

Introduction

Who is there so feeble-minded or idle that he would not wish to know how and with what constitution almost all the inhabited world was conquered and fell under the single dominion of Rome within fifty-three years?

(Polybius, I. 1. 5)

Polybius' association of Rome's phenomenal military success with the excellence of her constitution may surprise twentieth-century readers, but it was almost self-evident for a Greek intellectual from within the governing class in his period. It was Herodotus who first made the connection between political systems and their military capacities. In his view an important result of the reforms (eunomia) of Lycurgus was the victory of the Spartans over their neighbours; again, when the Athenians acquired democracy (isegoria) through Cleisthenes, the immediate consequence was their victory over the Boeotians and Chalcidians. This is of course also the theme of Pericles' funeral oration, as reported by Thucydides. In Plato's Republic the starting-point of the discussion of the ideal constitution (as opposed to the utopian primitivism first described in Book 2) is the need for the city to be victorious in war.' As far as I know, there is no specific text of this kind in our Roman sources: the closest parallel is in Livy, who ascribes Roman success to their skills in civil and military affairs (artes domi militiaeque) as well as their way of life (vita and mores). For other Romans their military success was the outcome of good mores and the favour of the gods.' Nevertheless, the Livian narrative of the Second Punic War, for example, places in relief not only the effectiveness of Roman political activity but also the constitutional innovations that the war brought about. We shall see in the next chapter how political activity is used in a later book of Livy to frame the story of military success.

Nowadays, when historians study the republican constitution, it is not so much because it is the key to understanding Roman success abroad, but because they wish to evaluate Roman politics and society in this period. The fact that the constitution was, as Polybius saw, a natural growth,' rather than the creation of a legislator at a specific point in time, arguably justifies us in treating it as a true reflection of forces in Roman society and of Roman ideology concerning the conduct of politics, although even here there may have been a conflict between traditional norms and current practice (I shall have more to say about this later). In the study of Roman history understanding of the constitution is also helpful in various ways. Politics in the Republic were a game played according to complex rules. Without knowledge