No historian of antiquity has been so overtly assertive of his intentions as has Polybius. Throughout the fragmentary remains of the forty books which comprise his *Histories* he repeatedly breaks into the narrative to tell us what he considers are the purpose and value of history. Not content with numerous prefatory statements to his books and digressions in the text he devotes an entire book (XII) to illustrate by contrast with the works of his contemporaries what an historian should do.

In so far as Polybius is impelled to explain at some length, even at the risk of wearisome iteration, what he is about, he marks a significant change in historiography from his Greek and Roman predecessors for whom history did not call for the justification that Polybius of a later age thought necessary. In part no doubt his keen consciousness of intent was due to his almost unique experience and situation for like other ancient historians, including Herodotus and Thucydides, he was exiled from his homeland.\(^1\) To an educated and intelligent Greek who had travelled and dwelt among foreigners, even under virtual, if favoured, house arrest, the sea and land change was traumatic. For Polybius we may reasonably believe that it deepened his self-awareness and made him acutely conscious of the nature of the task that he set himself and accomplished, \textit{viz.} to write the history of Rome and how it subdued and conquered the known world in less than 53 years. In a sense the task was one that only he in his peculiarly privileged position could do. As a prominent member of the Scipionic circle he was well and uniquely placed to observe the Rome of his day and enquire into its history. Moreover, as a Greek not involved in Roman patriotic sentiment he could take a detached and reasonably objective standpoint. So that as Mommsen fairly observes, Polybius understood the history of Rome more clearly than did contemporary Romans.\(^2\) And few could have been more sympathetic, for, steeped in Hellenism though he was and conscious of its superiority over many aspects of the Roman way of life, he saw virtue in the politics of Rome and in the decisive action that followed them and opened up a more extensive area of operations than the politics of his Greek city states had known.

Fortunately, too, by the 2nd century circumstances had widened
the potential scope for western historiography. The time in fact were propitious for a more comprehensive account and assessment of history, for owing largely to the conquests of Alexander it had overflowed beyond the confines of the Mediterranean into Persia and as far as India. Romans had begun to look beyond the narrow bounds of their cities to ponder the intriguing prospects of terra incognita. Life had become less uniform than that of Thucydides: politics especially had become more complex with civic, monarchical and federal systems. To understand it all and measure its significance it was necessary to view it as a whole. This could only be done by discovering how it had all come about: without such knowledge the present was unintelligible and the future inconceivable. It was not then surprising that none placed so high a premium upon the value of history as did Polybius.

To appreciate the kind of value that history had for him we must consider first how he conceived his self-appointed task and his methods of historiography. Highly critical of most historical writings of his Roman contemporaries and of his Roman predecessor e.g. Fabius Pictor, from whose mistakes he sought to benefit, he set about to write a new kind of history free of the faults of other historians and above all comprehensive and universal in its scope. Apart from Ephorus, who had apparently written a universal history (V, 33) no other historian had attempted anything more than episodical history. For Polybius such a restricted canvas added little to knowledge and nothing to a secure grasp of universal history (I. 4.). In particular, only universal history could establish a complete account of the enterprises and means which led Rome to conquer the world. He judged that from the 140th Olympiad (220 BC.) events began to take on a universal character and the history of the various parts of the known world to cohere into an organic unity (I. 3.). Moreover, though Polybius may not have sensed it, by the second century B.C. the archaic, rigid, cosmological view of the world was giving way to a more flexible explanation.

In a more eclectic philosophical ethos Polybius as a man of the world and of public affairs rather than of letters saw history in a plain, uncomplicated fashion. To him it presented no epistemological difficulties. The facts of the past were there to be narrated and explained. Nor did they present any insuperable difficulty to those who were prepared to apply themselves diligently to the collection and study of the evidence (XII. 25 b ) The myths that comprised the cosmogony of the age he was disposed to treat in an almost
Vichian fashion, in that he assumed that they contained a core of indubitable fact which could be found by allowing for poetic imagination and licence.

But for a full and proper study of the human past much more was needed than the attributes of a secluded scholar. In his view the study of documents was of less importance than the acquisition of political and geographical knowledge. An historian must above all be a man with practical experience, fully immersed in politics (XII. 28), else his history would be no better than that of Timaeus whom Polybius was never weary of criticising for his total lack of such training and for his pedantry. Here it can be fairly said that few ancient historians were as much acquainted with public affairs as was Polybius who was the first Greek to see the Roman constitution at work and take some part in it.

Along with political experience was the need to know the terrain where events had happened at first hand (XXX. 4.). No historian of his day stressed more strongly the value of geographical knowledge in order to help understand why men did what they did. It is unfortunate that his contributions to geography have largely perished with so much of his Histories. But not content with the bookish geographical knowledge he must see for himself. Accordingly, he travelled widely and among many of his journeys was one to retrace the steps of Hannibal over the Alps (III. 48.). He would fully have agreed with the English historian, R.H. Tawney that what a historian needs is not more documents but stronger boots. Unfortunately, strong as Polybius' boots were they sometimes led him astray, nor were they sufficient in themselves. As Thomas Arnold points out in his History of Rome, his enthusiasm for geography was not equalled by his knowledge; and what topographical knowledge he may have had of the topography of the various campaigns is dulled in its presentation by unimaginative, pedestrian, and often inadequate description. For all that, he has some claim to be regarded as a geographical determinist since he was greatly impressed with the importance of both climate and the environment upon us in moulding both human character and physical formation. (IV. 21.)

These somewhat elementary and superficial inferences from an historian who laid great store by personal observation and by personal enquiry of witnesses (XII. 4.) underline the largely contemporary nature of his work. Like Herodotus and Thucydides he wrote of what he knew from personal experience and acquaintance or of that which was near to him in time. His last twenty books concern his
own generation, the first twenty the preceding one. The period that he set out to narrate covered in all barely 53 years, from the 140th Olympiad, when the conflict between Rome and Carthage began, to the defeat of Perseus and the final destruction of Macedonian power at Pydna in 168 B.C., but in fact he carried his account another 23 years to 145 B.C. the year after the crushing of the Achaean League at Corinth. It is significant of his synoptic view of history that he chose as his starting point when history became a connected whole: the affairs of Italy and Libya are involved with those of Asia and Greece and the tendency of all is to unity. (I. 3.) So involved and interrelated were the affairs of various states that the history of no one state could properly be dealt with in isolation.

Indeed, it was the nature of their involvement one with another that interested Polybius more than events themselves. For him the most important elements of history were motives and causes. (III. 7.) Let him speak for himself 'Neither the writer nor the reader should confine his attention to bare statement of facts: he must take into account all that precedes, accompanied or followed them. If you take from history all explanations of cause, principle and motive, and of the adaptation of the means to the end, what is left is a mere panorama without being instructive'. (III. 31.) It is as though he were on the brink of saying with R.G. Collingwood 'to know why is to know what'. But if the idealist approach was alien to his nature, the view that history was the answer to problems was certainly not. For Polybius it was in fact the response to questions put to the evidence, the authenticity of which was oddly enough seldom in question. Nevertheless, it is to his credit that he repeatedly emphasised the need to understand causal connections between events. 'What profit to our readers' he asks rhetorically 'to describe wars and battles, the storming of cities and the enslavement of their inhabitants if they are to know nothing of the causes which conduce to success or failure' (XII. 19.).

Yet he was careful to draw explicit distinctions between different kinds of causes, aitia, prophasis and arche, i.e. motives, excuses or reasons and actions initiating events. (III. 6.) His concern was with the first, aitia, for human motivation was for him of the greatest importance in accounting for historical events. The clear demonstration of motives alone would establish incontrovertibly the truth of history. Yet, as Mommsen has pointed out, this apodictic approach was limited to the tracing of external and mechanistic links. His conception of relations is everywhere jejune and lacking in imagin-
atation. True, we today should seek further in our search for causes, and plumb the psychological depths of the human mind, have recourse to scientific knowledge which was denied Polybius, but in essence, we should be no more rational in our explanation.

Nowhere better is this borne out than in his treatment of Fortune or Tyche. Although he sought always to explain human events in natural and commonsense terms, he had to admit of fickle Fortune occasionally intervening to act in a capricious fashion and give a sudden twist to man’s lot. Knowing how she could not be denied, he set out to put before his readers a compendious view of the part she played in bringing about the general catastrophe. (I. 4.) Yet, like that of Thucydides, his attitude to Fortune was inclined to be sceptical. She must not be invoked to explain events when a sufficient rational explanation can be given. (XVIII. 28.) To speak of chance when causes can be found is an evasion of responsibility. In this respect Polybius reveals a modern agnostic approach to human affairs; the gods may have their place in the scheme of things, and admittedly the influence of Fortune is incalculable (XXIX. 21.) so that an historian cannot ignore them, but unless they obviously intervene to determine the course of events there is no need to invoke them.

But no matter the unpredictable, if determinate, role played by Fortune, man was not absolved from moral responsibility, for within limits man was free to act as he willed. Statesmen moreover, who were more free than most, could properly be praised or blamed for their actions. Not only was Polybius ever ready with his own but he invited his readers to make their own moral judgments (III. 4.). He recognised implicitly that statements about the human past often involved moral judgments which only an historian could give.

Such responsibility for moral judgment was nowhere greater than in the need of an historian to be objective and impartial. Although we may suspect that behind the bare, unvarnished facade of objective narrative there lurked a Polybius ever ready to obtrude with personal comment and justification, he nevertheless was well seized with the need for impartiality, difficult though it was to meet (VIII. 10).

‘Directly a man assumes the moral attitude of an historian he ought to forget all considerations of that kind (patriotism and loyalty to friends). There will be many occasions on which he will be bound to speak well of his enemies and even to praise them in the highest terms, if the facts demand it, and on the other hand many occasions on which it will be his duty to criticise and denounce his own side,
however dear to him, if their errors of conduct suggest that course. For as a living creature is rendered wholly useless if deprived of its eyes, so if you take truth from history what is left is an idle unprofitable tale' (I. 14.). Yet patriotic though he could be, in the main Polybius lived up to these precepts. Although a Greek, he thought well of Rome, yet he was prepared when he felt it necessary to criticise it (XVIII. 35.) and to give full credit to the genius of Hannibal (IX. 9; XXIII. 13.). He is moreover inclined to allow that an historian can be excused for showing some partiality to his own country, so long as he does not depart from the facts. (XVI. 14).

It is this insistence upon respect for the facts that also characterises his *Histories*, for the facts are for Polybius the plain and simple truth of the matter, the attainment of which, he is never tired of reminding us, is his chief aim. (I. 35; III. 4; X. 21; XII. 12; XXXVIII. 4). For him, as for all historians of antiquity the facts once discovered through diligent research and impartial judgement were established for all time. *Quod est factum* was so obviously beyond dispute as never to raise the slightest doubt to a philosophical realist and a thorough going pragmatist. For on this basis was found­ed the essential and inestimable value of history, as it was for all antiquity, *viz*. its usefulness. As an early 17th century French Classical Scholar, Isaac Casaubon, points out, his approach to history was deliberately pragmatic. He wrote not for his own delectation of others, but for the use his works might have for his readers (XI. 2). On this he was quite explicit ‘I record these things in the hope of benefitting my readers. There are two roads to reformation: one through the misfortunes of their own, the other through those of others. The former is the most unmistakable, the latter is the least painful’ (I. 35). In a manner of which the German 19th century historian, L. von Ranke, would have heartily approved he stated that his function was above all to set down with fidelity what was actually said and done, however commonplace it was (II. 56).

Polybius then was nothing if not a teacher. His didactic approach was directed especially at politicians and statesmen, for history was in his view a guide to political action, above all else. It had authority because it was largely susceptible to rational interpretation. It alone provided past lessons of supreme interest and instructiveness (XXXIX. 19). Statesmen could correct their own conduct by, for example, a study of change in the character of Philip V (VIII.II) and could profit from an account of the Roman
constitution. For, believing as he did in the Aristotelian cyclical theory of constitutional development (VI. 3-4), he naturally thought that knowledge of previous modes of government would prepare one for what must eventuate. History was a valuable form of knowledge which as well as making the present intelligible revealed the broad outline of the future. Not only was it a training for a political life but it had wider educational value in that, so long as it was universal history, its knowledge increased our intellectual stature (V. 75). Through history we would become more mature in our judgements and hence be able to act more wisely in a crisis. (I. 35). What we learn from the tragedies and mistakes of the past was not how to avoid such misfortunes but how to bear them stoically when they befall us (I. 1).

But the past could not of itself be of such pragmatic value to us unless it were approached properly. It was not sufficient to know the bald historical facts in the manner of rote learning, but they must be answers to specific questions put to the evidence of the past, and that a ‘universal’ past. These questions are not those that asked simply what happened but why it happened. This involved him in a study of causation which was the heart of his pragmatic approach to history. It is true that his notion of causation was too restricted and mechanistic, and lacking in more than elementary psychological insight into motives. Moreover, they were the motives of a few outstanding individuals — the heroes of history — who, Polybius believed, played a determinative part in the course of events, whatever in influence of Fortune. He was never more at home than when describing the strategy and objectives of military and naval commanders. Of social causation and the forces that move peoples as a whole to action he had little understanding. This was largely because his Histories were too much concerned with political and military affairs and lacked any reference to social, economic or cultural events.

They are, in short, the epitome of Polybius himself and reflected his individuality, his own tastes, inclinations and role of an active participator in events that he described. Nor is he himself ever far from the scene of his Histories. Highly objective and impartial though they were he is so bent on reminding us that they were such that we are seldom allowed to forget for long their essential subjectivity. We feel throughout that somewhere he is always on the stage, if in the wings, waiting for an opportunity to go up front and criticize, emphasize or expound.
But to whom? we may well ask. Not to *hoi polloi* who would scarcely have understood his didacticism or appreciated his austere Stoicism but to soldiers and statesmen and men of public affairs generally. They made the stuff of Polybius' history, and made it one of ceaseless conflict, campaign and counter campaign, assault and retreat. War was the staple element in the histories of antiquity and none saw this more clearly than did Polybius.

And few, we may infer from the subsequent influence of his work, made a greater impact on later historiography. With him, Hellenistic historiography assumed an enlargement of consciousness and a widening of perspective. He impelled it, moreover, with a livelier insistence on the pragmatic value of history than earlier Greek historians had done. And though we may not wholly subscribe to Mommsen's verdict of Polybius that 'His books are like the sunrise in the field of history, when they begin the veils of mist which still enshroud the Samnites and Gauls are lifted and where they end a new and, if possible, more vexatious twilight begins', we can fairly say that for clarity and rationality he set a standard of historiography which, with its decline under the heavy eschatology of Christianity, was not equalled again for nearly 2,000 years, with the histories of Hume and Voltaire.
NOTES


3. All such references are to the book and section in Evelyn A. Shuckburgh’s The Histories of Polybius. Macmillan & Co. N.Y. 1890. 2 vols.

4. See Giambattista Vico’s New Science for his seminal treatment of myth.


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