

## Polybios: The New Odysseus

Polybios of Megalopolis is best known today for his partially surviving history, a primary source for the events of the latter third and first half of the second centuries BC. Yet this is not how he wanted to be remembered: his own self-image was as a great explorer, who "wandered over the land and every sea" (Pausanias 8.30.8). This paraphrase of the Homeric view of Odysseus appeared on his cenotaph in his home city of Megalopolis in the Peloponnesos, and is the best evidence for how Polybios saw himself. The inscription on the cenotaph made no mention of writing a history. His *Histories* were written relatively late in his life, but in his earlier years he was rightfully able to claim the title of the new Odysseus, and probably was the first Greek to reach the equator (Walbank 1972: 6-13).

His original journey of exploration was tracing Hannibal's route across the Alps, probably an effort of the 150s BC, when people were still alive who remembered his passing (Polybios 3.48.12). This may have been a project connected with the writing of his *Histories*, which covered the period of Hannibal. Polybios recognized the necessity of topographical research to historiography, and he may have been the first Greek to explore the interior Alps. Early accounts of south central Europe tended to ignore them or to be badly confused: Herodotos (4.49) thought that "Alpis" was the name of a river. Polybios attempted to tackle the major topographical problem of Hannibal's route, an issue that remains today. On another topographical journey, he set forth for the British Isles, following the path of the great Massalian explorer Pytheas (Polybios 3.59.8; Athenaios 8.322).

In early 146 BC Carthage fell to the Romans. Polybios was there, in the entourage of his patron P. Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus. For the first time the Romans (and Polybios) learned about the extent of Carthaginian territory, and, moreover, now had access to records of exploration that were recorded in their state library. Collating this information was assigned to Polybios, and Scipio sent him to explore the Carthaginian possessions outside the Pillars of Herakles, a region from which both Greeks and Romans had been banned for many years (Polybios 34.15.7-9; Pliny, *Natural History* 6.199-201). Scipio gave Polybios a fleet and sent him out into the Atlantic (Eichel and Markley 1976: 237-43). He went down the African coast past the Atlas mountains, visiting old Carthaginian trading posts along the way, and eventually reached the tropics, noting the unusual flora. Polybios almost certainly had along with him the report of the Carthaginian explorer Hanno, who had gone by the same route 250 years previously. One of Polybios' duties was to catalogue the ethnic groups of West Africa, perhaps as a matter of interest to the Romans. Finally he came to the mountain known as the Chariot of the Gods (modern Mt. Cameroon), lying just north of the equator (Desanges 1976: 146-7).

Upon his return Polybios published a treatise, *On the Inhabited Parts of the Earth Under the [Celestial] Equator*. It has not survived, and the only reference to it is by the mathematician of the first century BC, Geminus (16.32). The treatise refuted the long-standing view that the equatorial regions were hot, because Mt. Cameroon, rising to over 13,000 feet, made it obvious (so it seemed) that the territory around the equator was a high altitude and therefore temperate. This caused a complete revision of long-standing views of the terrestrial climate zones, and began the comprehension of the topography of

central Africa and its high equatorial mountains. Polybios had reached the equator, going farther south than anyone previously from the Greek world.

He remains one of the more misunderstood scholars from antiquity. To be sure, his *Histories* are of the highest importance, but he disdained even to mention them on his memorial and saw himself as someone whose prime duty was to make the remote parts of the inhabited world known to Greeks and Romans. Three centuries after his death his cenotaph was still standing in Megalopolis, recording that he was the new Odysseus.

### Bibliography

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