Six Themes Concerning Alexander the Great in the Writings of Polybius

This paper will discuss the image of Alexander the Great created by Polybius of Megalopolis, the second century B.C.E. historian, and will reinvestigate the Polybian themes concerning the great king. Polybius’ history is our earliest extant source that features an analysis of Alexander (Billows 2000). Yet Polybius’ treatment of the Macedonian king has gone relatively unexamined. Other than a study by Richard Billows, which involves a brief analysis of Polybius’ thoughts and arguments on Alexander, there has been no comprehensive study of Polybius’ depiction of the great Macedonian. Billows, in his pioneering study, suggested that there are five Polybian themes found in his analysis of Alexander: Alexander’s destruction of Thebes, his comparison with other kings, his character and generalship, the allocation of praise under his leadership, and the relationship between Alexander and Fortune (Billows 2000). Yet our current assumptions about the scope of Polybius’ portrayal and his own conclusions require reconsideration. In fact, we find an additional theme in the Polybian material: Polybius’ favorable comparison of the accomplishments of Rome to those of Alexander the Great. He establishes Rome as Alexander’s true successor, as hegemon of the world, and he judges that as great as Alexander was, the extent of Rome’s hegemony and the manner in which it achieved this glory was even greater.

Unlike the apologetic or adulatory tone found in most of the accounts of the traditional Alexander historians, Polybius – as Billows has pointed out – sometimes depicted Alexander in a less flattering manner. What emerges from Polybius’ portrayal is a more balanced depiction of Alexander, where the Macedonian king was capable of both positive and negative actions. Nevertheless, this balanced depiction should not come as a surprise. At 4.8.7-8, Polybius himself tells us that, in his estimation, the human personality is complex. He believed strongly that great men deserved both praise and blame (Eckstein 1995). For Polybius, Alexander became a prime example of what to do and what not to do (Oakley 2005). The military vigor and the vast accomplishments of Alexander were something to emulate and respect. Yet, for Polybius, the misdeeds of Alexander also were important.

Thus, Polybius’ balanced account of Alexander is in line with his general philosophy about the actions of great men. However, if Polybius’ account is balanced, do we mean that it is balanced equally, or do we mean that, while containing both positive and negative elements, it leans primarily in one direction? This question is fundamental to the following paper.

Billows has argued that Polybius offers a more balanced account of the Macedonian king than the traditional Alexander historians, which also lacks any trace of the usual Alexander apologetics and, in fact, often presents Alexander in negative terms (Billows 2000). This paper will argue that if we reconsider the Polybian material concerning Alexander not only does an additional theme emerge; but we see also that Polybius’ depiction of Alexander, although it contains both praise and criticism, is flattering overall. Polybius does not disassociate his text completely from an apologetic tone and offers a generally positive opinion of Alexander the Great.

Works Cited:

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