

Hannibal the Historian

In his twelfth book, Polybius presents his views on the necessary qualifications for writers of history. In order to emphasize that historians should be actively engaged in public affairs, he re-frames a famous passage from Plato's *Republic* (5.473c11-e4) by proclaiming that history will be best served when either men with practical experience (οἱ πραγματικοὶ τῶν ἀνδρῶν) write history or when historians consider practical experience (τὴν ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων ἕξι) necessary for the writing of history (12.28.2-5). Modern scholars of Polybius have tended to read abstract statements such as this in Polybius' work as isolated comments which bear little relevance to the remainder of his historical narrative. But as Maier 2012 has shown, Polybius' desire for significant overlap between the roles of historians and statesmen is supported by the representation of statesmen in his history, who frequently exhibit important historiographical practices such as careful research, questioning of witnesses, and first-hand observation.

However, the statesmen represented in Polybius' text do not behave in this fashion with uniformity. In this paper, I will focus on Polybius' representation of the Carthaginian general, Hannibal. I will demonstrate that Hannibal is described by Polybius in a manner that reflects Polybius' vision of an ideal historian even beyond the basic research practices identified by Maier. For example, Polybius cites as one of his sources an inscription left by Hannibal and, in doing so, notes the precise accuracy (ἀκρίβεια, 3.33.17) of Hannibal's record. Previously in the same book, Polybius similarly emphasizes the importance of ἀκρίβεια in the composition of a proper historical narrative (3.21.9-10). He here praises Hannibal, therefore, as a reliable recorder of history. This characterization applies to Hannibal's actions as a general as well. Before his first battle against the Romans, for example, Hannibal stages a contest among captive Gauls in order

to demonstrate to his soldiers the great lengths to which one must go in desperate situations (3.62-3). Polybius praises Hannibal for his construction of this example (παράδειγμα, 3.63.14) in terms which reflect the didactic use of such *exempla* by Polybius himself. These and other examples will show that Hannibal -- uniquely in the text of Polybius -- is able to construct *exempla*, to interpret the past, and to draw lessons for his audience in the manner of a historian.

Significantly, however, Polybius' depiction of Hannibal is not universally positive. As a young general at New Carthage, Hannibal is criticized by Polybius for his overly emotional and irrational treatment of Roman envoys (3.15; see Eckstein 1989). Polybius again frames this youthful exuberance in terms which reflect the important historiographical principles of his work. In justifying his aggressive behavior, Hannibal is criticized by Polybius for not citing the true causes (ἀληθιναῖς αἰτίαις, 3.15.9) of the war but instead resorting to illogical excuses (εἰς προφάσεις ἀλόγους). Just a few chapters earlier (3.6-12), Polybius describes at length the need for historians to distinguish between the cause (αἰτία), the beginning (ἀρχή), and the excuse (πρόφασις) of a war. As Walbank notes in his *Commentary* (1.323; see also Rich 1996, 9. n. 32), this is the only instance in Polybius' text in which a πρόφασις is explicitly provided for the Second Punic War. In this initial passage, therefore, Polybius uses Hannibal as a negative example of the proper historiographical analysis of causation.

Subsequent to this scene, however, Hannibal develops the positive traits described above and is no longer criticized by Polybius in this way. It is only after Hannibal accumulates practical experience in command of his army, therefore, that Polybius begins to depict him in the mold of a proper historian. This reflects Polybius' requirement that historians be men of practical experience. The importance of practical experience in Polybius' depiction of Hannibal is confirmed in the scene prior to the Battle of Zama in which Hannibal meets with his opponent,

Scipio Africanus. There, Hannibal claims that he has learned from his own experiences (δι' αὐτῶν τῶν πραγμάτων, 15.6.8) and advises his younger adversary to learn from them as well (σκόπει...τὰ πράγματα, 15.7.2). The emphasis on learning from experience in this passage not only confirms that this is a critical factor in Polybius' representation of Hannibal's development, but also again places Hannibal in the role of a historian who attempts to use these past experiences as a didactic tool.

Bibliography

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