

HISTORIKÁ

HISTORIKÁ

Studi di storia greca e romana

XII

2022

Historika Studi di storia greca e romana
International Open Access Journal of Greek and Roman History
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO
Dipartimento di Studi Storici - Storia antica
in collaborazione con CELID
LEXIS Compagnia Editoriale in Torino srl,
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Volume XII 2022

Tutti i contributi sono sottoposti a *peer review*

*Questo volume è stato pubblicato con il contributo dell'Università di Torino,
Dipartimento di Studi Storici*

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Torino, giugno 2023
ISSN 2240-774X e-ISSN 2039-4985
ISBN 9788867890729

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SIMONE RENDINA

Private and Public Behaviour in Polybius

The relationship between personal morals and political behaviour is a theme of great interest for all ages. It is to Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733) that we owe a full formulation of the idea that ‘private vices’ may bring about ‘public benefits’; that is, the notion that private vices can contribute to the public good. A section of Mandeville’s poem titled “The Fable of the Bees” describes a beehive in which bees are immoral and self-interested, but through their very self-interest, they contribute to the well-being of their society¹. The remainder of the poem, on the other hand, narrates how a reformation of morals in the beehive provoked both the loss of vice and the loss of affluence. According to Mandeville, without vice and self-interest, there would be no prosperity and no society.

The theme of the relationship between private and public behaviour was also discussed in ancient philosophy and historiography. Among Greek historians, Polybius of Megalopolis explained that good rulers and politicians also had to be decent individuals². In later centuries, however, Latin historians such as Sallust and Tacitus followed a different path from Polybius.

¹ B. Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, London 1724³, esp. E-G: “Such were the Blessings of that State; / Their Crimes conspir’d to make them Great: / And Virtue, who from Politicks / Had learn’d a Thousand Cunning Tricks, / Was, by their happy Influence, / Made Friends with Vice: And ever since, / The worst of all the Multitude / Did something for the Common Good”.

² For Polybius’ moral outlook, see Isnardi 1955; Walbank 1965; Eckstein 1995; Hau 2016, 23-72; Moore 2020. For his attitude towards philosophical theories of ethics, see Krewet 2017, who argues that he was influenced by Stoicism rather than by Aristotle; see also Ničev 1978; Scholz 2013.

According to Polybius, cowardice and laziness (δειλία καὶ βλακεία) in private life (κατ' ἰδίαν) bring dishonour only to those who are characterised by them, but when found in a leader, they are the gravest of misfortunes for an entire community (III 81.7). He also claimed that injustices committed in private life differ in nothing from public injustices, except in their magnitude (IV 29.4)³. This also means that, according to Polybius, individuals who are righteous in public life are righteous in private life as well, whereas immoral people can only be bad politicians, as we will see in other passages that we will analyse below.

Another series of reflections on the relationship between public and private behaviour in Polybius has been identified by A.M. Eckstein⁴. In Polybius' text, the turmoil in Cretan social life is explained by the inborn and despicable greed of the Cretans (VI 46.3)⁵. He claims that those customs and laws that make the private lives (κατ' ἰδίαν) of people holy and moderate and the public life of a polis (τό τε κοινὸν ἦθος τῆς πόλεως) civilised and righteous are desirable, since honourable customs and laws result in honourable men; on the other hand, immoral traditions and laws result in people being immoral in their private lives (VI 47.2-4). In particular, the Cretans act treacherously in their private lives and unfairly in public (VI 47.5)⁶. It is thus clear that, according to Polybius, one's behaviour in private life and his behaviour in public life cannot be independent from each other.

Polybius also claims that some people believe that a man's true nature is revealed by circumstances and that some men reveal themselves as they really are when they occupy positions of power or when they are in disgrace (IX 22.9)⁷. This opinion, which Polybius does not contest, and which he later applies to the psychological development of Philip V (X 26.7-10), was "a traditional view, il-

³ This passage is mentioned by Hau 2016, 34.

⁴ Eckstein 1995, 72.

⁵ In contrast, one of the reasons Rome was politically stable during the Hannibalic War and thus able to overcome the impending danger was the restriction on avarice enforced by the Roman ruling elite (Plb. VI 56.1-6). See Eckstein 1995, 72. I will not deal here with the effects that corruption, according to Polybius, may have had on Roman society starting in the second century BCE. For Polybius' approach to corruption, see Zecchini 2018, 125-133.

⁶ For the Cretan constitution and the vices of the Cretans according to Polybius, see Walbank 1957, 732-734; Remy 2015. As shown by Walbank 1957, 733, and Remy 2015, 274-275, 285-286, the prejudice against the Cretans, who were described as skilled deceivers, was very ancient, as allusions to their involvement in piracy were already in Hom. *Od.* XIV 199-234. Hdt. I 2.1 blames the abduction of Europa on the Cretans. In addition, the paradox formulated by Epimenides of Crete according to which "all Cretans are liars" was probably inspired by the commonplace that Cretans were liars. See also Isaac 2004, 98.

⁷ Thus, according to Polybius (IX 22.8), it is difficult to understand the true nature of politicians. This contention of Polybius has been highlighted by Thornton 2020, 163-164.

illustrated by the proverb ἀρχὴ ἄνδρα δείξει (Bias *ap.* Arist. *EN* V 3 1130a1)” according to Walbank⁸. However, there is not much room for personality contradictions in Polybius’ characters: there are few figures in the Histories who can display both good and bad characteristics at the same time, and who can, for instance, be both evil and brave⁹.

A further example of Polybius’ belief that all good politicians are decent men can be found in his representation of the Achaean leader Philopoemen, of whom Polybius considered himself to be a sort of pupil¹⁰. According to Polybius, Philopoemen was careful about his conduct of life and simple in his outward appearance, for he had adopted from his own teachers and companions the opinion that it is not possible for one who is neglectful in his private life (κατὰ τὸν ἴδιον βίον) to be a good leader of public affairs (τῶν κοινῶν προστατεῖν καλῶς), nor it is possible for people who squander their own patrimony to keep away from the resources of their own country (X 22.5)¹¹.

One more passage from Polybius’ History confirms that he did not consider contradictions between public and private behaviour to be morally acceptable. As stressed by Eckstein, he claimed that people who do not marry and do not have children are guilty of greed and sloth, and that their cities become depopulated because of their behaviour; therefore, laws should be introduced to make child-rearing compulsory (XXXVI 17.7-10)¹².

For the study of this matter, it is difficult to conduct a *Quellenforschung*, as the relation between the public and private spheres is a universal matter. Its attestations in Greek literature are not necessarily connected to each other. For instance, Theognis of Megara mentioned the relations between public and private and the contrast between the public and private appearances of friends and po-

⁸ See Walbank 1967, 151, for the “traditional” character of this idea and for its application to Philip V.

⁹ Some examples of moral corruption and bravery in the same individuals according to Polybius are listed by Hau 2016, 57: these individuals are Antiochus III, Philip V, and the Celtic barbarians. On the other hand, many figures in Sallust and Tacitus display such a double personality: see *infra*.

¹⁰ See Plu. *Phil.* 21; *An seni respublica gerenda sit* 791a; Thornton 2020, 31-34.

¹¹ Philopoemen’s teachers and companions were Cleander of Mantinea (who had been his father’s friend), Ecdemus of Megalopolis, and Demophanes of Megalopolis (Plb. X 22.1-2). Thornton 2020, 197-202, on the other hand, claims that political activity diverges from morality in Polybius. In any case, we should stress that Polybius’ knowledge of human psychology allowed him to understand that the virtues of an individual are not always consistent. For instance, Cavarus the Galatian, though otherwise a virtuous man, was corrupted by Sostratus, a flatterer (Plb. VIII 22.3).

¹² Eckstein 1995, 157. See also Walbank 1979, 680-681.

litical allies in several passages¹³. It is not necessary to suppose that Polybius knew these passages; on the contrary, they show that these themes are universal and that he might have formulated his idea intuitively.

Classical Greek authors had already reflected on the relationship between personal ἦθος and its manifestations in the public sphere. Aristophanes came up with situations that transformed private necessities into public matters or brought public institutions into one's private sphere. For instance, Dikaiopolis makes a private peace treaty in the *Acharnians*, and Bdelycleon converts his own house into a private law court in the *Wasps*. Before Polybius, however, the question of whether virtues in public life are closely related to private virtues does not seem to have been analysed in depth, with the exception of a few authors. One of them is Thucydides, who mentioned the relationship between the public and the private spheres in Pericles' Funeral Oration for the Athenians who had died in the first year of the Peloponnesian war (Thuc. II 35-46). In particular, in Thucydides' text, Pericles argued that an individual should be praised if he fights for his country, regardless of his own flaws (Thuc. II 42.3)¹⁴.

Later on, the relationship between private and public behaviour was deeply investigated by Aristotle, who asked himself whether the virtues of a good individual (ἀγαθὸς ἀνὴρ) and of a good citizen (σπουδαῖος πολίτης) are the same. Since there are several kinds of constitutions, it is clear, according to Aristotle, that many different political virtues exist. On the other hand, he argues that there is only one kind of individual virtue; in particular, a good individual is such because he has a kind of virtue that all his peers have. It is therefore clear to him that political and individual virtues do not coincide; thus, a good citizen may not be a good individual. While it is impossible for a city to be made up entirely of good men, he thinks that it is nevertheless necessary for each one to perform his task well by practising virtue. In short, Aristotle explains that the virtue of a

¹³ See, e.g., Thgn. I 49-52: public evils can bring gain to wicked individuals. I 121-124: it is painful to realise that a false friend is a liar. I 499-502: wine reveals the true nature of individuals. I 979-982: true friends are not those who claim to be friends, but those who are helpful in a concrete manner.

¹⁴ καὶ γὰρ τοῖς τᾶλλα χεῖροσι δίκαιον τὴν ἐς τοὺς πολέμους ὑπὲρ τῆς πατρίδος ἀνδραγαθίαν προτίθεσθαι: ἀγαθῷ γὰρ κακὸν ἀφανίσαντες κοινῶς μᾶλλον ὠφέλησαν ἢ ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων ἐβλαψαν. See Gustin Law 2017, 96. Other passages from Pericles' Funeral Oration stress that public and private lives in Athens are in harmony with each other: Thuc. II 37.3: ἀνεπαχθῶς δὲ τὰ ἴδια προσομιλοῦντες τὰ δημόσια διὰ δέος μάλιστα οὐ παρανομοῦμεν, τῶν τε αἰεὶ ἐν ἀρχῇ ὄντων ἀκροάσει καὶ τῶν νόμων. Thuc. II 38.1: καὶ μὴν καὶ τῶν πόνων πλείστας ἀναπαύλας τῇ γνώμῃ ἐπορισάμεθα, ἀγῶσι μὲν γε καὶ θυσίας διετησίους νομίζοντες, ἰδίας δὲ κατασκευαῖς εὐπρεπέσιν. See Gomme 1956, 103-144 and Hornblower 1991, 294-316. For public and private life in this speech, see Musti 1985; 1995, 3-19. For the extent to which Polybius read Thucydides, see Rood 2012; Longley 2012; Miltisios 2013; Porciani 2020.

good citizen and that of a decent man are not the same, and that even people who are not virtuous as individuals can be good citizens (*Pol.* III 4 1276b16-1277a12)¹⁵.

However, it would be impossible to prove that Polybius referred to these passages from Aristotle's *Politics* in his reflections on public and private virtues. In fact, there is not much evidence for Polybius' knowledge of this work¹⁶. Moreover, it does not appear that in Hellenistic philosophies, the question of whether a man virtuous in public is necessarily virtuous in private was posed in the same terms as Polybius did. In particular, Stoicism, before becoming the most widespread philosophical school in Rome, seems to have mainly proposed a cosmopolitan political project and in some cases seems to have put forward the provocative political programme of an isolated community of sages: nothing close to Polybius' views¹⁷. It is therefore probable that Polybius' reflections either echo common sense or are completely original.

Was there a perceived idea of virtue in Rome at the time of Polybius?¹⁸ Roman virtues in Rome were represented in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, for example, by the *Elogia Scipionum*, which showcased a "clear message of *virtus* in the double meaning of courage and moral excellence"¹⁹. The correlation between private and public virtues is especially evident in the *elogium* of Cn. Cornelius Scipio Hispanus (*CIL* I² 15 = *ILLRP* 316), to whom the following conduct is attributed: *Virtutes generis mieis moribus accumulauit, / Progeniem genuit, facta patris petiei. / Maiorum optenui laudem, ut sibi me esse creatum / Laeten-*

¹⁵ This passage has been recently commented upon by Gustin Law 2017, who argued that according to Aristotle, even in constitutions that are not perfect, an individual can simultaneously be a good man and a good citizen. For civic virtue in Aristotle, see also Inamura 2015, 106-142. Aristotle later asks himself whether there are any cases in which the virtue of the decent man and that of the good citizen are the same. Such an identity of virtues can be found in good rulers, who are decent and wise men, while citizens do not need to be wise men. In fact, according to some individuals, the education that the ruler receives must be different from common education. Moreover, the virtues of rulers and good citizens are not the same (*Pol.* III 4 1277a12-1277b32). See Robinson 1995, *ad loc.* In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however, Aristotle claimed that the science that seeks the highest good in the field of ethics is politics (*EN* I 1 1094a26-27; cf. *Pol.* III 12 1282b14-16). See Caiani 1998, 29; see also Betbeder 1970; Hager 1972; Aubenque 1980.

¹⁶ Pédech 1964, 326 was certain that Polybius did not know Aristotle's *Politics*. On the other hand, Baronowski 2011, 206 n. 29 supposes that Polybius was familiar with this work. Cf. Blösel 1998, 42.

¹⁷ For ethics in the Stoa, see Pohlenz 1959, 123-141; Lévy 1997, chap. 3, 2.1.c; Schofield 1999; Long 1986, 107-209; 2006, 285-394; Sellars 2007.

¹⁸ For *virtus* in Rome according to ancient historiography, see Balmaceda 2017. For the relation between Roman and Greek virtues, see *ivi*, 15.

¹⁹ Balmaceda 2017, 25. For the *Elogia Scipionum*, see also Van Sickle 1987; Massaro 2002; Jacotot 2013, 601-620.

tur: stirpem nobilitavit honor (“I have increased by my customs the virtues of my family, / I have founded a progeny and tried to equal the feats of my father. / I have preserved the glory of my ancestors, so they rejoice to have begotten me: / My honour has ennobled my lineage”).

A comparison with Roman *virtus* according to Livy can also be useful²⁰. In his work, there are both negative and positive examples of how to behave. According to A.M. Feldherr, a characteristic of Tarquin the Proud was that he used to hide too much of his private conduct and personal motivations from the public. On the other hand, the birth of the Republic was accompanied by the revelation of the secrets of power and the creation of an open, public political space²¹. As recalled by L. Beltramini and M. Rocco, according to Livy, Scipio Africanus “was remarkable not only for his real abilities, but thanks to a certain skill also had from his youth adapted himself to their display, doing most of his actions before the public”. In addition, since he reached the age of majority, “there was not a day on which he did any business public or private without going first to the Capitol”²². As stressed by A. Rossi, Livy’s Scipio is the Roman *civis* who sets the standards for the interaction between *patria* and *familia*, public and private, individual and collectivity. On the other hand, Hannibal’s solemn oath, which he takes against the Romans in a private location, dramatically foreshadows his early career, which is characterised by a political worldview diametrically opposed to that of Scipio²³.

There is not necessarily a tight connection between the ideas shown by the *Elogia Scipionum* and Livy and those shown by Polybius; on the other hand, these concepts illustrate how pervasive the reflections on the interaction between private and public life were in Greek and Roman culture.

The ambiguity of the relationship between the public and private spheres continued to be discussed in the Roman world, including by Sallust and Tacitus, who described some individuals who were immoral in private life but resolute and magnanimous in their public activities. Sallust and Tacitus seem to be im-

²⁰ See Chaplin 2000 and Balmaceda 2017, chap. 3 for *virtus* in Livy. For Livy’s moral outlook, see also Levick 1982; Schork 1988; Stem 2007.

²¹ Feldherr 2009, 421-422.

²² Transl. by L. Beltramini and M. Rocco. Liv. XXVI 19.3-5: *fuit enim Scipio non ueris tantum uirtutibus mirabilis, sed arte quoque quadam ab iuuenta in ostentationem earum compositus, pleraque apud multitudinem aut per nocturnas uisa species aut uelut diuinitus mente monita agens [...] ad hoc iam inde ab initio praeparans animos, ex quo togam uirilem sumpsit nullo die prius ullam publicam priuatamque rem egit quam in Capitolium iret ingressusque aedem consideret et plerumque solus in secreto ibi tempus tereret*. See Beltramini - Rocco 2020, 232.

²³ Rossi 2004, 367.

pressed by the effectiveness of these men in public life and stress that this effectiveness was not undermined by their private vices²⁴.

However, Polybius, far from proposing such a provocative view, argued that a virtuous man should be virtuous in every situation; in this view, he was probably following common sense. The many examples from ancient literature that have been mentioned (and that are often unrelated to each other) show that Polybius did not refer to a single tradition in ancient thought but rather came up with his idea based on an unidentifiable popular wisdom. For Polybius, the vices of bad leaders lead whole communities to ruin, while the private lives of good leaders such as Philopoemen are irreproachable. The historian thus showed an unyielding view of morals that did not allow him to separate the public from the private sphere²⁵.

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²⁴ Only a few examples will be mentioned here. In the *Bellum Iugurthinum*, Sallust claims that Emilius Scaurus was a very active nobleman, and that he was greedy for power and honours, but was also very skilled at masking his vices. To avoid scandals, he thus managed to limit his greed (*Iug.* 15.4-5). As a consul, Scaurus was gifted with many physical and moral qualities, but they were all stifled by his greed. He was resistant to fatigue; he was of subtle intellect, foresighted, not lacking in military ability, and steadfast in the face of danger and unpopularity (*Iug.* 28.5). Jugurtha himself was an immoral and corrupt man, but he also showed fortitude (*magna vis animi*, *Iug.* 33.1-2). Sallust also showed, in the work that he dedicated to Catiline, that this man had great intellectual and physical strength, but also an immoral and evil nature (*Catil.* 5.1). According to Tacitus, Otho was an accomplice to Nero's vices. Nevertheless, he administered the province of Lusitania very well and later became the most brilliant of Galba's followers (*Hist.* I 13; cf. *Hist.* I 71; *Hist.* II 50; *Ann.* XIII 46). Vespasian was a brave leader and an accomplished orator; he was also skilled at sowing discord and exploiting sedition and turmoil for his own ends; he was a squanderer, and he was a far better man in war than in peace (*Hist.* II 86). Although Sallustius Crispus had a strong inclination towards luxury, he still had an intellectual strength that made him capable of accomplishing great deeds, all the more so since he concealed it under an ostensible tendency to laziness (*Ann.* III 30). Another example was the courage that Caninius Rebilus showed in facing death, which seemed to go against his life of vices (*Ann.* XIII 30). Finally, Gaius Petronius was considered to be a man who led a pleasant and refined life. However, as a proconsul in Bithynia and later as a consul, he appeared to be resolute and up to the task. Afterwards, whether he really relapsed into vices or pretended to have no moral compass in order to better integrate into corrupt high society, he was admitted into the circle of Nero's closest friends (*Ann.* XVI 18). See Syme 1964, 158; La Penna 2017, 52, 188; and Balmaceda 2017, 57-58, for Sallust's fascination with exceptional, perverse figures and Fontana 1993, 32, 37 for the relationship between the private and the public spheres in Tacitus. See Balmaceda 2017, chap. 5 for individuals with a mixture of good and negative characteristics in Tacitus. For Sallust's moral views, see also Levick 1982.

²⁵ This article has greatly benefited from suggestions by its anonymous reviewers.

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Abstract

Polybius' Histories represent a fundamental step in the ancient debate about whether individuals who are virtuous in public are also necessarily virtuous in private. The historian argued that the uprightness in the public life of politicians must reflect their uprightness in private life. Before Polybius, this theme had only been analysed in depth by Aristotle, although a connection between the reflections of the two authors cannot be demonstrated.