

POLYBIUS AND THE CONSTITUTION
OF THE ACHAEAN LEAGUE: A NOTE*

It is generally accepted that in his eulogy of the Achaean *koinon* in his second book of the *Histories*, Polybius exploited termini referring to the relationship of individuals within a *polis* to denote that existing between different *poleis* of the league.¹ Hence the latter's members enjoyed *eleutheria*, *isegoria* and *parhesia*, as well as a *demokratia*. The Achaean *sympoliteia* brought about, according to Polybius, its ἀυξησης,² resulting in a δύναμις³ προκοπή,⁴ and εὐδαιμονία.⁵ On this background, one may say, it is surprising that Polybius failed to discuss, where one would expect it, the Achaean league's constitution.⁶

* I am indebted to the late Professor A. Fuks, who among many other subjects introduced me to those herein presented: Polybius and the socio-economic aspect in Hellenistic Greece. I would also like to thank Professor F.W. Walbank who was so kind as to read this paper, make some useful comments, and above all send me the proofs of the relevant chapter on the Achaean assemblies from his then forthcoming *Commentary on Polybius* vol. III.

¹ Polybius, 2, 37, 7 ff, and F.W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius* (Oxford 1957), I, pp. 215 ff. See, in particular, A. Aymard, *Les premiers rapports de Rome et de la confédération achaienne* (198-189 av. J.-c.) (Bordeaux 1938), p. 17, n. 10; M. Gelzer, *Die Achaica im Geschichtswerk des Polybios*, *Kleine Schriften* (Wiesbaden 1964), III, pp. 124 ff; F. W. Walbank, *ibid.*, pp. 221 ff; K.W. Welwei, *Demokratie und Masse bei Polybios*, *Historia* 15 (1966), p. 283, n. 5; D. Musti, *Polibio e la Democrazia*, *Annali della scuola normale superiore di Pisa* 36 (1967), p. 163.

² Cf. A. Mauersberger, *Polybios-Lexikon* (Berlin 1968), s.v. ἀυξησης, and, for instance, Polybius 2,37,8; 45,1; Plutarch, *Aratus* 24,4; and Petzold's discussion (K.E. Petzold, *Studien zur Methode des Polybios und zu ihrer historischen Auswertung* [München] 1969, p. 49, n. 2; pp. 109 ff).

³ For example, Polybius 2,40,1; and Mauersberger, *Lexikon*, *ad loc.*

⁴ *Lexikon Polybianum*, ed. Schweighaeuser (Leipzig 1795), *ad loc.*, and for example 2,45,1; 24,10,10.

⁵ Mauersberger, *Lexikon*, *ad loc.* and cf. 2,38,9; 2,62,4. Is it accidental that we find in Polybius only in few instances the application of the term to Greek states, whereas more frequently the term is used in relation to Rome and Italy?

⁶ Books 2 and 6. It is difficult to think of another place in his *Histories* where Polybius could present the league's constitution; see A. Aymard, *Les assemblées de la confédération achaienne* (Bordeaux 1938), pp. 8 ff.

Many have raised this problem, particularly in relation to book six, and have attempted to find a solution.⁷ A. Aymard claimed that whereas Polybius could compare the constitutions of Athens, Sparta and Crete to that of Rome, there was no room for a comparison between the "municipal" constitution of the latter, and the federal Achaean one.⁸ M. Gelzer thought that a favourable account of the Achaean constitution could not fit into the *metabole* framework of the sixth book, and even less so within a discussion of the mixed constitution.⁹ K. v. Fritz argued that the different meaning of the term *demokratia* in the sixth book (i.e. majority rule and political power of the poorer classes) and in book II, where Polybius uses the term for the Achaean league in the accepted sense of his time (i.e. "freedom from arbitrary power exercised by an individual or a group"), deterred him from mentioning the constitution in his sixth book. Moreover, the Achaean constitution was of "extraconstitutional elements" and thus could not be placed in the sixth book.¹⁰ Th. Cole maintained that "Polybius may have been only too aware that his descriptions of democracy and the mixed constitution were based, in part, on a single model. To mention the model by name would be to jeopardize the already shaky structure of theory by which he sought to establish the peculiarly natural character of Roman constitutional development and the peculiar completeness of the succession of Peripatetic eide it embodied."¹¹ F.W. Walbank rightly criticised the last two theories and claimed¹² that Polybius' ignoring of the Achaean constitution in the sixth book is due to the fact that such a discussion could not fit within the traditional roster of constitutions for discussion. Also, Polybius did not want to involve himself in an embarrassing

⁷ M. Klatt (*Chronologische Beiträge zur Geschichte des achäischen bundes* [Berlin 1883], p. 10) claimed that originally the sixth book included a section on the Achaean constitution, but since Aymard's *assemblées*, (p. 9), this claim is rightly not accepted.

⁸ A. Aymard, *assemblées*, pp. 8 ff.

⁹ M. Gelzer, *op. cit.*, pp. 125 ff.

¹⁰ K.v. Fritz, *The Theory of the Mixed constitution in Antiquity* (NY 1954), pp. 7 ff.

¹¹ Th. Cole, The Sources and Composition of Polybius VI, *Historia* 13 (1964), p. 485, n. 114.

¹² F.W. Walbank, *Polybius* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1972), pp. 150 ff. For a criticism on Th. Cole, see also D. Musti, *Problemi polibiani 1950-1964*, *PP* 104 (1965), p. 395, and for a criticism of K.v. Fritz, F.W. Walbank, *JRS* 45 (1955), pp. 150 ff. On this question see also D. Musti, *Annali*, pp. 191 ff; K.E. Petzold, *op. cit.* p. 31, n. 2.

comparison between the Roman constitution and that of Achaea “which could hardly have been satisfactorily concluded by an Achaean patriot analysing the causes of Roman success while living in a slightly privileged form of detention in Italy.”¹³

While not rejecting Walbank’s argument, I would like to suggest another consideration that might have contributed to Polybius’ ignoring of the Achaean constitution. In fact, Polybius was aware of the dichotomy existing between the masses’ political rights within the Achaean federal constitution and their socio-economic condition. In other words, despite the socio economic gap within the Achaean league, the ‘havenots’ could at any time materialize their political rights, that being in Polybius’ eyes a latent menace to the league’s constitution. This, I believe, deterred him from mentioning the Achaean constitution within his *Histories*, a fact which becomes clear when one examines the place of the masses within the constitution of the Achaean league and their socio-economic condition in the late 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C. on the background of Polybius’ views of the mixed constitution.

The fact that Polybius mentions the political institutions of the Achaean league only in passing has perplexed scholars for many years. He mentions *ekklesia*, *boule*, *synkletos*, *synodos*, *to diabolion*, *hoi polloi*, *plethos*, *hoi Achaioi*, etc. Unfortunately, not much is to be learned from the Latin equivalents (concilium, contio, conventus).¹⁴ For our purpose it is sufficient to bring a resumé of the more recent views on this difficult issue, views which in fact represent (with some nuances) the two main groups of interpretation to be found since the end of last century. First, Larsen’s view, according to which the *boule* (from 217/200 B.C. onwards also called *synodos* when meeting together with the magistrates) was composed of representatives from the league’s cities in proportion to

¹³ Polybius, p. 151; *JRS* 45 (1955), p. 150; J.A.O. Larsen (*Greek Federal States* [Oxford 1968] p. 219) claimed that “for the institutions of the Achaean Confederacy, no first class ancient description exists. Polybius himself probably took a knowledge of Achaean institutions for granted and so wrote no such description” (and see also W.W. Tarn, *CAH* VII, p. 737). If this indeed was Polybius’ consideration, then many parts of the *Histories* wouldn’t have been written.

¹⁴ See, in particular, A. Aymard, *assemblées*, pp. 9 ff, 46 ff, and elsewhere. W.W. Tarn, *CAH* VII, pp. 737 ff; J.A.O. Larsen, *Representative Government in Greek and Roman History* (in paperback 1966), pp. 75ff; *id.* *Greek Federal States*, pp. 223 ff.

their populations.¹⁵ The council, composed of men above the age of thirty, convened frequently and voted according to cities, not to numerical representation.¹⁶ The *ekklesia*, or *synkletos*, was Achaean's primary assembly (also only men above the age of thirty) convened on special occasions after 200 B.C., with the *boule* and magistrates in attendance.¹⁷ Second, Walbank in his *Commentary* III (following Giovannini) withdraws his earlier views on the matter, and argues that the *boule* (chosen from among male citizens over thirty), magistrates, and primary assembly (open to all men of military age) convened at four *synodoi* annually. In the second century special meetings of council and assembly called under certain defined conditions (with the exception of 168 B.C.) were called *synkletoi*.¹⁸ It should be noted that in spite of this dispute on constitutional matters, it is generally accepted that there was some kind of primary assembly, and that the circumference of the league and the fact that the *bouleutai* were not paid for their service,¹⁹ constituted a barrier against the participation in the *boule* by the ordinary people. Hence, it was composed of the more well-to-do.²⁰ Also the leading magistrates, namely the *strategos*, *hyparchos*, *nauarchos*, *hypostrategos*, *damiurgoi* (perhaps the *gerousia* mentioned by Polybius 38, 13, 1²¹) etc. were from among the wealthy.²²

This outline shows that although the league was led by people from among the 'haves' (a matter which can easily be seen from the leadership's reaction to any popular propaganda²³), the masses had a share in political life, especially through the *ekklesia*, which was indeed

¹⁵ J.A.O. Larsen, *Greek Federal States*, pp. 225 ff. See also Walbank, *Commentary*, I, pp. 219 ff.

¹⁶ J.A.O. Larsen, *ibid.*, pp. 226 ff; the numbers of the participants are uncertain: Larsen, *ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁷ J.A.O. Larsen, *ibid.*, pp. 224 ff.

¹⁸ A. Giovannini, Polybe et les assemblées achéennes, *Mus. Helv.* 26 (1969), pp. 1 ff; F.W. Walbank, The achaean Assemblies again, *Mus. Helv.* 27 (1970), pp. 129 ff; *id.* *A Historical Commentary on Polybius* (Oxford 1979), III, pp. 406 ff.

¹⁹ J.A.O. Larsen, *Greek Federal States*, pp. 226 ff.

²⁰ W.W. Tarn, *CAH* VII, p. 739; R.M. Errington, *Philopoemen* (Oxford 1969), pp. 6 ff (and see also Aymard's discussion in *assemblées*, pp. 136 ff; 331 ff).

²¹ Cf. Ch. Habicht, *Chiron* 2 (1972), p. 117.

²² See for all these institutions, Larsen, *Greek Federal States*, pp. 220 ff.

²³ Larsen, *ibid.*, p. 226.

expressed on several occasions within this era.²⁴ The socio-economic polarity can be deduced from the terminology our sources use²⁵ as well as from specific cases in which it comes to light. A short resumé will point up the significance this aspect could have on Polybius' considerations as to the Achaean league's constitution.

Plutarch states for the year 243 B.C., referring to the impact of Agis IV's socio-economic program on people outside Sparta (Agis, 14, 3):

... ἀξιοθέατος ἦν καὶ ζηλωτὸς ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν ἐπεὶ τοῖς γε πλουσίοις οὐκ ἤρεσκεν ὁ νεωτερισμὸς αὐτοῦ, δεδιόσι μὴ κίνημα καὶ παράδειγμα τοῖς πανταχόσε δῆμοις γένηται.

The rich had apparently good reasons to fear Agis' *neoterismos*.²⁶ Almost twenty years later the Achaean league was on the verge of collapse due to the popular revolutionary propaganda of Cleomenes III, and Plutarch says (*Cleomenes* 17,3): "... there had been agitation among the Achaeans, and their cities were eager for revolt, the common people expecting division of land and abolition of debts, and the leading men in many cases being dissatisfied with Aratus ..."²⁷ Some hints of the socio-economic condition within the league are scattered throughout Polybius' account of the so-called 'Social War'. We hear of socio-economic troubles in Cynaetha, Megalopolis, and Messene (which was for a short time a member of the league); some cities were so often raided that it would have been a wonder if the 'havenots' were not affected strongly.²⁸ States could no longer pay their contributions

²⁴ See either Larsen, *ibid.*, pp. 224 ff, or Walbank, *Commentary* III, pp. 406 ff.

²⁵ οἱ πολλοί, ὁ ὄχλος, τὸ πλῆθος, ἄποροι (throughout Polybius' account) ἄριστοι, πλούσιοι (Plut. *Arat.* 14,1; *IG* VII, 188; *Syll.*³ 665) εὐποροι (for instance, Polybius 38,15,6). On the socio-economic connotation of these terms, see A. Fuks, *Patterns and Types of the Social-Economic revolution in Greece from the 4th to the 2nd century B.C.*, *Anc. Soc.* 5 (1974), pp. 51 ff.

²⁶ See in general, P. Oliva, *Sparta and her Social Problems* (Amsterdam-Prague 1971), pp. 213 ff, especially 226 ff.

²⁷ Cf. my 'Polybius and the socio-economic reforms of Cleomenes III, reexamined', forthcoming in *Grazer Beiträge* 1980, and P. Oliva, *op. cit.*, pp. 246 ff.

²⁸ Polybius, 4, 3 ff; See generally for the socio-economic condition of Greece within the discussed period, Polybius 36,17,1-12, and M. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (Oxford 1941), Ch. IV, 1; V, 1; VI, 1.

(Polybius 5,30,2 ff)²⁹; a floating segment of the populace, looking for a living, is still evident in this period.³⁰ No wonder Polybius, who generally does not emphasize the socio-economic aspect in his *Histories*, comments at the end of his account about the 'Social War' (5, 106, 2): "ἄμ' Ἀχαιοῖς ... ἀνεκτῶντο μὲν τοὺς ἰδίους βίους, ἐθεράπευον δὲ τὴν χώραν."³¹

Livy's remark (34, 34, 7) on the condition of the cities of the league in 195 B.C., may also throw light on the socio-economic condition. He says: "Haec oratio primum animos omnium ad respicienda sua cuiusque domestica mala convertit, segnitiam, invidiam et obtrectationem domi manentium adversus militantes, libertatem difficilem ad consensum, inopiam publicam, malignitatem conferendi ex privato." Also of interest is Plutarch's information, dealing with the unrest Cato had to appease in the region assigned to him in the Achaean league on the eve of the Roman-Syrian war (Plutarch, *Cato major* 12,3): ... "καὶ τὰ μὲν πλείεστα τῶν νεωτερίζοντων ... Κάτων δὲ Κορινθίου καὶ Πατρεῖς, ἔτι δ' Αἰγυεῖς παρεστήσατο." The 'havenots' in Achaëa, as elsewhere in Greece, saw in Rome the guardian of the socio-economic and political status quo, hence it is not surprising that they looked to Perseus on the eve of the third Macedonian war in the hope that Macedonia would

²⁹ They were, however, relieved later on, Polybius V, 94,9 ff, and see G.T. Griffith, *The Mercenaries of the Hellenistic World* (Cambridge 1935), p. 102.

³⁰ (On the 'floating' element in 4th century Greece, Isocrates, *Paneg.* 168 ff, and A. Fuks, *Anc. Soc.* 3 [1972], pp. 18 ff) Polybius calls this element *peiratai* — at last they joined the Aetolian side in the 'Social War', Polybius 4,3,8 ff; 6,1; 68,1; 79,6; 80,4. Another indication of the same problem are the many Greek mercenaries to be found in Hellenistic armies of the time, G.T. Griffith, *op. cit.*, pp. 80 ff. Note, for instance, the 8500 mercenaries of the proposal mentioned in Polybius 5,91,6; Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 101. Towards the end of the third century B.C., the 'floating' element seems to have disappeared: a) no mention of it can be found after the so-called 'Social War'; b) Polybius says that in "his times" (36,17,5 ff) Greece underwent a process of *oliganthropia*, a matter which is also reflected in the epigraphical evidence, W.W. Tarn, *Hell. Civ.* (London²) pp. 92 ff; A. Landry, Quelques aperçus concernant la dépopulation dans l'antiquité gréco-romaine, *Rev. Hist.* CLXXVII (1936), pp. 1 ff; Rostovtzeff, *op. cit.*, III, p. 1464, n. 23. In such a condition I doubt whether a 'floating' element would exist; c) a drastic decrease of Greek mercenaries in Hellenistic armies is evident towards the end of the 3rd century, M. Launey, *Recherches sur les armées Hellénistique* (Paris 1946), I, in particular pp. 63 ff; and M. Rostovtzeff, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 624 ff; Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

³¹ On the 'Social War' in general, see F.W. Walbank, *Philip V of Macedon* (Cambridge 1940), pp. 24 ff.

change their condition.³² The *Bellum Achaicum* is a prominent example of the state the socio-economic tension had reached within the Achaean league.³³

From these scattered references in the sources it becomes clear that there existed in the period under discussion a "social question" in the Achaean league. Polybius, who was hostile towards the masses and their attempts at changing their condition, must have been aware of the latent threat the 'havenots' constituted for the Achaean league, being able through constitutional means to improve their socio-economic condition (a matter which at last occurred in 147-6 B.C.). This, I believe, deterred Polybius from presenting his own country's not-too-perfect constitutional system. Four references from Polybius' *Histories* strengthen this view.

A) In the only place where Polybius alludes to the Achaean constitution (not to the federal system), he says (2, 37, 10): "...ἀλλὰ καὶ νόμοις χρήσθαι τοῖς αὐτοῖς καὶ σταθμοῖς καὶ μέτροις καὶ νομίσμασι, πρὸς δὲ τούτοις ἄρχουσι, βουλευταῖς, δικασταῖς τοῖς αὐτοῖς..." It is not mere chance that Polybius only mentions the *Boule*, which was only a representative council,³⁴ and not the general assembly of the people,³⁵ which was after all a factor in the Achaean constitution hardly to be ignored.³⁶

B) In his eulogy of Philopoemen, Polybius says (23,12,8): "Ὅτι Φιλοποίμην τετταράκοντ' ἔτη συνεχῶς φιλοδοξήσας ἐν δημοκρατικῷ καὶ πολυειδεῖ πολιτεύματι, πάντῃ πάντως διέφυγε τὸν τῶν πολλῶν φθόνον, τὸ πλεῖον οὐ πρὸς χάριν, ἀλλὰ μετὰ παρρησίας πολιτευόμενος ὃ σπανίως ἂν εὔροι τις γεγυῖος." Philopoemen's glory

³² See my 'The attitude of Antiochus III towards the class struggle in Greece (192-191 B.C.) *Rivista Storica dell'Antichita* 8 (1978), pp. 27 ff; 'Perseus and the Socio-economic question in Greece (179-172/1 B.C.). A study in Roman propaganda,' *Anc. Soc.* 9 (1978), pp. 55 ff.

³³ Polybius 38,10,1 ff, and see especially A. Fuks, *The Bellum Achaicum and its Social Aspect*, *JHS* 90 (1970), pp. 78 ff.

³⁴ Against A. Aymard, *assemblées*, 157 ff, who thinks that *bouleutai* refers to the primary assembly. Aymard's theory did not receive any support for the simple reason that in ancient Greece, *boule* never referred to a primary assembly, but always to a deliberative council, Larsen, *Repres. Govern.*, p. 77; F.W. Walbank, *Commentary*, I, pp. 219 ff.

³⁵ Not even in one of the familiar terms, like *ekklesia*, *synkletos*, *hoi polloi*, *plethos*, etc.

³⁶ Especially before 200 B.C., Larsen, *Repres. Govern.*, pp. 75 ff, and *Greek Federal States*, pp. 223 ff.

as a statesman was a consequence of his ability, without courting favour, to avoid "in any way or any occasion" the hatred (φθόνος) of the masses, one of the components of the Achaean democratic constitution.³⁷ Nevertheless, he openly directed the state's affairs (μετὰ παρρησίας πολιτευόμενος). The οἱ πολλοί, who obviously constitute in this constitutional context a part of the Achaean constitution, are in passing heavily criticised by Polybius.

C) Polybius' hostile comment on the *synkletos* at Corinth in 147/6 B.C., speaks for itself. He says (38,12,4): "For never had there been collected such a pack of artizans and common men ..." the latter brought about, according to Polybius, the catastrophe of the *Bellum Achaicum*.³⁹

D) Polybius may have been thinking of Carthage,⁴⁰ but also of his own country's constitution, when he discussed the reasons for the decline of the Roman mixed constitution. In book VI, 57, he claims that the popular element of the mixed constitution,⁴¹ by its desire for more, ἀλαζονεία and πολυτέλεια,⁴² will demand the lion's share through the constitutional instruments of the state (8): "τότε γὰρ ἐξοργισθεῖς καὶ θυμῷ πάντα βουλευόμενος οὐκέτι θελήσει πειθαρχεῖν οὐδ' ἴσον ἔχειν τοῖς προεστῶσιν, ἀλλὰ πᾶν καὶ τὸ πλείστον αὐτός." This process will bring about "the worst thing of all", *ochlokratia*.⁴³

To sum up, the possibility, within the Achaean league's constitutional framework, of the masses improving their socio-economic condition was, in the eyes of Polybius — the man who was consistently against any attempt of the masses to better their condition⁴⁴ — a serious weakness

³⁷ Polybius uses here πολυεῖδε, and Paton is right to translate the phrase "a democratic state composed of various elements". Cf. Schweighaeuser, *op. cit. ad loc.*

³⁸ The following (23,13–14) also shows clearly that Polybius is thinking in the traditional terms of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy.

³⁹ 38,12,4, and see A. Fuks, *art. cit.* pp. 84 ff; in general on this passage, F.W. Walbank, *Commentary*, III, p. 408.

⁴⁰ Polybius 6,57 compared with 6,51; see also K.W. Welwei, *art. cit.* pp. 296 ff.

⁴¹ There is no need to see in this passage a later addition of Polybius, F.W. Walbank, *Polybius*, pp. 133 ff.

⁴² On the socio-economic connotation of these terms, see Mauersberger, *Lexikon*, s.v. ἀλαζονεία and Schweighaeuser, *Lexikon*, s.v. πολυτέλεια.

⁴³ Even if this chapter was written within the context of the *anakyklosis*, the socio-economic aspect cannot be separated (see also Polybius 6,9,9).

⁴⁴ Cf. my 'Polybius and the socio-economic revolution,' forthcoming in *L'antiquité Classique*.

in the whole system. Hence, whereas in the sixth book he was able to discuss this matter in general terms, he naturally (as in many other things⁴⁵) preferred to avoid it in reference to his own country's constitution.

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⁴⁵ See my paper quoted in note 27, above.