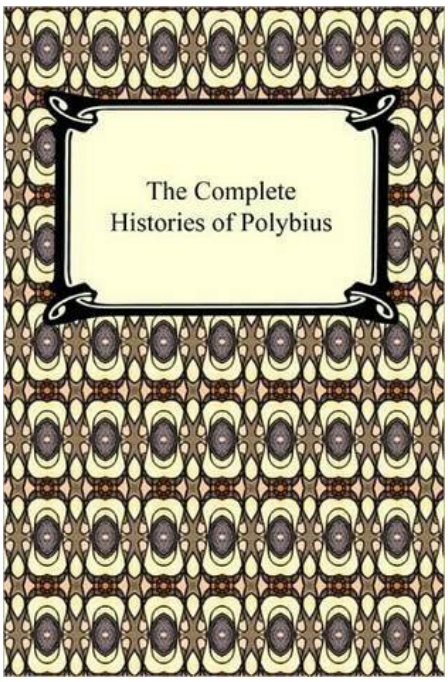


# The Complete Histories of Polybius

*Polybius , W R Paton*

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**The Complete Histories of Polybius** Polybius , W R Paton
Written during his 16-year exile to Rome, Polybius' On Roman Imperialism attempts to explain why most of the inhabited world came under the domination of Rome within 53 years.

## The Complete Histories of Polybius Details

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# From Reader Review The Complete Histories of Polybius for online ebook

### Robert Sheppard says

WHAT EVERY EDUCATED CITIZEN OF THE WORLD NEEDS TO KNOW IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE GREAT HISTORIANS OF WORLD HISTORY--HERODOTUS, THUCYDIDES, SIMA QIAN, IBN KHALDUN, THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS, JULIUS CAESAR, PLUTARCH, LIVY, POLYBIUS, TACITUS, GIBBON, MARX, SPENGLER & TOYNBEE----FROM THE WORLD LITERATURE FORUM RECOMMENDED CLASSICS AND MASTERPIECES SERIES VIA GOODREADS—-ROBERT SHEPPARD, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." is an apt admonition to us all from George Santayana, who, in his "The Life of Reason," echoed the similar earlier words of the conservative philosopher Edmund Burke. But the great histories and historians of World History bring us far more than events of nations, chronicles of the Rise and Fall of Civilizations, or lessons and precedents from the past; they also constitute a fundamental part of World Literature, bringing us great reading experiences and exciting sagas as in Thucydides' "History of the Peloponesian War," in-depth portraits and readings of the character of great men and shapers of the world as in Plutarch's "Parallel Lives" and China's "Records of the Grand Historian" by Si Ma Chen, and deep philosophical and scientific insights into the workings of human society its environment as revealed in the panoramic visions of great Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun, Karl Marx, Oswald Spengler and Sir Arnold Toynbee. As such, in our modern globalized world of the 21st century, where not only our own history, but also the interrelated histories of all of nations show so clearly that "the past is always present," and therefore every educated citizen of the modern world has an obligation to read the great works of history from all major civilizations to even begin comprehending the living world about us and the ultimate meaning of our own lives.

WHAT WAS THE FIRST WORK OF HISTORY IN THE WORLD?

If to begin our survey we put the daunting threshold question of what was the firs work of "history" in human experience, like most radical questions we will find that the answer all depends on how we put the question and define its terms. "History" undoubtedly began with the campfire stories of Neolithic man about families, tribes and conflicts far before the invention of writing. Histories were passed down in oral sagas memorized by poets such as Homer's "Iliad and Odyssey," and only centuries later recorded in script. But true history begins with works of systematic analysis and interpretation of human events, and in that light the general consensus is that the first great work of World History was that of the Greek historian Herodotus in the 5th Century BC, "The Histories."

## HERODOTUS, AUTHOR OF "THE HISTORIES"

Herodotus (5th Century BC) is thus often referred to as "The Father of History," a title conferred upon him by Cicero amoung others, but also disparagingly as "The Father of Lies" by some of his critics. He was born in Halicarnassus, a Greek city which had become part of the Persian Empire that enjoyed strong trade relations with Egypt. He travelled widely, spending time in Periclian Athens, Egypt, Persia and Italy and collected histories, tales and historical lore wherever he traveled, noting the customs of the people, the major wars and state events and the religions and lore of the people. He wrote in a "folksy" style and purported to record whatever was told to him, which led to critics deploring some of the "tall tales" or mythical accounts in his work, but which Herodtodus himself said he included without judgment to their ultimate truth to illustrate the historical beliefs of the peoples he encountered. His primary focus was to explain the history and background of the Persian War between the Greeks and the Persian Empire, though he also included cultural observations of other peoples such as the Egyptians. His "Histories" is entertaining and interesting, though somewhat voluminous and scattered for the modern reader unfamiliar with the context.

## THUCYDIDES, MASTER OF REPORTORIAL AND EYEWITNESS HISTORY

Thucydides (460-395 BC) is most remembered for his epic "History of the Peloponnesian War" of Greece which recounts the struggle for supremacy and survival between the enlightened commercial empire of Athens and its reactionary opponent Sparta, which ended in the defeat of the Athenians. His approach and goal in writing was completely different from Herodotus, as he was himself a General in the wars he wrote about and set out to provide "the inside story" of eyewitnesses and personal accounts of the major participants in the great events of their history so that their characters, understanding, strategies and actions could be closely judged, especially for the purpose of educating future statesmen and leaders. This approach was later shared by Polybius in his "The Rise of the Roman Empire." As a more contemporary history it is often more exciting to read, and establishes the tradition followed by Livy and others of including the "key speeches" of the leaders in war council, the "inside story" of their schemes and motivations, and rousing tales of the ups and downs of fast-moving battles. It contains such classics such as Pericles "Funeral Speech" for the ballen war heroes reminiscent of Lincoln's Gettysburg address. It is a must for those seeking to understand Classical Greece and a rich and exciting read.

## SIMA QIAN, AND THE "RECORDS OF THE GRAND HISTORIAN" OF HAN DYNASTY CHINA

Sima Qian (Szu Ma Chien/145-86 BC) is regarded as the greatest historian of China's long and florid history and his personal tragedy is also held up as an example of intellectual martyrdom and integrity in the face of

power. He like his father was the chief astrologer/astronomer and historian of the Han Imperial Court under Emperor Wu. His epic history "Records of the Grand Historian" sought to summarize all of Chinese history up to his time when the Han Dynasty Empire was a rival in size and power to that of Imperial Rome. He lived and wrote about the same time as Polybius, author of "The Rise of the Roman Empire," and like him he wrote from the vantage point of a newly united empire having overcome centuries of waring strife to establish a unified and powerful domain. In style, his history has some of the character of Plutarch in his "Lives" in that it often focuses on intimate character portraits of such great men as Qin Shi Huang Di, the unifier and First Emperor of China, and many others. It also contains rich and varied accounts of topic areas such as music, folk arts, literature, economics, calendars, science and others. He was the chief formulator of the primary Chinese theory of the rise and fall of imperial dynasties known as the "Mandate of Heaven." Like the theory of the Divine Right of Kings, its premise was that Emperors and their dynasties were installed on earth by the divine will of heaven and continued so long as the rulers were morally upright and uncorrupted. However, over centuries most dynasties would suffer corruption and decline, finally resulting in Heaven choosing another more virtuous dynasty to displace them when they had forfeited the "Mandate of Heaven," a kind of "Social Contract" with the divine rather than with mankind. Then, this cycle would repeat itself over the millennia.

His personal life was occasioned by tragedy due to his intellectual honesty in the "Li Ling Affair." Two Chinese generals were sent to the north to battle the fierce Xiongnu hordes against whom the Great Wall was constructed, Li Ling and the brother-in-law of the Emperor. They met disaster and their armies were annihilated, ending in the capture of both. Everyone at Court blamed the disaster on Li Ling in order to exonerate the Emperor's relative, but Sima Qian, out of respect for Li Ling's honor disagreed publicly and was predictably sentenced to death by Emperor Wu. A noble like Sima Qian could have his death sentence commuted by payment of a large fine or castration but since he was a poor scholar he could not afford the fine.

Thus, in 96 BC, on his release from prison, Sima chose to endure castration and live on as a palace eunuch to fulfill his promise to his father to complete his histories, rather than commit suicide as was expected of a gentleman-scholar. As Sima Qian himself explained in his famous "Letter to Ren An:"

“If even the lowest slave and scullion maid can bear to commit suicide, why should not one like myself be able to do what has to be done? But the reason I have not refused to bear these ills and have continued to live, dwelling in vileness and disgrace without taking my leave, is that I grieve that I have things in my heart which I have not been able to express fully, and I am shamed to think that after I am gone my writings will not be known to posterity. Too numerous to record are the men of ancient times who were rich and noble and whose names have yet vanished away. It is only those who were masterful and sure, the truly extraordinary men, who are still remembered. ... I too have ventured not to be modest but have entrusted myself to my useless writings. I have gathered up and brought together the old traditions of the world which were scattered and lost. I have examined the deeds and events of the past and investigated the principles behind their success and failure, their rise and decay, in one hundred and thirty chapters. I wished to examine into all that concerns heaven and man, to penetrate the changes of the past and present, completing all as the work of one family. But before I had finished my rough manuscript, I met with this calamity. It is because I regretted that it had not been completed that I submitted to the extreme penalty without rancor. When I have truly completed this work, I shall deposit it in the Famous Mountain. If it may be handed down to men who will appreciate it, and penetrate to the villages and great cities, then though I should suffer a thousand mutilations, what regret should I have?”

— Sima Qian

## JULIUS CAESAR: HISTORY AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND AUTOMYTHOLOGY

Julius Caesar was famous for writing accounts of his own military campaigns, most notably in his "History of the Gallic Wars." Curiously, he writes of himself in the third person. Though a personal history, his writing contains little introspection or deep analytical thought and is rather the action-drama of the campaign, with special care to show his own personal courage and leadership. Before the 20th century most European schoolboys would read the work as part of their efforts to learn Latin in Grammar School. Later famous leaders such as Winston Churchill also followed in Caesar's tradition in writing history alonside making it, for which he received the Nobel Prize. Caesar's work is worth reading and exciting in parts, though sometimes becoming repetitive in the minutiae of the endless conflicts.

## THE GREAT ROMAN HISTORIES: LIVY, POLYBIUS, TACITUS, SEUTONIUS AND AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS

The thousand-year history of the Roman Republic and Empire can be gleaned from these five great historians in the order presented. For the earliest history of the founding of the Roman Republic from the 6th-4th Centuries BC Livy (59BC-17 AD) in his "Ab Urbe Condita Libri" (From the Founding of the City) is the best source, tracing the saga from the tale of Aeneas fleeing from fallen Troy to the Rape of the Sabine Women, Romulus & Remus, the tyranical Tarquin Kings, the Founding of the Republic, the evolution of the Roman Constitution and up to the sack of the city by the Gauls in the 4th Century BC. Though ancient history is presumed to be boring, I surprisingly found Livy's account surprisingly lively, almost a "can't put down read."

Polybius (200-118 BC) then picks up the story in his "The Rise of the Roman Empire" tracing the three Punic Wars with Carthage, Hannibal's campaign over the Alps and Rome's entanglement with the collapsing Greek Empire of Seleucis, Macedon and the Ptolmeys until attaining supremacy over the entire Mediterranean. Polybius is a surprisingly modern historian who saw as his challenge to write a "universal history" similar to that of our age of Globalization in which previously separate national histories became united in a universal field of action with integrated causes and effects. He was a Greek who was arrested and taken to Rome and then became intimate with the highest circles of the Roman Senate and a mentor to the Scipio family of generals. He like Thucydides then attempts to tell the "inside story" of how Rome rose to universal dominance in its region, and how all the parts of his world became interconnected in their power relations.

Tacitus (56-117 AD) continues the story after the fall of the Republic and rise of the Roman Empire under the emperors. Along with his contemporary Seutonius who published his "History of the Twelve Caesars" in 121 AD, he tells of the founding of the Empire under Julius Caesar, the Civil Wars of Augustus involving Mark Anthony & Cleopatra, the Augustan "Golden Age" and the descent into unbelievable corruption, degeneration, homicidal and sexual madness and excess under Caligula and Nero, followed by a return to decency under Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius. The endstory of the Roman Empire is reflected in Ammianus Marcellinus (395-391 AD) who wrote in the time of Julian the Apostate who unsuccessfully tried to shake

off Christianity and restore the old pagan and rationalist traditions of Classical Greece and Rome.

## PLUTARCH, THE GREAT HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHER

Plutarch (46-120 AD) is most famous for his historical biographies in "Parallel Lives" or simply "Lives." He was, like Polybius, a Greek scholar who wished to open understanding between the Greek and Roman intellectual communities. His "Parallel Lives" consists of character portraits and life histories of matching pairs of great Greeks and great Romans such as Alexander and Caesar, hoping to enhance appreciation of the greatness of each. Much of Shakespeare's knowledge of the classical world reflected in his plays such as "Julius Caesar," "Anthony and Cleopatra" and "Coriolanus" came from reading Plutarch in translation. His character analyses are always insightful and engaging to read. His biographical method was also used by the great near-contemporary Sima Qian of Han Dynasty China.

## IBN KHALDUN, ISLAMIC PIONEER OF MODERN HISTORY, SOCIOLOGY AND ECONOMICS

One of the blind spots in our appreciation of World History is the underappreciation of the contributions of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) and many other Islamic and non-Western thinkers, including Rash?d al-D?n Fadhl-all?h Hamad?n? (1247–1318), a Persian physician of Jewish origin, polymathic writer and historian, who wrote an enormous Islamic history, the Jami al-Tawarikh, in the Persian language, and Ala'iddin Ata-Malik Juvayni (1226–1283) a Persian historian who wrote an account of the Mongol Empire entitled Ta' r?kh-i jah?n-gush? (History of the World Conqueror). Of these Ibn Khaldun was the greatest and a theoretical forerunner of our modern approaches to history, far ahead of his time and little appreciated in either the Western or the Islamic world until recently. His greatest work is the The "Muqaddimah" (known as the Prolegomena) in which he anticipated some of the themes of Marx in tracing the importance of the influence of economics on history, including the conflict between the economic classes of the nomadic pastoral and herding peoples, the settled agriculturalists and the rising urban commercial class. Like Marx he stressed the importance of the "economic surplus" of the agricultural revolution and the "value-added" of manufacture, which allowed the rise of the urban, military and administrative classes and division of labor. He stressed the unity of the social system across culture, religion, economics and tradition. He even anticipated some of the themes of Darwin and evolution, tracing human progress in its First Stage of Man "from the world of the monkeys" towards civilization. Toynbee called the Muqaddimah the greatest work of genius of a single mind relative to its time and place ever produced in world history.

## THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOL EMPIRE

"The Secret History of the Mongol Empire" was precisely that, a private history written for the family of Ghengis Khan recording its rise and expansion from Ghengis Khan's humble personal origin to an empire stretching from China to Poland and Egypt. Its author is unknown but it contains an engaging account of the Khanate, the royal family and its traditions and the incredible expansion of its domain. While not a theoretical work it provides a useful missing link in our understanding of the Mongol Empire as a beginning stage of modern Globalization and a conduit for sharing between civilizations, East and West, and, unfortunatelyh for the transmission of the Black Plague across the world.

## THE GREAT MODERNS: GIBBON, MARX, SPENGLER & TOYNBEE

The "must read" classics of modern World History include the work of Edward Gibbon "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" which traces its fall to a decline in civic virtue, decayed morals and effeminacy amoung the public and the debilitating effects of Christianity vis-a-vis the rationalism of the Greek-Roman heritage. Marx, of course is central to modern history, not only formulating the laws of social development based on economics, class conflict and the transition from agricultural to capitalist economies, but also formulating the revolutionary program of Communism. Oswald Spengler was a remarkable German amateur historian whose "Decline of the West" traced a theory of "organic civilizations" that have a birth, blossoming, limited lifespan and death like all living creatures. He held this to be a cyclical universal historical process of civilizations now exemplified by the West entering the stage of spiritual exhaustion and collaps in warfare. Arnold Toynbee charted a similar process analyzing 26 civilizaitons across all human history, but differed with Spengler in that he believed moral reform and a return to Christian ethics could revive the West and forestall its decline.

## SPIRITUS MUNDI AND WORLD HISTORY

In my own work, the epic contemporary and futurist novel Spiritus Mundi World History plays a central role as various characters such as Professor Riviera in the Mexico City Chapter and Prof. Verhoven of the Africa chapters discourse on human history, evolution, evolutionary biology and the rise of civilization, culminating with the quest of the protagonists led by Sartorius to establish a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly for global democracy, a globalized version of the EU Parliament as a new organ of the United Nations.

World Literature Forum invites you to check out the great historians of World History and World Literature, and also the contemporary epic novel Spiritus Mundi, by Robert Sheppard. For a fuller discussion of the concept of World Literature you are invited to look into the extended discussion in the new book Spiritus Mundi, by Robert Sheppard, one of the principal themes of which is the emergence and evolution of World Literature:

For Discussions on World Literature and n Literary Criticism in Spiritus Mundi:

http://worldliteratureandliterarycrit...

Robert Sheppard

Editor-in-Chief
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Author’s Blog: http://robertalexandersheppard.wordpr...
Spiritus Mundi on Goodreads:
http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/17...
Spiritus Mundi on Amazon, Book I: http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CIGJFGO
Spiritus Mundi, Book II: The Romance http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00CGM8BZG



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### Yann says

Polybe, grec envoyé comme otage à Rome au deuxième siècle était devenu l'ami des puissants de la plus célèbre des cités Latine. Il entreprit de rédiger une histoire universelle des événements récents qui avaient vu l'essor inexorable de l'influence romaine sur les affaires du monde méditerranéenne. Les événements relatés vont des prémisses de la première guerre punique (laquelle fait défaut dans Tite-Live) jusqu'à la destruction finale de Carthage lors de la troisième guerre punique. Les théâtres d'opération vont de l’Espagne à la Mésopotamie, et Polybe rentre dans force détails pour saisir l'enchainement des causes et des conséquences.

Malheureusement, malgré ses mille cinq cent pages, l'ouvrage devient rapidement un vrai gruyère, et on est réduit à se contenter d'une myriade de morceaux éparts qui bien que ne manquant pas d'intérêt individuellement, nous privent de la vision d'ensemble à laquelle l'auteur voulait donner vie. La lecture préalable de Tite-Live permettra de ne pas être trop désorienté. Si on retrouve le souci d'exactitude de Thucydide, on note que Polybe ne manque aucune occasion d'égratigner les historiens qui l'ont précédés lorsqu’il juge qu'ils ont manqué d'esprit critique ou d'objectivité, mais lui même n'est pas exempt de critiques.

Il marque sa personnalité dans le livre, préférant toujours le parti du plus fort, le plus raisonnable à ses yeux. L’intérêt l'emporte sur la justice. Il méprise les causes perdues, quelque soit les ressorts de justice qui les animaient, ce qui l’amène à prononcer des jugements parfois désagréables à lire.

L'édition est agrémentée de nombreuses notes qui préviennent le lecteur, lorsque Polybe prend des libertés avec la vérité. On regrette quand même l’absence totale de cartes, ce qui réduit souvent le lecteur à contempler des suites de syllabes là où il devrait concevoir des noms de villes, de peuples ou de pays.

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### B.J. Richardson says

Polybius was born a Greek but spent eighteen years as a hostage in Rome. During that time he became friends with the house of Scipio and also was fascinated in the rapid rise of Rome from obscurity to the greatest power of its day in half a century. The first books in this "Complete Histories" focuses on the Punic Wars and the reasons why they thrust Rome into global dominance. Although they might be considered dry by modern standards they are fascinating reading for anyone who knows or wants to know this time period. I have often seen and heard them quoted by others and am glad I have finally had the opportunity to read them for myself.
The remaining thirty-five or so books are fragmented as only part of his writings have survived to our day. They deal much more with the wars and political machinations of the rest of the Mediterranean world as well as continuing on with Rome and Carthage. While I am very familiar with this area during the Peloponnesian War and the first couple centuries of the church, this was a hole in my history and I am glad to have it, even partially, filled in even though it made for slow going as I am introduced to new people every second page who Polybius assumes his readers would know.
For those not familiar with source material it might be jarring how often Polybius will break from his narrative to contradict and refute other writers and historians of his time. This is common for this time as writing was often meant to be read aloud and so it followed their current rules of rhetoric. While this translation seems to be a good one, for anyone who isn't a serious student of history I would recommend getting your hands on an abridged version that would stick to the Punic Wars.

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### Calilibrarian says

The cool thing about Polybius, is that he was a Greek. This book spans his interest in Rome's rise and homogenization of the Mediterranean world. Ranges from 264 thru 146 BCE.

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### Dylan says

*DISCLAIMER* I have not read this entire text; I didn’t think it prudent to, and have skimmed over about 30 percent of it. My review is based off what I read thoroughly (with notes), which I can say firmly is at least 60 percent.

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### Caroline says

Thanks to Jan-Maat for bringing this to my attention. I have read quite a bit set during the Roman Empire, or shortly before it, and wondered about all the references to the glories of the republic. And I knew Hannibal had taken his army and his elephants over the Alps, but had no context for the feat. Polybius filled in lots of holes in my knowledge of the history of Rome.

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### Jan-Maat says

Polybius' account of the rise of Rome, from city on seven hills to world power, has great vigour, reading book one which deals with the first punic war when Rome leapt out of Italy into conflict with Carthage for control over Scilly I had the sensation that the narrative was pursuing me like an elephant, bearing down on me as I fled before it. Although I remembered the injunction to either come home with my shield or on my shield, I cast it away the better to escape unencumbered, some Carthaginian has it now.

Polybius is also one of the hugely unlucky authors of antiquity, the first five books of his universal history survive along with fragments of the rest, in this translation we get the remaining bits of book six - discussing constitutions, part of Polybius' thesis is that it was Rome's distinctive mixed constitution that propelled the city state to dominance, and book twelve which deals with how unreasonably stupid other historians are.

The other part of Polybius's thesis is that the world is so interconnected in the second century BC and experience so globalised that we need a universal history - one can no longer , if one ever could look at a historical event as a discrete, disconnected happening, no, everything is interconnected, the rustling of a foot soldier's wolf skin in Italy has a bearing on events in Egypt. Therefore Polybius' history proceeds in parallel, we must understand Philip V's politics to appreciate how and why he got involved in the Hannibalic war, and how Philip V's activities interlinked with those of the other Macedonian dynasties in Asia and Egypt to realise how the Romans were drawn east to become masters of the universe, unfortunately because nobody in the medieval period had the *sitzfleisch* to copy out the whole of his history, it cuts out awkwardly after the battle of Cannae in Italy, which rather spoils the effect and leaves us with Livy, who saw the war with Hannibal, if not the whole of Roman history, as a great moral drama in which Hannibal wins for a while because of his low tricks, like ambushes and tactics generally. Polybius by contrast is analytical and thoughtful - his theme was thrust in his face, on the loosing side against Rome, the question of how this mysteriously warlike people came out of nowhere and conquered everywhere and took him as a hostage to an alien country was unavoidable.

The reason for this success for Polybius lay in Rome's constitution. Polybius has a Buddenbrooks view of constitutions, Kingship tends towards tyranny, aristocracy to oligarchy, democracy to mob rule, though not like some poncy optimist might think, over three generations, but immediately from one generation to the next. The best constitutions however escape this by being mixed, with each element balancing the other out & preventing, or at least holding off the inevitable decline. In his view the Athenian constitution was ok but like a ship without a captain and so doomed, Plato's constitution had never been tested in practise, Sparta with its equal division of land the best at achieving stability but did not provide the basis for massive expansion, the Roman constitution through trial and error however allowed the achievement of empire and if that is what you want, then it is the model to follow, he doesn't care for the Carthaginian constitution as they practised bribery, not as in promising greatness or tax cuts, but as in literally handing out coins for votes. Polybius's vision of history is cyclical, so everything tends to decay, he came from Acadia and as he says the Arcadian tends to be dour, unless they practise dancing and music (which presumably in exile he didn't, allowing his dourness to flourish and flower like a thistle), still *I think there can be no doubt what lies in the future for Rome, When a state has warded off so many serious threats, and has come to attain undisputed supremacy and sovereignty, it is easy to see that, after a long period of settled prosperity, lifestyles become more extravagant and rivalry over political positions and other such projects becomes fiercer than it should be. If these processes continue for very long, society will change for the worse. The causes of the deterioration will be lust for power combined with contempt for political obscurity, and personal ostentation and extravagance. It will be called a democratic revolution, however, because the time will come when the people will feel abused by some politicians' self seeking ambition and will have been flattered into vain hopes by other's lust for power* (p412) however just as you think he was bang on the money it turns out he thinks it will all end in mob rule rather than in tyranny and dictatorship.

The other factor in Roman success is personal risk, the Carthaginians hire mercenaries and so in Polybius' opinion have no stake in their wars, Romans send out their sons and will not ransom them either - you either fight to the death or fight to victory, third ways are not Roman. His account of the First Punic war shows how extreme this was with Rome constructing three fleets - loosing two in storms, all the rowers had to be trained on land as they had no maritime tradition to draw on. They even invent a boarding plank to be able to storm enemy ships - this such a good bit of equipment that it has never become an established part of naval architecture. They fight with no sense that compromise might be an option. There is also a discussion of how the Romans constructed their camps, and organised their army, down to the details of the curvature of their shields, although this isn't all positive, Polybius believes that the Roman emphasis on discipline made it difficult for the soldiers to fight back independently when ambushed at Lake Trasmene.

Full of insight and vigour, but tragically incomplete.

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### umberto says

I think reading this book by Polybius (c. 200-118 B.C.) is simply fascinating, informative and rewarding since, I think, we can learn and better understand the Roman Empire from the Greek statesman and historian's views as supported by written and oral sources.

I think, posting a review for this book needs time and ideas for my Goodreads friends, therefore, its scope will include a few topics worth mentioning and elucidating (probably more details for future inclusion):
1) How Hannibal crossed the Alps,
2) How Archimedes' contribution defended Cyracuse, and
3) How Scipio saved his father's life & his character.

Moreover, the section on Roman constitution compared to the others is also interesting.

However, before I forget, I'd like to reveal a section that needs improving for its next revised edition (again, if I don't forget I would inform those in charge at Penguin Books soon). I encountered such a problem when I read the footnote on page 527 as follows:

I. In Book XVIII. 35.

From my note there: I can't find any to read in this Book, i. e. p. 513 (?).

In other words, Book XVIII was ended by chapter 32, therefore, I can't find chapter 35 to read as suggested there! It's a bit disappointing for me, would some Penguin Books people in the UK see to the matter, please?

In brief, this book by Polybius is highly recommended to any interested reader of ancient history and you can't help admiring his god-like narrative of war engagements here and there.

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### Nish says

Polybius was a Greek born into an aristocratic family of the Achaean League and was selected as one of the 1000 aristocratic hostages transported to Rome. He fell into the good graces of the house of the Scipios. He

read the family archives and grew fond of Publius Cornelius Scipio and his son. Out of the forty or so *Histories* that he wrote only about five remained extant. The Roman Empire as an event fascinated Polybius and he sought to document its rise.

This work is written in a dry, factual manner but he remains what Edward Gibbons called "a philosophical historian" examining deeply the causes and consequences of the Punic Wars as a loyal outsider. Particularly well written is his theory of the transitional structure of government from anarchy to oligarchy to despotism. This section clearly influenced the Founding Fathers of the United States when they drew up the Constitution. Another interesting section is the organization of the Roman military and Polybius' belief that military service was an intrinsic part of Roman citizenship. Finally, his description of the Second Punic War is very well written. He interviews veterans and provides a dispassionate analysis behind the causes for Carthaginian aggression.

Overall this book was interesting as a historical artefact of first hand historiography but it was difficult to maintain constant interest.

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### Peter says

I have put this aside for now. Polybius's history is said to be important to our understanding of the formation of the Roman Empire. This I cannot dispute. But there is no art to description of events, and little analysis. It is basically one damn thing after another, which is principally, one damn battle after another, with no reflection on whether any of this is good. Turncoats and killing without sympathy or apparent need are denounced, but the general continuous war and carnage are treated as normal.

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### Bill P. says

Having a guilty pleasure that includes reading roman adventure novels of carnage and conquest, not to mention modern historians takes on the conflicts and events of the ancient world, I feel compelled to occassionally take on the guys that tend to be the source materials. These can seem pretty forbidding at the outset, but contemporary translations of Herodotus and Polybius made them both pretty easily digested. I really enjoyed David Anthony Durham's take on the Second Punic War (Prince of Carthage) and I have started a series from a UK writer whose characters are in the midst of the first punic war (both of which gain some modern relevance with todays events in Tunisia where the original Carthage was located). Polybius' The Rise of the Roman Empire may not be a page turner, but it is loaded with historical detail and speculations about motivations of individuals and societies and tangents about conflicts in other parts of the world that set the stage for the rise of the Roman juggernaut. Good stuff.

Next up, Plutarch.

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### Shyam says

> *To herald the opening of the sixteenth century, from the little Venetian printing press came forth all the great authors of antiquity, each bearing on the title-page the words ?λδος ?*

Μανο?τιος ?ωμα?ος κα? Φιλ?λλην *[Aldus Manutius, a Roman and a lover of Greece]; words which may serve to remind us with what wondrous prescience Polybius saw the world's fate when he foretold the material sovereignty of Roman institutions and exemplified in himself the intellectual empire of Greece.*

*Polybius is the last scientific historian of Greece. The writer who seems fittingly to complete his progress of thought is a writer of biographies only.*

*—Oscar Wilde, The Rise of Historical Criticism*

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I read Polybius for a first-hand account of the period of the History of Rome he discusses in his work, and did not do so with an especially analytical or critical eye.

So in lieu of my own thoughts, I thought I would share some more learned ones; below are some extracts from Oscar Wilde's Essay, *The Rise of Historical Criticism*. After finishing it, I do look forward to enjoying Polybius' work once again, and reading with a more analytical eye.

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*He starts by accepting the general principle that all things are fated to decay (which I noticed in the case of Plato), and that 'as iron produces rust and as wood breeds the animals that destroy it, so every state has in it the seeds of its own corruption.'*

*. . . Born in the serene and pure air of the clear uplands of Arcadia, Polybius may be said to reproduce in his work the character of the place which gave him birth. For, of all the historians—I do not say of antiquity but of all time—none is more rationalistic than he, none more free from any belief in the 'visions and omens, the monstrous legends, the grovelling superstitions and unmanly craving for the supernatural' (*δεισιδαιμον?ας ?γεννο?ς κα? τερατε?ας γυναικ?δους *[Polybius, xii. 24]) which he himself is compelled to notice as the characteristics of some of the historians who preceded him. Fortunate in the land which bore him, he was no less blessed in the wondrous time of his birth. For, representing in himself the spiritual supremacy of the Greek intellect and allied in bonds of chivalrous friendship to the world-conqueror of his day, he seems led as it were by the hand of Fate 'to comprehend,' as has been said, 'more clearly than the Romans themselves the historical position of Rome,' and to discern with greater insight than all other men could those two great resultants of ancient civilisation, the material empire of the city of the seven hills, and the intellectual sovereignty of Hellas.*

*Before his own day, he says, the events of the world were unconnected and separate and the histories confined to particular countries. Now, for the first time the universal empire of the Romans rendered a universal history possible. This, then, is the august motive of his work: to trace the gradual rise of this Italian city from the day when the first legion crossed the narrow strait of Messina and landed on the fertile fields of Sicily to the time when Corinth in the East and Carthage in the West fell before the resistless wave of empire and the eagles of Rome passed on the wings of universal victory from Calpe and the Pillars of Hercules to Syria and the Nile.*

*. . . Herodotus, while believing on principle in the supernatural, yet was sceptical at times. Thucydides simply ignored the supernatural. He did not discuss it, but he annihilated it by explaining history without it. Polybius enters at length into the whole question and explains its origin and the method of treating it. Herodotus would have believed in Scipio's dream. Thucydides would have ignored it entirely. Polybius explains it. He is the culmination of the rational progression of Dialectic. 'Nothing,' he says, 'shows a*

*foolish mind more than the attempt to account for any phenomena on the principle of chance or supernatural intervention. History is a search for rational causes, and there is nothing in the world—even those phenomena which seem to us the most remote from law and improbable—which is not the logical and inevitable result of certain rational antecedents.'*

*Some things, of course, are to be rejected a priori without entering into the subject: 'As regards such miracles,' he says, 'as that on a certain statue of Artemis rain or snow never falls though the statue stands in the open air, or that those who enter God's shrine in Arcadia lose their natural shadows, I cannot really be expected to argue upon the subject. For these things are not only utterly improbable but absolutely impossible.'*

*'For us to argue reasonably on an acknowledged absurdity is as vain a task as trying to catch water in a sieve; it is really to admit the possibility of the supernatural, which is the very point at issue.'*
*What Polybius felt was that to admit the possibility of a miracle is to annihilate the possibility of history: for just as scientific and chemical experiments would be either impossible or useless if exposed to the chance of continued interference on the part of some foreign body, so the laws and principles which govern history, the causes of phenomena, the evolution of progress, the whole science, in a word, of man's dealings with his own race and with nature, will remain a sealed book to him who admits the possibility of extra-natural interference.*

*. . . in the case of the wonderful rise of the Roman Empire—the most marvellous thing, Polybius says, which God ever brought about—are to be found in the excellence of their constitution (τ? ?δι?τητι τ?ς πολιτε?ας), the wisdom of their advisers, their splendid military arrangements, and their superstition (τ? δεισιδαιμον??). For while Polybius regarded the revealed religion as, of course, objective reality of truth, he laid great stress on its moral subjective influence, going, in one passage on the subject, even so far as almost to excuse the introduction of the supernatural in very small quantities into history on account of the extremely good effect it would have on pious people.*

*But perhaps there is no passage in the whole of ancient and modern history which breathes such a manly and splendid spirit of rationalism as one preserved to us in the Vatican—strange resting-place for it!—in which he treats of the terrible decay of population which had fallen on his native land in his own day, and which by the general orthodox public was regarded as a special judgment of God sending childlessness on women as a punishment for the sins of the people. For it was a disaster quite without parallel in the history of the land, and entirely unforeseen by any of its political-economy writers who, on the contrary, were always anticipating that danger would arise from an excess of population overrunning its means of subsistence, and becoming unmanageable through its size. Polybius, however, will have nothing to do with either priest or worker of miracles in this matter. He will not even seek that 'sacred Heart of Greece,' Delphi, Apollo's shrine, whose inspiration even Thucydides admitted and before whose wisdom Socrates bowed. How foolish, he says, were the man who on this matter would pray to God. We must search for the rational causes, and the causes are seen to be clear, and the method of prevention also. He then proceeds to notice how all this arose from the general reluctance to marriage and to bearing the expense of educating a large family which resulted from the carelessness and avarice of the men of his day, and he explains on entirely rational principles the whole of this apparently supernatural judgment.*

*. . . Having now examined Polybius's attitude towards the supernatural and the general ideas which guided his research, I will proceed to examine the method he pursued in his scientific investigation of the complex phenomena of life. For, as I have said before in the course of this essay, what is important in all great writers is not so much the results they arrive at as the methods they pursue. The increased knowledge of facts may alter any conclusion in history as in physical science, and the canons of speculative historical*

*credibility must be acknowledged to appeal rather to that subjective attitude of mind which we call the historic sense than to any formulated objective rules. But a scientific method is a gain for all time, and the true if not the only progress of historical criticism consists in the improvement of the instruments of research.*

*Now first, as regards his conception of history, I have already pointed out that it was to him essentially a search for causes, a problem to be solved, not a picture to be painted, a scientific investigation into laws and tendencies, not a mere romantic account of startling incident and wondrous adventure. Thucydides, in the opening of his great work, had sounded the first note of the scientific conception of history. 'The absence of romance in my pages,' he says, 'will, I fear, detract somewhat from its value, but I have written my work not to be the exploit of a passing hour but as the possession of all time.' Polybius follows with words almost entirely similar. If, he says, we banish from history the consideration of causes, methods and motives (τ? δι? τ?, κα? πως, κα? τ?νος χ?ριν), and refuse to consider how far the result of anything is its rational consequent, what is left is a mere ?γ?νισμα [Barren exercise], not a μ?θημα [Significant piece of thought], an oratorical essay which may give pleasure for the moment, but which is entirely without any scientific value for the explanation of the future. Elsewhere he says that 'history robbed of the exposition of its causes and laws is a profitless thing, though it may allure a fool.' And all through his history the same point is put forward and exemplified in every fashion.*

*. . . He thus may be said to have anticipated one of the most important truths of the modern methods of investigation: I mean that principle which lays down that just as the study of physiology should precede the study of pathology, just as the laws of disease are best discovered by the phenomena presented in health, so the method of arriving at all great social and political truths is by the investigation of those cases where development has been normal, rational and undisturbed.*

*The critical canon that the more a people has been interfered with, the more difficult it becomes to generalise the laws of its progress and to analyse the separate forces of its civilisation, is one the validity of which is now generally recognised by those who pretend to a scientific treatment of all history: and while we have seen that Aristotle anticipated it in a general formula, to Polybius belongs the honour of being the first to apply it explicitly in the sphere of history.*

*I have shown how to this great scientific historian the motive of his work was essentially the search for causes; and true to his analytical spirit he is careful to examine what a cause really is and in what part of the antecedents of any consequent it is to be looked for. To give an illustration: As regards the origin of the war with Perseus, some assigned as causes the expulsion of Abrupolis by Perseus, the expedition of the latter to Delphi, the plot against Eumenes and the seizure of the ambassadors in Bœotia; of these incidents the two former, Polybius points out, were merely the pretexts, the two latter merely the occasions of the war. The war was really a legacy left to Perseus by his father, who was determined to fight it out with Rome.*

*Here as elsewhere he is not originating any new idea. Thucydides had pointed out the difference between the real and the alleged cause, and the Aristotelian dictum about revolutions,* ο? περ? μικρ?ν ?λλ' ?κ μικρ?ν *[Not about trivial issues but arising from trivial causes], draws the distinction between cause and occasion with the brilliancy of an epigram. But the explicit and rational investigation of the difference between* α?τ?α *[Origin],* ?ρχ? *[Cause], and* πρ?φασις *[Pretext] was reserved for Polybius. No canon of historical criticism can be said to be of more real value than that involved in this distinction, and the overlooking of it has filled our histories with the contemptible accounts of the intrigues of courtiers and of kings and the petty plottings of backstairs influence—particulars interesting, no doubt, to those who would ascribe the Reformation to Anne Boleyn's pretty face, the Persian war to the influence of a doctor or a curtain-lecture from Atossa, or the French Revolution to Madame de Maintenon, but without any value for those who aim at any scientific*

*treatment of history.*

*. . . One of the greatest difficulties with which the modern historian has to contend is the enormous complexity of the facts which come under his notice: D'Alembert's suggestion that at the end of every century a selection of facts should be made and the rest burned (if it was really intended seriously) could not, of course, be entertained for a moment. A problem loses all its value when it becomes simplified, and the world would be all the poorer if the Sibyl of History burned her volumes. Besides, as Gibbon pointed out, 'a Montesquieu will detect in the most insignificant fact relations which the vulgar overlook.'*

*Nor can the scientific investigator of history isolate the particular elements, which he desires to examine, from disturbing and extraneous causes, as the experimental chemist can do (though sometimes, as in the case of lunatic asylums and prisons, he is enabled to observe phenomena in a certain degree of isolation). So he is compelled either to use the deductive mode of arguing from general laws or to employ the method of abstraction, which gives a fictitious isolation to phenomena never so isolated in actual existence. And this is exactly what Polybius has done as well as Thucydides. For, as has been well remarked, there is in the works of these two writers a certain plastic unity of type and motive; whatever they write is penetrated through and through with a specific quality, a singleness and concentration of purpose, which we may contrast with the more comprehensive width as manifested not merely in the modern mind, but also in Herodotus. Thucydides, regarding society as influenced entirely by political motives, took no account of forces of a different nature, and consequently his results, like those of most modern political economists, have to be modified largely 20 before they come to correspond with what we know was the actual state of fact. Similarly, Polybius will deal only with those forces which tended to bring the civilised world under the dominion of Rome (ix. 1), and in the Thucydidean spirit points out the want of picturesqueness and romance in his pages which is the result of the abstract method (τ? μονοειδ?ς τ?ς συντ?ξεως [Uniformity of structure]) being careful also to tell us that his rejection of all other forces is essentially deliberate and the result of a preconceived theory and by no means due to carelessness of any kind.*

*. . . Now, Polybius points out that those phenomena particularly are to be dwelt on which may serve as a* παρ?δειγμα *[Example] or sample, and show the character of the tendencies of the age as clearly as 'a single drop from a full cask will be enough to disclose the nature of the whole contents.' This recognition of the importance of single facts, not in themselves but because of the spirit they represent, is extremely scientific; for we know that from the single bone, or tooth even, the anatomist can recreate entirely the skeleton of the primeval horse, and the botanist tell the character of the flora and fauna of a district from a single specimen.*

*Regarding truth as 'the most divine thing in Nature,' the very 'eye and light of history without which it moves a blind thing,' Polybius spared no pains in the acquisition of historical materials or in the study of the sciences of politics and war, which he considered were so essential to the training of the scientific historian, and the labour he took is mirrored in the many ways in which he criticises other authorities.*

*. . . But the chief object of his literary censure is Timæus, who had been unsparing of his strictures on others. The general point which he makes against him, impugning his accuracy as a historian, is that he derived his knowledge of history not from the dangerous perils of a life of action but in the secure indolence of a narrow scholastic life. There is, indeed, no point on which he is so vehement as this. 'A history,' he says, 'written in a library gives as lifeless and as inaccurate a picture of history as a painting which is copied not from a living animal but from a stuffed one.'*

### Steve Gordon says

It is an absolute shame that most of this work did not make it down to the present day. And on that note I make my only criticism of this edition: the jacket and web material on this book state that it covers the Second Punic War and the later destruction of Carthage. The original work may have, but what is left to us is the history of the Second Punic War up to the battle of Cannae and nothing further. My favorite quote is on the use of religion as a means of control: "In Rome, nothing plays a more elaborate or extensive role in people's private lives and in the political sphere than superstition. Many of my readers might find this strange, but it seems to me that it has been done for the sake of the common people. In a state of enlightened citizens, there would presumably be no need for such a course. But since the common people everywhere are fickle...the only option is to use mysterious terrors and all this elaborate drama to restrain them. I very much doubt that the men who in ancient times introduced the masses to the idea of the gods and the concept of Hades just happened aimlessly to do so..."

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### Jeremy says

Polybius blends the retelling of the events with his own philosophy about the nature and goals of historical study in addition to his ruminations about the future of Empire (which are pretty much spot on), which can make the text feel a bit uneven at times. That being said, the chapters concerning Hannibal and his campaign against Rome are probably some of the most epically rendered set pieces in written antiquity. And they really help to show how Rome, after vanquishing an enemy this determined and this smart, set its sights on the broader goal of taking over the known world. Best read in small snippets as it can be kind of dry at times.

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### Chris says

3.5 stars.

I am not a historian, and have encountered almost all the content of this book in later works that probably just cribbed from Polybius. My rating reflects my enjoyment of the history, not it's importance.

The content itself is a roller coaster ride. It begins with books covering two wars between Rome and Carthage. The history is exciting and the writing captures it. Next are two books on The Social War occurring in Greece. Compared to the previous conflict, this is children squabbling over the father's estate. And Polybius's style changes from war-correspondent to gossip monger. I understand the importance of ascendant Rome and degenerate Greece rallying for one last attempt at glory, but it is a chore to read through. And that is the end of the history that survives. A great work written to describe how Rome came to rule the known world and by the chance of history, it is cutoff when Rome is at her lowest point.

This translations contains fragments from two later books. The first is a fascinating study on Roman politics and camp formation. The second is embarrassingly petty sniping of previous historians that Polybius didn't take kindly to. With 2000 years of perspective, he gets as much mud on himself as he does his targets.