

“Sufficient to bring you to great and frequent difficulty”: Polybius on Weather and the Good General

In the ninth book of his *Histories*, Polybius discusses the qualities required of a good general. Although Polybius' demands are fairly extensive (including knowledge of past military actions, local terrain, and even astronomy), he excludes from the commander's zone of responsibility such capricious natural phenomena as rain, snow, and misty weather, among others, on the basis of their inherent unpredictability (9.16). We would do well, however, not to accept this dismissal of the weather unquestioningly. After all, while the phenomena he mentions are unpredictable on an individual basis, the likelihood of encountering such common weather in the course of a campaign is quite high. Since such conditions could have so extremely adverse an effect on the soldier – especially the heavily armed legionary or hoplite – and therefore on the outcome of the battle (Hanson 1989), it seems the sort of thing so practical a military advisor as Polybius would consider important. This is all the more striking in that the historian seems to contradict his statements here when in the very first book he declares that blame for the destruction of ships wrought by a storm at sea lies not with Fortune but with the Roman commanders, because they ignored local experts who told them such weather was likely at this time of year (1.37). Could not then such expectation of a storm's likelihood at sea in winter apply to the common weather conditions Polybius lists in book 9?

My paper seeks clarification of Polybius' expectations of a good commander in relation to the chances of the weather by examining his narrative of a number of episodes during his account of the Hannibalic war in which weather conditions affect the fighting. I consider how on one hand Polybius takes advantage of the presence of natural phenomena at the Trebia (3.72-4) and Lake Trasimene (3.84) to highlight not the role of chance, as one might expect, but the importance of the general's skills (Walbank 1972). At the same time, however, brief comments at both the Trebia and before Cannae (3.108), as well as the more extensive description of the adverse weather affecting Hannibal's crossing of the Alps, provide a sense of balance to weather's role, highlighting the contrast between Polybius' stance and the willingness of others (including the predecessors Polybius criticizes (Marincola 2001), but also suggested by Hellenistic collections of *epiphaneiai* (Chanotis 2005)) to see divine marvels in such incidents. In this way my paper demonstrates how Polybius' treatment of even so small a facet of his material as the weather can contribute to his history's larger themes.

Selected Bibliography

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