

Are you picking up what I'm putting down?
On the responsibility of the reader in Polybius' *Histories*

Throughout his *Histories*, Polybius uses two related and highly idiosyncratic phrases: λαμβάνειν τι (or τιθέναι) πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν and τιθέναι τι (or λαμβάνειν) ὑπὸ τὴν ὄψιν. The phrases do not occur prior to Polybius, nor are they picked up and used to the same extent by later authors.¹ They are, then, if not coinages, distinctly Polybian phrases. By virtue of their uniqueness alone they are worthy of attention; all the more so because they are linked to how Polybius views the roles of the historian and the reader and the usefulness of pragmatic history.

To begin with the phrases are metaphors: Polybius uses them to signify what is clearly a mental process—remembering, calling to mind—yet the phrases describe a physical action: to place an object, or to take an object before one's eyes. When Polybius says in the beginning of Book 3 that, after describing how the Romans established their mastery of Asia, he will “place” the misfortunes of the Aetolians and Cephallenians “under the gaze” (θέντες ὑπὸ τὴν ὄψιν... 3.3.6) of his readers, he is treating the misfortunes of these peoples and his narration of them in his work *as a physical object*. In itself this is not new, long before Thucydides had written his history to be a κτῆμά... ἐς αἰεὶ rather than an ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἀκούειν (1.22.4). With typical concision Thucydides compresses much of his view of history in these words, at once opposing momentary existence with permanence over time, hearing with sight (he does not say this explicitly, but it is easily implied), and immateriality with physicality. As Moles (1999) has shown, Polybius is clearly building on the Thucydidean tradition of treating history as a physical object. Through his use of these two phrases, Polybius represents events in history and the lessons drawn from those events as objects to be set down (τιθέναι τι ὑπὸ τὴν ὄψιν) by the author to be taken up (λαμβάνειν τι πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν) in turn by his readers.

¹ The two phrases occur in all 48 times in Polybius. Contrast this with Diodorus, who has the largest number after Polybius at 7 times in all (though he does not use ὑπὸ τὴν ὄψιν).

This paper looks at some of the places where Polybius uses these phrases both in connection with characters within the *Histories* as well as where he uses them to describe his own actions and those of other historians. As I shall demonstrate, Polybius exploits these metaphors to emphasize the role of the reader of his *Histories* in determining their usefulness. For, while Polybius uses either *τιθέναι* or *λαμβάνειν* in situations where someone is placing something before his own eyes,² he only uses *τιθέναι* of placing something before another. So it is one of the ways he uses to describe what generals do when encouraging their troops (as he does with Hannibal at 15.11.5). More importantly, he uses the phrase to describe what he (as at 3.3.6) and other historians do in their writings (at 2.56.8 of Phylarchus; at 15.34.2 of those who have written about Agathocles and his kin). For Polybius, then, historians are, as it were, *οἱ τι τιθέντες ὑπὸ τὴν ὄψιν*. That is what generals, advisors, and historians do in the *Histories*. But they also encourage others to *λαμβάνειν τι πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν*. What this implies is that the phrases describe two distinct and separate actions. The one is performed by one group, the other by another group. Consequently, troops, advisees and readers are *οἱ τι λαμβάνοντες πρὸ ὀφθαλμῶν*. Historians may “place” an event, a fact, or a lesson “before the gaze” of their readers, but some action on the part of the reader is required, that of “taking it before their eyes” My paper will explore this interaction between author and reader and why Polybius insists on the active participation of his reader.

² When the verb is *τιθέναι*, and the character places it under his own eyes, the verb occurs in the middle voice.

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