POLYBIUS

The Siege of Syracuse

Source: Polybius VIII.3–7. Translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert. Penguin, 1979.

The great kingdom of Syracuse declared for Carthage during the Second Punic War and was subjected to a siege (214–212). The Syracusans held out not so much through the brilliance not of their generals but through that of their engineer, Archimedes.

The subsequent sack of Syracuse and Marcellus's triumph, in which the opulence of the Greek city was paraded before the populace, was later seen as the beginning of the erosion of Roman austerity.

After Epicydes and Hippocrates had seized power in Syracuse, they managed to transfer the friendship and allegiance which their compatriots had previously cherished for Rome to the side of Carthage. Meanwhile, the Romans, who had already been informed of the fate which had befallen Hieronymous, the tyrant of Syracuse, appointed Ap. Claudius Pulcher as pro-praetor to command the land forces, and M. Claudius Marcellus to take charge of the fleet. These officers then took up a position not far from the city and decided to assault it with their land forces at the quarter known as the Hexapyli; the fleet was to attack at the so-called portico of Scytice in Achradina, where the city wall extends to the quay-side. The Romans' wicker screens, missiles and other siege apparatus had been made ready beforehand, and they felt confident that with the number of men at their disposal they could within five days bring their preparations to a point which would give them the advantage over the enemy. But here they failed to reckon with the talents of Archimedes or to foresee that in some cases the genius of one man is far more effective than superiority in numbers. This lesson they now learned by experience.

The strength of the defenses of Syracuse is due to the fact that the city wall extends in a circle along high ground with steeply overhanging crags, which are by no means easy to climb, except at certain definite points, even if the approach is uncontested. Accordingly Archimedes had constructed the defenses of the city in such a way—both on the landward side and to repel any attack from the sea—that there was no need for the defenders to busy themselves with improvisations; instead they would have everything ready to hand, and could respond to any attack by the enemy with a counter-move. For his part Ap. Claudius Pulcher, who was equipped with penthouses and scaling-ladders, brought these into operation to attack the part of the wall which adjoins the Hexapyli gate to the east.

Meanwhile Marcellus was attacking the quarter of Achradina from the sea with sixty quinqueremes, each vessel being filled with archers, slingers and javelin-throwers, whose task was to drive the defenders from the battlements. Besides these vessels he had eight quinqueremes grouped in pairs. Each pair had had half of their oars removed, the starboard bank for the one and the port for the other, and on these sides the vessels were lashed together. They were then rowed by the remaining oars of their outer sides, and brought up to the walls the siege engines known as sambucae. These are constructed as follows. A ladder is made, four feet in width and high enough to reach the top of the wall from the place where its feet are to rest. Each side is fenced in with a high protective breastwork, and the machine is also shielded by a wicker covering high overhead. It is then laid flat over the two sides of the ships where are lashed together, the top protruding a considerable distance beyond the bows. To the tops of the ships' masts are fixed pulleys with ropes, and when the sambuca is about to be used, the ropes are attached to the top of the ladder, and men standing in the stern haul up the machine by means of the pulleys, while others stand in the bows to support it with long poles and make sure that it is safely raised. After this the oarsmen on the two outer sides of the ships row the vessels close inshore, and the crews then attempt to prop the sambuca against the wall. At the top of the ladder there is a wooden platform which is protected on three sides by wicker screens; four men are stationed on this to engage the defenders, who in the meanwhile are struggling to prevent the sambuca from being lodged against the battlements. As soon as the attackers have got it into position, and are thus standing on a higher level that the wall, they pull down the wicker screens on each side of the platform and rush out on to the battlements or towers. Their comrades climb up the sambuca after them, the ladder being held firm by ropes which are attached to both ships. This device is aptly named, because when it is raised the combination of the ship and the ladder looks remarkably like the musical instrument in question.

This was the siege equipment with which the Romans planned to assault the city's towers. But Archimedes had constructed artillery which could cover a whole variety of ranges, so that while the attacking ships were still at a distance he scored so many hits with his catapults and stone-throwers that he was able to cause them severe damage and harass their approach. Then, as the distance decreased and these weapons began to carry over the enemy's heads, he resorted to smaller and smaller machines, and so demoralized the Romans that their advance was brought to a standstill. In the end Marcellus was reduced in despair to bringing up his ships secretly under cover of darkness. But when they had almost reached the shore, and were therefore too close to be struck by the catapults, Archimedes had devised yet another weapon to repel the marines, who were fighting from the decks. He had had the walls pierced with large numbers of loopholes at the height of a man, which were about a palm's breadth wide at the outer surface of the walls. Behind each of these and inside the walls were stationed archers with rows of so-called 'scorpions', a small catapult which discharged iron darts, and by shooting

through these embrasures they put many of the marines out of action. Through these tactics he not only foiled all the enemy's attacks, both those made at long range and any attempt at hand-to-hand fighting, but also caused them heavy losses.

Then, whenever the enemy tried to work their sambucae, he had other engines ready all along the walls. At normal times these were kept out of sight, but as soon as they were needed they were hoisted above the walls, with their beams projecting far over the battlements, some of them carrying stones weighing as much as ten talents, and others large lumps of lead. As soon as the sambucae approached, these beams were swung round on a universal joint and by means of a release mechanism or trigger dropped the weight on the sambuca; the effect was not only to smash the ladder but to endanger the safety of the ships and of their crews.

Other machines invented by Archimedes were directed against the assault parties as they advanced under the shelter of screens which protected them against the missiles shot through the walls. Against these attackers the machines could discharge stones heavy enough to drive back the marines from the bows of the ships; at the same time a grappling-iron attached to a chain would be let down, and with this the man controlling the beam would clutch at the ship. As soon as the prow was securely gripped, the lever of the machine inside the wall would be pressed down. When the operator had lifted up the ship's prow in this way and made her stand on her stern, he made fast the lower parts of the machine, so that they would not move, and finally by means of a rope and pulley suddenly slackened the grappling-iron and the chain. The result was that some of the vessels heeled over and fell on the sides, and others capsized, while the majority when their bows were let fall from a height plunged under water and filled, and thus threw all into confusion. Marcellus' operations were thus completely frustrated by these inventions of Archimedes, and when he saw that the garrison not only repulsed his attacks with heavy losses but also laughed at his efforts, he took his defeat hard. At the same time he could not refrain from making a joke against himself when he said: 'Archimedes uses my ships to ladle sea-water into his wine-cups, but my sambuca band have been whipped out of the wine-party as intruders!' So ended the efforts to capture Syracuse from the sea.

At the same time Ap. Claudius Pulcher found himself faced with similar difficulties when he attacked by land, and finally he abandoned the attempt. While his troops were still at a distance from the walls they suffered many casualties from the mangonels and catapults. This artillery was extraordinarily effective both in the volume of its fire, as was to be expected when Hiero had provided the supplies, and Archimedes designed the various engines. Then, even when the soldiers did get close to the wall, they were so harassed by the volleys of arrows and darts which continually poured through the embrasures, as I described above, that their advance was effectually halted. Alternatively, if they attacked under cover of their penthouses, they were crushed by the stones and beams that were dropped on their heads. The defenders also killed many men by means of the iron grappling-hooks let down from cranes, which I mentioned earlier: these were used to lift up men, amour and all, and then allow them to drop. In the end Pulcher withdrew to his camp and summoned a council of the military tribunes, at which it was unanimously decided to use any other methods rather than persist in the attempt to capture Syracuse by storm. And this resolution was never reversed, for during the eight months' siege of the city which followed, although they left no stratagem or daring attempt untried, they never again ventured to mount a general assault. So true it is that the genius of one man can become an immense, almost a miraculous asset, if it is properly applied to certain problems. In this instance, at any rate, the Romans, having brought up such numerous forces both by sea and by land, had every hope of capturing the city immediately, if only one old man out of all the Syracusans could have been removed; but so long as he was present they did not dare even to attempt an attack by any method which made it possible for Archimedes to oppose them. Instead they concluded that in view of the large population of the town, the best way to reduce it was by starvation; they therefore cut off supplies from the sea by means of the fleet, and by land by means of the army, and rested their hopes on this solution. But as they were anxious to achieve some useful results outside, and not waste all the time during which they would be blockading Syracuse, the two commanders separated and divided their forces. Pulcher took command of two-thirds and invested the city, while Marcellus with the remaining third made raids on those parts of Sicily which were supporting the Carthaginians.