

## POLYBIUS FOR THE COMMON READER

Brian McGing, *Polybius' Histories* (Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature). New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xvi + 286. ISBN 978-0-19-531032-0 (hb), \$74.00/£45.00; 978-0-19-531033-7 (pb), \$18.95/£13.00.

Polybius, *The Histories*, a new translation by Robin Waterfield with an introduction and notes by Brian McGing (Oxford World's Classics). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xlvi + 560. ISBN 978-0-19-953470-8 (pb). £11.99/\$15.95.

The Editors' Foreword to Brian McGing's *Polybius' Histories* states that the Oxford Approaches to Classical Literature aims to provide 'a clear, lively, and reliable account based on the most up-to-date scholarship without dwelling on minutiae that are likely to distract or confuse the reader' (p. v). McGing's (henceforth McG.) monograph lives up to this purpose statement admirably.

The book has an Introduction, which both explains why Polybius' *Histories* is usually only read by a small body of Classicist experts and manages to show convincingly why this is a shame. It then falls into five chapters: 1. Contents and Organization of the Work; 2. The Historian's Task; 3. Art and History: The Narrative of Books 4 and 5; 4. The Historian as Homeric Hero; and 5. The Political Theorizing of Book 6. They are followed by an epilogue sub-titled 'Into the Future' about the reception of Polybius from antiquity until today. Throughout, the book is clearly aimed at the general reader rather than the expert: the style is lively and accessible, and the text is uncluttered by references and footnotes, with a useful 'Further Reading' section at the end of each chapter. Moreover, all quotations are in translation only. This latter decision, although bound to be popular with (or perhaps unnoticed by?) non-Classical readers, will alienate some academic readers and is perhaps sending a wrong signal to the cohorts of undergraduate Classics students who will no doubt soon be using the book.

In addition to the text the book contains two very clear maps (one of Greece, one of the Mediterranean), an appendix offering an excellent 16-page outline of the *Histories*, a fairly short bibliography, which contains all the most important works on Polybius as well as many others on topics

touched on in the book, and a list of ‘Prominent Persons’, both in Polybius’ narrative and otherwise mentioned in the monograph. All of this extra material will be very helpful for the reader new to Polybius (and perhaps to Classics), and the outline of the *Histories* will also be a useful tool for more seasoned scholars using passages of that work in their research.

The five chapters all do pretty much what it says on the tin. The least successful is Chapter 1, probably because this is the one with the broadest scope, and where McG. has consequently had to compromise the most while walking the thin line between oversimplifying and providing too much information. Any judgement on such a matter is necessarily subjective, but for my taste there is too much detailed information in the sections on ‘Polybius’ Standard Procedure’ (pp. 18–20) and ‘Programmatic Statements’ (pp. 20–26), whereas the section on ‘Other Narrative Pauses’ (pp. 38–44) feels like a hotchpotch of examples of different kinds of narrative pauses without enough interpretative comments or explicit theoretical framework to make the point of the section clear. In the section ‘Character Sketches’ (pp. 26–38) McG. gives a lot of weight to the Homeric tradition of character description, but says hardly anything about the practices of Polybius’ historiographical predecessors, which I think slightly skews the picture of Polybius’ place in Greek historiography. These are all minor quibbles, though; it is clearly impossible to include everything in such an introductory chapter, and different scholars have different priorities.

Polybius’ predecessors get their own section at the beginning of Chapter 2 (pp. 52–66). Sensibly for a book aimed at non-specialist readers it focuses on the three extant classical historiographers and it has sensible things to say about Polybius’ debt to them. It would have been nice to see more of an indication that what survives is only the tip of the iceberg of an enormous body of historiographical material linking Polybius with his classical predecessors, but this is difficult to do without getting into complex discussion of fragmentary works that might well frighten off the uninitiated. After this section Chapter 2 has intelligent and useful things to say about Polybius’ purpose and intended readership, an excellent discussion of his famous analysis of the causes of the Second Punic War, and a good treatment of geography, polemics and speeches in the *Histories*.

Chapter 3 manages to use basic narratological concepts (focalisation, narrator–narratee, proleptic and analeptic statements, temporal displacement) to analyse Polybius without making the approach seem anything but straightforward and natural. This works well as sort of a ‘light’ introduction to narratology, and I certainly cannot imagine any readers unfamiliar with this approach objecting to this chapter on account of its theoretical complexity. (I would personally object to the direct identifications Polybius = narrator and we, the readers = narratee, but the jury is still out on this par-

ticular issue with regard to ancient historiography). A slightly more explicit introduction of the use of narratology in scholarship on ancient historiography, akin to what Simon Hornblower did in his 1994 article on a narratological approach to Thucydides,<sup>1</sup> would have been useful, but has probably been consciously avoided for fear of frightening away readers unused to explicit use of theory. For those interested, the standard works on narratology appear under ‘Further Reading’, although Hornblower’s article is conspicuous by its absence (which is particularly odd as Rood’s 1998 monograph *Thucydides: Narrative and Explanation* figures). For the reader new to Classics, or to reading ancient historiography as anything but a convenient source for ancient history, this chapter is an excellent introduction to the value of a narrative approach to the genre (especially the excellent conclusion pp. 126–7), and the methodology commonly used. For more experienced readers it will feel patronisingly over-detailed.

Chapter 4 is my favourite chapter in the book. It discusses Polybius’ life, but rather than giving a traditional biographical interpretation of the *Histories* on a basis of a birth-to-death account of Polybius’ life it focuses from the beginning on the history of the age—mainly the relationship between Rome and Greece and their changing policies towards each other—and considers Polybius’ life on this background. It concludes with 20 pages on the much-debated topic of Polybius’ personal views on Rome and its conquest of Greece and the Hellenistic kingdoms. Refreshingly, about half of this discussion centres on Polybius’ moral and political evaluation not of Rome, but of Greece, Macedon, Seleucia, and Egypt; the second half focuses more traditionally on his evaluation of Rome, sub-divided into ‘Roman Decline?’ and ‘The Nature of Roman Rule after 167 BCE. McG. has many intelligent things to say about Polybius’ views of both Rome and the Greek world, some of them provocative, and this section of the book will be useful and interesting for the Polybian novice and the involved scholar alike.

Chapter 5 is also very good. It begins with a brief, clear summary of Polybius’ *anakyklosis* theory, then continues to summarise Polybius’ account of the mixed constitution of Rome and discuss its validity as a description of the Roman reality, before looking for its application elsewhere in the *Histories*. McG. offers an overall positive reading of Polybius here, arguing that his mixed constitution is a valid description of the Roman political system, that it fits into the *anakyklosis* rather than contradicts it, and that the *anakyklosis* can be seen at work in numerous places throughout the *Histories*, but that Polybius ‘was simply too practical a thinker to feel it necessary to fit all the details of history into a theoretical straitjacket’ (p. 194). In every case McG.

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Narratology and Narrative Techniques in Thucydides’, in id., ed., *Greek Historiography* (Oxford 1994) 131–66.

identifies the thought of decline as central to Polybius' political theorizing. The chapter ends, a bit incongruously, with a section on 'Fate/chance (*Tychê*)' in Polybius. Here McG. sets out the time-honoured problem of Polybius' view of *tyché* and provides his own very sensible and largely rhetorical explanation for it. This chapter will be eminently useful for first-time readers of Polybius and even has much to say to more seasoned Polybianists. If anything can be criticised, it is the tendency to downplay the problems and inconsistencies in Polybius' account, but this practice will no doubt smooth the road for novice readers, and is in any case perhaps often closer to the way that the practical-minded Polybius wanted to be read: with an application of common sense and reasonable intelligence rather than with the mercilessly scrutinising eye of a 20th- or 21st-century philosopher.

The Epilogue traces the reception of Polybius from his own time until today, pausing on the way to offer an extended comparison of a passage from Polybius with its derived passage in Livy and draw some astute conclusions about what this sort of exercise can tell us about Polybius' interests and working methods. The section on Constantinople (pp. 209–11) gives an admirably clear overview of the oldest surviving Polybian manuscripts and how they seem to have come into being. The following section, on Polybius' influence on the modern world (pp. 212–22), particularly on the American Constitution, is excellent for giving the reader a glimpse of the contemporary relevance of this ancient author. Fascinatingly, the chapter (and book) ends with a brief mention of renewed use of Polybius by 21st-century political theorists, something that is likely to be news even to scholars who regularly work on this often neglected author.

Overall, this book sets out all main areas of Polybian scholarship well and on the whole strikes a good balance between summarizing Polybius, explaining the problems debated by scholars, and expressing the author's own views on both. It is an excellent introduction to Polybius for any reader unfamiliar with him and also contains some arguments of interest for Polybian scholars.

\*

The introduction to the Oxford World's Classics translation of Polybius' *Histories* is recognisably written by the same author as the monograph just reviewed: it goes through many of the same topics under similar headings and, apart from the historical overview right at the beginning of the period covered by the *Histories*, reads like an abbreviated version of the book. This is not a bad thing: such an abbreviated version is exactly what readers of the translation are likely to need, and if they want further information, they can

pick up the monograph or any other work included in the ‘further reading’ section.

Any single-volume translation of the *Histories* will necessarily have to be selective. In this case the decision has been to include the complete Books (1-5) in full as well as all the fragments of Books 6 and 12 because of their intrinsic interest. This is a very sensible decision, which places Polybius and his work in focus, in contrast with the 1979 Penguin edition, which has an entirely historical focus (clearly signalled by its title, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*) and contains excerpts from across the *Histories* making the already fragmentary text seem even more incoherent than it is.

Waterfield’s translation is accompanied by helpful year numbers in the margin. There are also three very clear maps (Italy, Greece, and the Mediterranean) and an extremely concise timeline (one and one-half pages) of events mentioned by Polybius from 390 to 146 BCE. At the back there are 30 pages of largely historical ‘Explanatory Notes’, which will be of great help to the reader unfamiliar with ancient history, but contain little of interest for the scholar. This is followed by four and a half pages of ‘Textual Notes’, which are, on the contrary, only interesting for someone likely to use the translation as a research tool. Finally there is a glossary and a copious index of proper names.

The translation itself is, as one would expect from Waterfield, lively, idiomatic, and sensitive to Polybian speech-patterns. The guiding principle has been readability (as is explained in the ‘Translator’s Note’), but by retaining such arch-Polybian mannerisms as frequent rhetorical questions and repeated hendiadyses it still conveys the feeling that one is reading an author with a distinct, and distinctly un-contemporary, style. It is, in short, a very successful and enjoyable translation, which serves 21st-century readers immeasurably better than its predecessors, and which is bound to gain popularity quickly with teachers and students alike.

*University of Glasgow*

LISA IRENE HAU  
lisa.hau@glasgow.ac.uk