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William John Law

Excerpt

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## THE ALPS OF HANNIBAL.

## PART VIII.

## KNOWLEDGE OF THE ALPS IN EARLY TIMES.

## CHAPTER I.

*Strabo on the Alps. His allusion to Polybius and Hannibal. Doubtful that he wrote the three words. Improbable that the four Passes were named by Polybius. Errors of M. Letronne.*

HAVING done what I can to interpret Polybius, I find myself called upon to touch some subjects which others have resorted to in interpreting him. I postpone, therefore, for a while the examination of Livy.

One would have desired that, for this interpretation, it might not be necessary to explore the topography of Strabo, to dissect the narrative of Cæsar, to notice so late a writer as Ammianus Marcellinus, or to contemplate that curiosity, nearly contemporary with him, the Chart or Table of Peutinger. But the task cannot be avoided: it is not enough to answer argument: we must meet the influence of learned men, attending them where they call us, though they may bring into their service things which hardly belong to the subject. On whatever topics our laborious and dexterous adversaries

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[More information](#)

2

*Early Knowledge of the Alps.*

[PART VIII]

have exhausted their efforts of invention, we must grapple with them ; and some inquiry into the early knowledge of the Romans on Alpine passes may aid us in exposing the errors of prevailing theories.

*Strabo on the Alps.*

Many commentators rely on Strabo, not as being himself an authority on Hannibal, but as an interpreter of the views of Polybius. M. Letronne says gravely, “ La géographie de “ Polybe étoit la source unique où il puisoit ce qu’il rapporte “ des Alpes.” We may not find elsewhere a proposition quite so rash as this ; but the learned Ukert, the zealous Larauza, with other French and English critics,—in short, every theorist who favours the Cenis, the Genève, or the Viso,—all rejoice in the aid of Strabo as guiding them to the meaning of Polybius. We, then, who repudiate their theories, are compelled to investigate the worth of the evidence.

In his account of Gaul, in the fourth book, Strabo treats the Alps as a distinct subject of inquiry. He notices tracks by which they had been surmounted, and clearly recognises some as leading into Gaul. In speaking of the first conquests made by the Romans beyond the Alps, in a warfare of many years along the coast, he indicates a maritime pass : in the route which he describes from the Rhone, through Briançon, over the crest of Alps, to the boundary of the Cisalpine province, he designates the Genève pass ; and he points out, in the most explicit terms, the passes of the Great and Little St. Bernard as two ways that lead to Lyons. In his notice of the chain of Alps eastward, and the nations that belong to them, his words do not identify any particular pass until he names the extreme Ocra, the pass of the Carnic Alps, which led from Aquileia to Nauportus ; but he certainly apprehended passages through the mountains into the Grisons and the Tyrol.

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[More information](#)*His allusion to Polybius.*

Towards the end of the book there are allusions to Polybius. Strabo refers to him on the elk, the gold in Noricum, and the comparative magnitude of the Alps and the mountains of Greece. We then read these words:—Τέτταρας δ' ὑπερβάσεις ὀνομάζει μόνον· διὰ Λιγύων μὲν, τὴν ἔγγιστα τῷ Τυρρηνικῷ πελάγει· εἶτα τὴν διὰ Ταυρίνων, ἣν Ἀννίβας διήλθεν· εἶτα πῆν διὰ Σαλασσῶν· τετάρτην δὲ διὰ Ῥαιτῶν· ἀπάσας κρημνῶδεις, p. 209. “He names four passes only: “that through the Ligyes, being the nearest to the Tyrrhenian “Sea; then that through the Taurini, which Hannibal went “through; then that through the Salassi; and the fourth “through the Rhæti: all precipitous.”

This sentence has attracted notice: not, as it might have done, for a question on the Rhætian pass, but by the mention of Hannibal. It is pressed by some as important, and slighted by others as unimportant. The patron of a Taurine pass is ready to adopt conclusively the three words ἣν Ἀννίβας διήλθεν, as an interpretation of Polybius by one who was sure to understand him. Now, I conceive that Strabo was by no means sure to understand him; and others who have before them the details of Polybius himself on Hannibal's march, claim the right of interpreting him for themselves: they ought to be more capable of doing this rightly, inasmuch as there is now ample knowledge of Alpine passes such as no man in Strabo's time had attained, or had the means of attaining.

Whatever may be deemed the value of the three words touching the passage of Hannibal, it is not clear that Strabo ever wrote them. There is a manuscript of high value, lately examined by the learned Gustavus Kramer, Epitome Vaticana No. 482, in which the words ἣν Ἀννίβας διήλθεν do not appear: he examined every letter of this manuscript; he

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ranks it among those “quorum maxima est auctoritas,” and pronounces it “quantivis pretii.” Præfat. pp. xliii. lxxxix. Further, if the three words are genuine, it is quite possible that Strabo placed them after *Σαλασσῶν*, and that they have been shifted into their present position after *Ταυρίνων*. Those, therefore, who have so greedily seized the three words for identifying the track of Hannibal with a track through Cottian Alps, are threatened with these casualties :—1. That the words have been shifted by some careless or officious copier into a wrong place ; 2. That in Strabo’s own edition they had no place at all. I will not rest on either contingency as dissuading from inquiry. If Strabo had expressed his opinion on Polybius in the most unequivocal manner, we are not bound by it when we find it unsound, on a deliberate study of the original narrative. It is best, however, to face all objections ; and to take the text as it stands in the printed editions. One preliminary observation is requisite : that the phrase *διὰ Ταυρίνων* does not imply that the mountain pass was in the Taurini ; but that, in making your way to the Cisalpine province in those Alps, you must go through the Taurini : in the same manner Strabo calls the two more northern passes *ὑπερβάσεις διὰ Σαλασσῶν*, because, to reach them, it was necessary to travel through the Salassi.

The Oxford Dissertation insists that the words are Strabo’s own words : and by the logic of the sentence they are so. Others have expressed the same idea, saying that the words are a parenthetical comment or gloss of Strabo. Such remarks, however, do not deprive the sentence of importance : as it stands, it exhibits four passes as having been named by Polybius ; and Strabo would hardly append to one of them the notice of Hannibal, if he did not imagine Polybius to concur upon the fact so introduced. He might himself be under the impression erroneously : he might, like others, assume the fact for no better reason than that the first operation in Italy told

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[More information](#)

## CHAP. I.]

*Strabo on the Alps.*

5

by Polybius was against the Taurini : still, if his words, taken altogether, make it probable that he wrote under that impression, they claim attention. The inquiries, to which such a subject leads us, will be found also not uninteresting in themselves.

Those who assent to the leading facts of Polybius's narrative, and take pains in drawing a conclusion from them, may be indifferent to a construction made by the later writer : they will rely on the historian as his own interpreter. But, if any are inclined to submit their judgments to the three words as presented, let them advert to questions which fairly offer themselves. Is Strabo safely to be relied on, when he quotes an earlier author ? For instance, is he justified, when, in his fourth book, he appeals to Cæsar's Commentaries, as giving the same descriptions as himself of Aquitani, Celtæ, and Belgæ ? Is Hannibal's line through the mountains a subject that interested him, so as to engage his attention, and produce accuracy ? Was Polybius likely to speak of *ὑπερβάσεις διὰ Σαλασσῶν*, or *διὰ Ταυρίνων*, or of any *ὑπερβάσις* at all ?

*Hannibal's Route did not interest Strabo.*

If there was reason to suppose that Strabo would care for the Alps of Hannibal, it would be more likely that he should be accurate in the allusion to Polybius : if it did not interest him, he might, without scrutiny, adopt an hypothesis which was entertained by his contemporary Livy. There is not in all Strabo's works an allusion to the Carthaginian march from Spain to Italy, unless it be in those three words *ἣν Ἀννίβας διήλθεν*. He had abundant opportunity of noticing the expedition in its earlier stages. He has been exhibiting the geography of Valentia, Catalonia, the Pyrenees, Outer Gaul, and the regions of the Rhone, the approaches to the Alps, and portions of the Alps themselves. Nevertheless, the Carthaginian invasion is nowhere alluded to by Strabo till it reaches

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the confines of Etruria, unless it be in those three words. He describes particularly the route from Spain to this very pass, the Mont Genève, but with no note of Hannibal. It was his habit to illustrate geography by ascertained features of history, as in the case of the Salassian valley; and he often alludes to the later operations of Hannibal in the regions nearer to Rome. It seems, therefore, that if he had cared for the question on the Pass, and himself studied the route of the invaders, he would have annexed to his own description, whether of a Taurinian or of a Salassian hyperbasis, some commemoration of the great exploit. This is unquestionable: that, if the words ἡν Ἀννίβας διήλθεν, which appear in this list of four passes, should be shifted from one of those passes and attached to another, there is not a thought in Strabo's works that would be offended by the exchange.

*Reasons against Polybius having authorized those names  
of Passes.*

We do not find any of Strabo's nominations of passes in the extant writings of Polybius. Rhæti are not mentioned at all. Salassi are not mentioned at all. Ligurians are called Λιγυστινοί, not Λίγυες; and Taurini are not connected with a pass. If Polybius had been prepared to speak of a Salassian, a Taurinian, or a Ligurian pass, there were opportunities for doing so in those parts of his works which survive to us. He tells of the early invasions of Northern Italy by the Gauls, and of their irruption before the second Punic war: they made their way through the valley of Aosta; he might therefore have introduced them διὰ Σαλασσῶν. He details the invasion of Hannibal, and might have introduced him διὰ Σαλασσῶν: or, if he apprehended the invasion to be by the pass which Strabo calls διὰ Ταυρίνων, he had every provocation to name it. But, on the contrary, he completes his narrative of the passage through the Alps; he launches

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[More information](#)

CHAP. I.]

*Strabo on the Alps.*

7

Hannibal into the plain and the nation of Insubres ; describes his encampment ; and, when the army is restored to health and fit for service, relates how he turned his arms against the Taurini, who were at war with his friends, the Insubres : then only do we find a notice of that people. As to a pass *διὰ Λιγύων*, this also he had full opportunity to speak of. Throughout his life the Romans were working to bring their schemes along the coast to maturity : he records their first enterprise beyond the boundary of Italy, when the consul Opimius invaded the country of the Oxybii, beyond Nice and Antipolis. He marched *διὰ τῶν Ἀπεννίνων ὁρῶν* : not a word of a pass *διὰ Λιγύων*.

If these expressions were truly imputed to Polybius, we might fairly expect to meet with them : his second book exhibits a geographical description of Italy, the plains of Italy, the great river of Italy, the seas of Italy, the mountains of Italy ; and, if he had recognised by those titles four entrances through the great barrier, he might have added such information to the rest. There is not a word which gives countenance to these names of passes ; and the words of Strabo, in which he seems to assume that those which he recognised himself had been similarly recognised by Polybius, are not to deter us from weighing the probabilities that this historian ever designated those things as *ὑπερβάσεις διὰ Λιγύων, διὰ Ταυρίνων, διὰ Σαλασσῶν, διὰ Παιτῶν*.

Though I find no reason to suppose that Polybius ever gave expression to any one of these *ὑπερβάσεις*, I need not dwell on the first and last of them : they are not involved in our inquiry, like the other two. The routes through Salassi and Taurini are closely concerned with our controversy, and these I propose to consider more deliberately. I have against me an ample list of critics, ending with Mr. Ellis, who have professed obedience to the words of Strabo. But M. Letronne has gone beyond the rest, by discussing the value of the



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sentence; and I will advert to his doctrines before I proceed further.

*Errors of M. Letronne.*

This eminent man, the first assailant of De Luc, has thus expressed himself: "Ce passage contient non seulement la "pensée de Polybe, mais jusqu'à ses expressions" . . . "dans "tout ce qui précède et ce qui suit, Strabon ne fait que rap- "porter les opinions et les propres paroles de Polybe;—que "Strabon suit sans restriction pour tout ce qui concerne les "Alpes." Again: "La géographie de cet historien, ou plutôt "la partie de son histoire qui traite de la géographie, étoit la "source unique où il puisoit ce qu'il rapporte des Alpes;" and further: "l'ouvrage de Polybe son unique guide." \*

These propositions are one and all erroneous. Most of what Strabo says concerning the Alps is drawn from events which arose after the death of Polybius: he by no means follows him, and I doubt that in any instance he adopts his expressions. The Alpine matters drawn from Polybius are few and easily told: Strabo refers to him on the fact that the elk is found in the Alps; he refers to him on the superiority of the Alps to the mountains of Greece and Thrace, adding the sentence on the passes now under discussion; and he refers to him on the Alpine lakes, naming and describing the three large lakes of Italy,—Benacus, Verbanus, Larius,—and the rivers issuing from them. This is all. And, as Strabo throughout his work is from time to time citing Polybius as his authority for facts, we are not to presume that he has that authority where he does not adduce it. Indeed, if we search for other things on the Alps that could have been derived from Polybius, though not so alleged, we find very little, and may be the more surprised with M. Letronne's proposition, that one followed the other "pour tout ce qui concerne les Alpes."

\* *Journal des Savans.* Janvier et Decembre, 1819.



So far as the Alps had been connected with Roman events, they were likely to be noticed by Polybius. But the scope of this connexion was very limited. The Romans in his day were just beginning to feel their way towards either extremity of the great chain that severed them from the rest of Europe. The entire central range was unvisited by them. The eastern Alps were approached in the unauthorised and fruitless attempt of Cassius Longinus, in 171 B.C., and Strabo's appeal to Polybius on the gold mines near Aquileia, and the salt springs at Timavum, might lead to the conjecture that the historian had himself made the land journey between Italy and Greece. The first advance of the Romans along the Mediterranean coast took place while Polybius was an exile in Italy; the movement in aid of the Massilians against the Oxybii and Deciataë, tribes in the neighbourhood of Frejus. Strabo refers to him on the existence of those peoples. Twenty-nine years elapsed before such an effort was repeated.

How small then at that period was the knowledge of Alps arising out of Roman transactions! If we look to all prior history of the great natural rampart, the only operations which had been recorded were in the passage of Hercules; the irruptions of the Gauls; and the invasion of Hannibal. On the passage of Hercules Strabo says nothing: on the Gaulish invasions through the Alps nothing: on Hannibal's pass the three words which produce this discussion. And never does he allude to Polybius as the historian of Hannibal, unless you suppose him to do so in those three words.

Strabo himself abounds in matter connected with the Alps, especially with the outer side of them: but it is not derived from Polybius. I believe that the only fact on the Transalpine cited on his authority is the fact of the Rhone having two mouths. The Romans in the time of Polybius had little

acquaintance with those regions : the agents of their intrigues were hardly as yet moving in the interior of Gaul when he made his journey through the Alps : their communication was through Marseille by sea. They gained no footing in Gaul till after his death. In his time, what they knew, he knew. They may have heard of the lake of Geneva : but there is no evidence that they had, or that he had. As to the other Swiss lakes, there is strong reason to think that he did not know them. When Strabo tells the peculiarities of the Rhone and its great lake, and names the nations bordering on the Rhine and its great lake, he makes no reference to Polybius. He rather shews that Polybius had never mentioned these things : for he does say that Polybius had spoken of Alpine lakes, and that three were large ones : he names them, and they are all Italian. Polybius acknowledged the obscurity of those regions. When he opens his narrative of the march from the Pyrenees, he announces that he shall not attempt to express names belonging to countries so unknown. Accordingly we do not meet with the name of any town visited by the invaders between Spain and Italy, and only of one people. Names begin when mountains end.

Thus trifling in fact is the amount of Alpine matter that Strabo did or could draw from Polybius. The history of conquest brought geography along with it : Strabo's memoranda on the Alps were drawn from later events. His notices of southern Gaul are founded on the performances of Fulvius, Sextius, Domitius, Fabius, Marius : and his details of the passes are Roman details. Before he came to write on the passes, they had been traversed by Pompey, Cæsar, D. Brutus, Augustus, Tiberius, Drusus. Some exploits he had heard of : not all. Every anecdote which he brings forward, excepting in those three words, concerns some event which was after the death of Polybius. In the route from Spain to the Cottian pass he names places and distances. But he stops