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Tall talks about elephants: Hannibal's crossing through disciplines

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ABSTRACT

The enigma of Hannibal's Alpine crossing has captivated minds and sparked debates across centuries, much like an elusive puzzle that resists a definitive solution. This article explores the fierce and often acrimonious scholarly debates surrounding Hannibal's journey, where the quest to separate historical fact from romantic myth has turned into a battleground for competing disciplines. Military historians, geographers and philologists have all staked their claims, each employing distinct methods to argue their case, yet the controversy has only intensified. As the debate has evolved, the focus has shifted from merely identifying the route to examining how historical truths are constructed amid academic rivalries. The article scrutinizes the rhetorical strategies and epistemological conflicts that have defined this ongoing dispute, revealing how the quest to solve Hannibal's mystery has often led to sharp intellectual skirmishes. These clashes, far from resolving the issue, have instead highlighted the complexities of reconstructing ancient events with limited and sometimes contradictory information. Ultimately, these debates, as harsh as they may be, have contributed to elevating the Western Alps as a zone of historical attention and prestige, now increasingly exploited for heritage.

Sir Gavin de Beer knew how to craft an epigraph. His widely read *Alps and Elephants*, the book in which the director of the British Museum (Natural History) traced in 1955 the route of Hannibal's march to Italy, opens with a biting excerpt from Juvenal: 'Forward, you madman, and hurry across those horrid Alps so that you may become the delight of schoolboys' (Juv. X, 166–7).[1] To underscore how that laddish 'delight' had morphed into an obsession over the years, De Beer called upon the wit of Mark Twain: 'The researches of many antiquarians have already thrown much darkness on the subject, and it is probable, if they continue, that we shall soon know nothing at all'.[2] De Beer's talent did not stop at the art of the epigraph – he was also adept at lifting them. Both of these passages, in precisely this order, appear in an earlier work on the same subject by Douglas Freshfield, once president of the Alpine Club

[1] G. de Beer, *Alps and Elephants: Hannibals's March* (London, 1955), p. [xvi]; on the passage, see P. Murgatroyd, 'An intertextual Hannibal', *Latomus*, lxxi (2012), 784–8, at pp. 787–8.
[2] De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. [xvi].

and secretary of the Geographical Society in London.[3] Freshfield had used them to temper his defence of an alternative route through which he argued the Carthaginian commander had crossed the Alps in 218 B.C.E., purportedly with an army of fifteen to twenty thousand horses, seventy thousand troops and thirty-seven elephants.

Mark Twain's comment is a spectral presence – nowhere to be found in his published works. Yet its popularity is as vast as its wit is sharp. Freshfield, who clearly linked it to the 'ancient argument' over Hannibal's Alpine passage, ensured it a lasting place in mountaineering literature.[4] Its spurious nature is further evidenced by its equally fitting association with the forensic debates over *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the novel Charles Dickens left unfinished upon his death in 1870, presenting readers with an unsolved literary puzzle to unravel.[5] The apocryphal nature of the quip probably stems from its origins in oral performance. In various Victorian sources, the remark is attributed to Artemus Ward, the nom de plume of American humourist Charles Farrar Browne, one of the most cherished voices in Twain's humoristic library.[6] Ward, a pioneer of stand-up comedy, gained considerable fame with his entertaining lectures at the Egyptian Hall in London, where his satirical commentary was often accompanied by the flickering images of magic lantern slides.[7] Twain's wry humour is often connected to Ward, making it easy to see how a comment by one could be misattributed to the other.[8]

As noted by Leonard Elliott-Binns, Ward's comment was delivered as a satirical jab at Victorian historians of the new school, writing in the *English Historical Review*. Inspired by the methods of Leopold von Ranke, they had launched a crusade against the more 'enlightening and picturesque' storytelling of the old school, but in doing so, they risked veiling truth with an excessive focus on documentary detail.[9] It is no coincidence, then, that the quotation often resurfaces in discussions on the meaning of history and where the boundaries between historical truth and fiction blur.[10] Such contexts, where mysteries – whether historical or scientific – invite scholars into meticulous detective work, often reveal facts riddled with gaps, leading to multiple interpretations. These controversies seem to invite solutions that lie as much in the realm of fiction as in fact. The age-old debate over Hannibal's crossing of the Alps, for example, has evolved over the years into an enigma of monumental proportions, where the search for truth continues to spark both scholarly investigation and imaginative speculation.

The adventure of Hannibal, as Freshfield remarked in 1914, is destined to remain unsolved 'until a suit of Punic armour or an elephant's skeleton has been brought to light' beneath the tranquil pastures of the High Alps.[11] As one of the foremost scholars on the Carthaginian general, the late John Francis Lazenby, observed in 1998, 'So far no elephant bones have been found on an Alpine pass, with a Punic coin of 218 B.C. conveniently to hand, to prove at long last which pass Hannibal used'.[12] As we patiently await the discovery of compelling artifacts that could finally resolve the mystery, our goal is not to offer an armchair solution to a question that only archaeology and its allied sciences can definitively answer. Instead, we seek to examine how historical truth is constructed through the rhetorical interplay of various disciplines and modes of exposition. In this, we echo Sir Dennis Proctor's approach, who viewed his Hannibal book as 'as much a study of the movement of thought on the subject as a study of the march itself'.[13]

Our focus here is less on the Alpine pass allegedly crossed, which continues indeed, 'as in Juvenal's days, to interest boys and perplex schoolmasters', but more on the 'movement of thought' that this

[3] D. W. Freshfield, *Hannibal Once More* (London, 1914), pp. 97–8.
[4] Freshfield, *Hannibal Once More*, p. 98; see R. Clark, *The Alps* (New York, 1973), p. 88; and P. H. Hansen, *The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering After the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), p. 222.
[5] A. W. Scheflin and J. L. Shapiro, *Trance on Trial* (New York, 1989), p. 227.
[6] *Victorian Prose, 1830–1880*, ed. K. and M. F. Allott (Harmondsworth, 1956), p. 66.
[7] J. C. Austin, *Artemus Ward* (New York, 1964); on visual aids in his performances, see E. Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), pp. 235–6.
[8] M. Twain, *Letters*, ed. L. Salamo and H. E. Smith (6 vols., Berkeley, Calif., 1988), i.
[9] L. E. Elliott-Binns, *The Development of English Theology in the Later Nineteenth Century* (London, 1952), p. 46; further developed in L. E. Elliott-Binns, *English Thought, 1860–1900: the Theological Aspect* (London, 1956), p. 95.
[10] F. M. Szasz, 'The meanings of history', *The Historian*, xxx (1968), 238–43, at p. 241; and C. Alway, *Strange Stories, Amazing Facts: Stories That Are Bizarre, Unusual, Odd, Astonishing, and Often Incredible* (Pleasantville, N.Y., 1976), p. 217.
[11] Freshfield, *Hannibal Once More*, p. 97.
[12] J. F. Lazenby, 'Preface to the paperback edition', in *Hannibal's War: A Military History of the Second Punic War* (1978, repr., Norman, Okla., 1998), p. v.
[13] D. Proctor, *Hannibal's March in History* (Oxford, 1971), p. 2.

fascination has sparked throughout history.[14] As Eve MacDonald has rightly observed, the 'modern and ongoing fascination with Hannibal's journey rests in the disagreement over which route he took', and, as we might add, following Randall Collins, in the prestige that an academic controversy is able to generate when it configures itself as a distinct and enduring 'node of attention'.[15] Countless valleys in the Western Alps take pride in being considered one of the halting places along Hannibal's march. However, it is not Hannibal who bestows this prestige, but rather the ongoing controversy that allows each location to become, even if only briefly, a focal point of historical attention. But when the controversy intensifies, shifting focus from the problem itself to the validity of the methods applied, the question is no longer about the specificity of a historical location – it is about the epistemological reputation of an entire discipline, transcending the boundaries of that site or issue.

Historical enigmas do not merely persist – they generate debate. In some cases, such debates give rise to what Peter Galison describes as a 'trading zone', where interdisciplinary partnerships emerge, blending perspectives and fostering the development of new insights.[16] But in others, especially when marked by intellectual acrimony, the controversy becomes a battleground – a clash of incompatible disciplinary positions, each striving to impose its authority.[17] This has been particularly true in the early stages of the dispute over Hannibal's Alpine crossing, especially among British historians. While the debate has always been European in scope – engaging French, German and Italian scholarship to varying degrees – it was in Britain that it gained particular momentum, spilling beyond the confines of academic history and philology to circulate through learned societies, travel writing, the heritage sector and the social worlds of gentlemen's clubs and amateur enthusiasts. In navigating the maze of scholarly publications, we have focused on instances where the controversy reached its point of highest friction – moments that reveal both the resilience and the vulnerability of competing disciplinary claims.[18]

This article is entirely devoted to the shifting terrain of this epistemic quarrel, tracing how the debate has unfolded over more than two centuries and continues to generate new claims, methods and forms of authority into the present. Grounded in historiographical reception and genre analysis, it explores how this enduring controversy – and the methods used to sustain it – became a site of intellectual friction, disciplinary performance and at times theatrical re-enactment, carrying the debate beyond academic dispute into the realm of public history. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which scholarly inquiry, amateur enthusiasm and popular media overlap and diverge: reviews, re-enactments, travelogues, documentaries and scientific studies are treated not as interchangeable evidence, but as distinct discourses with their own narrative logics and epistemological claims. While this article deliberately retains a narrative arc, this choice is not simply rhetorical but integral to the method by which the material is analysed. Rather than flattening the sources into typologies or abstractions, it proceeds historically, tracing the shifting strategies of authority through which scholars, enthusiasts and scientific practitioners have sought to secure epistemic legitimacy. The result is a layered mapping of how Hannibal's story continues to attract figures both within and beyond the academy, and how disciplinary and generic boundaries are repeatedly challenged and redrawn in the pursuit of historical understanding.

This is, indeed, the story of grown-up 'schoolboys' who turned the delight of solving a historical mystery into an obsession. The authors are not just historians or classicists; they include military officers, clergy members, doctors, lawyers, civil servants and scientists – all equally captivated by the African general and the lure of the mountains. The topic, once entertained only by local antiquarians and erudite librarians, acquired international momentum when Napoleon symbolically restaged the crossing in 1800, transforming the Alps into a 'zone of civilizational prestige' and Hannibal into their chief

[14] Freshfield, *Hannibal Once More*, p. 97.

[15] E. MacDonald, *Hannibal: a Hellenistic Life* (New Haven, Conn., 2015), p. 94; and R. Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: a Global Theory of Intellectual Change* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), p. 15.

[16] P. Galison, *Image and Logic: a Material Culture of Microphysics* (Chicago, 1997), pp. 803–44.

[17] H. Collins, R. Evans and M. Gorman, 'Trading zones and interactional expertise', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, xxxviii (2007), 657–66, at pp. 657–9.

[18] For an overview of the extensive scholarship on the topic, see L. Dalaine, 'Par quel col Hannibal est-il passé? Une littérature sans fin …', in *Hannibal et les Alpes: Une traversée, un mythe*, ed. J.-P. Jospin and L. Dalaine (Gollion, 2011), pp. 127–37; for the myth, see A. Hilali, 'L'épopée d'Hannibal à travers les Alpes', *Cartagine*, iii (2018), 1–12.

'sponsor'.[19] But the real interest in the crossing surged during the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Alps became the favoured playground for British mountaineers eager to undertake daring ascents and intrepid adventures.[20] This was indeed the moment, as Artemus Ward had playfully hinted, when historical investigation shifted its focus to proven documentary facts, relegating fanciful legends to the realm of romance, and geography sought to provide topographic evidence through the direct exploration of historical sites, grounding theories in the physical landscape. It was the moment, also, when controversies between competing disciplines began to arise.

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One author, who never set foot in France or Italy but found in these countries the most suitable atmosphere for staging her suspenseful and sinister stories, is Ann Radcliffe. In a chapter of her acclaimed novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), set against the backdrop of sixteenth-century Europe, Radcliffe brings to life a young woman, Emily, in her enchanting excursions through the Alps. While the 'chairmen' swiftly trotted through the cliffs and precipices of the mountain region, her fears were mingled with 'such various emotions of delight, such admiration, astonishment, and awe, as she had never experienced before'.[21] As the travellers paused at a cliff's edge to rest, two local savants, Montoni and Cavigni, 'renewed a dispute concerning Hannibal's passage over the Alps, Montoni contending that he entered Italy by way of Mount Cenis, and Cavigni, that he passed over Mount St Bernard'.[22] Radcliffe portrays Cavigni and Montoni as men constantly engaged in 'political or military topics', with Montoni's eyes instantly gleaming with fire only 'at the mention of any daring exploit'.[23]

Emily remained oblivious, her thoughts drifting as if caught in a reverie. In her mind, Hannibal evoked a picturesque tableau of 'vast armies winding through treacherous mountain defiles', fires flickering against the night, and the distant gleam of spears and helmets, as if captured in a dramatic battle by Salvator Rosa:

> The subject brought to Emily's imagination the disasters he had suffered in this bold and perilous adventure. She saw his vast armies winding among the defiles, and over the tremendous cliffs of the mountains, which at night were lighted up by his fires, or by the torches which he caused to be carried when he pursued his indefatigable march. In the eye of fancy, she perceived the gleam of arms through the duskiness of night, the glitter of spears and helmets, and the banners floating dimly on the twilight; while now and then the blast of a distant trumpet echoed along the defile, and the signal was answered by a momentary clash of arms. She looked with horror upon the mountaineers, perched on the higher cliffs, assailing the troops below with broken fragments of the mountain; on soldiers and elephants tumbling headlong down the lower precipices; and, as she listened to the rebounding rocks, that followed their fall, the terrors of fancy yielded to those of reality, and she shuddered to behold herself on the dizzy height, whence she had pictured the descent of others.[24]

This is a well-known passage, frequently cited to highlight the differing gendered perspectives on historical landscapes.[25] As Chloe Chard has observed, the Rosaesque quality of this fanciful

[19] J. W. Spaeth, 'Hannibal and Napoleon', *Classical Journal*, xxiv (1929), 291–3; and P. Hicks, 'Napoleon and Hannibal', *Napoleonica*, xxxv (2019), 42–8.

[20] J. Ring, *How the English Made the Alps* (London, 2000); R. J. Ellis, *Vertical Margins: Mountaineering and the Landscapes of Neoimperialism* (Madison, Wis., 2001); P. L. Bayers, *Imperial Ascent: Mountaineering, Masculinity, and Empire* (Boulder, Colo., 2003); A. C. Colley, *Victorians in the Mountains: Sinking the Sublime* (Farnham, 2010); and Hansen, *Summits of Modern Man*.

[21] A. Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho: a Romance* (London, 2001), p. 159.

[22] Radcliffe, *Mysteries of Udolpho*, p. 159. Radcliffe read about the dispute in P.-J. Grosley, *New Observations on Italy and Its Inhabitants*, trans. T. Nugent (1764, repr., 2 vols., London, 1769), i. 37–8; see J. M. S. Tompkins, 'Ramond de Carbonnières, Grosley and Mrs. Radcliffe', *Review of English Studies*, v (1929), 294–301, at p. 295.

[23] Radcliffe, *Mysteries of Udolpho*, p. 164.

[24] Radcliffe, *Mysteries of Udolpho*, pp. 159–60. For the frequent comparison of Alpine scenery to Salvator Rosa's landscapes, see W. Bainbridge, *Topographic Memory and Victorian Travellers in the Dolomite Mountains: Peaks of Venice* (Amsterdam, 2020), pp. 39–43; for his role in shaping Radcliffe's Gothic style, see A. Beville, 'Salvator Rosa and Ann Radcliffe: a study in style', in *Reception Studies and Adaptation: a Focus on Italy*, ed. G. Magazzù, V. Rossi and A. Sileo (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2020), pp. 46–70.

[25] B. Battaglia, 'The "pieces of poetry" in Ann Radcliffe's "The Mysteries of Udolpho"', in *Romantic Women Poets: Genre and Gender*, ed. L. M. Crisafulli and C. Pietropoli (Amsterdam, 2007), pp. 137–51, at pp. 148–9; and J. Uden, *Spectres of Antiquity: Classical Literature and the Gothic, 1740–1830* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 94–6.

re-enactment is well justified by the source Radcliffe employed to paint the vivid contours of Emily's imagination.[26] Writing to William Palgrave in 1765, Thomas Gray noted a list of imaginary paintings that he had compiled during his time in Italy. Among the catalogue of Rosa's works, Gray expressed a wish to see three scenes united in a single picture: 'Hannibal passing the Alps; the mountaineers rolling down rocks upon his army; elephants tumbling down the precipices'.[27] The same scene would later be popularized in an illustration by Heinrich Leutemann for the *Münchener Bilderbogen*, yet it is already effectively mirrored in Emily's vivid description, demonstrating how one act of imagination can inspire another.[28]

Radcliffe's juxtaposition of erudite disputes with fanciful recreations anticipate the re-enactments commonly used in historical documentaries, where actors bring past events to life while scholars provide analysis that frames the dramatizations.[29] It was precisely this blend of romance and erudition that fuelled the enduring fascination of painter and traveller William Brockedon with Hannibal and his legendary Alpine crossing.[30] His initiation into this lifelong study began with a book published in 1820 by 'a member of the University of Oxford', who chose to remain anonymous.[31] The booklet, promisingly titled *A Dissertation on the Passage of Hannibal Over the Alps*, presented a theory credited to Scottish general Robert Melville, who, after returning from a high military command in the East Indies, dedicated himself to the study of Roman military antiquities, spending years travelling through Europe.[32] His extensive research in the Alps led him to favour the Little St. Bernard Pass as the most plausible route for Hannibal's crossing.

Inspired by this reading, Brockedon decided to embrace the challenge and test the theory on the ground. The result of his travels went far beyond the confines of an academic dissertation, culminating in a pioneering two-volume work with detailed *Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps*. This comprehensive guide, furnished with maps and picturesque vignettes penned by the author, served both the occasional savant and the prospective tourist. In this context, Hannibal acted as a compelling hook to engage readers and draw them into an exploration of the Alps over a summer holiday:

> In a work like this, intended to be descriptive rather than historical, it is impossible, from the limit proposed to the text, to enter into a defence of the opinion which the author feels himself entitled to hold, that the passage of Hannibal was by the Little Saint Bernard. He has read every work upon the subject to which he could get access, and traversed the Alps by twenty-four different passes into Italy: these passes include every route by which the various theorists have led the Carthaginian army, and all by which it was possible for that army to have crossed the Alps; and these researches and examinations have induced the conviction, that the Pass of the Little Saint Bernard alone is that by which, according to the account of Polybius, Hannibal led his army into Italy.[33]

In contrast to Radcliffe, who allows Emily to indulge in a fanciful re-enactment of Hannibal's crossing, Brockedon provides the reader with a more grounded opportunity to view the daring pass as it existed in his own time, captured through a picturesque lens. The first vignette in his series on the Little St. Bernard Pass is distinctly Rosaesque, but it is only in the subtitle – *The Route of Hannibal* – that the

[26] C. Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography, 1600–1830* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 193–5.

[27] T. Gray, *The Letters of Thomas Gray*, ed. D. C. Tovey (3 vols., London, 1904–12), iii. 66.

[28] Dalaine, 'Par quel col Hannibal est-il passé ?', p. 130.

[29] J. De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Milton Park, 2009), pp. 109–16; and J. Aaltone and J. Kortti, 'From evidence to re-enactment: history, television and documentary film', *Journal of Media Practice*, xvi (2015), 108–25.

[30] T. S. R. Boase, 'English artists and the Val d'Aosta', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xix (1956), 283–93, at p. 288; M. Tailland, *William Brockedon: Un peintre à travers les Alpes. De Turin à Grenoble par le Col du Montgenèvre: 1824* (L'Argentière-la-Bessée, 2005), pp. 5–8; and P. Piana, C. Watkins and R. Balzaretti, *Rediscovering Lost Landscapes: Topographical Art in North-West Italy, 1800–1920* (Woodbridge, 2021), pp. 75–8.

[31] W. Brockedon, *Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps* (2 vols., London, 1828–9), i. 2.

[32] [H. L. Wickham and J. A. Cramer], *A Dissertation on the Passage of Hannibal Over the Alps* (Oxford, 1820). Melville's thesis remained unpublished but circulated through J.-A. de Luc, *Histoire du passage des Alpes par Annibal* (Geneva, 1818); on Melville, see D. Proctor, 'Hannibal in Edinburgh, 1775', *History Today*, xxii (1972), 439–43.

[33] Brockedon, *Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps*, i. 14.

reader could find an allusion to the African commander.[34] Among Brockedon's readers was Camillo Benso, Count of Cavour – prime minister of the Kingdom of Sardinia and a pivotal figure in the Italian Risorgimento. In one of his early attempts at writing in English, Cavour requested that Brockedon procure the anonymous Oxford dissertation on Hannibal for him. A few years later, in relation to his 1833 work *Excursions in the Alps*, Brockedon revealed to Cavour that his underlying aim was to encourage English tourists to explore the valleys of Piedmont, promoting it as a summer destination preferable to Switzerland. When Cavour visited England in 1835, Brockedon took him to dine at the Royal Geographical Society with John Murray, the publisher of the Handbook for Travellers series.[35]

This episode confirms Brockedon's ambition to elevate the region as a 'zone of civilizational attraction' – with Hannibal as its chief 'sponsor'.[36] His name was etched into the very toponymy, lending authority to tales passed down through generations. Tourists would traverse Pont Charra, entering 'upon the line of the march of Hannibal into Italy'; encounter the Roche Blanche – Polybius' White Rock – where Hannibal was said to have taken a defensive position against local aggressors; rest at a location called the Hospice, purportedly the site of his army's encampment; and pass through the Cirque d'Hannibal, where the Carthaginian commander was believed to have held a council of war.[37] Artists began flocking to the area, and historians, including distinguished continental scholars, increasingly concurred that the Pass of the Little St. Bernard was indeed Hannibal country. Even the authors of the 1820 Oxford *Dissertation* emerged from anonymity to publish a second edition in 1828, as Hannibal's route became the subject of lively conversations in gentlemen's clubs and the parlours of learned societies.[38]

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One of the circles where the topic was most fervently debated was the Alpine Club in London. The pursuit of tracing the routes followed by soldiers and explorers became a favourite pastime for its members, who viewed the Alps as Europe's 'playground'.[39] The typical clubman was young, usually of the middle class, accustomed to moving swiftly 'from peak to peak, from group to group, and even from one end of the Alps to the other during a short summer holiday'.[40] His chief motives were exercise in the freshest air, a dash of adventure and a love of nature, deeply felt even if not always expressed. For these young male enthusiasts, Hannibal served as the chief sponsor for ennobling their adventures, especially around the time when the tragedy on the Matterhorn in 1865 had provoked sharp criticism within British society.[41] Figures like John Ruskin notably condemned the intrepid but reckless practice of conquering peaks, accusing mountaineers of compromising the sacred dimension of mountains.[42]

The primary motivation of these holidaying historians was to challenge the opinion of distinguished academics who, based solely on studies conducted through books and maps, defended the Little St. Bernard Pass as the most likely route for Hannibal's Alpine crossing. The readings of Polybius and Livy had led Barthold Georg Niebuhr in 1828 to consider that pass as the only possible route, finding authoritative confirmation in Theodor Mommsen's *magnum opus*, *Römische Geschichte*, whose part on the Republic was published in 1854–6. Despite their distinction, Niebuhr and Mommsen based their findings on the work of lesser-known historians. Niebuhr cited the 'unbestreitbaren Erörterungen' (indisputable examinations) by Swiss geologist Jean-André de Luc, published in 1818, which were in

[34] Brockedon, *Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps*, i. 17.
[35] Boase, 'English artists and the Val d'Aosta', p. 288.
[36] R. Collins, 'Civilizations as zones of prestige and social contact', *International Sociology*, xvi (2001), 421–37, at p. 421; for the notion of 'sponsor' in heritage landscapes, see W. Bainbridge, 'Titian country: Josiah Gilbert (1814–1893) and the Dolomite Mountains', *Journal of Historical Geography*, lvi (2017), 22–42, at p. 28.
[37] Brockedon, *Illustrations of the Passes of the Alps*, i. 2–8.
[38] H. L. Wickham and J. A. Cramer, *A Dissertation on the Passage of Hannibal Over the Alps* (2nd edn., London, 1828); they considered De Luc, *Histoire du passage des Alpes par Annibal*, and J.-L. Larauza, *Histoire critique du passage des Alpes par Annibal* (Paris, 1826).
[39] L. Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (London, 1871).
[40] D. W. Freshfield, *Italian Alps* (London, 1875), pp. 182–3.
[41] W. M. Conway, *The Alps* (London, 1904), p. 225: 'To mention the historic passes is to call up the name of Hannibal'; see H. E. L. Porter, 'After the Matterhorn', *Alpine Journal*, lxii (1957), 39–51; and R. Messner, *Fall of Heaven: Whymper's Tragic Matterhorn Climb*, trans. B. Bierling (Seattle, 2017). The expedition in 1865 resulted in four of the seven climbers falling to their death on the descent.
[42] K. A. Morrison, 'Embodiment and modernity: Ruskin, Stephen, Merleau-Ponty, and the Alps', *Comparative Literature Studies*, xlvi (2009), 498–511; and E. Sdegno, 'The Alps', in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, ed. F. O'Gorman (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 32–48.

fact based on the unpublished discoveries of General Melville.[43] Mommsen supported his claims on the authority of the anonymous Oxford *Dissertation* published in 1820 by Rev. John Anthony Cramer, born in Switzerland and then tutor and rhetoric reader at Christ Church, Oxford, and his cousin Henry Lewis Wickham, who was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1817.[44]

Between 1854 and 1856 a dispute erupted between Rev. Robert Ellis, a fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, and William John Law, a barrister who graduated from Christ Church.[45] Ellis had conducted thorough investigations during his excursions in the Alps in July 1852 and in April and May 1853. Departing from Melville's theory, Ellis proposed the Pass of the Little Mont Cenis as the site of Hannibal's crossing. His proposal was based on ten major and ten minor conditions deduced from Polybius, which he argued the pass ought to satisfy. These conditions could be summarized into two key criteria: the area of the pass should be ample enough to allow Hannibal to camp his army, and the summit should offer a commanding view of the Po Valley.[46] Law sharply contrasted this theory, claiming that Ellis misinterpreted Polybius' writing style and drew faulty conclusions, taking words out of context and altering the meaning of the Greek. The lawyer supported his argument with an excellent knowledge of ancient languages, resorting to the authorities of Niebuhr and De Luc to ultimately confirm the thesis of General Melville.[47]

The dispute underscored the tension between topographic and philological methods in historical research. Ellis's approach involved formulating the most plausible course of events through direct observation and then comparing the resulting hypothesis with historical accounts to assess their alignment with what seemed most probable. His inductive method selectively interpreted and possibly distorted the sources to fit field analysis but proved useful in dealing with historical events with limited and sometimes conflicting evidence. Law, on the other hand, relied mostly on Polybius' account, disregarding geographical feasibility, and used observation only to reject interpretations that were clearly impossible. This deductive approach led him to overestimate the certainty and detail of the sources. The debate between Ellis and Law revealed, with textbook-like efficacy, the shortcomings of both methods. Ellis's topographic theory started with geographical feasibility and interpreted sources to support it. Law's philological critique strictly adhered to textual evidence, sometimes at the expense of geographical practicality.

The official position of the Alpine Club was articulated in the first volume of John Ball's authoritative *Alpine Guide*, published in 1863.[48] The section on Hannibal's crossing was entrusted to Rev. Thomas George Bonney, then junior dean at St. John's College, Cambridge.[49] For the occasion, Bonney compiled a succinct and balanced report on the controversy between Ellis and Law, ultimately siding with his Cambridge colleague.[50] The reasons for his choice are tersely revealed in a lengthy review written in 1867 upon the publication of Law's definitive two-volume work on the subject and the Ellis's reiterated response against his 'old antagonist'.[51] The anonymous reviewer candidly points out that, despite its scholarly rigour, Law's theory is impractical for holidaying mountaineers: 'Polybius did not write a guide-book', and adhering strictly to his authority, as the Oxford lawyer does, leads nowhere. Law 'gives

[43] B. G. Niebuhr, *Vorträge über alte Länder- und Völkerkunde an der Universität zu Bonn gehalten*, ed. M. Isler (Berlin, 1851), p. 336.

[44] T. Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte* (3 vols., Leipzig, 1854–6), i. 210, 404.

[45] G. Goodwin and R. Smail, 'Ellis, Robert (1819/20–1885), classical scholar', *O.D.N.B.* <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8708> [accessed 31 July 2025]; and G. Boase and E. Metcalfe, 'Law, William John (1786–1869), judge', *O.D.N.B.* <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-16155> [accessed 31 July 2025].

[46] R. Ellis, *A Treatise on Hannibal's Passage of the Alps, in Which His Route Is Traced Over the Little Mont Cenis* (Cambridge, 1853), p. 54.

[47] W. J. Law, *A Criticism of Mr Ellis's New Theory Concerning the Route of Hannibal, With Some Remarks on the Hypothesis of M. Replat* (London, 1855), p. vi; and J. Replat, *Note sur le passage d'Annibal* (Chambéry, 1851). See also R. Ellis, 'Observations on Mr Law's "Criticism of Mr Ellis's new theory concerning the route of Hannibal"', *Journal of Classical and Sacred Philology*, ii (1855), 308–29; and W. J. Law, *Reply to Mr Ellis's Defence of His Theory in the Journal of Classical and Sacred Philology* (London, 1856).

[48] J. Ball, *A Guide to the Western Alps* (London, 1863).

[49] Ball, *Guide to the Western Alps*, p. 54: 'The editor is much indebted to the Rev. T. G. Bonney, of St John's College, Cambridge, for the following summary of the arguments which seem to establish this as Hannibal's Route, deduced from the writings of the Rev. Robert Ellis, of the same university'; on Bonney, see D. Oldroyd, 'Bonney, Thomas George (1833–1923), geologist', *O.D.N.B.* <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-31962> [accessed 31 July 2025].

[50] Ball, *Guide to the Western Alps*, pp. 54–6.

[51] W. J. Law, *The Alps of Hannibal* (2 vols., London, 1866); and R. Ellis, *An Enquiry Into the Ancient Routes Between Italy and Gaul, With an Examination of the Theory of Hannibal's Passage of the Alps by the Little St Bernard* (Cambridge, 1867).

scarcely a single name … and very few geographical details', making it impossible to retrace the old route by following his footsteps; his dissertation is more about 'Hannibal's passage on the brain' than on the Alps, 'as the disease may be styled'.[52]

George's review openly promotes an imaginative 'cult geography' as opposed to a scholarly or historical one.[53] If mountaineers, in the course of a short holiday in the Alps, wanted to see the Po Valley as the backdrop where Hannibal cheered his men from the top of a daring pass, as Polybius describes, the Little St. Bernard was unhelpful. Law was forced to explain that speech as a rhetorical gesture, arguing that Italy would have still lain at their feet even from that pass. Ellis, instead, takes Hannibal up a peak very near the Little Mont Cenis to make that gesture truly meaningful. What matters here is not so much historical accuracy as the topographic resemblance that provides a visual reflection of Polybius' description during one of the narrative's most dramatic moments. The geography of the Little St. Bernard appeared to dull that moment, making it blunt and uninspiring. In contrast, the Little Mont Cenis, though requiring a slight detour, promised to enhance the spectacle, bringing the dramatic scene to life for those who visit.

At this point, the reviewer indulged in a 'manipulation of times and distances', suggesting a 'theory less exacting than Mr Ellis's' but capable of taking 'Hannibal into Italy by a pass higher and more creditable to his mountaineering genius than any yet proposed, selecting for that purpose the Col du Géant', the main passage over Mont Blanc between Courmayeur and Chamonix.[54] The superb view over Italy from there would do justice to the difficult interpretation of the ἐνάργεια τῆς Ἰταλίας (Plb. III 54, 2 'the vividness of Italy') concept that both Ellis and Law discussed at length, 'for no one who has stood upon the Col du Géant on a clear day will doubt the propriety of saying that from thence Hannibal might have pointed out to his soldiers a superb view over Italy'.[55] There is both irony and bluntness in this rather absurd provocation. But in its playful erudition, the passage encapsulates the very essence of that 'aesthetics of evidence', embedded in a vividness of description, that mountaineers sought to bring to life while exploring the Alps, through the lens of classical literature, in the course of a short summer holiday.[56]

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That this suggestion, however, was not just a provocation but a wishful belief emerges from a contribution to the same journal by Douglas Freshfield. In his article 'The pass of Hannibal', which marked the first of a series of carefully considered interventions on the subject, Freshfield dismissed the Mont Blanc proposed by 'a matter-of-fact friend … who maintains to this day that the Col du Géant is the only pass that satisfies the requirements of the story'.[57] The context makes the reference to the 1867 review even more evident, as it re-enacts the opposition between a 'pedantic spirit of literal accuracy' and the allure of the 'picturesque incidents interwoven with the narrative' of the quarrel between Law and Ellis.[58] While not ready to dismiss the picturesque entirely, Freshfield felt compelled to acknowledge the need for accuracy. As someone who served as the editor of the *Alpine Journal* from 1872 to 1880 and as secretary of the Royal Geographical Society from 1881, Freshfield understood that an overemphasis on the picturesque for tourist purposes could undermine the reputation of British mountaineering.

Perhaps that reputation was already compromised. What had driven Freshfield to reopen the sprawling Hannibal file was the steadfast reluctance of the most esteemed historians and classicists in Britain and elsewhere to embrace the theories endorsed by the members of the Alpine Club. This time, the occasion arose from Reginald Bosworth Smith's 'interesting book about Carthage', in which the respected Oxford historian accepted, with only cursory deliberation, the thesis of the Little St. Bernard over that of Mont

[52] [H. B. George], 'Hannibal's passage of the Alps', *Alpine Journal*, iii (1867), 193–6, at pp. 193–4; the identity of the reviewer is revealed in D. W. Freshfield, 'The pass of Hannibal', *Alpine Journal*, xi (1883), 266–300, at p. 286.
[53] For the notion of 'cult geography', see M. Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London, 2002), pp. 144–57.
[54] [George], 'Hannibal's passage of the Alps', p. 196.
[55] [George], 'Hannibal's passage of the Alps', p. 196.
[56] H. F. Plett, *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age: the Aesthetics of Evidence* (Leiden, 2012).
[57] Freshfield, 'Pass of Hannibal', p. 270.
[58] Freshfield, 'Pass of Hannibal', p. 270.

Cenis.[59] His *Carthage and Carthaginians*, which compiled seven lectures delivered before the Royal Institution in London, only tangentially addressed the topic. As the author warned in his preface, he purposely 'avoided all prolonged discussion of disputed points, such, for instance, as the route of Hannibal over the Alps' and 'waded through what is, in fact, a literature in itself, a very sea of treatises and rejoinders, of observations and counter-observations' to offer the most credited solution.[60]

This stance, however, opposed not only some of the most esteemed mountaineers of the Alpine Club, such as the aforementioned 'Mr Ball and Professor Bonney', but also respected associates of the Royal Geographical Society.[61] In 1880 the Cambridge classicist and numismatic historian Edward Herbert Bunbury was awarded a medal by the society for his groundbreaking work on Greek and Roman geography.[62] In his *A History of Ancient Geography*, Bunbury reviewed the Ellis-Law debate and sided with Ellis.[63] The validity of the Little Mont Cenis over the Little St. Bernard aligned with the weighty opinion of Friedrich August Ukert, a member of the Geographisches Institut in Weimar, who had advocated for Mont Cenis as early as 1832.[64] Thus, a geographical thread of authority, equally prestigious on the international stage, was mobilized against a historical one, whose most brilliant strand was Theodor Mommsen: 'The partisans of the Little St Bernard in this country had of late years, partly no doubt borne up by the influence of Mommsen, begun to speak and write as if the question had been finally decided in their favour'.[65]

The reasoning that led Freshfield to propose the Col de l'Argentière (now Col de Larche, in French, or Colle della Maddalena, in Italian) as yet another route for Hannibal's crossing is less pertinent here. What matters is the resilience of the Little St. Bernard theory, which began to be perceived as a bastion of historical authority over geographical interpretations. To challenge this stronghold, one needed a diverse set of skills, including proficiency in Greek and Latin, familiarity with a growing body of literature in foreign languages, and first-hand experience of the Western Alps gained through numerous expeditions. Freshfield added to the mix also 'historical imagination', as a quality essential for enabling the investigator to think like an ancient author and walk like an ancient soldier.[66] That bastion, as it turned out, was ultimately conquered by French military officers. In the same year that saw the publication of Freshfield's article in the *Alpine Journal*, retired artillery colonel Jean-Baptiste Perrin presented a compelling case for the Mont Cenis, ultimately challenging the dominance of the Little St. Bernard Pass.

Originally published in 1883 in only twenty-five copies to satisfy the whims of his fellow comrades ('compagnons d'armes'), Perrin's book was not fully accessible to British readers until 1887.[67] Curiosity, however, had already spread to London as early as 1884 through a thoughtful article by Hermann Schiller. In considering recent theories about Hannibal's Alpine crossing, Schiller reviewed, among others, the works of Perrin and Freshfield, acknowledging their merits in discarding the Little St Bernard route.[68] Here and in a subsequent publication, he portrayed the French colonel as possessing unsurpassed expertise on the area, as a military man who 'knows the mountains like few others', having directed fortification and artillery work in the High Alps and examined all relevant passes from military, geological and geographical standpoints.[69] The main difference from what was defended by members

[59] Freshfield, 'Pass of Hannibal', pp. 267–8.
[60] R. Bosworth Smith, *Carthage and Carthaginians* (London, 1878), p. xii.
[61] Freshfield, 'Pass of Hannibal', p. 268.
[62] R. J. A. Talbert, 'Bunbury, Sir Edward Herbert, ninth baronet (1811–1895), classical scholar and author', *O.D.N.B.* <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-45514> [accessed 31 July 2025].
[63] E. H. Bunbury, *A History of Ancient Geography Among the Greeks and Romans From the Earliest Ages Till the Fall of the Roman Empire* (2 vols., London, 1879), ii. 37.
[64] F. A. Ukert, *Geographie der Griechen und Römer von den frühesten Zeiten bis auf Ptolemäus* (6 vols., Berlin, 1816–46), iii. 113, 561–606, with comprehensive bibliography, was sharply criticized from a philological perspective in [C. Thirlwall], 'Hannibal's passage over the Alps', *Philological Museum*, ii (1833), 671–86, whose authorship is revealed in Law, *Alps of Hannibal*, i. 24, who used it to discredit Ellis's Mont Cenis; the pass was then endorsed in H. Nissen, *Italische Landeskunde* (2 vols., Berlin, 1883–1902), i. 158.
[65] Freshfield, 'Pass of Hannibal', p. 268.
[66] Freshfield, 'Pass of Hannibal', p. 269.
[67] J.-B. Perrin, *Marche d'Annibal des Pyrénées au Pô* (2nd edn., Paris, 1887), p. i.
[68] H. Schiller, 'Über den Stand der Frage, welchen Alpenpass Hannibal benutzt hat', *Berliner Philologische Wochenschrift*, iv (1884), 705–9, 737–40, 769–73; and D. W. Freshfield, 'Douglas W. Freshfield und Herman [*sic*] Schiller', *Berliner Philologische Wochenschrift*, iv (1884), 'Beilage', n.p.
[69] Schiller, 'Über den Stand der Frage', p. 740: 'Der Verf[asser] hat vor den meisten anderen Forschern zwei Dinge voraus: er ist Militär und kennt die Berge, wie kaum ein anderer; denn er hat die fortifikatorisch-artilleristischen Arbeiten im Jura und in den Hochalpen geleitet und alle Punkte, die in Betracht kommen können, vom militärischen, geologischen und geographischen Standpunkte aus untersucht'.

of the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society was a slight deviation from the river Arc, favouring the passage through the Col de Clapier over the one through the Little Mont Cenis.

Members of the Alpine Club prided themselves on their unrivalled 'local and historical knowledge' of the Western Alps, but they could not claim equal experience in leading an army over those passes.[70] Perrin had a strong advantage in emphasizing this point. The vast majority of those who had written about Hannibal's crossing, he wryly observed, 'had never travelled these mountains, except on maps spread out on their study table', and those who did travel them 'were ignorant of the first principles of the march of an army, of its needs, and of what can be expected of it in the most exceptional circumstances'.[71] Freshfield must have felt personally piqued but allowed his comment to be conveyed through William Arnold's annotated edition of his grandfather's *History of Rome*: 'Mr Freshfield, who has the advantage of being the latest to review the entire question in light of his predecessors' labours and of his own personal experience – for I do not regard Colonel Perrin, with his Col du Clapier, as a serious rival – at present holds possession of the field'.[72]

That possession, however, did not last long.[73] The advantage of the Little Mont Cenis over the Little St. Bernard lay in its alleged alignment with the view over the Po Valley, as described in ancient sources. However, as Bonney had already noted, reaching that view required a detour off the main road toward a neighbouring summit.[74] Freshfield, like Law before him, dismissed this description as a dramatic embellishment. Yet, the Col de Clapier not only offered that view but also provided a plateau where Hannibal could have camped his army. Perrin's solution was endorsed by captain Jean Colin and later by general Paul Azan, gaining widespread approval.[75] Freshfield sardonically remarked that it was left to 'some French officers to put a literal interpretation on the classical texts, to push it to its logical consequence, and to have the good fortune to convert' even the most expert mountaineers, such as Henri Ferrand, president of the Société des Touristes du Dauphiné in Grenoble and honorary member of the Alpine Club in London, who, in 1908, after a careful survey of the area, announced his 'conversion to the Clapier'.[76] In Britain, this view was embraced by the 'distinguished military critic' Spenser Wilkinson.[77]

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Freshfield was a lawyer, as Law and Wickham before him, and another lawyer – indeed, a very distinguished one – was John Westlake, who entered the debate in 1899, presenting the topic of Hannibal's crossing the Alps as a subject bearing particular attraction to a 'lawyer's fondness for weighing evidence'.[78] In fact, as early as 1883 Freshfield himself had described such a quandary as particularly well suited to legal minds, likening the process to that of a juror who is 'ever ready at the judge's request to dismiss from his mind the comments that may have come before him in the public press', focusing instead solely on the evidence at hand.[79] Westlake, however, turned out to be the only one in Britain who publicly endorsed the Col d'Argentière, and when that pass faced criticism even among members

[70] D. W. Freshfield, 'Hannibal's pass', *Geographical Journal*, xiii (1899), 547–51, at p. 547, as a reply to his Alpine Club colleague W. A. B. Coolidge ('Hannibal's pass', *Geographical Journal*, xiii (1899), 448–9), who then replied to him in W. A. B. Coolidge, 'Hannibal's pass once more', *Geographical Journal*, xiii (1899), 669–73.

[71] Perrin, *Marche d'Annibal*, p. 73 (our translation).

[72] T. Arnold, *The Second Punic War: Being Chapters of the History of Rome by the Late Thomas Arnold*, ed. W. T. Arnold (London, 1886), p. 373; for William Arnold's limited success in updating his grandfather's providentialist historiography in light of Mommsen's empirical approach, see L. Dowling, 'Roman decadence and Victorian historiography', *Victorian Studies*, xxviii (1985), 579–607, at pp. 579–80.

[73] Already in his first article on the crossing, Freshfield conceded the isolation of his proposal for the Col de l'Argentière, describing it as 'a choice which leaves me solitary, or nearly so, among the great army of critics who have addressed themselves to this question' (see Freshfield, 'Pass of Hannibal', p. 286).

[74] Ball, *Guide to the Western Alps*, p. 55. Locating that viewpoint proved difficult, as noted in S. Wilkinson, *Hannibal's March Through the Alps* (Oxford, 1911), p. 8: 'My own observation and that of my companions has failed to find a point on or near the Mont Cenis route from which the plain of Italy can be seen'.

[75] P. Azan, *Annibal dans les Alpes* (Oran, 1902), pp. 93–9, with a comprehensive bibliography of previous studies at pp. 141–55; and J. Colin, *Annibal en Gaule* (Paris, 1904), p. xvi; see also E. Hesselmeyer, *Hannibals Alpenübergang im Lichte der neueren Kriegsgeschichte* (Tübingen, 1906).

[76] Freshfield, *Hannibal Once More*, p. 41; see H. Ferrand, 'L'hypothèse du Clapier (Extrait de lettres)', *Revue des études anciennes*, ix (1907), 43–5; and H. Ferrand, 'Une conversion au Clapier', *Revue des études anciennes*, x (1908), 79–84.

[77] Freshfield, *Hannibal Once More*, p. 41; and Wilkinson, *Hannibal's March Through the Alps*, p. 8.

[78] J. Westlake, 'Hannibal's pass: some points on the classical authorities', *Geographical Journal*, xiii (1899), 310–12, at p. 310.

[79] Freshfield, 'Pass of Hannibal', p. 269.

of the Alpine Club, Freshfield felt compelled to restate his position 'once more' in the form of a book in 1914. *Hannibal Once More* is not merely a compilation of previously published material but also a meticulous review – reminiscent of a legal argument – of recent interpretations.[80]

In his passionate exercise, Freshfield did not hesitate to draw upon medieval and early modern sources, adding further layers to his argument. The reader was now taken on a journey from peak to peak, valley to valley, and library to library, as if navigating a legal brief rather than a historical narrative. Freshfield meticulously assembled his arguments with the precision of a defence attorney, selectively referencing classical texts and modern sources alike, to build a case for his preferred route of Hannibal's crossing, embodying a kind of forensic antiquarianism that aimed to discredit competing theories rather than simply confute them. The nervousness of the tone suggests someone who felt attacked not just on a personal level but as a representative of esteemed institutions like the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society. This defensive posture, imbued with the weight of these prestigious affiliations, almost served as a warning to those who might dare to challenge his conclusions or venture into this contentious historical arena without the same level of meticulous preparation and authority.

A few years later, that same legalistic atmosphere was humorously critiqued in a little but unexpectedly popular book, *Small Talk at Wreyland*, by Cecil Torr. The volume, intended to rekindle the charm of 'table talk' literature, where topics of general interest were explored with wit and ease, revisited the old dispute as a nostalgic recollection of a spirited 1869 conversation: 'Junius was talked out: Tichborne and Dreyfus were yet to come; and Hannibal filled the gap'.[81] The debate was thus sardonically elevated to the level of weighty legal disputes like the Junius, Tichborne and Dreyfus affairs, highlighting how the discussion of Hannibal's route had transformed into a courtroom drama – complete with experts playing the roles of both prosecutors and defenders, each intent on securing a victory in this intellectual trial.[82] The satire was subtle, yet pointed. By listing all the relevant passes by name, Torr implicitly took aim at their ardent supporters: 'I used to hear them at home as well as there; and they all had their pet routes for Hannibal – Col d'Argentière, Montgenèvre, Mont Cenis, Little Mont Cenis, Little St Bernard and Great St Bernard, and even Simplon and St Gothard'.[83]

Torr's piquant table talk was laced with wit: 'In 1871 I went looking for traces of the vinegar on the Grand St Bernard', a playful nod to Livy's famously contested passage.[84] His quip cleverly poked fun at the lengths some might go to verify a legendary anecdote, such as the one of Hannibal using vinegar to crack heated rocks during his Alpine crossing.[85] In this recollection, we catch a glimpse of a young Torr, eager to impress his father, who staunchly defended the Mont Cenis as the only pass from which Hannibal could have looked down upon the plains of Italy. True to the spirit of the genre, Torr indulged in a touch of erudition, crafting a learned analogy to gently undercut the entire Hannibal controversy: 'I think he may have shown his men their line of march upon a map, just as Anaxagoras used a map to show the Spartans their line of march 282 years earlier'.[86] This venial typo – 'Anaxagoras' for 'Aristagoras', as Herodotus's tale goes – became the hook that brought him cutting 'letters from Members of the Alpine Club and from a former President'.[87] The real reason for their reaction was not the slip of the pen, of course, but rather Torr's satirical jab at Freshfield and his colleagues.

In the second and equally successful series of his *Small Talk at Wreyland*, Torr seized the occasion to transform that slip of the pen into a topic in its own right. Towards the end of the book, which unfolds as a long, unbroken chat with the reader, Torr delved into the nature of such errors, starting with personal anecdotes about his family's correspondence and the casual mishandling of important documents. He

[80] Freshfield, *Hannibal Once More*.
[81] C. Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland* (Cambridge, 1918), p. 75; for the 'unexpected success' of the booklet, see D. McKitterick, *A History of Cambridge University Press* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1992–2004), iii. 260.
[82] For details on these famous affairs, providing 'table talk for everyone', see A. Thompson Denning, *Landmarks in the Law* (London, 1984), pp. 284–97 (on Junius); A. Thompson Denning, *Leaves From My Library: an English Anthology* (London, 1986), pp. 158–75 (on Tichborne); and G. R. Whyte, *The Dreyfus Affair: a Chronological History* (Houndmills, 2005).
[83] Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland* (1918), p. 75.
[84] Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland* (1918), pp. 75–6.
[85] For an overview on the debate, fervently discussed in the nineteenth century, see R. Halleux, 'Sur le prétendu vinaigre employé par Hannibal dans les Alpes', *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, cli (2007), 529–34.
[86] Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland* (1918), p. 76.
[87] C. Torr, *Hannibal Crosses the Alps* (Cambridge, 1924), pp. v–vii.

then broadened the discussion to encompass historical missteps, from Greek inscriptions to Egyptian hieroglyphs, and then, in a moment of candid self-reflection, he acknowledged his own error in writing 'Anaxagoras' instead of 'Aristagoras' in his previous work, pondering how, in the process of writing and proofreading, the mind often sees what it expects rather than what is actually there.[88] Suddenly, this introspective attitude was deftly turned toward his detractors from the Alpine Club, who relied on misguided emendations to support their theories about Hannibal's route:

> Such emendations are deceitful things. In this case they make Livy say the Isère, and make Polybios say it also, iii. 49, though he says something else; and then Members of the Alpine Club saying that the river must have been the Isère, since Livy and Polybios agree in saying that it was. Other folk may say it does not matter what the river was; but that is a reason for leaving the whole thing alone, not for getting it wrong. If you take it up at all, you should not risk the sort of snubbing that Westbury gave the herald after cross-examination – 'Go away, you silly man: you don't even understand your own silly science'.[89]

With his characteristic wit, Torr suggested that even his critics had fallen victim to seeing what they wished to see in the ancient texts, rather than engaging with the actual content of the sources – a scholarly folly not unlike his own, but with far more serious implications. The reference to Richard Bethell, Baron Westbury, renowned for his biting sarcasm and incisive debating style at the bar, further sharpened Torr's attack on Freshfield, the lawyer and former president of the Alpine Club.[90]

But far more intriguing is the paragraph that follows, where Torr invites his readers to ponder two types of authors in what initially seems like a casual table talk. The first type of author, much like a lawyer in court, produces an overly detailed but unfocused narrative, yet is praised by the reviewer for his apparent wealth of learning:

> An author collects materials till he is bewildered – 'cannot see the wood for the trees' – and he makes a bulky book, putting all this material in, but doing nothing to clear the subject up. And the reviewer will praise him for his wealth of learning, and will say he has done all that is humanly possible towards the solution of a problem that really is insoluble.[91]

The second type of author offers clarity and precision but is unfairly dismissed by the same reviewer as superficial:

> Another author sifts the materials and solves the problem. He makes a much smaller book, putting in nothing that is not essential, and stating his conclusions so effectively that they command assent. And the reviewer will dismiss it as a book of platitudes, which tells you nothing that is not obvious to the meanest comprehension.[92]

The placement of this comparison, immediately following Torr's critique of the Alpine Club members who favoured the Isère route, subtly exposes his sharp criticism of Freshfield's legalistic approach in his book on Hannibal: 'Gifts that help an advocate may be a hindrance to an author'.[93] Of course, he added, these 'are extreme cases; but the reviewer often fails to see that mere pomposity is not a guarantee of solid learning, and that frivolity need not mean shallowness'.[94]

Three years later, Torr published his own book on Hannibal, adhering to the concise style of the latter type. Spanning just forty pages, it is neatly divided into seventy-two numbered sections, each addressing issues drawn from classical sources and compared with the geography of the region – modern

[88] C. Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland: Second Series* (Cambridge, 1921), p. 102.
[89] Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland* (1921), p. 104.
[90] J. B. Atlay, *The Victorian Chancellors* (2 vols., London, 1906–8), ii. 219–37.
[91] Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland* (1921), p. 105.
[92] Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland* (1921), p. 105.
[93] Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland* (1921), p. 105.
[94] Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland* (1921), p. 105.

contributions are notably absent. The book was a response to the 'letters from Members of the Alpine Club and from a former President who is a champion of the Isère route', so it was no surprise that his first reviewer was none other than Douglas Freshfield.[95] In it, the former president of the Alpine Club saw his favoured Col d'Argentière challenged by yet another proposed route – this time through the Col de la Traversette, over the Mont Viso. Torr's repeated references to this pass not so much as an alternative to the Col de Clapier, but specifically in relation to the Col d'Argentière, make it clear that his true target was Freshfield, even though his name is never mentioned in the book.

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Freshfield fell into the very trap Torr described as characteristic of the first type of author, unable to resist the temptation to insert references where Torr had deliberately avoided them. His review informs the reader that the Col de la Traversette had been previously mentioned by the Henri de Saint Simon, Luigi Vaccarone, Henry Lawes Long and an anonymous 'member of the University of Cambridge'.[96] However, he neglects to mention that he himself had previously dismissed this view as unworthy of serious consideration in an earlier article.[97] While the review acknowledged Torr's classical expertise, it ultimately revealed the true motive behind the book – to discredit what he perceived as the unwarranted intrusion into a specialized field of inquiry:

> Mr Torr, as we have seen, resents the intrusion of members of the Alpine Club into the discussion of this famous historical episode. It is of course true that the large majority of his predecessors in the argument have been scholars or bookmen: writers industrious in collecting all the references to it in classical literature, ardent in investigating every statement of classical geographers that has any bearing on it, experts in elaborately computing distances, or arguing over doubtful renderings of local names in the corrupt texts of Polybius and Livy. Yet these may not be the only qualifications needed for the discussion of Hannibal's Passage of the Alps. There should be room for writers with a personal knowledge of the Western Alps and an accurate appreciation of their physical features and climate. For in the endeavour to determine the route of the Carthaginian host it is essential to take into account matters that must have weighed on the decisions of any competent leader of an army. Among these the relative heights and difficulty of the passes available, the character of the river-crossings, and the natural resources of the districts to be traversed must have held a prominent place.[98]

Setting expert tensions aside, the thorniest issue at the heart of the dispute resurfaced with the question of the view over the plains of Italy that, according to the sources, Hannibal is said to have shown his troops from the summit of the Alpine pass at which he camped his army. This detail, often regarded as a cornerstone in identifying the correct route, had already sparked comparisons between historical analysis and the more tourist-oriented perspective noted in the earlier controversy between Ellis and Law.

Freshfield remained sceptical, cautioning against a literal interpretation of Hannibal's supposed oration. He suggested that Hannibal, 'being more like Napoleon than Bädeker', would have appealed to his soldiers' imaginations rather than providing them with a sweeping panorama.[99] Indeed, this was the weakest point of Freshfield's argument, and Torr seized the opportunity to sharpen his response:

[95] Torr, *Hannibal Crosses the Alps*, p. vii; and D. W. Freshfield, 'More talk about Hannibal', review of *Hannibal Crosses the Alps*, by C. Torr, *Geographical Journal*, lxiv (1924), 241–5.

[96] Freshfield, 'More talk about Hannibal', p. 241. The precedents of Torr, however, indicated the Mont Viso generically, without naming the pass; see M. H. de Saint-Simon, *Histoire de la guerre des Alpes ou campagne de 1744* (Amsterdam, 1770); L. Vaccarone, *Le Pertuis du Viso. Étude historique d'après des documents inédits conservés aux archives nationales de Turin* (Turin, 1881); and H. L. Long, *The March of Hannibal From the Rhone to the Alps* (London, 1831).

[97] D. W. Freshfield, 'Vaccarone's tunnel of Monte Viso', *The Academy*, xxii (1882), 4–5.

[98] Freshfield, 'More talk about Hannibal', p. 244.

[99] Freshfield, 'More talk about Hannibal', p. 242.

> If Polybius was capable of saying there was a great view where there was no view, he was capable of saying anything; and his evidence would not be worth discussing. But if his evidence is admitted, we have to choose between his statement that Hannibal crossed a pass commanding a wide view of Italy, and Mr Freshfield's statement that Hannibal crossed the Argentière, which commands no view at all.[100]

Torr's sarcasm is here skilfully woven into the pointed comparison he draws between Polybius and Freshfield, leaving the reader to discern the contrast with a wry smile. In his rebuttal, the then vice-president of the Royal Geographical Society conceded the fundamental divergence of their respective approaches to ancient sources and leaned on the review of Torr's book that had appeared in the *Alpine Journal* for support.[101] Shielded by the veil of anonymity, that review contrasted Torr's position far more sharply than Freshfield had dared in the *Geographical Journal*, and detailed an inspection of the Col de la Traversette, commissioned from Henri Ferrand of the Grenoble bar, who provided a photograph of the steep and rough promontory from which Hannibal was said to have delivered his speech, rendering Torr's claim implausible.[102]

In addition to the *Alpine Journal* and the *Geographical Journal*, the *Journal of Roman Studies* also joined the fray, this time featuring an attack from the pen of another expert in the field, the military historian Spenser Wilkinson.[103] Torr replied in the second edition of his book, slightly expanded to include a 'counterblast against critics'. The sharpest 'blast' was reserved for his concluding remarks, where he aimed to discredit not only the reviewers but also the distinguished institutions represented by their journals:

> I certainly should not say 'silly' in speaking of these critics. I should require a much stronger term to characterise their incompetence and their effrontery. It is astonishing that journals of repute should get reviewing done by people of that kind. But editors are usually good judges of what their readers want. *The Geographical Journal* is for the Royal Geographical Society, the *Alpine Journal* for the Alpine Club, and the *Journal of Roman Studies* for the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies; and I suppose the editors of those journals know what kind of stuff their readers are prepared to swallow.[104]

Torr purposefully defied here Freshfield's earlier invitation to refrain from dismissing 'his predecessors in the game' as 'silly men'.[105] In a pointed and deliberate move, Torr escalated his critique, opting instead to characterize his critics with even harsher terms. Freshfield chose to remain silent, but the response from both the *Alpine Journal* and the *Journal of Roman Studies* was swift and unforgiving.[106] Editors and contributors alike rallied to defend the integrity of their institutions, condemning Torr's scathing critique and reinforcing their commitment to the scholarly rigour that he had so openly questioned. The backlash was as intense as it was immediate, reflecting the deep-seated tensions between these disciplines and the level of intellectual acrimoniousness in this ongoing battle.

In this skirmish between alpinists and antiquarians, yet another pass was proposed, one destined to become, even to this day, the site of increasingly intense disputes between disciplines. It all began in the rural life of Wreyland, a small hamlet in Devon, with a book meant for private circulation among friends. Written with the intent of preserving the local knowledge and anecdotes passed down orally in that peaceful community, the work inadvertently sparked a scholarly dispute. The seemingly minor error – 'Anaxagoras' instead of 'Aristagoras' – fuelled the controversy, leading us to wonder whether Torr's

[100] C. Torr, 'More talk about Hannibal', *Geographical Journal*, lxiv (1924), 428–31, at p. 429.
[101] D. W. Freshfield, '"More talk about Hannibal"', *Geographical Journal*, lxiv (1924), 500–3.
[102] Review of *Hannibal Crosses the Alps*, by C. Torr, *Alpine Journal*, xxxvi (1924), pp. 424–6, with photograph at pp. 426–7.
[103] S. Wilkinson, review of *Hannibal Crosses the Alps*, by C. Torr, *Journal of Roman Studies*, xiii (1923), 192–4.
[104] C. Torr, *Hannibal Crosses the Alps: With a Counterblast Against Critics* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 1925), pp. 63–4.
[105] Freshfield, '"More talk about Hannibal"', p. 503.
[106] 'A counterblast countered', review of *Hannibal Crosses the Alps: With a Counterblast Against Critics*, by C. Torr, *Alpine Journal*, xxxviii (1926), 49–53; and S. Wilkinson, review of *Hannibal Crosses the Alps: With a Counterblast Against Critics*, by C. Torr, *Journal of Roman Studies*, xv (1925), 269–71.

Col de la Traversette was advanced simply to provoke the 'Alpinists'.[107] The continent remained largely oblivious to this distinctly British quarrel.[108] In France they appeared more or less unanimously persuaded by Colonel Perrin; while in Germany they chose to focus on individual textual puzzles, aligning with the authoritative view of Ulrich Kahrstedt, who, as early as 1913, had framed the issue as 'literarhistorisch nicht topographisch', emphasizing its philological rather than topographical nature.[109]

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Fifty years later it was Gavin de Beer, an evolutionary embryologist and president of the Linnean Society, who brought the issue back to topography. De Beer, who served as director of the British Museum (Natural History) from 1950 until his retirement in 1960, deftly steered the conversation away from the philological and back to the physical landscape. The preface to his 1955 book, enticingly titled *Alps and Elephants*, frames the subject as a deeply personal hobby – a blend of his lifelong passions for military history, scientific puzzle-solving and the simple joy of holidaying in the Swiss Alps.[110] The project was formally passed to him by Spenser Wilkinson, who, two decades earlier, had harshly criticized Torr's work. Yet, in what would have certainly surprised the late Chichele Professor of Military History at Oxford, De Beer became a fervent supporter of Torr's thesis, wholeheartedly endorsing the Col de la Traversette as Hannibal's route through the Alps. His defence of Torr took on the tone of a posthumous rehabilitation:

> His stimulating little book, Hannibal Crosses the Alps, was savagely attacked by a trio of reviewers whose reviews and letters in the Alpine Journal, the Geographical Journal, and the Journal of Roman Studies together almost exceeded the length of Mr Torr's book. I came into personal contact with all three of these eminent gentlemen, but I never imagined that they might be capable of such false argument, special pleading, sheer absurdity, and I am bound to add, specious statements, as some of them displayed in their treatment of Mr Torr's book. I am grateful to Mr Torr for exposing his critics in such a way as to provide a perfect object-lesson in the technique of controversy.[111]

Even more curious is that the sharpest reactions against De Beer, though perhaps less vehemently expressed this time, once again emanated from the *Alpine Journal* and the *Journal of Roman Studies*.[112] History, it seemed, was repeating itself.

The reviewers were both steeped in classical training – indeed, they were distinguished authorities in ancient philology. Alexander Hugh McDonald, a reputed Livy scholar, had taken up the mantle from Stephen Keymer Johnson in editing Livy Books XXXI–XL for the Oxford Classical Texts series.[113] Frank William Walbank, no less esteemed, was an authority on Polybius and would soon go on to publish his monumental three-volume commentary on his historical work.[114] With such impeccable credentials, they were ideally suited to evaluate a book on Hannibal's crossing of the Alps. The two were lifelong friends, having forged a close bond during their college years at Cambridge in the 1930s. Their scholarly paths intertwined frequently, as they not only shared a deep passion for classical history but also collaborated on publications that delved into similar topics.[115]

[107] A. D. Godley (review of *Hannibal Crosses the Alps*, by C. Torr, *Classical Review*, xxxix (1925), 32–3) refers to members of the Alpine Club as 'Alpinists'.

[108] C. Jourdain-Annequin, 'L'image de la montagne ou la géographie à l'épreuve du mythe et de l'histoire. L'exemple de la traversée des Alpes par Hannibal', *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne*, xxv (1999), 101–27, at p. 107; see also J.-P. Renaud, 'Reconnaissance de l'itinéraire d'Hannibal du Rhône au dernier col alpin', *Bulletin de la Société d'études des Hautes-Alpes* (1994), 55–115, at p. 113, which describes the passage over the Traversette as an 'idée presque caricaturale'; similarly, S. Lancel, *Hannibal*, trans. A. Nevill (1995, repr., Malden, Mass., 1998), p. 76.

[109] U. Kahrstedt, *Geschichte der Karthager von 218-146* (3 vols., Berlin, 1879–1913), iii. 181–7.

[110] De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*.

[111] De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. xii.

[112] A. H. McDonald, 'Hannibal's passage of the Alps', review of *Alps and Elephants*, by G. de Beer, *Alpine Journal*, lxi (1956), 93–101; and F. W. Walbank, 'Some reflections on Hannibal's pass', *Journal of Roman Studies*, xlvi (1956), 37–45.

[113] F. W. Walbank, 'Alexander Hugh McDonald: 1908–1979', *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxix (1979), 249–50; and N. G. L. Hammond, 'Alexander Hugh McDonald, 1908–1979', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, lxv (1981), 737–42.

[114] F. W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius* (3 vols., Oxford, 1957).

[115] Hammond, 'Alexander Hugh McDonald', p. 738.

The genres of their commentaries diverge notably, but their scholarly tones remain aligned. McDonald offered a traditional review, though unusually lengthy by the journal's standards. Walbank crafted a scholarly article, presented as a 'reflection' on De Beer's work. Yet, despite their different approaches, both critiques arrived at the same conclusion, rejecting the route over the Col de la Traversette. Their scholarly style, however, marks a departure from the earlier rejections aimed at Torr. This time, the criticism zeroes in on the amateurish handling of sources, with particular emphasis on De Beer's foray beyond his field of expertise. Both authors, in fact, adopted the same philological stance that Kahrstedt articulated in 1913. In his commentary on Polybius, Walbank's note nearly echoes the perspective of the German historian: 'The problem of Hannibal's route across the Alps is primarily one of source criticism.'[116] The two philologists jointly protected here the boundaries of their own discipline, reminding readers that the intricacies of source criticism should not be eclipsed by the allure of improvised topographical speculations.

It was, in fact, Torr, the classical antiquarian from Wreyland, who had charted the philological course for them, uncovering the 'deceitful emendations' that had allegedly distorted the textual tradition and led the 'Alpinists' astray.[117] Torr's problem, however, lay in the format of his observations – a thin and light book written in the style of a table-talk conversation – and in the ultimate target of his approach, which was indeed more focused on 'providing a perfect object-lesson in the technique of controversy' than on contributing to a scholarly debate.[118] Wilkinson had little difficulty to dismiss Torr's book as 'an essay with its attractive style and its elaborate display of learning evidently aimed at a popular rather than a scholarly public'.[119] Torr had emphasized, De Beer maintained, that to properly uncover Hannibal's march, one must penetrate 'through the garbled printed texts to the original manuscripts' to find the true clues for the itinerary.[120] Those clues, as it turned out, were less tied to the specific pass Hannibal crossed and more to the route he took to approach the Alps. The sources offered only scant insight into the former question and were notoriously confused when it came to the latter.

What did Hannibal do after crossing the Rhône? Which path did he choose to reach the Alps? Polybius and Livy mention an 'island' at the confluence of two rivers as a key topographical marker for the beginning of the ascent – but which rivers were they referring to? They both agree on the Rhône as one of them, yet they diverge in their identification of the other. The issue, seemingly a topographical puzzle demanding complex metrological calculations – how long did he march, how fast did he march, through what terrain did he march? – was, in truth, a philological riddle. Both Polybius and Livy named the mysterious river, yet their transmitted texts identify it with different words – a discrepancy that has plagued scholars since the Renaissance, leading to the alleged emergence of 'deceitful emendations' in the attempt to pinpoint its location on a map. It is here that the embryologist ventured into a disciplinary field unfamiliar to him, and here is where he became most vulnerable. For what he did, in fact, was to closely examine a map to infer what the sources might say – an approach that, despite being cloaked in the guise of philology, remained fundamentally topographical.

It was a tangle of textual intricacies in which De Beer found himself. According to Polybius, after crossing the Rhône, Hannibal reached 'the so-called Island' within four days (Plb. III 49, 5–7), a location that Livy describes as *Insulae nomen inditum* (Liv. XXI 31, 4–5) – a triangular region bordered by two rivers and a nearly inaccessible mountain ridge. The first river is identified as the Rhône in both sources. Polybius refers to the second river as σκαρας in all manuscripts except one, which reads σκωρας (B = MS. Monacensis gr. 157), a variant that served as the basis for the earliest printed editions. The Livian tradition offers the readings *ibi sarar* (M = Florence, MS. Mediceus Laurentianus Plutei 63.20, later corrected to *ibi arar*), *ibi arar* (C = Paris, MS. Parisinus Colbertinus lat. 5731) and *bisarar* (D = Cambridge, Trinity College, MS. R.4.4.214). The Latin *Arar* is known as the Saône, which would place Hannibal near Lyon – a location difficult to reconcile with a four-day march. Since no known

[116] Walbank, *Historical Commentary on Polybius*, i. 383; at pp. 382–7 Walbank offers an overview on the topic from a philological point of view; the contribution of Torr and the others are subsumed in the articles that mention them – here the 'Alpinists' (although some are included) are kept at a distance.
[117] Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland* (1921), p. 104.
[118] De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. xii.
[119] Wilkinson, review of Torr, *Hannibal Crosses the Alps*, p. 269.
[120] De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. xi.

rivers correspond to Σκαρας (Skaras), Σκωρας (Skoras) or *Sarar*, the search for this region has focused on various points along the east bank of the Rhône.[121]

The textual discrepancies between Polybius and Livy paved the way for what Torr termed a series of 'deceitful emendations'. But were they truly deceitful? Philipp Klüwer (Cluverius), in his posthumously published *Italia antiqua* (1624), had interpreted Livy's *ibi sarar* as a haplographic corruption of *ibi Isara*, leading him to emend Polybius' river to Ἴσάρας (Isaras). Such a revision was indeed a daring move – hence his own gloss, 'audacter ego emendo' (I boldly correct).[122] Without further justification, Torr would have had more than one reason to be perplexed. If Ἴσάρας (Isaras) was indeed the original reading, how did errors like Σκαρας (Skaras) or Σκωρας (Skoras) arise? The solution was offered by Lukas Holstein (Holstenius) in his commentary on Cluverius's *Italia antiqua* (1666). Holstenius pointed out the quirks of uncial script, where the capital letter sigma (Σ) was often written as *C*, and the absence of spaces between words made it easy to confuse *C* with *O*, and *IC* with *K*.[123] Jacob Gronow (Gronovius), in his *Notae in Polybium* (1670), praised Cluverius for his astute emendation of the text ('optime Ἴσάρας reponit') and commended the keen-minded Holstenius ('acutissimus') for clarifying that the error originated from a confusion in the transcription of majuscule letters.[124]

The puzzle was considered solved, and its origins elegantly attributed to a simple misreading as early as in the seventeenth century, revealing that the mysterious river was none other than the Isère – a point made even clearer by Holstenius in his subsequent refinements of the text.[125] How, then, could Cluverius's emendation be deemed 'deceitful' at the dawn of the twentieth century? On what grounds could Holstenius's explanation be challenged? Omert Schrier, who has critically re-evaluated the question of the 'Island' from both metrological and philological perspectives, highlights the impact of Friedrich Hultsch's influential 1867 edition of Polybius. Schrier notes that this edition led to Holstenius's subtle insights being overlooked by later editors, ultimately causing them to fade into obscurity.[126] Yet, until that point, several essays on Hannibal's crossing of the Alps had found those palaeographical explanations convincing. As Law remarked in 1866 regarding the contentious passage in Polybius, 'There is something, therefore, which requires correction, and he who resists the correction of Holstenius should favour us with a better one'.[127]

The subtleties of philology, particularly when stripped of their scholarly apparatus and simplified for a broader audience, become an easy target for mockery. De Beer's account of the genesis of those deceitful emendations veers into caricature.[128] In rejecting what he dismissingly considered 'a wholesale garbling of texts', he turned what was probably a common error of transcription into a grand discovery: 'It is not difficult to recognise Polybius' *Skaras* in the medieval forms *Icarus*, *Aigarus*, *Equeris*, *Ecaris*, etc, and I cannot understand why it has fallen to me to discover and point out the significance of this for the solution of the problem of Hannibal's route'.[129] Ironically, after dismissing the established emendations, De Beer turns to philology to support his own claims: 'The change in the form of the name is in accordance with the principles of Romance philology'.[130] Philology is summoned back, once again, as the ultimate method to bolster his identification: 'The identity of the *Skaras* with the Aygues is therefore proved not only by documentary continuity but also by philology'.[131] Interestingly, in what can be seen

[121] O. J. Schrier, 'Hannibal, the Rhone and the "Island": some philological and metrological notes', *Mnemosyne*, lix (2006), 501–24, aptly summarizes the philological issue at pp. 517–21; D. Hoyos, 'Crossing the Durance with Hannibal and Livy: the route to the pass', *Klio*, lxxxviii (2006), 408–65, at pp. 427–36; for a geo-archaeological appraisal, see P. Leveau, 'Le franchissement du Rhône par Hannibal. Le chenal et la navigation fluviale à la fin de l'Âge du Fer', *Revue archéologique*, xxxv (2003), 25–50.

[122] Philippus Cluverius, *Italia antiqua* (2 vols., Lyon, 1624), i. 367.

[123] Lucas Holstenius, 'Annotationes in Italiam antiquam Cluverii', in *Annotationes geographicae* (Rome, 1666), pp. 1–311, at p. 16.

[124] Jacobus Gronovius, 'Notae in Polybium', in *Polybii Lycortae F. Magapolitani Historiarum*, ed. Jacobus Gronovius (3 vols., Amsterdam, 1670), iii. 396–453, at p. 415.

[125] Schrier, 'Hannibal, the Rhone and the "Island"', p. 520.

[126] Schrier, 'Hannibal, the Rhone and the "Island"', p. 520.

[127] Law, *Alps of Hannibal*, i. 180.

[128] De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. 21.

[129] De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. 21. The Aygues was already discussed, without the need to question Cluverius's emendations, in R. L. Dunbabin, 'Notes on Livy. I', *Classical Review*, xlv (1931), 52–7, at p. 55, in a polemic with A. R. Bonus (*Where Hannibal Passed* (London, 1925)), who replied, defending his position, with a letter to the editors of the *Classical Review*, xlvi (1932), 189; his book had been reviewed by Cecil Torr in the same journal in 1926, qualifying his suggested pass as a 'ridiculous route' (*Classical Review*, xl (1926), 35).

[130] De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. 21.

[131] De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. 21.

as a deliberate effort to rekindle the old dispute of half a century before, the true target is revealed in the late Freshfield: 'So much for Douglas Freshfield and his "best editions" which have emended the *Skaras* into the Isère.'[132]

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In the fervour of the debate over those 'garbled classical texts', perhaps the most dramatic element of the Hannibal legend risked being overshadowed. Drawing on numismatic evidence, as highlighted by Howard Scullard, De Beer addressed the debate over whether Hannibal's elephants were Indian or African.[133] Yet, as another of his reviewers dryly noted, the real challenge lay elsewhere: 'It is now left for some student (preferably a millionaire at Wisconsin looking for a doctoral thesis) to purchase an elephant or two and drive them successively over the five or six more probable routes'.[134] By the time *Alps and Elephants* appeared in bookstores, elephants had already trodden some of those ancient routes. The sight of elephants lumbering through the Alpine passes once more – whether as a historical experiment or a spectacle for the masses – no doubt rekindled public fascination with Hannibal's daring feat, although dragging those poor, weighty and probably untrained pachyderms over the steep ridges of the Col de la Traversette would undoubtedly have met with the firm resistance of any animal welfare advocate.

It was not a Wisconsin millionaire, but rather an intrepid adventurer from Tennessee who dared to take on the challenge. Richard Halliburton, known for his flamboyant escapades and zest for the dramatic, undertook the audacious task of retracing Hannibal's legendary route in 1935.[135] His first book, *The Royal Road to Romance* (1925), written after his graduation at Princeton in 1921, became an instant bestseller, allowing him to live a lavish lifestyle and mingle with the entertainment industry's elite. One of his most extraordinary exploits, before his Hannibal re-enactment, was a flight around the world with a young pilot from Los Angeles during 1931–2, an adventure he later chronicled in *The Flying Carpet*. His final adventure was proposed by the organizers of the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition: to sail from Hong Kong to San Francisco aboard the *Sea Dragon*, a replica of an ancient Chinese junk. On March 24, in the midst of the Pacific's rough seas, the ship sent out its last radio message. By October, Halliburton was declared dead, just shy of his fortieth birthday.[136]

The star of Halliburton's Alpine adventure was Dally, affectionately known as Miss Elysabethe Dalrymple, a circus elephant well versed in public performances. However, her usual repertoire of tricks and harmonica playing offered little preparation for the gruelling task ahead: crossing the formidable Great St. Bernard Pass. The project was not merely about crossing the Alps; it was an ambitious attempt to recreate Hannibal's legendary march on Rome. Yet, the steep inclines and rugged paths soon took a heavy toll on Dally, whose feet were ill-suited for such treacherous terrain, forcing the journey to end in Turin. Historians, naturally, took issue with his choice of route. But it was not the scholarly debate that sparked Halliburton's adventure; it was two full-page illustrations – *Hannibal Crossing the Rhône* and *Hannibal Crossing the Alps* – that he stumbled upon in a history book.[137] His vivid description of the latter, where 'mountaineers were hurling huge boulders onto the elephants' and two of the beasts were 'plunging downward into the cloud-filled abyss', show a striking resemblance to Leutemann's illustration and Emily's reverie in Radcliffe's novel.

In Frank Walbank's obituary of his lifelong friend Alex McDonald, a brief yet telling remark hints at how the Cambridge scholar's review of De Beer's *Alps and Elephants* became more than just an academic

[132] De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. 22.
[133] De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, pp. 91–7; see H. H. Scullard, 'Hannibal's elephants', *Numismatic Chronicle and Journal of the Royal Numismatic Society*, viii (1948), 158–68.
[134] P. G. Walsh, review of *Alps and Elephants*, by G. de Beer, *University Review*, i (1955), 70–3, at p. 70.
[135] R. Halliburton, *Seven League Boots* (London, 1936). See R. Halliburton, *Richard Halliburton: His Story of His Life's Adventure as Told in Letters to His Mother and Father* (Indianapolis, 1940); J. H. Alt, *Don't Die in Bed: the Brief, Intense Life of Richard Halliburton* (Atlanta, 2013); and C. J. Prince, *America Daredevil: the Extraordinary Life of Richard Halliburton, the World's First Celebrity Travel Writer* (Chicago, 2016).
[136] J. Mathieu, 'A dos d'éléphant à travers les Alpes en l'an 1935 après J.-C. Sur la réception d'Hannibal à l'époque contemporaine', *Vallesia*, lxx (2015), 139–49, with references to the mentioned books at p. 142.
[137] Halliburton, *Seven League Boots*, pp. 290–2.

exercise – it turned into a passionate topic that McDonald eagerly passed on to his students. Walbank sketches the portrait of 'an eminently likeable man', always ready to assist, whether it was an 'eminent scholar seeking expert counsel on *Hannibal's Legacy* to Italy' – probably a nod to Arnold J. Toynbee – or 'a group of undergraduates planning to take an elephant over the Alps in Hannibal's wake and anxious to choose the right pass'.[138] Those undergraduates were John Hoyte and Richard Jolly.[139] Though neither were classicists, De Beer's book sparked their enthusiasm for Hannibal. In 1956 their passion culminated in the 'Cambridge Alpine Hannibal Expedition', a summer adventure funded by a travel scholarship from St. John's College. The group set out to investigate several potential routes, and upon their return, they were convinced: Dr. McDonald had been right all along – Hannibal had indeed crossed the Alps via the Col de Clapier.[140]

Two years later, the group reconvened to retrace Hannibal's footsteps once more – this time, with an elephant in tow. Hoyte and Jolly assembled a team of eight, including Colonel John Hickman, a reader in Animal Surgery at the University of Cambridge, who had worked with elephants during the Second World War in Burma.[141] With youthful audacity, the venture now known as the 'British Alpine Hannibal Expedition' secured an elephant named Jumbo from the zoo in Turin, persuaded Lloyd's of London to cover the insurance and even captured the sponsorship of *Life* magazine.[142] In July 1959 they set out from Montmélian with the ambitious goal of guiding Jumbo back to Turin over the Col de Clapier. Unfortunately, halfway along, the trail proved too treacherous for safe passage, and, with Jumbo's safety in mind, the team decided to cross the Alps via the road over the Col du Mont Cenis.[143] Their journey culminated in a triumphant arrival at Susa, where the British consul in Turin awaited them, and the entire village turned out to celebrate in a festive triumph in honour of Jumbo.[144]

Despite its partial success, the British Alpine Hannibal Expedition became a sensation in the Italian media, making the summer of 1959 an unexpectedly busy season for elephants in the Alps.[145] Just one month after the British attempt, the Italian circus tamer Darix Togni seized the moment with the flair of a consummate showman. Togni set out to cross the Col de Clapier backwards, from Italy to France, with Tony, Menta and Cora, three elephants of his circus.[146] The venture was a resounding success, and the elephants, soon dubbed the 'Alpini' – a nod to Italy's elite mountain troops – became iconic figures, re-enacting Hannibal's crossing with oversized Alpine hats under the circus tent's bright lights. Togni's crossing is immortalized in a home movie, now preserved in the Archivio Nazionale del Film di Famiglia in Bologna.[147] By December that year, audiences in theatres were treated to scenes from *Hannibal*, an Italo-American production by Warner Brothers, directed by Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia and Edgar Ulmer.[148] Though some scenes were shot in the Alps, the elephants of this sword-and-sandal epic ended up roaming among polystyrene mountains, in a far less glamorous studio setting.

Twenty years later, Livio Togni rented out Baby and Chiquita, two of his circus elephants, to Jack Wheeler and Jaqueline Vial King, a former ballerina of the Folies Bergère in Paris. Though billed as a scientific expedition, complete with a metal detector to uncover Hannibalic relics on the Col de Clapier,

[138] Walbank, 'Alexander Hugh McDonald', p. 249.

[139] J. Hoyte, *Trunk Road for Hannibal: With an Elephant Over the Alps* (London, 1960); and C. Pilkington, *Elephant Over the Alps* (London, 1961).

[140] Hoyte, *Trunk Road for Hannibal*, pp. 41–2; and Pilkington, *Elephant Over the Alps*, pp. 11–12.

[141] Hoyte, *Trunk Road for Hannibal*, p. 59; and Pilkington, *Elephant Over the Alps*, p. 14.

[142] D. Lees and P. Boulat, 'Alpine elephant without Hannibal', *Life*, 17 Aug. 1959, pp. 81–7.

[143] Hoyte, *Trunk Road for Hannibal*, pp. 136–42; and Pilkington, *Elephant Over the Alps*, pp. 94–6.

[144] Hoyte, *Trunk Road for Hannibal*, p. 101; and Pilkington, *Elephant Over the Alps*, p. 114.

[145] P. Amerio, 'Attraverserà le Alpi un elefante con il cappotto', *Il Piccolo*, 14 July 1959, p. 7; S. Barber, 'Parte oggi da Torino l'elefante Jumbo per ripetere sulle Alpi la "Traversata di Annibale"', *La Stampa*, 17 July 1959, p. 5; 'Jumbo accolto in Francia con feste inizia domani la traversata delle Alpi', *La Stampa*, 19 July 1959, p. 9; P. Amerio, 'L'elefante Jumbo si diverte nella difficile impresa storica', *Il Piccolo*, 22 July 1959, p. 9; and S. Barber, 'Jumbo conclude la spedizione accolto a Susa da folla e autorità', *La Stampa*, 30 July 1959, p. 8.

[146] G. Lunt, 'Seconda spedizione a "rovescio" verso il Clapier. "Tony", "Menta" e "Cora" in marcia sotto la pioggia', *Stampa Sera*, 25 Aug. 1959, p. 6; 'Eguagliata l'impresa di quelli di Annibale. Gli elefanti guidati da Darix Togni hanno raggiunto ieri il Colle Clapier', *L'Unità*, 28 Aug. 1959, p. 2; and P. Amerio, 'Superato il Colle Clapier dai tre elefanti di Togni', *Il Piccolo*, 28 Aug. 1959, p. 9. Jakob Seibert, 'Der Alpenübergang Hannibals. Ein gelöstes Problem?', *Gymnasium*, xcv (1988), 21–73, at p. 26, briefly mentions an attempt to to cross the Clapier with elephants from the Circus Althoff; see T. Röhrig, *Dank gebührt Hannibal* (Würzburg, 1981).

[147] L. Ceccarelli, 'Italian family films: the case of the Archivio Nazionale di Bologna', in *Experimental and Independent Italian Cinema*, ed. C. Coen and A. Cristiano (Edinburgh, 2020), pp. 131–40, at p. 136.

[148] H. Dumont, *L'antiquité au cinema. Vérités, légendes et manipulations* (Paris, 2009), pp. 279–81.

the project was, in truth, an extravagant indulgence – more a tribute to 'Daring Dick', 'Handsome Hal' or 'Romantic Richard' Halliburton, than to the Carthaginian commander. As the *Los Angeles Times* cheekily noted, the endeavour catered to the whims of Sam Oschin, a sixty-five-year-old American businessman, so 'rich, very rich, rich enough to vacation in Europe' with elephants in tow.[149] The Italian press revealed more details, including the involvement of Anton Van Muster, a Dutch photographer who captured footage for a short film.[150] As extravagant as these re-enactments might have appeared to locals, as reported by Renato Scagliola in *Stampa Sera*, they nonetheless revealed that well-trained circus elephants were better equipped than their zoo counterparts to traverse the Alps via the Col de Clapier.[151]

The route favoured in these widely publicized endeavours seemed to reinforce, on a practical level, the old colonel Perrin's thesis, which McDonald had de facto endorsed in his review of De Beer's *Alps and Elephants*. However, as a reader of *Stampa Sera* pointed out, another ambitious project had long been discussed in the local press, proposing an allegedly 'experimental' crossing of the Col de la Traversette – De Beer's favoured route – with six elephants and fifty people.[152] The details of this description align with yet another British expedition that was being planned in those years and whose 'ultimate objective' was 'to take a team of six fully trained adult working elephants from the Camargue to Italy'.[153] A preliminary experiment was indeed conducted the following year with Mina, an Asian elephant from Chipperfield's circus, who was led over the Col de Clapier while her physiological parameters were recorded using 'radio telemetry monitoring techniques'.[154] Unfortunately, a lack of funding prevented the team from testing the viability of other potential routes, innovatively extrapolated using data inputted into an early computer system.

The letter in *Stampa Sera*, signed as 'Lidia Gay', was actually penned by Edoardo Garello, an archaeologist who claimed to have conducted thirty years of research into Hannibal's crossing, introducing a new discipline called 'enigmology' and establishing the Centro Studi Enigmologici in Turin to lead research in this area.[155] The centre's main goal was to unravel the great unsolved mysteries of history, with a particular focus on Hannibal, as the Celto-Ligurian tribe from which the city derived its name first entered the historical record by opposing, albeit unsuccessfully, his march into Italy.[156] Garello delved into local folklore and popular myths, believing they might harbour overlooked clues passed down through generations.[157] His 1985 book positioned itself as a counterpoint to the glamorous parades of elephants in the Alps, grounding its findings in etymological, archaeological, ethnic and historical evidence. The scholarly veneer of the 'Annibale 85' expedition, as detailed in his book, largely depended on the absence of elephants – whose presence would have transformed the endeavour into something far too spectacular to be considered scientific.[158]

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A less esoteric account of the 'Annibale 85' expedition is found in the 1987 book by ethno-anthropologist Massimo Centini, who was commissioned by a Turin cultural institution to assemble a team of experts,

[149] P. Dean, 'Crossing the Alps in Hannibal's footsteps', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 Aug. 1979, pp. 1, 4, at p. 1.

[150] 'Per "ripetere" Annibale sul Moncenisio arrivano oggi gli elefanti', *Stampa Sera*, 10 Sept. 1979, p. 1; L. Curino, 'Vogliono fare come Annibale sulle Alpi ma con due elefanti prestati dal circo', *La Stampa*, 12 Sept. 1979, p. 6; R. Scagliola, 'Una lite sui soldi blocca a Modane gli elefanti pronti a ripercorrere la strada di Annibale', *Stampa Sera*, 12 Sept. 1979, p. 27; L. Curino, 'Gli elefantini oggi al Clapier come Annibale 2200 anni fa', *La Stampa*, 14 Sept. 1979, p. 7; and R. Scagliola, 'Gli elefanti di Mister Annibale (valicate le Alpi) si riposano', *Stampa Sera*, 17 Sept. 1979, p. 28.

[151] Scagliola, 'Una lite sui soldi'.

[152] L. Gay, 'Il passaggio di Annibale', *Stampa Sera* ('Le lettere dei lettori'), 12 Sept. 1979, p. 26.

[153] W. Zeuner, 'Elephant over the Alps', *Illustrated London News*, 28 Nov. 1981, pp. 59–61. Zeuner's scientific endeavour was inspired by his father, who collaborated with De Beer at the Natural History Museum, South Kensington (Zeuner, 'Elephant over the Alps', p. 59).

[154] Zeuner, 'Elephant over the Alps', p. 60.

[155] E. Garello, *Annibale in Piemonte. La traversata delle Alpi dall'Ebro al Po* (Turin, 1985), p. 82: 'Uscì però su *Stampa Sera* del 12 settembre '79 un articoletto con cui lo scrivente ricordava il tentativo di un altro gruppo di 50 persone e 6 elefanti che tentarono la salita del Col di Traversette. In quel frangente si diceva che il Centro Studi Enigmologici da molti anni faceva ricerche sul famoso passaggio di Annibale'.

[156] E. Culasso Gastaldi and G. Cresci Marrone, 'I Taurini ai piedi delle Alpi', in *Storia di Torino*, ed. G. Sergi (9 vols., Turin, 1997–2002), i. 93–131, at pp. 116–21.

[157] For this approach, see E. Garello, *Enigmi e misteri della Torino magica* (Cavallermaggiore, 1991); in relation to Garello's interpretation of Hannibal's crossing, see D. Tacchino, *Torino. Storia e misteri di una provincia magica* (Rome, 2007), pp. 135–8.

[158] Garello, *Annibale in Piemonte*, pp. 19–20.

mountaineers and artists to retrace Hannibal's passage.[159] Centini's narrative delves into the meticulous deliberations of the group, as they wrestled with the crucial decision of which pass to explore. After an entire night of debate, the Col de la Traversette was ruled out in favour of the Col de Clapier-Savine Coche and the Col du Mayt.[160] The team then embarked on what they termed an 'archeo-trekking', marking their route with ten numbered plates as memorable tokens and tourist signposts of the 'Spedizione "Annibale 85"'.[161] On the Italian side, these markers were accompanied by elephants engraved into the mountain rocks by landscape artist Francesco Ferzini. The first plate was put on Mont Niblè, whose very name, as Garello argued, echoed Hannibal's ancient passage. The project's culmination was showcased in a photographic exhibition in Turin.[162]

The scholarly framework of the Turin expedition was grounded in a modest yet focused body of research, as reflected in the bibliographies of both Garello's and Centini's works, which predominantly drew on Italian and French sources, highlighting a considerable local interest in the topic that is not widely recognized elsewhere. German studies are entirely neglected, but British scholarship is acknowledged in the works by Freshfield, Wilkinson and De Beer, with the latter referenced in a French translation. But although written in French for the *Travaux de la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Maurienne*, the lucid work by Marc Anthony de Lavis-Trafford, once physician to the duke of Connaught, is also given due consideration.[163] The decision to explore the Col de Savine Coche – so close to the Col de Clapier that they are virtually indistinguishable from the French side – probably reflects the influence of his consultation.[164] The French government found his thesis so convincing that they renamed the pass Col de Lavis-Trafford, while French historians began dubbing the Col de la Traversette (proposed by Torr and De Beer) the British route – with a touch of ironic disdain.[165]

Lavis-Trafford's clear and effective argument was fully endorsed in a polemical article by German historian of classical antiquity Ernst Meyer. Meyer entered the debate after discovering that media attention around De Beer's book had led the editors of Westermann's *Atlas zur Weltgeschichte*, a widely used school textbook, to map Hannibal's crossing through the 'non-sensical' Col de la Traversette ('diese unsinnige Marschroute'), without considering any alternatives.[166] Such continental reactions were soon echoed and amplified in Proctor's *Hannibal's March in History*. Sir Dennis Proctor, a distinguished civil servant, was enjoying his well-earned retirement in the picturesque French Vaucluse when, as he recounts in the preface to his book, his wife attended a village town hall conference. She returned with a book on Hannibal's passage by a local French author, which sparked Proctor's interest and led him to embark on an in-depth investigation.[167] This effort culminated in one of the most balanced re-examinations of the various theories surrounding Hannibal's legendary march from Spain to Italy.

By that time, the Alpine Club had evidently decided that Hannibal's crossing no longer held relevance for mountaineers, as the *Alpine Journal* remained conspicuously silent on the matter. McDonald, who had once reviewed De Beer's *Alps and Elephants* for the journal, now shared his favourable impressions of Proctor's work in the *Classical Review*.[168] His friend Walbank, whose scholarly insights on De Beer's book had appeared in the *Journal of Roman Studies*, was probably consulted by Clarendon Press as a

[159] M. Centini, *Sulle orme di Annibale. Indagine storica* (Turin, 1987).

[160] Centini, *Sulle orme di Annibale*, pp. 16–17; see 'Spedizione torinese esplora il monte Clapier sui sentieri del Moncenisio a caccia di Annibale e dei suoi elefanti', *Stampa Sera*, 13 Aug. 1985, p. 2.

[161] Centini, *Sulle orme di Annibale*, p. 17.

[162] 'Annibale e gli elefanti in migliaia di fotografie', *La Stampa*, 1 Oct. 1985, p. 26; and 'Sulle Alpi alla ricerca della "via di Annibale". Una mostra fotografica itinerante', *La Stampa*, 3 Oct. 1985, p. 24.

[163] M.-A. de Lavis-Trafford, 'L'identification topographique du col alpin franchi par Hannibal', *Travaux de la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Maurienne*, xiii (1956), 109–200.

[164] On the French side, the route is identical up to the pass, but diverges at the top. Seibert ('Der Alpenübergang Hannibals', p. 64) could not distinguish the two paths ('Schließlich handelt es sich um ein einziges Joch!').

[165] Renaud, 'Reconnaissance de l'itinéraire d'Hannibal', p. 113; and E. Meyer, 'Noch einmal Hannibals Alpenübergang', *Museum Helveticum*, xxi (1964), 99–102, at p. 100.

[166] E. Meyer, 'Hannibals Alpenübergang', *Museum Helveticum*, xv (1958), 227–41, at p. 241; and *Westermanns Atlas zur Weltgeschichte. Vorzeit-Altertum, Mittelalter, Neuzeit*, ed. H.-E. Stier and others (Braunschweig, 1956), p. 26. The B.B.C. Third Programme covered the book on the radio, featuring the author himself; see G. de Beer, 'How did Hannibal cross the Alps? A suggested solution to the problem', *The Listener*, 26 May 1955, pp. 926–8.

[167] Proctor, *Hannibal's March in History*, p. 3; and G. Devos, *D'Espagne en Italie avec Hannibal* (Vaison-la-Romaine, 1966) is the book that attracted his interest.

[168] A. H. McDonald, 'Hannibal again', review of *Hannibal's March in History*, by D. Proctor, *Classical Review*, xxiv (1974), 252–3.

peer reviewer for *Hannibal's March in History*. His name featured in the acknowledgements, where Proctor, despite being critical of Walbank's own conclusions, gratefully noted his commendation and appreciated his efforts in correcting several inaccuracies prior to publication.[169] Years later, this mutual respect surfaced again in a survey of Polybius studies, where Walbank described Proctor's book as 'a lively account of the many proposed solutions' regarding Hannibal's passage.[170] Forced to find another reviewer for his book, the editors of the *Journal of Roman Studies* entrusted the task to none other than Gavin de Beer – and it turned out to be as harsh as any author could ever expect to receive.[171]

In all likelihood, De Beer's nervousness stemmed less from Proctor's careful literature review and more from the fact that his two detractors, Walbank and McDonald, appeared to accept his theories only after they had been digested through Proctor's more sympathetic approach to philology. De Beer was culpable for having sided with Torr's rejection of the seventeenth-century 'deceitful emendations', thereby exposing to scholarly ridicule the discipline of philology as it had been practised by recent editors of Livy and Polybius who had accepted them as valid. Proctor, more cautiously, started his analysis with a careful scrutiny of those very emendations: 'One of the main themes of the present book is to trace the origin of Cluver's emendation and the changing course of ideas about Hannibal's route which have developed from it through the succeeding centuries'.[172] His findings, which identified the Aygues rather than the Isère as the river forming Polybius' mysterious 'Island', aligned with De Beer's conclusions, though he credited the discovery to a much earlier French antiquarian.[173] The other divergence, aside from Proctor's belief that Hannibal crossed the Alps in November, was the pass – De Beer favoured the Col de la Traversette, while Proctor argued for the Col de Clapier-Savine Coche.

Was this enough to warrant De Beer's sharp retort? Proctor subtly cast De Beer's work as the result of a lifelong infatuation with Hannibal. He insinuated that his conclusions were coloured by an 'intuitive' and 'imaginative' flair, more akin to the realm of 'romance' than scholarship, and dismissed the fascination with Hannibal as bearing an unsettling resemblance to the aura of someone far more sinister than a romantic hero – Adolf Hitler.[174] De Beer rejected such insinuation outright. Romance had no place in his work, which was firmly rooted in the disciplined rigour of science, honed through years of practice in a laboratory. He scorned Proctor's meticulous review of past studies as nothing more than 'chercher midi à quatorze heures',[175] using the language of the country where meanwhile both had retired.[176] For De Beer, it was science – and only science – that mattered, the kind of natural science that was increasingly being applied to 'problems of prehistory, protohistory, and history', leaving no room to the verbose approach of philology. There was no place for Proctor's book in his library, 'for there is a limit to the number of times that a dog returns to his vomit'.[177]

The target of De Beer's critique was the method of *Quellenforschung* or 'crenology' – the painstaking review that philologists and historians alike commonly perform to address thorny questions by drawing on the various solutions proposed throughout history.[178] One of the finest examples of this scholarly technique can be found in the 1988 article by the German Hannibal historian Jakob Seibert. Based on a rigorous review of both ancient documents and modern studies, Seibert confirmed that the problem of Hannibal's crossing could not be resolved through the analysis of textual sources alone. Such sources appeared too vague and contradictory ('Die antiken Quellen sind zu ungenau und widersprüchlich'), and depending on which aspect a historian emphasizes in their interpretation, one Alpine pass or

[169] Proctor, *Hannibal's March in History*, p. [i].
[170] F. W. Walbank, *Polybius, Rome and the Hellenistic World: Essays and Reflections* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 24.
[171] G. de Beer, review of *Hannibal's March in History*, by D. Proctor, *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxii (1972), 180–1.
[172] Proctor, *Hannibal's March in History*, p. 3.
[173] Proctor, *Hannibal's March in History*, pp. 127–8, based on A.-J. Fortia d'Urban, *Antiquités et monumens du département de Vaucluse* (Paris, 1808), p. 188, well conscious of his discovery: 'Je suis peut-être le premier qui place l'Eygues où l'on a voulu mettre la Saône et l'Isère'.
[174] Proctor, *Hannibal's March in History*, p. 5.
[175] Literally, 'looking for noon at two o'clock', that is, needlessly overcomplicating something.
[176] De Beer, review of Proctor, *Hannibal's March in History*, p. 180.
[177] De Beer, review of Proctor, *Hannibal's March in History*, p. 181.
[178] Meyer, 'Hannibals Alpenübergang', p. 241, claimed the scientific prerogatives of the method: 'Daß es eine Wissenschaft der Quellenkritik gibt, die bei Benutzung antiker Quellen unentbehrlich ist, ahnt der Verfasser nicht'. On the method, see G. W. Most, 'The rise and fall of *Quellenforschung*', in *For the Sake of Learning: Essays in Honor of Anthony Grafton*, ed. A. Blair and A.-S. Goeing (Leiden, 2016), pp. 933–54. *Crenology*, a term used for the study of thermal springs, was figuratively applied by Giovanni Pascoli to philology; see G. L. Passerini, *Il vocabolario pascoliano* (Florence, 1915), p. 123 – it is used in romance languages as an equivalent of *Quellenforschung*.

another may emerge as the leading candidate.[179] He concluded his analysis by cautiously reviving the old thesis that Hannibal probably opted for more than one pass in crossing the Alps, leading his forces through both Mont Cenis and Montgenèvre in two separate columns, just as he had done before to ensure greater chances of provisioning his troops.[180]

Back in 1955 philologist and Livy expert Patrick G. Walsh, with a hint of irony and perhaps a dash of envy, noted that De Beer approached Hannibal's Alpine crossing 'with considerable advantages over his predecessors' – the key difference being that he was a 'scientist'.[181] Walsh read De Beer's book 'with fascinated incomprehension', crafting a caricatured comparison between a stereotypical 'German scholar, locked in his study grappling with his *Quellenforschung*', and the intrepid Sir Gavin, whom he imagined free 'at work on the seasonal flow of rivers, the altitude of perpetual sunshine, the glacial formations in the Alps, the declination of the Pleiades, and the analysis of the pollen-grains found in the peatbogs'.[182] In 1972 the same range of disciplines – 'astronomy, meteorology, glaciology, silviculture, the physics of river-flow, and botany (where olive trees grow)' – was put forward as an argument to make clear that the Hannibal 'imbroglio', as he aptly called it, was no longer a matter for 'classical scholars, historians, hair-splitters, flint-skinners, and sea-lawyers', who, echoing Mark Twain once again, 'have thrown much darkness on the subject'.[183]

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In the marketplace of historical storytelling, especially when the product is crafted for a wider audience that craves certainty, vagueness presents a unique challenge. The tension lies in the temptation to fill the gaps, to smooth over the rough edges of ambiguity, with the risk of history slipping into the realm of fiction. In recent historical and biographical reconstructions, some writers have avoided specifying any particular pass for the crossing altogether, while others have largely converged on a *communis opinio*, with the Col de Clapier-Savine Coche in the Mont Cenis group emerging as the preferred choice, challenged only by the Col de la Traversette in the Mont Viso area.[184] To defend the latter pass in a book aimed at the general public, for instance, John Prevas took considerable liberties with the historical accounts of Hannibal's march over the Alps, blending fiction with fact in a way that subtly diverges from the ancient sources.[185] By reframing episodes and introducing imaginative details, Prevas crafted a narrative that departs from established texts, prioritizing an engaging story over historical accuracy. The Traversette, as the highest and most dangerous pass in the Cottian Alps, aligns perfectly with the intention to celebrate Hannibal's intrepidity.[186]

The scholarly debate that once flourished in the fields of military, classical and geographical history – with occasional forays into travel literature – has now migrated to the specialized fields of archaeometry, palynology, microbiology, paleoclimatology, geochemistry and geomorphology, bringing with it a transformation of the debate in both style and agency. Contributors now present themselves as part of international teams of specialists, adept in mastering new technologies and approaching the enigma from multiple perspectives reflecting the need for diverse insights in a context increasingly characterized by academic collaboration and credibility. Findings are now presented through data-driven methods in a highly formalized style, densely packed with information and tailored for an audience of experts

[179] Seibert, 'Der Alpenübergang Hannibals', p. 73; see also J. Seibert, 'Die Alpenüberquerung Hannibals', *Antike Welt*, xvii (1986), 44–54.

[180] Seibert, 'Der Alpenübergang Hannibals', p. 73, followed by P. A. Barceló, *Hannibal* (Munich, 1998), pp. 50–1. Walbank (*Polybius, Rome and the Hellenistic World*, p. 24) considers Seibert's suggestion 'a somewhat drastic solution to a source problem'; D. Hoyos (*Hannibal's Dynasty: Power and Politics in the Western Mediterranean, 247–183 BC* (London, 2005), p. 227) thinks similarly. The solution, often advanced to comply with conflicting interpretations, was already evaluated in Replat, *Note sur le passage d'Annibal*, pp. 9–10.

[181] Walsh, review of De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. 70.

[182] Walsh, review of De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. 70.

[183] De Beer, review of Proctor, *Hannibal's March in History*, p. 180.

[184] P. Leveau and L. Mercalli, 'Hannibal et les Alpes. L'identification du col franchi et son contexte environnemental', in *Hannibal et les Alpes. Une traversée, un mythe*, ed. J.-P. Jospin and L. Dalaine (Gollion, 2011), pp. 25–50; and A. Guillaume, *Annibal franchit les Alpes, 218 av. J.-C* (La Tronche-Montfleury, 1967), p. 93, opted for both.

[185] J. Prevas, *Hannibal Crosses the Alps: the Enigma Re-examined* (Rockville Centre, N.Y., 1998); for his liberties in dealing with ancient sources, see M. and S. Kuhle, 'Lost in translation or can we still understand what Polybius says about Hannibal's crossing of the Alps? – a reply to Mahaney', *Archaeometry*, lvii (2015), 759–71.

[186] Prevas, *Hannibal Crosses the Alps*, pp. 163–7, with a comparison between the Col de Clapier and the Col de la Traversette.

versed in the natural sciences. Textual emendations central to philology have now been replaced with layers of geological beds, spreads of lichens on rocks, traces of bacterial endospores, fossils of tapeworm eggs, remnants of bodily fluids, deposits of age-old pollen, inventories of seeds and fragments of D.N.A.

William C. Mahaney, president of Quaternary Surveys and former director of the Geomorphology and Pedology Laboratory at York University in Toronto, has devised a sound project compellingly articulated into two phases. The first phase, entirely philological, entailed piecing together the 'fragmentary descriptions in the ancient literature' concerning Hannibal's crossing to locate the most probable pass; the second phase, entirely topographical, concerned the application of sophisticated technologies to analyse the environment of the identified location, considering scientific data extracted from its 'geology, geomorphology, topography, climate, ecology'. The aim was a scientifically grounded pursuit of 'locating important historical archaeological evidence' of Hannibal's passage.[187] Outlined as such, the project was inherently interdisciplinary. Yet, the team Mahaney assembled to carry it out was conspicuous for the absence of any historians.[188] The focus was placed entirely on the second phase of the project, leaving the first one to a selective review of previous historical research and the consultation of ancient sources only through their English translations – translations into other languages or specialized dictionaries were not considered.[189]

In reading such translations, Mahaney stumbled upon an allegedly overlooked description in Polybius (III 54, 7) and Livy (XXI 36, 2) in which a unique 'two-tier rockfall' below Hannibal's pass is allegedly identified.[190] He and his team located such a 'landslide' around the Col de la Traversette – the route advanced by Torr in 1925 and endorsed by de Beer in 1955 – supporting their claim through detailed geomorphological assessments, which they believed confirm Polybius' description of the event. The genre of Mahaney publications evokes the same sense of 'fascinated incomprehension' that Walsh experienced while wading through De Beer's *Alps and Elephants*, and we might indeed find ourselves siding with him, 'well aware of the need to agree or perish'.[191] This reaction, however, is not unique to historians. In reviewing Mahaney's *Hannibal's Odyssey*, geoarchaeologist Lucy Wilson felt compelled to reject the book outright ('It was a struggle to get through this book, and I cannot recommend it'), which appeared to her 'marred in places by poor presentation and organization' and densely packed with 'a lot of detail making it sound impressive, but [that] proves nothing'.[192]

The most contentious point for Wilson was Mahaney's interpretation of Polybius (III 54, 7). She consulted the translation Mahaney used and found that the text did not support the idea of a landslide blocking Hannibal's path with boulders, but rather described a narrow path that had probably fallen away due to rockslides ('The track was not blocked – it was too narrow').[193] This very point was independently supported by geographers Matthias and Sabine Kuhle from Göttingen. Upon closer examination of Polybius' original text, the Kuhles singled out the word ἀπορρώξ, which in Ian Scott-Kilvert's English translation – the one originally used by Mahaney – is rendered as 'landslide'.[194] They argued that the geological phenomenon implied by that word is not a 'landslide', but, on the contrary, the effect of a 'break-off' or 'tear-off' of the terrain, indicating not an accumulation of rocks but, on the contrary, 'a *loss* of material resulting in a declivity or escarpment'.[195] Hannibal did not encounter a blockade of

[187] W. C. Mahaney, *Hannibal's Odyssey: the Environmental Background to the Alpine Invasion of Italia* (Piscataway, N.J., 2008), p. 1.

[188] W. C. Mahaney and others, 'The Traversette (Italia) rockfall: geomorphological indicator of the Hannibalic invasion route', *Archaeometry*, lii (2010), 156–72; W. C. Mahaney and others, 'Hannibal's invasion route: an age-old question revisited within a geoarchaeological and palaeobotanical context', *Archaeometry*, lii (2010), 1096–109; W. C. Mahaney and others, 'Biostratigraphic evidence relating to the age-old question of Hannibal's invasion of Italy, I: History and geological reconstruction', *Archaeometry*, lix (2017), 164–78; and W. C. Mahaney and others, 'Biostratigraphic evidence relating to the age-old question of Hannibal's invasion of Italy, II: Chemical biomarkers and microbial signatures', *Archaeometry*, lix (2017), 179–90.

[189] W. C. Mahaney ('Polybius: decipherer of Hannibal's Alpine route and ancient stratigrapher', *International Journal of Earth Sciences*, cxii (2023), 1989–95, at p. 1994) notes that he consulted the historian John Lazenby – 'arguably one of the foremost authorities on Hannibal and the Punic Invasion of Italia' – but he prefers to rely on Gavin de Beer, whom he describes as a 'polymath, classicist, noted biologist and former director of the British Museum of Natural History'.

[190] Mahaney and others, 'Traversette (Italia) rockfall', p. 156.

[191] Walsh, review of De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. 70.

[192] L. Wilson, review of *Hannibal's Odyssey*, by W. C. Mahaney, *Geoarchaeology*, xxvi (2011), 458–60, at p. 460.

[193] Wilson, review of Mahaney, *Hannibal's Odyssey*, p. 460.

[194] M. and S. Kuhle, 'Hannibal gone astray? A critical comment on W. C. Mahaney et al.: "The Traversette (Italia) Rockfall"', *Archaeometry*, liv (2012), 591–601.

[195] Kuhle and Kuhle, 'Hannibal gone astray?', p. 596.

boulders or clasts typical of a landslide or rockfall, as Mahaney identified near the Col de la Traversette. Instead, he faced a steep escarpment or funnel-shaped erosional landform – a feature of the terrain that Ellis had described as such when reading Polybius' text as early as 1853.[196]

The first lines of their abstract, where the Kuhles presented the Col de Clapier as the route most favoured by historians, may have triggered Mahaney's impatience.[197] He accused his detractors of neglecting due diligence in reviewing existing literature ('should the authors have deigned to find it').[198] Yet in the reading list he provided for them to consider, only De Beer and Prevas supported his views; the others either ignored the Traversette altogether or outright opposed it.[199] It was probably this sort of accusation that prompted geoarchaeologist Patrick Hunt, who directed the Stanford Alpine Archaeology Project from 1994 to 2012, to list in an article virtually all the studies supporting the Col de Clapier, from Colonel Perrin to Serge Lancel and beyond – closing the list with the articles by Matthias and Sabine Kuhle.[200] Although Hunt included Mahaney's publications in the bibliography of his subsequent book on Hannibal and described him an 'indefatigable scientist' in the acknowledgements, he did not engage with his work in the text.[201] He limited himself to dismissing the southern route over the Col de la Traversette in an endnote, describing it as 'one of the weakest arguments' since Gavin de Beer, adding that when his Stanford team crossed the pass on foot in 2006, none found it a credible match for Polybius' criteria.[202]

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In his publications Mahaney consistently adds a historiographical excursus with studies that support his preference for the southern route. But do they really? In one of his articles published before the controversy in 2004, he listed seven titles: 'Dodge, 1891; De Beer, 1969; Bath, 1981; Cottrell, 1992; Prevas, 1998; Bagnall, 1999; and Baker, 1999'.[203] Colonel Dodge in fact opted for a route over the Little St. Bernard.[204] Bath includes a map indicating an itinerary over the Traversette but refrains from 'devoting overmuch space to what must remain largely guesswork'.[205] Cottrell's 1992 edition of his 1961 monograph simply follows De Beer, for in 'six short weeks' of fieldwork he could not 'explore every pass which Hannibal may have taken', admitting at the end that his choice might well be wrong.[206] Bagnall's book on the Punic Wars, here referenced in its Pimlico 1999 edition instead of its Hutchinson 1990 first edition, follow De Beer's itinerary along the Aygues but remains vague about which pass Hannibal crossed.[207] Baker's 1999 study is, in fact, 'an unabridged republication of the edition first published in New York in 1929', where the Col de la Traversette is mentioned only in a footnote as a recent proposal 'brilliantly advocated by the late Mr Cecil Torr', but is not presented as conclusive, since 'the exact route of Hannibal is not yet agreed'.[208]

[196] Ellis, *Treatise on Hannibal's Passage of the Alps*, p. 55.
[197] Kuhle and Kuhle, 'Hannibal gone astray?', p. 591.
[198] W. C. Mahaney, 'Comments on M. Kuhle and S. Kuhle (2012): "Hannibal gone astray?"', *Archaeometry*, lv (2013), 1196–204, at pp. 1196–7.
[199] Mahaney, 'Comments on M. Kuhle and S. Kuhle', p. 1196.
[200] P. Hunt, 'Lichenometry dating in the Alps: implications on Hannibal's route', *Atti della Accademia Roveretana degli Agiati: Classe di scienze matematiche, fisiche e naturali*, 9th ser., v (2015), 67–84, at pp. 79–80. Consequently, Hoyte's travelogue (that 'extraordinary little cocktail of historical investigation and gay, student adventure'; see Hoyte, *Trunk Road for Hannibal*, p. 47) is cited alongside Walbank, the esteemed Polybius scholar who, unlike his friend McDonald, never fully endorsed the pass; see Walbank, *Polybius, Rome and the Hellenistic World*, p. 24: 'The general balance of the evidence seems to me to favour one of the passes in the Mt Cenis group; but doubts still subsist'.
[201] P. Hunt, *Hannibal* (New York, 2017), p. 273.
[202] Hunt, *Hannibal*, pp. 283–4.
[203] W. C. Mahaney, 'Geological/topographical reconnaissance of Hannibal's invasion route into Italia in 218 BC', in *Studies in Military Geography and Geology*, ed. D. R. Caldwell, J. Ehlen and R. S. Harmon (Dordrecht, 2004), pp. 67–78, at p. 69.
[204] T. A. Dodge, *Hannibal: a History of the Art of War Among the Carthaginians and Romans Down to the Battle of Pydna* (2 vols., Boston, 1891), i. 195: 'It is the Little St Bernard which appears best to satisfy the relation of Polybius, and that it is the one which Hannibal apparently took'; see also De Beer, *Alps and Elephants*, p. 109, where Dodge is associated with the Little St. Bernard Pass.
[205] T. Bath, *Hannibal's Campaigns: the Story of One of the Greatest Military Commanders of All Time* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 47–8.
[206] L. Cottrell, *Hannibal: Enemy of Rome* (New York, 1961), p. viii.
[207] N. Bagnall, *The Punic Wars: Rome, Carthage and the Struggle for the Mediterranean* (1990, repr., London, 1999), p. 164.
[208] G. P. Baker, *Hannibal* (1929, repr., New York, 1999), pp. 81–2.

Torr, who first introduced that contentious route into the debate and discussed that 'landslip' in relation to both passes, is conspicuously absent in Mahaney's references.[209] One may wonder why. Did the classicist antiquarian from Devon perhaps not fit the required 'scientific' credentials to contribute authoritatively to the field? Whatever the reason, the true hero here is Gavin de Beer, though his name finds its way onto the list through his book on Hannibal rather than the one specifically devoted to his Alpine crossing. De Beer is the hero of this story because he is a scientist. The most significant narrative that Mahaney relentlessly repeats to defend his position is that only De Beer, before him, sought to apply scientific methods to the question. Historians, who got it all wrong, are here synecdochally evoked through Mommsen, whose work on the Roman Republic, originally published in Leipzig between 1854 and 1856, was already attacked by members of the Alpine Club for his lack of direct knowledge of the region:

> Only de Beer (1969) sought to bring natural history into play to look at the environmental side of Hannibal's crossing. All other investigators have studied the topography of the various routes to weigh in with one route at the exclusion of all others and in most cases the actual route identified was based on incomplete assessments of all the topographic variables (see Mommsen, 2006, for example). It was de Beer (1969) who added certain aspects of natural history to his reconstruction but fell short of analyzing the geology and geomorphology of the various invasion routes.[210]

The argument once made by the director of the Natural History Museum in London to defend his theory against the criticism of philologists was now being revived by the emeritus professor of geomorphology from York University in Toronto. The curious twist in this renewed version of the age-old debate is that the sharpest criticism, while indeed philological in its essence, emerged from within the discipline of geography itself.

The Kuhles may not have 'deigned to find' out what Prevas had to say on the matter in the first instance, but they certainly 'deigned' to take a closer look at Polybius' original text and provide a translation to elucidate their reading. In their response to Mahaney's comments, which addressed the question only tangentially, they lingered on issues of methodology to reiterate the core issue: 'Even as a practical field researcher, with some reservations about armchair reasoning, one must not forget that Hannibal's crossing of the Alps was first and foremost a historical event, which we know about *only* through ancient literary texts'.[211] The fundamental problem, as the Kuhles saw it, is that Mahaney and his team 'seriously underestimate[d] and completely neglect[ed] the source-critical research', relying, in fact, on the fictionalized account provided by Prevas.[212] The controversy continued in another journal, where Mahaney accused his critics of obfuscating history with Google Earth images and focusing solely on the 'rockfall enigma'.[213] This time, however, the debate came to an end – Mathias Kuhle had tragically died the year before during fieldwork on Manaslu in Nepal.[214]

What is evident here, as it was in the case of De Beer's research, is that the focus is not on collaboration between sciences and humanities, but rather on competition. This aspect found further exposure in the media with the release of two popular documentaries on Hannibal in 2018 – one German and one British – featuring footage from a more recent scientific expedition in the Alps.[215] Mahaney is presented here not as an archaeologist, but as a geomorphologist 'who wants to prove the historians wrong' and

[209] Torr, *Hannibal Crosses the Alps*, pp. 28–9; for Torr's predecessors, see Freshfield, 'More talk about Hannibal', p. 241, but, as already remarked, they mention the Mont Viso only generically – the proposition of the Col de la Traversette ought to be credited to Torr.

[210] Mahaney, *Hannibal's Odyssey*, p. 1.

[211] Kuhle and Kuhle, 'Lost in translation', p. 764.

[212] Kuhle and Kuhle, 'Lost in translation', p. 763.

[213] W. C. Mahaney, 'The Hannibal route controversy and future historical archaeological exploration in the Western Alps', *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry*, xvi (2016), 97–105, at p. 102.

[214] J. Ruppert, 'Die letzte Exkursion', *Der Spiegel*, 2 May 2015 <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/nepal-wie-der-geograf-matthias-kuhle-beim-erdbeben-umkam-a-1031713.html> [accessed 1 Aug. 2025].

[215] *Hannibal – Marsch Auf Rom* [television programme], dir. C. Gutschmidt and J. Voelker, Süddeutsche TV, ZDF, ARTE, Germany, 17 March 2018, 52mins, available also in English as *Hannibal's Elephant Army: The New Evidence* [television programme], dir. G. Clark, Lion Television, 25 Feb. 2018, 46mins; see transcript at 'Hannibal in the Alps', *PBS* <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/secrets/hannibal-alps-film/3784/> [accessed 1 Aug. 2025].

'lift the fog of history from the myth of Hannibal'. While the German documentary mentions the Col de Clapier as 'the closest match when compared with ancient texts' and thus favoured by 'many scholars', the British one dilutes its critical significance by including it in a map of possible routes together with the Col du Mont Cenis and the Col de Montgenèvre. The southern route over the Col de la Traversette is described as 'the highest and most dangerous of all', in fact 'so treacherous that most historians have dismissed it as impossible'. The only argument put forward to discredit other routes is that they are allegedly too easy for the Carthaginian commander.

The statement by Matthias and Sabine Kuhle that so irritated Mahaney in 2012 ('For a long time now, historians have considered the Col de Clapier as the most likely route for Hannibal's army to cross the Alps') has now become the rhetorical pivot around which the image of the geomorphologist, determined to challenge the prevailing opinion of historians, is built.[216] In the German documentary, Mahanay fully endorsed the image of the scientist who goes against the grain of the prevailing historical reconstruction, putting it now in his own words:

> The archaeologists virtually have done very little to nothing in terms of this question. It's all been with historians. They basically argue over their own theories, and many of them have shifted distances, time, motion – it's been played with to fit their theory of which pass was used, basically. And in my case, this is a forensic thing, a forensic exercise, where I'm using environmental milestones, if you like, to try to pinpoint the route.

Mahaney and his team are not 'merely trying to fill in the gaps in ancient sources', which 'they too scrutinize … for clues and important hints' – for them, 'unlike scholarly research, their foremost reference is the ground'. In that ground, located roughly three hundred meters below the pass, microbiologist Chris Allen discovered traces of an impressive concentration of Clostridia – a bacterium found in the guts of horses – in a stratum that could date back to Hannibal's time, potentially indicating the presence of his army around the Col de la Traversette. We leave it to specialists to interpret this finding and determine how it relates to the churned-up soil around that layer, which could be attributed to the fact that the pass was a major thoroughfare in medieval times, primarily for the salt trade, leading to the creation of a tunnel in the fifteenth century to facilitate passage.[217]

But none of this is discussed, nor is Allen's significant discovery presented as definitive evidence. Full attention is given instead to the 'landslide' that Mahaney discovered in Polybius. That geomorphological piece of evidence, which other geographers had sharply criticized, is thus once again put forward as the proof for Hannibal's route in the documentary – 'I figured this was a key thing. If I found the rockfall, I probably have the route', Mahaney says. In the German documentary, Hannibal historian Pedro Barceló warned against a hasty consultation of the extant sources, which 'must be read with a critical eye and with some caution'. But that line of thought was not further developed. In the British documentary, historians provide insights into military techniques, numismatic iconography, war elephants and the significance of Hannibal for the heritage of modern Tunisia. Eve MacDonald, who wrote an insightful book on the Carthaginian commander, is also there. Her role in the film is to walk the route towards the Col de la Traversette with Polybius' book in hand, using his account as 'almost a checklist of elements to locate'.

At the top of the treacherous pass, with the camera lingering on a commanding view toward Italy, the final word went to MacDonald: 'This was undoubtedly the most difficult pass Hannibal could have taken', she declared, and, probing deeper into his motives, she framed them as a reflection of his personality: 'Because the more difficult the journey, the more difficult his quest almost, the greater his heroic status would be'. In short, 'He created the myth, and we still believe it'. But in a documentary that aimed to report 'new evidence' of his Alpine crossing and 'lift the fog of history from the myth of

[216] Kuhle and Kuhle, 'Hannibal gone astray?', p. 591.

[217] R. Comba, *Per una storia economica del piemonte medievale. Strade e mercati dell'area sud-occidentale* (Turin, 1984), pp. 92–3; and L. Provero, 'La committenza delle comunità e la costruzione degli spazi politici locali. Dronero e la valle Maira (CN) nel Quattrocento', in *La signoria rurale nell'Italia del tardo Medioevo*, iii: *L'azione politica locale*, ed. L. Provero and A. Fiore (Florence, 2021), pp. 13–30, at p. 26.

Hannibal', that statement could just do the opposite – reinforcing the legend and validating Juvenal's timeless quip 'Go on, you maniac, and race through the savage Alps, in order to appeal to schoolboys and become a speech in the schools!'[218] It was up to the narrator to reel the story back from the edge and bring it to a close: 'Hannibal's journey was legendary, and now we know it wasn't a myth'.

Hannibal has led geographers to traverse not just the pass he allegedly crossed, but also through the nuances of translation and textual emendations. If his journey is not a myth any more, it has certainly been an obsession for many. Every scholar, whether an armchair traveller charting routes through books and maps or an Alpine adventurer braving treacherous paths in search of Hannibal's traces, has claimed to have turned legend into reality. So far, it seems, philologists still stubbornly cling to Cluverius's emendations in their editions of Polybius, translators shy away from identifying a 'rockfall' in his text, and historians remain sceptical about considering bacterial traces a worthy substitute for a Punic coin or an elephant fossil. The heritage industry, however, is busy as always. Climbers can now seek refuge at the summit of the Col de Clapier in the chic Bivacco Annibale, a sleek addition to a transregional heritage project sponsored by the European Union; meanwhile, holidaying mountaineers can opt for guided tours in Hannibal's footsteps over the Col de la Traversette, courtesy of the Monviso Natural Park.[219] But as David Lowenthal reminds us, 'We elect and exalt our legacy not by weighing its claims to truth, but in feeling that it *must* be right'.[220] And so the myth of Hannibal marches on, undeterred by the facts that trail in its wake.

[218] P. Murgatroyd, *Juvenal's Tenth Satire* (Liverpool, 2017), p. 86.

[219] See 'Sulle tracce di Annibale', in 'Programma ALCOTRA (Alpi latine cooperazione transfrontaliera, Italia–Francia). Rapporto finale di esecuzione' (Jan. 2017) <https://www.interreg-alcotra.eu/sites/default/files/rfe_2016_finale_wp4.pdf> [accessed 1 Aug. 2025], p. 40; and F. Rolfo and others, 'The Monviso Massif and the Cottian Alps as symbols of the Alpine chain and geological heritage in Piemonte, Italy', *Geoheritage*, vii (2015), 65–84, at pp. 78–9.

[220] D. Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 2.

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