

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

A PAPER HELLENISTIC KING

Emma Nicholson, *Philip V of Macedon in Polybius' Histories: Politics, History, & Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. viii + 391. Hardback, £117.50/\$140.00. ISBN 978-0-19-286676-9.

Over the last few decades, our understanding of the *Histories* has indeed been significantly enriched. Since the early 1990s, scholars have systematically studied the narrative of Polybius, demonstrating that the Achaean historian, far from being a simple writer with a transparent narrative that allowed direct and unmediated access to the events he recounted, carefully sought to impose his own perspective and viewpoint on readers regarding Roman expansion across the Mediterranean Sea. To achieve this, he employed rather complex narrative resources.¹ Meanwhile, there have also been significant changes in scholarship regarding the Hellenistic empires. Far from the classical historical interpretations of decadent imperial structures incapable of facing Rome, which had relied on often hostile literary sources, of whom Polybius was one, the vitality and complexity of the political and territorial structures of these Hellenistic empires have been recognised in recent decades. This has dramatically changed our historical reading, for instance, of the Seleucid Empire.² However, although Ptolemies and Seleucids have been the focus of recent and very innovative monographs, the Antigonids, in contrast, had remained the Cinderella of Hellenistic history. Only a few classical, predominantly biographical books on some of their kings, such as William Tarn's on Antigonus Gonatas, Frank Walbank's on Philip V, Piero Meloni's on Perseus, and Sylvie Le Bohec's on Antigonus Doson, monopolised the field of studies until very recently.³ Yet, on the one hand, the renewed examination of Macedon guided by Miltiades Hatzopoulos, based on a more robust foundation of archaeological and epigraphic evidence, has captured the interest of scholars in the ancient

¹ An issue observed first by Davidson (1991). See now for a full development of a narrative approach: Miltsios (2013).

² Kosmin (2014).

³ Tarn (1913); Walbank (1940); Meloni (1953); Le Bohec (1993), and also Worthington (2023). See now Waterfield (2021), although this last book is intended more for the general public.

Macedonian imperial core.⁴ On the other hand, a renewed interest in understanding the importance of the Antigonid dynasty in a broader imperial context has allowed for a significant reinterpretation of the figure of Philip V in his age. This is particularly notable in Monica D'Agostini's excellent book focusing on the early years of the young Antigonid king until 212 BC, and in Michael Kleu's study on the naval policy of the same king, but also in a series of recent doctoral dissertations, such as those by Felipe Soza, Pierre Bourrieau, and Charalampos Chrysafis, which have expanded our understanding of the Antigonid dominion strategies in Greece and the Aegean.⁵

In her book *Philip V of Macedon in Polybius' Histories*, Emma Nicholson, for her part, intelligently brings together both lines of historiographical development. This excellent book under review, as its title suggests, is not intended to provide a historical biography of Philip V but serves as a study of the literary and historiographical treatment of the figure of the king in the *Histories*. This has consequences for our current historical understanding of the final stage of the Antigonid Empire and its confrontation with Rome. As the author demonstrates, the emerging image of Philip V in the *Histories* is heavily influenced by the political, historiographical objectives and didactic intentions of a Greek historian, more precisely an Achaean, who sought to make sense in his work of why the powerful Macedonian kingdom had been defeated by Rome, the new emerging hegemonic power in the Mediterranean Sea. This needed to be dramatically assimilated and, ultimately, accepted by Greek readers who were facing a momentous historical change of Mediterranean magnitude.

Therefore, firstly, it can be stated that Nicholson with her current book has effectively contributed to deepening our understanding of the narrative resources employed by Polybius to construct the image of King Philip V. Secondly, the author has thoroughly explored the centrality of the figure of the Antigonid king within Polybius's political and didactic framework. In doing so, she has additionally challenged some of our classical certainties about the supposed ineffective nature of this king, prompting a historical inquiry into the abundant epigraphic and numismatic evidence for Philip V that surfaced in recent decades.

Regarding its structure, the book comprises an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion, along with three very useful maps, as well as an *Index Locorum* and a general index of mentioned names in the work. Nicholson initially composed this text during her doctoral studies at Newcastle University from 2012 to 2015. The present monograph is the outcome of her ongoing and dedicated efforts on both the text and the subject matter.

⁴ Since Hatzopoulos (1996).

⁵ D'Agostini (2019); Kleu (2015); Chrysafis (2017); Bourrieau (2022); Soza (2023).

The chapters of the book have the following titles: Chapter 1 ('Constructing Macedon and the World Through an Achaean Perspective' (27–58)); Chapter 2 ('The Darling of the Greeks Turns into a Tyrant' (59–100)); Chapter 3 ('Philip V and His Greek Allies' (101–63)); Chapter 4 ('Philip and the Romans' (164–227)); Chapter 5 ('A Tragic King' (228–66)); and Chapter 6 ('Woven History, Woven Lives' (267–327)).

In Chapter 1, Nicholson focuses on unveiling the Achaean perspective from which Polybius writes about Macedon and its king. This aspect has been emphasised by historiography in recent years, particularly by John Thornton, who has stressed the political nature of the *Histories* and, in particular, its use by Polybius as a diplomatic tool to negotiate the Greeks' situation in relation to Roman power.⁶ For his part, Nicholson draws attention to the resources that allow Polybius to continually defend the reputation of the Achaean *koinon* and Aratus, and how this directly impacts the judgment of King Philip V's actions in the work: 'Polybius is generally happy to allow and, as we will see, has indeed allowed his patriotism to filter through the fabric of his narrative' (30). In this way, it is understood how and why in the narration of events that occurred between 221 and 215 BC it is possible to discern a clear preference for material involving the Achaean people and why the image of Philip is so openly positive during those early years when the king interacts actively with them.

In Chapter 2, the author examines Polybius's narrative treatment of the alleged worsening relationship between Philip and his Greek allies, the members of the *Symmachia* newly founded by Antigonos Doson.⁷ According to the Achaean historian, this decline of the king is attributable, on the one hand, to the brutality displayed at Thermum (Pol. 5.11.6) during his attack on Aetolia in 218 BC, and, on the other hand, to Philip's actions in Messene in 215 BC (Pol. 7.13.7). Again, Nicholson points out that Polybius judges both actions of the Antigonid king strictly from a Greek, and particularly Achaean, perspective emphasising, distorting, and omitting certain details. It is interesting, above all, how Nicholson seeks to contrast these prejudices of Polybius with the historical objectives that Philip had to strengthen his kingdom—objectives that, of course, did not necessarily have to be shared by the Achaean historian or align with those of his Achaean allies. For instance, the brutality in the treatment of the Aetolian sanctuary in Thermum, though seemingly gratuitous to the historian, can be understood as a logical stern message following the earlier Aetolian attacks on Dium and Dodona. Moreover, rather than harming his

⁶ Particularly Thornton (2020) 137–54, especially regarding the judgment on the Achaean War and the Achaean leaders of the time; also, Moreno Leoni (2017) 131–226, where the use of Achaeans and Aetolians as positive and negative examples of a relationship with a hegemonic power is discussed.

⁷ On the *Symmachia*: Scherberich (2009).

relationship with his Greek allies in the *Symmachia*, this action could and did become a useful resource for the king to acquire loot. Therefore, against Polybius, Nicholson concludes: 'There is more going on in the destruction of Thermum than irrational vengeance ...' (77). Similar considerations apply to the events in Messene, which, for Polybius, 'mark the start of Philip's degeneration in character and conduct' (81). In this case, Messenia had always been a contested territory with strategic importance, and its control was vital to prevent a dangerous coordination of Aetolian and Spartan forces in the Peloponnese. However, as an Achaean, Polybius could not view favourably a hypothetical reinforcement of Macedonian control over the Peloponnese (with strongholds already in Heraea, Lepreum, Orchomenus, and Corinth), as this could jeopardise Achaean hopes of eventually integrating Messene into their *koinon*.

In Chapter 3, the author goes further in her study of the relationship between Philip and his Greek allies. Polybius had characterised the king's behaviour, in his interventions between 215 and 197, as increasingly 'unfaithful and treacherous' (103). However, did Philip V become the tyrant portrayed by Polybius, or was he rather an energetic and dedicated ally until the end of the Second Macedonian War?

As Nicholson demonstrates, it is clear that 'the advocacy of Hellenic unity under the leadership of the Macedonian is more a reflection of Greek aspirations and idealism than a realistic example of Macedonian policy in practice' (106). The Greek, or rather Achaean, lens of Polybius once again has a distorting effect because it presents Philip during his early years leading the *Symmachia* as very concerned about providing security to his Greek allies when, in reality, his actions were always primarily aimed at strengthening his kingdom. In the Polybian narrative, there is also an imbalance in favour of the influence of Aratus and the Achaeans in the events during the young king's early reign, along with a shift in focus of Antigonid actions outside the Peloponnese. The post-215 BC escalation of supposed 'unkingly' behaviour would thus prepare readers of the *Histories* not only to understand the reasons for the fall to Rome in 197 BC but also, perhaps more significantly, given the Achaean perspective of the narrative, to justify the Achaean decision to break the alliance with Philip in 198 BC (140). However, despite Polybius's narrative efforts, Philip's alleged increasing mistreatment of his allies exists solely in the historian's constructed narrative, operating as a strong distorting filter for our historical evaluation of the Antigonid reign and its policy in Greece.

In Chapter 4, the focus is primarily on understanding the place of the character of Philip V in a general historical narrative aimed at making sense of historical change, helping readers assimilate and better understand what happened in the last fifty years. In this sense, Philip, as a character, acquires a certain teleological dimension in the work, providing the key to understanding what will happen later in the narrative precisely because it has already

happened in the events, ‘in terms of explaining the transition of power and the inevitability of such a change’ (165). Indeed, Philip, as the initiator of the conflict with Rome and, in turn, portrayed as the one who planned the final war that would bring destruction to his kingdom in 168 BC under the reign of his son Perseus and the establishment of Roman hegemony, necessarily occupies a central position in the work. Moreover, the contrast between Rome and the Macedonian king helps readers understand and rationalise why Rome was successful and, fundamentally, why Macedon and the eastern Greek states were not.⁸ Above all, in the post-Pydna reality, it guides readers to accept why submitting to Rome seems to be the only sensible path to follow.

Following Craige Champion’s perspective, Nicholson argues that Polybius deploys in his work a rationalisation of historical change and the transition of power in terms of ‘cultural politics’ and through the prism of Hellenism (173).⁹ According to the author’s argument, this is achieved by producing a narrative that progressively assimilates the Romans to Hellenism and, in parallel, alienates Macedon towards Barbarism. Although Philip V is left in a situation of cultural ambiguity—what Champion terms ‘politics of cultural indeterminacy’¹⁰—the information provided by the narrative guides readers to understand this shift in Philip’s behaviour and character from kingship to tyranny and towards Barbarism: ‘During the narrative, therefore, it becomes right for the Romans, as the more Hellenic identity, to defeat Philip, a barbaric tyrant ...’ (224). Thus, Nicholson argues that in the events between 215 and 204 BC, there is a shift of the king towards tyranny and Barbarism, ‘from that of an ally of the Greeks to an enemy, and from Hellenic reason to barbaric irrationality, passion, and savagery’ (194).

Between 203 and 200 BC, on the other hand, Philip reaches the peak of his villainy in the *Histories* and receives the harshest censure from the historian (197). Philip is judged again according to Greek categories, always from a Greek perspective. However, it is interesting that, ultimately, the final fall of Macedon is never solely attributed to the decline in the king’s moral character but also to the comparative weakness of his *politeia*, of monarchy as a political regime, not only in Macedon but also in the rest of the eastern Mediterranean at the time of the confrontation with Rome.

In Chapter 5, the few Polybian fragments that deal with the last years of Philip V (183–179 BC) are studied, which involves investigating how Polybius narratively constructed the end of the king by resorting to tragic imagery, but

⁸ Recently, Juan Pablo Prieto Iommi (forthcoming) has studied some elements in the description of the Macedonian ritual *Xanthika*, showing that its depiction in Polybius is linked to the Macedonian decline and the necessary understanding of the historical change towards the new hegemony for Polybius’ Greek readers.

⁹ Champion (2004).

¹⁰ Champion (2004) 4–10.

not as a literary device per se, 'but also appropriate in preserving the didactic quality of his portrayal of Philip' (233). Obviously, it is a contingent experience, in which multiple actors and realities from a world where Polybius's *symplokē* openly justifies the need for a universal history are intertwined. However, there is also room for Polybius's teleological vision to operate. Certainly, the Polybian narrative was necessarily influenced by hindsight knowledge of what ultimately had happened to the king. This knowledge is already present from the moment the historian begins to narrate. Thus, Polybius manages to provide coherence and meaning to the events recounted. Ultimately, didactics and morality are central and, as Nicholson notes, the entire life of Philip, his career, must be seen as a warning and lesson for the readers.

Finally, in Chapter 6, Nicholson significantly explores how Polybius managed to weave into his work, which deals with universal events, biographical or 'proto-biographical' (274) approaches to the lives of great men 'to illustrate how everything and everyone was connected in bringing about the rise of Rome' (269), while turning them into examples of lives to be emulated for young leaders. Moreover, by weaving these individual lives together with events that occurred in different Mediterranean settings, a complex narrative was created with 'a more realistic impression of world affairs as complicated, interdependent, and unpredictable ...' (285). Nicholson shows, then, how the lives and actions of great leaders, kings in general, but also of important generals like Hannibal Barca, are woven by the historian into a broader universal history to provide his readers with a sense of complexity, simultaneity, and synchronicity, impressing upon them that they are facing inextricably connected realities. This would distinguish, for example, Polybius's approach from that of Theopompus, the fourth-century BC Greek historian whom he harshly criticises for shifting the focus of his history from Greece to the life of Philip II (Pol. 8.11.3-4). Instead, the Achaean historian integrates the life of Philip V into a broader history covering the entire Mediterranean, 'but subsumed into the larger picture of events' of a universal history (284).

But not only Philip V captures Polybius's attention; other Hellenistic kings in his narration of the transition from the third to the second century BC also appear in the work, although not with as much centrality as the Antigonid king. The author's conclusion is interesting as it highlights an apparent perception of the fragility of monarchy as a simple *politeia*, at least in the face of Rome, a theme that Nicholson had already touched upon earlier in the book.¹¹ Indeed, after reviewing the portraits of different Ptolemaic, Seleucid, and Antigonid kings, the author notes that their brief treatments nonetheless serve 'to conceptualize these three kingdoms as a trio representing the inadequate and disappointing nature of monarchy in the face of Roman

¹¹ Troiani (1979).

power' (314). Monarchy thus appears as an ineffective form of government in the early second century, incapable in its decline and vulnerability of facing Rome.

Why do Macedon, and especially Philip V, have such centrality in the work? This would undoubtedly be the result of their relationships with the Achaeans, but also because the Antigonid was the first significant Hellenistic empire that the Romans faced in their eastward expansion. Additionally, from Polybius's Greek perspective and that of the majority of his readers, Macedon was considered the most important actor: 'This extra attention reflects the great importance Macedon held in Greek political and cultural affairs, even after the kingdom's destruction, and highlights the inherent Greek perspective of the work and its author' (327).

Emma Nicholson has unquestionably written an excellent and engaging book. It is well informed, drawing from both classical and more recent scholarship, well written, and well argued, making it highly convincing in its main ideas. The contribution to Polybian scholarship is certainly substantial. There are only a few points, however, with which this reviewer does not agree or, at least, on which different interpretations, more nuanced than those proposed by the author, might be considered. For instance, her adherence to the romantic thesis of Polybius, envisioning him writing and revising his work until his last days, might need to be reconsidered in light of Paul Veyne's suggestion on this matter (6).¹² Also, the too unrestricted application in the book of the Hellenism/Barbarism polarity as the main, and at times the only, prism for understanding Polybius's ambivalent attitudes towards various peoples, individuals, and regimes, I believe, risks historical oversimplification. For example, I do not believe that Apelles, the Antigonid courtier, can be reduced to a 'barbaric threat' within the court from the historian's perspective (189). Instead, he could be seen indeed as a dissolving element inherent in the weakness of the kingdom's *politeia* and its court structure, perfectly rationalisable in political terms by the historian. In any case, the application of the Barbarism/Hellenism polarity seems at times excessive, as when the author refers to 'the Aetolians, semi-Greeks in Polybius' work' (189). While it is clear that the Achaean historian feels no sympathy for this people, blaming them for the entry of the Romans into Greece due to their alliance treaty, Polybius not only never openly barbarises them but, in the only direct allusion preserved in the work, issued by the historian-narrator himself, it is stated that Alexander of Aetolia was the richest 'Greek' (Pol. 21.26.9).¹³ This provides enough evidence of a general, although possibly critical, inclusion of the Aetolians within Hellenism. On another note, Nicholson's assertion about the

¹² Veyne (1996) 273–4; Heller (2011) 292 n. 15.

¹³ Moreno Leoni (2017) 185–6.

universal dominion aspirations attributed to Philip by Polybius being 'not historically accurate' or, at least, as a rhetorical exaggeration by the historian (238–9), I believe should be nuanced. The idea of dominion over all, or the known world, became central to the ideological framework shared by every Hellenistic *basileus*, including those of the Antigonid house, as this notion referred to a personal concept of power, ideally universal, that fuelled their imperial model. This language and royal imagery linked different kings and legitimised their aspirations, even if it did not materialise in practice, as it referred to the models of Alexander the Great and also the Near Eastern rulers.¹⁴

On the other hand, although the book's editing is of excellent quality, as Oxford University Press typically provides, and only a few negligible typos in the Greek text could be mentioned, I do think it would be useful to highlight just a few small historical errors that could be corrected in a subsequent edition of the text. In this regard, it is stated that 'Thasos was also not the only island of the Cyclades to be seized' (139), but Thasos is not part of that archipelago. When mentioning the individual cities of the Achaean *koinon* that refused to break the alliance with Philip V in 198 BC, 'Corinth, Megalopolis, Dyme, and Argos' are listed (149), but Corinth was not a member of the *koinon* at that time. Also, 'The Megalopolitans, ... when defeated by the Spartans, had been restored to their homes by Doson in 226 BC' (153), but the correct date of restoration would be 223 BC. 'The Achaeans' decision to defect in 197 BC', when in reality, this decision occurred the previous year, in 198 BC (again, 203; cf. 206, where, in fact, the correct date is provided). Athens is mentioned among Greek allies betraying Philip, but the Athenians had remained neutral in wars until the Second Macedonian War (223; cf. Pol. 5.106.6–8).¹⁵ On page 3, the end of the 'conflict between Epirus and the Achaean League' is mentioned, but the author probably confuses Epirus with Sparta. 'Lucius Aemilianus Paullus' is used instead of the correct form 'Lucius Aemilius Paullus' (6). Aratus' advice to Philip is mentioned 'in the early part of his reign (221–212 BC)', but the Sicyonian leader would have died the previous year (213 BC).

All of these are only very minor details, many of them debatable and open to different interpretations, which do not diminish the value of an important book. Nicholson has provided decisive evidence to better understand the narrative and historiographical procedures of Polybius, while also contributing to modifying certain classical historical conceptions about Philip V and his

¹⁴ Martin Parra (2022).

¹⁵ Ultimately, see: Habicht (2006) 206–14.

relations with the Greek world. Undoubtedly, *Philip V of Macedon in Polybius' Histories* will become irreplaceable reading in the coming years, adding a valuable contribution to a growing bibliography on the historian published in recent years.¹⁶

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¹⁶ Just to mention the books published in recent years: Loehr (2024); Miltisios (2023); Battistoni (2022); Scherr–Gronau–Saracino (2022); Moore (2020); Thornton (2020); Zecchini (2018); Miltisios and Tamiolaki (2018); Sebastiani (2017); Moreno Leoni (2017). Additionally, a Landmark edition by Craige Champion and a Brill's Companion edited by Felix Maier and Bruce Gibson dedicated to the Achaean historian are about to be published.

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