• PREFACE •

The writings of Polybius have extraordinary value in my mind for two main reasons. First, because of the period about which he was writing and in which he was fundamentally involved, and second, thanks to the claims he makes about how the history of such a period should be written. Both have significant importance not just for students of the ancient world, but for anyone interested in how we should construct the narrative of our past, and, even potentially, learn from our own history for the future.

Polybius' own life bridged the great divide between the last gasps of independence in the ancient Greek world and the seemingly unstoppable rise of Roman *imperium*. He was an eyewitness to one of the greatest power shifts in Mediterranean history. And crucially, he wrote about those events in their immediate aftermath. His work is a history by someone on the ground, not only bearing witness to events, but also being swept up in them and their consequences. As such, Polybius' work stands in contrast to other Roman historians, like Livy who began his narrative with the earliest history of Rome far before his own days, only ending with a narrative of his own time.

Following a résumé of the historical events of the period 264–220 BC, that bore witness crucially to the first clash for Mediterranean supremacy between Rome and Carthage, Polybius' narrative focuses on the period from 220 BC to 146 BC. As a result, the narrative starts in full at the time of Rome's second clash with its long-term enemy Carthage, which left Rome as master of the Western Mediterranean and free to turn her attentions to the East, to the Greek world of Hellenistic monarchies, which had governed the area since the demise of Alexander the Great in the late fourth century BC. Polybius' narrative ends with Rome's destruction of the Greek city of Corinth in 146 BC (the same year Rome returned to destroy once and for all the city of Carthage in North Africa), and Rome's complete mastery of the Mediterranean.

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The exact publication timeline of Polybius' work is uncertain, but many argue that he wrote the first fifteen books of his forty-book history between 168 and 150 BC. This first section (which eventually extended to thirty books) dealt with the period between 220 and 168 BC: that is to say, Polybius started writing almost immediately after the culminations of events on which his history focused. Even more tantalisingly, some argue that these early books may even have been published almost immediately following their completion. As a result, we are left with the intriguing possibility that his narrative of Rome's ascension en route to 168 BC was available to those involved in the continuation of that ascension down to 146 BC, which would in turn become the subject for the last ten books of Polybius' history. Polybius' narrative of the recent past thus potentially influenced the very events it would eventually come to describe. This was thus possibly 'live history', in contrast to the vast majority of Roman historians, like Sallust or Tacitus, who never came to write about events that they could claim to have influenced through their own previously published narratives.

What makes Polybius' history even more fascinating as a piece of contemporary scholarship is the fact that Polybius was Greek. We are used to the idea that history is written by the winners. And yet here – in the work of the only Hellenistic historian to survive in substantial form – we are reading the words of a man writing about Roman ascendancy, whose country was subsumed and crushed by Rome. Polybius was (we think) from Megalopolis, a city in the middle of the Peloponnese, an urban settlement created out of nothing (its name translates literally as 'Great City') in the pressure-cooker that was the Greek world in the run up to the conquests of Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great. His is thus a history of conquest written by one of the conquered.

Moreover, Polybius was one of the individuals actively caught up in the conflict: he was deported to Rome as a result of Rome's paranoia in the aftermath of 168 BC and only allowed to return home in 150 BC. His was, as a result, a unique perspective. A Greek, forced to Rome, living in the belly of the beast that was in the process of consuming the Mediterranean and his homeland, writing about that series of events. He was a man very much between two worlds, and he made the most

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of it. While in Rome, he became friends with (and advisor to) powerful Romans like Scipio Aemilianus the man who would eventually destroy Carthage in 146 BC, who took Polybius on military tours with him to Hispania and Africa and, crucially, enabled Polybius to be an eyewitness to the destruction of Carthage. But Polybius also continued to be an important figure when finally back in Greece. He seems to have been instrumental not only in helping Greece, through his historical narrative, to come to terms with its new conqueror, but also in actively helping to reconstruct his homeland. As Pausanias, the second century AD 'tour-guide' writer later said 'whenever the Romans obeyed the advice of Polybius, things went well with them, but whenever they would not listen to his instructions they made mistakes' (*Description of Greece*, 8.30.8–9). Pausanias even goes so far as to claim that 'Greece would not have fallen at all, if she had obeyed Polybius in everything, and when she met disaster, her only help came from him' (*Description of Greece*, 8.37.2).

Greek citizen, war captive, contemporary historian, friend and advisor of Rome, indispensable stalwart of Greek reconstruction and adaptation, Polybius was indeed a fascinating character with a unique perspective on the critical changes sweeping the Mediterranean in the late third and second centuries BC. It is no wonder that his text – despite criticism of it in antiquity, and despite the piecemeal state in which it survives today (only the first five books survive in full) – has been taken up with gusto by generations occupied with military dominance and political power shifts, perhaps most notably amongst rulers in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, at the time of the American revolution, and in the aftermath of the Second World War and the rise to pre-eminence of the USA.

But what kind of history did he produce? Scholars have increasingly come round to seeing Polybius' work as part of a continuum of development in historical narrative stretching back to the first work of *historia* (investigation) by Herodotus in the fifth century BC. Herodotus had sought to understand a world conflict (that of Greece and Persia), its causes and effects, just as Polybius set out to do. But Polybius' narrative also draws from a Hellenistic style of 'universal history' – broad, all-encompassing narratives that try to present a complete picture of the world and its many inter-connected events (it's

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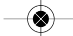
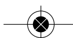


no accident, for example, that Polybius' work is five times the length of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*). For Polybius (and much of his stake in how history should be written is set out in the first two books of his narrative) history had to be universal to be useful (*chresimon*, cf. Polybius, 1.4.11), and the only point in writing history was for it to be useful to others as a general guide for improving life and specifically as a necessary part of one's training for a political career. Moreover, for a history to be universal, for Polybius, it was impossible for the writer to stay put at his desk (he is very critical of other ancient historians, for example Timaeus of Tauromenium, not only for his over-narrow focus, but also for his lack of practical experience of the events he was writing about). It was an imperative of good history to get out and about, to travel, not only in order to bring geography and historical events together, but to obtain multiple 'on the ground' perspectives on events. Polybius' history is thus – despite its conception in the second century BC – shockingly modern in its outlook, style and concerns. It demands a universal view, supported by multiple perspectives obtained by direct eyewitness contact on the ground, written by someone with acute political and military experience who has travelled far and wide. It seeks to understand what kind of political system enabled such military expansion and success, and questions how one should deal with and think about those with whom one is at war. It offers historical narrative mixed with biography, ethnography and geography, as well as political, juridical and military analysis, in an effort to be of active use to its readership in their own lives and careers, as well as a guide for future generations to help them judge worthy of praise or blame past actions and events. It is no surprise as a result that Polybius has not just been of use to those interested in changing the balance of military and political power across history, nor only those interested in re-creating the world he described (e.g., Flaubert's *Salammbo*), but also to thinkers like Machiavelli, Hume and Montesquieu interested in constitutional affairs. Indeed it is, ironically, as a Roman constitutional theorist that Polybius is in fact best known, whose work came to be influential in the development of key constitutions that still dominate our lives today, like that of the USA.

When we read Polybius, we thus not only read the major surviving account of a crucial period of Mediterranean history, but rather an



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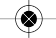

account written by someone intimately connected with those events, designed to offer useful instruction for present and future generations. As a result, what Polybius offers us today is not only a crucial window into the mindset of a world which is indelibly interlaced into the fabric of our modern global society, but also, perhaps even more importantly, an argument about the way to write history and the value of history for humankind. Polybius worked on his narrative for something like fifty years. The result is something that has – and should – survive for millennia.

MICHAEL SCOTT