

Reaching the Point of No Return: Dehumanization in Polybius' *Histories*

The historian Polybius theorizes about what happens when parties in war take things too far (23.15). This passage is unique not only in its focus on the repercussions of destroying fruit-bearing trees but also in the extremity of these repercussions. According to Polybius, destroying trees on an invasion of enemy territory reduces enemies to such a state of dehumanization (ἀποτεθριωμένοι), creating implacable hostility (ἀμετάθετος ὀργή). This theory highlights the danger of unrelenting emotion, driving people to the point of no return. This psychological theory embedded within Polybius' *Histories* provides a foundation for the evaluation of narrative cases of dehumanization and despair. Polybius' theory also warns against the dangers of dehumanization, not only for those experiencing it but also for their enemies. This paper argues that dehumanization presents a serious challenge to collective political agency and represents for Polybius the extreme of political problems.

Through examination of critical passages within Polybius' *Histories* and informed by modern political and psychological studies (Fierke 2012; Kronfeldner 2021), this paper examines the interrelations between dehumanization (ἀποθηριοῦσθαι), despair or hopelessness (ἀπελπίζειν), and political agency within Polybius' *Histories*. Within the historical narrative, humans reach a point of complete dehumanization or are reduced to a beast-like existence, signified by the verb ἀποθηριοῦσθαι. Moreover, in a medical analogy, Polybius specifies that this form of dehumanization (ἀποθηριοῦσθαι) falls below the level of animals, stating that nothing is more savage or cruel than a human being who has become beast-like in their soul (ὥστε μηδὲν ἀσεβέστερον ἀνθρώπου μηδ' ὠμότερον ἀποτελεῖσθαι τῶν ζώων, 1.81.7). How do characters reach this extreme condition? What drives them to this and is there any remedy?

How do these characters exercise political agency in this status? Taking Polybius' theory in 23.15 as a frame and drawing on modern studies for parallel processes and critical vocabulary, this paper examines these questions in the dehumanization of the mercenaries in the Mercenary War against Carthage (1.67-81) and the Aetolians after their war with the Romans (20.10). The collective, political identities of these groups, indicative of Polybius' wider usage of dehumanization, highlight both the complexity and the importance of the dynamics of this process. In both his theory on not cutting down trees and in the Aetolian collective dehumanization, Polybius warns against actively promoting this process. Lastly, Polybius provides glimpses on mechanisms by which the process of dehumanization and despair can be alleviated (1.81, 4.20, 3.60; Miltsios 2023).

Works Cited

- Fierke, K.M. 2012. *Political Self-Sacrifice : Agency, Body and Emotion in International Relations*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
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- Miltsios, N. (2023). *Leadership and Leaders in Polybius*. Berlin: De Gruyter.