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978-1-108-07577-0 - A Treatise on Hannibal's Passage of the Alps: In which his Route is Traced Over the Little Mont Cenis

Robert Ellis

Excerpt

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## A TREATISE

ON

## HANNIBAL'S PASSAGE OF THE ALPS.

### CHAPTER I.

Introduction.—Brief notice of Hannibal's march from New Carthage.—Polybius' estimation of the lengths of the different parts of the whole march from New Carthage to the plains of Italy.—A peculiarity in Polybius' mode of narration observed.—Division of the march from the passage of the Rhone to the country of the Insubrian Gauls into seven stages.

A PERIOD of more than twenty years of peace succeeded the close of the first Punic war. It was not however a peace which could be expected to endure. The mutual exhaustion of the contending parties had obliged them for a time to desist from the further prosecution of hostilities: but the power of neither the Romans nor the Carthaginians was inwardly shattered; and the rivalry and hatred with which they had long regarded each other were necessarily increased rather than diminished by the losses which both had suffered. These losses, severe as they had been, were gradually repaired; each nation recovered its former vigour, and looked forward to the renewal of a strife, which the deeply-rooted animosity, the clashing interests, and the ambitious spirit of both parties, plainly forewarned them could have no end but in the complete subjection of Rome or Carthage. The first Punic war had established an inveterate rivalry between the two cities: the event of the second war was to determine which should fall.

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The struggle which was to decide this question at length approached. In the year 219 B. C. the peace between the Romans and Carthaginians was formally broken; hostile declarations were exchanged at Carthage, and preparations for the contest were made on both sides. The news of the rupture reached Hannibal at New Carthage in Spain, a country which he had in a great measure reduced under the Carthaginian yoke; and where the continual growth and consolidation of the power of their enemy had given much umbrage and disquiet to the Romans. It was there he meditated the invasion of Italy and the fall of Rome, and resolved upon that march which has associated his name for ever with the Alps. His preparations for the invasion had commenced before he was aware of the rupture of the peace, and by the spring of the year 218 they were finally completed.

A fortunate conjuncture of circumstances had enabled him to secure allies in Italy. The Romans were at this time, and had been for some years previously, making gradual encroachments upon the territories of the Cisalpine Gauls: and the Gauls, feeling that they were of themselves incapable of resisting the growing might of Rome, readily embraced the opportunity of forming an alliance with the great enemy of the Roman name. In anticipation of such an event, and before he had received the news that the Romans had declared war against the Carthaginians, Hannibal had despatched an embassy from Spain into Cisalpine Gaul, to ascertain and confirm the disposition of the inhabitants towards the Carthaginian alliance, and to discover also, whether the passage of the Alps was practicable or not.

The return of his envoys he was now awaiting. At length they arrived at New Carthage, and brought back the intelligence, that the Cisalpine Gauls were very favourably disposed towards the Carthaginians. The passage of the Alps they also reported to be practicable, although exceedingly difficult and unavoidably attended with great labour<sup>1</sup>. Impossible, however, they were assured that it was not. For the Gauls themselves had frequently, not

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<sup>1</sup> Polyb. III. 34.

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only in remote, but also in recent times, crossed the mountains with large armies<sup>1</sup>: and although the march of the Carthaginian host, encumbered with its elephants and baggage, would be much less easily performed than that of an army of barbarians; still the difference was not so great as to lead them to conclude the passage impracticable. The receipt of this intelligence determined the course of Hannibal. His resolution of penetrating across the Alps into Cisalpine Gaul was finally taken, and at the end of May the army began its march from New Carthage.

It consisted at first of 90,000 foot and 12,000 horse, besides elephants and baggage-animals. All, however, did not quit the Spanish territory. Some were lost in subduing the nations between the Ebro and the Pyrenees: and when the march was resumed after the reduction of these tribes, a detachment of 11,000 was left behind under Hanno, and an equal number of men were dismissed to their own homes. 50,000 foot and 9000 horse were all that crossed the Pyrenees and entered Gaul. After the passage of the Rhone this number was diminished to 38,000 foot and 8000 horse<sup>2</sup>. Of these, 20,000 foot and 6000 horse alone survived the passage of the Alps, and succeeded in reaching the plains of the Po.

Hannibal's route from New Carthage lay, as just intimated, northward; and was directed along the coast of Spain. The river Ebro was crossed, the nations between it and the Eastern Pyrenees were subdued, the extremity of those mountains was passed, and Transalpine Gaul entered. After the passage of the Pyrenees, Hannibal still kept for a time near the sea, but at length turned inland, and crossed the Rhone at a distance of nearly four days' march from the sea. Proceeding subsequently along the left or eastern bank of the Rhone for four days more, he

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<sup>1</sup> Polyb. iii. 48.

<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to account for the loss of 13,000 men between the Pyrenees and the Rhone. The ordinary casualties seem insufficient to explain it. Perhaps a number of the Iberians had deserted on entering Gaul, and returned to their own country, having been disappointed at not being included in the number of those whom Hannibal had allowed to do so.

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reached, at the end of that period, a district called the Island, of which Polybius gives a particular description. Having left the Island, Hannibal struck off towards the Alps, effected his passage across them, and descended into the plains of the Po. The whole of this march, from New Carthage to the Italian plains, has been divided by Polybius (iii. 39) into five stages, which terminate, respectively, at the passage of the Ebro, at Ampurias (Emporium), at the passage of the Rhone, at the foot of the first Alpine ascent, and at the commencement of the plains of Italy. The last two of these stages, in which the passage of the Alps is included, are all with which this book is immediately concerned.

Before, however, proceeding to the examination of this part of Polybius' narrative, it will be necessary to give the distances comprised in each stage of the march, from New Carthage to the commencement of the plains of Italy. They are laid down by Polybius as follows (iii. 39):

"From this city (New Carthage) to the river Ebro the distance is 2600 stadia: again from this river to Emporium 1600 stadia; and from thence also to the passage of the Rhone about 1600 stadia: for these distances have been now measured in paces and marked carefully by the Romans at intervals of eight stadia. From the passage of the Rhone, as they (the Carthaginians) marched along the bank of the river, in the direction of its sources, as far as the ascent of the Alps on the way to Italy, there was a further distance of 1400 stadia. *There still remains to be estimated the passage of the Alps, a march of about 1200 stadia*; and, after crossing these mountains Hannibal would immediately arrive at the plains of Italy lying around the Po. The whole length of his march from New Carthage would consequently amount to about 9000 stadia<sup>1</sup>."

The first thing requisite to be observed here is Polybius' scale of measurement. He computes, it will be perceived, by lengths of 200 stadia, or 25 Roman miles. Doubtless, with his deficient means of estimating distances,

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<sup>1</sup> The sum of the distances given by Polybius only amounts really to 8400 stadia.

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he found himself unable to determine the lengths of the several marches more closely, at least in such parts of the route as the Romans had not measured. Yet for these parts also he employs the same rule of computation, it not being apparently his object to aim at greater accuracy. This fact must always be borne in mind in the investigation of Hannibal's route, in order that too much stress may not be laid upon discrepancies of distance, when not great: while, at the same time, due attention should still be paid to the statements of distances, given by so careful an authority as Polybius, and a too great laxity avoided in accommodating them to actual routes. It must therefore be remembered that Polybius' measure of distance is 25 Roman miles, in computing the length of a march of several days' duration.

The passage marked in italics, in the quotation given above from Polybius, is more particularly connected with the following investigation. It supplies at once one of the conditions, which the pass to be identified with that which Hannibal crossed must satisfy. This condition may be thus stated:

“The length of the route over the Alps, beginning at the commencement of the ascent of the mountains, and terminating at the commencement of the plains of Italy, must be about 150 Roman miles<sup>1</sup>.”

That the termination of this part of the march was at the commencement of the plains of Italy, is clearly stated by Polybius. That “the ascent of the Alps on the way to Italy” means the place where the route first became mountainous, the point where the army was first obliged to ascend the mountains,—this seems also sufficiently plain; for it appears scarcely probable that any other meaning can be attached to the expression of Polybius, τὴν ἀναβολὴν τῶν Ἀλπεων τὴν εἰς Ἰταλίαν. There is however a certain amount of vagueness in it, and a different interpretation might be possible.

The narrative of Polybius, from the time when the march was resumed after the passage of the Rhone, up to

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<sup>1</sup> Condition II.

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the time of Hannibal's arrival in the plains of Italy, will now be given in full, with the exception of three chapters and part of a fourth. The passages omitted include the end of the fifty-sixth chapter, and all the fifty-seventh, fifty-eighth, and fifty-ninth chapters. These parts of the narrative are passed over, as not bearing upon the question of Hannibal's passage of the Alps, but as relating either to the operations of the Roman armies, or else containing general reflections upon the subject of history.

There is, however, one peculiarity in Polybius' style of narration, especially in this part of his history, upon which it will previously be necessary to make some observations. The peculiarity alluded to is this: that the historian, before entering into the details of a particular march, event, or military transaction, gives, in a few lines, what may be regarded as a short statement or summary of the occurrences which took place at that particular period. Having done this, he proceeds to make such observations, and give such explanations, as appear necessary, or to narrate at length the various circumstances that attended the facts in question, whenever they were of such importance as to deserve minute consideration. The short summary serves frequently, in point of fact, as an argument to the succeeding and more detailed account. The whole of that portion of Polybius' narrative now about to be given, may be considered with much probability as written in this manner, and will divide itself into seven parts. Four of these relate to the actual passage of the Alps; two to the march from the place where the Rhone was crossed, to the commencement of the mountains; and one to the march from the foot of the Alps, on the Italian side, to the territories of the Insubrian Gauls, the allies of Hannibal. The first division will consist of the march from the passage of the Rhone to the district called the Island; the second, the march from the Island to a certain defile and town at the commencement of the Alps; the third, the march from the town just mentioned to the neighbourhood of a certain *λευκόπετρον ὄχυρόν*, or 'strong'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Strong,' of course, in a military point of view.

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white rock,' where the army encountered great danger from an attack of the Alpine Gauls; the fourth, the march from this rock to the summit of the pass; the fifth, the circumstances which took place while the army remained on the summit of the pass; the sixth, the descent from the summit of the Alps to the commencement of the plains of Italy; and the seventh, (all of which will not be given) the march from the foot of the Alps to the country of the Insubrians.

These form the seven parts, into which the narrative seems to be divided. The correctness of the supposition, that this mode of narration was adopted by Polybius, will be best seen by an inspection of the historian's own words. Accordingly, those parts of his account, which are supposed to be the summaries in question, will, in the extract from Polybius which now follows, be distinguished by being printed in capital letters. Those passages also of the narrative, which bear more particularly on the present question, and afford a clue to the determination of the features of the country through which Hannibal passed, will be brought prominently forward by being printed in italics. Polybius' account of the march, thus arranged, will form the substance of the next chapter.

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## CHAPTER II.

Polybius' Narrative of Hannibal's March, from the passage of the Rhone to the capture of Turin.

Polybius. Book III. Part of Chap. 49.

**H**ANNIBAL, HAVING CONTINUED HIS MARCH FOR FOUR SUCCESSIVE DAYS FROM THE PASSAGE (OF THE RHONE) CAME TO THE DISTRICT CALLED THE ISLAND, A POPULOUS AND CORN-PRODUCING TRACT OF COUNTRY, WHICH DERIVES ITS NAME FROM THE VERY CIRCUMSTANCE (OF ITS FORMATION). For the Rhone flowing on one side of this district, and a river called the Scaras<sup>1</sup> on the other, sharpen it into a point at their confluence. It is similar in size and form to the so-called Delta in Egypt; excepting that, in the case of the Delta, the sea forms one side (i. e. the third side) by joining the mouths of the rivers (which form the other two sides); whereas the third side of the Island is formed by *mountains difficult of approach and entrance, and, it may be said, almost inaccessible*. When Hannibal arrived at the Island, he found two brothers contending for the royal power, and encamped with their armies opposite each other; and when the elder brother tried to induce him to second his efforts in acquiring the sovereignty, he listened to the overtures which were made to him: for it was sufficiently evident what advantages he would derive from the assistance of the Gaul at the present juncture. By their combined forces, the second claimant of the sovereignty was attacked and expelled; and Hannibal afterwards received great assistance from the victor. For he not only abundantly supplied the army with corn and all other necessaries, but also exchanged such of their arms and accoutrements as were old and worn out, and equipped afresh all the forces at a time when such aid was very opportune. He also furnished the mass of the soldiers with clothing and shoes, a provision which was of great service for the passage of the mountains. The most signal benefit however which he conferred upon them was, that as they were apprehensive of danger while they marched through the territory of the Gauls who are called Allobroges, he covered their rear with his own troops, and secured for them a safe advance until they approached the passage of the Alps.

<sup>1</sup> The manuscripts have *Σκάρας* or *Σκώρας*. *Ἰσάρας* is only conjectural. It has been thought better to adhere to the MS. reading.



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## Chap. 50.

HANNIBAL, IN THE COURSE OF TEN DAYS, HAVING ADVANCED ALONG THE RIVER-SIDE FOR A DISTANCE OF 800 STADIA, COMMENCED THE ASCENT OF THE ALPS, AND FOUND HIMSELF IN A SITUATION OF THE GREATEST DANGER. For as long as the army continued *in the plain*, all the petty chieftains of the Allobroges refrained from attacking them, *partly from the fear of their cavalry*, and partly from fear of the Barbarians who formed their escort. But when these last had returned to their own country, and Hannibal, with his army, was advancing towards *the places which were difficult of passage*, the chieftains of the Allobroges collected a sufficient body of forces, and took possession of *the advantageous posts* along the road by which Hannibal was obliged to make his ascent. Had they concealed their plans, they must have altogether destroyed the Carthaginian army; and, even after their purpose was detected, they inflicted great injury upon the troops of Hannibal, although the loss which they themselves incurred was equally great. For, when the Carthaginian general discovered that they had occupied the advantageous posts, he halted his troops, and encamped *near the heights*: he then sent forward a party of the Gauls, who acted as his guides, to discover the plan of the enemy, and the whole scheme of their operations. The Gauls executed his commission; and the Carthaginian general found, from the intelligence they brought, that the enemy guarded very vigilantly their posts during the daytime, but withdrew at night *to a town in the neighbourhood*. To counteract therefore their designs, he determined upon operations of the following nature. He set his army in motion *and advanced in open view*; and, *when he drew near to the difficult places, he encamped at a short distance from the enemy*. When night came on, *he ordered the watch-fires to be lighted*, and left in the camp the mass of his forces; while he himself, *with the most active of his troops, purposely equipped for such a service, penetrated in the night through the defile, and seized the posts which had been before occupied by the enemy, who had now retired to the town, according to their usual practice*.

## Chap. 51.

WHEN this had been accomplished, and day appeared, the Barbarians, observing what had taken place, desisted for a time from their original design; but when they subsequently saw the numbers of the baggage-animals and the cavalry *laboriously, and, in an extended line, defiling through the difficult places*, they were induced, by this circumstance, to attack the line of march. When this was done, and the Barbarians had

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fallen upon them on many points, a great loss ensued to the Carthaginians, especially in horses and baggage-animals: and this was caused, *not so much by the attacking enemy, as by the nature of the ground.* For the way by which the Carthaginians had to advance *was not only narrow and rugged, but also precipitous, so that at every shock or commotion, numbers of the animals with their burdens were carried down the precipices.* This confusion was mainly caused by the horses which were wounded. Some of these, rendered unruly by their wounds, fell back upon the baggage-animals; and others, in their impetuous advance, drove before them all that fell in their way upon this difficult ground. Very great confusion was thus created. When Hannibal saw this, and reflected that even those who escaped such dangers would have no chance of preservation ultimately, if the baggage-animals were lost, he set in motion the soldiers who, during the night, had taken possession of the heights, and rushed down to the succour of the foremost column in the line of march<sup>1</sup>. By this movement many of the enemy were destroyed, *in consequence of Hannibal attacking them from the heights above them; but the loss which he caused to his own army was equally great.* For the tumult on the line of march was increased on both sides (Allobroges and Carthaginians) in consequence of the shouts of the newly-arrived troops, and their intermingling in the conflict. But when Hannibal had destroyed the greater number of the Allobroges, and forced the remnant of them to fly homewards, then all the baggage-animals and horses which were left, with much labour and trouble effected their passage through the difficult places. Meanwhile, Hannibal collected as many of his soldiers as he could after this perilous service, and fell upon the town from which the enemy had made their attack: and finding it almost deserted, in consequence of all its inhabitants having gone out in hope of plunder, he became master of it. This capture ensured him many present and subsequent advantages. *He recovered immediate possession of a number of his horses and beasts of burden, and the men who had been made prisoners with them,* and gained a supply of corn and cattle sufficient for two or three days' consumption. But the chief advantage which resulted was, that he inspired such great alarm among the people adjacent to the ascent<sup>2</sup>, that none of them for the future ventured lightly to attack him.

<sup>1</sup> Read here with Casaubon, Gronovius, and Bekker, *πρὸ λαβοῦσι*.

<sup>2</sup> (i. e.) adjacent to the district where he then was, which was that where the ascent to the mountains first began.