

Polybius and Atrocity in Hellenistic Warfare

Modern international treaties and conventions clearly define wartime atrocities, with enslavement, mass murder, forced deportation and other acts of excessive violence understood as “crimes against humanity” outside the range of acceptable behavior (see e.g. ICC, Rome Statute Article 7). The ancient historian will immediately recognize that such violence was hardly uncommon in the ancient world—and hardly restricted by effective international law (Eckstein 2006). But the harsh reality of ancient warfare does not preclude the existence of informal standards of conduct. Indeed, there is evidence for such standards in Hellenistic Greece: our sources frequently report public outcry and condemnation in reaction to massacres, enslavements, and other mass violence, and it is worthwhile to consider whether Hellenistic Greeks viewed certain conduct as outside the range of acceptable behavior—that is, as atrocity. The natural starting point for this investigation is Polybius, as his *Histories* are our best contemporary source. I propose to examine Polybius’ attitudes about the limits of permissible wartime violence and his narrative treatment of ‘atrocities’ in order to determine whether the historian recognized consistent standards of conduct.

In the fifth book of his *Histories*, Polybius gives his explicit opinion about the limits of acceptable violence in war. On the one hand, Polybius accepts the ‘rights of the victor’ (5.11.3)—the victorious party’s unlimited power to treat the defeated and their property as they choose—but he then insists that the object of war should not be to destroy one’s enemies, but to treat even the ‘guilty’ with mercy (5.11.5). The contrast creates some ambiguity; however, even if he does accept that the victor is technically empowered to do as he will, it is clear that the historian regards outright brutality as unacceptable in war.

Polybius’ narrative descriptions of atrocities are fairly consistent with his view of acceptable military conduct. Describing instances when Philip V (15.22.1 – 23.6) treated his vanquished enemies without mercy, the historian puts his behavior in negative terms and is quick to report the criticism of other Greeks. Of course, Philip V was once an Achaean enemy and is presented as increasingly degenerate throughout the *Histories* (Champion 1997); one may begin to sense that violence only becomes unacceptable ‘atrocity’ when committed by opponents of Polybius’ homeland. On the other hand, his account of the Cydonian massacre and enslavement of the Apollonians (28.14.1-4) is consistent with the descriptions of Macedonian atrocities—and these

were not political enemies of Achaea. Finally, even though Polybius (hypocritically) defends the mass enslavement of the Mantineans perpetrated by his own countrymen (2.56.6-7, 2.57.1 – 58.15), he admits that the act was exceptional and abnormal for the Achaean League.

Polybius generally asserts—regardless of the perpetrator—that mass violence was out of step with Greek norms of war. He may defend his own countrymen for employing brutal methods, but he admits that such methods were exceptional. In broader terms, this suggests that the historian is fairly faithful in reporting both mass violence and Greek responses to such episodes; he thus provides a useful starting point for assessing Hellenistic attitudes toward violence and atrocity.

Works Cited

Champion, Craige. “The Nature of Authoritative Evidence in Polybius and Agelaus' Speech at Naupactus.” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 127 (1997): 111-128.

Eckstein, A.M. *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.