

14.4. Polybius / The Destruction of Corinth

The Romans sacked Corinth in 146 BCE, during the Rome's war with the Achaean League, nearly simultaneously with the final annihilation of their western rival, Carthage, the same year. Polybius was with the Roman army at Carthage, but he returned to his native Greece not long after to help the Corinthian populace. His Histories were written some time before his death in ca. 118 BCE.

Polyb. 37.3–11, 39.7–17. Source: Polybius. *The Histories of Polybius*, vol. 2. Trans. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh. London: Macmillan, 1889.

My thirty-eighth book embraces the consummation of the misfortunes of Greece. For though Greece as a whole, as well as separate parts of it, has on several occasions sustained grave disasters, yet to none of her previous defeats could the word “misfortune” be more properly applied, than to those which have befallen her in our time. For it is not only that the sufferings of Greece excite compassion: stronger still is the conviction, which a knowledge of the truth of the several occurrences must bring, that in all she undertook she was supremely unfortunate. At any rate, though the disaster of Carthage is looked upon as of the severest kind, yet one cannot but regard that of Greece as not less, and in some respects even more so. For the Carthaginians at any rate left something for posterity to say on their behalf; but the mistakes of the Greeks were so glaring that they made it impossible for those who wished to support them to do so. Besides, the destruction of the Carthaginians was immediate and total, so that they had no feeling afterwards of their disasters: but the Greeks, with their misfortunes ever before their eyes, handed down to their children's children the loss of all that once was theirs. And in proportion as we regard those who live in pain as more pitiable than those who lose their lives at the moment of their misfortunes, in that proportion must the disasters of the Greeks be regarded as more pitiable than those of the Carthaginians—unless a man thinks nothing of dignity and honor, and gives his opinion from a regard only to material advantage. To prove the truth of what I say, one has only to remember and compare the misfortunes in Greece reputed to be the heaviest with what I have just now mentioned...

Critolaus the Achaean Strategos being dead, and the law providing that, in case of such an event befalling the existing Strategos, the Strategos of the previous year should succeed to the office until the regular congress of the league should meet, it fell to Diaeus to conduct the business of the League and take the head of affairs. Accordingly, after sending forward some troops to Megara, he went himself to Argos; and from that place sent a circular letter to all the towns ordering them to set free their slaves who were of military age, and who had been born and brought up in their houses, and send them furnished with arms to Corinth. He assigned the numbers to be furnished by the several towns quite at random and without any regard to equality, just as he did everything else. Those who had not the requisite number of home-bred slaves were to fill up the quota imposed on each town from other slaves. But seeing that the public poverty was very great, owing to the war with the Lacedaemonians, he compelled the richer classes, men and

women alike, to make promises of money and furnish separate contributions. At the same time he ordered a levy en masse at Corinth of all men of military age. The result of these measures was that every city was full of confusion, commotion, and despair: they deemed those fortunate who had already perished in the war, and pitied those who were now starting to take part in it; and everybody was in tears as though they foresaw only too well what was going to happen. They were especially annoyed at the insolent demeanor and neglect of their duties on the part of the slaves—airs which they assumed as having been recently liberated, or, in the cause of others, because they were excited by the prospect of freedom. Moreover, the men were compelled to make their contribution contrary to their own views, according to the property they were reputed to possess; while the women had to do so, by taking the ornaments of their own persons or of their children, to what seemed deliberately meant for their destruction.

As these measures came all at once, the dismay caused by the hardship of each individually prevented people from attending to or grasping the general question; or they must have foreseen that they were all being led on to secure the certain destruction of their wives and children. But, as though caught in the rush of some winter torrent and carried on by its irresistible violence, they followed the infatuation and madness of their leader. The Eleians and Messenians indeed did not stir, in terror of the Roman fleet; for nothing could have saved them if the storm had burst when it was originally intended. The people of Patrae, and of the towns which were leagued with it, had a short time before suffered disasters in Phocis [*in the battle with Metellus at Scarphea*]; and their case was much the most pitiable one of all the Peloponnesian cities: for some of them sought a voluntary death; others fled from their towns through deserted parts of the country, with no definite aim in their wanderings, from the panic prevailing in the towns. Some arrested and delivered each other to the enemy, as having been hostile to Rome; others hurried to give information and bring accusations, although no one asked for any such service as yet; while others went to meet the Romans with suppliant branches, confessing their treason, and asking what penance they were to pay, although as yet no one was asking for any account of such things. The whole country seemed to be under an evil spell: everywhere people were throwing themselves down wells or over precipices; and so dreadful was the state of things, that as the proverb has it “even an enemy would have pitied” the disaster of Greece. For in times past the Greeks had met with reverses or indeed complete disaster, either from internal dissensions or from treacherous attacks of despots; but in the present instance it was from the folly of their leaders and their own lack of wisdom that they experienced the grievous misfortunes which befell them. The Thebans also, abandoning their city en masse, left it entirely empty; and among the rest Pytheas retired to the Peloponnese, with his wife and children, and there wandered about the country.

He came upon the enemy much to his surprise. But to my mind the proverb, “the reckonings of the foolish are foolishness” applies to him. And naturally to such men things clear as day come as a surprise... . He was even forming plans

for getting back home, acting very like a man who, not having learnt to swim and being about to plunge into the sea, should not consider the question of taking the plunge; but, having taken it, should begin to consider how he is to swim to land....

Diaeus having recently come to Corinth after being appointed Strategos by the vote of the people, Andronidas and others came from Caecilius Metellus. Against these men he spread a report that they were in alliance with the enemy, and gave them up to the mob, who seized on them with great violence and threw them into chains. Philo of Thessaly also came bringing many liberal offers to the Achaeans. And on hearing them, certain of the men of the country attempted to secure their acceptance; among whom was Stratius, now a very old man, who clung to Diaeus's knees and entreated him to yield to the offers of Metellus. But he and his party would not listen to Philo's proposals. For the fact was that they did not believe that the amnesty would embrace them with the rest; and, as they regarded their own advantage and personal security as of the highest importance, they spoke as they did, and directed all their measures on the existing state of affairs to this end: although, as a matter of fact, they failed entirely to secure these objects. For as they understood quite clearly the gravity of what they had done, they could not believe they would obtain any mercy from Rome; and as to enduring nobly whatever should befall on behalf of their country and the safety of the people, that they never once took into consideration; yet that was the course becoming men who cared for glory, and professed to be the leaders of Greece. But, indeed, how or whence was it likely that such a lofty idea should occur to these men? The members of this conclave were Diaeus and Damocritus, who had but recently been recalled from exile owing to the disturbed state of the times, and with them Alcamenes, Theodectes and Archicrates; and of these last I have already stated at length who they were, and have described their character, policy, and manner of life.

Such being the men with whom the decision rested, the determination arrived at was what was to be expected. They not only imprisoned Andronidas and Lagius and their friends, but even the sub-Strategos Sosicrates, on the charge of his having presided at a council and given his voting for sending an embassy to Caecilius Metellus, and in fact of having been the cause of all their misfortunes. Next day they empaneled judges to try them; condemned Sosicrates to death; and having bound him, racked him until he died, without, however, inducing him to say anything that they expected: but they acquitted Lagius, Andronidas and Archippus, partly because the people were scared at the lawless proceeding against Sosicrates, and partly because Diaeus got a talent from Andronidas and forty minae from Archippus; for this man could not relax his usual shameless and abandoned principles in this particular even "in the very pit," as the saying is. He had acted with similar cruelty a short time before also in regard to Philinus of Corinth. For on a charge of his holding communication with Menalcidas and favoring the Roman cause, he caused Philinus and his sons to be flogged and racked in each other's sight, and did not desist until the boys and Philinus were all dead. When such madness and ferocity was infecting everybody, as it would not be easy to parallel even among barbarians, it would be clearly very natural to ask why the whole nation did not utterly perish.

For my part, I think that Fortune displayed her resources and skill in resisting the folly and madness of the leaders; and, being determined at all hazards to save the Achaeans, like a good wrestler, she had recourse to the only trick left; and that was to bring down and conquer the Greeks quickly, as in fact she did. For it was owing to this that the wrath and fury of the Romans did not blaze out farther; that the army of Libya did not come to Greece; and that these leaders, being such men as I have described, did not have an opportunity, by gaining a victory, of displaying their wickedness upon their countrymen. For what it was likely that they would have done to their own people, if they had got any ground of vantage or obtained any success, may be reasonably inferred from what has already been said. And, indeed, everybody at the time had the proverb on his lips, "had we not perished quickly we had not been saved."...

Aulus Postumius deserves some special notice from us here. He was a member of a family and gens of the first rank, but in himself was garrulous and wordy, and exceedingly ostentatious. From his boyhood he had a great leaning to Greek studies and literature: but he was so immoderate and affected in this pursuit, that owing to him the Greek style became offensive to the elder and most respectable men at Rome. Finally, he attempted to write a poem and a formal history in Greek, in the preface to which he desired his readers to excuse him if, being a Roman, he could not completely command the Greek idiom or method in the handling of the subject. To whom M. Porcius Cato made a very pertinent answer. "I wonder," said he, "on what grounds you make such a demand. If the Amphictyonic council had charged you to write the history, you might perhaps have been forced to allege this excuse and ask for this consideration. But to write it of your own accord, when there was no compulsion to do so, and then to demand consideration, if you should happen to write bad Greek, is quite unreasonable. It is something like a man entering for the boxing match or pancratium in the public games, and, when he comes into the stadium, and it is his turn to fight, begging the spectators to pardon him if he is unable to stand the fatigue or the blows.' Such a man of course would be laughed at and condemned at once." And this is what such historiographers should experience, to prevent them spoiling a good thing by their rash presumption. Similarly, in the rest of his life, he had imitated all the worst points in Greek fashions; for he was fond of pleasure and averse from toil. And this may be illustrated from his conduct in the present campaign: for being among the first to enter Greece at the time that the battle in Phocis took place, he retired to Thebes on the pretense of illness, in order to avoid taking part in the engagement; but, when the battle was ended, he was the first to write to the Senate announcing the victory, entering into every detail as though he had himself been present at the conflict....

The incidents of the capture of Corinth were melancholy. The soldiers cared nothing for the works of art and the consecrated statues. I saw with my own eyes pictures thrown on the ground and soldiers playing dice on them; among them was a picture of Dionysus by Aristides—in reference to which they say that the proverbial saying arose, "Nothing to the Dionysus,"—and the Hercules tortured by the shirt of Deianeira....

Owing to the popular reverence for the memory of Philopoemen, they did not take down the statues of him in the

various cities. So true is it, as it seems to me, that every genuine act of virtue produces in the mind of those who benefit by it an affection which it is difficult to efface... . One might fairly, therefore, use the common saying: "He has been foiled not at the door, but in the road."... There were many statues of Philopoemen, and many erections in his honor, voted by the several cities; and a Roman at the time of the disaster which befell Greece at Corinth, wished to abolish them all and to formally indict him, laying an information against him, as though he were still alive, as an enemy and ill-wisher to Rome. But after a discussion, in which Polybius spoke against this sycophant, neither Mummius nor the commissioners would consent to abolish the honors of an illustrious man... . Polybius, in an elaborate speech, conceived in the spirit of what has just been said, maintained the cause of Philopoemen. His arguments were that "This man had indeed been frequently at variance with the Romans on the matter of their injunctions, but he only maintained his opposition so far as to inform and persuade them on the points in dispute; and even that he did not do without serious cause. He gave a genuine proof of his loyal policy and gratitude, by a test as it were of fire, in the periods of the wars with Philip and Antiochus. For, possessing at those times the greatest influence of any one in Greece, from his personal power as well as that of the Achaeans, he preserved his friendship for Rome with the most absolute fidelity, having joined in the vote of the Achaeans in virtue of which, four months before the Romans crossed from Italy, they levied a war from their own territory upon Antiochus and the Aetolians, when nearly all the other Greeks had become estranged from the Roman friendship." Having listened to this speech and approved of the speaker's view, the ten commissioners granted that the complimentary erections to Philopoemen in the several cities should be allowed to remain. Acting on this pretext, Polybius begged of the Consul the statues of Achaeus, Aratus, and Philopoemen, though they had already been transported to Acarnania from the Peloponnese: in gratitude for which action people set up a marble statue of Polybius himself...

After the settlement made by the ten commissioners in Achaia, they directed the Quaestor, who was to superintend the selling of Diaeus's property, to allow Polybius to select anything he chose from the goods and present it to him as a free gift, and to sell the rest to the highest bidders. But, so far from accepting any such present, Polybius urged his friends not to covet anything whatever of the goods sold by the Quaestor anywhere:—for he was going a round of the cities and selling the property of all those who had been partisans of Diaeus, as well of such as had been condemned except those who left children or parents. Some of these friends did not take his advice; but those who did follow it earned a most excellent reputation among their fellow-citizens.

After completing these arrangements in six months, the ten commissioners sailed for Italy, at the beginning of spring, having left a noble monument of Roman policy for the contemplation of all Greece. They also charged Polybius, as they were departing, to visit all the cities and to decide all questions that might arise, until such plain time as they were grown accustomed to their constitution and laws. Which he did: and after a while caused the inhabitants to be contented with the constitution given them by the commissioners, and left no difficulty connected with the laws on any point, private or public, unsettled.

The Roman Proconsul, after the commissioners had left Achaia, having restored the holy places in the Isthmus and ornamented the temples in Olympia and Delphi, proceeded to make a tour of the cities, receiving marks of honor and proper gratitude in each. And indeed he deserved honor both public and private, for he conducted himself with self-restraint and disinterestedness, and administered his office with mildness, although he had great opportunities of enriching himself, and immense authority in Greece. And, in fact, in the points in which he was thought to have at all overlooked justice, he appears not to have done it for his own sake, but for that of his friends. And the most conspicuous instance of this was in the case of the Chalcidian horsemen whom he put to death...