

Document 17: Polybius

Background

The following excerpt is the description of the Roman constitution provided by the Greek historian Polybius in his book *The Histories* written between 167-119 BCE, a period of rapid Roman expansion. Polybius greatly admired the Romans, and the purpose of his work was to describe how Rome came to dominate the world.

The Roman constitution has three elements. Each of them possesses independent powers, and their share of power has been so well regulated that no one can say for sure whether the constitution is an aristocracy or democracy or despotism. The Consuls (magistrates) lead the military and are the supreme masters of the government. They bring matters requiring debate before the Senate. They also call together the people's Assemblies, and carry out whatever the majority of the Assemblies decide. They have absolute authority in running the military and fighting wars and can spend as much public money as they choose. Seeing these powers would justify our describing the constitution as a despotism. The Senate proposes laws and has the control of the treasury. It also handles all crimes requiring an investigation. In addition, if it is necessary to send diplomats to a foreign country to make peace or to proclaim war, this too is the business of the Senate. As a result, many foreign kings imagine the constitution is a complete aristocracy because nearly all the business they had with Rome was settled by the Senate. After all this, someone would naturally ask what part is left for the people in the constitution. There is, however, a part left to the people (the Assemblies), and it is a most important one. It is the people in the Assemblies who grant office to those that deserve it through the elections. The Assemblies also have the final say in passing or repealing laws, and most important of all it is that they make the final decision on the question of peace or war. These considerations again would lead one to say that the chief power in the state was the People's, and that the constitution was a democracy.

Vocabulary

- **aristocracy:** form of government in which power is held by the nobility
- **despotism:** form of government where a ruler holds absolute power
- **magistrates:** local officials who administers the law