

Between Narrative and Interpretation: Writing History in the Ancient World

Unit 6: Polybius

Introduction

Polybius is a difficult author to place into most categories. He was a Greek historian, who was born in mainland Greece, wrote in Greek and was very interested in the history of the Greek world. Yet, he is rightly remembered as the historian of the encounter between the Greek and the Roman worlds, and of the events that led up to the Roman conquest of the Greek world. He was also very familiar with Rome and the elite that ruled the Roman empire; he spoke Latin and used a number of Latin sources, both written and oral; and he was very influential in the development of Roman literature. While classing Polybius as a Greek historian is perfectly accurate, it may not be entirely helpful: it is not, so to say, the end of the story. Polybius was the citizen of a world that was changing fast and deeply; he also chose to be the historian of that world, and precisely for this reason he should not be confined to a specific, and inevitably reductive label.

Polybius was born in about 200 BC in a prominent family of Megalopolis, in Arcadia, Central Greece. His father Lycortas was a renowned figure within the Achaean League, the political and military confederation that gathered a significant number of Greek cities in the third and second centuries BC. Lycortas was on a number of occasions the leading representative of the League (*strategos*), and Polybius himself was the leader of its cavalry (*hipparchos*) in 170/169 BC. Polybius's background was the conventional one of a member of an important Greek family, who was expected to take part in the political life of his city and, most importantly, of the league where the city belonged. He received a military education, but was also taught to practice rhetoric and – quite obviously – to speak and to write excellent Greek. More generally speaking, he was trained – or trained himself – not to think simply in political or military terms. His later choice to embrace literature and historiography must be explained in light of this background. Polybius never regarded

politics as a 'technique', nor he regarded historiography as just a form of literature, or art. The two levels were closely integrated.

Polybius and Rome

Polybius' career unfolded at a time of great uncertainty and difficult challenges for the Greek world, and especially for mainland Greece. Rome's increasing involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean posed very urgent problems to the Greek elites. While the clash between Rome and the Hellenistic kingdoms of Macedon or Syria was in many ways an outcome to be expected, the position of the Greek cities vis-à-vis the newcomers was more problematic. The choice between appeasement and open confrontation was the issue that the Greek elites, and especially the great leagues of mainland Greece were compelled to face. Unlike the majority of his peers within the leadership of the Aetolian League, Polybius thought that the clash with Rome had to be avoided, and that there was no need for the Aetolian League to take sides in the war between Rome and Macedon. Despite his opposition, the League took sides with Macedon, and Polybius loyally joined its forces in the conflict that is known as the Third Macedonian War. The decisive event of the conflict was the battle of Pydna, in 168 BC, which ended with Rome's crushing victory, the capture of the king of Macedon Perseus, and the end of the kingdom that had belonged to Philip and Alexander the Great. Rome's retaliation duly extended to the Greeks who had joined their Macedonian ally: 1,000 members of the Achaean League were captured and taken to Rome. Polybius was among them.

It was arguably the defining moment of his life. With one stroke, his political career was over, and a difficult life of Greek 'guest' in the capital of the empire started. What could have been a miserable and even dangerous experience for others turned out to be an extraordinary opportunity for an intelligent and capable man like Polybius. He had the intellectual profile and the range of knowledge to command the respect and admiration of the many members of the Roman elite who knew and admired Greek culture, spoke the Greek language, and were familiar with Greek literature and philosophy. By the second century BC, a significant part of the Roman governing class could be considered 'philhellenic'; the traditionalists like Cato the

Censor, who purportedly refused any contact with Greek culture, and refused to learn the language, were a minority. It is within the philhellenic elite that Polybius made perhaps the most important encounter of his life: that with Scipio Cornelius Aemilianus, adoptive son of Scipio Africanus, the winner of the Second Punic War, one of the most remarkable and promising members of the Roman elite. Polybius the Greek exile and Aemilianus the Roman promise became close friends; it was the beginning of a close cooperation, which had important political implications. What is most remarkable is that we have an account of their encounter and friendship in Polybius himself (31.23-25, transl. W. R. Paton):

Now that the progress of my narrative and the date call our special attention to this family, I wish in order to satisfy the reader's curiosity to execute a promise I made in the previous book and left unfulfilled, and this was that I would tell how and why the fame of Scipio in Rome advanced so far and became so brilliant more quickly than it should, and to tell also how his friendship and intimacy with the author grew so great that this report about them not only spread to Italy and Greece, but that even further afield their liking and intercourse were a matter of common knowledge. Now I have already explained that their acquaintance took its origin in the loan of some books and conversation about them. But as their intimacy grew, and when the Achaeans in detention were sent off to provincial towns, Fabius and Scipio, the sons of Lucius Aemilius, urgently begged the praetor to allow Polybius to remain in Rome. This was done, and their intercourse now becoming much closer, the following incident took place. On one occasion when they were all coming out together from the house of Fabius, the latter happened to take a turning leading to the forum, while Polybius and Scipio turned off in the opposite direction. As they advanced Scipio, addressing Polybius in a quiet and gentle voice, and blushing slightly said: 'Why, Polybius, since there are two of us, do you constantly converse with my brother and address to him all your questions and explanations, but ignore me? Evidently you also have the same opinions of me that I hear the rest of my countrymen have. For, as I am told, I am believed by everybody to be a quiet and indolent man, with none of the energetic character of a Roman, because I don't choose to speak in the law courts. And they say that the family I spring from does not require such a protector as I am, but just the opposite; and this is what I feel most.'

Polybius was surprised at the way in which the young man opened the conversation; for he was then not more than eighteen years old. 'For goodness' sake, Scipio,' he said, 'don't talk in that way, or get any such notion into your head. I don't, I assure you, do this because I have a low opinion of you or ignore you, but because your brother is your senior.'

I both begin conversation with him and finish with him, and as for any explanations and advice, I address myself especially to him in the belief that your opinions are the same as his. However, now I admire you when you say that you are pained to think that you are of a milder character than becomes members of his family; for that shows that you have a high spirit. I myself would be delighted to do all in my power to help you to speak and act in a way worthy of your ancestors. For as those studies which I see now occupy and interest you, you will be in no want of those ready to help both of you; so great is the crowd of such men that I see flocking here from Greece at present. But as regards what you say now troubles you I don't think you could find anyone more efficient than myself to forward your effort and help you.' Before Polybius ceased speaking, Scipio, grasping his hand in both his own and pressing it warmly, said: 'Would I could see the day on which you, regarding nothing else as of higher importance, would devote your attention to me and join your life with mine; for then I shall at once feel myself to be worthy of my house and my forefathers.' Polybius was on the one hand very happy to see the enthusiasm and affection of the young man, yet was embarrassed when he reflected on the high position of the family and the wealth of its members. However, after this mutual explanation the young man never left his side, and preferred his society to anything else. From that time onwards continuing in the actual conduct of life to give proof to each other of their worth, they came to regard each other with an affection like that of father and son or near relations.

The first direction taken by Scipio's ambition to lead a virtuous life was to attain a reputation for temperance and excel in this respect all the other young men of the same age. This is a high prize indeed and difficult to gain, but it was at this time easy to pursue at Rome owing to the vicious tendencies of most of the youths. For some of them had abandoned themselves to amours with boys and others to the society of courtesans, and many to musical entertainments and banquets, and the extravagance they involve, having in the course of the war with Perseus been speedily infected by the Greek laxity in these respects. So great in fact was the incontinence that had broken out among the young men in such matters, that many paid a talent for a male favourite and many three hundred drachmas for a jar of caviar. This aroused the indignation of Cato, who said once in a public speech that it was the surest sign of deterioration in the republic when pretty boys fetch more than fields, and jars of caviar more than ploughmen. It was just at the period we are treating of that this present tendency to extravagance declared itself, first of all because they thought that now after the fall of the Macedonian kingdom their universal dominion was undisputed, and next because after the riches of Macedonia had been transported to Rome there was a great display of wealth both in public and in private. Scipio, however, setting himself to pursue the opposite course of conduct, combating all his appetites and moulding his life to be in every way coherent and uniform, in about the first five years established his universal reputation for strictness and temperance.

In the next place he sedulously studied to distinguish himself from others in magnanimity and cleanhandedness in money matters. In this respect the part of his life he spent with his real father was an excellent grounding for him, and he had good natural impulses towards the right; but chance too helped him much in carrying out this resolve.

If anything, this passage is a good reminder that there is no such thing as an impartial history. What is most remarkable is that Polybius did nothing to hide his connection with Aemilianus. Declaring one's friendships and background was perfectly acceptable in ancient historiography: it could contribute to consolidate an idea of the preferences and inclinations of the historian. Moreover, Polybius' association with Aemilianus had important consequences on the biography of the historian, which enabled him to reach a better understanding of how the Roman empire worked. Polybius joined the staff of Aemilianus, and could travel extensively in the Western provinces of the empire with his friend and patron. When Polybius was released from his captivity in 150 BC, along with other 300 surviving prisoners from Pydna, he returned to his hometown, Megalopolis, where he completed the wide-ranging historical work that he had started in Rome. By that time, having a fellow-citizen with such important friends at Rome could be an invaluable asset for a Greek city. We know that Polybius embarked on other journeys during his stay in Greece, including a return to Rome; we can safely assume that he lived until old age, although we must not necessarily believe the anecdote that has him dying at 82 by falling off a horse. His death must be placed somewhere between 132 and 120. The detail is not irrelevant, because it would clarify if Polybius witnessed, or was aware of the Gracchan crisis and kept into account in his narrative.

Polybius is known mainly for his *Histories*, the full-scale narrative of the events between the battle of Pydna (168) and the fateful year 146, which saw both the fall of Carthage and the sack of Corinth, two defining moments in the making of the Roman hegemony in the Mediterranean. Quite rightly, we will focus on this work in most of this unit, but it is worth paying some attention to the scarce evidence we have for the other lost works of Polybius. We know that he wrote a treatise on warfare, especially concentrated on strategic issues: his interest in these issues is apparent from many passages of the *Histories*, and the biography of Polybius shows how important

his military profile was. His interest in military matters dated back to his upbringing as a prominent young member of the Achaean elite. It is to this period that his interest in history may be traced back: as he himself states (10.21), he wrote a monograph in three books on Philopoemen, the charismatic leader of the Achaean League of the generation before Polybius, whom he had met and admired as a young man. Towards the end of his life, he turned to a topic of contemporary history, the campaign that led to the conquest of Numantia in Spain, which took place in 133 BC under the leadership of Scipio Aemilianus: it is unclear if Polybius followed his friend on the campaign, but it is a safe guess that the appearance of a monographic work on such an important event made some impact on Roman historiography, which was used to more wide-ranging and general narratives.

Whatever the scope and importance of the monograph on the *bellum Numantinum* may have been, the work that earned Polybius his reputation among posterity and a place of great importance in the history of ancient historiography is the great work on the history from the beginning of the Second Punic War to 146. Its importance and its success are apparent even if only a relatively small portion of this great work has survived. The Histories consisted of forty books: we have the complete text of the five opening books; four books (17, 19, 37 and 40) are entirely lost; the other books survive only in fragmentary form. Although the thrust of Polybius' narrative is devoted to the seven decades between 220 and 146, a significant part of what we have of his work is actually focussed on a different period: the first two books provided a rich summary of the events between the First and the Second Punic Wars (264-220), a 'preparation' for the reader that had a number of illustrious precedents in classical historiography, most notably Thucydides' *archaiologia*. The pace of the narrative was not always consistent or predictable: some books covered one year, others four years, i.e. the time of an Olympiad. Most importantly, Polybius did not refrain from interrupting his narrative for a digression, even a lengthy one. Book 6, for instance, consists of a famous discussion of the virtues of the Roman constitution, and the factors that made the Republic so successful; book 12 was devoted to problems of historical method and the polemic with a number of his predecessors, especially the fourth century BC historian Timaeus of Tauromenium;

book 34 focussed on a geographical exposition; book 40 was a summary of the whole work.

What did Polybius intend to do?

The chronology of the planning, redaction and publication of this work is a highly debated, and probably unsolvable problem. The central issue, or indeed puzzle, is the apparent change of plan that Polybius decided at some point through his work: it appears that his original intention was to stop with Pydna, and that only after the defining events of 146 did he decide to continue his narrative for two more decades. As a matter of fact, there are references to Carthage as an existing city in the first fifteen books: it could be evidence of an imperfect revision of the work or, more probably, of a publication of the Histories in several instalments. This would not be surprising, especially if we consider how demanding Polybius' project was, and how time-consuming it must have been. It is perfectly conceivable, in fact, that Polybius was prepared, or indeed keen to publish parts of his work as it was being produced and to prompt a debate about it among his readers.

This would seem perfectly consistent with what we know about Polybius' attitude to debate and vigorous arguments. Unlike most ancient historians, he was obviously keen on theoretical discussions on matters of historical method and literary profile. He was a committed supporter and practitioner of universal history, which he regarded as the only kind of historical research worth pursuing. This conviction did not derive from abstract considerations, or from Polybius' admiration for Herodotus over Thucydides. On the contrary, it derived from the clear understanding that the history of his own time was not simply Greek or Roman history, but was the history of the Mediterranean world, where the integration of different regions was becoming the rule (1.4, transl. W. R. Paton):

For what gives my work its peculiar quality, and what is most remarkable in the present age, is this. Fortune has guided almost all the affairs of the world in one

direction and has forced them to incline towards one and the same end; a historian should likewise bring before his readers under one synoptical view the operations by which she has accomplished her general purpose. Indeed it was this chiefly that invited and encouraged me to undertake my task; and secondarily the fact that none of my contemporaries have undertaken to write a general history, in which case I should have been much less eager to take this in hand. As it is, I observe that while several modern writers deal with particular wars and certain matters connected with them, no one, as far as I am aware, has even attempted to inquire critically when and whence the general and comprehensive scheme of events originated and how it led up to the end. I therefore thought it quite necessary not to leave unnoticed or allow to pass into oblivion this the finest and most beneficent of the performances of Fortune. For though she is ever producing something new and ever playing a part in the lives of men, she has not in a single instance ever accomplished such a work, ever achieved such a triumph, as in our own times. We can no more hope to perceive this from histories dealing with particular events than to get at once a notion of the form of the whole world, its disposition and order, by visiting, each in turn, the most famous cities, or indeed by looking at separate plans of each: a result by no means likely. He indeed who believes that by studying isolated histories he can acquire a fairly just view of history as a whole, is, as it seems to me, much in the case of one, who, after having looked at the dissevered limbs of an animal once alive and beautiful, fancies he has been as good as an eyewitness of the creature itself in all its action and grace. For could anyone put the creature together on the spot, restoring its form and the comeliness of life, and then show it to the same man, I think he would quickly avow that he was formerly very far away from the truth and more like one in a dream. For we can get some idea of a whole from a part, but never knowledge or exact opinion. Special histories therefore contribute very little to the knowledge of the whole and conviction of its truth. It is only indeed by study of the interconnection of all the particulars, their resemblances and differences, that we are enabled at least to make a general survey, and thus derive both benefit and pleasure from history.

Polybius regarded himself as a writer of ‘pragmatic history’ (*pragmatike historia*): the adjective *pragmatikos* has no moral implications, but must be understood with reference to the practical side. His priority is to make sense of the political, military and diplomatic history, and his focus is on the recent and contemporary history. The history that Polybius puts together has therefore a strong emphasis on the use that its readers are going to make of it, and on the importance of educating them. Polybius’ audience is therefore clearly identifiable: politicians, generals, members of the elites, who will be interested in a reliable reconstruction of the past and will want to use its lesson to make more reliable decisions in the future.

This agenda is based on two leading principles. First, the refusal of a narrow approach to historical narrative, whereby facts succeed each other. Polybius is firmly

convinced of the importance of making the succession of causes and effects as clear as possible (3.31, transl.W. R. Paton):

It might be said by some of these who look on such things without discernment, that these are matters which it was not necessary for me to treat in such detail [the background of the Hannibalic War]. My answer is, that if there were any man who considered that he had sufficient force in himself to face any circumstances, I should say perhaps that knowledge of the past was good for him, but not necessary; but if there is no one in this world at least who would venture to speak so of himself either as regards his private fortunes or those of his country — since, even if all is well with him now no man of sense could from his present circumstances have any reasonable confidence that he will be prosperous in the future — I affirm for this reason that such knowledge is not only good but in the highest degree necessary. For how can anyone when wronged himself or when his country is wronged find helpmates and allies; how can he, when desirous of acquiring some possession or initiating some project, stir to action those whose co-operation he wishes; how, finally, if he is content with present conditions, can he rightly stimulate others to establish his own convictions and maintain things as they are, if he knows nothing at all of the past history of those he would influence? For all men are given to adapt themselves to the present and assume a character suited to the times, so that from their words and actions it is difficult to judge of the principles of each, and in many cases the truth is quite overcast. But men's past actions, bringing to bear the test of actual fact, indicate truly the principles and opinions of each, and show us where we may look for gratitude, kindness, and help, and where for the reverse. It is by this means that we shall often and in many circumstances find those who will compassionate our distresses, who will share our anger or join us in being avenged on our enemies, all which is most helpful to life both in public and in private. Therefore both writers and readers of history should not pay so much attention to the actual narrative of events, as to what precedes, what accompanies, and what follows each. For if we take from history the discussion of why, how, and wherefore each thing was done, and whether the result was what we should have reasonably expected, what is left is a clever essay but not a lesson, and while pleasing for the moment of no possible benefit for the future.

The attention to the deep causes of historical processes involves the attention to the personality of the key figures that took part in the events, and especially in the events they took part in; the attention to geographical factors; the institutional context. At the same time, Polybius has a typical Hellenistic taste for, and interest in the role of Fortune in the historical developments: the role of Tyche was sometimes used compatibly with other developments.

Another important factor in the historiographical agenda of Polybius is a strong emphasis on the reliability and truthfulness of his narrative. The claim to

accuracy and trustworthiness is based on two principles: the discussion of the deep causes, and the personal experience of the historian, who could rightly claim to be a witness of many of the events that he dealt with, and to have a direct knowledge of the events he was talking about (3.4, transl. W. R. Paton):

Now if from their success or failure alone we could form an adequate judgment of how far states and individuals are worthy of praise or blame, I could here lay down my pen, bringing my narrative and this whole work to a close with the last-mentioned events, as was my original intention. For the period of fifty-three years finished here, and the growth and advance of Roman power was now complete. Besides which it was now universally accepted as a necessary fact that henceforth all must submit to the Romans and obey their orders. But since judgments regarding either the conquerors or the conquered based purely on performance are by no means final — what is thought to be the greatest success having brought the greatest calamities on many, if they do not make proper use of it, and the most dreadful catastrophes often turning out to the advantage of those who support them bravely — I must append to the history of the above period an account of the subsequent policy of the conquerors and their method of universal rule, as well as of the various opinions and appreciations of their rulers entertained by the subjects, and finally I must describe what were the prevailing and dominant tendencies and ambitions of the various peoples in their private and public life. For it is evident that contemporaries will thus be able to see clearly whether the Roman rule is acceptable or the reverse, and future generations whether their government should be considered to have been worthy of praise and admiration or rather of blame. And indeed it is just in this that the chief usefulness of this work for the present and the future will lie. For neither rulers themselves nor their critics should regard the end of action as being merely conquest and the subjection of all to their rule; since no man of sound sense goes to war with his neighbours simply for the sake of crushing an adversary, just as no one sails on the open sea just for the sake of crossing it. Indeed no one even takes up the study of arts and crafts merely for the sake of knowledge, but all men do all they do for the resulting pleasure, good, or utility. So the final end achieved by this work will be, to gain knowledge of what was the condition of each people after all had been crushed and had come under the dominion of Rome, until the disturbed and troubled time that afterwards ensued. About this latter, owing to the importance of the actions and the unexpected character of the events, and chiefly because I not only witnessed most but took part and even directed some, I was induced to write as if starting on a fresh work.

In this context, the use of written sources and documents is less significant: while they can help to enlighten some aspects of the history, they cannot be considered more instructive than personal experience and direct expertise in political and military matters. The excessive reliance on written sources is in fact the main factor in the polemic that Polybius wages against some of his predecessors, and

especially against Timaeus of Tauromenium, whom he accuses to have been the exemplary portrait of the historian who writes in a library (12.25, transl. W. R. Paton):

There was a brazen bull which Phalaris made in Agrigentum, and in it he shut up men and afterwards lighting fire beneath it used to take such dreadful revenge on his subjects that as the brass grew red and the man inside perished roasted and scorched, when he screamed in the extremity of his agony, the sound when it reached the ears of those present resembled, owing to the way the thing was constructed, the lowing of a bull. This bull during the Carthaginian domination was taken from Agrigentum to Carthage, and though the door at the joint of its shoulder-blades through which the victims were lowered into it, was still preserved, and though no reason at all can be found why such a bull should have been made in Carthage, yet Timaeus attempts to demolish the common story and to give the lie to the statements of poets and authors, asserting that neither the bull that was in Carthage came from Agrigentum, nor had there ever been one in Agrigentum, and entering into quite a long disquisition on this subject. What terms are we to use in speaking of Timaeus? For to me it seems that all the most bitter phrases of the kind he applies to others are appropriate to himself. That he was quarrelsome, mendacious, and headstrong has been, I trust, sufficiently proved by what I have already said, but what I am about to add will make it evident that he was no philosopher and in general a man of no education. For in his twenty-first book, near the end, he says, in the course of Timoleon's address to his troops, 'The earth lying under the universe being divided into three parts named Asia, Africa, and Europe.' No one would credit that, I will not say Timaeus but, even the celebrated Margites had said such a thing. For who is such an ignoramus, I do not speak of those who undertake to write history but... [the text breaks up here]

We have plenty of evidence for Polybius' use of a number of other authors, from Ephorus to Fabius Pictor, to Aratus and to Timaeus himself, although he often used critically, both because of their relative unreliability and their competence. Moreover, Polybius was using some documentary sources, which he could use because of his personal experience and familiarity with members of the Greek and Roman elite. It is conceivable, for instance, that he used some Roman public records, which he probably had access to during his stay in Rome.

We should not make the mistake of thinking that, because of his explicit commitment to accuracy and truthfulness, Polybius was a dry historian, or a dull writer. He was very sceptical, however, about the contamination between historiography and drama. His attack on Philarchus, the fourth century BC historian

who attempted a combination between history and tragedy, is very instructive (2.56, transl. W. R. Paton):

Since, among those authors who were contemporaries of Aratus, Phylarchus, who on many points is at variance and in contradiction with him, is by some received as trustworthy, it will be useful or rather necessary for me, as I have chosen to rely on Aratus' narrative for the history of the Cleomenic war, not to leave the question of their relative credibility undiscussed, so that truth and falsehood in their writings may no longer be of equal authority. In general Phylarchus through his whole work makes many random and careless statements; but while perhaps it is not necessary for me at present to criticize in detail the rest of these, I must minutely examine such as relate to events occurring in the period with which I am now dealing, that of the Cleomenic war. This partial examination will however be quite sufficient to convey an idea of the general purpose and character of his work. Wishing, for instance, to insist on the cruelty of Antigonos and the Macedonians and also on that of Aratus the Achaeans, he tells us that the Mantineans, when they surrendered, were exposed to terrible sufferings and that such were the misfortunes that overtook this, the most ancient and greatest city in Arcadia, as to impress deeply and move to tears all the Greeks. In his eagerness to arouse the pity and attention of his readers he treats us to a picture of clinging women² with their hair dishevelled and their breasts bare, or again of crowds of both sexes together with their children and aged parents weeping and lamenting as they are led away to slavery. This sort of thing he keeps up throughout his history, always trying to bring horrors vividly before our eyes. Leaving aside the ignoble and womanish character of such a treatment of his subject, let us consider how far it is proper or serviceable to history. A historical author should not try to thrill his readers by such exaggerated pictures, nor should he, like a tragic poet, try to imagine the probable utterances of his characters or reckon up all the consequences probably incidental to the occurrences with which he deals, but simply record what really happened and what really was said, however commonplace. For the object of tragedy is not the same as that of history but quite the opposite. The tragic poet should thrill and charm his audience for the moment by the verisimilitude of the words he puts into his characters' mouths, but it is the task of the historian to instruct and convince for all time serious students by the truth of the facts and the speeches he narrates, since in the one case it is the probable that takes precedence, even if it be untrue, in the other it is the truth, the purpose being to confer benefit on learners. Apart from this, Phylarchus simply narrates most of such catastrophes and does not even suggest their causes or the nature of these causes, without which it is impossible in any case to feel either legitimate pity or proper anger. Who, for instance, does not think it an outrage for a free man to be beaten? But if this happen to one who was the first to resort to violence, we consider that he got only his desert, while where it is done for the purpose of correction or discipline, those who strike free men are not only excused but deemed worthy of thanks and praise. Again, to kill a citizen is considered the greatest of crimes and that deserving the highest penalty, but obviously he who kills a thief or adulterer is left untouched, and the slayer of a traitor or tyrant everywhere meets with honour and distinction.¹ So in every such case the final criterion of good and evil lies not in what is done, but in the different reasons and different purposes of the doer.

A similar approach is used to the use of speeches in the narrative. According to Polybius, his predecessors used speeches as a tool to display their rhetorical ability and literary talent, and not as a way to serve truth. Polybius' approach is different: in his view, speeches must be discussed as a way to tell what truly happened, and what was said.

Polybius, his style and his readers

Polybius was from central Greece, and we could expect his style to reflect this background, and be influenced by the local dialect. However, he consistently wrote in the Attic dialect. The aim was clear: he chose the dialect that was more widely recognised as the preferred form of literary Greek, and which could be read and appreciated also by those readers who did not speak Greek as their first language. The problem of Polybius' readership is very serious, and perhaps impossible to solve: was he writing for a Greek audience, or for a Roman one? He probably had in mind both constituencies of readers: he intended to explain his fellow Greeks why Rome had won and what made it such an important presence in the Greek world; on the other hand, he was surely interested in offering his Roman friends the viewpoint of a Greek associate of theirs. On some occasions, the distinction was not even relevant. The famous discussion of the Roman constitution in book 6 could have appealed both audiences, albeit for different reasons (6.1-4, transl. W. R. Paton):

I am aware that some will wonder why I have deferred until the present occasion my account of the Roman constitution, thus being obliged to interrupt the due course of my narrative. Now, that I have always regarded this account as one of the essential parts of my whole design, I have, I am sure, made evident in numerous passages and chiefly in the prefatory remarks dealing with the fundamental principles of this history, where I said that the best and most valuable result I aim at is that readers of my work may gain a knowledge how it was and by virtue of what peculiar political institutions that in less than in fifty-three years nearly the whole world was overcome and fell under the single dominion of Rome, a thing the like of which had never happened before. Having made up my mind to deal with the matter, I found no occasion more suitable than the present for turning my attention to the constitution and testing the truth of what I am about to say on the subject. For just as those who pronounce in private on the characters of bad or good men, do not, when they really resolve to put their opinion to the test, choose for investigation those periods of their life which they passed in composure and repose, but seasons when they were afflicted by adversity or blessed with success, deeming the sole test of a perfect man to be the

power of bearing high-mindedly and bravely the most complete reverses of fortune, so it should be in our judgement of states. Therefore, as I could not see any greater or more violent change in the fortunes of the Romans than this which has happened in our own times, I reserved my account of the constitution for the present occasion. . . .

What chiefly attracts and chiefly benefits students of history is just this — the study of causes and the consequent power of choosing what is best in each case. Now the chief cause of success or the reverse in all matters is the form of a state's constitution; for springing from this, as from a fountain-head, all designs and plans of action not only originate, but reach their consummation.

In the case of those Greek states which have often risen to greatness and have often experienced a complete change of fortune, it is an easy matter both to describe their past and to pronounce as to their future. For there is no difficulty in reporting the known facts, and it is not hard to foretell the future by inference from the past. But about the Roman state it is neither at all easy to explain the present situation owing to the complicated character of the constitution, nor to foretell the future owing to our ignorance of the peculiar features of public and private life at Rome in the past. Particular attention and study are therefore required if one wishes to attain a clear general view of the distinctive qualities of their constitution.

Most of those whose object it has been to instruct us methodically concerning such matters, distinguish three kinds of constitutions, which they call kingship, aristocracy, and democracy. Now we should, I think, be quite justified in asking them to enlighten us as to whether they represent these three to be the sole varieties or rather to be the best; for in either case my opinion is that they are wrong. For it is evident that we must regard as the best constitution a combination of all these three varieties, since we have had proof of this not only theoretically but by actual experience, Lycurgus having been the first to draw up a constitution — that of Sparta — on this principle. Nor on the other hand can we admit that these are the only three varieties; for we have witnessed monarchical and tyrannical governments, which while they differ very widely from kingship, yet bear a certain resemblance to it, ¹⁰ this being the reason why monarchs in general falsely assume and use, as far as they can, the regal title. There have also been several oligarchical constitutions which seem to bear some likeness to aristocratic ones, though the divergence is, generally, as wide as possible. The same holds good about democracies. The truth of what I say is evident from the following considerations. It is by no means every monarchy which we can call straight off a kingship, but only that which is voluntarily accepted by the subjects and where they are governed rather by an appeal to their reason than by fear and force. Nor again can we style every oligarchy an aristocracy, but only that where the government is in the hands of a selected body of the justest and wisest men. Similarly that is no true democracy in which the whole crowd of citizens is free to do whatever they wish or purpose, but when, in a community where it is traditional and customary to reverence the gods, to honour our parents, to respect our elders, and to obey the laws, the will of the greater number prevails, this is to be called a democracy. We should therefore assert that there are six kinds of governments, the three above mentioned which are in everyone's mouth and the three which are naturally allied to them, I mean monarchy, oligarchy, and mob-rule. Now the first of these to come into being is monarchy, its growth being natural and unaided; and next arises kingship

derived from monarchy by the aid of art and by the correction of defects. Monarchy first changes into its vicious allied form, tyranny; and next, the abolishment of both gives birth to aristocracy. Aristocracy by its very nature degenerates into oligarchy; and when the commons inflamed by anger take vengeance on this government for its unjust rule, democracy comes into being; and in due course the licence and lawlessness of this form of government produces mob-rule to complete the series. The truth of what I have just said will be quite clear to anyone who pays due attention to such beginnings, origins, and changes as are in each case natural. For he alone who has seen how each form naturally arises and develops, will be able to see when, how, and where the growth, perfection, change, and end of each are likely to occur again. And it is to the Roman constitution above all that this method, I think, may be successfully applied, since from the outset its formation and growth have been due to natural causes.

Polybius' claim for accuracy and attention to detail is confirmed by the unusual blend between elegance and factual tone that he reached in his style. Some ancient readers of Polybius, such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus, reproached Polybius for his dull style, which made it almost impossible to read out his work, as was customary for ancient historians. Surely this was a deliberate choice on Polybius' part: producing a history of his own time for people to read in private, and to think about in private. A 'scholarly' text, full of factual information and informed opinions, which people could use to learn about their past, not simply to be impressed by it.

In many ways, Polybius is the continuator of the line inaugurated by Thucydides. He is a committed supporter of the importance of recent and contemporary history. At the same time, he persuaded of the primacy of *autopsia*, and of the invaluable role of direct knowledge and experience. Although he was as original a thinker as his great Athenian predecessor, he was a formidable interpreter of his own time, and a formidable contribution to the culture of the late Hellenistic period, where the role of erudition and scholarship became increasingly important.

Polybius' work was very influential in antiquity. He was used by Livy for the period between 264 and 146 – yet another pointer to the impact that his work made at Rome. The extant books of Polybius are an invaluable source for the understanding of the late third century BC and the beginning of the second. Despite his idiosyncrasies and the biased stance towards the Aetolian League and Rome, he remains an essential

source for the study and understanding of the Hellenistic world. What makes it so invaluable is the direct attempt that it contains to study and understand the crucial issue of Polybius' time: the encounter between Rome and the Greek world, which was not simply a military event, but a political and cultural process that changed the face of the ancient world. Polybius' answers may not always be appropriate or persuasive, but he certainly asked the right questions.

Suggested reading:

1. F. W. Walbank, *Polybius*, Berkeley 1972.
2. F. W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, 3 vols, Oxford 1957-1979.
3. F. W. Walbank, *Polybius, Rome, and the Hellenistic World : Essays and Reflections*, Cambridge 2002 [available from Net-Library, www.netlibrary.com].
4. A. M. Eckstein, 'Notes on the Birth and Death of Polybius', *American Journal of Philology* vol. 113 (1992), 387-406 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/295460>]
5. F. W. Walbank, 'Polybius and Rome's Eastern Policy', *The Journal of Roman Studies* vol. 53 (1963), 1-13 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/298359>]
6. P. S. Derow, 'Polybius, Rome, and the East', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 69 (1979), 1-15 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/299054>].
7. D. W. Baronowski, 'Polybius on the Causes of the Third Punic War', *Classical Philology* vol. 90, No. 1 (Jan., 1995), 16-31 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/270689>]

Short assignment: What did Polybius base his account of the Roman constitution upon?

