

2. POLYBIUS ON THE CAUSES OF THE WAR*

Polybius (ca. 203–120 B.C.) was a citizen of Magalopolis, a major city in the Achaean League. The son of Lycortas, an important leader of the faction which advocated an independent policy for the League, he was taken to Rome as a political hostage after the Third Macedonian War. In Rome he became a member of the famous Scipionic circle and a personal friend of Scipio Aemilianus. He wrote a *Universal History* for the period 264–144 B.C. in forty books, of which only some are preserved.

Some historians of the Hannibalian war, when they wish to point out to us the causes of this contest between Rome and Carthage, allege first the siege of Saguntum by the Carthaginians, and, secondly, their breach of treaty by crossing the river called by the natives the Iber. But though I should call these the first actions in the war, I cannot admit them to be its causes. One might just as well say that the crossing of Alexander the Great into Asia was the *cause* of the Persian war, and the descent of Antiochus upon Demetrius the *cause* of his war with Rome. In neither would it be a probable or true statement. In the first case, this action of Alexander's could not be called the cause of a war, for which both he and his father Philip in his lifetime had made elaborate preparations: and in the second case, we know that the Aetolian league had done the same, with a view to a war with Rome, before Antiochus came upon the scene. Such definitions are only worthy of men who cannot distinguish between a first overt act and a cause or pretext; and who do not perceive that a *cause* is the first in a series of events of which such an overt act is the last. I shall therefore regard the first attempt to put into execution what had already been determined as a "beginning," but I shall look for "causes" in the motives which suggested such action and the policy which dictated it; for it is by these, and the calculations to which they give rise, that men are led to decide upon a particular line of conduct. The soundness of this

method will be proved by the following considerations. The true causes and origin of the invasion of Persia by Alexander are patent to everybody. They were, first, the return march of the Greeks under Xenophon through the country from the upper Satrapies; in the course of which, though throughout Asia all the populations were hostile, not a single barbarian ventured to face them: secondly, the invasion of Asia by the Spartan king Agesilaus, in which, though he was obliged by troubles in Greece to return in the middle of his expedition without effecting his object, he yet found no resistance of any importance or adequacy. It was these circumstances which convinced Philip of the cowardice and inefficiency of the Persians; and comparing them with his own high state of efficiency for war, and that of his Macedonian subjects, and placing before his eyes the splendour of the rewards to be gained by such a war, and the popularity which it would bring him in Greece, he seized on the pretext of avenging the injuries done by Persia to Greece, and determined with great eagerness to undertake this war; and was in fact at the time of his death engaged in making every kind of preparation for it.

Here we have the *cause* and the *pretext* of the Persian war. Alexander's expedition into Asia was the *first action* in it.

So too of the war of Antiochus with Rome. The *cause* was evidently the exasperation of the Aetolians, who, thinking that they had been slighted in a number of instances at the end of the war with Philip, not only called in the aid of Antiochus, but resolved to go to every

extremity in satisfying the anger which the events of that time had aroused in them. This was the *cause*. As for the *pretext*, it was the liberation of Greece, which they went from city to city with Antiochus proclaiming, without regard to reason or truth; while the *first act* in the war was the descent of Antiochus upon Demetrius.

My object in enlarging upon this distinction is not to attack the historians in question, but to rectify the ideas of the studious. A physician can do no good to the sick who does not know the causes of their ailments; nor can a statesman do any good who is unable to conceive the manner, cause, and source of the events with which he has from time to time to deal. Surely the former could not be expected to institute a suitable system of treatment for the body; nor the latter to grapple with the exigencies of the situation, without possessing this knowledge of its elements. There is nothing, therefore, which we ought to be more alive to, and to seek for, than the causes of every event which occurs. For the most important results are often produced by trifles; and it is invariably easier to apply remedial measures at the beginning, before things have got beyond the stage of conception and intention.

Now the Roman annalist Fabius asserts that the cause of the Hannibalian war, besides the injury inflicted upon Saguntum, was the encroaching and ambitious spirit of Hasdrubal. "Having secured great power in Iberia, he returned to Libya with the design of destroying the constitution and reducing Carthage to a despotism. But the leading statesmen, getting timely warning of his intention, banded themselves together and successfully opposed him. Suspecting this Hasdrubal retired from Libya, and thenceforth governed Iberia entirely at his own will without taking any account whatever of the Carthaginian Senate. This policy had had in Hannibal from his earliest youth a

zealous supporter and imitator; and when he succeeded to the command in Iberia he continued it: and accordingly, even in the case of this war with Rome, was acting on his own authority and contrary to the wish of the Carthaginians; for none of the men of note in Carthage approved of his attack upon Saguntum." This is the statement of Fabius, who goes on to say, that "after the capture of that city an embassy arrived in Carthage from Rome demanding that Hannibal should be given up on pain of a declaration of war."

Now what answer could Fabius have given if we had put the following question to him? "What better chance or opportunity could the Carthaginians have had of combining justice and interest? According to your own account they disliked the proceeding of Hannibal: why did they not submit to the demands of Rome by surrendering the author of the injury; and thus get rid of the common enemy of the state without the odium of doing it themselves, and secure the safety of their territory by ridding themselves of the threatened war—all of which they could have effected by merely passing a decree?" If this question were put, I say, it would admit of no answer. The fact is that, so far from doing anything of the sort, they maintained the war in accordance with Hannibal's policy for seventeen years; and refused to make terms until, at the end of a most determined struggle, they found their own city and persons in imminent danger of destruction.

I do not allude to Fabius and his annals from any fear of their wearing such an air of probability in themselves as to gain any credit,—for the fact is that his assertions are so contrary to reason, that it does not need any argument of mine to help his readers to perceive it,—but I wished to warn those who take up his books not to be misled by the authority of his name, but to be guided by facts. For there is a certain class of readers in whose eyes the personality of the writer is of more account

* Polybius, 3. 6–10; 14–15; 20–21; 27–30, translated by D. Shuckburgh.

than what he says. They look to the fact that Fabius was a contemporary and a member of the Senate, and assume without more ado that everything he says may be trusted. My view, however, is that we ought not to hold the authority of this writer lightly: yet at the same time that we should not regard it as all-sufficient; but in reading his writings should test them by a reference to the facts themselves.

This is a digression from my immediate subject, which is the war between Carthage and Rome. The cause of this war we must reckon to be the exasperation of Hamilcar, surnamed Barca, the father of Hannibal. The result of the war in Sicily had not broken the spirit of that commander. He regarded himself as unconquered; for the troops at Eryx which he commanded were still sound and undismayed: and though he yielded so far as to make a treaty, it was a concession to the exigencies of the times brought on by the defeat of the Carthaginians at sea. But he never relaxed in his determined purpose of revenge; and, had it not been for the mutiny of the mercenaries at Carthage, he would at once have sought and made another occasion for bringing about a war, as far as he was able to do so: as it was, he was preoccupied by the domestic war, and had to give his attention entirely to that.

When the Romans, at the conclusion of this mercenary war, proclaimed war with Carthage, the latter at first was inclined to resist at all hazards, because the goodness of her cause gave her hopes of victory,—as I have shown in my former book, without which it would be impossible to understand adequately either this or what is to follow. The Romans, however, would not listen to anything: and the Carthaginians therefore yielded to the force of circumstances; and though feeling bitterly aggrieved, yet being quite unable to do anything, evacuated Sardinia, and consented to pay a sum of twelve hundred talents, in addition to the former indemnity paid them, on condition of avoiding the

war at that time. This is the second and the most important cause of the subsequent war. For Hamilcar, having this public grievance in addition to his private feelings of anger, as soon as he had secured his country's safety by reducing the rebellious mercenaries, set at once about securing the Carthaginian power in Iberia with the intention of using it as a base of operations against Rome. So that I record as a third cause of the war the Carthaginian success in Iberia: for it was the confidence inspired by their forces there which encouraged them to embark upon it.

[Polybius describes Hannibal's pacification of Spain south of the Ebro River.]

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After the defeat of this host, no one south of the Iber rashly ventured to face him except the people of Saguntum. From that town Hannibal tried his best to keep aloof; because, acting on the suggestions and advice of his father Hamilcar, he did not wish to give the Romans an avowed pretext for war until he had thoroughly secured the rest of the country.

But the people of Saguntum kept sending ambassadors to Rome, partly because they foresaw what was coming, and trembled for their own existence, and partly that the Romans might be kept fully aware of the growing power of the Carthaginians in Iberia. For a long time the Romans disregarded their words: but now they sent out some commissioners to see what was going on. Just at that time Hannibal had finished the conquests which he intended for that season, and was going into winter quarters at the New Town again, which was in a way the chief glory and capital town of the Carthaginians in Iberia. He found there the embassy from Rome, granted them an interview, and listened to the message with which they were charged. It was a strong intimation to him to leave Saguntum alone, as being under the protection of Rome;

and not to cross the reef, in accordance with the agreement come to in the time of Hasdrubal. To this Hannibal answered with all the heat of youth, inflamed by martial ardour, recent success, and his long-standing hatred of Rome. He charged the Romans with having a short time before, when on some political disturbances arising in the town they had been chosen to act as arbitrators, seized the opportunity to put some of the leading citizens to death; and he declared that the Carthaginians would not allow the Saguntines to be thus treacherously dealt with, for it was the traditional policy of Carthage to protect all persons so wronged. At the same time he sent home for instructions as to what he was to do "in view of the fact that the Saguntines were injuring certain of their subject allies." And altogether he was in a state of unreasoning anger and violent exasperation, which prevented him from availing himself of the real causes for war, and made him take refuge in pretexts which would not admit of justification, after the manner of men whose passions master all considerations of equity. How much better it would have been to demand of Rome the restoration of Sardinia, and the remission of the tribute, which she had taken an unfair opportunity to impose on pain of a declaration of war. As it was, he said not a word of the real cause, but alleged the fictitious one of the matter of Saguntum; and so got the credit of beginning the war, not only in defiance of reason, but still more in defiance of justice. The Roman ambassadors, finding that there must undoubtedly be a war, sailed to Carthage to enter the same protest before the people there. They expected, however, that they would have to fight not in Italy, but in Iberia, and that they would have Saguntum as a base of operations.

[Saguntum is besieged and taken by Hannibal.]

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But when news came to Rome of the fall of Saguntum, there was indeed no debate on the question of war, as some historians assert; who even add the speeches delivered on either side. But nothing could be more ridiculous. For is it conceivable that the Romans should have a year before proclaimed war with the Carthaginians in the event of their entering the territory of Saguntum, and yet, when the city itself had been taken, should have debated whether they should go to war or no? Just as absurd are the wonderful statements that the senators put on mourning, and that the fathers introduced their sons above twelve years old into the Senate House, who, being admitted to the debate, refrained from divulging any of its secrets even to their nearest relations. All this is as improbable as it is untrue; unless we are to believe that Fortune, among its other bounties, granted the Romans the privilege of being men of the world from their cradles. I need not waste any more words upon such compositions as those of Chaereas and Sosilus; which, in my judgment, are more like the gossip of the barber's shop and the pavement than history.

The truth is that, when the Romans heard of the disaster at Saguntum, they at once elected envoys, whom they despatched in all haste to Carthage with the offer of two alternatives, one of which appeared to the Carthaginians to involve disgrace as well as injury if they accepted it, while the other was the beginning of a great struggle and of great dangers. For one of these alternatives was the surrender of Hannibal and his staff to Rome, the other was war. When the Roman envoys arrived and declared their message to the Senate, the choice proposed to them between these alternatives was listened to by the Carthaginians with indignation. Still they selected the most capable of their number to state their case, which was grounded on the following pleas.

Passing over the treaty made with

Hasdrubal, as not having ever been made, and, if it had, as not being binding on them because made without their consent. And on this point they quoted the precedent of the Romans themselves, who in the Sicilian war repudiated the terms agreed upon and accepted by Lutatius, as having been made without their consent)—passing over this, they pressed with all the vehemence they could, throughout the discussion, the last treaty made in the Sicilian war; in which they affirmed that there was no clause relating to Iberia, but one expressly providing security for the allies of both parties to the treaty. Now, they pointed out that the Saguntines at that time were not allies of Rome, and therefore were not protected by the clause. To prove their point, they read the treaty more than once aloud. On this occasion the Roman envoys contented themselves with the reply that, while Saguntum was intact, the matter in dispute admitted of pleadings and of a discussion on its merits; but that, that city having been treacherously seized, they had only two alternatives,—either to deliver the persons guilty of the act, and thereby make it clear that they had no share in their crime, and that it was done without their consent; or, if they were not willing to do that, and avowed their complicity in it, to take the consequences.

[Polybius records all the treaties between Rome and Carthage in the period 509-241 B.C.]

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At the end of the first Punic war another treaty was made, of which the chief provisions were these: "The Carthaginians shall evacuate Sicily and all islands lying between Italy and Sicily.

"The allies of neither of the parties to the treaty shall be attacked by the other.

"Neither party shall impose any contribution, nor erect any public building, nor enlist soldiers in the dominions of the other, nor make any compact of friendship with the allies of the other.

"The Carthaginians shall within ten years pay to the Romans two-thousand two-hundred talents, and a thousand on the spot; and shall restore all prisoners, without ransom, to the Romans."

Afterwards, at the end of the Mercenary war in Africa, the Romans went so far as to pass a decree for war with Carthage, but eventually made a treaty to the following effect: "The Carthaginians shall evacuate Sardinia, and pay an additional twelve hundred talents."

Finally, in addition to these treaties, came that negotiated with Hasdrubal in Iberia, in which it was stipulated that "the Carthaginians should not cross the Iber with arms."

Such were the mutual obligations established between Rome and Carthage from the earliest times to that of Hannibal.

As we find then that the Roman invasion of Sicily was not in contravention of their oaths, so we must acknowledge in the case of the second proclamation of war, in consequence of which the treaty for the evacuation of Sardinia was made, that it is impossible to find any reasonable pretext or ground for the Roman action. The Carthaginians were beyond question compelled by the necessities of their position, contrary to all justice, to evacuate Sardinia, and to pay this enormous sum of money. For as to the allegation of the Romans, that they had during the Mercenary war been guilty of acts of hostility to ships sailing from Rome,—that was barred by their own act in restoring, without ransom, the Carthaginian prisoners, in gratitude for similar conduct on the part of Carthage to Romans who had landed on their shores; a transaction which I have spoken of at length in my previous book.

These facts established, it remains to decide by a thorough investigation to which of the two nations the origin of the Hannibalian war is to be imputed.

I have explained the pleas advanced by the Carthaginians; I must now state what is alleged on the contrary by the Romans.

For though it is true that in this particular interview, owing to their anger at the fall of Saguntum, they did not use these arguments, yet they were appealed to on many occasions, and by many of their citizens. First, they argued that the treaty of Hasdrubal could not be ignored, as the Carthaginians had the assurance to do: for it did not contain the clause, which that of Lutatius did, making its validity conditional on its ratification by the people of Rome; but Hasdrubal made the agreement absolutely and authoritatively that "the Carthaginians should not cross the Iber in arms."

Next they alleged that the clause in the treaty respecting Sicily, which by their own admission stipulated that "the allies of neither party should be attacked by the other," did not refer to then existing allies only, as the Carthaginians interpreted it; for in that case a clause would have been added, disabling either from making new alliances in addition to those already existing, or excluding allies, taken subsequently to the making of the treaty, from its benefits. But since neither of these provisions was made, it was plain that both the then existing allies, and all those taken subsequently on either side, were entitled to reciprocal security. And this was only reasonable. For it was not likely that they would have made a treaty depriving them of the power, when opportunity offered, of taking on such friends or allies as seemed to their interest; nor, again, if they had taken any such under their protection, was it to be supposed that they would only allow them to be injured by any persons whatever. But, in fact, the main thing present in the minds of both parties to the treaty was, that they should mutually

agree to abstain from attacking each other's allies, and on no account admit into alliance with themselves the allies of the other: and it was to subsequent allies that this particular clause applied, "Neither shall enlist soldiers, or impose contributions on the provinces or allies of the other; and all shall be alike secure of attack from the other side."

These things being so, they argued that it was beyond controversy that Saguntum had accepted the protection of Rome, several years before the time of Hannibal. The strongest proof of this, and one which would not be contested by the Carthaginians themselves, was that, when political disturbances broke out at Saguntum, the people chose the Romans, and not the Carthaginians, as arbitrators to settle the dispute and restore their constitution, although the latter were close at hand and were already established in Iberia.

I conclude, then, that if the destruction of Saguntum is to be regarded as the cause of this war, the Carthaginians must be acknowledged to be in the wrong, both in view of the treaty of Lutatius, which secured immunity from attack for the allies of both parties, and in view of the treaty of Hasdrubal, which disabled the Carthaginians from passing the Iber with arms. If on the other hand the taking of Sardinia from them, and imposing the heavy money fine which accompanied it, are to be regarded as the causes, we must certainly acknowledge that the Carthaginians had good reason for undertaking the Hannibalian war: for as they had only yielded to the pressure of circumstances, so they seized a favourable turn in those circumstances to revenge themselves on their injurers.