

## Land battles in Polybius' *Histories*: General characteristics and the determinants of success

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For a long time, scholars of Roman and Hellenistic warfare have analyzed primarily the actions of large units on the eve and during battles. Authors working within this paradigm (H. Delbrück<sup>1</sup>, J. Kromeyer and G. Veith<sup>2</sup>, P. Connolly<sup>3</sup>) have traditionally praised Polybius and based much of their analysis and conclusions on his work. However, in recent years there have been substantial monographs by G. Daly<sup>4</sup> and S. Koon<sup>5</sup>, as well as conceptual articles by F. Sabin<sup>6</sup> and J. Lendon<sup>7</sup>, which have highlighted the limitations of the traditional approach to military history. The authors of these works believe that research of military history should primarily take into account the psychology of the rank-and-file participants in battles. At the same time, their distrust of the former methodology was automatically transferred to Polybius' work: they criticized the Greek author for his schematic approach to tactics and his underestimation of the influence of the psychological factor on the outcome of battles.

In this article, by analyzing the problem of the relationship between tradition and innovation in Polybius' views on tactics, as well as the circumstances which influenced them, we plan to show that the Achaean historian's approach to tactics was more complex and multifaceted than is commonly thought. We will concentrate on the analysis of the descriptions of major battles, since it is in these fragments that Polybius' tactical views are most fully manifested. The *Histories* give a relatively detailed account of 19 significant battles<sup>8</sup>. Undoubtedly, the details of these clashes were quite different: there were different armies with different weapons, tactics, structures and generalship which faced each other<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, a detailed analysis of the above issues will allow a number of generalizations to be made about Polybius' views on tactics.

1 Delbrück 1997.

2 Kromayer & Veith 1903; 1928.

3 Connolly 2001.

4 Daly 2002.

5 Koon 2010.

6 Sabin 2000.

7 Lendon 1999.

8 For a list of these, see the appendix. On the circumstances of the battles of that period (duration, loss ratio, role of the different branches of the army, etc.) and the factors that influenced their outcome, see: Sabin 1996; 2008.

9 These include Roman, Carthaginian, Hellenistic armies and various "barbarian" armies, especially those of the Celts and Iberians.

At first sight it would seem that Polybius' tactical views were not very different from those generally accepted in Greece. As the author of an extant work on tactics (9.20.4)<sup>10</sup>, Polybius gave a decisive role in warfare to the art of battle formation (Ael., *Tact.*, 3. 4). It is noteworthy that in his theoretical reasoning on the methodology of historiography (12.25, F 3) Achaean historian believed that the narrative of military operations should primarily describe the deployment of armies on the eve and during battles. Prime examples of such descriptions in the *Histories* were the comparison of the legion with the phalanx (18.28-32), and the historian's coverage of particular battles (1.33.10; 2.28.6; 2.33; 4.11.7-9; 12.17-22; 16.18-19). Polybius was also strongly influenced by the prevailing ideas in Hellas about the decisive role of heavy infantry in battles (Arist., *Pol.*, 1297b)<sup>11</sup>.

The author's views were vividly illustrated by the terminology he used. According to Polybius, in the battles of Tunis in 255<sup>12</sup> (1.34.5), Selassia in 222 (2.68.9; 69.8), Cannae in 216 (3.113.3; 115.5) and Cynoscephalae (18.24.8; 25.2; 26.2) armies relied primarily on massive formation (βάρος) and dense ranks (βάθος)<sup>13</sup> to drive the enemy back (18.22.3: ἐνέκειντο; 2.68.8-9: πιεζόμενοι; 3.73.6; 3.74.2-3; 18.24.4). Speaking of the battle of Raphia in 217, Polybius notes that the fighting lasted as long as both sides were able to withstand the onslaught of the enemy (5.85.10: ἀντέστησαν). It is quite characteristic that in describing the battle at Cynoscephalae Polybius figuratively compares the battle formation with a weighted weight (18.24.5: βαρέως ἐπέκειντο). The Achaean historian stressed that it was the loss of formation (11.16.2: προδιαλελυκότες; 4.12.3) which occurred in the battles of Caphyae in 220 and Mantinea in 208, or its confusion (18.21.4: κατεβαρούντο; 18.21.8), which occurred in the battle of Cynoscephalae, which leads one side to retreat. It is no coincidence that it was the disorganization of the enemy ranks (συνταράξαι καὶ διασπάσαι τὰς τάξεις τῶν ὑπεναντιῶν) that was Hannibal's chief aim in the battle of Zama in 202 (15.16.3-6)<sup>14</sup>.

Among other factors influencing defeat, the historian noted the physical exhaustion (κακοπαθούντων) and the fall in strength (κλινούσας καὶ διατετραμμένες) of those fighting, which occurred, for example, in the battles of Trebbia and Mantinea (3.73.3; 11.16.2-3).

However, in a number of aspects Polybius' views on tactics differed from those that prevailed in classical Greece. Lightly-armed infantrymen play a much more active and

10 On this work Samokhina 2007.

11 On the clashes of heavily armed warriors in ancient Greece Anderson 1974, 111-164; Pritchett 1985, 44-76; Hanson 1989, 35-197; van Wees 2005, 184-199.

12 All dates, unless otherwise stated, are BC.

13 In two of the 19 battles the failure of one side to form automatically led to its defeat, as was the case for the Carthaginians at the battle of Utica in 203 (14 2.1-5.15) and in the battle of Baecula in 208 (10.39.5), when the Carthaginians failed to line up for battle (παρὰ τὴν προσδοκίαν καθυστέρει τῆς ἐκτάξεως), and their ranks were upset in consequence (10.39.7). Livy (27.18), in addition to the unpreparedness of the Carthaginians for battle, explains the Roman victory at Baecula by their psychological superiority and ability to operate on rugged terrain. Most likely, the passivity of the Carthaginians in that situation was due to their unwillingness to engage in battle in this particular situation; Seibert 1993, 371.

14 The failure of this plan was due to the fact that the Carthaginian commander had only recently returned to Africa from Italy and was unable to communicate with most of his army (apart from the veterans with whom he had been fighting together for many years); Seibert 1993, 467-469.

efficient role in battles<sup>15</sup>. It is interesting that Polybius generally cites little data on direct casualties from the use of throwing weapons: only in one of the battles described by the historian – the Battle of Telamon in 225<sup>16</sup> – the Roman infantrymen's javelins<sup>17</sup> did inflict heavy casualties on the enemy (2.30.3)<sup>18</sup>. Despite this, the light infantry seriously hampered and held back the enemy at the Battle of Ilipa in 208 (11.22.3) and Trebbia (3.74.2). Even the potential threat of action by enemy lightly-armed warriors could affect the course and outcome of the battle. Polybius noted that it was because of fear of being surrounded by enemy light infantry that the Spartan king Cleomenes III introduced a phalanx into the battle under unfavourable circumstances and eventually suffered a crushing defeat at Sellasia (2.67.1-69.3).

Polybius gives an even greater role to the cavalry. He believes that “to win a battle you can have half as many infantry, but decisively outnumber the enemy in horsemen” (transl. F. G. Mischenko)<sup>19</sup> (3.117.6: ὅτι κρεῖττον ἐστὶ πρὸς τοὺς τῶν πολέμων καιροὺς ἡμίσεις ἔχειν πεζοῦς, ἱπποκρατεῖν δὲ τοῖς ὅλοις, μᾶλλον ἢ πάντα πᾶρισα τοῖς πολεμίοις ἔχοντα διακινδυνεύειν). Indeed, the cavalry played a significant, if not decisive, role in many battles.

- 15 In the classical period, their function was more about covering deployments before battles; Anderson 1974, 42; Pritchett 1985, 51-53; van Wees 2005, 64.
- 16 Even in this situation, the effectiveness of Roman darts was due to the complete lack of armour amongst the Celts.
- 17 Polybius' similar views on throwing weapons are supported by the findings of contemporary scholars, according to which dart fire itself was irrelevant and direct damage by lightly armed men was negligible: Daly 2002, 170-178; Sabin 2008, 414; Koon 2010, 54.
- 18 It seems that the real losses from throwing weapons were somewhat underestimated by the historian. Thus, for example, the General History does not even mention the rather famous cases of Philopoemen wounded by a throwing spear at the battle of Sellasia (Plu., *Phil.*, 6) and L. Aemilius Paulus (Liv. 22.49.1) by a stone from a sling at the battle of Cannae. It is noteworthy that in the case of L. Aemilius Polybius mentions his severe wound (3.116.9) but does not name the type of weapon with which it was inflicted.
- 19 It can be assumed that in describing such actions Polybius may well have been influenced by his own experience of participating in the siege of Carthage, which was notoriously very difficult for the Romans and was accompanied by a series of sudden and successful attacks by Carthaginian cavalry (App., *Lib.*, 97; 102) as well as successful sorties by the defenders of the city (App., *Lib.*, 124). On the role of cavalry in the military affairs of the time Gaebel 2002, 230-263; Nefedkin 2019; Burgh 2020. Researchers note that the importance of cavalry has declined since Alexander's time (Gaebel 2002, 239) but, at the same time, the specialization of cavalry was increasing during the Hellenistic period (Nefedkin 2019, 408; Burgh 2020). It is also worth noting the general prestige of service in this branch of the military (Nefedkin 2019, 407).

In the battles of Tunis (1.34.7), Bagradas<sup>20</sup> in 240 (1.76.8) and Trebbia (3.74.7) cavalry and elephants inflicted huge losses on the Roman army<sup>21</sup>. At the battle of Cynoscephalae, the bravery of the Aetolian cavalry at the start of the battle saved the Romans from disaster (18.24.5)<sup>22</sup>. Seleucid cataphracts were relatively effective at the battles of Panium in 200 (Pol. 16.18-19) and of Magnesia in 190 (Liv. 37.42.7-8)<sup>23</sup>. The success of the Achaean cavalry also played a huge part in the Battle of Sellasia (2.68.2)<sup>24</sup>. It was the attack by the Numidian horsemen that decided the outcome of the Battle of Zama (15.14)<sup>25</sup>. The role of the cavalry was significant even in situations where they did not inflict direct damage on the enemy. At the battle of Trebbia, the Numidian cavalry<sup>26</sup> caused the Romans damage, hindering the fight with the enemy (3.73.7; 74.1), confusing and alarming them (*παραχῆν καὶ δυσχρηστῆσαν*)<sup>27</sup>. The historian noted the demoralizing effect that the Carthaginian cavalry had on the Roman infantry by attacking them from behind at the Battle of Cannae (3.116.8)<sup>28</sup>.

Polybius also left a number of interesting observations concerning the general nature of battles of the 3rd-2nd c. BC. Thus, in Polybius' narrative the battles usually begin with skirmishes of separate detachments (usually light-armed soldiers) and only gradually

- 20 For more details on this battle Thompson 1986. Recent research shows that Polybius presented the actions of Hamilcar in a somewhat embellished form, and the main reason for the victory of Carthaginians was not so much the talent of their commander, but rather low level of training and discipline of their mercenaries (Hoyos 2007, 115-124). It is noteworthy that the successful actions of the elephants in these battles have not made a particular impression on the historian. The same can be said about the successful attack of Seleucid elephants against cavalry at Raphia (5.85.5). Apparently, he considered that elephants successfully operate only on demoralized or disorderly crowd of soldiers. On the contrary, well-knit and effective units are able to repulse easily elephant attacks, as it happened at the battle of Zama (15.12.1-6). At the same time, modern scholars note that elephants were capable of effective action in a variety of situations, including attacks against heavy infantry and cavalry; Abakumov 2012, 76-82; 99-104).
- 21 There is a view that the Romans' defeat at Tunis was due to fatigue from the long march to the battle site (App., *Lib.*, 3). On this battle see also Tipps 2003, 375-385. In the battle of Trebbia a considerable role in the success of the Carthaginian elephantry was played by the horses' fear of elephants (21.54-56). Ancient authors repeatedly noted the great psychological impact elephants had on fighting armies; see, for example *B. Afr.* 72; Polyæn. 8.23.5.
- 22 Modern research confirms the high combat effectiveness of the Aetolian cavalry; Nefedkin 2019, 270-273.
- 23 Livy's account of the battle of Magnesia is borrowed from Polybius (Bar-Kochva 1973, 165). However, modern scholars (Bar-Kochva 1973, 170; Gaebel 2002, 245) confirm the information available in the sources that cataphracts put one of the Roman legions to flight (Just. 36.8.6), although the use of cataphracts against enemy infantry was rather atypical (Nefedkin 2019, 432-435). Of all Hellenistic states the Seleucid kingdom possessed the most numerous and efficient cavalry (Nefedkin 2019, 348-383).
- 24 Scholars, however, believe that Polybius exaggerated Philopoemen's role in this battle (Delbrück 1997, 185-188; Kromayer & Veith 1903, 238; Errington 1969, 22), especially as the cavalry had not played a significant role in the army of the Achaean alliance (Nefedkin 2019, 274-302).
- 25 The role of the cavalry was crucial as the Romans were able to neutralize the Carthaginian elephants and prevent Hannibal from bypassing against the second and third lines of Roman infantry (Gaebel 2002, 274-275).
- 26 The huge role of cavalry in the Carthaginian army was due, on the one hand, to the possibility of recruiting Numidians for service, and on the other, to the weakness of the Punic infantry compared to the Roman (Gaebel 2002, 268). On the tactics of the Numidian cavalry also Diod. 20.39.2; Caes., *Ciu.*, 2.41; *B. Afr.*, 14-15; Sall., *Jug.*, 50. 4-6; 97.4; App., *Hisp.* 25; *Lib.*, 11.
- 27 In the battles of the Second Punic War, the cavalry's role was usually to psychologically influence the enemy and disrupt his lines (Daly 2002, 175-184).
- 28 However, Livy (22.48.5) also acknowledged significant losses from such attacks.

grow into a battle involving the main forces. In his description of the battle of Mantinea the Achaean historian noted that "in the beginning the light troops fought individually or en masse" (11.13.2: πάντα δὲ τούτων συμπλοκῆς ἀθρόως καὶ κατ' ἄνδρα). Polybius notes the manoeuvrable character of such skirmishes, in which, he says, retreats were replaced by attacks (3.15.1: ἐξ ἀναστροφῆς καὶ μεταβολῆς ὁ κίνδυνος). These fights were important in boosting the morale of the remaining soldiers. Polybius tells us that the remaining soldiers looked at the outcome of the skirmish through the dust, wavering between fear and hope (5.85.7: ἀμφηρίστους ἔχουσαι τὰς ὑπὲρ τοῦ μέλλοντος ἐλπίδας). The historian also paid attention to other means of psychological motivation for soldiers – the battle cry (1.34.2-3)<sup>29</sup>, as well as the noise of whistles and trumpets (2.29.6-8). Heavily armed soldiers engaged in battle only at its final stage (10.25).

There is another circumstance which demonstrates the historian's attention to the psychology of the combatants. Speaking of the battles of Zama and Cynoscephalae, he noted the role played in the confrontation by such circumstances as fury, impetuosity, and enthusiasm (ὄρμη καὶ προθυμία φρονήμασι), and high morale (φιλοτιμία), (18.22.4). There is a view that in his narrative Polybius was conveying features of Roman tactics<sup>30</sup>. However, Polybius acknowledged the role of such psychological factors as the zeal and exasperation of the combatants (2.67: ἐκθύμωσ [... ] καὶ βίαιος; 11.14.1), and the fury and tenacity (5.85.8: θύμος [... ] ὄρμη καὶ προθυμία), and in his descriptions of the battles of Sellasia and Raphia, in which exclusively Hellenistic armies took part.

However, the role of the psychological factor was not decisive. For Polybius the motivation of soldiers depended on the ability of commanders of different ranks to control and inspire their subordinates. At the same time, the fact of presence or absence of the commander at the place of the decisive combat encounter could influence the combat spirit of soldiers. Polybius specially emphasized (5.85.8) that at the battle of Raphia the simple appearance of the king Ptolemy IV at the place of struggle between phalanxes significantly raised the fighting spirit of his soldiers. Antiochus III's absence from the same battle<sup>31</sup> on the other hand, caused the morale of his soldiers to begin to drop (5.85.8: κατεπλήξατο). Similarly, in the battles of Caphyae and Mantinea, it was the loss of control on the part of the commanders that caused the soldiers to panic (4.12.12: ἐκπλήττοντες) and cowardice (11.15.2: ἀποδειλιάσαντες). It is worth noting another important circumstance: in Polybius' presentation a major role in battles was played by the actions of individual detachments. In describing the flank and rear-guard attacks in the Punic wars (3.73.7; 3.74.2-5; 3.84.2-3; 3.115.8-12; 10.39.4-6; 11.24.4-6; 15.14.8), the historian paid particular attention to the effect that these maneuvers had on individual

29 On the great role of the battle cry, see also: Caes., *Civ.*, 3.92. An interesting observation about the advantage of a coherent battle cry over a discordant one was made by Livy (30.34.1). Contemporary studies (Danilov 2007, 175-176; Koon 2010, 56) confirm such observations.

30 Koon 2010, 68-72.

31 This evidence is particularly valuable given Polybius' distaste for Ptolemy IV (Bar-Kochva 1973, 128). Antiochus III did not arrive at the scene of the decisive clash because of his participation in the horse-racing and subsequent pursuit, the purpose of which was to capture or kill Ptolemy, who, according to the Seleucid king, could be in the rear of his troops (Bar-Kochva 1973, 137; Gaebel 2002, 241). The idea that Antiochus was good as a cavalry commander but was unable to coordinate the different branches of the army seems very reasonable (Gaebel 2002, 253-254).

units<sup>32</sup>. The battles of Lake Trasimene in 217 (3.84.2-3) and those of Cannae were the most striking examples (3.115.8-12). According to Polybius, at the battle of Cannae (3.115.12)<sup>33</sup>, being no longer able to fight the whole line, the Romans fought alone (*κατ' ἄνδρα*) and in separate maniples (*καὶ κατὰ σπείρας*) with the enemy pressing in on their flanks<sup>34</sup>. The effectiveness of individual units depended on the skills of their commanders. The historian stressed that one of the circumstances that led the Romans to their disastrous defeat at Trasimene<sup>35</sup>, along with the mistakes of consul Flaminius, was the loss of control over the soldiers by the military tribunes due to the simultaneous attack by the Carthaginians from the rear and flank (3.84.2-3).

What was the reason for this historian's views? It seems to us that Polybius' aim was to adapt traditional tactical models to the new historical conditions. Modern scholars note that the militia nature of the armies of classical Greece made effective command over them difficult<sup>36</sup>. This is why military theoretical thought of the period was focused on finding the favourable terrain for the battle, convenient for leading troops (*Xen., Cyr., 1.6.35-63; Aen. Tact., 1.2; 16.7-10*)<sup>37</sup>. The best terrain for phalanx operations was considered to be the plain<sup>38</sup>. Cross-country battles did occasionally occur, but were the rare exception: the battles of Nemea in 394 and Mantinea in 362 were notable examples<sup>39</sup>.

The growth of professionalism of Greek armies in the late Classical and Hellenistic periods, noted by modern scholars<sup>40</sup> led to a significant decrease in the dependence of the battle success on the terrain. It is known that in the battles of Granikus in 334 and Issus in 333, the army of Alexander fought effectively on rugged terrain<sup>41</sup>.

All this could not but influence Polybius' approach to tactics. Thus, the modern literature<sup>42</sup> notes the historian's great attention to military topography. According to Polybius (5.21.6) most of the battles were lost because of ignorance of the terrain. However, the historian's approach to the problem had a number of peculiarities. Polybius criticized commanders for failing to find suitable terrain before the battle and for failing to make use of suitable terrain during the battle itself. Examples of this were the actions of Euclid at the battle of Sellasia

32 This vividly shows that the instability before flank attacks, which is a typical feature of the phalanx (Echeverría 2011, 56-58; 68; 75), was also characteristic of the legions.

33 In this battle the Romans were unable to exploit their numerical advantage and the possibility of bypass manoeuvres, preferring a frontal attack (Seibert 1993, 196-197). A major role was played by the low level of fighting ability and military spirit of the Roman army, a large part of which was composed of new recruits (Samuels 1990).

34 On the role of flank attacks in ancient warfare Sabin 1996, 65. According to F. Sabin, neither before nor after the Punic wars in the military affairs of Antiquity were flank maneuvers and operations to surround the enemy so widely used.

35 Livy was more lenient on the actions of the Roman commanders in this battle, emphasizing their bravery; Seibert 1993, 151-156; Connolly 2001, 172.

36 Anderson 1974, 165; 181-191; 211-212; 217-219; Wheeler 1993; Konijnendijk 2017, 128.

37 Pritchett 1985, 76-80; Konijnendijk 2017, 83.

38 Konijnendijk 2017, 84.

39 For more on this Konijnendijk 2017, 85-86; also Pritchett 1985, 76-80.

40 Chaniotis 2005, 131-133.

41 Pritchett 1985, 85; Konijnendijk 2017, 77-91.

42 Konijnendijk 2017, 86. It is therefore quite debatable whether Polybius gave battle topography a secondary role.



(2.68.3), the Achaean generals at Caphyae (4.11.1-8), the Spartans at Mantinea (11.16.7)<sup>43</sup>. On the contrary, the active use of terrain features by Xanthippus at Tunis (1.32.1-5) or by Hannibal at Trasimene (3.83.1-5) were for Polybius a model of skillful command.

When referring to the text of the *Histories*, one cannot fail to note the attention Polybius pays to the nature of the terrain on which the battles of the Hellenistic armies took place. While at Mantinea<sup>44</sup> the phalanxes fought in a ravine (11.16-17: τάρφος) and at Panium they fought at the foot of a mountain (16.18.4: ὑπώρεια), at Sellasia the phalanxes acted on a hilly upland (2.65.8: λόφος)<sup>45</sup>.

However, the problem of commanders retaining control of the situation remained a problem in the Hellenistic period as well<sup>46</sup>. See the works of the military theorists Asclepiodotus and, with some reservations, Onasander<sup>47</sup>. Both of these authors recognized the difficulty of effectively controlling an army during a battle (Ascl. 12.10-11; Onos. 6.1-14). Therefore, in order to control the soldiers more effectively they suggested choosing in advance the most suitable formation (Ascl. 12.1-9; Onos. 30-31.2), taking into account the terrain (Onos. 15.1) and the proportion of troops between themselves and the enemy (Onos. 16.1-18.1). Another means was also effective motivation of soldiers during the battle (Onos. 13.1-14.4). The initiative of individual squad leaders was not envisaged as such.

Polybius generally held similar views on the leadership of troops. The outcome of his battles at Tunis (1.33.1-11), Trebbia (3.71.1-10)<sup>48</sup>, Cannae (3.113.6-8)<sup>49</sup>, Caphyae (4.11.1-9) was determined by the effective deployment of troops on the eve of the battle. Polybius clearly demonstrated that the army whose commanders retained control over their units was the one that succeeded. At the same time, one cannot but note a number of nuances in Polybius' views. For example, he pointed out that even in the case of successful deployment before the battle the actions of individual force commanders played a major role, as was the case for Hasdrubal at Cannae (3.116.5)<sup>50</sup>, Mago at Trebbia (3.74.1) and Laelius at Baecula (10.23.1-6), and Ilipa (10.39.4)<sup>51</sup>. This factor becomes even more important when the outcome of a battle is unclear. In this case the initiative of unit commanders who coordinate with their commander-in-chief and exploit the mistakes of enemy commanders is decisive. In the battle

43 As for the role of the terrain topography in the battle of Cynoscephalae (18.22.9; 25.6-7), it was not the only factor. Polybius pointed out that in this case the unpreparedness of one of the flanks of the Macedonian army for the battle and the mistakes of its command played a role.

44 On the battle of Mantinea Kromayer & Veith 1903, 281-314; Wallbank 1968, 283. Researchers have noted Polybius' clear tendency to obscure Philopoemen's mistakes in this battle.

45 On the topography of the Battle of Sellasia Kromayer & Veith 1903, 210-244.

46 Beston 2000, 321; Poznanski 1993, 206-209.

47 The work of Onasander, who lived in the 1st c. AD, dates back to the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, Onasander drew heavily on Hellenistic experience; Peters 1972, 253.

48 The battle formation used by Hannibal at the battle of Trebbia, with some modifications, was also used in subsequent battles; Seibert 1993, 128.

49 Nevertheless, Polybius did not subscribe to the ancient tradition (App., *Hann.*, 23; Plu., *Fab.*, 16), which turned out to be fictitious (Seibert 1993, 192), that in this battle the Romans were stopped by the wind, which blew in their faces and blinded them with the dust that was blowing.

50 According to Delbrück 1997, 236, Hasdrubal was carrying out Hannibal's instructions.

51 It is noteworthy that Laelius' actions at Ilipa were carefully coordinated with the army commander-in-chief and were part of a single tactical plan to encircle the enemy; Seibert 1993, 395-396.

of Raphia the initiative of Ehecrates (5.85.1) and the absence of Antiochus in the decisive battle decided everything. The defeat of the Spartans at the battle of Mantinea was caused by the fact that the Lacedaemonian tyrant Mahanidas went in pursuit of the fleeing lightly-armed Achaean soldiers instead of leading the main forces of his army (11.16.3). Mahanidas's adversary, the Achaean *strategos* Philopoemen, by contrast, effectively coordinated his actions with the commanders of the minor detachments (11.15.1-5).

Thus, in Polybius' time, the problem of managing individual units continued to be an issue for Romans and Greeks alike. But what then was the secret of Roman success? This question has preoccupied historians, including Polybius himself. It is well known that the account of the Roman army in Book 6, as well as the comparison of the legion with the phalanx in Book 18 are probably some of the most famous parts of the General History. Subsequently, these fragments of Polybius' work became one of the main sources for the history of the Roman army during the Punic Wars and the heyday of the Republic. For this reason, the issue deserves special consideration.

Polybian work describes the following general battles between the Romans and Hellenistic armies: Cynoscephalae, Thermopylae (191)<sup>52</sup>, Magnesia and Pydna (168). It is worth noting at once that the widespread notion of the legion's overwhelming tactical superiority over the phalanx "in general" as the main reason for Roman victories in these battles is not supported by concrete facts. In reality, each of these clashes was accompanied by serious temporary setbacks for the Romans. At the battle of Pydna some Roman units retreated, and at Cynoscephalae they fled under the onslaught of the phalanx. In the battle of Magnesia some Roman soldiers turned to flight under the onslaught of the cataphracts (Liv. 37.42.7-8). At the battle of Thermopylae the numerically superior Roman army unsuccessfully attacked the Seleucid phalanx for some time (Liv. 36.18). The position of the Roman army was particularly critical at the beginning of the battle of Cynoscephalae. One flank of the Roman army was defeated by the Macedonians, and only the action of the Aetolian cavalry rectified the situation (18.22.4)<sup>53</sup>, and the initiative of an unknown Roman tribune decided the outcome of the battle<sup>54</sup>. Polybius himself in his description of the battle emphasized in every possible way that the Macedonian army was not prepared for battle and its units went into battle separately (18.24.4-8), but even in this situation the Macedonians were close to victory. In this connection the conclusions Polybius draws on the outcome of the battle of Cynoscephalae (18.28-32) about the superiority of the legion over the phalanx seem to us rather disputable and stem not from concrete facts, but from traditional Greek conceptions of tactics, according to which a more effective battle formation ensures victory.

52 As we have noted, the description of the battle of Magnesia was taken by Livy from the unpreserved text of Polybius. The description of the battle of Thermopylae is also borrowed by Livy from Polybius (Briscoe 1981, 241). As for Plutarch's borrowing the description of the battle of Pydna from Polybius (Briscoe 1981, 241) Walbank 1979, 378; Reiter 1988, 94.

53 In this connection, the view (Eckstein 1995, 183-192) that the actions of T. Flamininus at Cynoscephalae were a model of military command seems somewhat exaggerated. On the battle of Cynoscephalae also Hammond 1988. The author notes the chaotic nature of this battle and Flamininus' limited role in the Roman success.

54 His name is not given even by Livy (33.9.8). In this connection there is a point of view that in reality the initiator of this attack was T. Flamininus himself; Pflischtifter 2005, 105; Kromayer 1907, 84. Contra Hammond 1988, 76.



Nevertheless, the Romans were victorious in all these battles. It is also hard to deny that, despite occasional setbacks in the battles, the legions were generally more effective. What was the reason for their success?

It has long been accepted to attribute the success of the Roman army to its discipline<sup>55</sup>. At the same time, there is considerable evidence of a highly disciplined Macedonian army as well. According to Polybius, the Macedonians were excellent soldiers: "Fearless in open land battles, the Macedonians, when circumstances demanded it, were no less willing to serve at sea, digging ditches with the greatest diligence, erecting trenches, perform all other hard work" (5.2.5-6: *πρὸς τε γὰρ τοὺς ἐν γῆ κινδύνους ἐκ παρατάξεως γενναιότατοι πρὸς τε τὰς κατὰ θάλατταν ἐκ τοῦ καιροῦ χρείας ἐτοιμότατοι, λειτουργοὶ γε μὴν περὶ τὰς ταφρείας καὶ χαρακοποιίας πάσαν τοιαύτην ταλαιπωρίαν φιλοπονώτατοί τινες*). Polybius characterised the Macedonian soldiers in the words of Hesiod about the Aecidians: "They delight in war as in feasting" (5.2.5-6: *πολέμῳ κεχαρηότας ἤϋτε δαιτί*). It is characteristic of them to enclose their camps with ditches and trenches (5.3.5-6; Liv. 31.34.7-8; 39.8-9; 32.5.11-12)<sup>56</sup>. The systematic measures to maintain discipline in the Macedonian army are illustrated by the famous Amphipolis Military Manual, which contains a detailed list of penalties for breaches of discipline that existed in the Macedonian army<sup>57</sup>. An indicator of discipline in the Macedonian army is the fact that even after the unsuccessful clash at the river Aous in 198, the very next day all the soldiers, with the exception of those killed in the battle, gathered as if they had been given the signal (Liv. 32.12.9)<sup>58</sup>.

It seems to us that the reason for the Roman victories was higher efficiency and flexibility at the level of separate units, than in Hellenistic armies. The historian himself noted the ability of the Roman army, depending on the circumstances, to act effectively both in a single formation and in separate detachments (15.15.7-8); this, according to Polybius, is what distinguishes the legion from the phalanx (18.32.10-12)<sup>59</sup>. Indeed, in the battles of Pydna and Cynoscephalae it was the manoeuvres of individual units that managed to turn the initiative in favour of the Romans. In the battle of Pydna the coordination between Aemilius Paulus and his junior commanders and the lack of coordination in the Macedonian army is striking (Plu., *Aem.*, 19-20)<sup>60</sup>.

Such circumstances should not be absolutized. Polybius clearly shows that even a phalanx, in principle, is capable of acting in separate units. Speaking of the training of the army of the Achaean alliance under Philopoemen, he notes the special attention paid to the skill of the commanders of the individual detachments (10.23.9: *τῶν κατὰ μέρος ἡγεμόνων ἐμπειρίας*). The data of the *Histories* show that these very measures contributed to the subsequent victories of the Achaean army (the most famous of which is the battle of Mantinea). In this battle

55 Kromayer & Veith 1928, 1; Delbrück 1997, 215-217; Connolly 2001, 127...

56 These passages are borrowed by Livy from Polybius; Briscoe 1973, 115.

57 See more about this here: *Hatzopoulos* 2001, 141-145; 161-164; *Juhel* 2002.

58 On borrowing this episode from Polybius *Eckstein* 1995, 172.

59 On Roman tactics of this time *Connolly* 2002, 129-142.

60 This episode is borrowed by Plutarch from the unpreserved parts of Polybius; *Reiter* 1988, 96. There is a view that such actions were planned in advance by the Roman commander (*Morelli* 2021, 124-125). Even so, success would not have been possible without the skilful actions of individual unit commanders.

the effective interaction of the commanders of different ranks enabled to turn the tide of the clash even after the initial setbacks. The Seleucid phalanx at the Battle of Magnesia was divided into several parts<sup>61</sup>. But whereas in Hellenistic armies everything depended on the skill of the individual commander, for the Romans this kind of battlefield management was a well-established and practiced system that minimized the role of adverse accidents.

Modern research partly confirms this perception of Roman tactics. The long battle in tight formations required enormous psychological and physical strain<sup>62</sup>, and so the battles involving the Roman army were, for the most part, clashes between separate units<sup>63</sup>. The whole-arms attack only followed in the closing stages of the battle. In these situations, the battle was decided by small unit attacks<sup>64</sup>, where the Roman army had a decisive advantage<sup>65</sup>.

However, the reason for this Roman advantage is interpreted differently. J. Lendon attributed Roman successes to the special offensive spirit of the Roman army, which ensured its superiority over its enemies<sup>66</sup>. Polybius, on the other hand, tells us about the demoralization of the Romans at the start of the battle (Liv. 32.14.3; 37.19.2<sup>67</sup>; Plu., *Aem.*, 24). This suggests that notions of an inherently higher Roman moral are, at the very least, exaggerated. From Polybius' reports, the reasons for the Roman successes should be sought primarily in the peculiarities of the Roman approach to tactical training and, most importantly, to the actions of individual units. Speaking of the role assigned to centurions, Polybius points to the special attention paid by the Romans to the selection of the heads of individual units, and the principal here is not so much strength and courage, but rather the ability to command, as well as fortitude and mental firmness (6.24.9: οὐχ οὕτως θρασείς και φιλοκινδύνους ὡς ἡγεμονικούς και στασίμους και βαθείς μάλλον ταίς ψυχαίς). It is worth noting that a rather similar role of Roman centurions was described by Vegetius (2.14), who reflected typical Roman views (albeit of a later time) on all issues related to military affairs<sup>68</sup>.

Furthermore, in his narration about the Roman army, Polybius emphasizes that the whole system of incentives was designed, on the one hand, to encourage valour and, on the other, to promote mutual assistance<sup>69</sup>. In the case of a feat the consul glorified the soldiers

61 However, in the flat terrain in which the battle took place, the phalanx in its standard formation could have been much more effective (Bar-Kochva 1973, 172).

62 Sabin 2000, 12.

63 Koon 2010, 93.

64 Koon 2010, 97.

65 Sabin 2000, 16.

66 Lendon 1999. This work suggests that for the Romans the most important thing in war was *uirtus*, which they considered an innate quality, while for the Greeks the main factor of success in battle was good physical training of soldiers and tactically competent command. Similar ideas were expressed earlier by Kromayer & Veith 1928, 253, who contrasted the "soldier's spirit" of the Romans with the "non-soldier's spirit" of the Greeks.

67 This fragment of Livy is taken from Polybius; Briscoe 1981, 8.

68 Kuchma 2001, 121. Modern studies also stress the enormous role of centurions in the Roman army; Gilliver 2007, 187.

69 This trait was inherent in the Roman army throughout its history (Makhluyuk 1999). See also Brand 2019, 171-189. According to the author, both the Romans and the Macedonians were highly motivated, but the Romans were also stimulated by the competitive spirit inherent in the political system of the Roman Republic. He also believes that the combination of discipline and individualism was a unique feature of the Roman army.

in every possible way (6.39.1). Lavish rewards were also given to those who rescued their comrades in battle. After the end of the battle the rescued person was obliged to honour his rescuer for the rest of his life. One of the most honorable rewards in the Roman army was a golden wreath for saving a comrade. All this encouraged soldiers to compete in military valour. As a result, according to Polybius, "...with so much care and concern for rewards and punishments, it is not surprising that the military enterprises of the Romans are crowned with brilliant successes" (6.39.1: τοιαύτης δ' ἐπιμελείας οὔσης καὶ σπουδῆς περὶ τε τὰς τιμὰς καὶ τιμωρίας τὰς ἐν τοῖς στρατοπέδοις, εἰκότως καὶ τὰ τέλη τῶν πολεμικῶν πράξεων ἐπιτυχῆ καὶ λαμπρὰ γίνεται δι' αὐτῶν).

Thus Polybius' dual vision of the tactics of the armies of Rome and the Hellenistic states reflects the transitional spirit of the time. The historian has clearly shown that military innovations consisting in splitting up the military order into independent units and making active use of terrain features were also practiced in Hellenistic armies. However, among Hellenes these innovations had not yet become a system and a generally accepted and standard norm. In the Roman army, on the contrary, these tendencies were most fully developed. The introduction of such changes in tactics allowed them to maintain control over the army, maintain high motivation, react quickly to changes in the situation and in most battles achieve success even after initial failures.

In this study we have considered Polybian views of the nature of the tactical aspects of land battles and on the factors defining success. The final conclusion seems to be the following: while retaining, in general, traditional Greek views on tactics, Polybius nevertheless introduced a number of innovations. In his work he demonstrated the increased importance of light infantry, elephants, cavalry and the importance of their interaction with heavy infantry. Polybius' views on the topography of the battlefield also differed. The historian believed that the commanders must not only choose a convenient position for battle in advance, but also be able to use the features of the area already during the battle, depending on the situations that arise. Such views were prompted by the realities of the time, when the increasing professionalization of armies led to changes in tactics. The role of commanders at all ranks, from commanders to unit commanders, also increased. Success awaited those armies which combined effective centralized command with the ability for autonomous action by individual units. Polybius showed that it was the Roman army that applied these innovations most fully and effectively, enabling it to overpower a variety of opponents and eventually to subdue the entire Mediterranean.

## APPENDIX

## List of land battles described by Polybius (in chronological order)

	Event	Event context and date	<i>Histories</i> of Polybius (or works dependent on them)	Result
1	Battle of Tunis	First Punic War, 255.	1.33.1-34.12	Carthaginians' victory over the Romans
2	Battle of Bagradas	Mercenary War, 240	1.75.4-76.10	victory of Carthaginians over the rebel mercenaries
3	Battle of Telamon	Roman wars with the Gauls in Northern Italy, 225	2.27.4-31.1	Roman victory over the Celts
4	Battle of Sellasia	Cleomeno War, 222	2.66.4-69.11	victory of the Macedonians and Achaeans over the Spartans
5	Battle of Caphyae	Allied War, 220	4.11.1-12.13	victory of the Aetolians over the Achaeans
6	Battle of Trebbia	Second Punic War, 218	3.71.1-74.10	victory of Carthaginians over the Romans
7	Battle of Trasimene	Second Punic War, 218/217	3.80.3-84.15	victory of Carthaginians over the Romans
8	Battle of Rafia	Fourth Syrian War, 217	5.82.1-86.7	victory of the Ptolemaic army over the Seleucid army
9	Battle of Cannae	Second Punic War, 216	3.113.1-117.12	victory of Carthaginians over the Romans
10	Battle of Baecula	Second Punic War, 208	10.38.7-39.9	Roman victory over the Carthaginians
11	Battle of Mantinea	War of Sparta and the Achaean Union, 208	11.11.1-18.10	victory of the Achaeans over the Spartans
12	Battle of Ilipa	Second Punic War, 206	11.20.1-24.9	Roman victory over the Carthaginians
13	Battle of Utica	Second Punic War, 203	14.2.1-5.15	Roman victory over the Carthaginians
14	Battle of Zama	Second Punic War, 202	15.9.2-16.6	Roman victory over the Carthaginians
15	Battle of Panium	Fifth Syrian War, 200	16.18-19	victory of the Seleucid army over the Ptolemaic army
16	Battle of Cynoscephalae	Second Macedonian War, 197	18.21.2-26.12	Roman victory over the Macedonians
17	Battle of Thermopylae	Syrian War, 191	Liv. 36.18-19	Roman victory over the Seleucid army
18	Battle of Magnesia	Syrian War, 191	Liv. 37.39-44	Roman victory over the Seleucid army
19	Battle of Pydna	Third Macedonian War, 168	Plu., <i>Aem.</i> , 17-22	Roman victory over the Macedonians