

OXFORD APPROACHES TO  
CLASSICAL LITERATURE

POLYBIUS'  
*Histories*



BRIAN MCGING

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*Histories*

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CLASSICAL LITERATURE

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## Editors' Foreword

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen a massive expansion in courses dealing with ancient civilization and, in particular, the culture and literature of the Greek and Roman world. Never has there been such a flood of good translations available: Oxford's own World Classics, the Penguin Classics, the Hackett Library, and other series offer the English-speaking reader access to the masterpieces of classical literature from Homer to Augustine. The reader may, however, need more guidance in the interpretation and understanding of these works than can usually be provided in the relatively short introduction that prefaces a work in translation. There is a need for studies of individual works that will provide a clear, lively, and reliable account based on the most up-to-date scholarship without dwelling on minutiae that are likely to distract or confuse the reader.

It is to meet this need that the present series has been devised. The title *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature* deliberately puts the emphasis on the literary works themselves. The volumes in this series will each be concerned with a single work (with the exception of cases where a "book" or larger collection of poems is treated as one work). These are neither biographies nor accounts

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of literary movements or schools. Nor are they books devoted to the total oeuvre of one author: our first volumes consider Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Plato's *Symposium*, not the works of Ovid or Plato as a whole. This is, however, a question of emphasis, and not a straitjacket: biographical issues, literary and cultural background, and related works by the same author are discussed where they are obviously relevant. Authors have also been encouraged to consider the influence and legacy of the works in question.

As the editors of this series, we intend these volumes to be accessible to the reader who is encountering the relevant work for the first time; but we also intend that each volume should do more than simply provide the basic facts, dates, and summaries that handbooks generally supply. We would like these books to be essays in criticism and interpretation that will do justice to the subtlety and complexity of the works under discussion. With this in mind, we have invited leading scholars to offer personal assessments and appreciations of their chosen works, anchored within the mainstream of classical scholarship. We have thought it particularly important that our authors be allowed to set their own agendas and to speak in their own voices rather than repeating the *idées reçues* of conventional wisdom in neutral tones.

The title *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature* has been chosen simply because the series is published by Oxford University Press, USA; it in no way implies a party line, either Oxonian or any other. We believe that different approaches are suited to different texts, and we expect each volume to have its own distinctive character. Advanced critical theory is neither compulsory nor excluded: what matters is whether it can be made to illuminate the text in question. The authors have been encouraged to avoid obscurity and jargon, bearing in mind the needs of the general reader; but, when important critical or narratological issues arise, they are presented to the reader as lucidly as possible.

This series was originally conceived by Professor Charles Segal, an inspiring scholar and teacher whose intellectual energy and range of interests were matched by a corresponding humility and generosity of spirit. Although he was involved in the commissioning of a

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number of volumes, he did not—alas—live to see any of them published. The series is intended to convey something of the excitement and pleasure to be derived from reading the extraordinarily rich and varied literature of Greco-Roman antiquity. We hope that these volumes will form a worthy monument to a dedicated classical scholar who was committed to enabling the ancient texts to speak to the widest possible audience in the contemporary world.

Kathleen Coleman, Harvard University  
Richard Rutherford, Christ Church, Oxford



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## Acknowledgments

The opportunity to write most of this book was provided by a year's leave in 2006. The leave was paid for by Trinity College Dublin's Centre for Mediterranean and Near Eastern Studies (of which I am the director), a project funded by the Irish Government's Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions. This funding has enabled us to undertake and promote exciting work that would otherwise have been impossible; and I would like to acknowledge our great debt to the Higher Education Authority for the generous support they have given us.

I have tested out various parts of this book on students, among whom I thank particularly Helen Stonehouse, Duncan Macrae, Charlotte Finnegan, Kevin McGee, and Jessie Evans. Perhaps they were just being kind to me, but they seemed to enjoy reading Polybius, an author not very commonly read on Classics "set-book" courses; and I certainly enjoyed their company in our Polybian investigations. I am also very grateful for the response to papers I delivered at my own institution, Trinity College Dublin, and at Manchester, Maynooth, Exeter, and Liverpool (where Bruce Gibson generously made available before publication his own excellent paper on Polybius' debt to Xenophon). I am very fortunate

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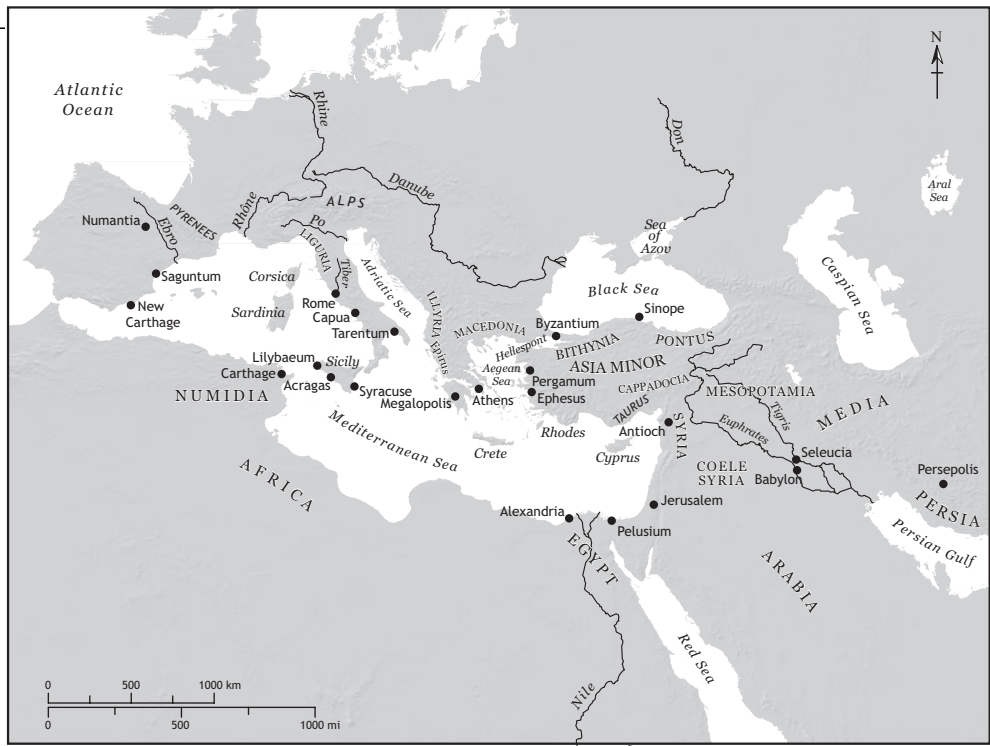
to have had the map-drawing expertise of Patrick Florance at my disposal—my thanks to him for including me in his busy schedule. I owe most, however, both to Andrew Erskine, who kindly took the time to read and correct the whole text, an act of scholarly *amicitia* for which there is no adequate thanks; and to Kathy Coleman and Richard Rutherford, the editors of this excellent series, *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature*: they have done their editorial job so superbly, with such interest and attention to detail that I am tempted to say they should be blamed for any remaining errors. But that would be a poor return for their enthusiastic encouragement and the privilege they conferred on me in the first place by inviting me to write the book. I thank them most sincerely.

In the summer of 2007, Tom Harrison and his colleagues at Liverpool hosted, with the warmest hospitality, a small international gathering of Polybian scholars to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the first volume of Walbank's *Historical Commentary on Polybius*, one of the great works of classical scholarship of this or any other age. It was an excellent conference over which Frank Walbank presided from a distance, too frail to attend. He died in October 2008, full of years and learning and distinction. I would just like to say, now sadly too late for him to hear, what a pleasure it was in writing this book to read and reread not only Polybius himself, but also his greatest commentator.

Polybius hoped his work would be useful. I hope above all that this book will lead those who have not read Polybius to take him up and grapple with the issues of power which he confronted and which are so central to the human condition.

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## Maps



Map 1 The Mediterranean world of Polybius



Map 2 Greece in the second century BC

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POLYBIUS'

*Histories*

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## Introduction

Why should we read Polybius' *Histories*? What does a second-century BC Greek historian have to offer the modern reader? If I had difficulty in answering these questions enthusiastically and positively, I would not (I hope) be writing this book. Polybius' account of the rise of Rome's empire and the nature of its government has impressed commentators through the ages, both for the excellence of its information and analysis, and for the sophistication of its historical method. His treatment of the Roman constitution in book 6 has retained its reputation as a classic work of political science. Furthermore, his vision of the world as an organic whole is almost prophetic in its anticipation of the modern concept of "globalization". We are dealing, then, with a historian generally and, in my opinion, correctly regarded as one of the best of the ancient world; and one who continues to challenge our interpretation of Roman history and of the roots of Mediterranean identities. In the course of this book I hope to justify these claims, but I think it only fair to start by saying that the *Histories* is often seen as a "difficult" work. A number of factors conspire to create this impression.

First, even what survives of the text is long: whether for expert or amateur readers, it is not easy to engage with such a scale of

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treatment and varied subject matter—forty books covering the period 264–146 BC. Polybius himself was aware of this danger and argued, not altogether convincingly, that it is much easier to follow large-scale works that present the whole picture than shorter monographs on specific subjects (3.32.1–10). Not only is it long, but after the opening five books, when we have scarcely got into the meat of the work, it is preserved only in part. The fragments, or excerpts, of the rest of the *Histories* are often very substantial, allowing us a good view of the entirety of what Polybius had to say in certain books; but even when whole episodes are fully extant, it is difficult to avoid the feeling of reading a halting, stop-start narrative.

Compounding these problems is a rather workmanlike, at times even awkward style of Greek. This is part of Polybius' persona as a historian—the hard-nosed pragmatist who is going to present the truth unadorned (16.17.9–11)—but however important to him this distinct lack of literary embellishment may have been for conveying the veracity of his account, it is not what we might call user-friendly. Even in the ancient world some found it heavy going: at the end of the first century BC, for instance, Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*de compositione verborum* 4.110), believed that Polybius' style made it difficult to read his work all the way through.

The length of the work and this perception that as a stylist Polybius was deficient may have contributed to a reluctance to translate him. In English, the only modern, complete, and readily available translation is that made by W. R. Paton for the Loeb Classical Library (1922–1927). Although this has performed sterling service, the interested general reader may well be put off by its six volumes and somewhat dated English. Here is Paton's version of Polybius' statement on the character of Scipio Africanus (10.3.1–2):

It is generally agreed that Scipio was beneficent and magnanimous, but that he was also shrewd and discreet with a mind always concentrated on the object he had in view would be conceded by none except those who associated with him and to whom his character stood clearly revealed. One of these was Gaius Laelius, who from his youth up

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to the end participated in his every word and deed, and who has produced the above impression upon myself, as his account seems both probable on the face of it and in accordance with the actual performances of Scipio.

This certainly conveys something of the involved character of Polybius' Greek, but it is labored and, by modern standards, not easy to read. More attractive is Scott-Kilvert's version in his one-volume translation for Penguin Classics (1979):

It is widely acknowledged that Scipio was a man of humane and generous disposition, but the testimony that he was also astute and discreet and possessed a mind which was always concentrated upon the purpose he had in view, comes only from those who were closely associated with him, to whom his character stood revealed as if by the light of day. One of these was Gaius Laelius, who had been the witness of almost every word and deed of Scipio's from his boyhood until the end of his life, and who convinced me of the truth of his evidence, because what he had to say seemed probable in itself and corresponded to the record of Scipio's achievements.

Although not as close to the Greek as Paton, the modern idiom has greatly improved its readability. While it is much more fluent, the Penguin translation, however, is at times fatally compromised by its necessary selectivity. In this famous sketch of Scipio, for instance, and subsequent account of his capture of New Carthage (which I discuss shortly), it leaves out the character-revealing story of how Scipio stood for the aedileship (one of the annually elected officials of the Roman state) along with his brother, Lucius, to improve the latter's chances (10.4–5), and omits the marvelous scenes of Scipio's treatment of the captured inhabitants of the city, including that in which he is offered a beautiful young woman prisoner (10.17–20). There can scarcely be any such thing as a perfect translation, but with regard to Polybius' *Histories* the situation is disappointing.

Add all this together, and you are left with a long and mostly fragmentary work of history written in difficult and plain Greek,

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not completely satisfactorily translated into English. It is not an obviously appetizing prospect.

In the past, Polybius probably also suffered to a degree from being a writer of the Hellenistic age (323–30 BC), that era between the death of Alexander the Great and the triumph of the future emperor Augustus over Antonius and Cleopatra. Critics of his style would cite what they perceived to be the literary mediocrity of those times, but even from the point of view of historical events, in the English-speaking world there was for a long time something suspect about the period. It was not really proper Greek history, which lost its appeal after Alexander, nor yet the vital part of proper Roman history (the late Republic and early Empire); Polybius was no Herodotus or Thucydides, nor yet Sallust or Tacitus.

Modern scholarship has, we should be thankful, woken up to the fascination of the Hellenistic age and to the qualities of Polybius. He has been fortunate in attracting one of the great commentaries of Classical scholarship, that of F. W. Walbank (3 vols., 1957–1979), whose countless other contributions have brought brilliant illumination to many aspects of Polybius' work. But this and most modern studies of Polybius are designed for experts. In English, one can cite the excellent books of, for instance, K. Sacks, *Polybius on the Writing of History* (1981), A. M. Eckstein, *Moral Vision in the Histories of Polybius* (1995), or most recently C. B. Champion, *Cultural Politics in Polybius' Histories* (2004). While these and scores of articles have greatly advanced our understanding, the full panoply of modern scholarship can only be somewhat forbidding for a "general reader". Although Polybius receives his due in excellent introductory studies like T. J. Luce's *The Greek Historians* (1997), or J. Marincola's *Greek Historians* (2001), nothing has been written in English along the lines intended by *Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature*. Polybius has remained largely the preserve of experts.

This is a pity. For, in spite of initial appearances to the contrary, there is a great deal in Polybius' *Histories* to attract the nonspecialist. First, he was writing about one of the most exciting and important developments in the history of the ancient world—the transformation of Rome from an Italian peninsular state into the first and only

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pan-Mediterranean super-power. War and imperialism are going through a period of particularly stern scrutiny at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but the poor publicity they are attracting does not seem to have had any effect on our passion for reading about them. If it was really only the twentieth century that first saw a challenge to the primacy of political history—an agenda set by Thucydides, and endorsed repeatedly down the ages (never more enthusiastically or convincingly than by Polybius)—this has not prevented modern historians from continuing to pour out a stream of works for the general reader on the wars, empires, and political history of the modern era. And although the ancient world is perhaps too distant in time to arouse quite the same passions, Rome’s acquisition of her empire was such a shatteringly dramatic story in Mediterranean history that Polybius’ question right at the beginning of his work is as fresh and vital as when he posed it: who could possibly *not* be interested in this, the greatest success story ever recorded in human history?

While many authors have demonstrated that it is quite possible to write about interesting affairs in an uninteresting way, Polybius’ writing, for a variety of reasons, is unusually gripping. The capture of New Carthage in Spain by the young Scipio Africanus in 209 BC (10.2–20), a famous account from the narrative of Rome’s great war against Hannibal, may serve briefly to illustrate the point. Polybius starts this set piece with a character study of Scipio. Because of his exceptional fame, everyone will want to know what sort of person he was, especially as other commentators are quite wrong about him. They attribute far too much to his good fortune and not enough to his calculation (*logismos*) and foresight (*pronoia*). Like the famous Spartan legislator Lycurgus, Scipio created confidence among his men by presenting himself as divinely favored. He enjoyed a reputation for generosity and magnanimity, but only those who really knew him, people like Gaius Laelius, knew how shrewd (*agchinous*), discreet (*neptes*), and focused he was. Laelius tells of his exceptional bravery on the occasion when he rescued his father in a battle against Hannibal; but when he came to command armies himself, as one on whom the hopes of his people rested, he wisely avoided unnecessary



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