

CONTESTING THE GREATNESS OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT:
THE REPRESENTATION OF ALEXANDER IN THE HISTORIES OF POLYBIUS
AND LIVY

By

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Chapter II

The Argument for a Negative Polybian View of Alexander and Its Faults

In Richard Billows' article, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," he recognized the lack of scholarly work on Polybius' opinion of Alexander the Great.¹ His arguments deserve to be addressed in detail, since they are marked by some surprising shortcomings and oversights. He argues for the existence of "five basic themes concerning Alexander that interested Polybius."² According to Billows, those five themes are: Alexander's destruction of Thebes, how he is compared with other kings, his character and generalship, the achievements of the Macedonians under Alexander, and Alexander's military fortune passing to other generals.³ Billows uses these five categories of analysis in an attempt to establish Polybius' resistance to and dislike of Alexander the Great. Billows pursued this line of argument by focusing on the passages found in Polybius' history where he interpreted Polybian criticisms of Alexander. Although Billows' argument does cover many important Alexander passages in Polybius' work, it fails to appreciate fully the laudatory statements addressed at the beginning of this study, namely passages 8.10, 12.23, and 3.59. Many of Billows' judgments on the evidence that he did discuss are misleading.

The negative Polybian view of Alexander that Billows' article advances does not reflect the sentiments of all Polybius' passages involving Alexander. Billows' argument often

¹ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 286. For a concise, yet extensive study on Alexander scholarship, see Edward M. Anson, "Alexander the Great in Current Scholarship," *History Compass* 7, no. 3 (Online publication date: April, 2009): 981-92.

² Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 289.

³ *Ibid.* 289-90.

misconstrues the language or judgment of a passage in order to support his argument that Polybius had a negative outlook on Alexander. In reality, Polybius' opinion of Alexander is far more evenhanded, balancing between respect for his accomplishments and Polybius' agenda of representing the Romans as greater than Alexander. This is not to imply that Polybius failed to criticize Alexander, as seen in his description of Alexander's sack of the city of Thebes, discussed below. Polybius' handling of Alexander in his work is more nuanced than Billows credits. Polybius can criticize Alexander in particular points in his history without expressing a generally negative opinion of him. Polybius himself tells us that, in his estimation, the human personality is complex, stating, "So true it is that there is something multiform in the nature not only of men's bodies, but of their minds, so that not merely in pursuits of a different class the same man has a talent for some and none for others, but often in the case of such pursuits as are similar the same man may be most intelligent and most dull, or most audacious and most cowardly. Nor is this a paradox, but a fact familiar to careful observers."⁴ Polybius believed strongly that great men deserved both praise and blame.⁵ His general tone toward Alexander, with the exception of a few statements discussed below, is positive. Under additional scrutiny, the negative picture painted by Billows appears less convincing.

Polybius' Criticism of Alexander over the Destruction of Thebes

Billows' strongest evidence for Polybian criticism of Alexander involves Polybius' discussion of the sack of the city of Thebes. In 38.2.14, Polybius refers to Alexander's sack of the city of Thebes as "unjust and terrible (ἀδίκᾳ καὶ δεινᾷ)." Polybius' criticism proves

⁴ Polyb. 4.8.7-8

⁵ Eckstein, *Moral Vision*, 239.

partially unjustified, conforming as it does to the conventional Greek resentment toward Alexander over the sack of Thebes, which was still present when Polybius wrote.⁶ Ultimately, however, it is difficult to refute the negative view presented by Polybius in 38.2.13-4. However, it is also unnecessary. This one criticism of Alexander does not shape Polybius' entire opinion of him, which, as I have demonstrated, is mostly positive. The criticism of Alexander over Thebes, on its own, cannot support Billows' claim that Polybius harbored a collectively negative opinion of the great Macedonian.

Additionally, although Polybius condemned Alexander's sack of the city of Thebes, he does praise Alexander's piety and his sparing of the Theban temples in 5.8-11. This passage testifies to Polybius' undeniable appreciation of Alexander, as it praises his sparing of the holy structures at Thebes. Section 5.8-11 indeed establishes a positive view of Alexander and is given insufficient appreciation in Billows' article.

According to Polybius in this passage, Philip V had captured the Aetolian city of Thermus. In retaliation for the Aetolian destruction of the holy sites of Dium and Dodana, he looted and sacked the holy places of Thermus. Philip's actions horrify Polybius, who immediately highlights Alexander's correct treatment of Thebes and the Persians:

And take Alexander. Though so indignant with the Thebans that he razed the city to the ground, yet he was so far from neglecting the reverence due to the gods when he captured the city, that he took the most anxious care that not even any unintentional offense should be committed against the temples and holy places in general. Even when he crossed to Asia to chastise the Persians for the outrages they had perpetrated against the Greeks, he strove to exact the punishment from men that their deeds deserved, but refrained from injuring anything consecrated to the gods, although it was in this respect that the Persians had offended most while in Greece.⁷

⁶ For the Greek resentment of Alexander over the sack of Thebes, see Green, *Alexander of Macedon*, 151.

⁷ Polyb. 5.10.6-8

In this passage, Polybius praises Alexander's holiness and respect for sacred sites. In addition, Polybius's text characterizes Alexander as a righteous conqueror, punishing those who deserved punishment and sparing that which was sacred to the gods. Polybius voices complete agreement with this policy.

Polybius highly praises Alexander's piety in the face of the betrayal of the Thebans and the crimes of the Persians. The approval shown for Alexander by Polybius cannot be denied. The passage also represents Philip V as unworthy of his Macedonian predecessors for not following their examples in such a responsible manner:

With these examples constantly present to his mind Philip should now have shown himself to be the true heir and successor of those princes [Philip II, Alexander, and Antigonos III], not inheriting so much their kingdom as their high principles and magnanimity. But, instead of this, though all through his life he was at great pains to prove that he was allied in blood to Alexander and Philip, he was not in the least anxious to show himself their emulator. Therefore since his practices were the reverse of theirs, as he advanced in years his general reputation came to be also the reverse.⁸

Thus, Philip V failed morally where Alexander triumphed. The laudatory tone of this passage toward Alexander is unmistakable. In 5.8-11, Polybius does not portray Alexander's sack of Thebes as an evil or cruel action like Philip V's sack of Thermus. To be fair, Thermus was more of a collection of temple complexes than a traditional Greek polis. Therefore, the issue that Polybius here emphasizes is proper treatment of temples. Nevertheless, Polybius' favorable view of Alexander in this passage is undeniable. To exclude this passage when considering Polybius' general opinion of Alexander is unreasonable if one seeks an accurate appraisal of how Polybius collectively viewed him. Alexander's sparing of the Theban temples, in Polybius' opinion, was a redeeming aspect of Alexander's sack of Thebes. Even if Polybius had separated his judgments on Alexander's actions against the temples of Thebes and those against Thebes itself, eliminating

⁸ *Ibid.* 5.10.9-11.

any contradiction on his part, he still provides an opinion of Alexander's sack of Thebes that contains different degrees of criticism. We simply cannot view Polybius' judgment of Alexander's conduct in sacking Thebes as completely negative.

Polybius may have condemned Alexander's sack of the city of Thebes in 38.2.14. Yet, it is clear from this passage that Polybius considered Alexander a king of "high principles and magnanimity." He respected Alexander's responsible behavior and reverence for the temples of Thebes during the sack of the city. Hence, although Billows cites this passage, he does not give it the prominence that it deserves.⁹ In addition, it calls attention to another reason for Polybius' respect for the actions of Alexander, his display of piety.

Contrary to Billows' opinion that Polybius did not portray Lyciscus as defending Alexander at 9.34, in fact Polybius does have Lyciscus defend Alexander's sacking of Thebes by stating that "when he [Alexander] believed himself to be wronged, he punished Thebes (ἀδικεῖσθαι δόξας τὴν Θηβαίων πόλιν ἐκόλασε)."¹⁰ Since he states that Alexander punished those who had wronged him, this does not represent Alexander as incorrect in his feelings. In addition, Lyciscus' speech minimizes the negative act of sacking Thebes by listing the numerous benefits Alexander provided for Greece by his conquest of the Persians.¹¹ It is true that Lyciscus does not directly justify Alexander's sack of Thebes. However, Polybius' argument indicates that, in his own view, Alexander's benefits to Greece far outweighed the punishment of Thebes. Polybius sympathized with the opinion of Lyciscus.

⁹ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 289-90.

¹⁰ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 290; and Polyb. 9.34.1

¹¹ Polyb. 9.34.1-3

It is significant that Lyciscus' speech follows that of Chlaeneas, who attacks the Macedonians for their oppression of Greece since Philip II.¹² It is also significant that Chlaeneas was an Aetolian, since the Aetolians were bitter rivals of Polybius' Achaeans, and that Lyciscus defends Antigonus III, whom Aratus, a hero in Polybius' work, supported. In fact, Chlaeneas' speech advocates war against the Achaeans!¹³ Additionally, it is important that Polybius chose to include Lyciscus' defense of Alexander. These details point to Polybius' own support of Lyciscus' defense of Alexander against the attacks of Chlaeneas.¹⁴ Billows presents this passage in his article as only attacking Alexander's "atrocities" against Thebes.¹⁵ This is misleading. As we have seen, the passage has a more complex message.

Finally, even if we take Billows' unfair example at face value, which we should not, Lyciscus' failure to justify Alexander's destruction of Thebes overtly in his speech, (although Lyciscus does argue that the benefits of Alexander's great accomplishments far outweighed his problems with the Greeks), does not confirm that Polybius conveys disapproval of Alexander's actions at Thebes in this passage.¹⁶ In fact, as stated above, it could be more easily argued that since Polybius has Lyciscus speak against the Aetolians, whom Polybius did not support, since Chlaeneas advocated war against the Achaeans, since Lyciscus' speech came second as a rebuttal, since Lyciscus defended Antigonus, whom Aratus had supported, and since Lyciscus' speech was over twice as long as that of Chlaeneas, that Polybius wished to emphasize and

¹² *Ibid.* 9.28-30.

¹³ *Ibid.* 9.30.6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 9.36.1-7.

¹⁵ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 290.

¹⁶ Polyb. 9.28, 31

sympathized with the argument that he placed in Lyciscus' mouth. In this scenario, Lyciscus is a creation of Polybius and he could characterize Lyciscus as he wished. Ultimately, the Spartans rejected Lyciscus' speech and followed the Aetolians and Romans into war with the Achaeans and Macedonians. Polybius' decision to assign Lyciscus a longer speech and the rebuttal becomes interesting and significant.

Thus, just like Polybius' overall opinion of Alexander, his account of Alexander's sack of Thebes is more nuanced than Billows admits. For Polybius, Alexander's actions against the town were cruel and terrible. However, as indicated by Lyciscus' speech and in opposition to Billows' opinion, Polybius knew that Alexander's actions against the Thebans could be defended since Thebes had wronged Alexander.¹⁷ It is important that Polybius had someone defend this stance. In addition, Polybius praises Alexander's piety and reverence toward Thebes' holy places. Polybius' treatment of Alexander's actions against the town and the temples is not necessarily contradictory. In 4.8.7-8, Polybius notes that Alexander's actions were complex and warranted both blame and praise. Consequently, Billows exaggerates the general impact of the Theban sections on Polybius' general opinion of Alexander.

We cannot ignore either 38.2.13-4 or 5.10.6-7 when discussing Polybius' view of the sack of Thebes. Nor does either passage allow for a clear representation of Polybius' collective attitude toward Alexander on the issue of Thebes, let alone his general opinion of Alexander. Polybius' accounts of the sack of Thebes may not support the argument that Polybius was sympathetic to Alexander's actions, since 38.2.14 makes clear that he was not. Yet, Polybius was not critical of Alexander's feelings of betrayal toward Thebes; through Lyciscus' speech, he implies that some thought Alexander's actions defensible. Ultimately, Polybius praised

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 9.28-39.

Alexander's restraint in saving the Theban temples but faulted Alexander's lack of restraint in sacking the city. Billows' pronouncement that "for Polybius, Alexander's treatment of Thebes was simply an unjustifiable atrocity" is too simplistic.¹⁸ We have shown the issue to be more complicated. Polybius thought the sack of the city was cruel. At the same time, though, he thought that the sparing of the temples was admirable behavior, something that Billows does not fully appreciate. The important observation to conclude from the Polybian discussions of Alexander's sack of Thebes is that they do not establish Polybius' overall view of Alexander as negative. Rather, they confirm that Polybius continued to be generally respectful of Alexander's actions and accomplishments.

Polybius' Comparison of Alexander with Other Kings

Billows' second theme is that of Polybius' comparison between Alexander and other kings. Again, he cites four examples in an attempt to display a negative Polybian opinion of Alexander, stating that "of the four comparisons he [Polybius] draws, the contemporary kings come out ahead in two, and Alexander in the other two."¹⁹ Billows emphasizes that Polybius differs from the majority of other ancient historians who treat Alexander because "the standard adulatory view of Alexander placed him far above contemporary rulers."²⁰ Billows is correct to argue that Alexander was often lauded above contemporary rulers. However, he is wrong in inferring that Polybius does not also share this view. As observed earlier in this study, where Billows' assertions would have been correct is in characterizing Polybius' accounts comparing

¹⁸ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 290.

¹⁹ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 291.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

the Romans to Alexander, since Polybius does consistently represent the Romans as superior to the great Macedonian.

Firstly, Billows gives an incorrect reference for one of his examples. He states that Polybius compares Philip V unfavorably with Alexander in 38.2.13-4, when in fact this is one of Polybius' discussions of Alexander's sack of Thebes and in no way mentions Philip V. What Billows meant to cite was passage 18.3.2-5. Let us now turn to this passage.

In the two pro-Alexander passages that Billows intended to cite (5.10.6-9, 18.3), Polybius yet again voices adulation for Alexander's abilities. The other two passages cited by Billows require closer inspection. His first example, (4.23.9), treats the sack of Thebes, a topic addressed above. To be sure, Polybius favored sparing the Spartans in 220 B.C.E. because their marginal crimes did not merit the punishment of destruction. The situation of Sparta, moreover, did not parallel that of Thebes in 335 B.C.E. Yet, we should not consequently infer from this passage that Polybius favored Philip V's "merciful treatment" over "the merciless treatment of Thebes by Alexander" as Billows puts it.²¹ Polybius' text itself does not make this moralizing judgment. In fact, it limits the amount of praise due to Philip for his decision to spare Sparta because Polybius argued that this judgment was unlikely to have been his own.²² Even if we can detect an implicit criticism of Alexander here, in an unfavorable comparison with Philip in this section, then Billows provides only one indecisive example to support this argument (out of four). Additionally, this example comes from his analysis of Alexander's treatment of Thebes, which he already discussed. Therefore, it adds little more to his hypothesis.

²¹ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 291.

²² Polyb. 4.24.1-3

Billows' other example, 5.55.9-10, involves Polybius supposedly representing Antiochus III favorably at the expense of Alexander for allegedly conquering Media Atropatene. Billows contends that Polybius believed Alexander failed to do this, thereby "at least implying comparison favorable to Antiochus."²³ Certainly, Polybius had a purpose in mentioning Alexander next to Antiochus. Nevertheless, the idea that Polybius somehow characterizes Antiochus as surpassing Alexander in prestige is ill founded, as Polybius describes the weakness of Media Atropatene.²⁴

Antiochus never "conquered" Media Atropatene, as Billows suggests; rather, he brought it under his hegemony without bloodshed and without difficulty.²⁵ In this passage, Polybius' point is not to argue that Alexander could not have accomplished this task where Antiochus did, as Billows argues; instead, he maintains that Alexander ignored this insignificant region and Antiochus did not. Billows attempts to make far too much of this passage. Alexander did not *fail* to conquer Media Atropatene, as Billows puts it, nor is Polybius implying as much in this section. Alexander never even made the attempt. Billow's second theme, unlike the first, does more to promote Polybius' respect for Alexander than it does to challenge it.

The Character and Generalship of Alexander

Billows' third theme concerns Polybius' opinion of Alexander's character and generalship. He also presents this topic by giving four examples (5.10.6-9, 12.17-22, 12.23, and 16.22a.5). The first three examples again are laudatory statements, where Polybius praises

²³ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 291.

²⁴ Polyb. 5.55.9-10

²⁵ Polyb. 5.55 and Strabo 11.13.1-2

Alexander's religious reverence, defends his command ability, and emphasizes his superhuman character. Billows only mentions this evidence, which is contradictory to his argument of Polybius' negative view of Alexander, in passing. His article then concentrates solely on the final example, involving the Gazans' resistance to the Persians, Alexander, and Antiochus III.²⁶ Billows' argument, even by his own acknowledgement, is only an interpretation of the possible implications of the text.²⁷

In attempting to produce a series of Polybian criticisms of Alexander, Billows' work focuses on the use of three words in the passage: safety (σωτηρία), impulse (ὁρμή), and force (βία).²⁸ Billows views Alexander as the destroyer of *soteria*, the harbinger of *bia*, and a man endowed with animal *horme*. We must emphasize again that this is Billows' interpretation of the passage, not one suggested directly by Polybius. Billows' argument may make some worthwhile observations, because Polybius does praise the Gazans and mention the enslavement of Tyre. Still, Billows' overall argument is weak; in addition, he exaggerates its significance for the meaning of the passage and for Polybius' general view of Alexander.

It is important to note that a Persian and Arab force garrisoned Gaza. One can therefore argue that Gaza's resistance to Alexander was more the decision of the Persian garrison than of the local population.²⁹ However, Polybius' failure to mention the Persian occupying force in Gaza, choosing instead to emphasize the determination of the Gazans alone, again illustrates his difference in attitude toward Alexander from the more traditional "Alexander historians." His

²⁶ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 291-2.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 292.

²⁸ Polyb. 16.22a.4-6

²⁹ Arrian tells us that the Governor Batis had a mercenary force of Arabs. Arr. *Anab.* 2.26; and Curtius Rufus records that 10,000 Persians and Arabs were killed in the siege. Curt. 4.6.30

emphasis on the Gazans making efforts to defend their freedom from Alexander, as opposed to a Persian garrison defending Gaza from Alexander, demonstrates that Polybius intended Alexander's actions to be interpreted differently from our other sources. Polybius admired cities that resisted the aggression of kings. Polybius' approval of the resistance of the city of Abydus to Philip V is another example of this theme.³⁰ At 16.22a.4-6, Polybius champions the actions of the Gazans over the advances of Persia, Alexander, and Antiochus III. Yet, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the passage does not focus on the actions of Alexander and that Billows' arguments go too far.

Billows' article offers an interesting perspective on the passage. Perhaps if this passage was the only evidence we had left from Polybius' commentary on Alexander there might be more reason to accept Billows' perspective. Yet, the passage cannot bear the weight placed on it by Billows. Most of what Polybius says about Alexander is positive and hence contradicts this hypothesis. In fact, Billows himself acknowledges that the majority of the examples he cites in this third theme give a positive impression of Alexander, and the one possible exception that he champions is an interpretation relying on a reading of the text that cannot be *proved* to be correct. It is perfectly reasonable and appropriate to take this passage at face value as a military description. It is true that Polybius represents Alexander as aggressive and as the enslaver of those who resist him. Nevertheless, this passage more likely expresses a moral judgment passed by Polybius on the correct way for small states to face the forceful pressures of stronger states, than it does a deliberate attack on Alexander.

³⁰ Polyb. 16.30-4

In spite of this, Billows' work equates Polybius' praise of the Gazans with direct criticism of Alexander.³¹ He then proceeds to assume that Polybius, in fact, agreed with Hegesias of Magnesia that this was another instance of ruthless and cruel conduct by Alexander.³² Thus, for Billows, Polybius characterized Alexander in this passage as the opposite of the Stoic ideal of a king and, in an indirect way, passed negative judgment upon Alexander by praising the Gazans who resisted him in defense of their autonomy. As we have seen previously, Polybius' text demonstrates that he was more than capable of openly alerting his reader when he condemned the actions of Alexander.³³ Such open expression of negative opinion is also apparent in his commentary on Philip V, Antiochus III, the various Roman sycophants of the Greek world, and even the Romans themselves. With such a propensity toward openly voicing his own opinion throughout his history, why Polybius suddenly would choose this passage to mask his hidden opinion of Alexander as the negative of Stoic ideals further undercuts Billows' argument. Polybius saw Alexander behaving aggressively in this instance. One should not disregard his praise of the Gazans' resistance. Nevertheless, this passage is not a direct attack on Alexander. Billows' argument, while it has a point, is speculative.

Billows finishes his discussion by stating his personal opinion, "I venture to suggest therefore that Polybius does here, in praising the Gazans' resistance to Alexander, depict Alexander in critical terms borrowed from the Stoic treatise on ideal kingship."³⁴ Billows' suggestion no doubt appeals to those who wish to see Alexander painted in an unattractive

³¹ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 293.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Polyb. 38.2

³⁴ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 293.

light.³⁵ However, since it is Billows' own admitted interpretation, unsupported by dependable evidence, and contradicted by the frequency with which Polybius portrays Alexander positively, it does little to further the credibility of his hypothesis that Polybius' depiction of Alexander is primarily negative.

Those Deemed as Praiseworthy for Greatness

Billows' fourth theme concerns "the allocation of credit for the achievements of the Macedonians under Alexander's leadership."³⁶ He is correct to point out that most of the "Alexander historians" have a tendency to place most, if not full credit for Macedonian success in the East with Alexander.³⁷ For Billows, "Polybius did not share that view."³⁸ He offers two passages (3.6.4-14, 22.18.10) to illustrate that Alexander merely made use of the preparations of his father, Philip II, to invade Persia. However, Billows' assessment that, in Polybius' opinion, Philip did *all* the preparation and planning, "while Alexander merely put Philip's plans into effect," is an exaggeration of what the text actually states.³⁹ At 3.6.5, in an attempt to show that Alexander's invasion did not cause the war with Persia, Polybius refers to "plans and preparations for which, in the case of the Persian war, had been made earlier, *many* (πολλά) by Alexander and even *some* (ὀλίγα) by Philip during his life." Certainly, Polybius is not guilty of giving *all* the credit to Alexander, nor should he have done so. However, he still gives more credit to Alexander than to Philip, contrary to Billows' assertions.

³⁵ For the recent popularity in modern scholarship to portray Alexander in a negative light and the problems associated with this trend, see Anson, "Alexander the Great in Current Scholarship," 981-6.

³⁶ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 293.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 293.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 293-4.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 294.

At 22.18.10, Polybius, in an attempt to equate the military situation of King Perseus with that of Alexander, states that “Philip [II], son of Amyntas, conceived and meant to carry out the war against Persia, but it was Alexander who put his decision into execution.” This passage again does not support Billows’ claim that Polybius had a negative opinion of Alexander. Here Polybius’ text makes no mention of physical planning or preparation, emphasizing only Philip II’s words and Alexander’s actions. In fact, Polybius stresses that although Philip meant to carry out the war, Alexander actually executed it. Alexander ultimately capitalized on the idea and wish of his father, unlike Hannibal or Perseus, who failed in their attempts to carry out their fathers’ alleged conceptions. To be fair, Philip II was murdered and therefore could not invade Persia. All the same, this passage accords much praise and glory to Alexander.

Billows’ third example is 8.10.7-11. We discussed this passage previously in this study. Billows’ article does not deny the laudatory and respectful tone displayed by Polybius. Instead, it focuses on Polybius’ attempt to share credit between Alexander and his subordinates. Again, though, Billows’ wording is misleading. Billows ignores the level of credit offered to Alexander by Polybius. Billows states, “In sum, for Polybius only a share of the credit for the Macedonian conquests belongs to Alexander, *a greater share* belonging to his generals and advisers.”⁴⁰ Polybius assigned a large (μεγάλην) share to Alexander and no less (οὐκ ἑλάττω) to his companions and therefore *an equal* level of credit to Alexander and his subordinates, not a greater share to one or the other. Billows’ own translation of the passage is: “no less credit.”⁴¹ No less does not mean greater.

⁴⁰ Billows, “Polybius and Alexander Historiography,” 294. (The italics are mine.)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

In an attempt to attribute a negative opinion of Alexander to Polybius in 8.10.8-9, Billows continues, “Alexander’s youth and inexperience are emphasized, as opposed to the extensive experience of his chief underlings while serving his father.”⁴² Polybius does refer to Alexander’s youth, stating, “although he was young (καίπερ ὅντι νέω).”⁴³ However, one should not view this as a negative. In addition, this section nowhere mentions Alexander’s “inexperience.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, Polybius simply asserts that we should “give no less credit to his [Alexander’s] helpers and friends.”⁴⁵ Polybius greatly praises Alexander’s companions but he does not mention their infinite wisdom and greater experience. The portrait of a young, ignorant Alexander deserving less credit than his subordinates of masterful quality and ability is a creation of Billows, not of Polybius. Polybius’ praise of the deserving subordinates of Alexander is more extensive than in what we find in many of the surviving “Alexander historians,” but not to the extent that Billows argues.

Billows concludes his argument by stating, that “the view of the correct apportioning of credit for Macedonian successes espoused here by Polybius is far more plausible than the Alexandro-centric view offered by the ‘Alexander historians’ and uncritically endorsed by Tarn.”⁴⁶ Perhaps, but this issue is more complicated than Billows suggests. Polybius wanted

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Polyb. 8.10.8

⁴⁴ Billows, “Polybius and Alexander Historiography,” 294.

⁴⁵ Polyb. 8.10.8

⁴⁶ Billows, “Polybius and Alexander Historiography,” 295.

Alexander and the companions to share credit for good reason, but Billows exaggerates what Polybius says here.⁴⁷

Did Polybius Believe that Alexander Owed Everything to Luck? Would that Matter?

Billows' final theme involves Polybius' opinion of Alexander's fortune. As an example, he cites Demetrius of Phalerum's discussion of Fortune, as recorded by Polybius.⁴⁸ Billows claims, "The clear implication of Polybius' presentation of Demetrius' views is that Alexander's success was due primarily to the favour of Fortune."⁴⁹ This statement does not hold up to close examination as well when we scrutinize the passage thoroughly. Polybius quotes the relevant portion of Demetrius' views as follows:

"For if you consider not countless years or many generations, but only these fifty years before us, you will read in them the cruelty of Fortune. I ask you, do you think that fifty years ago either the Persians and the Persian king or the Macedonians and the king of Macedon, if some god had foretold the future to them, would ever have believed that at the time when we live, the very name of the Persians would have perished utterly — the Persians who were masters of almost the whole world — and that the Macedonians, whose name was formerly almost unknown, would now be the lords of it all? But nevertheless this Fortune, who never makes a compact with life, and who always defeats our reckoning by some novel stroke. She who ever demonstrates her power by foiling our expectations, now also, as it seems to me, makes it clear to all men, by endowing the Macedonians with the whole wealth of Persia, that she has but lent them these blessings until she decides to deal differently with them." [Polybius continues] And this now happened in the time of Perseus.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ In fact, the failures of Philip V, Antiochus III, and Perseus against Rome only emphasize further the importance of competent subordinates. Polybius' description of Philip V's defeat at Cynoscephalae in particular demonstrates the emphasis that Polybius placed on the need for competent subordinates and the superior military abilities of Alexander to those of his successors. Clearly, Polybius understood that the greatest asset of a general was a good supporting class of officers. He saw that Alexander benefitted equally from one of the greatest officer corps of all time. Yet, he also understood that Alexander's great success was due to his own personal ability.

⁴⁸ Polyb. 29.21.1-7

⁴⁹ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 295.

⁵⁰ Polyb. 29.21.3-7

This discussion about the influence of Fortune on the Persians and Macedonians is less than clear and does not even explicitly mention Alexander.⁵¹ The “king of Macedon” referred to above is likely his father, Philip II.⁵²

What we must consider also is that the complete passage undeniably concerns King Perseus and his fall from power. The connection of Fortune to Perseus is a more pressing issue in this discussion than any commentary on Alexander. In any case, the passage refers to the Fortune of all of Macedon, not just of Alexander. We must therefore at least conclude that Polybius’ use of the passage shows that he believed that all of Macedon’s successes and failures were connected to Fortune. To focus only on Alexander here would be inappropriate. What is more, one cannot warrant Billows’ assumption that this statement is evidence for a “clear” Polybian connection between Alexander’s success and Fortune. There is no way to prove that this is Polybius’ clear purpose in including the Demetrius passage, especially since the passage obviously describes the Macedonians as a whole and is concerned with Perseus’ fall, not primarily Alexander. In addition, a connection between Alexander and Fortune would not

⁵¹ Who is “the king of Macedon” referred to above? Because of the emphasis on the former obscurity of Macedon, it easily could be Philip II, who after all created a dominant Macedonian state in Greece and began the plans to invade the East. In fact, if we take into account Livy’s similar description of this rise and fall of Macedon, then we can again see that Demetrius probably intended Philip II. See Livy 45.9; Walbank argues that the king referred to in this passage is Amyntas III. However, the fifty year period does not necessarily have to begin with Darius’ death, as Walbank indicates, nor does it have to coordinate with the King’s Peace. See Walbank, *Historical Commentary on Polybius*, Vol. 3, 394. Also, see Xen. *Hell.* 5.1.29-35; and Diod. 24.110

⁵² Demetrius was a contemporary of Philip and Alexander (c. 350-282 B.C.E.), meaning Walbank’s 330 B.C.E. date is possible. Yet the time when Demetrius was writing is crucial. Cicero tells us at *Fin.* 19.54 that it was during his exile in Egypt after 297 B.C.E. that Demetrius composed his works. If Demetrius referred to the fifty years before the time that he was writing, then 380 B.C.E. is too far back in the past to consider. The Persians, under the leadership of Artaxerxes III, known as the Great Shah, were still “masters of almost the whole world,” especially after Artaxerxes’ defeat of Nectanebo II and his re-conquest of Egypt in 343 B.C.E. See Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press Inc., 2002), 386-89. Thus, Demetrius’ statement, “for if you consider not countless years or many generations, but only these fifty years before us,” would begin his discussion most likely in the reign of Philip II (359-336 B.C.E.), presumably not in that of Amyntas III, as Walbank suggested, and certainly not in that of Alexander.

necessarily carry a negative connotation, serving as evidence that Polybius held a negative view of Alexander.

The connection of Alexander with Fortune is a common motif in ancient writing, and although Billows might have justification for including Polybius among the writers who depict Alexander in this way, the passage about Demetrius does not qualify as adequate evidence.⁵³ It does not refer directly to Alexander and is concerned principally with Macedon's fall from power under Philip V and Perseus. However, Alexander's linkage to Fortune would not have lessened the respect and admiration felt by the ancients for the Macedonian and his accomplishments. S. P. Oakley points out that for a person living in the ancient world to say that Fortune favored someone was a great compliment.⁵⁴ We must emphasize that Polybius was not necessarily different from other ancient writers. Associating Alexander with Fortune does not have to carry a negative implication.

Connections made between Alexander's personal success and the blessings bestowed on him by fortune might change from author to author, situation to situation. However, even if Billows' account claims that "it is clear [for Polybius] that he [Alexander] benefited from a *very great deal* of plain old good luck," he does not offer much support for this claim.⁵⁵ His argument is unconvincing and does not establish Polybius' view of Alexander as negative.

⁵³ For the most extensive ancient example still extant of connecting Alexander with Fortune, see Plutarch, *On the Fortune of Alexander*.

⁵⁴ Oakley, *Commentary III*, 199.

⁵⁵ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 295.

Polybius Compares Alexander Favorably to Other Dominant Figures in His Work

An additional section of Polybius' work that Billows does not emphasize is worth addressing: his account of the causes and beginning of Alexander's war with Persia. As discussed previously, Polybius argues that past events involving Persia had a strong impact on the actions of Alexander. Former Greek military successes alerted Philip II to the opportunity awaiting the Macedonians in the Persian Empire.⁵⁶ For Polybius, Philip II and Alexander used Persia's invasions of Greece in 490 and 480 B.C.E. as a suitable pretext for war.⁵⁷ It is interesting to note that Polybius does not brand Alexander as the aggressor against Persia. Admittedly, Polybius was not primarily dispensing moral judgments in this section. Rather, he was analytically discussing causation of wars for the benefit of future historians. Failing to blame Alexander for the war with Persia is not the same thing as praise of Alexander by Polybius. Still, it is significant that when given the opportunity to criticize Alexander on his reasons for invading Persia, Polybius did not decide to do so. Conversely, he did criticize Hannibal's actions in the Second Punic War, Antiochus' actions in the Syrian War, and later, Perseus' actions in the Third Macedonian War.⁵⁸ These statements elsewhere further underline that Polybius is not criticizing Alexander here. Such evidence refutes Billow's assertion that Polybius had a thoroughly negative opinion of Alexander. This section of Polybius' work warrants discussion in this context because it furnishes another example establishing Polybius' lack of hostility toward Alexander. Instead of noting Alexander's ambition for glory, desire for bloodshed, want of fortune, or unstoppable aggression as the causes for war, Polybius adopts the pro-Macedonian

⁵⁶ Polyb. 3.6

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ See *Ibid.* 3.6-10, 22.18.10, 28.9-10, and 29.17-19.1

reasoning to justify the invasion, namely the violent actions of Persia against Greece. It is necessary to address the passage closely, focusing on where Polybius records his thoughts on the causes, pretexts, and beginnings of wars:

Some of those authors who have dealt with Hannibal and his times, wishing to indicate the causes that led to the above war between Rome and Carthage [the Second Punic War], allege as its first cause the siege of Saguntum by the Carthaginians and as its second their crossing, contrary to treaty, the river whose native name is the Iber [the modern day Ebro]. I should agree in stating that these were the *beginnings* of the war, *but I can by no means allow that they were its causes, unless we call Alexander's crossing to Asia the cause of his war against Persia and Antiochus' landing at Demetrias the cause of his war against Rome, neither of which assertions is either reasonable or true.*⁵⁹

Here Polybius indicates that he did not feel that Alexander's invasion of Persia was the cause of the war. Polybius continues:

*For who could consider these to be causes of wars, plans and preparations for which, in the case of the Persian war, had been made earlier, many by Alexander and even some by Philip during his life, and in the case of the war against Rome by the Aetolians long before Antiochus arrived? These are pronouncements of men [i.e. the historians that Polybius is scolding] who are unable to see the great and essential distinction between a beginning and a cause or purpose, these being the first origin of all, and the beginning coming last. By the beginning of something I mean the first attempt to execute and put in action plans on which we have decided, by its causes what is most initiatory in our judgments and opinions.*⁶⁰

Polybius' argument thus demonstrates the general short sightedness and confusion of other historians in their discussions of the beginnings and causes of wars. Polybius desired to make clear that every conflict has a cause, pretext, and beginning, in that order. In his deliberations on Alexander's war with Persia, Polybius states:

The nature of these [the cause, pretext, and beginning] is evident from the instances adduced above; it is easy for anyone to see the real causes and origin of the war against Persia. The first [cause] was the retreat of the Greeks under

⁵⁹ Polyb. 3.6 (The italics are mine.)

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* (The italics are mine.)

Xenophon from the upper Satrapies, in which, though they traversed the whole of Asia, a hostile country, none of the barbarians ventured to face them. The second [cause] was the crossing of Agesilaus, King of Sparta, to Asia, where he found no opposition of any moment to his projects, and was only compelled to return without effecting anything owing to the disturbances in Greece. *From both of these facts Philip perceived and reckoned on the cowardice and indolence of the Persians as compared with the military efficiency of himself and his Macedonians*, and further fixing his eyes on the splendor of the great prize which the war promised, he lost no time, once he had *secured the avowed good-will of the Greeks*, but *seizing on the pretext that it was his urgent duty to take vengeance on the Persians for their injurious treatment of the Greeks*, he *bestirred himself and decided to go to war, beginning to make every preparation for this purpose*.⁶¹

Philip II recognized the successes of Xenophon and Agesilaus as attractive causes for war. These military actions had left Persia in a diminished state of perceived power and diminished the “uncertainty principle” restricting Macedonian action against Persia.⁶² The conquests of Philip had increased the power of Macedon and numerous internal conflicts had weakened the Persian Empire.⁶³ Thus, a “power transition crisis” had emerged.⁶⁴ In political-science terminology, what was once a system of unipolarity under Persia, i.e. an international system where hegemony is dominated by one superpower, was now replaced by a system of bi-polarity, i.e. the shared dominance of hegemony by two rival powers, between Persia and Macedon.⁶⁵ Philip saw an opportunity to wage a “hegemonic war” against Persia to establish Macedon as the new leader of

⁶¹ Polyb. 3.6 (The italics are mine.)

⁶² (Roughly defined) The “uncertainty principle” involves the opaque awareness of states to one another and their various capabilities or deficiencies. A state can only discover actual power through conflict. See Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*, 17.

⁶³ Philip added much of the Balkans, Illyria, and Greece to the Kingdom of Macedon, greatly increasing his power. Meanwhile, the internal conflicts weakening Persia were devastating, namely the numerous civil wars from 424 B.C.E. to 336 B.C.E. under Darius II, Artaxerxes II, III, and IV, and Darius III and the recent rebellion of Egypt.

⁶⁴ (Roughly defined) A “power transition crisis” is a sudden, large fluctuation in power relations within a system of multi or bi-polarity, significantly increasing the possibility of conflict. See Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*, 24.

⁶⁵ Note Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy*, 23.

a system of unipolarity.⁶⁶ With his causes established, Philip desired a justified pretext for war. This came in the form of the Greeks' desire to avenge the invasions of 490 and 480 B.C.E. by the Persians.⁶⁷

Polybius concludes, "We must therefore look on the first considerations I have mentioned [i.e. the actions of Xenophon and Agesilaus] as the causes of the war against Persia, the second [avenging the Persian invasions of Greece] as its pretext, and *Alexander's crossing to Asia as its beginning*."⁶⁸ Ultimately, Philip was the cause of the war and Alexander was the instrument through which the war began. Whatever judgment Polybius' argument makes here, it does not view Alexander negatively. In fact, Polybius' lack of criticism of Alexander when compared to the extent to which he criticized Hannibal, Antiochus, and Perseus is significant.

We must mention again that Polybius' text attempts to teach future historians a lesson in the proper manner by which to determine causation more than it passes moral judgments. However, Polybius' lack of hostility toward the actions of Philip and Alexander is apparent. If Polybius had a generally negative attitude toward Alexander, as Billows argues, then it seems likely that Polybius would have voiced this negative opinion in this part of his history. Polybius could have characterized Alexander as a cruel aggressor. Although this section of Polybius' text is more analytical than moralizing, the noticeable distinction made by Polybius between the example of Philip and Alexander and the example of Hamilcar and Hannibal is important.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ For a succinct account of realist theory and its application to the ancient world, see *ibid.* 2, 12-29, 30-31, 33, 35-36, 67-68, 72, 76-78, 195, 258, 260-62, 282, 308, and 315.

⁶⁷ For Polybius' thoughts on causation, note A. M. Eckstein, "Hannibal at New Carthage: Polybius 3.15 and the Power of Irrationality," *Classical Philology* 84, No. 1 (January 1989): 1-15.

⁶⁸ Polyb. 3.6

⁶⁹ Polyb. 3.7

Polybius portrays Hannibal's war against Rome as based first on his anger.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Polybius juxtaposes the hot emotion fueling the Hannibalic War against the cool reasoning behind Alexander's expedition.⁷¹ He then describes Hannibal as the vessel and continuation of his father's hatred.⁷² In 3.15, Polybius also represents Hannibal as the model of a bad statesman.⁷³ Finally, Polybius describes Hannibal, who in his opinion had a justifiable pretext for war against Rome in the illegal confiscation of Sardinia by the Romans, as "in a mood of unreasoning and violent anger," and as "obsessed by passion" after failing to advance this justified point.⁷⁴ Polybius' opinion implies that Hannibal lost all moral superiority in the conflict by creating a false pretext for war with Rome over Saguntum. Polybius states that Hannibal appeared to be "embarking on the war not only in defiance of reason but even of justice."⁷⁵

Polybius' discussion of the causes and pretext of Hannibal's war with Rome stands in contrast to what he recorded about Alexander's war with Persia. It would be shortsighted to interpret it as merely factual analysis on the part of Polybius, devoid of any deeper meaning. The negative moral judgments passed by Polybius on Hannibal, and the lack thereof passed on Alexander, should not be dismissed as inconsequential. Nor should we overlook Polybius' intentional pairing of Alexander's correctly executed war with the wars incorrectly executed by Hannibal and Antiochus III.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 3.9. Also, note Eckstein, "Hannibal at New Carthage," 8.

⁷¹ Eckstein, "Hannibal at New Carthage," 5.

⁷² Polyb. 3.12

⁷³ Eckstein, "Hannibal at New Carthage," 2.

⁷⁴ Polyb. 3.15 Also, see Eckstein, "Hannibal at New Carthage," 9.

⁷⁵ Polyb. 3.15

Although Polybius faults Antiochus III for waging war because of the misguided anger of the Aetolians, and Hannibal for prematurely launching the Second Punic War through hatred and foolishness, Polybius does not criticize Alexander's resolution to invade Persia.⁷⁶ He also praises Alexander's success.⁷⁷ Additionally, Polybius here embraces the pro-Macedonian justification for war and appears unwilling to disparage Alexander for committing a war out of personal ambition, greed, or aggression. Although Polybius pairs Alexander's success with Hannibal's and Antiochus' failures, this passage should not be taken as strong praise for Alexander. Yet, it still qualifies as further evidence disproving Billows' argument that Polybius considered Alexander in mostly negative terms.

Final Thoughts on the Shortcomings of the Claim that Polybius Viewed Alexander Negatively

Billows' article raises some interesting points about Polybius' assessments of Alexander. Nevertheless, his methods and conclusions too often misrepresent Polybius' text. Billows does succeed in showing that Polybius wrote about Alexander in a different way from that adopted by the more traditional sources, the "Alexander historians." Billows is also correct to point out that the apologetic tone found in many of the "Alexander historians" is mostly, if not completely, missing from Polybius' work. However, where Billows' argument ultimately fails is in its efforts to prove that Polybius was hostile to Alexander. Other than Polybius' discussions of Alexander's sacking of the city of Thebes, the text does not validate this claim. In addition, Polybius' passages on Thebes are more nuanced than Billows contends, and they are insufficient evidence for determining Polybius' general opinion toward Alexander.

⁷⁶ Polyb. 3.6, 15. Also, note Eckstein, "Hannibal at New Carthage," 2, 6, 9, and 11.

⁷⁷ See Polyb. 3.59, 8.10, and 12.23

Billows' article does not pay enough attention to evidence contradictory to his arguments. Nor does he sufficiently consider Polybius' respect for Alexander the Great.⁷⁸ Billows does bring more attention to Alexander's impact on Polybius.⁷⁹ Yet, he also reaches conclusions by exaggerating some of Polybius' views. Billows does not discuss the topic in adequate detail. It is a goal of this present study to do what Billows did not manage to accomplish, by looking at evidence that he neglected or misconstrued.

There can be no denying that Polybius respected the accomplishments and abilities of Alexander. It is also clear that Polybius did not refuse to criticize Alexander when he felt that it was necessary. In comparing what Polybius says about the Romans to what he says about Alexander, we see that Polybius made certain criticisms of the Macedonian king. However, offering criticism did not render Polybius' collective opinion of Alexander as negative, despite Billows' argument. What is important to remember is that these criticisms do not challenge the greatness of Alexander; instead they serve the purpose of portraying Alexander and his accomplishments as more human, and therefore, more humanly obtainable. Ultimately, Polybius saw Rome as the true successor and rival of Alexander. Polybius believed that Alexander was indeed great; however, he portrays the Romans as greater.

⁷⁸ See especially Polyb. 8.10, 12.23, and 3.59

⁷⁹ Billows, "Polybius and Alexander Historiography," 286.