

CHAPTER SIX

HANNIBAL'S INVASION OF ITALY

In 218 B.C., an army led by the Carthaginian general Hannibal invaded Italy, taking the Romans completely by surprise. The Romans' shock was caused not so much by the invasion itself, for Rome had been in conflict with Carthage for years, but by Hannibal's advance into Italy across the Alps—a barrier that was believed to be impassable by an army. Appian, a second-century A.D. Greek historian—and a Roman citizen—described the exploits of Hannibal in Italy in one of the books of his history of Rome. As you read the following excerpt from Appian's account, note how Hannibal opened a passage through the Alps and how he gained a victory over the Romans in the Battle of Trebia.

Having collected a large army of . . . Africans and other nationalities [in Spain, Hannibal] crossed over the Pyrenees into the country . . . which is now called Gaul, with 90,000 foot [soldiers], about 12,000 horse [soldiers], and 37 elephants. . . . When he came to the Alps and found no road through or over them . . . he nevertheless boldly began to climb them, suffering greatly from the cold and deep snow. He cut down and burned wood, quenching the ashes with water and vinegar. Having thus rendered the rocks brittle he shattered them with iron hammers and opened a passage which is still in use over the mountains and is called Hannibal's pass. As his supplies began to fail he pressed forward, the Romans remaining in ignorance even after he had actually arrived in Italy. With great difficulty, six months after leaving Spain, and after suffering heavy losses, he descended from the mountains to the plains.

After a pause, he attacked Taurasia, a Gallic town, [and] took it by storm. . . . Then he advanced to the river . . . now called the Po. . . . The Roman consul Publius Cornelius Scipio . . . came before Hannibal to the Po. . . . After a skirmish and a cavalry engagement, the Romans were surrounded by the Africans and fled. They took refuge in Placentia, . . . crossing the Po by bridges which they afterwards demolished. Nevertheless Hannibal made a new bridge and crossed the river. . . .

Sempronius, the other consul, . . . embarked his forces [and] came to Scipio's aid. . . . The river Trebia separated the hostile armies, which the Romans crossed before daylight on a raw, sleety morning. . . .

The order of battle on each side was [as follows. The Roman cavalry] were posted on the wings in order to protect the infantry. Hannibal ranged his elephants opposite the Roman horse and his foot soldiers against the legions, and he ordered his own cavalry to remain quiet behind the elephants until he should give the signal. When battle was joined the horses of the Romans, terrified by the sight and smell of the elephants, broke and fled. The foot-soldiers, although suffering much and weakened by cold, wet clothes and want of sleep, nevertheless boldly attacked these beasts, wounded them, and cut the hamstrings of some, and were already pushing back the enemy's infantry. Hannibal, observing this, gave the signal to his [cavalry] to outflank the [Romans]. The Roman [cavalry] having been just dispersed by fear of the elephants, the foot soldiers were left without protection, and were now in difficulties. Fearing . . . they [would] be surrounded, they everywhere broke in flight. . . . Many were cut off by [Hannibal's cavalry], who naturally overtook foot-soldiers, and many perished in the swift stream, for the river was now swollen with melting snow so that they could not wade, on account of its depth, nor could they swim, on account of the weight of their armor. Scipio, who followed trying to rally them, was wounded and almost killed, and was with difficulty rescued.

From Horace White, trans., *Appian's Roman History*, Vol. 1 (London: William Heinemann, 1912).

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

1. How did Hannibal cut a path through the Alps?
2. For what battle purpose did Hannibal use his elephants?
3. Appian noted that Hannibal's elephants frightened the Roman cavalry horses. In what other instances in history have unfamiliar animals or new weapons given one side an advantage in battle?