THE TREATY OF LUTATIUS

The Peace That Ended the First Punic War

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A reading sample: Polybius at the Tablets

From Part I: The Sources

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Polybius at the Tablets

Everything begins with one man reading bronze. In the third book of his *Histories*, Polybius interrupts his own narrative to lay before his readers the full text of the treaties that Rome and Carthage had sworn to one another across the centuries, and he prefaces the exercise with a remark that ought to be the motto of this entire series. The treaties, he says, are preserved on bronze tablets in the treasury of the quaestors beside the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus; and the oldest of them is written in a Latin so archaic that even the most learned Romans of his own day can construe it only with difficulty, and after careful study.[1] He then gives translations.

Consider what this passage establishes. Polybius is not repeating a tradition about the treaties; he is reporting from autopsy—from having seen the documents himself, or having had them read and rendered for him by Romans who could. He is aware that the language is a barrier, and he says so, rather than smoothing the difficulty over. And he is discriminating: he transcribes the first treaty, the second, the treaty of the Pyrrhic war, and the treaty that ended the war for Sicily, and he distinguishes their clauses from one another with care. A historian who tells his readers that his source is hard to read, and who confesses the limits of his own access to it, is a historian testifying against his own convenience. That is the mark of a witness worth trusting.

Two things follow for the Treaty of Lutatius. The first is that Polybius's summary of its terms rests on the same documentary habit that produced his transcriptions of the older treaties. He gives the terms of 241 twice—in the first book, within the story of the war's end, and in the third, within the review of treaties—and the two accounts agree.[2] The second is subtler and is the theme of the next section. Because Polybius had read the actual documents, he was in a position to catch another historian in a claim about them that the documents did not support. He took the trouble to do so. The refutation is one of the most revealing passages in the ancient literature of the war, because it shows a critical mind at work on exactly the problem this book confronts: how to tell a real treaty from an invented one.

A caution belongs here, and it will be developed as the volume proceeds. Polybius wrote roughly a century after 241, as a Greek in Roman custody, moving in the circle of the Scipios; and in the third book his account of the treaty is not disinterested narration but evidence marshalled for a thesis about the causes of the war of Hannibal.[3] None of this touches the core of what he reports—the clauses of the treaty are corroborated where corroboration survives. It touches the emphasis, the silences, and the framing. The witness is reliable. He is not neutral. Both statements are true, and a reconstruction that forgets either will go wrong.

Notes to this excerpt

1. Polybius, Histories, III.22.3 (the archaic Latin) and III.26.1 (the tablets in the treasury of the quaestors beside the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus). The series of transcribed treaties runs from III.22 to III.25.

2. Histories, I.62.8–63.3 and III.27.1–9.

3. On the argumentative purpose of Book III, see the Introduction above and Maze (2022), 24–48. On Polybius's Scipionic connections and their bearing on his handling of the war, the classic statements are Walbank's commentary and, for the first war specifically, Lazenby (1996), 1–17.

References named in note 3 are references to the complete book's bibliography. This sample reproduces the selected notes as written.