

Polybius' Narrative of the Capture of Achaeus as a Case Study
on the Role of τύχη in the *Histories*

Polybius believed that history should be instructional (1.1.1-2). He followed the Thucydidean maxim (Thuc.1.22.4) that the consistency of human nature enables one to profit from studying the actions of others (e.g. 12.25b, 38.4.5). Yet the presence of τύχη in the *Histories*—especially as a goddess (e.g. 1.4.2)—complicates the didactic assumption that one can observe and explain the causes of past events. This paper argues that Polybius' narrative of the capture of Achaeus (8.15-21) offers a glimpse into the ways that human action and τύχη interact in the *Histories*—both in terms of historical causation and practical instruction.

In 214 B.C.E. Achaeus, the rebellious Seleucid satrap of Asia Minor, is being besieged by the Seleucid king Antiochus III in the citadel of Sardis. A Cretan by the name of Bolis crafts an elaborate scheme to deliver Achaeus to Antiochus. Feigning that his plan is to help Achaeus escape, Bolis convinces Achaeus to accompany him down a precipitous path out of the citadel. Once Achaeus is in his power, Bolis seizes him. Polybius emphasizes the irony of the situation, noting that even when Achaeus is bound and on the ground in front of Antiochus he is thought by his own men to still be secure in the citadel of Sardis (8.20.12). Antiochus himself is struck by the drastic and unforeseen reversal of Achaeus and wondered at “the difficulty of preventing, and the unexpectedness of, events due to fortune (ἐκ τῆς τύχης)” (8.20.10).

Scholars have taken different stances on the role of τύχη in the *Histories*. Some have seen it as being used sometimes rhetorically or metaphorically, and at other times with the full force of personification (Walbank in Marincola 2011). Others have viewed Polybius' use of τύχη as being exclusively rhetorical or metaphorical (McGing 2010, Longley in Smith 2012). I believe

the latter reading to be more correct, but I argue that both approaches fail to recognize the didactic function of τύχη.

Polybius repeatedly identifies human feeling, thought, and action—independent of τύχη—as the critical force of historical causation (Derow in Hornblower 1994). He often interjects himself into the narrative in order to point out the lesson to be learned from the success or failure of a given person. Antiochus’ statement about “events due to fortune” provides insight into the relationship between human action and τύχη. (Although this sentiment is ascribed to Antiochus, the prefatory phrase “ὡς ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ” clearly demonstrates that these are the musing of Polybius himself.) Polybius has just described—in great detail—how the cunning of Bolis and the willingness of Achaeus to trust him led to the capture of the latter. τύχη is completely absent from the narrative as an independent force. Bolis is consistently portrayed by Polybius as being motivated by greed (8.16.4-9). In fact, Polybius repeatedly stresses that the greed and cunning of Bolis is the result of his natural Cretan demeanor (e.g. 8.16.4). It was human emotion, action, and error that resulted in the capture of Achaeus. Polybius thus refers to a result achieved by humans as an event “due to τύχη”. In this context, τύχη is not a capricious goddess, but rather a term referring to the inscrutable machinations of Bolis. This use of τύχη is not an isolated event in the *Histories*. For example, Polybius employs the term τύχη similarly in the story of Regulus at 1.35.1-3.

In summation, τύχη may be a sort of personification after all. This Τύχη, however, does not represent any divine force, but rather the principle of unpredictability that humans themselves have a hand in propagating. For Polybius, the world is more complicated and unpredictable than Thucydides had presented it. But this element of unpredictability does not strip history of its usefulness as a guide to human conduct. Polybius saw human action as a

fundamental force of historical causation, and he wanted his readers to remember that human action can be just as irrational, unpredictable, and inscrutable as the unexplainable events of life—heavy rain, drought, plague, etc.—that one can only ascribe to τύχη, for lack of a better (rational) explanation (36.17.2-4). The rational person must always be prepared to face the unexpected.

Works Cited

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