

Conceptual blending and historical understanding in Polybius

written by Nicolas Wiater | 1. November 2022

At about the middle of the second century BCE, the Greek historian Polybius set out to write an analysis of Rome's rise to a world power (by ancient standards), his monumental *Histories*. Scholars often characterise Polybius' way of writing as clunky, heavy-going and unsophisticated. He was a military man and politician and, therefore, the argument goes, expressed himself in a simple, unadorned and somewhat bureaucratic language. I fundamentally disagree with this assessment, which reflects stereotypes and prejudices about the decline of Greek literature and style after the 'classical' period. In this short entry, I will show that more attention to Polybius' style, encouraged by cognitive approaches such as conceptual blending, opens up new perspectives on how this fascinating author conceived of the process of historical understanding.

To begin, I invite you to consider the following passage. At [Histories 1.57.1](#), when dealing with the fighting at a place called Heircte (*Heirktē*) during the first Roman-Carthaginian War (264-241 BCE), Polybius declares the failure of traditional ways of narrating the past in light of the complexity of the events:

It is impossible to give a detailed account of these combatants [the Romans and Carthaginian commanders]; for just as with boxers, distinguished for pluck and both in perfect training, when they meet in the decisive contest for the prize, continually delivering blow for blow, neither the combatants themselves nor the spectators can note or anticipate every attack or every blow, but it is possible from the overall activity of each, and the determination that each displays, to get a fair idea of their respective skill, strength, and courage, so it was with these two generals. The causes or the modes of their daily ambushes, counterambushes, attempts, assaults were so numerous that no writer could properly describe them, while at the same time the narrative would be endless as well as unprofitable to the reader. It is rather by a general pronouncement about the two men and the

result of their rival efforts that a notion of the facts can be conveyed.

(Transl. W.R. Paton, rev. by F.W. Walbank and C. Habicht, [Loeb Classical Library 128](#), Cambridge, MA, and London 2010, adapted)

The declaration of the failure of narrative representation is by itself remarkable in any author, but especially in Polybius who is often seen as particularly rational and analytical. But what he does to overcome this problem is even more remarkable. Instead of providing a detailed description of the concrete events, he prompts his readers to draw on their cultural knowledge and experience of one-on-one fighting in sports (boxing) in order to understand what happened at Heircte.

What we have here is a prime example of a conceptual blend. In their fascinating study [The Way We Think. Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities](#) (New York 2002), Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner illustrate this process as follows:

One of us had a ski instructor who prompted him to stand properly and face in the right direction as he raced downhill by inviting him to imagine that he was a waiter in a Parisian café carrying a tray with champagne and croissants on it and taking care not to spill them.

What at first might look like a simple analogy is, in fact, a cognitively complex operation by which the brain is prompted to conceive of parts of one complex activity in terms of parts of another. Fauconnier and Turner rightly point out that the result of the mental process is 'not the simple sum of carrying a tray while moving downhill on skis' (21). Instead, by prompting the brain to make new interconnections, our attitude to the world changes - in the case of our example, this includes our posture and movement. Through the changes to our posture and movement we also understand better how 'skiing' works, but in an embodied, rather than analytical-rational way. The image, the mental processes prompted by the image, and the bodily modifications which that causes result in a deep, bodily understanding of the activities involved.

We can observe the same process at play in the Polybius passage. The individual reader's bodily experience, or shall we say 'bodily understanding' of


the image, the boxing match, is central to Polybius' text. This bodily understanding can concern actual boxing as well as the bodily experience of being a spectator at the boxing match. In fact, note how the perspectives of agents (the boxers) and spectators are integrated in Polybius' image: 'neither the combatants themselves nor the spectators can note or anticipate every attack or every blow'. By 'knowing' what participating (actively or passively) in a boxing match feels like, you come to 'know' what happened between Romans and Carthaginians at Heircte, even though Polybius does not give us a single piece of concrete information about these events.

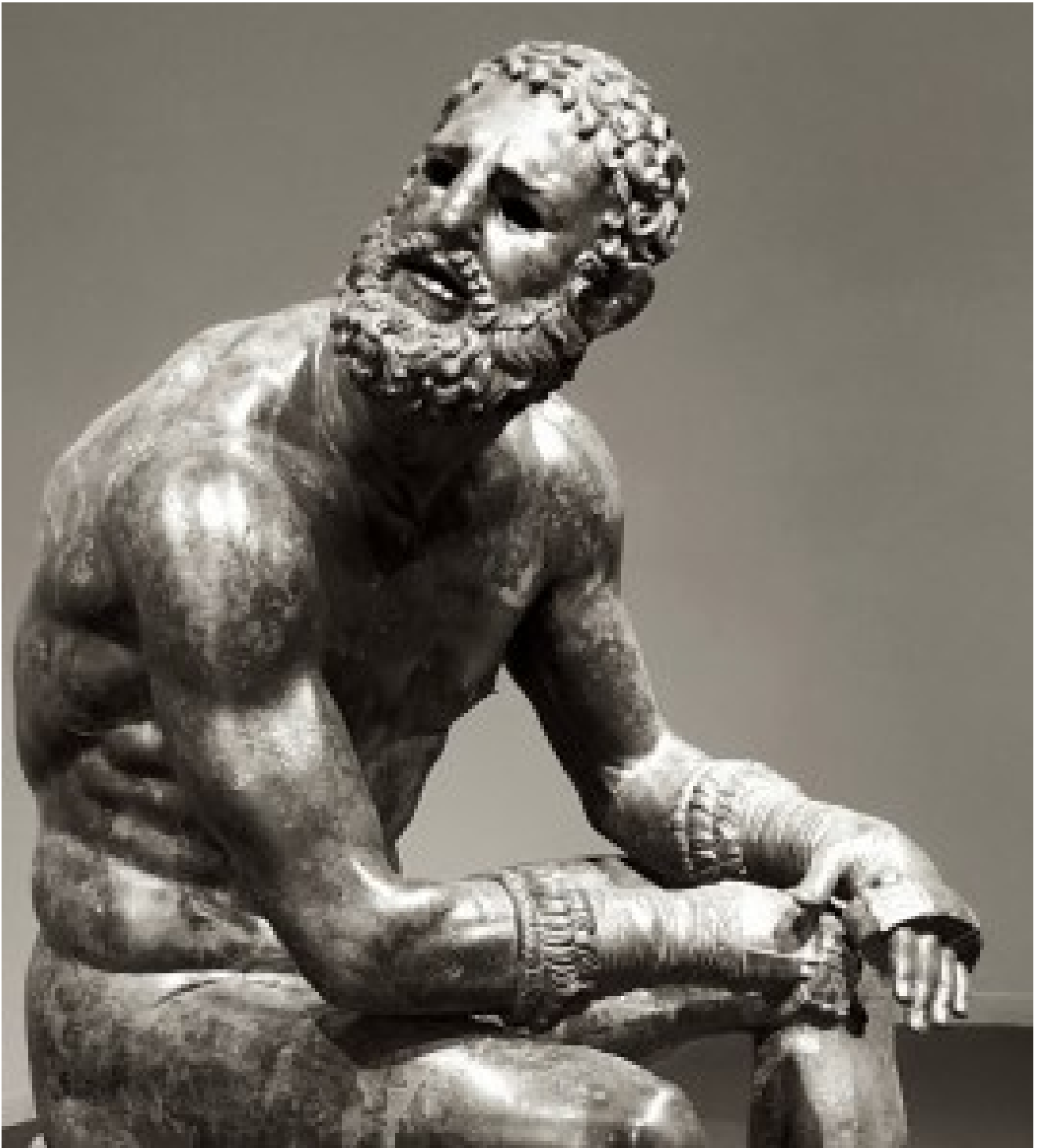
This transformation from rational-analytical representation and understanding to embodied understanding through blending is carefully prepared: the collective action of Romans and Carthaginians is first reduced to the physical encounter between two individuals, their commanders; in a second step, that physical encounter between two historical agents in a specific historical situation is transformed into the physical encounter between two boxing champions, which, in turn, opens up the text and the events to the bodily re-enactment and, hence, bodily understanding, on the part of the readers. Note how Polybius merges the experience of the boxers themselves and that of the spectators ('*neither the combatants themselves nor the spectators can note or anticipate every attack or every blow*', in the quotation above). In cognitive experience, the distinction between boxers and spectators is blurred, an idea we can relate to our knowledge of how mirror neurons in our brains prompt us to experience vicariously in our minds what we perceive outside of our bodies. Note also how this kind of physical understanding is built into Polybius' style: the polyptoton 'blow for blow' (Greek *plēgēn epi plēgēi*) conjures up the quick succession of hits, and the asyndeton 'ambuscades, counterambuscades, attempts, assaults' (Greek *enedras, antenedras, epitheseis, prosbolas*), thus effectively mapping that 'blow for blow' of the boxers onto the actions and reactions of the historical agents. This further reinforces the blend between Polybius' readers and the spectators at the boxing match, by conceptualising experiencing the historical events through Polybius' style and language in terms of being a spectator at a boxing match. Polybius' text makes his readers spectators of the events, but not in the conventional way of providing a detailed description of them, as would be customary according to the ancient rhetorical theory of *ekphrasis*. Instead, Polybius' text makes his readers spectators of events he does **not** describe, by prompting them to blend their

experience of being spectators at a boxing match with the experience of reading Polybius' text.

Emotional involvement is clearly also key here, but not in the sense of the traditional palette of emotions such as anger, hatred, or fear. The emotions envisaged here are, partly, more visceral than that: the excitement, the suspense, the 'being on the edge of your seat' when we are participating as spectators in a top-class boxing match; the empathy, too, the recoiling - or excitement - at the sight of blood, depending on which one of the fighters we are favouring. On the other hand, emotions are more indirectly involved through emotionally charged cultural values. Polybius mentions 'determination', 'skill', 'strength' and 'courage' (Greek *philotimia*, *empeiria*, *dynamis*, *eupsykhia*).

Passages such as this one, in which the bodily experience of the boxing match results in a bodily understanding of the past, thus not only open up new ways of reading Polybius and different ways of appreciating Polybius' language and style. They also help us understand better how such abstract cultural concepts as 'determination', 'skill', 'strength' and 'courage' are emotionally encoded through their association with concrete physical experiences, such as boxing matches. The understanding is further facilitated as these concepts are blended with higher-level events such as complex military operations between two parties at war. We value 'determination' (Greek *philotimia*) in a commander because we know what 'determination' looks and feels like in a boxing match.

If we want, we can complicate things a little further. I have so far assumed that readers will be familiar with boxing from active or passive participation in the sports culture of the ancient city-state. And that is certainly a realistic and reasonable assumption. But we can also ask to what extent readers might have been familiar with boxing by proxy, as it were, because they have read literary narratives of intense boxing matches such as the fight between Polydeuces and Amycus, at Theocritus *Idyl* 22 (75-134); or to what extent they might be drawing on representations of boxing in art such as the so-called Therme boxer, which is pictured here ( Nicolas Wiater):



To what extent are bodily experiences of the type Polybius' blend is prompting drawn from non-literary, real-life experiences of box fights? To what extent are they based on literary and artistic representations? The discussion of the passage from Polybius makes clear that we need to be aware of both: the literary and the extra-literary are overlapping circles. As we try to conceptualise reading experience, and the cognitive re-enactment of scenes and events in the readers' minds, the boundaries between literature and the extra-literary world become increasingly blurry. Reading Polybius through the

lens of conceptual blending raises a whole lot of questions that go well beyond understanding Polybius better. It touches on general questions about how blending informs crucial aspects of our daily thinking and acting.