

REVIEW

POLYBIUS ON THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE AND HISTORY

Daniel Walker Moore, *Polybius: Experience and the Lessons of History*. *Historiography of Rome and its Empire* 6. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020. Pp. xii + 168. Hardback, €97.00/\$116.00. ISBN 978-90-04-42611-5.

P*olybius: Experience and the Lessons of History* explores Polybius' views on the relationship between history, experience, and learning, and the value of history in the education of political and military leaders. It engages with the age-old question of 'What is the best way to acquire wisdom and to impart knowledge to others?', showcasing how the Greek historian was a keen investigator of this issue and particularly of finding the right balance between learning from the past and learning from experience. Polybius was not, however, always clear about the relationship between these two methods of advancement, and sometimes contradictory in his statements about which one imparted knowledge and wisdom best (cf. 1.1.2 and 1.35.8–9). In this volume, Moore aims to clarify Polybius' position and to explore how the *Histories* both theorises and models the correct historical-experiential relationship.

Following an outline of aims, content, and scholarly foundations in the Introduction (1–6), Moore begins in Chapter 1, 'History and Experience in Polybius' (7–34), with an analysis of Polybius' terminology and concepts (*empeiria*, *methodikē empeiria*, 'pragmatic' history), epistemological views, and programmatic statements about history, experience, and knowledge. It is persuasively argued that while Polybius can be inconsistent in some of his statements about the relationship between history and experience, he ultimately believed experience to be a more effective teacher than history, but that certain fields of knowledge needed for effective leadership could only be obtained through historical study (for instance, knowledge of foreign nations, and how to persuade and choose potential allies: 3.31). Further consideration of the rhetorical function of the *Histories'* opening lines as emphasisers of the importance of Polybius' historical endeavour would also offer an additional cause for his inconsistency and give extra weight to this line of argument. Experience and history were seen by Polybius, therefore, as cooperative vehicles of knowledge, and history defended as a crucial resource for a comprehensive political education. Moore then highlights how Polybius'

assertion that *empeiria* (experience) could be acquired by reading history and be passed from one generation to the next challenged both earlier Greek philosophical and epistemological debates about *empeiria* and historiographical conventions and aims. Polybius' opening lines, it is argued, suggest that the genre of history had not previously fulfilled its experiential potential and it was only now, with the creation of his new historiographical methodology—a universal, *pragmatic* history focused on demonstrating cause and effect, reason and truth—that such a promise could be fulfilled. This new type of history provides both *epistēmē* (knowledge) and *empeiria* (experience) because it encourages an active method of study and helps its readers develop the crucial skills of rational thought and correct judgement needed for political and military success. The chapter concludes by noting Polybius' belief that an *empeiria*-imparting history could only be created by a historian who has experience of and/or actively researched the relevant subject areas and skillsets outlined in the text. Experiential, *pragmatic* history must, therefore, be written by a *pragmatikos anēr* since it needs political and military experience to be written. There is, as a consequence, a good deal of overlap between the activities of a statesman/general and those of a historian.

Following Chapter 1's analysis of Polybius' programmatic comments about history and experience, Chapters 2–6 respond to Maier's call to scholars to delve more fully into Polybius' text by investigating how this relationship plays out and is clarified in the course of the narrative.¹ Chapter 2, 'Hannibal, Practical Experience, and the Model Historian' (35–69), begins by considering how, in Polybius' mind, Hannibal represents a near perfect *pragmatikos anēr* in his ability to learn from experience and setbacks, to investigate the terrain, history, and character of the peoples on his march over the Alps, to prepare for and respond to unexpected situations, and to communicate effectively with, and impart appropriate knowledge to, his soldiers despite their multitude of different cultures and languages. Moore also makes a good case, although is perhaps a bit too strong, in his final claim that Hannibal represents the model historian for Polybius: there is significant overlap in Polybius' mind between the activities of a good leader and a good historian, yet they were not quite the same thing and Polybius never celebrates Hannibal explicitly for this role. More caution is needed here, and we might question further to what extent the roles of historian and statesmen were actually conflated in Polybius.

Chapter 3, 'Learning from History' (70–91), develops these themes by exploring Polybius' observations about how few leaders willingly and successfully learn from the past. Moore begins with Polybius' discussion in Book 9 of military failures by Aratus of Sicyon, Cleomenes III of Sparta, Philip V of Macedon, and Nicias the Athenian (9.16–19) to demonstrate this theme, but

¹ F. K. Maier, *Überall mit dem Unerwarteten rechnen: die Kontingenz historischer Prozesse bei Polybios* (Munich, 2012).

uses the development of Philip V as the key case study. The king not only fails to learn from history himself, as exhibited by his failure to emulate the positive example of his predecessors at Thermum in 218 (5.9–10), but also, after finally learning from his own experience, fails to teach his sons appropriate conduct by reference to the past (23.22). This inability to learn from history is seen by Polybius as a key reason for Philip's downfall. In contrast, as Moore notes, the Roman Scipio Africanus is held up as an exceptional individual, even more so than Hannibal, for his ability to learn both from his own research, experiences, and setbacks, and from the past and others (his father and uncle). Such an ability combining both methods of learning, in Polybius' mind, explains Africanus' unparalleled rise and justifies the historian's view that heeding 'the lessons of history is not only a fundamental element of training for practical life but an action which can truly set someone apart from the masses of people who fail to perform this simple task' (91).

Chapter 4, 'Experience and History in the Roman Constitution' (92–110), then questions what the source of Africanus' willingness to look to the past is, and whether his success can be replicated. Moore outlines how Polybius' answer lies in his depiction of the Roman state. In Book 6, experience is seen as a positive feature in the development of all constitutions, yet the inability of singular *politeiai* to transmit knowledge gained from experience to future generations, and thereby to retain lessons through historical memory, leads to political instability and decline. Rome's mixed constitution is different, on the other hand, in that it is able to preserve and develop its improvements across generations firstly by learning from its own experiences and setbacks, and secondly by retaining a collective memory of past advances through cultural institutions, such as the aristocratic funeral and the retelling of stories about exemplary individuals, such as Horatius Cocles (6.55). Learning from the past is not only effectively ingrained in Roman institutions, but the unique co-operation between experience and historical memory is what makes the Roman constitution, in Polybius' mind, so resilient and successful. Moore here also notes a parallel between the roles and aims of the aristocratic funeral and Polybius' conception of history as they both function to preserve the past and inspire future generations to noble action (note particularly Polybius' obituaries of Philopoemen, Hannibal, and Scipio Africanus: 23.12–14). Polybius' statements about the value of the Roman funeral, therefore, also subtly reinforce the value of his own work and its use as an essential educational tool.

Chapter 5, 'Roman Innovation in Polybius' Narrative' (111–28), then explores whether Polybius' characterisation of the Roman ability to learn from experience and the past, as outlined in Book 6, is limited to his depiction of Africanus or applicable to Romans elsewhere in the narrative. In answering this question, Moore aligns himself with those scholars who see a clear connection between Book 6 and the rest of Polybius' narrative. He observes that the Romans and their developments in the *Histories* are consistent with the

combined learning methods in Book 6: the Romans' naval advancements during the First Punic War (1.20.9–16) and their adoption of Greek cavalry weaponry (6.25.8) are key examples of their capacity both to adapt when circumstances demand it and to imitate the superior methods of others (6.25.11). Roman development during the first two Punic Wars, moreover, supports the conclusion that their combined approach to learning provides the means for political and military success. The fact that Roman progress is collective rather than individual, Moore notes, is also a crucial feature of Polybius' treatment of Rome's rise. While the Romans do learn that one talented individual can on occasions be more valuable and effective than many hands together (alongside Africanus, Moore highlights Archimedes at the siege of Syracuse: 8.3–7), the individual is less frequently spotlighted in Polybius' rendition of Roman advancement, and a picture of collective progress based on shared experience is considered the primary means of their constitutional stability and rise to power.

Chapter 6, 'Exemplary Roman History' (129–40), then questions whether the Romans continue to retain their ability to learn and preserve lessons from the past after the Second Punic War and explores the apparent shift of focus from collective development to individual development in more depth. Aemilius Paullus and Scipio Aemilianus are the key figures of this chapter and offer a positive answer to the first question, putting the theory expounded in Book 6 into practice. They reflect not only a desire to model one's own behaviour on past exemplary Roman leaders, but also to serve in turn as an example to continue the transmission of valuable lessons to subsequent generations: like Hannibal before him, Aemilius Paullus, it is argued, is presented as the model historian after his victory over Perseus because of his efforts to instruct members of his inner circle (29.20); Scipio Aemilianus is exemplary for his concern with living up to the examples of his ancestors and for his ability to learn from and imitate the example of his father (31.30); the young Roman also becomes a historical example for his contemporaries in the text and for Polybius' readers alike, just like Horatius Cocles before him, because of his willingness to take part in the Celtiberian War (35.4). Yet Moore also notes that while individual exemplarity often has the greatest impact, exemplary models are not always easy to find, and a more permanent historical memory becomes necessary, therefore, in order to overcome the absence of available models. The aristocratic funeral and history are therefore once again held up as essential foundations of knowledge and experience.

The beginning of this volume opened by discussing the Greek influences on Polybius; the Conclusion (141–6), alongside drawing the arguments together, satisfyingly finishes with Roman ones. Moore argues that Polybius' focus on the uniqueness of the Roman constitution and progress and the value of a combined theoretical and practical education betrays interactions with Roman thinkers during his internment (cf. Cic. *Rep.* 1.15, 35–6; 2.2, where

Polybius seems to have been present at dialogues between Cato the Elder, Scipio Aemilianus, and Panaetius). Ever the practical, adaptable, and intermediary figure, in and through his *Histories* Polybius offers an integrated solution (or a middle ground) between the Roman preference for learning through experience and the Greek penchant for philosophical training. Taking the best of both worlds, Polybius believed that it was this combination of personal experience and learning from the past that enabled leaders to work with or in spite of changes of Fortune.

The volume finishes with a comprehensive bibliography (147–60), *index locorum* (161–5), and general index (166–8). The text is generally free of errors and clear and consistent in its style and copy.

Overall, the volume is a coherent, concise, and well-argued piece, and Moore's intention to clarify Polybius' views on experience and history and their value is achieved. The volume engages with and contributes to developing trends in Polybian scholarship which see the *Histories* as a complex document motivated by political and didactic agendas, and carefully moulded by literary and rhetorical structures and influences. By its discussion of Polybius' use of proofs in the construction of his arguments (135), it equally complements Thornton's volume published in the same year, which reinforces the highly political, rhetorical, and contrived nature of the *Histories*.²

It should be noted, however, that while the volume admirably promotes Maier's call to work with both the programmatic statements and the narrative sections of Polybius' work more comprehensively, its coverage is generally limited to Romans and topics connected with Rome. Hannibal, Scipio Africanus, the Punic Wars, the Roman constitution, the aristocratic funeral, Aemilius Paullus, and Scipio Aemilianus are the main players involved, although there is some consideration of Philip V, Aratus of Sicyon, Lycurgus, and others in the course of the work, and more non-Romans make an appearance in the footnotes. This close focus on the Roman material of the *Histories* is inevitable and crucial given Polybius' subject matter (and the text's survival pattern) and may perhaps be further encouraged by the volume's inclusion in Brill's *Historiography of Rome and Its Empire* series. Yet the universal and interweaving nature of the *Histories* that Polybius worked so hard to construct and promote, and the fact that large portions of the work do not focus on the Romans, does not come out so clearly in this reading. There is therefore potential for expansion of this investigation into questions of how the universal and interconnected nature of the *Histories* adds to its experiential quality, as well as how other non-Roman (and Carthaginian) individuals, peoples, and histories reflect and/or contribute to Polybius' views on the value of experience and history.

² J. Thornton, *Polibio: il politico e lo storico* (Rome, 2020).

Despite the observation above, Moore's *Polybius: Experience and the Lessons of History* remains a valuable and accessible contribution to Polybian scholarship, offering a clear analysis of the historian's views on the value and cooperation of experience and history in education, setting his views against both Greek and Roman pedagogical thought and practices, and offering plenty of avenues for future study. Moreover, although Moore does not explicitly provide an answer to the question of the value and place of history in a modern educational setting, this work has plenty to offer these larger debates.

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