REVIEW

POLYBIUS ON LEADERSHIP

Nikos Miltsios, *Leadership and Leaders in Polybius.* Trends in Classics Supplementary Volumes 145. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2023. Pp xv + 176. Hardback, €109.95. ISBN 978-3-11-123947-7

Polybius' intention to explain the rise of Rome to world dominance in a work of universal history was an undertaking on the grandest scale. In spite, however, of his apportioning of some sort of role to destiny and, more clearly, to the excellence of Rome's institutions and national character, he evidently believed that individual human beings were the dominant factor in how the details of the story developed. It is a story peopled largely by leaders—kings, politicians, advisers, army commanders—and one designed, at least partly, to be useful for aspiring leaders. Polybius has important things to say about leadership, but they are scattered throughout the narrative, rather than centralised in some blueprint, and therefore a good subject for specialist investigation. That Nikos Miltsios (M.) now brings his extensive Polybian expertise to bear in a book on the matter is a welcome addition to Polybian scholarship. In the introduction (ix–xv), he offers an eloquent rationale for the book and makes clear that this is a literary study: he is interested in showing how leadership gets written into the story, how Polybius 'constructs his narrative'. This will 'unveil key aspects of both his approach to leadership and his literary technique' (xiii). Close reading of narrative units is what M. is particularly good at, and is a strength of the book throughout. He also has a particular aim to show how Alexander the Great and literary depictions of his conquests influenced Polybius' representation of leadership. The first chapter takes us through a case study of Philip V of Macedon, then 'Effective Leadership Behaviors' in Chapter 2 and 'Ineffective Leadership' in Chapter 3. Chapters 4 ('Leadership and the Vicissitudes of Fortune') and 5 ('Collective Leadership: the Romans') seem to me to move beyond the topic of leadership more into a study of group behaviour.

Philip V is a good place to start, as he is the king we see in action more than any other, and he changed from being an excellent leader into a monster. Polybius' favourable assessment of Philip's abilities at 4.77.3 and his account of the king's brilliant exploits during the Social War interest M. primarily because they immediately bring to mind Alexander the Great. M.'s purpose in this chapter is to show how the Alexander tradition, particularly as it appears in

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Arrian, functioned as 'a basic source of inspiration' for Polybius' own depiction of the leaders in his narrative. M. is, however, less concerned to show direct use of Polybius by Arrian (although there are some clear parallels): his argument is that while Polybius probably owes more to his sources on Philip than on Alexander, the whole Alexander tradition feeds into the *Histories*, and affects the way he wrote up the story of brilliant leaders in general (15–23). In the case of Philip, this works well. M. draws convincing parallels between the two Macedonian kings, in the brilliance of their strategic thinking (1–4), the speed with which they operate (4–6), the effect they have on their opponents (6–10), and their youthfulness (10–14). With regard to these characteristics, on the matter of the emotional reactions that Philip V caused among his opponents, and the same effect Alexander had on his, M. certainly makes his point in most cases, but is perhaps less strong on fear. He comments on how often the participle καταπλαγείς is used of Philip's opponents (7), echoed in the frequency of ἐκπλαγείς in Arrian (it occurs 16 times). What weakens the argument is that καταπλαγείς occurs 46 times in Polybius, ἐκπλαγείς 16 times; other forms of καταπλήττω, and its adjectival cousin καταπληκτικός, occur 80 times; and ἐκπλήττω and ἐκπληκτικός 34 times. These are very common words throughout Polybius, for whom astonished fear is a normal human reaction, applied to many people and situations, not just to Philip and his story. It is how he sees warfare working. Alexander certainly instilled the same fear, but it is harder to track a close connection between Polybius' extensive use of the motif and the Alexander tradition. M. does strengthen his case by showing how Hannibal also displays the same qualities (17–19), particularly with regard to speed, and Flamininus, too. Indeed, all Polybius' great leaders share the same traits, inherited, M. argues, both directly and indirectly, from the Alexander story.

Hannibal has already made an appearance in Chapter 1, but he is treated in a more detailed case study in Chapter 2 (25–38) along with Scipio Africanus (38–55). The two have been much studied before and M.'s purpose is to emphasise the importance Polybius lays on the mental processes of military commanders and the debt this manner of presenting the story owes to the Alexander tradition. M. follows his standard procedure of carefully reading narrative units, which effectively highlights the contrast between well in-formed, focussed, rational commanders and their emotional and irrational opponents. Thus we have the calm, collected, and thoughtful Hannibal facing impulsive and emotional Roman generals like T. Sempronius Longus before the battle of the Trebia, or C. Flaminius before Trasimene, and M. Minucius Rufus after it. The Scipio Africanus set pieces—the story of his election as aedile, the capture of New Carthage and the Battle of the Camps—function from a narrative point of view in very much the same way. M.'s analysis in this chapter brings out the many correspondences Polybius draws between the

rationalism of successful commanders and the unthinking, emotionalism of the losers, and he is surely right to conclude that in Polybius' narrative 'emotionalism and impulsiveness seem to predict failure with almost mathematical precision' (55). I also think he is right when seeking to explain the multitude of similarities in the narrative to look beyond an explanation that this is 'merely a symptom of Polybius' tendency to indulge in repetition and mannerism' (53). Polybius had clear ideas about what made a successful commander, and it is natural that they should recur, but as M. shows, they are worked out in subtly different ways in the narrative units.

Chapter 2 has already identified some of the traits that characterise unsuccessful leaders. Chapter 3 deals with the centrally important matter of morality—leadership failure in Polybius is nearly always a function of moral shortcomings—but also to the effects of moral, and thus leadership, failure on the people at large. The main narrative units studied in this chapter deal with Hasdrubal in the Third Punic War (58–62), Diaeus and Critolaus in the Achaean War (62–7), the fall of Agathocles of Alexandria (67–74), and the conspiracies of courtiers in the Antigonid, Ptolemaic, and Seleucid kingdoms (74–82). It is certainly the case, as M. claims (62), that the interaction between leaders and the led has not received the treatment it deserves. I wonder whether the behaviour of multitudes is really about leadership, but if we accept the results of good leadership, victory in war and a well run state, as a topic for study, then perhaps it is legitimate to see what effect bad leadership has, beyond the obvious one of military defeat. Diaeus and Critolaus are the most striking examples of morally deficient politicians leading their people to disaster, whereas Agathocles, an equally corrupt politician, is such a failure that he cannot get the Alexandrian crowd to follow him; indeed they end up murdering him and his family. M. tracks carefully the interplay in Polybius' narrative between morally bankrupt leaders and a multitude whose base tendencies can only be controlled by proper leadership.

The last section, on conspiracies in the Hellenistic monarchies, is about kings and courtiers, a somewhat different subject from that of the relationship between rulers and multitudes. Good kings in Polybius, like Massinissa (36.16.6) or Hiero (7.8.4), rule for decades without anyone conspiring against them, and the implication is that a good leader should not attract conspiracies. An outstanding example was Hannibal, who spent seventeen years on campaign in difficult conditions without anyone plotting against him (23.13.2). Probably the clearest contrary example was Ptolemy IV of Egypt, who paid so much attention to the pleasures of sex and drink, and so little to the exercise of government that, as was to be expected ($\epsilon \mathring{\iota} \kappa \acute{o} \tau \omega s$), conspiracies arose against him (5.34.4–10). The same with the similarly sensuous Prusias (36.16). A poor leader, it seems, will almost inevitably attract conspiracies. In some ways, then, it is surprising that the brilliant young king Philip V is beset with conspiring courtiers, although they are conspicuous by their absence when Polybius is

describing Philip's military exploits in the Social War. So, I think M. is right to suggest that Polybius uses conspiracies against Philip, Antiochus, and Ptolemy as a barometer of their ability to manage such a challenge, especially as internal threats of this sort are identified elsewhere (11.25.6) as being particularly difficult to deal with: they call for great 'adroitness' (ἐπιδεξιότης) and exceptional 'shrewdness' (ἀγχίνοια), the latter quality one of those Polybius attributes to the young Philip V (4.77.3).

As I suggested at the start, I am not convinced by the strict relevance of Chapters 4 and 5 to the subject of leadership. Theoretically, I understand that Chapter 4 is attempting to answer the question of how the good leader can best deal with what happens in an uncertain world, and M. answers the question relevantly with his coverage (91–4) of Polybius' specific advice on generalship in Book 9 (12–20), and on how leaders need to learn from the past in order to make the most effective provisions for the future (94–100). But do we need detailed discussion of the vexed subject of Tyche in Polybius (83–91)? I cannot easily see its relevance to leaders and leadership, as it mostly operates at the level of world events. Even if we take at face value Polybius' statements about Rome's world dominance being the work of Tyche, we are still left with Roman leaders who display qualities that are superior to those displayed by the leaders of other peoples. Whether they developed these qualities with or without the assistance of Tyche does not really affect either the qualities themselves, or, more important for M., how Polybius constructs his narrative about them. At the level of world history, as M. concludes (87), correctly in my opinion, the apparent contradiction between what is fated and human agency is largely a rhetorical device, and at the local level Polybius is mostly interested in asserting his superiority over other historians who too easily invoke supernatural explanations for events like Hannibal's crossing of the Alps (3.47.6–9), or Scipio Africanus' capture of New Carthage (10.2–20). This latter, Polybius shows (10.2.13), was due entirely to Scipio's calculation and foresight (λογισμοῦ καὶ προνοίας), qualities other historians have failed to note.

If the relevance of Tyche to the declared subject of the book seems to me limited, the same applies to M.'s use of Book 6 and the cycle of constitutions to discuss how leaders might use the past to predict the future (4.3 'Historical knowledge and the possibilities of prediction' and 4.4 'Historical recurrence in Polybius'). While learning from the past is one of the fundamental aspects of the usefulness of history, Polybius' cyclical theory only assists foresight in relation to knowing where a state is in the cycle of constitutions, not in the matter of everyday events. M. quotes Momigliano, 'outside the constitutional chapters, in the rest of the history, Polybius operates as if he did not hold any cyclical view of history'. This is largely correct, but, I believe, needs to be qualified: while Polybius does not refer to cycles outside his constitutional analysis, there are particular moments of his cyclical theory that may be

observed in the course of events. Philip V of Macedon, most famously, for example, changed from a king into a tyrant (4.77.4), and his moral degeneration into a serial sexual abuser (10.26.3) reflects exactly what Polybius says about the change of a king into a tyrant in his theoretical analysis in Book 6 (6.7.7). Cleomenes also changed kingship into tyranny at Sparta (2.47.3), and the decline of Boeotia (20.6.2–5) looks very like the last part of Polybius' constitutional cycle (6.9.8–9). So, we see moments in the cycle. Momigliano, then, was not completely right, but I do not think M. is justified in claiming he was also wrong because 'there may be found some kind of repetition in the occurrence of historical events' (101). That Polybius points out how, just as Philip II's plans were executed by his son, Alexander, so Philip V's plans were carried out by his son, Perseus, has, it seems to me, nothing to do with cycles of history: it is simply history repeating itself, a narrative motif in Polybius that M. analyses with his customary skill from the point of view of the narrative, but in my opinion, incorrectly in presenting it as a function of cyclical theory. The parallels between the beginning and end of the Second Punic War, too, are indeed striking and 'unmistakeable', and, again, M. analyses Polybius' careful design of the narrative convincingly, but while I certainly accept that Polybius is stressing the interconnection of events, I cannot see how the similarities in the situation illustrate 'the cyclic character of the events' (103). This claim that 'the cycles in the *Histories* are not forgotten after the theory of the *anacyclosis* of forms of government' (106) seems to me fundamentally incorrect as presented, as it confuses cycles with recurrence, repetition, and reversal, all, to be sure, literary motifs skilfully unpacked by M., but not cyclical in nature.

At the beginning of Chapter 5, M. says that a study of leadership in Polybius 'could hardly omit a discussion of the presentation of the Romans' (110). On the whole, I disagree. I understand the value of examining the collective character traits that enabled the Romans to conquer the world, but this is about conquest, not leadership. I do not think there is any suggestion in Polybius that the Roman people aimed to offer leadership to the Mediterranean world; they just wanted to conquer it and retain control of it. So, the title of Chapter 5, 'Collective Leadership: the Romans', seems to me misplaced: with the one possible exception of the senate, there is no such thing as collective leadership in Polybius, and the chapter is really about the factors other than individual leadership that explain Rome's success—the collective Roman character (111–22), and the constitution (122–33)—and then at the end of the chapter, how the Romans exercised their success once they had won dominance (133–50). The collective Roman character is illustrated by Polybius' presentation of the Roman people (and the Carthaginians) during the First Punic War, with M. providing particularly good readings of what Polybius says about the importance of morale (115–16) and what Roman naval policy revealed about their collective character (117–20). In his analysis of the

constitution M. concentrates less on the political structures of the Roman state, more on what Book 6 says about other matters, such as the importance of Roman religion, particularly the inspirational effect of their funerals, and of the Roman military system.

If there was such a thing at all as Roman collective leadership, it was only the senate that could provide it. M. does not seem to make the claim, but his examination of how Rome exercised her dominance after 167 BC and how her subjects viewed this performance, could be justified in a book on leadership by the senate's failure to offer moral leadership: in Polybius' negative portrayal of the Romans, time and again it is the senate who display cynicism, self-interest, and moral degeneration. But M. is more interested in trying to show that this darker side of Roman behaviour is a reflection of the continuing influence of the Alexander tradition on Polybius: the 'bad' Rome, so to speak, equals the 'bad' Alexander. I am less convinced by this than by the argument that the Alexander was the model for good leaders in Polybius, as the individual failings of Alexander are now made to be the model for the collective failings of the Romans. M. also argues that the prominence of embassies sent to Rome in the later books of Polybius reflects not just the interest of Byzantine excerptors, but also the influence of the embassies sent to Alexander reported in Arrian. M.'s point that these embassies function as a confirmation of Rome's and Alexander's power and dominance is well made, but the link with the Alexander tradition seems strained to me.

One subject that might add to M.'s concentration on the narrative of leadership is Polybius' vocabulary. He used dozens of different words to describe leadership qualities (which are sometimes difficult to translate). I note, for instance, Philip II of Macedon after his victory over the Athenians at the battle of Chaeronea (5.10), when he displayed $\epsilon\pi\iota\epsilon\iota\kappa\epsilon\iota\alpha$, $\phi\iota\lambda\alpha\nu\theta\rho\omega\pi\iota\alpha$, $\epsilon\dot{\upsilon}\gamma\nu\omega\mu\sigma\sigma\dot{\upsilon}\nu\eta$, $\mu\epsilon\tau\rho\iota\dot{\sigma}\tau\eta s$, $\pi\rho\alpha\dot{\sigma}\tau\eta s$, $\kappa\alpha\lambda\sigma\kappa\dot{\alpha}\gamma\alpha\theta\dot{\iota}\alpha$, and $\dot{\alpha}\gamma\chi\dot{\iota}\nu\sigma\iota\alpha$. How does Polybius deploy these words here, and elsewhere? Is there some significance in the choice he makes of who to attribute particular qualities to, or in the narrative contexts in which the words occur? In his coverage, for instance, of foresight and how leaders need to prepare for the future, M. notes the frequency of $\pi\rho\sigma\sigma\rho\hat{\omega}\mu\alpha\iota$ and other similar words (94). Among them is $\dot{\sigma}\tau\tau\epsilon\dot{\upsilon}\sigma\mu\alpha\iota$, a very rare word in Greek literature, but used five times by Polybius. Is there some special significance when he uses it? I cannot immediately see one, but the question remains, and I think that careful attention to Polybius' vocabulary might add to our understanding of his treatment of leaders and leadership. So, too, I suspect would modern theories of leadership. As with so many other areas of classical scholarship which have been enhanced by modern theoretical approaches, contemporary concerns about political and business leaders and leadership styles and the extensive theorising and bibliography they have produced surely have something to offer the classical

scholar in devising lines of investigation to understand better what one of the greatest historians of the ancient world wrote on the subject. But that is work for another book.

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