

One man’s victory is another man’s defeat – but for the Greek historian Polybius, the diminished hegemony of his own Achaean League was inseparable from his successful career as Rome’s spokesman in the reorganized Hellenistic world. Polybius thus confronted the tensions inherent in making commemorative choices during a time of shifting cultural and political identities (cf. discussions in modern contexts, e.g. Ho Tai; Merridale). Because his *Histories* chose to “remember” Rome in favorable terms, Polybius has been labeled a “quisling” by some, while others have defended his ability to compromise (Eckstein; Green; Sterling; Walbank). This debate is incapable of resolution, because it relies upon scholars’ idiosyncratic receptions of Polybius’ character as mediated by their readings of his text. Such responses are, by their very nature, a product of these scholars’ own experiential contexts. This leads, necessarily, to the suggestion that Polybius’ intentions are not recoverable (Champion; Derow).

We may advance further if we leave aside notions of a “personal” Polybius, and instead ask how his writing activated his dual roles as the political representative of the defeated to the victors and as the literary expositor of the victors to the defeated. How did this *authorial* persona integrate the needs of an autobiographical subject within a historiographic genre? (on Polybius’ persona, see Clarke; Flower 47-50) In this paper, I will propose that we should not seek Polybius’ “autobiographical” self in his account of his native Achaean League, or, indeed, in his descriptions of his tenure as a Roman hostage. Rather, we may find Polybius in his self-reflective construction of the great *Roman* defeats of the Second Punic War.

My paper will focus on one broad example, in which the initially triumphant Carthaginians are presented in the opening of Book 3 as “breaking the power (*dunasteia*) of the Romans,” and causing them to fear for their native land (3.2.1-2). Polybius has already made explicit his opinion that these Punic victories were among the “great events” of the period 220-168 BCE; that is, he has consciously located Rome’s staggering defeats within his (otherwise unnecessarily expanded) chronology of Rome’s rise (3.1.4-11; cf. 1.3.8-9; Sacks). But when Polybius has arrived at the Roman defeats in the “real time” of the narrative – eschewing the “I” of his prefatory statements and assuming the depersonalized syntax of a reporter – he presents the Punic gains as far smaller than he had done in his initial synopsis (3.118.2-5).

The disparity arises from Polybius’s desire to make a larger statement about the ways that the appearance of total defeat could yet permit a phoenix-like resurgence. Thus, he describes Punic victories in terms that were more applicable to Rome’s triumphs in the East. He nevertheless relegated this exploration of his defeated self to a secondary importance in the context of his *Histories* as a whole: defeated Rome might be explored as a model for defeated Greece in isolated remarks, but the model did *not* obviously affect the historical narrative. Ironically, because no comparable source survives to “correct” our reading of Polybius, the textual presentation of his political self would now receive greater sympathy if he had in fact shaped his larger narrative to accord with his personal asides.