

Scott FARRINGTON Action and Reason: Polybius and the Gap between Encomium and History

Polybius is a crucial witness to the natures and divisions of the Greek prose genres. His statements about how his encomium of Philopoemen differed from history provide a clear picture of the development of encomium, history, and biography in the Hellenistic era. This paper analyzes how Polybius contrasts history's blend of descriptive and protreptic moralism with encomium's purely protreptic call to virtue. The more philosophical project of history, and its departure from the simpler purpose of encomium, is remarkably similar to the moral program of Plutarch's *Lives*.

For Arnaldo Momigliano, Polybius's *Philopoemen* showed that the gap between "historical encomium and a full biography of a king or a of a general is so narrow that any neat separation is impossible" (1993: 83). He also argued that from Polybius onward, history and biography were explicitly separate genres (1993: 41). His first point has been widely accepted, but many scholars disagree with the second (e.g. Schepens, 2007). Their dissent is supported by the *Histories*, which contains biographical sketches of men like Hannibal, Scipio, and Philopoemen. Polybius even describes Theopompus's *Philippica* as a history that gave an account of the pomp and life of a king (viii.11.5: μονάρχου πρόσχημα καὶ βίον). Polybius describes only two genres: encomium and history. Biography belongs equally to both, but is consistently subordinated to one or the other. The question becomes, therefore, whether Polybius defines any intersection between encomium and history.

Scholars attribute similar moral projects to encomium, history, and biography (e. g. Dihle, 1987: 15-16; Fortenbaugh, 2007: 64). Polybius, to the contrary, differentiates encomium and history chiefly on the grounds that they do not offer the same type of moral education. The encomiast amplifies the subject's praiseworthy deeds. Roman generals praise heroic actions before their commands to instill in the troops a desire to win praise through virtuous actions. The effect is immediate, temporary, and effective primarily on the uneducated masses. The elite, like the distinguished members of the Spartan assembly or Antiochus III, are given to reason, and consistently resist the stimulation of encomia.

In contrast to the encomiast, the historiographer assigns praise and blame through a reasoned consideration of actions, their contexts, and their consequences precisely because this process is essential for effective and lasting moral correction. Phylarchus and Timaeus, who amplify the virtues of allies and the vices of enemies, deny their readers this particular benefit of the study of the past. Their fellow partisans rejoice in the moment, but the statesmen who study Polybius's even-handed considerations of virtue and its consequences reap an everlasting reward: they learn how to determine themselves whether actions and decisions are virtuous. The effect of this instruction is permanent and applicable to nearly any situation; therefore, it empowers the reader to bear all the vicissitudes of fortune nobly.

History's more philosophical approach to moral instruction is remarkably similar to the moralism of Plutarch's *Lives*. His *Philopoemen* in particular highlights an interplay between descriptive and protreptic aims (Pelling, 1995: 220). Though a departure from Polybius's notion of encomiastic habituation, Plutarch's method bears an uncanny resemblance to the moral didacticism of the *Histories*.