child to whom he bade farewell as he took his departure and whom he was not to see again until he was past middle age. A somewhat conventional marble bust, discovered in Capua, shows him, helmeted,

bearded, with intelligent features and a determined mouth; of his semitic origin there is little trace, it might be a Roman head.

The outstanding feat in Hannibal's amazing military career was the crossing of the Alps. A descent on Italy by sea would have been a perilous undertaking as the Romans held the command of the Mediterranean. He therefore planned an attack by land, a march from Spain across the Pyrenees through Southern Gaul and over the Alps. With extreme secrecy he prepared the invasion and by B.C.218 was ready for his great enterprise. He set out in May of that year from Cartagina in Spain at the head of 90,000 foot, 12,000 horsemen and 37 elephants, the finest army Carthage ever possessed, organised and trained with much skill and care. It included nearly all the services of a modern army, commissariat, transport administration and hospitals and there was an excellent body of sappers, miners and pioneers. Long trains of impedimenta and beasts of burden accompanied it. The difficulties of an Alpine crossing had been foreseen and it would seem that the Carthaginians possessed some kind of explosive—probably a Greek invention — which was used with good effect when rock-blasting became necessary.

Such was the formidable army which Hannibal led to what he hoped would be the downfall of Rome. At first all went well. The Ebro was reached with ease and crossed without difficulty. But in the Catalonian wilds a fierce and prolonged resistance was met and the Carthaginians had to fight their way with heavy



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loss to the Pyrenees. The crossing of this first mountain barrier was uneventful and the army marched unimpeded through most of Southern Gaul. When it reached the Rhone a large body of Gaulish warriors opposed Hannibal's progress and it was only after bitter fighting that he was able to force a passage of the river. He then turned north, skirting the Rhone, towards Lyon, branched off East in the direction of Grenoble and Chambéry and by the middle of October found himself at the foot of the main chain of the Alps over which he meant to lead his army into Italy. By that time he had less than 60,000 men left.

The exact locality of the crossing is not known and it is not possible to say how near Hannibal came to the Swiss mountains. Most historians incline to the belief that the crossing was effected through the gap of the little St. Bernard.

It is not difficult to imagine the awe and terror that huge host of armed men must have struck into the primitive minds of the savage clansmen in these remote mountain regions, few of whom had ever seen a horse let alone an elephant. Jealous of their wild freedom, they prepared to fight off the invaders. At every dangerous point, as the Carthaginian columns were toiling along the narrow tracks, they were attacked in front, flank and rear. Terrible scenes of confusion followed, horses, waggons and supply trains with their attendants were hurled in the yawning depths beneath, thousands of men perished as they were forced over the cliffs and hundreds were cut off and made prisoners. Only the cool courage and skill of Hannibal averted a complete disaster. Largely by the exertions of his renowned Balaeric slingers, every attack was stemmed and the army extricated from its dangerous position.

The worst of these onsets occurred a few days before the summit of the pass was reached. As the van of the army entered a narrow defile, it was assailed by a multitude of Celts hidden in ambush on top of the cliffs, an attack that was followed by another, no less desperate, on the rear. Rocks and boulders were hurled down on the helpless Carthaginians, causing immense destruction of men and beasts. The damage was severe but again Hannibal succeeded in restoring the position and gradually to force back the fierce mountaineers.

At last the summit of the pass was reached. Here, in a desolate region, amid ice and snow, Hannibal gave his worn-out soldiers a few days rest. Their sufferings

had been severe and even the bravest had begun to lose heart but their intrepid commander inspired them with fresh hope. The descent was begun and though no hostile tribes interfered a considerable number of men and horses were lost on the precipitous slopes. Eventually a point was reached where avalanches had swept away the track and formed an impenetrable wall which made further progress impossible. An attempt was made to find a path higher up; it failed and a gallery was then cut in the side of the cliff, probably by means of blasting with the explosive already referred to. The same explosive was used later in the siege of Turin when a mine was sprung under the City walls before the final assault.

And so, in mid-winter B.C.218, Hannibal entered Italy. The losses had been heavy: no more than 20,000 infantry and 6,000 horsemen were left, a mere shadow of the splendid army that had set out from Spain. The men were frost-bitten and exhausted, the horses scarcely able to stand and weeks were required before the worn-out troops were in a condition to resume their march and face the Romans that awaited them in Piedmont.

An interesting detail is that all the elephants, though famished, were saved and survived to play their part in the coming battles.

Great had been the cost, but Hannibal had achieved his purpose and the next fifteen years saw him master of Italy until, undefeated, he and his army returned to Carthage.

The remaining years of his life were spent in exile, out of reach of the Romans who with relentless persistence sought to get him in their power. His last asylum was in Asia Minor at the court of the King of Bithynia who betrayed him to the Romans. Rather than fall into their hands, Hannibal took poison, preferring death to captivity and a Roman triumph. He was about seventy years old.

It is a far cry from Carthage to the Alps and much of the detail of the crossing is lost in the mists of antiquity. Hannibal belonged to a race noted for cruelty, greed and perfidy, a race which in culture and civilization lagged far behind the Latins and whose preponderance in the ancient world would have been a calamity. Yet, it is impossible to withhold one's admiration from one who beyond a doubt was possibly the greatest figure of his time. *J.J.F.S.*