

Polybius and Livy on Fabius and Scipio: What Makes an Effective General?

Scholars have often noted differing focuses in Polybius and Livy. Polybius concentrates more on political themes for public figures (Walbank 2002, 240), while Livy produces moral exempla through detailed characterizations in his history (Walsh 1961, 82-83, Luce 1977, 231). The two historians' portrayals of Fabius Maximus and Scipio Africanus have been used to support these observations (Miltisios 2023, 33-37 [Polybius]; Levene 2014, 207 [Livy]). Polybius and Livy's differing approaches, however, are more significant than scholars have realized. While Polybius has a single ideal of effective generalship that is embodied in both Fabius and Scipio, Livy sets up a contrast between the characters of these generals, revealing more nuance in his moral exempla than he has often been given credit for.

Polybius, who focuses more on providing concrete, useful exempla for statesmen and politicians, shows both generals as being steadfast and prudent, developing in Fabius characteristics that he will put on full display in Scipio. Although Polybius does not directly compare these generals in the surviving portions of his work, his use of similar language to describe their skill (3.87.6, 3.89.8, 3.105.9 [Fabius]; 10.2.13, 10.6.12 [Scipio]) shows a strong kinship between their generalships. Although Polybius' portrait of Fabius has not survived in full, nearly all of what has come down to us is the narrative of his dictatorship (3.87-105), where he is contrasted with his rash and unsuccessful Master of Horse, Marcus Minucius, who is seen as no leader (cf. Levene 2010, 229). From this account, it appears that Polybius uses Fabius as a model of an effective general who was able to contain Hannibal, another good general (Miltisios 2023, 25). To an even greater degree, Polybius sees Scipio as the embodiment of the idealized general he describes in Book 9 (9.12.-9.20; cf. Eckstein 1995, 179). Scipio, like that ideal

general, takes every eventuality into account (10.7.1, 10.9.1 [Scipio]; cf. 9.13.2-3, 9.14.1 [Polybius' ideal general]). Scipio is also likened to his rival Hannibal, whose defeat at Zama, Polybius asserts, was not due to one or the other having a superior strategy (15.15-16). While Scipio and Fabius are not directly compared, strong similarities between the two are seen when they both match Hannibal's prowess.

Livy, however, directly contrasts the personalities of these two generals throughout his account of the war. Fabius is a slow-and-steady, rational force that saves Rome at the beginning of the war, while Scipio is a fast moving, yet morally flawed leader who brings the war to a successful conclusion. On the one hand, Fabius is seen as thoughtful in his strategy of cautious delay and faithful to duty, often performing religious functions at Rome (e.g. 22.9.7, 22.18.8; cf. Burck 1971, 34). Scipio, on the other hand, acts very rapidly and is against delay (notably divergent from Polybius' calculating general). He is also less pious than Fabius, encouraging rumors that he is of divine origin (26.19.8). This contrast reaches its high point in a debate between Fabius and Scipio over the proper way to win the war (28.40-44). Scipio desires to draw Hannibal out of Italy by sailing to Africa and appears to be willing to disrupt the order of the assembly to get his way (cf. Rossi 2004, 378-9), while Fabius argues for a cautious policy of pursuing the war according to his previously successful strategy. In his obituary for Fabius, Livy hints at the contrast again when he asks whether differing strategies are better in different parts of the war, an idea that stands in contrast with Polybius' single ideal of a general that both leaders exemplify (30.26.7-10).

These observations confirm Walbank's argument that Polybius wrote his history primarily to be useful to statesmen-generals, highlighting figures he sees as exemplifying these goals. Livy's moral exempla, however, are more complex than scholars such as Walsh have seen, and

his mixed picture of Fabius and Scipio suggests that there is not one kind of effective general, but circumstances play a large role in determining what kind of general is best.

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