

Seleukid Perspectives – Band 1

Franz Steiner Verlag

Auszug aus:

Seleukid Ideology



Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart 2023

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CHAPTER 8

SECOND-HAND PROPOGANDA: POLYBIOS AND ZENO ON THE ROLE OF ANTIOCHOS IV AT THE BATTLE OF PANION

Benjamin E. Scolnic

Abstract: Polybios castigates Zeno of Rhodes for his account of the Battle of Panion, fought between Antiochos III and Ptolemy V's Aitolian commander Skopas in 200 BCE, claiming that this is an example of how historians go wrong. Zeno's battle account does indeed contain mistakes, but not only for those reasons Polybios gives or that modern scholars have hypothesized. Instead, the description of this important battle should be seen as the transmission of propaganda, as one element in the legitimization of Antiochos IV as ruler of the Seleukid kingdom. In this context, it appears that Polybios does not realize the full significance of his observation that there was only one Antiochos at the Battle of Panion. He thus misses the context behind the many errors of Zeno's account. Zeno may in fact have conflated two different narrative, one relatively accurate and the other ideologically distorted by Antiochos IV's re-writing of history. A reconstruction of the main commanders at the Battle of Panion will show how Zeno's conflated account emphasizes the role of a figure who, if he was there at all, did not play a major part. The revised version that Zeno transmitted reflects the Seleukid ideology of the king as military commander and hero.

In a well-known passage, Polybios castigates Zeno of Rhodes for his account of the Battle of Panion between Antiochos III and Ptolemy V's Aitolian commander Skopas in 200 BCE, claiming it as an example of how historians go wrong.¹ Modern evaluations include Walbank's suggestion that Polybios's reading of Zeno was careless,² Lenfant's charge that Polybios intentionally presented Zeno's account as confused,³ Meister's agnostic statement that we have no way to judge the criticisms

1 Polyb. 16.18.1–19.11. Elsewhere I have maintained that the traditional date of 200 BCE for the battle is correct, though the effect of the battle's results may have been overstated and that further campaigning was required to complete the Seleukid conquest of Koile-Syria by 198/97 BCE; Scolnic in preparation.

2 Walbank 1967, 517f.

3 Lenfant 2005, 183–204.



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without some parallel account of the battle,⁴ and Bar-Kochva's claim that the Rhodian historian's mistakes were a result of his unfamiliarity with the terrain of Panion.⁵ I will maintain that while Zeno's account of the Battle of Panion does indeed contain mistakes, it is not only for the reasons that Polybios gives or that modern scholars have hypothesized. Instead, my contention is that Zeno erred not only due to his exercise of literary license but because it suited his political agenda as a Rhodian to follow a pro-Seleukid narrative. The description of this important battle in Hellenistic history should be seen rather as the deliberate transmission of propaganda, representing one element in the legitimization of Antiochos IV as ruler of the Seleukid kingdom and the assertion of Seleukid power over Koile-Syria and Judaea. I will attempt to isolate the following layers of history and historiography:

1. The Battle of Panion.
2. An earlier account of the Battle of Panion that featured Antiochos III, his oldest son Antiochos, and a third commander, perhaps Antipatros.
3. A re-written Seleukid account of the battle that emphasizes the role of the future Antiochos IV.
4. Zeno's account based on the re-written Seleukid account.
5. Polybios' summary and criticism of Zeno's account, which does not realize the full significance of his observation that there was only one Antiochos at Panion, thus missing one of the reasons why Zeno's version is so full of errors.

I will work backwards from the account we have (5) to what I will theorize lies beneath it.

I. POLYBIOS ON ZENO OF RHODES

Polybios (c. 200–c. 118 BCE) and Zeno were contemporaries; Polybios says that he corresponded with Zeno when composing his own history.⁶ We do not know how many passages in Polybios are dependent on Zeno's work or to what historical point that study extended, but it does seem that Polybios used his Rhodian contemporary's work in dealing with events in the eastern Mediterranean.⁷

Polybios notes that Zeno and Antisthenes of Rhodes were contemporary with the events they described and that they participated in politics; he mentions that one of their purposes in writing was to do 'their duty as statesmen'.⁸ Polybios does agree that historians have a right to be subjective and patriotic about their countries, but

4 The notion that Polybios is capable of distorting another historian's work is not unfounded, as Meister shows in studying how Polybios distorts Kallisthenes' account of the Battle of Issos by studying the parallel tradition of Arrian; Meister 1975, 81–91, 177.

5 Bar-Kochva 1976, 146–157. Popular representations follow Bar-Kochva, as in Taylor 2013, 89–93 and Wilson 2004, 4–6.

6 Polyb. 16.20.5–7.

7 Wiemer 2013, 282.

8 Polyb. 6.14.



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this does not mean they should change the facts, for example, turning a Rhodian defeat at the Battle of Lade, as Polybios accurately reports it, into a victory, despite archival evidence that could be seen at Rhodes.⁹ Everyone makes mistakes, Polybios writes, but if historians

make deliberate misstatements in the interest of our country or of friends or for favour, what difference is there between us and those who gain their living by their pens?¹⁰

Historians should not make intentional mistakes due to their patriotic sentiment. Polybios also criticizes Zeno's ignorance in describing the topography involved in other important events and claims that he is guilty of placing pride in the elegance of his style over proper inquiry into the facts.¹¹ Polybios launches into a lengthy and detailed review and analysis of Zeno's treatment of the Battle at the Panion, claiming that Zeno is so concerned with extravagant language that the result is sensationalistic, paying 'so little attention to facts that his recklessness and lack of experience are again unsurpassed'.¹² I suggest that Zeno erred not only because of literary license but because it suited his Rhodian political agenda to follow a Seleukid account. While it is Polybios' purpose to criticize Zeno, he does present the latter's narrative of Panion, so I will now turn to Zeno's account.

II. ZENO ON THE BATTLE OF PANION

After a Seleukid attempt to seize Palestine and Gaza in 201 BCE was rebuffed by the Ptolemaic army, Antiochos III waged a successful campaign the following year that marked the end of Ptolemaic rule in Koile-Syria, including Judaea. The Battle of Panion, generally understood as the crucial conflict in this war, was fought between the Seleukid army led personally by Antiochos III and the Ptolemaic forces led by Skopas of Aitolia.¹³ We have only meagre sources concerning the Fifth Syrian War and even less about the Battle of Panion.¹⁴ In fact, the only account of this important battle that we have is the second-hand review by Polybios of Zeno's description of the battle.¹⁵ Unfortunately, the names of any geographical or

9 The Battle of Lade, fought between the navies of Rhodes and Macedon in 201 BCE during the Cretan War, was a crushing victory for the Macedonians that caused the Romans to intervene in order to save Rhodes.

10 All translations of Polybios here are from Paton 2009.

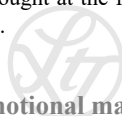
11 Polyb. 16.16.

12 Polyb. 16.18.

13 Skopas served his native Aitolian League in the Social War (220–217) but did not gain office in Aitolia and left for Alexandria; Polyb. 13.2.1.3. Within three years he was the general of Ptolemy V's army at Panion and, judging from Josephus' *AJ* 12.3.3 (132–136), functioned as such in the wider campaign as well; cf. Walbank 1992, 77f.

14 Gruen 1984, vol. 1, 615, n. 16 calls the war 'notoriously ill-documented'; so also Walbank 1967, 523 and Holleaux 1952, 320.

15 We also have this summary of Polybios in Josephus: 'Yet it was not long afterward when Antiochos overcame Skopas in a battle fought at the fountains of Jordan, and destroyed a great part of his army'; *AJ* 12.3.3 (132–133).



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