

Polybius and the Roman State

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I

IT WOULD BE INTERESTING, if it were possible, to discover who first described the Romans as masters of the world. According to Polybius,¹ Scipio Africanus in his speech before Zama promised his men that if they were victorious, they would “gain for themselves and their country undisputed command and sovereignty over the rest of the world.” But since Polybius says the same thing himself a chapter earlier [15.9.2], he may have attributed to Scipio sentiments which he (or his source) later judged appropriate to the situation.

After Magnesia, in 190/89 B.C., we find Rhodian and Syrian spokesmen similarly addressing the Romans as “rulers and masters of the world”;² and this is perhaps easier to believe, since the defeat of Antiochus must obviously have made a tremendous impact on the Greek east. In the negotiations which preceded the Syrian War the Romans had insisted that Antiochus should not cross over into Europe, and propaganda on both sides had created the impression that Rome spoke for Europe and Antiochus for Asia. Antiochus’ defeat had thus left Rome mistress of both continents and so, since Carthage had already been humbled, of the whole world; or so it may well have seemed. At any rate, when Carneades, the leader of the New Academy, delivered his famous lecture on justice at Rome fifteen years later in 155 B.C., he could refer to the Romans as masters of the world, as if the phrase were a commonplace;³ and twenty years later still, Tiberius Gracchus stirred his popular audience with references to these “so-called masters of the world, who do not possess a single clod of earth to call their own.”⁴

Masters of the world—*κύριοι τῆς οἰκουμένης*; in this phrase we have

¹ 15.10.2 If not otherwise stated, references are to Polybius.

² 21.16.8 (Syrians), 23.4 (Rhodians).

³ Cf. Cic. *Rep.* 3.24, from L. Furius Philus’ speech, which is based on that of Carneades.

⁴ Plut. *Tib. Gracch.* 9.5; on the authenticity of these words of Gracchus (transmitted via Nepos) see P. Fraccaro, “Oratori e orazioni dell’età dei Gracchi,” *Studi Storici per l’Antichità Classica* 5 (1912) 423; Scullard, *JRS* 50 (1960) 64 n.1.

the realisation of those Greek fears voiced by an Aetolian statesman as early as 217 at the peace conference of Naupactus [5.104], and the characterisation of a new period in Mediterranean politics in which the old Hellenistic balance of power was as dead as the dodo. It is of this new era of the world-power that Polybius is the historian and—if one can dignify him with such a title—the philosopher. His subject is precisely defined and a matter of concern to his contemporaries; he will discuss by what means and under what kind of constitution the Romans, in less than fifty-three years, have succeeded in subjecting nearly the whole inhabited world to their sole government—a thing unique in history [1.1.5].

As a statement of the central problem of Roman imperialism this may appear inadequate; it certainly by-passes most of the issues which are hotly debated in contemporary journals and monographs. Today we ask: in what sense were the Romans imperialists? Did they go to Greece as part of a plan of expansion or moved by sentiment? Did they win their empire in a mood of nervous aggression engendered by fear? Was the Senate blundering or machiavellian? But these are issues in which Polybius is not interested. Consider, for example, his picture of early Roman expansion overseas. The Romans undertook the first war with Carthage in response to an appeal from some Campanian freebooters who had settled at Messana [1.10.2–11.3]; but no sooner had they taken Agrigentum in 262/1 than “they began [says Polybius at 1.20.1–2] to plan to drive the Carthaginians out of Sicily.” The experience of the First Punic War and its perils so schooled the Romans that [1.63.9] “it was perfectly natural that they not only gained the courage to aim at universal dominion, but executed their purpose.” One war led to another. “I regard the war with Antiochus,” writes Polybius [3.32.7], “as deriving its origin from that with Philip, the latter as resulting from that with Hannibal, and the Hannibalic War as a consequence of that about Sicily, the intermediate events, however many and various their character, all tending to the same purpose.”

On this assumption *our* problem—Why did the Romans seek an empire?—hardly exists. It was perfectly natural—*λίαν εἰκότως*; or, as the Athenians had long ago observed at Melos,⁵ “of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of nature men rule wherever they can.” This was not, of course, good enough for the Romans themselves. Their well-established tradition, that Rome

⁵ Thuc. 5.105.2.

fought only just wars, would have suffered rude violence from the acceptance of such a thesis; and fortunately by the second century, when the Romans found themselves on the defensive about their imperial motives, the Stoics were already at hand to help them out with the comfortable doctrine that the Roman empire was the reward of Roman virtue, and an instrument of justice benefiting ruler and ruled impartially.⁶ Polybius was not blind to these considerations, and he has some pertinent remarks on Roman morals and Roman morale. But his primary concern was different. The question he asked was not "Why did the Romans acquire their empire?", but "How did they contrive to do it so successfully?"

The Hellenistic answer to this kind of question was regularly cast in one of two forms: either Fortune, Tyche, was the motive force directing events, or alternatively success was due to the transcendent power of some individual, a Philip or an Alexander. Polybius was a Greek and his history pays its due to the role of one determined man.⁷ But he was also, first and foremost, a rationalist, and if he speaks of the rise of Rome to world power as an accomplishment of Fortune, he leaves it quite clear that this is not a formula designed to absolve him from the duty of explaining the process also in terms which a rationalist would find acceptable. He does not despise moral worth—far from it—nor does he underestimate what chance can do; but he rates higher than either the political acumen which can create a stable, imperialist state, and that is why after describing the catastrophe of Cannae, where Hannibal annihilated the best part of two consular armies, he breaks off his narrative to devote a whole book to the problem of the Roman constitution.

There may be something a trifle arid about Polybius' theorising, a lack of imagination, a tendency to schematise, to want an answer to everything. But he wrote on the spot, an intelligent man, himself a statesman and a general, in touch with those who controlled the realities of Roman political life, a man moreover with the fresh eye of a foreigner who looks at new institutions against the background of a different experience. At a time when the affairs of Greece and Rome were becoming inextricably intertwined, as they have been ever since, he stands out as an important witness whose evidence should not be neglected.

⁶ Cf. W. Capelle, "Griechische Ethik und römischer Imperialismus," *Klio* 25 (1932) 86–113.

⁷ Cf. 1.35.4; 8.3.3, 7.7; 9.22.1, 22.6; 22.4.2.

II

Born about the end of the third century at Megalopolis in Arcadia, Polybius devoted the first thirty years of his life to acquiring the education and the military and political experience of an Achaean statesman. His father was Lycortas, an eminent politician and a follower of the great Philopoemen. It was no doubt thanks to this connection that Polybius was selected in 182 to carry Philopoemen's ashes to burial,⁸ and sometime later he wrote his biography.⁹ The boy's upbringing was coloured by the family's position as rich landowners. His interest in military matters is shown by his lost book on *Tactics* [cf. 9.20.4], and by many digressions in the *Histories*;¹⁰ he was also devoted to riding and hunting—indeed tradition ascribed his death to a fall from a horse at the ripe age of eighty-two.¹¹ Admittedly, his knowledge of literature was not extensive; occasional quotations from the poets often suggest the use of a commonplace book.¹² His philosophic studies too were limited. Despite his use of the word 'unphilosophical' as a term of abuse,¹³ his references to Heracleitus, Plato, Aristotle and Demetrius of Phalerum provide no evidence that he had gone very deeply into any of these writers.¹⁴ On the other hand he had obviously given close attention to his predecessors in the field of history, such as Timaeus, Phylarchus, Theopompus and Ephorus. This emerges very clearly from the strictures which he feels it his duty to pass upon most of them whenever an occasion offers.¹⁵

Of Polybius' career between Philopoemen's death and the Third Macedonian War only a little is known. But he was Cavalry Commander of the Achaean Confederation for the year 170/69, a critical moment in his country's history. Involved in an irksome war with Perseus of Macedonia, the Romans were irritably watching all Greek states for signs of disloyalty. It was the tradition of Polybius' family to maintain an independent attitude vis-à-vis Rome, and in 170 B.C.

⁸ Plut. *Philop.* 21.5.

⁹ 10.21.5f; it was the source of Plutarch's *Philopoemen*.

¹⁰ E.g. 3.81.10, 105; 5.98; 10.16.1–17.5, 22–24, 32.7–33, 43–47; 11.25.6.

¹¹ Ps.-Lucian, *Macrob.* 23.

¹² See C. Wunderer, "Citate u. geflügelte Worte bei Polybios," in *Polybios-Forschungen* II (Leipzig 1901).

¹³ 12.25.6 (Timaeus); 36.15.5 (Prusias).

¹⁴ Cf. 4.40.3, 12.27.1 (Heracleitus); 4.35.15, 6.5.1, 45, 7.13.7, 12.28.2 (Plato); 12.5.4ff, 6a1ff, 6b3ff, 7.2, 7.4, 8ff, 11.5, 23.8, 24.2, 31.16.3 (Aristotle); 29.21 (Demetrius).

¹⁵ For attacks on Timaeus see Book 12 *passim*; on Phylarchus, 2.56.1–63.6; on Theopompus, 8.9–11; Ephorus is more gently treated, cf. 5.33.2, 12.28.10.

independence among Greeks was a quality little respected by the Senate. In the purge which followed Perseus' defeat, Polybius found himself one of a thousand eminent Achaeans who were summoned to Rome, ostensibly for examination, and subsequently detained there without even the pretence of justice.

Once at Rome, Polybius was more fortunate than his colleagues. Soon after the internment began, and while he was still in the city, he had the good fortune to attract the attention of the eighteen-year-old Scipio Aemilianus. The acquaintance, which sprang out of "the loan of some books and conversation about them"¹⁶ quickly ripened into friendship, and when soon afterwards the other internees were distributed among the municipal towns of Italy, Polybius received permission to stay on in Rome, where he became Scipio's mentor and close friend.¹⁷ His position was now highly ambiguous. Technically a foreign internee,¹⁸ he enjoyed friendship on equal terms with men like Aemilianus, his brother Q. Fabius, and the whole of that famous circle. Undoubtedly he felt flattered by this attention; and it is not wholly surprising that he responded sympathetically to the special virtues of Roman aristocratic character and tradition.

The majesty of the Senate,¹⁹ that repository of political talent, directing an amenable people thanks to a moral prestige or *auctoritas* enhanced by the successful struggle against Hannibal, could not fail to impress the Achaean statesman, who was all too conscious of the unruliness of Greek popular assemblies. The author of the *Tactics* had already experience of the methods and discipline of the Roman army; the more he studied it, the greater grew his admiration. In their civil life, too, the Romans had avoided the errors of his compatriots. Their peculiar and somewhat sensational funeral customs were designed to inspire the young noble with a sense of duty, family pride and patriotism, and a determination to model his own conduct on that of such figures as Horatius Cocles [cf. 6.53.1–55.4]. A strong public opinion, reinforced by the salutary sanction of the death penalty, inculcated strict standards of public honesty [6.56.1–5]; bribery, the most venial

¹⁶ 31.23.4 ἔκ τινος χρήσεως βιβλίων καὶ τῆς περὶ τούτων λαλίας. Gelzer, *Kleine Schriften* III (Wiesbaden 1964) 178 n.133, following Leo, takes *χρήσις* to mean 'reading together,' rather than 'loan.' The books were probably from Perseus' library, now the property of Aemilius Paullus (Plut. *Aem.* 28.1).

¹⁷ 31.23ff; Diod. 31.26.5; Vell. 1.13.3; Plut. *Mor.* 659F; Ps.-Plut. *Mor.* 199F.

¹⁸ The Achaeans were *κατεχόμενοι*; cf. 30.32.8, 33.1.3; see Gelzer *loc.cit.* (n.16 above).

¹⁹ On the Senate see 6.13.

of Greek sins, was virtually unknown.²⁰ Finally, Rome still possessed what the cynical and critical Greeks had so lamentably discarded, a state religion clothed in great pomp, and penetrating every aspect of private life with its reminders of the terrors and torments of Hades, so that any potentially unruly plebeians were kept in order and compelled by their fears to respect the sanctity of the oath [6.56.6–15].

To Polybius this all seemed most desirable. Gradually he cast aside his resentment and lurking hostility towards the state which, despite its *fides* and its *deisidaimonia*, had treated him and his colleagues so ill, and anticipating the role of a Smuts, became the interpreter, theoretician and philosopher of his adopted empire. He resolved in short to write a universal history which should explain by what means and thanks to what kind of constitution in a period of almost fifty-three years—from the outbreak of the Second Punic War to the victory over Perseus at Pydna—Rome had become mistress of the world.

III

This programme, it will be observed, is twofold—“by what means, and thanks to what kind of constitution,” *πῶς καὶ τίνι γένοι πολιτείας*. The means by which Rome rose to world dominion is the subject of Polybius’ history as a whole: but his account of the Roman constitution is concentrated in Book 6. It is to that account I propose to devote the remainder of this paper.

The great importance which Polybius attaches to the constitution as a factor in Roman success illustrates that concern to find the best type of state which had been a Greek preoccupation at least since Herodotus composed his famous dialogue on the subject and put it into the mouths of the Persian nobles.²¹ In the fourth century, Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws* and Aristotle’s *Politics* are only the most outstanding discussions of the ideal constitution; and the output went on into the Hellenistic age and beyond. Moreover, as Professor Sinclair has pointed out,²² the Greek interest in utopias was never wholly divorced from reality; and this fact is illustrated not only by Plato’s unhappy adventures in Sicily, but also from another aspect by Aristotle’s comprehensive study of 158 existing constitutions, of which the *Constitution of Athens* survives as a solitary example.

²⁰ 6.56.2; later this integrity was less universal at Rome, *cf.* 18.35.

²¹ Herod. 3.80–82.

²² T. A. Sinclair, *History of Greek Political Thought* (London 1952) 7.

Polybius himself devotes a substantial part of Book 6 to a comparison of the Roman constitution with those of Sparta, Crete and Carthage [6.43–56]. In other respects, however, he breaks new ground. His sixth book has suffered in modern times partly because it has survived only in fragments—though these are in fact substantial enough to permit a convincing reconstruction of the plan and even the details—and partly because the argument is itself complicated and attempts to combine within a single thesis elements which are not always fundamentally reconcilable.²³

At bottom Polybius is always the teacher. He writes because he wants his readers to benefit from his work. Repeatedly he stresses the utility of what he is saying; and it is partly at least his didacticism which has led him to overelaborate his discussion of the Roman constitution. He wants this lesson in political science to be one which will not only explain why Rome has grown to what she is, but will also enable students and statesmen to forecast the future, whether at Rome or elsewhere; and he recognises the special difficulties which Rome presents. “In the case of . . . Greek states,” he writes [6.3.1–3], “. . . it is an easy matter both to describe their past and to pronounce upon 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.” This passage commits Polybius to two tasks—an analysis of the Roman constitution as it functioned at the time of the Second Punic War, and an account of earlier Roman history. But if this account is to be of general application and relevant to other states, in short if any universal lessons are to emerge, then he must also show to what extent the development of the Roman state corresponds with the more general principles of political evolution.

At this point an obvious objection presents itself. Are there in fact any such general principles of political evolution? Polybius believes that there are, and he devotes chapters four to nine of Book 6 to their exposition. They are based, he claims, upon a general law of nature, the simple rule that all things have their beginnings, their growth,

²³ See Brink and Walbank, “The Construction of the Sixth Book of Polybius,” *CQ* N.S.4 (1954) 97–122.

their perfection, their decline, and their end. This is a law which is valid for all mortal things. But its application to political development can be defined with greater detail and precision. The result is the remarkable system to which Polybius gives the name of the ἀνακύκλωσις τῶν πολιτειῶν,²⁴ the cycle of constitutions. According to this doctrine all constitutional development is in a circle. Originally mankind lives in a state of complete lawlessness, in herds like animals, for the sake of mutual protection. In such a society the man who excels in physique and courage becomes the natural leader, “as happens in the case of bulls, bears, boars, cocks and the like.” Such a leader we term the monarch.

In the course of time, however, through a process which Polybius analyses in detail moral concepts arise along with feelings of sociability and companionship. When this happens and the “leading and most powerful man throws the weight of his authority on the side of such moral notions,” the basis of his power changes from fear to respect; and instead of a monarch (μόναρχος) we speak of a king (βασιλεύς). In time however, the king’s descendants degenerate through yielding to their appetites and exploiting their position of privilege, and this sets up feelings of hatred, envy and resentment; the kingship has become a tyranny. The next stage is reached when the noblest, the most high-spirited and the most courageous unite to lead the people against the tyrant, to expel him and to substitute an aristocracy.

But once again, when the original liberators are succeeded by children who have had no experience of either misfortune or moderation, they in turn deteriorate, and by devoting themselves to the pursuit of gain, or to wine and rioting, transform an aristocracy into an oligarchy, until they are driven out by the angry commons, who now set up a democracy. Once more, however, when a generation grows up which does not remember the vices of the oligarchs, men again become selfish and eager for power; they are now so used to freedom and equality that they no longer value them. Demagogues arise who seek popular support by the giving of bribes, and the people are corrupted by receiving them. All turns into the rule of violence: under such leaders the people begin to massacre, banish and plunder, until they degenerate again into savages and so once more find their master. At this point the cycle begins all over again.

²⁴ 6.9.10; cf. 5.4–9.9 for the detailed account.

How precisely Polybius sought to reconcile this cycle with the simple law of birth, perfection and decline, of which he clearly considers it to be a special case, is a subject which deserves fuller discussion than it can be given here.²⁵ At some points it appears as though the biological idea is being applied to each separate stage in the circle, with three separate points of perfection in kingship, aristocracy and democracy, each in turn followed by its own decline and a new start with the transition to the next stage. Elsewhere the cycle as a whole appears to be regarded as following the biological principle, but never very adequately: with the mixed constitution regarded as the ideal form, it was difficult to find an alternative acme anywhere among the simple forms which the cycle offered.

Where Polybius found this theory is not known. He connects it with "Plato and certain other philosophers [5.5.1]"; and it is true that in Book 8 of the *Republic* [544c] Plato sets out an 'order of states'—the best form (equated with aristocracy or kingship), the Cretan or Laconian form (equated with timocracy), oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny—with the implication that these develop one into another. But, as Aristotle observes in Book 5 of the *Politics* [7(5).12.1316a1ff], Plato failed to close the circle with a change from tyranny to the best state; he also failed to show how the changes come about. Admittedly, *Republic* 8 is not the only passage in which Plato discusses the theory of constitutional change;²⁶ but nowhere do we find anything quite like the *anacyclōsis*, and it seems clear that despite Polybius' reference to Plato, the origins of this must be sought at a date later than the fourth century. In his valuable book *Metabole Politeion*, the Swiss scholar Ryffel has traced two distinct traditions within Polybius' *anacyclōsis*—a theory of the origins of culture going back to the sophists and, in particular, to Protagoras, and a theory about the causes of corruption in states. It seems, however, pretty certain that it was not Polybius who conflated these two themes, but that he borrowed the theory *in toto* from some immediate predecessor. Who that was we cannot tell. Panaetius of Rhodes, who is known to have been a member of the Scipionic circle, has been suggested,²⁷ and there is a case for seeing some Stoic influence in Polybius' theory. On the other hand, it also

²⁵ For fuller discussion see the article quoted in n.23.

²⁶ See also *Laws*, 3.677Aff, 4.709Aff, *Ep.* 7.326bff, *Polit.* 291D–E.

²⁷ See references quoted in *CQ* 37 (1943) 85; Walbank, *Commentary on Polybius I* (Oxford 1957) 644.

contains non-Stoic features, and since most philosophical schools were fairly eclectic in the second century B.C., the positive evidence for Panaetius is really very weak. On the whole, it is more likely that the origins of the theory lay in some popular philosophical milieu such as that which produced works like the pamphlets known as Pseudo-Hippodamus and Ocellus Lucanus.²⁸

In any case, the important thing is the use Polybius made of it. Understanding of the Roman constitution, he had said, was handicapped by Greek ignorance of the Roman past. Unfortunately, the section of Book 6 in which he set out to remedy this gap has not survived except in a series of fragments. Something can be deduced from the second book of Cicero's *De Republica*, which certainly drew on Polybius' excursus on early Roman history; but it is not known how close the resemblance was. One fact seems to be well established. Cicero carried his account of Roman history down to the time of the Decemvirate, which undertook the codification of Roman law about 450 B.C.; and Polybius apparently did the same, since a fragment following immediately after the excursus [6.11.1] seems to refer to 450 as the date at which it ended. What was the significance of this date? It may, of course have been chosen because of the character of Polybius' sources. But it seems altogether more likely that it had a special importance in his interpretation of Roman history. Polybius' historical excursus—let us call it by the convenient and traditional title of the *archaeologia*—seems in fact to have been designed to lead up to the date at which Rome succeeded in emerging from the *anacyclōsis* by acquiring a constitution of a finer and more stable type. Within the *anacyclōsis* we have traced six forms of constitution (omitting the primitive monarchy which closed the circle). These are kingship, aristocracy and democracy, each followed by its respective perversion (*παρέκβασις*), tyranny, oligarchy and ochlocracy. "But it is evident," says Polybius [6.3.7], "that we must regard as the best constitution a combination of all the three above-mentioned varieties, since we have proof of this not only theoretically but in actual experience." This combined, or mixed, constitution is the one found at Rome at the time of the Hannibalic War, and it is in the possession of this that the strength of Rome lies.

Thus the *archaeologia* served to illustrate the workings of the normal

²⁸ See Walbank, *Commentary*, *loc.cit.*

constitutional cycle, the *anacyclōsis*, as it occurred at Rome, as well as to show how the setting-up of a mixed constitution put the brake on that fatal process. The surviving fragments, together with a cautious use of Cicero's *De Republica* 2, suggest that in this version of early Roman history Romulus and his immediate successors filled the rôle of the king (whether or not Romulus began as the primitive monarch is not clear), and that with Tarquinius Superbus kingship degenerated into tyranny. The expulsion of Tarquin led to the setting up of an aristocracy with regular magistrates, and this deteriorated into an oligarchy with the Decemvirate. At this point, however, Rome diverged from the pattern. In the absence of substantial fragments we cannot be certain to what extent elements of balance and the mingling of the three forces—the one, the few and the many—appeared in the earlier stages of the Roman constitutional evolution; but there is an interesting passage in Cicero [*Rep.* 2.42] in which he says that these three elements *ita mixta fuerunt et in hac civitate et in Lacedaemoniorum et Carthaginiensium, ut temperata nullo fuerint modo*—they were mixed, both in this state (he means Rome under the kings) and in Sparta and in Carthage, in such a way that there was no balance among them whatsoever. If this remark is based on Polybius, it suggests that the *archaeologia* traced, among other things, the gradual achievement of a balance between kingship, aristocracy and democracy, which finally came to fruition after the Decemvirate, at a time when the normal working of the *anacyclōsis* would have led the observer to expect the emergence of a democracy.

Certainly the *archaeologia* was intended primarily to explain the genesis of the Roman mixed constitution; and it is followed by a detailed analysis of how that mixed constitution functioned in practice [6.11.11–18.8]. The date with which Polybius is nominally concerned is the period of the Second Punic War. The mixed constitution may have taken its rise in 450, at the time of the Decemvirate, but it was at its height, its acme, at the end of the third century B.C., when the Romans were fighting Hannibal. In chapters 11 to 18, therefore, after some introductory remarks, Polybius proceeds to list in order the powers of the consuls (whom he takes to represent the kingly power), those of the Senate (or aristocratic element) and those of the people, followed by an analysis of the checks and limitations exercised against each of the three in turn. For example, the consuls have almost unlimited power as commanders in the field; but without the consent of the

Senate they can get neither food nor clothing nor pay for their troops; and on laying down office they have to account for their actions to the people. The Senate has vast powers, including control of the treasury and a general supervision over serious cases requiring a public investigation throughout Italy; but a *senatus consultum* has to be confirmed by the people before the Senate can hold such an enquiry, and its proceedings are subject to tribunician veto. Finally, the people alone has the right to confer honours and inflict punishments; but in competition for public contracts—and here it is interesting to find Polybius identifying the people with the group which shortly afterwards emerged as the *equites*—they are wholly at the mercy of the Senate through its control of censorial contracts and the law courts.

After listing these and many other similar instances, Polybius concludes that “such being the power that each part has of hampering the others or cooperating with them, their union is adequate to all emergencies, so that it is impossible to find a better political system than this.” For in time of danger from abroad, the three parts unite in the face of the common peril; and if in time of peace any element tends to become too predominant, the system of checks inherent in the constitution quickly restores the *status quo*.

This leads Polybius to a comparison between the mixed constitution of Rome and other noteworthy constitutions [6.43–56]. Athens and Thebes are both quickly dismissed. The success of those states was due to chance and circumstance, a rapid and ephemeral effulgence that was quickly quenched. Thebes owed everything to two men, Epaminondas and Pelopidas—a just criticism [6.43.6–7]; and once the era of Themistocles had passed, Athens displayed all the characteristics of a ship without a helmsman—a remark perhaps somewhat unfair to Pericles [6.44.2–3]. Crete is treated at greater length because Ephorus (and others according to Polybius) had commended it and compared it to Sparta; Ephorus’ claim is rejected, since “it would be rare to find personal conduct more treacherous or public policy more unjust” than in Crete [6.47.5]. Plato’s *Republic* is excluded from the comparison as a purely intellectual conception, not a real state [6.47.7–8]. Lycurgan Sparta is given high praise as a genuine mixed constitution—already in an earlier chapter Polybius had assumed that it stood on an equal footing with Rome in this respect [6.10.12–14]—but it is less well adapted to foreign conquest, and therefore, in view of Polybius’ general standpoint in his *Histories*, inferior. “If anyone esteems it finer and more

glorious," he remarks, ". . . to be the leader of many men, and to lord it over many and have the eyes of the world turned to him, it must be admitted that from this point of view the Laconian constitution is defective, while that of Rome is superior and better formed for the attainment of power" [6.50.3-4].

This leaves only Carthage; and in comparing the constitutions of Rome and Carthage, Polybius concludes that although Carthage was also a mixed constitution, at the time of the Hannibalic War this was already past its prime. By then the masses had acquired the chief voice in deliberation, whereas at Rome the Senate still kept control over this important aspect of policy. This conclusion is followed by a detailed examination of the two states [6.51-6], taking account of such matters as their skill in sea and land fighting and their morale; and in this connection we are given some interesting information about Roman customs and the relative behaviour of the two peoples in regard to the acquisition of wealth, and about religious observances. This all contributes to Polybius' general picture of Roman *mores* and the Roman constitution; and it now becomes apparent why Rome was able to beat Carthage and advance to the mastery of the known world.

In these final chapters the reader is brought back to the theme of prognostication. Polybius' purpose, like that of all the more reputable ancient philosophers, is didactic. As we saw, his essay was designed not merely to explain the growth of Rome, but also to enable his readers to forecast the future. What lessons have emerged from his analysis? First, the example of Carthage provides one warning. Carthage, like Lycurgan Sparta, was a mixed constitution, but at the time of Hannibal she had passed her prime; her constitution had not saved her, and presumably the Roman constitution would not ultimately save Rome either. A mixed constitution, so long as it functions and is maintained intact, can prevent political decay. But the mixed constitution is no more immortal than anything else. "That all existing things are subject to decay and change," writes Polybius in the last chapter but one of the book [6.57.1,5-9], "is a truth that scarcely needs proof"; and he goes on to say that "when a state has weathered great perils and subsequently attains to supremacy and uncontested sovereignty, it is evident that under the influence of long established prosperity life becomes more extravagant, and the citizens more fierce in their rivalry regarding office As these defects go on increasing, the beginning of the change for the worse will be due"—the change in

tense is significant—"to love of office and the disgrace entailed by obscurity, as well as to extravagance and purse-proud display." The cause, he adds, will be the people, who for various motives give way to passion, reject authority, and demand the lion's share in everything. "When this happens, the state will change its name to the finest sounding of all, freedom and democracy, but will change its nature to the worst thing of all, mob-rule."

The lesson for Rome is explicit. The "change for the worse" is still happily in the future. But already Rome has won "supremacy and uncontested sovereignty," the Romans are "lords of the earth," *κύριοι τῆς οἰκουμένης*. Despite the temporary brake of the mixed constitution, the general trend of the *anacyclōsis* is unmistakable; and though in the chapter from which I have just quoted, Polybius slurs over the exact process by which a mixed constitution slides back on to the revolving wheel of change, the ultimate outcome, ochlocracy, is never in doubt.

IV

Does this mean that Polybius had a secondary purpose in Book 6, to prophesy disaster to the Roman constitution and the Roman state? And if so, was this due to a later revision of his views? Many have thought so; and it has been argued that those parts of Book 6 which concern themselves with the *anacyclōsis* and the decay of the mixed constitution belong to a second layer added at a date when Polybius had awakened to the signs of corruption in Roman society and had lost that earlier confidence which shaped the original concept of his *Histories*.²⁹

To this hypothesis there are several objections. First: in so far as Polybius is concerned with foretelling the future development of Rome, this is a secondary purpose. The primary object behind Book 6 and the work as a whole was that enunciated at the outset and repeated in the last chapter of Book 39—to explain Roman success. Secondly, if at the end of Book 6 Polybius describes in terms which clearly apply to Rome the beginning of the decline from the mixed constitution, he makes it clear (as I have just pointed out) that this constitutional decline is still something in the future—a fact hard to reconcile with the hypothesis that it is part of a revised plan which

²⁹ For bibliography see Walbank, *Commentary* I, 636.

Polybius has adopted because he has now come to recognize the beginnings of the process of decay going on around him.

According to that hypothesis Polybius was shaken by the events of 150 to 146—the wars with Carthage, Macedon and Achaëa, and the destruction of Carthage and Corinth—and began to condemn, or at any rate to distrust, Roman imperialism. The Third Punic War was preceded by a famous debate between Cato and Scipio Nasica on what ought to be done about Carthage, in which Nasica argued that the removal of all outside dangers must leave the road open to internal conflict and decay.³⁰ This, it is suggested, was the belief of Polybius; and in support of this thesis it is conveniently pointed out that Polybius' friend Scipio Aemilianus had wept tears beside the burning roofs of Carthage and quoted Homer—"a day shall come when Priam's holy city too shall perish"—in dismal foreboding for Rome itself [38.21–22]. According to an anecdote related by Valerius Maximus [4.1.10], when Scipio was censor four years later in 142 B.C., he made a significant change in the official prayer. This had formerly called upon the gods to "render the possessions of the Roman people ever greater and more ample"; Scipio, we are told, preferred to pray that "they should maintain them for all time undiminished." Here was evidence, it seemed, that Scipio, and so by implication his friend Polybius, was awake to the dire consequences of world dominion.

It is an interesting thesis; but it will not stand up to detailed examination. In the first place, it is reasonably certain that the anecdote in Valerius Maximus is completely apocryphal.³¹ Secondly, Aemilianus' career shows him to have been the consistently loyal servant of the Senate in its policy of imperialism. From the day when he won the approval of Cato during his first command at Carthage to his destruction of the Spanish city of Numantia in 133, he acted like the true son of Aemilius Paullus, who in a carefully coordinated piece of frightfulness sacked seventy Epirote cities and enslaved 150,000 persons in a single hour. As a commentary on the toughness of both men it is perhaps also appropriate to recall that Aemilianus *exemplo patris*

³⁰ Plut. *Cat. Mai.* 27.3; App. *Lib.* 69; Diod. 34.33.4–6; see Gelzer, *Kleine Schriften* II, 39–72. It has recently been argued by W. Hoffman ("Die römische Politik des 2. Jahrhunderts und das Ende Karthagos," *Historia* 9 [1960] 309–344) that this debate is apocryphal; I hope to discuss this view, which I find unconvincing, elsewhere.

³¹ Cf. A. Aymard, *Mel. de la soc. toulousaine* II (1948) 101f. In *JRS* 50 (1960) 68 n.38, H. H. Scullard argues that Cic. *De Orat.* 2.268, which appears to imply that not Scipio but his colleague Mummius *condidit lustrum*, could in fact refer to Scipio; but he admits that this would be a somewhat strained interpretation.

sui, Aemili Pauli, qui Macedoniam vicerat,³² shared with his father the doubtful distinction of being the first Roman to introduce the custom of throwing deserters and fugitives to the wild beasts in a public show. As for Aemilianus' tears over Carthage, that was in the Hellenistic tradition; Antiochus the Great had wept [8.20.10] when his men brought in the traitor Achaeus bound hand and foot, "because," Polybius suggests, "he saw how hard to guard against and how contrary to all expectations are events due to Fortune." It did not prevent his acquiescing in the decision "to lop off Achaeus' extremities and then, after cutting off his head and sewing it up in an ass's skin, to crucify the body." Similarly Aemilius Paullus greeted Perseus after his surrender with tears in his eyes,³³ and delivered himself of a sermon at Perseus' expense. Hellenistic men were quick to weep and quick to recall the fickleness of Fortune; and Aemilianus prided himself upon his Hellenic culture. In terms of Roman policy, however, it meant just nothing.

The same conclusion holds good for his friend Polybius. Scipio Nasica had argued that Carthage must be maintained in existence so as to ensure internal harmony at Rome. Polybius, on the contrary, asserted that "when the Romans are freed from fears from abroad (*τῶν ἐκτὸς φόβων*)" and reap the consequent prosperity, any tendency to excess and disproportion is countered by the checks of the mixed constitution, which automatically restores the equilibrium [6.18.5-8]—an argument which reads very much like a reply to that of Nasica. Not the existence of a dangerous foe, but the maintenance of the mixed constitution is Rome's best protection against internal disruption. Indeed, if Professor Gelzer is right in attributing a passage in Diodorus to Polybius, as I think he is, the latter committed himself to the view that "states who seek hegemony acquire it through courage and intelligence, increase their power by moderation and kindness towards men, but assure it by inspiring fear and consternation."³⁴ Sir Frank Adcock's comment is to the point: "Polybius probably yielded to the temptation to defend Roman frightfulness by treating it as though it followed some kind of natural law."³⁵ This again would point to an orthodox attitude towards Roman foreign policy.

On the other hand, it is certainly true that Polybius was not uncritical either of the Roman political system or of Roman society. But this

³² Livy, *Ep.* 51; Val. Max. 2.7.13.

³³ 24.20.1-4; Plut. *Aem.* 26.5.

³⁴ Diod. 32.2 and 4; see Gelzer, *Kleine Schriften* II, 64-5.

³⁵ F. E. Adcock, "Delenda est Carthago," *CambHistJ.* 8 (1946) 127-8.

fact cannot be used to sustain the theory of a change in emphasis in Book 6, because it is clear that his critical attitude dated from his first arrival in Rome, and no doubt from before then. The detailed chronology of the composition of Polybius' *Histories* is a subject of controversy³⁶; it would, however, be generally agreed that he started the work shortly after his internment began. But already in Book 1 we find him asking why the Romans, now that they are masters of the world, are no longer able to put such large fleets to sea as they had done in the First Punic War [1.64.1–2], and he promises an answer in Book 6; unfortunately it has not survived. Here he points clearly to deterioration following upon the acquisition of world dominion; and in a later passage in Book 18, where he is discussing the fact that Romans are no longer proof against bribery,³⁷ he defines the period of moral change as that at which they began to undertake overseas wars—by which he seems to mean the second century wars in Greece and the Near East.

In detecting some moral deterioration from that time onwards, Polybius was of course neither alone nor particularly far-sighted. As early as 184 Cato's censorship had been celebrated by the setting up of a statue in his honour in the temple of Salus with an inscription stating that "when the Roman state was tottering to its fall, he was made censor and, by helpful guidance, wise restraints and sound teachings, restored it again."³⁸ The reference was to Cato's campaign against luxury and declining morals. Polybius cannot have been unaware of the controversies this had awakened, and he must therefore have known that the issue of moral decay at Rome had been a lively one sixteen years before he set foot in Italy. By 168 it must have been a commonplace.

Thus from the time he planned his history Polybius was conscious of some degree of decline since the great days of the Hannibalic War; he did not need the arguments of Scipio Nasica and the events of 146, still less the Gracchan catastrophe of 133, to convince him of this. Consequently, if despite this knowledge he could plan a work which was to explain Rome's imperial success by reference to the Roman mixed constitution, with its checks and its functional stability, there was nothing in the years during which he was becoming more and

³⁶ See my discussion in *Commentary* I, 292–7; add H. Erbse, "Polybios-Interpretationen," *Philologus* 101 (1957) 277ff; Gelzer, *Kleine Schriften* III, 209–10; T. Cole, "The Sources and Composition of Polybius VI," *Historia* 13 (1964) 440–86.

³⁷ 18.35; see above n.20.

³⁸ Plut. *Cat.Mai.* 19.3; cf. Walbank, *Commentary* I, 647–8.

more identified with the ideals of the Scipionic group to lead him to change that emphasis.

In 150 Polybius returned to Greece; he was with Scipio at the fall of Carthage [38.21–22], and later did great service to his fellow-countrymen in Achaëa by acting as mediator with the Romans after the disastrous Achaean War.³⁹ At some date after this—we do not know precisely when—he decided to extend the original plan of his history to go down to 146 instead of 168, in order that “contemporaries will 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 [3.4.7].” Once again Polybius strikes the didactic note. A lesson is to be learnt; and the many remarks hostile to Roman policy which occur throughout his narrative of the years 167 to 150, when as a detainee at Rome and a victim of Roman policy he was watching affairs from outside, detached and even cynical, might suggest that the verdict was to be given against Rome.⁴⁰ But this conclusion would be wrong. From 150 onwards, as the friend of Aemilianus and an active participant in what was going on in the next five years in Africa and Greece, Polybius’ sympathies are increasingly with Rome. His account of the Third Punic War, the war with Andriscus and the Achaean War are all whole-heartedly pro-Roman in sympathy. Support for Andriscus is only explicable as a heaven-sent infatuation, *daimonoblabeia* [36.17.12–15]. The Carthaginians may have given posterity some grounds, however slight, to speak in their defence; the Greeks gave none, and it is a historian’s duty to speak out in their condemnation without mincing words [38.1.5]. The commander Hasdrubal was wholly worthless; indeed the Greeks and Carthaginians were alike in their leaders at this time [38.7.1, 8.14]. Polybius had seen these things for himself, and he had seen them from the Roman camp; he had no illusions and no doubts. And, as we observed, where Romans did resort to frightfulness, he was inclined to condone it as the inevitable accompaniment of an empire which must be secured.

V

Of Polybius’ later years we know little; but apparently he died in his own land. His long exile at Rome and his conversion to the *fatum*

³⁹ See Walbank, *Commentary* I, 5 n.8.

⁴⁰ Books 30–38 are full of remarks critical of Roman policy.

Romanum had left him a Greek at heart; and when one has made every allowance for the influence of the Scipionic circle, his picture of the Roman state in Book 6 remains almost wholly the product of Greek political speculation. As we saw, the *anacyclōsis*, though it appears for the first time in its complete form in Polybius, can claim a long ancestry and a probable parentage in the popular philosophy of the Hellenistic age. The mixed constitution has equally venerable origins. Thucydides had praised Theramenes' constitution of 411 B.C. as a moderate combination as between the few and the many [8.97.2]; and Plato and Aristotle had both dealt with the theme at length, Plato applying it in particular to his interpretation of Sparta. As in the case of the *anacyclōsis*, Polybius' immediate source is obscure. Many scholars have thought of Dicaearchus, who wrote a work called the *Tripolitikos*. But we know that at some stage the Stoics also approved the mixed constitution, so certainty is impossible.⁴¹

Polybius' sources then must remain an open question. The novelty in his treatment lay in the application of Greek political theory to the realities of the Roman state. Admittedly, there is some creaking. As a definition of Roman government in the late third and early second centuries the mixed constitution is over-formal. It stresses an important aspect of the Roman character, its genius for compromise; but it neglects that elaborate texture of political life which ensured the domination of the noble class. The *anacyclōsis* too, put forward as the natural cycle of political evolution, is far too schematic to fit the history of any one state; and its fallacies had been pointed out long ago in advance by Aristotle, who observed, criticizing Plato, that in fact any constitution could turn into virtually any other [*Pol.* 7(5).12.1316a1ff]. The real mainspring of Rome's imperial success lay in the domination of the Senate and in her flexibility and capacity for growth—a feature which had impressed Philip V of Macedon, who commented on it in a letter written to urge an intake of new citizens at Larisa several years before Polybius was born [*Syll.* 543]. This potentiality for growth and change was something which escaped Polybius entirely—and naturally so; for as a Greek of the upper classes he was conditioned both by philosophical traditions and by inclination to identify the ideal state with immobility and in political evolution to see nothing but the threat of disorder.

⁴¹ See Walbank, *Commentary* I, 640–1.

Yet in one respect he succeeded in throwing off the preconceptions of his theories. It is to his credit that he could point to the Roman constitution as the fruit of a long period of political development, which the Romans had attained “not by any process of reasoning”—the Greek way—“but by the discipline of many struggles and troubles and always choosing the best in the light of experience gained in disaster [6.10.13–14].” This diagnosis acutely characterizes the development of Rome; and as a piece of political analysis it is likely to outlive the elaborate scheme of the *anacyclōsis*, the much-advertised science of prognostication, and the ingenious fiction of the mixed constitution.

Indeed this might well have been a convenient point to leave the subject—if it were not for the fact that ideas have their own history and ingenious fictions sometimes foreshadow realities. Polybius’ sixth book as a whole has exercised an outstanding influence on later political thought. As we saw, Cicero drew on it for his *De Republica*; and though it had little relevance for the Roman Empire—Tacitus jeered at the mixed constitution as something easier to describe than to accomplish—we find it cropping up many centuries later in Machiavelli. The *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy* opens with a restatement of the theory of the *anacyclōsis* almost in Polybius’ own words; and Machiavelli follows it with an account of the principles of the mixed constitution developed to fit his thesis of a balance of competing social and economic interests held in check by a powerful prince.

After Machiavelli the two main aspects of Polybius’ theory, the cycle of development and the mixed constitution designed to slow down its effects, seem to have made their appeal in different quarters. To the historical philosopher, the *anacyclōsis* contained the attractive suggestion of a universal law of political development. Giambattista Vico in his *Scienza Nuova* sets out to reveal “the ideal, the eternal laws in accordance with which the affairs of all nations proceed in their rise, progress, mature state, decline and fall.” Despite the profound difference of approach in Vico’s devout attempt to reveal the design of God in human history, Polybius’ influence is unmistakable. Similarly in more recent times, it is apparent that the vast structures raised by Spengler and Toynbee would not have borne quite the same appearance had Polybius’ sixth book not survived at all.

It is however to the mixed constitution rather than to the *anacyclōsis* that statesmen and political scientists have turned in their search for

the ideal state. As Sabine points out in his *History of Political Theory*,⁴² the doctrine of the mixed constitution was not alien to the Middle Ages, with their notion of tempered monarchy and the division of powers which lay behind mediaeval constitutional practice. But quite apart from mediaeval influence, there is a direct debt to Polybius in the work of Machiavelli's contemporary, Francesco Guicciardini, who wrote of a *governo misto* made up of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy; and the same is true of the constitutional theory of John Calvin.

More interesting perhaps than either, because he interprets the idea of a mixed constitution less as a union of political forms than, like Polybius before him, as a system of mutual checks and balances exercised by various embodiments of political power—in this case between the legislative, the executive and the judiciary—is Montesquieu. Montesquieu saw this balance exemplified in Britain and made it (together with our climate!) the source of English liberty. Whether he was right in so doing after 1688 and the assertion of parliamentary sovereignty is arguable; it has been suggested⁴³ that he was here following Locke and Harrington, and the already obsolete theories of his friend Bolingbroke, who in 1733 wrote that "it is by this mixture of monarchical, aristocratical and democratical power, blended together in one system, and by these three estates balancing one another, that our free constitution of government hath been preserved so long inviolate."⁴⁴

Whatever the merits of Montesquieu's views on the English constitution of the eighteenth century, his theories were however destined to make their mark in English-speaking lands abroad. Bryce described the *Esprit des Lois* as the bible of eighteenth century political philosophy. Its influence can be detected in several American state constitutions of the late eighteenth century, for example in the Virginian Declaration of Rights of 1776 and the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780; and as a recent essay has pointed out,⁴⁵ the pages of the

⁴² G. Sabine, *History of Political Theory*³ (London 1951) 278ff, 471.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 472–3.

⁴⁴ Bolingbroke, *A Dissertation upon Parties*: Letter 13; from the *Craftsman* (1733–4), quoted by Sabine, *loc.cit.*

⁴⁵ A. Delatte, *La constitution des Etats-unis et les Pythagoriciens* (Paris 1948). See also on this topic G. Chinard, "Polybius and the American Constitution," *JHistIdeas* 1 (1940) 40ff; R. M. Gummere, "The Classical Ancestry of the United States Constitution," *American Quarterly* 14(1962) 3–18. Gummere records the fact that "Thomas Jefferson sent from Paris to Madison, a former graduate of John Witherspoon at Princeton, and to George Wythe, a finished Greek and Latin scholar . . . copies of Polybius and sets of ancient authors."

Federalist and the notes published by James Madison in 1836 show the great fascination which this work exercised over the members of the commission set up to study forms of government, ancient and modern, in preparation for the American Constitution of 1787. Thanks very largely to this influence of Montesquieu, the American Constitution is today the example *par excellence* of separated powers and an equilibrium based on checks and counter-checks. The legislative organs can block the executive, the executive the legislature; and the Supreme Court can—and frequently does—block both. It is a system which has been severely criticised on various occasions. John Adams, the second president, thought it of dubious efficacy and Jeremy Bentham feared it might lead to stagnation. It has certainly not done that; but to this day it is the cause of an element of uncertainty in American policy, which cannot be under-estimated as a factor in contemporary politics. For this feature, good or ill, we must, I suggest, reserve at least part of our thanks or execration for Polybius, whose essay on the constitution enjoyed by the *κύριοι τῆς οἰκουμένης* of his own time has thus by a strange and unexpected channel of transmission helped to shape the destiny of a people whose role in the modern world is perhaps not altogether dissimilar to that of the Romans in theirs.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ A lecture delivered at Duke University on May 5th, 1964, and at several other universities in the United States and Canada the same spring.