

Polybius on Hope

Polybius mentions hope in several innovative ways in his *Histories*. While he draws to some extent on Thucydides and Aristotle, he also departs from tradition and forms his own unique concept of what good hope is and how to obtain it. I examine two important passages, one in Book 6 that illustrates how hope is important in his narrative, and another (two-part) episode (2.35.5-10; 38.2.1-5) that shows how he connects hope with historiography. These passages have Homeric and Aristotelean overtones.

Hope in Greek literature and history is found as a noun or a verb and is used in a standard way (“I hope that”); it is formulaic in Homer. But my interest is limited to passages where hope itself is discussed or when hope plays a significant role in a passage of literature or history. In Archaic poets like Hesiod (*Op.* 96-9; esp. 498-501), Bacchylides (1.160-5; cf. 9.18), and Aeschylus (*Pers.* 746), hope is good or bad (cf. Cairns 2016). Among the philosophers, hope was of little interest (Bloeser and Stahl 2022): Plato limits himself to two sentences: hope is a bad emotion like anger and fear (“hope ready to seduce” ἐλπίδα δ’ εὐπαράγωγον *Timaeus* 69d); but Socrates says that a man in pain sometimes has a “sure hope” and sometimes a worthless one (*Philebus* 36a-b), and every man is full of hopes (*Philebus* 40a) whether or not they are fulfilled. Plato is contradictory although he acknowledges that hope is “necessary to human agency” (Bloeser and Stahl 2022). Only Aristotle discusses hope: in his *Nicomachean Ethics* he connects hope with courage, saying the brave always have hope, and adds that hope inspires people to be brave (*NE* 3.7, 1116a2; Gravlee 2000). He also gives examples of hope without courage: a man who hopes his ship won’t sink, someone suffering from disease (*NE* 3.6, 1115a35ff.), and someone who hope his luck will change (*NE* 3.8, 1117a10ff.).

Among the historians, only Thucydides stands out since hope plays a role in several major passages (Schlosser 2012): e.g., the plague (2.51; Schlosser 2013, 175-176); the Sicilian Expedition, which ends with only Nicias believing their luck must change (7.77; Schlosser 2013, 172-173); and when the Athenians remind the Spartans how they were courageous and “staked their lives ... on desperate hope” when they fought at Salamis (1.74.2-4). Although Thucydides sometimes calls hope destructive or bad, he also says that hope impels men to act courageously (3.45.1).

Polybius is remarkable because he presents hope as positive and because he goes beyond earlier literature, illustrating his own usages and formulating his own definitions. He mentions it in two innovative ways in his narrative. One of these is that he views depriving the enemy of hope as a necessary tool for the military (or political) leader. This is especially noticeable in the famous passage in which he explains why the Senate did not ransom Roman prisoners held by Hannibal (6.58.9-13). Polybius also uniquely connects hope with historiography several times, acknowledging with Aristotle and Thucydides that hope inspires people to be brave, but going beyond them to insist that it is History that provides that hope of bravery. He also asserts that through recounting a particular episode (2.35.5-10; 38.2.1-5), History itself *gives* the reader the hope of persevering in adversity.

Bibliography

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