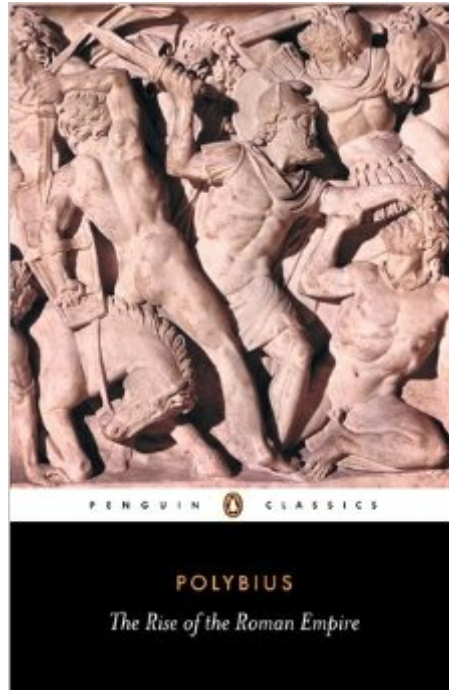


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The Rise Of The Roman Empire (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

The Greek statesman Polybius (c.200–118 BC) wrote his account of the relentless growth of the Roman Empire in order to help his fellow countrymen understand how their world came to be dominated by Rome. Opening with the Punic War in 264 BC, he vividly records the critical stages of Roman expansion: its campaigns throughout the Mediterranean, the temporary setbacks inflicted by Hannibal and the final destruction of Carthage. An active participant of the politics of his time as well as a friend of many prominent Roman citizens, Polybius drew on many eyewitness accounts in writing this cornerstone work of history. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Polybius, a Greek hostage held in Rome from 168 BC to 150 BC, set himself the task of explaining the rise of the Roman Empire. Deliberately written for Roman audiences, Polybius intends to describe the 53 year rise to hegemony from 220-167 BC. However Polybius includes considerable background material on the First Punic War and he later decided to extend his history to include the Third Punic War. Unfortunately, much of the original work is missing and Penguin has decided to edit out even more, which leaves a hollow remnant. The real value of this book lies in Polybius'

description of the Second Punic War with Hannibal. There are excellent battle descriptions of the Trebbia, Lake Trasimene, Cannae, the Metaurus and Zama. Remember, Polybius was writing only 60-70 years after these events and had access to many documents that are now lost. Polybius was also able to visit some of the battlefields when they had not changed significantly since Hannibal's time. There is also a good section on Roman military methods, which was enlightening. However this book is disappointing in a number of areas. In terms of the original work, Polybius tends to digress on topics of interest to himself (but not to modern readers), such as criticizing other contemporary historians. He also has a strong pedantic streak and strives more to impart "lessons" than facts. He continually hammers home his theory that one cannot be a good historian unless one has walked the ground and gained personal military and political experiences. This certainly helps, but there are plenty of generals and politicians that make poor authors.

Many other reviewers on this site lament all that has been cut from this translation. The decision, of course, was not entirely up to Penguin. A great portion of Polybius' work has been lost to the ravages of history. Other surviving portions are quite repetitive. As someone with an interest in the history but not a consuming scholarly passion, I found the selections well-chosen and fascinating; the translation readable. What more can you ask? F.W. Walbank's long-winded introduction told me much more than I ever needed to know about this second-tier historian. What makes Polybius valuable is that he actually played a part in some of the events he described and seems to have prized first-hand sources, interviewing people involved and consulting contemporary documents, especially in the Roman Senate. As a Greek who had spent time in Rome, he wrote the history primarily for his fellow Greeks, to explain how a nothing civilization (Rome) on the edge of the Hellenistic World rose to power so quickly. The account of Rome's Wars with Carthage is very even-handed and compelling. In other passages, his Greek prejudices often show through. Especially when he is talking about rival historians like Timaeus. He devotes a whole chapter, in fact, to insulting Timaeus. The chapter shows you something of Polybius' character that he would stop his history of the world to engage in academic fisticuffs. This book functions well as an explanation of Rome to a non-Roman. I learned a great deal about the character of Rome and the Romans as well as all the Hellenistic kingdoms. At 541 pages, no one can accuse this of being a reader's digest version.

I am not going to review Polybius, the historian, because this is not the appropriate place to do so. But, suffice it to say that Polybius is one of the more reliable ancient historians extant. For the period

Polybius covers in his history, particularly for the period for which he was a contemporary, he is considered the most authoritative source, other than inscriptions or archeological evidence. Thus, the importance of Polybius cannot be overstated. That is why this English Language edition is both so promising, and at the same time disappointing. F.W. Walbank is the pre-eminent English-speaking Historian of the past 60 years on Polybius and the Hellenistic era. His scholarly work "Historical Commentaries on Polybius" are a standard reference for any historian writing about this period. As such, an accessible English translation of Polybius edited by Professor Walbank should be (and I emphasize the word "should") the standard text in every English speaking classroom teaching this material. And, in fact it mostly is. But, like many others reviewing this edition, I can only lament that material that has been left out of the volume. And, I also agree that for whatever reason, Professor Walbank did not do a particularly good job of explaining what was excised and why he made the editorial decisions he did. The translation by Ian Scott-Kilvert is first rate. And you have the added comfort of knowing that the great F.W. Walbank gave it his stamp of approval. But, I wish there were a complete, modern Polybius English translation that included all of the fragmentary materials and the portions of Polybius' work that were left out of this edition. [The Loeb translation by Paton is over 80 years old].

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