

Polybius (1)

, Greek historian, c. 200–c. 118 BCE

Summary

Polybius was a Greek historian who documented Rome's rise to power in the Mediterranean in the third and second centuries BCE. Originally a leading figure of the Achaean League, he was deported to Rome after the defeat of Perseus of Macedon in 168 and became closely attached to Scipio Aemilianus, forming part of the so-called Scipionic Circle. While in Rome he began to write his *Histories*, a vast 40-book historical account of the middle-Hellenistic world and Rome's establishment of dominion over the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, only the first five books remain complete; the rest are preserved in varying degrees of fragmentation. The *Histories* is the earliest surviving 'universal' history and interweaves the events of the different geographical areas of the Mediterranean together to demonstrate the increasingly interconnectedness of world affairs.

The *Histories* are also described by Polybius as *pragmatikos*, concerned with political and military affairs, and have a strong didactic and moral direction aimed at leaders and future leaders. It intends to explain not only what happened in the Mediterranean and why, but also to train its readers to navigate a political and military career for greatest success and how to bear reversals of fortune with courage. Polybius was highly concerned with truthful narrative, the careful consultation of documents and witnesses, reason and correct judgement, a focus on human character and action, and the elucidation of cause and effect. While not immune from bias himself, Polybius adheres rigorously to these principles throughout his *Histories*, often criticising other historians for their lack of accuracy, judgement, or objectivity, and for this he has been considered one of the most reliable of the ancient Greek historians.

Keywords

Polybius, Rome, Achaean League, Hellenistic world, history, historiography

Key Locations

Rome, Greece, Macedonia, the Peloponnese

Biography

Polybius' father, *Lycortas* of Megalopolis, was a leading figure of the *Achaean League* in the 180s BCE and, along with *Philopoemen*, one of the architects of the doomed Achaean attempt to treat with Rome on a basis of equality during those years. Polybius bore Philopoemen's ashes to burial in 182 (Plut. *Philopoemen* 21.5), was appointed as envoy to *Alexandria (1)* in 180, and served as *hipparch* of the League in 170/69 ([Plb. 28.6.9](#)). After Rome's victory over *Perseus (2)*

of Macedon at **Pydna** in 168, Polybius' political career was cut short as he was denounced as insufficiently friendly to the Romans by **Callicrates (2)** and became one of the thousand prominent Achaeans who were deported to Rome and subsequently detained without trial in various towns of Italy.

During his detainment, Polybius was allowed to remain in Rome and became a friend and mentor to P. **Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus** ([31.23-25](#)), forming part of the so-called **Scipionic Circle**. In this period, Polybius started writing his *Histories*, while also continuing to have an active role in politics. In 163/2 BCE he assisted (perhaps with the support of the Scipios) in the escape of **Demetrius of Seleucus** from Rome, who had been a hostage since the 180s and subsequently took up the Seleucid throne ([31.2](#), [11-15](#)). It was also through Polybius' efforts, with the assistance of the Scipios and **Cato the Elder**, that the surviving Achaean detainees were eventually released in c. 150 ([35.6](#)).ⁱ



Cleitor Relief with portrait of Polybius; cast of a now lost original. Creator: Jona Lendering. Museum: Rome, Museo nazionale della civiltà romana. Licence: [CC0 1.0 Universal](#)

After his release, Polybius acted as a military consultant and adviser to the Romans, and even witnessed the destruction of **Carthage** (146 BCE) in Scipio Aemilianus' company ([38.19-22](#); cf. Plut. *Regum.* 82; and Appian *Punica* 132). Following the **Achaean War**, sack of **Corinth** and subsequent dissolution of the Achaean League (146), Polybius returned to a more active political role by helping the Romans usher in a new settlement of Greece and was subsequently celebrated and honoured with statues and relief images for appeasing Roman anger and resolving legal matters throughout the Peloponnese ([39.2-5](#); cf. Strabo 8.6.23; Plut. *Philop.* 21; Paus. 8.30.9; cf. 7.16). A cast of a relief portrait from Cleitor is the only honorific image of Polybius produced in this period to come down to us (currently found in the Museo nazionale della civiltà romana).ⁱⁱ

Polybius travelled extensively in his later life, accompanying Scipio Aemilianus in c. 151 to Spain and Africa (where he met **Masinissa**), returning to Italy over the Alps in **Hannibal's** footsteps, and later undertaking an exploratory voyage in the Atlantic. He also visited Alexandria and **Sardis**, and may have been at **Numantia** in 133.ⁱⁱⁱ He is reported to have died at the age of 82 after falling from a horse in c. 118 BCE (Ps.-Lucian, *Macr.* 23; cf. Plb. [3.39.8](#) with a reference to the Via Domitia laid down in 118).

Works

Polybius' minor works include an early encomiastic biography of Philopoemen ([10.21](#)), a work on tactics, a history of the Numantine war, and a treatise on the habitability of the equatorial region.

These are all, unfortunately, lost. His main work, however, the *Histories*, survives in a more substantial form and he has the peculiar privilege of being the only Hellenistic historian whose work has come down to us in any significant amount. As a result, Polybius' *Histories* are of crucial importance for our understanding of the middle Hellenistic period and dominate our understanding of Hellenistic historiography.^{iv}

Yet, of the *Histories*, only books 1–5 of the original forty survive intact. After book 5 we are dependent upon excerpts and occasional quotations preserved by other writers. The 'Excerpta Antiqua' are a continuous abridgement of books 1–18 and provide the majority of what remains of books 6–18. For the remainder, the main source is the slightly later collection of excerpts, by a number of hands under various headings and from many Greek historians along with Polybius, made for the emperor *Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus* (CE 912–50). From five books there are no excerpts at all (17, 19, 26, 37, 40); these were presumably lost by this time. A few quotations from 19, 26, and 37 are found in other authors. Book 34 (devoted to geographical matters) was much referred to, especially by *Strabo*, but it survives only in quotations. Books 17 (covering the years 199–198) and 40 (Index) have perished without trace.^v Certain parts of Polybius' missing narrative can be reconstructed in broad strokes using *Livy's* history of Rome, which consulted the *Histories* extensively as a source for Greek affairs and in places nearly quoted it verbatim.^{vi}

The *Histories*: Purpose, Structure, and Methodology

The *Histories* are a massive feat of historical writing, documenting the rise of Rome from 264 to 146 BCE. Polybius' original purpose in writing them was to document and explain how Rome rose to world dominion, to answer the question 'how and by what sort of constitution' (πῶς καὶ τίνι γένει πολιτείας) almost the entire known world was conquered and fell under the single rule of the Romans in just under 53 years' (1.1.5; from the beginning of the 140th Olympiad in 220 to the end of the Macedonian monarchy in 167; books 3–30). He was profoundly impressed and inspired by this process, both by the end of the Macedonian monarchy that had dominated the affairs of Greece for almost two centuries and by the way in which the course of events seemed almost calculated to produce the final result of Rome's supremacy. A metaphor of supernatural guidance and direction is often invoked in the form of τύχη, *fortune*, coordinating all the different political players of the known world to move towards this outcome (cf. 1.4). While Fortune seems very close to being an active, even a vengeful, agent in the *Histories*, it is often rhetorical and never invoked as an all-encompassing explanation for world change.^{vii} An explanation of divine causation is only resorted to for the inexplicable and natural disasters (36.17); rational, human reasons are always preferred and sought out.

Later, Polybius extended this purpose to show how the Romans subsequently exercised their dominion after obtaining supremacy, how the world under them reacted to it, and how both were affected by this new world order (3.4–5). This extension (books 30–39; book 40 contained a recapitulation and chronological survey) not only allowed him to cover events in which he himself was either personally involved or a contemporary of, but also to contribute even more to his second original objective: to teach his readers about politics and leadership, and how to bear bravely the vicissitudes of fortune (1.1.2). For Polybius, like many of his predecessors, history was about

teaching and was considered a great aid for learning about political and military affairs. This didactic function was a fundamental principle of his work and there is a keen focus on explanation, cause and effect, and the evaluation of action and character in the *Histories*, often with a political and moral bent.^{viii} Books 1 and 2 are introductions to the main period in the *Histories* (221/0-146), spanning the years 264-221 and covering the *First Punic War* and development of the Achaean League and its relationship with the *Aetolian League* and *Macedonia*. Polybius' target audience seems to have been the Greeks (1.3.7-10), although he also expected the Romans to consult his *Histories* as is indicated at 6.11.3.

To document Rome's rise to power and offer his readers a comprehensive view of this process, Polybius developed a new structure for historical writing. Given his belief that the process at issue was fundamentally about the unification of the known world, the *Histories* needed to allow for both a wider synoptical view and a narrower regional one. This was made possible by offering broad outlines of events in the prefaces (1.3; 3.1-3) and then combining chronological and geographical organization in an innovative way to document their details and interconnectedness. Chronologically, the *Histories* proceed by *Olympiads*, with each book containing information relating to a four-year period associated with the cycle of the panhellenic (Olympic) games. This method of chronicling time was first used by Polybius' predecessor *Ephorus*.^{ix} The Olympiad structure was, however, not rigidly fixed and was frequently adapted by Polybius to accommodate the flow of events (note, for instance, that the first five books do not yet adhere to this structure and in book 14 Polybius deviates from it in outlining the events in Egypt in the reign of *Ptolemy IV Philopator*). The framework is also geographical with a fixed progression from west to east each year: first, events in Italy (with Sicily, Spain, and Africa), then Greece and Macedonia, then Asia, and finally Egypt. The combination of Olympiads and the cycling between geographic areas produced an interweaving structure (*symploke*), which mimicked the increasingly interwoven nature of the known world in the third and second centuries BCE (1.4.6-11).^x In Polybius' mind, this interweaving of the world began in the year 217 (Book 5), instigated by *Philip V of Macedon* at the Conference of *Naupactus* (5.105), and was completed with the destruction of the Macedonian empire by Rome in 167 (book 29). This synoptical and narrow approach to history, wheeling through various geographical regions, has resulted in Polybius being credited as the earliest surviving 'universal' historian.

For the kind of history he wrote, Polybius also invented the term *pragmatikē historia*, 'pragmatic history', which denotes a particular focus on political and military affairs rather than genealogical or (πραγματική ιστορία, 6.5.2; αἱ πράξεις αἱ πολιτικάί, 12.25e). This type of history was specifically targeted at those readers who were or would be politically active and was designed to offer instruction in political affairs.^{xi} This political focus is grounded by Polybius' belief that it was because of Rome's constitution that the Romans were so successful in conquering the Mediterranean (3.118.8-12; 6.2). Book 6 is, therefore, dedicated to a discussion of political constitutions, the different forms of government and how they change (the cycle of constitutions or *anacyclosis*), and the uniqueness, strength and resilience of Rome's mixed constitution (incorporating elements of kingship, aristocracy, and democracy). Yet, the scope of the 'political' was for Polybius quite wide, as may be inferred from the breadth of his account of the Roman *politeia*, which embraces military, economic, religious, and social aspects, alongside political institutions and practice. Apprehension of all these elements was needed, in Polybius' mind, to fully understand why Rome came to power and why the Greek and Macedonian world fell.

For Polybius, the highest form of history was that which insisted upon truth and accurate narration of historical action and speech as much as possible. History without truth was deemed a fickle and unreliable tale, unhelpful for the education of the reader, and Polybius openly criticised other historians for their excessively sensational and inaccurate accounts (e.g., *Phylarchus* at [2.56-63](#)). Inquiry aiming at accuracy involved the careful and rigorous consultation and examination of documents (i.e., treaties), written memoirs and eyewitnesses, as well as geographical study (and especially ‘autopsy’ or personal examination of sites), and first-hand knowledge and experience of events, politics and war. Reason, explanation and demonstration of cause and effect were also of prime importance in the educational purpose of history: ‘The mere statement of a fact may interest us, but it is when the reason is added that the study of history becomes fruitful: it is the mental transference of similar circumstances to our own that gives us the means of forming presentiments about what is going to happen ...’ ([12.25b](#)).^{xii} This resembles *Thucydides (2)* ([1.22](#)), however, Polybius goes beyond his predecessor (of c. 200 years) in his insistence upon the element of explanation and beyond anybody else, even his more contemporary historians, in his explicit formulation and emphasis on the need to distinguish between the beginnings (ἀρχαί), causes (αἰτίαι), and pretexts (πρόφασις) of war (Plb. [3.6-7](#)). For Polybius, a proper explanation of war and the changes of the political world must delineate and identify these processes and elements; such an outline would allow his readers in turn to delineate and identify them in their own careers and act with more reason and foresight, having gained a greater understanding of how political affairs and war generally occur. In dealing with the wars that led to Rome's dominion Polybius adheres rigorously to his principles, documenting and explaining this process and outcome in as truthful, reasoned and multifaceted a way possible.

Confident in the superiority of his structure and methodology (and having access to Rome and Romans in a way that his Greek predecessors and contemporaries did not), Polybius was regularly critical of past and contemporary historians, often polemically and sometimes excessively, whether for their method or their bias. He is critical of *Philinus* and *Fabius Pictor* for their lack of accuracy and bias in documenting the First Punic War in book 1 ([1.14-15](#); [3.8-9](#), [26](#)), of Phylarchus for his sensationalism in his account of the *Cleomenean War* in book 2 (see above), of *Theopompus* for transforming his history of Greece into that of Philip II in Book 8 ([8.9-11](#)), of *Eratosthenes* for his geographical errors in book 34, and most famously of *Timaeus (2)* in book 12 (a book dedicated to the topic of how to write history) for being an ‘armchair’ historian, for his lack of political and military experience and knowledge, and for his subsequent inaccuracies.

Despite his adherence to truth, however, Polybius himself was manifestly not free from bias, whether positive (as for the Achaean leaders *Aratus of Sicyon* and Philopoemen, Scipio Aemilianus, or the Achaean League as a whole) or negative (as for Philip V of Macedon, the Aetolian Confederacy, many of Rome's opponents, or the masses generally), and these leanings flavour much of his commentary. Yet, although not neutral, he was honest (even to an extent about Rome) and, above all, concerned about the effect of undisputed dominion upon the society that wields it and upon those who inhabit the world in which it is wielded. In the latter portion of his *Histories*, he could not help but warn Rome about the consequences of its increasingly heavy-handed treatment of its subjects by, for instance, documenting four differing Greek views on Rome's annihilation of Carthage in 146 BCE (Plb. [36.9](#)), and foreshadowing Rome's own eventual downfall through the mouth of Scipio Aemilianus while watching Carthage burn (Plb. [38.21-22](#)).

Legacy

While Polybius has not received the same recognition and fame as his classical predecessors, he has had a substantial impact on the ancient and modern fields of warfare, politics, political science, historiography and the philosophy of history, and his legacy, interestingly, even stretches into modern telegraphy, cryptography and gaming.

In the ancient world, a number of subsequent authors used and cited Polybius' work, including *Sempronius Asellio*, *Cicero (1)*, *Diodorus*, Livy, *Dionysius of Halicarnassus*, Strabo, *Josephus*, *Plutarch*, *Arrian*, *Appian*, *Athenaeus* and *Orosius*, and he inspired further advancements in historiography, political thought and geographical writing. While Polybius fell into obscurity for a time he experienced a revival of interest in Renaissance Italy, encouraged by Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455), the founder of the Vatican library, when he urged Cardinal Perotti to undertake a Latin translation of the first five books, the only ones then known to exist. Vernacular translations in French, German, Italian and English soon followed in the late 16th century, and Polybius's works found a wider reading audience (although still only among the educated and scholars), including Isaac Casaubon, Jacques Auguste de Thou, William Camden, and Paolo Sarpi. In the sixteenth century, Polybius was used as a military guide and directly impacted European warfare; in the seventeenth, Niccolò Machiavelli held him up as an exemplar of practicality in his *Discourses on Livy* and as one of the first political scientists, and he was important in this capacity in Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. In the eighteenth century, the Founding Fathers of the American constitution and particularly John Adams were also inspired by Polybius' account of Rome's mixed government. More recently, Polybius' tripartite division of government and 'universal' approach to history has drawn the attention of Negri and Haart (2000) in redefining 'empire' in a modern globalised world, and Inglis and Robertson (2006) have reinforced the relevance of Polybius for human scientists today in being the first 'global thinker' and an important precursor of contemporary social scientific analyses of 'globalization'.^{xiii}

In more practical terms, in his own time Polybius also assisted (alongside Cleoxenus and Democleitus, otherwise unknown) in the development of a more flexible means of communication via fire signaling. Previous signalling systems had been based on a finite number of predetermined messages (e.g., "Cavalry arrived in the country", "Heavy infantry", etc.), and were not efficient for conveying every contingency. The new enhanced system, however, could convey any message in detail as letters were its base unit. Polybius' description of this more versatile communication system in book 10 ([10.43-47](#)) is the basis for what has become known in the modern world as the Polybius Square or Cypher, a 5 x 5 grid (sometimes extended) containing the letters of the alphabet (sometimes replaced with symbols). Numbers are placed along the top and down the side and are combined to indicate which letter is being signalled. Because of its versatility, this square is still used in modern day telegraphy, steganography and cryptography, and has even been used as the "knock code" to signal messages between cells in prisons by tapping the numbers on pipes or walls.

Perhaps the most bizarre legacy, however, is the use of his name in titling a fictitious arcade game (nicknamed 'the most dangerous arcade game in the world'), which has now become an urban legend. Purportedly appearing in Portland Oregon for one month in 1981 as part of a government-

run psychology experiment, the game *Polybius* was said to produce psychoactive and addictive effects in its players with side effects including amnesia, insomnia, night terrors and hallucinations.^{xiv} This urban legend has subsequently inspired a number of video games of the same name.

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Primary Texts

Editio princeps

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- ⁱ For Polybius' detainment, see Andrew Erskine, "Polybius among the Romans: Life in the Cyclops' Cave," C. Smith & L. M. Yarrow (eds.) *Imperialism, Cultural Politics, and Polybius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 17-32.
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- ⁱⁱⁱ For Polybius' travels, see Walbank *HCP* I 4-9, Paul Pédech, *La Méthode historique de Polybe* (Paris, 1964): 524-5, and Andrew Erskine, "Polybius among the Romans: Life in the Cyclops' Cave," C. Smith & L. M. Yarrow (eds.) *Imperialism, Cultural Politics, and Polybius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 28-30.
- ^{iv} See Guido Schepens, Jan Bollansée, *The Shadow of Polybius: Intertextuality as a Research Tool in Greek Historiography* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005).
- ^v For the surviving excerpts, see J. M. Moore, *The Manuscript Tradition of Polybius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) and Kenneth Sacks, *Polybius on the Writing of History* (Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 1981) 11-20; for the arrangement of what survives of books 7-39, see Walbank, *HCP* 3. 1-62.
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- ^{vii} For *tyche* in Polybius, see Lisa I. Hau, "Tyche in Polybius: Narrative Answers to a Philosophical Question," *Histos* 5 (2011): 183-207.
- ^{viii} See Arthur Eckstein, *Moral Vision in the Histories of Polybius* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1995) and Lisa I. Hau, *Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus Siculus* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016) for morality in Polybius.
- ^{ix} See John Tully, "Ephorus, Polybius, and τὰ καθόλου γράφειν," G. Parmeggiani, ed. *Between Thucydides and Polybius. The Golden Age of Greek Historiography* (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2014): 153-195.
- ^x For the *symploke*, see Frank W. Walbank, "Symplōke: its role in Polybius' Histories," W. Walbank, ed. *Selected Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 313-324.
- ^{xi} For *pragmatic history*, see Kenneth Sacks, *Polybius on the Writing of History* (Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 1981) 178-80.
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- ^{xiv} <https://www.radiotopia.fm/showcase/the-polybius-conspiracy/>