

Learning From Experience: Political Theory in Polybius' Historical Narrative

In Book Six of his *Histories*, Polybius presents both a general discussion of political theory and a more specific analysis of a number of historical constitutions including those of Sparta, Carthage, and especially Rome. While Polybius clearly regarded the political analysis of Book Six as central to a proper understanding of this overall historical narrative of the rise of Roman power (cp. 1.1.5 and 6.2.3), the tendency in modern scholarship has been to view Book Six in isolation and to minimize the relevance of Polybius' political theories to the historical narrative (Momigliano 1969; Hahn 1995, 10). In response to this trend, however, there has been some recent scholarly effort directed toward understanding the ways in which Book Six is relevant to Polybius' historical narrative (Hahn 1995; McGing 2010, 189-94; Balot 2010). Such an approach can be useful in understanding the ways in which the historical narrative reflects the political theories advanced in Book Six, so long as we do not expect events of history to fit perfectly into the theoretical models.

One of Polybius' political ideas, for example, which I discuss in my paper, is his distinction between the Roman and Spartan constitutions. While he sees both as examples of a mixed constitution, Rome's constitution differs from Sparta's because it was not created through the design of a lawgiver like Lycurgus, but was developed over a period of time through their own experiences (6.10.14). A similar sentiment can be found in Cicero's *De re publica* (2.2), where he also suggests that the Roman constitution is distinguished by its formation over a long period of time with the benefit of experience and attributes this idea to Cato the Elder, a contemporary of Polybius. While the relationship between the statements of Polybius and Cato, and for that matter between the two men themselves, is controversial (Eckstein 1997, 192-8), the

repetition of this idea demonstrates that Polybius is making no idle comment about the nature of the Roman constitution.

In my paper, I investigate the extent to which this idea of learning through experience is evident in Polybius' historical narrative. This theme, for example, is developed through the course of the narrative of Book Three, as the Romans engage in multiple battles against the invading forces of Hannibal, but is then made explicit by Polybius in his description of the joint dictatorships of Fabius and Minucius. Following the battle in which Fabius' caution saves the Roman army from the complete destruction that would have resulted from Minucius' recklessness, Polybius notes that from that point on the Romans heeded the commands of Fabius because they "had been taught by their experiences" (3.105.10). Polybius uses language here about the Romans which anticipates his later evaluation in Book Six about the development of their constitution. The lessons that the Romans learn during these trying times, moreover, play a significant role in Polybius' account of their response to the disaster at Cannae and their recovery from it (3.118).

Examples of learning through experience in Polybius are not limited to constitutional changes, since such changes are relatively rare in the period that Polybius covers, but also include cases of military, cultural, and even more abstract instances of learning and innovation. This ability to learn from experience is not an exclusively Roman phenomenon. Polybius' repeated emphasis on this trait in the Romans, however, is significant in light of his own statements about the development of the Roman constitution, because it suggests this discussion in Book Six is more than just abstract political theory but is borne out by history.

Works Cited

- Balot, R. 2010. "Polybius' Advice to the Imperial Republic." *Political Theory* 38.483-509.
- Eckstein, A. M. 1997. "Physis and Nomos: Polybius, the Romans, and Cato the Elder." in P. Cartledge, P. Garnsey, E. S. Gruen, eds. *Hellenistic constructs: essays in culture, history, and historiography*. Berkeley. 175-198.
- Hahn, D. E. 1995. "Polybius' Applied Political Theory." in A. Laks and M. Scholfield, eds. *Justice and Generosity*. Cambridge. 7-47.
- McGing, B. 2010. *Polybius' Histories*. Oxford.
- Momigliano, A. 1969. "Time in Ancient Historiography." in *Quarto Contributo Alla Storia Degli Studi Classici e del Mondo Antico*. Rome. 13-41.