Throughout ancient history, wars have plagued the earth. A few that may come to mind are the Punic Wars. These wars were fought over pure hatred and grudges held by one side against the other. The Carthaginians and Romans were probably the two fiercest contenders during their time period. Both were expanding their empires rapidly and it was only natural for them to engage in a war (or three). Both empires had their famous leaders. The Scipio family in Rome and the Barca family in Carthage were both very important people in the Punic Wars. Hannibal Barca is one of the most known Carthaginian general in history. One of the, if not the, greatest feats of Hannibal was his journey over the Alps into Italy. Two thousand years later, we can tell from ancient sources and research exactly how and where Hannibal crossed the Alps. However, to understand how this was done, one might say that only through Hannibal’s personality and character was the journey across the Alps possible.

For the longest time, the Greeks and the Carthaginians had a running dispute. As with most of the wars in early history, their dispute was over the acquisition of land. In fact, this dispute had been continuing for many years. After Rome stepped in and became the ruler of Greece, “it was virtually inevitable that she would be drawn into the century-old conflicts.”

Hannibal’s father, Hamilcar was a very important general in the first Punic Wars. He commanded the army during the First Punic War. However, at the end of the war, the Carthaginians had failed to take control of Sicily. The Romans now controlled Sicily and this was a matter that Hamilcar did not take lightly. Hamilcar was “driven by his hatred of the Romans.”

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1 P.1277 Oxford Classical Dictionary
2 p. 40 Hannibal Crosses the Alps
surrender at Sicily. The Carthaginian senate sent Hamilcar to Spain to expand the empire in 237 BC. Hamilcar was very successful in his mission in Spain, which aroused suspicion in Rome. Hamilcar claimed that their occupation in Rome was only to obtain money to pay for the first Punic War.

After the death of Hamilcar, his son-in-law Hasdrubal was given command of the Carthaginian army in 229 BC. Hamilcar was successful in his campaign to Spain. Now, it was up to Hasdrubal to continue expanding the Carthaginian Empire. Hasdrubal had inherited the job of colonizing Spain. He spent a lot of his efforts in Spain and became more like a governor than a commander. Roman began to be concerned with the growing Carthaginian power in Spain. They sent emissaries to New Carthage (a city built by Hasdrubal located on the Spanish Mediterranean coast) to make a deal with Hasdrubal. He agreed that the Carthaginians would not expand beyond the Ebro River. Hasdrubal did uphold this treaty for the duration of his reign.

Hannibal had been waiting in Carthage for his moment to rise to power. At a very early age, Hamilcar “made his son swear eternal hatred to Rome.” Hasdrubal asked Hannibal to come to Spain and receive proper education in the military. The Carthaginian senate was hesitant at first to allow Hannibal to go to Spain. However, Hannibal was allowed to go to Spain and be educated about war.

Hannibal had a very interesting personality. Hannibal was no older than twenty when he arrived in Spain. One of the most important characteristics of Hannibal was that he was the son of Hamilcar. When Hannibal arrived in Spain, the troops “saw in this young boy their old commander Hamilcar.” As the years passed, Hannibal matured and soldiers began to respect him more. Hannibal learned arts of politics from Hasdrubal and tactics of war seemed to come

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3 p. 184 A History of the Roman World, 753-146 BC
4 p. 44 Hannibal Crosses the Alps
5 p. 184 A History of the Roman World, 753-146 BC
6 p. 48 Hannibal Crosses the Alps
naturally. Hannibal never did anything in excess; he only ate and drank what was required to survive. He slept on the bare ground with the soldiers and took guard duty accordingly. Hannibal became a very skilled fighter. He was very well educated and learned the enemy language, Latin. Hannibal, like his father, also had a desire to strengthen the Spanish territory. Hannibal became very popular in the ranks of the Carthaginian army and no longer needed the reputation of his father to support him. Hannibal developed a bond with the soldiers that would be vital to the coming war.\(^7\)

Hasdrubal’s life came to a violent end at the hand of an assassin in 221 BC. Hannibal was much more ambitious and daring than Hasdrubal. When Hannibal first came into power, he did not abide by the conditions set by the Romans and Hasdrubal. His hatred for the Romans fueled his ambition. Hannibal realized very quickly that “Carthaginian victories in Spain would not break the power of Rome.”\(^8\) He needed to break the Italian Confederacy to take down Rome. Hannibal decided that Saguntum, a city allied to Rome in between Spain and the Alps, was “a threat to Carthage’s position in Spain.”\(^9\) Hannibal advanced toward this town in 219 BC and laid siege to for eight months before taking it. Saguntum was allied with Rome, but it was still on the Carthaginian side of the Ebro River, so Hannibal did not break the treaty. The Romans were still furious and “ordered the Carthaginian government to hand Hannibal over to them.”\(^10\) Hannibal ignored this threat and decided that he must carry out his own plans to ensure the safety of the Carthaginian Empire.

To keep the battles away from Spain or Carthage, Hannibal decided that the target of invasion should be Italy. From Spain, the best route for Hannibal to take would be across land. The land route to Italy from Spain is a very difficult journey. Hannibal's force would have to

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\(^7\) p. 48-49 Hannibal Crosses the Alps  
\(^8\) p. 186 A History of the Roman World, 753-146 BC  
\(^9\) p. 665 Oxford Classical Dictionary  
\(^10\) p. 98 History of Rome
cross over the dangerous Alps to invade Italy. Hannibal brought with him a very sizeable force. He was planning to take the war to Italy and end it there as well. The total force of Carthage was about 90,000 infantry and 12,000 cavalry. Hannibal brought 50,000 infantry and about 9,000 cavalry with him on his journey over the Alps. He also brought along more than thirty African war elephants. Finally, in 218 BC, Hannibal began his crusade into the Alps.

Crossing the Alps was unheard of and deemed impossible during Hannibal’s time. The Romans thought that their Northern front was impenetrable because the Alps were a natural wall. Hannibal may have been crazy, but he was driven by revenge. His hatred for the Romans pushed the idea of making such a seemingly impossible task. Many have tried to find out where Hannibal crossed the Alps. These people include the great Roman historian Livy and Greek historian Polybius. Though neither was from the exact time of Hannibal, they both were able to write in detail about the journey by using other sources. First of all, these historians help identify when Hannibal crossed the Alps. We know that he left Spain in late spring. Polybius wrote that he crossed “near the setting of the Pleiades, when the snow began to be thick on the heights.” Livy also confirms this time period. One might be able to infer that he crossed sometime in winter. The historians then had to find out where he crossed the Alps. Though the ridgeline of the Alps is very steep, there are still quite a few mountain passes that would allow access through the Alps. These passes are Mongenevre, Clapier, Traversette, Mt. Cenis, Larche, and St Bernard. Both historians wrote that Hannibal used one of the highest passes. Both Livy and Polybius wrote that the pass had snow on it year-round. Immediately, the number of possible routes is limited to two choices, the Traversette and Clapier. These are the only two passes with the conditions of being covered by snow year-round. Another fact that Polybius and Livy both claim

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12 Polybius Book III Sec. 54-55
13 Polybius Book III Sec 53-56; Livy Book XXI Sec 36
is that there is a view of Italy along the pass. Hannibal would point out to his men that they would conquer the land they see before them. The army relied on the view for hope.\textsuperscript{14} Another important fact was that the mountain pass led directly to the city of Turin, which was the first city Hannibal took after crossing the Alps. These facts still point to the Traversette and Clapier passes as they both provide the given conditions. Finally, both historians write that from the summit of the pass, Hannibal had a view of the Po River valley and the plains of Italy. At the summit of the Clapier there is really not a view of anything matching the description. Only the Traversette matches the description both of the historians gave. By looking at ancient sources, we can infer approximately where Hannibal crossed the Alps. Although we cannot be certain, we have a general idea and have evidence to back up the claims.

Throughout the journey, it was mostly likely Hannibal’s leadership was what kept the soldiers going. The soldiers still had the bond with Hannibal and their respect for him kept the army alive. On the journey, there was even conflict between some of the troops and Hannibal. A mercenary group called the Carpetani became disgruntled and threatened mutiny.\textsuperscript{15} Hannibal realized he needed to defuse the situation properly. Otherwise, his other men may also begin to revolt. He gathered the army and told them that he sensed that some troops were losing heart for the campaign. He allowed those troops to return home and reinforce the garrisons there. He solved the problems without violence and bloodshed. Hannibal’s vast knowledge of military tactics also kept his men alive. Most of the time, Hannibal tried to stay away from elevated areas to decrease the chance of ambush. Whenever they set up camp for the night, they made sure they were not in an area where they could be easily taken by surprise. However, there was one time when Hannibal’s army was led into a valley by tribesmen, who were supposed to be guides. The tribe then ambushed the army from above. As troops were dying, Hannibal still pushed his

\textsuperscript{14} Polybius Book III Sec 54; Livy Book XXI Sec 35  
\textsuperscript{15} p. 85 Hannibal Crosses the Alps
troops on. He just told them to run, having no wish to fight the Gaul tribe. Even though he did lose many men, he was able to continue on.\textsuperscript{16} Hannibal’s tactics and education served the army well during the journey.

Hannibal successfully led his army through one of the most dangerous expeditions in history. When he came down from the Alps, he had about 20,000 men left and 6,000 cavalry.\textsuperscript{17} The troops were weary, but they had made the journey. They were now in Italy, where the Romans least expected them. Their first great victory was in the city of Turin. For the next few years, Hannibal occupied northern Italy, and had many great victories, such as at the Battle of Cannae. Roman was forced to call troops back to protect the city. However, the war came to an end in 205 BC when the consul Scipio took Roman troops to Carthage in Africa. Hannibal was forced to return home and defend the city. Hannibal lost and the Carthaginians were forced to sign a treaty taking away many of their rights.

Though it was Hannibal who formulated the great strategy and took the Romans by surprise, he still lost the war. Hannibal’s education, background, and personality were some of the main factors that contributed to the success of the crossing of the Alps. Hannibal was a very skilled tactician and was well prepared for the journey. His personality helped keep the morale of the troops high. Hannibal was indeed one of the greatest generals in the Punic Wars. It was unfortunate that Hannibal eventually lost after he accomplished such an amazing and daring feat.

\textsuperscript{16} p. 127-131 Hannibal Crosses the Alps
\textsuperscript{17} Polybius Book III, Section 60; Livy book XXI Section 38
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