

The Aftermath of Trasimene: Livy, Polybius, and Roman Religion

This paper discusses Livy's account (Book xxii) of the aftermath of Rome's defeat by Hannibal at Lake Trasimene in 217 B.C. Livy's handling of Polybius (Book iii) as a source demonstrates his high level of interpretive sophistication as a historian.

My paper builds upon the work of H. Tränkle (1977, 2009) and, especially, D.S. Levene (2010) in elucidating Livy's dynamic use of Polybius as a source. While earlier scholarship (e.g., Walsh 1961 and Luce 1977) was wary of seeing any direct use of Polybius in Livy's account of the early Hannibalic War, preferring to see any Polybian elements as digested through Livy's consultation of Coelius Antipater (late 2nd century B.C.), closer analysis of parallel narrative segments strongly supports the case for Livy's engagement with his Greek predecessor. A second line of inspiration is drawn from recent studies of intertextuality in Livy, a field with growing momentum (Polleichtner 2010). My study further illuminates the situation, whereby Livy must be 'read against' Polybius in order to appreciate fully the former's skill in interpreting historical events.

When relating the first actions of the dictator Q. Fabius Maximus (elected in the aftermath of Trasimene), Livy parallels Polybius in word order and diction to signal his engagement with the latter. In particular, Livy chooses words that mimic the semantics and sounds of Polybius:

Polybius iii.88.7: Φάβιος μετὰ τὴν κατάστασιν θύσας τοῖς θεοῖς ἐξώρμησε . . .

Livy xxii.9.7: Q. Fabius Maximus dictator iterum quo die magistratum iniit uocato senatu,
ab dis orsus . . .

Each passage includes reference to Fabius, mention of Fabius' entry into office, and allusion to religious rites. More significant, however, is the perceivable wordplay Livy engages in when mentioning the gods. Polybius, in a curt dismissal that Walbank (1957, p. 423) classifies as

cynical, simply states θύσας τοῖς θεοῖς ἐξώρμησε, while Livy, in what must be an intentional parallel, has *ab dis orsus*. Livy's targeting of Polybius is made even clearer when we notice that not only are ἐξώρμησε and *orsus* close in meaning (both meaning 'to begin' or 'to set forth'), but this similarity of definition is also accompanied by the symphony produced when -ώρμ- in ἐξώρμησε is placed beside *ors-* in *orsus*. Yet the coincidence is only apparent—its purpose being to draw the observant reader's attention to the Polybian account. Livy's true aim is to introduce a different explanation for the disaster at Trasimene.

Whereas Polybius (iii.80.3-4) had used Hannibal's opinion to characterize C. Flaminius (the consul at Trasimene) as “not suited naturally (οὐκ εὐφυῆ) to handling the arts of war and, what's more, overconfident in his own circumstances (καταπεπιστευκέναι τοῖς σφετέροις πράγμασιν)”, Livy draws different conclusions. Through Fabius Maximus' inaugural speech given prior to his departure in pursuit of Hannibal, Livy (xxii.9.7-8) asserts that Flaminius erred not so much by his *temeritas* ('boldness') and *inscitia* ('ignorance') as through his neglect of religious rights (*neglegentia caerimoniarum*). While Polybius proceeds quickly from θύσας τοῖς θεοῖς to Fabius' departure with the legions (ἐξώρμησε), Livy has taken this paltry reference and expanded it into an affirmation of ritual and a digression explaining the exact methods by which the Romans propitiated the gods. This exegesis continues for another full chapter before returning to the corresponding point in Polybius. What's more, his account of the rituals includes a number of archaizing words and formulae, such as the repetition of *esto* in prescriptions, the use *faxit*, and the substitution of *duellis* for *bellis*. Therefore, in Livy's opinion Polybius, who took pride in his knowledge of Roman society, has missed the mark entirely: Rome was defeated not because of Flaminius' personality and generalship but his lack of due diligence for ritual. One must *begin from the gods (ab dis orsus)* rather than *sacrifice to the gods*

and then begin (θύσας τοῖς θεοῖς ἐξώρμησε). Livy has artfully corrected Polybius and declares his own opinion with subtlety. As this case shows, he was clearly capable of making independent historical judgments, and one of the ways in which he accomplishes this task is by responding to his predecessors.

Works Cited

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