

A Likely Story: Rhetoric in the Service of Truth in Polybius's *Histories*

In his attack on Phylarchus, Polybius asserts that the historian's duty is to "teach and persuade" ($\deltaιδάξαι καὶ πεῖσαι$, 2.56.11). I argue that this phrase refers to rhetorical persuasion and places rhetoric at the heart of Polybius's historiographical method.

At the conclusion of *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, A. J. Woodman asserts that ancient historiographers produce works that are ““willingly believed’ and in which historical truth does not imply ‘the authenticity of facts and events”” (1988). In contrast, P. J. Rhodes and J. E. Lendon have argued that ancient historians are not “practitioners of rhetoric,” but truth-tellers (Rhodes 1994, Lendon 2009). Subsequent studies have taken intermediate positions (e.g., Pernot 2005, Pownall 2005, Bosworth 2003, Moles 1993). I argue the dichotomy between “rhetorical” and “truthful” is false: Polybius employs rhetoric to determine the likeliest, and therefore most true, course of events and to convince the reader to accept his account.

The relationship between teaching and persuading is well established already in Thucydides, who repeatedly uses forms of $\deltaιδάσκω$ to describe rhetorical acts (e.g. 2.93.1; 4.17.2-3; 5.86.1; 5.98.1). Further, Plato uses similar vocabulary to describe persuasion that does not resort to emotional appeal and rhetorical trickery (*Gorg.* 453d9-10, 453e2-4; *Phaedr.* 265d3-5). In fact, near the end of the *Apology*, Socrates states that he believes a defendant must “teach and persuade” ($\deltaιδάσκειν καὶ πείθειν$, 35b9-c2) the jurors to vote for him. Finally, a similar description of rhetoric appears in Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1.2.1355b25-29). As a collocation, “teaching and persuading” consistently refers to rhetorical argument.

Rhetoric has a prominent role in the *Histories*. First, Polybius employs rhetoric to analyze competing historical accounts. For instance, he rejects certain estimations of Hannibal's character through considerations of likelihood: he finds it unlikely that one man could have

exhibited the contradictory qualities attributed to him (9.23.4). Similarly, he details the unlikely aspects of the histories of Chaereas and Sosylus (3.20.4). Furthermore, he applies techniques of sophistic argumentation, like peritropes and antilogies, to uncover faulty reason in historical accounts. For instance, he explains in detail that Callisthenes' account of the Battle of Issus is self-contradictory (12.17-22). The standards by which Polybius judges historical narrative are rhetorical.

Furthermore, while Polybius employs rhetoric to analyze evidence, he persuades his reader that his analysis is correct. The truth of past events is often in doubt (e.g. 2.29.2, 18.13), disputed (e.g. 1.65.9, 3.6.1, 3.32.4), or obscured (e.g. 3.26.2). Therefore, the historian must use rhetoric to examine historical narrative (2.42.1, 2.53.3, 4.33.7, 6.11.7-8, 12.28a.9) and induce the reader to judge whether the examination presented is correct (4.24.1, 12.26c.1). In this vein, he complains that Phylarchus presents a false, unpersuasive historical narrative (2.58.12-13: τὸ ψεῦδος ἀπίθανον). Similarly, he dismisses Fabius's account of the Hannibalic war as unpersuasive (3.9.2). He chooses to follow Aristotle's account of the history of the Locrians over Timaeus's because, though both accounts are likely, Aristotle's is more persuasive (12.7.4). By arguing his points before the reader and inducing the reader to participate in the judgment, Polybius persuades his readers to reject the narratives he rejects while accepting those he accepts.

Nevertheless, Polybius is aware that not every likely historical account is true. He remarks repeatedly that he must back up his assertions with a detailed account of affairs so that his narrative will garner belief (e.g. 2.42.2) Tellingly, when he thinks that his level of detail will arouse suspicion because it is more accurate than seems possible, and that he might be accused of larding up his narrative with invented details in order to garner belief, he presents his evidence

and witnesses (e.g. 2.47.10, 3.33.17, 10.3.2). Polybius is aware, therefore, that rhetorical standards in historiography can be deceptive, but does not believe they deceive the reader in every case.

For Polybius, rhetoric is a tool for identifying the likeliest course of past events and convincing the reader that the account he presents is worthy of belief. He employs rhetoric to determine the truth and convince his reader to accept that determination.

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