



# On Hannibal's Trail

The Carthaginian general took elephants over the Alps. Brothers **Danny, Ben** and **Sam Wood** took touring bikes – and a TV camera

**Y**oungest brother Sam had the idea of following Hannibal's Italy invasion route on bicycles from Spain, via France, Italy and then back to Tunisia. My siblings and I are ancient history nuts so this adventure was very appealing. We also liked the thought of turning our journey into a history documentary – and were overjoyed when the BBC did as well!

We're a lucky combination, arguably well suited for this cycling, travel and history expedition. Sam's an archaeologist, Ben is an IT developer, I'm a journalist, and we all studied history at university. My younger brothers are also experienced touring cyclists who entered family folklore riding bikes from London to Naples with dyed-blond hair and a support vehicle painted blue and yellow like Mel Gibson's in the movie *Mad Max*. My cycling experience was minimal, but I tried not to dwell on that too much.

On Hannibal's Trail (which has just aired on BBC Four) is the story of two epic adventures: Hannibal's and ours. Of course, I cringe when I describe our 2,200 mile cycle in ten weeks as epic because I know that it isn't anything much compared to other cycling efforts, and certainly nothing compared to Hannibal's trip. He started out from the Spanish city of Cartagena in 218BC with a force of more than 100,000 men and 37 elephants and for 15 years wrought havoc on his enemy, inflicting Rome's worst ever defeat at the Battle of Cannae.

In September 2009, after two years of researching, training and planning, we found ourselves on the port promenade of Cartagena about to start our journey. Robin our director and John our cameraman were ready to film our send off by the local Carthaginian Society dressed up in their Iberian barbarian outfits. It was a fabulous moment, but we were to find that cycling and filming weren't always such easy companions.

We wouldn't swap our experience for the world, but ten weeks of cycling and filming was a real physical and psychological challenge.



“Riding 2,200 miles in ten weeks is nothing next to Hannibal's trip with 100,000 men and 37 elephants”

A typical ten-hour day could involve filming in the morning for a few hours and then cycling during the afternoon, filming again in the late afternoon, and then cycling some more until dark. Day in, day out it proved at times to be an exhausting combination. We loved and hated it and after two weeks on the road were somewhat dreading crossing our biggest obstacle: the Alps.

In retrospect our misgivings were very appropriate. In fact, one of the most satisfying parts of the trip was how our physical and emotional condition seemed quite in tune with how we imagined Hannibal's at the same stages of his journey. Like the Carthaginian warrior we felt euphoria as we crossed the Alps and enjoyed a 30-mile descent from Col d'Agnel into Italy. And like him, we regarded

the locals – in our case, crazy drivers – with suspicion as we struggled on busy European highways.

There were so many classic moments: riding through vineyards in France; enjoying coffee in an isolated Alpine village; and visiting the only known bust of Hannibal in Rome's Quirinal Palace. Even one year later it's hard for our brains to compute the whole trip.

Looking back, our BBC crew's combination of enthusiasm and calm as we sweated and grunted stands out. When the going was tough, the professionalism of our directors, Robin, Fiona and Andrea, our unstoppable cameraman John, and their sense of humour, kept us going. They did an amazing job, with talented editors and our very supportive executive producer, Chris, knitting it all together and crafting a documentary.

The Roman historian Livy described the war with Hannibal as 'the most memorable war in history'. Hopefully, in a small way, we've stimulated more public interest – not just in riding bikes in beautiful places but in Hannibal's war and his Carthaginian civilization.

For more information on the Wood Brothers' trip, visit their website: [www.woodbrothers.tv](http://www.woodbrothers.tv)