

REVIEW

POLYBIUS AND ROMAN IMPERIALISM

D. W. Baronowski, *Polybius and Roman Imperialism*. Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 2011. Hardcover, £50.00/\$80.00. ISBN 978-0-7156-3942-9. Paper, £22.99/\$39.95. ISBN 978-1-4725-0450-0.

Note: The Table of Contents for this volume appears at the end of the review.

This book examines an issue that has often been discussed in various guises, but which has, surprisingly, never had a full monograph in English devoted to it before: Polybius' attitude to Roman imperialism.¹ The author begins by stating that Polybius' views were complex and ambivalent and that the monograph will examine 'how he reacted to the expansion of Roman power' and 'to what extent he identified himself with the ruling nation' (p. ix). In practice, the second of these questions receives rather less attention than the first one and is only really tackled in the conclusion.

The Introduction provides a biography of Polybius, an overview of issues with the chronology of the composition of the *Histories*, and a brief discussion of the Romans' view of Polybius, all of it standard material in introductions to Polybius, but well researched and well documented. An extensive overview of scholarship on Polybius' judgement on and conception of Roman imperialism follows. Here Baronowski labours slightly to make his own argument stand out from the crowd, partly because he undersells its level of nuance. 'This study seeks to demonstrate that Polybius on balance viewed Roman domination favourably' does not sound like a very novel endeavour: although some scholars have argued that Polybius was originally, or became gradually, critical of Roman imperialism or Roman rule, most in fact agree that he admired Rome as imperial ruler and welcomed her dominance over Carthage, the Eastern powers, and even Greece. Some of the analyses of Polybius' thought provided by Baronowski later in the book are, in fact, a good deal more nuanced and interesting than this.

Part I, 'Roman Imperialism in Contemporary Writings', is divided into three different types of intellectual context for Polybius: Greek philosophers;

¹ Musti (1978) in Italian discusses similar issues, but uses a very different approach from the book under consideration here.

poets and prophets; and historians (Greek and Roman). The middle chapter is by far the most innovative and the one containing the most new material.

Chapter 1, 'Greek Philosophers', extrapolates from Cic. *Rep.* 3 to his assumed Greek sources. This is common practice, but still carries with it some risks of seeing what one wants to see which it would have been nice to see acknowledged. Baronowski concludes, uncontroversially, that Cicero's sources were mainly Carneades and Panaetius, who are then taken to have embraced imperialism in general, and probably Roman imperialism more specifically.

Chapter 2, 'Poets, Prophecies and Roman Imperialism', provides an overview of a long list of Hellenistic poems that celebrate Rome and a few that are critical of Rome. More interestingly, Baronowski then draws in a host of more obscure Hellenistic texts dealing with Roman imperialism, moving from the Sibylline Oracles over some Near Eastern texts (the Avestan *Bahman Yasht*, Babylonian Dynastic Prophecy, the Book of Daniel, 1 Enoch, Aramaic prophecy) to the obscure Greek poets Polystratus and Antipater of Sidon. The conclusion is that all of these Hellenistic authors, despite their differing cultural backgrounds, view imperialism as 'normal'. Most condone the Roman version of imperialism, and even those who are critical of this are willing to accept imperialism when wielded by Eastern or Greek powers. Baronowski does not discuss how relevant this poetic and prophetic context is for Polybius, and one could argue that it can legitimately be ignored because the Achaean historian was most likely entirely ignorant of it. However, in the grander scheme of the study of the intellectual context of Polybius' attitude towards Roman imperialism, it is surely relevant that most intellectuals, both in Greece and the Near East, tended to think of imperialism as a normal human urge, and perhaps even a glorious one. This goes some way towards explaining how Polybius could admire Rome for conquering his native Greece (even if Baronowski does not say so explicitly).

Chapter 3, 'Historians and Roman Imperialism', provides an overview of Greek and Roman historiography from Fabius Pictor via Cato the Elder, Philinus, Silenus, and Sosylus to Agatharchides of Cnidos and Posidonius. This is uncontroversial, but the conclusion serves to strengthen the sense that Polybius was a product of his time: apart from Agatharchides, who is shown to be opposed to imperialism regardless of which power engages in it, every single historian on review seems to have supported the imperialism of either Rome or Carthage (and most of them of Rome).

The overall aim of the second and longer part of the monograph, 'Polybius' Attitude to Roman Domination', is to show that Polybius 'admired imperial rule in general', but that unlike the philosophers

(including Posidonius, the philosopher-historian) ‘he did not attempt to justify this phenomenon, for he accepted it as intrinsically noble’ (p. 61).

Chapter 4, ‘Polybius on Legitimate Expansion’, is the most problematic chapter of the monograph. Much of the discussion consists of summaries of Polybian passages with a few words of interpretation to tie them together and prove the author’s point. The passages are always well chosen and previous scholarship usually well referenced, which makes the book a good starting point for anyone interested in this aspect of Polybius’ thought; but the discussion often ignores the complexity or ambiguity of Polybius’ thought and could go deeper.

For instance, the claim that Polybius presents the Romans as siding with the treacherous Mamertines (Pol. 1.7-11) out of ‘aggressive and acquisitive motives’, partly in order to prevent Carthage gaining control of Sicily and partly for ‘substantial private gain for individuals’ (p. 68) ignores Polybius’ detailed exploration of the Roman agonising over the decision, which they know is unjust (e.g., 1.10.3: *Ῥωμαῖοι δὲ πολὺν μὲν χρόνον ἠπόρησαν διὰ τὸ δοκεῖν ἐξόφθαλμον εἶναι τὴν ἀλογίαν τῆς βοθηείας*, but the description of the Roman dilemma takes up all of 1.10.1-11.4), but which they perceive to be necessary, not in order to further their own imperialism, but in order to protect Italy from the Carthaginians (1.10.5: *οὐ μὴν ἀγνοοῦντής γε τούτων οὐδέν, θεωροῦντες δὲ τοὺς Καρχηδονίους οὐ μόνον τὰ κατὰ τὴν Λιβύην, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς Ἰβηρίας ὑπήκοα πολλὰ μέρη πεποιημένους, ἔτι δὲ τῶν νήσων ἀπασῶν ἐγκρατεῖς ὑπάρχοντας τῶν κατὰ τὸ Σαρδόνιον καὶ Τυρρηρικὸν πέλαγος, ἠγωνίων, εἰ Σικελίας ἔτι κυριεύσαιεν, μὴ λίαν βαρεῖς καὶ φοβεροὶ γείτονες αὐτοῖς ὑπάρχοιεν, κύκλω σφᾶς περιέχοντες καὶ πᾶσι τοῖς τῆς Ἰταλίας μέρεσιν ἐπικείμενοι*). Nowhere does Polybius say that the Romans had expansion in mind here. Moreover, he portrays the motives in Rome as different for Senators and People, with the Senate in the end ruling in favour of justice rather than security and deciding against aiding the Mamertines (1.11.1), but the war-weary People overruling this decision, persuaded by military commanders who talk of the common good and private profits (1.11.2: *περὶ τοῦ κοινῆ συμφέρειν τὸν πόλεμον καὶ κατ’ ἰδίαν ἐκάστοις ὠφελείας προδήλους καὶ μεγάλας*).

The main conclusions of the chapter are, firstly, that ‘Polybius considered imperialist expansion in principle to be a noble objective, and regarded as virtuous the men who achieved it’ (p. 65), although he censures powers who use excessive force or rely on treachery in their imperial pursuit, or treat the defeated with excessive harshness; and, secondly and more controversially, that ‘Polybius viewed the Roman empire as the intended result of an aggressive drive’ (p. 67). These points are argued successfully, mainly by means of accumulating passages. A discussion of when Polybius places the starting-point of Roman expansionist policy (pp. 71–2) suffers from the

common scholarly problem of wanting to pin down something that may well not have been thought out properly by the ancient author. Polybius was writing his *Histories* with hindsight, and it must have been almost impossible for him not to imbue his account of the origins of the Roman empire with some sense of what the outcome was, even if, should anyone have asked him directly, he may well have placed the consciousness of that goal in the Roman mind rather later. Pp. 73–7 offer an excellent and nuanced discussion of Polybius' concept of pretexts and causes of imperialist wars.

Ten pages are taken up with a discussion of 'International Relations, Morality and Self-interest' (pp. 77–86). Here Baronowski argues that Polybius can be critical of Roman self-serving decision-making, but never condemns it. Rather, he criticises the peoples on the receiving end for provoking the displeasure of Rome or giving the Romans the opportunity to intervene and strengthen their own interests. In this argument Baronowski comes close to the arguments of both Walbank and Ferrary (as he acknowledges). The passages for discussion are well-chosen, but the discussion largely ignores the complexity of Polybius' views. What it especially misses is the astounding degree to which Polybius always manages to argue against behaviour which he finds morally reprehensible on the basis that it is inexpedient. This is especially clear in the case of the actions of Sulpicius Galba against Eumenes (Pol. 31.1.2–8; Baronowski, p. 80). It would also have been interesting to see a discussion of Polybius' motivation for focusing his criticism in the years 168–145 BC on the Greeks who either misled the Romans or who brought Roman anger onto their peoples rather than on Roman decision-making: could this not have something to do with Polybius sharing his work as he produced it with his Roman friends and ultimately expecting a partly Roman readership? The idea of prudent self-censure has been aired by Momigliano² and others, but could do with more exploration.

Chapter 5, 'Polybius on the Acquisition, Expansion and Preservation of Imperial Rule', begins with a summary of passages which show Polybius' doctrine that power should be acquired and wielded with beneficence and humanity, which in turn will produce willingly obedient subjects (pp. 87–90). The passages are well-chosen, but discussion does not go very far; a more in-depth discussion can be found in Hau (2006). The analysis only really comes into its own in the discussion of Rome's treatment of Carthage after the end of the Third Punic War (pp. 97–106), where Baronowski shows depth and nuance. A discussion follows of a passage from Diodorus Siculus (Diod. 32.2 and 4), which is commonly thought to derive from Polybius and states a much harsher doctrine of empire acquisition, expansion, and preservation than what is otherwise seen in the surviving Polybius text. The discussion is

² Momigliano (1974).

detailed and reaches the sensible and interesting conclusion that the passage is based on a speech now lost from Polybius' *Histories*, but, at the risk of sounding immodest, it is problematic that there is no engagement with, or even mention of, Hau (2006), which devotes more than thirty pages to a detailed investigation of the same problem. The overall conclusion of the chapter is that 'although the historian expressed some reservations and criticism at different points in the *Histories*, Polybius believed that the Romans generally treated other nations with moderation and beneficence at all stages of their imperial evolution' (p. 113).

Chapter 6, 'Polybius on the Enemies of Rome', is divided into a discussion of Books 36–39 and Books 1–29. The analysis of 36–39 begins with an excellent analysis of the difference between 'disaster' (*ἀτυχία*, *ἀτύχημα*, brought on by one's own folly) and 'downfall' (*σύμπτωμα*, suffered undeserved) (pp. 115–17). This is followed by a summary of passages showing that Polybius condemned the leaders of Macedonia, Greece, and Carthage for initiating wars with Rome which they should have known would lead ultimately to their destruction. The section on 1–29 argues rightly that as Roman domination is not yet complete in these books, more options are available to states at this stage than later. Therefore Polybius praises some leaders who go to war against Rome and blames others. Some are even blamed for not pursuing their war against Rome effectively. This Polybian tendency to value a clear understanding of one's situation (e.g. of the feasibility of opposing Rome) and efficiency in pursuing one's purpose has been well analysed by Eckstein,³ who could have received more credit in this chapter.

Chapter 7, 'Polybius in the Service of Rome', provides a summary of what Polybius did for Rome during the Third Punic War, the Achaean War, and the Numantian War. Baronowski proceeds to suggest that Polybius supported the new constitutions instituted in Greece by Rome after the Achaean War not purely out of loyalty to Rome, but partly because they tallied with his political convictions. As evidence, he offers a discussion of a range of Polybian passages on constitutions (pp. 137–42) with particular focus on his repeated criticisms of radical democracy and his leaning towards moderate democracy. (An Appendix on Pausanias as source for the constitutions introduced by the Romans is attached, pp. 142–8).

Chapter 8, 'Polybius, Rome, Barbarism and Fate', is a very short chapter (pp. 149–52). The issues discussed are complex: did Polybius consider the Romans barbarians? Did he attribute their achievement of world domination to Fate? Such questions deserve more discussion; but as such discussion would take up much space and perhaps overshadow other parts of the book,

³ Eckstein (1995), especially Chapter 7 and Conclusion.

and as they have been treated in depth by others,⁴ it is understandable that Baronowski has decided to keep the discussion to a minimum. However, a more detailed overview of scholarship would have been useful, as would a clearer indication of the author's own views on the issues and their implications for his overall conclusions. As it is, most of the chapter (pp. 149–51) is taken up by a discussion of the historicity of Polybius' speeches occasioned by the observation that the Romans are only explicitly labelled 'barbarians' in speeches in the *Histories*.

Chapter 9, 'Polybius on the Future of the Roman Empire', discusses the question of whether or not Polybius thought of the Roman empire as eternal. This is, in my opinion, the best chapter in the book. The question is an interesting one, and the discussion is well observed and nuanced throughout. Baronowski argues sensibly that 'Polybius believed that the power of Rome was founded on her constitution. Conversely, he maintained that the Roman empire would eventually fall when this very constitution broke down as a result of corruption' (p. 154). The cycle of constitutions had only been put on pause by the mixed constitution; even this would eventually decay because of the greed and ambition of the elite. According to Polybius this downward slope has already begun, but the downfall is being slowed down by the mixed constitution and by the fact that the Romans are not abusing their good fortune by mistreating their subjects. The chapter concludes with a discussion of what judgement Polybius expected would be passed by future generations on Rome (p. 162). Baronowski argues convincingly that Polybius expected the usefulness of his work to consist in that it should help them make decisions about how to act towards Rome and how to judge Roman behaviour towards their subjects. Polybius implies that the judgement will be mixed—positive when the Romans behave with temperance and show themselves worthy of their empire, negative when they abuse their power.

The 'Conclusions' is another high point of the book. It begins with a good, concise summary of the conclusions reached by each chapter. Then follows a nuanced and interesting discussion of Polybius' '*distance interieure*' from Rome. Baronowski argues that 'while Polybius on the one hand admired Roman dominion, he simultaneously advised weaker states to limit the increase of Roman power' (p. 169). The analysis includes a discussion of Polybius' actions as Achaean statesman before his deportation, and it is well observed that his reasons for committing Achaean troops to aid Rome in the Third Macedonian War are entirely negative (fear of what might happen if he does not) as opposed to the enthusiasm he shows for helping the Ptolemies against Antiochus IV (p. 171). Baronowski concludes that 'The histori-

⁴ This issue has been amply discussed by Champion (2004). For an overview of scholarship on Fate in Polybius see Hau (2011).

an's deepest loyalty was to his own country' (p. 172). The monograph ends with a defence of Polybius against the accusation—levelled against him by de Sanctis and others—of treachery, intellectual and practical, against his own country. Baronowski makes this point well, and one comes away from the book persuaded that Polybius did indeed admire Roman imperialism (and imperial ambition and power generally) at the same time as preserving his loyalty to Achaea and his intellectual and moral integrity.

Overall, this is a well-researched and thorough examination of Polybius' attitude towards Rome. It will be useful for any student or scholar on Polybius and is bound to be widely read. In some chapters one could have wished for a more nuanced discussion rather than an accumulation of passages to prove an uncontroversial point; in these chapters the main value lies in the handy collection of relevant passages and the overview of previous scholarship. In other chapters more subtle analyses are offered, and these will provide food for thought for any scholar of Polybius. On the whole, the book is a valuable addition to Polybian scholarship.

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Table of Contents

Preface

List of Abbreviations

Introduction

Part I. The Attitude of Intellectuals to Imperial Domination in the Hellenistic Period

1. Greek Philosophers and Roman Imperialism
2. Poets, Prophecies and Roman Imperialism
3. Historians and Roman Imperialism

Part II. Polybius' Attitude to Roman Domination

4. Polybius on Legitimate Expansion
5. Polybius on the Acquisition, Expansion and Preservation of Imperial Rule
6. Polybius on the Enemies of Rome
7. Polybius in the Service of Rome
8. Polybius, Rome, Barbarism and Fate
9. Polybius on the Future of the Roman Empire

Conclusions

Notes

Bibliography

Index of Passages Cited

General Index

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