

ON THE TRANSLATION OF POLYBIUS 1.1.2*

Abstract. This paper deals with the meaning of the words *πάντες ὡς ἔπος εἶπεν ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει κέχρηται τούτῳ* in the proem to Polybius' *Histories* (1.1.2). Unlike previous translations, the reading should be: 'all of them [sc. the previous historians], from beginning to end, so to speak, made use of it [sc. praised history]'. In particular, *ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει* should be linked to *πάντες*, and, together with it, referred to the insistence with which previous historians addressed the praise of history in their historical narratives, and to the community of earlier historians at whom Polybius looks back, albeit in a cursory way.

In the proem to his *Histories*, Polybius states (1.1.1–3) that his predecessors praised history first because—so they said—the knowledge of the past enables one to correct his conduct; second, because the study of history is the perfect training for political action; and third, because knowing the vicissitudes of others helps withstand the vicissitudes of fortune.

Polybius has no objections. Indeed, he maintains that it is not necessary to argue on such topics further, since previous historians have already addressed them. He states (1.1.2):

ἐπεὶ δ' οὐ τινὲς οὐδ' ἐπὶ ποσόν, ἀλλὰ πάντες ὡς ἔπος εἶπεν ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει κέχρηται τούτῳ, φάσκοντες ἀληθινωτάτην μὲν εἶναι παιδείαν καὶ γυμνασίαν πρὸς τὰς πολιτικὰς πράξεις τὴν ἐκ τῆς ἱστορίας μάθησιν ...

Polybius is clearly impatient with the insistence shown by his predecessors in dealing with the topics of the praise of history. Much less clear, however, is the meaning of his words, *πάντες ὡς ἔπος εἶπεν ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει κέχρηται τούτῳ*. The interpretation of this passage has challenged modern scholars, who have offered conflicting translations:

They [sc. my predecessors] *have all begun and ended, so to speak, by enlarging on this theme:* asserting again and again that the study of History is in the truest sense an education, and a training for political life (...).¹

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¹ Shuckburgh (1889) 1.

But *all historians, one may say without exception*, and in no halfhearted manner, *but making this the beginning and end of their labor*, have impressed on us that the soundest education and training for a life of active politics is the study of History (...).²

Mais, puisqu'ils ne sont pas seulement quelques-uns à *avoir fait cet éloge de temps à autre*, mais *tous autant dire, en commençant et en finissant*, qui déclarent que l'école et l'apprentissage le plus vrai de l'action politique est le savoir tiré de l'histoire (...).³

But in truth *all historians without exception, one may say, have made this claim the be-all and end-all of their work*: namely that the study of history is at once an education in the truest sense and a training for a political career, (...).⁴

Ma poiché non solo alcuni, né in modo limitato, ma *tutti, per così dire, hanno fatto di questo l'inizio e la conclusione*, ribadendo che la più autentica educazione e il più autentico addestramento all'azione politica è l'apprendimento tratto dalla storia (...).⁵

But in fact it is hardly an exaggeration to say that *all of my predecessors* (not just a few) *have made this central to their work* (not just a side issue), by claiming not only that there is no more authentic way to prepare and train oneself for political life than by studying history, but also (...).⁶

What does Polybius mean? Is he saying that his predecessors praised history and/or emphasised history's educational merits at both the beginning and the conclusion of their own works? Is he suggesting that historians considered the praise of history and/or the education history imparts as the origin and end of their own work, that is, as the essence of their historical writing? Or does Polybius mean something else, different from these two recurrent interpretations?

To address these questions, we shall try to understand first, to what the lemma *τούτω* refers and second, what the meaning of *ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει* is, the very expression that holds the key to comprehending the entire passage.

² Paton (2010) 3.

³ Pédech (1969) 18.

⁴ Scott-Kilvert (1979) 41.

⁵ Musti (2001) 193.

⁶ Waterfield (2010) 1.

The broader context of Pol. 1.1.1–3 reads (my translation):

If it had happened to my predecessors, who recorded actions, to leave out the praise of history itself (*τὸν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς τῆς ἱστορίας ἔπαινον*), it would have been perhaps necessary to urge everyone to choose and appreciate historical writing, because no better correction exists for men than the knowledge of past actions (*διὰ τὸ μηδεμίαν ἑτοιμοτέραν εἶναι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις διόρθωσιν τῆς τῶν προγεγενημένων πράξεων ἐπιστήμης*). But since not a few historians, nor with limitations, but all of them, so to speak, *ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλει κέχρηνται τούτῳ*, claiming (*φάσκοντες*) that the study of history is the most trustworthy education and training for active politics, and also that the only and most effective teacher to withstand the vicissitudes of fortune with strength is the knowledge of the vicissitudes of others, it is clear that no one, least of all I, could think to repeat things that have already been well said by many.

It would appear that the lemma *τούτῳ* refers to the idea of ‘praise of history’ (*τὸν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς τῆς ἱστορίας ἔπαινον*), but also to the clause, ‘because no better correction exists for men than the knowledge of past actions’ (*διὰ τὸ ... ἐπιστήμης*). It is far less likely that *τούτῳ* refers to the material introduced by *φάσκοντες*, i.e. ‘that the study of history is the most trustworthy education and training for active politics, and also that the only and most effective teacher to withstand the vicissitudes of fortune with strength is the knowledge of the vicissitudes of others’: as *φάσκοντες* suggests, this material is rather an explanation of the *διόρθωσις* (‘correction’) provided by history.

The reading here suggested is not without consequences: the arguments for the praise of history are basically two, namely ‘the study of history is the most trustworthy education and training for active politics’ (*ἀληθινωτάτην μὲν εἶναι παιδείαν καὶ γυμνασίαν πρὸς τὰς πολιτικὰς πράξεις τὴν ἐκ τῆς ἱστορίας μάθησιν*) and ‘the only and most effective teacher to withstand the vicissitudes of fortune with strength is the knowledge of the vicissitudes of others’ (*ἐναργεστάτην δὲ καὶ μόνην διδάσκαλον τοῦ δύνασθαι τὰς τῆς τύχης μεταβολὰς γενναίως ὑποφέρειν τὴν τῶν ἀλλοτρίων περιπετειῶν ὑπόμνησιν*). The first argument, ‘because no better correction exists for men than the knowledge of past actions’ (*διὰ τὸ ... ἐπιστήμης*), is a general premise for what follows. Thus, *κέχρηνται τούτῳ* (literally, ‘made use of it’) is to be understood as either ‘[my predecessors] praised history’ or ‘[my predecessors] emphasised that no better correction exists for men than the knowledge of past actions’, and we are not forced to choose one argument over the other as if they were mutually exclusive. If we are to trust Pol. 1.1.1,

the insistence on the *διόρθωσις* ('correction') provided by history is itself an expression of praise for history; therefore, it is not a mistake to translate *κέχρηται τούτῳ*, for sake of simplicity, as 'praised history'.

The issue of the exact meaning of *ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλει* is far more complicated, and requires a preliminary survey of Johannes Schweighäuser's notes in his authoritative commentary on Polybius. The German philologist translates the Greek *ἀλλὰ πάντες* [sc. *οἱ πρὸ ἡμῶν ἀναγράφοντες*] *ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλει κέχρηται τούτῳ* as follows: 'Sed omnes [sc. the historians] prope dixerim hoc et exordio scribendi et exitu usi sunt.' Schweighäuser's rendering is rather literal ('But everyone, I would almost say, used this [sc. the praise of history] both at the beginning and at the end of their writing', trans. mine), but the philologist himself cautions that *ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλει* is a proverbial expression, that is to say, it should not be understood literally. As he remarks: 'Proverbialiter dictum monuit Casaub(onus) ut *θρυλλεῖν ἄνω κάτω*, *ad significandam crebram rei usurpationem*' ('Casaubon warned that [the expression] is said proverbially, as the Greek *θρυλλεῖν ἄνω κάτω* [to repeat over and over], to mean an excessive exploitation of the argument', trans. mine).⁷ *Crebram rei usurpationem* makes clear that, in Casaubon and Schweighäuser's reading, Polybius' use of *ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλει* underscores how verbose and repetitive previous historians were by addressing the topic of the praise of history.

That *ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλει* is a proverbial expression is remarked also by Carl Wunderer, who establishes a connection between *ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλει* in Pol. 1.1.2 and *ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος* in Pol. 6.6.7:

ἐξ ὧν ὑπογίνεται τις ἔννοια παρ' ἐκάστῳ τῆς τοῦ καθήκοντος δυνάμεως καὶ θεωρίας ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος δικαιοσύνης.

From all this there arises in everyone a notion of the meaning and theory of duty, which is the *beginning and end* of justice.⁸

Upon recalling an epic ancestry, Wunderer observes: 'Diese Verbindung der Anfangs—und Endpunkte einer Handlung zur Bezeichnung der ganzen Thätigkeit entstammt den alten Gebeten' (quotations from Homer and Hesiod follow).⁹ Wunderer's connection of Pol. 1.1.2 with Pol. 6.6.7 suggests that if, in the latter occurrence, *ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος δικαιοσύνης* is used to mean the 'wholeness' of the concept of justice, namely its essence, then in 1.1.2,

⁷ Schweighäuser (1792) 117 (emphasis added).

⁸ Paton (2011) 305, 307.

⁹ Wunderer (1898) 73–4.

ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει is used, not dissimilarly, to qualify the historical work as a whole, and refers to its entirety and essence. In short, Polybius argues that historians before him considered the praise of history to be the pinnacle, the essence of their historical work.

Casaubon/Schweighäuser's and Wunderer's remarks lead to different conclusions. A third interpretation, however, should also be considered. Unaware of Casaubon/Schweighäuser's and Wunderer's observations on the proverbial meaning of *ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει*, Richard Laqueur translates Pol. 1.1.2 as follows: 'Da nun aber alle diese Tatsachen (sc. die Prieße der Geschichtswissenschaft) zu Begin und zu Ende hervorheben (sc. die früheren Historiker)'.¹⁰ According to Laqueur, *ἀρχῆ* and *τέλει* are local adverbs, and the expression, *ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει* should thus be understood literally: prior to Polybius, historians started and concluded their own work with a praise of history.

Laqueur's reading requires a closer look. If Polybius meant to say that historians before him started and concluded their own work with a praise of history—as Laqueur maintains—we ought to imagine historical writing as constructed in a rather particular and questionable circular structure. As a matter of fact, it is not true that every ancient historical work began with a praise of history.¹¹ But let us assume that Polybius is simply generalizing and that in fact, he means that many historians—not all of them—began their works by praising history. If such a statement were acceptable, textual evidence would clearly disprove the claim that historians praised history also at the conclusion of their works.

Following this line of reasoning, there is no doubt that Laqueur's interpretation has to be dismissed. And indeed it was, first by Kurt Lorenz, who stresses 'die qualitative Wertung' of *ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει*, and translates, 'fast alle (sc. die Historiker) haben dies zum Α und Ω (ihrer Auffassung) gemacht';¹² then, by Frank Walbank, who, upon endorsing Lorenz's view, comments on *ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει κέχρηται τούτῳ* as follows: 'The sense is not local (so Laqueur, 257), but qualitative: "they make this the be-all and end-all of their work."¹³ According to Lorenz and Walbank, whose interpretations are rooted in Wunderer's earlier observations, Polybius intends to say that previous historians considered the praise of history (or the education that history provides) as the most important characteristic of their work.

¹⁰ Laqueur (1913) 257–8.

¹¹ It suffices to look at Herodotus' and Thucydides' proems.

¹² Lorenz (1931) 76 n. 33.

¹³ Walbank (1957) 39.

Although Lorenz and Walbank's view is more convincing than Laqueur's, it also lends itself to some objections. First, in Pol. 6.6.7, ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος is followed by the genitive δικαιοσύνης; thus, we have no doubt that the idea of 'thoroughness' is referred to that of 'justice'. In Pol. 1.1.2, by contrast, ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλει occurs without any further specification: in this case, what the expression refers to is, unquestionably, much more vague. Second, we should consider the broader argument (1.1.1–3) in which ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλει appears: Polybius' words suggest a critique of his predecessors' ταυτολογεῖν, i.e. their tendency to repeat always the same contents, rather than a mere acknowledgement of their consideration that the praise of history (or the education that history provides) is the core of their work. Indeed Polybius, concluding his argument, says in 1.1.3 (my translation):

... δῆλον ὡς οὐδενὶ μὲν ἂν δόξαι καθήκειν περὶ τῶν καλῶς καὶ πολλοῖς εἰρημένων ταυτολογεῖν, ἥκιστα δ' ἡμῖν.

... it is clear that no one, least of all I, could think to repeat things that have already been well said by many.

As we can see, it is the ταυτολογεῖν or repetitiveness of his predecessors that Polybius wants to avoid. Third, we wonder whether ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλει should be read in conjunction with κέχρηται [sc. οἱ πρὸ ἡμῶν ἀναγράφοντες] τούτῳ, as Lorenz, Walbank and most of the modern translators of Pol. 1.1.2 maintain, rather than πάντες ὡς ἔπος εἶπεῖν. This last point is mainly philological, and merits closer consideration. To address it, it is necessary to examine preliminarily Polybius' use of the parenthetical words ὡς ἔπος εἶπεῖν ('so to speak').

In Pol. 8.10.10, we read:

ἅπαντες δ', ὡς ἔπος εἶπεῖν, βασιλικοὶ καὶ ταῖς μεγαλοψυχίαις καὶ ταῖς σωφροσύναις καὶ ταῖς τόλμαις ἀπέβησαν.

In speaking of the greatness of the generals of Philip II and Alexander the Great, Polybius maintains that each of them was regal, i.e., like a king, for magnanimity, temperance and courage. The parenthetical words, ὡς ἔπος εἶπεῖν do not refer only to ἅπαντες, as if Polybius said 'almost all were regal for magnanimity, temperance and courage'; clearly, ὡς ἔπος εἶπεῖν refers both to ἅπαντες and βασιλικοί: 'all were regal, so to speak, for magnanimity, temperance and courage'. In Polybius' argument, 'all' and 'regal' are not separated but rather form a unit, to which 'so to speak' refers. Judging from the remaining occurrences of ὡς ἔπος εἶπεῖν in Polybius' work, what we note

in 8.10.10 appears to be a common technique in his style; in most cases, *ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν* is placed between two reciprocally linked terms, and serves as a ‘bridge’ connecting two terms which form a conceptual unit.¹⁴

Our survey of the occurrences of *ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν* in Polybius’ work suggests that in 1.1.2, in line with Polybius’ style, we should interpret *ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει* in conjunction with *πάντες*. In order to understand the meaning of *πάντες, ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει*, we shall reconsider Polybius’ words within their larger syntactical context:

ἐπεὶ δ’ οὐ τινὲς οὐδ’ ἐπὶ ποσόν, ἀλλὰ πάντες ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει κέχρηται τούτῳ, φάσκοντες ἀληθινωτάτην μὲν εἶναι παιδείαν καὶ γυμνασίαν πρὸς τὰς πολιτικὰς πράξεις τὴν ἐκ τῆς ἱστορίας μάθησιν ...

One could note that *πάντες, ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει* parallels *οὐ τινὲς οὐδ’ ἐπὶ ποσόν*: as *οὐ τινὲς* and *οὐδ’ ἐπὶ ποσόν* form a unit (‘not a few historians, nor with limitations’), so do *πάντες* and *ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει*. The unit that they thus form reinforces the litotes *οὐ τινὲς οὐδ’ ἐπὶ ποσόν*, or, in other words, it stands in opposition with *τινὲς, ἐπὶ ποσόν*. As for the parenthetical words *ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν*, they indicate that *πάντες, ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει* is a saying. Therefore a translation of the entire sentence could read as follows:

But since not a few historians, nor with limitations, but all of them, *from beginning to end*, so to speak, made use of it [sc. praised history] ...

‘From beginning to end’ (*ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει*) simultaneously refers to the insistence with which, as Casaubon and Schweighäuser suggested, previous historians addressed the praise of history in their historical narratives (*ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει ὁρροσες ἐπὶ ποσόν*), and to the community of earlier historians at whom Polybius looks back, albeit in a cursory way (*ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει completes πάντες*).

Our reading reveals some rhetorical features characterising Polybius’ proem: an ascending climax is now apparent, *οὐ τινὲς οὐδ’ ἐπὶ ποσόν ... ἀλλὰ πάντες ... ἀρχῆ καὶ τέλει*, while the entire phrase is formally balanced, displaying a careful symmetrical disposition of the terms:

¹⁴ See Pol. 1.64.3: *σχεδὸν δ’ ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ἄγνωστον*; 3.100.8: *τῶν δὲ συναγόντων ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ἀναριθμήτων*; 5.33.7: *καὶ πᾶσι κοινὸν ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν τοῖς μόνον τολμῶν δυναμένους ὑπάρχει*; 6.17.3: *σχεδὸν ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν πάντας*; 6.58.7: *πάντων δ’ ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ἐστερημένοι τότε τῶν συμμάχων*; 12.25c.5: *σχεδὸν ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ἴδοι τις ἄν.*

ἐπεὶ δ' οὐ τινές ~ ἀλλὰ πάντες
οὐδ' ἐπὶ ποσόν ~ ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλει

While πάντες stands opposed to τινές, ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλει counters ἐπὶ ποσόν. Such a structure is not by chance.

In conclusion, ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλει refers neither to the beginning and end of historical works, nor to historians' particular consideration of the praise of history as the pinnacle of their work. Rather, ἀρχῇ καὶ τέλει should be linked to πάντες, and, together with it, referred to the repetition and insistence that Polybius identifies as a common feature in earlier historians, who address the topics of the praise of history.

Polybius' strategy becomes clear. We could argue that, contrary to Polybius' statement, not so many historians before him—as far as we know—praised history, nor did they explicitly insist on the education provided by history as much as he maintains.¹⁵ In fact, Polybius' view on the practice of his fellow historians masterfully exemplifies the way ancient historians used to magnify their own subject and praise themselves.¹⁶ The general proem is a place for solemn statements; here Polybius' style is highly rhetorical, and his argument conforms to the general tone. Polybius' emphasis on the (presumed) 'choral', and thus annoying 'tautology' (ταυτολογεῖν) of his predecessors in praising history is rhetorically aimed at preparing the reader for something that is instead unique and extraordinary, which best displays history's educational effectiveness and most convincingly justifies the choice of writing history, namely the ascent of Rome to power (1.1.4 ff.). By explaining this extraordinary event, Polybius provides his

¹⁵ Schweighäuser (1792) 117 remarks: 'Ceterum ex omnibus illis Scriptoribus, quos ait Polybius de utilitate Historiae copiose in suis Historiis verba fecisse, nullus ad nostram aetatem pervenit. (...) Ipse Scriptor noster, laudationem Historiae transilire se velle simulans, lubens tamen ei immoratur, et quavis occasione ad eandem revertitur. Vide I 35, III 32, V 75, IX 1 sq.' In the proem of Book 9—the last *locus* among the ones mentioned by Schweighäuser—Polybius quotes Ephorus of Cyme (*FGrHist* 70 T 18b). Ephorus may well be among the historians who, before Polybius, stressed the importance of history in the education of the 'political man' (*politikos*): see Parmeggiani (2011) 150–2. Unfortunately, we are confronted with the limits of our knowledge, because much of the historiographical literature after Thucydides—the very literature to which Polybius looked—has been lost. This notwithstanding, Polybius' statement in his proem sounds rather general; he seems to imply this himself when he uses the expression ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν ('so to speak').

¹⁶ See Marincola (1997) 34 ff.

reader with a new ‘lesson’, which he considers far more important and complete than the one imparted by his predecessors: men’s best training originates in the knowledge of the authentic meaning and uniqueness of present politics.

Università degli Studi di Ferrara

GIOVANNI PARMEGGIANI
prmgnn@unife.it

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