

### Fortune Lookers: Three Degrees of Degeneration

"Fortune" has several related but slightly different connotations. It is often construed as something favorable, like good luck or a monetary windfall. At other times, as to early historians like Polybius, Cicero, and Sallust, it refers to one's future circumstances in life. Although some factors may make the nature of life itself difficult to truly comprehend, the examination of events from the past facilitates that task. With hindsight, authors like Polybius, Cicero, and Sallust can look for patterns and make sense of the past's apparent randomness. For example, with years of history to analyze, Polybius, in The Rise of the Roman Empire, traces the progression from monarchy through kingship, tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and mob rule (304-9).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the above authors organize Roman history by ascribing its events to the seemingly arbitrary ups and downs of Fortune. As they consider political intrigues in their works (Polybius' Rise, Cicero's Against Catiline, and Sallust's The Conspiracy of Catiline), they politicize the nature of this force. In fact, each historian's view of Fortune parallels an increasingly corrupt degree in Polybius' definition of one-man rule, as Polybius himself endows it with the qualities of a benevolent king, Cicero with those of a less accessible one, and Sallust, despite its democratic potential, with the facets of a tyrant.

Polybius' treatment of Fortune hints at the benevolence of its rule over man's circumstances. Kingship, according to him, develops when the rational application of goodness and justice for the ruler's subjects (his "duty") overshadows the more brutish "physical strength

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<sup>1</sup> Polybius, The Rise of the Roman Empire, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (London: Penguin, 1979).  
Cicero, Against Catiline, trans. M. Grant (1969; London: Penguin, 1989).  
Sallust, The Conspiracy of Catiline, trans. S.A. Handford (London: Penguin, 1963).  
All citations refer to page numbers.

and courage" that had brought him to that position. Although Polybius calls the formation of such ideas "the origin . . . of true kingship," his statement that "duty" (to the people—a selfless, intrinsically good notion) is the "beginning and end of justice" implies that such ideas are the effect as well as the cause of kingship. Therefore, the fact that a kingship forms "and then . . . mankind conceives the notions of goodness, of justice" indicates the institution's ultimately positive ends. The specificity of such a result driven by duty, meanwhile, implies the overall coherence of kingship's function. Moreover, since the ruler "support[s] the views of the majority" on nobility and baseness and "rewards or punishes" in accordance with them, kingship also involves the determination of the ruler's actions and regulations by his subjects' proclivities (304-7).

Polybius attributes similarly kingly qualities to that which "has steered . . . the affairs of the world," Fortune (44). He most clearly illustrates its functional unity when he explains the political cycle from one-man to minority to mob rule (304-9). Yet, while "it is impossible to prevent [the three] kinds of government . . . from degenerating into the debased form of itself" cyclically and endlessly (310), Polybius maintains the particularity of Fortune's purpose. According to him, "Fortune has . . . forced [the world's affairs] to converge upon one and the same goal" (44) and "contribute to a single end" (43). This focus supports the idea that, like a king with a mission to rule his realm, Fortune has a plan for mankind.

What makes this detail attributable to not just any planner or ruler is the seemingly moral spirit in which Fortune works. Polybius says "it is inevitable that the man who excels in physical strength and courage should lead and rule over the rest" (305). True, such strength and boldness does not necessarily represent the good; each can be abused or misused. However, that Fortune lets a factor that facilitates man's survival—i.e., leadership by the most capable people—be natural and thus easier to realize seems almost altruistic. That military commander Scipio extends magnanimity and fairness to the defeated Carthaginians after considering humanity's edicts and Fortune's vicissitudes also shows Fortune's positive influence for positive

ends. Granted, Polybius does point out an unjust aspect of Fortune by stating that it sometimes "thwarts the plans of the valiant" (479). Nevertheless, that the lessons learned from many "struggles and difficulties" have resulted in "the best of all existing conditions" (311) shows that, like those of a benevolent king, the curveballs Fortune throws at mankind are for a good, just end.

A king's receptiveness to people's input also characterizes Fortune. For example, Polybius states that the military successes of Scipio, "a man favoured by Fortune," resulted from not that force alone but also his "rational calculation" (404). Like a ruler who enacts the laws that will determine his subjects' states after considering their needs and wishes, Fortune plans man's life course after taking into account the latter's "calculation and foresight" (405). Also, it does not always forcibly impose specific dictates but lets man choose between the paths it lays out. For instance, as Polybius describes, Scipio could choose to decline kingship though it "was often placed within his grasp by Fortune" (423). In another scenario, the force "has given [the Romans] . . . the choice of . . . prizes according to which way the battle [against Carthage] is decided . . ." (473). As Polybius describes it, such receptivity to man, along with its aim toward the fair and good, makes Fortune resemble his own definition of a benevolent king.

Meanwhile, paralleling a kingship's degeneration, Cicero casts Fortune in a similarly regal but dimmer light. It is true that, in contrast to a king's nobly focused mission, Cicero's Fortune seems fickle. When he declares, "The darkness of night no longer . . . conceal[s] [Catilina's] traitorous consultations" (79) or points out the "limit" on the man's deeds (81), Cicero implies the conspirator's stark, negative change in Fortune. Since Cicero treats Catilina as a villain, such bad luck represents the punishment of a wrongdoer. In fact, Catilina has only survived until now so he can face the ultimate fate for his deeds (89): the god Jupiter "will immolate [him and his followers] . . . in retribution without end" (93). Indeed, since "good fortune that favours the people of Rome" had stopped the assassins' plans (83), Fortune's inconstancy to Catilina reveals that like a moral king, it aims for justice and good.

Unlike the most magnanimous ruler, though, Cicero's Fortune is slightly debased by its inaccessibility to its subjects. He implies this fact when he proclaims to the Senate, "let all bad citizens . . . separate themselves from the good . . . let every man's political views be written on his brow for all to see" (92). It is true that Cicero often refers to his own power in the matter, as when he says, "I order [Catilina's] arrest and execution" (76) or "I watch for the safety of our country . . ." (80). However, his aforementioned allusions to Fortune—i.e., its bias against Catilina—indicate his actions' accordance to *its* plan. Since Fortune has thus been set as the highest ruling force over society, it must also be the force with the power to "decree" certain changes. By asking to "let" something happen, Cicero is probably asking not only the Senate but also Fortune. Still, the speaker does not address the concerns of those whom the aforementioned measures will affect most directly: the citizens. This conspicuous neglect—and the fact that Cicero proposes such changes before his second speech "to the People" (93)—implies the exclusiveness of political decisions. Since rulers of merit "kept in close touch with the people in their daily activities" (Polybius 307), those who are not so accessible must be less laudable. This circumstance combines with Fortune's nonetheless good aims to depict it as a ruler teetering between benevolence and social apathy.

In Sallust's version of Fortune, its democratic potential is dwarfed by its tyranny—the final phase of Polybius' one-man rule definition. As the latter historian states, a government becomes democratic when the ordinary citizens "assume the superintendence and charge of affairs" (309). Likewise, as Catilina says, the fact that people "have but to make a start [in action]" because "the rest [of the desired events] will follow easily" (Sallust 189) indicates their input's potential impact on future conditions—the very thing Fortune determines. Meanwhile, among the new privileges that can be established under a democracy are social and political equality (Polybius 309) and the benefits thereof. Indeed, when the conspirator stirs his followers—including "youths" he has taught and corrupted (Sallust 185)—with the grand benefits that Fortune offers (190), the force seems generous to everyone, not just the elite few. Granted,

Catilina's very inclusion of Fortune as an authoritative entity makes his desired society less than purely democratic. The greater distribution of power and privileges he describes, though, at least pushes it in that direction. As for Sallust, it is true that his recounting of Catilina's views does not entail his agreement with them. However, the historian does express anxiety over Cicero and other consuls' unrestrained military and political power (220). Such fears over the concentration of power in one hand conversely implies his preference for its dispersion—i.e., for a more if not purely democratic state if Fortune will allow it.

Unfortunately, as Sallust describes, Fortune is sterner than that. A tyrant, according to Polybius, evolves from a king when he uses his secure position and power "to indulge [his] appetites," sometimes lawlessly. This propensity suggests his focus on his desires over the people's welfare and his disregard for justice. Moreover, kingship turns more tyrannical when the ruler believes himself "distinguished from [his] subjects" and thus less accessible or receptive to their needs (Sallust 307-8).

Fortune shows uncharitable indifference, as well. Sallust states that it celebrates or neglects men's deeds "without regard to their true worth" (180). Fortune displays this unconcern through active pitilessness, such as when it "turned unkind and confounded all [Rome's] enterprises" after it defeated Carthage (181-2). Its callousness is manifested passively, too, when it lets rather than makes citizens lose virtues like hard work and self-restraint (223). Though people's actions deserve some blame, if Fortune is "supreme in all human affairs" (180) and presumably omnipotent, it must be capable of helping them. Since this action is thus a choice and not a necessity, to choose not to help many—its "subject"—and sustain his good reveals apathy. Individuals' subjection to this "ruler's" whims, despite any desire the people may have for better, signifies Fortune's lack of sympathy with and for them. Despite its glints of democratic potential, Sallust's Fortune is more tyrant than benefactor.

While the three historians thus treat this force as a ruler, Polybius' description of a particular nature of Fortune (benevolence) initially seems to contradict his account of the

changing political cycle. Yet Fortune is, of course, not an actual being but a concept only comprehensible in the mind. Whatever people think or say it "is" merely facilitates their understanding, so Fortune's "nature" actually rests on their perceptions of it. If, like a historian, one were to step back to examine this ruling force, what one would see changing is this perception of Fortune, not the force itself. Since history (whose events Fortune ignites) does repeat itself through the political cycle and societies' rises and falls, it displays a tidy, self-perpetuating system that does suggest a designer. While Cicero lays down but does not justify Fortune's penchant for good, and while Sallust considers its caprices, Polybius both recognizes and explains history's cohesiveness. His peculiar grasp thereof, despite the changing view of Fortune, lends credence to his specific treatment of Fortune as a benevolent king with a particular duty to the people. For a feasible merger of its cyclical quality and its end's specificity, perhaps this end (or goal) of Fortune's plan is to have no end. The continuous evolution of human society would help mankind progress, sustain, and, emerging from its constant trials, improve itself. Thus, Fortune not only determines mankind's future but also ensures that it exists at all, hopefully under better conditions than those already part of history—Roman or otherwise—have had.