

## Chapter 1

### Origins. From Prehistory to the Romans

#### 1. *The Power of Place.*

Until quite recent times, Turin's development as a city was conditioned primarily by its geographical position. Even before the city was founded by the Romans in the first century B.C.E, its site was already a strategic and commercial crossroads, and for much of its subsequent history it would be sought after and fought over by conquerors and invaders because of its location. Turin is sited on the west bank of the river Po, commanding the surrounding region, which would come to be known in the middle ages as Piedmont – “Pedemontium” in Latin, “the land at the foot of the mountains”. Nature has clearly defined this region. It is a fertile plain intersected by the river Po and its tributaries, and almost encircled by mountains and hills: the Alps to the west, the Ligurian Apennines to the south, the hills of Monferrato to the east. Turin is situated where the plain formed by the Po flowing northwards between the Alpine foothills and the hill country of Monferrato reaches its narrowest point, becoming a corridor only eight or nine miles wide. Here the Po is joined by its tributaries the Dora Riparia and the Stura di Lanzo, which flow down from the Alps to join it just north of the city. Thus Turin has always been a nexus of communication for land and water traffic along the upper reaches of the Po, before the river turns eastwards to follow its course across the plains of Lombardy towards the Adriatic. The city also commands what was for many centuries one of the few easy crossing points over the upper Po for east-west traffic. From the earliest times, merchants, pilgrims and armies moving between Lombardy and the Alpine passes had to cross the river here, making the river-crossing at Turin a prize of great military and commercial value, and the city itself a staging-post on the road between southern France and northern Italy.

Westwards from Turin the road follows the course of the Dora Riparia, climbing up the steep valley of Susa to the twin passes of the Mont-Cénis and the Mont-Genèvre. This is in all probability the route that Hannibal's army and its elephants followed in 218 B.C.E on their