



**Polybius**  
The Histories

A new translation by Robin Waterfield

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## THE HISTORIES

POLYBIUS, son of Lycortas, was a statesman, soldier, explorer, and historian from the Greek city of Megalopolis in the Peloponnese. He was born in about 200 BC and died probably around 118. His career as a leading politician in the confederation of Peloponnesian states known as the Achaean League was cut short when he found himself among 1,000 Achaean leaders deported to Italy after the Roman victory over Macedon in 168. He spent seventeen years in exile in Rome where he befriended the young Scipio Aemilianus. He was with Scipio at the destruction of Carthage in 146, a year in which the Achaean League also met with destruction at the hands of Rome. Polybius played a major role in the reconstruction of Greece after this disaster. At some stage he retraced Hannibal's march from Spain to Italy, and also sailed into the Atlantic and down the coast of west Africa. He wrote works (no longer extant) on tactics, on Rome's war against Numantia in Spain, on the equatorial region, and on the great Achaean statesman Philopoemen, but his main literary enterprise was the *Histories*, a study in forty books of Rome's rise to world power and her method of rule in the years 220–146 BC. Only the first five books survive in full, but there are extensive excerpts from many of the others, including Book 12, an analysis of how to write history (and how not to write it), and Book 6, a study of the Roman constitution.

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POLYBIUS

*The Histories*



*Translated by*

ROBIN WATERFIELD

*With an Introduction and Notes by*

BRIAN MCGING

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Rome's rise to power*

AS the third century BC moved into its last quarter, Rome was standing on the threshold of Mediterranean dominion. Both in the period when kings ruled Rome and after the foundation of the Republic (traditionally dated to 509 BC) she had enjoyed a steady, indeed, in spite of setbacks relentless growth in political power. She had gradually absorbed the surrounding towns and areas of central Italy, and in due course brought to heel all challengers on the Italian peninsula. From 280 to 275 she had even seen off the threat of the Greek adventurer, Pyrrhus, king of Epirus, who had answered the call for help from the people of the south Italian town of Tarentum, and brought an army to confront Rome. The astute observer will have found it militarily and politically significant that although Pyrrhus actually defeated the Romans in battle on three occasions, his victories were unsustainably expensive ('Pyrrhic'), and he could not match the Italian manpower at Rome's disposal.

Rome's resources were soon tested again, this time by a much mightier opponent, the great maritime and mercantile power of Carthage. It is difficult to say who was responsible for the First Punic War (264–241)—perhaps both sides equally—but Carthage had long controlled western Sicily, and Roman meddling in the east of the island brought them into conflict. What might initially have been a localized firefight in the north-eastern corner soon developed into a struggle for control of all Sicily, a struggle which Rome eventually won.

Immediately after the war, Carthage had to face a revolt of her extensive mercenary forces, and Rome took advantage of the situation to seize Sardinia, another Carthaginian possession. Even without the benefit of hindsight, many contemporaries must have thought that there was unfinished business between the two powers and that it would again lead them into conflict. The causes of the Second Punic War (218–201) are also uncertain, but it was Mediterranean dominion that was at stake. The east coast of Spain was the flashpoint—the capture of Rome's ally, Saguntum (modern Sagunto), by the brilliant



young commander of the Carthaginian forces in Spain, Hannibal, would probably have been enough to precipitate war—but Hannibal's decision to launch an invasion of Italy made it clear that this war was not going to be about bragging rights in Spain: the Carthaginian objective was the conquest of Rome. A series of early victories, culminating in the destruction of the Roman army at the battle of Cannae (216), put Hannibal within touching distance of success. But that was as good as it got for him: with the city of Rome apparently at his mercy he failed to besiege it, and although the war dragged on for another fifteen years in different theatres of war (Italy, Spain, Sicily, and eventually north Africa), Hannibal never again got close to achieving overall victory. In 202, having been recalled to Africa to defend Carthage, he suffered the same sort of defeat at the battle of Zama as he had inflicted on Rome at Cannae. Carthage, unlike Rome, did not have the resources to soak up defeat, and had no option but to surrender.

The Second Punic War undoubtedly inflicted a severe psychological wound on Rome—it had threatened her very existence as an independent political power, and it had been highly disruptive and destructive—but victory left her master of the western Mediterranean, and, it would appear, keen to turn her attention to the east. Here, the major powers were the Hellenistic kingdoms of Macedon, Syria, and Egypt, divisions that emerged from the break-up of Alexander the Great's vast empire. They were run by Macedonian dynasties which had inherited the Macedonian fighting machine from Alexander. Rome might have been impressive in defeating the relatively untried Carthaginians, but in 200 BC few would have backed her against the armies of Alexander's successors. Just over thirty years later, however, there was no one left to challenge her. In a series of stunning victories she established herself as *the* Mediterranean superpower. If the struggle against Hannibal had tired the Romans, it certainly did not show in the speed with which they declared war on Philip V of Macedon in 200, and defeated him in 197. Five years later, they took on the even more powerful Seleucid king Antiochus III, whose empire stretched from the Mediterranean to Iran. He fared no better than Philip, meeting with decisive military defeat in 189. Philip's son Perseus also defied Rome, to his considerable cost: after his defeat in 168, the Senate abolished the Macedonian kingdom. Theoretically, Egypt was still intact, but in practice it was militarily too weak to

offer a real threat: it was not until Cleopatra gambled her kingdom on Marcus Antonius in 31 (and lost it) that Egypt actually came to blows with Rome.

### *Polybius of Megalopolis*

There would be further victories and acquisitions, but in just over half a century Rome had established a position of dominance in the Mediterranean. From now on, states either had to follow Rome's orders or face destruction by her armies. We rely for our knowledge and understanding of this dramatic imperial process very largely on the work of the second-century BC Greek historian, Polybius of Megalopolis. Indeed, the very formulation of Rome's imperial expansion in these terms is his. Right at the beginning of his *Histories*, he states his purpose: 'is there anyone on earth who is so narrow-minded or un-inquisitive that he could fail to want to know how and thanks to what kind of political system almost the entire known world was conquered and brought under a single empire, the empire of the Romans, in less than fifty-three years—an unprecedented event?' He sets out, then, to explain how Rome conquered and unified the world in the years 220–167 BC, and, as it offered a crucial part of the explanation, what sort of political system enabled her to do this. In Book 3 he announces a change of plan: he will extend the chronological limit of the work down to 146, in order to study Roman imperial policy and assess the reaction of her subjects. Was Roman rule something to be admired or condemned? The year 146 was perhaps an even more decisive stopping point than 167, for it was in that year that Rome brutally put down Achaean and Carthaginian resistance, and destroyed the cities of Carthage and Corinth. Neither incident would seem to indicate a resounding vote of approval from these particular subjects of Rome.

As we shall see, Polybius believed that one of the vital qualifications for writing history was practical political and military experience. In this respect, he was, by his own standards, exceptionally well qualified to carry out the task that he had set himself. He was born in about 200 BC (probably—we are not sure) in the Peloponnesian city of Megalopolis, into one of the leading political families of the Achaean League, a federal organization of the southern Greeks, with its capital at Megalopolis. In the 180s his father Lycortas had been general (that is, annually elected leader) of the League several times,

and Polybius' early career gave every indication that he would be following in his father's footsteps. He first emerges in a public role in 182, when he was chosen to carry the ashes of the deceased at the funeral of Philopoemen, the main architect of Achaean prominence in Greek politics and one of the great heroes of the League. Two years later we find Polybius among the members of a diplomatic mission to Ptolemy V of Egypt (who died before the mission could set out). And the clearest indicator of his career trajectory was his election as hipparch (deputy-leader) of the League in 170/169. Two years later, however, his career in Achaean politics was abruptly terminated. The cause, ultimately, was Rome.

After the defeat of Philip V and Antiochus III, all the states of the eastern Mediterranean were suddenly forced to consider very carefully the policies they would pursue in relation to Rome. Domestic issues continued to concern the Achaean leaders, but for them too the single most important matter was the stance they should adopt towards Rome. The most advantageous policy was far from obvious and, as was to be expected, different views emerged. Theoretically, you could advocate outright resistance to Rome—and in 147 demagogic hotheads did just that, and led the Achaean League to destruction (that, at least, is Polybius' interpretation of the Achaean War that ended with the sack of Corinth)—but, realistically, the options were limited to different shades of acquiescence. Among previous Achaean leaders, Philopoemen's advice had been to treat the Roman Senate as a rational body that would respond to reasoned, legal arguments, while Aristaenus thought it was necessary to be more actively pro-Roman (24.11–13). The logical extension of Aristaenus' position was unquestioning and obsequious submission in all ways to the will of Rome, and an adherent of this policy came to the fore at the end of the 180s. His name was Callicrates, and he was Polybius' arch-enemy. On a mission to Rome, Callicrates spoke in the Senate and stated what he regarded as some home truths about the situation in Greece (24.8–10). It was simple, he said: there were friends of Rome, and there were others who used every means to oppose Rome's will; it was time the Senate supported its Greek friends and got tough with the others. In Polybius' opinion, Callicrates' intervention had a disastrous effect on the relationship between Achaea and Rome.

Dealing with Rome in a time of peace was hard enough, but when she was at war, her attitude to the states within her orbit was even

more demanding: you were either an outright friend or an outright enemy. There was no room for sitting on the fence. Unfortunately for Polybius, when he became hipparch of the Achaean League, Rome was at war with Perseus of Macedon. Anyone in a position of leadership in the Greek world who did not behave with the pro-Roman zeal of Callicrates—and Polybius was certainly in that number—was very likely to incur suspicion. And indeed Polybius claims that the Roman ambassador, Gaius Popillius Laenas, was intending to accuse him and his father, Lycortas, precisely of fence-sitting (28.3). He did not make the accusation, but Achaea's enthusiasm for the Roman cause could hardly be described as unequivocal. Sensing this, the League decided in 169 to make amends by offering military assistance to the consul, Q. Marcius Philippus (28.12–13). Polybius was commissioned to lead an embassy to convey the offer. This was already the third year of the war, and we may well imagine that there was an element of irony in Philippus' polite refusal. While the other ambassadors returned home, however, Polybius stayed on with Philippus. He does not make clear what his role was, but in view of his expertise as a military tactician (he wrote a work on tactics which he refers to at 9.20), it seems likely that he acted as a military adviser to Philippus. He needed all his diplomatic skills when Philippus asked him privately to sabotage the request for Achaean troops from the legate Appius Claudius Centho. But this gave him a chance to get to know Philippus, which perhaps proved useful a year later when Polybius and Lycortas were all set to lead an Achaean expeditionary force to help Egypt against Antiochus IV of Syria: when Philippus cautioned against this, Polybius immediately complied (29.23–5).

On 22 June 168 the Roman general Lucius Aemilius Paullus defeated Perseus at the battle of Pydna. Rome's revenge was uncompromising. This was now the third time she had been at war with Macedon in a little over thirty years, and the Senate decided to disband the kingdom, replacing it with four independent republics, tributary to Rome. Macedon's allies were brutally treated—seventy towns in Epirus were sacked and 150,000 sold into slavery (according to Polybius)—but even Roman allies, like Rhodes and Pergamum, were punished for not being supportive enough. Rome's paranoia played into the hands of her Greek stooges, who made extensive lists of their (and Rome's) political enemies for deportation to Italy. Along with others from all over Greece, 1,000 Achaeans were deported,

including Polybius, who must have been one of the first pencilled in on Callicrates' list. Presumably Callicrates took the opportunity to get rid of all possible opponents, and it is therefore a little strange to note how the Achaeans sent a number of embassies in subsequent years to ask for the return of their exiles. This would seem to indicate that Callicrates did not have things all his own way. At any rate the Senate refused to listen, until eventually, some seventeen years later in 150, they relented, and those exiles still alive were finally allowed to return home.

If Polybius missed his beloved Achaean League, there is little sign of it in what survives of the text. He does report the general despair at the Achaean failure to get the exiles back (30.32), but he himself seems to have been more annoyed at Callicrates than at Rome, and relishes the opportunity to tell how children in the street insulted Callicrates and his followers to their face; or, how at the time of a festival in Sicyon, people who went to the public baths would not bathe in the same tubs as Callicrates' party until the water had been emptied and fresh water put in (30.29). Although deprived of his political career at home, Polybius actually flourished in Italy. In the first place, he was allowed to stay in Rome, rather than a provincial town. Rome was the most important city in the world, and for someone writing the history of world (that is, Mediterranean) affairs, there could hardly be a better place to gather information and opinions. An educated Greek aristocrat like Polybius would have a great deal in common with his Roman equivalents, and he was fortunate in striking up a friendship with one of the most powerful Romans of his day, Scipio Aemilianus (31.23–5). It had been Scipio and his brother, Quintus Fabius Maximus, sons of the great Aemilius Paullus, who had won for Polybius permission to reside in Rome. He does not describe how he had made contact with them in the first place, but thereafter the relationship grew close, particularly with the young Scipio. No doubt this opened doors for Polybius, and also added to his authority as an analyst of Roman affairs.

It also seems to be the case that Polybius enjoyed considerable freedom of movement. He made a number of visits to the town of Locri in southern Italy in order to help the Locrians win some exemptions from the obligations of their treaty with Rome (12.5): the mere fact that they asked for his help implies that he was seen to have political influence. He befriended the Seleucid prince, Demetrius, who was a

hostage in Rome, and used to go hunting with him. In 162 Demetrius escaped from Rome, and took up the Seleucid throne. Polybius claims that he devised and executed the escape plan (3.1.11–15), but he can hardly have done so without help from, or the approval of, some leading Romans. And, probably still within the time of exile, he witnessed Scipio on campaign in Spain, and went to Numidia (modern Tunisia) to interview King Masinissa (35.5; 9.25). Polybius tells us that he personally retraced Hannibal's route from Spain to Italy (3.48): we do not know when, but his return journey after this visit to Spain would provide one obvious opportunity.

When the Senate decreed in 150 that the Greek detainees be allowed to return Polybius presumably thought that he would be able to revive his political career. But Roman events again intervened. First, one of the consuls of 149, Manius Manilius, summoned him to Africa as an adviser in what seemed to be the coming conflict with Carthage (36.11). Although Rome declared war in 149, the trouble initially subsided when Carthage yielded to demands, and Polybius thought the war was over. But Rome backed Carthage into a corner and when his great friend Scipio Aemilianus was given command in 147, Polybius joined him at the siege and Ammianus Marcellinus, the Roman historian of the fourth century AD, provides an interesting snippet of information about Polybius' and Scipio's involvement in the fighting: he says that they took part in an attack on a city gate as part of a *testudo*, or 'tortoise' formation (24.2.24–7). This was a minor engagement, and it is difficult to think of a single convincing reason why the commander of Roman forces and a 50-year-old Greek should take part: the story sounds like later myth-making.

Probably after the fall of Carthage, Polybius took the opportunity to journey beyond the straits of Gibraltar and explore the coast of Africa, in a ship given to him by Scipio (Pliny, *Natural History* 5.40). If he had been at home during this time, would he have been able to avert the disaster that overtook Achaëa? In 146, for no easily discernible reason, the Achaeans went to war against Rome: they were defeated, the League disbanded and Corinth destroyed. Unfortunately Polybius' own account of the years leading up to 146 does not survive, so we know nothing of the state of Achaean politics he found when he returned in 150 after so long away. Fragments indicate that he blamed the populist politicians, Diaeus and Critolaus, for what happened in 146 (38.10–13), but there is not enough to explain

why or how the situation developed as it did. What we do know is that Polybius played a major role in the reconstruction of Greece after the disaster. He was appointed by the senatorial commission settling Greek affairs to assist the various cities in understanding the legal and constitutional changes they faced, and he was clearly involved in drafting new legislation himself (39.5). According to Pausanias, the travel writer of the second century AD (and to the posthumous editor of Polybius, who comments personally right at the end of the work), many cities of the Peloponnese erected statues to Polybius in gratitude for his achievements at this time (8.9, 30, 37, 44, 48), and we have inscriptions attesting to this.

Polybius is usually thought to have lived for another quarter of a century or more after the Achaean War, but we know almost nothing about his life in these years. There are brief glimpses of him in Rome and Alexandria; and, judging from a separate monograph he wrote on Rome's war against Numantia, he may have accompanied Scipio Aemilianus again at the capture of Numantia in Spain in 133, when Scipio commanded the Roman forces. For somebody who had been active all his life as a politician, soldier, explorer, and writer, it is hard to imagine that he settled down to a life of inactivity. He must have continued to research and write. We do not know the schedule of his literary output, but in addition to the *Histories*, there was the work on the Numantine War just referred to, and the study of tactics. There was also a biography, in three books, of Philopoemen, and a treatise on the habitability of the equatorial region. Our only evidence for Polybius' death, an anonymous later work entitled *Macrobioi* ('Long Lives'), certainly implies a vigorous old man: it records that he died when he fell off his horse riding home at the age of 82.

### *The Histories*

Polybius' grand theme was Rome and the unification of Mediterranean history under her aegis. As we have seen, the *Histories* originally set out to describe the process of imperial expansion in the years 220–167, but was then extended to 146. The finished work comprised forty books, 1–30 taking the story to 167, 31–40 completing the revised plan. Of the forty books, only the first five survive fully extant, and of these, Books 1 and 2 form an introduction to the work, outlining events between the first war that Rome fought against Carthage

and the start of the Hannibalic War (264–220). Book 3 takes us to the year 216 and ends with the great victory of Hannibal at the battle of Cannae; Books 4 and 5 then review the main events in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean before 216. Although that is the extent of what we have in full, we do also have substantial excerpts of many, but not all, of the remaining books. These excerpts were made in the tenth century by Byzantine scholars, who are at the same time both heroes and villains of the textual story. Their enthusiasm for making excerpts and anthologies of classical works probably ensured the disappearance of the full text of Polybius. The first five books must have been sufficiently well established by this stage to ensure their survival, but for the rest, it is clear that readers were content with excerpts rather than the complete text, which eventually just disappeared from the record. The reason for this is probably a mixture of the length—in its complete form the work would have taken up something like seven volumes of the present translation—and the fact that Polybius wrote in a stylistically unadorned, at times even awkward, Greek. The first-century BC historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus said that it was one of those works you could not really read cover to cover (*De compositione verborum* 4.110). So perhaps the full text might have disappeared anyway, and we are lucky that the Byzantine scholars preserved such extensive sections of the later books.

The work was not all a straight historical narrative. Book 6, for instance, was a study of the Roman system of government: there are certainly big gaps, but a great deal of the book survives and has become the most famous part of the *Histories*. Similarly, we have large sections of Book 12, a discussion of history writing, much of which is taken up with a sustained assault on the Sicilian historian, Timaeus (c.350–260 BC). The only other entirely digressionary book was 34, a study of geography: from this, very little survives beyond occasional quotations and citations by other ancient writers. Book 40 seems to have been a sort of summary of the contents of the whole work.

### *Book 1*

Polybius opens with important and interesting introductory considerations (1–5) in which the theme, plan, and starting point are set out. The work proper will start with the 140th Olympiad and the Second Punic War, Rome's famous struggle with Hannibal (for the Olympiad



dating system see the explanatory note to p. 4). It was not desirable, however, to plunge *in medias res*, since Greek readers were unfamiliar with Roman and Carthaginian history: Polybius, therefore, felt it necessary to start with two introductory books going back to Olympiad 129 (264–261 BC), when the First Punic War started. It makes good sense to introduce the two protagonists who both start and finish the work. After a further introductory section (6–12), which actually starts with the sack of Rome by the Gauls in 387/6, the book finally settles down to its plan and divides into two parts, the first war between Rome and Carthage (13–64), and the war that immediately followed between Carthage and her mercenaries (65–88). The First Punic War obviously provides important background for the Hannibalic war, but although Polybius claims that an account of Carthage's mercenary war was important for understanding the causes of the Second Punic War, it is far from clear why we need such detail. It did, however, explain how Rome was able to grab Sardinia, an act that was itself partly responsible for the Second Punic War, and it also highlighted a fundamental weakness in Carthage's military capacity, her reliance on unreliable mercenaries. And, artistically, the two wars of Book 1 form a stark and handsome contrast with each other. Polybius is at pains to emphasize how the First Punic War was conducted with nobility and courage, both sides striving mightily and with honour, while the mercenary war was marked by extreme savagery.

### *Book 2*

Book 2 has three main sections, covering Rome's war with Illyria, her first military venture in Greece (2–12), her conquest of northern Italy (14–35), and the history of Greece (or, more specifically, of the Achaean League) before Olympiad 140 (37–70). Polybius is also well aware of the extensive expansion of Carthaginian power in Spain in the same period, but only has time to refer to it briefly (1, 13, 36). There is much valuable introductory material in this book. It was important to explain how Rome had become involved in Greek affairs, and how she had secured the north of Italy, where the first campaigns against Hannibal would be fought. Her successful subjugation of the Celts of the region also perhaps serves to emphasize how difficult the Carthaginians had found it (as described in Book 1) to deal with their internal problems, the mercenaries.

The war against Illyria is treated only briefly in three episodes: the siege of the city of Medion by the Aetolians, the situation in the Epirot city of Phoenice, and the actual confrontation with the fiery queen of Illyria, Teuta, who murders a free-speaking Roman ambassador and precipitates the crisis. The subjugation of northern Italy includes a most interesting section on the geography and natural resources of the area (14–16). As we shall see, Polybius regarded geography as one of the crucial elements in good history writing. Although Rome's major opponent in Greece was Macedon, Polybius cannot resist the opportunity of putting the Achaean League centre stage, but his account of its constitution and development is an important source of information for the history of the League. Characteristic of Polybius' method is the fierce assault he launches on the historian Phylarchus (56–63).

### *Book 3*

Book 3 marks the beginning of the work proper, and concentrates solely on the causes (6–33) and first years (33–117) of the Second Punic War. Polybius enunciates for the first time his distinction between the causes, pretexts, and beginnings of wars (6–7), but in spite of a lengthy analysis of the background of the Hannibalic War, he remains uncertain as to whose fault it was. The causes of the war were the Roman treatment of Carthage after the mercenary war, the anger of the Barcid (that is, Hannibal's) family, and the growth of Carthaginian power in Spain, but Polybius is uncharacteristically vague about the beginning and pretext of the war. By ancient standards, however, it is almost certainly the longest analysis of the causes of a conflict that we have, and a very thorough attempt to tease out the possibilities. The narrative of the war itself is an important source for the early years of the war, but also makes for exciting reading: Hannibal's march from Spain to Italy across the Pyrenees, the south of France, and the Alps (33–59), the battle of lake Trasimene (77–94), and the Cannae campaign (106–17) all represent historical narrative of a high quality. Polybius then leaves the reader in a state of suspense, as he does not resume this storyline until Book 7: he must first fill in the history of eastern affairs (Books 4 and 5) and analyse the Roman constitution (Book 6), before he can return in Book 7 to describe how Rome faced the greatest crisis in her history.

*Books 4 and 5*

The scene now shifts to the east and the events in that region of Olympiad 140. The two books together form a continuous story, in which the Social War (220–217 BC), the conflict between Philip V of Macedon with his allies (the Achaean League particularly) and the Aetolians, provides a sort of structural framework: it begins and ends both books (4.3–37 and 57–87; 5.1–30 and 91–105) which are, additionally, closely linked by the story of the conspiracy of Apelles against Philip V (4.76–5.29). Polybius weaves into the account of the Social War coverage of other events: in Book 4, the war between Byzantium and Rhodes (38–52), which includes a long analysis of the geography, hydrography, and resources of the Black Sea (38–42), and a brief review of the situation in Crete (53–5); in Book 5, the Fourth Syrian War (219–217 BC) fought between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies (34–87), and a description of the international aid sent to Rhodes after it suffered a disastrous earthquake in about 227 (88–90). The reasons for the choice of material are not always clear. Why do we need to hear of the local disputes in Crete, for instance, or of the Rhodian earthquake? The answer may well lie in the later, lost books, but both events, although on one level purely local affairs, do involve the wider Mediterranean world, and perhaps demonstrate the process by which Mediterranean history was beginning to flow into a single story. At the end of Book 5 Polybius ties up loose ends with a rapid summary of the situation in Greece and the east (106–11).

*Book 6*

It had been Polybius' purpose right from the start of the work to explain how and under what sort of constitution (in the sense of governmental structures and state institutions) Rome had conquered the world. Book 6 provides the answer to that question and is, thus, a crucial part of the *Histories*. It is also the most famous part. Polybius may be seen in the present day as one of the great historians of antiquity, but his reputation from the sixteenth century on rested more on this (incomplete) book of political science than on the historical narrative of the first five books. What caught the attention of Machiavelli and other writers on republican government was Polybius' analysis of the Roman constitution as 'mixed', that is, a mixture of monarchy,

aristocracy, and democracy. Book 6 was heavily influenced by Greek political theory, but it was, as far as we know, the first attempt to apply such theory to the reality of Roman government and history and the first attempt to explain Rome's success in these terms.

Although the book is by no means completely preserved, large parts of it survive and we can be reasonably sure what the rest contained. The first major subject is the cycle of the different types of constitution (3–10). The three simple, and good, forms of constitution (monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy) alternate with their degenerate equivalents (tyranny, oligarchy, and mob-rule) in a naturally occurring cycle. The cycle is started by a primitive monarch who brings order to chaos and who, when he replaces brute force with reason, turns himself into a king. Kingship then degenerates into tyranny, which itself gives way to aristocracy. It soon turns into its corrupt form, oligarchy, from which democracy takes over, before it becomes greedy for wealth and power, and changes into mob-rule. The abuses of mob-rule reduce the state to chaos, out of which a primitive monarch emerges and starts the cycle again. Each of these forms of government is like a living organism that has its own natural birth, rise, fall, and death, and indeed the cycle itself is the product of nature.

Polybius next develops his theory of the 'mixed' Roman constitution (10–18). The Spartan, Lycurgus, had understood that each of the simple and good forms of constitution is precarious, bearing within it the seeds of its own degeneration into its corrupt form. So he decided to try to unite the best features of the simple forms into a mixed variety, in which the balance between monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy would fend off the natural tendency to corruption. This resulted in the retention of liberty at Sparta for a longer time than in any other state. Rome achieved the same mixture as Lycurgus devised, but by means of a natural set of developments rather than as a conscious decision. At this point there is a big gap in the text, and it is a disappointing one, because fragments indicate that it contained an account of early Roman history up to the middle of the fifth century BC. Presumably the purpose was to demonstrate how the events of Roman history had created what, by the middle of the fifth century, had become a mixed constitution. It would be fascinating to know how Polybius viewed this process.

Fortunately, the description of the workings of the Roman system does survive: three chapters outlining the powers of the consuls, Senate, and people (12–14) are balanced by three more which set out

the checks on the power of the consuls, Senate, and people (15–17). This is a controversial section, as it seems to leave out a number of what modern scholars regard as basic elements of the way the Roman system worked. There is, for example, no reference made to the different voting assemblies of Rome, and only the consuls receive attention among the office-holders. It is important, however, to note two points. First, Polybius in this section is presenting a schematic plan of the main power structures of Rome, not a complete inventory of the entire system. Second, the text again fails us at this point, and when it resumes it deals in considerable details with the structures and camp system of the Roman army (19–42). We do not know how long the gap is, or what it contained. It must at least have offered a transitional passage explaining why we are moving on to the Roman army; and some scholars have suggested that there was also a summary of the Roman constitution. The fragmentary nature of the text warns us, or should warn us, to be wary of jumping to conclusions.

The remainder of the book seeks to illuminate better the Roman constitution by comparing it with other ‘mixed’ examples—Athens, Thebes, Sparta, Crete, Mantinea, and Carthage (43–56), in which Polybius is really only interested in Sparta and Carthage. Roman institutions were better at fostering bravery than Carthaginian ones, and there is an interesting section on the inspiring nature of Roman funerals (53–4). The book ends with a story about the battle of Cannae, which serves to bring us back to the story that we left off at the end of Book 3.

### *Book 12*

The surviving sections of Book 12 are somewhat less coherent than those of Book 6, with the result that it is not really clear how the book works. It appears to be an assault on the Sicilian historian Timaeus, but some argue that it is rather a presentation of historical theory and method that just happens to involve heavy criticism of Timaeus. I believe that its purpose is primarily polemical—Timaeus was in fact the first historian to deal extensively with Roman history, a subject on which Polybius wanted to be regarded as the great expert—but that in attacking Timaeus it deals with issues of central importance to the writing of history.

Any plan of Book 12's structure can only be speculative, but one way of viewing it divides it up into four sections. The first (1–4) deals with errors Timaeus made about Africa and Corsica, and with his ignorance and pedantry. Polybius then defends at some length authors attacked by Timaeus, particularly Aristotle (5–23). The third section highlights Timaeus' lack of qualifications for writing history, in particular his lack of political and military experience (24–26d). This includes a famous comparison between history and medicine (25d–e). The last section examines in more detail the reasons for Timaeus' technical incompetence (27a–end).

### *Polybius and the writing of history*

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of all aspects of Polybius' historical theory and method, but a brief examination of some of the main characteristics will give a flavour of how interesting Polybius was as a historian.

#### OUTSPOKENNESS

Perhaps the most immediately noticeable feature of Polybius' work is the frequency with which he interrupts his narrative to think out loud about, and comment on, a wide variety of topics. He was a man who spent his entire adult life among the rich and powerful; he travelled the world, he was a leading politician, he commanded armies, he was a writer. Such a varied and exciting career seems to have given him the confidence to pronounce judgement on all sorts of issues, with little evidence of self-doubt or recognition that those with whom he disagrees might know what they were talking about. This readiness to discourse upon what swims into his ken is a great gift to posterity. It leads him into interesting considerations of, for example, the power of music to combat the harsh effects of nature on human character, as evidenced by the Arcadian people of Cynaethae who abandoned their musical traditions with disastrous effects (4.20–1); or, for instance, into a less immediately interesting comparison between Roman and Greek military palisades (18.18). But most valuably for us, he says more about the art of history writing than any other historians of antiquity, most of whom have little, or sometimes nothing, to say about what they were doing or how they thought it should be done.

In this mode of exposition he is closest to his great fifth-century predecessor, Herodotus.

#### THE HISTORIAN AND PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

Timaeus utterly neglected the questioning of informants, which Polybius regards as ‘the most important aspect of a historian’s work’ (12.4c). He continues:

Events take place simultaneously all over the world, but it is impossible for one person to be in more than one place at the same time, and it is equally impossible for him personally to visit every part of the world and see what is special about them. His only option is to question as many people as possible, to believe those who deserve belief, and to be a good judge of what he hears.

Timaeus’ main failing was that he sat in a library for fifty years and conducted no investigations in the field: he was an armchair historian (12.25d). Even if he had undertaken personal enquiry, however, he was, in Polybius’ opinion, fatally underqualified for the task. For he lacked the one indispensable qualification needed for the writing of political history: practical experience of politics and war (12.25g):

just as it is impossible for someone who lacks military experience to write well about warfare, it is impossible for someone who has never acted in the political sphere or faced a political crisis to write good political history. Nothing written by authors who rely on mere book-learning has the clarity that comes from personal experience, and so nothing is gained by reading their work. For without its educational element, history is altogether uninspiring and useless.

In a famous comparison between medicine and history (12.25d–e), Polybius says that, just as medicine has three parts (the theory of disease, dietetics, and surgery/pharmacology), so too has political history: the study of written sources, personal fieldwork, and political experience. He does not say it directly, but without experience the first two elements are useless: you simply cannot know how to make the correct judgements about what you read or hear or see. Polybius’ whole methodology is based on this critical assessment of all the evidence, written, oral, and visual, an assessment that only the experienced soldier-politician can make.

## GEOGRAPHY

One of the required three elements of history, as we have just seen, is personal investigation in the field, 'the inspection and mapping of inland and coastal features such as cities, battle-sites, rivers, and harbours' (12.25e). The reader will find a great deal of topographical and geographical description in Polybius. The purpose is didactic clarity (to which we shall return below). The campaigns in Sicily of the First Punic War, for example, cannot be understood if you do not know the geography of Sicily (1.41): 'I shall briefly try to describe the natural advantages and the location of the places in question, because I would not want any reader to find my account opaque just because he is unfamiliar with the geography of the island.' This is a simple, practical point, often repeated and to good effect, especially in military narrative (other instances include the description of northern Italy at 2.14–16, or of Sparta at 5.21).

More difficult to understand is the reason why, on certain occasions, Polybius engages with geography at a much more theoretical level. When describing Hannibal's march from Spain to Italy, for example (3.36–7), he sets out to explain its geography. This should make perfectly good sense, but the description immediately takes leave of the details of Hannibal's route in order to discuss the compass points and general layout of the world. Polybius seems to forget the practical purpose with which he started. Similarly, when discussing the war of Bithynia and Rhodes against Byzantium (4.38–52), he begins by explaining the site of Byzantium. This starts out at a practical level, but soon develops into a very detailed and theoretical analysis of the flow of water into and out of the Black Sea (4.38–42).

There are perhaps two aspects to this higher theoretical geography we encounter in the *Histories*. Polybius was a general, and generals have to understand local topographies, roads, distances, the layout of cities, and so on. But he was also a research scholar, and it is possible that these, initially practical, needs, developed into deeper, scholarly interests which led him from the purely practical into the theoretical. It has also been suggested, however, that these theoretical passages may be more closely linked to Polybius' conception of the unity of world history. Various rivers flow into the Sea of Azov, the Sea of Azov into the Black Sea, the Black Sea into the Sea of Marmora, the Aegean, the



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