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Polybius on the Roman Republic: Foretelling a Fall

Mary Jo Davies

During his sixteen-year detention in Rome, Polybius's initial admiration for the Romans faded as he came to see them in an increasingly unfavorable light. Political reasons prevented him from overtly expressing his views, but he provided clues for his reversed opinion throughout the *Histories*. As Rome's power grew so did its overconfidence and arrogance. This eventually provided the catalyst for the demise of the Republic. Although he died roughly one hundred years prior to the fall of the Republic, the signs of change were evident to him. In his account of the final destruction of Carthage in 146 BC, Polybius described how the Romans razed Carthage to the ground by "stratagem and deceit."¹ In time, he had come to believe that every form of government was transitory, including that of Rome, but to grasp how he was able to analyze the organic nature of Rome's mixed constitution, it is crucial to understand how he believed all forms of leadership worked based on his assessment of human behavior.

Historiography and Sources

Polybius's goal in writing history was to provide a moral lesson. In an effort to educate his readers, he offered examples of virtue and vice, and demonstrated how each can mean the difference between success and failure for the survival of a state. Hence, Roman general Aemilius Paullus, who defeated King Perseus of Macedonia at the Battle of Pydna in 168 BC, earned a favorable mention when he abstained from arrogating anything from his victory, despite the fact that he had won absolute control over Macedonia.² In contrast, the Carthaginian general, Hannibal, led by his anger and violent hatred of the Romans, violated the terms of the treaty that his father, Hamilcar Barca, had forged with Rome after the First Punic War.³

In time, Polybius was effectively able to portend the fall of the Republic simply because the degeneration of the once honorable behavioral customs of Roman society was enough to determine the course their government would take.⁴ Yet, regardless of their conduct in warfare, and how it contributed to the fall of the Republic, it is important to note that Polybius did not incorporate socioeconomic issues and the possible role these played in the Republic's demise. By not considering the sociologic and economic impact on the course of history, Polybius limited his writing to military and political affairs as the agent of change. Indeed,

historian F. W. Walbank, considered an authority on Polybius, stated, “[a]s a contribution to sociology it is practically worthless.”⁵ Since Polybius was Greek by birth he was no doubt acquainted with the works of preeminent Greek writers such as Aristotle and Xenophon, both of whom had contributed observations on early economic thought in their writings. Aristotle, whose works include reflections on military and political matters, had also applied an analysis of distributive justice and how it affected society in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁶ The only evidence in the *Histories* regarding Rome’s economy was Polybius’s conflicting thoughts on appropriating the wealth of conquered territories for the financial benefit of Rome. Seizing gold and silver from their enemies was reasonable, while all-out plundering, such as what happened at Syracuse in 212 BC, garnered his criticism.⁷ Yet this is more indicative of Rome’s behavior in warfare than it is an analysis on economic thought and how it could affect a society.

Walbank also suggested that Polybius did not provide novel insight concerning the cyclical nature of governments, which he termed the *anacyclosis* theory. His analysis of monarchies, aristocracies, and democracies and how each, on their own, degenerate into their respective evils of tyranny, oligarchy and ochlocracy (mob-rule), highlights the weaknesses of single-rule forms of government. When a monarchy becomes tyrannical, the aristocracy takes over the affairs of the state. But rule by aristocracy eventually degenerates into an oligarchy when they come to believe that they have supreme rights over the populace. When the people turn against this system of government, democracy is born. This, in turn, degenerates into ochlocracy at which point the cycle begins anew.⁸ Yet, Walbank stated that Aristotle had previously pointed out that “in practice any type of constitution can turn into almost any other,” including mixed constitutions.⁹ However, while Polybius’s insight may not have been novel, it rested on his initial confidence that Rome’s growth was different from that of all other governments. It had developed through many victories and defeats and thrived on its unique internal structure and military skills.¹⁰ Although Polybius knew that the Republic’s mixed constitution was just as vulnerable to decay, he initially believed it to be better than all other forms of government.¹¹ Based on this premise alone, he had much to contribute to the discourse.

Polybius believed that the *Histories* would aid readers in determining whether to emulate or reject Roman rule.¹² He exhorted their trust not only because he witnessed, but also participated in some of the events.¹³ Historian Luke Pitcher, author of *Writing Ancient History*, believed that an ancient historian’s affinity for

producing a highly detailed narrative does not necessarily mean proof of first-hand sources such as interviews. Pitcher stated that it could be an author's attempt to create a more engaging account for readers. However, Polybius himself believed that accuracy was critical.¹⁴ If Polybius believed eyewitness accounts were the most reliable, it makes sense that he took great care to provide as truthful an interpretation of the events he witnessed as possible. Despite the difficulties related to the plausibility of ancient writing, Polybius's accounts remain widely regarded as the most comprehensive and most eloquent account of the Roman Republic and eventually served as a source for those historians who followed him, such as Livy (59 BC - 17 AD).¹⁵

Background

Born into a wealthy, influential family in Megalopolis, Arcadia around the year 200 BC, Polybius was much more than a Greco-Roman historian of the Hellenistic period. He began an active career in politics at a very early age as a member of the Achaean League, a confederation, which included most Greek city-states on the Peloponnesian peninsula with the exception of Sparta.¹⁶ Following the death of Alexander the Great, his empire split into a number of successor states, with the principal sections ruled by the Ptolemaic, Seleucid, and Antigonid dynasties. These Hellenistic strongholds provided protection against foreign raids, but disputes among them made it difficult for the traditional Greek city-states to remain united in defense of their borders.¹⁷ With their frontier protection waning, the Greeks faced the extraordinary, rising power of Rome. In 172 BC, war broke out between Rome and Macedonia, forcing the members of the Achaean League to choose where their sympathies lay.¹⁸ In an attempt to secure autonomy for Achaea, Polybius chose to support Rome by acknowledging its supremacy. This recognition put him in a position to offer his services to Rome. However, constant hesitation over how much they should oblige their overlords caused friction within the league. At issue was whether to submit when Rome infringed on Achaean laws.¹⁹ League member Aristaenus believed they should, while Philopoemen and Lycortas (Polybius's father and a prominent politician in the League) firmly held that they should obey only if Rome strictly abided by the terms of the alliance.²⁰ Polybius sided with the latter group, which eventually led to his incarceration in Rome in 167 BC along with a thousand other dissenters.

Despite the forced condition of his permanence, he forged a lifelong friendship with the Roman General, Scipio Aemilianus. During his time in captivity, Polybius began recording the *Histories*. He wrote in the Greek language to appeal to

a Greek audience. Although the political position he was in caused him to put Rome in a favorable light, he did, nevertheless, come to see the Roman constitution as the best form of government, stating that it was “sufficiently firm for all emergencies.”²¹ Yet he also knew that all forms of political administration, including that of Rome, were susceptible to decline.²²

How Leadership Worked In Terms Of Moral Behavior

Polybius believed human character was essentially weak and easily swayed by external influences. Sloth, greed, uncontrollable lust, anger, rashness, drunkenness, arrogance, and cowardice were among the harmful traits that Polybius found to be rampant in humans. However, amongst all of these vices he regarded a thirst for greed and power as the most destructive. Each one led to vices of every kind. In contrast to these negative aspects of human behavior, Polybius believed that humans responded positively to acts of kindness and generosity. However, because of the impulsive nature of the human character, he believed *Tyche*—fortune, fate, and chance—rather than wisdom played a larger part in achieving greatness. As previously mentioned, Polybius maintained that proper behavior toward achievements was crucial to the lasting success of a state. He reasoned how “the most signal successes have, from ill management, brought the most crushing disasters in their train; while not unfrequently the most terrible calamities, sustained with spirit, have been turned to actual advantage.”²³

In Book 6 of the *Histories*, Polybius exposed his version of the ephemeral nature of single rule forms of governments. Although he considered monarchies and aristocracies to be weak, it is clear that Polybius found democracy to be of the worst kind. He expended more effort in detailing the degeneration of democracy into ochlocracy than any of the other forms of government. When generation after generation of people become accustomed to the freedom democracy grants, the government is transformed into one ruled by violence.²⁴

Rome’s mixed constitution contrasted sharply with the destructive nature of the single-rule forms of government mentioned above. Its unique structure was built on a balanced system of safeguards established to counteract any propensity to excess that might undermine internal stability and cause a collapse. Knowing that each component had the power to support or harm the other would help each to develop a relationship of respect. However, while Polybius’s methodology indicated that Rome’s constitution was the best and most balanced, he knew that the usual course of nature leads to the decline of all things, including Rome’s form of government.²⁵ Roman philosopher and politician, Marcus Tullius Cicero, similarly

elaborated on mixed constitutions in *The Republic*. In his interpretation, monarchies and aristocracies would survive on their own, provided they placed themselves on an equal footing with the general population by adhering to the same rules and by not giving in to lust, passion, or power. In turn, he believed, the population would more readily oblige their rulers. Democracies, on the other hand, could never promote equality of rights. In Cicero's analysis, people tend to be too corrupt to understand the difference between honor and infamy. By according the same recognition to the most ignominious in society, democracies pervert the very characteristic that engenders equality—morality. But since all three elements—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—on their own, have a tendency to deviate into their “kindred vice,” Cicero, like Polybius, believed that mixed constitutions were the most successful.²⁶ It is interesting to note that *The Republic*, written in 54 BC, represents Rome not long prior to its transition to Empire, when the need to reevaluate the deteriorating condition of its constitution and restore unity to the state, was at its peak of urgency.²⁷

Behavior and Just Causes in Warfare

Polybius had already recognized this urgency a century earlier. Perhaps by chronicling negative aspects of foreign governments Polybius endeavored to spare Rome from the same fate. A brief, historical background of both Sparta and Carthage is helpful to better analyze the nature of the Republic's decline.

While Polybius took great care to pay homage to his Greek roots, he remained focused on the mission of his work, which was to provide a moral lesson, even if it meant sometimes presenting both positive and negative aspects of the history of his own people. In this vein, the Spartan King Lycurgus received godlike reference because of his sagacity.²⁸ His mixed constitution, like that of Rome's, combined the best features of each government in an attempt to prevent any one form from gaining too much power and deviating into its “kindred vice.”²⁹ Focusing on internal politics and the distribution of land and food, Lycurgus secured peace within Sparta's borders.³⁰ However, while he was successful where civil harmony was concerned, he did not provide the Spartans with constitutional guidance in matters regarding the treatment of conquered societies and this would have serious consequences for their own society for years to come.³¹ Polybius reinforced this argument by reminding his readers of the way the Spartans had conquered the Messenians for the purpose of enslaving them.³² Indeed, for the sake of attaining the finances they needed to secure supremacy over Greece, the Spartans had enlisted the help of those whom they had once conquered to liberate Greece—the Persians. In

what Polybius regarded as a sign of constitutional weakness, a series of treaties, which were enacted to end the Peloponnesian war, brought certain areas of Greece once again under Persian control.³³

Hence, the success of a constitution lay not only in its internal affairs, but also in how it managed imperialistic ventures. A just cause for war was necessary. However, wars cannot be successful without a specific goal established at the outset.³⁴ Hannibal's aggressive behavior during the Second Punic War invited disaster. It interfered with his ability to act judiciously at the most critical moment—the start of war.³⁵ As a child, his father, Hamilcar Barca, a general in the First Punic War (264-241 BC), had made him swear never to be friendly with the Romans.³⁶ After twenty-three years of fighting, Rome claimed victory and forced harsh peace terms on the Carthaginians. This included a hefty fine and a Carthaginian withdrawal from Sicily.³⁷ In addition, the Romans displayed questionable behavior when they seized Sardinia, a stinging blow to Carthaginian pride.³⁸

Twenty years after the First Punic War, Hannibal vowed to reclaim Carthaginian dignity and honor. After the death of his father, he broke the treaty, which had also forbidden them from crossing the Ebro River. Thus, in the year 218 BC, in a state of what Polybius considered unreasonable and malicious fury, Hannibal crossed the river to seize Saguntum from the Romans.³⁹ As the war escalated, he succeeded in defeating the Romans at Trasimene in 217 BC and Cannae in 216 BC. Nevertheless, no matter how masterful Polybius believed Hannibal to be in military organization, Hannibal did not appear to have any concrete plans with respect to seizing Rome proper.⁴⁰ In the meantime, the disaster at Cannae had given the Roman Senate the impetus to deliberate over a plan of action.⁴¹ In an effort to prevent further loss of infantry through direct combat, they adopted Roman General Fabius Maximus's indirect response to frustrate Hannibal's intentions.⁴² Positioning armies at strategic locations such as Cumae, Suessula, and Nola, the Romans encircled Hannibal to block him from pillaging more countryside.⁴³ More significantly, Hannibal had eyed Nola's agricultural wealth as a means to provide sustenance for his army, but by sending general Marcus Claudius Marcellus there to defend Nola from Hannibal, the Romans denied the Carthaginian general and his army their much needed food supply.⁴⁴ These tactics proved to Polybius that Hannibal's triumphs at Trasimene and Cannae were not enough to claim victory. Furthermore, as Polybius stated, if a country and its army can maintain a positive spirit in light of its disasters the tides will eventually turn in their favor, and for Rome, they had. However, since pretexts were crucial to justifying warfare it

is important not only to examine Hannibal's motives and behavior in battle, but Rome's as well.⁴⁵

Rome's Behavior in Warfare

Polybius's *Histories* revealed how the Romans' skillful enterprises allowed them to become "masters of land and sea."⁴⁶ Cicero mentioned that, unlike Lycurgus, whose sole wisdom created the foundation for the Spartan's mixed constitution within the timeframe of his own administration, Rome's mixed constitution was fashioned over the course of centuries from the genius of many individuals.⁴⁷ It was established, "by continually adopting reforms from knowledge gained in disaster," such as they had after their defeat at Cannae.⁴⁸

In his article, "Polybius on the Causes of the Third Punic War," historian Donald Walter Baronowski reveals Polybius's principle that wars should *appear* just.⁴⁹ As Polybius mentions, "the general impression that they [the Romans] were justified in entering upon the war with Demetrius enhances the value of their victories, and diminishes the risks incurred by their defeats."⁵⁰ In this context, the question then becomes whether the Romans were ever justified in their imperialistic ventures. If warfare required merely *appearing* justified, then one can easily make the leap and suppose that the Roman pretext for war was for power and supremacy, otherwise regarded as self-aggrandizement. This seems to compromise Polybius's view that the Roman mixed constitution was the best form of government by linking it with the "kindred vice" of his *anacyclosis* theory. While Polybius always knew that mixed constitutions were vulnerable to deterioration, he did believe Rome's was more stable, but seen from this perspective, the Roman government had been showing signs of monarchical arrogance all along. Since Carthage was one of the wealthiest cities at the time, economic gain from conquest was likely one of Rome's motives for war.

Contrary to this line of thought, it is significant that after the Carthaginian surrender of 149 BC, the Romans had agreed not to annex their country, suggesting that the Roman pretext for war was not for profit.⁵¹ Indeed, the era of annexations did not begin until the destruction of Carthage, around 148 BC.⁵² Prior to that, Rome had every opportunity to annex Carthage, as well as Illyria and Macedonia at the time of these victories, but the Romans did not do so in each case until long after the initial war. In the cases of Hispania and the Carthaginian territories of Egypt, the Romans did not complete a systematic annexation until 19 and 30 BC despite the fact that these territories fell to the Romans in 206 and 201 BC.⁵³

By the same token, it is difficult to assume that Rome fought solely for

defensive reasons. This becomes clear if we consider the events leading up to the First Punic War. While Carthaginian power in western Sicily had begun to grow, Carthage took no explicit action against Rome even though the Romans had involved themselves with the Mamertines against King Hiero II of Syracuse, an independent city in eastern Sicily and Carthaginian ally. Carthage could easily have considered Rome's proximity menacing, yet it did not budge until Rome had made the decision to go to war. If Rome's motive to go to war with Carthage rested on the presumed danger of a threat to its borders, the Romans would have allied themselves with King Hiero II rather than the Mamertines.⁵⁴ However, Rome's decision to form an alliance with the Mamertines against Syracuse suggests a ploy toward a much bigger purpose—eliminating Carthage to establish control over Sicily. Nevertheless, a Carthaginian threat might have seemed real enough to Rome; after all, Carthage had naval superiority. The possibility of naval raids on Rome's territory was plausible, which is why the Romans eventually pushed Carthage out of Sardinia. Yet absent Carthaginian action against Rome, it is more reasonable to assume that by taking down this formidable opponent, Rome would be in a position to appropriate its wealth, and as a consequence, enjoy sovereignty over the Mediterranean beyond the borders of the Italian peninsula.⁵⁵ Based on this premise, the assumption of monarchical arrogance is clear indeed.

Polybius's Changing Assessment of Rome—Foretelling the Fall

Polybius recognized Rome's propensity for prudence in military and political affairs. Unlike Hannibal, whose anger and passionate hatred fueled his military enterprises, Rome's equanimity in warfare reinforced the notion that not only was their mixed constitution better than that of the single-rule forms of government, it was also superior to other mixed constitutions, such as that of Lycurgus. Rome's internal system of checks and balances allowed its constitution to remain steadfast under the most extreme conditions, certifying imperialistic success under a solid policy of hegemony.⁵⁶ They remained cool and levelheaded, a composure that assisted them in their achievements and turned their failures into triumphs.

Polybius's criticism lay in the fact that while Rome was more successful than any other state at conquering foreign empires, over time they abandoned their ethical governing skills.⁵⁷ He condemned the Romans for forsaking the principles upon which their constitution rested. After all, these principles sustained them as they strove to achieve their position of supremacy. Their unnecessarily harsh and destructive methods encouraged excess in future generations. Traditionally,

ruthlessness was tolerable up until the point the conquered territory submitted. Afterwards, the conquered received fair treatment. Polybius's assessment of Scipio's exploits on the Iberian Peninsula, and his descent upon Carthage in 209 BC gave a clear example of this. When Scipio faced resistance, he ordered most of his troops to kill anyone they encountered without mercy.⁵⁸ After much bloodshed, Mago Barca, brother of Hannibal, surrendered the city. This allowed the Romans to collect and distribute booty, after which Scipio promised the prisoners freedom as long as they remained loyal to Rome.⁵⁹ This suggests that Polybius's ability to foretell the future of the Roman Republic had less to do with trying to identify who was the more aggressive party than it had to do with how aggression and ruthlessness are a necessary part of war, or more significantly, how wisely (or unwisely) each player carried out their task.

Nevertheless, although analyzing pretexts and justifications are important to understanding ancient warfare, it is equally important to bear in mind that mutual fear, misunderstandings, and accidents (details of which might be lost to history or simply veiled by authorial prejudice in ancient historical accounts) demand consideration. As a result, judgment may not always be possible. In the case of Rome, there is no clear-cut formula that can definitively identify them as the provoker in every case.⁶⁰ It is also important to know that all empires are built with economic benefit in mind. That both the Carthaginians and the Romans desired to occupy Sicily suggests each power coveted that territory for its economic prosperity and strategic location.⁶¹ Yet, pretexts and economic issues aside, one thing became evident to Polybius—Rome's old structure was not consistent with the current path of merciless destruction and individual narcissism. Although the transition from Republic to Empire was still a century away, Polybius endeavored, through his writings, to save Rome from what he ultimately foresaw as its irreversible destiny—that despite the enduring success of their constitution, their system of checks and balances would eventually founder and drive them to a system of one-man rule.

Notes

1. Polybius, *Histories* 37.1, The Perseus Catalog, accessed July 10, 2015, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.

2. *Ibid.*, 32.8.

3. *Ibid.*, 3.15.

4. *Ibid.*

5. W. Walbank, "Polybius on the Roman Constitution," *The Classical Quarterly* 37, no. 3/4 (1943): 89.
6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 5.4.1-13, The Perseus Catalog, accessed July 10, 2015, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.
7. Polybius, *Histories* 9.10.
8. Craig B. Champion, "Polybius on Political Constitutions, Interstate Relations, and Imperial Expansion," Academia.edu, accessed April 1, 2014: 8. <http://www.academia.edu>; Polybius *Histories* 6.9.
9. Walbank, "Polybius on the Roman Constitution," 89, footnote no. 2; Aristotle, *Politics* 5:1316a, The Perseus Catalog, accessed July 10, 2015, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.
10. Polybius, *Histories* 6.10.
11. *Ibid.*, 6.18.
12. *Ibid.*, 3.4.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Ernst Breisach, *Historiography Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 49.
15. H. L. Ebeling, "Livy and Polybius: Their Style and Methods of Historical Composition," *The Classical Weekly* 1, no. 4 (1907): 26.
16. R. J. H. Schutt, "Polybius: A Sketch," *Greece & Rome* 8, no. 22 (1938): 50.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 51.
19. Walbank, *Polybius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 7.
20. Champion, "Polybius on Political Constitutions, Interstate Relations, and Imperial Expansion" 8.
21. Polybius, *Histories* 6.18.
22. *Ibid.*, 6.57.
23. *Ibid.*, 3.4.
24. Polybius, *Histories* 6.9.
25. *Ibid.*, 6.57.
26. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods, Divination, Fate, The Republic, Laws, Etc.* trans. C. D. Yonge (London: Bohn's Classical Library, 1853), 1.34.
27. Elizabeth Asmis, "A New Kind of Model: Cicero's Roman Constitution in 'De republica,'" *The American Journal of Philology* 126, no. 3 (2005): 385.

28. Polybius, *Histories* 6.48.
29. Ibid., 6.10.
30. Ibid., 6.48.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 6.49; Jan P. Stronk, "Sparta and Persia 412-386: An Outline," *Talanta* (1990-1991): 117.
34. John Peddie, *Hannibal's War* (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1997), 5.
35. A.M. Eckstein, "Hannibal at New Carthage: Polybius 3.15 and the Power of Irrationality," *Classical Philology* 84, no. 1 (1989):12.
36. Polybius, *Histories* 3.11.
37. Peddie, *Hannibal's War* 2-3.
38. Ibid; Livy, *The History of Rome* 21.1.
39. Polybius, *Histories* 3.15.
40. Peddie, *Hannibal's War* 66.
41. Ibid., 98.
42. Ibid., 119.
43. Ibid., 115.
44. Ibid., 118.
45. Polybius, *Histories* 3.4.
46. Ibid., 1.3.
47. Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods, Divination, Fate, The Republic, Laws, Etc* 2.1.
48. Polybius, *Histories* 6.10.
49. Donald Walter Baronowski, "Polybius on the Causes of the Third Punic War," *Classical Philology* 90, no. 1 (1995): 22.
50. Polybius, *Histories* 36.2.
51. Baronowski, "Polybius on the Causes of the Third Punic War" 29.
52. Ibid.
53. Marcel Le Glay, et al., *A History of Rome*. 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009): 92.
54. William H. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome: 327-70 BC* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 187.

55. Ibid.

56. Polybius, *Histories* 6.18.

57. Ryan Balot, "Polybius's Advice to the Imperial Republic," *Political Theory* 38, no. 4 (2010): 493.

58. Polybius, *Histories* 10.15.

59. Ibid. 10.17.

60. J. A. North, "The Development of Roman Imperialism," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 71, (1981): 2.

61. Peddie, *Hannibal's War* 2.

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