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The Human Side of Hannibal

How the ancient general used personal strengths to inspire his men and outsmart his enemies

It's one of the most famous moments in military history: the Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca crossing the Alps with his battle elephants in 218 B.C. In the July/August issue of *Smithsonian*, Franz Lidz travels to Italy to meet Chris Allen, a lecturer at Queen's University Belfast, who has used 2,000-year-old fecal matter to make a case that the crossing may have happened at the pass called Col de la Traversette.

Patrick N. Hunt, an archaeologist, historian and biographer who has taught humanities, archaeology and mythology at Stanford University since 1993, believes the crossing happened further north at Col du Clapier. He spoke to us about the evidence and stories laid out in his new book, [Hannibal](#). [Simon and Schuster].

Why has the legend of Hannibal's military exploits endured in popular imagination for so many centuries?

"Hannibal was a bogeyman to the Romans because it took them several decades to figure out to avoid him in pitched battle. "Hannibal at the gates"

became a reminder that a dangerous enemy could threaten their very way of life. The ancient Greek historian Polybius provides great detail about his adult life, emphasizing Hannibal's almost endless planning. But any attempted psychological portrait of Hannibal must at least try considering what made him possible in a distant time and place, which is difficult given few sources about his youth."

What made Hannibal such a revolutionary military strategist?

"Hannibal was a genius at tactics derived in part from his father and in part from his mentor, Alexander. (Alexander was taught by Aristotle, after all, in critical thinking and logic.) Being able to acquire on-the-ground intelligence about the enemy while anticipating their next moves was one of Hannibal's greatest assets. He always tried to arrive first and set up battlefield environments to his advantage rather than let the enemy choose them."

"Moreover, he was always on the alert. At Volturnus, Fabius Maximus thought he had Hannibal boxed in but Hannibal used a night maneuver to outwit him. He sent thousands of captured cattle disguised as moving soldiers in the middle of the dark night with burning firebrands tied to their horns. The Roman guards only saw moving torches running uphill and thought this was Hannibal's army escaping another way, so the Romans followed the cattle instead and Hannibal's army escaped. I maintain that Scipio, his eventual Roman nemesis, actually learned much from Hannibal, studying his successes until he could imitate them."

You argue that Hannibal followed the Col du Clapier-Savine Coche route. What evidence supports this?

"I have spent over 20 field seasons tracking Hannibal, not only in the Alps but also in Spain, France (Gaul) and of course Italy and elsewhere including Carthage and Western Turkey. Our Stanford teams have crossed at least 30 Alps passes and we've always used Polybius as a guide. Polybius gives some helpful clues but never names the pass. He suggests it was the highest pass (at the time)."

"The Clapier-Savine Coche route—an ancient Celtic pathway with a summit around 8,500 feet—best fits Polybius in my opinion and many others'. This verified route has been used for thousands of years and while there is erosion on the precipitous descent that has taken away most of the ancient

pathway, the summit valley floor is fairly stable and has been for millennia. Mammal animal mire there has also built up over a long time because the Clapier-Savine Coche summit valley has been a grazing place since at least Celtic times. I always encourage Alps explorers to weigh multiple passes against each other rather than to merely examine one pass and conclude prematurely or only read about it, which is dangerously inadequate."

What new arguments does your book make regarding Hannibal's life and legacy?

"There are several, but one is that even though the seacoast of Gaul was blocked by Roman armies and Carthage no longer controlled the sea, Hannibal was predisposed to crossing the formidable Alps mountain range because his very name called for Baal's favor (Hannibal means the "favor of Baal" as a personal god identity) and Baal was very much a mountain storm god. Connected to this is a new argument that young Hannibal's vow to his father to forever be against Rome was cemented in a live sacrifice to Baal where his destiny was sealed, contradicting Livy's propaganda that Hannibal was completely irreligious."

The elephants make the crossing sound especially fantastical. How would elephants have been able to cross the Alps?

"Burmese elephant operations in World War II show Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*), which he had, can actually clamber well up steep and narrow inclines. Elephants in Africa actually move high up on Mount Kenya and high altitude contexts. Most think African elephants (*Loxodendron africanus*), which he also likely had (possibly even an Atlas Mountain subspecies), are not so easily domesticated but they are also amazingly intelligent. I was part of a documentary in Hollywood where Susie, a 25-year-old African elephant could understand around 100 commands and was astonishingly long in memory. She didn't want to stand on and crush fake human dummy heads, shaking her head side to side in resistance, and she had to be heavily coaxed to even put her heavy foot on one. I suspect Susie later needed elephant psychotherapy!"

What do we know about Hannibal as a human being?

"It needs to be emphasized that he personally inspired his army with his charismatic leadership. He never seems to have distanced himself from his

men but even slept on the ground with them and shared their hardships. This created unusual bonding. In times when they were generally outnumbered, Hannibal even cracked jokes as at Cannae, when an officer named Gisco worried about the size of the gathering Roman army stretching to the horizon. Hannibal smilingly replied, "Yes, but none of them is named Gisco." He knew when to put his men at ease yet still showed them how to respond to surprise. Conversely, Hannibal knew how to stoke overconfidence in the enemy and then, in unanticipated, stunning reversals, paralyze them with fear. It is most likely that the German idea of *blitzkrieg* was borrowed from Hannibal."

"We might also learn from Hannibal's tragic inability to see the future of Roman land hegemony expansion, and how armed farmers would overtake his seaborne Punic mercantile people. Though Hannibal was crafty and a tactical genius, the proliferating, land-grabbing Romans became an unstoppable force of nature. We archaeologists and historians always hope that by understanding some of the past, we may comprehend the present and maybe can augur a bit of the future."