THE MINOR CHARACTERS OF POLYBIUS

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If the austerity of Polybius' style and his determination to establish the precise truth about all matters, however trivial, incline one to resort to him as a reference source rather than embracing him for pleasure, an unexpected light is thrown on him by a study of his minor characters. The chief heroes (e.g. Scipio) and the chief villains (e.g. Perseus) may sometimes provoke the objection that they come so close to being mere embodiments of rationality or irrationality respectively that they are psychologically unconvincing, and some readers will suspect that their idealised or stereotyped delineation is simply designed to exalt Polybius' faith in πρόνοια καί λογισμός ἐστῶς καὶ νουνεχής (3. 105. 9 'foresight and calculation solidly based on good sense'), However, there is nothing particularly schematic or predictable about a host of lesser figures, drawn with vivid strokes and composing a rich canvas especially in the later books. It is unfortunate that the fragmentary state of these books has in large measure obscured the historical reasons which may have prompted Polybius to supply as much detail as he has, but the general tone of his narration suggests a definite interest in the characters for their own sake. This paper, then, examines a less familiar and quite refreshing aspect of Polybius, who appears occasionally as a raconteur almost in the manner of Herodotus.

Eccentric behaviour may rouse Polybius to amusement or contempt, but he appears to delight in reporting it. King Prusias II of Bithynia and the Roman ex-consul Aulus Postumius invite comparison because of the ridiculous excesses to which they carried their admiration for an alien culture (cf. 30. 18 and 39. 1). This is the characteristic of both which Polybius highlights in sketches comprising other, less venial traits. As a background to Prusias' visit to Rome, Polybius recalls his earlier reception of Roman envoys at his court: he had gone to meet them with his head shaven and in the very costume of a libertus, since that, he told them, was the relationship in which he stood to Rome, so great was his desire to copy everything Roman. Not surprising, then, and even more preposterous was his behaviour on arrival in Rome. He prostrated himself at the entrance to the senate, greeting the senators as saviour gods, and Polybius says that his own sense of decorum causes him to omit further instances of even worse self-abasement. However, there is a wry twist in his reflection that Prusias' very contemptibility gained him a kindly response from the senate. With Prusias'
servility before the Romans Polybius associates effeminacy (ανανδρία, γυναικισμός), a theme taken up in later strictures of his character and appearance with most emphatic repetition: γυναικισμένος (32. 15. 7), γυναικοδύμως (ibid. 9), ἀμηρ and γυναικώδης (36. 15. 1), ἐκτεθηλυμμένος (ibid. 2). Polybius reveals an especially cerebral approach to human behaviour in that the aspect of Prusias' sacrilege at Pergamum which is thrown into relief is his inconsistency, since the destruction and plunder took place on the day following ritual sacrifices and libations. In this connection Polybius speaks of him as a madman devoid of reason (32. 15. 8 θυμού λυττώντος...ψυχής έξεοτηκυίας τών λογισμών), and elsewhere (36. 15. 4-6) he appears, perhaps somewhat hyperbolically, as a second Sardanapalus, a thoroughgoing sensualist, impervious to the finer things in life.

The long-windedness and vanity of Aulus Postumius (39. 1. 2 Ἦν...στρώμλος καὶ λάλος καὶ πέρπερος διαφερόντως) are illustrated in the context of another weakness, namely an addiction to Greek culture so extreme that contemporary Romans found it offensive (ibid. 3-9). In recalling an occasion on which Postumius asked in the preface of a Greek work of his own to be excused for any imperfections stemming from his being a Roman, Polybius commends Cato for exposing him as a humbug. With Roman good sense Cato pointed out that no one had forced Postumius to write a history in Greek and that his apology was as ludicrous as one coming from a man who had entered his name for a boxing contest but who craved indulgence in the stadium if he should prove unequal to the exertion. Polybius completes his picture of Postumius with another example of hypocrisy all the more serious because it involved cowardice as well (ibid. 11-12). He was a malingering at the battle of Phocis, yet emerging from his retreat afterwards, he sent the senate an account of the fighting so circumstantial as to suggest that he had participated in it. That, ironically, was how he distinguished himself on his first visit to the Greece he loved so well! Indeed, the anecdote is quoted as an instance of his susceptibility to the worst in the Greek character (ibid. 10) – we are meant to believe that he became addicted to pleasure and reluctant to exert himself (φιλήδονος...φυγόπονος) as it were through contagion.

Rather more good-humouredly Polybius tells how a victory of the praetor Lucius Anicius went to his head, leading to celebrations whose chaotic aspects are described with apparent relish (30. 22). Having summoned the most eminent artists and musicians in Greece and having witnessed a regular performance, Anicius was dissatisfied and called for more 'competitiveness', which turned out to be a euphemism for utter dissonance and an all-out tussle involving boxers,

2. Other trenchant sayings of Cato are reported at 35. 6. 2 and 4; 36. 14. 4-5.
among other extraneous characters. One cannot help regretting Polybius’ reticence about the tragic actors, which was inspired by fear of seeming to mock his readers.

For sheer absurdity these events can be rivalled only by the activities of Antiochus IV, whose title 'Επιφανῆς ('Illustrious') was easily and aptly altered to 'Επιμανῆς ('Lunatic'), and at two points (26. 1 and 30. 25-6) Polybius indulges us to the full with meticulous, unrestrained expositions of incredible extravagances and indignities. The two passages complement each other extremely well inasmuch as in the first Antiochus’ eccentricities are enacted in a plebeian setting, while in the second they are all the more incongruous because of the unique sumptuousness surrounding them. The first description owes its effect to a rapid series of memorable vignettes: the king airing his views on the working of metals to the experts on the job, gate crashing at parties and frightening the guests away, conducting mock elections of himself as a candidate for political office and giving judgements quite earnestly from his ivory chair, making presents of gazelles’ knucklebones or dates to friends or strangers, bathing in public with exquisite ointments. All this, we are told, was regular behaviour for Antiochus, but the account is rounded off with an anecdote worthy of a Charlie Chaplin comedy. In response to a bather who had admired the fragrance of his ointment on the previous day, Antiochus had so ample a jar of it poured over the unsuspecting man’s head that all the common folk there could merrily wallow and slip about in it. As Polybius wryly concludes, the king was a purveyor of laughter. The balancing sketch of the games celebrated by Antiochus is even more circumstantial. Indeed, Polybius relies for his effect largely on the prodigious accumulation and multiplication of extravagant details, with a sudden contrast and total deflation brought about by the woebegone appearance of the King himself. And the whole scene is framed between Polybius’ statements of Antiochus’ trivial and pretentious motive for the spectacle (30. 25. 1), and of his highly unscrupulous means of financing it (30. 26. 9). No summary could come anywhere near conveying the impact of Polybius’ description, which must be read in full. But if the scene in the baths was pure slapstick of 60 years ago, then the games look ahead to Cecil B. de Mille, with their cast of scores of thousands, not counting the animals and the statues, all in the most splendid technicolour and with a variety of exotic fragrances wafted in for good measure. The only exception to this magnificence is its royal instigator, riding a cheap hack alongside the procession, acting as usher, behaving like a jack-in-the-box at the banquets, joining the clowns in their act after being left on the ground in a drunken stupor. One may suspect that for the sake of a good story Polybius followed a hostile source uncritically in these chapters, since shortly afterwards Antiochus was quite clever enough to create a
most favourable impression of himself on Tiberius Gracchus (30. 27. 2).

Polybius introduces us briefly to quite an array of criminals, and through notable variations of emphasis he has given each sketch a distinguishing feature. Perhaps the least individualised of these criminals is Molpagoras of Cius, since he is presented almost as the classic rabble rouser, having secured his own despotic power by inciting the needy against the well-to-do and distributing among the former the goods of the latter, who have been either killed or banished (15. 21. 2). This rudimentary portrait is simply an introduction to Polybius’ thoughts on human folly (ibid. 3-8). He draws a bitter comparison between the readiness of mankind to be lured by greed and ineptitude into always the same disastrous political blunders, regardless of the clear lessons of history, and the intelligence of animals, which will not go near a snare a second time if they have been caught in the past. The passage elaborates earlier remarks on human gullibility in which Polybius had been more hopeful about the practical value of a knowledge of history (5. 75. 2-6), and it is echoed later more briefly and somewhat more emotionally (18. 40. 1-4).

While the sketch of Molpagoras is concise and self-contained, the more detailed one of his spiritual brother Critolaus emerges gradually from the action (38. 10. 8-ibid. 13. 8). His faction is colourfully introduced as οἱ χείριστοι καί τοίς θεοίς εχθροί καί λυμαινόμενοι τὸ ἔθνος (ibid. 10. 8. ‘the most depraved men, detested by the gods, and violators of the nation’), and the misguidedness of their policies towards Rome receives much emphasis (ibid. 10. 9-10 and 12-13; 11. 5-6). Polybius shows some sympathy for the people who were duped (ibid. 10. 12), but their characteristic shortsightedness and gullibility attracts censure as well (ibid. 11. 11). Critolaus’ methods of achieving his aims included more or less subtle distortions (ibid. 11. 8-9; 13. 4-5), selective bribery or exactions (ibid. 11. 10), an understanding of mob psychology (ibid. 12. 7), the use of specious appeals (ibid. 12. 9), a blend of aggressiveness and feigned moderation (ibid. 13. 1-2), and the exploitation of divisions among the people (ibid. 13. 3). He trod a tortuous road with undeniable skill, and the measure of his success, as he saw it, may be gauged by his securing not just the desired vote for war, but also, unconstitutionally and almost incidentally, absolute power for himself as commander-in-chief (ibid. 13. 7). However, in his final judgement of Critolaus, Polybius re-affirms the irrationality of his hostile policy towards Rome and his offences against the divine and human law (ibid. 13. 8).

Critolaus’ associate and eventual successor as general, Diaeus, was his peer in unscrupulousness and excelled him by far in sheer brutality. His exactions were normally haphazard (ibid. 15. 5), involving on occasion the pathetic spectacle of women stripping themselves and their children of jewellery (ibid. 15. 11). Whole peoples are pictured as the victims of his madness and his misguidedness, which
are likened to a raging torrent (*ibid.* 16. 2). The manner of the man is reflected in Polybius’ sustained picture of widespread terror and upheaval, entailing suicides, the reversal of moral values, the abandonment of cities (*ibid.* 16. 5-10). Diaeus was venal (*ibid.* 18. 4) and sadistic: within sight of one another he flogged and tortured a man and his young sons until they died (*ibid.* 18. 6). Polybius, so often thought of as a dispassionate historian, is prompted by his own account of the depravity of Diaeus and his associates to imagine a kind of wrestling match between them and Fortune skilful and enterprising (*ibid.* 18. 8), the paradoxical outcome being that defeat in war saved the Greeks from worse outrages: *ei μη ταχέως απωλόμβθα, ουκ ἂν ἔσωθημεν* (*ibid.* 18. 12 ‘Prompt ruin was our salvation’).

Widespread terrorisation emanated also from the Epirot Charops, whom Polybius compares to a beast (30. 12). Murders open or covert, confiscations, proscriptions were characteristic of him, with his unsavoury mother to the fore if the torture of women was required (32. 5. 11-14). Part of the interest in Charops stems from his misuse of his liberal education in Rome (27. 15. 4) and of the contacts he formed there in order to gain plausibility and credence (32. 5. 9). Polybius traces in some detail Charops’ machinations, which followed the traditional pattern of skilful distortion, to malign his political opponents to the Romans (27. 15. 8-9), and especially his manoeuvring of the normally consistent Cephalus into an unwanted alliance with Perseus (*ibid.* 10-16). Indeed, Polybius professes an intimate understanding of the successive mental processes leading up to Cephalus’ final decision. But whatever dividends were paid by Charops’ unscrupulousness at home, Polybius reports with evident pleasure and approval how he was snubbed privately and publicly by distinguished Roman citizens (32. 6. 4-8). With characteristic shamelessness, however, Charops distorted a senatorial reply in such a way as to suggest that his actions were favoured by the Romans (*ibid.* 9).

An encounter between Moagetes tyrant of Cibyra and the consul Manlius deserves study, since the former’s cruelty towards his own people contrasted so sharply with his cringing dread of Roman might (21. 34). We note the peremptory manner of Manlius, who saw through his insincere professions of friendship for Rome, being impressed rather by his record of hostility, and the

3. Cf. 24. 7, where Chaeron of Sparta, who had only a common man’s education, misused his natural gifts (he was *σοφός καὶ πρακτικός* ‘a shrewd man of action’ – supreme praise from Polybius) in order to despoil women and misappropriate public moneys. But, unlike so many of Polybius’ villains, he did not succeed in the long run, since the murder of an auditor in broad daylight led to his imprisonment and the restitution of the property confiscated by him.
significant point about Moagetes’ considerable self-abasement before Manlius is that it was not imposed by the latter but rather chosen by himself as a means of winning Roman friendship at a bargain price. Despite Manlius’ initial firmness and threatening demeanour, and his awareness of Moagetes’ motives, we do see how the tyrant’s craftiness eventually stood him in good stead, inasmuch as the desired friendship was secured by humiliating entreaties combined with a gradual increase in the price offered.

The Rhodians Deinon and Polyaratus are presented by Polybius with evident distaste. The motivation of their adherence to Perseus was avarice and adventurism in Deinon’s case, and financial need in Polyaratus’, since his pretensions had got him into debt (27. 7. 12), but we are able to study the plausible way in which they promoted a policy hostile to Eumenes and the Romans, shrewdly exploiting whatever prejudice already existed and using every trivial circumstance to cast suspicion on Eumenes (ibid. 5-10). Later on (30. 8-9) Polybius describes the subsequent fate of Deinon and Polyaratus in considerable detail, and it is perhaps an open question whether there is a slight element of self-deception when he finally disclaims ‘trampling’ on them in their downfall and asserts that he merely wishes to point a salutary lesson for the benefit of posterity by underlining their stupidity (ibid. 9. 21). Stupidity and cowardice are certainly the qualities that he singles out in condemning both their failure to accept the realities of a hopeless situation and their forfeiting of any claim to sympathy through their tenacious quest for survival (ibid. 8. 1-4). Polyaratus especially appears as a wretched and ridiculous figure with his suppliant boughs, being rebuffed at one port of call after another (ibid. 9. 1-20).

In addition to his eccentrics and scoundrels Polybius has portrayed memorably a number of minor characters either wholly admirable or with sharply contrasted strengths and weaknesses. Cotys, king of the Odrysae, combined with his skill as a soldier such qualities as discretion, mild manners, profundity of thought and a generous spirit: νήπτης ὑπήρχε καὶ πραότητα καὶ βάθος ὑπέφωνεν ελευθέρων (27. 12. 3). He was what we should call a ‘gentleman’, and Polybius cannot refrain from pointing out how very un-Thracian he was! Gorgus of Messene is presented as the ‘complete’ man, having wealth, birth, an impressive appearance and manner, a most distinguished career as an athlete in his earlier years and as a statesman later in life (7. 10. 2-5). In the case of King Masinissa of Numidia, Polybius lists a number of amazing physical feats and alludes to the far-reaching benefits of affection within his family as well as of his concern for the fertility of his country (36. 16). The gentleness and goodness of King Ptolemy Philometor are illustrated by several examples of noble forbearance, but Polybius explains his setbacks by a concomitant tendency to relax in success and to be overcome by Egyptian decadence and
sloth (39. 7)! The skill of Diophanes of Megalopolis as a soldier (21. 9) was combined with political ineptitude (22. 10. 4-15), just as, conversely, Aratus of Sicyon showed himself capable of the shrewdest and most elaborate calculations (2. 47. 4 — *ibid.* 50. 11) and of swaying a justifiably hostile assembly in his favour through sheer eloquence (4. 14), but committed the most elementary blunders in the practical business of fighting (4. 11. 6) — *ibid.* 12. 13). Indeed, it is the manifest dichotomy of his talents that prompts Polybius to speculate at length about the ‘multiformity’ of the human spirit (4. 8). Finally, Deinocrates of Messene embodied not only a more complex combination of strengths and weaknesses, but a more dangerous one, since the weaknesses were obscured by a certain superficial appeal (23. 5. 4-18). For his immediate context Polybius need have depicted only Deinocrates’ poor political judgement — his ‘I’m all right, Jack’ attitude, his misplaced reliance on Flamininus, his lack of concentration and organisational power. But his more positive side is revealed clearly as well, supporting Polybius’ description of him as αὐλικός καὶ στρατιωτικός ἀνθρώπος (*ibid.* 4."courtier and soldier"). To take the latter aspect first, Polybius acknowledges his coolness and daring in battle, indeed his brilliance in single combat. And we gain a fuller impression of his qualities as a *bon vivant*: his devotion to women, wine, the theatre; his charm and ready wit in society, with the anecdote of Flamininus’ reproach after seeing him dance in a long robe underlining his unsuitability and lack of insight as a politician. Flamininus’ words had, of course, only a temporary restraining effect, Deinocrates being the man he was. Clearly he had been promoted to a position of influence for quite the wrong reasons, and the warning inherent in Polybius’ judgement that his capacity for political action was spurious and tawdry in reality, even though it appeared flawless to the Messenians (*ibid.* 5 τὸν δὲ πραγματικῶν τρόπων ἐπέφαρε μὲν τέλειον, ἣν δὲ ψευδεπίγραφος καὶ ρωπικὸς), strikes home all the more tellingly in these days of TV image politics. However, Polybius has this time refrained from overt moralising and, in an inconsequential episode, the spotlight falls glaringly on an intriguing personality alongside whom most of Polybius’ major characters appear wooden and lacking in dimension.

For the serious historian the principal value of Polybius will naturally remain divorced from the topic treated here and, some would argue, from his notions about characterisation in general. Even the literary impact of the pen portraits discussed above can be but imperfectly assessed because of the gaps in our text. The least we may do, perhaps, is to acknowledge and correct the error of regarding Polybius as consistently earnest or dry as dust.
Chapter 4 of Pédech's book (see below) is essential reading, as it deals fully with the protagonists as well as the philosophical influences manifest in Polybius' characterisation. Indeed, the scope of this article was partly determined by Pédech, whose remarks on the lesser figures are inevitably scanty.

**FURTHER READING**


The most convenient text of Polybius' *Histories* is in the Loeb Classical Library (6 vols., 1922-1927), and the Greek quotations in this article are taken from it. However, as I have found the translation by W.R. Paton to be not always accurate or happy, I have preferred to supply my own translations and paraphrases.