

Fortune in Polybius: Tyche's Constantly Inconsistent Rationale

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Polybius' *Pragmatikē Historiē*, which deals with the rise of the Roman Empire in a mere fifty-three years, is a work that involves a major contradiction. Polybius furthers the purpose of the *Histories* as a pragmatic historical account which looks to rationally explain events by introducing three distinct levels of causality: cause, pretext, and beginning. However, it also features *Tyche*, or Fortune as a central force. There can be no question as to the importance of this conundrum and it seems intrinsically wrong to the modern mind to emphasize the role of Fortune in a pragmatic history. We might instead expect to find it in the histories of Polybius' predecessors, such as Herodotus, with no reasonable place in *Pragmatikē Historiē*. Nevertheless, the difficulty exists. Polybius in a number of passages explains both its purpose and its proper use, considering it to be a necessary element of his work. Why then, we may ask, is this issue worth investigating? As numerous scholars have pointed out, Polybius is inconsistent in his conceptualization of Fortune and of the purpose it serves. The question of why Polybius uses Fortune as crucial element in the *Histories* may be more appropriately answered by asking how he uses it. In this sense, this paper does not seek just to analyze systematically instances of *Tyche* in its different forms, but to push beyond these analyses, suggesting that Fortune in the *Pragmatikē Historiē*, despite its inconsistency, serves a reasonable, explanatory role in Polybius' rational and pragmatic work.

The role of *Tyche* in the *Histories* has sparked significant debate among historians. No serious academic discussion of Polybius can ignore the research of historian Frank W. Walbank. Walbank wrote extensively on the subject of *Tyche*, arguing that a rational, universal history which includes a prominent role for Fortune is not a contradictory one in the case of the *Histories*.¹ Though the weight of Walbank's scholarship is overwhelming, this paper will attempt to credibly expand on his assertions about Fortune in the *Histories*. It shall be suggested that Polybius' introduction, his discussion of Regulus, book thirty-six, and the underlying themes of his work include attempts to enlist *Tyche* as a rationalizing force. An essential and difficult distinction must be made before moving forward. Fortune, or *Tyche* as a concept, despite being as inconsistent in its presence in the *Histories* as it is in Polybius' explanations for its proper use, however, is still being placed in a rational world. Fortune's actions may be inconsistent, but they are not unexpected.

As Polybius writes in the opening passages of his work, "the soundest education and training for a life of active politics is the study of History and that surest and indeed the only method of learning how to bear bravely the vicissitudes of Fortune is to recall the calamities of others."² Thus the only

¹ Frank W. Walbank, *Commentary on Polybius*, vol.1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 16.

² Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, ed. Frank W. Walbank, trans. Ian Scott Kilvert (New York: Penguin Classics, 1979), 1.1. Emphasis mine.

way to bear the inevitable vicissitudes of Fortune is to remember and understand the *mis*fortunes of others. Hence for Polybius, Fortune is not incalculable; in fact it is wholly expected. Recalling the calamities of others at the hands of Fortune can provide insight into what his audience can expect, and for what they must prepare themselves. Walbank writes that, “Polybius regards the study of the past as essentially a way to attain practical ends by learning lessons...in human affairs a good deal is calculable even if a residuum is not.”³ What is tangible about Fortune is not necessarily its actions, but rather the reactions of historical figures to its vicissitudes, which can form a rational, and moral process of behaviour.

It is widely accepted that Polybius uses Fortune inconsistently in his work. When considering whether or not this inconsistency demonstrates that Fortune has no single, overall function in the *Histories*, we would do well, before engaging wholly with *Tyche* and its role, to look back to Paul Shorey’s influential article, published in the 1920s, *Tnxh in Polybius*. As Shorey asserts, “it is a fundamental fallacy of the argument that anyone really possesses a final and consistent philosophy of fate, Fortune, and providence which we can apply as a canon to measure the deviation of earlier thinkers from perfect consistency.”⁴ Shorey’s point is well taken when one considers that in addition to this reality, Polybius’ use of *Tyche* does not entail simply one contradiction. Rather there are several contradictions. Further to this, as Walbank suggests, the different conceptions of Fortune merge into one another.⁵ There is no doubt that Polybius’ concept of fate was inconsistent, but as he writes himself, “Fortune has steered almost all affairs of the world in one direction and forced them to converge on one and the same goal.”⁶ However Polybius understood the manifestations of *Tyche*, it certainly existed as a central force in his perception of history and the affairs of man.

At this point it will be useful to provide some important examples from Polybius’ work that show the dual explanation of rational action and the role of Fortune in single events. The most significant example, noted by Frank Walbank in his *Commentaries on Polybius*, concerns the central theme of Polybius’ work, the rise of Rome in fifty three years to dominance over the known world. Polybius attributes the rise of Rome to both *Tyche* and rational reasons. Firstly it appears as though he thought Rome’s dominance was the “will” of Fortune, writing that, “It is the task of the historian to present to his readers under one synoptical view the process by which [Fortune] has accomplished this general design.”⁷ Later though, in 1.63, Polybius credits Rome’s empire to the fact that since “the Romans deliberately chose to school themselves in such great enterprises, it is quite natural that they should not only have boldly embarked upon their pursuit of universal dominion, but that they should actually have achieved their purpose.”⁸ Faced with this example, should rational choice, or Fortune, take credit for the rise of the Roman Empire? As Walbank writes, in *Polybius and Rome’s Eastern Policy*, “when [Polybius] speaks of *Tyche* in relation to the rise of Rome, Polybius seems to be envisaging a power akin to Providence, which comes in to upset and contradict the reasoned analysis of the ‘pragmatic’ historian.”⁹

How can these two concepts, applied to Polybius’ understanding of the rise of Rome, co-exist? Walbank suggests that in looking back on the process of Rome’s speedy rise to power, and recalling the words of Demetrius of Phalerum, Polybius was led to confuse what had happened with what had been destined to happen and in doing so, personified *Tyche* as a power working towards a conscious goal.¹⁰ Walbank’s conclusion, here, seems too simple. We cannot attribute to Fortune the role

³ Frank W. Walbank, *Polybius*, vol. 42, Sather Classical Lectures (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 58.

⁴ Paul Shorey, “Tuxh in Polybius,” *Classical Philology* 16, no. 3 (1921), 280.

⁵ Walbank, *Commentary on Polybius*, 24

⁶ Polybius, *Histories*, 1.4

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. 1.63.

⁹ Frank W. Walbank, “Polybius and Rome’s Eastern Policy,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 53, no. 1,2 (1963), 12.

¹⁰ Walbank, *Polybius*, 65.

of the constitution, education, and religious values of the Romans in their rise to dominance. We may instead examine how the contradictory forces of Fortune and rational development meet.

Given that Polybius portrays Fortune as an inevitable factor in human affairs,¹¹ however it manifests itself, there must be some link between rational causation and *Tyche* in his explanation of the rise of Rome to its position of prominence. Consider that in the case of Fortune as an explanation, *Tyche* takes on a capricious role; it is the general design of Fortune to have willed Rome to rule the world. In this case Fortune is active, but as will be seen shortly, this is not the only role that Fortune plays in the *Histories*. As a rational explanation of the supremacy of the Romans, Polybius emphasizes their training and military exercises, which he considers to have naturally emboldened them not only to *attempt* world dominion, but to actually *succeed* in achieving it.

The inconsistency of Polybius' use of fortune may permit us to view these two seemingly incongruous notions as existing in a formal relationship. The Romans could attempt world domination, be successful, and continue to achieve it, but this leaves no room for the question of against whom, or in the face of what. Presumably Polybius implies domination over the other city-states in the world, but to be sure they are not the only barrier to success, Fortune also reverses this right. As Polybius notes, "the disaster which befell Regulus offers us the clearest possible illustration of the principle that we should not rely upon the favours of Fortune, above all when we are enjoying success."¹² Regulus, who leads the unsuccessful Roman invasion of Africa during the First Punic War has no pity or mercy for his enemies while he is "winning", but is taken captive, and forced to beg for his life from his enemies when the tide had turned.

As noted, Rome came to dominate the Mediterranean during a fifty-three year period of almost continuous victory abroad.¹³ This may be, as in the case of Regulus, a moral issue for Polybius. Though he may regard the pragmatic actions of the Romans as critical to their success it is perhaps because of the moral nature of Roman conduct, unlike the behavior of Regulus during his campaigns, that Fortune allowed them to succeed. Returning to Polybius' rational explanation allows us to see the difference between the pragmatic measures that gave Rome, firstly, the ability to *attempt* to succeed, and, secondly, the fortunate result of having *actually* achieved success, as two separate variables. Attempting success is one thing, achieving success, i.e. with the "permission" of Fortune, is another. Thus, Polybius' rational explanation for Rome's dominance is not in contradiction with his emphasis on the role of fate; rather, his distinction between attempting success and successfully achieving dominance, combined with the different roles that fate plays in his work, allows, if one concedes the abovementioned, for these two explanations to coincide without difficulty.

As has been suggested, *Tyche* plays a number of different roles in the *Histories*, and serves a number of purposes for Polybius.¹⁴ Fortune plays a capricious role, as well as a moderating one, allowing no one to prosper indefinitely.¹⁵ Polybius, in book thirty six, also delineates the proper usages and appropriate placements of Fortune in historical works. Writing in order to justify his criticism of other writers, and to explain the use of *Tyche* in his work, Polybius writes that using fortune is appropriate to explain events, "of which it is not easy to discover the cause."¹⁶ First Polybius provides for events that are equivalent, in Walbank's mind, to "acts of God".¹⁷ Such events include draughts, plague,

¹¹ Frank W. Walbank, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, 27.

¹² Polybius, *Histories*, 1.35.

¹³ Ibid. 1.1.

¹⁴ Frank W. Walbank, "φιλιππος Τροχωδομενος," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 58, no. 1 (1938), 213.

¹⁵ Walbank, "Polybius, Philinus and the First Punic War," *The Classical Quarterly* 39, no. 1/2 (1945), 6.

¹⁶ Polybius, *Histories*, 36.1.

¹⁷ Walbank, *Commentary on Polybius*, 17.

and famines that occur, seemingly without rational causation. Polybius does not, in other cases, shy away from attributing to Fortune events which are a product of human nature, which could surely have other rational explanations.¹⁸

Polybius provides the reader with two sample events, both involving human nature, one with a rational cause, and one with a cause that Polybius can only attribute to Fortune. His primary and most obvious use of Fortune though, is one that involves natural events, ‘acts of God’ of which there could be no genuine, rational explanation—given the limits of contemporary scientific knowledge. As an example of the role of human action with a rational cause in deciding the course of events, Polybius cites the phenomenon of a low birth rate, population decrease and subsequent agricultural decline and city desertion in Greece. On the matter, Polybius notes that consulting the Gods would be futile, “since the cause of this situation was self-evident and the remedy lay within our own power.”¹⁹ Fortune, in this case, is not a rational explanation because both the *cause* was self-evident and the *remedy* lay within human power. Here again, Polybius sees two levels of rational explanation.

Polybius then provides another explanation of human events for which Fortune is the cause. It concerns the history of Macedonia “where it is impossible or difficult to establish the cause, then the answer must remain in doubt.”²⁰ In this instance, the Macedonians, despite having received a number of benefits from the Romans, rise up against them under the pretender Philip, and even defeat a Roman army.²¹ For Polybius, the Romans had freed Macedonia from the arbitrary demands of autocratic rulers, allowed them to live in liberty, and had put down civil strife and internal factions. In Polybius’ view, during the brief period in which Roman ascendancy over Macedon had been overthrown, the Macedonians had suffered exile, torture and murder at the hands of the pretender Philip, “yet now when they were fighting on behalf of a hateful man, they displayed the highest courage in defending his throne and actually overcame a Roman army.”²² Polybius claims to be baffled by this outcome. Firstly, the Romans had done nothing to cause it. Secondly, the remedy was not in Rome’s hands. Rather, Fortune, or in Polybius’ words, “one would be inclined to call it an infatuation sent from heaven,”²³ was sent to the Macedonians.

Outside the realm of rational explanation in human affairs, Polybius, unable to detect a reasonable human motivation for this event, nor able to rationally explain the Roman defeat, credits it to Fortune. Certainly though, there are rational explanations for both; Rome’s moral stance in this case is not in the wrong from his perspective, and thus Polybius is unable to explain it. Fortune, as a force in and of itself, may be inconsistent, but still serves as a rational explanation and example. In this case it is a reasonable explanation that includes *Tyche* as an actor, in place of a pragmatic and humanly explicable one.

As Frank Walbank explains, “one important lesson lay in learning how to meet those vicissitudes which demonstrably occurred in every man’s life. To have left these out of his *Histories* would have falsified the observed course of human events.”²⁴ To expand on this point, Polybius could have easily given another explanation for the causality of the Macedonian revolt; yet he employs Fortune as a reasonable explanation for the cause and effect of these events, even though it is inconsistent. To his audience, and to Polybius himself, it must have made sense. Pragmatic, human explanations for the Mace-

¹⁸ Walbank, *Polybius*, 61.

¹⁹ Polybius, *Histories*, 36.17.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Walbank, *Commentary on Polybius*, 16.

donian revolt must have existed, nonsensical though they may have been in Polybius' eyes. He chose Fortune because it probably made more rational sense to him than the practical explanations for their unfathomable behaviour. In the words of Paul Shorey, "Polybius is always willing to dramatize or personify Fortune and moralize the lessons her vicissitudes teach on the rise and fall of empires."²⁵ In this case, where Polybius finds no acceptable explanations, Fortune serves as the reasonable replacement.

The inconsistency of *Tyche* in Polybius' *Histories* makes it extremely difficult to form a cohesive and coherent conclusion as to its intended use. As has been seen, Fortune is applied differently in different places, serving numerous purposes and functions in both Polybius' work as a narrative and his causal conclusions. Whatever the purpose, function, or place - Polybius uses Fortune continuously throughout the *Histories*. Asking why Polybius employs Fortune as a central force within his work differs, obviously, from asking how he uses it. The former question requires some consistency in its use; to ask why he uses it only serves to explain its presence in the narrative. Asking how he uses *Tyche* in his work begs the larger question, how does Polybius include Fortune and to what end? The answer is not a satisfactory one: he uses Fortune both as an active and passive force, a moral enforcer, an act of god and as a trite saying.

Reasonable explanation, though, is the nuptial bind that allows these inconsistencies to exist without contradiction. It would be near impossible to suggest any coherence, as Shorey suggested, to the concept of fate; Polybius obviously does not escape this quagmire. However, the coherent and plausible explanation of the role of Fortune, for Polybius, derives from rationale, an aspect of which includes *Tyche*. Frank Walbank writes that, "in short [the domain of *Tyche* is] all that lies outside the sphere of rational analysis."²⁶ As we have seen, the domain of Fortune does *include* that which lies outside of human understanding; but rational analysis in the *Histories* also includes Fortune as a major player. While Fortune's actions may be inconsistent and irrational, her presence certainly is not.

²⁵ Shorey, "Tnxh in Polybius." 281.

²⁶ Walbank, *Polybius*, 61.

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