

Hannibal's crossing of the alps



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Hannibal's crossing of the Alps is one of history's most remarkable military achievements even to this day. There are many accounts of the crossing of the Alps and what happened during those weeks and we can only speculate and use the sources and information that has lived through the decay of time. Our main primary sources that historians use to piece together the crossing of the Alps are by two of Rome's most famous historians, Polybius and Livy.

Polybius was a very rounded and mostly non-biased historian who got out of his way to travel to his locations to document facts and information which he used in his text and who lived during the time of the First and Second Punic Wars. On the other hand we have Livy who was a very pro-Roman historian who had documented his facts based on other historians who were before him as he lived almost 200 years after the Punic wars.

When we compare the two accounts by both historians we tend to believe and rely more on the accounts made by Polybius as we know him as a reliable and fairly non-biased source whereas Livy was very biased towards Rome and based his information off of other historians. Although we see Polybius as the more reliable source, Livy does come up with some points that concern the crossing that are quite conflicting with the information presented to us by Polybius. By analysing both of these accounts we can get a better understanding of the crossing of Hannibal's crossing of the Alps.

Polybius who was a very reliable historian who we know lived around 200-118 BC during the time of the two Punic Wars provided a very detailed account of both Punic wars and Hannibal's crossing of the Alps. Polybius is known for his determination to get actual factual evidence and firsthand

knowledge of events that occurred. He resided in Rome for most of his life and occasionally undertaking long journeys throughout the Mediterranean to get knowledge on historical sites and interview primary sources who were actually at the events.

Polybius's works (The Histories) documents the events between 264 and 146 BC which mainly involved the rise of the Roman Empire and the effort in which they went to subdue their rival Carthage. Polybius documents the First and Second Punic wars with incredible detail and is our main source for the wars, although Livy also provides some very important facts and information. Titus Livius Patavinus (59 BC - AD 17) (more commonly known as Livy) we know as to be a very pro-Roman historian who can be seen as very biased towards the Romans and paints them in an honourable and almighty glow within his texts.

Some of his texts we can see as just plain lies and so we are reluctant to solely use Livy's information to base our research and understanding around. Livy wrote a complete history of Rome from its very foundations all the way up to the reign of Augustus in Livy's own time but the only surviving work of his is the "History of Rome". During the reign of Augustus Livy wrote his texts emphasizing the accomplishments and triumphs of Rome, and wrote everything with a pro-Roman view to promote a new type of government which was implemented by the emperor Augustus.

With that being said a lot of Livy's texts and accounts mislead to reader into taking a Roman view and often cut out pieces of information which would downgrade the view on Rome, and so we have come to rely more on Polybius's accounts than Livy's, although Livy does also provide many

accounts and descriptions of events that are unavailable elsewhere and so his texts and reports are still highly valued is one of the main sources we have. Both Polybius's and Livy's accounts of Hannibal's crossing of the Alps can be seen to have many similarities and so we can determine that the same source and information has been used.

Although there are many similarities between the two there are also some differences which can be seen throughout both texts. For example when Hannibal is crossing the Alps and he soon finds his path blocked by a pile of rocks Livy states that he uses Vinegar and Fire to break through the rock. Polybius says nothing of the subject and up to this day there has been no evidence of rock that has been carbonized at the site in which Livy had stated. Livy's accounts of the crossing were very much the same as Polybius's although we can see in some parts of Livy's work that his Roman bias has written the work for him.

When Hannibal was making a speech to his men after their crossing of the Rhone Polybius wrote that Hannibal spoke of their past achievements and that the hardest part of their journey was already over, but according to Livy Hannibal told his men that they were going to be fighting against the most powerful and grandest city in the world. This was not the case in Hannibal's time and so we can clearly see that Livy had just created a false fact and account just to paint Rome in a brighter light.

Livy's biased for Rome is something that constantly alters Livy's accounts. Much of Hannibal's ascent and crossing of the Alps documented by Polybius and Livy are very similar with only a few minor alterations in the accounts of some events which took place. The main reason why the accounts of some

events are different is mainly because of Livy's biased and attitude towards Rome which makes him document the account and alter it in such a way that it paints Rome in a sense of glory and success.

Another main reason which dictates the differences of the accounts is that Polybius who lived during the time of these events could go to places and get a firsthand experience and knowledge of the event by interviewing the people involved and taking notes on the actual location whereas Livy who lived a long time after the crossing had to rely on other peoples accounts and could not get firsthand knowledge on a lot of the events.

The crossing of the Alps is a fairly well documented event during the Second Punic war and one that is the most remarkable. Polybius and Livy both have very detailed accounts of the crossing and we rely on this information to piece together Hannibal's crossing of the Alps. Although some of the facts of the crossing remain disputed and unknown we have sufficient information between both sources to have a good understanding of the crossing.

Both historians give a lot of information on the crossing although we tend to use Polybius's account as it is more reliable and he had firsthand experience and knowledge whereas we know Livy to be a very pro-Roman and did not live during the event but many years later. Both accounts of the crossing have proved to be very useful for our understanding of Hannibal's crossing of the Alps.