

“Those who write memoranda on the walls of their houses” (Polybius 5.33.5): A New Form of Historical Writing?

Polybius at 5.33, while remarking on universal history, states that some unnamed contemporary historians claimed that they wrote universal history but did not do so because they only devoted “three or four pages to the Second Punic War,” even though it deserved as much attention as Greek affairs. He adds that these (bad) historians “did not even write as much as those who write memoranda of events on the walls of their houses” (trans. Paton). Does this fascinating sentence (which has been translated differently by three translators and several scholars) indicate a new sub-genre of history, that of “the historians who write on walls?” Or does it have a different meaning? Recent work on Greek and Roman graffiti provides evidence that there was writing inside ancient houses (see, e.g., essays in Norena 2019 and Benefiel 2016); but these involve very brief writings. There were texts on buildings (see essays in Norena 2019; Angliker & Bultighini 2023), but I cannot find evidence of historical memoranda that were written on interior or exterior walls in the Greco-Roman world in the time of Polybius or before.

The sentence has attracted attention mostly from older scholars, who are split between public and private. Translators such as Schuckburgh 1889 and Paton thought that the sentence refers to private writings by individuals on the interior walls of their houses. On the other hand, German scholars believe that it indicates government records. Wilhelm 1909 thought it meant official public chronological records; Laqueur 1926 argued it was a new genre of public chronological writing akin to the *acta diurna* of the pontifex maximus at Rome; and Waterfield 2010 translates it as public chronological records that are inscribed. But Jacoby 1949 (with whom Walbank 1967 agreed) said that it was not chronological and that it means short government notices placed on walls to inform citizens. I examine the words of the Greek

sentence closely and in relation to Polybius' language in his *Histories* and I argue that everyone else is wrong (partly or completely) but that my analysis both closely follows the Greek and clarifies Polybius' meaning with the result that my interpretation makes sense.

Works Cited

Angliker, Erica and Ilaria Bultighini (eds.), *New Approaches to the Materiality of Text in the Ancient Mediterranean. From Monuments and Buildings to Small Portable Objects* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023)

Benefiel, Rebecca and Peter Keegan (eds.), *Inscriptions in the Private Sphere in the Greco-Roman World* (Leiden: Brill, 2016)

Jacoby, F. *Atthis. The Local Chronicles of Ancient Athens* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1949)

Laqueur, R. "Lokalchronik," *RE* 13.1 (Stuttgart 1926), cols. 1083-1110, at cols. 1088-1089

Norena, C. and Nikolaos Papazarkadas (eds.), *From Document to History: Epigraphic Insights into the Greco-Roman World* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)

Paton, W. R. trans. *Polybius. The Histories*. Vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1923)

Schuckburgh, Evelyn S. (trans.) *Polybius. Histories* (London: Macmillan, 1889)

Walbank, F. W. *A Historical Commentary on Polybius 1* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967)

Waterfield, Robin (trans.) and B. McGing, (notes and introduction), *Polybius. Histories*. (New York: Oxford UP, 2010)

Wilhelm, A. *Beiträge zur griechischen Inschriftenkunde* (Vienna: Alfred Hölder, 1909)