CHAPTER FOUR

REPUBLICAN ROME:
AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL STRUGGLES

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The name of Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, Hannibal’s conqueror, heads the catalog of autobiographical works by Roman authors. Written in Greek, we know of only one existing reference to it, made by Polybius, who describes it as a letter addressed by Scipio to Philip (Philip V of Macedon). The relevant affirmations that we can gather from Polybius’ referral are the following: (1) Many stories full of falsehoods circulated about Scipio; fed by his fame, these stories attributed the military successes of the Roman leader to chance, fortune, and the protection of the gods. (2) Rather, it must be believed that Scipio pretended to act under divine inspiration in order to instill courage in his troops. Wisdom, foresight, ingeniousness, and cleverness constituted the factors that lead to his success. (3) This is confirmed both by the testimonies of those who shared their existence with Scipio (Laelius, with whom Polybius had spoken about this matter, is concretely cited), as well as by Scipio himself. In his Letter to Philip, he clearly sets out the calculations and reasoning he employed in order to achieve his military triumphs in Iberia, among which was the conquest of New Carthage.

The formal features of the Letter to Philip are easily explained. Its use of the Greek is not only attributable to the known philhellenism of the author, but also to the fact that the first Roman historians (Fabius Pictor, Cincius Alimentus, Postumius Albinus, Gaius Acilius) used this language. Furthermore, letters were often used as vehicles for autobiographical literature. The general wreckage of early Latin literature—including works that used Greek—can explain, finally, the fact that only

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1 Plb. 10.2.1–10.9.3 (= Jacoby, FGrHist 232 = Peter, HRR, fr. 1, 1:45–46).
2 Now Cartagena.
one mention has reached us of the Letter to Philip, that of Polybius. Consequently, Misch presents it as a writing of political propaganda ("politische Flugschrift"): after his victory over Hannibal, Scipio’s high reputation and the exceptional status that he enjoyed (twice consul, princeps senatus in 199, 194 and 189, censor in 199) as well as his family, motivated the attacks his political adversaries made on him to invoke the pretext of the liberty of the Republic, that is, the equality of all of the noble houses. The Letter to Philip would thus have constituted a defense from such attacks; Misch supposed it to have been, essentially, an apologetic work.

Nonetheless, evidence exists that appears to discredit Misch’s hypothesis. Cicero offers it when he asserts that he does not have access to any work written by Scipio. Now, if the letter had had any important political significance, Cicero probably would have mentioned it. Scullard tries to unite this evidence with that of Polybius in the following way: Scipio is said to have written a letter at the request of King Philip V, with whom he had entered into contact and attained a certain degree of friendship in the year 190, while warring against Antiochus III. Philip, unhappy with the versions that were circulating about Scipio’s exploits, had thus supposedly asked the Roman general to send him a truthful account of his deeds. Therefore, Scipio’s letter would have been an answer intended to satisfy the monarch’s curiosity. However, although Roman generals were accustomed to publishing memoirs and accounts of their undertakings, this custom did not take root until the second half of the second century BC. The Letter, therefore, would have been a private document that was stored away from public eyes in the Scipios’ family archive. Thanks to his friendship with Scipio Aemilianus, Polybius would thus have been able to access the archive and consult the document.

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6 Cic., Off. 3.4: Nulla enim eius ingenii monumenta mandata litteris, nullum opus otii, nullum solituidinis munus extat.
7 Scullard, Scipio Africanus, 11. This argument appears already developed in Jacoby, FGrHist 2B (n. 3), 656–657, and, even earlier, in Peter, HRR, 1:CXVII–CXVIII.