

The Destruction of Corinth

Source: Polybius, *The Histories*, 38.1, 39.7-17. From: *The Histories of Polybius*, 2 Vols., trans. Evelyn S. Shuckburgh (London: Macmillan, 1889), II.515-525, 530-540. Scanned by: J. S. Arkenberg, Dept. of History, Cal. State Fullerton. Prof. Arkenberg has modernized the text.

The destruction of Corinth, one of the greatest cities of Greece, ended the Achaean War—a desperate bid by the Greeks of Peloponnese to fend off Roman domination. A severe departure for Roman foreign policy, and taking place in the same year (146 BCE) as the destruction of Carthage that ended in the Third Punic War, the sack of Corinth seemed an ominous turning point for the Romans.

On his arrival in the Peloponnese, the consul L. Mummius Achaicus was joined by allies who greatly enlarged his army. The Achaeans made a sudden attack upon them and gained a slight success, which was a few days afterwards revenged by a signal defeat. Diaeus, leader of the Achaeans, fled to Megalopolis, where he killed his wife and himself. The rest of the beaten Achaean army took refuge in Corinth, which Mummius took and destroyed on the third day. Then the commissioners were sent from Rome to settle the whole of Greece.

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....

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 Aristeides—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 Achaicus, 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... .