

Abstract: “The Alps as *Katábasis*: Landscape and Liminality in Livy Book 21”

In Book 21 of *Ab Urbe Condita*, Livy narrates Hannibal’s crossing of the Alps in 218 BC, presenting the Alps as a forbidding wasteland of dangers that include brutal weather, sheer cliffs, icy paths, and treacherous and violent inhabitants. D.S. Levene has argued, in *Livy on the Hannibalic War* (2010), that Livy frequently includes unreal and mythical details in his narrative and that he prioritizes the creation of a historical universe that emphasizes his moral themes, whether or not that universe is faithful to history as it actually happened. My analysis uses Levene’s contention as a starting point for a close reading of the Alps passage of Book 21; I argue that the Alps, as Livy presents them, are not strictly a representation of the real Alps – which were mostly explored by Livy’s time – but a construction of a mythical landscape only loosely mapped onto a real one.

Drawing upon the work of cultural geographers such as Mike Crang and Denis Cosgrove, I define the term “liminal landscape” and argue that Livy’s depiction of the Alps gives them qualities of a liminal landscape, including a constantly-shifting nature, animalistic and inhuman inhabitants, and existence at a boundary space between civilized and wild and between earth and sky. Finally, I argue that this characterization of the Alps as a liminal landscape allows Livy to present Hannibal’s conquest of them as a symbolic conquest of death; this is a conquest that echoes the *katábasis* motif present in Greco-Roman hero stories including those of Herakles, Orpheus, and Aeneas.

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