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VII

ERIC W. MARSDEN

Polybius as a military
Historian

POLYBIUS AS A MILITARY HISTORIAN

Most of Polybius's work is military history. Does not Polybius show this reasonably clearly in the introduction to Book I? There he asks, "Who among men is so worthless and lazy that he would not want to know how, and by what kind of state organisation (to which we could now legitimately add, "in peace and in war, but chiefly the latter"), did the Romans conquer and bring under one government nearly all the inhabited world in less than fifty-three years—which is not found to have happened before?"¹ Military history is, or at least has become, an extremely complex subject. Polybius may well have played an important part at a fairly early stage in its development. It seems probable, incidentally, that his account of the battle of Cannae contributed quite considerably and not very long ago to the formulation of a plan by General von Schlieffen, based on "the theory of double envelopment", a plan which was employed in 1914 and on numerous occasions afterwards². Therefore ancient military history would appear to be not altogether without its uses even now.

In spite of what has been said above, and in spite of the fragmentary nature of Polybius's books from VI or VII onwards, his work is quite complicated in some respects. Modern scholarship has produced many valuable studies, elucidating and interpreting the original³. In attempting

¹ I 1, 5; the whole introduction, I 1-5, contains further matters of military importance.

² Lt.-Col. A. H. BURNE, *The Art of War on Land* (London 1944), 26: 201.

³ One need hardly say that it is extremely useful, whether one is interested in military history or other topics, to consult F. W. WALBANK, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius* I and II (Oxford 1957 and 1967) covering Books I-

to assess Polybius's ability and worth as a military historian in a relatively short space, one regrettably cannot employ more than a small fraction of the expert findings in connection with innumerable problems that arise out of his work.

It is most important to determine his accuracy. For example, until 1948 or soon after it was believed that Polybius was quite wrong with regard to his view of the differences between Indian and African elephants¹. It was then demonstrated, in 1948, that Polybius was perfectly right after all, because Africa possessed, and still possesses, two types of pachyderm, and the Ptolemies and Carthaginians used the smaller, more docile forest elephants (*Loxodonta cyclotis*)². Further, it now appears conceivable that they may at times have been able to acquire hybrid elephants in North Africa³. Again, it was thought for a long time that Polybius's account of the battle of Sellasia (222) was 'topographically impossible'⁴. A recent convincing re-examination of Polybius's description and the topography 'has failed to reveal any error in the account of Polybius'⁵. A great deal has also been done to reach a decisive conclusion on the topography of the battle of Trasimene and therefore to clarify Polybius's report on the engagement⁶.

XVIII. I am also most grateful to Frank Walbank for discussions and suggestions on the present subject. He does not, of course, necessarily agree with the views expressed here.

¹ H. DELBRÜCK, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst* I, *Das Altertum* (Berlin 1920/1964), 252 (Raphia).

² F. W. WALBANK, *Comm.* I, 614.

³ Verbal communication from H. H. Scullard whose new book on elephants will appear in the near future (Thames and Hudson, London).

⁴ II 65-69; F. W. WALBANK, *Comm.* I, 272 ff.; W. K. PRITCHETT, *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography* I (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1965), 59 ff.

⁵ W. K. PRITCHETT, *op. cit.*, 69; see also p. 59 on Polybius's determination to travel and see sites personally (ἀντοπάθεια).

⁶ F. W. WALBANK, *Comm.* I, 415 ff., on III 83-85, 6.

On the other hand, Polybius sometimes does seem to have made mistakes. For instance, Plutarch refers straightforwardly to two such errors when dealing with an operation just before *Pydna* in his life of Aemilius Paulus (*Aem.* 15, 3 ; 16, 2). One source was a more or less open letter (ἐπιστόλιον) from Scipio Nasica to an unnamed Hellenistic monarch, this Scipio being in command of the pre-battle operation together with Fabius Maximus. Scipio says he took 8000 infantry, but Polybius apparently gave a larger number in his twenty-ninth book, now lost. Similarly, a few sentences later, when Scipio Nasica reached the top of the pass in Perrhaebia through which he was sent to force his way, Plutarch informs us that Polybius said the soldiers in the units despatched by Perseus to guard that area were asleep ; but Nasica mentioned in his letter a sharp and hard engagement for the highest section of the mountainous route in which he personally had a hand-to-hand struggle with a Thracian mercenary and slew him. Actually it may be that there was very little difference between the two accounts, of Scipio and Polybius, and that the latter's inaccuracies were slight and not too important. In view of the above and similar experiences, it is proposed for the moment to assume that Polybius made every effort to secure accuracy and that he is generally accurate unless it can be proved beyond all reasonable doubt that he has been misled and misguided. But each problem should be examined on its merits.

What are we to expect in military history? Is it sufficient to find various brief accounts, as accurate as possible and with a few instructive and helpful comments, of major battles, important sieges, occasional references to strategy and tactics, manufacture and employment of weapons and armour, the training of troops, the construction and use of military machinery, of particular generals and the art of the commander? Should not the historian examine these aspects

of warfare on both the hostile sides in a war, and not concentrate entirely or almost entirely on one contestant? Is a military historian to deal mainly with important, decisive battles and the generalship displayed in them particularly on the victorious side? Where are we to draw the line between history and military history?

Battles are rarely important by themselves. After all, the really essential thing is to win the war. Many great battles may be lost, but the war is normally won by the side victorious in the last battle. Hannibal impressively won the notable battles of Trebia, Trasimene, and Cannae. These successes did not enable the Carthaginians to win the war. The tactical triumphs are worth studying in a limited way, but politicians, soldiers, and historians would need, obviously, to examine very much more material if they wished to discover how wars may have been won and might be won. The Romans under Scipio were victorious in the last battle, Zama (202), and the result was absolutely decisive. Why did the Romans succeed on this occasion; why did it bring the whole conflict to an end whereas Cannae achieved nothing lasting? As early as the fifth century B.C. an idea emerged that a state could achieve a satisfactory result in war without presuming at any stage to attempt a battle on land. This was an essential part of Pericles's strategy in 432/1¹. It has been occasionally found that one army wins every major engagement, every battle, and yet loses the war. Napoléon had this experience, unfortunate from his point of view, in 1812. Conversely, one state can fail in every battle and still be victorious in the war to all intents and purposes.

When a writer composing a history reaches a point where war looms, he should put on the cap of a military historian, because most of his material will relate directly or indirectly

¹ Thuc. I 144, 3-7.

to the conduct of war. He should try to show how and why the conflict began, the way in which it proceeded and arrived at a particular conclusion, and what were the results when peace returned. Polybius seems to have this form of approach very much in mind as he explains in his introduction to Books I and III¹. In these introductions and elsewhere from time to time, he shows that he appreciated the complexity of determining how and why one side proved victorious in war and the other was defeated. He therefore enters into as many aspects of military history as he can possibly find.

The economy of his histories must be taken into consideration. No military historian can tell his readers everything; that is to say he cannot explain or even mention each plan formed by each general and he cannot describe every single step taken by individual soldiers, since the economy of even a vast work in many modern volumes would preclude this. As any historian must be, the military historian has to be selective, choosing for display the events and comments which he considers important in the operations with which he is dealing. He should be judged, therefore, as far as it is possible, on his ability to select the most valuable material. This is difficult to do with regard to Polybius, because in many cases very little material which may have existed in other sources has survived. We do not know what he had to make his selection from.

A military historian submits information in three basic ways.

1. An account of the planning, the military build-up, and the selected operations is supplied with instructive comment. For instance, Polybius produces an apparently satisfactory factual account of Cannae and inserts some

¹ E.g. especially III 1, 4-6 ; 31, 11-13 is also interesting.

remarks to explain why Hannibal was victorious, including his own opinion on the vital importance of cavalry ¹.

2. An account without comment of any sort, probably because the writer held the significance and the military concepts involved to be sufficiently obvious. The Raphia campaign is perhaps a Polybian example of this type of account, and will be considered shortly.
3. An account without comment because the writer considers his information interesting and possibly instructive, but cannot see clearly and precisely where or in what its importance lies.

A military historian cannot be a sort of divinely inspired master of the art of war. Comments, interpretations, and conclusions worth advancing can only be offered when they are based on the writer's own personal military experience—and Polybius had certainly seen service ²—*or* on his reading of good military reports from the past, *or* on his contact and discussion with expert military men. A factual account without helpful comments will, if accurate, enable later military men to draw their own conclusions. Polybius definitely kept an eye on the value of his work to the reader. Examinations of earlier reports on wars have been made over the centuries so that in modern times some authors have developed theories on the Art of War.

Writers on this subject seem to have evolved simple but important lists of factors and principles that play an important though not altogether decisive part in the achievement of victory in war, *or*, conversely, generally lead to defeat if not applied fully or correctly. The first really distinguished

¹ III 117, 4-5. It is most difficult to agree with his view, but he is certainly entitled to put his opinion, and it is not without value.

² F. W. WALBANK, *Comm.* I, 3.

work of this sort was perhaps the book published in 1804-5 by the Swiss Baron Jomini, *Traité des grandes opérations militaires* (to confine oneself to the first part of a lengthy title) ¹. The first published work of Sir William Napier, still regarded as one of the finest British military historians, was a study of Jomini's *Traité* in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1821 ². Napier fully appreciated the importance of the work and, when gathering material for his own *History of the War in the Peninsula* (6 vols., 1828-1840), met Jomini on two occasions, possibly more. Another long and important study of innumerable major and minor matters in the conduct of military operations was composed by Karl von Clausewitz; his *Vom Kriege* seems to have first appeared as the first three volumes of *Hinterlassene Werke über Krieg und Kriegführung* (1832-37), published posthumously ³. For the present purpose we can confine ourselves to the first three short chapters in Lt.-Col. Burne's *Art of War on Land* (1944), which very neatly summarize a fairly recent view of the factors. In the following list of factors I am most heavily indebted to his work ⁴.

¹ Baron Antoine Henri JOMINI's best known work is *Précis de l'art de la guerre* (1836), published in translation as *The Art of War* (trs. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill, Philadelphia 1879).

For his life: F. LECOMTE, *Le Général Jomini, sa vie et ses écrits* (1861, reedited 1888), and C. A. SAINTE-BEUVE, *Le Général Jomini* (1869).

² *Edinburgh Review* 35 (1821), 377-409. Napier was shown to be the author by H. A. BRUCE (ed.), *Life of General Sir William Napier, K.C.B., Author of "History of the Peninsular War"* I (London 1864), 225.

³ There are various translations of the first three volumes: C. von CLAUSEWITZ, *On War* (tr. J. J. Graham, London 1873); K. von CLAUSEWITZ, *On War* (Washington D. C. 1950). For discussion of the military thought of Jomini and Clausewitz, see Edward M. EARLE (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton 1943).

⁴ Explained briefly, but more fully, in A. H. BURNE, *The Art of War on Land*, 1 ff. (strands or factors); 11 ff. (principles); 23 ff. (strategy and a little on tactics).

*List of factors affecting war and of principles
to be kept in mind :*

1. The Personality and Ability of a general. These include a commander's character, his skill in inspiring troops, his capacity in acquiring and assessing information about the enemy, to mention but a few relevant points.
2. Quality and skill of the troops. Their physique and fitness, skill with weapons and heavier equipment, training, and ability to move in tactical operations.
3. Morale. This is the will to fight until victory is attained, the refusal to accept defeat.
4. Resources. States at war must build up resources of all kinds—numbers of troops (incidentally, it is at once clear that wherever information is available Polybius provides numbers involved in operations), armaments, equipment, supplies of food, transport (not so applicable in the ancient world).
5. Principles of War, usually taken as eight :
 - i. Maintaining the objective ; not frittering away valuable troops in fruitless expeditions.
 - ii. Offensive action. Some people consider defensive action more economical, but offensive action at some stage is essential and often less expensive.
 - iii. Surprise. A phrase of Stonewall Jackson amplifies this principle neatly : "Mystify, mislead, surprise your enemy."
 - iv. Concentration. A general or high command should bring forward the maximum numbers to decisive points strategically or tactically.

- v. Economy of force. A high command should not send too many troops to the wrong places, but naturally as many as possible to a well chosen point.
- vi. Security. Quite simply, a state attempts to protect what it can, but Maréchal Foch showed that planning for security must be sensible because "Qui veut tout défendre ne sauve rien" ¹.
- vii. Mobility. Rapid or well planned movement was as important then as now. Caesar's *celeritas* became famous ; Hannibal did not sit in Spain waiting for the Romans, but took Saguntum which they were contemplating as their advanced base and embarked on a splendid strategic march through the Alps.
- viii. Co-operation, that is combination between units within an army or between armies.

6. Variable factors :

- i. Terrain.
- ii. Weather.
- iii. Luck. Clausewitz is credited with calling it a little more precisely *friction de guerre*. It might be difficult to work out what part or parts of Polybius's τύχη, if any, might be related to modern military conceptions of luck. But Polybius definitely seems to regard τὰ παράλογα τῶν ἔργων (II 1, 3) or τὰ παράλογα τῶν ... συμβαινόντων (VIII 29, 2), for example, as the 'unexpected', the unpredictable in action ; thus, τὰ παράλογα correspond closely to modern military 'luck'.

7. Strategy, or, basically and very roughly, the art of bringing your enemy to battle when and where you wish.

¹ *Des Principes de Guerre*, 49 ; quoted by A. H. BURNE, *op. cit.*, 20.

8. Tactics, or the art of deploying and manoeuvring troops in battle to defeat the enemy.

These factors and the principles have always existed, it is generally believed, though they were not analysed in this way in ancient times. In assessing Polybius's standing as a military historian, we may perhaps find the most rapid method is to see how many of the factors and their parts he covers, even if he only provides the evidence without comment. May we not assume that he has chosen information related to the eternally important factors and principles, if he is a good military man and military historian, because he is aware of the importance of certain points though he has no simple list of these matters at his disposal as we now have?

For example, the qualities, personalities, and abilities of generals are quite regularly examined, and snippets of information on details without specific comment are also inserted. Polybius briefly presents Xanthippus's achievement in the service of Carthage, culminating in Punic victory at the battle of the R. Bagradas (255)¹. Immediately on arrival the mercenary captain sought all obtainable information about the Carthaginian army and the enemy, listening to accounts—or an account—of the recent engagement in which the Carthaginians were defeated. He then looked at what was left of the Punic army including the cavalry and elephants, so that, on the basis of information and unofficial inspection, he reached the conclusion that there was nothing much wrong with the army. In fact, it had brought defeat upon itself mainly through the inexperience of the commanders. Invited later to meet the government, Xanthippus presented his assessment and the reasons for it (*ἀπολογισμούς*), then his recommendations. They should follow his instructions; if they confine movements, camps,

¹ I 32-34.

and engagements to the plains, they will easily preserve the security of their force and will defeat the enemy. Since the Punic generals accepted his statement, Xanthippus must have put it in an attractive and convincing way, though Polybius says nothing about this. When news of his opinions passed through the Carthaginian community, ordinary people became much more hopeful. Xanthippus was allowed to lead the army out and conduct manoeuvres, whereupon Polybius admirably sums up the effect as follows: "He acted in a way so absolutely different to the inexperience of the former generals that the common soldiers showed their approval with a cheer and were keen to engage the enemy as soon as possible, convinced that they would come to no harm with Xanthippus in command"¹.

In relatively few words ending with this passage, and with no apparent use of a distinct military terminology, Polybius has nevertheless excellently covered quite a number of the vital military factors mentioned previously in the modern list. He shows that Xanthippus skilfully acquired information, satisfactorily checked Carthaginian armament, and demonstrated his character and personality by effectively presenting his views, did much to restore the seriously damaged Punic morale (*δυσθυμία*)—perhaps the most important service performed by Xanthippus, revealed his ability, on parade at least, as a more than competent tactical commander, and recommended offensive action as long as the necessary precautions, mainly keeping to the plains, the most suitable terrain for the army, ensured security. If Philinus, the probable source, wrote on this episode more or less in this way, he deserves much of the credit. If, however, Philinus provided a more elaborate, garbled, and perhaps exaggerated version, Polybius should be congratulated for abstracting the really important materials.

¹ I 32, 7.

Since elsewhere Polybius gives the numbers ¹, he has included in his factual account consideration of factors 1 to 4, principles 5 ii and vi, factor 6 i (terrain); factor 7, strategy, and a brief reference to tactics, factor 8, on the parade ground. He follows the description of the battle with a didactic chapter which is moralising rather than military. However, he does refer to an old concept that it was one man and one intelligence (εἷς γὰρ ἄνθρωπος καὶ μία γνώμη) that caused the destruction of a seemingly invincible force and revived the power of a seriously damaged state and the much weakened morale of its troops (τὰς ἀπηλγηκυίας ψυχάς). Perhaps absence of a decent source on the Roman side prevented him from dealing more than cursorily with reasons for the Roman army's failure. A modern military writer would simply say about Xanthippus that generals of his calibre do not grow on trees.

Polybius constantly slips in valuable details on the character and ability of generals. A commander may be extremely tough, but he must pay continuous attention to inspiring his troops. When Hannibal subdued the area between the Ebro and the Pyrenees at the commencement of his expedition and then proceeded to allocate his troops to various tasks, Polybius reports that he acted as follows: "He dismissed at the same time an equal number of troops (apparently 11 000 Spaniards) to their homes, with the view of leaving them well disposed to himself and encouraging the hope of a safe return in the rest of the Spaniards, not only those who were serving with him, but those who remained in service in the homeland, so that if he ever had to call on them for reinforcements, they might all readily respond" ². Does not

¹ I 32, 9, Carthaginian army: 12 000 infantry, 4000 cavalry, almost 100 elephants (these numbers have been unnecessarily questioned); I 29, 9, Roman army: 15 000 infantry, 500 cavalry.

² III 35, 6.

Polybius appear fully aware of an important aspect of generalship? Again, though the account is not absolutely clear, it seems that, at the crossing of the Rhone in the face of considerable opposition, Hannibal went some way with the first flight of light landing-craft (μονόζυλα) and gave his advance troops a few remarks of encouragement as he sent them in to the hostile shore ¹. Thus Polybius realises what may be expected of a good general at crucial points in a tricky operation. At other points, Polybius understandably attempts to examine Hannibal's character, admitting however "that from his actions in Italy it is very difficult to discover the man's real nature" ². Similarly, Polybius goes quite deeply into Scipio Africanus's career, character, and personality, one of his most important statements being this: "Likewise Scipio, by inculcating into his ordinary soldiers the belief that his plans were divinely inspired, made the men under his command more bold and more eager to face dangerous operations. But that he conducted each operation with calculation (λογισμός, perhaps a technical military term) and forethought (πρόνοια), and that all his operational plans when completed turned out as he calculated, will be clear from the accounts about to be given" ³. It is really important to know in this connection, as we do, that Polybius was able to derive his information from conversation with a man who knew Scipio in wartime very well indeed, namely C. Laelius (cos. 190) ⁴. Polybius also offers a digression on

¹ III 43, 11.

² IX 24, 2, the whole discussion running from 22, 7 to 26, 11. For further places, see F. W. WALBANK, *Comm.* II, 294.

³ X 2, 12-13.

⁴ X 3, 2. On Scipio's life and achievement, see now H. H. SCULLARD, *Scipio Africanus: Soldier and Politician* (London 1970). For the interesting views of a noted twentieth century military thinker and military historian, see B. H. L. HART, *A Greater than Napoleon: Scipio Africanus* (Edinburgh & London 1926).

the art of the commander which contains much that is detailed and instructive¹. There are many other occasions in the surviving portions of his work in which the characters and abilities of generals are examined briefly or at some modest length. One could proceed with examination of Polybius's history on these lines almost indefinitely.

A good military historian, at least in modern times, ought to present clearly his personal attitude to war. Biographies, autobiographies, and histories related to military matters wholly or partially often deal inadequately with this. Thus, even an intelligent reader is inclined to think that the writer regards war as a perfectly satisfactory institution, which is probably in most cases not true at all. Some people now believe that only the holocaust of the First World War and the introduction of the atomic bomb have really revealed the enormity and horror of war. But Polybius, in the second century B.C., made some interesting comments. Probably about 150, he inserted his view clearly in an advisory passage²:

"I say war is frightful (ἐγὼ γὰρ φοβερόν μὲν εἶναί φημι τὸν πόλεμον), yet not so absolutely frightful that we submit to everything in order to avoid war."

Shortly afterwards, a corollary, his view on peace is put in:

"Peace with justice and honour is the finest and most profitable possession, but peace associated with dishonour or disgraceful cowardice is the most shameful, disgusting and the most harmful of all things."

¹ IX 12-20. Possibly the first man to appreciate fully the need to study the character and ability of commanders was Xenophon; see P. J. RAHN, Xenophon's developing historiography, *TAPA* 102 (1972), 497 ff.

² On war, IV 31, 3; on peace, IV 31, 8.

Polybius offered very much his own thoughts in these passages, elsewhere similar statements appear ¹. The occurrence of perhaps corresponding sentiments in Thucydides and other writers long ago is of no importance at all. We want to be sure, and I think we may be, that Polybius is not simply giving views which had become merely fashionable and conventional phrases after the fifth century B.C., but is providing his own personal carefully considered opinions. As a matter of fact, Thucydides's expressions are rather different. The first comes in the speech of Archidamus delivered at the Spartan ἐκκλησία in 432 when that Spartan king attempted to recommend caution and not an immediate entry into war.

"I am experienced in many wars already, Lacedaemonians, and I see those of you of the same age, so that none of you either through inexperience or thinking it is good and safe are eager for warlike activity which the masses would accept ²."

Archidamus is simply saying that war is more dangerous than the uninitiated think. Much more to the point is a sentence in the final decisive speech of the chief Corinthian representative at the meeting of the Peloponnesian League later in the same year :

"Consider, gentlemen of the allies, that we have reached an essential crisis and at the same time the best advice is being put forward ; vote for war, not frightened at the immediate terror, but eager for the more lasting peace emerging from it. Peace is made far more stable as a result of war ³."

¹ F. W. WALBANK, *Comm.* I, 478 ; collection of Polybius's views on war in R. von SCALA, *Die Studien des Polybius* I (Stuttgart 1890), 306.

² Thuc. I 80, 1.

³ I 124, 2.

There are very significant differences between Thucydides's presentation and that of Polybius. Thucydides places the statements in speeches; they may be his own thoughts, but are not submitted to the reader as such. Polybius inserts his views in a similar pre-war period, but serves them to his readers as an ἐγὼ φημι, the authoritative pronouncement of a military historian who has derived his views from personal experience and from the study over many years of military history in the immediate as well as the remoter past. In Thucydides the views are related to one particular war. Up to a point, the same is true of Polybius. But he presents his considered opinion in a way that readers could more readily accept as a statement applicable to all occasions on which war is near at hand. Further, the Thucydidean Corinthians are made to say something that Polybius does not. They assert roughly that a better peace will result from the war. In less than a decade, from 404 to 396, in fact as early as 404 probably, the Corinthians themselves realised that this is unduly optimistic and not necessarily true, even if one is on the winning side.

Whether he realised the consequences of his statement fully or not, and he does not seem to say anything directly about them either here or anywhere else, Polybius certainly provokes thought on an implication that has always been important but never more so than in the twentieth century (A.D.). Until every state in the world or worlds of mankind becomes absolutely certain that all other states feel war in any shape or form is utterly dreadful and to be shunned at all costs, a state must make defensive arrangements and have at least a few people who study the art of war in case conflict becomes inevitable and absolutely unavoidable. For this purpose at least some knowledge can be acquired from military history. It is still felt, quite strongly, that military history should be didactic. Polybius certainly believed this

in the second century B.C. ¹. He is giving all the instruction he can to people who may become politicians or military commanders or both, which was not uncommon in the ancient world.

An examination of an account of Polybius covering one complete campaign may reveal how wide or narrow are his thoughts and methods as a military historian. The war for Coele-Syria, ending with the decisive battle of Raphia and its aftermath, contains much of interest for this purpose. Having first stated that he is transferring his attention from Europe to Asia ², Polybius devotes three chapters to explaining why and how he means to do this ³. He intends to go back a little in time, and perhaps his most important reason is expressed in a question: "How can events be properly summarized if they are not taken back to the beginning; viz. whence, how, and why the final situation came about? ⁴"

Can we not take this to mean that Polybius realised that earlier events before the war and during its initial stages were as vital militarily as the concluding actions and, of course, the battle of Raphia itself? If we do so take it, then Polybius's approach is modern. The seeds of victory and defeat, a twentieth century military writer might claim, had been sown before Raphia, the result of which was predictable, as far as anything can be certainly predicted in war, an art not a science. It is a great pity that Polybius's style of writing is so monotonous and uninspiring, because his dry, factual

¹ F. W. WALBANK, *Comm.* I, 211 with references to "lessons" in note on II 35, 2-10). For several modern views on military history, see Jay LUVAAS, *The Education of an Army* (London 1965; Univ. of Chicago 1964), index s.v. Military history, uses of.

² V 30, 8; for a detailed examination of valuable aspects (Molon's revolt, Hermias, Sources), see Hatto H. SCHMITT, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Antiochos' des Grossen und seiner Zeit* (Wiesbaden 1964).

³ V 32, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

prose effectively conceals the amusing nature of several factors that emerge and develop.

He looks at once at the early careers and characters of the two men who will be ultimately the opposing commanders-in-chief, in a sense, at the final battle, Antiochus III about nineteen on accession (late summer 223) and Ptolemy IV Philopator about twenty-three (first half of February 221). Ptolemy is depicted as a sensuous young man interested almost entirely in women and drink and very little concerned with the government of his country and its external dominions ¹. Nevertheless, Polybius reveals that a certain Sosibius mainly controlled state affairs in Egypt (οὗτος γὰρ μάλιστα τότε προεστάτει τῶν πραγμάτων) ². By early 219, Ptolemy or his government or both had grossly offended the Aetolian Theodotus of Calydon, Ptolemaic governor of Coele-Syria, which was going to have serious consequences ³.

On the other hand, young Antiochus was most concerned with the grave problems facing his realm right from the start. Polybius reports on many matters of military significance, the most important being the suppression of Molon's rebellion ⁴. From the point of view of the Fourth Syrian War, it is highly significant that two experienced commanders Xenon and Theodotus made no headway against Molon ⁵, another professional Xenoctas the Achaean took over the command and was utterly defeated by him ⁶, and that finally Antiochus, having marched East with a large army, won a decisive victory ⁷. When Syrian troops were

¹ V 34, 10.

² V 35, 7.

³ V 40, 1-3.

⁴ V 41-54. See now H. H. SCHMITT, *op. cit.*, 116 ff.

⁵ V 42, 5.

⁶ V 47, 1-48, 10.

⁷ V 53-4.

dismissed for the winter (220/19) ¹, war factors for Syria in modern terms seemed very good on the basis of what Polybius reported. There were troops of reasonable quality, and rebel troops had been sympathetically treated and drawn back into the fold (all factor 2). The officers and men were well trained. Morale was high from top to bottom (factor 3), especially as troops had been sent home for the winter. State resources had been restored to some extent by the recovery of Media, a valuable area including the royal herds of horses and large production of corn and cattle (factor 4) ². The success of Syria in any war with Egypt would appear assured. The country possessed a general of promising character and ability in so young a man, or so it deceptively seemed.

In Spring 219, the war for Coele-Syria opened. Antiochus's forces assembled at Apamea, where a (military) council met (*διαβούλιον*) ³. Discussions for the war were full of correct military planning, for they covered terrain or topography (*περὶ τῶν τόπων*), the military build-up (*περὶ παρασκευῆς*), and co-operation with the navy. Apollophanes, as it were head of the royal medical corps, put in a plea to make Seleucia the first objective, since it was his home-town. This limited, but sound proposal was accepted and soon successfully concluded. Later Theodotus of Calydon offered to hand over Coele-Syria to Antiochus, a piece of luck, one would not dare to call it *τύχη*. Antiochus accepted ⁴, marched in ⁵, and finished at Tyre and Ptolemais where he took over military resources and forty ships, twenty being decked, four-bankers or above.

¹ V 57, 1.

² V 44, 1.

³ V 58, 2-3.

⁴ V 61, 3-6.

⁵ V 62, 2-3.

Then, it is important to note that, though Polybius's dry style fails to reveal what significance he personally attached to it, Antiochus had planned to attack Pelusium; but emergency defence measures there, of which he was a good enough general to secure information, put him off and he abandoned the project—τῆς μὲν ἐπὶ τὸ Πηλούσιον ἐπιβολῆς ἀπέστη¹. His plan now was to try to gain possession of cities in Coele-Syria more or less one by one.

Polybius inserts an account of Ptolemy's dreadful character and very weak position². We are actually being presented with a rather amusing situation, with Ptolemy and his country doing absolutely nothing, Antiochus and the Syrian offensive developing satisfactorily. Antiochus has lost a good main objective (Principle of war I); Pelusium was too ambitious, but something more substantial was required than mopping up cities individually. The tide is turning. Need we really object to Polybius's lack of a military historian's comment?

He plunges, in chapter sixty-three, into the strategical planning of Ptolemy's ministers, Agathocles and Sosibius, who act like expert modern chiefs of staff and rapidly change the whole situation. They have a most definite main objective—the enrolment, arming, and training of a new army to fight when ready. Their secondary objective is to keep Antiochus guessing and encourage him to fritter away his forces, thus reducing Syrian morale. They distract Antiochus by fruitless diplomatic exchanges to gain time; Antiochus is also led to continue to believe that Ptolemy would not dare to fight. Polybius supplies an excellent description of the build-up of the army, intensely interested in the choice of senior officers, the admirable training, the parades and mili-

¹ V 62, 4-6.

² V 62, 7-8.

tarily instructive talks ¹. The troops will plainly be of good quality and ability. Details of the army units, complete with numbers, reveal the remarkable concentration of troops which will meet Antiochus's army at a site that the Ptolemaic high command no doubt intends to choose ². In particular, there will be a large, formidable phalanx of 45 000 men. This is the main feature in all the planning and the whole operation, this will be the maximum concentration of force at the vital point, though it is not, admittedly, the numerical advantage of three to one in such circumstances without which many modern generals will not move. At Raphia the advantage would be 45 000 to 20 000, two and a quarter to one. Everything Polybius says about numbers and, later, about tactical arrangement agrees with this, yet many modern scholars find it impossible to accept the 45 000 ³. If only Polybius had, for once, made a suitable military historian's comment!

Agathocles and Sosibius had offices in Memphis, visiting the military training centre at Alexandria by turns ⁴. Sosibius met embassies at Memphis and never allowed even his own envoys to visit Alexandria to see what was going on there, a wise precaution ⁵. Presumably he is aiming at complete secrecy and surprise. For the winter 219/18 Antiochus sent his troops into quarters at home where it is significant that he did not bother to continue with exercise and training, so convinced was he then that there would be no need for a battle ⁶. While he resumed steady attrition in Coele-Syria in 218, the Ptolemaic high command, apparently not yet

¹ V 63, 11-64, 7.

² V 65.

³ F. W. WALBANK, *Comm.* I, 590.

⁴ V 63, 7-10.

⁵ V 66, 8-9.

⁶ V 66, 5-7.

ready with their army, kept him busy by appointing the Aetolian mercenary officer Nicolaus more or less to complete command there and sending him a scratch force together with plentiful supplies. Sosibius paid close attention in this way to the economy of force, because it would have been tempting, but a total mistake, to send out units from the new army in dribblets in efforts to block some of Antiochus's movements.

The Syrians wintered (218/17) at Ptolemais and Antiochus seems to have marched South without hesitation when he learned that a Ptolemaic army was leaving Egypt. Polybius provides a clear straightforward account of the battle of Raphia which contains many interesting details, though much more could have been included, such as the depth of each phalanx. If Antiochus's heavy infantry was sixteen ranks deep, Ptolemy's will most probably have been thirty-two deep, to preserve the secret of its real strength, which could also have been done in other ways. When the phalangite attack took place, the 45 000 had little difficulty in driving it home ¹.

Polybius's account of this war, which has been briefly summarized here, much regrettably being omitted, provides a large amount of militarily important material with hardly an explanatory comment. He has here written what might be called straight military history unadorned with needless interpretation. It may just be that he thought his carefully

¹ V 79-87. On the military situation before Raphia, see Ed. WILL, *Histoire politique du monde hellénistique* II (Nancy 1967), 29. Ed. WILL and P. CHANTRAINE (the latter in *RPh* 77 (1951), 293) think the Ptolemaic phalanx numbered 45 000. Will believes the 20 000 native Egyptians were introduced because of the shortage of mercenaries. This is no doubt true, but the real point was that Sosibius and Agathocles wanted a phalanx at least twice as large as the Syrian phalanx in order to make victory as sure as humanly possible—a surprisingly (?) modern concept of concentration—a decisive massing of troops at a vital point. For this they later paid the price.

selected and simply stated versions are clear enough in themselves.

Very many other aspects of Polybius's approach to military history ought to be considered; mainly in accounts of sieges, for example, he deals with heavier pieces of military equipment. One cannot expect any military historian to provide a full technical and detailed description like an engineer or master-craftsman of a relatively complicated machine. This model of a large siege-tower designed by Posidonius, the Macedonian artificer, for Alexander the Great, his description being passed on in some form to us by Biton, may illustrate the point¹. The scale is 1:36 ($\frac{1}{3}'' = 1'$; 1 cm = 36 cm; or 2.8 cm = 1 m), though in preparing such a small model it has not been possible to keep to this exactly in some of the details. Such a reconstruction obviously could not have been built from a historian's brief account. Nevertheless, Polybius gives short basic reports of machinery, including essential and important details, and sometimes employs technical engineering terms. He could probably only do this when the source seemed to him reliable and sensible. His judgement appears to have been good, and his version is fundamentally accurate as far as one can tell, but perhaps a shade confusing.

Notably he goes into considerable technical detail, with numerous technical terms, but hardly a dimension, when he examines Philip V's siege of Echinus (210) and the most lively period (eight months in 213) during the siege of Syracuse². Hence, in the matter of military engineering, Polybius whets our appetite rather than satisfies it.

¹ Bito 52-56 W; E. W. MARSDEN, *Greek and Roman Artillery. Technical Treatises* (Oxford 1971), 70 ff.; 84 ff.

² Echinus: IX 41, 1-8; F. W. WALBANK, *Comm.* II, 183-5; E. W. MARSDEN, *Greek and Roman Artillery. Historical Development* (Oxford 1969), 109 f. Syracuse: VIII 3-7; Liv. XXIV 33, 9-35, 1; F. W. WALBANK, *Comm.* II, 69 ff; E. W. MARSDEN, *op. cit.*, 108 f.

With regard to state organisation, mainly the Roman πολιτεία, Polybius includes two interesting remarks near the beginning of Book VI.

"I said that the best and most valuable part of my effort is that readers of the work should perceive and learn how, and by what type of state governmental organisation (πολιτεία) practically the whole of the world was conquered in less than fifty-three years and fell under one dominion, that of the Romans, a thing which is not found to have happened before" ¹.

"Now the chief cause of success or the reverse in all matters is the form of a state's constitution: for springing from this, as from a fountain-head, all designs and plans of action not only originate, but reach their consummation" ².

Can we not take it from these statements and similar ones elsewhere in his work that Polybius means quite plainly, to put the points in modern terms, that he must see how the Roman system of government contributed to Rome's winning the wars and then winning the peace so that she both acquired and held her dominion? In other words a great deal of his study of the πολιτεία was an essential part of military history, just as it would also be a vital part of the study of how the government eventually imposed successful rule over conquered peoples. A modern state contains institutions which are semi-dormant in peacetime, a war office, a ministry of defence, and various subordinate departments, for example. When war threatens, and during a war, these bodies in a state come to the fore, expand, and multiply. The central governmental body, the cabinet, becomes a war cabinet, changing its structure to some extent, and making all sorts of decisions mainly related directly or indirectly to war. Hence a modern military

¹ VI 2, 3.

² VI 2, 9-10 (Paton's translation).

historian spends a great deal of time examining the government of states in wartime in order to discover as far as he can what effects they had on the conduct of the war.

In a simpler way Polybius seems to be doing the same thing. On the whole, however, the system of government in an ancient state does not really seem to have embraced separate departments expanding in wartime, and much the same πολιτεία functioned both in war and peace. In the circumstances, Polybius deserves praise for attempting to assess the importance in war of the Roman πολιτεία. Also he has brilliantly chosen the point in his history at which he introduces his discussion of governmental systems and of the Roman system in particular. The Romans were at rock bottom after Cannae, yet somehow, possibly due in part to their system of government, as Polybius thinks, they survived ¹.

One passage seems most valuable, namely chapter fifteen where he examines the positions and powers of the consul, having already observed that the *populus Romanus* has the power to bestow offices, in other words the people elect the consuls. Although a consul, as military commander, has complete control of operations in the field—up to a point, the senate can interrupt him, if affairs are not proceeding well in its opinion, by refusing further essential supplies of corn, clothing, and pay ². Then, of course, the senate can replace him at the end of one campaigning season; on the other hand, if he operates successfully and promisingly, the senate can retain him for part of an additional year, or for a full second year, or even more ³. Polybius makes no comments on the importance of this procedure. A military

¹ V 111, 9-10; VI 2, 1-3.

² VI 12, 5; 15, 2 (consul supreme commander on campaign); 15, 4 (senatorial control).

³ VI 15, 6.

historian now might explain that it was rather fortunate for the Romans that the Carthaginians apparently did not have this system. Otherwise, the Punic High Command might have recalled Hannibal about 214 and replaced him with a new general who, though not quite such an expert tactical commander, had more idea how to win the war. Polybius also tackles a matter that is just as important as the πολιτεία, namely Roman character and Roman morale. After Cannae they in fact clenched their teeth and showed what was in them. In spite of everything their morale did not crack, they still refused to accept defeat. Polybius occasionally provides a useful comment; for instance, he asserts 'the Romans, fighting as they are for their country and their children, never can abate their fury but continue to throw their whole hearts into the struggle until they get the better of their enemies' ¹. In this passage, he also considers the tremendous advantages of the Roman national army over the mainly mercenary Carthaginian force and Italian superiority over Phoenicians and Africans in physical strength and personal courage (τῇ τε σωματικῇ ῥώμῃ καὶ ταῖς ψυχικαῖς τόλμαις) ². These are just examples of the many militarily pertinent topics that Polybius talks about or touches upon. Thus, in Book vi, Polybius considers the efficiency and skill of the Roman government and the value of the state organisation in war, also the quality and ability of Roman and Italian troops as opposed to others, and finally the extraordinary Roman morale which could survive the most terrible disasters. All these are highly important military topics ³.

As he wanted to be, Polybius is a veritable mine of information for the military man. It may be a positive advantage

¹ VI 52, 2-9.

² VI 52, 10.

³ For the other important matters, see P. PÉDECH, *La méthode historique de Polybe* (Paris 1964), 420; 422-5.

that he did not include more interpretative sections, which might have contaminated the factual evidence rather than clarified it. It was possibly the economy of his work, imposed by himself, that forced him to be so selective that some modern readers will greatly regret the numerous detailed omissions. However, at the very least, he began the breakthrough into more advanced, even modern, military history.

DISCUSSION

M. Gabba: Mr. Marsden ha enucleato dalla narrazione di Polibio quelli che sono, secondo lo storico greco, i principi militari fondamentali, per vincere le battaglie e le guerre. In una storia come quella di Polibio, largamente fondata sugli eventi militari, il significato della « storia militare » spesso si confonde con il valore della stessa opera storiografica ed è decisivo capire le ragioni della selezione del materiale, operata da Polibio, per spiegare la causa delle vittorie. L'accuratezza e la credibilità delle narrazioni militari polibiane sono di grande rilievo anche per l'influsso che la trattazione di Polibio ha avuto sulle opere moderne di storia militare.

M. Schmitt: In der Antike sind politische und militärische Leitung oft, in Polybios' Zeit beinahe regelmässig in einer Hand vereinigt; man muss daher in einer Liste der notwendigen Feldherreneigenschaften auch gewisse politische Fähigkeiten aufnehmen; z.B.: die richtige Behandlung der eingeborenen Truppen im Heer (z.B. bei Raphia auf beiden Seiten), die Fähigkeit, auch während des Krieges Bundesgenossen zu gewinnen und ihre Loyalität zu sichern (Bundesgenossenpolitik Hannibals; Perseus' Niederlage wird u.a. mit seinem Geiz gegenüber Genthios begründet). Antiochos' Sieg über Molon ist wohl nicht zuletzt auf die persönliche Anwesenheit des Königs zurückzuführen; die Rebellen, die seinen Generälen Widerstand geleistet hatten, laufen zu ihm über. Die Autorität des « gekrönten Hauptes » ist ein politisches Element, ihr Einsatz im rechten Augenblick ein strategisches.

M. Walbank: Polybius is obviously fascinated by the problems raised by the employment of mercenaries (including the psychological aspects and the danger of barbarians), and this is

one reason for his detailed treatment. But was he also interested in the contrast between an army of this kind and the disciplined Roman army which he was going to describe in book VI? There was clearly a difference between the mercenary army in revolt and Hannibal's army which never faced a mutiny. But the disproportionate length of this long episode in book I seems to call for some explanation.

M. Marsden: It may be that Polybius started his history originally about the year 221/220. It is possible that he decided later that he ought to start earlier because it might then be easier to answer questions which seemed to be developing. I have suggested (cf. *supra* p. 274) that military writers may be anxious to include information which they do not fully understand, but think may prove important and useful to others later. The Romans entered the field with a national army, together with allied forces, of course; the Carthaginians used mainly mercenary armies. Polybius clearly recognized the advantage to Rome (VI 62, 10). It may have occurred to him that a fairly full enquiry into the earlier Mercenary War could be valuable to some historians at some point.

M. Nicolet: L'histoire « militaire » a mauvaise presse aujourd'hui; on lui reproche de détourner l'attention de l'historien des sujets essentiels et des « vrais problèmes »: l'économie, la société, etc. Naturellement Polybe (comme la plupart des historiens grecs et romains) paraît être le modèle même des erreurs à éviter. Je me demande toutefois si, en tant qu'historien militaire avoué, il ne fournit pas, du fait même de ce parti pris, une clé parfaitement adéquate pour une compréhension réelle des « structures » socio-politiques du monde qu'il décrit. Le fait, par exemple, qu'il consacre un si long et si intéressant développement, au livre VI, à la *militia Romana* (insistant sur le *dilectus*, sur la discipline patriotique, etc.) signifie évidemment qu'il veut opposer — en tant que cause de la victoire de Rome — l'armée « nationale » aux armées hellé-

nistiques, le plus souvent mercenaires. Mais ce fait même n'est-il pas un renseignement (ou une réflexion) de première importance sur la différence des structures socio-politiques de Rome (encore toutes modelées par les faits militaires) et celles — peut-être plus « évoluées » — de la plupart des pays grecs, et en tout cas de Carthage, qui ne connaissaient que les mercenaires ?

M. Marsden : Polybius is not altogether writing for Greek readers, but, as it were, for all who seek to obtain further information about many subjects. Chapter vi 50 may be helpful in this case, because Polybius there seems to mention that the Roman state organization was not only suitable in time of war, though not quite as satisfactory as the Spartan system, but was also very powerful when it came to governing dominions. One might see also some remarks in a portion of my essay that I did not read at the time (*supra* pp. 293-4).

M. Paschoud : Beaucoup d'historiens anciens, quand ils racontent une bataille, n'ont pas comme but premier de présenter une narration qui soit la plus précise possible, mais plutôt de rédiger un morceau de bravoure littéraire. Les exemples abondent ; l'un des plus frappants est fourni par le récit de la bataille de Strasbourg chez Ammien Marcellin, auquel on ne saurait reprocher son incompétence, puisqu'il a fait une carrière d'officier d'état-major. Dans quelle mesure Polybe historien militaire se laisse-t-il influencer par des critères purement littéraires, qui pourraient lui suggérer certaines retouches, certaines imprécisions ?

M. Marsden : In reality, no history of a battle can reconstruct the rather chaotic series of events that took place (see the closing paragraphs of my *Campaign of Gaugamela*). In general, however, for instance in connection with the R. Bagradas, Sellasia, Trebia, Trasimene, Cannae, Raphia, and with others, Polybius certainly seeks to provide a schematic (as he seems to understand himself) and accurate reconstruction of the major tactical movements and

their consequences. He does not appear to be concerned with just an attractive literary account, his style remaining solemn and dry.

M. Walbank: Do you mean that Polybius perhaps imposes an order on what was really confused, in the way that Tolstoy in *War and Peace* argues that all battles are chaotic but that very soon afterwards an "accepted version" arises, to which even those who experienced the chaos come to subscribe? As regards M. Paschoud's point, I would say Polybius was certainly not interested in fine writing in the sense that Livy was in his elaboration of material; and unlike Livy he knew what a battle was.

M. Lehmann: Sehr eindrucksvoll ist hier auf die entscheidende Bedeutung umfassender Selektionskriterien für Kritik und praktische Darstellung im Werk eines « military historian » hingewiesen worden. M. E. lassen sich gerade anhand eines Vergleiches zwischen der von Professor Marsden erwähnten, in Plutarchs *Aemilius Paullus* — wohl indirekt — benutzten ἐπιστολή des Scipio Nasica (mit dem Polybios nach 167 v. Chr. ja zweifellos gut bekannt geworden ist) zur Kampagne von 168 v. Chr. und den Resten der polybianischen Darstellung (vor allem bei Livius) ausnahmsweise einmal ganz konkret Polybios' hervorragende sachkritische Arbeit und der weite Abstand des Historikers zum ganz einseitigen, verfälschten Bericht des Augenzeugen Nasica würdigen (vgl. meinen Aufsatz zur Endphase des Perseuskrieges im Augenzeugenbericht des P. Cornelius Scipio Nasica, in *Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte und deren Nachleben, Festschrift für Fr. Altheim I* (Berlin 1969), 387 ff.). Eine Analyse der in Plutarchs Text noch gut erkennbaren Spuren vermag nicht allein die sachlichen Unrichtigkeiten dieses « publizierten » ὑπόμνημα in allen seinen Differenzen zu Polybios (von der Truppenzahl von Scipios Detachment, den Angaben zu der geographischen Situation und dem militärischen Verlauf des Umgehungsmanövers bis hin zur Entscheidungsschlacht bei Pydna und der Gefangennahme des

Perseus) aufzuzeigen, sondern lässt auch höchst charakteristisch den hellenistisch-pathetischen Stil jenes Primärberichtes und zugleich den Blickwinkel eines jungen römischen nobilis hervortreten.

M. Pédech : Polybe s'intéresse aussi bien à la tactique terrestre qu'aux opérations navales, ce qui peut surprendre chez un Grec terrien.

1. Pour la première guerre punique, il a surtout mis en relief la guerre navale, ce qui l'a conduit à négliger beaucoup d'opérations terrestres, en particulier pendant le commandement d'Hamilcar Barca. Il raconte quatre batailles navales (Myles, Ecnome, Drépane, îles Egates), et seulement deux sièges (Agri-gente, Lilybée) et un combat terrestre (victoire de Xanthippe sur Régulus).

2. Pour la guerre d'Antiochus, il donne un récit détaillé de quatre batailles navales : celles de Corycos, de Panormos, de Sidé, de Myonnèse (nous le savons par Tite-Live, qui lui a emprunté sa narration : XXXVI 43-45 ; XXXVII 11 ; 23-24 ; 28-30).

Son attention se porte surtout, dans ses récits, sur le recours à des moyens de combat inédits, et sur les manœuvres tactiques. Il signale et décrit longuement le « corbeau » utilisé par les Romains à la bataille de Myles. A la bataille de Panormos et de Myonnèse, il note l'emploi de récipients remplis de poix enflammée qu'on fixait au bout d'une longue perche pour les laisser tomber sur le navire ennemi, invention rhodienne (XXI 7). Pour ce qui est de la tactique, il a retenu la formation en triangle de la flotte romaine à Ecnome (I 27-28) ; l'habileté manœuvrière d'Adherbal pour éviter d'être enfermé dans le port de Drépane par la flotte romaine ; de même l'amiral rhodien Eudamos et le préteur romain échappent à l'amiral d'Antiochus qui menaçait de les bloquer dans le port de Geraisticon.

Polybe est donc un historien militaire complet. Il va jusqu'à mettre une certaine coquetterie à s'étendre sur les opérations navales.

M. Marsden: M. Pédech's long and full survey of naval operations and Polybius's treatment of them needs some comment. The history of war indeed includes a study of naval as well as of land engagements; but my decision to stick to war on land was taken deliberately, because the whole subject of war is so vast. Also Polybius criticized Ephorus's dealing with land warfare, but praised his accounts of naval fighting, possibly because Polybius had had little or no experience at sea and therefore did not understand so well the employment of warships and what happened in action. Nevertheless, a complete examination of Polybius as a historian of war must necessarily include a treat-
of his account of naval affairs and engagements.

