

REVISITING HELLENISTIC HISTORIOGRAPHY:
THE DYNAMICS OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE
(A REVIEW ARTICLE)

Dirk ROHMANN, *Psychologie in der hellenistischen Geschichtsschreibung*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2023 (Palingenesia. Schriftenreihe für Klassische Altertumswissenschaft, Bd. 173), 239 pp., ISBN 978-3-515-13473-6 (print); ISBN 978-3-515-13475-0 (e-book), €56.00.

Dirk ROHMANN's book consists of an introduction, five main chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, an index of names and places, a general index and an *index locorum*. In the extensive introduction, ROHMANN (= R.) states that while the influence of the medical and philosophical concepts of the human psyche on the literature of the Classical age have been explored, the impact of those kinds of discourse on Hellenistic historiography remains understudied (p. 9). R. also stresses the scarcity of medical writings from the Hellenistic period devoted to the human soul, as well as the non-existence of psychology as a scientific field *sensu stricto* in antiquity. The questions and theories posed by the modern discipline of psychology belonged largely to ancient medicine and philosophy. R. offers an overview – chiefly for the Classical and Hellenistic period – of the different approaches to the soul in historiography, tragedy, philosophy and medicine. In the case of medicine, recent scholarly works on the question of the soul and its illnesses are discussed in more detail (pp. 16–19). R. also provides an outline of the problem of the soul and general psychology in Galen's texts (pp. 19–22), which is followed by a brief analysis of a piece from the second book of Cicero's *De republica* in which the idea of the state-as-soul occurs, which leads R. to the exposition of the core argument (“Kernthese”) of the study. It posits that in Hellenistic historical works negative attributes of the soul and mental illness, in particular of leading statesmen and rulers, are conceived as infectious and as a major cause of the fall of states. R. focuses on Polybius and Diodorus of Sicily; fragmentary Hellenistic historians are also covered to a certain extent.

In chapter one (“Der Historiker als Arzt oder Verderber der Seele”) R. discusses explicit ancient theories of the soul and its illnesses, as well as those of a group's soul and an individual soul, concentrating on Polybius and Diodorus. In subchapter 1.1, R. offers an interesting reading of the passages in Polybius in which the historian thematises historiography as a type of therapy for the soul. R.'s analysis of Polybius' famous critique of Timaeus of Tauromenium highlights the idea that the relation between a historian and his reader is analogous to that of a doctor and his patient. There is a clear methodological angle in that analogy, namely that just as a doctor who knows his treatment methods solely from handbooks can be a threat to his patient, a historian that has no personal experience of the political and military reality can be dangerous to his reader's soul. As the critique of the so-called “tragic historiography” by Polybius shows, sensational history can be the cause of an illness of the reader's soul. This can especially be the case when the recipient of the work is a statesman who further shapes his people's souls. Various passages in Polybius (i.a. Polyb. III 7, 5; XXXVIII 16, 7–9; V 88, 3) suggest that negative conditions of the soul, such as ὄβρις or insanity, can be transmitted “top down” from the leader to the lower parts of the society. Such a perspective is particularly valuable in the context of Polybius' analysis of the Roman constitution in book six of the *Histories* (pp. 36–37). An ideal historian, according to R.'s interpretation of Polybius, is one who is able to fulfil the Stoic ideal of ἀπάθεια, or freedom from passion in writing. R. continues (subchapter 1.2) with the motive of the soul's wanderings and the historical determinism in

Diodorus¹. Taking Diodorus' *prooemium* as the starting point, R. argues that the historian, similarly to Polybius, has the psychological impact of his work on the reader in mind, and tries to achieve it, e.g., by displaying the falls of prominent historical figures. The discussion of Diodorus' notion of the eternal nature of the soul and its afterlife runs parallel to those recorded in his work but clearly attributable to other thinkers, especially Pythagoras. Through a close reading of the numerous passages of the *Library*, R. intends to show that a specific theory of the soul ("Seelenlehre") is vital to Diodorus' concept of the function of providence in the life of individuals. R. also notes that Diodorus was skeptical about the existence of the soul after death. Diodorus' philosophical stance concerning the soul thus seems to be eclectic. Next (subchapter 1.3), R. approaches several pieces by lost Hellenistic historians, arguing that some of them had a propensity towards the Pythagorean doctrine of the soul, but also towards other currents assuming the soul's eternal life (e.g. Manetho and Megasthenes). A look into Plutarch's writings, that concludes the section, serves R. as additional evidence for the adduced testimonies about the soul and foreshadows the next chapter.

In chapter two ("Die Psychologie von Herrschern bei Polybios") R. endeavours to demonstrate how Polybius' understanding of historical work in medical terms shapes his depictions of statesmen, kings and tyrants. In the section on Philip V of Macedon (subchapter 2.1), R. highlights the Polybian notion of the detrimental impact of the king's counsellors on his psychological disposition and character. In Polybius' view, it is crucial whether or not the given leader takes bad advisors on board, and whether he wilfully allows them to influence his judgment and actions. Hence, in the case of Aratus of Sicion (subchapter 2.2) Polybius' assessment is different from that of Philip, as the former was able to take decisions and act independently from external pressures and influences. On the other hand, Polybius admits that Aratus was sometimes considered to be inconsistent in terms of emotion and action, which R. interprets in the context of how inconsistencies of character reflect upon inconsistencies in his narrative. R. shows that such a perspective is due to the broader Polybian tendency of "Psychologisierung des historischen Geschehens" (p. 62). As the third instance of Polybius' approach to psychology and character of historical figures, R. adduces the depictions of the Scipios (subchapter 2.3). R. first analyses the famous *Somnium Scipionis* that constitutes a part of Cicero's *De republica* and the concepts/ideas about the soul and its wanderings after death, stressing the notion of the eternal existence of the soul. Then R. looks forward to the reception of the *Somnium* by the Neoplatonic Macrobius: that apparently far excursion is crucial to the proper understanding of Polybius' depiction of the Scipios, as Macrobius offers additional philosophical perspectives and insights concerning the soul, which are otherwise only indirectly accessible to us. The reception of the mantic abilities of the Scipios in Cicero and the secondary reception by Macrobius can be indicative of the intentions of the primary text of Polybius (in relation to those later authors), e.g. for his suggestions regarding Scipio Maior's godlike qualities and his prescience in political matters (Polyb. X 2). As the last books of Polybius are very fragmentarily preserved, and Scipio's dream would be located around 149 BC while the *Histories* end with 146 BC, we do not find the dream among the extant pieces of the work. But in his extensive argument R. makes a compelling case that in Polybius' account Scipio was also probably seen as able to bring his soul in contact with divine providence. Moreover, Polybius seems to have contrasted Scipio's dream with the "demonic" dreams of his literary opponent Timaeus of Tauromenium. In the fourth section (2.4), R. explores Polybius' descriptions and mentions of tyrants in relation to their psychological qualities, showing that in contrast to ideal statesmen (such as the Scipios), tyrants would not have direct contact with the divine, that their souls would be full of anger and folly, and that their degeneration impacted the entire generations of their subjects, who were destined to be punished by the gods for their masters' deeds.

¹ Or in Diodorus' underlying sources: R. is mindful of the problem of Diodorus' use of sources, and argues that the latter's psychological concepts and theories are largely homogenous across the *Library* (p. 38 with n. 39).

In the third chapter (“Psychologische Wirkung schlechter Herrscher bei Diodor”), R. develops a reading of Diodorus’ *Library* in which the Pythagorean concept of the harmony of the soul, as well as the Stoic and Epicurean notion of the tranquility of the soul (*ἀπάθεια*) permeate the narrative of universal history. As for the complex problem of Diodorus’ input vs. reproducing his underlying material, R. admits that generally we are unable to decide with certainty to whom we can actually attribute the given ideas or notions (Diodorus or his source), yet still that material in the books under analysis comes from Hellenistic authors, and as such offers insight into Hellenistic historiography in general. In the subchapter 3.1, R. discusses potential Hellenistic projections of some Hellenistic ideas on ancient Egypt. In particular, we learn how Diodorus (or his source) views the Egyptian rulers – R.’s reading is through the Stoic lens, including the ideal of a leader free from excessive passion. That is set in a wider context, namely that of how in book I of the *Library* the constitution of the ruler’s soul and his dealing with justice impact the well-being of the entire state.

In the next section (3.2), R. explores Diodorus’ world of Greek heroic figures. R. argues that the figures Diodorus mentions display a consistency when it comes to ideas about the soul and its well-being or illness. As an example, the account about Heracles is analysed, illustrating how the historian would conceive of madness and the murder of a member of one’s family. In this part R. focuses on insanity/mental illness and the acts caused by it. The section concludes with a reading of Diodorus’ narrative on how in the time of Cronos such specific qualities of the ruler’s soul as justice and simplicity were believed to be transmitted to the members of the generations that stemmed from that time. This is meant to demonstrate that Diodorus’ notion of the transmission of certain characteristics of the soul from the ruler to the ruled is consistent across the *Library*, and how it applies to the descriptions based on myth rather than history. In section 3.3, R. explores Diodorus’ use of the term *μεγαλοθυμία*, which, supported by its definitions in other authors, esp. philosophers, can be read as a quality close to *ἀπάθεια* or absolute calmness of the soul. R. sets Diodorus’ account of the valours of Pittacus’ of Mitylene against the account of Cambyses. In this part, the political-constitutional connotations are important: Pittacus is depicted as sound and democratic, while Cambyses represents insanity and despotism. This reading is bolstered by Diodorus’ account of Aristogeiton: the greatness of soul implies and spurs the opposition to tyranny. Diodorus’ narratives on the lawgivers in the Magna Graecia (section 3.4) allow R. to further explore the concept of the influence of one soul on another: here it is the lawgiver that impacts those who are to apply his laws. Laws themselves are conceived as a tool for moral and soul-focused shaping of the body of citizens, and a lawgiver that cares about his citizens’ souls is similar to a doctor looking after his patients; just as a historian has been shown to be in chapter one of the study. R. then moves to an exposition of how the tendencies and notions described up to this point resonate in the account of more recent history, namely that of the late Classical period and in particular the idea of how the harmony of the soul of the citizenry determines the course of its fate, e.g. Sparta after Mantinea in 362 BC. Diodorus’ thinking about the degeneration of the communal, political soul seems particularly important when applied to the account of the transition from the Classical to the Hellenistic age. Diodorus depicts Epaminondas as the last Greek political figure with great soul and character, while the statesmen that came after him were affected by mental illness. R. continues (section 3.6) with an analysis of the notion of greatness of soul as an effect of philosophical instruction on Philip II (influenced by Lysis of Taras) and Dion of Syracuse (influenced by Plato). The link between these figures is a philosophical association with Pythagorean doctrine. The next subchapter (3.7) is devoted to Diodorus’ treatment of Alexander, and shows how differently the historian viewed the king in comparison to pre-Hellenistic rulers or statesmen. The Macedonian king is, as R. convincingly argues, deliberately depicted by Diodorus as not influenced by philosophy, even if he is still described in a largely positive light. R.’s exposition makes it evident that the history of Alexander is also filtered through Diodorus’ overarching idea of providence steering historical events. In the concluding section 3.8, R. enquires into the parts of the *Library* that cover the Hellenistic period in search of the connection between the soul of the ruler and the well-being of the state. The fate of some of the despotic rulers is shown to be a direct consequence of the degeneration of their soul. Agathocles is paradigmatic as

a tyrant with an ill soul, whose end comes through divine punishment – another instance of providence’s intervention in the history. The moral degeneration of Antigonos is interestingly depicted as a model for the degeneration and fall of the whole world of Greek *poleis*. R. also advances an interesting interpretation of Diodorus’ metaphorical use of the word μητρόπολις in relation to historiography: the latter is meant to morally “colonise” the world, as in Diodorus’ mind it is meant to shape the characters and souls of its audience. In contrast to the negative characteristics of the degenerate kings and tyrants, Diodorus presents the Roman statesmen’s features of the soul; the paragons are – as in Polybius – the Scipios, who possessed the virtues of *clementia* and *moderatio*.

In chapter four (“Psychologie der Kriegsführung”) R. delves into the question of the psychological aspects of military command in Polybius and Diodorus. In section 4.1, R. analyses the general framework of the Polybian ideal of a statesman, highlighting how the historian combines the moral and the psychical elements in his concept. The characterisation of Scipio emphasises his μεγαλοψυχία, influencing his soldiers, the citizenry and the well-being of the entire Roman state. R. detects another instance of the medical analogy in the Polybian descriptions: the military commander is like a doctor of the soul for his soldiers, just as the historian is for his audience. The antithesis for the Scipios thus characterised is Philip V and his destructive impact on the Macedonian state. R. also discusses the attention Polybius paid to the ethnic homogeneity vs. heterogeneity of the army, which seems to be a crucial factor in maintaining its psychological integrity. As opposed to the Roman army which is ethnically “pure”, the Carthaginian army is composed of heterogeneous elements and thus fallible to insanity (even of an animal-like character: R. aptly spots Polybius’ use of ἀποθηριώω in this context). In section 4.2, R. continues with a reading of Diodorus’ thinking of the military commander as the soul interconnected with the body of the army under his command. Diodorus seems to view the soul as primary to the body, and to be less interested than Polybius in the characteristics of the soul of Roman commanders. Diodorus’ convictions about the Greek *paideia* as civilizing the soul are at work, as the military successes of the Thebans are explained by their training in the Greek gymnasia. Their mental health is antithetical to the psychological condition of the Macedonian army, which again comes close to insanity, especially during the aggressive war in Asia.

The fifth chapter (“Interaktion der Seele mit dem Göttlichen”) integrates the findings from the preceding chapters into an examination of the concepts of interactions between the soul and the gods/divinities in Polybius and Diodorus. The idea of infectious insanity works in the background of both historical works – but R. highlights yet another aspect, namely that insanity can be conceived as divine punishment or revenge. Thus, in section 5.1, R. demonstrates how Polybius connects the sacrilegious acts of Philip V, Antiochus III, Antiochus IV and Prusias II with their mental illness, as well as with the calamities their armies faced. We learn that the very decline of the world of independent Greek *poleis*, as well as of Macedon, is – in Polybius’ narrative – ultimately caused by divine agency, taking the form of the mental or moral illness of the central figures; and those figures, as already shown in the preceding chapters of the study, transmit that illness further to their peoples. Then, R. examines Diodorus’ descriptions of divinely-induced insanity and plague (section 5.2). In this part, R. adduces abundant evidence bolstering the already adumbrated reading of Diodorus’ views on sacrilege and its consequences regarding the mental condition of men. In at least one instance in the *Library* we can find the notion of mental illness transmitted as if it was a plague: and there, R. points out, it is imposed by the gods as revenge for the destruction of sacred objects: the illness that befalls the Carthaginians upon their war on Sicily in 396 is a punishment imposed directly to the commander who committed the crime, but is then transmitted to the entire army.

The book concludes with a brief summary of the study’s findings, and a look at the phenomena discussed in the book in the Imperial period and Late Antiquity. As R. notes, the idea of insanity was often employed as a tool of political rhetoric against the emperors by historians and biographers, although there were various beliefs as to what constituted that madness: intemperance of passions, deification during one’s life, etc. In Late Antiquity the notion of insanity gains new contexts, particularly as applied to the Christians in the Roman Empire, which were seen by members of the Roman elite as spreading an infectious disease. Early Christianity would use the notion

of insanity as a tool in the conflict with its opponents, and after its success it in turn would perceive heresy as an infectious disease threatening the emperor and the state.

To sum up, R.'s monograph is an interesting read, as it provides a new perspective on the concepts of the soul, the psychology and the character, of the Hellenistic historians, in particular Polybius and Diodorus. Moreover, it presents the problem in a broad spectrum of contexts including medical and philosophical discourse and religious beliefs. R.'s diligent study highlights the less explored layer of the Hellenistic authors' historical thinking, i.e. that of the cause and effect beyond the political or military "material" processes, namely that of the "spiritual", psychic and moral factors, as well as how they are interconnected and integrated into the historical narrative. Those factors intertwined, as R.'s study shows, are not mere additions to the historical account. They can actually be seen as the key drivers of the Polybian and Diodorean narrative.

This review has been, thus far, focused mainly on analysing the content of the *Psychologie in der hellenistischen Geschichtsschreibung*, as I found very few faults with the book. It is definitely a well-researched and insightful study, particularly important for scholars specialising in Polybius and Diodorus². The bibliography used for the study is extensive and up-to-date (pp. 207–220). If I were to indicate some aspect worth taking into consideration, it would be the use of terminology related to soul. The word ψυχή has several basic senses that are only partly compatible, e.g. ψυχή as a life force or animating principle, spirit; ψυχή as the centre of emotions, desires and thoughts, or ψυχή as character/personality, etc. R. seems to be aware of those distinctions, although it is not always self-evident what overarching conception of ψυχή is in the background in the passages that are discussed in the given section, where the argument focuses on the various notions and ideas around that conception. Given that in R.'s book philosophical thought on the human soul and psychology is a vital part of the background for the concepts found in historical works, the argument could possibly be enriched by including more of the Panaetian understanding of ψυχή and his creative input in the psychological theory of the Stoic school, especially in view of the philosopher's probable impact on Polybius³. R. is not unfamiliar with Panaetius, as he mentions him several times, once discussing μεγαλοψυχία (pp. 64, 69, 108 n. 68); we could supplement that e.g. with Panaetius' fragment 86a VAN STRAATEN, which analyses ψυχή in greater detail⁴.

Without a doubt, these remarks do not diminish the worth of R.'s important book, which can be highly recommended to scholars of ancient historiography, particularly to those specialising in Polybius and Diodorus, as well as those interested in ancient mentality in general.

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² There are exceptionally few, minor typographical errors in the book. I have noted "Nikoloas" instead of "Nikolaos" on p. 175; "and" instead of "und" on p. 56; in the table of contents the "Personen- und Ortsregister" has 222 as the starting page, while it is actually page 221.

³ For the so-called "Scipionic circle", of which Polybius and Panaetius were a part, see also M. SOMMER, *Scipio Aemilianus, Polybius, and the Quest for Friendship in Second-Century Rome*, in: B. GIBSON, T. HARRISON (eds.), *Polybius and His World: Essays in Memory of F.W. Walbank*, Oxford 2013, pp. 307–318; J. BARLOW, *Scipio Aemilianus and Greek Ethics*, CQ LXVIII, 2018, pp. 114–117. Panaetian concepts have been traced especially in the sixth book of the *Histories*, see E. VIMERCATI, *Il Mediostocismo di Panezio*, Milan 2004, pp. 189–190; 198–202; cf. G. MOHAY, *Imperium Iustum: Panaitios' Theorie bei Polybios*, AAntHung XLVII 2007, pp. 175–184.

⁴ For that fragment see M. VAN STRAATEN, *Panétius: sa vie, ses écrits et sa doctrine avec une édition des fragments*, Amsterdam 1946, pp. 99–100; 119–129; A.J. VOELKE, *L'idée de volonté dans le Stoïcisme*, Paris 1973, pp. 115–120; F. ALESSE, *Panezio di Rodi e la tradizione stoica*, Naples 1994, pp. 214–215; *Panezio di Rodi: Testimonianze*, Naples 1997, pp. 261 f. E. VIMERCATI's edition (*Panezio. Testimonianze e frammenti*, Milan 2002) places that passage among the "frammenti attribuibili" (B 26).